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The 24th of July: A Novel-In-Progress

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The 24th of July

A Novel-In-Progress

by

Kimberley A. Hanna

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract <i>The 24th of July: A Novel-In-Progress</i>	ii
Introduction	
Introduction Statement	1
Works Cited	20
Manuscript <i>The 24th of July: A Novel-In-Progress</i>	
Chapter One	21
Chapter Two	40
Chapter Three	68
Chapter Four	106
Chapter Five	124
Chapter Six	143
Chapter Seven	162
Chapter Eight	170

The 24th of July
A Novel-In-Progress

Kimberley A. Hanna

ABSTRACT

The 24th of July is a fictional novel set in the present day. The story centers around Michelle, an eighteen year old girl from Warm Springs, Idaho who fears the sexual games she has played with her cousin Edna have tainted her for a Temple marriage. She meets Duke, a charismatic fundamentalist polygamist, who believes polygamy is part of the plan for eternal salvation as set down by the original doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the prophet Joseph Smith. Michelle sees Duke as her chance to put her relationship with Edna in the past and obtain the rewards waiting for her in the celestial heaven by marrying him and having babies.

But life as a polygamist wife is more difficult than she anticipated and it is further complicated by the fact that she and Cheron, Duke's second wife, fall in love. When Duke discovers the nature of their relationship, both are forced into making choices that will change their entire way of life.

INTRODUCTION STATEMENT

I began writing when working on my undergraduate degree at Eckerd College, where I graduated with honors in 2001 with a bachelor's in Creative Writing. I was happy to be accepted into USF's Master's program in creative writing in 2002 as I wanted to improve my writing and saw being a part of a master's program as the best way for me to do so.

At Eckerd, my first introduction to writing class was a formative experience. It was taught by Mark Leib, who is also a professor at USF and the theater critic for *The Weekly Planet*. This class introduced me to fiction, playwriting, and poetry. While it was not comprehensive enough to do more than present the basic concepts of each genre, I was thrilled to discover, as I have in each subsequent writing class I have taken, that writing is a craft that can be learned and honed and is not entirely dependent upon innate talent, but just as much upon hard work, tenacity, and ability to listen to critiques and implement suggestions in the rewriting process.

After I left Eckerd and before beginning at USF, I took a graduate-level class in playwriting as a non-degree seeking student from Professor Leib at USF. The class was difficult and my attempts at writing the weekly required scenes did not always reach the level for which I hoped. I was trying to write about what I saw as the hollowness of an upper-class existence and it was coming off as simply stereotyped or Martha-Stewart-idealistic.

For several weeks in a row, I would write a scene, read it the next day, toss it in the garbage, and start over. I was not just revising, I was starting over on a totally different topic. I would do this several times a week until I had a scene that conveyed what I was trying to say.

One week, the assignment was to write a monologue. I wrote about illness, namely the *desire* for it. The piece was based on my experience with illness and how I started looking back on my own postoperative period with a certain fondness. My life had become out-of-control-busy with full-time work, school, charity work, social obligations, and the demands of being a corporate wife, leaving no time for my child or to write. But after I was diagnosed with a bone tumor, all that ground to a halt.

Soon, certain stimuli would remind me of this peaceful time. It could be the scent of a lotion or the feel of my childhood blanket I would fall asleep with, thick with the aftereffects of anesthesia and morphine. These triggers were the impetus of my monologue, *The Pleasure of Your Company*. I wrote about a woman who found major surgery a better alternative to the life she led, a woman who wanted that tumor to come back, to give her a reprieve from the perfect life she had built. I wrote about a woman who was tempted more by the seductions of Vicadin than her best friend's husband. By using the theme of illness and by talking about an aspect of it that people do not always admit to, I was able to convey some of the detriments of an upper-middle class lifestyle, but without the stereotype.

After that piece, I wrote *Newsbreak*, which portrayed the different ways family members cope with a random attack on the protagonist's sister. I wanted to convey how

they dealt with a major tragedy and how these differences, while breaking the family apart in ways that they never reconcile, stem from the fact that each person is really exactly the same – just trying to get through it whatever way they can.

My next piece, *A Gala Evening*, was about an argument between a husband and a wife in a valet line after a charity ball. Arguments had been difficult for me and I tended to let the winner win without much of a fight from the loser. But in *A Gala Evening*, I let the husband and wife *finish* their argument, all the way to the bitter end. This short play was accepted and read at the Edward Albee Last Frontier Theater Conference in 2002. Making things difficult enough for my protagonist is still not one of my natural gifts, but I am aware of it and work at it continually.

I use these early works as examples of what I was trying to work on to improve my writing. I wanted to write without judgment. I wanted to write without stereotype. I wanted to write with more conflict. I wanted to write about issues that I am passionate about, yet do it well enough that my work becomes universal. These pieces were steps in this direction, but interestingly, these are all still issues in my writing that I remain very conscious of.

I also wrote *Hypoxia Zone*, a full-length play, as a class requirement. A dark comedy, the play centers around three troubled friends enjoying a beach weekend. Their lives appear tranquil and satisfying, but, like the literal hypoxia zone in the water (a dead zone devoid of oxygen), harbor dark secrets. Over the course of the weekend, Leigh decides to leave her husband because her life has been reduced to providing food and sex and Eve begins to check off items on her to-do-before-she-dies list that includes sleeping

with a woman. But it is Geena's life that is most vulnerable when Eve and Leigh confront her about their suspicion that her daughter is being abused.

Mark Leib described *Hypoxia Zone* as better than most plays he reviews and an "impressive new comedy" when announcing StageWork Theater's 2003-2004 season in *The Weekly Planet* (Leib 35). With his encouragement, I sent it out to theaters and it is currently slated for production July 8-28, 2004 in the Shimberg Theater at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center and is under consideration for production by The Theatre District at the Cast in Hollywood, CA. It has also received staged readings by StageWorks Theater in Tampa and The Players Theater in Sarasota.

When I wrote *Hypoxia Zone*, its latent lesbian theme seemed bigger than life to me, as I was personally struggling with that very issue. I felt exposed when the play was workshopped the first time. Now that I am divorced and ensconced in a lesbian lifestyle, the play no longer has that effect on me.

