

HARLEY AUSTIN



BOOK TWO

DOMINION

AWAKENED SERIES



FROM THE AUTHOR OF AWAKENED,  
WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT MASTER  
STORYTELLER HARLEY AUSTIN'S

## DOMINION

*"I stayed up all night reading. I couldn't put it down!"*

— D. Carol, Orlando, FL

*"Bravo! Originally written, just when you think you may have read something like this before, the author changes it up big time, breathing fresh life into what has seemed monotonous storytelling by other authors for the last decade."*

— M. Strickland, Dallas, TX

# HARLEY AUSTIN'S

## AWAKENED SERIES

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DOMINION

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BOOK SIX  
PARADISUS

BOOK TWELVE  
ASCENSION

AWAKENED SERIES

BOOK TWO

# DOMINION

HARLEY AUSTIN

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*For my beautiful angel;  
the love of my life and the very best friend  
anyone could ever hope to have.*





DOMINION



# PRELUDE

OUT OF THE FIRES OF DEATH AND DESOLATION SHALL  
THE GODDESS OF WAR BE REBORN

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

**I**t feels warm under the covers. I just lay here drifting in an out of sleep like I usually do with little dreams popping in and out while my body slips slowly back into reality.

I move softly, warmly between the sheets. I realize slowly that I feel really sore for some reason. I haven't run in a few days so the exercise couldn't be it; besides, the soreness is like all over. My legs, my arms, my back and sides, it isn't painful, but it's there, a dull soreness that comes from every muscle as I move. It wakes me up.

I lean up off the pillow — sorely.

I'm usually a little disoriented when I wake up and it takes me a few seconds to focus and figure out that I'm in my

bedroom. Within a few moments the cloudiness in my head fades as usual. But as I look around the room this time I realize—this is not my bedroom.

A twinge of panic moves through me as I look around the tiny unfamiliar room.

‘Where am I?’ I wonder in my thoughts trying to think of how I got here.

The sheet and covers cascade off when I sit up. I quickly realize I’m not wearing anything. My typical bed shirt is missing and the cooler air of the room wakes the skin of my breasts. I pull the sheet up to cover my bare chest.

I’ve never seen this room before in my life. It has an odd décor. Everything in the room is small-looking. The room is small, the end tables compact. It reminds me of a large camping trailer or motor home, but, everything in this room is really nice, like an expensive designer version.

I can hear the wind blowing fiercely outside. There’s a window I’d like to get to and look out of. Looking around I see my clothes nicely folded on the other side of the bed. They’re the same ones I had on yesterday while driving home. I feel a sudden dull throb in my head as I try to remember. ‘Ouch.’ That’s not good. I’ll try to think about it later.

The door of the room is closed, so, naked, I slip quietly out of bed. Interestingly, my clothes are ironed and smell clean, like they were just washed.

It feels good to be dressed. The soreness seems to be fading quickly the more I move around. There’s an extra pair of red wool socks laying next to my cotton ones. The floor is cold and I don’t see my boots so I slip the red wool ones on over my white ones.

At the window I push back the thick expensive curtains and look out of a generously-sized window. The snow is blowing wildly. The clock on the beside table tells me it’s almost noon, but the snow is blowing so thickly it may as well

be dusk. I can see what looks like an empty parking lot with the highway and snow-covered pines not far off. There are no other cars anywhere and the snow looks really deep. They probably closed the road because of the snow, I think to myself.

But how did I get here?

Looking around the room, I spend a few minutes taking in the interior design of the space and the really nice furniture. The chairs and tables are beautiful and efficient for the small room but it all works well with the fine wood paneled walls, dark walnut book cases, a small desk and elegantly carved wood doors.

The small en suite master bathroom looks like something out of a magazine, complete with a bidet, separate glass and stone-tile shower and whirlpool tub. While exploring the bathroom, I snoop. I find a new toothbrush still in the box and some toothpaste to get the morning taste out of my mouth. My hair is a mess but it brushes out nicely with a guy-brush I find in one of the drawers.

Back in the bedroom, another door leads to a small walk-in closet. I flip on the light and note the well-stocked men's wardrobe that almost fills the entire space. Everything from casual jackets, dress shirts, polo's, jeans, slacks, khakis; every kind of shoe and boot, even flip-flops. It's all nicely laid out, hung-up and color-separated. Yes, I feel a bit guilty for snooping, but it doesn't stop me from looking in every drawer. I'm amazed at how neatly organized everything is.

The last door must lead to the rest of the RV. I open it slowly and look into the next room cautiously. It's a living room and galley kitchen area. The whole place is huge for an RV. It must be one of those models with the expanding walls, I think to myself. I can see all the way up to the driver and passenger seats. Snow has built up on the windshield and I can't see out of it. The whole place is empty.

I cautiously make my way out and somehow, instinctively, politely, I call out, "Hello?"

But there's no answer.

"Hello? Anyone here?"

There's no reply from anyone. The only sound is from the savage wind blowing outside.

Inside the main cabin I quickly realize that someone is around somewhere; there's the smell of coffee in the air from an elegant-looking polished silver pot with a fluted spout. Everything in the space is just as elegant and over-the-top designer as the coffee pot. I move all the way to the front where the over-stuffed leather captains chairs are, but there's no one to be found. I can't imagine anyone wanting to brave the blizzard that's blowing outside, but someone made the coffee and they're definitely not in the motor home at the moment.

A home. That's what this place reminds me of, an elegant home. I'm having a hard time even thinking of it as an RV now.

As bad as the wind is blowing outside, I decide against even opening the door to look outside. Besides, the massive windows show me exactly what I need to know—that I don't want to step foot outside right now, not even for a moment.

My curiosity gets the better of me again and I continue snooping. The coffee smells really good so I find a porcelain cup and pour myself some, loading it up with some real cream from the wood-paneled refrigerator and a small dose of one of the flavored syrups from the coffee cabinet.

The cupboards all close tightly automatically, as do all of the drawers, with just a touch. Both the refrigerator and the pantry look like they've just been stocked for some kind of long road trip.

When my curiosity has been finally satisfied exploring everything in sight, I finally have a seat on the plush couch next to the glass coffee table to enjoy my coffee and wonder how I

got here. Trying to think about what happened only brings back that insidious throb in my head. Bad idea.

There's an iPad on the coffee table but unfortunately it asks me for a passcode I don't know, so I'm stuck flipping through a handful of RV and travel magazines from a small built-in teak rack.

In the distance I can hear the whine of an engine. It's getting closer. It's a snowmobile. I look out the window but all I can do is hear it, I don't see it. It's just outside now. Then I hear other sounds like machinery working under the floor of the RV. I guess that the RV has stowage for things like snowmobiles and ATV's. It was a high-end feature I'd just been looking at in some of the magazines.

I don't know what to think or what to do. I don't know who this person is or what their intentions are or even how I got here! Trepidation and outright fear cascade through me but I keep my composure.

'It's not as bad as you think,' I tell myself. But I don't really know what to think at the moment.

The machinery under the RV has stopped and there's more automated sound coming from the side door. I curl up on the sofa wishing I'd grabbed one of the large kitchen knives from the knife block on the counter. But it's too late. A tall man enters the motor home from the side door and quickly closes it to keep the snow and wind out. His black parka is literally covered in a thin layer of blown snow. His back is mostly to me; he doesn't see me yet.

He flips back the hood of his parka, peels off goggles and a ski hat and hangs them up. He then slips out of the zippered parka hanging it on a hook to drip onto the stone tile foyer area. I don't really get a good look at him with his back to me but I catch a glimpse of a thick five-o' clock shadow. His broad shoulders are covered by a white denim shirt tucked into thin-waisted black Levis.

He unclips his snowmobile boots and steps out of them, pushing them together carefully by the door. He's wearing the same red wool socks I am.

I watch him with some amusement as he straightens his parka on the hook for the second time.

"How's the coffee?" he says, not turning to look at me.

He did see me! But his voice and demeanor as he tidies his boots and jacket once again, it's—it's very disarming. I feel myself relax a bit.

"Ah, fine," I manage, not wanting to be rude.

"How do you feel?" he asks, pausing to casually look over his shoulder, but still not turning around.

I pause wondering what to say.

"I don't know where I am?" I admit.

He turns to look at me. There's real worry written all over his face. But while I can see he's concerned, I'm suddenly taken by his incredibly handsome features. The guy is maybe mid or late twenties. His strong jaw and kind eyes and look of worry totally melt away whatever trepidation my mind had conjured about being in this place.

"Do you know who you are?" he asks.

The odd question catches me by surprise. Of course I know who I am, I'm—and suddenly my head begins to hurt with an intense throb.

"I'm," I begin out loud, but then nothing follows.

"I'm," I start again. But all I get is more of the throb in my head.

"Oh, my gosh," I suddenly alarm. "I—I don't know."

I think he can see the sudden worry washing over my face. He quickly takes a seat on the far end of the sofa, keeping his distance while trying to calm me.

"Shh—shh," he says trying too hard to keep me calm, "don't try to force it. Relax. It's okay."



"I can't remember my name," I react badly. "That's not okay!"

"It'll come back," he assures calmly; but I'm unconvinced. I can tell he's just trying to keep me from freaking out. Somehow, he talks me off the ledge and I calm down.

"Where am I? What happened to me?" I ask.

"I rescued you from your car last night," he begins. "I was looking for a place to pull off after getting caught in the storm. I saw your convertible just sitting there in the snow with your flashers on. I wasn't going to stop in the bad weather but something inside me made me put on the brakes."

"I remember ... I was on my way back home," I struggle, but that's all the memory the ache in my head rewards me with.

"That's better than nothing," he assures. "I jumped out and went to your car to make sure no one was in it, and then I saw you. The car was on but your motor was off."

"I ran out of gas," I remember out loud. "I can't be out of gas, I just filled up," the memory spills out of my mouth.

"No, you ran out, but it wasn't your fault."

"Huh?"

"I smelled gas all around your car when I pulled you out last night. You must have had some kind of leak in the tank or the fuel line. That can happen with all the hard ice that builds up on the roads if it strikes a fuel line."

"Why can't I remember any of this?" I struggle with the ache in my head.

"You were totally out of it last night. I pounded on your window several times and yelled to get your attention but you just looked at me, mumbling. I tried to get you to unlock the doors. You looked like you were just going to fall asleep in the cold."

"Oh my gosh!" I realize how dangerous that would have been. "What happened?"

"I broke your window and unlocked your door. You were almost totally unresponsive. I carried you in here to warm up. I couldn't just leave the rig on the highway so I drove us to this rest stop to park."

"I don't remember any of this," I admit.

He looks at me with those piercing blues of his, nodding and pursing his lips. "I'm sorry," he says. "What's the first thing you do remember?" he then asks.

I think hard. "All I can remember is waking up this morning." Then it hits me, "without any clothes," I add.

I watch him look away with a shy half-grin as his face flushes red. "Yea, ah, sorry about that. It was unavoidable."

"Unavoidable?"

"After I parked here, even indoors you were still unresponsive. I slipped my hand onto the skin of your back. It wasn't warm; it felt cool actually. You were still losing body heat; it felt like your core temperature was dropping. I didn't have a whole lot of options at that point. I carried you into the bathroom, took off your clothes and soaked you in a really hot bath."

Hearing his words I'm deeply grateful but totally mortified at the same time.

"A hot bath? You saw me totally naked?" I'm mortified and also half grinning, but I can't help it for some reason. I'm alive and grateful for being so. Apparently he can see that I'm not really all that upset.

"Yes, I saw you naked, every inch of your incredibly beautiful body," he assures me very matter-of-factly with his own half grin. "Sorry," he half apologizes. "Like I said, it was kind of unavoidable," he repeats shyly. "I wasn't going to just dunk you into a bath fully clothed, although, now that I think about it, I suppose I could have. I'm sorry," he half jokes again.

"No, no, it's okay. I understand, really," I begin back peddling on my overreaction. "What are you going to do with

a girl in wet clothes?" I muse out loud. "How long was I in the tub?"

"About an hour. You finally began coming around and being responsive, but it was like you were still very dazed. I asked you over and over who you were, but you kept telling me you didn't know. I dried you off and put you in bed with the electric blanket. I figured that would keep you warm."

The thought of this handsome guy toweling me off from head to toe starts me grinning and feeling embarrassed again. I pull a large pillow to me and wrap my arms around it so it covers me.

"Please don't feel embarrassed," he says getting up and going to the coffee pot. "Your life was in danger. I kept checking on you all night. You seemed to be sleeping soundly but I didn't know if you'd wake up."

He pours himself a porcelain mug and adds as much cream to his coffee as I usually do. Then he leans back against the galley kitchen counter taking a sip, looking at me.

"Oh, my name is Jerrod, by the way, Jerrod Sharp."

I instinctively attempt to reply with my own but all I get once again is the all too familiar annoying throb in my head. I rest my forehead in my palm waiting for the dull ache to subside.

I hear him set down his cup. "Are you going to be okay? Do you want some Advil or something?"

I nod. "Two please," I ask.

He retrieves a couple from some kitchen cabinet and gently places them into my hand. His fingers touching my skin give me a warm sensation as does his dimpled smile.

He returns to his spot at the counter to sip more of his coffee. I can tell Jerrod is going out of his way to keep his distance, maybe to make me feel less threatened with having to be cooped up in a small place with a perfect stranger. Oddly, those aren't the feelings I'm having right now looking at him.

## DOMINION

# 1

**T**he snow outside continued to blow furiously, covering the windows and giving both of them the feeling of being in a kind of luxury igloo. She found it hard to believe that Jerrod would have even ventured out into such a mess.

“So where did you go this morning?” she asked tucking her feet under herself and setting the large pillow aside. “It’s really ugly out there.”

“Oh!” Jerrod began, “I totally forgot. I went back to your car.”

“You did? What for?”

“I thought you might want this.”

He went to his parka and removed a small purse from a large lower pocket.

“Jerrod, my purse!”

She wasn't sure how she knew it was hers, she couldn't remember anything else, but somehow she knew this purse was hers.

"So you recognize this?" he smiled and handed it to her.

"I do! Oh, my gosh, this will tell me who I am!"

"Hopefully. Maybe it will jog your memory; bring you back."

She deftly opened the small purse like she knew she'd done a million times before and found her wallet. Everything in the small bag felt ice cold. She fished out a small stack of freezing ID's, bank and store cards and looked at them. She stared at the name on the bank card sitting at the top of the stack. She read the name again. She could feel Jerrod staring at her with deep curiosity.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I, I don't recognize this name."

"It doesn't jog any memories?"

She shook her head. "I mean, I know it's my card and my bank. It looks really familiar. I even recognize the card number."

"And the name?"

She shook her head again. "It may as well be 'Jane Doe.'" She flipped through the cards, finally finding her driver's license. It was her photo. Her license. She could see it was her license. But the name was completely foreign to her as was the address. She tried to remember but the dull ache in her head was the only reward she received for her efforts.

"What's your name?" Jerrod asked.

She look up at him. "I don't know," she told him, disappointed.

Jerrod looked at her and then sat down on the couch, still keeping his distance. He looked unsure of her answer.

"Can you read the name?" he asked gently.

She nodded. "I can read it. But I don't know who this is," she said shaking her head.

She looked at Jerrod and those amazing eyes of his. There was wonder and concern all over his face. But he said nothing, his head only nodding slightly in understanding. She looked and stared at the cards again, rifling through them.

She looked into her purse again. Her iPhone was ice cold as she pulled it from the bag. It didn't turn on.

"Here," he reached out his hand, "we'll need to warm that up before it will work. I'll plug it in for you. It might be a couple of hours."

She handed it to him making sure her hand touched his. His fingers lingered against her skin for a few moments longer than were necessary for him to take the device. He walked away to the front of the motor home to plug it into the dash. She couldn't help but watch him, how he moved, and how ridiculously good he looked in black Levis.

She tore her gaze from Jerrod and back to her purse. She somehow knew she had photos in an inside pocket. At this point, she felt convinced that if a photo of herself didn't help her recall her name, then photos of others wouldn't be of much use either. She was right.

She sifted through the images of nameless people she didn't know or recognize. She was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of deep despair. Of course these people were her family—but somehow she knew none of them. She didn't recall ever meeting or seeing any of them. Their names and faces were all those of complete strangers.

She felt a deepening sense of sadness washing over her. Jerrod sat down on the sofa, on the cushion next to her this time.

"It'll be alright," he assured her.

But she wasn't so sure. A sudden sadness welled up inside her. She couldn't stop it. Leaning into his shoulder the tears begin to flow.

"It's okay," he comforted. "It's okay. You're going to be fine. You're safe," he continued reassuringly. Jerrod's strong arms folded in around her and she sank into his embrace, her tears falling uncontrollably.

She didn't know who she was or who her family was, or where she even lived. But right now, despite the pain and sadness filling her soul, she suddenly didn't care; because a kind and gentle voice was wrapped around her, telling her, "It's going to be okay."

Jerrod held her for several minutes before she finally stopped crying. He wiped her tear-streaked face gently with the backs of his fingers.

"You're going to be okay," he assured again.

She nodded.

"Do you mind if I look?" he asked, motioning toward her purse. She handed him the small stack of plastic. Jerrod rifled through the cards reading the same name off of each one and then stopped at her driver's license.

"Oh," he said.

"Oh? What does 'oh' mean?"

"I know where you're from. I mean, I've been where you're heading to."

"Really? What's it like?"

Jerrod gave her a look of concern.

"I take it you're not big on the place."

"No, not really," he confided matter-of-factly.

"Is it a bad place?"



He shook his head, "No, nothing like that. It's nice actually, it just kind of has this bad reputation. Not everyone there is bad though."

"Is it far?" she asked.

"No, just in the next county."

She nodded. She knew nothing about it. She had no memories of the place or the people who lived there.

"This must be your name," he said pointing to the embossed letters on a bank card.

She shook her head. Somewhere inside her there was a strange almost visceral reaction. She didn't like the name he was showing her for some reason.

"That's not my name, Jerrod."

He looked at her oddly for a moment, but then his expression turned thoughtful. "Okay," he smiled, "what name do you want?"

"Kari." The name just fell out of her mouth. She didn't know where it came from, but it just rolled off her lips like she'd known it her entire life.

"Well. That was a quick choice."

"I don't—think it was a choice," she offered. Somewhere inside her the name just felt like it was hers.

"Well, 'Kari' it is then," he smiled. "It's beautiful. It fits you. It rhymes with starry, just like your eyes," he grinned.

Jerrod made her smile.

She watched him as he got up and refreshed his cup of coffee within the small elegant space.

"So, my home is apparently in the next county. Where's home for you?"

"Grand Rapids. My family uprooted from Seattle a few years ago after Dad bought an RV manufacturer," he offered trying to hide a yawn.

"You look tired, Jerrod."

He nodded. "I was too worried about you last night. I didn't get much sleep."

"You should go and get some rest then."

"I don't know if I'll be able to sleep. I want to make sure you're okay."

"I'll be fine. I'm going to start worrying about you. Go, get some rest."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I feel fine. Just, tell me the code for the iPad before you go," she grinned, picking it up.

Jerrod gave her the simple code and then walked back to the bedroom door trying to tear his gaze from Kari. "Wake me up if you need anything."

"Would you just go!" she demanded with a grin.

He smiled back at her and finally closed the door gently.

'Wow,' Kari thought to herself. Life had suddenly delivered an odd turn of events.

Aside from a few semi-interesting games, the iPad was of little entertainment. The blizzard outside made the internet all but useless. Kari managed to get part of a weather site that showed the storm burying everything within several hundred miles of where they were, but then the connection failed altogether.

She turned off the coffee pot and cleaned it along with Jerrod's mug and put them away. The RV was already immaculate. There wasn't much to tidy up.

Kari soon found herself at the bedroom door and she rapped lightly. There was no reply. Opening the door quietly she could see that Jerrod was already fast asleep, still dressed in his clothes laying on top of the comforter. She just watched him sleeping for several minutes.

'This is the guy who saved my life last night,' she thought.

She walked into the cool room and pulled part of the comforter over him. He didn't stir. She watched him again until the door was finally closed.

She should have been worried about her situation and the amnesia. But she wasn't for some reason. Maybe it was because her thoughts kept wandering back to the handsome man sleeping deeply and peacefully in the next room.

## 2

**I**t was close to four when Kari heard the sounds of life from the back of the RV. The motor home was nice, but the thin walls told her that Jerrod was up and in the shower.

The wind had stopped blowing but the snow was still falling in fluffy flakes so big they looked like cotton balls hitting the ground outside.

Jerrod emerged from the bedroom dressed in similar but different clothes. He wore blue Levis this time and a long-sleeved white turtleneck that showed off an incredible set of muscles she definitely hadn't seen before. Kari may have had amnesia but she wasn't stupid. She could tell when a guy was dressing to impress. Jerrod in those clothes was more than attractive.

"Hey," she smiled, pouring on a little of her Southern charm. "How did you sleep?"

He walked up and then leaned against the galley counter next to her. “Really well. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. A little bored,” she confessed.

“Looks like the storm is passing. It’s just dropping a bunch of snow now. This should clear up by tomorrow,” he said turning and looking out the galley window. “That’s good. We can refuel the generator before both of us freeze to death out here.”

Kari hadn’t even thought about what was keeping the home warm. “How long does it last?”

“I can get about five days from a full tank. We’ll be fine. It was mostly full yesterday when I found you.” He looked out the window again. “Once the snow stops falling so hard they’ll have the plows out. We should be out of here in another day or two at the most.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yea,” he grinned. “The ski resort is only about ten miles up the road from here. They’ll have more plows on this road tomorrow than we can count. People are going to want to hit this powder with a vengeance.” He looked at her. “Do you ski?”

“I—I don’t know,” she admitted. “Maybe.”

“Well after they clear the roads, maybe we should find out?”

“Jerrod, don’t you think people are going to be looking for me? I mean, taking a day to go skiing when people might be worried about me seems rude somehow.”

He looked at her. “Interesting.”

“What?”

“It almost seems like you’re not all that keen on your family, but then you’re worried about how they’ll feel about you being gone. It just seems—interesting.”

Jerrod had somehow zeroed in on exactly how she felt. She nodded. “I just don’t want people to worry.”

"You're very thoughtful, Kari."

Hearing Jerrod use her name seemed like it should have felt odd, but it didn't. It felt natural to her somehow. Like it was a name she'd always had.

"It'll be dark in an hour. Do you have any plans for tonight?" he asked her, a slight dimpled grin appearing on his face.

She looked at Jerrod and gave him the same a wry smile. "Plans? Like I'm going somewhere?"

"You know," he began thoughtfully, "I just said that as kind of a joke, but, now that I think about it," he paused with a sudden nervous breath. "Maybe, since you and I are kind of stuck here, maybe we should plan something to do?"

Kari oddly knew what he was thinking. Jerrod became totally cute with some nervousness.

"Are you asking me out? Like a date?" she asked him, just to make sure.

He looked at her with his suddenly serious piercing blues, "Yea," he nodded with a smile, "a date. That's exactly what I would like. I mean, I know we just met. You don't have to ..." he gave her an out.

His smile completely melted her inside. She couldn't resist those dimples.

"Okay, sure," she smiled with a sudden flush of glow that welled up within her. The idea of an unexpected date gave her a warm feeling inside. "We're stuck here. May as well make it official," she smiled.

Jerrod grinned widely and moved close to her. He gently put his arms around her and she could not help but pull him close to herself as well. Suddenly holding each other felt warm, new and strangely, very elating. Instead of a quick hug, the two of them just stood in the kitchen holding each other, feeling each other's warmth. Kari caught the faint scent of Jerrod's cologne.

They both realized the foolishness of just standing and embracing each other for such a long time, but neither seemed to want their embrace to end. Jerrod didn't feel like a stranger to her. She felt like he could hold her here like this all day if he wanted to. She sank her full emotion into the moment with him and moved her hands onto his back as he pulled her closer. Somehow she felt he was feeling the same way about her. His lips brushed the side of her head. She felt his deep breaths and the warmth between them as his hand gently caressed across the waves of her hair.

After many long minutes they moved apart softly with both Jerrod and Kari taking deep sighs. He looked at her, moving the hair out and away from her eyes. Whatever their chemistry together it was becoming very clear that it was not just compatible, but flammable.

"Wow," he said softly.

"Yea," she breathed.

It was obvious that neither of them wanted to leave their long embrace and yet it was a little awkward. What did either of them really know about the other? Still, there was no denying the emotional, even spiritual connection they'd both just shared together. Yes, Kari's memory was gone, but she was pretty sure she had never felt anything like this; something this emotionally powerful. Jerrod seemed to be just as surprised by their chemistry together as she was.

Leaning back against the counter Kari calmed her emotions. She felt slightly embarrassed, but Jerrod didn't *feel* like someone she'd only just met this morning.

"Kari," Jarrod invited, "maybe we should sit down and talk."

Kari nodded and they sat down on the sofa, probably closer together than they should have.

"I don't know what's happening between us," Jerrod cautioned.

"You mean just now? When we were holding each other?"

"Yea," he nodded, still a little breathless. "Am I just imagining this or did we just have a really hard time letting each other go a moment ago?"

"No, it wasn't your imagination." She put her hand on his knee, partly to reassure him and partly because she just needed to be touching him.

Jerrod put his hand on hers.

"Kari, I seem to have this incredible, emotional," his words stumbled, "attraction to you somehow. Honestly, I don't just hug strangers I rescue on the highway. I don't think I've felt anything like this before."

"I know, it's," she shook her head, "strange. I feel the same way. I don't know what it is with the two of us."

"Part of me wonders if I'm just over reacting after seeing you last night. Like I'm just getting caught up in all of the excitement of what happened."

"I don't think so, Jerrod. I didn't exactly see you in the tub," she smiled. "But I'm just as drawn to you. It's not just you," she assured.

"Kari, I really wanted to kiss you a moment ago. But then I thought, I don't even know you. You're totally vulnerable right now without your memory. I feel like I'd be taking advantage of you. But then there's this—this, really powerful attraction. It's a little confusing." He released a deep breath.

She watched Jerrod's lips as he talked. They looked perfect to her. She leaned in closer to him, her mouth slightly open.

"Kari, what—" Jerrod couldn't help himself. He leaned in closer to her. "We shouldn't do this," he said softly.

"Do what?" she played coy, inching closer until she could feel his breath on her skin.

"Kari, honestly, I'm not going to have any control around you," he warned her with soft words that made her pulse jump rather than wane with caution.



“So?” she whispered, lightly folding her lips into his. Jarrod returned her light kiss with one of his own. Feeling Jerrod’s warm lips on her own was beyond exhilarating.

Jarrod kissed Kari lightly at first, trying to hold back. But feeling his lips smoothly caressing across her warm pout only left him more enticed and breathless as one kiss followed another and then another.

Kari was just as taken with Jarrod’s lips. His hand cupping the side of her face only increased the warmth she felt. Kari didn’t remember if she was really all that experienced at kissing. She just followed Jerrod’s lips and chased them softly wherever they wanted to go.

They moved closer together, her hands and fingers gently tracing the sides of his neck and shoulders. She was just trying to feel what he felt, her hands delicately sliding all over his shirt in a way that he seemed to really enjoy.

Jerrod’s emotion was on the rise, but so was his chivalry. He pulled back from her lips looking at Kari and drawing some deep breaths. She could feel that he wanted to keep kissing but he seemed to have a strong, overriding sense of gallantry as well.

“Whoa.” Jerrod looked at her exhaling deeply with a concerned smile. “You kiss way too well, Kari,” he assured. “This date thing could get out of hand.”

Kari nodded.

It already had.

Kari knew she should feel embarrassed for making out with a perfect stranger like this, but for some reason Jerrod just didn’t feel like a stranger to her. She knew she needed to reign in her feelings. After all, she was Southern. The last thing she wanted was for Jerrod to think her too forward.

Kari pulled back her long blonde hair with one hand and let it fall back into place around her shoulders. She knew it was

a kind of sexy, teasing gesture. It had the desired affect on Jerrod, but it only sent him retreating further.

“Maybe we should start dinner,” he smiled, getting up.

Preparing dinner with Jerrod in the small galley kitchen turned into a fun event. It became a kind of tease-fest with the both of them moving around each other in the tiny space as they chopped and stirred and boiled up almost as much steam as was rising off the dinner they were putting on their plates.

Jerrod poured some wine for the both of them into chilled crystal glasses while Kari finished setting a very formal table for two, complete with cloth napkins and silver. She arranged everything just so, making the small table look magnificent, like a picture out of a fine home magazine.

“Kari, this is beautiful,” Jerrod complemented, setting down their wine glasses in the proper place.

“Do you like it?”

“Oh yea. You’ve done this before.”

“I guess I have. I don’t remember.”

Their combined skills in the kitchen produced an amazingly elegant dinner for two. They sat on opposite sides of the table but Jerrod’s red stocking feet were intertwined with hers. Jerrod was watching her intently as they ate.

“What are you looking for?” she asked, taking an elegant bite and lingering the fork while pulling it from her lips, knowing she had his rapt attention.

“I’m just watching you,” he admitted. “Trying to see who you are. You set a classic table, chop mushrooms like a chef, and you eat with the poise of royalty. Then there’s that cute Southern accent of yours. Not exactly the type of girl I would have expected to pull from a car this far north.”

“Judging books by their covers, are we?” she teased.

“No, just trying to gather clues,” Jerrod lifted his glass and held it up. Kari picked up hers.

“What are we toasting?” she asked.

“To friends,” he said.

“To heroes,” she added.

They tipped glasses. Jerrod’s wine was exceptional.

“How is it?” he asked.

“It’s really very good. This has a nice bouquet. I don’t like them too dry.”

“You’re definitely well born, Kari,” he offered musing at her over his glass. But somehow she sensed a kind of trepidation from him with what should be something good.

“That’s an odd look on your face,” she began. “Being from a good family concerns you?”

“There are some good families and bad ones where you’re from, Kari. I was just hoping that you’re from one of the good ones.”

“And what happens if it turns out that I’m from one of the bad ones?” she asked factiously while holding her glass elegantly. “You could be on a date with the daughter of a scoundrel.”

Jerrod nodded, “Or worse ...”

# 3

THE LIFE BLOOD OF GOD SHALL MOVE UNSEEN DRAWING  
TOGETHER THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF MEN

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

**A**fter dinner they both cleaned up the dishes together, washing and drying and moving around each other in the small galley. More than once Kari felt Jerrod slide against her from behind to put something away and more than once she did the same to him. Sometimes she found herself leaning into him or standing shoulder-to-shoulder, chatting about what she could remember and what she couldn't.

"So you're not even sure if you're dating anyone?" Jerrod asked.

"I guess I might be," she confessed. "I really wouldn't know right now," she offered, sort of making fun of herself.

She felt Jerrod move away from her to take a towel and dry his hands. He didn't return to standing right next to her.

"But I don't know that I'm dating anyone."

Jerrod looked at her. "Kari, someone who looks like you, and as nice as you are, is dating someone. Trust me."

"Maybe I'm between boyfriends at the moment," she offered.

He nodded, "Hmm, that's a possibility."

"Are you looking for an excuse not to kiss me again?" she asked.

Jerrod glanced at her with a thoughtful smirk. "Yea, probably. I guess I am."

"Why?" She watched him look at her.

He took a long breath and visibly sighed. "Because, Kari, in case you hadn't noticed, the two of us are a little dangerous together."

"Dangerous? How am I dangerous?" Jerrod was practically twice her size.

Jerrod looked at her warmly. "Because, Kari," he spoke softly, honestly, "I don't want to just kiss you," he admitted, deliberately looking at her. "And I won't take advantage of you. Not like this. Not while you have no memory of who you are. I'm not that kind of guy."

"Jerrod," she nodded, "I've thought about that. But I'm not exactly feeling all vulnerable." She moved close to him as they automatically embraced. Each felt the other exhale softly. "Does this feel vulnerable to you?"

The embrace felt natural to both of them. Jerrod pulled her closer and Kari felt his lips on hers once again. They stood together again, embracing and feeling the warmth of each other while tied up in their soft kiss.

"This is so risky, Kari. I can't think rationally around you. You're so vulnerable right now," he offered, pulling back softly

from their kiss with a lot more willpower than it should have taken for him to do so.

“Then maybe we can just hold each other,” she breathed softly, pulling him warmly close and feeling him wrap his arms around her.

But it wasn't long before their lips met once again. The gentle kiss was followed by others slightly warmer than the previous ones had been. Soon both of them were lost in the warmth and emotion of each other's lips all over again. Kari felt Jerrod's hand move softly across her back and then slip softly down over the back of her jeans. Her hands caressed along the ridges of the front of his shirt.

To Jerrod, Kari's lips were beyond talented. It was like she knew exactly what he liked and how he liked it. She was easily heating up his emotions. Jerrod's hand cautiously found the front of her shirt. She rewarded his lips while he kneaded her well-curved breast warmly.

The temperature between them easily moved beyond makeout. Kari felt her shirt becoming un-tucked, but then, she had already started to un-tuck his. She pulled the jersey knit out from his Levis and slid it up and over his head. Jerrod's very fit skin was a sight to behold and Kari could not resist keeping her fingers from his rippled and chiseled form. Her exploration of his chest was briefly interrupted by her own shirt being lifted away and Jerrod wasting no time dropping her bra onto a nearby chair as well.

The two of them held each other close, bare skinned, kissing and moving against the other softly.

“I never thought I'd ever see you like this again,” he whispered between kisses, holding her warmly against himself.

“You're not the only one who's been wanting to see someone shirtless,” she pulled away from him to drink-in the

sight of his form, her fingers moving sweetly over his skin, while he admired hers with his own touch.

"Kari, you are so beautiful," he complimented half breathless looking at her, his eyes dancing from her nose to her navel. The backs of his fingers smoothed along her unusually toned feminine abs and then caressed along her fit shoulders. "You work out like I do. I can see it all over you."

The heat between them continued to rise with the two of them returning to a soft but hungrily passionate lip play.

Jerrod's fingers soon found the front of Kari's jeans and she felt them being softly unbuttoned and then slowly unzipped. The feeling should have caused her some caution for a first date, but the way Kari felt at the moment, she more than welcomed his fingers loosening her denim.

She slipped off his belt, still immersed in his kiss, and unbuttoned his Levis slowly, pulling each button away, one by one.

Jerrod pulled away softly looking at her. Whatever willpower he had with her was almost gone. If they wanted to stop this, she was going to have to be the one to do it. "You know we don't have to go any further, Kari," he exhaled heavily, looking into her eyes with a deeply sincere gaze that told her the exact opposite of his words.

"Would you stop interrupting," she grinned. "If I didn't want to kiss you, I wouldn't."

"Kari," she felt Jerrod's hands slip under the loosened denim and over her ass. "You're about to get more than just kissed," he warned.

"Maybe we should talk about this in the other room?" she suggested with a wry smile.

Jerrod gently returned her smile and then took her hand, locking his fingers in hers. They walked together into the next room. Jerrod dimmed the lights and took her into his arms once again. He felt Kari's warm smooth skin against his once again;

felt her lips on his. They kissed as Jerrod's hands slipped inside her jeans and over her ass once again, and then he felt his jeans slide gently with hers onto the floor.

Kari's hands were all over the back of his ribbed designer French briefs pulling him timidly, teasingly, against herself, the well-firmed front of his briefs moving ever so slightly against her low-cut panties. Kari couldn't remember being with a man, but Jerrod's briefs teasing against her panties left her with the impression that he was not a small guy beneath them.

Jerrod started to slip off her panties, but she took hold of his wrists and gently lifted his hands up behind his head.

"Oh, what's this?" he stood in the dimness looking at her, his fingers now locked behind his head.

"Don't move your hands," she grinned.

"Don't move my hands? Why not—oh, god, Kari!" he exhaled deeply feeling her fingers running teasingly along his tall hardening length through the ribbed cotton of his briefs.

"What are you doing?" he breathed heavily, smiling at her, still not moving his hands.

Jerrod's muscular frame looked amazing as he stood in front of her just flexing while enduring her torturous fingers.

"Exploring," she teased.

Jerrod couldn't help but spread his feet slightly to give her fingers more room to continue her exploration of himself.

Jerrod's build was mesmerizing to Kari as she brought him breathing heavily under her investigative fingernails. Making him promise not to move his hands, she drew down his briefs uncovering a thick, commanding male spire.

"Oh," she breathed, a little astonished looking at him.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She slipped off her own panties and moved herself up to him, kissing him lightly, softly, while barely touching herself to his skin.



Jerrod arched his neck back trying to endure the sensations Kari delivered. "Oh, you are just going to get it," Jerrod promised through a deep breath. "I can't touch you?" he played her little game.

"No," she smiled, slipping the curve of her ass against his flexing thigh and then lightly against his thick towering cock.

"Kari," Jerrod exhaled heavily, feeling her tease him by now moving the front of her body fully against his back and tush, her hands now sliding over his pecs and abs as she teasingly explored him with light touches to his skin. "You are *not* being nice."

"Who said anything about being nice?" she whispered into his ear while smiling to herself. From behind him her fingers and nails danced lightly over his incredible length.

"Kari, I can't," he endured, as her finger nails playing the tip of him making his legs weaken. Jerrod suddenly turned and took Kari into his arms, holding her warmly. The kiss between them was long and sweet as they stood in the bedroom with nothing but the warmth of each other between them.

"You are so going to kill me teasing me like that," he breathed against her lips. "I need to kiss you, Kari."

For long moments they kissed, pulling each other close until the slight chill in the room moved the both of them between soft sheets and under the comforter.

"Kari," he whispered grinning, kissing her softly under the sheets, his body wrapped around her, "I think I like that game. You and I should play it again. Next time it's my turn."

"Next time," she replied in soft mirth.

"Mmm-hmm," he kissed.

Jerrod and Kari warmed the cool sheets, making out while gently rolling between them. Kari found herself lost in Jerrod's exceptional kiss and firm muscles that softly wrapped and caressed her.

While Jerrod satisfied her lips, he teased the tip of himself against her, gently brushing his fully hardened thickness intimately against the dampness of her very sensitive folds. Kari's body couldn't help but open to him, allowing Jerrod to torment and push ever so slightly and tenderly into her.

"You know we're bare, Jerrod," Kari breathed feeling him intimately tease her with his slight penetration.

"I know," he whispered heavily, kissing her passionately, "I want you bare."

Jerrod's words didn't give Kari the feeling of carefulness that she knew she should have. Instead of caution, his words raised the exact opposite emotion within her. How Jerrod made her feel right now, she didn't want anything between them either.

Jerrod knew he had protection, within an easy arm's reach. He knew it was more than irresponsible. It wasn't that he didn't care, but there was just something primal about being with Kari, something that stirred a deep primitive instinct within him.

"You are so amazingly beautiful, Kari," he breathed warmly against her neck, teasing her intimately with his cock so rock hard now it was throbbing. "I really need to fuck you, Kari," he said softly, viscerally, against her skin in a way that sent a deep warm jolt of emotion through her.

"Ohh, Jerrod," she responded with a breathy soft whisper, "You need to fuck me, Jerrod," she returned enticingly against his lips, the massive wave of intense ancient emotion shooting through her own body. The smooth and elegant way Jerrod held Kari became intoxicating. With his lips on hers and his fingers warming her skin she felt his thick length push gently, wetly, slowly into her.

Kari inhaled and then released a deep breath feeling herself yielding softly and tightly around him.

“Are you okay,” he breathed, lifting himself to watch her accept him.

She touched his face. “Ooh,” she exhaled softly feeling him push snugly into her and then retreat just as softly. “You’re teasing me,” she breathed heavily at him.

Jerrod watched the expressions of pleasure glide across Kari’s face as he slowly played her, moving himself ever so slowly deeper into her, and then retreating.

Feeling Jerrod slip intimately into her with his playful rhythm pushed Kari’s emotion into overdrive; the feelings he delivered were surreal. He moved so slowly, like he was savoring the experience of being with her as she felt him push tightly and ever deeper into her.

When Jerrod had extended himself fully, he kissed Kari softly, rolling intimately with her under the comforter. A soft gentle, almost imperceptible rhythm joined their lip play as they shared each other’s warmth and the deeply intimate connection between them.

After long minutes, Kari could not help herself, she had to move away from Jerrod’s lips to take some badly needed deep breaths.

“Are you alright?” he asked again softly with a grin, watching her chest rise as her body flexed beneath him with the subtle rocking of his hips against hers.

“Jerrod,” she exhaled deeply as he continued moving slowly within her. “You’re going to—” she couldn’t finish her thought as a wave of desire mixed with raw pleasure trembled unyieldingly within her.

Jerrod kissed her again. “To what—?” he breathed a soft smile against her lips, watching what his soft, slow motions were doing to her.

Kari arched her back slowly as the first real feelings of building desire rippled through her. The magnitude of Jerrod’s

exceptional manhood moving snugly within her sent her emotions soaring. “—make me explode,” she rasped.

Jerrod exhaled heavily against her lips. Feeling Kari wrapped tightly around himself was doing the same thing to his own emotions.

“I need you, Kari,” he kissed her again, unable to keep his lips from her open pout. “I need to be making love to you. I need to be inside of you like this,” he breathed passionately against her lips.

“I need you inside me, Jerrod,” she admitted, returning his emotional kiss. Jerrod’s movement within her increased softly. He was swiftly building something massive, deeply within her. She could feel that his own desire was deeply building as well.

“You are so beautiful, Kari,” he whispered through a warm, heavy breath while looking at her, watching her gasp for breaths as he pushed intense feeling after feeling deeply through her. “I want to watch you come,” he pushed into her, whispering softly.

His visceral words again struck a primeval chord within her. She couldn’t stop holding on to him; moving herself with him. Jerrod was easily bringing her to the edge. Raw primitive feelings began to wash over her as she felt a deep desire for him pushing itself to the limit within her.

“Jerrod, don’t stop,” she pleaded, holding onto him and wrapping her legs around his. He kissed her passionately and then watched her in their slow, soft rhythm—watched her as he sent Kari over the edge into a powerful ecstasy that erupted loudly from deep within her. She screamed; her full-breasted chest rose with her arching back as her legs locked powerfully around his. Seeing her like this drove Jerrod’s feelings for her into something he’d never experienced before. It seemed he could almost feel what she was feeling inside, and it gripped him like nothing he’d ever felt.

The emotion that had detonated within Kari had been explosive, but Jerrod wasn't stopping. He watched her completely out of control as deep unbridled feeling continued to erupt from within her. With each rhythm, he pushed Kari into a new painful pleasure that coursed through her writhing and glistening body as the pleasure became too much for her.

Raised onto his forearms over her, it was the sight of Kari so unleashed, so out of control, calling out his name and arching her body beneath him that now sent Jerrod spilling powerfully over the edge as well. He buried himself deeply, fully, and warmly into her, softly, painfully calling out her name while rapturing forcefully within her. The pain on his face as his own pleasure ripped through his body made Kari feel deeply for him as she reached up to his face. Jerrod breathed out her name again and again. The deep rhythm of his flexing body soon softened and then subsided.

Both kissed each other; both still out of breath. "Are you okay," she ask softly, stroking his hair and looking at the glow of his skin in the dim light.

He looked at her, his breaths still heavy. "You are so—so fucking beautiful, Kari," he had to kiss her. Pulling his lips away he stroked her face with the backs of his fingers, slowly recovering from the most intense emotional peak and sexual release he'd ever had in his life.

Kari said nothing now as she touched his face and watched him recovering. She could swear she could feel his emotions for her and those emotions drew her even deeper into her own feelings for him.

Even expended, Jerrod continued to kiss and to tease her with his still very rock solid male. But Jerrod wasn't the only one who wasn't through with the evening. Kari rolled him over strongly onto his back.

"Just so you know big guy," she began, her hair and breasts moved teasingly against his skin, "I am so not done with you."

## DOMINION

Jerrod looked a bit astonished for a moment and then he grinned at Kari, his glistening chest still rising deeply, "I was right," he breathed heavily, smiling. "You are dangerous."

# 4

**T**he distant sound of snowplows broke into the soft dead quiet of the morning all around them. Kari stirred slowly back into reality, only this time, she knew exactly where she was and who was lying beside her. She opened her eyes to see Jerrod already awake and watching her with those beautiful blues of his. He smiled at her. She reached her hand out to him under the covers. Her hand found his and they locked fingers.

“How did you sleep?” he asked warmly.

“Really well,” she smiled.

“How’s your memory?”

“I think you and I made some memories last night.”

He smirked. “Kar, you know what I mean.”

“It’s not changed.” she sighed. “Still just a blank. Let’s not talk about it.”

Jerrod moved up to her under the covers and they wrapped themselves warmly around each other. Kari basked in the

sensation of Jerrod's skin warmly touching all over her; she couldn't help but sigh softly.

Laying close together, she moved herself softly against his skin. Although the warmth of her skin had quickly aroused him again, he just held her and brushed a sweet kiss every now and then along her neck and shoulder. The romantic moment was sweet, but as the sound the plows drew closer Kari was reminded that today was going to be filled with all kinds of stress and unhappiness. Her phone probably had dozens of messages from worried family members she now had never known.

"You're anxious about today." Jerrod moved his hand along her skin under the covers.

Kari sighed. "Yea."

"Listen, you don't have to do this alone. I'll be with you if you want."

"I'd really like that, Jerrod."

He hugged her like he would never let her go, and she held onto his strong arms as they reassured each other of their feelings and what they shared.

Kari kissed him sweetly and then slipped from his embrace and out from beneath the sheets. She stood in the cool room and yawned, lifting her arms over her head and giving Jerrod a teasing eye-full of her beautifully unclothed form in the dim light.

"Oh, you are just not being nice to me," he complained with a grin.

"We could go again?" she offered teasingly.

"Oh no!" A look of worry suddenly crossing his face. "You almost killed me last night. Multiple launches for you is fine. Guys were not built for doubles, let alone triples. Don't you dare come near me," he grinned, half hoping she would.

Kari flashed him one of her beautiful smiles and headed for the bathroom, closing the door. She knew herself far too well



after last night. She had easily outendured Jerrod, and teased him mercilessly, but she also knew that she had a long day ahead of her. She didn't want to see Jerrod outside of the covers right now. There was no way she'd have had any self-control if she caught any sight of him wearing only those luscious abs of his.

Breakfast was already on the table when Jerrod came out of the bedroom dressed in his typical Northwest style.

"Oh, hey, you made breakfast. You didn't have to do that," he assured.

"I wanted to. Isn't that what the wife is supposed to do?"

He grinned sitting down. "The 'wife'," he mused. He couldn't stop smiling at her.

She sat down across from him at the table and wrapped her stocking feet around his as they began to eat.

"I didn't realize you were vegetarian," she began.

"The lack of meat in the home give me away?"

She nodded.

"I wasn't always. Are you?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." Kari suddenly made a life-changing decision. "I am now."

"Well, that's kind of a big change. You don't need to change yourself because of me. You need to be your own person; make your own decisions for your own reasons."

"I don't," she began, and then paused.

"Don't what?"

"I don't want to disappoint you."

Jerrod looked at Kari. He set down his orange juice with a look of concern.

"Kari," he began seriously. "I will never lie to you. Ever. I might mess up; make mistakes; even accidentally hurt your

feelings. I might even refuse to tell you something. But I will never lie to you.”

She knew exactly what he meant. She hadn’t told him what she’d really been thinking. She realized that between the two of them, they communicated feelings far too well. Somehow she could read Jerrod’s body language and feelings like a book; and he was having no trouble reading hers as well.

She nodded. “Alright,” she began, “I don’t know that I’ve ever had that kind of freedom. It just feels like I’m used to being told what to do. Like someone’s always there telling me what to do and how to do it. Like I don’t have any freedom.”

“A man?” he asked curiously.

“Yea,” she nodded. “It’s always some man.”

The look on Jerrod’s face wasn’t a happy one.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m trying to piece you together.”

“Where I’m from?”

“Yea,” he said unhappily.

“You have something in mind, what is it?”

“I don’t know that I should tell you. I could be totally wrong and I don’t want to make something up that’s not true. I might give you a bad impression when you’re reunited with your family. I don’t want to do that.”

They heard the snowplows rumble by and both of them looked out the window to see three large plows in a kind of formation blowing huge sprays of snow into the trees along the side of the highway. They were clearing and sanding the road in a single pass.

“Looks like we’re going to have company,” Jerrod gestured out the window. A sheriff’s SUV with its own plow was pushing its way into the rest area toward them. Kari suddenly felt nervous. Jerrod squeezed her hand and gave her a smile.

Jerrod was already at the door opening it and inviting the officer in before he even made it to the RV through the knee-deep snow.

“Good morning, Sheriff,” Jerrod offered.

“Good morning,” the middle-aged and slightly weathered officer replied. He looked around the motor home as soon as he was out of the cold and gave Kari a nod. “Ma’am.”

Kari just smiled, but Jerrod was practically chummy. She didn’t like the police. She didn’t know why.

“I was wondering when you folks would be getting the plows out here,” Jerrod smiled.

“Oh, they’re out in force now,” the officer assured.

“You look like you could use a cup of coffee, Sheriff.”

“You know I could, but I can only stay a minute, I need to run with the plows and make some well visits. We’ve got missing people all over the place with this storm.”

“I’ve got a to-go cup I can put it in.”

“Well, if it’s not any trouble.”

“No trouble at all, Sheriff.”

The sheriff looked around the RV while Jerrod poured some coffee into a travel mug.

“My goodness, you two are travelling in style. I’ve seen some nice ones before but this is really well done.”

“Thanks. I designed it myself,” Jerrod offered. “Well, okay, I had a little help.”

“My compliments.”

“You like anything in your coffee, Sheriff?”

“Ah, no thanks, just black, please.”

Jerrod capped the cup and handed it to the officer.

“Did you two just get stranded by the snow?”

Jerrod nodded. “Actually, I rescued my friend here from her car just as the storm was getting going a couple miles back.”

"Really? Then that must have been your car we passed a few miles back. The driver's side window was smashed."

"What?" Kari feigned surprise.

The officer switched his coffee to the other hand and pulled a printed list from his jacket pocket.

"Either of you Jerrod Sharp or Elizabeth Connor?"

"I'm Sharp, she's Connor," Jerrod pointed.

"Oh, for crying out loud," he began with a grin. "Half the county's out looking for you two—well, and looking for about a dozen others as well."

"Well, you can cross us off your list, Sheriff. We're fine. As soon as I dig us out of here I'll take Miss Connor home."

The sheriff looked at Kari, "Miss Connor, you okay with that? Mr. Sharp here behaving himself?" the deputy looked at Jerrod with a half serious look now.

Kari mustered every ounce of Southern charm she had, "Oh, goodness, yes, Sheriff. Mr. Sharp has been an absolute gentleman."

"Would you like me to take you anywhere, Miss Connor," the Sheriff added.

"Honestly, Sheriff, I assure you, I am perfectly safe right here."

He nodded to her and then to Jerrod. "Just following protocol, folks. You can't be too careful these days. I'm glad the two of you are safe. I'll radio dispatch and tell them they can stop looking for you. I'm sure both your families will be relieved to know you're both okay."

Jerrod followed the officer outside and walked with him to his vehicle. Kari watched them from the window as he and Jerrod talked for several minutes. The officer was nodding and then shook hands with Jerrod just before getting back into his SUV plow.

Back inside, Jerrod shook the snow off of his Levis.

"That was a long talk," she probed, more than curious.

"You want to know what we were talking about."

"I do."

"I can't tell you."

"Jerrod!" she pouted, becoming a little upset.

"I'm sorry, I just don't want to ruin your reunion."

"Jerrod this reunion isn't going to be a happy one. I can feel it. There's a reason I don't like my family, why I can't or don't want to remember anything about them. You sense it too. Honestly, I appreciate your wanting to help me, but keeping things from me isn't helping."

Jerrod looked at Kari with the 'that's interesting' look of his. "You never told me you didn't like your family."

She thought about what she'd just said. "I guess didn't know I didn't like them until just now." She looked at him as he took his seat back at the table. "Jerrod, you know something about me that I don't. You're not telling me and it's beginning to scare me."

"Alright," he nodded, "I'll tell you." He warmed his hands on his coffee mug. "Kari, your home address is in the middle of cult central. The whole county you live in is run by your church."

"How do you know it's my church?"

"I don't, that's the problem. Your family might be one of the few normal ones living there. But the chances of that, in that county, are pretty slim. And the fact that you have this trepidation about them, doesn't bode well."

"I don't know anything about them or this church, Jerrod."

"No, but I'll bet a couple of days ago you did; before I rescued you. The odd thing is, and the reason why I don't know if my theory is true, is how someone as beautiful as you was able to leave the county by themselves? These people treat women like we're still living in the Dark Ages. They wrap their women in denim dresses and keep them on very short leashes.

They're practically slaves. Someone like you doesn't just leave town without a male escort."

"You seem to know a lot about them."

"Kari, my family isn't exactly poor. That church is constantly trying to recruit wealthy members from all over the state, doctors, attorneys, business people, even politicians. Anyone who grew up around here knows about them and how they operate."

"So that's what you were telling the sheriff?"

"I asked him if it was possible to report that you'd been found okay, but not to disclose your location and I explained why. He didn't have a problem with my request. He's not big on them either. Besides, I designed all of the brochures and yard signs for his boss' re-election campaign last year. Our Sheriff will keep a lid on it—at least for a while."

Kari was shaking her head, wondering how she could be part of such a mess. She let out a nervous sigh.

"It'll be alright, Kari," Jerrod said, taking her fingers in his and squeezing them reassuringly.

"The question is now, you were heading back home for some reason, and alone. Why?"

"Maybe I ran away?" she posed.

"They don't let people just run away, Kari. People try to leave the church and the county all the time. They keep their members hostage in a kind of emotional prison. And if that doesn't work they have their own Gestapo-like security force, literally. The people running this church will ruin lives, break laws, lie, commit blackmail, all for the sake of keeping the membership in line. Sometimes people even just disappear; no one knows if they escaped or what happened to them."

"Why don't the police put a stop to it?"

"The police are the church in that county, Kari. It owns everything there. Including the police."

"Don't the people there see what's happening?"

“No, they don’t; or they don’t care; or they don’t want to see it. I’ve been to those services before and I’ve seen how they work. It’s beyond impressive. They have something like fifty thousand members just at their main campus and dozens of satellite churches all over the state. They bring in millions of dollars every week from television broadcasts that are seen worldwide. It’s like they’ve created their own kind of Mecca here.”

“Why would anyone want to even join?”

“Because the church is a master at marketing and because it’s a great place to live, as long as you’re a paying member. Sure, their doctrines are whack-job and their women are slaves, but there’s absolutely no poverty in the county at all. It’s one of the smallest counties in the state, but over half of the people own their homes, and they’re debt-free. Everyone makes a really good living. They have schools that are second to none in the nation. Their hospitals are well funded and the doctors are some of the best trained in the world. There are practically no taxes in the county. They even eliminated property taxes a few years ago. The whole county’s a kind of boom town. And all of it financed by the members’ ‘sacrificial giving to Jesus,’” he mocked.

“It sounds like the ultimate commune.”

“In a way it is. Unless you’re a woman. Then it’s a private hell. The suicide rates among women in the county are some of the highest in the nation,” he frowned.

“Do you think that’s why I left?”

“Maybe. The real question is, how did you get out? I’ve heard that it’s next to impossible for a woman to even get a driver’s license in that county unless you’re somebody or somebody’s daughter.”

“Define somebody,” she asked.

“Like a close family member of one of the church’s leaders or one of their apostles.”

Kari looked at Jerrod. "This church has 'apostles'?" she offered dryly.

"Yea, they do. It's their ruling council. Twelve members who run everything. If you're lucky enough to be born into one of those families your privileges in the county are unlimited. The women of those families are granted exceptional status because they have to serve God's anointed."

Kari shook her head grinning, unable to help it. "Jerrod, you're saying all of this with a straight face, but it sounds like a joke. I just cannot believe that in the modern era people in America would choose to live like this."

"Believe it. I think this may be the world you came from. The Apostles are dangerous, evil people, Kari, and they're completely untouchable."



# 5

**A**fter breakfast, Jerrod shoveled them out of the snow drifts with the help of a couple of road crew who showed up in smaller vehicles with plows to clear out the rest area. Kari finished up the dishes and made the bed. She may not have been able to remember much before yesterday, but she was sure able to remember her feelings from last night. She mused the memory with Jerrod over and over as she tucked in the sheets. If Jerrod walked in right now and wanted to make love to her, she'd be all over him. Kari's feelings for Jerrod had grown strong. She wondered if her feelings for him were because her mind had nothing else to grab onto? Was her psyche just attaching all of her emotions onto Jerrod? They probably had a name for her mnemonic and now emotional condition. At least she realized that her emotions might be artificially inflated and influenced by her lack of memory. But then she thought, 'No, Jerrod is

experiencing the same feelings. I can feel him and he feels me,' she mused to herself. 'He's just as attracted to me as I am to him.' So much for her hypothesis, she thought. Still, artificial or not, Jerrod had been mind-blowing last night.

Kari felt the engine of the motorhome hum to life. It was quiet, like that of a fine automobile. When Kari got to the front she found Jerrod sitting in the driver's captain chair looking at so many electronic gauges and small computer monitors that it gave her the impression of an aircraft preparing for takeoff.

"How do we look?" she asked, taking the passenger's chair.

"Terrific. The generator didn't use as much fuel as I thought it would. We can refuel once we get to the resort."

Jerrod handed Kari her now fully charged iPhone. "I bet you have messages," he said.

She turned it on. "It's interesting that I remember my phone's passcode but not my own name," she said unlocking the phone and browsing the dozens of messages from people and phone numbers she either didn't know or just vaguely recognized. Kari realized that she didn't want to listen to them. She set the phone on the dash.

"Is it because of me you don't want to listen to them?" he asked.

Kari shook her head. "It's not about what you said or the church thing. I just don't want to deal with it right now. I want some time to think. To try to remember who I am, or maybe forget who I am."

"I can understand that. The sheriff's office will be letting your family know that you're okay. At least they'll be relieved you're alive, even if they don't know where you are at the moment."

Ironically enough Kari's phone began to ring out with a nice musical tune. She looked at the screen and recognized the name as one of the same people who had left call after call and

message after message, someone named Keith. Kari didn't know if he was her dad, her brother, her uncle or her husband. She ignored the call and turned off her phone.

"That Keith guy has been really persistent. Aren't you curious about who he is?" Jerrod asked.

Kari nodded. "Do you think I'm married?" she asked.

"I don't know," Jerrod admitted. "I hope not. I'd feel really bummed if you were. I don't think you're married though. Your husband's name would be somewhere in your purse. I didn't see anyone else's name on any of your ID's or insurance cards when I looked yesterday."

"No. Everything just has the Elizabeth name on it."

"Well, I think it's safe to say you're not married," he smiled at her. Jerrod touched a couple of controls on the dash that began retracting the expanded sections of the RV automatically until the unit looked like a sleek black bus.

Jerrod looked at Kari. "Are you ready?"

"For what?"

"The rest of our lives."

She gave Jerrod a smile. "Only if it's with you."

"I'm not going anywhere without you, Kari."

Kari couldn't help but give Jerrod a warm kiss.

He pulled the RV out onto the newly plowed snow and then onto the highway at the typical snow-safe RV speed.

Already they were being passed by a few cars outfitted with ski racks equipped for the slopes. They passed beautiful pines laden with new fallen snow; and half-frozen lakes and ponds. The snow had softly blanketed the meadows and stream banks in a luscious new smooth powder that all glistened in the morning sun.

It wasn't long before they reached the base of a small mountain and turned into what looked like a tiny town of

snow-covered restaurants, shops, gas stations and hotels all built from logs or hewn timbers. It all looked very rugged and quaint. Kari had the feeling she'd been here before.

"This place," she began, "I know this place. It looks familiar."

"Really? Maybe you've been here to go skiing?"

"Maybe."

Jerrod refueled the rig at one of the gas stations and then they headed up a short hill toward a larger three-story log hotel at the base of the slopes. The ski lifts were already running with a few people taking in the fresh powder on the runs. They parked in one of the lodge's numerous RV spaces.

"I had reservations for a room here the night before last, but fate obviously had other plans."

"Are we staying here?"

"If you want to. I haven't been skiing all year. I'm probably a little rusty. We should see if you know how."

"I really think I've been here before."

The hotel's lower floor was like a grand mini mall with the ski lodge, a few different types of restaurants and ski shops. Kari tried to look incognito as Jerrod checked them in with the front desk. She smiled as she heard him use the names 'Jerrod and Kari Sharp' to check them in.

Their third floor room was nice, rustic and quite huge for a hotel room, with a separate bedroom and two bathrooms.

"Are you expecting company?" she asked.

"Actually I was. But it looks like the storm may have delayed everyone. We might have some of my friends join us—or not, it depends on how you feel."

"I don't want to ruin your vacation plans."

Jerrod walked up to her and held her warmly, making her smile. "You are not ruining anything, Kari," Jerrod assured her. "If anything, you have just made the whole ski trip much, much better. I cannot imagine having a better time. Besides,

this is about you now and helping you find yourself. Sometimes fate changes things. You just have to roll with it and do the best you can. The best we can.”

Kari relaxed as she folded herself into his embrace. Jerrod held her like he did the first time they had embraced with the both of them standing together for minutes on end moving softly with each other in a kind of imperceptible slow dance. She drew strength from his warmth and his feelings for her.

“We should find you some warm clothes and some skis.”

The thought of doing some shopping lifted Kari’s spirits.

Downstairs in the pro shop Kari tried on a couple of ski outfits that Jerrod not only liked but she could feel were literally turning him on. The warm ski pants fit her like a glove and the jacket was well fitted for someone with her chest size. As nicely dressed as she was now, Kari only hoped that she knew how to ski. She was also able to find some simple clothes, some new jeans and warmer shirts.

Jerrod insisted on paying for her new clothes, equipment, and tickets. He smirked at her as the guy at the counter couldn’t seem to tear his eyes from Kari dressed in her new snow bunny outfit. They collected her skis, boots and poles, and their lift tickets, and then headed for the RV to pickup Jerrod’s gear.

It was almost noon by the time Jerrod and Kari stepped into their bindings. They both coasted easily to a short chairlift line leading to a beginner run.

“Well, you seem to know something about skiing,” Jerrod complimented, noting how smoothly and easily Kari slipped into line at the chair lift as they rode the chair into the air.

“I guess I do,” she agreed. The skis felt very natural to her. They rode the short chairlift together to the top of the small hill. Kari felt unusually excited to be sitting in a chairlift seat. She

could already tell that the little hill they were heading for was not going to be a challenge. Jerrod discovered that Kari was right at home on the slope as both of them ate-up the small moguls in a kind of race to the bottom. She sprayed to a stop in front of him, her poles already under her arms.

Jerrod slid up next to her at the bottom of the run pushing his sunglasses up. "Jeeze, Kari, ski much?" he quipped with a half grin.

"Evidently," she smiled beautifully at him.

"You are so going to kick my ass," he chuckled, shaking his head.

"You kicked mine last night," she reminded him.

"No, I distinctly remember that being the other way around," he corrected.

"Race you to the lift," she sped off.

Jerrod was suddenly intrigued as he watched Kari slide skillfully toward the chair gates. She moved like a master skier. The truth was she seemed to have quite a few hidden talents; not the least of which had been her endurance in the bedroom last night. Her stamina and sexual appetite had been way beyond his own. She was also a lot stronger than she looked. More than once last night she had overpowered him—somehow. He'd enjoyed it, but it gave him some pause about her.

The ride up to the top of the mountain with Kari was fun. The powder was amazing and at times neither of them could even see their skis as the fluffy snow drifted up past their knees. They took turns spraying each other on their way down the slopes. On one of the plateaus Kari ballet kicked her skis around and talked to Jerrod while skiing backwards. The move appeared effortless for Kari to do. Kari pushed away from him and ballet danced along the plateau with several elegant moves that made her look like she was an Olympic figure skater on

ice instead of a skier on snow. Kari couldn't remember ever having lessons, but her body just seemed to know what to do.

After several runs they were both a little thirsty and getting hungry. Jerrod locked their equipment to a rack and they headed into the lodge's cafeteria. It was well after the lunch rush and the place was not all that busy now. It felt good to sit down with their food.

"I think I'm out of shape," Kari lamented. "I actually fell once."

"Kari," Jerrod looked at her with a smile, "there is absolutely nothing wrong with your shape. Besides, you only fell because I pushed you."

"Yea, what was up with that?"

"I wanted to roll in the powder with you," he grinned.

"Is that what that was?" she flipped her long hair back.

"Actually, it was more of a test."

"Oh?"

"You know, you're really strong."

Kari looked at Jerrod. "What do you mean?" she munched a Dorito from a bag on her tray.

"I pinned you down in the powder to kiss you."

"Yea?"

"And then you pushed yourself on top of me."

"So? You let me."

Jerrod shook his head. "No. No, I didn't."

"What are you saying? That I'm stronger than you? Hardly."

"Kari, I enter bodybuilding competitions all the time. I've even come close to winning some. As weight trainers, we're not exactly weak guys. I probably outweigh you by almost a hundred pounds. Yet, last night, there were a couple of times I really tried to escape your grip, you know, be all dominating," he shook his head. "I couldn't pull away from your grasp."

“Really? I mean, I saw you trying to. I liked watching your muscles flex, but I thought you were just toying with me.”

Jerrod shook his head. “And just now, up on the side of the run in the powder, I was kissing you, but I wasn’t going to let you up. I was kind of testing this, so I held you there with everything I had. But you just tossed me off and then you pinned me yourself.”

“Jerrod, you let me push you off.”

“No, Kari, really I didn’t.”

He held out his hand with his elbow on the table. “Here, arm wrestle me.”

“Jerrod, here? In front of all of these people?”

“They’re not going to know anything. Please?”

Kari nodded and took hold of his hand from across the table.

“Now just go easy. Resist me and try to keep your arm from moving down.”

She nodded. She felt Jerrod’s hand flex and some pressure from his grip around her hand but not much else. She looked at him. He was clearly putting some real effort into this test of his. A lot of effort in fact. A very determined look washed over his face, as if he were really struggling. Their hands never moved. Jerrod exhaled deeply as he stopped trying, and then brought her hand back down onto the table with his hand on top of hers.

“Kari, what just happened — is impossible.”

“Jerrod, this is stupid joke. You didn’t even try to move my hand. This isn’t funny.”

“Kari, this isn’t a joke. I just gave you almost everything I had a moment ago. I bench press way more than you weigh.”

“I,” she began. “I don’t know what to say. I was just holding your hand like you told me to. It really didn’t feel like you were even trying.”



Jerrod exhaled again, shaking his head and smiling. "Kari you are incredibly strong. Scary strong. I've never met anyone like you."

"Jerrod you're kind of scaring me now."

"I don't mean to. I'm sorry. I'm not meaning to sound dramatic."

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by a thirty-something woman wearing a light blue denim overcoat and a bun hairdo. "Excuse me, I hate to interrupt," she asked in a sickeningly sweet tone, "but I just have to ask: Aren't you Elizabeth Connor? Apostle Connor's daughter?"

Jerrod suddenly looked at Kari with raised eyebrows.

Kari smiled at the woman.

Jerrod could see that Kari was stumbling for something to say. He stepped into the conversation, "I'm sorry ma'am but we're in the middle of a private lesson."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I just wanted to say that I absolutely loved your last DVD. Sorry to interrupt." And then she hurried off like she'd just committed some unpardonable sin.

Kari looked at Jerrod, one of her own eyebrows raised.

Jerrod did not look happy. He just stared at her with a shocked and worried look of sudden surprise.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

He began shaking his head, "I am such an idiot. I don't know why I didn't realize this sooner. Jesus, I should have put two and two together. I guess I just didn't—think."

"Think what?"

Jerrod was still shaking his head in disbelief, "Oh, this is unreal." He buried his face into his palms. "No, no, no, no, this cannot be happening."

"What?" she asked.

"Connor. Why'd it have to be Connor?" Jerrod asked rhetorically, obviously musing to himself quietly. "Why

couldn't it have been Rios, or Brandt? Oh, no. I have to be the one to find Apostle Connor's daughter! Kari!" Jerrod looked at her, "You're Elizabeth Connor! The daughter—of Apostle Connor."

"So?" she asked.

"So?!" He leaned in close whispering emphatically, "Kari! I'm doing Apostle Connor's daughter!"

She looked at Jerrod. "Who's Apostle Connor?"

"Oh, Jeeze. Kari!" he was shaking his head. "Your father is the head Apostle of the Dominion!"

"He is? What's the Dominion?"

"It's the name of your church, your whole denomination. You have no idea how famous you are. You don't know your own family right now. I do, unfortunately."

"So you know who I am!?"

"Well, yes and no, obviously. I mean, I don't watch your broadcasts or buy your books. I've probably seen you before here and there on TV, but before yesterday I wouldn't have been able to pick you out of a line-up."

"I write books?"

"And music. You're like the star of the show."

"Get out!"

"No, I'm serious. They put you on billboards, Kari. And TV commercials. If I tuned into one their radio stations right now we'd probably be listening to one of your songs."

"Oh my gosh. Jerrod. I don't—"

"Remember any of this?" he finished her thought.

Kari could feel the blood draining out of her face. She just shook her head ever so slightly.

Jerrod reached out to her, taking her hand in his again and squeezing it.

"Jerrod, what am I going to do?"

"I don't know. We should probably try to keep a low profile; maybe we need to get you a disguise of some kind."

Kari put on her sunglasses.

Jerrod nodded. "Yea, that's probably better. Only now you look like a bug," he smiled.

"Quit," she drawled.

"We probably just scandalized that poor woman," Jerrod started. "The Grand Apostle's own daughter dressed in fashionable, form-fitting skiwear. Turning heads with her amazing curves."

"Would you quit, already? I feel bad enough."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't make light of the situation. But, we need to think about this. Why don't you head upstairs to the room and let me put the equipment away. I'll be up in few minutes and we'll talk about how we're going to deal with this."

Kari already felt like she wanted to disappear anyway. "Okay. Consider yourself kissed. I'll see you upstairs."

Jerrod squeezed her hand again, giving her one of his dimpled smiles she'd grown so fond of seeing.

## 6

**C**losing the door to their room brought Kari some sense of solitude and relief. She was thankful that there was hardly anyone in the hotel at the moment, but she knew that would change. People would be clamoring to hit the slopes with all of the new fallen powder and the tiny après-blizzard resort town would soon be packed with skiers. It was interesting that she had discovered that she loved powder and loved skiing. Jerrod wasn't bad either.

Seeing that poor woman in the cafeteria dressed in her denim overcoat gave Kari a rush of emotions that she was still trying to sort out. Everything from how the woman had been dressed, her demeanor, no makeup, 'the look' on her face. Kari had seen that 'look' before and she hated it. In fact, it made her angry. She didn't know why. Was she angry at the woman? 'The look'? Or was it what that 'look' represented? She didn't

know. A couple of days ago she knew. But those memories were lost to her now.

Seeing the woman in denim also seemed to stir something deep inside Kari's psyche. Like a part of her that once was lost was now aggressively pushing itself to the surface, giving Kari some new clarity of who she was. So she was the daughter of one of these apostles, was she? Somehow that thought in and of itself stirred within her a newfound strength she didn't know she had. Kari felt suddenly angry at herself, as if she'd been behaving like some pathetic, whiny wimp when it came to wanting to know more about herself. But now, thanks to this unknown woman, somehow, her feelings and memory had been jogged. Kari understood that a being a coward was not who she really was. 'No. I don't run—from anything,' she thought.

