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The Apocrypha Line

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Shannon Michelle Purchase

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Prologue

This the angels showed me. From them I heard all things, and understood what I saw; that which will not take place in this generation, but in a generation which is to succeed at a distant period, on account of the elect. 1Enoch 1:2

A man holding a hand grenade, a woman wearing three strands of blow job beads, and a young Asian woman in a caterer's uniform boarded the streetcar at Lee Circle. "Uh-scuse me," the man said. "Gentlemen first." He pushed past the women, waved his three-day Jazzy Pass in the air, and took four swipes at the fare counter before the driver snatched the pass from his hands, flipped it over, and swept it through the card reader.

The only empty seat on the streetcar was beside Joss, and she already knew who'd take it. Thank God they were almost to Canal Street. The man sat down next to her just as the streetcar lurched forward, causing him to spill the contents of his hand grenade on Joss's lap. Slushy green liquid soaked through her white linen slacks; she jumped to her feet, tried to brush away the frozen concoction. "Are

you kidding me?" she said. This was why she hated New Orleans. This and a million other reasons. She wanted to go home, back to her niece, Evie, and their quiet life in Oregon.

"Oops," the man said. "Looks like you got bombed." His words slurred into laughter before he even finished his sentence.

There was a puddle of sticky alcohol on her seat now, dripping through the slats of the wood to the floor below. "Just move."

The man shifted about an inch back on his seat, then flopped his head back, about to pass out, so Joss was forced to decide whether to squeeze past facing away from the man or towards him, butt or boobs. He looked like he'd spent the entire evening wandering the Quarter. Butt, she decided. She squeezed by. He smacked her ass.

"Idiot," she said, and moved toward the rear exit. The streetcar rumbled to a stop on Carondelet, just before Canal Street. Now, she would really have to face the mobs. She didn't think anyone would ever recognize her. Her formerly long, black hair was now silver and cut in a pixie

style. Farm work had hardened her once soft body. She was a different person now. When she had fled New Orleans eighteen years ago, she'd sworn she would never return. And she hadn't, even when her sister, Violet, died three years later. Now, here she was. Not only in New Orleans, but heading for Bourbon Street. The worst of the worst.

Joss stepped off the streetcar. Everything was just as she'd remembered it. The Footlocker was still on the corner where the streetcar stopped; drunken tourists and worn-down locals still perched on the sloped ledge beneath the store window, or sat on the filthy sidewalk beneath it, while waiting for the St. Charles streetcar to take them uptown. The air was still too soupy to breathe, thick with humidity and the vapors rising from the filth that littered the French Quarter. Garbage, vomit, sweat, and alcohol. She started towards the crosswalk, just wanting to get this visit over with as quickly as possible.

First, she needed to change. People kept looking at her crotch, some even pointed. It didn't matter what the tourists thought of her, but she didn't want to stand out. Her mission would be hard enough as it was, and she'd

prefer to blend in. Standing out could get her in serious trouble, but Evie was worth all this.

Locating one man—one nameless man—among thousands, well, it was daunting. She had a few ideas of where to look, but her green crotch was definitely attracting too much attention. It was ten o'clock, though, and finding a new pair of pants would be difficult. Why couldn't the asshole have spilled on her shirt? A shirt would be no problem; dozens of tee-shirt shops lined Canal and Bourbon. She would have her choice of tees emblazoned with catchy slogans like, "I Support Single Moms, One Dollar at a Time," or, her personal favorite, "I Got Bourbon Faced on Shit Street." Pants, on the other hand, might be tricky.

She crossed the street and stopped at the first shop she saw. The thing about the open-all-night tee-shirt shops in the French Quarter is that if you've visited one, you've visited them all. The merchandise would be about the same in any of them, so you might as well buy whatever junk you're after in the first one you stop at. Joss looked around. Near the front of the store was a rack of tie-dyed hippie dresses which were backless and way too low-cut.

Next to the dresses, there was a table stacked with flimsy mass-produced sarongs.

"Help you find something, Miss?" the clerk asked.

"Do you have any pants?" Joss made a sweeping motion in front of the green stain on her slacks. "Someone spilled their drink on my lap."

"Just those," the clerk said, waving her to the rear of the shop.

The back wall, like all the other walls, was covered in peg board, metal hooks jutting out at odd intervals to hold displays of cheap clothing and beads. And there were the pants.

Great.

Joss had her choice of several styles. There were three colors of short-shorts, each with a rhinestone fleur-de-lis bedazzled over the hipbone. Shorts so short she was certain that half of her rear would hang out the bottom. Joss was forty-eight years old. She didn't do short-shorts, despite the fact that she was still trim and farm work kept her toned. The only option left glared out at her. Yoga

pants, her choice of hot pink or aqua. The aqua pair had "Bourbon St." printed across the seat in gold foil letters. The hot pink pair had "NOLA" in black letters. Hot pink it would be. She paid for the pants and asked if there was a dressing room she could use to change.

"No, *chere,*" the clerk said, "Step behind the curtain into the storage room if you want. Just be fast about it, I'm not supposed to let customers back there."

Joss changed quickly and tossed the old pants into a large trash bin. The stain would never come out anyway. She thanked the clerk and hurried out of the store, trying not to dwell on the fact that she'd just traded a green crotch for a printed butt. She had more important things to worry about. Things were changing fast. Too fast. Evie, the niece she had raised pretty much since birth, had just turned twenty-three. Now she'd decided to go move out to attend graduate school. Away from the safe, hidden existence Joss had engineered for her years ago.

Joss had managed to keep Evie on the ranch for all these years. Their small town was safe. Joss had done background checks on every family before moving there, and

on the few newcomers that had arrived since. Still, Joss had homeschooled her niece, and Evie had even gotten her bachelor's degree from Oregon State's online program. Joss had been shocked when, a few months ago, Evie told her she'd been accepted into the master's program at Eastern Oregon. It was only a few hours away, and LaGrande was still pretty isolated, but it was much larger than Evie was accustomed to. And there were way too many people there for Joss to run background checks on them all. Joss didn't blame Evie for her grasp at a normal life; she just wanted to be sure that this move wouldn't lead Evie's father, Sam, straight to them.

And the only person who could help Joss make sure that she and Evie stayed hidden was Danel. And Danel was missing. Or, at least, Joss hadn't heard from him in over a year, and her attempts at contacting him through the usual methods had all failed. This trip to Bourbon Street was her last resort. The man she was looking for was Danel's friend, one of few people, he had once told her, that he trusted without reservation. Joss didn't know the man's name, but she'd met him once with Danel. "Remember him, Josephine," Danel had said to her. "He'll always be able to

track me down, and you'll always be able to track him down. He's on Bourbon, working in some bar, almost every night." Well, now she was counting on that.

And now she was on Bourbon Street, wearing tight pants made for coeds, preparing to go into every bar until she found the man. How many bars were on Bourbon, anyway? Dozens, she guessed, not counting the go-cup stands and daiquiri shops. And what about the strip clubs? Might he work in one of those? It would take a week to make her way through all of the possibilities. At least Bourbon Street had remained relatively unchanged over the years. Before her trip she'd used Google Earth to reacquaint herself with the area, so she felt prepared for the search. She decided to play the odds. First, she'd check the bar he worked at when she met him eighteen years ago. If she was lucky, he'd still work there. Though judging by how the evening had gone so far, this wasn't going to be a night blessed with luck. If he wasn't there, she'd make her way through all the bars of a similar caliber. Maybe the guy had a type.

Joss stood for a moment, looking down the length of the street. The Friday night crowd was swarming Bourbon, which was blocked to traffic at night. It looked just the

same. Neon bar lights still flashed, reflecting on the wet asphalt. Tourists still wandered without aim, laughing and carrying oversized daiquiri cups and drinking Huge Ass Beers. Bouncers stood outside their bars, pretending to check IDs and trying to charm pretty girls into their bars in hope of attracting the real spenders, the middle-aged men. Just the same.

She took a deep breath, and shook off the old memories. Danel's friend, when she'd met him, had been a bartender at The Cats Meow, almost at the other end of the tourist stretch of Bourbon. The center of the street was the best place to walk. The sidewalks were crowded, and it was too easy to be bumped into the filthy gutters. The pavement on the street was rounded, so the muck drained to the sides, leaving the center relatively uncontaminated. Joss made her way toward Rue St. Peter, weaving through throngs of tourists. There was a time she would have expected cat-calls and invitations to join groups of revelers for drinks, but that was in her pre-wrinkle cream era. For the most part, thank God, she seemed to be invisible to the people she passed.

"Stop, woman!" a man said, his voice booming at Joss. She felt her heart skip before she saw the fliers he was holding and realized he was just one of the Bourbon Street crazies. "Turn from this filth that will rot your soul!"

Whoops. Eye contact. She was out of practice; in the old days, she never would have ambled into a group of proselytizers by mistake. She averted her eyes and dodged to the left.

"Don't go down that street," the man continued, dodging with her. "The wages of sin is death. Keep to the ways of the righteous." He thrust a pamphlet into her hands.

It was the typical watery painting of Jesus on the cross, with red lettering across the bottom. *Where Will YOU Go When You Die?* She almost laughed.

"Here," she said, handing the brochure back. "You need this more than I do." She sped past him and jaggged to the right to avoid his-colleague—who was waving a sign with all the subtlety of a Las Vegas showgirl and the size of the Goodyear blimp. *Fear God*, it said in red letters dripping

with blood and draped with Mardi Grad beads. God wasn't the one she feared.

Once she made it through the gauntlet of zealots, the going was easy. She could see the pink and green neon sign of The Cats Meow ahead. The iron lace balcony on the second story of the bar was lined with patrons. They stood shoulder to shoulder, leaning on the railing; some were dangling beads and whistling at girls on the street, offering their plastic trinkets for a flash of breasts. Maybe if they were throwing Harry Winston diamonds, she'd do it.

She was standing outside, now. Not moving. She took a deep breath, and forced her feet toward the door. He probably wouldn't be in there, and, anyway, she didn't know why she was so nervous. She'd come a long way to find this guy, and Danel trusted him, so he must be okay.

The bouncer was checking everyone's ID, which was something new. She didn't remember ever having been carded in the Quarter before. She went inside and discovered that the bar looked the same. A group of young girls about Evie's age were on the karaoke stage, singing a bad

rendition of "Like a Prayer." The closest Evie had to a friend, aside from Joss, was their mail carrier, John, a kind man in his sixties who always stopped to chat with Evie for a few minutes when he delivered the mail to their ranch. Joss felt a pang of guilt. She'd just been trying to keep Evie safe, but perhaps she'd gone too far.

Joss made her way around the first floor, scoping out the employees. The man she was looking for was at least 6'6", as tall as Danel, so she shouldn't have much trouble spotting him. She made the loop twice before heading upstairs, just to be sure she hadn't missed him. He wasn't upstairs, either. A young server was gathering empty glasses from a table that had just been vacated, and Joss saw it as an opportunity. Danel had warned her that looking for his friend wasn't without risk—Evie's father, Sam, also knew him and might have people watching him. It had been a long time since Joss had seen the man, but she had no idea how often Danel came around. It could still be risky to be too obvious in her search. But Joss was a good actress, and practically a professional chameleon.

"Miss?" Joss said, infusing her voice with youthful up-talk and the sort of bounce that coordinated with the

hot pink pants. "I was down here last weekend and—well, this might sound strange..."

The girl smiled. "I've heard it all."

"So I met a guy who worked at a bar, right? Trouble is I can't remember which bar." Joss sighed. "You know how that goes?"

The waitress nodded, still loading her tray with empty glasses.

"Anyways, I know I was here at some point. He was really tall? Like way over six feet? Big guy, dark skin, has a tattoo of a cross on his arm?" Joss held her breath. "Really good looking guy?" she added.

The waitress laughed. "Sorry, no one like that works here." She took a pass at the table top with a damp cloth. "My roommate tends at Tropical Isle Bourbon—the one just up from here, towards St. Ann—and she always talks about this huge bouncer they have. Might be worth a try."

Joss thanked the waitress, and headed back to the street. She realized that, despite her bad luck and her self-talk to the contrary, she'd expected the guy to still

work at Cats Meow. The thought that she might actually have to spend several evenings down here on her search made her shudder.