All these pieces helped develop my writing and I learned that if I were not afraid of putting a piece of me on paper, if I just had the wear with all to mine my own thoughts and feelings, no matter how private, I could write a more universal piece, no matter where I set it – in a trailer park or in the valet line. Dorothy Allison, a literary influence, states that the "best fiction comes from the place where the terror hides" and says that if a writer does not "break out in that sweat of fear when you write, then you have not gone far enough" (*Skin* 217). I want to find that fear, because I know that once I get over getting it on paper, the effect of it on me dulls over time, until it totally disappears. What was once a secret becomes a work independent of me – a story or a play. It takes on a

life of its own and in doing so it disengages from me, much like teenagers need to separate from their parents and go out into the world.

In addition to *The 24th of July* and *Hypoxia Zone*, my body of work consists of three other plays. *Jane Avril: La Dernière Grisette*, a one-act, one-woman commission depicting the lives and loves of Toulouse-Lautrec's most famous model, was produced at the Tampa Museum of Art in November 2003 and at the Baltimore Museum of Art in April 2004. In it, the life of the celebrated Moulin Rouge dancer is told through the stories of those closest to her, from her abusive mother, the *demi-mondaine* who exploited her; to May Milton, her closest confidant and one of many lovers. When this play was commissioned, I chose to explore Jane Avril because of my interest in women's relationships and the fact I wanted to highlight Avril's lesbianism (and that of her peers Yvette Guilbert, May Belfort, May Milton, and the whores). From a development standpoint, *Jane Avril: La Dernière Grisette* took me out of using my own experiences as writing material and forced me to use writing tools such as research, but I am amazed at how much of "me" is still in there.

Another play, *X-RAYTED*, an unproduced work, is set on Anne and Ted's new boat. While planning the boat's christening party, Anne and her two friends plot to kill Ted, an abusive and arrogant radiologist. When Ted turns up dead in the second act, the three women come together, apart, and together again as they attempt to determine if his death were an accident or if one (or more) of them did indeed kill him. The title refers to Ted's chauvinistic attempts to name the boat something that will convey to the world that

he is a player, while still being able to act innocent about his intentions. He starts with *T & A*, but Anne does not buy his reasoning that it is just their initials. When he renames it, he names it for himself: *X-RAY TED*. But Ted does not space his letters well and the boat again has an x-rated name. Writing *X-RAY TED* helped me explore forces of connection and disconnection as a way to create conflict. The conflict isn't Ted getting killed or even who did it. Instead, it is the way the women unite and divide that creates the suspense.

Pool Rules, also unproduced, is set at a country club party on the pool patio. Five women enter. Over the course of the play, it is revealed that these five women are one woman who is struggling to keep the rigors of her life from pulling her apart. She is juggling the demands of being a corporate wife, a formidable social schedule, motherhood, and work with questions about her sexuality. The women come together and apart until they are forced to make a decision that will bring them back together.

Pool Rules is my first piece that is not firmly grounded in realism. In addition to five actors portraying one woman, I use faceless dummies that the actors move around to represent the other party guests. It is also more of a farce than realism, with the action become more and more confusing to the one woman who is trying desperately to hold her life together, cumulating when the others appear in a strap-on dildo (pool rule: only flexible swim aids are permitted in the pool), knock out one of the other party guests after he makes a pass (pool rule: no animals allowed in the pool area, unless authorized by pool management), and hole the sick kids up in the locker room (pool rule: adult supervision of minor children is mandatory at all times).

Pool Rules has been workshopped in StageWork Theater's playwriting group (led by the artistic director of the Asolo Theater in Sarasota). I have also submitted it to various theaters and new play competitions.

I have several common themes in my work. I write about women's relationships first and foremost, as either friends or lovers. I aim to depict the forces that connect and disconnect strong female relationships. In writing about lovers, I aim to bring the nature of the relationships between women to the forefront and move the sexuality to the background, making any physical relationship more the natural outcome of falling in love with a same-sex person instead of it driving the attraction.

In addition, my characters face the hollowness of what appears to be idyllic lives and grapple with their own past and present abuse, the abuse of their children and the part they play in it, addictions, and coming out as a lesbian in their largely heterosexual worlds.

These themes, for the most part, parallel issues in my own life or the lives of those around me. Growing up, my family was lower middle class at best, but when my second husband and I moved to Culbreath Isles, a waterfront neighborhood in South Tampa, I thought I had what I wanted. However, my marriage became an institution at best that a beautiful home and a busy social calendar could not help. I also saw how the lives of my girlfriends *inside* the gates of Culbreath Isles were no different from my childhood experience or the lives of the disenfranchised I worked with at two of Tampa's social service agencies (I am the former Director of Development at Alpha House of Tampa, a

pregnancy crisis center, and The Children's Home, an orphanage for abused children). The only difference is more money and with more money, abuse and addiction can become invisible. It is this invisibility I want to expose in my writing. I think of Sandra Cisneros, who wrote, "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. [. . .] You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are. [. . .] You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you" (Cisneros 129). I left Culbreath Isles, which is, while no Mango Street, just as treacherous. And I left plenty of women who can't leave, women whose children are abused, women who feel they have no options, and women who know their lives have become insignificant and seek refuge in drugs or alcohol. I love them and attempt, in my writing, to "come back for them," just like Sandra Cisneros.

My goal as a writer is to concentrate on the lesbian statement in my work. I think that representing this underheard voice is important. With the current issue of gay marriage at the forefront of our nation's consciousness, I am a proponent for the line of thinking that says all people, gay and straight, are the same, and that the homosexual experience should not be carved out and become an identity issue that keeps us separate. On the other hand, I agree with David Román, who argues that it is "politically useful and necessary to assert a gay identity- again and again," to contribute to the "'we are everywhere' mantra" (Hughes and Román 4). He says that queer works help queer people create "new identity formations" and to "inform and shape our [queer] understanding of identity and community" (Hughes and Román 5-6). To accomplish this, it is important to me for my work to be seen as lesbian-themed.

However, what makes a work lesbian in nature? If a lesbian writer writes *without* lesbian content, is that piece still considered a lesbian work? If a straight writer writes *with* lesbian content, is that piece a lesbian work? How *much* lesbian content is enough to constitute a lesbian work? I think about these issues in my desire to be seen and identified as a lesbian writer.

I have focused on lesbian issues throughout my academic career at USF, even as it relates to non-creative work. I have written papers such as “The Use of (Homo)Erotic Symbolism to Construct Lesbian Desire in the Work of Holly Hughes” and “*Antony and Cleopatra*: Homoerotic Desire in Cleopatra’s Court in Performance and Text” in addition to the annotated bibliography “Lesbian (In)visiblity on Stage, 1890-1950.” My paper “Lesbian Representations in Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*” won a student prize at the International Bernard Shaw Conference hosted by USF in Sarasota, where I presented it in March 2004. I am currently revising it in the hopes of submitting it for publication.