She decided it was time to stop running from her unwanted identity and start looking at who this Elizabeth Connor person really was. On the one hand she was a little uneasy about her life before the accident, but on the other hand she was now very curious. Could this really be her? A kind of celebrity and the member of a powerful and wealthy religious family?

Kari changed into some of the new clothes Jerrod had bought for her earlier in the mini-mall downstairs and sat down in a comfortable room chair to discover who she really was. She decided to start with her own phone.

Keith Connor had more messages on her phone than anyone else. 'We must be close,' she thought. She started with the first message.

"Hey Sis," his message began. Kari was suddenly awash with feeling and the dull ache in her head returned with a vengeance upon hearing Keith's voice. Kari dropped the phone from her ear and nursed the throb in her head. 'This can't be good,' she thought. The throb subsided within a minute, but she was hesitant to attempt to play the message

again. Keith's voice sounded similar to Jerrod's, soft and masculine, absent Jerrod's Northwest accent. Keith's voice sounded calmly Southern and it did leave her with something she wasn't sure she'd feel—warmth. She didn't know who he was or anything about him, but she had the feeling that she could trust him with her life. She restarted the message from the beginning. There was only a slight twinge of pain in her head this time.

*"Hey Sis, the office said you left already. I guess you're talking with someone else. They say it's gonna snow really heavy on the roads tonight. Maybe you should get a room in town before heading home, just to be safe. Call me when you get this."*

Kari suddenly had the urge to call Keith and let him know that she was okay, but he probably already knew that by now. He just didn't know where she was. She wanted to keep it that way for the time being. There was worry in his next message.

*"Sis, you gotta call me and let me know you're alright. I just sent you a text. Call me as soon as you get this."*

The next message grew even more frantic.

*"Sis, Mom and Dad are getting really upset. Where are you!? You've dropped off the GPS. You've gotta call us!"*

GPS? Oh, no! Kari immediately tapped the settings icon on her phone and disabled the location services. It now looked like she was going to be dealing with her family, like it or not. It was all the more reason to try to find out more about them.

Kari finished listening to her messages from a mom and dad she didn't know and worried friends she'd never met, all

of whom were all but crying for her to call them. It broke her heart hearing their voices begging her to call them.

The next message had an odd number that didn't look like any phone number she'd ever seen.

*"We know who you are, Elizabeth, or should we say, 'Kari'! Yes, we know who you are and what you're trying to do to us! You will never get this message but your family will and they should take it as a warning from God not to become a stumbling block to the Saints! You might be frozen here but you'll soon be burning in hell, where you belong!"*

The voice was masked behind an audio filter. Kari thought about that for a moment. She knew about audio filters. She was, according to that woman in the cafeteria and Jerrod, a musician, and apparently a good one. She thought she might be able to restore the voice in ProTools to its original state. That suddenly made her smile. Yea, she knew ProTools. What studio musician worth their salt didn't?

'So that's why my tank was empty,' she suddenly thought. Someone was trying end her life! To the world it would look like an accident; but to her family, they would know it was murder, a warning to not be a 'stumbling block'? What was that all about? Was this attempt on her life over some church doctrine? Someone willing to murder someone else over some stupid belief?

Kari needed to know more about her family and herself. If her family knew she was alive they might be telling the person who was masking their voice that she was still alive also. Whoever wanted her dead would probably really want her dead now that they had exposed themselves in the voicemail. Was Kari now the target of some whack-job fundamentalist? According to Jerrod, she was the fundamentalist.

Jerrod closed the hotel room door behind him. He was trying to look nonchalant but there was worry written on his face that he was trying to hide. Kari set down her phone and looked at him.

“What happened?” she asked. “You look worried.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“We can’t seem to hide anything from each other, Jerrod.”

“No, apparently we can’t. Church security is all over the resort looking for you. It’s probably only a matter of time before they find you.”

“So, let them find me. I’m not going anywhere.”

Jerrod looked at Kari a little surprised as she looked back at him. “That kind of confidence looks really good on you. Where did that come from?”

“I think, I’m slowly remembering things; maybe not who I am but at least what I am.”

“That’s good, I hope.”

“You hope?”

“Kari, I have to be honest here. My fear is that you’ll suddenly find all your memories, and then suddenly that’s what I will become, a memory.”

Kari got up from the chair. She embraced Jerrod warmly. She somehow felt his uneasiness. He was nervous about them, about her. She understood.

“You have to take chances, Jerrod. Besides, this connection that you and I have; what we feel between us; that has nothing to do with my memory. You and I were made to be with each other.”

He sighed heavily. “I hope you’re right, Kari. These church security people just give me the creeps. They’re like unlicensed Secret Service. They just do whatever the hell they want. I don’t know how they found us?”

“I do. It was my phone.”



“Oh. Duh.” He frowned. “I should have thought of that.”

“No worries. I shut off the GPS.” Then she smirked, “They know I’m in town, they just don’t know where in town I am exactly.”

“So what do you want to do? Stay, leave?” he asked her.

She pulled away and looked at Jerrod with a wry grin.

“Uh-oh,” Jerrod began, a feeling of amorous trepidation rising through him, “I’ve seen *that* look before.”

Kari pulled Jarrod into the dim light of the bedroom and they replayed their slow dance kiss from the afternoon before, just holding each other in their warm embrace that they’d grown used to sharing in the short time they’d been together.

“If you keep this up,” he drew a heavy breath between their deeply passionate kisses, “I will be relieving you of these nice new clothes of yours.”

“You and what army,” she breathed into his open mouth as his hands slipped around her fitted denim ass. “I’m stronger than you are, remember?”

Kari felt her top becoming un-tucked as Jerrod slowly relieved her of her pullover.

“It won’t matter,” he breathed against her lips as she felt him loosening her bra.

“Oh, why is that?”

Jerrod lifted her arms, locking her fingers together onto the top of her head. Apparently it was Jerrod’s turn to play the game she’d started.

“What are you going to do to me?” she asked in a bated breath.

Jerrod ran the back of his finger lightly along the skin of her abs and then up to her chest and over the firming tip of her breast until it came to rest on her lips. “Torture,” he grinned lightly, moving his finger against her lips. “Slow. Relentless. Unending. Torture.”

His words drew up within her a deeply rippled breath. It was unbelievable the raw emotional power Jerrod had over her.

“You wouldn’t dare torture the daughter of an apostle?” she warned.

“You need to be paid back for last night,” he assured her, moving in to lightly taste her lips with his own while ultra lightly caressing her sides and her underarms with his warm fingers. “I want to see you writhing in agony. Just like you did to me.”

Kari watched her thickly muscled Jerrod, still fully clothed, kneel down to unbutton her jeans. He unzipped them slowly, folding the denim away from her skin until he revealed her thin, almost transparent panties. She closed her eyes, tipping her head back while feeling the sensation of Jerrod’s fine lips on her skin between her open pants. She felt his fingers sliding up the inside of one of her thighs and then grip her tightly covered ass while his lips descended onto her panties. Somehow Jerrod was touching her just the way she needed him to.

He drew down her denim, slipping the pants off slowly to around her toned thighs, revealing her fine curves covered only by thin underwear. Jerrod wasted no time in drawing his lips across the front of her panties, kissing her greedily while his palms gripped her firmly curved ass.

Kari couldn’t remember if she’d ever been kissed like this before. She should have been able to because the sensations Jerrod was teasing her with sent tremors of anticipation all the way down the inside of her legs, curling her toes.

“You’re going to kill me doing that,” she breathed with an open pout.

Jerrod smiled to himself as more than his lips began teasing Kari’s panties. With the sensations Jerrod pushed into her with his lips, his tongue, Kari wanted to spread her thighs wider,

but with her jeans holding her thighs, she couldn't move. Jerrod had her hips moving softly with his teases now. He could hear her breaths deepening. But Kari's primal feminine scent was beginning to have its own affect on Jerrod under his own jeans. He drew her panties down to her jeans, giving himself the full scent of her female desire. His tongue teased her, slipping between her feminine folds to feel and tease her firm button.

Jerrod smiled to himself hearing Kari whimpering audibly in shoots of ecstatic pain. He drew down her clothes until she had nothing on, not even her socks, while his tongue and lips teased her sparingly between her spreading thighs.

"OH! This is so not fair." Kari breathed, watching the fully clothed Jerrod tease her mercilessly while she stood completely naked with her hands and fingers still locked behind her head.

Jerrod stopped teasing her with tongue as his lips now moved up her trimmed bush to her abs. His tongue found her nipples now while one of his fingers continued between her thighs as another hand palmed her ass.

"You need to undress too."

"No—" He bit down playfully on her hardened nipple, rolling it between his teeth.

Kari gasped.

"—I think I'm going to keep you this way."

His words gave her a shiver. She was vulnerable. Naked. Yet the way he touched her like this made her feel deeply desired. She knew she was much, much stronger than he was, at any moment she could break free of his little spell. But he was touching her, moving his hands over her. He slipped himself behind her, his hands simply gliding over her skin, his fingers touching her lightly, intimately. She could barely stand now. Her body was on fire with building ecstasy.

"What's the matter, Kari?" he asked.

“Jerrod—” bumbled from her lips as her hips rocked uncontrollably now.

She dropped her hands from her head to lock her fingers around his powerful arms as her body filled with a powerful desire.

“I like seeing you naked.” He offered quietly next to her ear.

“I need to be naked with you.” The desire was so thick in her voice her words were like whispers. Kari’s skin had taken on a soft glow with Jerrod’s slow gentle teasing. She wanted to come. Now! And badly. But her body just wasn’t there yet.

Jerrod slipped around to the front of her again kneeling, his lips and tongue returning to her amazing scent. Kari spread her thighs wide giving Jerrod full access to her folds. Her hands gripping and slipping through his hair. There was suddenly no turning back now.

Kari slowly drew up to detonation. She tried not to scream as bolt after bolt of excruciating ecstasy leapt through her body. Her legs lost their strength, but Jerrod’s palms on her ass kept her from falling while his tongue pushed magnitude quakes of elation into her body. But even after the quakes had subsided, his tongue continued. He sent aftershock upon aftershock into her now very sensitive clit.

“NO. Jerrod! Please!” she protested.

He didn’t listen.

“AAHHH!” Kari called out in desperation as Jerrod tortured her as promised.

When it was clear Kari had finally subsided, Jerrod stood, taking her into his arms, kissing her, the scent of herself all over his lips.

“Are you okay?” he kissed.

“God no.” She returned his kisses heavily.

“I’m not done with you.”

Kari took an uncontrolled breath.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the daughter of an apostle, Kari wasn't sure if she'd ever showered with a guy in her life, well, not that she could remember anyway. It became a kind of new experience for her. Both of them became an aroused, soapy, make-out mess the whole time.

Jerrod towed her off carefully.

"This seems vaguely familiar," he grinned.

"I wasn't exactly lucid last time," she offered. "What were you thinking?"

"Are you trying to get me in trouble?" he asked.

"No, I'm just curious."

"Kari, honestly, I've seen naked women before. My only thought at that moment was to get you warmed up and save your life." He turned her around and began drying her front. She used the dangling part of the towel to begin drying off his chest.

"You didn't look at me?"

"You mean ogle?" he offered, drying her thoroughly.

"Yea."

"Well, not at first. But then you started coming around, moving in the water, stretching, arching your back. It was how you moved. That's when I really started to notice you; how beautiful you were; these curves of yours," Jerrod tenderly cupped his hand around the side of her very full breast, "how amazingly beautiful you were. I even thought to myself, 'why didn't I see this while laying you in the tub?'"

The towel was now on his back as she dried Jerrod off.

"Did I turn you on?" she asked, grinning.

"Kari, what do you think?" he retorted dryly.

"I'll take that as a yes," she smiled.

“This attraction we have between us; I think I was feeling it even when you were unconscious.”

Back in the bedroom they dressed together. Kari thought that she'd like to just spend the whole evening wrapped around a very naked Jerrod, but she knew she had some loose ends to tie up. Already she had been thinking about what she needed to do.

Someone out there didn't like her—enough to want her dead. They'd already made an attempt on her life but she could see that they'd been either cowardly or shoddy in going about it. They'd tipped their hand, which meant to Kari that they'd either try something boldly desperate or sink back into the woodwork for now to wait for another chance. She hoped it would be the latter. It would give her some time to re-acclimate, to get reacquainted with her mysterious and evidently somewhat notorious family.

Jerrod went into the living room to make some dinner reservations while Kari attempted to primp with what little makeup she had in her purse. When she finished, she found Jerrod walking around the room on the phone with his dad. It sounded like a good conversation. Jerrod didn't mention her at all. When he saw Kari was ready to go, Jarrod carefully moved their conversation to an end.

“How are your mom and dad?”

“They're fine. They were a little worried about the storm but they're relieved I'm okay.”

“I take it you didn't mention you picked up a stray?” she smiled.

“No. that would get them very curious and mom would want to know every detail. No thanks.”

Kari smirked. She felt like she somehow knew that feeling.

“I managed to get us a reservation downstairs, barely. The hotel is packed. I still don't understand why you want to show

yourself in public like this. You're calculating something; I can see it."

She grinned at how ridiculously easily Jerrod read her, even when she was trying to hide it. "You know this whole empathy thing we have—it's starting to get really annoying."

"Yea, well, it's there. So tell me what's going on?"

Kari wasn't going to try to lie to him. Not after this morning. "I listened to my voicemail while you were putting the equipment away."

"Oh? And ..."

"So my family and a bunch of friends were all worried sick. But then there was this ..." she played the ominous voicemail to Jerrod.

"Oh, Jesus!" Jerrod now knew exactly what happened. "So someone sabotaged your car."

Kari nodded. "We have to make an appearance, Jerrod, and a grand one."

"That's not exactly what my reaction would be. Why?"

"First of all, I'm not a coward. Whoever is out to kill me, I want them to know they failed; I want them to know that their little plot was botched. I want to embarrass them in front of whomever their little group is. Take them down a notch or two."

Jerrod folded his arms, listening. "Okay."

"The other thing is I want to be seen with you."

"Why?"

"Jerrod, my car is still sitting on the side of the road, abandoned, the window smashed with me and my purse missing. That just looks like all kinds of foul play. We need to be seen together having a great time. I don't know who these people are who were trying to take me out. But I don't want to give them any opportunity to turn this into anything that might look like a kidnapping—we need to protect you."

Jerrod unfolded his arms. He walked up to her and backed her against the wall lifting her chin with his finger, his powerful body trapping her. "What makes you think you've not been kidnapped and I really am the bad guy?"

"Because bad guys don't rescue the people they're trying to kill?"

He wrinkled his lips. "Oh, good point."

"What time's our reservation?"

"Now."

"Guess we'll have to pick this up later."

He pulled her away from the wall. "How in the world ..." he began.

"... did you get mixed up with someone like me?" she finished.

"Yea. I'd like to know where your name came from also. You remembered that name but not your own. Everyone is going to know you by Elizabeth. So who do I call you now?"

"Jerrod," she moved her hand over the side of his face. "I still don't know exactly who I am. But to you, I will always be Kari. Who ever that is."



# 7

**J**ust as they had expected, the entire hotel was abuzz with people from multiple counties converging on the fresh powder. It was already dark but that didn't stop the hard-core skiers who were taking advantage of the well-lit runs for night skiing.

At the entrance of the restaurant a young and somewhat snooty hostess ignored them for a minute until Jerrod got her attention. Jerrod didn't know if she was surfing Facebook on her reservation screen or if she was just confused.

"I'll be right with you sir," she excused herself firmly and left them standing at the counter.

"Good grief." Jerrod said, obviously annoyed after a couple of minutes.

There was now a short line behind them but no sign of the hostess. Jerrod picked up a couple of menus and walked Kari to an empty table for two right next to a window with a

beautiful view of the little snow-lit town below. It was like looking at a snowy painting of lights.

A friendly waiter approached them and took their drink orders while making the typical sales pitch for the daily specials. When Jerrod informed the man they were vegetarian and asked for his recommendations, the waiter was more than professional with a suggestion that sounded like something Kari really wanted to try.

It wasn't long before their drinks arrived. Kari took out her phone and turned on the location services fully knowing what that would cause.

"Any guesses on how many minutes it will take for them to find us?"

"Ten," Jerrod offered.

"I say five."

They were both wrong.

The snooty hostess now approached their table looking unhappy. She addressed Jerrod. "Sir, I didn't seat you. This table is reserved."

"Absolutely it is. I had a reservation, for Sharp."

"I'm sorry, but this table is reserved for another party, I'll need to reseat you."

"Young lady, I have no intention of moving. If you like, you can bring the hotel manager to our table and I will have a discussion with him or her about your highly unprofessional behavior."

Jerrod's comment seemed to completely unsettle any modicum of professionalism she was holding onto. "Sir, I'm afraid I am going to have to ask you and your party to leave our restaurant. You're not welcome here if you cannot abide by our policies."

"Well then I suggest you ask the four officers who just entered to remove us," he nodded toward the restaurant's entrance.

The hostess turned to see the small posse of dark-uniformed, armed officers and she began to storm toward them.

"That was fast," Kari mused.

"Yea, it was. I thought it'd take them at least a few minutes to get up the stairs."

The hostess approached the group of officers and tried to talk to them, but they all but completely ignored her, literally moving her aside as they made their way deliberately toward Kari and Jerrod's table. Three of officers hung back several feet talking quietly into their almost invisible headsets while a captain approached their table. He was excruciatingly polite.

Kari felt a visceral love-hate feeling moving through her as she looked at his black uniform. He looked like policeman, only he was dressed much more elegantly, with a designer dress shirt and a matching black tie and a fitted insulated jacket. His subtle patch insignia blended well with his uniform and it told Kari that he was unapologetically part of the infamous Dominion Security force.

The men and women of Dominion Security were all very professional, all business and exceptionally high-tech. The officer openly wore a laser-sighted semi-automatic reduced-recoil service weapon with chemically accelerated, Teflon coated, armor-piercing magnum rounds that were technically illegal in the state.

"Your Excellency, are you alright?" the officer asked very politely.

Jerrod's eyebrow went up.

"I'm fine, Whiteman," she smiled, reading his fine solid silver name badge. "I just had a bit of a delay on the way home because of the storm. But with all of this luscious new snow I had to stop to get into some of it."

"Completely understandable," the officer nodded. "All of us were very relieved to hear that you'd been found by the

sheriff's office this morning. We kept losing your position, however. Is your phone malfunctioning?" he asked professionally, politely.

"It got left it outside and it froze. I'll probably need a new one."

"No problem, Excellency. I'll have IT send you out a new one right away. Can I give his Eminence any messages?"

"Just tell everyone I'm fine and that I'll be staying here for a couple of days."

"I'll inform your assistants in case they need to clear your schedule."

"Oh, thank you, Whiteman. You're sweet," Kari smiled.

"Just part of our duty, Excellency."

"Oh, Whiteman, can you make sure we're not disturbed any further this evening?"

"Absolutely. Enjoy your evening, Excellency." The officer then nodded at Jerrod who was smiling politely, "Sir."

Jerrod and Kari watched as the security squad made its way to the front of the restaurant. A tall man dressed in a cheap suit was now standing next to the now red-faced hostess. It looked like both were being given some very firm instructions by Whiteman. They could see both the manager and hostess nodding. It was pure intimidation. The officers had no real jurisdiction or authority outside of their own county, but with their reputation they apparently had no problem getting their point across to the restaurant's management.

"That was interesting—Excellency," Jerrod mocked, looking at Kari over his wine glass with a factiously raised eyebrow.

"I know, right?" Kari grinned, setting down her glass.

"You played that amazingly well for someone without a memory," Jerrod said taking a sip.

"I just did what came naturally. I guess there are things I just instinctively remember."

“Well church security showed up at just the right time. Can you believe that hostess was actually asking us to leave? And I thought I was arrogant.”

“She’s new Jerrod. I could feel she was confused about what to do, and she had a really frustrated look on her face. They probably didn’t train her very well. These kids don’t know anything about customer service until they’ve been on the job for a few months at least. I hope she doesn’t get fired. We all make mistakes.”

“So you’re an expert in customer service?” he grinned.

Kari took a sip from her glass. “Are you serious? Jerrod, I am a customer service goddess, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“How’s that?” he gave her a quizzical look.

“Look at what I’m selling.”

“The Gospel?” he questioned.

“Exactly. You don’t grow a church into something the size of Dominion by being average. You have to be exceptional.”

“You are remembering things.”

Kari nodded. “Yea, I am.”

“That makes me nervous, Kari,” Jerrod frowned.

“Would you stop? I’m not going to leave you.”

“Yes. You are.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Because I’m not part of your church; I’m not even considered Christian by today’s standards. But you, you have a legacy to uphold, a way of life I don’t believe in. How is that going to work?” Jerrod shook his head and answered his own question. “It’s not.”

“Are you going to leave me?”

“Never,” he answered immediately looking into her eyes with complete sincerity. It sent goose bumps up and down Kari’s body. His answer made her feel sincerely warm inside, like he really did care deeply for her.

“Jerrod, let’s not destroy the relationship before it even gets going. You don’t know me and I don’t know you, not really. I think the two of us may have some grand surprises awaiting each other. I’m not asking you to convert to anything. Do you want me to become something I’m not?”

“No,” he assured.

“Sometimes, when I’m playing music, the whole tenor of the sermon changes from what the planning sheet says to do to something totally different, and you just have to roll with it. The emotion of the moment takes precedence. You have to be able to feel what the speaker is feeling, changing from what you planned to happen to what actually happens, and not getting upset because a month’s worth of practice just went out the window because the emotion of the moment went in a totally different direction.”

Jerrod looked at her with his piercing blues. He understood what she was saying.

“Right now, I’m following the emotion of the moment, wherever it leads.”

“Are you really willing to throw away a lifetime of work to follow this—particular emotion?” he asked.

“I am,” she assured. “What about you?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what I’m willing to throw away or keep at this point. I do know one thing. I am not leaving you, Kari. You’re the only woman who’s ever made me feel like this. It’s not just some lover’s crush. It’s,” he paused shaking his head, “primal, somehow. You feel it too. I can’t explain it.”

She agreed with him.

“Jerrod,” she began. “Do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Trust those instincts.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Tonight’s top story remains the massive blizzard that buried most of the Midwest in a thick blanket of snow, reaching as deep as three feet in areas of Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana and Ohio.

“But as one storm passes another storm is brewing on Capitol Hill as the House of Representatives moved today to bring impeachment proceedings against the President to a full vote on the House floor. Here with that story and a full report is our Washington correspondent, Erin Blake.”

“Thank you Jill. For months now the White House has been engaged in a non-stop effort to head-off what many see as the President’s most difficult challenge of his Administration to date.

“In the wake of an attempted assassination of two would-be witnesses who commandeered a Congressional hearing earlier this year, and the subsequent massive purge of the military’s top brass that many of the Administration’s adversaries have argued was a political witch hunt, sources on Capitol Hill tell us that the Administration has been quietly working around the clock behind the scenes to avoid a showdown with the President’s opponents in Congress.

“Weeks ago, data files were secretly delivered to Congress by Kent Levi and his wife Lisa Kyle; the same files we’re told that were destroyed by the military’s use of an EMP device during the hearing.

“Within those files, we’re told, are records showing the President’s campaign, apparently unwittingly, accepting foreign donations over its campaign website. The Administration has denied any wrongdoing and has stated that they are working transparently with the Federal Election Commission to put in place measures that would prevent such an occurrence from happening again on any election campaign website in the future.

“Despite the Administration’s willingness to correct the oversights and even refund the contributions, many of the President’s detractors are attempting to cast the Administration’s actions as a kind of cover-up, stating that the President’s actions are, in their words, quote, ‘illegal and an attempt by the President to sweep under the rug activities that he had full knowledge of’, unquote.

“However, despite the President’s efforts to come to an agreement with Congress on how to prevent such an occurrence from happening again, partisans within the House Judiciary Committee have left no stone unturned in their investigations of the Administration and its election committee.

“Representative Jonas Waters, a lone voice of support for the President on the House Judiciary Committee, has been highly critical of the Committee’s activities, calling the data files and evidence, quote, ‘tainted, illegal and inadmissible as evidence on any level.’

“But many within the President’s party lament that such objections about the illegal nature of the evidence have fallen on deaf ears within the committee, a majority of which are made up of members who remain politically hostile toward the President and the Administration.

“Today’s impeachment vote, many House members argue, while successful, remains mostly symbolic as it faces a very uncertain future in the Senate where a full two-thirds of the Senate must vote to either uphold the House vote or acquit the President of any wrong doing. Jill—”

“Thank you, Erin. As this story continues to unfold, the President doesn’t really appear all that concerned about these proceedings. Does he?”

“No, Jill, he doesn’t. The Administration has maintained all along that this data, this so-called evidence, has been wholly manufactured in some high-tech fashion as a means of sully-



the Administration in front of the American people. The committee has not allowed anyone to see or review the evidence except for members of Congress, many of whom remain dubious of where this evidence, implicating the President, even came from and how it got into the hands of Mr. Levi to begin with.”

“Do we even know where Kent Levi or Lisa Kyle are now, Erin? And why haven’t they been called into Congress for questioning?”

“Well, Jill, we’re being told that as potential witnesses within this very high-profile event that they are being kept away from the media by certain members of Congress. However, the media sequester hasn’t kept Ms. Kyle from using the media attention and spotlight to further her modeling career, nor has it stopped her from granting select interviews with selected reporters and the tabloids. Sources tell us that she has also been approached by a number of motion picture producers who would like to tell her and her husband’s story.”

“It’s always about the book and movie rights, isn’t it these days, Erin?”

“It sure seems like that, Jill. Back to you.”

“That was Erin Blake, reporting ...”

Kent clicked off the television. “Oh, that was ‘fair and balanced,’” he mocked. “And that’s why I never watch the news anymore.”

“Kent, you watch the news everyday,” Lisa grinned.

“I meant the network news. That story had more half truths and backhanded slant—I wonder if they ever realize what they’re doing, how their reporting actually comes across?”

“They don’t know who they work for, Hon. Let it go. We know what’s going on.”

Kent nodded. Both were more than well informed of what was happening in Washington DC while they sat in the study enjoying the afternoon sun gleaming brightly through the front windows of their home.

Snow had deeply blanketed the half-frozen stream and boulders outside. The new forest looked beautiful with the snowy frozen evergreens.

Kent hopped out of his favorite chair, stealthfully avoiding the massive half-sleeping bear parked hugely to one side of it. He reached down and gingerly scratched the animal's massive head, getting nothing more than a deep and subtle grunt from their oversized guest.

"When do you think the Senate will vote?" Lisa asked setting down the iPad and pulling her bare feet away from the warmth of their semi-sleeping bear rug.

"When they're sure they have enough votes not to convict him I'm sure," Kent added. "Probably in a few days."

"Is that why he's leaving the country, on this trip to Australia?"

"I'm sure," Kent nodded, the two of them walking back to the kitchen. "It tells me that the situation is still very fluid. That they really don't know if they have the votes yet."

"But they have to get to two thirds to convict him."

"Yea, they do. It just tells me that the President is very unpopular even within his own party. They all know the score, here, Lis'. They're not stupid. They all know he tried to have me murdered to keep this quiet. If he's able to pull this off and get the votes, it's going to cost him more political capital than maybe even he has."

"What does that mean, exactly, Kent? He's already sold himself to the Seven."

Kent nodded, grabbing a mug from the rack. "It means he's not going to have any inhibitions anymore, Lis'. He's already

in too deep. If he pulls this off, then the Seven will have made him practically untouchable.”

“What are we going to do? Just allow it to happen?”

He looked at her. “What do you want to do, Lis’?” he shrugged. “It’s just another Human government.”

“I know. But we used to be part of it. It’s still a great nation filled with good people.”

“It is. Who knows, maybe we will do something if it gets too bad. Right now, I think we need to focus on our own survival. You and I—we have our own nation to rebuild.”

## 8

**M**orning sun spilled into their hotel suite through the slightly open drapes. Both Jerrod and Kari got ready for a day of fun. They would hit the slopes with Kari teaching Jerrod some of the finer points of the sport she apparently knew much better than he did.

A knock at the door of their room interrupted their conversation as they were preparing to head down to the restaurant for breakfast. Jerrod looked through the peephole and then gave Kari a raised eyebrow look before he opened the door. Kari could see church security standing outside with another younger man about Jerrod's age. Jerrod let him in and closed the door.

Kari didn't know him at all, but he did look very familiar to her. She was sure they were related somehow and she had a pretty good idea about who he might be. When the young man

saw her, the first words out of his mouth came from the same voice as the many voicemails on her phone.

“Sis! Are you alright?!” he said, moving quickly toward her, a look of relief washing over his face.

Kari looked at him blankly. “Yes and no,” she told him with an unsure tone in her voice.

Keith’s look of relief washed away just as quickly as it had come. He suddenly looked a little worried and then shot an ugly glance at Jerrod.

“What’s wrong?” Keith looked back at his sister. “What’s happened to you!?”

“She has memory loss, Keith,” Jerrod offered.

“I think she can speak for herself,” Keith snapped.

“That’s enough!” Kari stepped into the verbal bout before it had the chance to escalate. The dull ache in Kari’s head had already returned along with some dizziness this time and she quickly sat back down in the chair.

Keith was immediately kneeling by her side. “Sis, what’s wrong?”

Kari sent Jerrod for some Advil.

“Jerrod’s right. I had some engine trouble on the highway. I almost froze to death. Jerrod rescued me and brought me back from the brink. But I guess my body temperature must have caused some kind of cell damage. Some of my memory is gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean gone? How gone?!”

She looked up at Keith’s worried face. Kari shook her head. “I don’t know who you are,” she admitted.

“You—you don’t recognize me?!”

Kari shook her head again. “I know who you are only because of the voice mails you left me. But I don’t remember you.”

“Holy Jesus,” fell out of his mouth from his astonished face. “We need to get you to a doctor!”

"No, Keith," she told him calmly. "They wouldn't be able to do anything for me anyway. You need to administer those drugs within hours of this kind of accident. The time was already lost. There was no way for me to get to a hospital. I'm just lucky to be alive."

"I don't believe in luck."

Kari just stared at him.

"How much do you remember?" Keith asked

"I can still ski," she quipped with a grin.

"Very funny; you knew how to ski out of the womb. That doesn't count."

Keith made her smile. Jerrod returned with some Advil and some water. He knelt next to her on the other side of the chair opposite from Keith.

"What's with the sudden headache?" Keith asked.

"It's you," Jerrod offered, glancing at Keith.

"Me?"

"Anything she sees that reminds her of people she can't remember, any mnemonic, triggers it. It's like her mind is trying to access parts of her memory that are locked away or just not there somehow."

"That can't be good."

Kari swallowed and handed Jerrod back the glass. "No, no it is good. It's forcing me to remember. It just hurts sometimes. I think seeing you is good. It usually doesn't make me dizzy though."

"You must really be a big part of Kari's life." Jerrod offered.

Keith glared suddenly at Jerrod, "Where did you hear that name!?"

Kari looked up at Keith, studying his face. Somehow, to her, it felt like Keith was suddenly alarmed and angry at Jerrod.

Kari put her hand on Keith's arm to get his full attention, "Hey," she looked at him, "this isn't about Jerrod. I gave him

that name. It's the only name I knew when I came to. It's who he knows me by. Whoever that is."

"Oh God," Keith breathed sighing, shaking his head, his face in utter disbelief.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You really don't have any idea who you are; neither Elizabeth or Kari?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, this is not good, Sis. This is not good."

"What's not good, Keith?" Jerrod asked.

"You should stay out of this, Jerrod. You know too much already."

Jerrod was half again broader than her brother and Kari knew at least something about Jerrod; he didn't take well to threats. Kari put her hand on Jerrod's arm before he could say anything. Jerrod just frowned, pursing his lips.

"That doesn't help, Keith. Like it or not, Jerrod's involved."

"Involved? Oh, I can see that!"

Jerrod moved before Kari could stop him. He jerked Keith to his feet by his jacket, "That's none of your business!"

"The hell it's not! She loses her memory; she's vulnerable; and you just take advantage of her!? Do you have any idea how fast I can have you put away for raping my sister?!"

Kari was suddenly on her feet very quickly. She pushed them both apart with incredible power and ease, holding onto each of their jackets very strongly. "Stop it! Both of you! That's enough!" she glared at one and then the other.

Jerrod knew better than to challenge Kari. She was a lot stronger than she looked. When they had settled down Kari let go of the both of them. Keith straightened his jacket. Jerrod folded his arms. Both men were still glaring at each other. Obviously neither one was backing down.

"This isn't helping," Kari huffed. She took a moment to regain her composure and then turned to her brother. "Kei, I

don't care what this looks like. If it wasn't for Jerrod, you'd be making funeral arrangements right now. Don't you ever insinuate that about Jerrod again."

Keith gave her a nod and then looked at Jerrod. "I'm—sorry Jerrod. She is my little sister."

Jerrod nodded.

Kari turned toward Jerrod, her hands smoothing out his jacket. "Jerrod, Hon, a word of advice," she began in a firm tone as Jerrod looked at her. "You know who we are. What we're capable of. The next time you lay your hands on the son of an apostle, might just be your last."

Jerrod pursed his lips and then nodded. "Sorry, Keith," he apologized.

Keith nodded as well.

"Now I'm hungry and still a little dizzy. Maybe you two could help me downstairs, I need something to eat."

Security was much more obvious around the hotel as they headed down for breakfast. County sheriffs along with church security seemed to be stationed practically everywhere in and around the lobby. Security was especially tight in the dining room where they entered for breakfast. The security people were not obvious, but Kari could tell they were there, in plain clothes. Perhaps it was just intuition or having lived in and around security people all her life. But she spotted all of them pretty easily.

A friendly host seated the three of them in a separate room usually reserved for private parties and guest overflow. Even this early, the dining room was already slammed with patrons here for the new snow, but Keith, Kari and Jerrod were the only ones in the large private room that held several other empty tables. The room's windows made them look like they were in a kind of fish bowl, but at least it was quiet and their



conversation could be kept private. The host and waiter were careful to make sure the doors stayed closed.

"Did you bring the National Guard with you too? What's with all of the sheriffs?" Jerrod nodded to Keith. Jerrod was obviously still holding a shallow grudge.

"It's protocol, Jerrod. One emissary of an apostle gets you a standard security detail. Put two or more emissaries in the same place from the same family and you get the security equivalent of Fort Knox. I didn't write the protocol. The church has its enemies."

"The leadership dropping like flies, are they?"

"Not at all," Keith leveled, "and security like this is why."

Keith nodded Jerrod's attention to outside the window into the main dining room where an undercover agent had just politely prevented some woman from snapping a phone pic of the three of them.

Three waiters entered the room and delivered menus, poured water, juices and coffee, and then took their breakfast orders. Kari ordered Jerrod's same vegetarian potatoes, eggs and cheese veggie skillet.

"No bacon, Sis? Really?"

"I'm going vegetarian."

"You too now?" Keith looked deeply disappointed. "Jerrod, you're a bad influence," he mocked. Keith looked at his waiter. "I'll have the same," he ordered. "If you can't beat them, join them, eh, Jerrod?"

Jerrod gave Keith at least a bit of a grin. The staff left them alone again.

Keith sipped some of his juice looking at his sister. "So how much of your memory do you actually have about us? What do you remember?"

Kari shook her head. "It's not much, Kei."

"You still call me 'Kei', that's a good sign."

"Some things, like reflexes, body memory, that's all fine."

“Do you still play?”

Kari nodded. “I was practicing air piano earlier. The music’s still there, at least I think it is.”

“How much do you remember about the family, Mom and Dad? Me?”

“Kei, I wouldn’t know our parents if they walked into the dining room right now. I barely have vague memories of you. I sort of recognized your face, some of your mannerisms, but not much else at this point.”

“Who else knows about this? Besides the obvious,” Keith looked at Jerrod.

“No one.”

“No one?” Keith asserted.

She shook her head. “No one. I listened to all of your voicemails. I wanted to call you earlier. The pain in your voice was killing me. But I couldn’t, Kei. I just didn’t know how I was going to deal with the loss. I had to think this through.”

“You had to know I’d come to help you, wherever you were.”

“Maybe I did know that, instinctively.”

“Well, I have to say, Sis, you’re certainly handling this situation with your typical apt expediency. The memory loss certainly hasn’t dampened your intellect,” Keith looked at Jerrod. “Or your taste in men,” he complimented Jerrod with a wry smile.

Jerrod took the compliment cautiously.

“Jerrod, you should know that security needed to make sure Elizabeth—Kari—was safe with whom ever she was with. We ran your background. Aside from a couple of traffic tickets, your life story is pretty boring. You have a nice family. You should think about joining Dominion.”

“We’ve been asked,” Jerrod frowned.

“I know. It was a joke.”

Keith at least got a small smirk out of Jerrod.

"Sis, do you remember anything about the ministry, anything at all?"

"Just what I've learned looking at our websites and what Jerrod's told me."

"The good, the bad and the ugly I suppose, Jerrod?" Keith asked looking at Jerrod again.

"Mostly the ugly," he quipped.

Keith got suddenly serious. "Yea, well, since you're already involved, you should know a little bit more about us, Jerrod. It only looks ugly from the outside. We're actually a very kind organization."

"You're going to have hard time convincing me of that," Jerrod muttered a bit disdainfully.

"Well, Jerrod, if you're going to be hanging around you need to know the truth about who we are; and since you don't remember anything, Sis, so do you. You both need to trust me."

"I trust you, Kei." Kari assured.

"I don't," Jerrod countered. "I'm sorry, Keith; I'm just being honest."

"That's fair, Jerrod," Keith nodded. "But at some point, you'll see for yourself who we are and what we stand for."

"I don't know, Keith; your church has a really nasty reputation. I don't see how you attract the congregations that you do."

"That's because, Jerrod, what you see and hear on the outside, in the press, the rumors, is totally PR. We actually go out of our way to cultivate bad press now and then; to give us a reputation of being this heavy-handed, take no prisoners, bully organization."

"So all of this rumor about people who cross the church having their lives destroyed or just disappearing?"

"Manufactured. Unless it really happens, in which case you'll never hear about it."

"Is that a joke?"

"No, we just like to deal with real problems quietly."

"You people take out your own? I mean, really take them out?"

"Jerrod, please, we're an international corporation with one of the largest HR departments on Earth. If you cross the ministry you get fired, not murdered."

"Didn't you say people really disappear?"

"Yea, and unfortunately that's what we're dealing with right now. There have been instances over the years where some nut case went after other co-workers. It happens in every large organization. Corporate can usually keep a lid on those things.

"The truth is, under the hood, Dominion is like any other private enterprise. You don't get to be the size we are by treating people badly. The fact is, people love working for us and we pay them handsomely."

"So why the big ruse then?" Jerrod asked.

"Because, Jerrod, when you get as big as we are, if you don't do that, you invite every penny-anti lawyer and government agency to come down on you like the plagues of Moses. Dominion is wholly owned by the Apostles and by extension, their families. There are effectively twelve stockholders, each with one share, and that's it."

"So the Dominion is closely held. That's hardly new," Jerrod sipped his coffee.

"No, but what's not widely known is that we generated just over four billion in church donations and sales last year, and that's just the tip of the iceberg."

"Right, your church operates a bunch of hospitals," Jerrod added.

"Not just hospitals, Jerrod, but several hospital systems and advanced healthcare facilities all over the world. We were able to build or buy these systems because we also manage, control or wholly own more hedge funds than any other

organization on the planet. We're one of the largest private property owners in the world, second only to the Catholic Church. We're talking literally trillions of dollars in assets here."

"With only twelve stockholders?" Jerrod's eyes widened.

Keith nodded. "Now you see the problem. It's an egregious amount of power concentrated in the hands of only a few people.

"But they're not really stockholders. The titles to those handful of shares are not really owned and locked into a family tree that can be passed on to the heirs. That would create a tax nightmare. The 'Apostleship' is really the only owner with each Apostle being a kind of exclusive manager of their share. When an Apostle retires or dies, there's an election with literally trillions of dollars at stake, all under the control of that one share."

"You don't just cast lots?" Jerrod smirked.

"Ah, no." Keith deadpanned the attempt at humor. "The Apostles vote by secret ballot who will be elected to fill the vacancy. The ballots are secret but the event is all very public."

"So what has that got to do with people disappearing?" Kari asked.

"I'm getting to that. Usually, the Apostles don't get involved with the day-to-day operations of the ministry. If a decision needs to be made they delegate whatever they need to the board and then the board handles whatever. The Apostles and their families are tasked with spiritual matters, not the mundane issues of business."

"Are you telling me that some board member is trying to influence the vote? Get themselves elected to an apostolic position somehow?"

Keith nodded, "That's part of it. But it looks like breakfast is about to be served."

The wait staff entered the room with steaming hot plates well filled with food. They refilled their glasses and warmed their cups with fresh coffee. After they left, Keith offered a blessing for the food and they began eating, picking up the conversation.

“Part of it?” Jerrod asked.

“The ministry is changing, Jerrod. It’s always changing. You keep pace with the customer or you die.”

“I thought that was the hallmark of the Gospel, it doesn’t change.”

“Oh, it changes. Historically, it’s gone through more reformations than most people are aware of or most scholars are even willing to admit. It’s our business to know and follow those trends through history and then project where the next big moves among the customer bases will be heading.”

Jerrod snorted. “Seriously? Listen to you, you sound like one of my dad’s marketing people.”

“I have two MBA’s, Jerrod, one of them in marketing.”

“Overachieve much?”

“Your girlfriend has an MBA as well, and a doctorate in music.”

Kari shrugged at Jerrod and then took a bite.

“So let me see if I understand this: the Gospel isn’t supposed to change but it always is. Newer generations bring new thinking, new traditions, new interpretations; you actually try to keep pace with those?”

“Exactly. A century ago people worshiped and prayed to ‘the Father’, ‘Jesus’ was more of side-kick. Today people pray to ‘Jesus’ and ‘the Father’ is more of the lesser figure. If our projections are accurate, in a hundred years ‘the Spirit’ will become the primary God figure within the Christian milieu.”

“You mean pantheon.”

“Whatever. The point is people change and we need to keep pace with those changes.”

“Let me guess, someone out there doesn’t like the changes you’re making or about to make.”

“Bingo.”

“Kei, who disappeared?” Kari asked.

“A really good friend of ours. He was on the board. His name was on a very short list of potential replacements for Apostle Lawton, who’s retiring soon.”

“What happened to him?” she asked.

“He never showed up for work one morning. His car was still at home. Nothing was amiss. He was just—gone. His security detail didn’t even know what happened.”

“Being on the short list to winning a trillion dollar lottery is plenty motive for taking out competitors,” Jerrod offered, taking a bite of his potatoes, “one way or another,” he munched.

“Of course, which is why the ballot system is completely private. Outside of the Apostles and the people who are actually on the ballots, no one knows who’s in the running. We try to keep the selection process as mysterious as possible so people understand that it’s actually God who is choosing the next apostle.”

“Somebody doesn’t like God’s choices?” Jerrod quipped.

“Jerrod, you’ve seen Dominion. If Sis had her memory back right now, she’d tell you.” Keith looked at Kari. But she pretty much knew already what he was going to say, some of it anyway.

“Our family was part of a group that founded this ministry in the 1800’s just after the Civil War. There was a lot of religious turmoil after the Reformation and then political unrest after the war, especially if you lived in the South where we were originally from. Christian denominations led by all kinds of people calling themselves shepherds and even prophets were popping up everywhere. People needed structure. They wanted something they could hold on to. Something to live by.

Something that gave them peace after all the carnage and loss and uncertainty. Our founders understood this, and they set out to give people peace. That's our product Jerrod; that's what we sell: peace.

"From those tiny beginnings in a one room converted schoolhouse, the Dominion began. We gave people structure, and the Gospel, and a benevolent authority to look up to, even going so far as duplicating the apostolic circle that started the Christian faith to begin with."

"I can't argue with the business model," Jerrod agreed. "It's certainly made you one of the largest denominations on Earth."

"Right, but the model has flaws. Cultural flaws. Sure it worked well when the church was just preaching in North America, but we're global now. We need to localize the message between the various divisions. What flies well in North America often doesn't fly at all in China, Africa or Indonesia or even the UK."

"When in Rome, do as the Romans?" Jerrod offered.

"Exactly. Only what do you do when Rome is global now and information travels at the speed of light? Localization becomes problematic when the people in one division can now see what the people in the other divisions are doing and saying and preaching. It causes all kinds of doctrinal friction."

"You have a good old-fashioned culture war on your hands," Jerrod mused.

"Tell me about it. But this is where we move from the ugly into just the bad. The church has a number of internal factions, Jerrod. Dozens of them in fact, all over the world. Most of them keep quiet because they're happy to be living under the Apostles. So we either officially and sometimes unofficially just let them do their own thing. It's when a faction or conference, or, God forbid, a division starts causing problems; that's when things get interesting."



“You have a division that’s causing problems?”

“No, the problems always come from the factions. The divisions will get upset, the conferences will sometimes split, but everyone stays happy, well, mostly happy. But the factions are never happy unless the whole world is conforming to their sectarian ideals. In many ways we’ve become a victim of our own success.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” Jerrod responded looking at Keith.

“The structure I was telling you about earlier, I wasn’t talking about the organization. I was talking about doctrine. Dominion preaches a doctrine that is highly structured. A is good, B is bad. That kind of thing.”

“Secular culture beginning to interfere with your doctrine?”

“It has been for a long time. We’re trying to change that structure and bring it into the twenty-first century.”

“I’d say it’s about time,” Jerrod assured.

“Timing is everything with things like this, Jerrod. Rush it too soon and you risk losing customers who aren’t where others are yet. Implement it too late and people leave because you’re behind the times.”

“So you’re pushing the envelope.”

“For Dominion, yea, we are,” Keith admitted. “For a long time we built the ministry on being exclusive and a little quirky. We had the only ‘Apostles’, we keep the Jewish Shabbat as our worship day, we reworked some of the Feast Days into our own; we had well defined gender and family roles that were easily backed up by the Scriptures, and we encouraged large families with well-educated kids. Much of the Dominion is vegetarian if not totally vegan. It’s a very conservative culture.”

“Well, I won’t argue with the latter; but I take it the denim burqa is not quite in style anymore?”

“No, it’s not. That piece of culture went out of style decades ago and should have been buried back in the 40’s when everyone worked in the factory during the war and gender didn’t matter. But roughly half of the people in our church are still preaching it. A lot of the laity are still buying it but it’s not being widely supported by the younger generations.”

“So you’re actually going to allow women to wear pants now?” Jerrod smirked.

Kari watched Keith frown. “It’s not funny, Jerrod,” Kari scolded.

Jerrod stopped smirking and looked at both Keith and Kari. “No. No, you’re right. It’s not funny,” Jerrod leveled looking at the both of them. “The truth is, I’ve hated your church ever since I can remember. You trap people in this medieval culture where the only thing women are used for is cooking and baby-making. It disgusts me, frankly,” Jerrod unloaded.

Kari watched Keith frown and nod his head. “You’re right, Jerrod; absolutely right. And that’s what we’re trying to change. It’s time we brought Dominion out of the Dark Ages and into the mainstream of the modern global culture.”

“I’m sorry, Keith. I didn’t mean to go off. I can see how painful this is for you. It probably isn’t the best time for me to be wearing my attitude about your church on my sleeve.”

“No need to apologize, Jerrod. The church has it coming. You’re one of millions who feel the same way we do. The culture is changing and the church needs to keep pace with it. We’re slowly destroying thick doctrinal walls that have been in place for almost two centuries, even to the point to ordaining women as church pastors. It would be the equivalent of women priests being ordained by the Catholics.”

“That can’t be going over all that well with your more fundamentalist factions,” Jerrod offered.

“Tell me about it,” Keith exclaimed, looking Jerrod in the eye. “But the change goes a lot deeper than just ordaining

women pastors. This is hitting a lot closer to home than you realize. Now that Apostle Lawton is retiring, one of the names on the ballot—is ‘Kari’.”

Both Kari and Jerrod looked at Keith with wide eyes.

“Keith, that’s impossible,” Kari assured. “There are no women apostles.”

Keith looked back at her with a kind of astonished grin, “Jogging your memory a bit are we, Sis?”

She nodded. “Yea.”

“You’re right. There’s never been a woman in the Apostleship, ever.”

“The ultimate ‘boys-only’ club?” Jerrod asked.

“In decades past it was. But Jerrod, you have to understand our culture. Even though the church is run like a business, the apostles try to stay above all that. They really do try to listen to God. Some are more successful than others.

“The last time ballots were cast to replace an apostle was a little over a decade ago. Somehow it had been leaked that there was a woman on the ballot. It caused all kinds of really ugly problems for the poor lady. Overnight she went from being a executive vice president at corporate to both ‘Mary the Mother of God’ and ‘Satan the Deceiver’ all at the same time. Church security had to move quickly to keep her from being mobbed. It all but destroyed the poor lady’s life.”

“What happened to her?”

Keith looked down at his plate again.

“Don’t tell me she was killed?” Jerrod alarmed.

“No, nothing like that. Actually, she won.”

“But there aren’t any women Apostles,” Jerrod said. “Even I know that much.”

“Well the truth was, nobody actually thought she had any chance of winning. When she did, no one was more surprised than the Apostles were. The Apostles were concerned that announcing a woman apostle at the time would lead to a lot of

real chaos. It was one of the few times where corporate got involved in an apostolic function. Corporate was caught completely flat-footed. There was no time for marketing to formulate a comprehensive strategy to sell the change to the laity. The apostles decided to just install a man instead.”

“Isn’t that a little dishonest? Robbing someone of their position like that?”

“It was totally political, Jerrod, no doubt about that. And it was a mistake. Everyone in the Apostleship understands that all too well now. They all know that they thwarted the will of God. The apostle they installed is a complete mess. He took the apostolic name of ‘Paulus,’ but secretly amongst themselves they’ve nicknamed him ‘Judas’. He’s kept on a pretty short leash but all of them realize now the mistake that was made.

“So this time things were done a bit differently. Aliases were used on the ballots instead of everyone’s real name. Only the nominating Apostle and the nominee knows the identity of the alias on the ballot.”

“That could lead to some chaos,” Jerrod quipped. “What keeps people from claiming they’re the real person behind the alias?”

“When the nomination is made, the person nominated turns in a DNA sample. We can easily run a quick DNA check if there’s a dispute.”

“So Kari’s on this ballot now.”

Keith nodded taking a sip of coffee.

“So what are her chances of winning?” Jerrod asked.

“Considering the fact that the Apostles want to rectify with God the mistake they made a decade ago, I’d say her chances are really good. That is, if she can stay alive long enough to get elected,” Keith looked at his sister smiling and then squeezed her hand.

“How safe will she be if she wins?” Jerrod began. “Aren’t you worried about the fallout?”

“Worried? No. Prepared? Absolutely.”

“Well, Keith, pardon me for not having any faith here, but you didn’t appear all that prepared when I had to step in and rescue Kari. When these people find out that ‘God’ chose a woman apostle, you’re going to have a lot bigger problem than I think you know.”

“Corporate has already run the numbers, Jerrod. If they’re correct, we’re not in for a whole lot of fallout over this. Sure, we will lose some conferences in some of the more backward divisions. But we’re prepared to sell those off as independent, if necessary. If we lose more than fifteen percent of our customer base I will be very surprised. The risk has been all very carefully calculated.”

“If I know anything about your church, Keith, it’s going to be losing a lot bigger chunk than that,” Jerrod countered.

“People are changing, Jerrod; they have changed, even within our own church. They won’t admit it openly because they just want to fit into the church’s culture, but a woman apostle will open the door for a much needed flood of changes. Changes that will be very much welcomed. People will leave, but they’ll eventually come back. We have marketing materials already prepared for that customer segment.”

“Still, not everybody is going to be happy about this,” Jerrod countered again. “Someone out there knows who ‘Kari’ is—and wants her off the ballot, dead or alive.”

“What are you talking about?” Keith shot a look at Jerrod and then at Kari. “No one but one of the apostles and the people sitting at this table knows who Kari is.”

“Not true, Kei.” Kari pulled out her phone and let him listen to the message.

Both of them watched as Keith’s face drained of color and then refilled with anger.

"Jesus," he swore under his breath. "So that wasn't just engine trouble. Someone actually tried to kill you!" he leveled looking at his sister.

"Yea. And if it hadn't been for Jerrod, they'd have succeeded."

Keith handed Kari back her phone. "Sis, I'm sorry, but your little ski vacation here just ended."

"I had a feeling you were going to say that," she frowned.

"And Jerrod," Keith began, "I hate to tell you this man, but you're now under the protectorate of the Dominion of God."

Jerrod looked at Keith, a pursing frown crossing his lips, "Like it or not?"

Keith gave him a very serious look. "Like it or not," he assured firmly.

# 9

WHEN THE SONS OF GOD LAY WITH THE DAUGHTERS OF MEN  
WE SHALL BECOME ONE AND THE REBORN SHALL BE  
CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

**T**he still snow-covered highway became a three hour drive back to Bethlehem, the center of the Dominion universe. Keith's personal chauffeur piloted Jerrod's magnificent RV while the three of them talked quietly in the main living room. Dominion security followed with multiple vehicles both in front and behind the sleek, black RV, as if the three of them were heads of state.

"Keith," Jerrod began, "where exactly did the name 'Kari' come from? Kari remembered that name, but not Elizabeth."

"Well, Jerrod, I guess you're going to find out sooner or later anyway. Kari is my sister's originally given name when

she was much younger. Nobody remembers her by that name anymore so Dad used it as her alias when he put Kari on the ballot.”

“So Elizabeth is an alias?” he mused.

“It is.”

“Why?”

Keith sighed. “We have our reasons, Jerrod. I’ll let Dad tell you more if he wants to.”

“Would any of those reasons have anything to do with your sister being able to bench-press a truck?”

“Jerrod!” Kari interrupted, frowning. “I can not! Please.”

Keith looked at Jerrod with a smirk. “I was wondering if you were going to bring that up. How long did it take you to notice?”

“Y’all!” Kari protested the conversation suddenly realizing where it was heading.

Now Jerrod was the one smirking. “It was pretty obvious, Keith. Let’s just say your sister has a very athletic build.”

“Oh!” Kari fumed. “I am not talking to either of y’all the rest of the day!”

Keith nodded a full grin. “Watch yourself, Jerrod. Your new girlfriend—she can be full of surprises.”

Their motorcade moved into the city along a massive twelve lane freeway that was mostly empty. But on Shabbat, the freeway could seem like a parking lot, crowded with the faithful heading to Temple worship. The concrete, stone and glass temple spire was itself a magnificent skyscraper office complex glistening in the noonday sun as they drove past. It was by far the tallest building, not just in Bethlehem, but in the entire country as well. The circular base of the Temple was the size of a superdome stadium where over a hundred-thousand could congregate for worship and then breakout into classes



teaching everything from simple Bible courses to advanced Hebrew. Kari looked at the sights of the beautiful city. It was beginning to come back to her now. Slowly.

They passed the city center and moved along leafless and snow-covered tree-lined freeways. Bas-relief concrete walls depicted Biblical characters and their stories. It seemed that no design detail had been overlooked. Bethlehem had won more awards than any other city in the country for its design, beauty, engineering and architecture. Despite his aversion to the Dominion, Jerrod could not help but marvel every time he came through here that these were indeed a blessed and industrious people.

Beyond the city, they exited into the upscale community of Jerusalem Park along Lake Galilee. Although she could not remember the details, Kari somehow knew that she lived here, somewhere, as she looked, immersed in her thoughts, out the window. They passed large expensive snow-covered homes and the occasional small strip mall with grocery stores and other businesses serving the local neighborhoods. Their motorcade then pulled into a gated community where the snow had thickly covered the lawns spanning acres and acres. Both Kari and Jerrod quickly realized that the gate was not the entrance to a community at all—but the entrance to a single home. Kari suddenly knew that she had been here before. She used to live here. This was the home of an apostle—and her parents.

They pulled around the neatly cleared large cobbled stone circular drive and were then professionally escorted from the bus. Kari immediately moved to Jerrod's side and held onto his arm, mostly to reassure him that it was okay. Kari knew that Jerrod's family was wealthy, but she didn't know that he'd be prepared for anything like this. They stood in the driveway for a moment to take in the view of the massive three story stone home sitting on the tree-lined snowy shore of Lake Galilee.

Security then led them into the home from the outside, but the officers themselves did not enter.

Inside the home it was warm. A male assistant, casually but nicely dressed, greeted them and Kari especially.

"Elizabeth! Oh, thank God you're alive and well!"

"Thanks," she smiled with faux warmth. He knew her, obviously. Kari wished she knew who he was.

"Where's Dad, Simon?" Keith asked.

"He's in the study upstairs."

"Thanks. That will be all for now."

"Very good, Excellency." Simon nodded, quickly strolling off to other palatial parts of the home unknown.

The home was massive and beyond opulent. The main foyer rose three tall stories in a kind of modern gothic style that someone had been able to make look warm and inviting instead of dark and ominous. They made their way up beautifully hewn stone stairs to the second floor, passing statuary, potted trees and other hand carved stone and wood tables. Keith opened one of the tall double doors of the study for all of them to enter.

Then Kari saw him. A shorter man, not nearly as old as she would have expected, with thick dark hair and kind features. He called to her excitedly, "Elizabeth!"

Immediately Kari's head began to throb and she suddenly felt very dizzy. But Jerrod was right there to steady her. She heard her father's voice asking what was wrong but it didn't help the dizziness at all. Her father was right beside her but she couldn't look at him. She felt Jerrod lift her off of her feet and walk her to a sofa. Jerrod's strong arms set her down. Kari felt embarrassed and somewhat foolish.

"There, there, Daughter, you're going to be alright," she hear her father say. "Keith would you please close the door."

"Sure, Dad."

Kari tried to reassure everyone that she was fine. She waited for the dizziness to pass.

"Dad," Keith began, "This is Jerrod Sharp, the gentleman I've been telling you about."

Keith and Kari's father stood from where he was kneeling next to Kari. "And quite the gentleman you are, Mr. Sharp. I am very pleased to meet your acquaintance. I am Apostle Connor, Elizabeth's father."

"Apostle." Jerrod greeted him respectfully, shaking his hand.

"Please, we need not be so formal here. Call me Aaron."

Kari's dizziness began to pass and she looked around the large, dark-wood paneled study. Keith was standing just behind her where she sat on the sofa. She instinctively reached back and took hold of Keith's hand like she knew she'd done a million times before. It made him smile. She listened as her father began talking to Jerrod.

"We owe you much more than a debt of gratitude, Jerrod. Elizabeth, or should I say, 'Kari', owes you as well. Thank you for rescuing my daughter. You have no idea how much you have done for us."

"Honestly, Sir, I don't know how much of your gratitude I actually deserve. It was kind of a fluke that I even bothered stopping. The truth is I drove right past at first. The snow was coming down pretty hard. I wasn't exactly being the good Samaritan."

"So then, Jerrod, why did you stop?"

"I really don't know, Sir. I just did. It just felt like someone was in trouble and I needed to go help them."

"Felt? Felt, you say?"

"Yes, sir. She wasn't very responsive. I had to break the window to pull her out."

"I see," he said turning toward his daughter. "Kari, from the reports I've been getting, you seem quite attracted to our

handsome guest. Are the two of you—dating? Keith tells me you were sharing a suite together at the ski resort.”

Kari sat up on the couch. The conversation was suddenly becoming a bit too personal. She felt Keith’s hand on her shoulder. “Easy, Sis. It’s not what it sounds like. Dad has good reason for asking.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Apostle Connor offered.

“Jerrod,” Apostle Connor began, now looking at him.

“Sir, this is not what it looks like—”

“Oh, I know exactly what it looks like, Jerrod. I wasn’t born yesterday.” Jerrod felt suddenly very nervous. But instead of giving Jerrod a stern look, Apostle Connor smiled. “I’m not exactly the overbearing father type, Jerrod. Kari is an adult and has been for some time. She has the right to choose who she likes. But Keith is right, we have good reason for asking. Kari can’t remember who she is at the moment. But trust me when I say Kari isn’t ‘attracted’ to many people. Beyond that, it’s you I’m mostly concerned about at this point, Jerrod, not my daughter.”

“Me? I guess I don’t know what you mean,” Jerrod conceded.

“I know you don’t; which is why we’re all here to have this little chat. You should all have a seat. Please.”

Jerrod sat right next to Kari and she took his hand, locking her fingers securely around his. Keith and Apostle Connor took chairs opposite them.

“Jerrod,” Apostle Connor began, “if you have spent any time in the company of my daughter, especially any intimate time, I’m sure by now you have realized that Kari, is—well, a little unusual.”

Jerrod looked at Apostle Connor and then nodded slowly.

“Apparently, you’re very attracted to her.”

“She is very attractive, Apostle Connor,” Jerrod offered, not really sure where the conversation was going.

“Couldn’t keep your hands off of her, could you now?”

“Daddy!?” Kari objected.

“What I mean, Jerrod, is that you have never felt so attracted to another human being as you have my daughter, now have you?”

Jerrod thought for a moment suddenly intrigued by Kari’s father’s words.

“No sir. That’s very true. How would you know that?”

“You are quite the strapping young man, Jerrod,” Apostle Connor appeared to ignore Jerrod’s question. “I’ll take it that you have noticed how Kari is, shall we say, strongly irresistible.”

“Kari is incredibly strong, Apostle Connor, if that’s what you’re getting at,” Jerrod acknowledged. “I don’t think she realized it at first, but yea, I noticed.”

“Yes, well that’s exactly what I wanted to hear, Jerrod. It seems you’ve now been exposed to our little family secret.”

“Is everyone in your family as strong as Kari?!”

“I assure you we are, Jerrod,” Apostle Conner nodded.

Jerrod suddenly looked at Keith. Then at Kari. Then back at Keith. “Oh, man, Keith,” Jerrod began, “I’m really sorry about this morning.”

Keith grinned, “Jerrod, stop apologizing. It’s fine.”

Mr. Connor looked at his son, “Oh? Did the two of you have an altercation?”

“It was nothing, Dad,” Keith assured. “I sort of insulted Jerrod and he got righteously defensive.”

“Keith, if you’re even half as strong as Kari, I would have been no contest,” Jerrod offered feeling sheepishly stupid now.

“Oh, I assure you, Jerrod, Keith is stronger than Kari,” Apostle Connor offered smiling.

“Jesus,” Jerrod whispered under his breath, shaking his head.

"Jerrod, man, don't worry about it. I'm not upset. It's a little funny actually," Keith grinned.

"Jerrod, you're discovering that the members of our family are quite unusual. Especially our women. They're very—sensitive."

"Most women are, Apostle Connor."

"That's not exactly what I mean. The women in our family know how you feel, they know *what* you feel."

"Aren't most women like that, a woman's intuition?"

"Not like this. Kari, how many people are in the house at the moment?"

Kari looked at her father oddly, "I don't know?"

"Kari," he looked at her and repeated himself, "how many people are in the house?"

Kari was a little surprised that he'd repeated the question. She obviously didn't know the answer to it. Did she know? Kari searched herself for some clue that would tell her the answer. She felt Jerrod next to her and Keith and her father in front of her and the maid out in the hall and Simon coming up the grand stairs. Without effort Kari was suddenly *feeling* people in rooms all over the home! In the kitchen and then several more upstairs in the bedrooms. It was like she could feel that they were there and she instinctively counted them like it was nothing. It only took her a moment.

Kari was suddenly quiet in stunned astonishment. Her father repeated the question patiently.

"Sixteen," she answered quietly with a dumbfounded look on her face at how she was able to feel all of these people in the home.

Keith was nodding, grinning at her.

Apostle Connor looked at Kari and then Jerrod. "Excellent. You see now, what I mean, Jerrod? Sensitive."

"Kari," Jerrod looked at her, "how could you know how many people are in the house? You don't know, do you?"

“Oh, but she does, Jerrod,” her father assured.

Jerrod was still looking at her. She sensed his presence, she felt him, felt his confusion and his doubt about what had just happened. Kari wanted to help him understand. Then, somehow, she let Jerrod know what she herself was feeling; she shared with him what she was feeling inside, allowing him to sense and even feel the same things she sensed within herself.

“Oh. Oh, my God,” Jerrod suddenly felt what Kari was feeling. “How—?” Jerrod looked at Kari suddenly and utterly astonished. “That,” he began, “that is just so—freaky. All these people, it’s like I can see them—I mean—I can feel them.”

Kari watched as Jerrod gave her father an intense astonished glance. Then she dropped whatever it was that she was doing and looked at the both of them.

“Daddy, who am I?” she asked also just as astonished by what she had just done.

“You’re my daughter, Kari,” he said with a gentle smile. It was a smile that Kari knew now that she’d seen many times. It was very comforting to her.

“In time, I’m hopeful that you will remember all about who you are. But what’s more intriguing to me at the moment is you, my boy,” he said looking at Jerrod. “The real question now is just who, exactly, are you?”

“I’m just a Northwest boy, Apostle Conner. Nothing special.”

“Oh, I disagree, Jerrod,” Apostle Connor told him. “You see, my daughter doesn’t cozy up to just anyone. As you might imagine, as beautiful as she is, she has had more than her fair share of suitors, young men vying for her affections over the years. The fact is Kari has never been interested in dating any of them, frankly; let alone sharing a room with one.”

“What are you trying to say, Daddy?”

“Kari, our family is—different. Although you cannot remember everything right now, a moment ago you caught a glimpse of just how different we are.”

“Daddy, that’s not just different. What am I?”

“It’s not just you, Sis. It’s all of us. Mom, Dad, you and me.”

“Are you saying we’re like—I don’t even want to venture a guess.”

“We’re just exceptionally blessed people, Darling. With some extraordinary ability. Sampson had incredible strength. Daniel and his friends had exceptional intellect. Abraham had exceptional longevity. We share all of these traits as well.”

“Daddy, how did we get this way?”

“Through a stranger. I never knew his name.”

“You should tell them, Dad. How you and Mom met,” Keith offered.

“Indeed. The first day I met your mother was under terrible circumstances. It was during the war between the States, just after what became known as the Battle of Wilderness, in the spring of eighteen sixty-four—”

“Sir,” Jerrod interrupted with a raised eyebrow. “Eighteen sixty-four? The Civil War? That’s impossible. You’d be over a hundred and fifty years old.”

“One hundred and fifty eight to be exact.”

“Mr. Connor, you’re barely forty, if that old.”

“Jerrod, how old do you think my daughter is?”

Jerrod looked at Kari, then back at her father. “Mid twenties.”

“Try a hundred and two.”

Jerrod grinned his incredulity. “My apologies, Apostle Connor, but I—I can’t buy that. There’s no way Kari is—”

“Jerrod,” Kari interrupted him, “I need to listen. You know how strong I am. You know what I just did, feeling all of the people in the house. You felt what I felt. I think we need to listen to this.”



Jerrod nodded.

“As I was saying, the battle was one of the bloodiest of the entire war. Tens of thousands of people died. The bodies were littering the ground everywhere. I was laying in an open field hospital under a large oak talking to the most beautiful nurse I’d ever seen. I’d taken a ball in the pelvis and I was dying, slowly bleeding to death. But the wound was too high, they couldn’t amputate or do anything for me. For days I just lay under that tree talking to that beautiful nurse. As fate would have it, over those few days we fell madly, hopelessly in love.

“They brought in another man and laid him next to us. He was badly, badly wounded. Like me he was dying slowly. He must have been really intrigued and very moved by what he saw between myself and this nurse.

“Then late one night as we were talking, just the three of us, he shared with us a fantastic secret. He wasn’t like us. He was different. And if I wanted to live, he’d share some of his blood with me and I’d be healed. Well, of course we thought he was mad, delirious from his wounds. But by the next morning I had taken a turn for the worse. My nurse was frantic. As the stranger lay in his delirium and I lay dying in mine, she cut him and me and our blood flowed together.

“This nurse, Daddy. Was that Mom?” Kari asked.

Her father smiled, “I’m getting to that, Darling. When I awoke I was laying in a war camp. My nurse was still hovering over me. The stranger was gone but his blood had sent me into a deep sleep for several weeks and my nurse had stayed with me the whole time. But when I awoke, I was not the same man I was when I went to sleep. Oh, no. Now I could see; really see, and smell, and move like I could not describe. I had been changed by the blood of this stranger. We had no other understanding other than to feel that this man was somehow a messenger, an angel. I’d been given a gift, a gift from God.”

"You," Jerrod suddenly had an epiphany. "It was you then," he offered. "You started the Dominion."

Apostle Connor nodded. "I did, Jerrod. We did. After the war we setup a church in a tiny building that doubled as school house during the week and church on Shabbat. We were married in that church. It was from this tiny church that we began the Dominion. We setup what we would teach, the doctrines we would preach. All of it based in part because of the gift we'd been given."

"Mr. Connor," Jerrod began, "just out of curiosity, why did you choose the Jewish Sabbath when everyone else was worshipping on Sunday?"

"Because, my boy, that nurse of mine had been raised as one of those confound Seventh-day Baptists and I didn't have a choice!" he smiled, chuckling. "I cannot tell you the arguments that day of worship caused between my wife and I. But, as it would later turn out, that worship day would become one of the hallmarks of our denomination. And it also gave us the opportunity to rent the building to the Sunday folks as well. That extra income would become the tiny building blocks of what would later spread into the global ministry you see today."

"Apostle Connor, that's quite the history. It does seem like God empowered you somehow to build something great. But I don't see where any of this has anything to do with me."

"Jerrod, Kari has senses she's not fully aware of right now. There's something about you, something within you she very much likes. Wouldn't you say, Keith?"

"Dad's right, Sis. You don't really date anyone. This is kind of a shock, actually."

Jerrod looked at Kari. "So what is it about me you seem to like?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "You just—oh, I am so going to embarrass myself here." She didn't finish her sentence.

"It's alright, Sis. Jerrod turns you on. We can see that," Keith harassed his sister jokingly.

"Jerrod, I'm bringing all of this up for both Kari's benefit as well as yours. Whatever this 'gift' is that's in our blood, whatever it is that makes us special, it can be transferred to others."

"Sir?"

"I sent my bride into a coma for nearly a month on our wedding night. When she awoke, she had become changed, just like I'd been by the stranger's blood."

"Are you saying that if we—?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, Jerrod. Kari has never taken an interest in anyone ungifted, until now. An intimate relationship with my daughter could bring some deep changes into your life. Changes you may want to deeply consider, even prepare yourself for. Changes you may not even want."

Jerrod looked at Kari and then back at Apostle Connor and Keith. He nodded his understanding; at least of what they were trying to warn him about.

"Kari, since your memory prevents you from knowing your own history, every few decades, it becomes necessary for us to change our identities, so that we can put down roots and mingle with people who are not as long-lived as we ourselves are. Your current name is Elizabeth and you are the daughter of Apostle Connor III and the great, great grand daughter of Aaron Connor the founder of the Dominion. There is no other name within the Dominion more honored and more revered than that of Connor."

"He's right, Kari," Jerrod agreed. "The Connor name is well known even outside of the Dominion. Connor University is renowned. I've read a lot about your family since we moved here to start building RVs."

"Yes, Jerrod, your family is quite industrious. Your father purchased a dying manufacturer and has turned it into vary

successful enterprise. The fact that your family is from the Northwest is also very interesting.”

“How so?”

“I’m still putting two and two together. In time I am sure we will know more. As for you Kari, you don’t know much about who you are. From what Keith tells me, we appear to have some sort of assassin hunting us. So for now, just to be safe, I want both you and Jerrod to stay here at the estate until we can track down who is responsible. I’ve asked Simon to prepare rooms for all of you.”

Kari nodded. “I’d like that, Daddy.”