Tropical Isle Bourbon was much smaller than Cats Meow, but they had a live Blues band playing, so the place was packed. A swarm of people surrounded the bouncer stationed just outside the open double door entrance. Despite the crowd, Joss could see that he was tall enough to be her guy, and though his skin was a little lighter than she recalled, it had been almost twenty years. Her memory was a little hazy. This could definitely be Danel's friend.

She pushed with the crowd, making her way to the entrance. The bouncer's profile came into view, then a muscular arm clad in a tight black shirt. She didn't see the tattoo, but she couldn't recall which arm it had been on. A large group of girls wearing matching tee-shirts emblazoned with *Norah's Gettin' Hitched!* on the back were allowed in all at once, leaving Joss standing before the bouncer. He was so close to what she remembered, but something wasn't right about him.

"Are you..." she stopped. Danel had warned her that looking for his friend was risky. She wasn't sure this was the guy. "Have we met?" she asked. "You look familiar."

He had been watching the exit, waiting for people to wander out so he could let more in, but when she spoke, his attention focused on her. It wasn't him. She was sure of it. "Oh, you know, I don't think you're who I thought," she said, turning to go.

"Don't you want in?" he asked. "Your turn." He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, uh, yeah," she said. "That's right." She was flustered. The bouncer was studying her now. She was alone on Bourbon, not slurring her words, and acting like she was lost or crazy. She'd done so much better at Cats Meow. "Actually, I think my friend told me to meet her at the other Tropical Isle."

"Huh," the bouncer said, turning back to watch the exit.

Joss started to walk away.

"Hey Miss," the bouncer called out to her. "Guy you thought I was—check over at Oz. There's a tender over there what could be my brother."

"Oh," she said, hoping she sounded nonchalant. She headed away from Oz, in the direction of the original Tropical Isle, where she'd told the bouncer she was meeting a friend. Her intuition pricked, and she didn't like that the man looked so much like Danel's friend and even worked near him. She'd head to the other Tropical Isle, order a drink, and stand around trying to look like she was waiting on someone. After a while, she could head back up Royal, a street running parallel to Bourbon, and cut back over to Oz without ever being in sight of the bouncer.

She chanced a look behind her, and the bouncer was paying no attention to her. He was gesturing with an ID and laughing with some pretty girls. Their encounter had probably been nothing to be concerned with. At his height, people would notice him, and surely some patrons mentioned his look-alike at Oz. Not that Oz and Tropical Isle have much of an overlap in clientele. But still. The bars were in such close proximity, someone was bound to notice the two tall men.

It was almost eleven o'clock now, and the crowd on Bourbon was growing even thicker. Dotted the street, clusters of people stopped to chat and toast one another before rejoining the streams flowing in and out of bars and shops. Joss seemed to be the only one who was alone tonight. She hurried into the original Tropical Isle, realizing she really did want that drink. Just one, to erode her nervousness.

The girl at the bar mixed her a Jack and Diet Coke. Joss stood near the entrance to the bar, checking her watch and looking impatient. After ten minutes, her drink was gone. She could pretend to wait a bit longer, maybe have one more drink. Ice had been the main ingredient in her cocktail, but two might still give her a buzz she didn't want. Well, a buzz she did want, but couldn't afford. Better skip the second drink. She left the bar, muttering about getting stood up as she exited, in case someone was paying attention.

Royal Street is a photo negative of Bourbon. It is open to pedestrian use only during the hours Bourbon is open to traffic. Antique shops, galleries, and upscale boutiques attract the type of tourists who venture out in

the daylight hours. Royal was, altogether, more to Joss's liking, though it did still smell of garbage. At night, displays are left lit for window shoppers, but stores are locked tight. There is always at least a smattering of people on the sidewalks, gazing at overpriced baubles through wavy glass.

Walking down the quiet street, Joss was alert. She'd messed up with that bouncer. A couple, hand in hand, strolled half a block ahead of her, and a group of boys was walking toward her, on the sidewalk opposite. They looked like they were done for the night, perhaps heading back to a French Quarter hotel. Joss thought of her quiet hotel room. She longed to be done with this errand and sleeping in the comfortable bed, preparing for a flight home to Evie. The New Orleans trip was a secret, Evie thought Joss was in Portland attending to business with her lawyer. She tried never to mention New Orleans around Evie, as if she could, by force of will, make Evie would forget the city existed. Evie's father knew they had fled New Orleans, but he was all too aware of the weaknesses of humanity and he knew the temptation of finding one's roots. He'd never stop looking for Evie here.

A pale, slender boy came around the corner just as Joss approached. He was dressed as a Goth, in all black with dark eyes and lips. He smiled a slow grin, revealing his teeth, filed into sharp points. Joss had supposed that, by now, the vampires—as they called themselves—would have moved on, but clearly there were at least a few still in the city.

The thing about vamps was that you could never tell the harmless from the real kooks. Some were just kids, rebelling against their parents and the world. Others were more removed from humanity. They lived the vampire lifestyle, drinking blood, sometimes hurting people. Humans weren't meant to drink blood. It made them turn crazy. And these crazies flocked to New Orleans, thanks to those Ann Rice books that never seemed to go out of favor. Now, there were vampire tours from dozens of operators running several times a day. People bought vampire souvenirs, thinking New Orleans had a long history of vampire infestation. In reality, New Orleans had no legends of vampires older than the oldest of those Lestat books. If only that teenage boy knew who really roamed the streets, not just here, but

everywhere, maybe he'd borrow his mother's makeup remover and cap those teeth.

The boy-vampire continued on his way, and at Rue St. Ann Joss cut back over to Bourbon. The music streaming from the open doors of Oz was a techno remix of a song she vaguely recognized. Madonna, maybe. Did gay men still love her? Joss didn't know what was popular these days. Inside, it looked like Mardi Gras; men were packed wall-to-wall, lit up with strong drinks and unabashed revelry. Oz's demographic was men, but there had always been a smattering of women who loved to dance at the club, and Joss noticed that hadn't changed. This had been one of the few places in the Quarter that Joss had actually liked. She could come here and just dance, forget herself for a while. She knew she'd never run into any of the family, especially her sister, Violet. She'd never have come here. Too prissy, too proper. That, and there was an inexhaustible supply of dance partners that wanted nothing from her but to share a good beat. Eventually, she got to know the regulars, and Oz became her safe place. Ironic, she thought, that she might find Danel's friend here.

Joss turned sideways and slipped through the small gaps between the bodies filling the space from the door to the bar. Still ten feet shy of the counter, she spotted a tall bartender. She could only see the back of his head, but it looked like her guy. Of course, she'd thought the same thing at Tropical Isle. But really, how many men of his size and general description could possibly work on Bourbon? She weaseled in as close as possible, but the mass of customers at the bar prevented her from getting a good look. This time, she wanted to be sure she had the right man before attracting his attention.

Fifteen minutes later, Joss managed to wedge into an opening at the bar. She had cash in hand, like any other customer; only her gender made her stand out in the crowd. Well, that and the damn pants. But they were out of sight below the bar, and her close cropped hair, at least, helped her blend in. She stood at the corner of the bar nearest the door, where another bartender was taking orders. The tall man was serving the side to her left, which ought to give her a good view of his face as soon as he turned to use the soda fountain. Her bartender hadn't noticed her yet, and she hoped he wouldn't for a while, affording her

the time she needed to observe. The tall man stood at the computer, adding a round of drinks to someone's tab.

The other bartender finished with a customer and turned to Joss. "What can I get you, honey?"

Shoot. "Jack and Diet Coke, please."

Just as she spoke, the tall man turned in her direction. His eyes met hers. It was Danel's friend, no doubt this time. She knew he wouldn't have aged, but his face was so unchanged, she was still a little surprised. Since they'd last met, her hair turned steel and crinkles appeared around her eyes. She wondered if he'd recognize this tarnished version of her.

But she'd found him. They would speak. Relief left her feeling almost lightheaded. He would find Danel, and Danel would make sure Evie was safe at college. It was June now, and Evie's classes wouldn't start until September, plenty of time for Danel to scope out the town and make any arrangements he felt necessary. Everything would be fine.

The tall man broke eye contact and turned to the other bartender, whispered something in his ear. The other man reached up and patted his coworker's back and nodded. When

the tall man came out of the bar, the crowd parted for him and within seconds he was at Joss's side.

"Quick," he said in a low voice. "Come with me." He didn't give Joss the opportunity to answer, or obey. His arm, now she could see the tattoo, snaked around her waist, and lifting her off the ground, her hip against his leg, he started to walk. Her feet didn't reach the ground, but his movements were so smooth a casual observer would just think they were walking arm in arm. Faces flashed at her as he whisked her toward a keyed door in the back. *Employees Only.*

"Josephine," he said when they were alone in a room stacked with cases of alcohol.

"I used to be."

"Why are you here?" he asked. "It's too dangerous. Sam has a man on me, you know."

"Danel told me you'd worked the Bourbon bars for decades, so I looked until I found you." Joss wondered if she really could trust him. And she wanted to know his name, it irritated her, thinking of him just as Danel's friend, or that guy. She'd asked Danel once, but he'd said

that there was power and danger in knowing someone's name, and if she didn't need to know, she shouldn't ask, and definitely shouldn't tell. Well, Danel wasn't around, this guy knew her real name, and she'd be damned if she wasn't going to ask. "Please, tell me your name. I hate not knowing."

He hesitated for a second. "Halpas, but most call me Hal." He glanced at his watch. "I take it you're in some kind of trouble, and need Danel. Is it the girl?"

"I can't find Danel," she said.

"He had a run-in with Sam about a year ago and went underground." He checked his watch again. "Look, I've got to get back out there. Shane'll be swamped with customers by now."

"I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't important. Believe me, this is the last place I want to be," she said.

He sighed. "No one knows you're here?"

The bouncer at Tropical Isle popped into her thoughts. She couldn't tell Hal about that and risk him turning his

back on her, and besides, she'd done a good job of losing him. "I don't think so."

They made plans to meet at her hotel as soon as Hal could get off work, and Joss headed back to Canal to catch the streetcar.

The air conditioning in her hotel had chilled her room, so Joss opened the French doors that led to her private, top floor balcony. Right away, she felt better. The river breeze and a long shower would be just the thing to cleanse away the filth of the Quarter. Joss was digging in her suitcase for toiletries when she heard the lock on the door tumble. She looked up as the door started to open, then caught against the security latch. The space between each of her nerves seemed to disappear, her body was electric. It was too soon for Hal to have arrived. "Who's there?" she said, her voice sharp.

No one answered, but the door closed. There was a phone on the night table; she had to call the front desk. There was another noise at the door, and this time she saw that the security latch was slowly moving, all on its own,

away from the door. Somehow, it was unlocking itself. She lunged for the phone, but there was no dial tone. The line going into the jack between the bed and the table was disconnected. She grabbed her cell phone as she dropped to her knees, trying to dial 911 with her cell as she plugged in the room phone.

The door flew open. The bouncer from Tropical Isle filled the most of the frame, but she could see another, smaller, man behind him. Joss stayed on her knees, partially hidden behind the bed.

"Don't move," the bouncer said. He gestured the smaller man forward and shut the door behind him.

Did she have time to call for help? Not likely. He could be at her side in a second. Slowly, she lodged her cell phone between the mattress and the box spring, pushing it as far towards the center of the bed as possible. She might have a chance to use it later, and she didn't want it under his control.

"You thought you could hide from me?" the bouncer asked.

She didn't know how to play this, how to gain an advantage. What did he know about her? Had Hal sold her out? Or had she been followed when she left Oz? She'd been watching for the bouncer, not his small accomplice. "I was trying to plug the phone in," she finally answered.

"Going to call the cops? Or your buddy Halpas?" the bouncer said.

"Would it matter?" she asked.

"What's your name, doll?" he asked.

"Leah Kellogg." The name on the identification papers she used when traveling, papers Danel had supplied her with over a decade ago.

"I doubt that," he said. He grabbed her purse from the credenza, and Joss felt the burn of vomit rising up her throat. She had both sets of ID in her purse. Before flying out of Portland, she'd used her regular ID and credit cards to hire a private investigator to look into the faculty at EOU. She'd almost left it in her suitcase, but hadn't wanted to leave it in her room unattended, though he'd probably search her luggage next anyway.