My favorite writers are Dorothy Allison, Carol Anshaw, Bertha Harris, Eileen Myles, Leslea Newman, Sarah Waters, Jeanette Winterson, Holly Hughes, Paula Vogel, Susan Sontag, and Radclyffe Hall. As much as I wish it would, my voice will never sound like any of my favorite writers. Knowing this, I am not attempting to emulate them; instead I hope to incorporate some of their essence into my work.

In Allison’s work, I admire the raw emotional grittiness of her characters. Her descriptive passages of damaged people are haunting in their realism. Allison says she

wants “hard stories” and that she “demands them” from herself (*Skin* 218). I want my stories to become harder and grittier, which has been a struggle for me, but something for which I continue to aim.

I also like the way Allison explores “the questions of family and loss and betrayal” instead of focusing on the “details of sexual abuse” that color her stories (*Skin* 54). Her novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, is a prime example of this. While this novel is replete with graphic abuse, it is fuller with the female relationships in young Bone’s life, and provides an interesting study of how strong, tough women can be buried under by the demands of the [flawed] men in their lives. How does a child get sexually abused in a house full of family? Allison tells me how.

When writing my own scenes, Allison's influence helps me to go far enough and to not stick to the surface of an issue. In addition, I use her writing as an example to explore the factors that *surround* abuse or other tragedies. As examples, in *Newsbreak*, I focus on *how* the protagonist’s sister’s attack changed the family and not on the attack itself. In *Hypoxia Zone*, the characters walk away from their suspicion that ten year old Caroline is being abused. While this ending is disturbing to some, the fact that kids get left in abusive relationships while others (including the family) know about it, is precisely my point.

If Allison is emotionally raw, Eileen Myles is physically raw. Her work is filled with the palpable descriptions of being a woman, being a lesbian, and being in relationships. It reeks of people: the way they smell, what they do, what they like. Consider her description of menstrual blood as having sex with oneself: examining the

blood, “Is it red, brown; does it look too bright,” or the description of it smeared across a lover’s face (Myles 89). I aspire to being able to describe physical scenes with this same earthiness. Myles makes me ask myself what it really smells like or tastes like when writing and to try to get that description on the page.

Both Allison and Myles keep their lesbianism to the forefront of their writings. But Sarah Waters, in *Tipping the Velvet*, makes her protagonist spunky and courageous first and lesbian second. I also like her use of the first-person, which draws me intimately into the story from the very beginning when she describes life as a fishmonger and seeing Kitty Butler for the first time. The first person works because she is such a complex character and I do not mind being in her head for almost five hundred pages. I too, want my characters to be who they are first and lesbians second. I do not want them to be solely defined by being a lesbian.

I like Carol Anshaw’s use of description in her stories. In *Seven Moves*, her protagonist finds photographs of her lover’s lover and describes her as “interesting-looking in a way that’s from someplace else,” full of “an intensity of expression American women don’t typically rise to” and with a face “carved from broad planes” (Anshaw 76). I do not know whether the woman has blond hair or brunette or is short or tall, but she is vivid in my mind. I like Anshaw’s ability to approach description from the side and still convey an illustrative picture. She has influenced me to add more detail into my work and to work on finding the perfect way to describe something with concrete detail.

I like this same thing in Jeanette Winterson. Here is how she describes a marriage: “Inside her marriage there were too many clocks and not enough time. Too much furniture and too little space” (Winterson 45). I have written pages about vacant marriages that do not convey it nearly as succinctly as those two sentences. Winterson has an ambiguity about her that strengthens the narrative so it ends up not feeling ambiguous at all. Winterson too has influenced me to find a different way to present description and to not think of the obvious. In some ways, her influence is the opposite of Anshaw's and I hope to combine both their examples in my own writing.

Because I chose to focus on playwriting in my early writing efforts, my development as a fiction writer has been different than if I had written more in the genre. At first, playwriting seemed like writing exercise. It was difficult for me to get characters on the page to convey an emotion or a thought using just dialogue, especially since people never say what they are really thinking. Playwriting does not have all the luxuries afforded to fiction, making it both harder and easier. There is no internal dialogue, narrative presence, point of view, description, exposition, summary or many of the other tools available to the fiction writer. Soon though, playwriting became less an exercise in trying to find the precise dialogue to convey what I needed and more like a crutch where I could rely on *only* dialogue for all my writing. Writing *The 24th of July* certainly changed that.

Workshopping the piece has highlighted several areas I continue to work on in my writing. One is that I need to use all the tools available to me as a fiction writer. I tended

to put very little description in my scenes, always eliciting the response that the reader did not feel entirely in the scene. In addition, I did not use much in the way of thoughts or make use of the narrator to convey information that couldn't be told with dialogue, thus eliciting the response that the reader did not really know my protagonist. I have worked at layering in description and more information about Michelle's motivations.

Another problem for me was finding the emotion in my story. I realized that when writing a play, I am relying heavily on the director to find the emotion in the words. As an example, I was shocked to see *Jane Avril: La Dernière Grisette* in rehearsal because the director found moments of intense emotion (especially in the scenes between Jane and her abusive mother and Jane and her lover whom she leaves to marry). The sheer *intensity* of the emotion was overwhelming and I could not believe that the play I saw was the one I wrote. Luckily, because of the director, the play I saw was better than the one I wrote. She saw things in the words I had hidden and looked over as easily as one looks over a typo in your own work. I have to admit that going through the rehearsal process was painful at times, but because of the input of the director and the actor, the play was better than anything I could have written.

In fiction, there is no luxury of having other people find the emotional intensity or tell you that a line does not sound natural. The writer is responsible for giving the reader a full experience. The playwright leaves emotional stage directions out of a script and I was doing the same thing with my manuscript. I wanted the reader to fill in the emotion from the words I put in the dialogue. I have also worked to add more emotion to Michelle.

However, when writing scenes for *The 24th of July*, I still find it easier to write the dialogue as I hear it, then go back through and cut out the extraneous parts of it while adding physical description, thoughts, and movements, thus fleshing it out into a richer visual for the reader. For me, this is the *craft* part, the part I need to study, use, and hone. The dialogue comes more naturally and my fiction will probably always be dialogue-driven and dialogue-heavy. I think I have the ability to *hear* people and can get it down on the page in a natural-sounding manner.

Most of my writings have concerned women's relationships, so it is no surprise that my thesis, *The 24th of July*, does too. But for my thesis, I wanted a situation where women were closer than friends or even family. The setting of a polygamist household was perfect.