“Jerrod, you look worried,” Apostle Connor assessed.

“I don’t feel like I can choose to leave,” he frowned.

Apostle Connor smiled. “Jerrod. When you made the decision to stop and rescue my daughter, you yourself set in motion a fate you could never have foreseen. I understand that. When my nurse infused me with the blood of that stranger, my fate changed, irrevocably; I had no choice in the matter. The fate of my wife as well changed. She had no choice. Likewise, there is something within you, within the both of you, that attracts you to each other. Neither of you were given a choice about this. Sometimes, Jerrod, fate doesn’t give us the ability to choose.”

“So what happens if I choose to leave anyway?”

“Jerrod!” Kari held onto his hand, looking at him in alarm.

“You now know our family secret Jerrod. A secret that we have been able to keep within the family for over a century and a half. We do intend to keep it that way,” Apostle Connor leveled ominously looking Jerrod in the eye. “But you’re a very intelligent young man. I don’t think you’ll have a problem making the right choice.” Apostle Connor smiled.

Jerrod still looked unhappy.

“Dad, what about the investigation?” Keith asked.

“Indeed. We do need to get to the bottom of who made this attempt on your sister’s life before the ballots are cast again next week. The chances are very good we’ll be seeing a quorum within the next few weeks if not sooner. If this would-be killer is serious, and I believe they are acting out of desperation, they will make another attempt on Kari. As long as all of you are here, you’ll be safe. That includes you now, Mr. Sharp. I am sure those people who want my daughter dead are well aware of you by now as well. Unless you know of better security than the Dominion, my suggestion would be to avail yourself to our continued protection.”

Jerrod thought about what Apostle Connor had just said. “Damned if I do and damned if I don’t, I guess I’ll take damned,” he mused with a frown.

Apostle Connor stood, then everyone else did as well. “Jerrod, I understand your feelings. At least stay with us for a few days to sort things out for yourself. It has been a pleasure meeting you,” he offered his hand again.

“Apostle Connor,” Jerrod shook his hand politely and firmly.

“Now, children, if you’ll excuse me, I have some work to do with this investigation. Out!” he smiled while waving his hands as if shooing five-year-olds. “Go. Go have some lunch.”

The three of them left the study and made their way downstairs in search of the kitchen.

# 10

**O**n the way down the grand stairs Kari kept her voice low with Keith. She could easily feel that Jerrod was lost, deep in a world of his own thoughts.

“Who else knows about us?” she asked her brother. “Are we the only ones?”

“No, there are others like us, Sis. They’re usually called ‘the clans’ or just ‘the family’. We’re good friends with quite a few of them and we help each other out now and then. All of us try really hard to keep the gift a family secret.”

“That’s a huge secret to be keeping.”

“Not really. It’s not half as difficult as some of the corporate secrets that keep getting leaked out all over the place. The fewer people who know, the easier it is to keep the secret—a secret.”

Keith lead them down a smaller hallway and into a larger but cozy kitchen with a breakfast nook only a few yards from

the lake shore and a beautiful view of the snowy pines in the distance. He closed the doors that led into the kitchen. "This is the breakfast kitchen. It's one of the family-only spaces in the house. We'll have some privacy here."

Keith made himself at home and seemed to know where everything was. He took what smelled like a fresh baguette loaf from a basket and started carving it up for sandwiches.

Kari continued to sense Jerrod's troubled feelings as he walked to the French doors and now stared out at the snow-covered shore and the water. She tried to really understand what his feelings were. She could tell that he still had incredibly strong feelings for her and for what the two of them had shared. He felt his freedom had been swept away, and now he felt imprisoned, not so much by Kari and her family, although she could feel some resentment building within him about them. She didn't know what to do about that. Mostly she could feel that he felt trapped by fate and that maybe he would no longer be able to see his own family ever again. Kari frowned, not wanting to continue invading Jerrod's personal feelings. His destiny with her, with them, would be something he would need to make a separate peace with. She looked back at Keith.

Keith motioned his bread knife in the direction of Jerrod. "He's a really nice looking guy," Keith spoke softly. "You two make a great looking couple," he complimented.

Her brother's words of support made Kari smile. "So why haven't you found anyone?" she asked.

Keith looked at her. "What makes you think I haven't?"

"Well, you're not wearing a ring. Have you?"

Keith tried to duck the question by fishing some things out of the refrigerator. But Kari was all over his feelings now. He had found someone.

Keith set the things for the sandwiches on the rare stone counter.

"Not fair," he grumbled, quietly looking at his sister.

"You know you can't keep secrets from me," she grinned.

"Or Mom," he quipped.

"So you 'guys' can't do this?"

"No, it's a girl thing evidently."

"So what's his name?" she asked.

Keith gave Kari a 'shush' look and then nodded at Jerrod who was still staring out the window.

Kari raised her eyebrow, "Another family secret?" she asked.

"Well, yea," he whispered indignantly. "I am the son of an apostle for crying out loud."

"How did you two meet?" she asked.

"Can we talk about this later?" he whispered back, nodding toward Jerrod.

"It's fine, Keith," Jerrod interrupted, still looking out the window. He turned and walked over to them. "My 'gaydar' went off the minute I let you in the hotel room this morning. I have too many gay friends for it not to. I'm from the Northwest, remember? Outside of San Francisco, Seattle is the gay center of the universe."

Keith nodded at Jerrod, apparently relieved that his love life was safe from being made fun of or broadcast.

"So who is he?" Kari asked again.

"His name is Eric. He's a lot like you, Jerrod. Built, smart, well educated, nice family. I met Eric at a really boring company meeting a few years ago. I was trying not to embarrass myself, but I couldn't take my eyes off of him. After the meeting we chatted some business. I could tell we had this emotional connection, but—"

"But what?" Kari asked.

"Let me guess," Jerrod interrupted, "company policy doesn't allow fraternizing between employees."



“That, and the church is not exactly the most gay-friendly enterprise in the world, for obvious reasons.”

Jerrod nodded.

“I really didn’t know if Eric felt the same way I did. I mean, I thought he did, but I couldn’t exactly out myself to an employee to find out.”

“So what did you do?” she asked.

“Well, we were in separate company divisions. So I got him promoted out of health finance and into corporate, where I was.”

“That’s kind of a ‘no-no’ in most companies, isn’t it?” Jerrod asked.

“Yea, it is in Dominion as well. Let’s just say I bent a few rules and leave it at that. After Eric’s promotion we started to talk business strategies at meetings; and then meet for lunch. The truth be told, the real problem with promoting Eric was that he was a really hard worker and it showed in his performance numbers. He did some amazing things at corporate in a really short period of time. Then during lunch one day he tells me he’s been promoted again—to another business unit in another building across town.”

Kari laughed. “Hoisted by your own petard.”

“Yea. That’s what I thought too.”

“So what happened to you two to after his promotion?” Jerrod asked, interested in Keith’s story now as well.

“I kind of lost track of Eric for several months. I’d call him to chat about this issue or that, but he always kept the conversations short. I couldn’t even get onto his calendar. Not without raising all kinds of eyebrows.”

“It sounds like he was avoiding you.” Kari offered.

“Yea, it felt that way to me too. I reluctantly just blew-off the possibility of Eric and I ever getting together and moved on. I was pretty depressed during those months. Ask mom. She couldn’t cheer me up to save my life.”

“But you and Eric must have met again somewhere, right?” she asked.

“Oddly enough, we did. It was on a flight to Vancouver for a hospital expansion and grand re-opening. Eric was seated a few rows behind me. We were both really surprised to see each other. I changed seats and we talked shop the whole flight. After we got our rooms at the hotel we were getting ready to head over for a concert in the hospital’s auditorium. Eric said he needed to talk to me and wondered if we could skip the concert. I said sure.

“We had a really long talk. It was then I found out about how Eric had been feeling. He told me that he’d been having ‘unnatural’ feelings and that he’d checked himself into a church counseling program to get himself and his feelings right with God. He didn’t actually get a promotion, he took a lesser position to put some space between the two of us as part of his counseling treatment.”

“Seriously?” Jerrod scoffed.

“Yea, Jerrod, seriously. Gay men are seen as evil and aberrant according to Dominion doctrine.”

“Yea? But I’ll bet it was gay men who designed half the city of Bethlehem.”

“Probably,” Keith agreed. “But the laity are taught to loathe the gay people and so that’s what they do.”

“So what did Eric say?” Kari prodded for him to continue the story.

“Eric told me that this would be his last trip with Dominion. He was resigning from the company and leaving the church, actually leaving Christianity and religion altogether.”

“Really?” Kari sounded very surprised.

“Eric’s a really bright guy, Sis. He’d been studying the Scriptures, the history of the Christian and Judaic faiths and where our doctrines had come from. He was pretty up-front

with his opinion that he had a really hard time believing that a true God of love would even ask for, let alone command, sacrifices. He'd become quite the scriptural historian in his own right. Despite the indoctrination attempted on him during his counseling sessions, Eric still had questions and he still had feelings—for me. His counselor couldn't really answer the questions that Eric was posing. At one point his counselor got so upset with Eric's questioning of the Bible that he started yelling at Eric. Eric walked out of the session and never went back. It's probably a good thing I wasn't in the room."

"Ditto," Jerrod chimed in.

"So, what happened?" Kari asked.

"Well," Keith sighed, "Eric, must have thought I was about to give him the same ration of dogma he'd heard from his counselor. I could tell he was ready to just leave. But I just looked at him and said, 'Do you want to go out?'"

"I bet he said 'no', didn't he?" Kari responded sympathetically.

Keith nodded. "Yea, that's exactly what he said, Sis. Eric didn't want to have anything to do with the Dominion, the church, Christianity, or anyone connected to it, especially anyone in leadership.

"But Eric made sure that I knew that it wasn't me or because of me that he was leaving; in fact, he really did want to go out with me. We'd already become good friends. It's just he knew that it would never work. Our worlds had grown just way too far apart."

"I know that feeling," Jerrod frowned. Kari slipped her arm around Jerrod and pulled him close. She could feel his sadness. His arm moved around her and he pulled her to himself.

"I'm sorry, Jerrod. I think I know how you feel. In a way, Eric felt just as trapped and torn by the Dominion and by his feelings for me."

"I take it Eric didn't know that the Dominion was on the precipice of change?" Jerrod asked.

"No, not really. But that's exactly what we discussed. I asked him if he'd help me change Dominion. It would be a massive challenge. I knew Eric would be intrigued by the prospect. He said he'd think about it."

"And," Kari continued to prod for more of the story.

"And the rest is history," Keith finished.

"You are so not dropping the story at the good part!" Kari insisted. "I want the details!" she smiled.

"C'mon, Keith," Jerrod started, "there's more to the story. Don't clam up on my account."

Keith nodded, "Yea, there's more, but let's get these made and I'll finish at the table."

The counter suddenly became a build your own sandwich free-for-all with chips and sodas. They finally sat at the table to eat.

"Okay, Kei, what happened with Eric? Did he accept?"

"Well, let's just say Eric and I slept on it."

"Uh huh?" Kari munched looking at Keith with an inquiring stare, "And?"

"Sis, I don't expect you to give me every juicy detail of your love life; I'm not giving you mine."

Kari gave Keith a faux frown like he'd just deeply wounded her somehow.

"She'll get over it, Keith," Jerrod assured. "What happened with you and Eric? Obviously he didn't just leave."

"No. We stayed in Vancouver, Victoria, and Seattle for a couple of weeks, keeping anything and everything church or company related out of the way. We had an amazing time getting to know each other as people, rather than executives."

"Wow, it was like a honeymoon," Kari offered.

"It was, Sis."

“So, Keith,” Jerrod began, “your family’s, ‘gift’; did you pass it on to Eric?”

“You know, Jerrod, I didn’t. I’ve always been really careful about that. Eric doesn’t know. It’s the only secret I’ve ever kept from him.” Keith looked down at the table. “And now I wish I hadn’t.”

“What do you mean?” Kari asked.

“After our trip I brought Eric home to meet Mom and Dad. They absolutely adored Eric. He became like one of the family. We had some long talks with them over the next couple of months about where Dominion was and where it was going. We even met with a few of the other apostles. We all decided that if we were going to make changes, we needed to have Eric in a position to help make those changes. Dad had him appointed to the apostolic board.”

“The board? Wow. Didn’t that look a little suspicious?” Jerrod asked.

“Not really. Eric is extremely talented with numbers and business strategy. He was already well known in the corporate circles as a rising star. But then something really astonishing happened. Eric’s name showed up on the nominating ballot when Apostle Lawton announced his retirement. Dad swore he had nothing to do with it. Evidently Eric impressed someone in the Apostleship. Enough for one of them to give him a shot at it. We just wanted him in a position of power on the board. We’d never thought he’d be placed on the apostolic ballot.”

“Keith,” Kari began slowly, “you said earlier today that someone on the ballot had disappeared. Don’t tell me it was—?”

“Yea,” Keith nodded, “It was Eric.”

Both Jerrod and Kari stopped eating and just looked at Keith.

“Oh, my gosh! Kei!”

“Oh, man,” Jerrod consoled.

“I keep thinking over and over to myself, if Eric had been given our gift, if he’d been changed, none of this would be happening right now. It’s like our secret cost him his life.”

“I don’t know about that, Keith,” Jerrod offered.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t get me wrong, your family’s gift is beyond amazing. But it didn’t protect Kari. It seems to really enhance what you already have, but it doesn’t make you a god, does it?”

Keith looked at Jerrod and then smirked, shaking his head. “You have no idea of the mouthful you just said, Jerrod. No idea at all.”

“I guess not,” he looked away, hoping he hadn’t just insulted anyone.

“So what is security doing about Eric?” Kari asked.

“Oh, Sis,” he looked at her, “whoever did this has no idea of the force of Nature they’ve just unleashed upon themselves. This is not just some missing persons case now. Eric was on the ballot of the Apostleship. This is an Apostolic issue now. No resource under the Dominion will go untapped until Eric is found and whoever kidnapped him will be brought to justice—one way or another.”

“Wow,” Jerrod offered. “What leads you to believe Eric was kidnapped? And not just—well ...”

“... murdered?” Keith finished.

“Yea,” Jerrod nodded. “I mean, they did try to murder Kari.”

“Well, we don’t know what happened to Eric yet, Jerrod. He may still be alive. The detectives think that Eric is of more value to them alive than dead. What they want, we think, is some publicity, a stage of some kind. They want to embarrass the leadership, maybe even the Apostles themselves somehow, in front of the whole of the church. But, that’s just a theory.

“But you’re right. I’m worried that what happened to Kari doesn’t bode well for Eric. The longer this goes on, the chance of him still being alive drops considerably.”

“So I take it you don’t know much at this point,” Jerrod offered.

“No, unfortunately, we don’t. But that’s where Mom and Sis come in. Mom’s out on interviews right now. The fact is, Sis, that’s where you were just before the accident, talking with the authorities and sitting in on some interviews of people of interest in the next county.”

They watched Jerrod nodding. “Well if I had kidnapped someone, someone in Eric’s position, I certainly wouldn’t keep them within the Dominion. Any county but this one would be my first choice; and the further away the better.”

“We agree, Jerrod. Which is why we started our search immediately outside of the Dominion in some of our satellite campuses. The question is, Sis, what or who did you discover? You must have gotten close to something for them to want to make an attempt on your life.”

Kari shook her head. “Whatever it was, Kei, whatever I found, it’s locked away in my head somewhere. I don’t remember anything about any interviews, meeting with police or anything like that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, Sis. It’s not your fault. It’ll come back to you.”

“I just hope we’re in time,” she worried.

“Me too, Sis. Me too.”

\* \* \* \* \*

An early afternoon sun hung low in the sky, partially obscured by winter clouds. Jerrod’s mind had fallen somber in his thoughts as he stood looking out of the terrace window of his third floor apartment-sized bedroom. From her own room next door, Kari could feel him thinking. It wasn’t like he was

in turmoil, but just deep in his thoughts about the two of them, about his family, Kari's family, but mostly Kari could tell Jerrod felt troubled by their family's gift, and what it might do to him if their relationship continued.

Kari let herself into his room and closed the door quietly. She found him just staring out at the lake. She walked up and stood close beside him taking in the view as well.

"You're really troubled about all of this," she offered. "I can feel it."

He nodded imperceptibly, "Yea."

"Want to talk about it?"

"I don't know how much there is to talk about. I mean, you just found out about this yourself today. You're kind of in the same place I am, still discovering it, whatever it is."

"Yes, but I'm kind of stuck with it. You're worried about being changed."

"Wouldn't you be?"

"I would."

"Kari—you're over a century old. You look like you're twenty. My family will be long dead and you and I will still look like we do today. I don't know how to deal with that—exactly."

"Do you want to stop seeing each other?"

He shot her a worried glance, "No. Do you?"

Kari moved her arm around him and she felt his arm move around her. "No, of course not. It's like I need you somehow. Like I'm drawn to you."

"That's how I feel too. It's like this overwhelming, pervasive attraction to you; it's always there; it's overpowering. Whenever I'm with you I just want to tear your clothes off and make love to you. Like I'm hungry for you all the time. And it's just with you. I've never felt like this with anyone else. It's like you have this spell on me. It's obviously part of your 'gift', somehow."



"You're right. So since I have you under my spell, maybe you should let me give you one of my 'magical' backrubs?" Kari suggested facetiously.

"Very funny," he retorted. "The next time I make love to you could put me in a coma, like it did your folks."

"But you'll wake up immortal."

"Yea, maybe."

"You're trying to figure it out, aren't you? How it works."

He nodded. "I don't believe in magic, Kari, or healing touch, or voodoo or—mystical energies or anything like that. There's a logical explanation for your family's gift. It would be nice to know more about it before getting infec—" Jerrod paused, "—ted."

Kari looked at Jerrod.

"Infected." He half whispered.

"Jerrod, I'm not a disease," Kari assured him.

"No, but that's—" he didn't finish his thought.

She could feel a kind of elation, almost a relief, rising through his feelings. "Are you going to finish your sentence?"

"That's got to be it, Kari. The stranger's blood, that cured your dad on the battlefield. There must have been something in it, like a super antibody or something."

"So what does it matter? It's a gift from God, right?"

Jerrod looked at her with a half smile, "I matters to me, Kari. It's just the way I am. I'm not exactly a man of faith. Your dad passed whatever he got from the stranger onto your mom and then you and Keith inherited it from birth. It's kind of starting to make some sense now."

Kari felt his mood lift a bit. She slipped her hand over his chest and slid herself in front of him. "Do I make sense to you?"

"No," he looked into her eyes warmly. "You make absolutely no sense to me whatsoever."

They locked lips warmly. Kari immersed herself into Jerrod's feelings. She could feel his emotion jump within him

and she now played it for everything it was worth. She moved her hand over him feeling what he liked and what sensations didn't do anything for him. Jerrod loved her lips and her hands on his chest. He liked his own hands around her ass which he now held firmly. In fact, she noticed that he liked her legs and tush more than her very prominent chest.

"You know you're a naughty little vixen, right?" he breathed against her mouth.

"You could say no," she breathed.

"No. I can't."

Kari's clothes were becoming un-tucked, unbuttoned, unbuckled and unsnapped, and so were Jerrod's. Soon it was just the two of them standing in the cool sun-lit room with nothing at all between them. Kari could suddenly tell that Jerrod was trying to resist her, to temper his attraction to her, but it was not just her teasing that was driving his emotions. Kari could feel him, something else inside him that was part of him; it was pulling him to her and her to him. It was something that permeated every fiber of his feelings and hers as well. She didn't know where it was coming from, she just knew it was there; and it was unbelievably powerful.

Still she could feel Jerrod's concern rising within him. He didn't want this yet. Yes, she could feel that he wanted her, badly, but she could also feel that there was a sincere caution mixed in with those feelings as well; even a sadness, like he'd be changed if he touched her.

Kari stopped playing her boyfriend and with more willpower than she thought she had Kari softly pushed away from him.

Jerrod's breathing was still just as heavy as hers.

"I'm sorry, Kari," he apologized, diverting his eyes from her beautiful body and taking a deep breath.

Kari stepped back against the bed post recovering from her own inflamed emotions. “No, don’t apologize, Hon; it was my fault. I was playing you; teasing your emotions.”

“You—you were doing that on purpose?!” he breathed heavily.

“Yea. I’m sorry.”

“Kari!” he began in a scolding tone.

Kari was waiting for his ire. She deserved it knowing how he felt—yet she just played him anyway. Jerrod looked angry.

“Don’t you ever,” he leveled his eyes at her—and then suddenly smiled, “forget how to do that to me!”

Kari felt a sense of relief and then some mirth. She was suddenly glad he’d not been angry with her. “Oh, you liked that did you?” she breathed.

“Oh, yea,” he assured, nodding.

“Jerrod, what are we going to do? I don’t want you to avoid me.”

Jerrod finally looked at her, seeing the look on her face. Kari could feel the concern for her more than he felt for himself. Jerrod walked up to her, standing dangerously close and kissed her lightly on the neck. “Do you want to get dressed?”

“No,” she admitted.

“Then I guess you had better play me,” he said moving his lips up to her ear.

“But what about the change? Your family?”

“I’ll survive.”

Kari could feel Jerrod’s concern but it was nowhere near his feelings for her. She reached out to his feelings and softly, gently caressed them with her own, letting him feel what she herself was feeling as well. Jerrod could all at once sense what Kari felt, what Kari liked, what she didn’t, and where she liked to be touched and how.

They soon discovered that they both liked rolling together over the duvet. They both liked their lips moving over each

other's and sharing each other's breath. Feeling what she felt, his control of her as he lifted her emotions became beyond skillful. It didn't take Jerrod long to push Kari's emotions into near rapture as he now played her. Jerrod brought her to the very edge of ecstasy but then deliberately denied her. He tortured Kari again and again, mercilessly driving her up to the very peaks of desire, and then bringing her down ever so gently, denying her building release. He returned her protests with only soft kisses as a heavy glow began to cover her arching and sexually aching body.

But Jerrod was not the only one who could feel. With deadly accuracy Kari honed in on Jerrod's own emotion and feelings, giving Jerrod sensations he didn't know existed. Kari also built Jerrod's emotion slowly, being careful not to push him too far before letting him down on her own rollercoaster of torturous ecstatic sensations.

But the point of no return at long last enveloped them both. Their extended toy-time with each other was now at an end as both Jerrod and Kari felt their emotions quickly rising to the breaking point. Jerrod buried himself warmly, deeply, tightly into Kari as they pulled each other over the edge together. Their now wet and perspiring bodies flexed and tensed uncontrollably with Jerrod's lips muffling Kari's deep climactic cries under their powerfully shared explosive mutual release.

"Jerrod!" Kari gasped a whisper followed by several deep breaths. "You're unreal! What you do to me!"

She noticed Jerrod watching her as the last tremors of passion rippled through her.

"Kari, you are so fucking beautiful when you're coming," he breathed heavily, watching her move beneath him.

"Ooh," she cooed, but also felt somewhat embarrassed that he was seeing her so disheveled and out of control in the daylight of their room.

Jerrod still felt what she felt. “No, no, Kari, don’t be embarrassed,” Jerrod kissed the side of her mouth once again. “You have no idea how beautiful you look. I love making you feel this way.” Jerrod wrapped himself around her, covering Kari, protecting her. Comforting her.

The truth was Kari wanted to be out of control with him. She wanted him to bring her to climax again. But she also suddenly knew it would have to wait. Another presence was now coming up the driveway outside, someone she didn’t know but who felt very familiar. Kari released Jerrod from their emotional bond. He looked at her, missing the feelings she had been allowing him to share with her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she grinned fixing his hair that she had made a mess of. “Mom’s home.”

“Oh, great. She didn’t see us just now, did she?”

“Jerrod, it’s my mother. Of course she can see us. Relax.”

# 11

**K**ari's mother was downstairs in the study with her father when Kari got the feeling that she wanted to see them. It wasn't like her mother was speaking to Kari, but rather an impression, like an empathic sensation. Kari discovered that she suddenly didn't like the impression. She had the odd feeling that she and her mother didn't exactly have a sterling relationship. Perhaps that was the reason why she'd felt some trepidation about her family when first meeting Jerrod.

When they had cleaned up and dressed, Jerrod could not help but kiss her again while taking a handful of her ass before walking out the door. "Fair warning," he breathed across her lips. "I am going to do this to you again tonight."

Even though her emotion was all but expended, his words made her breath ripple. "Oh," was all that fell out of Kari's

mouth and suddenly she could not wait to feel Jerrod all over her again.

They walked downstairs and into the study where Kari's parents were talking. When Kari saw her mother the throb and dizziness returned. Jerrod was already prepared, and he caught her.

"Oh dear!" Kari heard her mother react.

Jerrod again picked Kari up and set her on the sofa on the same cushion as before. Only this time, Kari could feel her mother's gentle soul touching hers. She soothed the throb in Kari's head somehow as she sat next to her daughter on the couch taking her hand.

"Just be still a moment, Kar. They told me this would happen. It'll pass."

Kari nodded.

Kari's mother was shorter like her father and awfully young looking for a mother. But the woman Kari could see and feel inside was well seasoned and wise. With her mother's help, the throbbing passed quickly and along with it the dizziness. It was only a minute or so before Kari was able to sit up again.

"Let me see how you're feeling, Kar," her mother asked. Within herself, Kari could feel that her mother wanted them to share their feelings. Kari felt her mother move gently, elegantly, deeply into her daughter's mind.

"Oh my," everyone heard her mother say. "Where are you, Kari?"

"I'm sorry, Mommy," Kari begin to weep, folding her arms around her mother. "I'm all gone."

"No," her mother smiled as her own tears begin to fall, "no, not gone, Honey, just lost. You're healing, I can feel it. You're finding your way back."

"You have to help me, Mommy," Kari cried softly.

"I will, Honey, but we have to let your body heal. It'll come back, in time; give yourself some time."

She held Kari, rocking her softly while sitting on the sofa and drying her tears.

"Will she be alright then, Mrs. Connor?" Jerrod asked.

"She'll—she'll be fine, Jerrod." Mrs. Connor placed her hand on Jerrod's and squeezed it. "Thank you for taking care of her. You have no idea how grateful we all are."

"Mrs. Connor, I really don't think—"

"Jerrod," Mrs. Connor interrupted him firmly, "don't try to downplay this. You're much more than just an accidental hero here."

When Kari's sadness had passed, Mrs. Connor stood up and helped Kari to her feet. Jerrod moved to Kari's side.

"You see what I mean, Katherine," Mr. Connor walked up beside his wife. "Quite the striking couple, don't you agree?"

Mrs. Connor looked intently at Jerrod, her senses focused around him. "Jerrod, there's definitely something more than just a little different about you."

"I don't know what that would be, Mrs. Connor. I keep telling people, I'm just a Northwest boy."

"Oh, you're more than that, Jerrod, I assure you. I can see now why you caught Kari's attention."

"What do you see, Katherine?" Mr. Connor asked.

"I don't know exactly," she offered puzzled. "I've never seen anyone like Jerrod before. Empathically speaking, Jerrod is like, like he's, on fire. He's very bright. What do you see, Kari," her mother asked.

Jerrod looked at Kari.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "He feels like Jerrod to me."

"Honey, look at Simon in the main dining room downstairs," her mother offered.

Kari nodded. "Simon's," she began, "well, he's a little drab."



"That's how everyone is, Honey," her mother assured. "Now look at your brother upstairs."

"Oh, wow, I see what you mean. You and Daddy look like him too."

"So, what do I look like?" Jerrod asked Kari.

"You kind of look like Mom and Dad, and Keith. Well, almost."

"Jerrod," Mrs. Connor began, "we've seen people like you before, but not nearly as bright—so to speak. But they were also gifted. You look like you're gifted already, but you're not."

"Tell me, Jerrod," Apostle Connor began, "is anyone within your family Jewish by chance?"

"Sir?"

"Do you have any Jewish relatives?"

"I think my grandmother on mom's side was Jewish, I mean religiously as well. Do you think that that has something to do with what you see in me?"

"I do. Those who have taken very well to being gifted have had some Jewish ancestry."

"Apostle Connor, I've been trying to piece together this 'gift' as you call it. I don't know what it is, but it seems to me that your family has been blessed with something extragenetic, something really rare."

Mrs. Connor looked a little surprised by Jerrod's words. "Not too many people even know what 'extragenetic' even means, Jerrod. Are you a biology major or pre-med?"

"Just some biology, Mrs. Connor. I don't pretend to know a lot about biology or biomechanics, but I find the topic interesting reading. It's one of my quirks."

"Interesting," Apostle Connor chimed in.

"What sir?"

"My wife has doctorates in several fields of medicine, one of which she pioneered, including biomechanics. You see Jerrod we've been attempting to get to the bottom of just

exactly what it is that makes us special for over a century. But the technology to do the work we needed to do didn't exist a hundred or even fifty years ago. It's only been in the last twenty years or so that we've actually begun to understand a little bit about what it is that makes us special."

"You must be carriers of some hyper protein chain or other rare element? Something that infects your blood somehow."

"You are correct, Jerrod," Mrs. Connor began, "our blood is very different than anyone else's. We have extremely elevated levels of common nutrients and all kinds of different cell structures not found in normal people. I've done plenty of tests and research on our genetics. I have my own lab downtown. Because of that, we have to be very careful, Jerrod. The—"

Keith entered, closing the door behind him. "So here's where everyone went to. Mom, I see you've met Jerrod already."

"I have. I was just discussing with Jerrod our gifts. The problem is, Jerrod," Mrs. Connor continued, "we have to be careful. We have enemies. Enemies we know very little about."

"What kind of enemies?" Jerrod asked.

"We don't know. Aaron, perhaps you should tell our young Jerrod what happened."

Kari felt her father shudder inside.

"We had just founded the new church, Jerrod, and were making some real progress in growing it. After some long discussions and deliberations between ourselves, Katherine and I had decided that our gift was too important to keep to ourselves. God had seen fit to deliver into our hands a miraculous gift and we had decided to share it with some of the new leadership of the church. These new people would form the core of our eventual Apostolic Council.

"But all of us were sworn to secrecy about our transformation. It was to be kept between ourselves and God.

We learned a lot in those early years about what our gift could do, and not do. Then the children came along. Most were wise and strong and sensitive, just like Keith and Kari. But some were not so wise and they refused to keep their talents and gifts a secret. They used them to gain publicity and notoriety within the local community. Word spread of their feats of strength and agility. We tried to reign them in, but our efforts were to no avail.

“We would hold a monthly prayer meeting where all of the leadership and our families would gather to discuss church and other business. On this Shabbat we had planned to gather to specifically discuss what to do about our ‘renegades’. However, for reasons that would become clear to us later, Katherine refused to allow me to go. She seemed to sense that something was amiss. I had grown to trust her intuition. So much so that instead of attending the prayer meeting, we packed some belongings and what little money we had into some saddlebags and left overland on horseback. We rode for days until Katherine could sense that we were no longer being followed.”

“Someone was following you?” Jerrod asked.

“Indeed they were, Jerrod. Someone who had our own gifts. Whomever it was, they followed us across the countryside and through several states before we lost them.”

“Do you know who they were?”

“No,” he answered. “We never found out.”

“What happened to the others?” Jerrod asked.

“They were murdered, Jerrod; slaughtered like livestock. We never went back to that first church, but the newspaper reports spread the gruesome news about how the prayer meeting had been ambushed by bandits. Everyone inside was shot to death and then the building burned to the ground. Forty-four people died; men, women, children, even the

infants. Every last one of them, a 'gifted' individual. They let everyone else go."

Jerrod just stared at Apostle Connor for long moments, shocked by the story. "Someone doesn't like you having this gift," Jerrod assured.

"No, they don't. But they're just like us, Jerrod."

"I can see why you keep it to yourselves then," Jerrod nodded, "why you keep it such a secret."

"That's why I never told Eric, Jerrod," Keith offered. "I wanted to gift him. I really wanted to, many times. But the danger is still a big unknown to us. We have no idea who these people are, other than they are ruthless and supremely evil."

"You would have to be to murder children," Jerrod frowned. "Have you ever encountered them again?"

"No. We try to stay under the radar, as it were. It was the notoriety the renegades created that seemed to bring judgment down upon us."

"Apostle Connor, with all due respect, you weren't being judged for any sins here. What happened to you and your church was nothing more than old-fashioned thuggery or maybe genocide. Somebody doesn't like you or anyone else having their same gift. The only difference is, you are good and decent people and they're willing to murder to keep their monopoly on it."

"Perhaps, Jerrod; but I cannot help but feel that God was the one who indeed allowed it to happen."

"God allowed the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor also, Apostle Connor. They killed thousands of people for no reason other than their own greed for power. Getting sucker-punched doesn't mean it was God's judgment—it means you need to learn to defend yourself against evil. Otherwise, how else will you defeat it?"

“We have a difference of understanding then, Jerrod. We try to promote non-violence within Dominion. We build hospitals to try to heal people, not blow them up in war.”

“And what happens when evil shows up again? Are you just going to stand and watch as they slaughter your family?”

Apostle Connor just looked at Jerrod. Kari could feel the turmoil within him. Kari’s father was not angry at Jerrod. It was obvious to Kari that he’d had this conversation before with others. But Kari could tell he hated violence, of any kind. Probably because of the carnage he witnessed on the battlefields.

“We have yet to see that day, Jerrod. I suppose I may have to cross that bridge one day and take the life of another human being. My hope and prayer is that such a day never comes.”

Jerrod held his words. Kari could tell he was frustrated with her father’s answer, but he respectfully just nodded and dropped the conversation.

Mrs. Connor broke the pregnant silence. “Well, perhaps we should focus our thoughts on finding Eric.”

“Did you find anything, Mom?” Keith asked, hopeful.

“No. I’m sorry, Honey. All of the interviews were dead ends. But after we talked this morning it was quite suspicious that Kari’s little accident had occurred just after her interviews. And then the voice mail you told me about. Whoever this is, they’re aware of Kari and Eric, and they don’t like the changes those names represent.”

Mrs. Connor looked at Kari, “I think you found some kind of clue or something, Kari. You may have even found someone who knows something about Eric.”

Kari tried to remember but all she got for her effort was a faint ache. She just shook her head. “It’s still gone, whatever it was I found.”

“Well, security is fully aware that someone made an attempt on your life now, Honey. They have their top people working on it.”

“Jerrod,” Keith chimed in, “you should see that place. It’s state-of-the-art police technology.”

“So I’ve heard,” Jerrod acknowledged. “You have your own drones now,” he frowned.

“That would be we Jerrod,” Apostle Connor offered with a chuckle, “I am reluctant to be the bearer of bad news, but you, my boy, are just as much a part of the Dominion as any of us now.”

“I—don’t recall joining,” Jerrod mused.

“The Dominion is our family, Jerrod. Are you not deeply attracted to my daughter? I mean, inescapably attracted to her? Is she not the most beautiful creature you have ever seen?”

Mrs. Connor grinned listening to her husband. Jerrod just looked at Mr. Connor and then at Kari, but didn’t answer.

“Young man. I dare challenge you to keep yourself away from her for even more than a few days.”

“Sir?” Jerrod asked.

“I am sure by now, Jerrod, that you have realized that your attraction to her is part of the gift. Kari is inseparably attracted to you, and you to her. We don’t know why but I’m sure it has something to do with what both my wife and daughter see within you. You can try to escape her, if you like. But you will fail. All the other spouses of the gifted ones did. Kari is the daughter of a ‘gifted’ Apostle. It’s only a matter of time now. Welcome to the family.”

# 12

**S**now blanketed the ground all around the tall pines and leafless trees. The walkways were dry and bare, obviously being warmed by some sort of radiant heat beneath them. Tiny waves trickled against an icy shore while a waning, dull sun peeked in and out of icy clouds to only slightly warm the late afternoon. Kari walked arm-in-arm with Jerrod who was silently buried in his thoughts. She could feel security people here and there, keeping close watch from an invisible distance.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked softly.

“Don’t you know already?”

She could tell he was upset. But she didn’t know how to comfort him. The truth was, she didn’t really know him. All she really knew was that she wanted to be with him.

“I can’t read your mind, Jerrod,” she frowned. “I didn’t know about any of this. It’s not like I laid a trap for you.”

Jerrod sighed. "I'm sorry, Kari. I shouldn't be snapping at you. You're right. In a way, without your memory, you're just as much of a victim in this tangled skein as I am. It's just so much to think about."

"So what are you thinking about?"

"What your Dad said, about you and I. Our attraction to each other. Kari," Jerrod looked into her eyes, "please don't take this the wrong way, but, I'm not in love with you, at least I don't think I am. I mean, I don't even know you. Yes, you're the most beautiful woman I think I've ever seen and Lord knows I'm incredibly attracted to you, but—" Jerrod shook his head, "that isn't love."

"I know what you mean. Honestly, I've had the same thoughts. I mean, what if you suck as a husband?" she looked at him with a wry grin.

He gazed at her and Kari watched as a smile grew across his lips. "I'm pretty sure you would not suck as a wife," he chuckled, pulling her close to himself.

"I wonder if we're overanalyzing Nature here," Kari offered.

"Nature? Kari, there's nothing 'natural' about this gift of yours. Supernatural is more like it."

"Oh? How would you know that, Mr. Biology Professor?" she quipped. "I thought you didn't believe in anything supernatural."

"No, you're right, I don't. So, somewhere, there's got to be a natural, logical, explanation for who and what you are."

"Jerrod I'm not alone here in this supernatural biology or whatever it is. You're not exactly 'mister natural' yourself. Somehow you show up pretty brightly on my radar. Whatever I am, whatever this gift is that makes us who we are, you had it long before you ever met me, Mister."

"I guess that's true," he admitted. "I guess can't fault you or your family for any of this. It's just that a couple of days ago



I was a regular guy minding my own business; taking a trip to the slopes to get some down time and avoid the rat race for a while. Today, I'm all but married to a beautiful woman four generations my senior and heir to the vast resources of the most feared and despised Christian denomination on Earth. God hates me."

"God doesn't hate you, Jerrod, He just has a sense of humor."

"Oh, so you think this is funny," Jerrod couldn't help but smile at her.

"Don't you?"

Jerrod shook his head. "Maybe. God must have a really odd sense of humor. Actually, Kari, you should be the one who's most angry at Him."

"I'm not angry at God, Jerrod."

"Why not? I think I would be."

"Jerrod, I almost died because someone tried to kill me. I don't know if you truly get that. I almost died. I'm sure a hundred cars probably passed by me, but you—you saved me. Whatever this gift I have, it reached out to you and drew you to me. What are the chances of you—you with your own inherent gift that was somehow sensitive to me—driving by at just that moment and then stopping? That's not just random chance. Not to me."

Jerrod pulled her close, their ski jackets crumpling against each other in the frigid air. She felt his mood lift a bit.

"No, I don't suppose it is. I just don't know what to do, Kari. For some reason, God or Nature, the Universe or something has seen fit to drop the two of us into each other's lives."

They walked further down the path, reaching a snowy boardwalk that took them out over the water.

"So do you like me?" she asked curious, sensing Jerrod's every feeling, not wanting to be lied to just out of courtesy.

Jerrod looked at her. "I do like you. You know I do. You don't have to feel insecure about that. It's the Dominion I don't like. It's like your parents built this massive church enterprise that took on a culture all its own and now they're struggling to tame it. Their willingness to make some big changes in the church's culture surprises me, actually. Your parents aren't quite the people I thought they'd be."

"They're a little surprising to me too."

"Everything is going to be a surprise to you until your memory returns."

"That's not exactly what I mean, actually. When you and my parents were talking about the church leaders who were killed, Mom asked Daddy to tell the story. She didn't want to tell it. Not in front of me. I think my mom knows more of the story than Dad does."

"Really? Did you sense something?"

"She was being a little evasive about her lab research."

"She lied?"

"No, she didn't lie; I'd pick that up. She just evaded the subject, and did so rather skillfully. Honestly, someone as brilliant as my mother with all the time she's had? She knows more than she's letting on."

They stopped at the edge of the boardwalk looking out over the icy water. "Kari, if that's true, she's not going to be able to keep a secret from you. Before your memory loss, you probably knew as much as she did."

"But what did I know that she's not telling?" she asked rhetorically, a thin dull pain came and went in her head. Somehow Kari felt like Jerrod was right. There was more to what her mother had allowed be told, she could feel it. "I think you're right, Jerrod. I probably did know. I just wish I could remember what it was."

"I don't think your mom is bad, Kari, I just think she has her secrets. Both of your folks are really afraid of this unknown

enemy. It's like they've been in hiding in the shadows all these years."

"Wouldn't you?" she asked.

Jerrod looked at her. "No, Kari, I wouldn't. I'd do everything in my power to find out who my enemy was, and then hunt the bastards down."

"Then wouldn't you become just as evil as they are?"

"The police kill people. Soldiers kill people. Are they evil for wanting to protect the peace and everyone's freedom? No. Evil acts only in its own self interest. The people who murdered your church family, they're still out there, somewhere. They need to pay for their crimes."

"I'm not disagreeing, Jerrod, but that's sounds a lot easier said than done."

"It usually is. But maybe it's time your family stopped running, Kari. Evil only understands and respects one thing; power. If you have more power than evil has, it retreats, and then you hunt it down and destroy it. You don't negotiate or compromise with evil. That's the first thing evil hopes you'll do."

"Battled a lot of demons, have you?" she snarked.

"Some. Mostly I read Sun Tzu."

"I don't think my parents are going to fight, Jerrod," she admitted. "They won't go to war with evil. They'll just try to avoid it."

"You're probably right. So I guess you and I, and God willing, Keith and Eric, we'll have to do it for them."

\* \* \* \* \*

A warm late-night fire burned fitfully in the upstairs sitting room. The staff had all long since gone home or to bed. Kari's thoughts and feelings drifted warmly over her beloved Jerrod sleeping soundly a few rooms away. She wondered what was

going to become of them. It seemed like there were just so many unknowns to think about.

Kari felt Keith coming up the driveway. He walked soundlessly into the house and then up the stairs to the third floor. On his way to his room he saw his sister sitting in front of the fire and smiled at her.

"I've never seen this picture before," he began with a quiet voice, "Not."

"Hey," she greeted, still surrounded by her own thoughts.

He took off his jacket and shoes then sat down opposite her on the short couch. He said nothing but just shared staring at the fire with her, like they had done a million times before. It felt good to have Kari back, safe and sound. She was his best friend and he hers. They'd shared countless fires just like this one talking about life, work, friends, love, church and God. Together, they had secrets not even their mom and dad knew. But she would be getting better, he hoped.

"Any news on Eric?" she asked. She knew Keith was working late at security admin trying to find even one warm lead.

Keith drew a deep, tired breath and sighed, "No. They're all dead ends. It's odd too. It's like there's just nothing there. And even the places where you think you should find something, there's nothing." He shook his head. "It's like someone out there is actively working against us."

"Maybe they are. They knew Eric was on the ballot and me as well. Obviously, it's someone with intimate knowledge of the Apostles. Maybe even inside knowledge of the investigation itself?"

Keith nodded. "We've been thinking that as well. That's what's making this even more difficult. Forensics lost some evidence for the second time this week."

"You mean someone stole it."

Keith nodded again. "The first time it happened we were really suspicious and now it's just obvious. It has to be someone connected to one of the Apostles. We just don't know who it is yet."

"You'll find something," she encouraged. "You always do."

"And how would you know that?" he looked at her.

She gave him one of her wry smiles, "Isn't that what I always say?"

"It is," he nodded. "You're remembering, aren't you?"

Kari nodded slightly. "But it's just bits and pieces. Shards of things I've known."

"But that's good, Sis. Maybe things will be back to normal soon, just like Mom said."

Kari continued to stare at the fire.

"Keith," she began, "tell me about our mom."

She sensed his sudden apprehension. He wanted to avoid the topic but he knew she wouldn't let him.

"Nothing gets past you, does it. Even wounded."

"I can't help who I am," she replied, still looking at the flames.

"You want to know more about the enemy?"

"Don't you?"

"We all do."

She looked at Keith, "All?"

"Kar, our family is not the only one that's been gifted."

"That's what you were saying earlier."

"You don't live as long as we do with the hyper-empathy that our women have without encountering others like us along the way here and there."

Kari looked at Keith now. "What are they like?" She was very curious. "These other families?"

"For the most part?" Keith shrugged, "they're just like we are. Small families with similar stories. All of us keep to

ourselves, mostly. We invent things, sometimes entire industries, like Mom and Dad have. And we keep ourselves out of sight, always looking over our shoulders for something lurking in the shadows.”

“Were any of these other families ever attacked, like we were?”

“At some point all of them have been. Their loved ones brutally murdered and then their bodies burned.”

“To destroy our blood,” she surmised.

“Yea. And they always attack in overwhelming numbers. If there’s a family of five or six, they show up with dozens and always with lots of firepower.”

“Who are they?”

“We still don’t know. Obviously they’re a group of gifted people who’ve been around a lot longer than we have. They’re well organized, well armed. Can you imagine the power of a clandestine army of gifteds? We’d be unstoppable. Evidently that’s what this other group of gifteds has decided. That there’s only room on the planet for one gifted clan and it’s only going to be them.”

“So why did Mom evade my questions this afternoon?”

“I think mostly because of Jerrod. He’s still an unknown. We’ve never seen anyone like him before.”

“But they appear to be happy for us.”

“Oh, they’re incredibly happy. We were beginning to think that you weren’t ever going to find anyone. You’re very picky, you know.”

“Quit,” she smirked at his joke. “Nature put Jerrod and I together. It’s not like we had a choice.”

“Oh, you had plenty of choices. Mom and Dad even went so far as to introduce you to some of the other gifted families. That was a mistake. Although, you did meet your best friend, Julia. She’s gifted. But you probably don’t remember her either though.”

Kari shook her head. "So what is it about Jerrod that Mom doesn't like?"

"I think she's just being cautious."

"She's being more than cautious, Kei. There's real trepidation there, I felt it."

"Kari," Keith began, "Jerrod totally came out of left field. He was a really big surprise to all of us. Mom thinks he could be dangerous."

"Dangerous? How?"

"You still don't remember our history yet. But different people when they're gifted respond to the gift in different ways. Some, it doesn't seem to do much to them at all except help them live a little longer than normal. Others of us become very strong and agile, tolerant to extreme heat and cold, and highly intelligent. That's kind of the norm."

"Tolerant to cold? I take it that's not one of my better attributes," she lamented.

"No, unfortunately. Mom's the same way. If it had been Dad or I in your car the other night, we'd have been just fine. But you and mom don't do well in the cold for some reason."

"So Mom thinks Jerrod might be a threat?"

"She's always been a little paranoid. She has good reason. Her instincts have kept us alive when other families like ours—weren't so lucky. You have her same instincts. You sense danger like it's nobody's business. Maybe even better than Mom."

"So it's what she sees in Jerrod that scares her then. He's not even gifted but when we look at him, he already feels like he is. I could see how that might be a little unsettling."

"It's probably what attracts you to him, and he to you. Mom's afraid he'll become, well, really gifted. Much more so than any of us are."

"I could see that. So what happens if he does become 'really gifted', as you say? What if he is more powerful than any of

us? Maybe we need someone like that right now. Maybe it's time we stopped hiding in the shadows and confronted our enemy."

"Now you're starting to sound like me," he quipped. "I've only been preaching that sermon to deaf ears for decades."

"And what about Eric, how does he feel about confrontation?"

"We've talked about war and stuff. He hates violence, but Eric's not one to run from a fight, especially a fight for survival."

Kari nodded. "Is Mom afraid of Eric too? What does he feel like to her? Obviously you were attracted to Eric."

"Eric's definitely special to me, Sis, but, I'm not attracted to him like you are to Jerrod. Just between you and me, I think we're all a little nervous about what's going to happen once he's actually gifted. Is he going to become a god?"

"Is that what mom's really afraid of? She won't be able to control him?"

"Yea. Probably."

"I think Mom and I need to have a talk."

"Yea, good luck with that. Let me know how it turns out for you," Keith got up from the sofa.

"We can't keep running, Kei. First we need to find whoever kidnapped Eric and then we need to start building our army."

"Army?" he smirked. "Get serious."

"They have one, don't they?"

"Yea. But—how are you going to control an army of gifteds, Sis. We sort of tried that already."

"No, we haven't. Keith, what we built was a church commune. That's not an army. We'll control our soldiers the same way our enemy does. The same way armies have been controlled since the beginning of time."

"Mom won't let you do it."

"What's she going to do, kill me?"



“No, of course not, but she might nag you to death; write you out of the will. I don’t know. Are you sure you really want to openly challenge Mom and Dad like this? That’s pretty nervy, even for you.”

“Yea, well, coming close to death and not remembering your past probably has a way of changing people. Maybe it’s our wake-up call. I’m not going to live my whole life hiding in the shadows. Mom and Dad can come along if they like. But it’s probably going to be a really ugly ride.”

# 13

**B**reakfast was a little cold. The food was hot but there was a kind of ice bridge of feelings between Kari and her mother at the table. They both knew what they were feeling as they privately, empathically communicated between themselves at the breakfast table with the rest of the family.

“Do you ladies need some time to actually discuss whatever it is, alone?” Apostle Connor offered out of the blue. He’d seen this kind of conversation before.

“Huh?” Jerrod looked at Kari.

“You haven’t been around them when they’re arguing, Jerrod,” Keith popped in.

“We are not arguing,” Mrs. Connor assured with her very Southern politeness.

Kari glared.

Jerrod looked at Kari’s mother who was wearing her Southern plastic face and then at Kari, who was not.

"Well, that's interesting," Jerrod admitted.

"Stay out of it, Jerrod, if you know what's good for you," Apostle Connor offered nonchalantly, folding his newspaper to the next page.

"Perhaps we need to talk some more after breakfast, Dear," Kari's mother evaded.

"Is this about us?" Jerrod asked.

"We're just having a little disagreement, Jerrod. We'll be fine," Mrs. Connor assured.

Keith cleared his throat, "Little?"

Apostle Connor looked at Keith over the top of his paper. "Are you mixed up in this as well?"

"I'm staying out of it," Keith backtracked with a half-full mouth.

Apostle Connor folded his paper, setting it neatly onto the table. "Katherine. Kari. Keith. Why am I always the last one to find out there's a feud?"

"It's not a feud, Dear; just a disagreement."

"A disagreement? Over what?"

"What we talked about yesterday," Katherine encoded.

"Should I step out for a minute," Jerrod offered, "I don't want to intrude on a family discussion."

Apostle Connor waved him to stay. "No, no, Jerrod. You're just as much a part of this family now as any of us are. The truth is we have been having some serious discussions amongst ourselves about you and Kari. I think its due time we made it a family discussion instead of all of this secrecy. Don't you think ladies?" Aaron glanced only at his wife.

Kari's mother gave her the 'now you've done it' feeling.

"Kari, since you're closest to Jerrod," Apostle Connor began, "perhaps you should be the one to introduce your fiancé to the discussion."

Jerrod looked at Kari, "Did I do something wrong?"

"Someone thinks so," Kari said still glaring at her mother.

"What'd I do?" Jerrod asked with a worried look like maybe he'd broken some ancient family taboo.

"It's not what you've done, Jerrod, Honey," Kari's mother chimed in politely, "but what you might do."

"I'm not sure I follow, Mrs. Connor."

"It's about your gifting," Kari told him.

"What about it?"

"We're just not sure, Jerrod," Mrs. Connor began, "if it's the right time to gift you."

"I thought all of you wanted me to be gifted?"

"That was yesterday, Jerrod. This is today," Apostle Connor quipped.

"Aaron, be serious, please," Katherine frowned. "Jerrod, we know so little about you at this point. In the past we've only gifted people we knew very well. We just need some time to get to know you. To make sure that gifting you is the right decision."

Jerrod's eyes darted as he thought about what Mrs. Connor had just told him. He nodded. "I think I understand, Mrs. Connor. I would probably be cautious too. Although, at this point, I don't know what there is to discuss. The decision is really not yours to make."

Apostle Connor's eyebrow rose slightly, as did the corner of his mouth.

"Well, you are certainly entitled to your perspective, Jerrod," Katherine continued. "But we have always made these decisions as a family and we will continue to do so."

"That's fine, Mrs. Connor. I respect that. My family will do the same."

"Your family?" Katherine queried.

"Kari and I are family." Jerrod took her hand under the table and she squeezed his firmly. "We appreciate your thoughts. But we're very capable of making our own decisions."

"I don't think that you are, Jerrod. Capable, I mean. Kari still doesn't remember who or what she is and neither do you. It would be irresponsible to gift anyone until they're ready."

"Really, Mrs. Connor? Were you and Mr. Connor 'ready' when you were gifted by this stranger? Was that irresponsible as well?"

"It was the will of God, Jerrod."

"Oh. Is that where we're going? Really? 'No one can challenge my authority because I'm the result of the will of God,'" Jerrod challenged openly. "Was it also the will of God that dozens of your gifted church members were ruthlessly slaughtered?"

"That's an unfair and offensive comparison, Jerrod!" Katherine shot back. "We had no idea an enemy like this existed at the time!"

"So now that we do, Mrs. Connor, what has your family responsibly done to actually mitigate that danger?"

"We do everything we can to keep ourselves safe, Jerrod, much more than you know. Part of what we do is not gift persons we know nothing about." Kari's mother emphasized while glaring at her daughter.

"You treat the gift like you own it, Mother!" Kari fired back.

"I'm certainly a good and careful steward of it!"

"Oh, and I'm not?"

"Alright now everyone," Aaron chimed in, "let's keep this a discussion and not a quarrel." He looked at everyone at the table who had now all fallen silent. "Jerrod, you level a compelling argument. Kari is an adult, no longer under the auspices of her mother and father. That was the chance we took when we had children. That they would one day find someone, marry and gift their spouse—with or without our approval," Aaron said looking at Katherine.

Katherine said nothing. She poked at her food with her fork. Kari could tell she was playing the silent card now.

Katherine hadn't counted on being openly challenged in front of the whole family, but Jerrod was not Southern like the rest of them. Kari could see her mother fuming inside but at the same time Kari could feel that her mother knew more than she was communicating. Kari sensed that her mother was really afraid of whoever this enemy was. Then Kari caught a glimpse that her mother was terribly conflicted inside. She just wanted to do the right thing. It gave Kari pause that Katherine was not really trying to be belligerent; just extra careful. Katherine took a deep breath trying to hold back her emotions of anger and fear and frustration. Kari was not the only one who could read those emotions on her face now.

"The fact is, Jerrod," Apostle Connor continued, "you rather frighten us."

"I do? How?"

"Like we discussed, neither Katherine or Kari have ever sensed anyone quite like you. You're not going to be just gifted, Son, but blazingly so. Both Katherine and Kari can sense it within you. Being gifted carries with it a mammoth responsibility. What happens if someone is gifted who is more powerful than any of us but who doesn't have that same sense of responsibility. It could spell complete disaster."

"Do I look irresponsible to either of you?" Jerrod asked the both of them.

Aaron looked at his wife who was looking intently at Jerrod for perhaps the ten thousandth time.

"You are rash, Jerrod," Katherine offered. "Unpredictable. Yes, you come from a good family and you're a responsible young man, but who knows what you will become once gifted."

"So, all of this is really just speculation about what I might become. That seems a little irrational."

"It's hardly irrational, Jerrod. Some of the gifteds we've known over the years turned out badly; they used their gifts

for fame and personal gain. Their families had to dispose of them before they brought the enemy down upon everyone. And that's exactly what you and Kari are planning to do, bring the wrath of the enemy down upon us all."

"No Ma'am. That is not what we are planning do." Jerrod's brow narrowed. "We intend to hunt them down and bring them to justice."

"Now who's being irrational?" Katherine asserted. "Neither of you have any idea of the evil that's waiting for you out there," she warned.

"Do you, Mrs. Connor? Do you know what's lurking out there? It seems to me that this is part of the problem. You don't know your enemy and you keep everyone else from knowing who they are as well. Evil is even more ominous and dangerous when you don't know or understand anything about who or what it is."

"Do you think we haven't been trying to find them?" Katherine leveled. "They're just like we are, Jerrod. Just as intelligent, just as resourceful, and just as careful about staying hidden."

"No, Mother," Kari countered, "that's where you're wrong. They're already more than we are and they've had centuries more than we to perfect what they are. They may have hundreds of Jerrod's. All we have is one. And that one could make the difference between our survival or extinction."

"Jerrod could also spell our extinction, Kari, especially with what the two of you are planning."

"Do you really want to live the rest of your life running and hiding in the shadows?", Kari pushed.

"We've done just fine for well over a century, Kari."

"And what happens to us when we have your grandchildren? What happens when our family grows beyond just a handful? What then? Do we all just cower in the shadows

for all eternity? Waiting for some unseen stalker to murder all of us in the middle of the night!?”

“We will cross that bridge when we get to it, Kari.”

“By then it may be too late, Mother. Who knows? It may already be too late.”

“Well, it may have been too late the day you were born, Kari, and there’s nothing now or ever that any of us can do about it.”

“Well, I guess we’ll never know,” Kari opened up with both barrels blazing, “because someone can’t see past their own jealousy of another family member being more gifted than they are!” The words just fired from Kari’s mouth on full automatic. A distant memory bubbling to the surface.

Kari’s words suddenly caused Katherine to fumble her empathic feelings. And then suddenly there it was. For a split second Kari saw it, she felt it. Her mother was hiding herself from her. Hiding emotions she didn’t want Kari to see. Kari didn’t know they could do that—but now she did.

“I—” Katherine began but never finished the sentence. Katherine’s eyes drew wide as she attempted to defend herself from Kari’s empathic assault. But it was too late. Katherine was already feeling her daughter invading her feelings. She tried to keep Kari out but she couldn’t. And Kari suddenly remembered why. Kari was much stronger than her mother was; and much, much more sensitive.

Kari now knew her secret. Katherine was afraid of strength; and she was also afraid of her own daughter. She had always been afraid of Kari. She loved her daughter with everything that she was, but she was utterly terrified that Kari would bring all manner of hellfire and damnation down upon the family. In many ways Kari felt her mother was a very strong woman, determined and unyielding; but in other ways, she was also a yellow coward.



“Kari, leave your mother alone, please,” her father asked politely. Kari nodded and immediately dropped her invasion, but it was too late. She already now knew the truth.

Katherine got up from the table and hurried out of the kitchen, completely violated.

“What’s going on?” Jerrod asked.

Kari was a little speechless.

“This is what happens, Jerrod, when you have two queen bees in the same hive,” Apostle Connor began. “The truth is, my wife and my daughter seldom see eye-to-eye on anything. Always in competition, always in some disagreement. Katherine is afraid of you, Kari. She always has been. Now you know why.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“It’s not me you need to apologize to,” he leveled with kind eyes.

Kari nodded and excused herself from the table.

Katherine had stolen herself upstairs into the master bedroom. It didn’t take an empath for Kari to see that her mother was hurt, angry, frustrated, and frightened all at the same time. Kari kept her feelings out of Katherine’s and to herself; she’d done enough damage for one day.

She entered her parent’s room and sat down next to her mother on the bed. The fact was, her mother didn’t really look that much older than Kari; they could very easily have been mistaken for sisters. The only outward difference between the two of them was culture. Kari had kept hers current while Katherine’s was more than a few decades behind. A young woman hopelessly mired in a culture of the past.

Kari placed her hand on the comforter between her and her mother; it was her version of a peace offering. Katherine placed her hand on her daughter’s and squeezed it.

"I'm sorry," Kari offered quietly. "I didn't know."

Katherine nodded wiping the streams from her face. "Now you do, Honey."

The both of them sat in silence for a few long moments.

"We haven't fought like this in a really long time," she admitted.

"I didn't mean to."

"It's alright, Kari, I probably—" Katherine paused. "No, not probably. I had that coming, Kari. I haven't been treating you very well these past few years. I deserved that."

"Why?" Kari asked.

"I know you don't remember, but, I've always had fear, Kari. Debilitating fear. Ever since that day your father and I ran away from the first schoolhouse, the feeling of that evil has always haunted me. That feeling; it never goes away. You'll know it one day when you feel it for yourself. I just hope when that day comes you'll be strong enough to defeat it."

"That's all we're trying to do."

"I know." Katherine squeezed Kari's hand again. "It's just that when you've struggled and built and strived to do all we've done, you want to be very careful. You don't want it to all unravel because of bad decisions. We have a lot to lose, Kari. More than you know."

"It's just stuff, mom. Things can be replaced."

"No, Kari, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about who we are. The gift we carry within us."

"I'm listening," Kari said looking at her mother.

"When your father was delirious and dying on the battlefield, the stranger and I had some long talks. He was handsome, well spoken and brilliant. He told me about things I thought were figments of his delirious dreams. But in time I began to understand what he was talking about. He said a great awakening was coming; a time when men would no longer be bound to the ancient ways and religious

superstitions. He said we would one day fly in machines built by our own hands. We would learn the secrets of things smaller than atoms, and eventually harness the power of the stars themselves."

"Wow," Kari began, "that was pretty visionary."

"It was more than visionary, Kari. His clan was already doing these things."

"Really! In the 1800s?"

Katherine nodded. "He said they were gifts from the gods."

"The gods?"

"That's what he called them."

"Called them? They're real? Who are they?"

"Very powerful beings living among us."

"Like angels?"

"No. Not like angels; *we* are like their angels, their messengers, even their soldiers. These people, these beings, they're much more powerful than even we ourselves are. We are their offspring, the result of their blood. That is what the gift is, Kari, the blood of the gods flowing through our veins."

"Where did they come from? Are they people like us?"

"No, Honey, they're not like us. They're like—Jerrod."

"Jerrod!?" Kari exclaimed in alarm. "How? How do you know?"

"Because whatever was following your father and I that day we escaped, felt like Jerrod. I know what I felt. Kari, Jerrod's not like us, not really. Once he's gifted, he could very well become one of these gods; good or evil."

"Jerrod doesn't have an evil bone in his body, Mother."

"I know he doesn't, Honey. I'm just fearful of what he might become." She looked away. "Perhaps Jerrod's right. It's an irrational fear."

"Have you ever met one of these gods?"

"No. Not personally. But we know of other clans of gifteds who have. They serve the gods."

"What are they like, these other clans? Are they good?"

"They are, Honey. They're wonderful people, good and righteous, just like we are. The stranger we met was from one of these clans."

"So what happened to the stranger?"

"He died, Kari. The gift doesn't make us immortal nor invulnerable. From the wounds he had suffered, I can't tell you why he was even still alive. It was just before he died that the stranger told me about the special gift he carried within himself; how it had been carried by his family for thousands of years."

"Wow. Is that how long we live?"

Katherine nodded. "Some of us will live to be over a thousand years old, Kari. Probably not your father and I, but definitely you and Keith."

"What about Jerrod? How long will he live?"

"I don't know how long the gods live. But if my guess is correct, he will probably outlive all of us."

"I wish we knew more about them," Kari thought out loud. "I'm sorry about all of this, Mommy."

"No need to apologize any more, Honey." Katherine gave her daughter a hug that Kari warmly returned. "I'm the one who should be apologizing to you. I'm sorry for the way I've been treating you. I'm just so glad to have you back home safe. I love you so much, Kari."

"It's okay, Mommy. I'm back now."

They hugged each other with a powerful hug between the two of them.

"I just wish we knew more about these evil ones and these gods," Kari mused.

"I think I need to show you something, Kar. If your fiancé is really who I think he is, you may want to give him something."

Kari looked curiously at her mother as Katherine all but pulled Kari into her closet. It was a lavish space the size of a living room with its own furniture and dressing tables and cabinetry, with all manner of hanging and neatly folded clothes. Katherine opened a concealed safe door that lead into a hidden walk-in closet displaying enough bling to open her own Tiffany's.

"Good Lord, Mother! Moderate much?" Kari looked at a few of the busts sporting diamond necklace and earring sets and a brooch with an unusually cut ruby the size of Kansas.

"They're investment pieces, Honey. Besides, you should talk. This hardly holds a candle your collection."

Kari suddenly wished she had her memory back.

Against the far wall was a closed cabinet. Her mother opened the cabinet as a tiny light faded on to illuminate the small interior. The only thing inside was a solitary ring display spire holding a single gold ring. It was wider, obviously made for the hand of a man, with some kind of diamond-looking inlay.

"What's this?"

"The ring of the stranger."

Kari's eyebrows lifted. "He gave you a ring?"

"Just before he died. I'd never seen anything like it at the time, and I've only seen one other since. I was told that the ring is only worn by the gods and their personal messengers."

"Can I touch it?"

"Go ahead, you have many times before."

Kari slipped the ring off the spire. It was heavy and unusually styled. There was some kind of inscription on the inside that she didn't recognize. It looked like it was in Hebrew

to her, but it may as well have been written in Klingon. She couldn't read it.

"Why did he give it to you?"

"I think he knew he was dying. He wanted me to take it, to keep it safe and not let it fall into the hands of the enemy."

"Was the enemy after it?"

"I don't know. Your father and I think that the stranger may have been involved in some kind of battle with them. Maybe they were. We don't know."

"Have you had any luck deciphering the inscription?" she turned it around in her fingers.

"No. The style of lettering is similar to paleo-Hebrew, but outside of that, it's undecipherable at this point."

"It feels heavy."

"It is, Kari; too heavy to be gold. The jeweler couldn't even scratch it. The inlay and the metal, are seamless. He couldn't begin to tell me how it was made."

Kari mimicked her best Cockney accent, "Maybe it's magical," she over-acted, grinning. "Forged in the fires of Mordor!"

Katherine chuckled. "You've been watching too many movies."

Kari placed the ring back on the spire. Katherine closed the cabinet door and then looked at her daughter. "This doesn't belong to us, Kari. It belongs on the hand of a god. If Jerrod is who I think he will become, this should belong to him, not any of us."

Kari's mind was moving in several different directions. "I don't know what to do. Jerrod doesn't really know what to do. I think he's feeling a bit of trepidation, you know, about such a big change."

"That's good, Kari. It's very commendable. It shows that Jerrod is actually thinking about his destiny."

"I feel like he's waffling," Kari admitted.

“Kari, it’s a big change. It takes some of us a while to decide whether or not we want the gift. I’ve known people who chose not to take it. But Jerrod isn’t like us, Honey. He has no idea about who he really is. God or Nature seems to have made Jerrod what he is. I don’t think fate is going to give him any choice. Your Jerrod may need a little push into his destiny.”

“Daddy said you were gifted on your wedding night. Did you cut yourselves?”

“Oh, no honey. Nothing like that. It was definitely your father’s seed. That’s all it took for the other families as well.”

“Well, I’m not exactly impregnating Jerrod, Mother.”

“No, but eventually you will. Men gifting women happens easily. Women gifting men, well, that can take a while sometimes. You have to infect him, Honey. Maybe you two should—play it a little rough next time,” she grinned. “Or, I can get a sample of your blood and inject him.”

Kari looked at her mother like she’d lost her mind. “Thanks. But, I think we’ll try the natural way first.”

# 14

**S**now lined the road, piled high along the sidewalks where the plows and neighborhood snow blowers had left it. It was only a short drive from her folk's estate to where Kari lived. She was excited to see her place for what felt like the first time. She hoped that seeing it would help return at least some of her memories. Kari could sense that Jerrod was very interested in seeing her home as well.

"How did you convince your mom to go along?" Jerrod asked, driving the plush custom Lexus slowly behind the security car ahead of them.

"I didn't, actually," she began. "I didn't need to really convince her of anything. She more or less decided on her own. I mean we talked about it, but it wasn't like I needed to do any arm-twisting. She's just afraid, Jerrod. Too much history and too many unknowns. She's deathly afraid of this enemy of ours."



"I'm sorry if I created a family feud. I really felt like a third wheel this morning."

"Don't apologize. You're part of our family now. We're gifted; not infallible. We have the same normal family problems everyone else does."

"I don't know, my family is completely perfect," he lied with a grin. "Maybe we should start calling me Saint Jerrod?"

"You need to have two miracles to be a saint," she returned his grin, looking at him affectionately.

"Darn. I guess I need one more then," he smiled back.

They drove through the neighborhood and then through a small elegant gate to a Tudor-inspired home with snow covered gardens and large areas of lawn surrounded by evergreens.

"Wow," Kari offered. "I like this."

Jerrod smiled again. "That's good, you probably designed all of it."

"It's strange," she began, "I feel like I recognize this place, but I know I've never been here before."

Kari's home was a magnificent two-story Tudor house, but it was nothing of the size or grandeur of her parents' estate. They parked in the large driveway. Security escorted them to the door but then stayed outside. Inside, the foyer was nicely apportioned with Jerusalem stone tile and an elegant throw rug, making it warm, cozy and very inviting.

Jerrod watched Kari carefully as she meandered around the entrance, touching pieces of furniture and nick-knacks, looking for memories.

"Everything is—familiar," she began.

"Any headaches?" Jerrod asked.

"No. It's all just really—familiar."

"Familiar and no headaches. That seems like a good thing," he offered.

Kari nodded.

The home was becoming more than just familiar as they walked through it together.

"I love the way this is decorated," she mused, with Jerrod in tow. "It's strange how everything is just—perfect."

Jerrod rubbed his hands along her arms in assurance that he was right behind her.

"I guess that should go without saying," she continued, "I mean, I decorated it. I guess I should love it."

Jerrod followed her upstairs as they explored the rest of the second floor of the home, its rooms and décor. There was a music studio complete with a baby grand, mixing boards, controller keyboards and a Mac with several large monitors that Kari recognized immediately.

They passed some guest rooms and then arrived at the master bedroom at the end of the hall. The master suite took up most of the upper floor of the home. It was simply and exquisitely decorated.

Jerrod was impressed and complimentary. "Nice. I like the way you've done this. Your color choices are perfect. The drape fabric works really well with the bedding. Elegant but not too prissy."

"I keep forgetting that you're a designer," Kari chuckled, hugging him close.

"It's my curse," he joked.

In the closet Kari was suddenly biting her tongue that she ever gave her mother a bad time about her things. Kari's closet was by far the largest room upstairs. She didn't have a vault up in the closet like her mother had in hers; somehow Kari knew hers was downstairs in the cellar. But she still had some large pieces of her own bling openly on display in the closet.

"Are these real?" Jerrod asked, ignoring the clothes and looking at the jewelry.

"Yea, I'm pretty sure they are."

"Seems like you should keep something like this locked up," Jerrod offered, tapping on the glass case door of a rather large and ornate diamond necklace and earring set.

"Probably, but I'm pretty sure this is the safest neighborhood in America."

"Yea. Still. Good grief," Jerrod offered looking at a exquisitely ornate diamond bracelet. "I think some of these are worth more than your house."

Kari smiled. She decided that she wasn't going to tell him about what was in the cellar. Mostly because she wasn't exactly sure she knew herself what was down there.

The clothes all felt very familiar to Kari. A handful of seemingly distant memories returned while she was looking at them hanging here and there. She opened one armoire-like closet that held neatly organized sports gear. Several pair of her skis, several pair of boots, a snowboard and various accessories. The next closet had some additional skiwear, workout clothes and a ceremonial karate gi neatly folded and loosely wrapped by a very ornately embroidered ebony belt.

Kari stared at the gi for several moments and then picked it up, unleashing a sudden wave of very old memories that flooded over her in an instant. The flash of memories only made her slightly dizzy, like a faint head rush. But the unexpected dawn of experience drew up a new and powerful awareness within her.

"Hmm," she smiled silently to herself, returning the gi to the shelf just as neatly as she had found it. Kari continued exploring the shoe sections of the closet while Jerrod sat in one of the closet's dressing chairs watching her closely.

"You look like a kid in a candy store," he mused watching her touch nearly every pair of shoes in the wall sized rack.