He pulled her wallet out first. Her mind was frantic, trying to think of some way to stop him from looking inside her wallet, but there was nothing she could think to do. She'd just have to hope Halpas would get a message to Danel that she'd been here, and that he'd go to Evie. The bouncer pulled out a driver's license. "Leah Kellogg. Huh." He kept looking. This was her travel purse, so all she had with the name Joss Martin on it was her real driver's license and a credit card, but surely he'd spot a duplicate license.

He looked again, pinching cards between meaty fingers, testing thickness to see if any cards were stacked together within the little leather and plastic holders. He was being thorough, and it surprised her that he hadn't found her other ID yet. He gave an aggravated grunt and threw the wallet onto the credenza, then started looking through the compartments of her purse. What was going on? Why hadn't he pulled out the other license? She wiped sweaty hands on her pant legs.

Her pants. She'd been wearing the white linen travel pants before the man on the streetcar had covered her in his drink. They'd come from a SkyMall catalogue years ago. Sewn into the waistband was a secret interior pocket

designed to hold some cash or credit cards, sort of like those skin-tone flat fanny packs they sold to travelers for use under their pants. After going through airport security this morning, Joss had stopped at a restroom and transferred her "Joss Martin" documents to the secret pocket. And then she'd thrown the pants away in that Bourbon Street tee-shirt shop. Sweet Jesus, she might make it through this interrogation after all. She just had to convince the bouncer that she really was Leah Kellogg, a woman with no ties to Sam or Danel.

The bouncer had moved on to her suitcase and was rummaging through her clothes. He wouldn't find anything there. He checked the drawers, which were empty, and the bathroom, which she hadn't had time to use. "Get up," he said.

Joss prayed. She didn't much care what happened to her; she only wanted this to end well for Evie. Whatever else came of it, she couldn't lead this man to Evie. Poor, unprepared Evie. She stood up, walked away from the bed, away from her hidden cell phone. The sidekick standing against the door tensed, as if Joss might launch a ninja attack on the bouncer.

The bouncer grabbed both her wrists with one of his enormous hands, and held them in a tight grip above her head. The other hand ran up and down her body, searching for something hidden. "Nothing," he said, smiling. His hand snaked up under her shirt. Her eyes burned when she closed them, but she couldn't stand to see the smile on the bouncer's face as he groped for identification he already knew wasn't there. One handed, he unfastened her bra, and then pawed her beneath the loose garment. His skin was soft, at odds with his appearance; the softness was sickening and more terrifying than anything she'd ever felt. "Nothing much there, either," he said, then twisted her nipple, hard. She bit her lip.

She wanted to bite him, to scream for help, to fight, but it was hopeless. She couldn't fight the bouncer, and screaming would probably leave her with a snapped neck. Or, worse, whoever heard her scream would end up with the broken neck. No, endangering other people, unsuspecting people, was not an option. She almost reconsidered, though, when the bouncer slicked his baby skin hand down her back and beneath the waistband of the hot pink pants. It had been almost two decades since anyone else's hands had been

there, and her jaw clenched and she trembled, not from the fear, but from the effort it took to hold in her fury. At least if this brute raped her, she'd have sense enough to abort it, which, as much as Joss loved Evie, was what her sister, Violet, should have done. It was time these sick fucks stop manipulating the Maupassant women.

As if he could read her mind, the bouncer, using only the hand gripping her ass, thrust her against him. She felt his erection jabbing her in the ribs. "Maybe you've hidden your real ID better than I thought," he said. His fingers probed between her cheeks. She wanted to kill him.

"My ID was in my purse," she said through her teeth.

He rammed his fingers into her body, dug and clawed inside her. "Not here, I guess," he said.

Now she couldn't breathe. She held herself together with such force that one breath could shatter her, and the tears would fall. She didn't want him to see her tears. His hand was still inside her pants, only now he was stroking her softly, like a lover. Bastard. He dropped the hands he'd held above her head, and instead held her waist in a vise grip.

"There are other ways for me to find out who you are," he said in her ear. "And if you're not who I thought you were, Jo—I mean, Leah, then there's no reason for me not to rape you right now."

She shuddered, and a choked, childlike sob escaped. She clamped down on it, not permitting a second sob to burble up.

"I have a place on Annunciation Street. You been there lately?" he asked. "The neighborhood's really gone downhill." He was still stroking her, soft strokes, soft skin. "It's too bad, really. Say I fell and broke a leg. Neighbors might hear screaming, but they wouldn't call for help. My house is real well insulated, though, so probably I'd have a hard time yelling that loud anyway."

She was going to have to do something. He couldn't take her captive. Eventually, Evie would find out where she'd really gone, and come looking for her. Or the bouncer would drug her, or starve her, or just beat her until she was too weak to resist him. How could she be sure she'd stand up to torture? How could anyone be sure? Some of the

toughest military men caved, and they'd been trained to resist.

"So, you want to talk now, baby?" He kissed her on the side of her mouth. "Or do you want to go back to my place?"

Oh, God. She had to do something. The bouncer's goon still blocked the door to the hall, not that she'd make it that far. "Now," she said. "But move your hand. I can't think when you're doing that." There, play to his ego and see if it earned her a little freedom.

The soft hand slid back up to her waist. "Please, I feel sick." She moved her tongue against the back of her throat, triggering her gag reflex. She nodded toward the bathroom door and heaved. "Please. I won't close the door all the way." She needed to think. The bouncer looked disgusted, released her, and nodded toward the bathroom door.

Once inside, she left the door open a crack and made retching sounds over the toilet. There was no window, and anyway she was on the twelfth floor. A plan, she needed a plan. She couldn't see the clock; it must have been approaching one o'clock. If she knew when Halpas would show

up, it would help. On the other hand, Halpas might have tipped the bouncer off. She could let the bouncer take her to his place, but that was unknown territory, and she doubted he'd take her there if there was any chance she could escape. And she couldn't risk letting him beat her down until she said something stupid, something that might get Evie in trouble.

Oh, Evie. God, she'd screwed up. She should have just told her about Sam. Protecting her from him all these years might be Joss's downfall, and Evie's. Joss had thought she could mold Evie, teach her to live a quiet farm life away from the world. She hadn't wanted Evie to live the paranoid life Joss had been forced to live since the moment Danel told her the truth about Sam and the Maupassant family origins. And that. Evie didn't even know that the Maupassants had existed, much less that she was one of them. Evie was completely unprepared for life, any kind of life, and it was all Joss's fault. She had to keep Sam and the bouncer off Evie's trail, no matter the cost, and she'd hope that Danel would hear what had happened and go to her, to help her and protect her.

"What's taking so long?" the bouncer said, all pretense of tenderness gone from his voice. Inspiration struck. She knew what to do.

She jammed her finger down her esophagus, and heaved Jack and Diet Coke into the bowl. "Almost...done." She took a deep steadying breath. She'd have to do this without hesitation. She drank straight from the faucet, washed up, and stepped out of the bathroom.

"I knew the risk I was taking when I became Hal's lover," she said, walking to the balcony door, leaning against the jamb, and gazing out at the city lights. "He told me it was against God, but that he loved me too much to say no, and he told me you'd come after me. You're Danel, I presume?" She didn't pause to allow him an answer. "Well, I won't let you ruin Hal's life because he fell in love. And my life is worth nothing without him in it."

The bouncer looked shocked. She'd managed to buck his expectations. This was her shot, probably her only shot. She sprinted out the open French doors leading to the balcony and hurdled the rail. She had time for one prayer before her body hit the pavement on St. Charles.

Please God, don't let my death be in vain.

Chapter One

Again they consider the days of summer, that the sun is upon it at its very beginning; while you seek for a covered and shady spot on account of the burning sun; while the earth is scorched up with fervid heat, and you become incapable of walking either upon the ground or upon the rocks in consequence of that heat. 1 Enoch 5:1

The summer Evie Martin's aunt disappeared was the hottest on record in Eastern Oregon since 1896. Wheat shriveled on the stalks; brush fires threatened homes and crops. Farmers and workers carried oversized Thermoses of water on the backs of their trucks and still stroked out. Animals languished in the shade of barns, not daring to wander too far from their troughs. As the passing of each day chiseled at the odds of Aunt Joss's safe return, the sun over Evie's farm burned hotter. It drove her. Drove her thoughts, drove her actions, drove her forward. It pressed against her, propelling her through the impossible tide of farm work that had to be done. Horses needed fed, eggs needed collecting, and, most of all, the wheat needed to be

harvested. She raced against the heat, but more moisture leached from the grain every afternoon. Evie couldn't harvest fast enough without her aunt's help. It was August now, and she should have finished in mid-July. The crops had already lost half their value.

Evie had tied a handkerchief around her forehead to keep the sweat from blinding her while she drove. The old combine didn't have air conditioning, and the temperature in the shade was 110 degrees. It was nearly five o'clock in the evening, and she had been in the fields since dawn.

In previous summers, Evie would run the combine, loading one of their two wheat trucks, while Joss drove the other truck to the grain bin. This harvest, Evie was still running the combine, but now she had to stop to take the truck to the grain elevator herself once the bin was full. Today she'd finally made it to their most hilly field. The added rigor of harvesting on a slope had worn her dull. She watched without sight as field mice scattered in front of the cutterbar.

Only five o'clock, and Evie's head was bobbing. She and Joss had always harvested until sunset, but alone, Evie

couldn't manage it. She was going to finish this load, then go back to the house to scarf a microwave meal and fall into bed. Exhausted as she was, she shuddered at the thought of sleep. Vivid nightmares had plagued her since Joss's disappearance. Evie threw the brakes on the combine, leaving the engine idling. She opened the door, leaned out, and stood on tiptoe to check the grain tank. Full. Thank God.

She lifted the reel and drove back to the parked wheat truck. She watched the contents of the combine's grain tank pour onto the gilded pile of wheat already in the truck. She perched on the combine's diamond-plate step to watch the cascade, as always, wary of the wheat flow. A child several farms over, Joss told her every summer, had died when a grain bridge collapsed, suffocating the boy before he could be pulled free. People, even farmers, often forgot how dangerous a mass of grain could be. Alone, Evie had to be even more cautious than usual. The grain transfer went as planned, though, and she was grateful to hop in the truck with its functioning air conditioner.

Martin Farms owned a combine with AC, but the auger had broken on Evie's second day of harvest. Sending the

combine to the shop was out of the question. After Joss was officially declared a missing person, the bank accounts had been frozen. Evie had to make do with their older, more inefficient machine. She wished—briefly, before her anxiety quelled the thought—that she had friends, that she knew someone at a nearby farm, that there was someone, anyone, she could ask for help. But Martin Farms was her responsibility now. She'd do whatever it took to hold on to it.

Inside the wheat truck, Evie sat with the door open, trying to circulate the air a bit before enclosing herself. It was so hot and dry, her eyelids were sticking to her eyes when she blinked. She opened the glove box, hoping Joss had stashed a napkin or something else she could use to wipe her sweaty, dirty face. An old issue of Progressive Farmer tumbled to the floor. She picked it up and fanned the air. The magazine fell open to a page Joss had dog-eared, featuring an article about a promising new variety of wheat, a hybrid that would require little fertilizer.

Evie had always been intrigued with the science behind agriculture, especially with hybrid plant varieties. It amazed her that researchers could, with trial and error,

end up with a consistent new variety of wheat, often with traits far different from those of the parent varieties. This hybrid had been especially appealing to Evie, and she had scrawled across the top of the page, "Let's do it!!!" Her handwriting was loopy and girlish, she noticed. Over the past few months, her penmanship had become tight and sharp. She barely remembered the carefree girl who'd doodled in the margins of the magazine in her hands. The date on the cover was July of last year.

The cab was as cool as it was going to get, so Evie tossed the magazine on the passenger seat and closed the door. A glance in the mirror told her she'd overfilled the truck a bit, and she'd have to go slower than usual. She released the parking brake. The truck crawled up the gentle slope of the field, and she prepared to shift gears as she crested. She'd worked too hard to lose a bunch of grain—and money, now she had to think about money—on the downhill.

She maneuvered the peak without much spillover, and she applied the brakes as the truck started back down the slope. The brakes felt soft. Squishy. Something was wrong.