As with my other works, I drew on a certain amount of autobiographical history for my story. I grew up in Salt Lake City and at seventeen, married into a large Mormon family. One cannot grow up in Utah or marry into a Mormon family and leave without being steeped in the culture. I love Utah and I love its people, but I am also the first to brood on the difficulties of being the other: non-Mormon in a Mormon environment.

Every day of my life, I was reminded of that otherness, whether at school or later at work. But it would always sneak up on me with someone I did not know until the question, "Are you Mormon?" was asked (and it is *always* asked when meeting a new person) because I *look* Mormon. I could easily pass for Mormon in situations where one is sized up by their physical traits alone (much like the way people presume I am straight

now in similar situations). But in Utah, I learned to embrace my otherness and did not want to pass for Mormon, just as I do not want to pass for straight now. I think that fact has significantly influenced my writing.

The tenets that Duke and his family believe in are not so far from what the contemporary Mormon Church teaches. Of course, as Duke explains, the Church no longer sanctions plural marriage, but otherwise the doctrine in *The 24th of July* is the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While it may seem outlandish, peculiar, or dangerous to those of other faiths, they are the convictions that surrounded my growing up. For the majority of my life, *I* was viewed as outlandish, peculiar and even dangerous to acquaintances and co-workers for not believing in what the vast majority of Utah's population practices.

Sandra Cisneros writes that “it is not enough simply to sense it [the otherness]; it has to be named, and then written about” (Cisneros xvi). I think all of my writing has been attempts to name my otherness, whether it was the otherness of not being Mormon, the otherness of living an upper-middle class lifestyle that did not quite fit, or the otherness of realizing I was gay in my [formally] totally heterosexual environment.

In writing *The 24th of July*, I drew on my knowledge of two polygamous families in particular that I knew of in Utah. One family were customers of the bank I worked for and operated a business similar to Duke's. Only the husband handled banking matters, but the business employed his many wives and no outsiders. The other family lived in the last farmhouse on the edge of the brand-new subdivision my first husband and I bought our first house in. The yard swarmed with children, but it was rare to glimpse any

women, though I drove by their house every time I came or went. When I did catch sight of a plainly dressed wife working industriously in the yard garden, I would think about her life for the rest of the day. Why was she there? What kept her there? I was only eighteen myself, but it now seems I have been thinking about the imbalance of power in marriage for a long time.

The 24th of July centers around Michelle, a young Mormon girl who fears the sexual games she has played with her cousin Edna have tainted her for a Temple marriage. She meets Duke, a charismatic fundamentalist Mormon polygamist, who believes polygamy is part of the plan for eternal salvation as set down by the original doctrine of the Mormon Church. Michelle sees Duke as her chance to obtain the rewards waiting for her in the celestial heaven and marries him. But life as a polygamist wife is more difficult than she anticipated and it is further complicated by the fact that she and Cheron, Duke's second wife, fall in love and begin a sexual relationship. When Duke discovers the nature of their relationship, both are forced into making choices that will change their entire way of life.

The title is currently a working title and refers to the Utah state holiday that commemorates the Mormons settling the Salt Lake Valley and the day Michelle and Cheron will consummate their sexual relationship.

I have written a first draft (although it has undergone many revisions) of more than 150 pages and I anticipate that to be about one-third of the novel. To date, Michelle has married Duke and is pregnant. She is also struggling to keep her same-sex longings

inside and with the demands of living in a polygamous household and has started to question her decision. But a phone call home confirms that she has nowhere to go.

I want to rework several aspects of the novel before continuing forward with the story:

- Michelle’s lesbianism will be the central conflict.
- The flashback needs to be condensed and prioritized to reflect Michelle’s sexual conflict first, then her conflict with her parents, and finally her courtship with Duke (currently, the flashback is weighted in favor of the courtship).
- I need to decide what to do with the flashback. Originally, it was sprinkled throughout the first part of the story because I thought it important to understand early why Michelle would marry a polygamist. But it kept taking the reader out of the story. I then consolidated it into the second and third chapters, but I am not sure if this works either.
- I need to add more daily conflict in the household. I have not made things hard enough for Michelle. I plan to use the children for some of this by introducing them into scenes more and using Little Duke as Duke’s eyes and ears when he is gone. I want Michelle to make more mistakes in this system by saying and doing the wrong things.
- I want to bond the women more and highlight Duke’s tyranny by showing things such as the difference in the household when Duke is home and when he is gone. I want Duke to be harsher, especially with the children, which will contribute to Michelle losing her illusions of him.

I write from an outline, which I revise and update as I go along. Currently, my plans for the plot development include:

- Michelle wins Little Duke over by enlisting him to help her get the car in the barn running.
- During one of Duke's many absences, the wives and kids have a picnic at the Great Salt Lake. Michelle kisses Cheron while they are alone.
- Sherry visits and upsets the household because of the risk of discovery.
- More complications I have not plotted out yet that build Michelle and Cheron's relationship and weaken Michelle and Duke's.
- Michelle feigns sickness at the Pioneer Day parade and Cheron takes her home. They have sex. LaRae is suspicious.
- LaRae tips Duke off to the nature Michelle's relationship with Cheron and he discovers them together. Duke forces them into a humiliating sexual experience with him.
- Michelle decides to leave, but knows Duke will not let her take her baby. The other wives have been enlisted to make sure he is watched at all times.
- Cheron decides to leave with Michelle, but something happens (not just a change of heart) to reverse this.
- With the help of Sherry and one of the wives (not sure who yet), Michelle leaves. She goes to Edna.

I added an epigraph to the beginning of each chapter in order to convey some of the underlying doctrine of the Church that I felt was important for the reader to know, but

was coming off as preachy when incorporated into the text. I hope this helps to fix that problem.

I think *The 24th of July* has a certain timeliness to it on a couple of counts, one as it relates to the topical concern of gay marriage. Some distractors of gay marriage use Bible principles to support their argument that marriage is a covenant reserved for heterosexual couples. Duke uses the Bible and the Book of Mormon to make his case that plural marriage is the only avenue to salvation. I hope *The 24th of July* illustrates in some way the danger of applying dogmatic tenets to solve questions about what marriage is or is meant to be and how terrifying it is to interpret the Bible so literally to fit ones own needs.