"I am!" she offered, holding a pair of nice dress pumps.

"How's your memory?"

"I'm remembering things, lots of things."

"Really?" he got up from the chair and walked over to her.

"These shoes," she began, "I wore them to my last concert at the Temple."

"Kari, that's awesome."

She looked at Jerrod. He was happy for her but she could still feel that he was uneasy about her recovering her full memory.

"Stop worrying," she looked at him.

"I'm sorry. I can't help it. It's just, I've never met anyone like you."

"Jerrod, *I've* never met anyone like me," she grinned.

"You know what I mean. If I lost you, Kari, it would just kill me. You're not exactly an easy act to follow."

"Jerrod, you heard my family, I don't date anyone. You're the first person I've actually taken an interest in. Besides, we're naturally attracted," she wrapped her arms around him.

"You mean unnaturally."

"The gift isn't 'unnatural'," she corrected, "maybe more like supernatural."

Jerrod sighed heavily with Kari in his arms. It did feel very natural and it gave him a sense of peace with her in his arms.

"Have you thought any more about being gifted?" she asked, looking beautifully into his eyes.

He nodded. "I'm not going to buck fate, Kari." Jerrod looked up, "One often finds their destiny on the road they take to avoid it," he seemed to quote.

"Is that Sun Tzu?"

"No, I just heard it in a movie once. But it made sense. Your father's right. I won't be able to stay away from you. At some point you are going to gift me; I'm not going to try to avoid it."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Yea."

“Well, we are in my bedroom,” she offered coyly. It didn’t take much to get Kari interested in seeing Jerrod undressed, especially with her fingers moving over his abs.

“Well, technically we’re in your closet,” he grinned.

“Close enough.”

“So, how many times does it take before things start to happen? Or does it just gradually happen?” he asked, teasing her skin with his fingers as he moved her hair back.

“It’s not gradual. We just have to—try a little harder, I guess.”

“A little harder?” Jerrod breathed a smirk. “Kari, honestly, you fuck my brains out every time we make love. I don’t know how much harder we can try.”

Kari giggled. “You’re too much of a gentleman, Jerrod. Maybe we just need to—rough things up a bit.”

“Rough, huh?”

“Yea,” she breathed with a saucy grin.

“You don’t exactly strike me as the ‘rough type’,” he offered. “I don’t know if I could even get rough with you,” he added. “I wouldn’t want to hurt you, ever.”

She looked at Jerrod, “Hurt me? Honestly, you should be more concerned about yourself, Mister.”

The memories had already returned. With more than half a lifetime of martial training behind her, Kari quickly sent her strapping Jerrod to the plush floor, landing him onto a sheepskin rug. She made sure it wasn’t too hard. Then just as fast, she was straddling him, pinning his arms above his head.

Jerrod was completely startled but not hurt. “Jesus, Kari! What was that!?”

“Rough,” she gave him an angelic evil grin.

Jerrod returned her grin, nodding. “So that’s the way you want it.”

Straddling Jerrod on the floor gave Kari’s pulse a serious jump. She knew he was vulnerable and she suddenly wanted

to take advantage of him. She could feel his own desire rising quickly as well.

Like they were paper, Kari tore Jerrod's layered shirts open revealing his large deeply cut pecs and stunning abs. Jerrod grabbed hold of Kari's shirt and pulled her down onto himself kissing her—hard. Jerrod's powerful body rolled her beneath himself pinning her to the floor with his full weight as she returned his kisses. His hand was already on Kari's ass, squeezing her not gently.

They wrestled each other across the floor kissing and grabbing as the heat ignited between them like a blast furnace. After several minutes, Kari's pulse was pounding, not from exertion, but anticipation. She was through with foreplay. She easily forced Jerrod to his back and took hold of his wrists, pushing his muscular arms above his head.

The shirtless restrained Jerrod was a sight to behold for Kari. She watched as his large arms and chest flexed and bulged as he struggled powerfully beneath her to free himself, but her own strength was far too much for him. Her eyes followed the curve of his massive biceps, down along his neatly trimmed underarms and onto his flexing pecs as he struggled beneath her.

His whole body was flexing and his abs tightening. Kari felt his firm Levis pushing against hers as she straddled him. She released his wrists so that her hands could find his wide black leather belt around his hips. Instead of undoing it, she tore it, shredding the denim covering his front until all he was left wearing were his thickly bulging designer-cut briefs.

Jerrod finally realized that he didn't need to be timid with Kari—at all. The woman was beyond strong and if she wanted it rough, well, he was going to give it to her—rough.

He took hold of her button-down shirt, popping it open with buttons flying and then pulling it down halfway around her arms, partially pinning them to her sides. He destroyed her

lace bra and pulled it from her well-rounded chest. She felt his mouth around one of her breasts and Kari exhaled deeply in pleasure as he drew her nipple heavily into his mouth.

Jerrod wrestled her firmly onto her back. Barely unbuttoned, he yanked her fitted jeans down to around her knees, her matching lace panties slipping halfway off with them. They began wrestling again, kissing hard, with Jerrod pressing himself firmly against Kari through his bulging briefs.

But Kari was done with clothes. Jerrod's briefs came off in pieces as did her jeans as she kicked and tore them off. With nothing between them over the sheepskin they rolled heatedly, moving savagely over each other kissing and gripping and pushing the pulse of the other higher.

Their rough foreplay had pushed Jerrod beyond rock hard. He was trying desperately to force himself into her, but Kari wrestled with him. She could have easily overpowered him, but she was obviously toying with him, letting him struggle with her. Kari suddenly realized that she really liked it this way with Jerrod. She wanted to keep going with it, but Jerrod had other ideas as he caught her by surprise.

While he hungrily kissed her, Jerrod's fingers seductively entangled in Kari's thick blonde hair; he then firmly pulled her head back hard. Kari gasped in surprise and for a moment she stopped wrestling against him. Jerrod moved quickly between her thighs and swiftly lanced her, deeply.

The sensation of Jerrod entering her so forcefully was mind-blowing; it caused her to call out. But before she could take another breath Jerrod had withdrawn and lanced her again just as swiftly. Kari's hips bucked uncontrollably with each drive. The sensation of him moving so quickly into her was leaving her breathless. Still holding her hair in his grip, Jerrod moved one hand to lock on her bare ass as he lanced her again. Kari's legs instinctively wrapped around his.

Jerrod's incessant assault sent waves of intensity through Kari's body. Her back arched with each powerfully intimate sensation he drove into her. She began to feel a glow of moisture move over her skin between them. Kari couldn't help but call out, as Jerrod's intimate assaults became even more intense. Although much stronger than he was, with every intimate charge of sensation he sent into her, she felt somehow weak.

Maybe he sensed her weakness. He wouldn't let her catch her breath. His fingers thickly entwined in her hair, he held her head back kissing her lips hard and passionately.

"What's the matter, Kari?" he kissed, lancing her thickly and making her call out again. "Rough too much for you?"

"Jerrod—I can't—" she began out of breath.

Kari could feel her body going over the edge. She could also feel that Jerrod's emotion was no where near where hers was. He was deeply torturing her, watching her completely out of control under the ecstatic pain he kept her under. Kari could not help but flex herself uncontrollably beneath him as he sent her body into a powerful eruption of euphoria that caused her to cry out in deep muffled screams of pure pleasure into Jerrod's mouth.

But Jerrod didn't let up. He continued to wetly, thickly, heavily, incessantly, torturously lance himself into her as his own emotion built.

Kari was about to go over the edge again when suddenly Jerrod buried himself fully into Kari, halting his intimate assault. He lifted himself to his forearms and gazed down at her in alarm as a sudden and powerful ecstatic sensation rocketed through his manhood.

"Ahhh!" he exhaled intensely. "Kari! What's—!"

Kari could see a look of intense pain moving over his face.

"Jerrod! Are you alright!?" her hand went to his pained cheek.



“Oh, God!” he gasped, pushing himself as deeply as he could into her. “Oh, God! Kari!” She could feel him releasing, over and over.

“Are you okay? Does it hurt?”

“No!” he gasped again shaking his head intensely. “It just feels like I’m coming—but it—it won’t stop! AHHH.” he exhaled vocally.

She reached out with her feelings to sense his euphoria. Everything within him was tingling. His rapture was off the chart intense.

“Oh! God, Kari! It won’t stop!” he cried out in his ecstatic pain.

Kari rolled Jerrod over softly, keeping him within her, watching him, feeling him, sensing what he was feeling. She could feel that his body was on fire with a massive euphoria.

“KARI!” he shouted helplessly, his back arching uncontrollably beneath her as another powerful wave of ecstatic emotion rocked through him.

After several long moments the euphoria Kari empathetically felt within him began to slowly fade. But everywhere else his whole being was tingling brightly.

“Kari—” Jerrod caught his breath, “what are—what are you doing to me!?” he breathed softly looking up at her.

“What do you mean?”

He looked at her. His powerful arms were quickly weakening as he held her. He touched her skin, her sides, her breasts, and then his hands fell, too weak to lift anymore.

“I can hear your heart beating,” he whispered.

“You mean you couldn’t you before?”

“No.”

“Oh,” she whispered gently, “I listen to yours all the time.”

“These colors,” he began. “Is this how you see things?” His eyes moved weakly from her to around the room.

“Of course, silly,” she grinned disheveled at him.

He looked at her again, drawing a long weak breath. "Your scent." He smiled. "I'll remember ... your scent ..."

Jerrod slipped softly away into sleep. The gift had overtaken him now, Kari thought. In a month he would awaken. For long minutes she just rested herself over him, listening to him breathe, feeling him grow flaccid within her. Kari didn't want to let him go.

Finally, she pulled herself away from her deeply sleeping Jerrod and carried him to her own bed, leaving him resting.

"Sweet dreams, beautiful man," she kissed him lightly on the lips. "Sweet dreams."

# 15

**K**ari hadn't left the house in three days. Keith had all but moved in and had been helping with keeping the home clean and with meals. Unlike her mom and dad, Kari liked to do things herself around the house; but at the moment she was a bit of a wreck with Jerrod in his gifting coma.

Kari was sitting in their master suite curled up in her favorite reading recliner with her iPad. The Dominion Signs had just released the latest ballot results. Whoever it was that kidnapped Eric had made a stark miscalculation among the Apostles. Being missing didn't remove one's name from the list. The Apostles knew who these people were. Three of the names had fallen off the list and now only four remained: Eric's alias, her own, and two others only her father and the rest of the Apostles knew.

There was a lot of buzz in the laity press now over a woman's name still remaining on the list, especially among the women of the Dominion. The polling showed a fairly even split among Dominion women about having a female Apostle. Kari just shook her head. It just told her that they still had a long way to go. There was even a guest piece in the Signs from a Roman Catholic cardinal warning the Dominion about thwarting the will of God by installing a woman into such a high office. It was well written and even somewhat convincing.

Jerrod's phone vibrated silently on the table next to her. It was his mom—again. It was the third time this morning. Kari sort of knew how they might feel as she watched Jerrod sleep. Then her own phone rang. It was Keith.

"Hey," she offered in her typical Southern.

"Sis, you are not going to believe what just happened!"

"You have a lead on Eric?"

"No, I wish. Apostle Bauer's dead."

"What!?"

"He died in his sleep last night. They say it looks like a heart attack. Dad want's you to go over to the hospital before they move him to the coroner. See what you can find out."

"Keith, what about Jerrod? There's no one here but us. I can't just leave him."

"I'm on my way, Sis. I should be there in ten minutes. Better get ready."

As Kari ended the call, she realized that despite her lack of memory, she was still an integral part of the Apostolic and Dominion leadership.

A dead apostle right after the ballots being cast? That was no coincidence. Someone was playing some real hardball. Whoever it was, it was obvious now that their name had been bumped off the list yesterday. Another Apostolic vacancy would likely put them back in the running. But several names

were knocked off the list and no one knew who they were except the apostles who put them there.

Whomever it was, they were beyond desperate to attempt something so brash and obvious. The Dominion needed to find this person; to weed them out of their hiding place before anymore members of the Apostolic circle were brought down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Word always traveled fast within the Dominion, with or without the internet. There was already a massive crowd outside surrounding the hospital when Kari's motorcade pushed through hospital security. Kari's fear was that she didn't want to suddenly get stopped by people she was supposed to know but didn't now. All of the apostles' families knew each other very well. They all knew Kari as Elizabeth. But she couldn't remember who any of them were at the moment.

Kari's assistant, a young woman named Sheree, was obviously one of the most efficient people on Earth. Sheree had evidently already been briefed about Kari's memory loss. She had already prepared short bios of all of the people who would be at the hospital's chapel where they had laid Apostle Bauer's body and she briefed Kari on everything they knew so far about his death, which unfortunately wasn't much at this point.

Sheree let Kari know that the family was also being very belligerent. They were already upset that security hadn't let them move the Apostle's body out of the hospital.

Kari didn't know Sheree from Eve, but she was impressed with her efficiency.

"I think I'm realizing now why I hired you, Ree," Kari gave her a smile. "How much do I pay you?" Kari asked.

Sheree smiled at Kari. "A lot, Miss Connor."

Sheree's answer left Kari with a warm feeling that she rewarded her people appropriately. Kari made a mental note to ask Sheree to lunch and get to know her again.

Kari was escorted with her assistant past the hospital staff, who looked at her curiously. Most of them knew who she was, but some didn't. The irony was that Kari herself barely knew who she was.

Through the windows Kari could see that the hospital chapel had been cleared of mourners and Apostle Bauer's body had been laid silently at the front, fully adorned in apostolic dress. Only a few people, immediate family, mingled within the auditorium-sized space.

A security officer at the door stepped in the way of their small group. "Mrs. Bauer and family do not wish to be disturbed," he announced to their officer escort.

"Sorry, friend," the escorting officer rebuffed, "but I have orders from a living apostle," he said.

The guard frowned and then nodded. He moved his people out of the way. Only Kari and Sheree went in.

There were thirteen people in the room, Kari instinctively knew. All of them were in varying degrees of sadness. They walked up to an older, dark-skinned lady. Mrs. Bauer looked young for her sixty-four years. She looked at Kari and tried to smile. Kari knew that she was supposed to know Mrs. Bauer so she gave her a silent hug. Kari could feel that she was in a lot of emotional pain and she could not help but feel deeply sorry for her. Suddenly, a memory flood back into Kari's mind. She knew her! She remembered! Kari had watched her grow up in Bethlehem. She knew Kari by another name back then, and she knew her by another name now, but Kari remembered her.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Ruth," Kari whispered.

"Thank you, Elizabeth."

"Listen, I know you want to leave. But security is asking me to look around first. Is that okay?"

"Of course, Dear. Anything you can do to get us away from this place. Please."

"They're just doing their jobs, Ruth. I'll see what I can do."

Mrs. Bauer nodded. "I know. I just can't believe he's gone ..."

As Ruth talked, Kari looked around the room reaching out with her feelings.

"... he was younger than I am." Ruth continued.

Nothing in the room felt out of the ordinary. Kari kicked it up a notch. Suddenly she became aware of hundreds of people all around her. It was a little astonishing to be aware of so many people at one time, but her mind apparently didn't have any trouble doing it.

Kari quickly waded through the feelings of others, looking for something, anything. But there was nothing. It was all just people doing their jobs. With some morbid apprehension Kari reached her feelings out to the body of Apostle Bauer, but there was nothing to reach out to. He may as well have been a chair, there was just nothing there for her to reach out and connect with. Kari made mental note of what dead people don't feel like.

They mingled with other members of the Bauer family. All of them brought back some memories to Kari which kept her and Sheree in the room for well over an hour. They were all helping Kari much more than she was apparently helping them at the moment.

Suddenly Kari was overcome with an odd feeling of trepidation; without trying she was all at once aware of some people watching her and the vibe she was getting from them was not good. She now remembered both her mother and Keith mentioning their ability to sense danger. She kept her composure and continued talking like she was not even aware

that they were there. Kari felt that there was a kind of animosity toward her by a couple of men in the chapel's balcony sound booth at the back of the room. There must be some stairs leading up there from the outside, she thought. Kari need to get up there. She excused herself and walked to the choir door, leaving the room.

Then she bolted. With incredible speed in the empty hallway Kari found the stairs that lead to the sound booth and she was very quickly at the top of the landing just as the door was opening. A younger man was standing in the doorway, obviously very startled, looking at Kari. Every ounce of empathy she had was now trained on him and the two Dominion Security guards that were with him. While the young man simply felt startled to her, the two security people behind him felt more than just unwelcoming, but deliberately evil.

She suddenly realized that she knew who the young man was. Like the Bauer's, she knew his family. He was the son of an Apostle.

"Hi Tim," Kari said leaning against the wall with a cracked smile.

"Oh! God, Elizabeth! You startled me," he lied. The truth was Kari had just totally freaked him out! A few seconds ago Tim had just finished watching Kari close the choir door. Now he saw her here. He was really nervous for some reason and now that Kari was right in front of him, she could tell that he was trying to get out of Dodge, but she didn't know why. Kari didn't move.

"Going somewhere?" she asked.

"Ah," he stumbled, "just to the bathroom," he lied again. The two security goons behind him didn't look happy. Kari was beginning to remember why she hadn't liked security people.

"I didn't know you were a sound guy," Kari offered.



“Oh, well, I’m not. Not like you. I just didn’t want to disturb the Bauer’s.”

“Yea, it’s a shame, isn’t it,” Kari offered, half mocking.

Tim picked up on her tone. A sudden wave of trepidation spilled out of him. Kari realized that he knew something about this. But she was an empath, not a mind reader.

“I didn’t know you and Apostle Bauer were so close?”

“Well, yea,” he offered another lie.

One of the security goons coughed to himself.

“All of the kids of the Apostles are.”

“Uh-huh,” she mockingly agreed with a smile. “Of course we are.”

One of his security reminded Tim of their ‘busy schedule’.

“I’d love to chat, Elizabeth, but, you know how schedules are!”

Tim pushed past her as well as his two security goons. Kari followed them empathically out of the building and into the parking lot until they had driven out of her ability to follow them any more. They knew something about this, she mused. They knew about Apostle Bauer and it felt like they knew some other things as well.

Then another rush of memory washed over Kari like a tsunami. She felt suddenly dizzy and steadied herself against the doorway leading into the sound booth. She had been in a room full of ‘people of interest’, interviewing them about the disappearance of Eric. But it wasn’t the people she was interviewing who she realized were the problem. Just like the goons following Tim, it had been the security people themselves in the room who were the ones ambivalent toward her, even rude. They felt exactly like the two officers who were now part of Tim’s detail!

They may have been dressed in Dominion uniforms, but these people were not Dominion Security. Kari suddenly, dizzily, realized that Dominion wasn’t dealing with just a

rogue criminal, but a full-fledged security breach! That is what she had discovered when she was away on her interviews in the next county. A security breach like this would go to the heart of apostolic safety. It might have been the reason for Apostle Bauer's death! Even Eric's abduction.

"Oh, my God," Kari mouthed to herself. "We're all in danger!"

Kari didn't chance a phone call. She didn't remember if she knew anyone in IT nor did she know who she could trust and who she couldn't. That must have been why she didn't call and inform her parents ahead of time on her way home through the storm. As long as the rogue security didn't know they were onto them they'd probably be okay finding out more about the breach. Kari returned to the chapel and gathered the security detail guarding Apostle Bauer's body and his family inside the chapel. All sixteen of them were clean.

"All of you. Y'all know who I am," she began.

All of them nodded.

"I'm giving all of you new orders that can only be undone by Apostle Connor himself. These orders are not to be overridden, not even by another Apostle. Do all of you understand?"

All of security people gave her serious nods.

"No one is to touch Apostle Bauer's body without my or my father's explicit presence and instruction. Understood? No autopsy without one of us present. Understood? No cremation. No burial. Understood?"

They all acknowledged her.

Kari looked at Ruth who was looking at her in a kind of stunned stupor.

"Elizabeth! What are you doing!?"

"I'm sorry, Ruth. I can't explain everything right now. Just trust me," Kari told her and then turned to leave with Sheree in tow.

"Elizabeth!" she heard Ruth shout at her. But Kari didn't have time for her pain right now. "Elizabeth!"

Out in the foyer Kari suddenly realized that her own security was compromised. A middle-aged woman walked with them out into the parking lot. Kari wanted to push her out of the detail, but then she thought, the rogue officer might be useful somehow. Kari could feel that the officer didn't hate her; rather she was simply indifferent. Kari didn't know who she was yet. But she was definitely not from Dominion.

Their motorcade finally pulled into and then around the circular drive of Kari's home. There were two security vehicles outside including Keith's car. Kari could already sense what was going on inside her house and she was already not happy. There were people all over inside her home—and Jerrod was not one of them!

Kari told her security people to wait outside and she closed the door behind herself. She found Keith in the kitchen holding a blood-stained towel against his chest.

"Oh, God! Keith! Are you okay?"

"Yea, Sis. Sorry about the mess. One of them tagged me in the back from behind. Bastard."

"Let me see."

He pulled away the red stained towel. The wound was practically already fully healed.

"It's not even bleeding anymore, you big wimp."

"Well, it still hurts," he complained. "You don't even remember the last time you were shot. It's not fun."

"Did you get all of them?"

He nodded. "There were eight, a full squad. Jerrod was already gone when I got ambushed. They must have been waiting for you to leave. I couldn't call you because I thought they might be monitoring somehow. These guys are not Dominion Security, Sis."

"Tell me about it. That's what I was on my way to tell you. One of my own security people outside is compromised. How could this happen?"

"I don't know yet. But these aren't like regular cops. They're more like—military."

"Military?!"

"Yea, I had to hit some of them pretty hard, Sis. Too hard," he frowned to her, lowering his head.

"I know, Kei," she lifted his chin. "It's okay. They attacked you, remember? You didn't start this."

Keith pursed his lips and nodded.

"We need to disable the rogue officer outside. Where are the others?"

Keith took her into the back family room where five large men had been neatly gagged, handcuffed and zip-tied together. The three who didn't make it were in the back guest room. Keith had already relieved all of them of their heavy and small weapons and disabled their communications.

Kari walked to her front door and then sweetly asked her security captain and the middle-aged woman officer to come inside for a moment. She escorted the two of them into the family room where the five security men were bound and gagged. The woman security officer almost immediately had her service weapon in hand but with lightning speed Keith caught her wrist, and swiftly relieved her of the gun which he now pressed very firmly under her chin. Kari then explained to her security captain what was going on.

"I understand Miss Connor," Her security captain adjusted his headset mic and calmly spoke into it before Kari could even complete her explanation.

"All units. Repeat. All units. Code. Six. Three. Nine. Repeat. Code six, three, nine. This is not a drill. All units. Code. Six. Three. Nine. This is not a drill."

He looked at Kari, "Miss Connor, I'm afraid I'm going to have to take both you and your brother into protective custody."

"You and whose army?" Keith quipped.

Kari searched the captain's feelings. He was for real. He knew exactly what he was doing. He was following some protocol for their own safety.

Kari put her hand on her brother's arm. "No, Kei. It's alright. Let them do their job."

Kari looked at their captain. "These people are extremely dangerous, Captain. They're not just police, We think they're military. Make sure they're unconscious before you untie them."

"Yes, ma'am."

# 16

**O**utside, security people and vehicles were practically pouring out of the woodwork and into Kari's driveway.

"Good God," Keith alarmed to his sister amazed at all of the security that had just showed up as if out of nowhere. "Normandy anyone?"

Kari searched the feelings of everyone in the area. Wherever these people came from they were clean. She just hoped that whatever protocol had just been activated didn't have moles like the ones Keith had just dispatched.

They were quickly stuffed into a vehicle and the driver rocketed them out of the suburb with a dozen other vehicles. Their convoy moved into the city where one by one the vehicles began veering off onto other streets. Kari assumed it was to throw off anyone who might be following them.

Their SUV pulled into a building parking garage and headed for the lower level. They entered what looked like a

service tunnel that then spiraled down a well-lit ramp for what seemed like maybe ten stories.

“Have you ever seen any of this before?” Kari asked Keith.

He shook his head. “I’ve been in this garage a lot too. Eric worked across the street for a while. I’ve never seen a tunnel like this.”

Their spiraling descent stopped with their SUV pulling into a small subway station terminal. Their security people opened the doors as Keith and Kari exited and looked around.

“Bethlehem has a subway?” Keith asked his sister rhetorically.

Kari shrugged.

They were approached by a squad of heavily armed soldiers dressed in black unmarked military-style uniforms.

“Captain,” a heavy muscled black-skinned soldier greeted their security detail, his voice was deep and smooth.

“Major,” the Dominion security captain began with a nod as he shook the soldier’s hand. “This is your new cargo. Handle with care.”

“Thank you, Captain. Good work. We’ll take it from here.”

Keith and Kari watched as their Dominion security drove away out of sight the way they had come in. One of the soldiers took out a security wand scanner and moved it closely along the front and back of both Keith and Kari looking for whatever it was that the wand is supposed to detect. “We’re clean,” he announced.

Kari scanned the area herself. Everyone here was very focused on getting the both of them to safety—wherever that was.

They were escorted to a waiting subway train, and a very modern-looking one at that. It smelled new inside. Standing next to each other, Keith and Kari took hold of a safety pole along with their military escorts. The doors of the train closed and then accelerated all of them quickly into the darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Rigel, I have to say,” the President began, “your people really know how to throw an impressive luau.” The two men walked along the path of the island plantation’s expansive private garden.

“Indeed. I trust you and your staff are comfortable?” Rigel’s accent was always thickly British and well cultured.

“Very. I feel like we’re being all too pampered.”

“Good. I want you and your people to be well rested for tomorrow, in the air, and over international waters before the vote tomorrow. Just in case.”

“Is there any reason you think the vote might not be in our favor?”

“Brett, I make it my responsibility to know every detail of my actions and what the outcome will be before I make any move. Part of that responsibility is to account for unforeseen discrepancies in our models.”

“The Senate vote was expensive this time, wasn’t it?”

Rigel nodded. “It was, Brett. Very expensive. But not to worry, such expenditures carry very long-term benefits for us. I don’t mind at-tall making these kinds of investments in our future. You just keep doing what you are doing, Brett. Things will happen just as they have been planned.”

The two men passed by Harlan and a very scantily clad Islander who were standing next to a beautiful garden waterfall while giggling closely, like a pair of college kids.

“I haven’t seen your daughter for months now, Rigel,” the two of them continued down the softly lit path. “I assume she’s okay, I hope?”

“That’s a bit of a painful subject with me at the moment, Brett. You see Amethyst is more than just my daughter, she’s also a very talented agent within the organization.”



“So I’ve noticed. She did an exceptional job weeding out the leaks we had in the Administration.”

“Those are the least of her skills, I assure you, Brett.”

“What happened? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“Not in the least. There was a bit of an accident. An unforeseen ‘glitch’, as you say, in one of her assignments. But she’s fine.”

“Something not go according to plan?”

“You are perceptive, Brett,” Rigel acknowledged. “Which is why I intend to exercise extra caution from here on out until our plans are complete.”

“Will she be coming back to work?”

Rigel glanced at the President with deep chuckle, “Oh, I assure you, Brett,” the elderly Rigel nodded smiling, “she has already been ‘at work’, more than you know.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Both Kari and Keith could feel the train descending deeper underground.

“How far down are we?” Kari asked.

“About fifty meters, Miss Connor,” the major replied.

“Dare I ask where we’re going?”

“Jericho.”

“Is that a city?”

“Of sorts. Your folks are already on their way there.”

“What about Jerrod?”

“Not to worry, Miss Connor. I assure you. As of this moment, nothing gets in or out of the Dominion without us knowing about it.”

“Ah, Major,” Keith began, “who is us, exactly?”

“Dominion Guard, Mr. Connor.”

“Guard? We have a Guard? That’s military. I didn’t know we had a military?!” Keith looked at Kari and then back at the Major.

“Now you do,” the major smiled.

Kari looked at Keith, “Are you serious? You didn’t know about any of this?”

“No!” Keith offered emphatically. “But it looks like Mommy and Daddy and Sissy have been holding out on me,” he miffed, glaring at Kari.

“Me? I didn’t know about any of this!” Kari complained.

“Oh, right,” Keith mocked. “Nothing gets past you. Before your memory went haywire you probably knew all about this place. I’ve been wondering for years now where you and Julia would disappear to. Now I think I know.”

The soldiers were all silent.

“Who’s Julia?”

Keith looked at his sister again, “You still don’t remember her?”

Kari shook her head.

“Your best friend. You guys would just disappear for weeks sometimes. If my guess is right, wherever this Jericho is, we’ll find Julia.”

“So we’re best friends, huh?”

Keith nodded.

After a few more minutes they felt the train begin to slow. There was a soft ding sound from a speaker somewhere in the cabin. The lights dimmed and a pleasant female voice began to speak, “Normalizing cabin pressure for aquatic environment. Beginning submersion.”

They could now see water splashing against the glass outside of their subway car. Kari looked at Keith who was just as surprised as she was.

“Major?” Keith began, “Dominion is landlocked. Are we near the shore already?”

"We are."

"But we'd need to travel through at least two counties."

"We just did."

"In ten minutes?"

"Maglev train, Mr. Connor, in a reduced atmosphere tunnel. We can move just about as fast as we want to."

Keith gave the Major a grin. "Sweet!"

The water moved up the glass of the car quickly until they could all tell that they were completely submerged. Outside the dark tunnel was now suddenly gone, replaced by a view of an undersea landscape as the train moved along its submerged track. Powerful lights along the track illuminated an underwater cave, giving them a magnificent view of a massive and beautiful subterranean cavern.

Outside in the distance they could see several massive pyramid-like structures that they were evidently moving toward on the track.

"Is that Jericho?" Keith asked the Major.

The Major nodded.

"It's huge," he marveled.

Within a few minutes they began climbing again, moving now within one of the massive buildings. The train emerged from the water and through the dripping glass they could see the interior of the massive pyramid. Their train passed slowly under large blowers that pushed the water from the surface of the car, drying the windows. They finally came to a stop that was so smooth none of them felt it.

The pleasant female voice began speaking again as the doors began to open automatically. "Destination: Jericho."

With their military escort they stepped from the car and into something that looked like the interior of a massive office complex. A teenager in artsy modern office attire appeared to be waiting for them. He looked at Keith and Kari with a smile. Kari immediately sensed him. He was gifted.

"Thank you, Major. I'll take it from here," the teen dismissed them. The teen's young male voice was deep and smooth, professional.

"Sir," the Major acknowledged and then their armed escorts dispersed into the interior of the complex. When the escorts were out of earshot the young man greeted Keith and Kari more informally.

"Kari, Keith, welcome to Jericho." Then he looked at Kari. "Kari, I know you don't remember me. I'm Carson, the director of this facility."

"Carson, you?" Keith balked. "You're the director here? You're like twelve," he joked. Keith thought Carson was maybe seventeen or eighteen at the most.

"You two know each other?" Kari asked.

"We do," Carson nodded. "Only, Keith knows me as one of your father's pages."

"Dad has you running this place?" Keith asked. "You're not even in college yet!"

"I'm only a few years younger than your father, Keith. We both fought in the war. Only, I was a powder boy at the time."

"You're—you're gifted?" Keith asked astonished and then looked at Kari.

Kari nodded her answer.

"What is this place?" Keith asked looking around.

"Let's talk inside," Carson offered.

They followed Carson across the lavish, stadium-sized atrium of the pyramid's interior. The atrium's interior was artificially lit and filled with tall trees and park areas; stone walkways and meandering garden paths. There were small grassy fields where scores of very fit men and women were training in a kind of group martial arts instruction. They watched as an instructor led several dozen students in complex hand and body movements.

They approached a building entrance on the far side of the atrium. Thick glass doors slid quietly open and they entered an office-like foyer. The sides of the pyramid formed a very large office building that was quietly busy with people working in various cubed and open areas.

They entered an elevator.

"I'm sorry for the silent treatment earlier," Carson began. "Not everyone here has the same clearance within the Guard. Some know more than others about us."

"What is this place? Where is this place?" Keith asked.

"Jericho is our Pentagon, Keith, our Langley, the nerve center of the Dominion Guard. We're actually in a natural cavern that's about half filled with lake water. Most of this building is actually underwater."

"Wow," Keith mused.

"Kari, how's your memory," Carson looked concerned. "Any of this bringing anything to mind?"

Kari nodded. It was all vaguely familiar, like her home was to her. She wondered how many people were here, but then she stopped counting at around five thousand.

"The main building we're in now is little smaller than the actual U.S. Pentagon in terms of space," Carson began again. "There are two other smaller complexes like this one in the cavern. You'll be able to see it better in a moment when we get above the surface to Admin."

The elevator doors opened to an elegant office floor with a tall ceiling. They were somewhere close to the top of the pyramid. Keith and Kari walked to the window for the view of the cavern outside. It was enormous and beautifully, artificially lit. They could see the two other pyramid complexes rising out of the water not far from the one they were in. A third building in the distance was obviously under construction as well.

"It's like an underground lake," Keith said in awe. "Where are Mom and Dad?"

"Upstairs," Kari responded.

They followed Carson up a wide, elegant, brushed metal central spiral staircase and then to a large very modern conference room where their parents and a few other gifted people Kari had never met were talking.

"Who are these people," Kari asked Keith.

"I only know Julia," he said quietly. "Are they all ... ?"

"Yea," Kari whispered.

But their whispering was folly, all of the people assembled could easily hear their whispers from across the room.

"Keith, Kari!" Apostle Connor called to the both of them, "come in, come in!"

In addition to the four of them and Carson, there were three other gifteds in the room, a young woman who looked about Kari's age and two twin teen boys who looked about Carson's age.

"Keith," Mr. Connor began as they walked up, "you know Julia already but I'd like to introduce you to Trevor and Blaze, our tech gurus."

Keith nodded at Julia smiling and then shook hands with each of the twins.

"Kari, do you remember your friend, Julia?" her father asked.

Julia did seem familiar and seeing her made Kari slightly dizzy for a moment. Julia walked up to Kari. She moved with the most unusual grace. Her movements were elegant, effortless, and like everything else about her, beautiful.

Julia gently touched Kari's feelings with her own, but when Kari reactively repelled her, Julia gently dropped all empathy toward Kari.

"You really don't recognize me, do you?" Julia asked. Her voice was melodic and beautiful, just like the way she moved.

"I'm sorry," Kari apologized. "You look familiar. I just don't remember everyone I know yet."

Julia nodded, the smile fading from her lips. Somehow seeing Julia lose her smile crushed Kari inside. She reached out to Julia instinctively, touching her arm, "But that doesn't mean we're not still not friends," she added, managing to bring at least part of the smile back to Julia's face.

There was something oddly attractive about Julia. Kari was fascinated by her demeanor somehow. She couldn't get over the way Julia moved; it was flawless and intriguing. No one else in the room seemed to have the same mannerisms she had.

The two brothers were Korean and both were dressed and styled like they had just finished shooting the latest K-Pop video. They greeted Kari with a typical "hey".

They all took seats with Kari taking hers next to Julia.

"Thanks to Kari and to you as well Keith," Carson began, "we've discovered a serious security breach today in the Dominion police force. As a security precaution, all of our gifted people are being brought here to Jericho. Kari and Keith, our apologies for bringing you here so abruptly. You two are the only ones here at the moment who have been kept out of the loop, shall we say, about Jericho and the Guard."

"You can say that again!" Keith began, glaring at his parents. "Y'all built an army like I've been harping about for I don't know how long and then you never told me about it!"

"I'm sorry, Honey," Katherine began. "It's my fault. Your father was one of the people spearheading the project. I couldn't tell him what to do and I couldn't keep it a secret from Kari, but there was no need for you to get wrapped up in all of this. Jericho is everything I never wanted. But now it seems I find myself completely embracing everything that it is."

"Dad, you couldn't tell me you were building an army?"

"No, Keith," his father responded, "I promised your mother that I would keep it a secret and not to tell you about it

unless it was an emergency," His tone grew more somber. "Well, now it's an emergency."

"How many gifteds are there?" Keith asked. "I thought we four were the only gifteds within the Dominion."

"Initially, there were only the four of you, Keith," Carson began, "however, Aaron and I met many years ago when the Apostles acquired one of my companies. Over the years, others, like Julia, and Blaze and Trevor, were discovered by providence in other parts of the world and joined us here. All of us, in some way, have been victims of the enemy."

"So now that we're all here, what are we going to do about the security breach?" Keith asked.

"Not everyone's here," Kari corrected. "My fiancé is still in the hands of the infiltrators."

"You're right, Kari," Carson offered.

"Fiancé?" Julia interrupted quietly, looking at Kari.

Carson appeared to ignore Julia's comment. "The Guard is being deployed in order to intercept anyone trying to leave the Dominion with a gifted individual."

"Carson," Keith began, "with all due respect, there are a lot of ways out of the Dominion. You hardly have enough empaths to watch the whole county."

"We have ways of detecting gifteds, Keith. We don't need empaths to do that."

"Huh? How do you detect a gifted person? Is that even possible?"

"Oh, it's not just possible, but quite easy if you have the right equipment. The backscatter x-ray units being deployed in airports around the world, if properly tuned, can actually detect us. We discovered too late what was happening after two of our gifteds were found murdered."

"So the enemy is behind these detectors?" Keith bit out, aghast at the thought.



“Yes. We’ve wasted no time in applying significant political pressure to have these machines removed. To some degree, it’s working.”

“Is the enemy behind our security breach?” Aaron asked.

“That’s difficult to tell at this point. We’ve brought the infiltrators here for interrogation. As Chief of Security, Julia is scheduled to interview a number of them on the detention level after this meeting. Perhaps, Kari, you’d like to join her?”

“Absolutely,” Kari agreed, looking at Julia who was nodding her approval.

“Hopefully they will be able to give us some intel on where they’ve taken Jerrod,” Carson then looked at Keith, “and Eric as well.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kari looked at Julia from the other side of the elevator as the doors closed. “What do you think our chances are?”

“Of finding Eric and Jerrod?” Julia asked.

“Yea.”

“Honestly?” she sighed. “They’re not good, Kar.” She hated to be so brutally honest, especially at a time like this, but there was no way she’d be able to keep the truth from Kari for long. “Unless the captors have a really good reason for wanting to keep them alive—” she shook her head.

Kari frowned. Now she knew exactly what Keith was going through.

“How long ago was Jerrod gifted?” Julia asked.

“It’s only been three days.”

“He won’t be coming around for weeks then. We just have to hope that whoever has Jerrod and Eric really needs them for whatever plans they have.”

Kari looked again at Julia. She was tall, like herself, just as well curved with long flowing black hair and just as beautiful. All telltale signs of a child of the gift.

“So how long have you been head of security here?” Kari asked, just trying to make conversation with a best friend she didn’t recognize.

“About thirty years.”

“Wow. I can’t believe my folks kept this a secret for so long. Especially from Keith.”

“I know. Keith has always wanted the Dominion to build a military, even getting into arguments with your mom about it.”

“Right; and here my folks had already been building one,” she grinned. “Ironic isn’t it?”

Julia nodded with a smirk.

“I’m sorry I don’t remember you, Julia. You look very familiar. I’m a little surprised I’d be able to forget someone like you.”

Julia tapped the hold button bringing the elevator to a smooth stop in the middle of their descent. “You don’t need to keep apologizing, Kari. Someone made an attempt on your life. We were all just glad that you’re still with us. Even if your memory isn’t.”

“Everyone keeps saying that we’re good friends. Are we?” Kari asked.

Julia nodded. “Yea. Best friends, Kar.”

“Julia, I—I feel like I know you,” Kari really tried to think hard, “but I—don’t remember.”

Julia nodded, a frown crossing her lips again. “So do I just look like a stranger to you? Someone you’ve never met?”

Kari nodded frustrated with herself. “I mean, you’re vaguely familiar to me, but,” Kari shook her head. “It’s just a blank. But that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends again.”

Julia forced a smile. “No, I suppose not.”

Julia tapped the button again for the elevator to resume its descent.

"Did we hang out a lot?" Kari asked.

"Yea, we did," Julia nodded with a pained smile. "We had a lot of fun times. You're the wild one and I'm voice of reason. Or was that the other way around?" she forced the joke, grimacing instead of smiling with the pain of seeing her best friend who didn't know her at all.

Kari didn't need to be an empath to see that Julia's feelings were a sudden shambles. Instinctively Kari reached out to Julia's feelings.

"You ... you may not want to do that right now ..." Julia warned, but then oddly Julia didn't resist Kari's empathic touch. Kari was all at once awash in Julia's feelings. Her emotions almost instantly told a vast story about their longtime and deep friendship and all that it was for many, many years. Their empathy did not relay details of events, but she could feel what Julia had felt about Kari and the feelings they both had shared. Deep and astonishing emotion filled Kari's soul as her feelings now mingled all too easily, even familiarly, with Julia's.

Kari took a step toward Julia in the elevator and reached out to tap the halt button on the panel.

"Just best friends?" Kari looked emotionally at Julia. "We're a little more than just best friends Julia!" Kari shook her head. "Why didn't you just tell me this a moment ago?"

Julia just looked at her and said nothing.

"Julia, talk to me!"

"I knew you'd see it, eventually. What was there to say? You've found someone else, a fiancé, no less. What do you want me to say? Congratulations?"

"Julia, I didn't know," Kari protested. "I didn't know anyone or anything. I didn't even know my own brother.

Jerrod was a complete surprise to me. I had no idea I was in any kind of relationship with anyone."

Julia looked at Kari. Pain had now written itself all over the both of their faces.

"I've been bawling my eyes out ever since I found out, Kar," Julia admitted. "First they told me about your memory loss and then Jerrod. They tried to tell me nicely, but is there ever a nice way to just tear someone's heart out?!"

"You should have come to me. Why didn't you?"

"They said I couldn't see you."

"They? You mean Mom."

Julia nodded. "And your dad. They don't exactly like me or our clan, Kar. They never have, especially your mom. I'm like you. I've kicked her ass a few times. She's afraid of me. They said the gift had attracted you to Jerrod. How am I supposed to compete with that!? I didn't want to come between what fate had obviously brought the two of you.

"When they told me I'd never be able to see you again I tendered my resignation with Carson. That was yesterday. I'd already packed. My flight was leaving tomorrow. But then this security breach kind of put a damper on my travel plans. Carson canceled my resignation just before all of you arrived.

"I wasn't going to tell you any of this. I'm sorry you had to find out about us."

"So, just like that? You were just planning on leaving and carrying all this pain alone by yourself?"

"It's alright. I've been through worse."

"No, it's not alright!" Kari moved toward Julia.

"Don't! Kar," Julia objected.

Kari ignored her protest and embraced her friend anyway. She could feel Julia's protest was superficial and not at all how she was feeling inside as Kari reached into Julia's emotions with her own.

“Don’t—don’t do this to me, Kar,” Julia embraced her, exhaling softly. But even as Julia’s words protested she couldn’t help but reach out to Kari with her own feelings, mingling them all too familiarly with Kari’s warmth. It took only a few moments for Kari to melt away Julia’s pain.

“Dammit—Kar. This wasn’t supposed to happen.” Julia exhaled a whispered, a tear leaving her misting eyes, “I thought I’d never feel you like this again.”

“I’m so sorry, Jules. I just—I didn’t know.”

“I guess fate is like that sometimes.”

“It’ll be okay,” Kari soothed. “Besides, fate seems to want to keep you around.”

“Maybe—” Julia tried to recover from her emotions as best she could. “Maybe you could tell Jerrod that I might need a hug from you now and then. If he doesn’t mind.”

Kari buried her warm feelings deeper into Julia’s, “I can feel what we have, Julia. I’m not going to just let that go.”

“How is that going to work? It’s not. I can’t compete with Jerrod. You have to follow the gift, Kar.”

“Do I?”

Julia exhaled a smile. “Your memory might be toast, but you haven’t changed at all.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Jules. Besides, I’m going to need my best friend. Who better than you to catch me up with who I’m supposed to know, and what we shared? I need you to help me remember who I am.”

“You should know: I can’t say no to you.”

Both Kari and Julia looked at each other for long moments, their feelings closely entwined with each other’s. Julia moved closer to her friend. Kari opened her pout ever so slightly as their warm lips touched. Their kiss was sweet, slow, soft, and deeply natural.

“I’m sorry I’m broken, Jules,” Kari breathed.

Julia pulled back. "Stop apologizing. You're alive. Besides, you always did have a knack for making life more complicated."

The elevator resumed its descent. Although they no longer embraced, their feelings remained tightly entangled.

"I always thought I'd be the one who found the guy," Julia smirked, wiping her misty eyes dry.

"You? So we dated other guys?"

Julia nodded.

"Why? Our feelings are so close."

"That's kind of our mystery, Kar. Maybe we just like both. I dated your brother for a while."

"Why did you stop?"

Julia looked at Kari. "Because of you. Keith is a terrific guy. No, he's an amazing guy. But he's not you."

Kari sighed and began slipping herself away from Julia's feelings. "You're right. This is going to get complicated."

"Ya think?!" Julia smiled. "Kar, we invented complicated years ago. I guess Jerrod's just another guy in our rather complicated lives."

"Yea, but Julia, I have to tell you," Kari became suddenly brutally honest, "it's worse than that. I mean I can feel what you and I have, our attraction, but Jerrod is like—" Kari shook her head, "nothing I've ever felt before. It's like I'm more than just attracted to Jerrod. I can't explain it. He's completely overpowering."

"It's the gift, Kari. Don't even try to fight it. You'll lose. Everyone does."

"The attraction is just, irrational. Whenever we're alone, I just want him, all the time, I want him all over me. A few days ago when it was just the two of us at home, I wouldn't even let him put on any clothes."

"All day?"

Kari nodded her head.

Julia smirked. "Yea, that's pretty bad. I've seen some of the security pics of the two of you. He's really cute. How did you plan on handling his family now that he's awakening?"

"I'm texting them from his phone now and then with updates. I've told them we're on a ski trip for a few weeks."

"That will probably work for about a week depending on how close he is to them. You should let me handle his absence from here. We'll make it a bit more real."

"Gladly."

The elevator slowed and the door opened to a concrete reception area with heavily armed guards outfitted in a kind of ultra modern bodysuit armor. The guards appeared to ignore the two women walking past them.

"That squad of security people who attacked Keith should be here within the hour. I think you and I will be able to handle them, don't you?" Julia smiled.

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## DOMINION



**W**e have an issue, your Eminence.”

The elder man stood up from his desk, his distinguished white layered robes and heavy jewelry gave him the aura of supremacy to the single servant now standing within his lavishly decorated office.

“So I have been hearing,” he offered, making no effort to hide his displeasure. “Do you know, Silas, how unsettling it is to hear reports from your adversaries even before you hear them from your own servants?”

“Yes, your Eminence,” Silas offered nervously.

“I don’t know that you do. The plan was, as I recall, the simple abduction of one apostate girl. Our own people even arranged the event during the shift change of her personal security detail. We had exquisite planning. Exceptional personnel. The best equipment. Did we not?”

“Yes, your Eminence,” Silas bowed.

The older man approached his servant, placing his hand on the young Silas' shoulder, patting it and pursing his lips disapprovingly. "And yet, you failed us. Not once, but twice now."

"It wasn't a failure, your Eminence."

"Oh? So where is the girl?"

"We don't know, Eminence."

"That sounds like failure to me, Silas."

"She had a bodyguard—evidently."

"Evidently," the elder man repeated. "This bodyguard," he began walking around his servant. "He must have been quite the adversary. James Bond no less?"

"Her brother, Eminence."

"Her brother? The faggot? And you had how many actual—men?"

"Eight were in the residence, Eminence."

"Eight." The older man nodded.

"I know this sounds unreasonable—"

"Unreasonable? Silas," the elder man began, "not only have you failed me twice, but both times you return with the most fantastic of excuses. The only reason you still serve me, is because you are not lying to me."

"Eminence? I would never think of—"

"Save it. I have already heard what happened from others. I have eyes and ears everywhere. Very little occurs within the Dominion that I do not know about as it happens."

"Yes, Eminence."

"Obviously, Silas, we have seriously underestimated the adversary. I cannot put the blame solely on you. You had what should have been more than adequate resources. I can only surmise that the minions of darkness have somehow invaded and taken possession of some of them."

The elder man shook his head as if in deep and prayerful thought. "Oh, this is not good, Silas. The Dominion of God on

Earth is in grave danger if our adversary is left unchecked. They will pervert the godly way of life we have worked so diligently to create.”

“Agreed, Eminence.”

“The prisoner you found in the harlot’s house. No one could wake him?”

“No, Eminence. He appears to be in some kind of coma. He was found already unconscious. He did not appear to be injured. The physician said his vitals were strong.”

“Odd. Send the physician to this new captive for a more thorough examination and to do some blood work. Find out why he’s unwakeable.”

“Yes, Eminence.”

“Did you locate our soldiers who were subdued by this—this abomination?”

“Un-loyal security has them somewhere, we think. Unfortunately, few people are talking now, if any.”

“Keep searching. You must find them, if you can, Silas. Normally I would not be concerned, but there is the power of evil at work here and our brothers may not have the ability to resist it. Those men could undo a lot of what we have built.”

“Understood, Eminence. I have people working to find them even now.”

“I know you do,” the older man patted his shoulder again. “Tell Luke and Timothy I want to see all of you this evening for dinner. Keep it quiet. No one is to know where you are.”

“Yes, Eminence.”

# 18

**J**ulia's Jericho apartment was small but nicely decorated in a way that seemed very familiar to Kari. Julia definitely had a knack for design. The apartment reminded Kari of her own home's decor. Obviously, Julia must have had a substantial influence in Kari's own design choices because her apartment made Kari feel comfortable and right at home.

Located "off base" in another of the smaller buildings, the corner windows of the almost top floor of the pyramid apartment complex gave Julia a one-eighty degree view of their underground sanctuary. With the lights and colors of the cavern and the reflections off the glassy-still water lake, the view was amazing and beautiful.

Kari stirred beneath the satin covers, her thoughts beginning to move slowly as her dreams faded. She felt Julia's warm body slide softly against her skin and then wrap around her. Neither of them felt the other as being quite fully awake

yet. She felt Julia sigh softly as Jules softly flexed herself against Kari's warm, smooth skin.

"Miss me?" Kari asked sleepily.

"Always," Julia whispered. "I hate not waking up next to you."

They softly moved themselves entwined around the other while their feelings were buried deeply into each other.

Kari let out her own sigh. "Do we do this a lot? Waking up with each other like this?"

"I wish. Your schedule's insane. We're lucky to get two or three times a month."

"What am I usually doing?"

"I am not talking about work right now," Julia informed.

Kari breathed a smile, smoothing her hand along Julia's soft, warm skin. She couldn't help but suddenly wonder where Jerrod was and if he was alright. She hoped that whoever had taken him would be keeping him alive. What would Jerrod think when he found out about Julia?

"Stop worrying about Jerrod," Julia felt her concern. "He's going to be okay."

"I was just thinking about how to tell him about us."

"He's just going to need to learn how to share. Besides, I was here first," Julia smiled.

"Quit. You know it's not going to be that easy."

"I know. I've been thinking about it too."

"Maybe I should write a song about this."

"Work," Julia warned.

"Sorry, but I'm mostly awake now."

"You need to learn to relax. There's nothing more any of us can do until we break a lead of some kind. And now you've got me talking about work. Ohh!" she fumed.

"I'm just worried, Jules. I'm sorry."

Kari withdrew her feelings, slipping away from Julia and out from the warmth of their sheets into the cool of the dimmed

room. Julia watched Kari as she morning stretched with her arms above her head wearing nothing but her skin.

"You always do that to me," Julia lifted herself on one arm, taking in every inch of Kari's very smooth toned body. "Not fair."

"So? I know you like it." Kari finished her slow stretch, smirking. "I do the same thing to Jerrod," she grinned.

"I should beat you up for teasing me like this, but you'd just kick my ass," Julia offered.

"You kicked mine last night. Jerrod's never made me feel like that."

"He just doesn't know you like I do," she smiled.

Julia slipped out from the sheets to stretch herself right next to Kari.

"Now whose teasing?"

"We should hit the shower and then go down to breakfast? Maybe Trevor and Blaze have come up with something. Hopefully a lead of some kind."

They walked toward the bathroom. "Hey, maybe we should take them on a double date?" Kari joked.

"You're so not funny in the morning."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lucas sat tapping his fingers waiting. He'd already gone through two cups of coffee. Why the Apostle kept these two bumbling idiots on staff continued both amaze and annoy him. The door of his office finally opened as the two servants entered. Both were younger corporate types and both had been promoted well beyond their levels of competency, at least as far as the physician was concerned.

"You're late," he grumbled.

"Sorry. It's the morning rush. Traffic was insane," Silas offered.

Tim shot an annoyed look at Lucas. As the son of an Apostle, Tim didn't take those kinds of words or the attitude from just anyone. He never did understand why Lucas had been elevated to such high positions within the hospital system. He was just another doctor. The Dominion had thousands of them. Yet, Lucas walked highly within the Apostolic circles as well as the corporate ones. He was no one special, other than he had the ear of some very powerful people.

"Listen, the toxicology report came back this morning from our little friend we drew vials from yesterday."

"Did you find what his problem is? Why he can't wake up?" Tim asked.

"No, his system's clean. But he's got some really odd indicators that are way high. I'm going to run some more tests and an MRI this afternoon. I've given everyone at the office on 15th and Mercy the day off today. They have an advanced imager that should tell us if he's got any kind of brain or spinal injury."

"What time do you want him there?" Silas asked.

"After lunch, no later than two o'clock. You'll be moving him in broad daylight so keep him disguised somehow in a wheel chair. No ambulances. No obvious security. There are still people in the building. We don't want to attract any attention. Can you two do that?" Lucas offered in a patronizing tone.

"Yes, Dr. Lucas," Silas assured. "We'll have him there on time."

"See that you do. We're through."

The two young executives left the office. They were well out of the medical complex and in the adjacent open parking garage.

"I don't know why you let him talk to you that way," Tim scowled at his friend. "He treats you like you're his personal bitch."

Silas opened the door of his BMW and got in. He looked at Tim. "You still don't get it do you?" He pointed down at the center console of the vehicle they were now seated within. "This is why I put up with their bullshit. I'm not like you, Tim. I wasn't born into money. I'm the dog here; I have to rely on whatever scraps that fall onto the floor."

"Yes, I know, I've heard it before. I just hate the way they all treat you. Self-serving arrogant pricks."

"I'm not big on either, Tim. And you should talk, you're one of the biggest pricks in the Dominion."

"Very funny. I'd rather be a prick than a bitch."

"We all have our callings," Silas said backing out of the reserved parking space and then leaving the garage into traffic.

"I'm still just dumbfounded that we haven't been able to nail this target," Silas offered. "I still don't know why the Apostle wants her dead instead of just kidnapping her like the other guy. Do you know why?"

"The rumor is they think she knows something about us and the operation. A lot, in fact," Tim informed.

"Really?"

"Yea. So we knew all kinds of hell would break loose after we nabbed that VP in the Apostleship."

"Right. Everyone is supposed to be laying low."

"So the incomparable Miss Connor herself shows up at some employee interviews at the satellite campus," Tim offered.

"So?"

"So she starts grilling quite a few of our people, and just our people; she knew exactly who they were; like she had a list of their names or something. Then, get this, she starts grilling our security people in the room," Tim continued.



“What!?”

“Yea.”

“Tim, that’s like really messed up. There’s got to be a leak somewhere.”

“That’s what we were thinking as well. I don’t think Connor learned anything, but it raised a huge red flag with the Apostle. He’s not taking any chances. That’s why he wants her out of the way.”

“That sucks.”

“Yea, tell me about it. Totally hot and a death wish to boot. Did I tell you I saw her the other day?”

“Yea, at the funeral. It was a bad day. Don’t remind me,” Silas frowned.

“You should meet her before you try to kill her again,” Tim smirked. “I’m telling you, she’s totally hot.”

“I’ve seen her a couple of times from a distance. Both her and that friend of hers, what’s her name,” Silas snapped his fingers in succession trying to remember, “Ju—Jul—Julia. I think she’s some kind of contractor. She was working with Security for a while.”

“Yea? Where is she now?”

“I think she’s still there. I see her now and then.”

“Man, what a waste,” Tim thought out loud.

“What’s a waste?”

“Dykes should never be allowed to be that hot.”

“What makes you think she’s a dyke?”

“Paul says so.”

“Yea, what does he know? Mr. ‘I see and hear everything in the Dominion’,” Silas mocked.

“I saw them last summer on a boat out on Galilee,” Tim reminded.

“Yea, you told me, several times, sunbathing in string bikinis. Thanks for not taking any pictures. Some friend you are.”

Their car stopped at a traffic light next to a street corner open air farmer's market shop where several women in long denim dresses and scarf-covered heads were containing their children while shopping.

Tim frowned. And then sighed. Silas looked as well. The light went green and they pulled away from the scene. It was a stark comparison between two worlds, one corporate that advanced into the future and the other religious that seemed to be in a kind of time warp, a temporal stasis that forever held its people in a culture that history should have forgotten long ago.

"You know, Tim, truth be told, I don't care if they are dykes. They're still hot. I'm not gonna stop looking at a beautiful woman just because of that."

"It didn't stop me from daydreaming about them—either of them."

\* \* \* \* \*

Carson looked out over the atrium from the executive observation lounge. Although several hundred yards away, his gifted eyesight focused very well on the train just now pulling into the open terminal. Aaron approached and stood next to him. Both watched as several personnel filed out of the train. He wasn't difficult to spot. Dressed in his typical all-black casual attire.

"So, he's back, I see." The apostle appeared unhappy.

"We need him, Aaron."

"I disagree."

"Are we going to have this discussion all over again?"

"No. You already know how I feel."

"Then maybe you should just try to stay away from him. I don't need distractions right now," Carson leveled.

“Then maybe you should keep him away from Kari. That entire family has spelled nothing but trouble for the Dominion.”

“You seem to keep forgetting they’re an important ally.”

“Ally. Humph. That’s a matter of opinion.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Dressed and casually primped, the two women emerged from the elevator and into the undersea ground floor lobby of their complex. Julia’s clothes were a near perfect size match for Kari. It wasn’t the first time they’d shared wardrobe when doing sleepovers at each others’ homes.

A short mall of sorts occupied the main floor of the complex and featured a handful of small stores, a micro spa and a few restaurants, only one of which was open early for breakfast. The restaurant was busy, but not packed. The two were seated in a booth next to the massive underwater window that ran along all sides and on every level of the complex. Underwater lights played off of the colors of nearby submerged stalagmites rising up from the cavern floor with the occasional fish swimming past them.

“We’re connected to the lake?” Kari asked.

“Yea,” Julia nodded sitting down. “There’s not much foliage, but we get all kinds of marine life wandering in from the great lake.”

Kari sat down still intrigued by the complex being half submerged. “Anyone ever wander in here, like divers?”

“No. A long time ago we had the area designated a state park and wildlife refuge. No boats or divers are allowed anywhere near the caves. No one knows that they even exist.”

“So what’s good here?” Kari looked at the menu. The selections looked really good but she also noticed that nothing was priced.

"I take it meals here are paid for?"

"Jericho is a military base, Kari. Sure we look all corporate, but you don't ask your soldiers to pay their way. It's bad for morale."

"So I'm a soldier now?"

"You have been for a long time. Earlier this morning when I said you'd kick my ass, I wasn't kidding. No one does martial arts like you."

"I saw the gi in my closet. That brought back some memories."

"That's good. We should probably train later today to see how much you remember."

A nicely dressed waiter with a bowtie approached them with some hot coffee. "Well, we haven't see you ladies here for a while. Welcome back."

"Thanks, Danny," Julia offered. "My usual, please."

"And you, Miss Connor? Your usual as well?"

"Please—but hold the meat."

"Going veg, Miss Connor?"

"Yes, actually. I am."

"No problem. I'll be back with your drinks."

Julia gave Kari a raised eyebrow.

"Let me guess, Jerrod's vegan."

"No, just vegetarian. I haven't eaten any meat since Jerrod and I met."

"Really? Don't you miss it?"

"No, not really. You know, truth be told, I never really like the idea of eating meat anyway. It's just always seemed, well, a little gross to me somehow. I guess this accident has changed me in some ways."

"Well, in some ways it has. Speaking of accidents, your car running out of gas, that was no 'accident.'"

"That's what Jerrod said as well."

"I read the mechanic's report. Your car was definitely sabotaged. Someone was deliberately trying to kill you."

"I'm trying not to think about that. It's no fun having a target on your back."

"We all have targets, Kar. We're gifted. I noticed your details were a bit brief though. What happened after Jerrod pulled you from the car?"

"Jerrod said I was unresponsive even after bringing me inside his RV. He soaked me in the tub, in really hot water. That's what brought me back. I wasn't going to put that in some report for everyone to read."

"He soaked you in his tub?" Julia was amused.

"Yea. I thought it was gutsy too. You strip a woman down to nothing and soak her in your tub? When it looked like I was coming around he dried me off and put me to bed and then stayed out in the living room all night, checking on me every hour or so."

"Oh. So he really did save your life."

"Yea. But I couldn't remember anything."

"So when did you two figure out you had the attraction?"

"The first day. It was a little weird actually. We were stranded in the snow and Jerrod asked me out. Sort of a date right there in the RV."

"Alright, I'm jealous now," Julia offered. "It sounds ridiculously romantic."

"It was. When I said sure, he took me in his arms and gave me the warmest hug."

"Uh oh," Julia smiled. She knew exactly where the story was now heading.

"Yea, the hug didn't stop. We just stood there, Jules, for like, maybe ten or fifteen minutes holding each other. I didn't want to let go of him and he didn't want to let go of me."

"Yea, that's typical. But you didn't know you were gifted at all at that point?"

"No. That's what kind of made it seem so weird. I thought what I was feeling was just, well, natural. We sat down to talk about what was happening and we ended up making out. He didn't want to rush into something. It was kind of my fault. I sort of lured him in I think. We couldn't keep our hands off of each other."

"Kar, this isn't the first time the gift has brought people together. The attraction is a little rare, but when it happens, you don't have a choice. My parents had some friends who met that way."

"So you know about this?"

Julia nodded. "Yes. And that's what worries me. Once the gift chooses someone for you, it's over for anyone else."

"Don't say that."

"I'm just being realistic, Kar. Once Jerrod's back, I don't know that you and I will ever be the same. Sure, you and I are attracted, but I don't know that I can compete with his level."

"What makes you think you and I aren't just as attracted?"

Julia looked at Kari with a slight frown. "Because he's a guy, hello? Those attractions are always really strong. It's what makes me nervous. I don't want to lose you."

"So stop selling yourself short, Jules. We both know what we felt last night."

"I know."

"What we need to focus on now is finding Eric and Jerrod."

"First we need leads, Kar. Someone who knows at least something. It might take a while before one of those imposture security officers starts talking."

"I would have gotten you some leads," Kari assured. "I could have made any of them talk."

"That's not how it's done, Kar. Pain works fine on regular civilians, but not with seasoned military. They're prepared for it. You'd have just ended up killing one and then we'd lose the intel."

“Sometimes I wish we could read minds instead of just feelings.”

“Feelings work well enough for me,” Julia assured her. “I don’t know that I would want to know what’s really going on in other people’s heads.”

Kari nodded taking a sip of coffee. “Did you interview Tim yet? He knows something. I’m sure there’s some leads there.”

“He declined the interview.”

“Huh? Julia, this is a security breach. How do you decline to be interviewed?”

“The same way you do.”

Kari just stared dumbfounded at Julia.

“You still don’t realize who you are, do you?” Julia chided. “You’re the daughter of an Apostle, Kari.”

“So?”

Julia rolled her eyes. “So?” she repeated mockingly. “Listen to yourself. The law doesn’t apply to you, or anyone who is a family member of an Apostle. You’re above the law Kari. All of you are. It’s like your families have your own code of justice. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been told by the Apostleship, and even you yourself, to butt-out. That’s why I left the Dominion. We have the best security people on Earth, but I was through with the double-standard. All the illegal crap that goes on within the Temple. I was just through with it.”

“So who handles the problems within the Apostleship?”

Julia looked at her friend, “Your family does. That was what you were doing when someone tried to kill you. Eric must have been tied up somehow with something the Apostles were doing when he was taken because both you and your mother were all over the case—and, you kept me out of it. I’m Dominion Guard, I’m even gifted. But I’m not part of the sainted Apostleship.”

“So you don’t know anything about Eric?”

"I know Eric and your brother are close, like we are. But I don't know what he does. That's all classified, even for me. Carson doesn't even have access to Apostolic records."

"Well."

"It feels like you know more about Eric than I do, even with your memory gone."

"Yea, I do, Jules. I was sort of briefed."

"I don't have to tell you, Kar, that all of this secrecy just makes finding either of them all that much more difficult. You're tying my hands."

"I know. It can't be helped. I just wish—" Kari looked at Julia who was suddenly looking at the entrance of the restaurant. A not quite so tall but unusually handsome thirty-something man with tanned skin had entered and was surveying the tables. He was dressed in black sportswear that showed off his military-built body very well.

"Well now," Julia said as she got up from their table and half ran over to the stranger. Kari watched as Julia and the stranger met with wide eyes and smiles. The stranger moved quickly to her and twirled Julia off her feet in an emotion-filled hug and then he kissed her on the cheek. Julia took him by the arm and returned to their table with the handsome mystery man in tow.

"Kari, I know you don't remember him, so I'd like to re-introduce you to my brother."

The unusually comely man shook her hand. "How are you Kari. Jule told me about your accident." He looked at her with his piercing steel-blue eyes. "I must say you're still just as beautiful as ever."

"Hands off, lover boy," Julia whispered menacingly to him. "She's mine."

"I'm not touching. Just looking," he coyed, smiling at Kari. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"No," both ladies lied and then smirked at each other.



“Do you mind if I join you? I just got in from an eight hour flight and I’m famished.”

Julia all but pushed him into the booth and then sat next to him.

“I take it it’s been a while since you two have seen each other?” Kari smiled seeing how both of them had a distinct family resemblance and the exact same interesting movements and mannerisms.

“It’s been almost two years,” he offered.

“So, Julia, does your brother have a name?” Kari asked.

“Oh, Kar, I’m sorry.”

Julia’s brother smiled, extending his hand, “It’s Dark, Kari. Admiral Dark.”

# 19

**A**n admiral?" Kari began. "Don't tell me the Dominion has a navy?"

"Ah, well, not exactly," Dark grinned. "I actually work for another clan that's helping the Dominion. But you do have Navy Seals, so I guess, in a way, the Dominion does have a navy."

"Dark commands the *Leviathan*," Julia offered.

"That sounds like something big. Is it an aircraft carrier?"

"Bigger," Julia grinned.

Dark seemed to frown at his sister's revelation.

"Bigger than an aircraft carrier?" Kari mused. "How do you keep a ship like that a secret?"

"It's a submarine," Julia offered.

Dark reached his arm around Julia and placed his hand over her mouth. "Don't listen to her, Kari." He dug his knuckle teasingly into his sister's ribs while muffling her very vocal reaction. "She doesn't know what she's talking about."

“She already knew anyway,” Julia said, mirthfully pushing her older brother’s hands back into his own space.

“Really? I’ve got to stop losing my memory,” Kari joked.

“It was a shame to hear about that, Kari,” Dark looked at her with oddly concerned eyes. “How is your recovery coming along?”

“I’m fine. Jules has been helping me along, you know, remembering things. Like the fact we have a military and a navy,” Kari raised an eyebrow at Julia. “So, the Leviathan, is it a nuclear sub?”

Dark looked at Kari with a raised eyebrow and a grin. “You’ve been aboard the Leviathan before. Maybe I should take you back to see her again. But we probably shouldn’t be talking about this here. Not everyone has your security clearance—your Excellency,” Dark half mocked, smiling.

“Oh, stop it. Here I’m supposed to be a soldier, just like everyone—else.” Kari’s gaze was now suddenly focused on the ring Dark was wearing as he studied the short menu. It looked exactly like the one her mother had shown her several days ago while they were in her bling closet. It was gold, the same width and with the exact same seamless gemstone inlay. The ring worn only by the personal messengers of the gods. Were Dark and even Julia somehow tied up with these gods? Kari stared, wondering.

“Are you okay, Kari?” Dark noticed her words trailing.

“Yea,” she began, “I—I was just noticing your ring. It looks familiar.”

Dark smiled at her. “It’s a family piece. Someone else has one too but she never wears it,” Dark eyed his sister, gently elbowing her.

“I do too wear it; sometimes,” Julia countered.

Both Kari and Julia felt Keith even before he’d entered the restaurant. Keith spotted them all in the booth and made his way to the table. “Hey, guys, room for one more?”

"There's always room for you, Kei," Kari smiled making room for her brother and then squeezing his hand as he sat down.

"Jesus, Dark, I haven't seen you in a while." Keith and Dark bumped fists across the table. "How've you been, man?"

"Very well. How are you doing, all things considered?"

"I'll be a lot better once you guys find Eric—and Jerrod," he added.

"That's what I'm here for," Dark nodded.

"Do you remember Dark, Sis?" Keith asked, a cautious feeling rising from him.

Kari shook her head. "I guess I should. I'm sorry, Admiral."

"No need to apologize, Kari. No need at all." Dark smiled at her with his steel-blues.

Kari smiled back. Dark had the most appealing demeanor. Cultured and refined. Similar to Julia's but much more so. Suddenly Kari realized that while she could see Dark, she couldn't actually feel him. Empathically, it was like he wasn't even there. It was a little startling. She could feel everyone else in the room, including Julia.

Realizing what was happening within Kari's feelings, Julia shot Kari an empathic feeling, 'Don't.'

Now Julia's brother really intrigued Kari.

\* \* \* \* \*

After breakfast Julia insisted on dragging Kari to their complex's private dojo for a workout. Keith and Dark had wandered off to admin somewhere leaving Kari clearly distracted. Their breakfast conversation had been nothing but small talk about some of Dark's recent adventures, but she still didn't know anymore about the man than she did when he arrived on base.

Dressed in a soft black gi, Kari now sat Lotus on a reed mat in front of Julia trying to center and failing miserably.

"You're not focusing."

"I guess I'm distracted."

"That will get you killed."

Kari dropped the attempt. "Julia."

Julia dropped her concentration and looked at Kari.

"Your brother. He's really different."

"He is. You want to know why you can't sense him?"

"Yea."

"You'll have to ask him. I'm staying out of it."

"Staying out of what?" Kari probed.

Julia went back to her centering.

"You know something. Tell me."

"No."

"I thought you were supposed to be helping me remember?"

"Kar, some things are better left forgotten."

"Some friend you are."

Julia opened her eyes and looked at Kari. "I am being your friend. Trust me."

"You know something."

"I do. But it's none of my business. Center."

"Maybe I should just beat it out of you?"

"Ha. As unfocused as you are right now. Not likely." Using only her legs, Julia lifted herself to her feet in a smooth, effortlessly graceful turn. "Let's test. Rise."

"If I win, then will you tell me?"

"No. Rise."

"Well, then I guess I'll just need to beat it out of you."

"You're hardly focused, Kar. That's not going to happen."

Julia was right. Kari wasn't focused at all at the moment. Kari may have forgotten names, places and events, but seeing her gi neatly folded in her closet the other day had brought

back a tidal wave of memories. That memory was now very much intact and somehow everything about her martial skills had come rushing back. Kari knew exactly how to bring focus.

Julia watched as Kari pulled back her long hair and secured it up tightly. Julia felt Kari gently but firmly push her out of her feelings. That was good. Empathy was a valuable tool in martial awareness, allowing one to sense the moves of an enemy well before they'd even begun to physically move. Now Julia would be blind to Kari's intended actions.

