

The book cover features a man and a woman in a dramatic, ethereal setting. The man, on the left, is shirtless and muscular, wearing dark jeans, looking off to the side. The woman, on the right, has long, flowing blonde hair and is wearing a red, form-fitting, off-the-shoulder dress, looking directly at the viewer with her hand near her face. The background is a dark, cloudy sky with a bright light source behind the woman, creating a halo effect and illuminating the scene with soft, glowing particles.

HARLEY AUSTIN

BOOK TWO

# DOMINION

A WAKENED 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

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DOMINION

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BOOK FIVE  
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BOOK ELEVEN  
NOVUS

BOOK SIX  
PARADISUS

BOOK TWELVE  
ASCENSION

AWAKENED SERIES

BOOK TWO

# DOMINION

HARLEY AUSTIN

HARLEY AUSTIN PUBLISHING

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Published by Harley Austin Publishing | [HarleyAustin.com](http://HarleyAustin.com)

Amazon ISBN Paperback: 978-1503158511

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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 LIFEBLOOD 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 unsnapped 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."

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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."

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