The 24th of July also fits into contemporary culture as society looks at religious zealots with a closer eye in the wake of the highly-publicized Elizabeth Smart abduction. Elizabeth lived as the plural wife of her ex-Mormon abductor Brian David Mitchell for none months (Smart 219). Mitchell, like Duke, “was directed by prophecy he imagined had been given to him by God” and he preached of the “blessings of polygamy” (Smart 219). To me, it is intriguing that Mormons can look at Mitchell with abhorrence, while still believing that God blesses [certain] mortal men with prophecy and at one time, these prophecies extolled the same blessings of polygamy in which he still believes.

The wives in *The 24th of July* are just as trapped as Elizabeth Smart was. I hope I have presented them as compassionately as one would Elizabeth Smart: as a victim of a smart, manipulative, and controlling fanatic.

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“Some Latter-day Saints face the confusion and pain that result when a man or a woman engages in sexual behavior with a person of the same sex, or even when a person has erotic feelings that could lead toward such behavior. We should distinguish between homosexual (or lesbian) thoughts and feelings, which should be resisted and redirected and homosexual behavior, which is a serious sin. We need to learn how to live so that a weakness that is a mortal sin will not prevent us from achieving the goal that is eternal.”

– from “Same-Gender Attraction”
by Elder Dallin H. Oaks
of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles
Ensign 10/95

CHAPTER ONE

Michelle woke to the crunch of thin ice breaking under the truck’s tires as Duke pulled the truck into the driveway. She must have been asleep since Pocatello; she didn’t remember crossing the border of Idaho into Utah at all. Her thick dark hair felt plastered to the side window, her cheek numb from the cold glass, spit still wet on her lip. She’d been dreaming. She was in the desert again, barefoot on a wide strip of hot sand bordered with white rocks, rocks whiter than the salty sand. A smell like rotten eggs hung in the air. A rumbling made her look up and she saw a wave gathering force in the distance, growing taller as it grew closer. Water calmly washed around her ankles right

as the wave became a perfectly vertical wall above her, ready to pull her under as it crashed down.

“We’re home!” said her new husband, Duke Stead. He was an imposing man, large and assured, with a face tanning into calloused leather and a voice that matched. She looked out of the window at her new home.

The house wasn’t as large as she’d imagined. It was red brick with two stories and an attic and a decaying wooden porch on all four sides. The sloping porch was strewn with a maze of objects: a pallet of cardboard boxes, a mini-trampoline, an old yellow Tonka dumptruck. It looked like any minute someone could burst through the back door and bring them to life. Not like back home in Idaho, where her dad’s wheelbarrow left out in the garden rusted or their plaster birdbath cracked from the cold. Snow covered the yard, but Michelle could tell it was used as a vegetable garden. The fine powder rose and fell in short furrows in the front and frozen stalks of brown corn and sunflowers rested against the porch railing.

“I was expecting it to be more of a farm,” she said.

“This isn’t Idaho,” Duke said. “The city keeps creeping up.” He pointed through the windshield to a row of squat square houses, some tan, some white, some a drab yellow, their backyards exposed as if they were naked. Swingsets, dog runs, and the occasional storage shed punctuated the bleak line. Only a drooping barbed wire fence separated the houses from the small pasture behind the barn. “See those houses over there? That used to be Thurgood White’s farm. He died, kids sold, now it’s Whitefarm Estates. They don’t bother us though. You’ll get used to it.”

Duke opened his door and the frigid winter air rushed into the cab. Michelle shivered and buttoned her coat. She gathered her small suitcase and her crocheted purse that contained her Book of Mormon and a stash of Hershey bars. Michelle loved chocolate, even though as a Mormon, chocolate and other addictive substances were prohibited by the Word of Wisdom. She'd quickly eaten one bar already when Duke was paying for gas outside of Twin Falls, accompanying the act with a prayer to try to save if not her soul, at least her body. "Heavenly Father, I'm the weakest of the weak of all saints. Thank you for my mortal body and help me protect it, especially from the ravages of chocolate, and keep it the holy sacred temple it is."

"I hope they like me. Do you think they will? What'd they say?" she asked. She tried to find her balance in the icy gravel of the driveway as she glanced at her hair in the rear-view mirror. Out of control as usual. Duke didn't respond and Michelle watched him as he unloaded her suitcase, his head down as if he hadn't heard her, his cheek bulging from a wad of chew. That wasn't allowed by the Word of Wisdom either, but Duke didn't seem as concerned with his mortal body as he was with hers.

"What'd they say?" she said, this time with a firmness that made Duke cock his eyebrow.

"What do ya mean, what'd they say? They haven't said anything." Duke started toward the porch but Michelle didn't move. No one had acknowledged their wedding, the biggest event of her life?

Duke paused and considered his words. "They don't know we got married," he said over his shoulder.

Michelle's eyes flashed with horror. "You didn't tell them?"

"When would've I told them?"

Michelle tried to remain calm. "I don't know. I thought . . . maybe before you left . . . didn't they know you . . ."

"Come on, let's get out of the cold." Duke led her up the rickety stairs and opened the back door into a too warm and too bright kitchen. Michelle was instantly comforted by the smell of beef stew simmering on the stove.

Four women were sitting around the large oak table, with brushes in hand and pots of paint, bowls of muddy water, empty 7-Up cans and an open package of Doritos in the middle. They were painting ceramic objects with thick unfired colors. Laughing and talking at the same time, they reminded Michelle of the lunch room back at her old high school, where all the girls would talk at once in a steadily increasing volume in order to be heard. The women's shrill laughter and boisterous talk must have obscured the sound of Duke and Michelle's arrival and they looked up in surprise.

"Duke!" said a skinny blond. She was bony and had the longest hair Michelle had ever seen. Thin and the color of the sand in the egg-timer that always stood in the middle of Michelle's mom's stove, it cleared her waist in the back and stopped even with her hips, with feathered sides and short bangs in front. She jumped up, excited to see him, then stopped when she spotted Michelle and her belongings behind him. Her voice trailed with waning enthusiasm and her thin eyebrows narrowed together.

Duke embraced her before introducing Michelle, his new bride and fifth wife, into their family.

The blond fell silent. She didn't move. Michelle knew she was LaRae, Duke's first wife, from the stories he'd told Michelle during their courtship. The other wives followed LaRae's lead and stayed quiet.

Michelle forced a smile, as astonished as they were. She was unprepared for just how plain they looked, and old too, even though she knew none were over twenty-six. Is this how the few polygamist wives she used to occasionally see in Idaho looked? She should've been paying better attention.