Kari rose effortlessly from her mat in a smooth rising turn, centering, focusing, like she'd done a million times before. She opened her unblinking eyes on Julia in an offensive stance.

"Is this 'focused' enough for you?"

Julia had seen this look before. She swallowed. "Yea."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dark sat in Carson's office.

"I thought I was pretty clear about you avoiding the Connors while you were here?"

"You were." Dark assured him.

"But yet you just waltz right in and have breakfast with them?"

"I had breakfast with my sister, Carson. I haven't seen her in years. It's not my fault if Kari and Keith happen to be there."

"Does she remember you?"

"No," he sighed, frowning.

"I'm sorry, Dark."

"Yea. Me too."

"You and Keith seem to still be friends."

"We've always been friends, Carson. Aaron is the problem here, you know that."

"Aaron can be difficult, no doubt about that."

"Difficult? The man acts like he's a god. If he's so god-like why bring me here?"

"He didn't ask you to come. I did."

"You? That was gutsy."

"Aaron and I have been friends for a long time, Dark. He's very old school, in case you haven't noticed."

"Yea, well old-school will get you killed these days."

"I think Aaron realizes that, Dark. He's arrogant and stubborn, but he's not stupid. Someone just made an attempt on his daughter's life and almost succeeded. He didn't protest all that much and he didn't try to stand in my way to bring you back here."

"I couldn't help what happened, Carson. You know that."

"It's not my place to judge another man's decisions, Dark. You're one of the most honorable men I know. You're the one who has to live with yourself. You make good decisions. That's why you're the best."

"I didn't make a good decision with Kari," Dark frowned.

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"Things didn't turn out very well."

"I don't know about that. I may not be as old as you are, but my experience tells me that men like yourself have a way of reaping a lot more than they sow."

"That's a nice platitude, Carson. I appreciate the sentiment, really. But I think the faster we find your kidnappers and get me out of here, the better it will be for all of us."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kari blocked Julia's thrust for the umpteenth time, deflecting the energy of her strike harmlessly away from her. Julia's constant thrusts were more than a test, but a decoy. Kari already knew what was coming somewhere within Julia's barrage of strikes. Kari caught Julia's stealthy hand in mid-

strike and held it firmly. Julia's fingers hovered just inches from Kari's ribcage and a highly sensitive area. The nerve strike would have caused excruciating pain for Kari had Julia actually landed the blow.

"I don't think so," Kari leveled at Julia eye to eye.

Despite her efforts to avoid Kari's counter attack, Julia felt herself being slammed onto the thinly padded floor, hard. It hurt. Julia's chest was rising heavily for breath, and a slight perspiration collected around her skin. Kari's knee and leg landed heavily on Julia's abdomen keeping her from taking in badly needed oxygen. The bruising around Julia's eye had already mostly faded but the side of her face still looked bruised and deeply purple. A small trickle of dried blood marred her swollen lip. Kari's open palm stopped only a fraction of an inch from Julia's chin.

"Satisfied?" Kari interrogated, breathing normally.

Julia nodded quickly.

Kari stood up, gripped Julia's hand and helped her friend to her feet. Julia immediately wrapped her arm around her agonizingly painful ribs, holding her side as she limped on a weakened knee to keep her balance. The light bruise Julia had inflicted on Kari's neck was now hardly noticeable.

"You're out of shape," Julia, warned. "You allowed me hit a vulnerable spot."

"I let you hit me," Kari corrected. "It opened you up for that cracked rib you're nursing."

Kari took a deep breath relaxing her center. "Here, let me help you to the bench."

Julia nodded.

Kari helped Julia hobble to a futon bench. It took a couple of minutes before Julia finally straightened up, but still rubbing her side. Her lip was almost back to its normal pouting self.

"Your eye looks better," Kari said moving Julia's hair out of the way.



"Your speed is unbelievable," Julia complimented. "I don't know how you do it."

"How's your side?" Kari asked.

"It's nothing. It'll be sore for a few hours. It's not the first time we've cracked each other's bones.

"You've cracked my bones before?"

"Yea, but that was," Julia took a deep breath see if she could yet, "quite a few years ago. You've had a few more teachers than me since then."

"Oh? Like who?"

Julia looked at Kari. "Dark, for one."

"Your brother teaches?"

"Not any more. You were his last student."

"I don't remember learning from anyone. I just—know. So how long was he my instructor?"

Julia smiled but said nothing.

"Why won't you tell me anything?"

"Because it's none of my business. I've told you too much already."

"Julia, we're friends, more than friends. I trust you. Why won't you tell me!?"

Julia looked at Kari, then stood up. She walked to the door and slid it open. "Some things are better left buried in the past, Kar. I don't know that you really want to dig this up."

## 20

**D**ominion Spire. Inarguably the most magnificent religious structure ever built on planet Earth. Rising just over 2,500 feet it was 144 stories of neo-Gothic opulence and the primary temple of worship for all things Dominion. At the base of the spire, a 120,000 seat climate-controlled indoor “sanctuary” was sectioned into thirds to match the triune architecture of the spire rising above it. Stadium seating provided worshipers with wide, plush carpeted hallways and high-back reclining comfort, while concessionaires offered the congregants free refreshments and complimentary Wi-Fi. The typical Sabbath filled a little more than a third of the Temple’s capacity. But on holy events, the massive stadium would be filled to capacity with tickets selling out sometimes years in advance.

Above the sanctuary rose one hundred floors of office complex meant for church staff and other Dominion business units. Then there were the offices of the Apostles which

occupied the highest levels of the Temple Spire. And at its very top, the Holy of Holies. The spiritual dwelling place of God and ever only seen by the Apostles themselves during the most holy day of the year.

Lucas frequented the Temple Spire often. Although not an Apostle, he enjoyed most of the benefits of them. He strode into the central spire's main lobby ignoring the massive stone and glass arches that were the hallmark of the Dominion Mecca. He entered the security area, walking past numerous armed officers, ignoring metal detectors and security staff. Internally, dozens of cameras and security personnel watched and followed him looking for any sign of trouble or something out of the ordinary. No one bothered to stop him or ask for credentials. They knew better.

He passed his RF card over the reader and entered the elevator. There would be no cameras on him now nor the rest of the time he was in the building. The floors he was heading to forbade them.

One of the tall ornate double doors of the apostle's office opened. Lucas closed it behind him. The only other man in the room stood looking out the tall glass window, sipping coffee from a red mug. The overcast sky had been dusting the other tall buildings far below with tiny snow.

"Morning Paul."

"Luke."

Lucas went to the window and stared out of it beside his friend. The rest of the city's tall buildings looked small below them. "Ever get tired of looking out this window?" Luke asked.

"Nope. It helps me think."

"Well, you might want to pull a chair up to it after I tell you what I found last night."

“Oh? Let’s have a seat then. By the coffee table,” he offered gracefully. The two men sat down in comfortable chairs in the middle of the office.

“You remember that guy we took into custody a few days ago during the raid on Elizabeth Connor’s house?”

“Oh yes, the one who was unconscious. Is he awake now?”

“No. But I have him resting comfortably in a cell. It was a good decision to keep him alive.”

The older man nodded, “Yes, he might know something about our operations. Did you find out why he’s in a coma?”

“Well, I did some initial blood tests just trying to see if that would give me some clues about what was wrong with him. Drugs in his system, that kind of thing.”

“And?”

“He was clean. But he had some really weird indicators, some of them exceptionally high, like off-the scale high.”

“Interesting.”

“I had Tim and Silas bring him into the new MRI lab yesterday, to run some tests—quietly. I needed to see if there was some kind of brain trauma or if there was something else wrong with him.”

The apostle nodded his interest. “Good thinking. I take it the scan showed you what was wrong?”

“No, not really.”

“No? So what did you find?”

“I’m not sure at this point.”

“You’re being far too cautious with the diagnosis here, Doctor. I’m not a medical board. Just tell me what you found.”

“Paul, this guy’s not human.”

The older man studied his friend’s face for a moment. “Luke, I like drama in my sermons; I don’t like it in my reports.”

“I’m not being dramatic,” Lucas offered flatly.

“Then perhaps you should define ‘not human’ for me.”

"I did a full body scan of our Mr. Sharp. These new MRI's are multifunction, extremely detailed and deliver all kinds of test result metrics on the fly. The first thing the scan flagged was that his bone density was way low. We can get near microscopic with these scans now. The osteocellular pattern of his entire skeletal structure is nothing like ours. Neither are the connecting tissues. They're not even close."

"Strange."

"It gets better. The contrast agent I injected him with, to do the scan, it never showed up."

"Did you miss the vein?"

"No! I didn't miss the vein," Lucas answered sarcastically, suddenly annoyed.

"Alright, alright, I'll shut up."

"His body metabolized it in less than a minute. Got rid of it entirely. I injected him twice and then watched the contrast fade from the scan almost as quickly as it went in."

"Amazing. What else did you see?"

"Without contrast, not a whole lot. Aside from the obvious light bone structure, he looks perfectly human on the scans."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, but I'm going to sound like an idiot for telling you this."

"You haven't sounded like one so far."

"The IV access. When I removed it. It didn't leave any mark. Usually they bleed or bruise a little."

"Yes, I've had them."

"The access wound faded away without a trace, almost instantly."

"It healed that quickly?"

"Yes, it did. I started probing his skin with the sharp. Every time, within a second or two, the wound was gone. It didn't even bleed."

"Extraordinary."

"Paul, this is unreal. I've never seen anything like it. Ever. Never even *heard* of anything like it.

"No. No, you wouldn't have."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're not an Apostle, Luke. I wouldn't expect you to know. But I'm going to tell you something, my friend, that no one other than an Apostle knows."

"Now who's being dramatic?"

"I'm being dramatic because what I am about to tell you is quite dramatic. The Apostles have secrets, Luke. As one apostleship is passed onto the next occupant so are the previous occupant's personal notes and writings. It's all very clandestine.

"It has long been rumored that some of the Dominion's apostles are descendants of the original Twelve, imbued with certain, 'gifts of God' that were passed down through the generations. The diaries of my predecessors were significantly detailed. Apostles come and go, but the Connor family is one of the few original founders of the Dominion who have remained within Apostleship. Only two other families can say the same.

"It would appear, my dear Luke, that we have stumbled upon a very closely-held family secret."

"But this Sharp guy, he's an outsider, not even part of their family. How could he have this gift, unless—"

"Unless what, Luke?"

"Unless you can transfer it to someone else."

"Or not, as may be the case with our young prisoner."

"Well, clearly you can Paul, he has this 'gift of God' as you call it, whatever it is."

"And he's also comatose. This 'gift of God' may come with dangers we're not aware of yet. What good is the gift if it destroys one's mind in the process?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The doors closed automatically while the pleasant female voice announced the train's departure for Bethlehem. Dark looked at his watch pretending not to see the woman who had ducked in through another door at the far end of the car at the last moment. They were alone. She moved closer to him with extreme stealth, not making a sound, just like he'd taught her. He'd been avoiding her, but he knew she'd find him, eventually.

He didn't turn around to look at her. "You're not supposed to be leaving Jericho," Dark offered. "It's not safe."

"I don't recall needing to ask permission," Kari leveled.

"Spoken like a true daughter of the Apostles." Dark turned around. She'd dressed in warm street clothes. Her hair fell amazingly over the shoulders of her slim black ski jacket.

The pleasant voice announced, "Now entering aquatic environment ..."

Dark looked at her. "Why are you following me?"

"Why are you avoiding me?"

"I have my reasons."

"Anything you'd like to tell me about?"

"No."

"Have you always been so—?"

"Obstinate?"

"I was going to say frustrating."

"I can be both," he assured her evenly.

"Why can't I sense you?"

Dark just looked at her saying nothing.

"I know you used to be my instructor."

"Did that come from Julia or Keith?"

Kari just looked at him and said nothing.

Dark smiled. "I always appreciated that about you Kari. You were always a very quick learner."

Water silently moved up the windows of their car as the train became fully submerged.

"Why is everyone being so evasive about you?" she asked. "No one will tell me anything about you."

He looked away. "You never did like being kept in the Dark."

"Very funny."

He looked at her again. "I wasn't joking."

Kari looked at him, putting two and two together, "Did we have a falling out?"

"You could call it that."

"Did I do something? What?"

"Kari," Dark sighed. "Leave it alone. It was a long time ago. Things change. Circumstances change." He looked down at the floor. "People change."

Kari searched for something to say. "I saw your ring."

He looked at her, again saying nothing. At least she had his attention.

"It brought back some memories," she offered.

He smiled. "I may not be an empath, Kari, but I know a lie when I hear one. Nice try."

"Dammit, Dark, they're my memories too!" she raised her voice, frustrated.

"Evidently not any more," Dark leveled rudely.

She slapped him—at least she tried to. Even with her speed, he caught her quick hand in mid-flight.

"Leave—" he pinned her hand to the car's vertical handrail with his own, "leave it alone, Kari."

"Let me go," she demanded half-heartedly, not really trying to get away.

Dark felt her struggle, then looked at her, suddenly struck by something he didn't know was still there. His gaze suddenly met her eyes.

"No," he said softly.



Kari tried to pull his hand away with her other but her only reward was both of her hands being trapped against the pole with both of his hands covering hers.

"You do remember," he offered. "Maybe not with your thoughts, but you remember."

She tried to pull free again, with even less effort than before.

"Go ahead, Kari" Dark offered. "Free yourself."

She looked into his steel-blues. Something inside her fought for a memory but it just wasn't there. Somehow, something inside her didn't want to pull away. Her outward frustration evaporated.

"No." She felt the word leave her lips. "Don't—let me go." The words just fell from her mouth.

She felt his grip tighten around her hands.

"Don't let me go," she said to him again, as if it felt familiar somehow. The words struck a deep sadness suddenly from deep within her.

The fully composed face of Dark began to crack with a hint of the deep pain that he was now suddenly trying to hide. He blinked his eyes trying to wash away the mist that began covering them.

Kari looked at him. "Why?" she began. "Why did you let me go?"

"I—" he started to answer, a slight waver in his voice, but he never finished. He looked away unable to show her the pain racing across his face.

Kari lifted his hands from the pole and held them in her own, moving close to him. She could feel something immensely deep within herself, like the echo of a lost memory that was part of her being. She moved close to him and slowly wrapped her arms around him and then felt his arms move around her. Somehow being in Dark's arms felt warm, comfortable, natural—familiar. She knew what this felt like.

She allowed her body to move with him with whatever physical memory might be there.

Her head lay on his shoulder; her palm resting against his chest. "We were together, weren't we?" she questioned, sadness coloring her voice.

She felt him draw a pained emotional breath. "Yea," he whispered softly, holding her in a way that brought back even more familiarity within her.

"I'm sorry I don't remember—details."

"It's probably better that you don't."

"But I remember feeling you."

Dark grimaced as deep pain now rolled in streams from his eyes as he held his Kari for the first time in decades.

"It's okay," Kari soothed. "It's okay."

"No. No, it's not okay. You don't know anymore. But it was not okay."

"I'm sorry, Dark. I didn't realize the wounds I was opening. I just wanted my memory back. I'm sorry."

"No. Don't apologize. It's not your fault, Kari. You're right. They're your memories too. Just because you can't remember doesn't mean they didn't happen."

She felt him exhale; a kind of agony was ripping itself through him.

"I wish I could feel what you're feeling."

"You wouldn't want to feel what I'm feeling right now, Kari. You wouldn't. I wouldn't want to do that to you."

"Then at least tell me what happened to us."

"Only if you promise not to let go of me," he looked at her now with misting eyes.

"I'm not going anywhere, Dark," she said warmly, holding him tightly.

Carson watched the video monitor feed that he'd routed exclusively to his personal desk. He didn't need anyone from the Guard sticking their noses in their personal lives. A smile crept across his face seeing Dark and Kari holding one another again. He rerouted the video feed to 'dev/null' and clicked off the monitor.

For several minutes Dark just held her with Kari holding him, experiencing whatever physical memories she could. It took Dark many long minutes to finally recover.

"We should probably find someplace a little more private to talk. I'm sure this car is more than wired."

Kari agreed.

The Guardsmen in the terminal murmured amongst themselves when they saw Dark and Kari exiting the train. The pair caught a ride with one of the soldiers to the parking garage and then walked several blocks in the lightly falling snow to a high-rise apartment building. A pair of ski hats and sunglasses kept both Kari and Dark in an adequate disguise.

The apartment Dark was using wasn't exactly stand-out. It was nice, but quite a bit below the standards of what Kari was used to. Still, it was clean, quaint and the gas fireplace added some cozy charm to the place with the morning snowfall outside.

Dark kicked off his shoes and loosened his tie. He made them some coffee and then sat down with Kari on the living room couch. He was having a hard time taking his eyes off of her.

"I was very sorry to hear about what happened, with the attempt on your life, and with your memory. I feel like I'm responsible."

"Why should you feel responsible? You weren't there."

"Exactly. I wasn't there. I should have been." He handed her a mug, the coffee made exactly the way she liked it.

She took a sip. "So why weren't you?"

"I made a bad decision, Kari. I never should have left. It seemed the best for all concerned at the time. But the only one who was happy with my leaving was your father."

"Why?"

"You should probably ask him that. He, more than anyone, knows the answer to that question."

"Daddy's soft spoken, but I think he can be a little headstrong."

"It's not one of his more charming attributes, Kari. But he loves you, Keith, and your mother. But you already know that. He built the Dominion for you, for all of you."

"Then I take it Daddy didn't approve of our meeting."

"No. He didn't mind you and Jule hanging out or even your sleepovers, but when she introduced you to me, there was instant friction between your father and I."

"Was it something you did?"

"It's not what I did. It's who I was. He didn't like the thought of you dating an older man."

"How old are you?"

Dark looked at her, "Three hundred and forty-eight."

"Oh, wow. Your family's older than mine."

"Much older and much more adjusted to our longevity. Your clan is very young, Kari. There are many things about us you have yet to learn."

"Us, you mean—?"

"Our people. Why we are the way we are. You call it being 'gifted.'"

"How old is Julia?"

"One-twenty-two; the same age as Keith. You're just over a hundred. Age isn't that big of deal with us. But your father thought it was. You're his only daughter and suddenly this

man more than twice his age swoops in and sweeps his only daughter off her feet. That was thirty years ago. In your mid-seventies, you were young, but you weren't exactly a child."

Kari studied Dark's face. He barely looked thirty-something. She herself was easily mid-twenties the way she looked. Dark's voiced echoed in her mind.

"Thirty years ago? That's how long Julia said she'd been with the Guard."

Dark nodded. "She took over for me when I—left."

"So you and Daddy had a falling out?"

"Falling out?" Dark chuckled. "If you want to call the Hatfields and McCoys a 'falling out.'"

"It was that bad?"

Dark shook his head. "No, not really. The feud was pretty much one-sided. The Dark clan never wanted anything but peace with the Connors."

"How do you start a feud by dating someone?"

Dark looked at Kari.

Kari's eyes suddenly drew wide. "Oh, my gosh! Dark. Did we get married!?"

He nodded softly.

"How?"

"When we told your father about the engagement he hit the roof. I've never heard your father yell in red-faced anger before, but that was it. I can still hear him yelling your name when you and I walked out the door."

"I'm surprised he didn't send security after us."

"He did. But it didn't matter. I wasn't born yesterday. We got out of the Dominion easily enough."

"So did we elope?"

"No. I introduced you to my family. My parents threw us a massive wedding. Everyone in your family attended; everyone except your father. Even Carson was there. Your father never forgave me, or my family."

"That just sounds so, petty."

"Your father's a decent, hard-working and honorable man, Kari. He's just very old-fashioned and in some ways he's not very understanding of who or what he is yet. But I think he's growing up. Some of us take longer than others. I know that sounds patronizing, but it's not meant to be."

"How long were we married?"

Dark looked at Kari. "Do I look like a man who would divorce his wife?"

Her mouth fell open. "We're still married!?"

"I love you, Kari. I have never loved anyone like I have loved you. There was a time when you felt the same way about me. I know you don't feel that for me now. You don't remember. But—some part of you still does."

Kari stood up from the couch and walked to the window. The snow was coming down a little harder now.

"God." She breathed.

Dark went to the window and stood a safe distance from her.

"I didn't know I was still married," she stared out the window not looking at him. "What about Jerrod? I can't just leave him, Dark. He and I, it's— " she shook her head.

"Like nothing you've ever felt before," he finished, nodding. "I know."

"You know?" she looked at him. "How could you know?"

"Because it is the way we are, Kari. This—'gift' as you call it—it can sometimes make for some very quirky relationships. Our people are often very strongly attracted to each other for reasons we don't entirely understand. Male, female, it doesn't matter. You and Julia for instance. She's your best friend. You two are inseparable; and you can't keep your hands off of each other. You never have been able to since the day you two met. You're not the only two who are like that. The history of our people is replete with this hyper attraction, especially among

the empathths. It's not something our people get worried about. It is what it is."

Kari went to staring out the window again. "It's just so—complicated."

"I know. And it's always been that way. I know how you feel. I've had my own attractions to other people now and then. It happens."

"Why did you leave me if we were married?"

"It was a really bad decision, Kari. I always trust my instincts. Always. And the one time I didn't trust them became the biggest mistake of my life."

She looked at him. "I wish I knew how you felt. I can see you but it's like you're not even there to me."

Dark nodded. "I know. I've been avoiding you. I knew if you could sense my feelings it would give me—give us—away. I was only brought in as a fixer; to find Eric and Jerrod. I wasn't supposed to get involved. In fact, your father forbade it. He still doesn't even want me talking to you."

"You keep avoiding the reason why you left me."

Dark looked at her. "Because I almost killed you, Kari. And I never wanted you to be in a situation like that again."

"Killed me? How?"

Dark looked out the window at the snow. It reminded him too much of a memory he'd always tried too hard to bury. "I'm a spook, Kari. A spy."

"That's hardly news, Dark."

"No, but it makes married life difficult. You didn't like being left alone for weeks on end while your husband was off gallivanting across the globe catching bad guys and ruining governments. You didn't like being kept—"

"—in the Dark." She finished.

He looked at her and smiled at the way she said it. That memory had to come from somewhere. "No. You didn't. You kept wanting to go with me. So finally, I said yes. I trained you.

You were a very fast learner. I was good, but together, you and I were unstoppable.”

“So what happened?”

“We were in Moscow,” he looked out the window. “On a day much like today. We’d just completed a short but important mission for the Reagan Administration. But Weinberger had a mole in the defense department and she alerted her Russian contacts of our mission. The CIA intercepted the communication and she was arrested, but, it was too late. There wasn’t time to extract us. Things got really ugly for us over the next few days as we tried to make our way out of Russia to Helsinki. I did fine in the cold. You, not so much.”

“I slowed you down, didn’t I.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” he responded, a sad sort of love shining from his eyes. “You’re my wife. I’m not going to leave you behind. I’ll die first. I kept you warm.”

“But we made it out.”

“Yea. Five bullet wounds between us and a lot of dead soldiers later we made it out. I don’t like killing, Kari. That was the ugliest mission I’d ever been on. I didn’t want to ever repeat it. I didn’t ever want you to be in that kind of danger again.”

“But you just said we were unstoppable. And we did make it out.”

“Yea, we were; and we did. But I did a lot of soul searching after that. What would happen if you had been killed? I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if you had died back there.”

“You would have survived,” Kari assured him gently.

Dark looked at her. “No. I wouldn’t have. I love you too much.”

“If you loved me so much, why did you leave me?”



“Because you wouldn’t stay put!” he raised his voice emphatically. Dark sighed. “You wouldn’t take no for an answer. You’re stubborn, Kari, just like your father. You refused to stay behind. We had a huge fight. I stormed out; and I never came home. It was the only way to keep you out of harm’s way. Your father decided to keep you busy with police work. It wasn’t half as dangerous and you were good at it.”

“You couldn’t just retire? Find another line of work?”

“I have responsibilities, Kari. You knew them. The lives of other people depend on me. Retirement wasn’t an option.”

“Did I hate you after you left me?”

“I don’t know, did you?”

“I don’t remember. I probably should have; what with me being so stubborn and all.”

Dark smiled at her mirth.

“How long are you going to keep hiding from me?” she challenged, her eyes soft with determination.

Dark looked at her. He lifted his hand and slipped the ring from his finger. He set it on the window sill. The moment his fingers left the band she felt him.

“I’m not hiding now,” he said.

Kari moved softly, silently over his feelings with hers. Although the details were missing, everything he’d told her about their marriage, her father, his work, his family, it was all true. Dark’s feelings for her were not just strong, but powerful, deeply powerful and incredibly moving. Deeper than anything she shared with Julia or Jerrod. She felt what they had shared as a couple. Kari walked up to him. He took her into his arms.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

She let him feel her own feelings. How nervous she was about not remembering him. But he knew just what to do to calm her feelings.

“It’s been a long time, Dark,” she said quietly.

“I’m sorry, Kari. I never should have left you.”

“No. It’s not your fault. I was the one being unreasonable. You didn’t know what else to do. I can feel that.”

He pulled her tightly closer to himself. “I love you, Kari. I know you can’t really feel the same for me right now. It’s okay.”

“What am I going to do, Dark? I feel so lost. How do I find those feelings I had for you?”

“Just trust your instincts, Kari,” he held her tightly. “That’s all any of us can do.”

# 21

**C**arson! Where is my daughter!" Aaron shouted. It had been a very long time since he'd raised his voice in hot temper like this.

"I sent her on a mission," he said calmly.

"You what!? You sent her out with that—that Dark, didn't you!? Didn't you!!"

"They are the most qualified."

"You're fired!"

Carson smirked. He knew that was coming. He clicked his pen on the desk and let it fall. "This isn't one of your boardrooms, Aaron. This is the Guard. The chain of command here is God and then me."

"This is insanity!" Aaron lowered his voice.

"Aaron, the only one who is upset, red-faced and yelling in this room right now, is you," Carson said evenly.

Aaron shot glances around at the rest of the people standing in Carson's office: Katherine and Keith, Julia, Trevor and Blaze. All of them were staring at him.

"I have every right to be—"

"Unreasonable?" Carson interjected.

"It's not your daughter who was almost murdered," he retorted. "Tell me about 'unreasonable' when your children are in harm's way!"

"Children? Aaron, they are adults. They have been so for a very, very long time. They have professions. They have lives. Kari's profession just happens to be a spy, and a damn good one at that."

"She doesn't remember any of that!"

"Ah, that's not exactly true, Mr. Connor," Trevor spoke up. "She may not know people or places. But she remembers her training."

"I didn't ask you!"

"That's enough, Aaron!"

He turned around as Katherine walked up to him. "I suppose you're on his side as well?"

"No," she looked her husband in the eye. "I'm on Kari's side. For once."

He stared at her, the anger within him swiftly draining away. "You—", he began but then stopped. He took a deep breath. "I can't let anything happen to her, Katherine," he ground out, his voice catching in his throat.

"We won't, Aaron. But everything you've built is about to come unraveled unless you allow other people to do their work. We're not living in the old days anymore. You've ceded control of everything else in your life so others could make things bloom, everything except your family. We made this mistake once before. It cost us a son-in-law, grand children and now our daughter's memory. You have to let go. The children know what they're doing."

Aaron frowned. He took a deep breath and looked again around the room at the faces. Finally, he nodded. "Alright," he sighed. "Alright. I know when I'm outgunned."

Keith walked up to his father. "You're not outgunned, Dad. We're all on the same side. You know that."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dark laid on the couch in the streetlamp-lit living room. She'd gone to bed hours ago, but he was still awake, still thinking about her, about them, and about the mission. He got up and with the silence of a wraith put on his boots and jacket. He pulled a crinkled envelope from his inner coat pocket and placed it on the counter where he knew she'd find it.

And then like a ghost, he was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Only a handful of lights shined in the lab where Lucas impatiently waited for the machine to process the latest blood samples. He'd reconfigured the unit several times this evening to test for specific markers and other elements. He was also quickly realizing that even this advanced equipment was ill-suited for doing the kind of deep testing he needed to. But without a real team and a true research lab, his findings would be less than adequate.

Then Lucas heard something that sent chills down his spine.

It was a moan.

Lucas whirled to look at his patient who was lying on the rolling bed. He was moving! Alarm shot through his mind. He'd not planned for this! There wasn't time to prep a sedative. It probably wouldn't work anyway. He had to act fast!

Lucas quickly went to his patient's bedside and disconnected the IV tap that had just started pushing blood into a collection bag.

'Dammit!' he kicked himself mentally. The draw had had barely enough time to get the bag stained red inside of it. Why hadn't he gathered more earlier!?

He slipped the now sealed bag into the pocket of his lab jacket and left the room in a hurry.

Jerrod took a deep, deep breath. He stretched slightly and lifted his hand to his hair.

"Ow!" he flinched his arm back as a sharp pain shot through it. He sat up quickly looking at his arm, the IV tap still taped to it. He looked quickly around the room. This definitely wasn't Kari's closet, or house, that was for sure. It wasn't a hospital room either. Jerrod felt uneasy and suddenly suspicious of his surroundings.

He carefully pulled the tapes off of the IV tap and removed the rather large, long needle. He was glad that the tiny wound didn't bleed. It was then that Jerrod stopped to really take in his surroundings. This gift had turned his entire world into HD Technicolor.

No detail in the room seemed to escape his attention. Although he could see that the room was dimly lit with a handful of task lights, the elements of the room were just as detailed, just as sharp, colorful and crisp.

"So this is what it's like to be gifted," he mused under his breath. Covered only in a thin sheet, Jerrod wrapped it around himself as he slipped to the cool floor with his bare feet. He looked around at the room with its medical machinery still operating on automatic. There was no sign of Kari, Keith or anyone.

"Jerrod, I have a bad feeling about this," he said quietly to himself. He looked around for a phone. There was one on a counter next to the door. He picked it up and dialed 911. An emergency operator answered asking what his emergency was.

"I need to speak with Elizabeth Connor. This is Jerrod Sharp. I don't know where I am."

"Are you injured, sir?"

Jerrod looked down at his arm. There was no sign of a wound.

"No. I'm fine but I need to speak with Elizabeth Connor!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't have an Elizabeth Connor in this office. Do you need me to send assistance?"

Already Jerrod could hear a number of quickly moving footsteps coming down the hallway.

"Somebody is coming. Yes! I need you to send assistance immediately. I need you connect me with Elizabeth Connor!"

The door of the room opened suddenly as several armed Dominion Security personnel entered, all of them training their weapons on Jerrod. One of the policemen took the phone from his hand and hung it up. "You're done," he growled.

Jerrod stared down the business ends of several large caliber hand guns as one of the security officers cuffed him. "Let's go, pretty boy. Give us any trouble and they'll find your head filled with so many holes dental records won't help them ID you. Got it?!"

"You're not Dominion Security, are you?"

The policeman pressed the muzzle of his weapon firmly against Jerrod's cheekbone and pulled back the hammer sending an ominous vibration of a ready weapon through his skull. "I asked you a question!"

"Yea." Jerrod answered, completely intimidated.

Sure, he was gifted now. But the story Aaron and Katherine had told him about the stranger also let him know that he wasn't bulletproof.

The officers led Jerrod down several flights of stairs quickly and out into the frigid night air.

It was odd. The freezing cold air actually felt nice on his skin. They pushed him into a sedan, pistols firmly pressed against his ribs. The driver pulled the car quickly out of the parking lot and down a side street away from the building. Jerrod could hear sirens in the distance as they drove away. He now understood what was happening within the Dominion. Rogue cops like these guys meant that someone was organizing for a coup of some sort. It didn't take but a few moments for Jerrod's new mind to connect the dots. Knowing what he knew of the Apostles, he had a hunch that whoever was behind this wasn't really all that interested in religion.



## 22

**T**hat's not possible. It's not even been a week."  
"Possible or not, Carson, the guy's up,"  
Blaze held up his iPhone. "You want to hear the  
call again?"  
"No," he shook his head. "Just tell me  
what's in the rest of the report."

"Security units converged on the site pretty quickly. The whole building was searched. There's a lab on the fourth floor that someone had been using. It had an empty ambulance gurney in it. Someone had taken blood samples and was in the process of running tests on them."

"Jerrod's blood no doubt."

"Yea. The samples we found in the machine were awakened. There's more: we also found an IV tube with a 16-gauge hypo attached to it. Someone was drawing a lot more blood than what was needed for just testing."

“Alright, Blaze. Thanks. I think this is going to be a much longer day than all of us anticipated. I don’t need to tell you that awakened blood floating around in the hands of these people is beyond dangerous.”

He nodded. “Do you think they know what they have?”

“Probably. But they’ll be just like anyone else with our blood. Ignorant. They were running tests. That means they probably don’t know a lot at this point. See if you and Trevor can find out what other equipment was used in that building. Whoever this is, I’m sure they’ve been running tests with the most sophisticated equipment we have in the city’s hospital system. Start with those units first. Maybe they left behind some clues.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kari stretched. She smelled freshly brewed coffee coming from the other room; it made her smile. She slipped out of her warm bed and into the cool air of the bedroom, then wandered into the small apartment’s kitchen facetiously wearing just her nipped-out tank and panties. After all, Dark was her husband. Giving him a little flash of her in her underwear might brighten his morning.

But the apartment was empty. The coffee pot had been set to brew automatically. Kari poured herself a cup. She mused that once again she’d been left in the Dark. She smiled to herself shaking her head. What a mysterious man she’d married.

Her eye caught the envelope laying on the counter. She put down her cup and picked it up. It felt like there was something metal inside. Tearing open the end, a platinum-looking band rolled out into her hand. It had the same seamless inlay as Dark’s and like the one her mother had shown her. But this ring was slender, more feminine. She rolled the band in her

fingers. It had the same interesting inscription on the inside, but the letters were a little different. But there was something familiar about this ring. She was pretty sure she'd seen it or something like it before.

She slipped it onto her left finger. It fit perfectly.

Somewhere in Bethlehem, Dark took a sip from his Starbuck's cup. A smile crept across his face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jerrod sat on his bunk. He'd never been dressed in a prison-orange jumpsuit before. Wherever this place was, it wasn't part of the normal county or state penal system. Then again, this was the Dominion. He'd heard stories of what the Dominion did to the unfaithful had they had the misfortune of getting arrested for heresy. Secret prisons where people disappeared to for weeks or even years. He never thought he'd find himself sitting in the middle of one.

Wherever he was he wasn't alone. Someone was in the cell next to him. Jerrod had been listening to them breathing quietly all night; their heart beating slow and steady. His new senses were very keen and delivered a view of the world around him in way that made him feel like he'd been all but blind before. So this is how Kari viewed the world? But she was born this way. She'd never known anything other than what he could see and hear and sense now. Whatever the gift was, it was incredible.

But Jerrod more than heard the man in the cell next to him, he felt him as well. Like Kari had shared with him earlier when counting all of the people in the Connor mansion, Jerrod now reached out with his own feelings. He sensed the young man sleeping in the next cell, the two guards in another room not

far away, dozens and dozens of men above them and other people walking around the area he couldn't actually see even further away. He shook his head smiling at the newfound sensations that were crystal clear in his mind, as if he were feeling the intricate details of their emotions.

The person in the cell next to him was beginning to stir. Jerrod hopped effortlessly off his bunk and went to the corner wall of the bars and waited for his cellmate to rouse.

"Congratulations, Luke, you're holding Sampson in a jail cell," Paul looked at the prison hall video that was being fed to his iPad. "And just how long do you think those bars of mere steel will be able to keep him confined? Five minutes? Ten maybe?"

"I'm not holding him with steel bars."

"Oh?" the apostle raised his eyebrow.

"No. His cellmate will keep him confined exactly where I want him. They've been looking for their VP for weeks. Now that they've found him, they're not going to just leave him. No, Eric is my lever to keep our Sampson right where I want him."

"You're playing with fire, Luke."

"I also have bullets."

"It would be a pity to have to use those."

"It would."

"So now that you've trapped, for now, a man with the ancient blood of the Apostles flowing through his veins, just exactly what are your plans for him?"

"I haven't decided yet. I still don't know all that much about what it can do."

"I'll say this to you again, Luke, as your friend. You are playing with fire, the very power of God here. Even touching it could kill us. Just like the Ark of the Covenant. We know next to nothing about this or what power it might have."

"I was getting set up to do just that when he started coming around. I had some vials drawn for testing and some samples in the machine but I wasn't going to wait around for him to wake up. I just left quickly and then sent security upstairs. Unloyal officers were already on their way. I couldn't risk being seen."

"Probably wise. But I don't think you're going to have any kind of cooperation from him at this point. He's not going to just allow you take any blood from him now."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Lucas said, now looking at Paulus' iPad. "He's definitely respectful of lethal force. I'll get him to cooperate. One way or another."

"Hey!" Eric heard someone say as he lifted his head off the pillow. Someone was in the cell next to his! He saw a hand waving over the bars from someone in the next cell. He quickly tossed back the blanket and went to the bars.

"Hello? Who are you?" Eric asked.

"Jerrod Sharp. Are you Eric?"

"Yea! How did you know?"

"I'm a friend of Elizabeth and Keith."

"Are they okay?"

"Yea, well, at least I think they are. I'm not sure. I've been out of it for a while. What day is it, the date I mean."

"February twenty-two."

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me," Eric droned, "I'm sure."

Jerrod thought about his sleep. He'd only been out for less than a week. But the Connors had described others being out for weeks at a time. Why was his sleep so short? Maybe it was because of how empathically bright he looked to Kari and Katherine, he thought? Jerrod mused at how quickly his

thoughts and logic came now. The gift did more than just enhance his senses.

"We've been searching everywhere for you. I'm glad I found you alive."

"Careful what you say. I'm sure the whole place is bugged."

"It's the Dominion, isn't everything?" Jerrod snarked.

"I take it you're not one of the faithful," Eric offered.

"Hardly."

"I know the Connor's very well. I don't know you."

"Let's just say I'm a new addition to the family and leave it at that for now."

"Forgive me if I don't exactly trust you."

"I'm not asking you to trust me."

"Fair enough," Eric offered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dark's phone buzzed. It was Carson.

"Yea?"

"Do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

"The bad," he frowned.

"Jerrod's awake."

"What!?"

"It's true. He made a 911 call last night from one of the hospital labs downtown. We were able to get there pretty quickly but whoever has him was already gone. I don't need to tell you how serious this becomes now."

"This is getting out of hand, Carson. What is this, the third one now?"

"Four. That we know of. I'm sure there are others we don't know about."

"Great. An illicit branch of Levi perhaps?"

"I'm beginning to think that this isn't limited to the Levites. This looks like it could be going all the way back to Shem. The gods are returning, Dark. No question about it. But they're vulnerable. Jerrod Sharp may not realize what he is yet."

"Thanks. I always work better under pressure. What's the good news?"

"The twins were able to access the logs of some of the medical equipment that's been used over the past week. They found a detailed MRI of Jerrod that had been marked as deleted."

"Obviously not the most computer literate person on the planet was doing the scan."

"No, but it was someone who knew their way around the equipment. Someone with a well-rounded background in medicine."

"Great. A doctor who is now an administrator of some kind. Nice work, Carson; you've just narrowed the suspect list to almost everyone in hospital administration, including most of the apostles."

"You're welcome. Where is Kari?"

"I left her at the apartment."

"Have you linked with her yet?"

"That's a little personal, don't you think?"

"Not funny, Dark."

"Yes. I can track her. We won't lose her."

"Good. Make sure that you don't."

"Carson," Dark began dead serious, "Jerrod's awakening kind of changes the plan now, you know that."

"Yes, yes I do. Be extra careful, Dark. At all costs, we need Jerrod Sharp very much alive. We cannot risk allowing the Seven to find any more of them before we do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kari walked through downtown in her ski hat and sunglasses disguise until she came to the outer walls of the Temple and a security gate where a very bored gate officer was watching something on her phone. She put down the phone. "Can I hep you, miss?"

Kari raised her finger to her lips and removed her disguise.

The officer's eyes grew as big as saucers. "Oh, Gawd. Oh muh Gawd! It's you! Em'nence!"

Kari shushed her softly.

"What you doin' out here!?" the officer asked bewildered.

"I snuck out to get some air. I do it all the time."

"Dat's not goo, Em'nence," the overweight woman shook her head.

"I know. But sometimes I just need to get away and talk to people, you know?"

She nodded. "I undertan' nat. Jesus done the same."

"Yes he did."

"What you nee'?"

"I just need to use your terminal for a moment to print myself a new access card. Is that alright?"

"Come inside out da cold, Em'nence. I print you a new card. C'mon. Lawd o' mercy, ain't no one gonn blieve dis."

Kari spent several minutes with the gate officer chatting. She listened to the officer talk about what everyone now was talking about, that two Apostleships were now open and that they would soon have some kind of change in the leadership.

"How do you feel about change in the Dominion?"

The woman looked at Kari but said nothing.

"You shouldn't be afraid to say what's on your mind," Kari assured.

"I nee my job, Em'nence."

"I've been talking to a few people lately, Bernice," Kari read her name badge. "I want to know what you think?"

"Ain't no one axe wat I think befo. Bu okay."



"How do you feel about a woman Apostle?"

"Oh, Lawd! Ima lose ma job!"

Kari sat down in one of the small station's chairs. "Do you really think God sent me out here just so you could lose your job?"

The older woman looked at her. "Well, I s'pose not."

"So tell me. I want to know what you think?"

"Gawd made bof male and female. He bless bof."

"Yes He did," Kari nodded.

"Dere ya go. Aint no reason to make it hard'r dan dat."

"You're a wise woman, Bernice."

"Dat mean a lot comin' from you, Em'nence."

Kari got up and pocketed the card Bernice handed to her and then gave Bernice hug. "Keep us in your prayers, Bernice. I have a feeling we'll need all the prayer we can get in the next couple of weeks."

"Oh, Lawd, Em'nence. We be prayin'! Dat what we do bess. You be carefu now."

"I will, Bernice. Thank you."

The older woman watched as Kari walked across the compound toward the Temple spire. Bernice touched a speed dial button on her phone. "Keisha, Hon. You ain't gonn believe wha jus hapn'. We gon be doin' some prayin' ..."

Kari walked to the employee entrance and entered the building with a couple of other ladies who obviously didn't recognize her through the thin disguise. Once inside the massive building, Kari moved among the countless employees. She scanned the myriad of people here and there, focusing especially on any security she passed. It wasn't good. About

one out of four of the security people she scanned in the building had compromised allegiances.

She looked at the clock tower in the massive foyer she'd just entered; it was a little after noon. The central spire's massive concrete and glass foundations reached deeply into the center of the dome. Making her way to the executive security checkpoint, she unzipped her jacket, slipped off her hat and sunglasses, unfurled her hair and headed for the security bypass line. A younger-looking security officer stepped in front of her.

"I'm sorry, Miss, this aisle is for authorized security personnel only. Please exit and use the public checkpoint."

"Excuse me?" Kari said.

"This access is for authorized security personnel only. Please use the security checkpoint," he repeated, pointing at the metal detector lines.

Kari's senses were all over him. Wherever he was from, it wasn't from the Dominion. Someone was secretly bringing in people from outside the Dominion to fill security positions.

"You're obviously new." Kari offered.

"No, Miss. I need to see your ID please."

"You're in my way," she offered, smiling.

The officer firmed his voice, "Your ID. Now, please." He held out his hand.

Kari started to walk around him. She empathetically noticed that their little exchange had caught the attention of several other security people close by who were now making their way quickly toward them.

The officer put his hand on her chest to keep her from going around him. She heard one of the advancing officers utter an expletive under his breath. She could also tell that of the five officers that were advancing, one was compromised. The man in front of her wasn't compromised, he was simply clueless, an outsider. Kari took hold of the officer's hand and flexed his

thumb and wrist back in an unnatural position that sent excruciating pain through his arm, bringing the officer instantly to his knees along with peals of agonizing screams. The whole area drew suddenly silent with everyone trying to see what was causing the loud commotion. Kari held him there wailing loudly in pain attempting to generate as much attention to her as she could.

She finally released him just as the other officers arrived. As soon as she released him he began nursing his throbbing wrist and arm.

“Excellency! Forgive us,” one of the arriving officers apologized. “We’re so sorry.” They lifted the offending security officer to his feet, still nursing his throbbing hand and wrist.

“What’s the meaning of all this!?” the security captain barked, pushing his way through the small crowd of officers. Kari sensed immediately that he was the compromised officer. “Where are you credentials, young lady?” he demanded.

“Ah, Captain, I wouldn’t—” one of the other officers began.

“I’m handling this,” he barked.

“Excuse me?” Kari began again, raising her eyebrow.

“Everyone wears credentials in this building, young lady. No exceptions.” He held out his hand, “Your credentials.”

“Oh, Jesus. Captain!” The officer next to him emphatically attempted to interrupt again.

“Corulli, interrupt me again and I’ll write you up!” He shot his glance back to Kari. “Your Credentials.”

Kari looked at him. “Captain. You’re fired.”

“Cute. Credentials. Now!” he demanded again.

“No need, Excellency.” Officer Corulli stepped in front of his former captain. Another officer immediately relieved the captain of his service weapon and pepper spray.

“What the—? You’re under my command!”

"Were," officer Corulli informed his former captain. "You no longer have any command, Simpson. I tried to warn you."

Kari looked directly at Officer Corulli. "*Captain Corulli,*" she emphasized, "I want these two arrested and remanded with my father's personal security detail. No one—no one, talks to them. I don't care who they are. Understood?"

"Yes, Excellency."

The security staff quickly cuffed the two suddenly unemployed security officers.

"You can't do this! I'm a State officer! You people don't have the authority to arrest a State officer!" Simpson bellowed angrily.

Kari looked him in the eye. "Oh no? I believe I just did."

Simpson glared at her. "You'll be hearing from the State Attorney for this!"

Kari whispered in his ear. "That's nice. I sure hope they know where to find you. *If they find you,*" she toyed.

Kari then looked at Corulli. "Congratulations on your new promotion, Captain. Dominion needs more men like you."

"Thank you, Excellency," Captain Corulli nodded politely.

She left the small crowd of security people with Simpson still barking orders to deaf ears as they hauled him and his still throbbing companion away.

Scores of dumbfounded staff looked on as Kari made her way to the executive elevator where some employees had gathered while waiting for it to arrive. They all stepped out of the way as she approached. The doors of the elevator opened, but no one seemed to want to enter the elevator with her.

"Please, everyone, I'm only going to lunch. I think we can share," she smiled and began ushering everyone into the car.

On the way up, a brave older lady offered, "I loved your last album, Elizabeth. It was so inspiring!"

"Oh, thank you," Kari poured on her Southern charm. "I loved making it."

“Oh, me too. You are really talented,” someone else broke in. “Are you working on anything right now?”

“Here’s a secret. I am working on something new,” she smiled. “I hope y’all like it when it comes out ...”

The elevator was empty by the time it got to her floor. It made her feel good that people seemed to really appreciate her music. It also felt good to be able to actually talk to people. Maybe that was something else that was missing within the Dominion. A way for people to talk personally with those who were actually leading it.

The executive lounge was a sprawling five-star restaurant for the building’s elite management, including the apostolic staff and family who worked in the upper floors of the spire. She scanned the floor looking for anyone who felt like they might be out of allegiance with the Dominion. She noted some plainclothes security people toward the back of the restaurant along with a couple of others sitting at their own table. Everyone else seemed to be clean.

“Hello, Liz. Haven’t seen you in a while,” the hostess greeted with a friendly smile as Kari walked up. “A table for you?”

The shortened name used by the hostess told Kari that they must be friends. She greeted her without using her name that she couldn’t remember anyway. “Oh, I’m just meeting someone. They’re probably already here. I’ll find them.”

“Okay. Enjoy,” she smiled warmly.

The security people at the back of the restaurant were really bad news. Whoever dug these thugs up was needing some serious hardened backup. Nothing good emanated from their table. She headed in their direction.

“So did you kiss her?” Tim asked.

“We made out, yea,” Silas took a drink from his glass. He then watched as Tim stood up looking past him.

“Well, my, my,” Tim began, “Elizabeth. Elizabeth Connor, what a— an unexpected— surprise.”

Silas’ swallow suddenly decided to head down the wrong path. He started choking and coughing trying to get the water out of his windpipe.

“Silvanus, you remember Elizabeth, don’t you?”

Silas finally got his reflexes under control and stood up, still unable to speak very well.

“Eliz—abeth,” Silas continued to half cough behind his cloth napkin. “How nice to meet you—in person, finally.”

“I hope I’m not interrupting?” she offered with a smile in her pure Southern charm.

Both young men looked at each other, “No, no, not at all,” they agreed simultaneously, both young men completely awestruck.

“I’m just waiting for a friend and I saw y’all here. How’s your mom and dad, Tim?”

“Oh, they’re fine. Busy, as always. And your folks?”

“On vacation. As always,” she chatted up warmly to both of them.

“Would you like to join us?” Silas invited. “Until your friend arrives?”

“Sure, join us,” Tim agreed.

The two young men’s personae felt oddly conflicted to Kari. Peculiar dichotomies of nefariousness and yet oddly innocent, like two boys toying with the drug of power; affected by its allure but not yet addicts who’d been wholly consumed by its grasp. Somehow these two powerbroker wannabes were

tied up in this mess. Kari wondered if Tim's father was wrapped up in this, or if Tim had ventured out on his own?

The men sitting at the table next to them were another story. None of the plain-clothes security held any shred of decent humanity. Kari kept an empathic eye on them.

"Oh, why thank you. I guess I can sit down for a minute." Kari slipped out of her jacket revealing her tight ski turtleneck tucked daintily into her custom-fit black denim jeans that well-hugged the curves of her hips. She mused to herself that both young men were adolescently awestruck. Tim and Silas were instantly out of their chairs in a flash to help Kari with hers.

"So, Elizabeth, how is Keith," Timothy asked.

"Oh, he's fine now. They let him out of the hospital yesterday."

"Hospital? Is he okay?" Silas hadn't heard about this.

"Yes. He's much better now." Kari leaned in with a lowered voice. "We're keeping it quiet, but some people dressed up as Dominion security broke into my house the other day. Keith was there!"

"Really?" Silas raised an eyebrow at Tim.

"I know. They ransacked my house. But I guess Keith's security took care of them. Keith was shot somehow during the break-in."

"I'm glad it wasn't more serious," Tim offered.

"Me too. I've been trying to help find the people who did this. Maybe you gentlemen could help me out? You know, keep your eyes and ears open for me?"

"Well, ah, sure Liz. Anything for a friend," Tim offered.

"Thanks, y'all. I really appreciate it. So, Silas, you must be working for one of the Twelve now? I'll bet that's a lot better than department work."

"Yea, I'm ..." Silas began.

Tim cleared his throat.

"... enjoying it a lot actually."

Tim and Silas watched as their security detail moved quietly from their table. The four husky men all with communications ear pieces took up positions behind Kari.

“With all due respect people, lunch is now officially over.” The large metal barrel of the big man’s Desert Eagle rested firmly and coolly against Kari’s neck, unseen by the other lounge patrons. “Your Eminence,” the security guard mocked quietly next to Kari’s ear, “if you utter one word, scream or otherwise make a sound or make a move that causes a commotion or attracts any attention, this weapon will spray your pretty little head all over that window. Have I made myself perfectly clear?”

Kari nodded, feigning sudden surprise.

“Good. Now if all of you will just follow us. There’s a service elevator in the hallway. This party is moving downstairs.”

The waiter returned to find two empty tables with half full glasses of water and unfolded napkins. He turned to look around the room to see if they had moved to another table or if they’d just left. He shrugged and then looked to see if anyone had left a tip. A crisp twenty was sitting beneath a paper Starbuck’s cup, practically right in front of him. Odd. He hadn’t seen it there a moment ago.

Neither Tim or Silas said a word as they rode the service elevator to the basement level. Kari could feel other corrupt security waiting for them even before they exited the elevator.

Several SUV’s were waiting in the basement with the other compromised security. But these security people didn’t look like the plain clothes thugs that were now escorting them.



A couple of men approached them as they stepped out of the elevator. They were dressed in business suits.

"Has she been searched?" one of them asked.

"No, not yet," the big man said now holstering his large weapon.

The other suited man began patting Kari down. Kari knew the routine. As part of security, she'd patted down many a suspect herself. The suited man deliberately began squeezing her breast in the processes. She slapped him. Hard. Hard enough that it sent him staggering back a couple of steps.

"Easy, missy." One of the big men behind her rested his hand on her shoulder. "You don't want this to get messy."

Kari's slap left a visible red hand print on the side of the man's face. He glared at her and started to move toward her but the other suited man beside him stopped him. "You want some fun, do it on your own time."

The man with the now red face finished his pat-down search avoiding her other feminine areas.

"She's clean," he glared at her.

"Put her in the truck," the man in-charge ordered the thugs. Then he looked at Tim and Silas. "You two. Stay out of trouble."

They both nodded.

The taller suited man who was apparently in-charge climbed inside the double bench seat SUV opposite Kari and closed the door. The driver, behind tinted security glass, began driving them through the garage.

Kari sensed something different about these men. They weren't loyal to the Dominion but none of them were exactly evil either. They felt more like a corporate types.

"You're hardly Dominion security," she probed.

"No, Miss Connor. We're not."

"You're a little too organized for State police."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"So you're a Fed."

"Something like that."

"Am I under arrest?"

"We call it 'detained.'"

"So, I'm not under arrest?"

"No."

"How long do you plan on 'detaining' me?"

"That's indefinite at this point. I'm sorry I can't be more specific."

"The government indefinitely detaining its own citizens? That's not pretty. A vendetta perhaps?"

"Just following orders, Miss Connor. It's nothing personal."

"So what's this all about?"

"The Dominion is under investigation, Miss Connor."

"That's nothing new, Agent—?"

"Diaz."

"Abducting Dominion officials. That's new."

"Certain people have been impeding our investigation. Your family is at the top of that list, unfortunately. It's a felony to interfere with a federal investigation."

"So is detaining citizens without due process."

"And you don't?"

Kari looked at Diaz. "Touché," she nodded with a wry smile.

"I'm glad we understand each other," he grinned slightly.

"You're conducting more than just an investigation, Agent Diaz. Your people are all over Dominion Security."

"You noticed. Obviously we have a leak somewhere. We couldn't risk keeping you at large and jeopardizing the operation. I don't suppose you'd be interested in telling me who your informant is?"

"I'll trade you. You tell me who you're working with first."  
Agent Diaz smiled.

Their SUV pulled onto the mostly empty freeway leading out of the Temple grounds and accelerated.

"So, Agent Diaz, since it appears I'm going to one of your extended stay facilities, do you mind telling me what the Dominion is being investigated for?"

"Not at all. Tax evasion."

"You're joking."

"We've had our concerns about the Dominion not paying it's fair share for decades, Miss Connor."

"Fair share?" Kari repeated with a raised eyebrow at Agent Diaz's choice of words.

"We know that the Apostleship scuttles away billions of dollars in offshore accounts every year. For years your attorneys have kept the federal government from properly investigating your sources and use of funds. That's about to change."

"So you're shredding the Constitution over money?"

"We're enforcing the law, Miss Connor."

"By breaking it. Nice."

"The Dominion has been, as you say, 'shedding the Constitution' for years, Miss Connor. A little tit-for-tat is probably in order."

"I'm not the federal government, Agent Diaz."

"You act like you are. We don't have royalty in America, Miss Connor. You're not a goddess. America resents people like you and your family taking advantage of others the way you people do."

"And which America would that be, Agent Diaz? The America that votes for your boss? I believe I'm getting a very clear understanding of the situation now."

"I'm glad we understand each other."

"You do realize you're being used."

DOMINION

"I beg your pardon?"

"You actually think you're in-charge."

"I'm not following you."

"Agent Diaz, with all due respect, you're not smart enough to take down the Dominion. You said yourself you were just following orders. Do you know where those orders came from?"

"Only my superiors, Miss Connor."

"Interesting." Kari pondered what was happening.

"You don't appear to be too concerned, Miss Connor, about your situation at the moment," Diaz observed.

"I'm not. I'm sure you're a really nice family man, Agent Diaz. I just hope you don't end up a casualty of all this."

## 23

**J**errod felt them, he heard their footsteps long before the group of guards made it into the cellblock. He could feel who was with them. He watched silently as a group of uniformed State prison guards walked Kari, cuffed and dressed in an orange jumpsuit, to a cell on the opposite side of the narrow hall.

Long before Kari had seen anyone within the mostly empty cellblock, she'd sensed Eric and—a very awakened and very bright Jerrod. He felt like Jerrod to her, but he also felt like someone she'd never felt before in her life.

“Elizabeth,” Jerrod smiled looking at her while leaning against his cell wall as her guards walked her to her cell.

Kari looked at Jerrod with one of her grand smiles and now a raised eyebrow. “Orange is definitely not your color there, Mr. Sharp.”

“Sorry, they were out of tuxes.”

"Eric, you've looked better," she offered. "I don't think prison life agrees with you either, sorry to say."

"No, I don't think it does. I'm sorry to see they've nabbed you now as well."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad the both of you are alive."

Kari now focused intently on Jerrod as the guards locked her cell door. This was not the man she left back in her room a little over a week ago. It was Jerrod and her attraction to him was just as alluring, but he was now very, very different. She'd never empathically 'seen' anyone like him before; well, not that she could remember. She wondered if the empathic equivalent of sun glasses had been invented yet. She moved carefully around him with her feelings but she couldn't look directly at him. He was just too bright for her senses. It actually hurt to move too close to him.

"That kind of tickles," he whispered quietly under his breath to her, not wanting Eric to hear.

"Really?" she whispered back.

He smiled at her. It didn't really tickle, but he could very much feel her empathically scanning him. Kari backed off. It was interesting he could sense her moving around him.

"This place is wired, Liz. Watch what you say," Eric warned.

"I'm sure it is. Have they been treating you two well?"

"Well, they're not torturing us—yet. You know how Dominion cops are," Jerrod mocked.

"Very funny. These people are not Dominion, Hon. They're feds."

"Feds? As in FBI?"

"As in IRS."

"Geez, Elizabeth, did you forget to file last year?" Jerrod snarked.

"I don't know. I can't remember," she grinned at him. "Eric, maybe you can put in a call to accounting once we make bail?"

"You two are taking this far too lightly!" Eric scolded. "This isn't fun and games, Elizabeth!"

"I'm sorry, Eric. You've probably been worried sick during this whole ordeal. It just took us a while to find you. We were worried that something really terrible had happened to you."

"Getting secretly arrested by the feds is pretty terrible, Liz. They didn't even read me any of my rights."

"I meant we're glad you're alive. Keith has been worried as well. We just—"

All of the lights in the cellblock suddenly flickered and then went out. Within a couple of seconds the cell block's emergency lighting came on giving the hall and cells an eerie, dungeon kind of look.

"Elizabeth?" Jerrod began, folding his arms and leaning back against the cellblock wall again.

"Hmm?"

"I don't suppose you brought some friends—with you?"

"Hmm ... maybe."

"Seahawk One, your target is blind. Engage. Repeat, the target is blind. You are free to engage." The Commander heard the order loud and clear over his headset. He looked at the assembled Seals packed into his helicopter transport that was moving at full speed and less than a half mile from the government's prison facility.

"Roger that, Base. ETA in fifty seconds. All units prep for hard drop."

The door of the warden's office opened. "Power's still out, Warden. Police scanner said there's a bad accident involving a semi and a power pole just this side of town."

"Lovely. Put everyone on lockdown. You know the drill."

"Yes, Sir" the assistant left.

The warden got up from his desk and went to the window to open the blinds. Maybe he could catch some of the remaining daylight before having to leave for the day. Opening the blinds he looked out at the four large helicopters now sitting in the main compound. He heard not a sound from any of them even with their rotors at full, as they sat on the game field inside the main wall. He could see several of the wall guards slumped over, unmoving, around the inner wall of the compound and other guards and inmates laying motionless on the ground.

"Good God!" he suddenly realized. "We're under attack!" He went to his desk and hit the riot button several times. But there was no alarm. He grabbed his cellphone and started dialing but then noticed the 'no service' message being displayed.

"Shit!" he cursed under his breath, grabbing his sidearm and an assault weapon from an office weapons locker. He raced out of his office only to find the door of his assistant's office open and his assistant laying on the floor. He whirled too late to see the Seal's weapon discharge from behind him. Something stung him in the right chest, like a bee sting. His vision was suddenly fuzzy and his legs quickly grew weak. Then everything went—dark.

"It's pretty quiet out there," Jerrod offered.

They all listened for another minute before the cellblock door opened. Jerrod watched as someone clad in all black attire



entered the hall. He went directly to Kari's cell and opened it with a key.

"You okay?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Fine."

"Are we clear?" he asked her.

"There's no one else here," she reported to him.

"Good."

Jerrod watched the small team of military men and women approach his cell with the key and open it.

"I like your friend, Elizabeth," Jerrod said moving up to her and quickly embracing her. She hugged Jerrod warmly.

"Dark, this is Jerrod," Kari said. "The man who rescued me from the side of the road."

Dark nodded a greeting.

"Jerrod, this is Admiral Dark, my husband."

"Huh!?" Jerrod immediately slipped his arm from Kari's waist and stepped away from her. "Husband?! But, I—I thought—"

Dark began moving around the both of them. "We should probably talk about this later," Dark said unlocking Eric's cell door. "Right now we have a chopper to catch."

The four of them made their way out of the cellblock and up a flight of stairs. Several Seals stood guard and then followed them as they made their way out. They were just about to walk out when Kari heard someone call her name, "Miss Connor!"

She stopped. Several of the IRS agents, along with a number of prison guards and inmates had been detained by the Seals in some of the empty cells on the courtyard level. The agents evidently had not even made it out of the prison after dropping her off before the rescue operation began. Kari walked over to Agent Diaz.

"Miss Connor."

"Agent Diaz?" she looked at him.

## DOMINION

“Miss Connor. What you said earlier, about not being smart enough to take down the Dominion. I think I know what you meant by that now.” Agent Diaz looked around at the assembled Seals.

She nodded.

He reached into his pocket. “I have something for you.”

Several of the Seal weapons leveled on the Agent. Slowly he brought his hand out. “I believe this is yours.”

Diaz opened his palm revealing her platinum ring. She lifted it from his hand and put it back on her finger.

“You’re a good man, Agent Diaz. I suggest you find another line of work.” She nodded to him.

The Seals ushered them out of the building and into one of the waiting helicopters.

## 24

**H**e slipped silently across the atrium like an unseen spirit. Inside the aquatic bay he set down his backpack and readied one of the submersible wet-bikes.

“And just where exactly is the incomparable Admiral Dark headed now?”

Dark stuffed his backpack into the watertight hold. “You shouldn’t startle me like that, Carson. It’s dangerous. How did you know I was leaving?”

“It’s my facility. It’s my job to know everything that’s going on here. Besides, it’s been written all over your face ever since you got back.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“It is to me. Then again, it’s probably because I’ve known you most of my life.”

Dark closed the compartment, sealing it.

“What do you want, Carson?”

"The question is, what do you want?"

"To be left alone."

"She loves you."

Dark ignored him.

"You're leaving her again? Just like that?"

"I'm not leaving her. It's not the same, Carson. She doesn't remember."

"Maybe you could help her remember."

"She's gone, Carson. Don't you get it? My wife, is gone. She died; back on some godforsaken highway."

"And you weren't there to rescue her."

"No. I wasn't."

"Is this really the best thing for you, for her?"

"It's best for both of us."

"You're making a mistake. Again."

Dark suddenly glared at him, "How would you know!?"

"I know you. You're not trusting your instincts, are you?"

"You have no idea how much this is killing me, Carson. Seeing her like this."

"You're not leaving because of her memory."

"Of course I am."

"No, you're not. I know you, Mr. Chivalry. If it was really her memory you were worried about you'd be taking care of her."

Dark's glare fell. He knew better than to try to match wits with Carson. Dark sighed. "She's attracted to a god, Carson."

"So?"

"So!? C'mon, Carson. I can't compete with that. You saw Jerrod. He's one of them. There's nothing Human about him. Not any more."

"You still love her and she still loves you. Somewhere those memories are still there."

"But she doesn't remember."

"Then you need to help her remember. She has memories, Dark. She just needs someone to help her find them. You deprived her of thirty years of memories. Maybe it's time you started giving her some of those back."

Dark blinked at him.

Carson just waited, looking at him.

"It's never going to be the same, Carson."

Carson nodded. "No," he admitted, "no, it's not. But that's no reason to abandon someone you love."

Carson walked quietly out of the bay.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jerrod went to the door of his new quarters and opened it. He knew exactly who it was that knocking on his door at eleven at night. He certainly wasn't tired after all that had happened today.

Kari stood beautifully in the hallway alcove, immodestly dressed in some snug black Softe shorts and white t-shirt that told Jerrod she wasn't wearing a bra.

"Do you want to talk?" she asked. "We really haven't had a chance since we got back to Jericho."

"Yea, I think we need to," Jerrod offered. He closed the door after her. "Something to drink?" he asked.

"Maybe a water. Thanks."

They sat down on a short sofa by the suite's window that looked out over water at the grand pyramid in the distance.

"You should have seen the look on your face when I introduced you to Dark." she smirked, taking a sip from the cold bottle he'd just handed to her.

"Kari, that was not funny. You planned that. I'm standing there with my arms around another man's wife."

"I did. I'm sorry, Jerrod. It was funny. Dark took it in stride."

"He did. But I've been thinking about that all evening. When did you find out you were married?"

"Only a couple of days ago, actually."

"Your family didn't seem to want to mention it to either of us."

"Daddy and Dark don't get along."

"So I take it you've been separated or something?"

Kari nodded.

"So what happened?"

"Dark walked out after we had a huge fight."

"Really? You're not exactly difficult to get a long with."

"I'm told I can be stubborn sometimes."

"I haven't met a woman who isn't." He took a drink from his own bottle. "What were you fighting over?"

"Work. We were spies, Jerrod. Like this dynamic duo. Dark said we were unstoppable."

"Considering what happened today, I can see what he means. So what was the 'dynamic duo' quarreling over?"

"We had a bad mission. I was almost killed. Dark refused to let me go out on any more."

"Oh. Ouch. Yea, I can see maybe where he was coming from."

"I'm a big girl, Jerrod."

"That's not what I meant. It's not about your ability. It's about not wanting to lose you. I wouldn't want to lose you either. But I guess that concern is rather moot now."

"Why is it moot?"

"Ah, hello? You're married!"

"So? Are you still attracted to me? Because I'm still really attracted to you."

"It's not right, Kari. I mean it would be different if you'd been divorced, but I guess I'm just a little too old-fashioned. I wouldn't want someone touching my wife; I'm not going to touch someone else's."

"I don't think you'll have a choice, honestly."

"Of course I have a choice," he looked at her oddly.

"It's the gift, Jerrod. It's what attracts us."

"So?"

"So, you can't resist it. Not for long anyway. A lot of the gifteds are attracted to other people, even if they're married. I know, it's bizarre."

"Are your parents like this, attracted to other people?"

"I don't know. If they are, they certainly haven't mentioned it. And you still haven't answered my question."

"Yes, Kari. I can't take my eyes off of you."

"Jerrod, honestly, I didn't come over here to just talk to you."

"I'm not making love to you, Kari. Not just after being rescued by your husband. I'm just not."

Kari set down her water bottle and moved alluringly across the sofa to where Jerrod was sitting; she hovered herself over him, breathing softly into his ear. The feeling of Kari's body to his new senses was intense; he caught her desirous feminine scent that lifted warmly from between her legs. It made his pulse jump her scent was so hot.

"You are just not playing fair," he protested.

"Who said anything about fair?" She breathed close to his mouth.

Jerrod's hands moved instinctively to around her hips and his lips found hers. It wasn't long before Kari felt her shorts slipping off from around her hips. Still kissing her, Jerrod moved Kari to her back on the sofa cushions, hovering over her.

"I thought you weren't going to make love to me?" she kissed.

"Kari you so need to be fucked right now. Just promise me one thing," Jerrod returned her kiss passionately.

“Anything,” she began shredding his shirt and shorts and tossing what was left of them onto the floor.

“When your super-spy husband finds out about this. Make sure I get a decent burial.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The undersea transparent tube walkway from the habitation complex to the grand pyramid looked beautiful in the way it was lit from the outside lights. Subtle task lights lit the sides of the floor along greenery and potted trees that made the expansive street-wide walkway a beautiful place for an early morning walk. Kari and Dark weren’t the only people now using it for just that purpose.

“You and Jerrod. You two seemed to hit it off pretty well, I mean, even without the attraction.”

“We do.”

“Kari, I am not expecting you to pretend to be someone you’re not. At one time we were married. Without your memory, you’re a different person. I’m someone new to you.”

“I have memories, Dark. I know at one time we had something. I can feel those.”

“But you don’t remember—us.”

“My body does. But you’re right, I don’t. I wish I did. I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Kari. This is my doing; my fault.”

They walked along the underwater corridor for a short way. Dark stopped and looked at her. “Listen, I don’t have the right to say I’m your husband anymore.”

Kari just looked at him, saying nothing.

“I’m going to do something, Kari, something I should have done thirty years ago—I’m going to stick around.”

“Why?”



“Because, you are the most beautiful woman on Earth. And I intend to help you find the memories that you lost; or give you some new ones you’ll never forget.”

His words sent an alluring shiver down her back. She looked at him.

“I’m falling in love with Jerrod, Dark.”

“I know you are. I can’t stop that. I don’t have the right to stand in the way of whatever you and Jerrod have Kari; but as God is my witness, I do intend to make you fall in love with two men.” Dark moved close her making sure she could definitely sense his scent and feel his emotion for her.

“Oh,” was all that slipped out of her mouth.

It had been a long time since he’d made her speechless. He smiled his steel-blues at her and then breathed next to her ear softly, “I’ll see you around.”

She watched him walk away down the glass corridor. Watched his body move. And suddenly she rediscovered something of why she fell in love with the man in the first place.

# 25

**T**he afternoon briefing was already buzzing with discussion even before Carson walked into it. Some of the gifteds and all of the senior staff members were assembled. Dark, Katherine, and Julia were conspicuously absent.

“Alright people,” Carson began, “let’s get started. We’ve all seen the news reports. Evidently, Jerrod, Eric, this is probably all your fault.” Carson grinned at the both of them as he sat down.

Jerrod and Eric looked at each other, neither of them were smiling.

“Someone at the IRS evidently wasn’t too happy about our liberating three of their illegal incarcerates and they pulled the trigger, no pun intended, on their plans of seizing the Temple in a massive IRS raid this morning.”

Everyone was nodding. They’d already been watching the live news reports.

“We’ve revved up our media people letting the outlets know that this was an illegal and unconstitutional raid by the IRS and the Administration. They’re pushing back, but I don’t think we have anything to worry about.”

“What is the status of the Temple now, Carson?” Aaron asked.

“Admiral Duke?” Carson motioned to one of the black-uniformed older men at the table.

“After the extraction yesterday, we had everyone prepared for some kind of retaliatory action. We didn’t think they’d actually do something, but we were prepared. They hit us pretty hard, first with a cyber attack on the Temple office complex—Blaze?”

“Oh, yea, well that attack was pretty massive. They hit most of our perimeter access nodes with a pretty nasty DDoS attack that attempted to shut down all traffic moving in and out of the county’s terrestrial fiber optics, and it was pretty successful. But I guess they were unaware that we have our own communication satellites, so that particular attack sort of went nowhere.” Blaze smirked.

“Even before the denial of service attack started, they’d invaded one of our honey buckets out of the gate—that’s really what tipped us off that something big was about to happen.”

“A ‘honey bucket’?” Apostle Connor asked.