The speedometer crept up as she rolled down the slope, even though she was pressing the pedal so hard her leg trembled. It was less than a five percent gradient, she estimated, but the tons of grain behind her pushed her along. Still, she wasn't concerned. Once she was off the slope, the truck would roll through the wheat and eventually come to a stop. The field was vast and empty; she had plenty of room to stop. She just couldn't believe the brakes had failed. The universe was out to get her. It would take at least a day of hard labor to shovel all the wheat into the other truck. This harvest was never going to end.

Going downhill, the truck had accelerated to just over twenty miles per hour. How far would she have to coast before finally stopping? She dreaded the walk back to the combine with the late afternoon sun slanting toward her and burning her face. She could already feel the threat of a heat stroke hammering behind her eyes. Then she thought of her insulated water bottle, still in the combine that was already a small green speck in her mirror. Thinking of water made her throat burn. She pinched the skin on her wrist. When released, the fold of skin slid slowly back in

place, a sign that she was dehydrated, probably severely so.

The truck had rolled so far from the combine. The walk back in the heat—without water—would be painful. If only she could use her feet to Flintstone-stop the truck. She bumped over a rutted road with a force that slowed her down by a couple miles per hour, but also released a tiny avalanche of wheat. A road. She shouldn't be crossing a road.

She wrenched her neck, looking over her shoulder. The combine was out of sight, and she could see no landmarks with which to orient herself. Still, she could swear she hadn't turned the wheels. She'd thought she was headed into the center of the field, but the only ruts in this field ran alongside the highway. The field ahead shimmered in the harsh sunlight, a sea of unending gold. Like a mirage floating above the stalks of wheat, a car floated past. She was headed for the highway. Heat and dehydration must have disoriented her completely.

Evie rammed her foot against the brake. She pulled at the parking break, but the truck didn't slow. If she turned

sharp, she could avoid the highway, but she was certain the truck would flip.

Ahead of her, the land was flat. There were no other cars visible as far as she could see in either direction. The only viable option was to steer the truck across the highway, allowing it to plow through the flimsy barbed wire fences. With any luck, she could regain control in the field across the highway.

She pumped her foot up and down, smashing it into the brake pedal, willing the truck to slow. Now she could see the pavement ahead of her. Still no vehicles. Not unusual for the area at all, and chances were good that she could make it across.

Only a hundred yards or so left to change her mind. Maybe she should try to steer away. A glance in the mirror revealed that she still carried a tower of grain; little had spilled from the runaway truck. It was too heavy a load. Too risky. She looked ahead and almost fainted. She'd forgotten the drainage ditch on the far side of the highway.

She yanked at her seatbelt, fingers blundering for the latch. It clicked and she pulled herself free. Her face was numb, her teeth foreign objects against her lips. She pulled the door handle toward her. It didn't budge. Up! She pulled up and the door swung open just as the grill made contact with the barbed wire fence bordering Martin Farms.

Evie launched herself from the gaping door, pushing herself outward, as far from the truck as possible. The time spent airborne seemed drawn out, the seconds stretching as the ground loomed closer. She pulled her knees to her chest, hit the dirt shoulder first.

The truck hadn't been moving that fast, less than eighteen miles per hour, she guessed, but her impact was violent. Something inside her cracked. Something else popped. Her head whacked against the ground.

She laid still, the breath knocked out of her lungs. The sky above her was a cloudless, piercing blue that seemed to reach down and swallow her. She wanted it to, hoped it would swallow her whole. She had failed. There was no way she could finish harvest with broken bones. There was no way she could save the grain from the wrecked truck.

How would she pay the bills? How would she buy feed for the animals? Or, for that matter, food for herself? With Joss's assets frozen, Evie had been counting on the money from harvest to sustain her and to fund a private investigation into her aunt's disappearance.

Evie considered just staying where she was. The sun would bake her day after day until there was nothing remaining but bleached bones; the nutrients in her body would feed the only thing she had left, the land. But the truck had wrecked. It might have hit another car or created a hazard on the road. She wouldn't ignore her responsibilities.

When she finally stood up, her ears were ringing. Breathing made her wince and everything hurt, but at least she could walk. She made her way to the gaping hole in the fence where the wheat truck had broken through.

She hobbled across the road. The truck had hit the ditch head-on. The weight of the load in the back had pinched the cab against the far bank of the irrigation ditch. Had Evie been inside she would have been killed, no question. A cat wouldn't fit in the cab now.

Arms tight around her ribs, Evie made her way into the ditch. She had to check for smoke or smoldering weeds. A brush fire in a drought like this would be nearly impossible to control. The air didn't smell of smoke, and when she pressed a finger to the hood she didn't detect abnormal heat. No signs of fire. She hurt too much to get down and inspect the truck more carefully, so she walked a slow circle around the front of the vehicle, hand on metal, feeling for excessive warmth. When she reached the passenger side, she startled.

Atop a pile of grain, last July's issue of The Progressive Farmer was opened to the article Evie had marked. It had somehow been ejected through the broken side window and landed on the spilled wheat. The pages were tattered, but intact.

Evie managed to pick it up. She brushed dust and chaff from the cover. Joss had given Evie her first subscription when she was twelve. "Evie," Joss had said, "This magazine is just what you need! Look at all the articles on going organic." They sat across from each other at the dinner table, a casserole between them. She slid the magazine

across the varnished tabletop. Evie caught it, looking at the headlines while forking soggy noodles into her mouth.

"I'm going to be the best organic farmer in Morrow County!" Evie said.

Joss laughed. "I'm pretty sure you'll be the only organic farmer in Morrow County, at least for the next century or two."

"Hey, at least we wouldn't have to worry about getting our anhydrous stolen," Evie said. "And I can go to Eastern when I grow up and learn to do business and we'll be our own grocery store brand."

"Perhaps, Eves, perhaps," Joss had said, scooping a second serving of casserole onto Evie's plate.

And now here she was. Joss was missing. Evie had withdrawn her enrollment from Eastern so she could try to keep the farm going while the police searched for Joss. The wheat truck was smashed, an entire load of grain lost. The remaining wheat was shriveling on the stalks, and now she was injured, unable to finish the harvest. She had no money, and no one to call for help. She didn't even want to call the police, though she knew she must, because she

hadn't been able to pay the insurance premiums in months. Neither Evie nor the truck had coverage.

She heard the car approaching before she could see it. A weathered sedan pulled onto the shoulder and a frantic woman sprang from the driver's seat, cell phone to her ear. "Is anyone inside?" she shouted.

Evie could feel her body react to the stranger's presence. Tears pricked her eyes, sounds came to her as if through a tunnel. Her nose was tingling. "No," she said. "I jumped out."

"Thank God," she said to Evie. Then, into the phone, "There's a girl here, says she jumped from the truck and no one else was inside."

The woman was looking her over, and Evie's heart was pinging around in her chest.

"Are you hurt?" the woman asked.

"My...yes. I think so." Evie's vision had narrowed to a pinprick of light surrounded by foggy black. She was gasping, taking in too much oxygen.

"Honey," the woman said, "You okay? You need water?"

Yes, water. And a paper bag to breathe into. But Evie wasn't speaking aloud.

"I think we need an ambulance here." The woman looked around. "Mile Marker 32."

No, don't, Evie tried to say. No ambulance. No more strangers. No more people staring at her, concern plain on their faces. No more expenses. No.

"Do you have asthma? Can you breathe?"

Evie shook her head, no asthma. Panic attacks. Her vision was almost gone; her thoughts were hazed and vague. The tingling that had started in her nose had spread through her body. Her hands formed claws, the pinkies and thumbs stiff and drawn together. Despite it all, she managed to find the wherewithal to feel humiliated. She wished she hadn't gotten up after she jumped from the truck after all.

"Lemme see if I have a paper sack or something in the car," the woman was saying. "Would that help?"

The tingling was so intense now that Evie felt herself sinking to the ground. As she bent, the pain from her ribs

ripped through her side. Mercifully, she lost consciousness, her body resting on spilled grain.

Chapter Two

And men, being destroyed, cried out; and their voice reached to heaven. 1 Enoch 8:9

The drugs in Evie's system kept her from having another anxiety attack when a man in a dark business suit—no lab coat or hospital badge—walked into her hospital room and sat down in the vinyl chair near her bed. Still, her muscles went rigid and she pulled the extra pillow supporting her arm across her chest like a shield.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Stephen Keats," he said, extending his hand toward her. "Nice to finally meet you in person, Evie."

Joss's lawyer. She shook his hand, though his touch made her stomach contract. "Are you here about Joss? Have they found her?"

"No. No, nothing like that, unfortunately. I wish I had news for you, sure do. But I'm just here to check on you, do some paperwork. The hospital called me after talking to your insurance agent."

This guy didn't seem like a lawyer, despite the fancy suit. He seemed, well, sort of goofy. Had he sounded this way when they'd spoken on the phone after Joss's disappearance? She couldn't remember. "Is the hospital going to sue me?"

"For what?"

"For not having insurance. To get their money."

"No, no. Of course not. That's not how it works, but we'll get it paid for out of your trust fund anyway, no need to worry. No need at all."

Evie's breath snagged in her chest. "Trust fund?"

"So it's a broken rib and a dislocated shoulder, is it? That right?"

"And a concussion." Had he said that she had a trust fund? A trust fund that she could access to pay her bills? Joss had never said anything about a trust fund.

"See, that right there is the nice thing about youth. Sure is. I wouldn't heal so quickly, I'm afraid." He angled the vinyl chair to face Evie. "You know, you really don't look much like your aunt."

She had the sense that he was disappointed about that, though she didn't know why he would be. "Sorry."

"You have her eyes, though. Yes, definitely her eyes. Her beautiful eyes." He flushed red and looked down at his lap.

This conversation was weird. Evie expected conversations to be weird, and the flocks of doctors she'd spoken with since yesterday's accident hadn't corrupted that assumption. But speaking with Keats was, by far, the strangest conversation she'd had to endure. "Did you say we could pay my hospital bill with my trust fund?"

"Yes, yes, I sure did. No problem there, it's an allowed expense." He scrunched his eyes when he blinked, like there was dirt or a stray eyelash bothering him.

"When did Joss set up this trust fund?"

"You don't know about it? Joss didn't tell you?" He swished his hand in her direction like he was shooin' a fly. "Your aunt didn't create the trust, your mother did."

Her mother. Evie held up a hand in the stop gesture. For once, Keats was quiet.

When had Violet, her mother, set up a trust fund? She'd been dead for fifteen years, and institutionalized for the five years before that. In all that time, why had Joss never mentioned the trust fund? They had talked about everything. Or so she'd always thought.

"So I have money of my own."

"Well, sure. Sort of." He stood up, the vinyl chair squeaking against the linoleum, and walked to the window. "I mean, it's a trust. You won't have full access until your thirtieth birthday. For now though, you can use the money for approved purposes."

"Like bills? For the farm?"

"There are very specific conditions for the trust, it's really pretty standard stuff, nothing weird. So medical bills, yes. Farm bills, no."

"I see." She was grateful for the softness of the painkillers. "Harvest didn't go well."

"Did you deposit the money in the farm account?"

"No. It's the only money I had access to. I have to buy feed, and the feed store won't extend any more credit. And the other bills are stacking up too---electric and phone, all of them. If I deposit the harvest money, I can't pay any of them." She turned her head away from Keats, stared at the wall. She heard the vinyl creak as he sat back down.

"Of course, of course. I meant that you ought to keep it on hand. Joss's accounts aren't going to be accessible until we find her."

"And if we don't find her?" Once the words were out, Evie wanted them back. The police would find Joss. They had to find Joss. Evie needed her, couldn't function without her. The farm needed her. She closed her eyes.

"If...well, we'll find her, but if, hypothetically, we couldn't, after seven years we could file for a death certificate. Then her will would go into effect and you'd inherit all the assets."

This was why Evie hadn't been answering the lawyer's calls. She didn't want to talk about filing for death certificates or about Joss's will. She'd talked to Keats a few times shortly after Joss's disappearance, when they all thought she'd turn up in a few days, but after that Evie had only listened to his voicemails. She'd tap in her pass code, then hold the phone away from her ear, listening to his voice just long enough to determine that he hadn't located Joss, then she would delete the message. Avoidance hadn't helped anything. Here he was, in person, talking about death certificates as if Joss could possibly be dead. Which she couldn't.