Michelle recognized the wife wrapped in a pink chenille housecoat, her brush poised above the bowl of water, as Rhonda from the dark circles under her eyes and disheveled hair. But she also had large, pendulous breasts that draped over the sides of her protruding belly. She wondered why Duke hadn't told her Rhonda was pregnant. It wasn't something a man who spoke so fondly of his kids would likely forget. Michelle wanted to be pregnant so badly she sometimes pretended she was when her period was late by only a day, even though she was a virgin, so the sight of Rhonda's bulging belly sent a stab of jealousy through her center.

The brush fell from Rhonda's hand and landed in the bowl of water. A small wave splashed out, leaving a smear of sand dollar white along the oak, and breaking the silence. Michelle said hello.

LaRae stepped forward, her nostrils flaring as if she were attempting to breathe deeply. "Michelle." She let Michelle's name hang in the air for a moment, suspended as if she'd set it on top of the tidal wave in Michelle's dream. "I'm LaRae, Duke's first wife. Welcome to our family." Her dispirited voice didn't convey any real welcome in

the words. Duke had told Michelle that none of his wives were territorial or jealous, yet the way LaRae had already made sure Michelle knew who she was made her uncertain about that.

The other wives didn't speak, taking their cue from LaRae on how to receive this new member. Michelle bit her lip hard. She wasn't sure where to rest her eyes in the silence. On Duke, demanding that he make them like her? On LaRae, who wouldn't meet her gaze? On the other wives, who were staring at LaRae and not her? Michelle glanced at the one who was peering at her from over the top of her wire-rimmed glasses. Michelle thought it was Cheron from her fiery red hair and the sprinkling of freckles across her nose. Her face was bright and open and Michelle sensed she was smiling, even if her mouth wasn't.

Michelle averted her gaze and looked around the kitchen, taking in the stacks of dishes, rinsed but not washed, that lined the counter next to the sink. The refrigerator was barely visible, its front covered with papers, drawings, and magnets, the top with columns of cereal boxes and loaves of bread that stretched toward the ceiling.

"This is a surprise," LaRae said to Duke. "I thought your trip to Idaho was for business."

"It was," Duke said. "You know we've been talking about this. I need GayLynn to help out in the office, and you're the one who keeps saying you have too much work to do around here as it is."

On the drive down, Duke had explained to Michelle why it was important for one of the wives to run the front office part of his food storage business. Duke wanted

that person to be family and he wanted it to be GayLynn. Michelle wasn't particularly interested and it worried her every time he looked at her instead of the road whenever he wanted to make a point.

"GayLynn," he now said, "didn't you tell me you wanted to start helping me at work? I can't do it all, you know."

GayLynn untangled her legs from the table and went to LaRae. She was the largest of the wives, heavy even, with a doughy middle perched above skinny legs. Her dull brown hair was tucked into a bandana and beads of perspiration formed below it, which she wiped off with her sleeve. "You know I'm real good at figures," she said. "My daddy always said so."

"That's why I need your help," Duke said. He turned back to LaRae. "Or I could hire some outsider to do it, a bookkeeper, and you know how much I'll have to pay them a month, and that's less for all of us. Do you want to do that to your children?"

"What will that do to the kids, not having their mother around?" LaRae said. "There's no point to a woman's existence but to bring children into the world and to care for them and teach them. Not go to work everyday. It's God-ordained."

"Cheron can take care of them. Listen to the words of Brigham Young," Duke said. "Women are not only useful to sweep houses, wash dishes, raise babies, but they should stand behind counters, become good bookkeepers, and be able to do business in any counting house. In the following of these things, they but answer the design of their creation." He paused before continuing. "Do you want to challenge a prophet?"

Did he mean Brigham Young or Duke Stead, Michelle wondered.

“The house is already bursting—”

Michelle tried to block LaRae’s protestations out of her mind and make them go away, because now they didn’t have anything to do with the kids and everything to do with her. LaRae’s words were calm and controlled, but they sounded as loud as gunfire to Michelle. She wanted, no she needed, to be accepted into this houseful of women.

Duke interrupted LaRae. “Do not deny me my celestial glory that I can only attain with more wives.” Duke continued, not waiting for an answer, quoting one of his favorite scriptures. “All must obey, and if any man takes a virgin and wants to take another, and she is a virgin and vowed to no one else, that is justified.” Duke really knew his Bible and his Book of Mormon, not like she, who often let her mind drift to other things during church. She liked it when he quoted Gospel. She vowed to read her own Book of Mormon every night.

Duke opened a cupboard. “What’s to eat? I’m hungry.”

The wives looked at LaRae. She pulled her long hair across her shoulder as she stared at Michelle. The wind picked up outside and it swept through the kitchen window, making the sound of the ocean like a seashell does when you put it up to your ear. It broke the standoff and LaRae looked up, her head making a nod so small Michelle could have imagined it.

Rhonda moved into action. “Sit down, both of you. What a drive! Who else’s hungry? Anyone?”

Michelle felt the wives silently appraising her, sizing her up. She was big-boned but slim, wearing her best white Sunday dress. Her skin was smooth and bright white,

the kind of skin that didn't tan in the sun, so Michelle kept perpetually covered. It wasn't all freckly like Cheron's or blotchy like Rhonda's rosacea left hers. They were staring at her dark hair, which stood out in their sea of blonds and reds. She'd tried to contain it in a ponytail, but it was like springs waiting to be unwound. Small ringlets traveled down her neck under the ponytail, too short to stay put. Her hand automatically went to them, trying to smooth them down. They probably thought her too old, Michelle speculated, remembering that Duke had married LaRae when she was just fourteen, and here Michelle was, already eighteen.

In no time, Rhonda set two plates of beef stew on the table, followed by salt and pepper shakers in the shapes of a beehive and a bee. Michelle's mouth watered just looking at the food she was so hungry.

"Kids in bed yet?" Duke asked. "Get them in here to say hello."

"Cheron, get the kids up," LaRae said and next thing Michelle knew, the door swung open with a bang and the kitchen was alive with eleven kids moving en masse, yelping and jumping and crawling all over each other like a litter of puppies. Two blond girls went straight for Michelle's small square bag she had carried in and set by the door.

"Billie! Bobbie! Leave that alone," Cheron said, but they ignored her and the suitcase was soon forgotten.

"Meet your new aunt," Duke said above the din.

The children jostled for Michelle's attention, but she couldn't keep up with the names or who belonged to whom. It was hard to remember if Dee was the scrappy girl of

ten with the scars on her knees to prove it or if that was Lois. Was Ogden the one in thick glasses or was that Dallas?