“I’ll let Trevor explain that one, Trev?” Admiral Duke motioned to the teen. “”

“Yea, it’s a cyber-security counter measure; a honey bucket is actually a faux entry-point into the Dominion network. Only it’s not actually the network, it just looks like it is. We setup security that’s tough, but not too tough to break into. We let them take over servers that really aren’t production servers, but they are made to look like they are. Then while they’re setting up their botnet components we secretly monitor and log their attack vectors and strategy as they transmit traffic

across the faux network. Within seconds we had automatic zero-day countermeasures in place being distributed across all of the servers and client machines worldwide. It took a few minutes, but we were pretty well inoculated against their code out of the gate. It looks like they were expecting a boatload of Windows machines to be affected as well, but since Dominion is almost entirely Mac-based, well, a lot of their viral code never even got off the ground."

"Blaze is correct," the Admiral resumed, "the cyber attack appeared to be a major component designed to knock out Dominion communications. What it really did was tip us off that they were coming and we were mostly prepared."

"Mostly, general," Apostle Connor asked.

"We were down a lot of personnel, Apostle Connor, and they attacked from the inside with their officer personnel who had already managed to infiltrate Dominion security. We knew that they they'd been secretly replacing our own officers and we'd already arrested and fired several hundred. I think they could see we were on to them, which is why I believe they decided to move now before we'd dwindled their numbers down to nothing.

"Their people have managed to get no further than the thirty-sixth floor. The spire has a massive security firewall there that they were obviously not aware of."

"So the fighting is still continuing, Admiral?"

"Active engagement really lasted only about an hour or so. We're now systematically eliminating pockets of resistance as we move up from floor to floor. The empaths are weeding out the disloyalists from our ranks even now."

"Empaths?" Eric whispered to Keith.

"I'll tell you later," Keith whispered back.

"What are the casualty numbers at this point, Admiral?" Carson asked.

“Minimal. At last update there were eighteen confirmed dead and just over a hundred and sixty wounded, all of which are being transported to our hospitals. We took the fight out of them pretty quickly. It could have been a lot worse.”

Automatic weapons fire in the Temple office complex was not something Dark appreciated hearing. He approached a group of hunkered-down Dominion security people who were being prevented from advancing from the elevator and stair lobby because large caliber rounds were blowing all kinds of holes in the walls and concrete pillars and shattering the thick glass windows. The security officer leading his team looked at Dark in his Dominion Guard armor.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Special Ops. Someone playing with a nasty toy?”

“Yea, and it’s making one helluva mess.”

“Stay low. I’ll handle this.”

Dark moved quickly with ease, disappearing around the corner. He moved stealthfully through the dust and smoke of the embattled office floor. He could now see a dozen rogue security people well positioned with a large caliber belt-fed machine gun at the ready.

“That’s not standard issue,” he breathed to himself. These were not your typical cops or even SWAT types.

A couple of the rogue officers were holding a number of Dominion office people in a small manager’s cube with a window wall.

Somewhere behind him Dark heard a heart beating heavily. He heard his measured breathing, sensed the crunching of the plush carpet. The enemy officer behind him was advancing slowly, cautiously.

“Hmm,” Dark mused to himself. He didn’t move. He soon felt a gun muzzle against the back of his head. “Move one

muscle buddy and you're dead," the voice from behind him snarled.

"Okay, you got me," Dark mocked, raising his hands slowly in surrender.

The big officer quickly cuffed him, going out of his way to wrench the cuffs down hard.

"Hey, easy there buddy, it's my first time," Dark said.

"Shut up. Now get up," the officer ordered.

Dark got to his feet and was marched past their defensive perimeter and up to someone who was apparently in-charge. Dark could see immediately this team was military all the way.

"Colonel, I got one trying to sneak around our flank."

"Good work, Lieutenant." The seasoned colonel looked at Dark and his uniform. "You're no cop," he said.

"Perceptive," Dark offered. "Neither are you."

"What are you? Some kind of special forces?"

"Something like that," Dark shrugged taking a count of all of the combatants and their positions and weapons.

"Well, for special forces, you suck! We just took you prisoner."

"Yea, I hear that a lot. Usually right before I decide to kick their ass. Here, these are yours."

Dark handed the colonel his handcuffs. The officer took them, realizing too late that his captive was now free.

To Dark, the world around him seemed to slow down. The colonel and his lieutenants closest to Dark didn't even have a chance to remove their weapons from their holsters before Dark's martial strikes had landed with superhuman force and center-focused accuracy. Suddenly three large men were fully airborne, fading into unconsciousness even before they would hit the office floor. The close-quarters melee worked fully to Dark's advantage as he took out two more of them that were only a couple of steps away.

The real problem was the hostage guards. These men already had their weapons out and were now firing. Dark saw the spinning hot lead coming at him like fastballs. One round he deflected off his armor's forearm while the other whizzed past him a safe several inches away. He lunged at both guards with incredible speed. The next two rounds deflected easily off of the thin armor from his chest and shoulder. He caught both men with outstretched strikes that sent them off their feet and back into the glass of the management office, shattering it.

Dark landed crouched low and then whirled instantly to face the remaining soldiers. Most of them had their weapons out now and began to train them on him. The thin martial darts were already in his fingers even before he'd turned to face them. He now let them fly, releasing one for each soldier as his hands flew out in a single graceful sweeping motion. Each poisoned dart struck its intended target squarely in their unprotected necks.

But before falling from the lightning-fast drug that was now quickly invading his system, one of the soldiers managed to squeeze off a wild round. The hot lead was speeding in Dark's direction. It would have missed him but the hostages, he wasn't so sure. The round struck the inside of Dark's armored palm as he closed his fingers around it. He quickly surveyed the area for any more threats. There were no more moving. He let the still hot round fall to the floor.

Dark stood up and walked over to the machine gun. He disengaged its ammo belt letting it fall to the floor and unchambered the large round. Dark spoke into the com that was embedded in his suit.

"We're clear now on thirty. Base, better hold your security people. Resistance is military up here."

"Roger that, Admiral. We have full Guard squads now heading your way," he heard in his earpiece.

## DOMINION

The colonel, laying several yards away, groaned. Dark strode to where he was, jerking him up against a cube wall.

"You're not just IRS. Who are you working for?"

"Go to hell," the colonel coughed.

Dominion security were soon pouring into the office from where they had been pinned down. Dark stood up and looked at their commander.

"Some people dressed like me are going to be showing up here in a minute. This guy and his cronies are to go with them immediately. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Dark started to leave but the captain caught his arm. Dark looked at him.

"Thank you." The officer offered.

Dark looked at his name badge. "Just doing my job, Corulli."

The captain watched him walk away and disappear into the smoke and dust.



**T**oday's top story remains the failed federal raid on one of America's most visible religious institutions, the Dominion. Yesterday's attempt by heavily armed IRS agents to seize the Dominion's most sacred holy places, its Temple Spire, was violently rebuffed by the Dominion which left twenty-two people dead and hundreds injured.

The raid has sparked outrage not only with the religious public but within the halls of Congress as well. Foxnews has a number of reporters on the ground in the city of Bethlehem this morning gathering more details about what some are calling an unprecedented and possibly illegal action by the federal agency.

And here to speak with us live from Bethlehem City is Foxnews special correspondent Megan Bradshaw. Megan, for our viewers just tuning in this morning and who may not

know what happened, can you fill us in on yesterday's actions by the IRS?"

"Good morning, Tyler. Absolutely. According to what we've been able to collect so far, yesterday morning, at just before noon reports of gunfire began coming in from 911 calls within the Dominion Temple. Smoke could be seen exiting several windows around the lower third of the Temple's floors.

"IRS agents we interviewed said that they were attempting to serve a federal warrant for the seizure of the Temple but were rebuffed by Dominion Security personnel who, according to reports, refused agents access and then engaged them with deadly force."

"Megan, do we know if the government had a valid warrant or court order? That seems to be what is in question here and from what I'm hearing, it's why Dominion Security refused the agents access."

"That's the story I'm hearing as well, Tyler. The government is claiming that it had proper warrants but the Dominion representatives I've spoken with said that agents refused to produce any warrant for inspection."

"Isn't that what the warrant is really for? To let whomever it is know that the police have the right to do what they're being ordered to do?"

"Exactly, Tyler, it is. But in the past these warrants have been lengthy and complex and even showing someone a warrant, unless you are a lawyer, can be more confusing than just providing whomever with the assurance that a warrant has indeed been properly issued and that the police are following it."

"Megan, the Dominion already has quite the reputation for being, shall we say, heavy-handed with its law enforcement. Do you think Dominion Security were simply being overzealous with it's treatment of the federal government's actions yesterday?"

“That is what quite a few of the people we’ve interviewed are saying. It’s no secret that many people feel that the federal government needed to step in and put the brakes on the county’s local law enforcement, formally known as Dominion Security. However, the faithful here in the city of Bethlehem see their security force as having protected one of the Holy City’s most sacred monuments from what many say was an illegal action by an already out-of-control federal agency. The IRS is already in political hot water for its alleged targeting of the president’s political adversaries, and many see this as just more evidence of an out-of-control agency that needs to be reigned in.

“In fact, one of the Dominion’s top Disciples and renowned best-selling author, John Mark, delivered a scathing repudiation of the government’s actions during Sabbath services this morning. Mark spoke to a nearly packed Temple audience and his remarks carried to other Dominion towns and synagogues around the world.”

“Megan, this clash between IRS agents and Dominion Security forces, isn’t this unprecedented? Where a militia-like State or local security force has actually attacked federal agents?”

“Well, Tyler, what I’m hearing on the ground here is that it was IRS agents themselves who attacked Dominion Security personnel, who then defended themselves.”

“Right, but shouldn’t the Dominion have just stood down? The IRS had the warrant and the authority to seize the property, did it not?”

“Well, again we’re all still trying to sort that out at this point. So far we’ve made repeated attempts to secure a copy of any kind of warrant or court order from the IRS, but they’ve not returned our calls.”

“Do we know what prompted this seizure by the government, especially one of this magnitude?”

"It has not been officially confirmed yet, but sources we talked to at the IRS have said that the agency is claiming the church owes unpaid taxes, possibly totaling into the trillions of dollars."

"Trillions? Wow."

"That is correct. It's no secret to anyone that the IRS has been pursuing the Dominion via the courts for decades. In fact, I'm told that the church has been audited by the IRS every single year since the nineteen-sixties."

"Every year?"

"That's right. An IRS representative, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that it's common for the IRS to maintain an entire group of agents and auditors to monitor large entities like the Dominion and other major corporations to prevent underpayments or illegal offsets."

"But Megan, the Dominion is a church, right? Don't churches enjoy some kind of tax exempt status?"

"They do, but since its founding just after the Civil War in 1870, the Dominion has chosen not to accept any tax breaks from any taxing authority."

"Really? Why is that?"

"In the past, the state and federal government have attempted to claim that tax breaks amounted to organizations receiving federal funding and as such are subject to federal regulations. To prevent the government from making such a claim, the Dominion has decided to be taxed just like any other major for-profit corporation, even paying state and local property taxes on the church's Temple, something few, if any other churches do. That decision alone has cost the Dominion billions, but has been a huge boon to the state and local economy over the years."

"So, Megan, this is news even to me. If the Dominion gets audited every year and it already pays taxes it doesn't have to, why did the IRS take action here?"

“That remains unclear, Tyler. So far, the IRS is being very tight lipped about the operation as is the Dominion. The only information we’re getting right now is from Dominion employees on the ground who witnessed the raid and from some IRS sources who are asking not to be identified. Many of the people we talked to are calling this nothing more than a Chicago-style shakedown by the Administration who has been actively going on the offensive in its attempt to fill massive budget gaps ...”

“Alright, turn it off, I’ve seen enough,” the President frowned hard. He looked at his Attorney General and Treasury and DHS Secretaries. “That wasn’t exactly smooth. I distinctly remember the both of you saying that we had more than enough people.”

“We did have more than enough people,” the Treasury Secretary offered.

“Obviously we didn’t, Diane, otherwise we’d be in-control of the Dominion’s assets by now. So what happened?”

“Our agents encountered significantly stiffer resistance than we anticipated. Evidently, the Dominion maintains not just a county police force but a secret military as well. A number of people have been uploading pics to social media, like this one. She showed him the image on her phone with a Dominion Guardsman posing with several smiling office workers.

“Yea, yea,” he waved it off, “I’ve already seen them. And why didn’t we know they had a military?”

Both of them looked at him shaking their heads. “Obviously, we had a breakdown in intelligence,” the Attorney General offered looking at the head of DHS.

“Obviously.” The President glared. He shook his head, “How could we not know they had a military? We’ve had

people on the inside there for a long time, Frank.” The president looked annoyed at the DHS Secretary.

“They did a really good job of keeping this a secret, Mr. President. But it’s worse than just they’re having a secret military, some of these images of the Dominion combatants—more than a few of these people are showing up on facial recognition as being AWOL.”

“AWOL? You mean from the purge we did last year?”

Frank nodded. “These people just dropped off the face of the Earth; like they went into their own witness protection or something. I think now we know where a lot of them may have ended up.”

“Christ,” the President swore.

“We had people go AWOL after the purge?” Diane was not fully up-to-speed on some of the internal fallout from what had become known within the media as the “Healthcare Hearing Shooting”. Part of the reason she was on the team now was that her predecessor had to be replaced to placate the media furor. They wanted blood. He needed to give them some.

“We did, Diane,” the President informed. “Hundreds of senior officers just quit after we began detaining the disloyalists.”

“I’m not surprised. You let it leak that they were being tortured.”

“We didn’t let it leak, Diane, it just happened,” Frank corrected incredulously.

“Yes, I know. But that’s why you had to bring in someone like Amethyst, to fix the problem.”

“Well, the classified part of this is that we had almost eight thousand rogue officers that we had rounded up and were replacing with Constitutionally loyal ones.”

“You mean our own people,” Diane leveled. “You don’t need to sugar-coat these things with me, Brett. I wasn’t born yesterday. I get it.”

“Yea, well, the bottom line is there was a prison break, it was an outside job, and all of these people just vanished into the dark.”

“Nice. Along with all of our top military knowledge and intel.” She shot a sarcastic glance at Frank. “What do you do for an encore?”

“Honestly, Diane, any one of us would have fallen prey here, even you,” the President inserted himself. Frank had taken more than enough of a beating lately. He got up from his desk. “There’s something else going on here; something really not right.”

Frank looked at his friend; the President’s hand folded thoughtfully over his face. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I can’t put my finger on it. But I’m beginning to think that maybe we’re more than just the pawns of the super-rich. There’s something more to this Oligarchy we’re all working for.”

“You’re still perplexed by that structure Harlan found in the Northwest, aren’t you?”

“Yea,” the President admitted. “It’s like there’s something else going on here; something big and I’m thrashing around in the dark trying to figure out what it is. What do you think, Diane?”

“Well, I’ve mostly just read the summary reports at this point. But I need to tell you this, Brett. Your boss, Mr. Rigel, is not unknown in global financial circles. He pulls the strings of a lot of movers and shakers. No one knows exactly how he got to be in the positions of influence that he has, but apparently he’s been around for a long time. And he has more money than God.”

“God, huh?” the President mused. He turned around and paced to the window, looking out of it. “Any of you ever hear of the Books of God?” He looked over his shoulder at no one in particular.

"You mean like in the Bible?" the Attorney General asked.

The President turned back toward them, shaking his head. "No, I'm talking about something completely different. Something I don't think many people even know about, in fact. Until a few days ago, I didn't even know they existed."

"Well, how do you know about these, Books of God? What are they?" Frank asked. The President was seldom even interested in religion; it was odd that he'd be interested in whatever these were.

"Let's just say I overheard a conversation I wasn't supposed to be listening to and leave it at that. I have it on pretty good authority that these Books of God exist. Evidently there's some kind of prophecy contained within them. Something about the return of the gods."

"Gods? You mean God, like in Revelation," Frank posited.

"No, Frank, I mean plural, as in gods."

The Attorney General and Treasury Secretary looked at each other and then back at Frank; none of them had any idea what these books were and only the vaguest recollections of what was in the book of Revelation.

"You were a pastor once, Frank," the president began, "I would have thought that you would know something about these Books of God?"

"That was a long time ago, Mr. President; before I got into Law Enforcement."

"But you have an M-Div. from Princeton. Did any of your professors ever talk about these Books of God?"

"Not that I remember; but we were just kids then. This sounds like it would have been more doctorate-level stuff. But I am curious now, this conversation that you overheard, these people were discussing the return of God?"

"Gods, Frank. Many of them possibly. They weren't sure if these prophecies were coming true. In fact they were arguing about them. Evidently some people seem to think that these



gods are already appearing. I'd like to know what that's all about. Do we have anything that's even remotely similar to what these books might be?"

Frank found himself suddenly dusting off his seminary studies from decades ago. "Not that I was ever taught, Mr. President. But that doesn't mean we don't have something of what might be in these Books of God."

"Oh?"

"Everything we have extant, still existing, are copies of copies of copies of ancient manuscripts. All hand-copied by different scribes over thousands of years. For the most part these copies were preserved rather well, but the originals," he shook his head, "we really don't know what the ancient books that we have today were originally based upon.

"The synoptic Gospels of the Bible, for instance, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we think they all may have had a common source; called the Quelle or Q for short. Each of the original authors of the synoptics borrowed from whatever was in this original Q document."

"So this Q then, it doesn't exist anymore?" the President asked.

"No, unfortunately. But archeologists are uncovering undiscovered ancient MSS all the time, old manuscripts, that we in the modern era are seeing for the first time since the Pharos ruled the Levant. The fact is, we know more today about the history of the Bible than even the ancient scribes who penned the codices the Bible was originally inscribed from."

"These prophecies," the President continued his inquiry, "they could be contained within some of the books we do have?"

"Possibly. Revelation is not the only prophetic book we have. And it was originally based on much earlier, non-extant sources from different authors. There were hundreds of

Revelation-type books in circulation in and around the first and second centuries.”

“But you just said these ancient scribes copied the original manuscripts pretty well. How does the prophecy from one book get inserted into another?” Diane asked, finding herself oddly interested in Frank’s rather esoteric knowledge.

“All of these ancient books are sectarian, Diane. The authors who wrote them had some kind of religious agenda they wanted to promote. If a popular prophecy was known that ‘many gods’ would be returning, that wouldn’t exactly fit too well within a monotheistic worldview of ‘one god’. So the scribe would have deliberately altered the copy he was making to make it fit within his religious worldview; instead many gods returning, it would be just one god returning.”

“So they would lie?” she asked.

Frank shook his head. “These scribes would not have seen themselves as lying, Diane; they were attempting to promote religious views they themselves had. They would have simply seen themselves as correcting what was to them bad teachings, errant doctrine.”

“Is it possible,” The President asked, “that some ancient manuscripts or collection of books, these Books of God, could have survived all this time without humanity knowing about them?”

“Possible, but—” Frank shook his head, “unlikely. Unless someone was deliberately keeping them away from us.”

“Oh, I think that’s a given here, Frank,” the President assured. “These books, whatever they are, are not being read by any of us. They’re being kept from us.”

“By whom? How do you hide something like this?” Diane asked, still very engaged and interested in where this conversation was going.

“It’s been done before, Diane,” Frank assured. “The Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran have been kept under lock and

key for decades now. Most of them were released to the public but only after a very small group of Jewish and Catholic scholars had vetted them for public release.”

“Vetted?” the Attorney General chimed in, “were they afraid they might contain something they didn’t want people to see?”

“That’s exactly what they were afraid of. The long and short of all of this is that a lot of Christian tradition is not really Biblical. People today are taught things about God that first century Christians would never have thought of believing in. But the church promotes the notion that Christians living in the first century were just like Christians living today. But after two-thousand years of church tradition and meddling by powerful leadership, one of the first things you learn as a seminary student is that what we do today is nothing like what people did back then.

“My guess is that quite a few of these scrolls at Qumran tell a very different story about what first-century Christians believed. You can’t release something like that to the public. It would destroy people’s confidence in their church and in faith and that’s not exactly good for business.”

The President leveled his gaze at his Homeland Security Secretary. “I want to have a look at these scrolls, Frank. The ones we’re not supposed to look at.”

“Surely, you’re not insinuating that these prophecies are real, Brett. That somehow God is going to return in the clouds of glory with a Heavenly city and legions of angels?” Diane offered, her skepticism running high.

“I don’t know what I believe at this point, Diane. But I want to have a look at these books anyway, whatever they are. I want to know who wrote them and why.”

“You think the same people who built that glass building up in the Cascades may have written these books?” Frank guessed.

"I do. And somehow our Mr. Rigel is at the center of all of this as well. He knows a lot more about all of this than he's telling any of us."

"And if these so-called gods are returning, as you say; what then?" Diane asked.

"Well—just between you and me," the President began with a serious nod to all of them, "whoever they are, our Mr. Rigel is more than just a little afraid of them. I think it's high time we found out who they are."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jerrod sat comfortably in the dojo dressed in a white gi, the soft light material hung comfortably tailored to his fine build. His breathing was deep and rhythmic. Calm. Focused.

"Very good," Dark offered. "You're picking this up easily."

Jerrod said nothing.

"Focus your thoughts and find your center." In his black gi, Dark sat calmly only a few feet from him in a similar position. He watched his student carefully. "There," Dark offered calmly. "Now look at me."

Jerrod opened his eyes. Both men laser-focused on the other.

"Excellent. Now stand, holding that thought."

Jerrod stood in a smooth turning motion, just as he'd been taught days earlier, his mind cleanly centered in an ancient martial focus.

"Very good. Now relax. Let it fade. Gently. Like a breath."

Jerrod's center melted away and he blinked at Dark.

"Nice. Very nice. This will be easier than I thought."

"It's not really that hard," Jerrod offered.

"Yes, it is. It's just not hard for *you*," Dark assured him. "Normal people take months just to get the breathing right. Gifteds, maybe a couple of weeks. You're doing it in days."

"I'm just doing what you tell me to," Jerrod shrugged.

"Right, but your mind and your body are adapting to the skill very quickly. Now, follow my movements. Not just what I do, but how I do them." Dark moved in a fluid motion; his hand grasping at nothing in front of him and then returning back in a graceful elegant gesture. Jerrod watched and followed, his exceptionally keen vision analyzing every detail. He was soon mimicking the agile Dark, motion for motion.

Dark watched his student carefully. "Don't just copy. Let your own body move the way it wants to. Be graceful. Elegant. Your limbs are like water that flows. Like this."

Jerrod took Dark's counsel to heart. Soon he was following his instructor's movements but with his own nuances and new fluid movements that were making Dark's teaching look almost amateur.

"Nice. You're finding your own way, Jerrod. You're now moving like a god. Your body has a memory that is beyond what you remember," Dark began. "When you defend or when you attack, the motion you use is not from your thoughts, but from how you train your body to move, to respond, to react."

"Is that why you move the way you do?" Jerrod asked, continuing to follow Dark's exercise with near flawless precision. "I've never seen anyone move like you do."

"You have bad habits, Jerrod; bad culture. Humans do not teach their children how to properly move. In time you will unlearn your ancestral culture and movements, and learn to move—like a god."

"I wish you'd stop calling me that. I'm no god, Dark."

"You are what the Universe has destined you to become, Jerrod. Like I said, you will need to unlearn your bad culture."

"I thought my parents raised me pretty well."

"They did well. That's not what I'm talking about. You need to learn to use your new mind and body. To take advantage of everything it's capable of."

"What makes you think I'm some kind of god?"

"I work with gods, Jerrod. I know a god when I see one."

"I don't exactly feel worthy to be called that."

"That's good," Dark offered. "Arrogant gods are typically bad news. I'm glad to see you're not one of them."

"Maybe we could come up with a different term then?"

"Suit yourself. You are what you are, no matter the label."

"So you seem to know a lot about me. What am I, exactly?"

"Honestly?" Dark stopped his movements and faced Jerrod. "I don't know how this is even happening. The gift, as you call it, doesn't usually do this. I've only seen a few others like you. There aren't many of you around. At some point the other gods are going to want to meet you. I don't want them to be disappointed by what they see."

"I'm just a guy, Dark. A guy stuck in some crazy dream that I keep wondering when I'll wake up from."

"No. Your life before meeting us, that was the dream. You have been awakened. This is reality."

"If you say so."

"Jerrod, you will outlive all of us," Dark offered moving back into a smooth sweeping motion.

"So I've been told," Jerrod offered, losing his concentration and utterly failing to copy Dark's move.

Dark looked at him in mid-motion and then dropped the exercise. "That bothers you."

"It does. Do you really think I'm going to outlive all of you? Kari too?"

Dark looked at his student. "Jerrod, children outlive their parents. It's natural."

Jerrod nodded. "Still, it's just a little unnerving, I guess. It seems like everyday I find out something else that makes it seem like being a god is more like a curse than a blessing."

Dark nodded. "We all go through that," he assured. "The time we spend here in the dojo, Jerrod, this is not just about

learning strikes and blocks. Fate has destined you to be what you are. You need to embrace that destiny. I will teach you everything you need to know about who and what you are; and at some point you will learn even more than I know; you will be shown the ancient knowledge of your people."

"Does Kari know about all of this?"

"She remembers, I think; some of it."

"She never mentioned anything about being a god."

"I'm sure it never came up."

"Dark, what's going to happen to Kari?"

"What do you mean?"

"We're both more or less dating her."

"No. You're the one dating her. I already know her."

"Aren't you jealous?"

"Yes and no. But I don't have the right to be jealous, Jerrod. I'm the one who walked out on her. It was a foolish mistake. I'm not going to make you or anyone else pay for my mistakes. I'm just glad that she's alive, even if she doesn't remember anything about us."

"That must be really painful," Jerrod offered.

Dark looked at him, "More than you know, Jerrod."

"I feel like I should just leave you two to work it out. You know, rebuild what you had."

"That's a very valiant gesture, Jerrod, but that wouldn't be fair to Kari."

"Why wouldn't it be fair? You're married."

Dark smiled at him, "Because she's in love with you, Jerrod."

"Only because we're unnaturally attracted."

"Oh, no. It's more than that. I've watched the way she looks at you; it's the same way she used to look at me. You can't make the same mistake I made, Jerrod. Don't do that to her. She lost one love and the Universe decided to protect her from

the memory of it. She doesn't deserve to be put through that again."

"I don't know, Dark."

"Jerrod." Dark looked at him unblinking. "Kari has been through a lot. Much more than you will ever know. But by all that is holy in the world, if you break her heart by leaving her—god or no god—I will hunt you down. And trust me, they won't find the body."

"Jesus, Dark—"

"I'm joking, Jerrod. Well, half joking," he smirked.

"Oh, half joking. Yea, that makes me feel better."

"Listen, it's not everyone who gets to fall in love with a god."

"You're really confusing me. It almost seems like you want to have her fall in love with the both of us," Jerrod offered.

"I'm pretty sure that's going to be unavoidable at this point. You're not leaving and neither am I. You're stuck and so am I."

"I should just leave."

"In some other place and time, yes, that would be an honorable thing to do, Jerrod. But this isn't that place and it isn't that time."

"What's Kari going to do? Marry both of us?"

"Why wouldn't that be an option?" Dark asked. "If she's in love with two men?"

"I don't know. I guess I wasn't raised that way."

"Again, it's your culture that's the problem. Throughout history, people have had more than one husband or wife. Only in the last few millennia has it become taboo, mostly because of the current religious culture. Humans are so fickle."

"I still think I'm more the monogamous type," Jerrod offered.

"You're a god, Jerrod. Trust me, after a couple of millennia there won't be anything monogamous about you. You're not



thinking long term at this point. You don't know it yet, but you have an incredible legacy and a destiny to fulfill and it's my task to make sure you fulfill it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello, Paul?"

"Luke! I am so glad to hear your voice. Where are you?"

"Safe."

"Oh, thank God. After the raid I wasn't sure where you ended up. So many of our people have disappeared."

"I'm fine, Paul. All of the Apostles accounted for?"

"Yes. The irony was that I was the only one in the Temple when the raid began."

"Maybe God's trying to tell you something."

"Not at all humorous, Luke. Have you heard from Timothy or Silas?"

"No. I believe they were in the area when the raid began. They may have been in the spire having lunch."

"Security has no record of them entering, I've asked."

"Well, Paul, quite a few of us have vanished. It's like Security knew exactly who our people were and were then whisked off to a secret dungeon. Do you know where?"

"No, and I dare not inquire at this point. I'm not going to give us away to the rest. We need to keep low for a while. It appears that our Timothy and Silvanus have been captured."

"That's not good, Paul. They know the most about us. If they get interrogated we'll be first on the list of the people who get fingered."

"Agreed."

"We should probably meet so we can draft a strategy in case they surface."

"Good thinking. I'll meet you in the park by the fountain in two hours."

“Alright. Make sure no one follows you.”

“No worries.”

Lucas ended the call. He walked across the dusty lab and opened the heavy insulated door that led into the blood cold storage facility. He picked up a portable blood transport cooler.

Looking toward the back of the room he eyed the two young men slumped against each other, still open eyed, blue and unmoving. Lucas left the room, closed the door and clicked off the light. He had only one more loose end to tie up.

**J**errod's lips pressed firmly against Kari's. He couldn't help himself. She just looked incredibly cute and enticing. It may have been late winter in the city above, but down here in the atrium of Jericho's main habitation complex it was always spring and warm. Warm enough for Kari to slip on some soft loose running shorts and a form-fitting tank. After a long run around the atrium's walk they cooled off under one of the atrium's many large shade trees.

"You're going to get the both of us arrested if you keep this up," she teased, kissing him gently.

"I didn't know you could arrest gods?" he returned her kiss, smirking.

"I don't think you can, but I'm not a god."

"You kiss like one," he smiled pulling back, realizing that it was probably a bad idea to get her aroused in public.

She exhaled softly, her pulse clearly revved by his lip play with her. "You shouldn't do this to me out here, Jerrod.

Seriously. You just push me right over the edge without trying."

Jerrod stood up, holding out his hand. She took hold of it as he helped her to her feet. On the way up she took notice that the front of his running shorts were completely indecent after their brief interlude of lip play.

"I don't think you want to walk around like that," she said with a smirk.

"Oh," he began taking his shirt off quickly. "These Soffe shorts you guys wear around here don't hide much, do they?" he grinned, now holding the shirt loosely in front of himself and taking her hand.

"Where are we going?"

"Up to your room."

"Oh? For what?" she asked smiling.

"To finish making out," he grinned.

They began walking across the atrium.

"So is that true? Your gods can't be arrested?" he asked.

"They're not our gods, Hon. We don't own you."

"So gods aren't worshiped?"

"I guess people a long time ago used to worship them. Not anymore. It's more like they're highly respected now. Besides, they don't want to be worshiped. Not the good ones anyway."

"It sounds like you remember something about them?"

"No, I don't. But Dark and I have been having some long talks about them. He's trying to jog my memories. It's starting to work, I think."

"Is that because you're dating one?"

She nodded. "He want's me to know who you are now."

"So what did he say?"

"Mostly that you have a lot to learn about who you are and that you have a rich culture to learn."

"He's been a little shy on the details so far."

"That's part of the training he's taking you through."

"Walking before running? That kind of thing?"

"That's part of it. It's also a test."

"Oh?"

"To see if you can adapt to the discipline and culture."

"And what happens if I can't? Or don't?"

"Then he doesn't train you any more. What Dark is teaching you Jerrod has been passed down through the gods since the beginning of recorded history. Their culture has outlived more civilizations than we know. You have a responsibility to carry it on now."

"How many of these gods are there?"

"I don't really know. Dark seems to. He's said that we're their descendants. Except you. You're kind of a wonder to everyone right now. A miracle actually."

"So this, 'gift', Kari. It's really the blood of the gods? Their race?"

"It is, Jerrod."

"Do your folks know? About the gods I mean."

"They know," she frowned. "But they don't like it so they choose not to believe it. It tosses a massive conundrum into their faith, Jerrod. They're supposed to be worshipping God; not becoming ones themselves. The Dominion is their life. We've all tried talking to them, but they're not going to change who they are or what they believe."

"So I take it Dark hasn't trained your parents."

"Oh, heavens, no. That conversation always ends badly. My parents don't want to know the history of the gods. They read only the scriptures they want and are repulsed by anything else. They won't even read the Books of God."

"Dark mentioned those. Do you know what they are?"

"The ancient chronicles of the people called 'Ra'; it's their whole history and their interactions with all kinds of human civilizations as well for tens of thousands of years. They also

include prophecies about what will happen to the gods in the future.”

“Wow, a whole history that long? And your folks don’t want to even read it? That makes no sense to me whatsoever. I would want to know—everything. How are you supposed to make an informed decision?”

“They don’t want to make an informed decision, Jerrod. They just want to live in peace in the religious world they’ve created for themselves.”

“Wow. Your parents are so intelligent too, Kari. How can someone with so much intellect make such a ridiculous choice like that?”

“It’s not ridiculous, Jerrod,” she corrected. “It’s just emotional. That’s all.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insult your folks.”

“I know. It’s always mystified Keith and I as well.”

“So you and Keith are on the same page?”

“Oh yea, and we’re both hypocrites. Keith and I have been front personalities for the Dominion for a long time. I write music for the faith, he preaches to the youth. We don’t believe in the doctrines, but we make people happy.”

“So I take it Keith has been trained as well. I mean, he seemed to handle those rogue security people who broke into your house pretty well.”

“Dark trained both of us.”

“You had to go through all of these breathing exercises? I feel like an adult in Kindergarten.”

“Everything he teaches you will be important later on. All I can tell you is that you need to master even the most trivial detail. Master your breathing and you’ll understand soon enough how it all falls into place with the rest of your training. Dark already told me about the progress you’re making. You’re kind of a star student. He’s impressed.”

“You think you can kick my ass now that I’m a god?” Jerrod smiled.

Kari grinned at him as they entered the building passing some other people and waving. They entered an empty elevator and began ascending.

“Not only can I kick your ass, Mister, but you’ll be begging me for more.”

“Oh?” Jerrod moved against her, pressing her back against the elevator wall. He locked his fingers around hers as their lips met. “I’m stronger than you are now. Faster. I might just decide to have my way with you however I like.”

“Yea, so?” she breathed softly into his mouth. They were still kissing when the elevator doors opened.

“I think it’s time we found out whose ass is really going to get kicked,” she mused, pulling him out of the elevator and then into her room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carson got out of his SUV and surveyed the parking lot and building that Dominion Security had cordoned off. He walked up to a small group of security people and flashed his credentials that told the officers he was an Apostolic Representative. “I need to see the crime scene.”

“I’ll take you there at once, Emissary,” one of the detectives offered politely, not sure how someone so young would have the security credentials he was flashing. But he wasn’t about to question an Apostolic Emissary.

Inside the building Carson was led into a basement level.

“This used to be a blood storage facility before the new one was built on Fifteenth,” the detective offered. “It’s evidently not being used for much at the moment.”

“Did you check the security logs?”

"We did. The system had been taken offline by someone last week. No video surveillance, no access logs, nothing after last week. Whoever entered the building had manual access with just keys."

They entered a lab processing area with a large cold storage room. Another officer opened the door. Carson recognized one of the young men at the back cold storage room. "That's Timothy Hendrickson, Apostle Hendrickson's son. Who's the other one?"

"His name is Mark Silvanus. He's listed as being on Apostle Paulus' staff. Normally, we wouldn't have bothered pushing this up to the top, but with Apostle Hendrickson's son being involved, it changes the protocol."

"Yea, absolutely," Carson sighed a frown. "How long have they been here?"

"We don't know. A building inspector found them this morning making a routine check for asset repurposing."

"Any idea of what they were doing down here?"

"No, but forensics thinks there were three people. Probably these two and someone else. We have two sets of fingerprints and latex residue on a bunch of surfaces."

"So someone was wearing gloves," Carson nodded, looking around with vision and senses more detailed than any of their equipment was capable of.

"Probably."

"Anything missing? Out of place?"

"Someone had forced open a sharps cabinet. But that was it. We ..." the detective watched as Carson suddenly entered the room quickly and began examining the two men. He put his fingers against the cold neck of Timothy. It was very faint, only his very sensitive touch could have felt it, but it was there.

"Good God," he whispered.

"What is it, Emissary?"



“Detective, I want an ambulance here; now! These men are alive!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Francesca looked in every detail the part of an Italian supermodel. Tall, slight, but unbelievably well curved, with thick brunette hair that flowed in smooth waves down most of her slender back; she was well-poised and, of course, beautiful. She was also the Dominion’s top Washington relations attorney. She walked into the D.C. meeting room of the government’s lead counsel. Francesca had a reputation in Washington and knew most of the real movers and shakers. This firm was not one of them.

“You’re late,” one of the older women at the table griped when seeing Francesca enter.

“Is that how we’re going to start this off? Good cop, bad cop? How adolescent.” Francesca never took her eyes off the older woman as she sat down. The woman finally looked away at her papers.

“Let’s reset the tone of this meeting, shall we? I am Francesca di Roma, lead counsel representing the Dominion. You are Abigail Jones,” she looked again at the older woman, “fifty-eight years old, divorced twice, mother of three, a graduate of Harvard Law ranking—ooh—eighty-fourth in your class, and now chief assistant to Edward Mahoney, Esquire.

“Mr. Damon Sparks, Esquire,” she looked at the next counselor in the room, “forty-seven years old, married but separated—mistresses often has that effect in your culture, Counselor—your first child is on the way, but not with your wife; you are also a graduate of Harvard, ranking twenty-first in your class and currently the assistant political advisor, also to Mr. Mahoney.

“And Mr. Edward Franklin Mahoney—”

The older gentleman raised his hand to interrupt her. "That's fine, Miss di Roma," he began with a smirk, "I think we all get the picture here. No introductions necessary. I believe my staff will be courteous from here on out," he said eyeing the both of them.

"Thank you for meeting us, Miss di Roma," Mahoney began. "The government has a vested interest resolving this situation with the Dominion."

"I also represent the government, Mr. Mahoney, and have been for many years. It is your transient administration who is responsible for unsettling what has been a very placid and time-honored relationship with Washington."

"Well, as you are probably aware, Miss di Roma, times change, as do governments and administrations. This president campaigned on change and was duly elected by the American people to carry out their will."

"Edward, neither you or your reprobate president give a damn about the American people. We all know what this is about so let's just cut to the chase, shall we?"

"As you wish, Miss di Roma. Internal Revenue has determined that the Dominion owes the federal government in excess of three trillion dollars in unpaid taxes, including penalties and fees."

"Only three trillion? Why not five or ten trillion, Mr. Mahoney?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The fact is both you and I know that such a number is completely manufactured. Interesting that your three trillion is oddly close to the President's budget shortfall. A coincidence perhaps?"

"The government doesn't deal in abstracts, Miss di Roma; we have hard numbers. The correspondence is purely coincidental."

“Sure it is,” she leveled. “The Dominion has been working every year with, and audited by, the IRS for decades and only now, miraculously, under your corrupt administration, does it come to light that there have been ‘discrepancies’ in our IRS prepared and approved tax liability? Tell me you’re not honestly going to try to make that fly.”

“We have evidence, Miss di Roma, that the Dominion has been illegally paying off high-level Internal Revenue staff for decades to facilitate its underpayments.”

“More manufactured evidence, Mr. Mahoney?”

“That’s a very serious allegation, Miss di Roma.”

“I call them as they are, Mr. Mahoney. We both know that this is nothing more than your administration attempting to shakedown the Dominion. It is nothing more than protection money, plain and simple. ‘Pay up and we leave you alone.’ How rudely unimaginative.”

“Tax evasion is a serious crime, Miss di Roma. Attempting to indict the government over your failure to pay taxes will get you no where in court.”

“Interesting.”

“What is?” Mahoney asked.

“I believe I can see where this is going, Mr. Mahoney. I am bemused however, as to why otherwise intelligent people ally themselves with obviously unstable jack-booted thugs like your client.”

“Name-calling the administration will also get you nowhere, Miss di Roma.”

“I am above name-calling, Mr. Mahoney. My adjectives are precisely accurate. We both know these allegations are completely contrived. The question is, if your boss is actually willing to sabotage the lives and reputations of probably dozens of innocent federal employees, destroying their families and sending them to prison, just so he can ‘cash-in’, how safe are you, really? When all of this blows up—and

believe me, it will blow up in the press—and he comes after you and your firm and your family to keep the evidence quiet, how are you going to protect yourselves?”

“I assure you, Miss di Roma ...”

“How?” Francesca reiterated.

Mr. Mahoney blinked at her. “We have very hard evidence. In fact, the Justice Department is preparing to convene a grand jury to compel additional evidence in this case.”

“More contrived facts? Good luck with that. We’ve already filed several lawsuits against the administration and the acting director of the IRS for your administration’s thuggery against the Dominion. We will make your grand jury look like the sour-grapes reprisal that it is.

“I would be very careful, Edward,” Francesca continued. “Your client’s reputation with the American people is already stepping on thin ice after his impeachment over the campaign finance debacle. The only thing that kept him in the White House was the Senate’s slim party-line refusal to convict. You and I both know the administration attempted to murder those two young witnesses. We will be reminding the American people about that, again, and again, and again.”

Francesca began getting up from the table. “It is so nice to see that you like to play with such fire.”

“We’re not through here, Miss di Roma. We’re willing to accept a settlement.”

“The Dominion isn’t interested in paying the administration protection, Edward. I’m sorry. I will assure you of this, however: you’ve just inserted your little rowboat into a very hot war between two very large battleships. There won’t be much left of you once the smoke clears. If I were you, I’d start rowing to stay out of the line of fire. This is going to get beyond ugly.”

“Miss di Roma—” Mahoney began.

But Francesca was already exiting the room. She let the door close behind her.

Mahoney scowled.

"Well, Ed, that didn't exactly go anywhere near what I was expecting." Damon closed his file.

"No, it didn't," Mahoney agreed, befuddled.

"She has absolutely no respect for who we represent," Abigail offered.

"Oh, she has plenty of respect, Abby," Mahoney corrected. "She just has no fear."

"Well, maybe it's about time the government put some fear into the Dominion for a change," Abigail offered.

Mahoney mused Abigail's words, frowning. He rubbed his chin, Francesca's words echoing in his mind.

Francesca dialed Carson as soon as she was inside her car and out of earshot of anyone who might want to listen.

"How did it go?"

"You have dreadful friends, Gregory."

"They're not really my friends, Francesca, more like acquaintances. You know, the kind you'd never like to see ever again."

"Well it appears that you're about to become much more acquainted with your acquaintances. I attempted to shed some light on just who it is they're working for, but it is very difficult to pierce the veil of stupidity when money is all they see. They really do not know or do not care about the evil they are working for. Nice kids. I would shred them in court," she talked hands-free, pulling out of the parking lot."

"I know you would, but is there any way of preventing that from happening? The PR war is going to be bad enough as it is."

"You are not dealing with rational minds, Gregory. All they see is a massive hoard of gold and they are failing to see the dragon sitting a top of it. They will send in as much muscle as they think necessary to take it."

"Ouch. This could escalate into civil war, Francesca."

"It could. But you are not going to allow it to."

"I take it you know how to prevent this from escalating?"

"I do. These people are vulgar, Gregory. Sluggards. Street thugs. They are unrefined, unwise and inelegant. They are simple evil. Their evil understands only one thing."

"A bigger bully," Carson assured.

"Exactly. They think they are secure behind their impenetrable walls. Ignore their saber rattles. But if they take a real swing at us, I suggest you show them just how vulnerable they really are."

"I see what you mean."

"Give the bully a reason to be constantly looking over his shoulder. His own cowardice will take care of the rest."

"And if he doesn't get the message?"

"He will, eventually. It is a very large hoard your clan has acquired, Gregory. It may take delivering a few, let us say, personal messages, before they realize that the dragon has fire and claws and not just armored scales."

"That's quite brazen, even for me, Francesca. Going after a head of state?"

"You cannot show weakness here, Gregory. Honestly, you have been sitting behind a desk too long. You are a soldier, are you not? Act like one. All of the clans will be depending on you."

"You're right. So, what are you doing for dinner tonight?"

"Still trying, are we?"

"You are the most beautiful woman on Earth, Francesca. Hope springs eternal."

Francesca smiled but never lost the all-business tone of her voice. "Sorry to so brutally crush your hopes, Gregory. The answer is still no. But thank you for asking. My visit to the Dominion is not for a holiday. I want to meet this Jerrod Sharp who you say is somehow now one of the gods. I have only heard about it. I want to see it for myself. Please do not tell him I am coming."

"As you wish. How long will you be in the Dominion?"

"As long as necessary. Why?"

"I may not let you leave until you have dinner with me."

"You are impossible, Gregory."

"I have my moments."

"I will think about it."

"Well, now. That's better than no."

## 28

**A**m I dead?" Silas awoke looking into the face of Julia. She was dressed in her sleek, form-fitting Dominion Guard uniform.

"Hey, I know you. You're Elizabeth's friend, Julia. Ooh, don't ask me how I know that."

"Don't worry about it flyboy; your seditious secret has been out for weeks. So have you, by the way."

"Oh, I am in hell then. Great." Silas frowned.

Julia breathed a chuckle. "The Dominion is hardly hell."

"Why does everything look so, bright?" Silas sat up on his elbows and darted his eyes around at the small room. It looked like a hotel but the view out the window was hardly typical. It was obvious that the place was in some kind of cave.

"I'm underground? Oh, this must be hell," he groaned flopping back down on the pillow. "I never should have tried to kill your friend, Julia. I'm sorry. I'm such a screw-up."



He looked at Julia again, her eyebrow now raised. "Hey, if this is hell what are you doing here?" He sat back up.

"Honestly, Silas, you're not dead."

"Then why does everything look and feel so different?"

"It's a long story. You've been in a coma for a little over three weeks. Impressive."

"What is?"

"Usually the shorter the sleep the more accepting your body is to being awakened."

"Awakened? From what?"

"Never mind for now. How do you feel?"

"Well, really good, actually. I don't think I've ever felt like this, even drunk I never felt this good."

Julia shook her head, smiling. "You are truly pathetic, you know that?"

"Hey, where's Tim? Is he alright?"

"Your friend is fine. He's in the next room. He's still sleeping. But I expect he'll be coming around in a week or two."

Silas sat up on the side of the bed. Someone had dressed him some comfortable short black shorts and a white fitted tank. "I guess I'm under arrest, huh?"

"No, not that I've been told. You're being watched, but not exactly confined. Do I need to put you under arrest?"

"I sure hope not." He stood up too fast. Julia steadied him on the way down.

"Jesus, what happened to the gravity!? Are we on the moon?"

"No, you're quite bit stronger than you used to be, and a little faster. Try to keep your movements slower. You're going to have to relearn a few things."

Silas tiptoed himself into the air slightly. It sure felt like there was less gravity, but he came back to the floor just as fast.

"What did he do to us?" he looked at Julia.

“Who?”

“Dr. Luke. Tim and I gave him a lift down to the old blood bank. There was something wet on his gloves. I knew something was wrong the minute he touched me with it. The room started getting fuzzy. He sat both of us in a couple of chairs and then stuck us with a sharp, like he was drawing blood.”

“He wasn’t drawing blood, Silas. He was giving it. He used the two of you as guinea pigs, for an experiment.”

“Guinea pigs? What kind of experiment?”

“Well I suppose you’re going to find out eventually. This Dr. Luke of yours injected you with what we call ‘gifted’ blood. He wasn’t sure what it would do so he tested it on you and your friend first. When it didn’t just kill the two of you he knew it would be safe to use it on himself. Your Dr. Luke is quite the humanitarian.”

“He’s anything but, Julia. The guy’s a major asshole. Both he and Paulus.”

“Paulus? As in Apostle Paulus?”

“Yea, my boss.”

“Silas, I don’t know how to break this to you, but Apostle Paulus is dead.”

“Really?!” Silas looked suddenly sad.

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

Silas pursed his lips. “That’s too bad.”

“You look a bit upset for someone who just dissed his boss.”

“Yea, well, Paulus could be a world class arrogant ass sometimes, but he kind of took me in, you know. I barely made it out of college. My grades were good, but I was an orphan brat; no money and in debt up to my ears right out of school. I was a nobody scratching my way up the corporate ladder. Paulus hired me when everyone else was tossing my resume into the circular file. He gave me position and some authority

within the Dominion. It wasn't a lot, but it was better than working in the hospital or being some drone at corporate."

"Don't you think he just hired you for muscle?"

"Really, Julia? Do I look like a muscle guy to you? Apostle Paul had a soft spot guys like me. Look at the rest of his staff. If you came from the orphanage that's all you needed on your resume to get hired. It was just the kind of guy he was."

Silas walked over to the window to look out at the interior of the cavern.

"What about Apostle Bauer?" Julia followed him to the window. "His cause of death is still an unknown. Do you know anything about that?"

"Don't look at me. I can't kill anyone to save my life. No pun intended."

"But you were the one who tried to kill Elizabeth?"

"Yea, well, Dr. Luke told me what to do. How to loosen the fuel line on her car so that she'd run out of gas in the middle of the storm.

"But originally the plan was just to kidnap her and turn her over to the IRS, like that VP we nabbed. But Dr. Luke felt like she was too much of a liability. She seemed to know who all of our people were, the one's we'd helped the government place in security management."

"So, Apostle Paulus was the one behind the infiltration and the kidnappings."

"Actually, Julia, they both were. I overheard them discussing getting Dr. Luke on the next ballot when Apostle Lawton retired."

"Evidently, Dr. Luke didn't like having competition."

"Yea," Silas acknowledged. "He got knocked out of the running. But somehow they'd found out that both Elizabeth and Mr. Wu were on the ballots. If they disappeared, that would place Dr. Luke's alias back in the running. They tried to make it look as if one of the factions was responsible. A woman

and a gay guy as an Apostle? That was just too easy to pin on any of the Conservatives.”

Julia nodded. “You’re probably hungry, we should get you some clothes and something to eat downstairs.”

“Yea, I’m starving. Thanks.”

Silas was intrigued by all of the Guard people down on the lobby level. “This place is huge. And the Dominion built it in a cave? That is so cool.”

“The Guard likes its privacy,” Julia offered.

“They’ve been looking for you, you know,” Silas offered.

“Who has?”

“The government. Ever since those pics showed up online with Dominion Guard in their Batman gear.”

They walked into the restaurant. In the late afternoon it wasn’t busy. They sat down.

“So, Julia? What’s going to happen to me, and to Tim?”

“Well, that’s up to you, Silas. Ordinarily, we’d put the two of you on trial. But you’re not exactly striking me as the criminal type. Seems to me you just got mixed up with the wrong people.”

“Do you think I’ll go to prison?”

She smiled. “If it were up to me, Silas, I’d sentence to you to twenty years hard labor back at corporate.”

He smirked, “Thanks, I think.”

“Fortunately for you, however, that’s probably not going to happen. You’re awakened now. If you thought you life was complex a few weeks ago, it’s about to get a lot more so. But let’s not talk about that here. Okay?”

He nodded.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You let me do that," Jerrod looked into the face of Dark who was now lying prone on the floor of the dojo. Jerrod hovered over Dark holding his martial stand.

"I wish I could say I did, but—ow," he winced, " I didn't. That was good; you caught me off guard."

"You want me to help you up?"

"No, give me a minute to heal here first. That move was—a little hard."

"I'm sorry."

"Your strength is still uncontrolled, Jerrod. That would have killed anyone else. You have to be careful." Dark held out his hand and Jerrod helped him to his feet. Dark straightened up, still very sore from his landing.

"And I thought Kari was fast," Dark began. "I think you could go toe-to-toe with her on speed, easily."

Another voice came from the partially open door of the dojo. "That is what you get for sparring with gods."

Both Dark and Jerrod looked to see Francesca standing quietly in the doorway. Neither of them had any idea she was even there.

"Jerrod," Dark began, "you should always keep the door closed. Otherwise it lets in all kinds of vermin," Dark smirked. "Like lawyers."

"I should kill you for that," Francesca sashayed into the room. Jerrod was impressed with the way she moved; it was just the way Dark had been teaching him. She seemed to flow across the floor, almost effortlessly.

"Are you a goddess?" Jerrod asked.

Dark scoffed, "Hardly," he answered, folding his arms. "More like a witch."

"Ignore him, Jerrod. He's still stewing over a little episode we had in Salem a few centuries ago."

"Episode? Is that what we're calling it now?" Dark mocked.

"You should thank me. We got out alive without being burned at the stake." She walked up to Jerrod. Her own slender arms folded in perfect symmetry of movement. "I am Francesca," she introduced herself.

Jerrod looked at Dark, unsure of what to say. Dark shrugged. Clearly these two had some kind of history.

"Nice to meet you, Francesca. You already seem to know me."

"I make it a point to know all of the gods, Jerrod. I must admit, I was skeptical about you at first. You are everything Dark said you are. I continue to disbelieve that such a thing is even possible. I am humbled."

"That'll be the day," Dark snarked.

She ignored him.

"We have much to discuss, Jerrod. At some point, we will need to introduce you to your brethren. I am sure they will be just as amazed as I am."

"You can hit the shower, Jerrod. Francesca and I need to talk."

Jerrod nodded, picked up his towel and left, closing the door.

Dark walked up to Francesca. "Well, what do you think? Amazing isn't it?"

"Extraordinary. The other gods we can look at; but these new ones; I cannot look directly at him," she agreed. "He's too bright."

Dark nodded. "Kari said the same thing."

Francesca looked at him, "And how is your bride?"

Dark sighed. "It's not going to be easy, Contessa. Her memory of us is all but completely gone."

"And now she is attracted to this new god?"

"Yea," he sighed.

"I am sorry for you. For your loss."

"Is it that hopeless?" Dark asked.

“Not hopeless. Difficult? Yes. But nothing is ever hopeless. You just need to keep her away from him. Once they are apart it puts you on level ground. Actually, you then have the advantage; you already know her.”

“That seems really underhanded.”

“All is fair in love and war, Mitchel. You know that. You made a mistake. An honest one to be sure. But now you are living with the repercussions of that decision. If you really want her back, you have to keep them apart. You cannot compete with attraction.” She looked at him. “We have tried, have we not?”

“That was a long time ago, Contessa.”

“Time has no effect on attraction, Mitchel.” She moved close to him. He wrapped his arms instinctively around her. Her scent was always incredible. There was no denying that he’d felt her uncanny draw the moment she’d walked into the room.

“Sometimes,” he wondered out loud, “I think we make mistakes by not just giving into it and letting the attraction choose for us.”

“Attraction is visceral and stupid, Mitchel. It has nothing to do with love. You love Kari and she at one time was deeply in love with you. I will be gone in a few days.”

“A few days?” he responded, alarmed.

“Is that a problem? Afraid of your own biology?”

“Contessa, that’s not fair. I’m trying to spend time with Kari!”

“Your wife has been waiting years, she can wait a few more days, and then I will be gone.”

“But—” he began to protest.

“Shhh,” she placed her finger gently on his lips. “Do not argue. I tried to get the Sentinels to send someone else, anyone but me. Honestly, I did. You cannot argue with the gods.”

“I know. How many are left now? Ten? Twelve?”

“Not that many. They’ve gotten even softer. Careless. They won’t even defend themselves now. Soon there won’t be any of them left. Which is why we need keep the new ones away from the rest of them. We need to teach this one the culture of his heritage and also how to defend himself. To be a wolf and not a sheep.”

“What about their knowledge? How does he learn it if you keep him away from them?”

“He does not learn it, for now.”

“So what happens to the knowledge of the gods when there are finally no more of them left? It will all be lost to him and the others, for all time.”

“No.” She held up his hand. “Even when they are no more, we will still have the rings. We will help Jerrod and the others unlock their destiny.”

“The old ones are going to want to meet him sooner than later.”

“I will handle the gods. You need to make sure your ward is properly trained for survival. Speaking of survival, how is your back feeling?”

“It’s still a little sore.”

She glided softly around him touching his muscles through his gi in ways that caused him to suddenly draw a deep breath of relief. “That was a nasty drop. I think you should let me have a look. It may require some of my personal attention.”

“Your backrubs always get us into trouble, Contessa.”

“Of course they do.”



**M**oonlight streamed into the large, finely decorated room. The couple sleeping together rested peacefully. A shadowy figure moved silently through the room. He leaned ever so gently against the dresser on the far side, a thin dime resting between the fingers of his gloved hand. With a quick motion the coin was airborne and it struck the sleeping man squarely in the forehead, leaving a skidding mark as it then bounced not so loudly off the wooden headboard.

“Ow!” the suddenly awakened man put his hand to his forehead. It felt slightly sticky, like maybe blood. He turned on the bedside table. It was blood! Not a lot but his forehead was bleeding slightly. He pulled a tissue from the night stand and applied it to the small wound. After a minute or so the bleeding had stopped. He dropped the tissues into the waste basket and was about to turn out the light when he saw the lone shadowy

figure standing, leaning against the dresser on the far wall. He just stared at the man dressed all in black. He couldn't make out his face, it was covered by a black nylon-like mask. But the man's hair was visible and neatly combed.

"What the fu—"

"Good evening, Mr. President," the dark stranger offered in an accent the president couldn't really identify.

"What are you doing in my room!? Get out!"

"I'm not one of your lackeys."

The President stared, his finger pressing the hidden alarm button several times.

"Don't bother. Unfortunately, for you it's not working at the moment."

The President's hand went quickly for a firearm from a hidden place within his bed. He brought the weapon out from beneath the covers and pointed it at the mysterious intruder, the barrel quivering slightly as he aimed it. The president pulled the trigger, the hammer drew back and then snapped closed, but nothing happened. He checked his gun and then looked up at the intruder.

"Looking for these?" the intruder held up a pair of high-capacity magazines filled with rounds. "Don't you know that coated hollow-points are illegal in D.C.? You're in violation of the law, Mr. President. It's a felony to have this kind of ammo."

"What do you want?"

"Oh, I thought we'd just have a little chat. Just the two of us. You know, man to man."

"What kind of chat?"

"We know all about you, Brett. How your funding sources are drying up after you tried to murder that young couple to keep them quiet about your illicit campaign funding scheme. Nobody wants to be anywhere near you now. We know how you've been robbing the Treasury and ferreting away trillions in stolen funds. The American electorate might be easily

beguiled by you. But we're not. We've tried to be civilized about this, Brett. But apparently you seem to be having a difficult time understanding what it means to be—civilized."

"What do you want!?"

"You issued a couple of executive orders to mobilize the National Guard today. That was—uncivilized."

"The Dominion. So that's what this is about. You're with the Dominion!"

"Don't worry, Brett, I assure you, none of this conversation is being recorded."

The president glared at the clandestine man. "You don't scare me," he said petulantly.

"That's because you're too stupid to realize who it is you're really dealing with. Your management is pathetic. You hire and appoint incompetents to the highest levels of your government. Your entire administration is run by idiots."

"No one speaks to me that way!"

"And that's part of your problem. You're nothing but a common thief and a repugnant arrogant bully. So I stopped by to bring you a little something that your Neanderthal mind was capable of understanding."

"What!?"

"I've already delivered it. It should leave an interesting scar. A kind of reminder to you that I could have left you with much more than a little scrape."

"You're insane! You'll never get off of these grounds alive! Security! SECURITY!" he yelled.

The mysterious man just folded his arms and didn't move. The president's wife never stirred. He tried to wake her. She continued to sleep soundly, as if drugged.

"What did you do to my wife!?"

"Who knows?" he shrugged. "I could have slipped her a little something. I could have slipped your kids the same."

"You bastard! You think you can intimidate me!?" The tall but slight-framed president slipped out of bed and approached the mysterious intruder angrily. The president never saw the punch coming. He was suddenly sitting on the floor of his bedroom in his striped boxers, very dazed with a nasty split lip that hurt like hell.

The intruder shook his head and then turned to leave by the bedroom window he'd come in through. But he stopped, suddenly cold.

It was impossible for him not to notice the subtle glow of her eyes as she stepped in front of the large window, her hair blowing unnaturally in a subtle breeze that wasn't there.

"Always in such a rush, Dark," her melodic voice offered, almost whispering. "Hmmm," she smiled, "we have all night."

She hadn't been there a moment ago, but he could see her very clearly now, even in the dim light of the room. Dark didn't need danger sense to realize he was suddenly in trouble.

"Amethyst," he stopped cold.

"You look surprised, Dark," she smiled. "Surprised to see me?"

"You—seem to have a difficult time staying dead." He mused, folding his arms.

"What can I say," she coyed. "It's one of my little gifts," she smiled beautifully.

Dark's mind quickly put two and two together. "So the Seven have been using you to pull the strings of the Administration. That's a little micromanaging, even for Rigel."

"It is. But it's just so hard finding good help these days," she looked down at the president who was still nursing the side of his face. She wasn't sure if he had even noticed she was in the room yet.

Dark tried to link quickly with the continuum but his mind wouldn't focus. His hand was beginning to feel numb.

“Oh,” she pouted, “are we having a little trouble phoning home?”

Dark suddenly felt his ninja-like clothing constricting all around him, holding him fast and keeping him from moving.

“What do you want, Amethyst?” the immobile Dark looked at her as she strode delicately, alluringly up to him.

Amethyst moved close to him and walked her polished fingernails up the chest of her captive and then smoothed her palms alluringly over his pecs. “I only want what every girl wants, Dark.” She shrugged beautifully looking at him. “Everything.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Jesus. Mr. President, what happened to you?” Harlan interrupted the meeting looking at his boss as he entered the Oval Office. The President, Attorney General and Secretary of Homeland Security were all in deep discussion.

“He was attacked last night, Harlan,” the Attorney General offered.

“Attacked!? By who?”

“Dominion spy,” the president answered. He’d already gotten three stitches and sported a large bruise that filled a good portion of the side of his face. There was a small bandage on his forehead as well.

“Shit! Where was Secret Service?” Harlan screeched at Frank.

“Obviously twiddling their thumbs,” the AG responded mockingly.

“That’s pretty brazen,” Harlan offered, amazed at the thought. “Breaking into the White House and roughing up a President. You’re going to make some arrests, right?” Harlan looked at Frank and then at the AG.

“Arrest who, Harlan? And for what?” Frank asked.

"Well for, assaulting a sitting president for one!"

"Are you trying to cause a panic? Or get me fired?" the DHS Secretary asked point-blank.

"Well, neither," Harlan backtracked.

Frank frowned. "It doesn't matter, we caught the bastard and now he's in custody."

"Listen, Gentlemen," the Attorney General continued the thought of where their meeting was before Harlan interrupted, "I shouldn't need to tell you that the Dominion did nothing more than fire a warning shot last night. The fact that they got one of their people into the presidential suite last night was nothing more than a demonstration just to prove that they could. No offense, Mr. President, but he was in there more than long enough. He could have done a lot more than just give you a fat lip."

The President nodded.

"You mean they're trying to scare us?" Harlan fumed.

"That's exactly what they're trying to do," Harlan. "If it hadn't been for our own special agent intercepting him, he'd have been long gone."

"What special agent?" Harlan looked at the other two men who seemed to know more than he did.

"Amethyst, Harlan," Frank revealed.

"Amy?" Harlan raised his eyebrow. "I thought she was just your new assistant?" he looked at the President. "She's a special agent?"

"Yes," the President assured annoyed. "She's more than just my assistant, Harlan. She's very well trained. She subdued the intruder before he could leave."

"Really? Jesus!"

"Even with Amethyst's new security protocols, Mr. President," Frank continued, "we cannot be sure they won't be able to find their way in here again."

The President nodded. "So what do you suggest, Frank, that we just turn-tail and run? That's not going to happen."

"Well, then we're going to need a new strategy to deal with the Dominion."

"I agree," the Attorney General began, "These people appear to learn very quickly. For weeks now, they have managed to block, evade and even disrupt our attempts to get them anywhere near a courtroom. Even Mahoney withdrew his firm from the case last week. I'm effectively starting over now."

"The intruder mentioned the executive orders I signed yesterday."

Frank nodded. "That makes sense. As long as we were keeping things at the litigation level, that's where they stayed. But now you're moving things up quite a few notches, mobilizing the National Guard to seize their property. They're matching us move for move. Like a chess game."

"Those orders were supposed to be secret, Frank," the President complained.

"Obviously, Mr. President, we still have leaks somehow. They could even have this room bugged right now and we wouldn't know it."

"That's messed up," Harlan frowned, looking around the room suspiciously.

"If it ever got out that the President of the United States was attacked in his bedroom and given nothing more than a fat lip, it would make a laughing stock of U.S. security all over the world. No one would respect us. We can't even keep our own Commander-in-chief safe."

"You're sounding paranoid, Frank," the president stared at his friend.

"I'm not paranoid, Mr. President," Frank stared back. "I just know my own limitations. All of us have done pretty well these past few years with you in the White House. We've had

some ugly bumps, but we contained them and we managed to do pretty well, as long as we kept things fairly small.

"But I warned you, all of you, about going after something this big. In case any of you actually need the 411 here, we just got our asses kicked last night. These people have more money than God. They have resources we are unprepared to deal with."

"So what you're really trying to tell us, Frank, is that this corporate conglomerate is better equipped, even possibly more heavily armed and more dangerous than our own government?" the president asked.

"You tell me, Mr. President. You're the one nursing a split lip."

"No need to get disrespectful, Frank. I get your point."

"All I'm saying is that we thought we were the biggest fish in the pond. We're finding out that's not necessarily the case."

"Even Goliath wasn't invincible, Frank," the president offered. "They have to have some kind of weakness. Something they're afraid of."

"I'm sure they do, Mr. President, and all of us will be long dead before we ever come close to discovering or exploiting whatever that is."

"I'm not so sure about that, Frank," the Attorney General interrupted. "They like to stay out of the public eye."

"You're not serious, Harrison. This is the Dominion we're talking about. They've never met a mic or camera they were shy about preaching in front of. And the wider the audience the better."

"But that's just their public personae. Every time we've tried to bring them into a public courtroom, they reel. So far they've been able to keep the media banned from every hearing we've had."

"Really?"



“Maybe that’s our key then,” the President offered. They don’t like the bad PR. It’s maybe not good for their faithful.”

“That’s a risky gambit, Mr. President. You’re talking about waging a full-scale PR war with what amounts to the second largest church on the planet. That kind of strategy is liable to backfire right into your lap. The last thing you want are the Catholics taking the side of the Dominion. We ran an rather extensive background check on their lead counsel, Miss di Roma. The firm she works for has some deep ties with the Vatican. She’s bad news. I wouldn’t recommend that.”

“We could take her out,” Harlan suggested.

“Have you been listening to nothing we’ve been talking about this whole time, Harlan?”

“Well, yea.”

“They are matching our tactics. If we even dared take out one of their people, just how long do you think it would take them to off one of us? I’ll tell you. A day.”

“Frank’s right. Let’s be smart about this,” the President mused. “We just discovered someone who isn’t afraid of us and they’re not afraid to punch us in the nose,” he touched his still smarting lip. I’ll rescind the orders I gave yesterday and we’ll simply continue with the litigation at this point. In the meant time, if we are fighting Goliath, we need to be looking for our David.”

# 30

**L**ucas looked up from his bed. The room was dimly lit, but he could see very clearly. He could sense the temperature was freezing, but he didn't feel cold. He sat up quickly, looking around. Everything in the room seemed to come into focus very sharply, even though there wasn't any light. The empty syringe was still sitting on the nightstand right where he'd left it. The partial bag of plasma next to it had frozen solid. A light layer of dust covered his things in the room.

How long had he been out, he wondered? He checked the date on the watch he'd brought with him. It read April 11.

"Good God," he mumbled under his breath. A little more than a month unconscious?

He got up from the bed feeling more energetic than he'd ever felt in his entire life. He didn't just feel energetic, but alive! Powerfully alive! He felt lighter, stronger.

Whatever was in the blood of the now frozen bag had markedly changed him. It had given him a new body, new senses, a new mind. The transformation had been nothing short of miraculous.

Although he really didn't need them, Lucas lit a couple of the lanterns in the room and then set to making a fire in the rustic cabin's potbelly stove. He was incredibly hungry. It wasn't long before he'd warmed the cabin and made himself a large breakfast. Things seemed to move so much slowly around him. He tossed his empty coffee mug into the air and then watched it practically float back into his hand as he grabbed it by the handle. It wasn't actually floating, but that is how his new senses and the speed of his new mind perceived it.

After breakfast he sat down in a rustic chair, fishing an old and frail looking notebook from his daypack. Written across the front of the notebook was a handwritten title, 'Acts of Our Apostles' dated 1882. He had already begun reading the aging, handwritten tome before injecting himself some four weeks earlier. Mostly the book contained notes, a kind of diary, of the life of someone named Josiah Brooks. While much of the diary contained mundane details of early Dominion church life, Josiah was hardly, himself, mundane. He'd been one of those 'gifted' by the Connor's Apostolic blood.

Lucas skimmed the notes carefully and much more quickly now that his mind moved faster than ever.

*"The blood that flows in the veins of our Apostles cannot be described as anything but a holy gift from God. I now count myself among the gifted of these most holy of men and women."*

Lucas mused to himself of what a 'gifted' woman might be like?

*"The mind of an Apostle is quickened with knowledge. My memory of the sacred Scriptures appears limitless as I forget nothing. ..."*

Lucas agreed. His memory of his college and even high school and grade school lessons, the people he'd know, all of it he seemed to recall with vividness. He continued skimming.

*"I appear to no longer fancy Sophia, my seminary sweetheart. I can tell she is heartbroken by my sudden and unexpected change of heart. What I cannot deny is my sudden and inexplicable attraction to Rachel. She is, unfortunately, the wife of another man within the growing congregation. God save me from this powerful lust I seem unable to control. ..."*

*"Three of the Apostles confronted me today, quietly. I was honest with all of them about Rachel. But neither did any of them condemn or chastise me, which I thought would be their intention. Instead we made an accord to resolve the appearance of impropriety so as not to affect the goodwill of the laity. ..."*

Josiah's prose and history were giving Lucas some insight into the church's earliest and somewhat colorful beginnings. Lucas well knew the kinds of things that went on behind the scenes in the Temple spire. He had engaged in quite a few relations and transactions himself and made himself unusually wealthy from his often illicit associations.

*"Rachael and I have set a date to be married next month."*

Lucas mused the words. "No mention of whatever happened to her husband, Josiah? Sent him off to battle on the front lines somewhere, did you?" He mused quietly to himself and continued reading.

*“Rachael has awakened a new and vivacious creature. I cannot seem to spend even a few moments away from her. Like the other women, she reads me, I cannot hide anything from her. I can make no secret that is hidden from her. Her gifted intuition is beyond measure.”*

“What?” Lucas said to himself. “What’s this?” Lucas read the words again mulling them over in his mind. He set down the notebook with a bookmark and got up from his chair looking out the dusty window and the half-melting snow outside. He rolled the words around in his thoughts,

*“Like the other women, she reads me, I cannot hide anything from her.”*

“So that’s how they found us,” Lucas nodded his head. “That’s how they knew. The whole plan was doomed to fail from the beginning,” he thought out loud. “Paul, you stupid dumbass. If you had just read this instead of worshiping it you’d known what we were up against!” Lucas fumed but continued gazing outside in thought. “You were standing right next to the power of God all this time and you never even realized it.”

Lucas stepped away from the window. He gathered his things neatly into the daypack he’d brought with himself and then tossed the bag of thawing gifted blood and syringe into the fire of the stove, watching it until he was sure it had all been completely destroyed. He then left the tiny cabin and set out on foot to the highway a few miles down the muddy snow-melting forest road. It was time to get as far and as fast away from the Dominion as inhumanly possible.