Joss couldn't be dead, and Evie couldn't think, not for a second, that she was. But the obvious fact that her aunt wouldn't choose disappear for two months without a word kept intruding. Something, she knew, had happened to Joss. Evie prayed it was something they could fix. Like amnesia. That happened sometimes. She'd seen it on television before.

"I don't want to inherit anything," she said. "I just want the farm bills paid. The farm belongs to Joss, why can't we pay the bills with Joss's money?"

"Wish it worked that way, sure I do. But the accounts are frozen, pending investigation. Completely frozen, no exceptions. Is the harvest money not enough to make it for a year? If you tighten up on expenses?"

"Not even close. It might get me through winter, but there's no way I'll have enough to replant."

"Well, maybe there's still a shot. After you start at Eastern, you'll have access to the trust fund your mother left you. School related expenses are payable, and of course the farm isn't related, but the trust will at least keep you afloat. You won't starve"

"I withdrew."

"From school? Why would you do that?"

"Because my aunt is missing, obviously. Because someone has to take care of the farm. Someone has to be there for the horses. And who else *is* there? Are you going to do it?" Under normal circumstances, in a confrontation like this with a near stranger, she'd be in the throes of a panic attack right now. She was beginning to see the benefits of modern medicine. Even frustration, when undiluted with anxiety, was pleasurable.

"We could close up the farm, you know. Just for a while? Maybe sell the horses?"

"We can't sell the horses. Joss would kill me."

"I think she'd understand, given the situation, don't you?"

"No, I don't."

"You were far more important to her than any horse, you realize. Far, far more important."

"How would you know? She's just your client."

"Yes." he whispered, nodding. "Yes, just a client." He cleared his throat and bent to pull his attaché onto his lap. "Just a client," he said. "A client I care for very much. Your aunt is a good person, you know, a decent person, and every time we talked, every time we...well, she always made one thing clear. Everything she did was for you. Every financial move she made, she asked how it might affect you. Every paper she signed, she considered you. And the few times she thought about making a move just for her own benefit, just to bring herself a little happiness, she stopped. Because it wasn't right for you."

Evie stared at the man. What was he talking about?

He cleared his throat and, for the first time, looked her in the eye. "So yes. Just a client. But that wasn't my choice."

Did he mean...was he saying he had feelings for Joss? Did Joss know? Maybe the feelings were mutual. Evie didn't know what to think. Joss had always made it sound as if Evie and the farm were enough for her, all she'd ever need. All Evie would ever need. But if that had all been posturing for Evie's sake, what did it mean? Was there some reason Joss had kept Evie so secluded, some reason Joss would give up her own happiness to keep Evie alone? Maybe there was something wrong with Evie. Something worse than panic attacks and freakish nightmares. This was a new vision, one of Joss as a woman with a life outside Evie's sphere. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe Keats had misread the situation. Then again, maybe there were things Evie didn't know. Things her aunt hadn't shared. Like the trust fund.

"I'm sorry," Keats said. "I didn't come here to upset you, I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'll heal." She pictured Keats kissing Joss.

"That's not what I meant, you know. I want to help you. What can I do?"

Evie shrugged, shaking off another unwelcome image of Joss and Keats. And really, if he couldn't release Joss's funds, or her own, there wasn't much he could help her with at all.

"Well, let's figure out a plan, how about? You'd be surprised at how efficient I can be. So what do you think? You want to try to keep working the farm? Or go to school after all? I could try to pull some strings and get you reenrolled at Eastern."

The pounding behind Evie's eyes was making it difficult to think. Her broken rib was barely throbbing, though, so she knew the headache was psychogenic. She sighed. "Nothing I decide will be right."

"True."

She'd been expecting another of his easily deflected, long-winded answers. His laconic response left her uneasy. "So what do I do?"

"Well, you know you'll have to decide that on your own. But financially speaking, I think you have a few options. You can try to stay on the farm, see if you can survive on the money you made harvesting. Or you can look for a job. If it is near enough, you could live at home, maybe still keep up with the animals. Then there's school, you could reenroll at school. I'm sure I could help you do that, but we'll have to close up the farm."

"What about loans? Could I get a loan for replanting?"

"Not without collateral, I'm afraid. There's just no way, no way."

No money and no loans meant no spring planting. No spring planting meant she wouldn't have any income at all next year. But if Joss came back before it was time to plant, everything would be okay. Evie could make it until then. She'd eat less, and she wouldn't turn on the heat in the winter. But if Joss didn't come back before spring—well, then Evie would know real trouble. There was no way she could make it for seven years without help. But leaving Martin Farms to wither while she went to school seemed an equally bad option. And what would happen in two years,

once she finished school? The farm would be in ruins by then.

Keats was studying her as if trying to read her thoughts in the twitch of a brow or the curve of her mouth. There was no answer that would replace the gravity that had been Joss.

"I'm going to make it work. I'm staying on the farm." She'd learn to be frugal. She'd find a job and save for the planting. Sell her possessions, her own horse if she must. Eat a lot of eggs. Learn to do all the repairs herself. She'd make it, somehow.

"What can I do to help? Anything at all?"

"You can give me a ride home when they let me out of here. I have no idea how else to get back to the farm."

Keats nodded, and settled into the vinyl chair to wait. Evie wondered what would become of her if Joss didn't come home soon.

Chapter Three

Great fear and trembling shall seize them, even to the ends of the earth. 1 Enoch 1:6

At home—among Joss’s belongings, breathing the scent of herbs Joss had grown in the kitchen window, wearing her own pajamas under Joss’s silk robe—Evie’s mind again felt connected to her body.

Riding home with Keats hadn’t been as horrifying as Evie feared. The strong hospital medications started to wear off during the trip, but her anxiety was clamped by the sharp pain of her broken rib. The drive took an hour, and before that, the doctors had dawdled over her release papers, debating prescriptions and doling out instructions. The hospital psychologist stopped by to talk to her about her new prescriptions and to urge her to follow up with a therapist of her choice.

By the time Keats pulled into her drive, it was almost nine o'clock. Evie realized that decorum required she offer Keats overnight accommodation, which he accepted without making even a token attempt to demur. Never having had need of one, there were no guest quarters in the ranch house, and Evie couldn't bear to let Keats sleep in Joss's bed. She offered him the camper as a guest room. Thankfully, he accepted that offer too.

With Keats settled, Evie struggled to brush her teeth and wash her face with a minimum of movement. Then she stood at the bathroom sink, contemplating the pills she'd been given. Two prescriptions were for pain relievers; one for night, one for day. She'd been warned not to expect the same level of relief she'd had from the hospital IV, and the doctors had not been wrong. Her entire chest was aflame and her shoulder ached, despite the supportive sling she wore. Swallowing the pain pills in one gulp, she wondered if they'd knock her out enough for her to sleep dreamlessly.

She picked up another bottle filled with medicine for anxiety. Those pills were tiny and round. She wondered how they worked, whether they would change her personality in

some fundamental way. And, if so, was the change reversible? What if she took the pills for a week and stopped caring about the farm? What if she stopped worrying about Joss?

She turned on the faucet to refill her cup, watched the water swirling down the drain. A tip of her hand and the pills would wash away. Down the drain, into the septic tank, into the soil. Back into the aquifer from which their well drew water. The aquifer that irrigated their wheat. Wheat she might never grow again, if she couldn't control her panic attacks long enough to find a job. She righted the amber bottle and filled her cup with water, swallowed a pill.

#

Sometime during the night, a rustling sound woke Evie. Her first thought was that Keats was in her room, wanting to talk again. But he was outside in the camper, and she'd locked the house up before bed. The rustling wasn't Keats, but Evie knew what it was—her nightmare. She wasn't really

awake at all. All hope that her new medication would prevent these nightmares dissipated like reality in the face of a ghost.

The nightmares were a habit of her subconscious now, a nervous tick she couldn't control. Every night since Joss went missing, she had heard a crash or a clatter, a thump or a scream, always something different so that she never got used to the dream, never developed the ability to really wake herself up. The nature of the dream confused her, it seemed as if she was really awake, but she couldn't escape the nightmare. Lucid dreaming, an internet search revealed. Theoretically, she could learn to control her dreamscape.

Tonight's quiet rustle was a perfect mimicry of the sound Keats's suit made as he walked. She kept her eyes scrunched tight. She hated seeing the nightmare unfold before her when the urge to look grew too strong to resist.

Evie tried to relax, to ignore the presence she felt to her left, so she could concentrate on that fleeting sense of self-awareness she could sometimes almost grasp. When her brain issued a command, there was that

infinitesimally small moment of time before the body responded, and in that gap, Evie thought, between the synapses of her nerves, was the essence of her being. If she could somehow lengthen that time, she could read her body the way she read a book. She could know her own soul, even understand the mysteries of the world. She could sense how close she was to the divine, but the gap was unyielding and comprehension always danced just out of reach.

The creature-sounds grew louder, more insistent. With the scratching noises, the clatter, the jostling of limbs, the raspy breathing all around her, she was desperate; she needed to conquer the person in the gap. She needed to control the part of her that was creating these dangerous nightmares, terrors that could send her hurdling over the edge of reason, flying toward her mother's fate.

Concentrate, she thought. Wake up. Her breathing evened and twitching muscles stilled. The electric energy inside her body, the ebb and flow in her veins, the exchange of carbon dioxide for oxygen, melded with the electricity in the air surrounding her still form. Individual atoms bombarded her sweat dampened skin, sparking sensation through the tiny collisions. Whatever it

was that made her alive was also in the atmosphere around her, and she drew in energy like a plant in the sun. The force inflated within her, until she felt invincible. Her mind was sharp and clear; she envisioned her empty bedroom. She was in control. She would wake up and see, really see, her room. In one swift motion, she sat up and opened her eyes.

There were at least a dozen of the fiends on her floor; small hominids, scrawny limbs tangled together, bones jutting beneath sagging, crepe skin, grey and mottled. Toothless mouths gaped, thin lips shaped soundless words. They moved rhythmically, each body doing a dance that sometimes joined with the gyrations of another. Each wizened face inclined toward her, the necks sometimes cranked at impossible angles in order to keep their eyes toward their Mecca. She closed her eyes. Willed herself awake. She was strong; she wouldn't let her mind's attack on her senses cripple her.

The mattress groaned. She opened her eyes again, determined to see only reality. A goblin-creature lay next to her, not touching her, but straining to make contact, an invisible bubble around her kept him—definitely a him—away

from her. His palms splayed in the air as if against glass. She nearly jumped from the bed, but managed to stay put when she remembered that the floor was strewn with more of them—dreams, she reminded herself, only dreams. She could walk through them if she wanted.

Evie's brown eyes involuntarily locked on to the yellow eyes of the creature on the bed. Slivers of luminescent silver shot through the irises. It occurred to her that in other dreams, she could never see anyone's eyes this clearly. "The eyes..." she whispered.

At her words, the creature wriggled a bony finger between his eye and its socket, plucking the eyeball out with two fingers. He held it out to her in offering, the gore trailing down his wrist.

The smooth muscle of Evie's stomach convulsed; she turned from the spectacle and held back heaves. Enough. Keeping her eyes locked on the light switch near the door, she threw the covers back and vaulted out of bed before she could change her mind. She anticipated the sensation of scrawny limbs rolling beneath her feet, but she felt nothing other than cold hardwood floor. In three steps she

was at the switch. In three steps she was at the switch; the harsh overhead light illuminated the room, constricting her pupils, exposing her empty room.

It wasn't natural having dreams like these, fantasies that adulterated the province of sleep. Their regularity, in particular, disturbed her. Were they a sign of a schizophrenic chink in the weave of her thoughts? Perhaps her mother, Violet, experienced such dreams before she'd been institutionalized. Evie shuddered and crawled back into bed with a book. Best not to think too much about it; she didn't have the time to fall apart. Later, she'd deal with this. When Joss was home and the farm was running again.

#

When she woke in the morning, the lights were still blazing and her book had fallen to the floor. She paced her room, scanning every item as if she could find an enemy perched on a shelf, among her knickknacks. Impotence was choking her; she'd never realized how dependent she was.