Only one child hung back and that was Little Duke, who was anything but little. At eleven, he was the first-born of the brood. With all the kids jumping around, Michelle didn't know who she'd met and who she hadn't.

"Little Duke," Duke said and Little Duke immediately stepped out from the wall.

"Hi, Little Duke," she said. "I've heard lots about you. Your daddy says you like to play baseball."

"Yes ma'am," he said. He studied the tops of his dirty white tennis shoes.

"I do too," Michelle said, "I can pitch pretty good."

"But you're a girl!" Callie said with a little lisp. "You can't pitch!"

"They'll be no time for baseball here, will there sisters?" LaRae said. The sisterwives laughed and agreed. "Not with eleven kids, a business to run, and a house to keep."

"Do you have any brothers and sisters?" Lois asked.

"I do," Michelle said and Lois demanded to see pictures of them. She looked around for the bag she'd carried in and discovered its contents strewn across the kitchen floor. Billie and Bobbie sat in the middle of her belongings, a pair of white slippers, worn from too many washings; a round hairbrush; a cloth book, the kind that looks like a diary; and a small round of soap, still in its pleated paper wrapper, held together at the center with a gold sticker with green letters on it. At least her Book of Mormon was safe

in her purse. The kids scattered and she gathered up her things, finding the photo album underneath where Callie had been sitting.

She flipped it open for Lois and the other kids crowded around. “These are my sisters and my brother.” The photo showed Michelle and her siblings in front of the Church meetinghouse in their new Easter clothes sewn by her mom. Michelle wore a navy dress with a matching cape and dusty broken-down shoes.

Michelle started to put the album back, but Lois reached out and turned the page. Michelle looked down and caught a glimpse of Edna’s shiny face smiling up at her. She quickly turned the page before she started to miss her again, but Lois stopped her.

“Who’s that?” she said, tapping a chewed nail on Edna’s head.

She’s the reason I’m sitting in your kitchen, Michelle wanted to say, but instead she said, “That’s my cousin Edna, right after we got baptized.” The photo showed a picture of Michelle and Edna, both eight years old and dressed in white. But that’s where the similarity ended. Michelle’s thick hair was still wet and glossy from the full-body immersion, while Edna’s copper bob had dried before the picture was even taken. Michelle was already tall at eight, but Edna was taller. Michelle looked somber and she could still remember how she felt that day when she looked at the picture. She couldn’t swim and the water scared her enough that she considered bolting when she felt the bishop’s hand on the small of her back.

After, she knew something had changed in her. The baptism made her accountable for her actions in the eyes of the Church and the weight of that responsibility already terrified and excited her. Edna, on the other hand, sported a gap-toothed smile,

oblivious to the fact that she was now capable of real sin. Michelle had looked at this picture often, thinking about how little each of them had really changed since it had been taken.

The kids wanted to look at all the photos. Michelle kept turning the pages. “Here I am just last year,” she said. She was posed on top of a pyramid of hay bales in the middle of a sea of golden grain, bored, with nothing but patchwork fields all around her.

Michelle tucked her pictures safely back in her bag and leaned back, groggy from Rhonda’s dinner. Duke was getting her trunk from outside. LaRae gave Cheron instructions to settle Michelle in and sent them upstairs.

Cheron fired questions at her before they’d even mounted the stairs. “You’re from Idaho? What town? Have you been to Salt Lake before?”

“I grew up on a hops farm in Warm Springs,” Michelle said. “Eight hundred acres.” Michelle thought of the grocery store, drugstore, meetinghouse, and post office with a room in the back that served as the public library, with a postmistress who was also the librarian, that constituted downtown. “This is my first time in any city.”

“I grew up on a farm too,” Cheron said, “but with eight aunts. And thirty-eight brothers and sisters.”

“Boy, I didn’t get along all the time with four siblings,” Michelle said. “I can’t imagine thirty-eight.” She and her siblings were the model family in public, especially at Church, where Michelle and her sisters taught in the Primary and her brother was a deacon, helping to pass the sacrament at every meeting. But at home, outside of the sight

of their parents, they argued about everything, especially when her sisters would spy on her or her brother would cheat at games and then act like he didn't.

On the landing, Cheron pointed to a closed door. "The older kids are in four bedrooms on the third floor, it used to be the attic. Duke fixed it up real nice. Then we're all on the second floor with the babies. LaRae has the only bedroom on the first floor."

"What about Duke?" Michelle asked, almost without waiting for Cheron to quit talking.

"We have a schedule," Cheron said. "Duke spends the night with whoever's turn it is. You'll have him for two weeks honeymoon before we get back on schedule. But GayLynn's still nursing and Rhonda's pregnant, so right now it's just me and LaRae and now you."

"Just you and me and LaRae?" Michelle repeated, not understanding why Duke didn't sleep with all his wives. Hadn't he said he loved them all equally?

"Duke doesn't have relations when we're pregnant or nursing," she said, then leaned closer as if telling a secret. "He doesn't have relations that time of the month either, which really makes him irritable for a while since the four of us always seem to have our monthlies together. Luckily he's away on business a lot during those times."

"But don't you miss him?" Michelle asked. The physical part of her marriage was one of the things she was looking forward to, as was being pregnant, and now to find out she couldn't have both at the same time.

“Get used to it,” Cheron said. “To resist temptation, Duke doesn’t sleep in the same room with those who are ‘off,’ as we call it. He says it’s the only way to keep the family clean and worthy and on a high plane.”

“Oh, yes, clean, worthy, and on a high plane,” Michelle repeated.

Cheron opened the door to the nursery. “Here it is.”

Michelle stepped in and looked around. It was a long and narrow room, with one window overlooking the back yard, crowded with cribs; a small double bed with a brown metal headboard, gold leaves painted around its border; a tall chest of drawers; and a low dresser with a mirror.

“I’ve never had my own room,” she said. “I love it.” She went to the window to peer out. Her room was in the front of the house and she could see what she thought was the whole Salt Lake Valley spread out in front of her. The Wasatch Mountains, blotchy with patches of white snow, green faces, and rocky bare brown plateaus, rose up from the valley floor with deeply cut canyons separating one from the other. She felt like Brigham Young, seeing the valley for the first time. “This is the place,” she murmured and pronounced it the promised land, just like he had when the Mormon pioneers arrived way back when.

Michelle found her brush and worked on readjusting her ponytail. She was smoothing down her eyebrows at the dresser when she looked in the mirror and saw Cheron unpacking her things onto the bed. She was holding the soap with the green sticker.