\* \* \* \* \*

The concrete room was definitely not originally designed for what it was now being used for. It looked more like the interior of an empty bank vault somewhere deep below the White House grounds. Dark's breath was visible as he struggled to keep himself warm within the deliberately below-zero refrigerated make-shift holding cell. Left only in his Soffe shorts, he paced the large cell, very sure that someone had noticed he'd fallen out of the continuum. He only hoped that Carson would be able to send a recon team in time before the Seven terminated him. He was pretty sure his death at the hands of the Seven would not be a quick or painless execution.

The deeply frigid air had deprived him of his strength and speed. In this extreme environment he was more than vulnerable as his body continuously regenerated, sapping him of anything resembling someone superhuman.

The thick steel door of his makeshift cell opened as a half dozen elite guards entered all dressed in well insulated white arctic clothing, each of them brandishing a heavy semi-auto. None of the human guard employed by the Seven were ever allowed to be awakened, but mundane or not, Dark wasn't about to tangle with any of them. Not in his present condition.

The guards fanned out into the cell as Amethyst entered, followed by someone Dark had not seen in over a century.

"Well, my Dear, I do hope this little surprise of yours is—is—Dark?" his British accent revealed someone genuinely astonished.

"Rigel," Dark glared.

"Dark? Oh, my. Oh, well, well, my Dear, Amethyst! This is indeed quite the surprise; more than I could have ever expected or imagined! The incomparable Mitchel Dark," he smiled, giddily. "Or, forgive me, it is 'Admiral' Dark now, if I am not mistaken."

Dark frowned.

Rigel immediately noticed Dark's hand. "And with a key no less."

The pair approached Dark clad in their arctic wear, protected and unfazed by the bitter cold. Dark cautiously backed away from the two of them until he was against the back wall of the cell.

"No need to be fearful, Dark," Rigel mocked with an elder handsome grin. He held out his hand. "You won't be needing your key any longer."

Dark folded his arms. "Go to hell."

"I could simply tear off your arm, if you would prefer?" Rigel offered indifferent.

Dark resisted with every ounce of strength that he had as Rigel took hold of his wrist and forcefully slid the now inoperative gold and crystalline band from his hand.

"Honestly, Dark," Rigel began examining the heavy band carefully as he rolled it between his fingers, "I never thought in ten lifetimes that I would see this day." He stowed the ring in his pocket. Rigel looked again at Amethyst. "You have done beyond well, my Dear. Come, we must have a celebration."

The two of them stopped just before leaving the cell. "It is a pity to be parting under such—ineloquent circumstances, Dark," Rigel acknowledged. "Honestly, I had thought our final meeting might be something much more—grand. I must admit; I am somewhat disappointed. The illustrious Admiral Dark, commander of the invincible Leviathan, unceremoniously executed, alone, in his cell." Rigel shook his head solemnly. "Such the pity."

Rigel then addressed the agents still standing in the cell, "Do as you wish. He doesn't leave, alive. And, do take your time. I would hate for all of this to be over too quickly."

The arctic-clad agents remained in the room. The door closed behind the two of them with an ominous echo that sent a sickening feeling deeply into the soul of Dark.

## DOMINION



**T**he old man shuffled quietly in his newer cozy kitchen, the smell of hot coffee rising from a plastic coffee maker; its LED clock ticking over to just after 3:00 AM. He heard the expected quiet rap on his back door. Opening the door he saw them. Typical. Dressed in black and without any markings. They looked like Nazi SS. He wondered if any of them had ever seen SS before. The six of them entered his kitchen quietly and fanned out into the rest of his small home while two stood in the kitchen with him.

“Professor,” the lead agent acknowledged.

“You people are all the same,” he gruffed, his German-Jewish accent still thick despite his advanced years.

The agent ignored the old man’s banter. He had a job to do. “Did you get what the government asked for?”

"Oh, I got it," the old man offered, pouring coffee into his mug. He didn't offer them any.

"May I see it?"

"It's right there," the old man motioned to a worn leather satchel laying on his counter. It had been in his possession since the 1950's. He still wasn't sure how many of them had found out about it. But he didn't care at this point. It was what it was.

The agent carefully opened the old satchel and looked closely at the old detailed large photographs of ancient Hebrew scroll fragments. There were only a handful of them. "Is this all there is? We were looking for books, Professor."

"Books? Ha. That's all we've ever had," he lied. "And those are the originals. I told you as much on the phone."

"You were part of the core team, Professor. You had access to a lot more than just these."

"You wanted to see the Books of God; that's all they are. A handful of extant fragments. It's all meaningless anyway."

"If it was so meaningless, why'd your team keep them such a big secret?" the agent glared, gently returning the aging photos into the satchel.

The old scholar wasn't about to get into an argument with a grunt. He kept silent. Somehow the government had discovered the existence of these books and wanted them. He didn't know how or what they even wanted them for, but he didn't need to get himself arrested in the process over them. These weren't nearly as important as the others they'd kept out of sight.

"Alright, Professor. Your country thanks you for your service."

"I'm sure it does. You know where the door is."

The husky team left quietly closing the door softly. The old man locked and latched it, for what good it would do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dark doubled over again as the next agent took sadistic pleasure in adeptly pummeling his abs with a tightly gloved fist while two of the others held him fast against the layered concrete wall of his cell. Ordinary punches such as these would have simply glanced off the demigod, but in his weakened state under the intense cold, Dark appeared just as human as any of his captors.

After more than an hour of being gang pummeled, Dark's body had become painfully, deeply bruised by the intensity of their ruthless and incessant assault. As trained as they were, any one of them could have killed him at any moment. But that wasn't their goal. Pain was. As if finely trained in the finer points of torture, each took his turn delivering a measured assault only to watch Dark try to recover as he sank deeper and deeper into the unending anguish each of them expertly inflicted into his weakening body.

Another big fist landed harder than any before it. Dark heard the crack of bone from his side as deep excruciating agony shot into him. He howled in pain, and then gasped for breath; and then coughed trying to breathe the frigid air. Blood erupted from his mouth as he coughed again to catch another breath. Another punch landed just as hard, and in the same place, sending an explosion of anguish into Dark that was more pain than he'd ever felt. For the first time in his life, Dark wailed from the torture that now rocketed through his body.

Their punches now flew furiously as even Dark's military trained body began to crumble under the incessant torturous assault seemingly encouraged by his uncontrollable cries under the onslaught of the inflicted torment. Dark could see that this was the end. He prayed for one of them to strike him unconscious, but their fists and now kicks only landed harder and harder into his ribs, abdomen and groin.

Somewhere, something far above them subtly rocked the subterranean cell, like a tiny earthquake. The light in the room flickered as another tremor more noticeable than the first knocked dust from the ceiling. The agents stopped their assault and looked around and then at each other.

Moments later, another tremor, much more noticeable now moved through the room as tiny fissures appeared in the walls. With each successive tremor the cracks grew larger. Then very large cracks appeared on the wall around the thick vault-like door. The agents' weapons were suddenly in their hands again as they all but forgot their captive, letting him drop almost lifelessly to the floor. The sound of rending steel was accompanied by large chunks of reinforced concrete falling heavily to the floor as something tore the multi-ton cell door from its moorings and sent it skidding like wreckage into the room in a shocking clamor of sparks and billowing clouds of concrete dust.

Through the clouds of dust they could now make out the lone figure of a man entering the room through the wrecked opening; someone large and dressed in a kind of form-fitting dark body armor. An eerie glow emanating from his eyes.

The elite guards didn't hesitate. The agents let loose a barrage of rapid semiautomatic gunfire. The figure stood silently as they fired heavy round after armor-piercing round, dropping empty magazines and reloading, their massive bullets deflecting from the armor of their target, shattering the concrete walls everywhere behind him. The agents continued until their weapons now simply clicked, their ammo and backup completely depleted.

Kent strode into the room pushing the heavy multi-ton cell door off to the side with his foot. The door skidded across the floor noisily until it struck the cell wall with a deep heavy metal thud.

The agents backed away slowly. None of them exactly sure what to do. Somehow a hot desert-like wind blew past them and began warming the room quickly.

“Pick him up—gently,” Kent ordered, the subtle glow in his eyes flaring slightly.

The agents went quickly to their wickedly beaten captive and gently assisted bringing him to his feet. The hot wind moving through the room felt invigorating to Dark as his body began to warm and recover.

Amethyst had already sensed Kent’s presence. She couldn’t psionically lock onto him, but then, he would have no idea she was even there as well, just like none of the other men in the room. They were men. All of them blissfully unaware of her. She now moved quietly into the room like a ghost, her own presence fully masked by her skillful psionic cloak. She’d already had the time to build up a more than lethal psychic charge. His crude male mind would be easily overloaded; incinerated by the potent psionic blast. But she would not be delivering the deathblow at range. She moved up completely silent behind her unsuspecting victim. Her now lethal fingers hovering just inches from the bare skin of his unprotected neck.

“Dark,” Kent began, taking a step closer and away from the invisible witch’s hovering fingers. All of the agents backed away as Kent moved up to his friend. Kent had never seen anyone so badly beaten.

“Dark! Look at me!”

“Kent, dammit—he coughed blood, speaking weakly, “get out of here!” The Admiral tried to take in a warm breath. “Too—danger—” Kent’s eyes burned with fire beyond anger now. He felt the subtle touch of someone’s fingers on the side

of his neck. Kent whirled with incredible blinding speed and caught the witch's bare hand in his own just as the psionic detonation was discharging fully from her. Her psychic stealth now dropped, Amethyst gazed evilly into Kent's eyes as she felt the massively powerful psychic thrust drain instantly away from her into the mind of her novice male adversary.

Kent felt the sudden and powerful psionic discharge entering his mind. The extreme thrust of the energy filled his synapses with warmth, a feeling akin to a fine Cognac. The massive surge of psychic power was almost as bright as the ones Lisa threw at him.

Holding firmly to Amethyst's hand he jerked her closer to himself and glared into her eyes. "Don't fuck with me, bitch; I'm not in the mood!"

Now Amethyst's eyes drew wide; she suddenly felt Kent's presence all over inside her mind; her own energies were being redirected back to her. She fought furiously to push him out but his now super-charged psionic strength was beyond incredible. 'His touch,' she reasoned now as she struggled. She needed to get away from his touch! But the strength of Kent's grip around her hand was holding her fast.

"You're hurting me, let go," she suddenly pleaded, struggling with her own massive strength to free herself from his grasp. "Please!" Amethyst begged as Kent's hand squeezed even harder around hers and his mind invading hers ever deeper.

"No! No, stop, PLEASE!" Amethyst called out in a panic. She had never felt anything so powerful in her entire life! Kent's overloaded mind was blinding hers, hurting her. His energies were massively overpowering and damaging her synapses!

"And where was your mercy when my friend was dying!?" Kent glared into her deeply pained face. "WHERE!?" he demanded, righteous fury driving his power even further.

Amethyst felt the bones of her hand being crushed, her mind overrun with the brightness of this new god. She was going blind. Amethyst screamed, her voice echoing in the cold chamber.

“Kent! No!” Dark called out faintly.

Kent heard Dark’s plea. His anger at the dark witch suddenly abated. He thrust her into the air sending her airborne and slamming hard against the far wall of the cell, causing it to crack as she struck the concrete heavily and then landed unmoving onto the dust of the floor.

All of the agents moved immediately to her, attempting to somehow help the unconscious Amethyst.

None of them heard the subtle sift of air; but when they finally looked up, their captive and his savior were gone.

**H**ow was he doing when you left?"

"I think he'll be fine. The infirmary on the Leviathan will take care of him. He'll be good as new by tomorrow."

The tall, muscular twenty-something executive walked to the floor-to-ceiling window of his top-floor San Antonio residence that looked out over the busy city below. "That was a close call, Kent. All of us are grateful."

"Save it, Rion, I'm tired of this sneaking around bullshit."

Still looking out his window, the young god smirked. "Spoken like a true warrior, Kent."

"But I'm not a warrior, Rion, that's part of the problem. I don't have half the discipline Dark does. I would have killed Amy."

"But you didn't."

Kent frowned. "Only because Dark kept me from doing it."



"You listened. That is hardly out-of-control. You're seeing real war for the first time in your life, Kent. Give yourself a break. It's okay to get angry when you see other people being hurt. I'd be alarmed if you weren't upset about that."

"I don't know how you do it Rion," Kent shook his head.

"Age, my friend. You're not even thirty yet. Cut yourself some slack. You should have seen me when I was thirty."

Kent nodded, trying to take some comfort in Rion's words. He got up from the sofa and poured himself a short Cognac from the apartment's well-stocked bar.

"How are we going to retrieve the ring?" Kent asked.

"We're not; for now."

Kent went to the window savoring the warmth of the thick liqueur as it went down. "We have too many of these just floating around out there. Now the Seven actually have one."

"The gateway's access was revoked. It's useless to them. They lack the basic tools to even scratch the surface."

"Hardly. Brenda has tools. What if they hire her?"

"Brenda's not going to help the Seven, I assure you."

"Don't bet on it."

"Kent, I grew up with Brenda. Trust me, I know her. She risked her own life to protect your folks. She didn't have to do that."

Kent thought about the events of last year when he'd first met the very enterprising Brenda. He nodded, pursing his lips and then finished his glass. Now there was a psionic. Brenda packed one helluva sucker punch.

"The Administration is really going after the Dominion. So this is how it begins," Kent mused.

Rion nodded next to him, holding his square-cut glass and finishing the last of something blue within it.

"I'm going to put Dark on a little vacation, Kent. Let him recover a little after this ordeal. Don't replace his ring yet. I think it would be good for him to have some down time."

Kent shrugged, "Okay. So when are *you* going on vacation, Mr. Workaholic?"

Rion looked at Kent. "Sevrin's been talking to you again, I see."

"You need some downtime yourself, Rion."

"I don't have time for vacations, Kent."

"You will if Lisa and I say you will," he smirked.

"Yea, good luck with that," Rion's eyes shimmered at Kent with a deep unearthly blue glow.

"Okay, we'll just tell Francesca, then."

Rion shot him a worried glance. "That's not funny, Kent."

**W**

hy aren't you wearing your ring?" Kari asked.

Dark drove their SUV along a state highway. The sun was out and the road was wet in places from the melting snow.

"I don't always wear it; especially around you," he evaded delicately with one of his dimpled smiles. The last thing he needed was Kari finding out what he'd been up to over the last couple of days.

"I already know," she said.

"Know what?"

"What you're up to."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"Keeping me away from Jerrod."

"I'm not exactly trying to keep that a secret," he offered. "I told Jerrod I was taking you out for a couple of weeks. He knows what going on. He's hardly stupid."

"So is Carson in on this as well? Sending the two of us out on assignment together?"

"Maybe. But I didn't ask him to. It's probably more Francesca's doing. Besides, it's been a while since you and I were on a mission together."

"This is hardly a mission, Dark. Sarnia? It's in the middle of nowhere. That's not a mission, it's a vacation. They don't need both of us out here."

"No they don't. Still, someone set off a perimeter sensor and that's not exactly insignificant. I'm willing to bet it was our Dr. Lucas. He's had more than enough time to gift himself."

"What happens to him when we find him?"

"He'll face the Continuum for his crimes."

"What's that?"

"It's more like who. The Continuum is not part of the Dominion. If he wasn't gifted we'd just put him on trial before a jury in the Dominion and be done with it. But since it appears that he's gifted now, after stealing the blood of a god, he'll face a group of his gifted peers. If he did murder any of the Apostles, he'll be found out and punished."

"Will the Continuum put him to death?"

"Maybe. It depends on their understanding of his character and his motives. If he's evil, he'll die. We don't put up with evil gifteds. They're destroyed."

"And if he's just misguided?"

"Dr. Lucas does not sound to me like he's misguided. Silvanus and Timothy, that's misguided."

She nodded her agreement. "I noticed Tim didn't respond very well to being gifted."

"No, and it's probably a good thing too. He has a little too much of the 'entitled attitude.'"

"Silas was certainly a surprise."

"Some people take really well to being gifted. Silas is definitely one who did. I think Jerrod's blood is little more potent than what we're used to seeing as well.

"I think with some training Silas could actually become one of the Dominion's stronger agents. He seems like a really nice guy. Even if he did try to kill you," Dark smirked at her.

"I know. We had a really long talk. My memory is gone because of him, but I'm having a really hard time staying angry at him. He really wants to make something of himself."

"That's the impression I got as well," Dark agreed.

"He also seems to be hitting it off with Julia rather well."

"Yea, that's interesting, isn't it?" Dark mused.

"I know, right? She's not even attracted to him."

"He makes her laugh, Kari. Jules could use someone like that in her life right now."

"So, Dark, we're not exactly attracted either. What brought us together? How did *we* meet?"

He smiled at her and then looked back at the road. "Julia. It was all her fault. Carson brought her in to help train the Dominion Guard. You two hit it off right away and became best friends. You had a lot of things in common, similar tastes. And you two were also giftedly attracted to each other. You guys could be a little embarrassing to even be around sometimes. Anytime she showed up, you were both like, well, never mind."

"Sorry, she's hot. What can I say?"

"You don't need to apologize. It's kind of cute actually."

"And you didn't mind the two of us—?"

"Having sleepovers?" he grinned looking at her. "No. It happens with empathes a lot. Besides, you two were attracted. I wasn't going to attempt to interfere with nature. And, you guys were really good friends as well."

"So Julia introduced us?"

"Yea," he smiled. "She taught you everything she knew about the arts. But after a while it was pretty clear that you had passed your instructor's ability. So she introduced you to me. Carson tasked me with picking up and continuing your training. You were a good student."

"Just good?" she smiled.

"No. You were an exceptional student."

"Better than you?"

"Yea, in some ways. In others, not so much. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. We complimented each other very well as a team. It's what made us unstoppable."

"So I take it the teacher got romantic with his student?"

"You don't remember me very well. That's not at all my style. You, my dear Kari, were the aggressor in this relationship, not me."

"I was not!" Kari protested. The notion completely rubbed against the grain of her Southern upbringing.

Dark nodded. "Oh yes," Dark countered. "I even attempted to have Carson put a stop to it, but you were the daughter of an Apostle. 'Just deal with it,' he told me. So, I dealt with it."

"That's too funny." Kari copped an over-the-top Southern belle accent, "Did my lil o' forward wiles get the better of you, Admiral Dark?"

"Please," he looked at her, smirking.

"Well, obviously something happened," she pressed.

"The truth is, Kari," Dark's voice drew serious and soft, "I fell in love with you the first moment I laid eyes on you."

"Oh."

"It wasn't gifted attraction. It was just you. But you were my student. The playing field wasn't exactly level. I shielded my feelings not only from you but I tried to hide them from myself as well."

"How did I feel about you?"

Dark looked at her, "You tell me?"

"I don't remember."

"I didn't ask you to remember."

"How do I feel about you? Now?" she asked.

"Mmm-hmm," he nodded.

"Well, you're cute; handsome I mean. You definitely have that 'bad boy' thing going on. Arrogant; I like arrogant," she mused out loud. "But you also seem to have this deep sense of honor. My own dad doesn't have that. He's flexible; you're not. It's an odd combination to see in someone."

He smiled. "Anything else you like?"

Kari searched him with her feelings, deeply. "You're a bit secretive. I can tell, you know things—things you're not telling anyone, not even me. That's a little mysterious."

He nodded, "That can't be helped."

"Did you ever tell me any of your secrets?"

He nodded. "Some."

Kari turned in her seat to look at him, studying him. "I could see myself getting interested in you. So what happened? What broke the ice?"

He looked at her. "There never was any 'ice' between us. That was the problem. You were just as in love with me, only you weren't hiding it. I made sure you couldn't read my feelings but you didn't need empathy to see my feelings for you. I guess I did a bad job of hiding them. You started wearing me down, Kari. I couldn't sleep. I wasn't eating. I couldn't focus. I just started avoiding you. I couldn't let you see me so—"

"In love?"

"I was three hundred years old, Kari, and had never been in love. For the first time in my life, I didn't really know what to do."

She just watched him, mesmerized by his voice and emotion, as he told their story.

"But I couldn't avoid you forever. I was your trainer. I can remember it like it was yesterday. You'd just come from the gym wearing some really snug running gear and not much of it at that. The minute your scent caught my senses, Kari, I—I just didn't want to pretend anymore."

"Did you kiss me?"

Dark nodded. "You started in with the whole tease routine. You were expecting me to just ignore you again, like I'd done every time before. Only this time, I didn't ignore you. I wanted you to know what you were getting yourself into. I forced you against the wall of the dojo and held you there with my body against yours. You didn't quite know what to do."

*"What's the matter Kari? Take on little more man than you can handle?" Dark pressed himself against her, holding her against the wall, his warm body firmly forced against hers. Dark's fingers found hers and locked around them. He looked into her eyes.*

*"What are you doing? Let me go," she weakly protested.*

*"Isn't this what you want? You know how to escape. Free yourself."*

*Kari looked into his eyes. She couldn't feel him but those steel blues held everything she needed to know. She exhaled a rippled breath. She could feel her own pulse jumping. Dark felt it too. For months she'd wanted to be like this with him, and now here he was. Was he really giving in, or just trying to scare her into leaving him alone?*

*Dark could see some fear in her eyes but that wasn't the only emotion there. She wasn't turning away. He'd have given her that chance if she wanted it. His lips hovered delicately, breathfully over hers. "Make your move, Kari. Or is a tease all that you really want? Go ahead, make your move. Otherwise leave me alone."*

*She knew Dark. He'd opened himself up to her. Made himself vulnerable. She would never have another chance like this—ever. Kari's lips met his, forcefully, passionately.*



*Dark breathed his emotion hotly against her mouth, finally tasting the desire of a lifetime. He unlocked his fingers from hers and took Kari warmly into his arms, his lips never leaving hers.*

Kari had been feeling his emotions during the entire story. Dark looked at her. The look on her face was part blank like some part of her was elsewhere.

"You made love to me," Kari offered softly.

"I'm sorry?" Dark looked at her.

"I kissed you and you made love to me, I remember."

Dark looked at her, utterly astonished, and then with a smile that showed some hope. "Really?"

She nodded. "For hours, you and I. On the floor of the dojo. You flipped out the lights and you made love to me, in the dark."

He nodded his surprise. "You do remember. But I wasn't the only one making love to someone, Kari. You were all over me. We spent the rest of the day there."

She nodded. "And then you took me out to dinner."

"Yes I did." He smiled.

"Oh, God, Dark," Kari looked suddenly astonished. "Oh, my God, Dark!"

"What? Kari, are you okay?!"

She looked at him with widened eyes, nodding, her mouth half open. "You're my husband!" she breathed. "Oh my God, Dark, I remember! The wedding!"

Dark quickly pulled off onto the side of the road and stopped. He looked at Kari, watching her and the expressions on her face as something within her, some part of her mind was suddenly overflowing with memories.

"We were so happy," her face lit with memories. "My house. That's where we lived. It was the first time I had ever lived away from my parents. We built that house. Together."

"We did, Kari. You and I."

Then the smile faded from her face.

"You left." She looked at him. "You left me." He could see a deep sadness wash over her as lost memories and lost emotions were suddenly restored. "Damn you. Why did you leave me!?" Her eyes began to mist. "Oh, God, Dark, it hurts."

He reached out and took her hand. "Stay with it Kari. Don't push it away. I know it hurts. I know it hurts badly. I'm here. Stay with it."

Dark quickly moved into her seat holding her on his lap as Kari held onto him.

"I'm here, Hon," he held her tightly. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. Not without you."

Kari began bawling intensely, her tears running trails down the sides of her face and his, as she released the deep pain of a memory that Dark now wished to God he'd never created within her. All he could do was hold her to help her through it.

For long minutes Kari let her painful emotions expend themselves. She loved him. She hated him. But now she knew she needed him. Desperately needed him. She squeezed him tightly.

"Why did you come back?" she wept.

"They'd said you'd been hurt. I had to come back. To try to fix what I had broken."

"Can you? Or will you just leave me again?"

Dark looked at his wife for the first time in a very long time. "Feel me," he began. "Go as deep as you want. I will never leave you like this again. Ever."

Kari felt his promise. "I still love you," she breathed, still recovering from her emotion.

"I've never stopped being in love with you."

"It's going to take me a while, Mitch. To sort through this. These feelings."

"Are you leaving me?" he asked.

"No. I can't. I won't do that to you."

"I understand."

"I just need some time. I seem to have found myself in love with two men."

Dark nodded. "It's the punishment I deserve for leaving you."

"Quit," she squeezed him tightly. "You're always telling me about destiny. How you can't avoid it."

He nodded.

"None of us would have been able to avoid this. One way or another, Jerrod needed to be gifted. Maybe God chose this path for us for a reason?"

"Maybe."

He suddenly felt Kari's lips on his. He remembered how she kissed; how she would hungrily go after his lips; this was indeed his Kari.

"You owe me thirty years, Mister," she kissed.

"Is that with our without interest?" he kissed her hard, his pulse moving.

"I think there's going to be a lot of interest." She martially touched him unexpectedly in a place under his arms that sent an intense feeling through his body, giving him the arousal equivalent of goose bumps. It had been a long time since he'd felt that touch from her.

He softly recovered from it. "What was that for?"

"Just a reminder, letting you know I'm back."

"It looks like we're both back now," he assured.

"We are both back," she squeezed him tightly. And then felt him flinch slightly under her supernaturally strong hug.

"What—? Are you okay?"

"Yea, fine. It's nothing," he tried to elude.

"Hello? Do you know who you're with? What happened?"

Dark sighed. Without his ring he was like an open book to her. He knew better than to try to hide anything from Kari

anyway. “Bad mission. I got roughed up pretty badly yesterday. The doc says it may be a few days before I’m a hundred percent again.” He didn’t lie to her but he didn’t exactly give her any details either.

Kari knew there was more to it. But she didn’t press him for anything more; she could already see the fear and pain he’d been through. She wasn’t going to make him relive it; not right now.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“Kari, I—”

“Shhhh—” she pressed her finger lightly against his lips. He felt her warm feelings washing over his. He’d forgotten how incredibly moving she could be as he felt her own feelings slip deeply inside him, soothing away his deepest emotional pain. Kari easily made him forget the previous day’s events as the two of them sank slowly into a warm soft kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

Toronto International felt much like any other North American airport Lucas had frequented. His frequent flier card had well over a million miles. Between business trips and medical missions early in his career, he’d been to just about every major city one could think of. He’d purchased a ticket to London and was relieved to find that no one had flagged his name on some ‘no fly’ list. Then again, he was in Canada. He wasn’t sure if he’d have been as fortunate if he’d chosen to fly out of Detroit. He was pretty sure the Dominion would have put two and two together by now.

He passed through customs and security and managed to get himself singled out for a pat down. But he was finally now at his gate, waiting for them to begin boarding, surfing various news sites on his tablet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dark's phone vibrated on the center console of their SUV. In the back of the vehicle, the seats had been folded down and Dark and Kari had folded themselves around each other.

"It's for you," she grinned.

"It's always for me," he groaned, reaching up and taking the iPhone.

"Yea," he answered.

"Dark, it's Blaze. Sorry to interrupt your vacation but we just picked up another sensor trip at Toronto International. We're pretty confident it's Lucas."

"Right. Thanks, Blaze. I'll be in touch."

"That's a worried look," she offered.

He sighed. "Looks like our Dr. Lucas is on the run. We should get dressed."

He's not going to be able to run very far. He'll be stuck on a plane."

"I'm not worried about finding Lucas. But we're not the only ones scanning airports."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lucas had stowed his carryon and was sitting in first-class waiting for the rest of the passengers to board. He looked up from his magazine to see four armed and uniformed airport security guards hovering around him.

"Is there a problem gentlemen?" he asked.

"Dr. Lucas, we need you to come with us. No need to gather your carry on, this may only take a minute."

Lucas shrugged and followed the security people off the plane. They led him to an elevator where one of the guards used a key to get to the lower floors. They led him to a small secured waiting area. The room was dirty with outdated

magazines and a tiny bathroom that reminded him of a bad truck stop.

After an hour wait he was pretty sure his flight had left without him and that he'd probably never see his luggage again.

The door opened and a very fat security officer entered, his breathing labored as he sat down.

"Mr. Lucas," the man began with a vulgar accent.

"That's Dr. Lucas," he corrected.

"Dr. Lucas. Sorry. They don't always get the titles right on these things."

"Why am I here?" he asked annoyed.

"Well, you were flagged by the s'curity staff upstairs as a possible 'terrorist.'"

"Oh? I suppose I look like a terrorist to you?"

"No. You flew through here tons of times. But this is the first time you set off this protocol. We thought it was just a mistake at first, you know, false positive we call 'em. Happens now and again. We were pretty sure that's what happened with you today."

"Obviously."

"We were just gonna let it go, but I checked and you're showing up as 'no-fly' in the States. Wanna tell me why?"

Lucas looked at the man. He was pure Canadian, a government type who didn't appear all that schooled or religious. Lucas played a card to see where it would get him.

"I'm trying to flee the Dominion. After the US government tried to reign them in, they found out I was helping the IRS. Now they're after me. My local contacts at the IRS have disappeared along with a lot of other innocent people. I thought London would be a safe place to regroup."

The guard looked suddenly alarmed, but then he was nodding. "My wife has been followin' that whole story."

Lucas wondered what this man's wife must look like. He forced the mental picture from his mind, smiling and nodding as well.

"Well, Dr. Lucas, according to protocol, we're supposed to turn people like you over to CSIS, but under the circumstances, we should proly get you as far away from the Dominion as possible."

"You're a good man, Officer Jenkins. I really appreciate your help. Airport security needs more people like you."

"Just doin' my job, Dr. Lucas." The big man stood up slowly and with a little difficulty.

Lucas stood up. "You know, Officer Jenkins, as a medical doctor, I should tell you that you need to lose some weight," he placed his hand on the officer's shoulder, gripping it reassuringly. "You're really stressing your knees."

"I know. I know, Dr. Lucas. You ain't tellin' me nuthun new."

"Just trying to be helpful, Mr. Jenkins."

"Well, I 'preciate that," he smiled. The two men exited the room back out into the waiting area. Lucas saw his carryon sitting in the middle of the room.

"Dr. Lucas, you need to place a call to my bruthinlaw. He has a charter service he runs outta here. He can get you back to the States and to Washington, if that's whar you want to go to get back in touch with the IRS."

"That would be awesome, Officer Jenkins."

"Here's his card. He's easy to find upstairs. Now he's a little 'sensitive, but he can keep it quiet, if you get my meanin'."

"Sure. I don't think that will be a problem. Thank you again, Officer," he shook his hand firmly.

"My pleasure." Jenkins pressed the button to open the elevator door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We were looking for Lucas at Heathrow, Dark. He never got off the plane."

"That's a little odd, Carson. Security must have deplaned him then, before it left."

"I don't need to tell you that he's been detected, Dark. They probably know who he is. There's a good chance he's already dead. That could lead them to start sniffing around the Dominion again."

"Yea. We'll try to stay low. See if the twins can find anything at all from airport security."

"We'll keep digging. You two should go get some dinner, enjoy your time out. Toronto has some great places."

"Thanks, Carson. We'll do that." Dark ended the call.

"Enjoy our time out?" Kari repeated, easily hearing the conversation over Dark's phone. "So he did send us out here together on purpose," she smirked.

"I thought that's what he was up to. His little plan seems to have worked out pretty well. I have my wife back."

"You do have your wife back, hunky-man. And I have you back."

"'Hunky-man'," he smiled. "I haven't heard you call me that in years."

"If you hadn't left you'd have heard it more often."

"I'm not leaving," he assured.

She reached out and squeezed his hand. "So where is dinner?"

"My place."

"Your place! You have a place in Toronto?"

"I do," he smiled.

"Mitchel Dark!"

"Hmm?" he knew this was coming.

"You do not! You left me and then moved practically right next door?"



"I did, Hon. I couldn't really get too far away from you."

"Did you ever come back to Bethlehem?"

"No. I knew if I did, if I saw you, I wouldn't be able to leave again. I kept telling myself that it was for the best. I had to keep you out harm's way. I also spent a lot time on the Leviathan. That kept me away for months sometimes."

"But Carson called you back. Did you think you'd be able to leave again?"

He looked at her. "I didn't know. But when I saw that your memory was gone, I—I was going to just leave after the mission to find Eric and Jerrod. What was the point of staying?—you were gone. And you had found someone else to take care of you. A god no less."

"That must have been really hard to see me like that. So why did you stay?"

"Carson."

"He ordered you to stay?"

"No. He sort of helped me realize that you needed me, now more than ever. He was right."

"I'm really glad you stayed," she looked at him, a little misty, her hand squeezing his and her feelings sunk deeply into his.

"Yea. Me too," he looked deeply into her eyes.

"Hey, there's a little market at the street level of the building I'm—we're in. We can stop there and find something for dinner. Are we still vegetarian?"

"I think so. You don't have to be. But I've kind of grown used to it."

"The legacy of Jerrod?" he grinned. "The gods are vegetarian you know. It's interesting that Jerrod chose that way for himself even before he became one."

"Oh, Dark, what am I going to do? I'm in love with you. I'm married to you! What about Jerrod?"

"Kari," Dark looked at her, "married gifteds have to realize that we're often hyper-attracted to others. I can't keep you away from Julia and I don't try to. In some ways I think you two have your own kind of marriage of sorts."

"We do," she admitted. "We feel very deeply for each other, it's not just the attraction."

"You see?"

"I can't be married to three people, Dark. How does that even work?"

"The same way it's worked for tens of thousands of years, Kari. Monogamy is cultural, Hon. Look at all of the divorces people go through. Over half of all marriages end because not all people are wired for just one partner. They get bored, distracted, or they change."

"Are the gods monogamous?"

"Some are. Most of them, no. But you shouldn't use them as your only example. In Nature some species are; most aren't."

"What happens if Jerrod is the monogamous type?"

"Well then he'll have to make a decision." Dark pulled the car into a parking space of the building and turned off the ignition. He turned in his seat to look at Kari. "Because I can tell you right now, neither I nor Julia are going to let you go."

Kari smiled and leaned in to kiss him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jenkins hadn't liked the sound of Bradford's tone over the phone. He nervously walked into his boss' office. Two men stood off to one side of the small office, men he'd never seen before. They looked like trouble.

"Sit down, Jenkins," his boss ordered.

"What's up, Mason?" Jenkins sat down.

"You detained a passenger today."

"Yep."

"Where is he?"

"Released."

"That was a breach of protocol. If the scanner flashes the code you are to detain those passengers for CSIS interviews."

"It was a false positive. That guy had been through here a million times. The scanner today just went off for some reason. It looked bogus."

The two CSIS agents looked at each other.

"Jenkins, that is not for you to determine. You allowed a potential terrorist to go free. He was 'no fly' in the States."

"D'at guy ain't no 'terrorist. Dominion S'curity put him on 'no fly.'"

"Dominion?" One of the other agents asked.

"Yea," Jenkins offered. "They wuz aft'r him cuz he helped da IRS."

"I see," the agent grinned slightly. "Did he tell you anything else, Mr. Jenkins?"

"Nope," Jenkins lied.

"After you released him, do you know where he went?"

"Nope," he lied again.

"I see," the agent's grin faded. "I think we're through here, Mr. Bradford."

# 34

**T**he older private plane Lucas found himself on landed well outside of Washington D.C. The trip had been very rough heading into the D.C. metro area due to bad weather. The small plane made an emergency landing at a small rural airstrip when the overweight pilot started seeing engine trouble lights.

Finally back on the ground, Lucas had already decided that he was through with air travel for a while. Thanks to the Dominion, law enforcement had already tagged him as some kind of fugitive; no doubt they'd issued warrants for his arrest. It was time to lay low for a while until he could figure things out.

The taxi driver was more than happy to give Lucas a two hour ride into D.C. as long as he paid for his return trip as well. Lucas checked into a swanky downtown hotel with cash and

then relaxed with a bourbon looking out of his third-story window at the busy D.C. sidewalk and street below.

He mulled over and over in his thoughts the narrow escape he'd just had with the Canadian feds. He'd have to be much more careful from now on. He wasn't going to be able to do this alone. He needed radar, like the Dominion had used to thwart their IRS raid. Someone who could be trusted. That someone might take a while to find. The problem was, he didn't have a lot of time. He could be busted at any time if he wasn't careful.

The Dominion had been able to survive for over a century without being detected. He needed to study what they did; how they worked. These people had been operating for years right under his nose, and he'd never been the wiser. The truth was, he respected Apostle Connor and his wife as highly intelligent people. Now he knew why.

Should he start his own 'Dominion'? His own organization of gifted people? He'd have to think about that for a while. Then again, he had time. Lots and lots and lots of time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jerrod awoke alone and in his own bed again. It had been nearly a week since Kari had left on some assignment with Dark. He was beginning to have a really bad feeling about the situation. Carson was giving him next to nothing in terms of updates.

He wandered through his morning, through breakfast and finally found himself in the dojo, alone.

The workout was tepid and his center worthless. He found it difficult to even concentrate. All he could think about was Kari.

Without any warning he became aware too late of someone behind him. Jerrod felt them quickly touch him, striking a few

pressure points over his back and sides stunning him quickly. He landed flat on his back. He felt numb and his arms and legs were completely unable to move.

He looked at his now visible assailant. Francesca lowered herself in a single smooth motion as if floating in Lotus beside him. She was wearing a black fine silk gi.

"How did you do that?" he asked looking at her, able only to move his neck.

"Your focus is terrible. Is that what Dark teaches you?"

"No," Jerrod admitted. "I'm worried about Kari."

"I know," Francesca assured him. "You should not practice with a distracted mind. It leads to bad habits. You were easily defeated—god," she mocked with a half smile.

"I have a feeling it wouldn't have mattered one way or the other. I'm still learning."

"You are correct."

"How long does this last?" he asked.

"For you, not long. For others, hours. I could have left you unconscious."

"Dark never showed me any of those techniques."

"No. And he won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I never taught them to him. He is not a god."

"You taught Dark?"

"I did. I have decided that I will now become your teacher as well."

"What about Dark?"

"Jerrod. I have news for you. Kari's memory is returning."

Jerrod frowned.

"She remembers Dark. Everything about him."

Jerrod just stared at the wooden ceiling of the dojo, a deep sadness suddenly filling his being.

"I am sorry," she offered. "I understand what you are feeling."

Jerrod took a breath. "I guess I knew that this would happen at some point. I was just holding out some hope that it wouldn't happen this soon. But I guess that wouldn't really be fair to Kari."

"I do not believe that fate has been completely fair to you, Jerrod."

"I'm pretty sure fate doesn't really care about fairness, Francesca."

"It does not. It does only what it wants. We have all been the victims of fate; more often than we know."

"How did I get myself into this? I'm in love with another man's wife," he bemoaned.

"You are. So what do you intend to do about it?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you in love or not?"

"I am."

"Does Kari love you?"

"Yes."

"I do not see your problem."

"Dark! Hello? He's her husband."

"Dark is having to deal with this as well, Jerrod. It was his mistake that caused the events that led to his wife falling in love with a god. That was not your doing. You were honest."

"So? She's still his wife. I'm not going to interfere with that."

"Love is love, Jerrod. You are too willing to toss away that which happens so rarely. Your culture is mundane and vulgar. You need to unlearn it."

"So I've been told."

"I am not disrespecting your family's culture, Jerrod."

"No?"

"No. Merely introducing you to another. One is not necessarily better than the other. They are only different."

"Well Western culture considers polygamy a bad thing."

“Western culture is a minority in the history of time, Jerrod. The more you study the ancient chronicles, the more you will begin to see that. You are only thinking about Dark when you should be thinking about Kari. Like you, she is the real victim of fate here.”

Jerrod began to feel his extremities once again as the numbness began fading. He slowly began to sit up.

“So you think Dark is going to be okay with me seeing his wife?”

“She may well become your wife as well. You worry about things you have no control over. Let Dark worry about himself. If you are in love with Kari, make sure she knows it. She is attracted to you and you to her and you two are in love. It is a beautiful thing that deserves to be nurtured and cherished; not discarded over some vulgar culture.”

“I don’t know that I can share her like that, Francesca. What if I get jealous?”

“Then you are not thinking about Kari any more. Unlearn this primitive culture and focus on the ancient. It is up to you.”

“I’ll have to think about this Francesca. It’s all very confusing to me right now.”

“It is. I understand. But, Jerrod,” she began, “do not make Dark’s same mistake. Do not leave the one you love for any reason. As you can see, it will only lead to disaster.”

“It’s already a disaster, Francesca.”

“Did I not already make that point?”

Jerrod nodded. “I don’t want to make it worse.”

“The only one you will end up hurting is yourself. You did nothing wrong here. Let Dark pay the consequences of his actions.”

Jerrod nodded, still thinking about the whole mess.

“Now rise and I will see how much damage Dark has done to this new student of mine.”



\* \* \* \* \*

Kent rested perfectly still, not sleeping but just letting his mind rest in thoughtlessness. Dressed only in white trunks, his arms above his head, his bare skin rested against the incline and warmth of the impenetrable and massive glass surface of a reflex energy conduit hidden in a place known only to the gods. It was one of the few places Kent felt utterly relaxed while awash in something like negative ions from the incredible power that moved silently, warmly, dimly beneath the glass. It was his man-cave.

He sensed her approaching. She rarely ventured this deep. He knew already who it was. Her thoughts and feelings were all over his.

"Everything okay?" Kent asked not opening his eyes.

"I'm not sure. I'm sensing something."

"Oh?"

"Someone, I think," Lisa offered.

Kent opened his eyes as Lisa approached. She'd dressed like a goddess, her somewhat but not quite transparent blue-green dress accentuating her curves as she moved effortlessly across the glass like a gliding angel.

"Someone? Not within the continuum?"

She shook her head. "No. It's strange. It's like we're connected somehow, but it's very faint."

"Another demigod or—someone like us?" Kent looked at her curiously now.

"Someone like us," she nodded. "A guy like you but also like me."

"Oh," he leaned up on to his elbows.

"A guy as psionically gifted as you?"

"He could be. He's really bright."

Kent nodded. "Has he sensed you?"

“Probably. He’s very young; I mean, new. He probably doesn’t know what he’s sensing yet.”

“Where is he?”

“Jericho, actually.”

“Halfbloods.” Kent rolled his eyes. “They still think they can keep secrets from us?”

Lisa smiled. “They’re just trying to help, Kent. They really don’t know anything about the newbloods. They think we’re just like the old gods.”

“Well, maybe you should introduce yourself to him then. If he is what you say, then he needs to be vetted and brought in. Psionics isn’t exactly my forte.” Kent reclined back onto the warmth of the massive conduit. “Besides, it’s time we sent the Seven a message. Bethlehem would be the perfect place to do it.”

**A** late spring cold front had gripped the city of Bethlehem and dusted its buildings and streets with a frosting of light frozen snow. Alone in the uppermost floor of the Temple spire, Jerrod looked out over the brightly lit tall buildings far below him. He watched the cars moving seemingly slowly along the freeways and streets as the clouds dropped fresh new snow onto the busy city below.

He sighed as his thoughts moved from Kari and then to his folks. He thought about Dark and what Francesca had told him. Was his culture really so primitive? Or was it just all he knew and clung to because that was only what he'd been exposed to? Could he really share the affections of another man's wife? Or was he looking at the situation all wrong in thinking too exclusively?

He wasn't exactly sure how he ended up at the top of the Temple, but he needed to get away from Jericho for a while and

just feel the outside. Oddly, as if drawn by some unknown curiosity, he'd made his way to the Temple. His Apostolic family credentials allowed him access to the uppermost floors. He'd made his way to the near circular lower floor just beneath the Holy of Holies and then ascended the wide ornate central stairs and entered the sacred space from below. The spacious and tall upper room was dark as he continued looking outside, lost deep within his thoughts.

The darkness within the large room began to softly give way. Jerrod turned to see a slender pale-blue shower of luminescence descending from the top most ceiling of the Temple's most holy place. It grew in brightness until it lit everything within room with its soft, pale-blue cascading water-like warmth. There was a presence to the light that he wasn't sure about. Whatever or whoever it was, they didn't feel dangerous. A slender but well curved figure began to take shape within the shower of light, dressed unlike anyone or anything he'd ever seen. Her not quite opaque dress seemed to dance softly with her every move, as if blowing from some faint unseen breeze. She emerged from the shower of light, flowing with the light still raining down onto the center dais as it washed like water over the stone floor.

"What are you looking at?" the well dressed man walked up to his wife, his Christian Dior overcoat blowing in the snowy winter night air as a uniformed attendant prepared to let them into their waiting limousine.

"I'm not sure," she admitted, as her husband now trained his gaze on the top of the Temple Spire. "It looks like there's a light coming from the Holy of Holies."

"Really?" The middle-aged apostle looked at the very top of the Temple spire. "Those floors of the Temple are sealed. No one can even get up there this time of year."

Others within the city watched and pointed as the light within uppermost floor of the Temple radiated with a kind of strange new light none of them had ever seen before.

“Welcome, Jerrod,” the feminine Southern accent caught his attention; it sounded a little like Kari’s, but different; her voice melodic and intriguing.

Jerrod watched the auburn haired goddess move toward him like he’d seen Dark and Francesca move, gliding across the floor as she walked until she was standing only a few feet from him. She looked vaguely familiar.

“Do I know you?” he asked.

“Only if you watch the news,” she smiled.

Jerrod nodded, his mind and memory eidetic. “You’re Lisa Kyle. That figures.” He grinned. “I guess you’d have to be a goddess the way you wear a swimsuit.”

Lisa smiled and walked up beside him to look out the window. Jerrod was having a hard time taking his eyes off of her the way she was revealingly dressed.

“You feel unsettled, Jerrod.”

“Just trying to clear my head.”

“You chose an interesting place to do that. I’ve been looking for a chance to talk to you. Ironic that you should show up here. Have they told you who you are, what you are?” she asked looking at him as he continued to stare out the window.

“A god, I guess.”

“You’re very bright,” she looked at him. “Like me.”

“That’s what they keep saying, but, honestly, I don’t know what the means.”

“It means, Jerrod, you’re one of the reborn; the beginning of a new race.”

"I'm getting the impression someone like me doesn't happen very often? Everyone seems really surprised to see me. It's like they're all afraid of me."

"They are afraid of you, Jerrod. They were just as surprised to see us—and just as afraid as well."

"So you used to be normal?"

She nodded.

"How are you dealing with it? The change I mean?" Jerrod asked.

"You mean besides having the government and evil gods allying to kill you? Hmmm, not too bad."

"Evil gods?" Jerrod's mind worked quickly. "So that's who's behind the murders of the gifted?"

"You didn't know?"

"They're not telling me much. I don't think they know themselves."

"Dark knows. Most of the demigod families don't. The gods try to keep the others in the dark. The gods that are now in power don't want them knowing our own legacy."

"You mean they don't want to deal with the competition?" Jerrod questioned.

"True—but it's more than that. The gods have long fallen into disarray, Jerrod. The fact is, they're not really even gods anymore. They're just the remnant of the ancient ones. A dying ember they don't even realize is going out. Their blood is so thin they've lost the ability to control most of their own legacy, most of the knowledge of the ancients doesn't work for them anymore; it hasn't for a long time. With each successive generation, they lose more and more of their control and become less and less protected. And what's left of the evil ones now just pick them off, one-by-one."

"So people like you and I, people with new blood, so to speak—that's why they're afraid of us."

Lisa nodded. "The ancient knowledge works for us, Jerrod. Nothing is beyond our reach. The old ones still think they're in-charge, still in control." She shook her head. "They haven't really been in control of much of anything for millennia."

Jerrod's mind moved quickly listening to what Lisa was saying. "So you're taking over now? That can't be going over well."

"We're taking over now," she corrected. "This includes you just as much as it does us. And you're right. It's not going over well. But this is about the survival of our race, Jerrod. A race, like it or not, you're very much a part of now." She folded her arms gracefully, moving elegantly like a goddess.

"So it's a coup you're planning," he surmised. "Against these gods who are still in-charge."

"Jerrod, the light of the gods went out millennia ago. All that remains of the legacy of our race has been quietly waiting for us to return. It's not a coup. We're simply reclaiming what is rightfully ours; what was designed to be ours and ours alone."

"If I know anything about these gods, Lisa, they're not going to just roll over and give you the reins of their power."

"It doesn't belong to them, Jerrod. It was never meant to be theirs to begin with."

"You're probably going to have a hard time convincing them of that," he stated flatly. "You're just going to be seen as interlopers."

"They know who we are, Jerrod. Long ago the ancestral gods stored our race, genetically, within the bloodlines of a handful of human families. We may have been born and raised Human, but our true heritage is *Ben Bath El*," her Hebrew spoken in a dialect that had not been heard in thousands of years, "the Sons and Daughters of God."

“So that’s really what I am,” he mused looking out the window into the night sky. “Some genetic orphan, raised by surrogate parents.”

“I supposed that’s one way of looking at it,” she mused. “But it’s what you’ve always been, Jerrod. You just needed to be awakened.”

“So are we like brother and sister or distant cousins?”

Lisa smirked. “Well, I’m not exactly feeling attracted to you. Our families, yours and mine, may be closely related.”

Jerrod’s mind worked quickly. “So that’s how they did it. Embedding this hyper-attraction into their genes somehow. They must have thought that eventually it would naturally attract the right couples and rebirth their race. Ingenious.”

“It was; only they never really embedded anything. It’s just the way we are, naturally.”

“How many of us are there?” he asked.

“Only three or four that we know of. There are probably more that we don’t know of. The prophecies aren’t clear about how many families were seeded into Humanity.”

“Prophecies—?”

“The *Cepher El*,” she offered in Hebrew once again, “part of the Books of God, Jerrod.

Jerrod nodded. “I’ve heard of those. I haven’t read them.”

“Very few humans have. They weren’t written for them. They are *Acharyyth Bëriyth Elohiym*, the Last Testament of God.”

The way Lisa spoke made Jerrod shudder slightly at the thought of what he was hearing.

“We have but one chance now of rescuing and rekindling our race, Jerrod. One chance to avoid extinction. We don’t know how many of us there will be; already the evil gods have murdered several of the new bloods, new gods the Dark clan knows nothing about. The only thing standing between ourselves and the evil ones is our knowledge. We have to start



finding the new ones before they do. It was only by chance you were found by the Dominion—before it was too late.”

“I don’t know anything about us, Lisa, except what Dark and Francesca have taught me. And that’s not exactly a lot right now. How do I fight gods? I don’t even know where to start.”

“You start,” she began, holding out her open hand, “with this.”

A thick gold band delicately appeared in her hand, its crystalline inlay aglow.

“A ring?”

“A key. Once you touch it, you’ll know what I mean,” she offered. “It’s the key to unlocking your destiny.”

Jerrod picked up the heavy gold band with its crystalline inlay. “Ohh—Jesus,” he whispered, elated as the deep and incredible sensations washed over his new and intricate mind. “Oh, oh this—this is unreal. I can see—everywhere.”

Lisa walked away from Jerrod, letting him experience the power of the continuum for the first time. She moved elegantly to one of the three massive marbled pillars that came together at the top of the colossal spire forming the Temple’s top most holy chamber. Lisa touched one of the massive pillars. Jerrod could now see markings and glyphs appearing all over the chamber’s walls and floor. He watched as Lisa’s hands played the symbols, illuminating other glyphs on the other pillars and the floor. Light seemed to flow around the markings illuminating the entire room as if it were some kind of control tower.

From somewhere deep inside the structure, far below, Jerrod now felt the ancient power stir from its long slumber.

Late night office staff looked up from within their cubes and offices within the Temple spire as they sensed the faint

vibration and hum of something unknown coursing through the massively tall structure. The glass of the massive tower's windows suddenly grew seamless. Windows that had yet to be repaired on the floors where combat had occurred now suddenly grew thick new glass, sealing the interior floors from the outside cold and blowing snow.

To the people outside on the streets and those within offices and homes facing the Temple, the spire appeared to now glow in the night with a strange and ominous new light.

Jerrod could now easily sense what she was doing as he slipped the band of gold over his finger. "Well that's certainly going to attract some attention. A beacon perhaps?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"An omen," she corrected.

"For whom?"

"The Seven. And anyone else who might try to stand in our way."

"The Seven? I don't know who they are."

"The ruling council of the evil ones. They were the ones who were behind the government attacking this tower. They attempted to use the IRS as their excuse to get their people inside. But they would have never made it here to the top anyway. It was a fruitless gamble."

"So these other evil gods were behind what happened with the kidnappings and the IRS infiltrating Dominion Security," Jerrod nodded his understanding.

"Both of us use the humans as our proxies," Lisa acknowledged. "It's the first line of defense in staying hidden."

"So I take it you don't exactly know where the Seven are."

"No. If I knew that this whole thing would be finished and we'd have peace on Earth. Trust me."

Jerrod nodded subtly.

“Jerrod,” Lisa looked at him, drawing his attention to her. “There’s some place I need to show you. Someplace only we as newbloods can go.”

“Oh, where’s that?”

“Just, follow me,” she smiled.

Jerrod watched her ascend the dais and fade away into the shower of falling light. He didn’t know where it would take him or what he was about to get himself involved with; but he could feel Lisa’s sincerity, even her trepidation of what the future held for all of them. He stepped up onto the dais as the warm light washed freely through his body softly sending him to wherever she had already gone.

# 36

THEN SHALL A DEEP DARKNESS FALL UPON THE NATIONS  
AS THE SEVEN ARISE TO MAKE WAR AGAINST  
THE REBORN OF GOD

—THE BOOKS OF GOD

**F**rom E Street, Frank could see that someone was burring the midnight oil in the Oval Office. Brett usually wasn't up this late.

Frank entered the task-lit office to see the president studying a bunch of papers and old photographs he'd strewn all over his always immaculately tidy desk.

"Good grief, you're up late."

"Can't sleep."

"Maybe you should have Susan give you one of her magical massages you keep raving about."

"Yea," the president snickered, "I don't get any sleep when I'm around her either."

"So what is all of this?" Frank approached and picked up one of the very old photographs. He studied it for several moments noting the deep detail of the image. "This looks like ancient Hebrew or Greek. Why do you have pictures of MSS?"

"It's not Hebrew or Greek, it's Phoenician."

"Phoenician? I didn't know there were ancient Biblical texts written in anything that old."

"These aren't Biblical, Frank; they're images of the Books of God."

"Don't tell me you actually found those?"

"I did. It took some digging and some arm-twisting, but what you're looking at are very well preserved copies of some ancient prophecies written in both paleo-Hebrew and Phoenician."

"I know some of the extant MSS are written in paleo-Hebrew; but Phoenician? That's news to me."

"You're holding a DSS fragment of one."

"This was part of the Dead Sea Scrolls?"

"Yea, a very closely held fragment that never got published."

"Wow. How old are these?" he picked up a few more of the old photographs.

"I'm told these are Canaanite, about four-thousand years old. They were copied from some other source that's much older, evidently."

"These can't be that old, Mr. President," Frank argued, drawing on his own knowledge of early manuscripts. "The Dead Sea Scrolls are only twenty-two, maybe twenty-three hundred years old at the most, and none of those were ever written in Phoenician. I'm pretty sure the Essenes weren't writing—"

"The Essenes didn't write these," the President interrupted.

Frank just looked at him. "So who did?"

"We don't know. That's part of the reason these were never published as part of the Qumran collection. They predate all of the other scrolls by almost two millennia."

"That's not possible. The Qumran scrolls we do have were written on papyrus and different types of animal skins, even some on copper. They were preserved in clay pots and even those were not surviving well. This is not a copper scroll," Frank motioned with his hand at the photograph. "An exposed MSS is not going to survive that long. It's just not."

"They're not written on vellum or papyrus."

"So what are they written on?"

"I'm told it's paper, of some kind."

"They didn't have paper four-thousand years ago," Frank leveled.

"Well, someone did. Someone made these scrolls that survived mostly in-tact for the past four millennia written on ancient paper that carbon dates to the same period."

"Carbon dates, huh?" Frank stood up still holding a couple of the photos, his eyes looking at the deep details of the images. "So what do they say? Have you had them translated yet?"

"Yea, but there's not a lot here to read. We really only got five or six broken pages of what appears to be something that spans multiple volumes."

The president handed him a single sheet of paper. Frank scanned the translations carefully for several moments.

"This reads like a page out of the book of Revelation."

"It does," the president agreed.

Frank scanned some of the translation, "'Only at night the seven evils shall arise to make war with the born-again of God? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Vampires?'"

The president shrugged.

Frank continued skimming the rest of the sheet.

"Who translated this?"

“One of our Biblical people,” the president confided, picking up another copy of the translation off of his desk. “He’s the only one who knew something about Phoenician.”

“I don’t think this translation is accurate,” Frank leveled.

“Oh, so your rusty M.Div. makes you an expert in ancient Phoenician now?” he mocked with a grin.

“No, no it doesn’t. But you need to have this translated by someone with a more secular period hermeneutic.”

“A herman-what?”

“Hermeneutic, Mr. President. It means someone with a more well rounded perspective of ancient Phoenician culture. Using a Biblical scholar to translate this means that the translator approaches the meanings of words from usually only a limited or even one-sided perspective. Bible scholars typically only see things one way, and they will typically mistakenly press a translation into their own period worldview.

“Many times when you have a Jewish scholar and a Catholic scholar translate Hebrew, you get two totally different translations of the same text. Both are looking at the translation of the text using very different hermeneutics, very different worldviews and perspectives. It colors their translations, even to the point where the translation becomes gibberish, like this—” Frank held up the paper that had the translation of the Phoenician MSS.

“So you don’t like the translation or just what it says?” the president asked.

“I sat in a masters class where students from very different life experiences and cultures were supposed to be translating Hebrew, Mr. President. Passages that were supposed to be simple turned out really very different; they read kind of like this does. It’s crap. Trust me. This is not accurate, or if it is, we’re missing some nuances here. Trust me, the ancient Phoenicians were not writing prophecies about the ‘born-

again' of God. Besides, I'm pretty sure they were pantheists, not Christian monotheists."

The President nodded. "Okay, I'll get someone working that angle in the morning."

"So you still haven't told me why all this interest in these books all of a sudden?"

"Let's just say I have a feeling that these gods, whoever these people are who are being talked about within these Books of God, are not exactly mythology."

"Are you thinking of switching religions again?" Frank smirked at his own joke.

"I'm about to," the president leveled a serious gaze at him.

"Oh, c'mon, Brett," Frank seldom used his friend's first name out of respect for his office. "You think these, these prophecies and people, whoever they are, are real?!"

"Oh, I'm pretty damn sure they're real."

The president slid a photo from beneath a stack of other papers and handed it to the DHS Secretary.

"Jesus, what the hell happened here? This is the vault downstairs—"

"What's left of it," the president acknowledged.

"It looks like a bomb went off down there. It ripped the door right off the wall."

"That was no bomb, Frank. It was a god."

\* \* \* \* \*

The man looking back at Lucas in the mirror was very different than the fifty-something he'd been before injecting himself with gifted blood. He certainly felt younger, but was he actually getting younger? He could swear he looked more like his early forties these days. His weathered and wrinkling skin had taken on a vibrant new tone, and a more smooth blemish-free texture. There was barely a wrinkle on his face



now. He smiled at the few days growth on his face that gave him a ruggedly new handsome appearance.

He finished washing his hands and exited the men's room of the posh lounge he'd been frequenting now for a couple of weeks. It was a high-class place not far from his hotel that hosted more than a few of the top-brass government types. Lucas parked himself on an out-of-the-way barstool while his very sensitive hearing picked up enough hushed conversation to send a good number of lobbyists, corporate heads and Congress people to prison for several lifetimes.

"Oh, Jesus, Frank, tell me you're not serious?"

"I'm afraid so, Harlan. He's really convinced himself that there is something supernatural going on here. Are you sure you're someplace where you can talk about this? It sounds like you're at the lounge."

"I am at the lounge. Don't worry about it. I'm on my secured Bluetooth in a private booth. It's just me; as usual."

"He showed me a picture of the basement vault."

"Oh, you hadn't seen that yet?"

"No. I've been out of town."

"Right. Well I had a look at it right after the explosion. The inspectors said that one of the primary gas lines sprung a leak and that a spark from the vault door blasted it off the hinges. It made a huge mess and knocked out all kinds of stuff down there. All those tunnels are pretty old; they were built clear back in the forties."

"I know. I saw the same inspection report. But Brett's all religious about this now. He thinks someone like Thor did it."

"Oh, Jesus, Thor? Really?"

"He's convinced himself of it. He thinks they're real."

“So he’s gonna become what now?” Harlan asked. “First he’s Bahá’í, then Catholic, and now Muslim. What’s next? Norse?”

“You got me? He’s really enamored with these Books of God. He even skipped his golf day this week so he could talk with some professor of archeology from the Smithsonian. And get this, he flew in some antiquities people from Hebrew University.”

“Israel?”

“Yea.”

“He can’t stand to even look at the Israeli’s.”

“Well, he’s talking with them now.”

“Man. He must really be desperate. So what’s in these Books of God that’s got him so absorbed?”

“They’re just a handful of prophecies at this point.”

“Prophecies? You mean end time stuff like in Revelations?”

“‘Revelation’, Harlan; there is no book of ‘Revelations’, but yea, it’s like snippets of events that happen when these seven evils supposedly take over the world.”

“Is this before or after Jesus comes?” Harlan asked.

“Jesus isn’t even in these, Harlan, they were written thousands of years before he was even born.”

“Oh; well, I don’t know. I’m just asking.”

“I know. I’m just frustrated at the moment. We’re supposed to be working on the Dominion issue and he’s lollygagging around with this crap. We need to get him to re-focus somehow, get him to—”

Harlan watched completely captivated as a waitress barely clad in the lounge’s signature all-too-short-short uniform walked past his booth and bent over slightly to set some drinks onto another table.

“—are you even listening to what I just said?”

“Huh, oh, sorry, Frank. I know what you mean.”

“Alright. We’ll let this play out for a few more days, I guess. Keep your eyes and ears open and if you see anything out of the ordinary, let me know.”

Harlan’s eyes were still fixated on the pear-shaped curves of the waitress’ ass. “Sure, out of the ordinary. Got it.” He tapped his earpiece to end the call.

It had been several minutes since Harlan had placed his order for lunch. He looked up to see a tall good-looking man standing in front of his table. The man smiled at him intelligently.

“Mr. Harlan?”

“Yea?”

“Mind if I join you for a few minutes. I think I have some information you may be interested in.”

“Oh, like what?”

The handsome stranger took a seat beside Harlan speaking softly. “Let’s just say I have intimate knowledge of—the Dominion.”

# 37

**Y**ou're watching Dominion Signs, I'm Kimberly Klein. We are now two hours overdue for the release of the vote tally from the Apostles of God. Many observers within the church leadership and media are beginning to speculate that the delay could be a sign that momentous changes are about to take place within the Dominion. For weeks now the Apostles have continued to whittle down a list of names, the aliases of people who have been nominated by the Apostles themselves.

With only nine Apostles voting to select the next Apostles, only five names remain on the ballot. Among the five names remaining are two women. Response from Dominion laity has been deeply divided with very few people undecided about the legitimacy of having a woman in the Apostleship for the first time in the history of the Dominion.

Signs recently ran an unscientific poll of viewers over the past twenty-four hours asking on our website, 'Do you approve of a woman Apostle?' Forty six percent of respondents have said 'No, they do not approve of a woman in the Apostleship, while fifty-three percent said 'Yes, they do approve of a woman in Apostolic leadership.' Astoundingly, only one percent of respondents have been undecided.

Here to discuss with us the ramifications of such an unprecedented election is our religious correspondent, Dr. Abram Antonio. Dr. Antonio, good to have you with us."

"Thank you, Kim; good to be part of such a momentous occasion as this."

"Dr. Antonio, I just have a few questions about—about—wait just a moment doctor. Are we now seeing the doors of the Apostolic chamber opening?"

"Yes! Yes, Kim, we are. This could only mean that the apostles have reached a quorum!"

"Dr. Antonio, I'm seeing Apostle Connor emerge from the chamber in full Apostolic dress, followed by several of the others. They are walking slowly out onto the spire balcony overlooking Jerusalem Square where tens of thousands of the faithful are eagerly awaiting to see who will follow and fill the three open posts."

"Indeed Kim, the crowd is cheering very loudly now as we see the current apostles take their positions out on the Apostolic Terrace."

"It seems that the cheering is falling into a kind of silence as the last two of the remaining nine apostles take their positions."

"Yes, indeed, Kim, but you notice that the doors of the apostolic chamber remain open. We are not finished."

"You are right, Dr. Antonio, there appear now to be rising cheers from the crowd now as another apostle, a new face, has just emerged from the chamber. He looks to be a rather young,

somewhat Asian-looking man in full apostolic dress. Bear with us ladies and gentleman as our staff attempt to learn who the new young man is. The din of the crowd is making it difficult to hear."

"Oh, my goodness gracious, Kim, look now at your screen!"

"Oh, my God, Dr. Antonio, we are now watching history in the making as a woman has now just emerged from the apostolic chamber!"

"Well, Kim, you won't need your staff to look up who she is, that much is for certain."

"Very true, Dr. Antonio. Elizabeth Connor, the daughter of Apostle Connor, has been elected by the Apostles and the will of God as the first woman ever to hold such a high and esteemed position."

"This is indeed a momentous occasion, Kim."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Antonio, I didn't hear what you just said, the noise on the ground here is just too great as the crowd is cheering. I'm—I'm also hearing what sounds like some detractions, some jeers, coming from some people in the crowd near me, but honestly, it's only because I'm standing pretty close to them. Overall, it seems to me that the crowd is quite happy with what is transpiring."

"Indeed, Kim, from where I am sitting, I cannot hear that anyone is booing. If they are, they are being well over-shouted by the rest of the crowd. And there is now the twelfth Apostle emerging from the doors as they are being closed. The cameras are attempting to focus on him now. He appears to be another young man, oh, oh, Kim, this is heart-wrenching. I know this young man. Mark Silvanus! A former page of the late Apostle Paulus. Incredible. Both men worked very closely together. Not unusual to see an apostolic seat transition to someone close to a previous apostle however. Aside from his age, not any real surprise about Apostle Paulus' replacement."

“The new apostolic leadership appear to be getting much, much younger than in previous elections, Dr. Antonio. Is this an indication of a trend?”

“This is, of course, much to early to tell—”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Dr. Antonio, but I’m being told that the unnamed young man taking over Apostle Lawton’s position is Eric Wu, a member of the Apostolic Board and someone who is not unknown within Dominion enterprise.”

“The hand of God has once again moved, Kim. The Apostles are whole once again.”

“Very youthful new faces among the Apostles of God, Dr. Antonio; a female apostle among them. What do you think this will hold for the Dominion as the world’s second largest Christian denomination moves forward ...”

\* \* \* \* \*

Her home was blessedly quiet. Kari climbed the stairs in the dim light that came in from the yard lights outside. She ignored turning on the lights as she normally didn’t; she could see just as well without them. She tossed her light jacket onto a chair, and then almost walked past a table beside the entrance of her closet. Her eye caught the three fresh long roses, the two chilled glasses already poured but still frosted, the open wine bottle, interestingly her favorite, and the little note with her name on it in Jerrod’s very stylish designer handwriting. She reached out with her feelings but no one was in the room or the entire house for that matter. She picked up the card and read, “Thought you might enjoy something soothing after a special day.”

Kari looked around but did not see or feel anyone. She looked down at the note again, smiling at the thought. The room’s gas fireplace lit seemingly by itself and suddenly she felt him. She looked up to see Jerrod standing by the fireplace

dressed a little more GQ than his usual Northwest casual. He looked fabulous in the attire.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he smiled warmly in the new soft light of the fire.

She felt his inescapable draw along with the warmth of emotion within him. She also felt her own feelings. She was suddenly glad he was here.

"That's quite the entrance," she mused, putting down the note. She picked up the glasses and walked over to where he was by the fireplace.

"You'll find I'm full of surprises these days," he offered, taking one of the glasses. They both took a drink, not taking their eyes off of each other. She noticed the gold ring with the crystalline inlay, just like Dark's and just like the one her mother had. The ornament of the gods.

"You've been busy, I see," Kari nodded at the ring.

"I've met my people, Kari. I know who and what I am now."

"Francesca said you had left your training. I guess you don't need us anymore."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," he assured her, his eyes lovingly resting on her beautiful face. "We're all in this together, Kari. Gods, demigods and humans. We all need each other. All of us. Now more than ever."

"I haven't seen you in weeks."

Jerrod smiled. "I wanted you and Dark to have some time to rekindle. I've heard your memory came back, finally. That was good to hear."

She nodded. "We missed you at the celebration today."

He nodded. "I didn't want to interrupt. I'm sure you and Dark and your family had fun."

"You're still nervous about Dark, though. I can feel it."

"I am," he nodded. "Sharing you; this is kind of new territory for me."



She nodded, "Yea, it's kind of that way for all of us. I don't know anyone whose ever dated a god."

Jerrod smiled. "Listen, Kari, I know you're tired. It's been a long day for you. I wasn't planning on staying. I just wanted to drop by to say congratulations, personally."

"You can stay. I don't mind."

"No. No, if I stay we'll be up all night and you need your sleep. It's been a very long day for you."

"I think we need to talk."

"We do. But we can talk later." He set his half-empty glass on the mantle. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Jerrod," she began.

"Hmm?"

She moved up to him and kissed him softly. She felt his feelings softly, warmly touch hers in a way she'd never felt anyone touch her before; and then he withdrew. "I love you too," he said.

She watched him walk out of the room. She followed him with her feelings downstairs into the foyer and then felt his presence quickly fade until he was gone.

**P**assover is a time to reflect on the gifts that God has given to us. It is a time to humble ourselves and remember how God delivered us from the bondage of our enemies. How He placed upon us the seal of His providence; and bestowed upon us the blessings of His good pleasure.”

Aaron Connor raised his glass looking pleased at the assembled faces of his family now seated around the Seder table. It warmed him knowing that there would be millions of Dominion families all over the world this night sharing the same or similar celebrations all over the world.

He watched as the family broke fast and began passing hot bowls and steaming plates to each other around the table. Silas and Julia sat next to Kari and Dark. While Keith and Eric and his beloved Katherine sat on the other side. The only sadness in his heart right now was the conspicuously absent Jerrod.

They had not seen him in weeks, although Kari assured them that she had.

The grounds outside the Connor mansion were quiet as Dominion security made their rounds under a starry night sky. Two of the guards met up inside the perimeter security fence.

“Chris,” the guard nodded to the other.

“David. Nice and quiet tonight.”

“Just the way I like it.”

They both stood talking with a view of the Bethlehem skyline in the distance and the shimmering Temple Spire.

“I’d sure like to know what makes it glow like that?” Chris mused.

“The power of God, man.”

“Yea, yea. No, I mean seriously.”

“I am serious,” David said, looking at his coworker. It wasn’t the first time they’d gotten into one of these banter.

Chris looked disapprovingly at David. “You always take everything so spiritually, Dave. Not everything is the will of God.”

“I disagree.”

“Yea, well, tell that to the people who never left Auschwitz.”

“Sometimes things happen that only God knows the reasons for, Chris. No one knows what goes on in the mind of God.”

Both men looked again at the shimmering tower and then both noted the shooting star apparently moving slowly past it high in the night sky.

“Wow, you don’t see one of those everyday,” Chris offered.

“Yea. See, there’s your answer, Chris. God knew we’d be talking about this and He gave you a sign.”

“That’s not a sign, Dave, the whole city can see it.”

“Then it’s a sign for the whole city.”

Chris shook his head, “Dave you are just imposs—”

“Impossible? What?”