Dependent on Joss, on her money, on her guidance. Dependent on life going the way she'd planned. She was needy, and she hated it. She kicked the throw pillow on her floor; picked up a book, threw it. The hardcover winged open, a corner hit the wall above her bed with a soft thunk and the book fell quietly to her bed. Not satisfying. Her rage had dissipated and her rib was shrieking, but she threw another. This time, the tattered novel hit spine first, releasing a dozen pages into the air like confetti.

Ruining the book only made her feel worse. Sticking around this house to see if she would go completely mad didn't hold much appeal, and she'd always found solace in physical labor. The sweat seemed to flush the doubt of her blood, and she was left clean, with the answer to whatever had been plaguing her mind. And broken rib or not, she had chores to do.

She started coffee for Keats and tidied up the kitchen. When she finished, it was six o'clock. It was light outside, but there was no discernible sign that Keats was awake in the camper. She propped open the front door to allow him entrance should he venture out and left cereal and a bowl on the counter in case he was hungry. Then she

headed over to the stables.

Of all the facets of farm life, she loved the horses best. Caring for them, exercising them, had been something she'd always done with Joss, and the four horses had been neglected since Joss's disappearance. There had been too much worry, too much to do for harvest. She missed sunset rides with her aunt, and the adrenaline of running barrels while Joss, cheering from the edge of the pasture, timed her. Even cleaning the barn had its appeal. There was something satisfying about the visible lines of progress, about the way she could track her efforts in strips of clean floor and in patches of fresh straw. It had been over two weeks since she'd mucked, and despite her injuries, she needed to at least achieve a semblance of sanitary conditions or the horses might become ill.

The heat wave hadn't broken in the night, and the morning was stale with hot, dry air scented with drought-blighted flora. Alex, Evie's trail horse, whinnied at her approach. She'd been so preoccupied with loading up on painkillers, she'd forgotten to fill her pockets with carrots before leaving the house. The handful of grain she offered instead only made Alex stomp his hoof in protest

before he gave in and ate it off her palm.

The shovel felt good to hold again, solid and warm beneath the gloves worn thin where the handle rubbed. When she attempted to clear the first shovelful of horse apples, though, it felt as if her rib had pierced her lung. She tried the rake, but achieved the same results. The muck was almost ankle deep already, and she couldn't possibly wait for her bone to mend. She tried again with the shovel, nudging muck onto the blade with a boot, then carefully dragging the load to one corner of the barn. Sweat broke out before she'd taken three loads. It would take her a week to finish, assuming she could keep the horses from doing anymore of their business in the barn in the meantime. She managed to clear most of the poop from the first stall before giving up.

The horses were making soft snuffing noises, having already forgiven her neglect. Only Joss's horse, Istahar, stood still and quiet. Evie offered her apple treats from the tack room, which she refused. Since Joss's disappearance, she would eat only hay pellets. Evie was brushing her down when she felt the horse's haunch stiffen beneath her hand.

"Don't let me startle you," Keats said. "I could hear the horses making strange noises and I thought I might find you out here."

Evie patted Istahar's flank and turned. "Morning."

Keats stood with his back pressed against the open barn door, making himself as flat as possible. His brows were drawn together, his forehead wrinkled. He was fussing with the lapels on his suit jacket and eyeing the horses.

"Look, Evie, there's..." His eyes flicked from the shovel propped against the stall door and the small pile of muck in the corner. "Have you been shoveling? You can't shovel. Really, I can't possibly let you shovel, I just can't. I'll shovel the mud out of here if it is so important you'd do it with a broken bone. You'll never heal if you do stuff like this."

Evie laughed, which also hurt. "It's not mud."

He squinted at the ground. "Oh, Jesus." He wrinkled his nose and took a step back. "I was going to say, Evie, there's something we need to talk about before I leave, but, please, let's go inside, where it's more comfortable, shall we?"

Evie was more comfortable in the barn, but it was obvious that Keats believed the horses might mutiny in an instant. She replaced the shovel and tack and led the way back to the house. Keats waved away her offer of an empty mug and sat down at the kitchen table. She poured herself a cup of coffee.

"So, what is it I need to do? Sign papers to pay the hospital bills?" Evie asked.

"No." Keats still looked ill at ease, though there was now a wall and three fences between him and the horses. "Maybe you should have a seat."

Evie set the mug on the counter and squared her shoulders, remaining on her feet. "She's dead."

"No, no, it's not that. We still don't know where she is, but there's been a bit of a break in the case."

A breath hissed out between Evie's clenched teeth. "Yes?"

"Well, it seems that your aunt flew out of Portland using a false identity. Leah Kellogg. Did she ever mention that name to you?"

"She flew out? Without saying anything to either of us? Why didn't they check the airline records right away?" There was a dish towel in Evie's hands, and she wasn't at all sure how it had gotten there. She twisted it as if she could squeeze answers from the damp terry loops.

"They did. Her name wasn't on any of the manifestos, which turned out to be because she used a false identity. One of the detectives finally got around to viewing airport security surveillance for the day we last heard from Joss. No one had reason to believe she'd flown out or possessed a false identification, so it was a low priority. But after spotting her on the security footage, the detective was able to use the timestamp to follow her through the terminal."

"So they know where she went?"

"She boarded a Southwest Airlines flight to Las Vegas, then caught a connection to New Orleans—"

"No way. She wouldn't go to New Orleans," she said.

"But she did, according to the records."

"Wait a minute," Evie said, pressing her fist into the

countertop. "Why didn't the police call me? Aren't they supposed to call me first?"

"Well, I believe they did, at least that's what the detective said this morning. Said he couldn't get you on the phone."

Evie patted her back pocket. No phone. She needed to tie the thing to her wrist. "So she's in New Orleans still?"

"They've just started looking, but there are no other hits on the name she flew under, so she's still considered a missing person at this point, but it does appear she left Portland under her own power. NOPD will be taking over the case."

"Well, that's good. Portland police sure have been slow."

Keats scrubbed his face with his hands, massaging his temples with tight, circular motions. "Well, it's not ideal, Evie, it sure isn't. New Orleans has a lot of crime, a lot of unsolved cases and overworked officers. I don't know that the investigation down there will go any better than the one here."

That wasn't what she wanted to hear. She'd been counting on the wheat money to pay for a private investigator. Now that she'd bungled harvest, the police were going to remain the only ones looking for Joss while Evie sat at home, paralyzed and ineffective.

"What about the trust fund? There has to be some loophole we can use so that I can hire an investigator? Like an emergency clause. Isn't a missing person an emergency?" There had to be a way to work this all out. There was money. Joss had tons of money, and apparently, so did Evie. On the way home from the hospital he'd revealed that her mother had left her over two million dollars. It was insane—like more insane than a schizophrenic experiencing a psychotic break while taking hallucinogenic drugs—that she couldn't use it to find her aunt or save their farm.

"It's an emergency all right, and I wish I could say yes, but I'm afraid I can't. Legally, I can only approve school expenses and medical bills until you turn thirty."

"What if I go to Eastern? Then you can give me spending money?"

"Yes, but not enough to pay for an investigator. They're expensive, Evie."

Her head was an atomic bomb exploding, and she couldn't see through the mushroom cloud surrounding her. "Jesus fucking Christ! I don't give a shit how expensive it is or what your fucking rules are or if you'll go to God-damn jail for breaking them, my aunt is lost in New Orleans and she might be hurt, she might have amnesia, she might be locked in someone's basement for all I know, and you drive down here all the way from fucking Portland to tell me I have a crap ton of money that I can't touch and that there is nothing you can do, so why are you even fucking here?"

She'd grabbed her coffee mug sometime during her rant, and the sight of the unblemished white porcelain repulsed her. It was so perfect and it matched all the other perfect mugs. It made a satisfying crash when she threw it against the brick wall opposite her.

The crash made Keats jumped in his seat, causing the chair to squeak. Evie burst out laughing at the sound, tears forging slick paths down her ruddy cheeks. She was a mess. Before today, she'd never thrown anything against a

wall in her life. Now she'd done it twice. At least she hadn't had one of her patented and fully-automatic panic attacks. It was as if the pills she'd been given were funneling her anxiety into a ridiculous and counterproductive anger.

Keats was standing next to his chair, perhaps afraid to move away from the kitchen table that provided a barrier between them. Evie wanted to apologize, but she was both laughing and crying too hard to speak. Her rib cage was ablaze and even her shoulder, which hadn't been bothering her before, felt fiery. And her language! How humiliating to have lost it like that in front of a near stranger. She couldn't even look at him.

She went to the mudroom to grab the broom. The mirror above the laundry sink framed a mess of a girl. Her hair was riotous, her face hot pink and mottled, and her eyelids raw and doughy. She opened the bottle of fabric softener and inhaled. She'd always been comforted by the aroma of clean laundry. It had always smelled exactly the same; Joss never bought a different brand or a new scent. She took a few deep breaths and managed to stop crying, though the chest-wracking sobs wouldn't stop.

Keats was sitting, head in hands, when she returned to the kitchen. She swept the shards of mug into a pile and realized she couldn't bend down to brush them into the dust pan, so she swept the pile into the corner. Keats was looking at her now.

"I'm going down there," she said. "To New Orleans."

"Alone?"

"Is there any other way? I'll find her myself. I'll take the harvest money and live on that for as long as possible. I'll have to board the horses, which will take a lot of the money, and the farm will fall apart. But when I find her, none of it will matter."

"How long will the money last after you pay for boarding?"

"Not long, probably. It doesn't matter, I'll figure it out."

Keats rubbed his temples and put his head back in his hands. "And what are you going to do when you're out of money?"

"Get a job. That's what normal people do."

"Yes, but you have no experience doing anything at all. You've never lived in the world the rest of us do. Have you any idea how difficult it will be to make it on the sort of income you'll draw?"

Evie felt the anger condensing again. She pressed her open hands against the countertop, determined not to lose control this time.

"Help me out here. You're the lawyer. You're supposed to be smart."

"Let me think." He stood up, circled the kitchen a few times. Picked up the dustpan and swept up the remnants of the mug she'd broken.

"How about this—hear me out before you say no—how about you go to school in New Orleans? The trust will pay tuition and living expenses, you'll have some spending money. You have to keep your grades above a C, but as long as you do that, the basics will be covered. You can use your free time to search for Joss, and the harvest money will board the horses. The farm will have to be shut down, at least for now, but you'll be okay."

"Isn't it too late to register for school?"

"In a program, yes, but you can still register as a non-matriculated student, you'll just take a few classes now and you can apply for next term."

It was what she'd just said she wanted, to go look for her aunt. But the reality of losing the farm, leaving the horses, shedding the only way of life she remembered—it seemed impossible. And terrifying. Nonetheless, what other choice did she have? Once, she'd asked Joss how she left her hometown and everything she knew to come to Oregon. "Easy," Joss had said, "I hopped in the driver's seat and drove."

"Yes. I'll do it. Let's do it."

"Good. Now, you realize school starts in a few weeks, right? We've got to start making arrangements."

From the kitchen window, she could see the front fields stretching away from her. She imagined them all fallow, the earth dry and dormant, waiting for her to return with her aunt.

Joss's horse, Istahar, was out of the barn—Evie hadn't seen her out since Joss had disappeared—and she seemed to be looking at Evie. Her lip curled back and she

let out a whinny Evie could hear through the glass, and
shook her head, nodding her encouragement. *You can do this.*

Chapter Four

This is the tree of knowledge, of which your ancient father and your aged mother ate, who were before you; and who, obtaining knowledge, their eyes being opened, and knowing themselves to be naked, were expelled from the garden 1 Enoch 31:5

Fifteen minutes spent rearranging, jostling, and jimmying the contents of the trunk and finally Evie's last suitcase was lodged in the trunk of the black Volkswagen Jetta. The car was an "off-to-grad-school" gift Joss had presented her with the month before she disappeared. Joss had noted that starving college students required cars with better gas mileage than the old farm truck could provide, but Evie suspected the real reason for the gift was Joss's not unreasonable fear that Evie would damage a building or run down a classmate while trying to parallel park on the narrow streets of La Grande. Joss's concern with Evie's parking abilities would have turned to panic had she been around to find out Evie was going to New Orleans. The trunk on the Jetta closed softly when she tried to slam it, which was nowhere near as satisfying as the hale thud of a

tailgate.

Evie ambled through the house one last time, trying to appease the nagging feeling that she was about to leave something important behind.

The days between her decision to leave and her actual departure had been too short, and she felt unmoored. When she reached her bathroom, she saw the watch Joss had given her when she graduated high school. It was lying on the tile; she must have swept it off the counter with her towel that morning. She stooped to pick it up, rubbing it dry with her shirt as she stood. She pressed the pad of her thumb over the engraving, trying to absorb the sentiment, and the person who had selected it. *Courage doesn't always roar.*

It was hard to believe she was leaving the ranch. She knew Joss would have been disappointed in her—she'd always told Evie that the farm was the bit of earth made just for them, their forever home. Evie felt lost, and only the momentum of the plans she had made kept her moving forward. She went through the rest of the house, making sure other important mementos would not be left behind. Just as they

had thousands of times before, her fingers skimmed the old wooden banister, and she wondered when she would walk down these stairs again. Without Joss to come home to, there was no way to know.

Keats's business card was secured to the fridge with a magnet Evie had made as a child from golden kernels of wheat gleaned from the field in front of the house. She stuffed the card in her wallet, hesitated, and then shoved the magnet in her purse. She'd miss the colors of Eastern Oregon, the gilded glow of wheat and sun-bleached land. Her memories from her early childhood in New Orleans, before Violet had been committed, were coated with the filmy haze of childhood, but she remembered her world there being green.

In the living room, the sun was shining; puddles of molten gold pooled on the carpet. Evie stood in the light, warming her feet. The house was a comfort to her in the daylight, a cushion from the hard landing of loss. Almost twenty years of history beckoned her to stay. It didn't feel as if Joss had been missing for almost four months, it seemed she Joss might walk in the door at any moment. The scent of her lemon verbena soap lingered in the bathroom,

though the bar was already beginning to dry out and crack. Canned goods in the pantry were still alphabetized, evidence of her OCD tendencies. Her gardening tools were clean and put away in her potter's bench, but her dirty gloves still sat near the laundry sink, waiting for her to slip them on for some morning weeding. Evie hadn't had it in her to move them.

A gleam of sunlight illuminated one of the photos on the sideboard near Evie; she picked up the picture. The missing frame created a hole in the mélange Joss had carefully arranged. The image showed Joss and Evie smiling in the direction of a pink birthday cake with six candles glowing on top. It was the only candid picture Evie could see with both of them in it.

Funny—she had never thought to ask who took the photo. Birthdays had always just been the two of them, days spent at home baking and decorating fanciful cakes. She realized the photo was from her first birthday after their move from Louisiana. Who had been with them that day? Maybe John, the mailman, had stopped by. Joss used to invite him in for a cold drink when the weather was hot. Evie hooked the photograph under her arm, and headed for the car. She

locked the front door, and refused to look back.

The August heat radiated off the asphalt driveway, causing the stubble in the fields to appear to shimmer. The intense blue sky, punctuated by the occasional cloud, met the honeyed line of wheat in an uninterrupted sprawl across the horizon. The barn stood empty, the horses already boarded, but the scent of them lingered. Evie stood still, absorbing the sights and the sensations of home. Baking heat on exposed skin, the sweet odor of dried grasses and scorched earth. All soon to be relics of her old life with Joss.

She slid into her car, and nestled the pink birthday cake photo in the passenger seat. The gravel crunched beneath the tires as she drove toward the highway. Her childhood, suddenly a tangible thing, was slipping away, clinging to the land that had nurtured it. Responsibilities of her farm life were bound to the land; she was leaving them behind in order to make her own decisions, to accept her own responsibilities. She would find her aunt, because no one cared more than she did. No one was as invested in the outcome of the search as Evie was.

The road heading toward the interstate was straight, but rolled with the hills. The heat waves coming off the asphalt made the pavement look like one of the satin ribbons Joss used to tie in Evie's hair. Refusing to look in the rearview mirror, Evie prayed that her nightmares, both real and imagined, would, like her childhood, stay behind in Oregon. She had over two thousand miles in which to leave them on side of the road. Joss was waiting for her.

Chapter Five

It happened after the sons of men had multiplied in those days, that daughters were born to them, elegant and beautiful. 1 Enoch 7:1

Arriving in New Orleans felt momentous. The trip had been a long one; Evie was unaccustomed to driving so far, and she'd ended up making three overnight stops instead of two. Each night, nightmares jolted her from sleep, just as they had at home.

She'd hoped that being proactive and taking charge of her search for Joss might ease the problem by making her feel more in control. And she'd felt a change of routine and fresh surroundings might help, but that no longer seemed reasonable. The dreams morphed along with the mutable American landscape. No matter. She was here to find Joss, nightmares or no. She just had to keep up her momentum, keep moving forward until she found her aunt. The police were looking too, but Keats had been correct. The

officer in charge of Joss's case had told Evie that considering the lack of evidence of foul play, the case wasn't a high priority. So far, all they had done was ascertain that Joss hadn't left New Orleans via plane or bus, at least not under her own name or her known alias.

Driving down Claiborne Avenue, the clipped voice of the GPS demanded Evie take a left on Jefferson. The neighborhood felt vaguely familiar, though she doubted the feeling was true recognition considering she'd only been five when she last lived here. As much as Joss had decried the city, Evie's curiosity about her hometown had grown over the years, unexpressed but potent, fed by Joss's reticence to discuss Evie's origins.

Being here tugged at the loose strings of memory. She felt her mother's presence as strongly as she felt Joss's. The tint on the windows seemed a nuisance now, an unwanted filter between her and the city she was born in. She pulled off her sunglasses and succumbed to the urge to roll down the windows, letting a blast of steamy air punch its way into the air conditioned car.

According to meteorologists, the day she arrived in

New Orleans was cooler than it had been in Oregon the day she left. A mere technicality, she decided. New Orleans was hellishly hot, more miserable than any day spent in the high desert heat of Eastern Oregon, even in the midst of this summer's heat wave. Her clothes clung in places they shouldn't. Little rivers ran down her spine, soaking the waistband of her skirt. Eastern Oregon summers may have baked her, but here the damp air condensed on her body and boiled her. Joss was here somewhere—as far as anyone could tell, she hadn't left—and this same air blanketed her too, an invisible root system connecting the two of them, and all the other sweltering bodies sharing this bit of universe.

Her new city had a scent. Most urban places she visited didn't have a unique odor, just the typical American blend of smog, food, and perhaps a hint of ocean if the city was coastal. New Orleans was different, distinct. She read once that some famous fragrance was created by the perfumer sampling the air of Paris. She didn't think anyone would buy a perfume that mimicked the air of New Orleans, but she found the smell comforting. It was raw—primitive, almost. Back at home, the July heat

would bake the hay, and the sweetness of the grass would mix with the earthy scent of manure. Sometimes she'd notice a surprising pleasantness to the odor of sweat, of animal muskiness, of natural things. New Orleans was like that. Sort of dirty and beautiful all at once. Sweet olive's strong floral mixed with a sour note of garbage, magnolia, stale beer, rain, and spice.

Not a scent everyone would appreciate, but for Evie, it was a beacon guiding her home. This was where she was from. Where her mother had lived. She didn't know why Joss had come here, but she knew she'd had a good reason. Whatever had gone wrong, Evie knew she could fix it. Being here felt right.

Early memories started to tickle, and she could almost remember walking down St. Charles Avenue with Violet. Joss's stories and Evie's own memories twined under the influence of the heady aroma of New Orleans. The connection she felt with the city was almost palpable, something she could reach out and grasp if only she was fast enough. She wanted to remember everything.

There was a drugstore just ahead, close to St. Charles

Avenue, so she pulled into the lot. Recollection pricked at the corner of her consciousness, just out of reach. Had this store been here when she was a child? Had she, perhaps, walked here with her mother to fill prescriptions and pick out penny candies? Like a hypnotist's soothing cadence, geotic reminders were working a sort of magic over her, returning bits of the past to her. Giving her hope for the future.

She set off walking toward St. Charles, headed for the median—sometimes Joss used to slip and call a median the neutral ground, as she had in her younger years in New Orleans—where the streetcar tracks ran between parallel lines of tall oaks. Even as an adult, Evie was small beneath their outstretched boughs. Dwarfed beneath them, she could feel her hand enveloped by the ghost of a larger hand. She walked slowly, the heat no longer bothering her, each breath of vapor air returning something to her, grounding her in a place that was at once new and familiar.

“Mother,” she whispered, “Help me find Aunt Joss. Help me.” As she walked with the ghost of her mother, she looked straight ahead, fearing to break the memory's spell.

She had been so small when Violet was alive; she couldn't remember the concrete details of their life together. There was only a vague sense of the emotions that once surrounded her, emotions that probably held more truth than actual events anyway. Now, as Evie and her mother—or her ghost—walked down St. Charles again, she felt the turbulence that had surrounded her as a child. What had it been about? Her father, she knew, was part of it. Most of it, maybe, if Joss's seething reactions to inquiries about him were an indication. Mostly, Joss had told the stories from before Violet had become ill, stories of their youth. She favored the anecdotes from their schoolgirl days, when the sisters had worn prim uniforms and braids. Torturing the nuns was their favorite pastime, along with sneaking food from the kitchen. Evie could imagine her aunt as a girl, waiting with Violet under one of these oaks for the streetcar to pick them up and take them to Sacred Heart, but Evie couldn't reconcile the volatile mother she had known for so brief a time with the mischievous schoolgirl Joss described.

She stopped near a streetcar sign and pretended to be the young Joss. She closed her eyes and imagined what it

meant to be Violet's sister. What it might mean as an adult, what might entice an adult Joss back here, years after Violet's death. Something had drawn Joss home, and Evie couldn't imagine it was anything other than family ties. Perhaps finding out about Violet would lead Evie to Joss. It was all she had to go on, really.

A rumbling sound broke Evie's reverie. Her eyes sprung open and her head whipped around to the source of the racket. She had walked sightlessly for blocks, and to her left was a grand stone building with a circle drive and a sign identifying the property as Tulane University. This she truly did recognize. The solid mass of Gibson Hall, a recent memory imprinted from the website and from the mailings she had received since registering for classes, brought her back to the present.

The grumbling grew louder, and just as she realized it was the sound of an approaching streetcar, a hand shot out and pulled her off the track. She gasped, and turned to thank her rescuer. He was closer than she expected, and she tried to slow her momentum, but couldn't keep from stumbling into him. Her shoulder collided with his torso, causing her center of gravity to shift; she tumbled to the

ground.

"Oh my gosh," she said, "I'm so sorry."

In answer, he extended a hand to help her up. The panic was already starting to blister beneath her skin, never mind the pill she'd swallowed with reverence this morning. She didn't want to take his hand, but it seemed rude not to, so she took hold and he hauled her to her feet. By the time she was vertical again, the streetcar had stopped in front of them. She imagined, but couldn't hear, the driver's laughter after witnessing her fall.

The man she had toppled into still didn't speak, just looked down at her and tipped his head toward her in a single sharp nod. He was darkly handsome, and had a faded scar bisecting the last quarter of his left eyebrow, making him look somehow dangerous. Evie shivered.

"You getting on, miss?" the driver asked.

She declined with a shake of the head, and started walking back the way she came. It occurred to her that in her excitement, she'd left the car unlocked. It was too hot to jog, but she walked as quickly as possible, hoping to find her possessions where she had left them. Evie knew how

common break-ins were in cities, but within fifteen minutes of arriving she had parked her car, filled to the brim with her belongings, and left it unlocked while she wandered around daydreaming.

In aftermath of her panic, it didn't take long to walk back to the drugstore, and she was relieved to find the car untouched in the parking lot. Windows back up, air conditioner cranked, she followed the droning GPS voice guiding her to her new apartment. It turned out to be only a few blocks away, close enough that the car hadn't even cooled a degree when she pulled into the drive.

The house was faded pink, a double shotgun Keats had located. It had been fortuitous, he'd said. He'd called a rental management company, and had been told there was nothing near Tulane available, and that he wouldn't find anything until at least the end of the semester. The company called back within the hour with this apartment; the student who'd rented it had decided not to return to school after all.