“Is that thing getting brighter?” Chris looked up watching the shooting star.

David’s eyes were trained on the light again, “Yea, yea, it is.”

“Oh, shit! That’s no shooting star! COMMAND!”, he yelled into his uniform’s hidden mic. “CODE ONE! CODE—”

The light blazed brighter moving toward them at incredible speed. Both men watched in sudden horror as the light bore straight down into the massive home several hundred yards away from them. For a moment the light just vanished into the structure and there was nothing. Then a massive sonic concussion broke the night as the entire mansion suddenly erupted into a near blinding explosive flash that sent both well-trained men instinctively dropping to the ground for cover.

The whole of the sprawling estate’s grounds were suddenly illuminated with the immense structure fire as security personnel from all over the estate descended on the massive home now fully engulfed in a savage blaze.

Hot debris from the home now landed everywhere, littering the lawns and driveways all over as personnel on foot and in vehicles quickly approached. But the heat of the blaze was just too much. It would be minutes before the fire trucks would be able to even begin dousing the raging inferno.

Eric was dazed but quickly recovered. A large beam along with other pieces of burning rubble covered him. He could see Keith lying face down not far from him, his clothes on fire! With new superhuman strength Eric tossed the massive beam

away like a toy and quickly rushed to Keith's side extinguishing the flames.

"Keith! Talk to me!" Eric coaxed.

Keith moved; and then coughed.

"Oh, God, Keith!" Eric felt a sudden relief. "Can you hear me?"

Keith coughed again. "What the—hell ... ?"

Eric didn't wait for him to fully regain consciousness. He lifted Keith from the floor and flames and headed for the wine cellar stairs not far from them.

Dark moved quickly through the flames, his clothing mostly shredded and his skin illuminated with the golden power of the gods. The entire home was a wreckage of burning massive wooden beams, shattered stone and furniture and bright thick smoke. He could easily see the night sky above him where the force of the explosion had ripped through three floors of the home. There were dead and dying people littering the rooms as he searched through them.

A feeling of elation moved over him as he saw Julia quickly carrying Silas out of the inferno and across the lawns. He hoped her friend was alright.

But his feeling of elation was quickly replaced with fear as automatic gunfire broke through the night air. It wasn't any kind of weapon he could discern; and the sound was coming from above them.

Dark quickly exited the inferno into the cool night air, his attention drawn upward to scores of large black drones moving not so quietly but mostly unseen through the sky above him. It didn't take but a matter of seconds for one of the drones to see his illuminated skin and make a strafing run at him. He managed to dart out of the path of the drone's large caliber rounds, but it wasn't easy. The larger unmanned

VTOL's were exceptionally accurate in their targeting and their turbofan lifts made them highly maneuverable. These were not government issue, that was for damn sure.

With gifted vision he counted dozens of the drones descending on the estate like a swarm. With inhuman speed, Dark sprinted toward his sister and Silas. Several of the drones were already targeting them and making strafing runs; their barrage illuminated by tracer rounds that lit up their targets.

Silas was awake by the time Dark reached them. Julia had taken cover beneath a small grouping of trees that the drones were riddling with gunfire. The gold ring around Dark's finger shimmered ever so faintly as a large piece of charred stone rubble from the once elegant mansion suddenly bolted from the ground at high speed striking the closest drone in the fan blades that kept it aloft. It was enough. The craft spun helplessly out of control and crashed along the shore of the lake.

Dark spoke as his mind took hold of another rock and prepared to send it into another drone. "Are you guys alright?" he said ducking in quickly behind the trees and avoiding the gunfire.

"Fine. One of them nicked me. I'll be alright," Julia gasped, looking around at Silas. Dark briefly looked at the large gash in her shoulder, but it was quickly getting smaller.

"I'm okay," Silas coughed. "What happened?"

Dark looked at the ruins of the hotly blazing home. "Some kind of high speed missile. That was a sonic boom just before the explosion."

"The IRS has missiles?" Silas questioned.

"This is not the government, Silas," Julia looked with anger and concern at her brother as another large piece of rubble launched itself from the ground into yet another drone, sending the remote-controlled compact car-sized aircraft

spiraling to the ground with the sound of crashing, rending metal.

"They're one and the same at this point, Jule," Dark offered.

"Dark, I've got this," Julia assured him, picking up a large rock in her hand and sending it with deadly accuracy into the fan blades of the last drone currently targeting them. "You've got to go find Kari and the rest!"

Dark watched the machine spin out of control and crash into the trees not far from them. He nodded and then like a ghost, he was gone.

The explosion had all but destroyed the upper floor of the sprawling house, laying it wide open to the starry night sky that was now partially obscured by flaming billowing hot smoke. The second floor below it had huge gaps where the floors had simply collapsed down to the first.

Kari found herself lying face down in the rubble of the second floor. Raging fires burned with an insane heat all around her. A large piece of furniture had pinned her against a stone wall and for the moment was protecting her from the searing heat. Then she heard the sound of some kind of engine. She wasn't sure what it was but her danger sense told her it was not search and rescue.

The vehicle-sized aircraft slowly descended into the rubble, blowing fire and smoke and debris everywhere. Kari ducked back under the furniture piece hoping it hadn't seen her.

The loud racket of automatic weapon fire erupted from the drone, sending its large rounds through the fine wood of the furniture. Several of the rounds struck Kari painfully in her upper thighs and pelvis. Instinctively, she bolted from her hiding place. She needed to be moving but the pain now

shooting though her lower body prevented her from moving anything but quickly. Several more of the rounds caught her in the abdomen and lower back as she attempted to run for cover behind the half missing thick vault wall of what used to be the master suite. It wouldn't take the remote pilot but a few moments to find and re-target her from her hiding place. Kari looked desperately around for an exit. She could hear the drone beginning to move over her.

On the marbled floor of the vault she saw it. The wooden case had crashed down and splintered, spilling its contents onto the soot-stained floor. The ring of gold with its crystalline inlay rested simply amidst the blacked dust, reflecting the fire and danger all around it.

Kari pulled herself painfully toward the band leaving her blood staining the once polished stone floor. She heard the sound of rapid gun fire again as the bullets ripped into her back and chest. Her hand reached out, her fingers inching toward the band as hot round after round entered her weakening body. Her fingers touched the metal of the band and then clasped around it.

Somewhere Jerrod looked up from his designs, his eyes suddenly ablaze with a massive psionic fire. "Kari? What!? NO!" his voice boomed as his body suddenly radiated with an explosive light of the gods.

Dark leapt to the edge of the craft and found himself dangerously close to the whirling fan blades that kept the drone aloft. The craft's computers immediately attempted to compensate for the weight of its new passenger, but as well-designed as the sleek aircraft was, the sudden addition of a two-hundred-plus pound passenger was well outside of its



flight specs. The drone toppled over the vault wall upside down, its turbo fans drawing it quickly into the rubble of the once opulent ground floor with its weapons still firing.

Dark moved quickly to where Kari lay motionless in a spreading pool of blood. He didn't hear her heart beating.

"Kari!" he spoke feverishly trying to get her to open her eyes. Her blood now covered his hands, arms and clothes as he lifted her riddled body into his arms. He watched her wounds. They weren't changing; they weren't healing!

"KARI!" he cried out as the ring rolled away from her lifeless bloodied hand and onto the dirty floor.

"We're pinned down here!" the security captain radioed into his uniform's mic. "We can't get—" he stopped short, as the large caliber rounds riddled across his body sending him to the ground.

And just as suddenly a stream of hot plasma lit the night, bolting through the deadly aircraft, igniting its fuel as it burst into flame and crashed to the ground in a blaze of fiery wreckage.

Jerrod stood in the middle of the courtyard of the once palatial estate, his body white hot with the energy of his plasma armor, his fists pulsating, and his mind fuming with disbelief and rage.

Jerrod turned and let fly another bolt that split into thirds, piercing three of the hovering craft as the aircraft were about to target more of the security staff hunkered down behind their vehicles. All three drone ignited and burst into flame in mid air.

But the drone pilots had easily well spotted him. Several of the large rounds slagged harmlessly off of his skin from multiple craft targeting him while he stood in the center of the courtyard.

Jerrod's hands and arms swept outward from himself as the mighty bolts leapt from each of his outstretched fingers striking a dozen of the craft that had quickly surrounded him. Bolt after bolt leapt from his fingers, lighting the sky with the deadly aircraft igniting in mid-air from the highly explosive fuels and ammo contained within them.

Jerrod prepared to target another highly organized wave of dronecraft moving toward him in formation when suddenly one of the craft tipped unnaturally vertically to its side, quickly gained a little altitude and then smashed itself like a hammer into the one hovering beside it, sending it to the ground. The sideways craft moved unnaturally to the next drone striking it similarly, sending shards of metal flying and dropping it from the night sky.

Jerrod watched the unnatural behavior, somewhat amused. Materializing out of nowhere both Lisa and Kent approached him clad in the same plasmatic armor. Jerrod could see Lisa's sky-blue eyes ablaze as a telekinetic wind picked up quickly around the three of them causing severe instability for the drones now moving in for the kill.

"I need to find Kari," Jerrod shouted in alarm from the calm center of the quickly building tempest Lisa was summoning.

"We felt her," Lisa assured him.

"Go!" Kent instructed. "We'll clean this up."

Jerrod nodded. His empathy already told him where everyone on the estate was. He'd already felt Dark up on the second floor and Keith and Eric in the wine cellar tunnels below. What he didn't feel were the Connors or his beloved Kari.

Jerrod appeared suddenly standing over Dark. Blood was everywhere, and Jerrod suddenly realized why he couldn't sense or feel Kari. The fire was incredibly hot all around them

and the smoke was thick. With a quick psionic thought of pyrokinetic control, Jerrod's mind extinguished the flames instantly all around them. The room was suddenly simply smoldering in the starlight as the only light within it now came from Jerrod.

Jerrod's plasma armor faded, replaced with the golden light that softly lit his skin as it did Dark's. He knelt beside a softly rocking Dark, who cradled a motionless Kari. Deep pain had spread all over his face as sooty tears flowed from his eyes.

"You're too late." Dark raised his voice in pain, looking at Jerrod. "Damn you!" he cried. "You're too late!" his voice softened as he pushed his cheek against her cooling forehead.

Jerrod reached down and picked up the ring. He lifted Kari's lifeless hand and slipped the oversized band around her finger as Dark watched in his emotional anguish.

"Am I?" Jerrod asked.

Dark just looked at him.

Dark watched as the thick gold band shimmered and smoothly resized itself to fit Kari's finger.

Jerrod's hand folded around Kari's. A deep new glow grew from beneath their enfolded hands.

"What—what are you doing!?" Dark looked at Jerrod.

Jerrod seemed to ignore Dark as the light from within him grew brighter and then seemed to flow from himself and into Kari's lifeless body.

"Kari," Jerrod spoke softly to her, his brightly golden-illuminated hand holding hers while his other hand caressed her face leaving some of his bright glow that quickly moved into her and began slowly spreading over her skin. "It's not yet time, Angel."

Dark's eyes drew wide.

The brightening glow that had slipped from Jerrod into Kari's soon moved and flowed like water over her skin. She

began lifting slowly from Dark's embrace as Jerrod's light now pulsed more fully from within her.

"What are you doing to her!?" Dark looked at Jerrod.

Jerrod looked at Dark. "What I was destined to do."

Dark watched as Kari lifted higher as if limply standing in mid-air. The light more than covered her and began pulsing more brightly than Dark could look at.

Suddenly Dark heard a heartbeat; and then another; and another! He heard her draw a sudden new breath. He quickly scrambled to his feet still covered in soot and her blood as the light that surrounded her now began to fade. Kari descended gently to the ground and into the waiting arms of Dark who caught her, holding her, as the light faded into the soft golden glow of the gods that now illuminated all of them. Kari's wounds had completely healed.

Dark looked at Jerrod in disbelief and then at Kari. After several long moments Kari opened her mouth drawing in a deep waking breath; and then slowly her eyes opened. She looked up at Dark and then at Jerrod who now stood beside him.

"How—?" she stood firmly on her own legs. She looked astonished at the golden glow now covering her skin; marveling at the soft light emanating from her arms. Jerrod pushed back her hair holding her face in his hand.

Kari took Jerrod's warm hand. "Am I dead? No—no I was dead! How!?" She looked up at Jerrod with his own skin in a deep soft glow.

"Jerrod," Dark began. "What did you do? Is she—?"

"A goddess?" Jerrod nodded. "I had to, Dark. It was the only way to save her life. Besides, she's my wife too. Believe me, it will be a cold day in hell before I let someone take her from me—or you."

Kari, Jerrod and Dark walked out of the smoldering mansion's remains just as part of the roof and the walls began to collapse behind them. Emergency vehicles and personnel were all over carrying out and tending to the most seriously wounded. The last of the drones had already fallen. Lisa psionically released her 'hammer' drone; it had long since stopped functioning and looked terribly worse for wear as it fell out of the sky and crashed like bad wreckage onto the lawn. Hundreds of the no longer functioning drones were strewn wrecked, smashed, smoldering or still burning all over the estate's lawns and gardens.

Lisa looked at the approaching group and now especially at Kari. "Oh ..." Lisa began a little astonished as she greeted Kari empathically.

Kari returned the kind empathic gesture. Kari didn't know who the other goddess was, but she looked familiar and she definitely had the same brightness as Jerrod. Kari could see there was ability ominously deep within her. In some ways she felt like Jerrod, but—in other ways Kari had never felt anyone like her before. Where had she come from?

Dark stood among the gods, his arm wrapped tightly around Kari and hers around him while she held Jerrod's hand, her fingers locked firmly in his.

Kent gave Kari a wry look and then looked at Jerrod as the mansion behind them continued to collapse into a massive fireball of rubble.

*"Out of the fires of death and desolation shall the goddess of war be reborn,"* Kent quoted.

"I thought you didn't believe in prophecy," Jerrod mused at Kent.

"I don't," he glared. "Are all of you alright?"

"Oh, my god, Jerrod, my family!?" Kari suddenly began scanning the grounds but Jerrod moved in closer to her,

interrupting her thoughts, preventing her from feeling what was around them.

“Kari,” he shook his head, “don’t.”

“But—”

“Keith is fine,” he assured her.

But Kari could already feel what Jerrod already knew. Jerrod pushed Kari into Dark’s waiting arms and buried himself deeply into Kari’s soul as the anguish he knew was coming erupted out of her.

## EPILOGUE

**K**ari stood silently in the colorful light that streamed through the church-like stained glass windows of the Connor tomb where her parent's home once stood. Her face was wet as she quietly wept. The crowds had long since been dismissed for its opening. She was alone in the massive arching rotunda that would now mark the resting place of her parents for all eternity. She looked up at their statues, elegantly embracing, their visages smiling as they appeared to adore each other as she remembered they always had.

She felt Jerrod fade like a spirit into the chamber, his sudden presence pushing a smile onto her tear-stained face. He walked up to her from behind. Kari slipped her arm around him and he pulled her close. "I thought I would find you here. Again."

She nodded.

"Kar. At some point, you have to let them go."

"I know." Kari took a deep sigh. "I'm getting there."

As a demigod, Kari Connor had been more than formidable, even against the well-trained and seasoned Dark. As a goddess, she was beyond adept in her thoughts and skill as a master warrior.

"You know," he teased gently, "it would really be a shame if the whole world learned that the Goddess of War had been a daddy's girl."

"I am not!" she complained in jest, burying herself into his arms. "I am not."

"It's okay, Kari," he held her close comforting her. "You can kick my ass anytime," he squeezed her tightly looking up at the towering embracing statues.

"Rion and the other gods are waiting for us."

"I know."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"Yes—" she assured, burying her feelings deeply into Jerrod's so he could support her as she regained her composure.

"You don't have to bear this all by yourself, you know. We all understand, Kar. We're all here for you. You'll heal. It will just take time," Jerrod assured, holding her just the way she liked.

"You guys—" she offered a warm smile, "I guess y'all are my family now."

"We are. And right now we have siblings to find before the Seven do."

She nodded, wiping the last of the dampness from her face. "Where are we going?"

"San Antonio. I want you to meet Rion."

"We won't be coming back here, will we?"

Jerrod shook his head, "No, Hon. We won't. It's too dangerous. It's all out war now between the Seven and



HARLEY AUSTIN

Sentinels. We'd be putting too many lives at risk. You can't continue living as an apostle—you need to be living, like a goddess."

\* \* \* \* \*

NEW! Bonus Chapters included from Harley Austin's LEGACY at the end of this book! Keep reading!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in the beautiful Pacific Northwest, I've spent most of my life writing. I am, at heart, merely a storyteller. As early as I can remember I have loved stories and loved telling them in my own inimitable way.

Through my teens and twenties, I captivated groups of friends by weaving their role-play characters into fabulous, immersive scenarios filled with intrigue and emotion. The games were more than just rolling dice, commanding starships and slaying dragons. Our weekends together became deeply personal surrealisms.

While those games have now become fond distant memories, the child within who created them lives on, more imaginative than ever.

# DOMINION

On his way to meet with friends for a long awaited ski trip, Jerrod Sharp finds himself caught in the middle of an ugly Michigan blizzard.

But hunkering down in his RV to weather the storm has become the least of his worries. The mysterious beautiful woman he's rescued from a broken down car on the side of the road cannot remember who she is or even where she's from.

Suddenly gripped by an irresistible romance, both soon discover that her bad luck was far from an accident of fate. With an unknown killer on the loose, their only hope is to seek protection from the most reviled underworld organization on Earth—the Dominion.

# HARLEY AUSTIN

The background of the cover is a dark, rocky cave. A bright, golden light emanates from behind the couple, creating a dramatic silhouette effect and illuminating the scene with a warm glow. Small, glowing golden particles are scattered throughout the air, adding a magical or ethereal atmosphere. The man on the left is shirtless, showcasing his well-defined muscles, and wears blue denim jeans. The woman on the right has long, flowing blonde hair and is wearing a light blue, ribbed crop top and blue denim jeans. She has her right hand raised behind her head. The overall aesthetic is that of a contemporary action or fantasy romance novel.

BOOK THREE

# LEGACY

AWAKENED SERIES

LEGACY

# 1

**G**age slipped the history book neatly into his locker, keeping a mindful eye on the other students who continued to flood noisily through the large hallway.

“Dude, you look paranoid.” Richard unloaded his own books into the locker beside his friend’s.

“Is it that obvious?” Gage lifted his backpack out of the short upper locker.

“Probably not. I just know you. Anyway, you should relax. The goon-squad got stuck in the media center on the way out. Canterbury will keep them busy for the next half hour at least.”

Gage smirked at his friend and relaxed a bit. He pulled a heavy white denim jacket from its hook and slipped it on.

“Hey, did you see the new girl yet? She’s a senior. I have her in my second, third and fifth periods.” Richard let out a soft whistle.

"Nice. I'm still a junior, remember? She's not in any of mine." Gage slammed his locker shut. "I don't even know what she looks like. I heard she's from South Carolina. Does she have Boyd's dorky accent?"

"Dude, there's nothing 'dorky' about her. *Whence thou she speaks the very winds refrain silent!*"

"Is that Shakespeare?"

"No, I just made that up. But seriously, she's hot."

"Yea, well, listening to someone say 'y'all' doesn't exactly strike me as sexy. Besides, I heard she was in Glee Club."

"So?"

"She's a cheerleader. Not exactly my territory."

"Oh, and what is your 'territory', exactly?"

Gage's lips thinned. "Well—"

"See that's the problem with you, Cameron; you second guess yourself all the time. Dude, have you looked in the mirror lately?" Richard lowered his voice. "You could fuck any woman in this building if you wanted to."

"Jesus, Richard—"

"Dude, I'm serious. Your confidence sucks. If I had your body and looks—I'd be an unstoppable—"

"—nerdy geek." Gage finished.

"Yea, okay, but at least I'd get laid."

Gage leaned against the locker. "Well, some of us have other things to worry about than getting—" He saw the look on Richard's face fall. Gage turned his head to see the four jocks making their way down the hall toward them. None of their lockers were even in this wing of the building. There was only one reason they'd be walking this way. Gage locked eyes on the burly students in their lettered school-colored jackets as they approached.

"Hey guys, lookie here, it's Gagey and his bitch." The four seniors surrounded Gage and Richard.

"What do you want, Barry?" Gage stared the slightly taller senior in the eye. Barry's left eye was still badly bruised.

"You went running like a little girl to Coach Green."

"I never talked to Green; you did. He's the one who made us sign the no-contact form."

"Yea, well you just watch yourself, Gagey. Contract or no contract, no one sucker punches me and gets away with it. If I were you I'd be watching my back. I've got my sights on you, Gagey."

"You don't scare me, Barry. Touch me and your little football season is over. If you're so tough why do you need your goons to fight your battles for you?"

One of the larger jocks stepped forward, "Y'little bitch, I'll—" But Barry's arm prevented him from moving closer. "No. Not here. They have cameras, idiot." Barry returned his attention to Gage, "You just watch your back, Gagey. Bad things happen to squealing little faggots."

Gage's face hardened as the four made their way out of the doors at the end of the hall.

Richard leaned back against the row of lockers, his heart pounding with trepidation. "Oh, we are so gonna die," he mumbled, looking up at Gage. "Coach Green made you two sign a no-contact?"

Gage nodded slightly, still watching the goons standing outside the doors, their breaths visible in the brisk fall air.

"Sinclair really has it in for you. What'd you do?"

"Nothing. He's a bully. He threw a punch at me and I fired back."

Richard nodded. "So that ugly black eye wasn't a helmet injury?"

"Is that what he's calling it?" Gage smirked.

"It's not funny, Gage. Sinclair's dad is a doctor and he's on the city council."

"So?"



“So, dude, you don’t just mess with the Sinclairs. I’ve heard stories about them. They’re really bad news. And Sinclair isn’t going to just let this go.”

“I know. Barry I can handle. It’s the rest of his goons that bother me.” Gage watched as the jocks finally left the doorway outside.

The parking lot was emptying slowly as students found their cars and headed home for the long holiday break. Now well into December, the mountain air of the small town was briskly cold, even in the full sun of the late afternoon. Gage had a sinking feeling as he approached his aging classic Firebird. It still had a nicely almost mirrored deep purple finish that he kept waxed, but it didn’t take him but a few moments to notice that all four of his mostly new tires were now flat. The sidewall punctures would be unfixable.

“Ohh, Jesus,” he breathed, resting his head onto his arms on the top of the car. He had a job to get to and he didn’t have time for this kind of nonsense.

“Hey, are y’all okay?” The feminine voice behind him had a distinctly Southern drawl.

“Huh?” Gage lifted his head and turned around. Another student stood beside her car in the next parking space. “Oh, fine,” he frowned.

“Oh, my God, what happened to your tires?” Her accent was thick but deliciously sweet at the same time.

“So you noticed that, huh?” he looked down at them again, a depressed feeling rising in his gut.

She walked up to him. He’d never seen her before but her accent clued him in on who she probably was.

“So what did you do?” she asked.

“Excuse me?”

She chuckled. “You must have really ticked somebody off. What did you do?”

"Oh, well; I—I guess I punched a jock."

The gorgeousness in front of him was nicely dressed in designer jeans and a short white fitted ski jacket. Beautiful blonde hair flowed over her shoulders. He was having a hard time taking his eyes off of her.

"So you're the infamous Gage Cameron," she offered.

"Infamous?"

"Yea. The whole school's talking about you."

"Really?" He half frowned again.

"I'm Savannah Scotland," she twinkled, reaching out a nicely gloved hand.

"The new girl." Gage politely shook her hand. She gripped his firmly. Gage couldn't help but notice how elegantly she moved and how beautifully captivating her smile was. "Welcome to Leavenworth," he smiled.

"Thanks." All day Savannah had been listening to the gossip and rumblings about some guy named Cameron who'd punched the school's team captain and first-string quarterback. She'd met all of the team members while in Glee Club, but Sinclair tailed her like a puppy dog. He'd been unusually chatty with her in class and in the halls. Sinclair was tall, good looking and charming, in a plastic sort of way. He'd said that his black eye had come from a helmet injury while at practice, but she knew the real score. A lying Yankee was hardly anything new to her. But she had been wondering what kind of person would have been able to best a sizable guy like Sinclair.

Cameron was broad-shouldered, very well built, even looking at him from outside of his insulated denim coat; but he wasn't burly like Sinclair or a lot of the other jocks. In fact, Cameron wasn't actually a jock at all. His dark, neatly tossed hairstyle, cut shorter on the sides, accented his unusually handsome features and dimples well. The guy looked like he could be a teen heartthrob on one of her favorite soap operas.

"I don't think your car is going anywhere tonight. Can I carry you home?"

Gage smirked, "Carry me?"

"Take," she corrected herself, smiling. She was still adjusting to the nuances of the Northwest and its stupid idioms.

Gage was suddenly finding himself stuck between a rock and a hard place. Richard hadn't exaggerated. Savannah was not just cute, but beautiful. He needed a ride home and then to work, but he couldn't—or didn't rather—want this incredibly beautiful girl to see where he lived or have to give him a lift to work.

"It's okay," she began, seeing some odd reticence in him, "really, I don't mind."

Gage sighed. "I appreciate the offer, Savannah, but—"

"Gage Cameron, are you really going to turn down a girl who is offering to carry you home in the bitter cold?"

Gage smirked at the Southern attitude of this new girl. She had spunk. He nodded. "Alright." He gathered some things from his car, locked it, and followed Savannah to hers. When they had both tucked themselves into her sporty Acura, Savannah started the engine. The high-end sports car immediately began to feel warmer.

"I appreciate the ride, Savannah." Gage stretched his hands over the vents. "My place is up the Icicle. Do you know where that is?"

"Like toward Sleeping Lady?"

"Yea. Just make like you're heading for the resort; I'm not too far past there."

"That's quite a drive. I'd feel terrible if I knew you were having to walk all that way in this cold."

"Well, truth be told, not too many people would offer to give me a ride, even in this cold."

"I think that I've discovered that the hospitality of you Northerners is not very civilized." Savannah frowned as she deftly pulled the car out of the parking lot.

"Well, it's probably not because of lack of hospitality. People around here think I'm dangerous."

"Oh? Why?"

"Well I suppose you'll find out sooner or later. I moved up here with my mom about this time last year. And then this past summer, Mom—" Gage winced at the sudden well of emotion that came out of nowhere. He'd thought he'd been done with these feelings but now suddenly, sitting in the warmth of Savannah's car and her company, they all came rushing back in an inopportune instant.

Savannah looked at Gage and immediately was struck by the sudden pain that was written all over his face.

"Oh my God, Gage, what happened to your mom?"

Gage was only barely able to keep his eyes from misting more than they did. He drew a slow breath.

"I don't know, Savannah. She just—disappeared." He tried to regain his composure. "I don't know where."

"Oh God, Gage; I'm so sorry." Savannah reached out her hand and took his, squeezing it tightly.

"I must look like a blubbering idiot." Gage wiped his eyes, trying to make sure tears didn't start streaming out of them.

"No, no you don't." Her voice was sympathetic as she clung tightly to his hand.

It took Gage a minute to finally regain his composure.

"Some people at the sheriff's office tried to say I had something to do with it. They interviewed me like a dozen times. But I wasn't even in town when she disappeared."

"That is terrible, Gage. Your mom disappears and then they try to pin something like that on you? Did anyone ever discover what happened?"

He shook his head. "No, it's an unresolved missing persons case at this point. Some folks tried to tell me that sometimes parents will do that, move to a new town and then just leave their kids, you know, start a new life without them somewhere else."

"Idiots. I can't believe someone would even tell you that."

"Yea. Maybe they were just trying to make me feel better." He gazed out the window. "Make me think she just left. But that's not the person she was, Savannah. She would never just leave like that. I know her. We were close."

"I don't even want to try to guess what happened to her," Savannah offered, trying hard not to sound macabre. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"Last August. I went to Seattle for a few days with a friend's family and when I got back, she was already gone. She'd already missed work; she had a lot of voice mails that the police were able to retrieve. A bunch of them from me. But they never found her or her phone; our car was still in the driveway."

"Our?" Savanna asked.

"Yea. My Firebird. It was Mom's pride and joy. She'd just put new tires on it before she disappeared."

"Oh, my God," Savannah was shaking her head. "And no one knows anything?"

"No. We kept pretty much to ourselves. She was sort of seeing this judge in town, Walker."

"Oh. Judge Walker. I know him. Daddy had him over for dinner last weekend."

"Really? Small world."

"It's not a big town, Gage, honestly."

"So you like big towns?" he asked, wanting to keep the conversation going but not about his mom.

"Towns, yes; cities like Atlanta, no. We used to live in North Charleston. We had a beach house in Hilton Head and I was born in—" she held out her hand for Gage to finish.

"Savannah," he offered.

She nodded.

Gage chuckled.

"What?"

"You." He shook his head. "You and I come from completely different worlds, Savannah."

"Oh?"

"I'm not exactly upper crust."

"Well, I'm not exactly a snob."

"Oh, no, no, I—I didn't mean it that way. I'm sorry."

"All of us are born into something, Gage. We can't help where we're born or the families we're born into. Besides, you're not exactly a redneck. I think it's pretty obvious that your mom raised you very well. She had culture."

Gage nodded.

"So what are you doing with your mom missing? Are you living with friends or relatives now?"

"No, I'm still in the same rental; only I'm the one paying the bills now."

"All by yourself? But you're still in school."

"I know. CPS wanted to place me with some foster family after mom disappeared. But Judge Walker stepped in and issued an emancipation order for me. I'm legally an adult even though I'm still only seventeen."

"I like Judge Walker. He seems very level headed."

"Yea, well, I think he's kind of creepy, actually."

"Why do you say that?"

"He's super nice on the outside and he's helped me out a few times, but he just gives me the creeps. I don't trust him. I never have."

"Do you think it's because he was sort of dating your mom?"

“No. They weren’t exactly dating. I think he wanted to but mom wasn’t interested. She didn’t have much use for him either. We both tried to avoid him, actually.”

The classy little car turned onto the road leading up the canyon toward Sleeping Lady. They drove up the winding road not far past the resort. Gage pointed out the driveway leading to a small trailer park and a rundown mobile home that had become his home for the past year.

As they got out of the car, Savannah could hear the river just on the other side of the drive.

“You didn’t tell me you had a house on the water!” Her grin was contagious as Gage let the two of them into the very modest, aging mobile home.

It was cool inside the trailer, but still much warmer than outside. Savannah was surprised to see an interior that did not reflect the dilapidating exterior. A plush carpet spread nicely throughout most of the space except for the kitchen, which had been set with large stone tiles. The finishes were timeless and the furniture looked fresh and new as well. The décor looked expensive, and the whole home smelled like it had been recently remodeled.

“Not what you were expecting?” Gage smiled as he closed the door behind them. “I did a lot of the work on this myself.”

“This is really nice, Gage.” Savannah ran her fingers along a shiny granite countertop. “From the outside I would never have guessed.”

“Mom and I used to watch decorating and remodeling shows all the time. So when we moved up here and found this place to live by the water, we convinced the owner to give us cheap rent if we updated the place.”

"I think he's getting the better end of the deal." Savannah's tone was admiring.

"Yea, probably. Still, it's what I can afford right now. I just need to grab my work clothes and we can head down to the body shop."

"Is that what you do? Fix cars?"

"Mostly I just paint them." Gage walked toward the back of the mobile home. Savannah followed close behind, marveling at the modern sense of style that surrounded her. The master bedroom of the home had been just as well decorated in creams and very dark dark-browns with touches of chrome here and there. It was a very nice masculine space.

"The other guys at the body shop do the repairs and then set up the paint booths for me do the finish work. Evidently the owner likes my work because he won't let me leave."

"What do you mean he won't let you leave? Did you try to quit?"

"Yea, several times, actually."

"Why?"

"I don't really get along with the rest of his crew. They keep accusing me of being gay." Gage rolled his eyes as he laid his backpack in the corner.

Savannah scoffed. "So? Why would they care?"

"Because they're idiot reprobates." Gage sat down on the bed to change his shoes.

Savannah smirked. "Now who's being a snob?"

"I don't have time for idiots."

"Why would they think you're gay?"

"I work out a lot and I walked into the shop the other day to pickup my check wearing a pink polo that Mom had gotten for me. She always thought I looked good in pastels. But that's all it took and the rumors started flying; not just at the shop, but around town. It even followed me to school. It's also why Sinclair got himself a black eye."



“He was teasing you.”

Gage nodded. “He was following me around the locker room just as P.E. was letting out and we were all getting dressed. He wouldn’t shut up, so I made some comment about his Neanderthal I.Q. and he took a swing at me.”

“Yea, I saw the whole thing on *Instagram*, actually.”

“Oh Jesus, don’t tell me that. You did not!” Gage looked at her wide-eyed, suddenly feeling ill. “Don’t tell me someone recorded and uploaded it.”

“Oh, yeah. A bunch of people did.” Savannah’s piercing green eyes were sparkling with her smile. “Like you just said, Sinclair was following you around the locker room while you were getting dressed. He throws a punch; you dodge and pop him in the face, knocking him over the bench. It was pretty spectacular, actually. You’re a celebrity, you and your now famous *Pump!* underwear.”

Gage flopped back onto the bed, rolling his eyes. He shook his head. “I can’t catch a break,” he groaned.

“Not true. Coach Green saw the videos too. It’s why Sinclair got in trouble and you didn’t. I think Sinclair’s lucky he didn’t get thrown off the team.”

Gage sat up again. “They won’t do that. His dad is *Doctor* Sinclair. They named a wing of the hospital here after him.”

“So are you?”

Gage looked up at her, “Huh?”

“Gay?”

Gage sighed. “To tell you the truth, Savannah, I don’t know myself. And I haven’t had a break from all of the nonsense going on in my life over the past few years to take the time to find out.”

Savannah smiled. “Honesty. I like that.” She turned and walked out of the bedroom while Gage’s eyes remained fixed on her delightfully curved ass. He smiled, shaking his head.

## 2

**G**age headed out the door for a morning run wearing a favorite pair of soft dark grey sweats to keep him warm. Savannah had been in his thoughts at work last night and now all morning. The Southern beauty wasn't exactly what he had expected. There was quite a bit more to this girl from South Carolina than the bubblehead he had originally assumed her to be. They'd talked quite a bit more in her car on the way to the shop and then, unexpectedly, she'd given him a warm hug just before he'd gotten out of her car. The memory of their hug and the sense of warmth he felt while watching her drive away still lingered in his mind.

He stepped out onto the rickety porch just as several sheriff's vehicles were pulling up into his empty parking spot and onto his frozen, weed-covered lawn.

"DO NOT MOVE!" The teen suddenly heard a siren chirp and lights flash as the words of a deputy echoed through the

small trailer park from one of the patrol car's loudspeakers. Gage stopped, his eye's wide.

"PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD, NOW!"

Gage had no idea what was happening or why the officers were even here. But he wasn't about to argue. He slowly raised his hands to his head while several deputies quickly emerged from their vehicles with pistols and shotguns already in hand.

Several of the deputies approached and began to handcuff him.

"Gage Cameron," one of the deputies addressed him.

"Yes?"

"You're under arrest for the murders of Carrie Cameron, Barry Sinclair and Savannah Scotland. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say, can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right ..."

Gage never heard the rest of the deputy's Miranda warning. He had already been arrested months ago after the disappearance of his mother. The sheriff's had run him through the mill then. But what he was hearing now was beyond belief. Savannah? Murdered? How? The stoic teen now felt an overwhelming and unexpected sense of dread as the deputies tugged him down his steps and stuffed him into a patrol car.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been several hours since Gage had been processed, fingerprinted, searched, cavity searched, humiliated and more than once pushed, punched and insulted. The entire time he'd said nothing. Not a word. He now sat in a cold, brightly lit interrogation room at the sheriff's satellite office. A thin, younger man entered dressed in a wrinkled light-gray business suit with an ugly tie and a small briefcase. He pulled a card from his pocket and set it on the table in front of Gage.

The card said the man was from the small county's public defender's office.

"I got here as soon as I could, Mr. Cameron."

Gage stared at the man blankly.

The man opened his case and removed a small stack of documents, obviously generated by the authorities.

"The sheriff's office issued an arrest warrant for you this morning, Mr. Cameron. They claim you know something about the disappearances of your mom a few months ago and now two of your classmates last night. If we can get a statement I think I can get this whole thing cleared up pretty quickly and get you out of here."

Gage just stared past the man. He'd heard his words. The authorities had just charged him with three murders. This wasn't going to get "cleared up" and he wasn't getting out anytime soon. Gage didn't trust any of these people. He played silent.

"You *can* talk to me, Mr. Cameron, the law protects our conversations. Even if the police were recording this conversation right now, which they're not, I assure you, it would be totally inadmissible in court."

Gage began to reach across the table toward the small stack of papers the attorney had placed between them. "May I?"

The man lifted the papers and handed them to Gage. The teen made sure his hand touched the skin of the attorney as he handed the papers to him. The sudden ill feeling Gage sensed when their fingers touched made him wince inside, but he kept his poker face just the same.

"I don't know that those will really be of any use to you, but you're more than welcome to look them over. It's really all just legalese."

Gage finished thumbing over the papers. "Is there a warrant?"

"Well, of course. It's part of the paperwork." The defender motioned at the stack.

"There's no warrant here," Gage pushed the stack back to the attorney, if he even was an attorney.

"Oh, I'm sure it is, let's see," the man began rifling quickly through the papers. "There we are," he pushed a paper toward Gage.

"That's not a warrant, Counselor."

"No, but it's the reference document. The warrant's been sealed for the time being."

"By who?"

"The court, Mr. Cameron. The court doesn't need to disclose who seals these things. I admit, it's a little unusual to see a sealed warrant, but it happens from time to time to protect certain witnesses and investigative proceedings while a criminal case and prosecution is in progress."

"Uh huh." Gage kept his face blank.

"Do you know where Barry Sinclair or Savannah Scotland might be?"

"Maybe you should ask your boss, or maybe the people who sealed your worthless warrant."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm through, Counselor. You're fired."

"That is your right, Mr. Cameron. But I assure you, you will need professional representation from here on out. I spoke with the D.A. this morning and evidence has surfaced in the disappearance of your mother and now Mr. Sinclair and Miss Scotland. I'm being assured that they have rock-solid evidence and motive that you were the one responsible for their deaths."

"But you just asked me if I knew where they were?"

"I did."

"Why would you ask that if already knew they were dead?"

"Are they dead, Mr. Cameron?"

"I wouldn't know, Counselor."

"It's up to you whether you want to cooperate or proceed, Mr. Cameron. I'll be available if you should change your mind." The attorney began to collect his things. "Keep the card in case you want to re-hire me and continue your defense."

"Don't hold your breath, Counselor."

"Very well. Good day, Mr. Cameron."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks for stopping by, Mr. Scotland; Dr. Sinclair. Please, both of you, have a seat," Judge Walker offered the two well-dressed men.

Rhett Scotland was a tall, tanned-skinned, handsome forty-something, refined Southerner, cleanly-shaven with well-groomed dark hair only beginning grey along the sideburns. His clothes were fine and conservative, reflective of his family's old money wealth.

Dr. Sinclair too was well into his forties and slightly overweight even for his stocky build. Raised in the small farming towns of the Northwest, he was well-to-do, but not quite so refined as the Southern gentleman Judge Walker had invited with him into his private chambers.

"Have you found the kids yet?" Dr. Sinclair's voice was nervous with trepidation as both men took seats in front of the judge's desk.

"No, no, not yet. We're all still very much looking for the both of them, though. I wanted to call you here personally to let you know a bit more of the situation and to ask a favor of the both of you."

"Anything, if it will help me get my Scottie back."

"It will, Rhett," the judge assured. "We've had a suspect under surveillance for several months now. We think this guy may have something to do with the disappearance of Barry and Savannah last night."

“Who is he?”

“Kind of a troublemaker actually. I’ve had to deal with him in my courtroom a number of times over the past year. Several months ago his mother disappeared. No one knows what happened to her or where she went. She just vanished.”

“Good God,” Rhett breathed.

“We even arrested him, booked him into the county holding facility here in town; but—”

“But what?” Dr. Sinclair asked.

“But we made some mistakes, frankly. The kid got off. We had to release him for lack of evidence. We had to let him go—but we kept our eye on him.”

“You just released this guy back into our community?” Dr. Sinclair looked like he was getting angry.

“Now hold on, David, I didn’t have a choice. I can’t just keep someone locked-up because I think they *may* have committed a crime, even a murder.”

“So you think this guy has something to do with the abduction of my daughter?” Rhett asked.

“I do, Rhett. I’m sorry. The point is we picked up the kid this morning and we have him in lockup. He’s not going anywhere. I’m using every procedural legality at my disposal to *keep him* locked up this time, until we can secure more evidence—evidence that is being provided to us by DHS, actually.”

“What?” Dr. Sinclair looked at Rhett Scotland and then back at Judge Walker. “How is Homeland Security involved in this?”

“I was asking myself the same question when I got a call from them last night. When we processed the kid’s arrest warrant it evidently set off something with the feds. I was on the phone for over an hour last night with an agent at DHS who informed me that this kid is *Bratva*—he’s on a watch list; he’s part of the Russian Mafia.”

"Oh, good Lord." Dr. Sinclair sighed, shaking his head. "They have their people in a high school?"

"They do, David. It's prime recruiting territory, I'm told. This kid and his mother moved up here from Las Vegas last year. Vegas has a huge Russian Mafia problem. They train their recruits in big cities like Vegas, L.A., even Seattle, and then send them out to much smaller towns like ours where we don't have the training or the resources to stop them or even slow them down. They commit all kind of crimes at will, everything from petty burglary to kidnappings, human trafficking, even murder. And when someone disappears, these people leave no evidence and no trace."

"Oh my God." Rhett's face paled as he glanced over at Dr. Sinclair, who was looking a little shaken himself. "Judge, who is this guy?"

"Well, you're both going to find out sooner or later. His name is Gage Cameron. He's got a rap sheet a mile long and he's only seventeen."

"Cameron?" Dr. Sinclair's brow suddenly furrowed. "The kid who attacked Barry in the locker room the other day?"

"Yes, David. The very same."

"Well that explains a lot!" Dr. Sinclair's face turned angry.

"Right. Barry wouldn't have stood a chance against this Russian military-trained soldier. I assume you saw some of the videos of the fight that the kids were uploading to the internet?"

"Yes, I saw them." Dr. Sinclair admitted. His frown deepened.

"Well, then, David, you saw how adeptly this Cameron guy evaded your son's swing and then counter-punched with what I am told is a martial jab. It knocked poor Barry right off his feet and over the bench. And did you see the way this kid is built? No seventeen-year-old is that ripped unless he's doing a military workout everyday."



"Unbelievable. And knowing all of this you still let this kid back out onto our streets?" Dr. Sinclair grew even more incredulous.

"I just found out about this Mafia connection last night myself, David! I have to follow the law. He's been technically a minor and he's used that shield more times than we can count to get himself off the hook. But after his mother disappeared, I did manage to convince him to sign an emancipation order. He's now legally an adult so if we catch him again in some criminal act, I can put him away for a good long while."

"That's all well and good, Judge Walker," Rhett began, "but I don't understand how Savannah got all mixed up with this Cameron fellow."

Walker looked at Dr. Sinclair.

"I think that's my fault, Rhett. Barry took Savannah out for a pop last night."

"Pop?"

"Sodas, Rhett," the judge interjected. "Savannah and Barry were on a kind of date last night."

Rhett was nodding. "She called me late last night and said she'd be out with a friend; so she was with Barry?"

David nodded. "And now, because of this altercation between Barry and this, this *Mafioso*, you think maybe Savannah got caught up into whatever plans the Cameron kid had for my son?"

"I'm pretty sure that's what happened, David." The judge looked at Mr. Scotland. "I'm sorry, Rhett."

Rhett nodded, pursing his lips. "Listen, gentlemen; no one could have foreseen this Cameron kid doing what he did last night. I can't blame you, Dr. Sinclair, for any of this. You're just as much of a victim here as anyone of us."

"Still, Rhett, I can't help but feel responsible." The doctor worried his phone between his fingers.

“Don’t worry about it now. We need to try to find out if our children are still alive and if they are still alive, where are they?”

“Absolutely, Rhett. But now that both of you know what’s really going on, we have to keep a lid on it. DHS is in the middle of full-fledged investigation. I’m being told that they have some of their people flying into town in a few days. I need both of you to give me your word that you won’t breathe any of this to anyone until I can get the all-clear from Homeland. One false move or slip of the tongue on our part, and we may never see our kids again.”

# 3

**T**hree A.M. Gage opened his eyes as if awakened by some internal alarm clock. He slipped quietly to the edge of his cell as the burly but overweight detention officer half-slumbered by on his routine bed check, far too close to the bars than he should have been. With Gage's hand now firmly in place around his fatty neck and windpipe, the only sound the startled officer was able to make were rasping gasps as he slumped softly and quietly to the floor, his brain temporarily deprived of oxygen. Gage had maybe ten to twenty seconds before the other detention officer noticed the camera that covered his cell; sixty seconds if the guy was not really paying attention during the cell check. At least the door was well oiled as Gage exited the cell without so much as a squeak from the sliding steel bars. The guard's RF card let Gage out of the minimum security inner cell block. Another wave of the RF card then allowed Gage to enter the main hall of the small

sheriff's station. He exited the building through an employee door and into a freezing cold and mostly empty back parking lot.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the past two days Savannah had sat scared but fuming in the large lodge-like home seated high on the hill overlooking the Icicle valley and the Wenatchee River flowing through its icy riverbed below. She'd never been arrested in her life. But she was under some kind of house arrest now for Barry's disappearance. She wasn't sure why they hadn't placed her in a jail cell or allowed her to contact even her folks. The events of the past few days had left her wondering about what was really going on.

She'd had full run of the large modern home but there were armed security guards at every exit. The only place she had any privacy was in the home's windowless basement guest bedroom and bathroom.

Now early morning, she watched out of the home's living room window with curiosity as a white SUV drove up the winding driveway and parked under the porte-cochère. There were a number of muffled voices that she could hear down in the foyer and she watched incredulously as Judge Walker topped the stairs and approached her.

"Hello Savannah," he offered with a smile. "I'm being told that you're unhappy with our current protective custody arrangement."

"Is that what we're calling this? 'Protective custody'? How about kidnapping and illegal imprisonment?"

"Now, now, it's all very legal, I assure you. Besides, it's not as bad as it seems. And—"

"Not as bad? What could be worse than being held against your will without even being able to even make a phone call!?"

“Well, Savannah, the court could be keeping you in a cell somewhere. But under the circumstances, I thought my house would be a much more comfortable place. You’re a lot safer here than in town.”

“You mean I’m out of the way.”

“It’s however you’d like to look at it, Savannah.”

“What I’d like to do is call my folks and go home.”

“Well, unfortunately that’s not possible at the moment. Some very important people are going to be coming into town in a couple of days and they’re going to want to speak with you about what happened to Barry.”

“I already told you what happened and I’m not talking anymore to any of you until I see my lawyer!”

“As you wish. But I have a feeling you’re going to want to speak with these folks just the same. They’re very interested in what—excuse me for just a moment.” The judge tapped his smart phone and lifted it to his ear. “Oh, and Savannah, please try to keep quiet during my call; the police already know you’re here.”

The irate teenager frowned, glared, and then indignantly turned back toward the window in a huff.

“Yea,” the judge began and then paused to listen. “Oh for godsakes! You’re joking. Tell me this is a joke! HOW?!”

Savannah’s ears perked as she listed to one side of the conversation.

“Alright, you know what to do. Follow the official protocol all the way. I want this kid found and found now! Understood?!” The judge fat-fingered his phone trying to turn it off, very visibly upset.

Savannah smiled. “Lose something, Judge Walker?”

The judge looked at the debutante with anger still in his face. But then, as Savannah watched him, a kind of wicked smile returned to his expression. “Yes. Yes, as a matter of fact I did lose something. And you know Savannah, my sweet? I

have a sneaking suspicion I know *exactly* where I'll be able to find him."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gage's warm breath wisped lightly from him as he eyed the home from his unseen vantage point and studied the guards through a small set of military-grade binoculars. They had been quietly bringing in more people all day. There were now maybe two dozen of Walker's "people", as he called them. Not all of them were cops. At the moment he could see Savannah looking out of one of the large living room windows. They'd be waiting for him now, using her as bait.

Truth be told, Gage had never really paid any attention to women before; but this one—he shook his head. In the span of a few hours she'd managed to wind her way into his life and knock his mind completely off focus. Was he somehow actually more than just a little attracted to her? He didn't even want to think about that. He was free. He could be out of this two-horse town and onto the next one in no time. But there was much more to Savannah than just her beautiful looks. And now that Walker's people had her she was as good as dead.

So here he was; armed, prepped and about to do something really, really stupid. He took a bite from a protein bar and continued to survey the large lodge home from afar.

\* \* \* \* \*

The winter night air of the remote canyon chilled all the way to the bone. The officer walked around the outer deck of the posh, big-timbered home with its grand view of the pine forested valley and river below. For a moment he thought he saw a shadow of something flicker across the light behind him. He turned with his hand on his weapon, but there was nothing.

He frowned and then shook his head at his stupid skittishness. He didn't know why Walker had loaded up the big pine home with so many PD. But it was good overtime, even if he did have to walk around in the frigid air at night. Then something stung him in the back of the neck. His hand went immediately to the tiny pain as he pulled a kind of needle from his skin. His vision blurred as he tried to focus on the pin or needle or was it some—the officer crumpled quietly onto the outside deck.

Another officer strolling along the outside of deck rounded the corner to see his partner lying motionless, but before he could reach his radio, a stinging sensation rang out just behind his ear causing his world to spin quietly into darkness.

A shadowy figure stepped silently over the two guards and then slipped into the darkened house through a French door. The figure moved through an empty bedroom and then into the dimly-lit living room.

Suddenly the lights of the living room were on as a dozen uniformed and plain-clothed people trained their weapons on to the darkly-clad muscular teen. But a strange stinging sensation was already being felt by four of them as they began to slump quietly onto the floor. As the attention of the officers was momentarily focused on their slumping comrades, other darts were quickly airborne, as another four felt the sting of darkness and slumped quietly to the floor.

Before another officer could retrain his weapon, the teen intruder had already moved like a blur, rolling and then sweeping his leg under the very surprised officer who landed on the plush carpet with a heavy thud. Gage moved past him leaving the small poisoned acupuncture-like needle-dart tucked neatly into his neck.

Gage was now on his feet again and stood only a couple of feet from another guard in plain clothes. Gage had no idea who the man was, but he wasn't any kind of trained police. The man leveled his weapon at the teen's chest, its barrel trembling.

“D-don’t — don’t move!” the thirty-something man visibly shook.

With a quick smooth motion, Gage disarmed the citizen leaving a thin needle in the man’s wrist. Gage pushed the dazed man into his fellow guards who instinctively lowered their weapons in an attempt to catch and keep him from falling to the floor. Another dart struck the flat rocker light switch on the far wall turning the room dark once again with the sound of three more men hitting the floor one by one.



# 4

Savannah awoke with a start at the sound of a police siren somewhere not too distant outside. She'd gone to bed in the guest room at Judge Walker's house, but the room she was now in was not the same room. The street noise outside gave her the impression that she was back in town. Somehow fully dressed, she was laying on top of the covers of a small twin bed in what was a kind of sparsely furnished small studio apartment, maybe on the second floor.

Light streamed into the apartment through some sheer drapes that Gage now was looking out of as a police car sped off in the distance.

"Gage?" Savannah recognized him.

He turned to look at her and then lifted his finger to his lips. She kept quiet. She watched him looking out the window. He was dressed in some black, tight-fitting sportswear. Savannah's eyes couldn't help but follow his muscular

silhouette against the light of the window. His slim but large muscled and cut masculine form along with the curved outline of a well-filled package awakened some oddly amorous thoughts within her. She frowned. What would her very proper mother think of her if she knew the kind of thoughts her daughter was having at the moment?

Gage turned from the window of the small room. He folded one leg under himself as he sat on the side of the bed next to her. "You okay? They didn't hurt you, did they?"

"No, I'm fine," she said quietly. "Where am I?"

"In town, just above Front Street. A little place I keep here. You're safe."

"Another apartment? I thought you were struggling for money?"

He smiled at her.

"Gage Cameron, what is going on? Who are you?"

"I'm just a guy, Savannah. A guy trying to make a living. Just like everyone else."

"Hardly."

"Honestly, that's the truth."

"You took me from Judge Walker's house."

He nodded slightly.

"How? Gage, they had armed officers with guns and rifles. You don't just walk into a—a fortress like that and take someone out of there. I heard Judge Walker on the phone. He was really upset that you'd somehow escaped from jail. Who the hell are you?" Her voice began to rise as she glanced around rapidly.

"I'm just a guy who rescued you, that's all."

Savannah could tell this conversation was going to quickly go in circles. No matter—she was just grateful to be out of Walker's clutches.

"I want to go home and just see my family."

Gage nodded. "Yea, me too. But as long as Walker is still out there, you'll only be putting yourself back in danger again, and maybe your family as well."

"I can't believe I trusted that man," she fumed.

"He's not a good person, Savannah. I never have trusted him. Mom never trusted the man either." He frowned and shook his head.

"Oh—your mom," Savannah looked at Gage with wide eyes.

"My mom? Savannah, what about my mom?"

"Oh my God, Gage, your mom; I think—"

"You think what, Savannah?"

"Oh, my God," Savannah lifted her hand to her mouth, a memory suddenly flooding into her mind once again.

"Savannah tell me! What happened to you the other night? They kept telling me that you and Barry had *disappeared*, and that they had evidence that I was responsible for your murders."

"Murders?"

"For some reason, Savannah, they want everyone to think you and Barry are dead; and they want to pin all of this on me. You need to tell me where Barry is."

"Barry. Barry's gone, Gage." Savannah stared.

"What? Gone? You mean dead? How?"

"After I dropped you off at the body shop. I got a call from Barry. He wanted to meet me for a soda. He'd been chasing me all week, so I said yes."

Gage nodded.

"After we'd finished he said he wanted to show me something really cool, something I'd never seen before, he said. I thought he was just wanting to go park somewhere, you know, and maybe make out.

"So, we drove up the canyon past your house and then off-roaded it up to this old abandoned mine. It was all locked up but he had a key."

Gage listened; his ears hanging on her every word.

Savannah's voice grew firmer. "It was all kind of creepy at first but we went inside and he started showing me this long tunnel with lights strung along inside of it. It was kind of an adventure, you know, wandering through an old mine like that."

Gage's face was devoid of emotion as he listened.

"Then he takes me around this corner and we see some different lights on inside the mine. They're sort of dim lights, you know, but in the mine it's dark, they look brighter, somehow." Savannah seemed to stare blankly now as she spoke.

"Savannah, what happened to Barry?"

"There's like this 'T' in the tunnel," she continued, as if in some kind of shock from the memory. "But the tunnel that goes left and right, it's not right, it's like got a smooth floor and the walls are like smooth frosted glass or something.

"Do you know what this is?" Barry asks me." Savannah's lips thinned as she continued to relive the memory.

*"I've never seen anything like it. Barry, what is this place?"*

*"It's our secret. Our people have been keeping this quiet for over a hundred years. But we're the ones who've finally discovered what this place really is."*

*"Can we go in?"*

*"No, no. You don't want to go in there. It's too dangerous. But soon we will be able to. Real soon."*

"Then he starts getting all cuddly and wants to kiss me. But I'm not in the mood. I'm too fascinated by the lighted tunnel. It was like, familiar to me somehow. But I'd never seen it before.

"He tries to kiss me but I turn my head away."

*"C'mon, Savannah, it's just a little kiss."*

*"Barry, I don't want—"*

"But then suddenly he's like all over me. Kissing my neck, grabbing my chest. His hands are all over the front of my jeans and he's pulling and ripping my top."

Gage didn't stop her. He let her continue as the ugly memory spilled out of her.

"I—I just reacted; instinct I guess. I kned him really hard in the groin just like we'd been taught in self-defense class. He doubled over and I ran."

"Ran where, Savannah?"

"Into the light; the tunnel with the light."

"Then what?" Gage coaxed.

"He's—he's looking at me, all doubled-over."

"Where are you?"

"I'm standing in the smooth tunnel, with the light. But he's just looking at me really angrily, clenching his teeth; like he's gonna hurt me—real bad. He starts to move toward me, he's seething, gritting his teeth at me, and then he—he leaves." She blinked.

"He leaves?" Gage could see the shocked look crossing Savanna's face.

"Yea," she whispered.

"How? How does he leave, Savanna?"

"I don't know, he just—leaves."

"He was coming toward you, Savannah—wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Angry." Gage coaxed.

"Very. Very angry."

"He's coming at you," Gage emphasized trying to help her with the memory.

"Yes!" she began to whimper in fear as the emotion of the awful memory crossed her face.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm backing against the tunnel wall. He's coming at me!"

"He's in the tunnel!" Gage coaxed again.

"Oh, my God! The light!"

"What about the light, Savanna. Tell me about the light."

"It has him!"

"It has him?"

"He's fighting it! It's getting brighter! *Oh, my God, Barry!*" she screamed her eyes wet with pain.

"Barry!" Gage tried to help her hold on to the memory.

"What happened to Barry? What did the light do?"

"It's hurting him! Tearing him apart!" she cried.

"It's tearing him?" Gage's eyes drew wide.

"I felt it. The light didn't like him. He wasn't supposed to be there, in the tunnel."

"The light didn't like him?"

She nodded. "And then he was gone. Oh, Gage, he's gone!" she suddenly burst bawling into tears. Gage immediately took hold of her, holding her tightly as the tears erupted from within her. "He's gone—oh, my God, Gage, he's gone." She wept bitterly.

"It's okay, Savannah." Gage rocked her softly in his arms. "You're safe now. It's okay."

She held as tightly as she could to him.

With Savannah in his arms Gage could feel the turmoil of her soul within himself. He felt her horror. And then without realizing, he sank his own feelings deeply into hers, calming her, soothing away the pain and turmoil she'd bottled-up inside herself from the terrible memory. He hoped in her present state of mind she wouldn't see or feel how he was able to do the things he was doing; but right now he just didn't care if she noticed or not. Savannah needed him. And right now, with her in his arms, somehow he was beginning to feel that maybe he needed her as well.

# 5

**Y**ou bumbling fools! Do you have any idea how much time and resources we've invested in this over the past century!?"

"I don't know who the hell you think you're talking to but I don't have to take that kind of talk from some dumbass fed!" Judge Walker shot back, now standing over the conference room table.

"Oh, you'll take it, and you'll like it!" the man fired back, already angrily standing.

"Like hell! Your high and mighty agency couldn't keep a lid on the kid; so don't come onto my turf and start giving me what-for when your own people couldn't keep him contained for more than five minutes either!" Walker glared, not taking his eyes off the special DHS agent.

The momentary silence was palpable as the two men glared at each other. None of the other assembled people dared to say a word—until a calm, deeper voice broke in.

"If you two, pricks, are finished," Brad calmly interjected, "perhaps we can get down business."

Both men now turned their glares toward him. The fact was, neither of them really knew who he was or even why he was here.

"Fine!" the DHS agent fumed and retook his chair at the table. Walker retook his as well.

"So now that we all hate each other," Brad continued, "I need to know more about these two subjects."

"Subjects?" Judge Walker raised his eyebrow at Brad.

"Yes, Mr. Walker, we need to know when, exactly, was the last time the subjects were in your possession and how."

"These people aren't targets, Mr.—"

"It's just Brad, Mr. Walker."

"—Brad. We need them alive."

"That's not your decision at this point, gentlemen. I'm being paid to assess the situation, provide a resource analysis and, if necessary, intervene."

"Intervene? What the hell does that mean?" the DHS agent asserted. "Homeland Security is in charge here."

"Of course you are. But if there are more of these mishaps, I've been brought in simply for—insurance purposes."

\* \* \* \* \*

The new bright red Corvette moved easily along the highway that paralleled the Columbia River past a place called Rocky Reach. A large dam with a lot of power lines leading away from it spilled huge sprays of water downstream. Sitting next to Gage, Savannah looked on at the massive hydroelectric structure as he drove the beefy sports car along the highway at just under the speed limit.

"I still don't get it. The police are out looking for you, they have your picture on every news site and milk carton in four



counties and we're driving in *this*? Doesn't this just scream 'arrest me now'?"

"We're wearing sunglasses." Gage grinned, checking his mirrors for any signs of a tail.

"Oh, because that's reassuring."

"It's just basic psychology, Savannah. Do exactly what the police don't think you will be doing. They won't be flagging a car like this as a getaway vehicle. They also won't really be too focused on this county; they'll think we've fled."

"What happens if we get caught?"

Gage scowled behind his dark designer Oakley's.

"That bad, huh?"

"That bad."

Savannah had never been to Lake Chelan. She stared out the window, entranced by the wide river bordered by leafless orchards, as their car moved past the entrance of the Eniat valley.

"You kind of make me nervous, Gage Cameron. Just so you know."

"Oh, why's that?"

"I'm still trying to figure out if I'm in the hands of the good guys or the bad guys."

"And which one am I?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe you should think about it this way, I'm not the one trying to kidnap and kill you."

"True, but you're not exactly what I expected. First you're a poor high school kid with flat tires on a classic car; but your trailer home is decorated like a magazine. You get arrested and thrown in jail and then suddenly you're rescuing *me* from a house full of police."

"They weren't *all* police."

"See! That's what I mean; you know and can spot an officer a mile a way."

"You're probably just Stockholmed."

"You're not helping."

He looked over and grinned at her.

"And those dimples of yours are slaying me—just so you know," she added.

"Well, you're not exactly hard on the eyes yourself, Savannah. That cute little accent of yours is really beginning to grow on me. I think I'm actually starting to like it."

"What's not to like about being from the South?"

Gage snickered at the way she said 'laaahhhk'. "I guess it's just because it's different. I wasn't raised in the South."

"Yank," she grinned.

"Yea, I suppose." Gage checked his mirrors again.

Their car easily climbed the steep hill heading for a tunnel.

"You look like you're a million miles away right now." Savannah idly twisted her fingers together in her lap. "What's in your bubble?"

"My what?"

"Your 'thought bubble', like in a comic book."

"Oh." Gage paused. He wasn't sure he wanted to discuss any of the things Savannah had been through. She'd had a couple of days to rest and recuperate after the ordeal, but he didn't want to keep reminding her of the bad memory again and again. A change of subjects was in order.

"So what is a beautiful Southern belle like you doing a tourist-trap town like Leavenworth? Seems a little out of place for someone like you."

"Daddy's an investor in the new LIFE21 Project."

Gage nodded. "Right, they want to like double the size of the town, make it into a kind of Bavarian theme park."

"I guess that's kind of what we do. Our family helped develop places like Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg; and we helped build Dollywood."

"Dollywood?"

"Sure, you know, Dolly Parton, the country singer?"

"She has her own theme park, named 'Dollywood,'" he deadpanned.

"You don't get out much, do you?"

Gage rolled his eyes. "Apparently not."

Their car rounded a corner in the highway bringing the beauty and majesty of Lake Chelan into full view.

"Oh, my God, Gage, it's beautiful!"

Gage nodded and smiled as he watched Savannah take in the splendor of the massive deep mountain lake. It made him glad that he could at least take her mind off of the gravity of their situation, if only for a few minutes.

"So where are going?"

"A place called Twenty-Five Mile. The lake is fifty miles long, so this place marks the halfway point. You need a boat or a seaplane to get any further. I know someone with a lake house up here. We'll be able to relax and think better without all of this police nonsense."

"You don't really believe that—that this is all just nonsense." Her voice shook a little.

"No. No, it was just a figure of speech."

"What do you think is really going on, with Judge Walker, I mean?" She lowered her glasses. Her green eyes were serious.

"I'm not really sure yet, Savannah. It seems like he's trying to pin the disappearances of people on me—or someone. Maybe to kind of sweep under the rug whatever is in that mine. I'm still trying to figure out if I was just a convenient choice or if maybe there's some other reason."

Savannah nodded. She stared out the window and the glistening frigid waters and icy shore. "You know Christmas is next week." "I've never been away from my folks during the holidays, ever."

Gage reached out his hand to hers and squeezed it. "I don't know what's going to happen, Savannah. Whether or not this thing blows over in the next couple of days or weeks or not.

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But I'll celebrate Christmas with you. That is, if you don't mind celebrating with the 'bad guys.'"

She squeezed his hand with a misty smile.

# 6

**Y**ou're running out of time, Brad. How much longer is your team going to take?" Harlan's voice was emphatic but still polite over the phone.

"As long as necessary, Mr. Harlan. Poor planning on your part does not necessitate an emergency on mine. These things can take time to work themselves out. Be patient."

"Yea, well, you're not the one who has to deliver a constant stream of bad news to *mein Fuhrer*."

"Again—" Brad began.

"Yea, yea, 'not your monkeys, not your circus'. I get it."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, just please call me the second something drops."

"Good day, Mr. Harlan."

Brad tapped his phone off and looked at the faces of his team working busily in their private conference area that had been transformed into a kind of high-tech war room.

A tall woman dressed in a nicely fitted black business suit approached. She moved close and wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders.

"There's a storm moving in." She got him to offer a rare smile.

"I know. I feel it."

"I know you can. You like storms."

He nodded imperceptibly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Savannah awoke warmly, slowly. For the first time in the last several nights she was free from the nightmares of being underground and running from a light she knew was trying to kill her. The twin bed was covered with a soft and fluffy duvet that kept her warm in the cold air of her small bedroom. She wondered if Gage was up yet. He typically liked to sleep in after being up late at night doing whatever he did while on the phone; speaking in some foreign language that sounded maybe like Russian.

She got up and dressed in some warm, soft white and pink sweats that Gage had found for her at one of the boutiques while the both of them clandestinely shopped in Chelan a few days earlier.

The small lake house had been slightly set into the steep bank of the lake with most of it actually built on pylons that set it out over the water. A large front deck would have been great for parties in the summer. But as Savannah emerged from her room into the home's singular great room, she could see snow falling thickly, covering the deck and furniture outside. It reminded her of home and the snow she'd seen often when the

family had vacationed in the mountains. It was beautiful how it fell silently across the near glassy stillness of the lake.

His room's door slightly ajar, Savannah peeked in to see Gage laying quietly on top of the covers, shirtless and barefoot but still in his jeans from the night before. As cold as the room was, he always seemed to like to sleep without covers in just his jeans. Savannah found that odd—didn't he feel how chilly it was?

The teenager made some coffee in a drip coffee maker and then rekindled the fire in the fireplace from the night before. Gage had already stacked plenty of wood for her to use now that he knew she liked a warm morning fire to sit by to have her coffee or cocoa.

The small house warmed and the smell of fresh coffee filled it as Savannah sat curled up on the sofa looking at their modest tree and the miniature lit-up Christmas town he'd bought for her. The two of them had spent hours having fun setting it up on the fireplace mantle. Looking at its slowly scintillating lights and lavish details gave her a warm Christmassy feeling inside.

She heard his door open and then watched him quietly as he moved still shirtless and barefoot to the coffee pot and poured himself a mugful. She watched as he sat down next to her on the small sofa and warmed his hands on the large mug.

"Hey, Merry Christmas, there, mister," she offered, smiling at the stunning guy as he moved his fingers through his pillow hair trying to smooth it.

"Merry Christmas," he smiled back. "It's snowing, finally. You got your wish."

"I did!" For a moment, her beautiful smile took his breath away.

"Your Christmas spirit is ridiculously infectious. I can't believe you actually had me singing Christmas carols with you last night." He grinned at her over the top of his cup.

“You have a magical voice, Mr. Cameron. You could be up front in our church or even on a talent show, you know. You’d win in a heartbeat.”

“Yea? In another time and another place, maybe.” He took a sip of his coffee.

“I bet you’re dying to know what I got you!”

“The thought has crossed my mind.” Gage grinned. The remorse he felt at spending this first Christmas without his mom was easily softened by the company of his exuberantly cheerful and adorable guest. It was obvious that Savannah loved Christmas and over the past several days he’d made it his mission to give her, if not a huge celebration, at least a celebration that would be cozy, warm and memorable.

“Do you want to open your presents now? Or wait?” Savannah’s, green eyes were sparkling.

Gage grinned. “Wait for what? Let’s open them now.” He nodded toward their tree.



# 7

**T**his isn't working, Mr. Rigel. With all due respect, I can't keep tossing people into this mine with nothing but hopes that they're going to come out alive. These disappearances are beginning to attract some attention. The authorities we can handle, but the townspeople and especially the business owners, they're starting to ask questions—and get nervous. I'm beginning to hear all kinds of conspiracy theories. If this catches the attention of the media, I won't be able to keep putting the blame on some kid whom no one has seen in weeks."

"Yes, yes, of course, Judge Walker. We do need to play this a bit closer to the vest than what we have been. We don't need to inadvertently attract the attention of our adversaries. That would be disastrous at this point. It's just that we're so very close."

"I agree."

“Very well. However, the Scotlands are an unfortunate necessity at this point.”

“I agree. If we can’t find Savannah, Georgia Scotland may be our only link.”

“I see. We may need to fall back on Mrs. Scotland if the situation doesn’t improve. Have we really no leads on the whereabouts of her daughter?”

“We do have DHS’s resources fully engaged, and the contract team as well. They’re being very thorough.”

“Yes, they are very good, but unfortunately, I can see that I am going to have to bring in someone who is just a little bit better.”

Walker had already seen the efficiency of DHS and the impressive display of technology that Brad’s contract team had assembled. He had his doubts that NASA itself could have assembled better surveillance equipment.

“You can stand down your teams for now, Judge Walker. Patch things up with the locals as best you can. We’ll handle things a bit more quietly from here on out.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Savannah, wake up!” The urgent whisper that intruded through her dreams brought the girl instantly awake to see Gage hovering over her in the dimness of her room.

“What! What’s going on?”

“Get dressed, we have to leave. Now.” His voice low and emphatic.

Savannah didn’t argue. She quickly tossed on her clothes from the day before and took up the day bag that Gage had asked her to keep prepared many weeks ago. His own go bag was already in his hand. Savannah was still zipping up her warm jacket and slipping on gloves while Gage led her outside

and then down a path to the docks in the dead of the winter night.

A light snow fell past the dock's one streetlight as Gage quietly uncovered and then stepped into an inflated skiff with a small battery-powered trolling motor. He helped Savannah into the raft and then pushed off, quietly heading them up the lake along the icy shore. They silently passed by the ice-covered pylons of the small lake house that had been their home for these past several weeks. Someone was already in the house; the lights were on and Savanna could make out shadows of quite a number of people moving inside as they trolled quietly by over the dark water in their small boat.

A tall handsome man with weathered skin looked unhappily at the DHS agents still mulling about the home.

"There's no one here, Sir."

"I think I can bloody see that," his thick Aussie accent not hiding his sudden frustration. "How long?"

"No more than twenty minutes. We're still getting a faint heat signature from one of the bedrooms."

"Bloody Christ," he swore under his breath and then pushed his way outside and onto the snow-covered deck of the house. He went to the deck railing that overlooked the water below and through gifted vision scanned the shore for as far as he could see in all directions for signs of anyone. But all he was able to perceive were the frigid waves lapping the rocky shore on the starless night.

"Dammit!" Rowan struck the railing with his fist in frustration, deeply cracking the large timber.

Savannah could hardly see a thing in the cold night air, but at least she'd dressed warmly. She said nothing but just trusted

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Gage to guide their small skiff along the shore or wherever they were going.

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\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of LEGACY is available now! Get your full copy to find out what happens next!