Evie stepped onto the porch, running her hand along the intricate lace of the railing as she walked. Her unit

was on the left. A lock-box with a key was in the planter, and she let herself in. As promised, the unit was furnished, albeit shabbily. It was home now, or it would be until she found Joss.

She had already dialed when she realized she was calling the farm to Joss to let her know she'd arrived safely. She hung up before it could ring. Keats was the only person in the world who cared where she was. Scratch that. He was the only person in the world who *knew* where she was. He probably didn't particularly care, so long as she wasn't throwing coffee mugs at him. She plunked down on the couch, feeling emptiness somewhere behind her lungs.

She flipped to her phone's contact list, looking for someone she could call, someone who might be interested in her safe arrival. The list was alphabetical, and short. Joss, still. Dr. Brennen, the therapist who'd seen her for a follow-up appointment after her panic-ridden stint at the hospital. There were a few of her old teachers from the online high school that she had used as references for college applications, but she'd never even met them in person. The registrar's office at Tulane. Keats, of course. The number for the police officer in charge of the Portland

investigation. The officer in charge in New Orleans.

She dialed Keats's number and got his voicemail. "Hi, Stephen," she said after the beep. "Just wanted to let you know I made it. Oh. This is Evie. Evie Martin. Thanks." Awkward. Good thing she didn't have anyone else to call.

#

While unloading the car, Evie kept getting distracted by the sights of her neighborhood. She hardly remembered living within sight of neighbors. People sat out on porches in lawn chairs, drinking from sweating glasses. Old men perched in pairs with chess boards between them, children played Cat's Cradle on the stairs, and old women rocked in their wooden chairs. Music blasted from stereos, different songs and styles that somehow managed to harmonize into a cohesive sound, the throbbing pulse of the neighborhood.

She noticed many houses with ancient, wheezing window units propped on buckled sheets of plywood, weathered 2x4 boards supporting the weight. And still more houses had

windows propped up with box fans, doors thrown open in the hope of catching a breeze. Her neighbor in the other half of the duplex had a window unit hanging out of the window, blowing hot air over his side of the porch. She'd need to buy one, too. Her apartment was a sweat lodge.

Unpacking in the hot, sticky air was more than Evie could stand, and she found that her tenuous grip on sanity was now tied to how fast she could strip and get into the shower. Under the cool stream of water, she felt almost human again. She let the drops pelt her back for twenty minutes before forcing herself to turn the faucet off. After toweling dry and dressing in fresh clothes, she felt clean for almost fifteen minutes before the urge to get back into the shower struck. Instead, she got out her laptop. Keats had done his job, and her wireless was ready to go.

Over the years, she'd scoured the internet for information about her mother, but she'd never had any success. But now that she was here, actually in New Orleans, something would turn up. Her mother had been a society girl; she couldn't be that difficult to track down. Finding out about her family would lead Evie to Joss, she

just knew it. Since the drive had taken longer than anticipated, Evie didn't have much time to start looking before classes started. Tomorrow—Monday—was orientation, and classes began on Wednesday.

It was after five o'clock, so Evie didn't bother making calls. She filled her notebook with the addresses and phone numbers of places she could check. River Oaks, the hospital where her mother had been committed, was her best bet. They were required to keep copies of all patient records, which would include birth and death certificates, power-of-attorney forms, a will, and perhaps, if Evie was lucky, a next-of-kin form with Evie's father's name on it. Or something with her father's name. She also made pages for the city's records office, the parish coroner, and the local ward of the LDS church. She'd read online that the Mormons kept excellent genealogy records, even of non-Mormon families.

Now that she was here, and Joss wasn't peering over her shoulder, Evie would find out what happened to her mother and her aunt, and, somehow, she'd find her father, too. That would require her to get her anxiety disorder under control, which, so far, hadn't proven easy. But

tomorrow was orientation, her first match-up of will versus mental meltdown. The thought of all those mingling students made her nose tingle, but, really, it was an opportunity. A chance to prove to herself that she could interact with humans, not just horses. She folded the cover of her notebook back in place and slipped it into her messenger bag. When orientation was over, she'd be ready.

Chapter Five

It happened after the sons of men had multiplied in those days, that daughters were born to them, elegant and beautiful. 1 Enoch 7:1

There were over a thousand people milling around the quad, and Andras was distracted by the smell of sweat mingled with the artificial fragrances of modern trappings—soap and laundry aides, cologne and antiperspirant. Chewing gum. Shampoo. Most of the rabble appeared, as Andras did, to be in their early to mid twenties. In preparation, he had popped in on the undergraduate orientation to observe how the male students dressed; rugby shirts and wrinkled cargo shorts had dominated. The outfit he wore today—a checked button up and pressed cargos—was a slightly more adult version of what he'd seen. His approximation of a young grad student was spot on. He blended with the horde.

Joining the cluster of students waiting to sign in, he eyed the females. Their dress code was not as uniform as that of their male counterparts. Some wore the skimpy

shorts and tank tops he'd seen on the undergraduates, but most were somewhat more modestly clothed. A few had dressed for business and wore suits with skirts and heels. Preliminary research on his target hadn't turned up a photograph or physical description, and any one of the girls in queue might be Evie Martin. He wasn't daunted. A few lies and some well-placed flattery had gotten him enrolled in Evie's econometrics and microeconomics classes and placed in the same orientation group.

When he reached the registration table, a volunteer typed his name into a laptop, handed him a blue name badge and an itinerary, and gestured toward the meeting place for his group. A man holding a blue sign was flanked by several clusters of jabbering students. One girl stood off to the side, alone, and Andras was certain he'd spotted his quarry. He'd learned that Evie Martin had lived a cloistered life, and had recently been prescribed buspirone and lorazepam, drugs used to help manage anxiety. This girl looked uneasy.

Her manner of dress was different from all the other girls. She wore a pale pink cotton sundress and white sandals. Clothes for a young child or an old woman, though

she wore them well. Tiny droplets of sweat glittered on her ivory skin, causing her pink cotton sundress to cling at the bust and waist. Chocolate hair was pulled up in a loose bun, stray strands waved against her nape in the humid air and she lifted a hand to brush them away. This girl possessed a quiet, peaceful beauty. And, clearly, she had been even more sheltered than he'd realized if she thought her outfit would help her mix with the crowd. He immediately thought of the puppet strings he could tug with her looks, the maneuvers he could manipulate with her help. The trouble he could incite. Why had he been sent to her?

His instructions had been clear, but the ultimate purpose of his assignment had not been disclosed, which was unusual. All he knew was that his imperative was to gain her trust, make her love him—as brother or lover, it mattered not—and to keep her from harm. There were factions, he was told, who wanted her dead. Andras was accustomed to leading people into trouble, not keeping them out of it. He wasn't sure how to proceed, which was irritating. He always knew how to proceed.

Approaching the group, he opted not to join one of the ready-made cliques. Experience had proven that he could

insinuate into any group of his choosing, but today it would serve him best to stand alone, near the girl, but not close enough to force an introduction. She would notice the only other outsider.

"Okay, people," the group leader said. "It's ten o'clock, and it looks like the line at the registration table's finally died down, so let's get started."

Andras felt the girl notice him. He focused more intently on the speaker.

"So I'm Matt, and I'll be your orientation leader. Ya'll lucked out and seriously got the best guide—this will be my sixth year here, first as an undergrad, and now I'm working on my MBA. So if you have any questions, I'm your man."

Andras glanced at the blue name badge pinned to the girl's pink dress. Evie Martin. He was right. Evie stood with her knees locked, and she looked pale, even in the heat. Her breathing was shallow and her fists were clenched. All signs of an impending panic attack. Andras stepped forward, angling his body between Evie and the nearest group of students, blocking at least some of their

view of Evie. He listened to her breathing, but faced the leader, giving her some privacy in which to compose herself.

"So," Matt said, leading Andras to wonder at the MBA candidate's abridged vocabulary. "I want everyone to pretend we're back in elementary school and find a buddy for the day. Keep an eye on your buddies, and if we lose someone while we tour the campus, give me a shout."

Excellent. He wished he'd thought to arrange Matt's juvenile plan himself. Feigning a look around for an unpaired student, he prepared to spot Evie. Before he turned toward her, she approached him. "Want to be partners?" she asked.

Unexpected. Impressive that she'd managed to surprise him. People were usually so predictable. "Sure," he said, and turned to her.

When their eyes met, he flinched. Evie's irises were a rich brown shot with reflective slivers of gold, a color combination he rarely saw anymore. She was clearly a half-breed. He hadn't seen a true Nephilim in over a century. Most had died out. The few remaining had weak bloodlines,

the angel having been almost bred out of them over the centuries. Evie's blood was strong. He'd bet that her father, or at the least her grandfather, was a full Celestial. This new development was interesting, but he couldn't fathom the reason he, of all possible choices, had been sent. Why would he care about a half-breed?

"I'm Evie," she said, offering her hand.

"Andras." He shook it, trying to read her expression to see if she knew what he was. She was so unquiet, he couldn't tell. He wondered if she knew what she was. Her pulse throbbed too rapidly in her palm. She hadn't regained control of her anxiety, she was just holding it back. The fear of a captured animal played in her eyes, and he knew she wanted to run. He wanted to chase.

"I'll be watching to make sure you don't become lost," he said, speaking with the light Hungarian accent he usually used when working in the States. He could always count on the xenophilia of most Americans to open a few doors.

"Okay," Matt said, already walking. "We're going to head over here, towards the auditorium, to start the tour."

Afterwards, it'll be about lunch time, so we'll head to a restaurant."

Evie was starting to hyperventilate. Normally, his job was to charm or rile people, not to calm them. Already he wanted to quit this assignment. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded at him, breathing quickly through her nose. She needed a paper bag to breathe into, but that would draw so much attention the girl would move into the attack. Matt had finished talking about whatever building they stood in front of, and the group started to move again. Evie stumbled along after them. Clearly, she didn't wish to be singled out.

Matt stopped in front of another building that housed the MBA program. As he spoke to his congregation, Evie's breathing grew more rapid. "Go inside," he whispered to Evie. "The door's unlocked, I saw someone go in a minute ago."

She just looked at him, jaw clenched.

"You can have a moment to gather your thoughts," he said. "I'll cover for you, and we'll catch up when you're

feeling better. No one will know."

This time, she nodded and headed into the building. He wondered if she would sneak out another door. Hard to tell with this one, he thought.

Andras caught up with Matt and murmured an excuse for Evie. Matt nodded and waved his hand to indicate the direction he planned to head next. Walking backward, Matt explained the history of the building housing the law school. Andras ducked into the building.

Evie's back was pressed against a wall, her chin tilted up and her eyes closed. Her skin was damp and Andras could smell her as soon as he entered the hall. He wanted to taste her. It had been centuries since he'd been so close to a half-breed.

Evie's eyes popped open and she saw Andras staring. "You looked ill," he said. "I thought I should check on you."

"I'm fine. Just a little overheated." A weak attempt at a smile.

"It's hot," he said, "but you'll get used to it. Do

you need me to take you to get some water?"

"No, really, I'm okay." She straightened and stepped away from the wall. "Let's just find the group before they're long gone."

Andras offered his arm, but Evie just looked at him quizzically and walked alongside him. He couldn't tell if she had rejected his gesture, which really had never happened before, or whether she hadn't understood his gesture. The latter, surely.

"I'm nervous too, you know," he said.

She looked startled at his confession. "I hadn't figured you for the type."

He winked. "Well at least I now know that you've been working on figuring out my type."

Her veins dilated and flooded her capillaries. He'd embarrassed her with such a mild comment. This one was going to require some finesse.

"It's okay," he said, holding the door back out to the quad open for her. "I've been figuring your type too, so we're even."

No response. That always drew a response. Sometimes a giggle, sometimes a question designed to draw out a compliment. But nothing from the half-breed. She really wasn't human.

"So, Evie Martin," he said, making sure she saw him glance at her name tag, "would you like to head back to the group, or shall we make our own orientation itinerary?"

He grabbed her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. "I know my way around this campus and city better than Matt does, I'm sure. I can show you around without the crowd."

He could see the conflict in her expression. "Let's avoid the crowd," he said. "What do you say? You in?"

Evie nodded.