Michelle turned and reached for the fat circle. “I’ll take that,” she said, again reaching for it, but Cheron was trying to make out the label and wouldn’t give it up.

“Gingembre et Citron de Sicile.” LaRae said, studying the foreign words on the package. “What’s it mean?”

“It’s the name of the scent. Please give it to me,” Michelle said.

“Smells like lemonade. Real sweet lemonade. Where’d you get it?”

“It was a present. From my cousin Edna.”

“The one in the picture,” Cheron nodded her head toward Michelle’s bag.

“Yeah. It’s just for looks. It’s too good to use. I’ve had it for three years and I don’t like anyone to touch it.”

She didn’t tell her that Edna had surprised her with it after she had admired it in a small store in Rexburg. They had gone on their semi-annual shopping trip with their mothers to purchase patterns and fabric for summer clothes. Edna and Michelle left their mothers in the Fabric Mart and wandered down main street to a small gift store. Michelle was drawn to the pretty soaps, some wrapped, some smooth, some filled with scratchy oatmeal or sweet lavender. But at six dollars and fifty cents a bar, she knew her mother wouldn’t buy her any and she had saved only four dollars for the trip. On her next birthday, Edna proudly presented her with the lemony bar, making her sure no one would ever love her as much as Edna did.

Michelle snatched the soap and when she did her eyes met Cheron’s. She hadn’t noticed them before behind Cheron’s glasses, but they were a deep amber, full of brown and yellow and black, like the tree sap that oozed from the maples back home and formed

sweet hard drops you could pick off and eat. They reminded Michelle of Edna's eyes, the way they had so many colors in them. Was Edna missing her right now? Michelle blushed and looked quickly away.

"Let me see it," LaRae said. Neither Michelle nor Cheron heard LaRae enter the room.

Michelle didn't relinquish it to LaRae. Instead she went to the bed and produced a saucer with no cup, with a spray of purple violets on it.

"I always keep it on my dresser, in this dish." She placed the soap in the middle of the saucer, then placed that in the middle of the dresser. She stood back to look at it.

"Too good to use?" LaRae said. "Here, we share and share alike."

"But it was a present," Michelle said. She didn't say it was the only reminder she had left of Edna. She wasn't willing to give it up.

"Cheron, what happened to that nice shawl you got for your birthday last year?" LaRae asked.

Casting a glance at Michelle, Cheron said, "I gave it to Rhonda." She spoke as if pleading with Michelle to understand. "She needed it more than I did. She's always cold and I had a newer jacket anyway."

The sound of boots on the stairs announced Duke and the trunk. He was followed by a pack of kids. "What's going on here?" he asked when he entered the room and found the three women staring at the dresser.

LaRae spoke before Michelle could. "Nothing," she said. "Just admiring Michelle's pretty things."

“All right then,” Duke said. He swung Michelle’s suitcase on the bed and left without another word, LaRae, Cheron, and the kids following close behind. Wait, Michelle wanted to say. It’s not nothing. You didn’t tell me I had to give them my things. I won’t. She took the soap out of the saucer and put it far to the back of the top dresser drawer.

After Michelle was as settled as she was going to be for the night, the family gathered in the living room. The room was large and cluttered. An old dark green recliner monopolized one corner, its seat sagging in the middle from wear. Michelle could tell this was Duke’s spot.

Duke picked up his well-worn Book of Mormon and selected a passage to read. He then passed the book to Little Duke who read the words of the prophet Mosiah, “And he commanded them that there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity and love one towards another.”

“Tonight’s a special night,” Duke said. “Would anyone like to offer a testimony to the trueness of the Gospel?”

Michelle would rather have sat quietly through the evening prayers, but she felt Duke was speaking directly to her. She was, after all, the one who should be most grateful to be part of this new family and one should always offer testimony when feeling especially blessed. She stood up next to Duke.

“Dear Father, I am called to your service because I know that your word is true. You have blessed me today with a new earthly family that I will love and comfort and

take care of. I will bring more spirits into Your mortal kingdom and prepare them for life everlasting in Your Celestial Kingdom. I make this testimony in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.” Cheron leaned over and hugged Michelle and whispered in her ear, “sister.” Duke had a small smile on his lips. LaRae was unmoved, her eyes studying a faded old picture on the wall of the Great Salt Lake rendered in ink on an olive green background. They stood in a circle, folded their arms, and bowed their heads. Duke prayed, “Lord, you have chosen a small number of choice spirits to come forth in these last days, to organize the Kingdom of God upon the earth and to build it up and defend it. Help us to work Your plan by making this home a part of heaven that is presided over with wisdom, where family is upheld and children are cared for. Amen.” When Michelle opened her eyes, she saw that Duke’s were already open and he was staring right at her, as if his message was meant for her alone. They all said “amen” in unison and the moment passed.

The family scattered in what seemed to Michelle like a thousand different directions. She wandered alone across the entry hall to what was probably once a dining room, but it was now set up like a schoolroom with small chairs in the middle and shelves of supplies lining the walls. Michelle looked through the crayon drawings on the table. There was one of the prophet Joseph Smith kneeling in the forest with the angel Moroni, the son of Mormon, floating above him. Someone had colored Moroni orange, giving him the appearance of being the sun.

Back in the kitchen, Michelle found a place on the bench and watched the busyness. She wanted Duke, but he hadn’t come back in from the outside chores. She

needed to be with him, to have him fold his body around hers and kiss her lips and eyes and face. She needed to blot out the images of Edna that kept running through her head. He was the only way to do that. She was anxious to be with him and she would have thought he would have left the outside chores to Little Duke on a night like tonight. Unless he didn't think tonight was any different than any other night. It occurred to her that Duke hadn't kissed or touched her once since the wedding ceremony ended.

She was tired, so she was relieved that nobody took her up on her offer to help. Instead, they barraged Michelle with more questions about her family, her home, and how she met Duke, anything to tell them who this new stranger was that they would spend the rest of their lives with. All but LaRae, that was, who took up a needlepoint-in-process and sat opposite Michelle. Her eyes rested on Michelle while her blunt needle found each opening in the white canvas as if on its own, drawing a tail of black yarn across the background of a large red rose.

Cheron finished scrubbing the stove and crowded onto the bench next to Michelle. Her thigh pressed up against Michelle's. Michelle looked down at Cheron's leg and could see the faint line where her garments ended above her knee and the way the hem hugged the curve of her thigh. She wanted to reach out and trace the line with her finger, but she shook the feeling off. She was married now and she wanted to stay pure and worthy of Duke's love and the love of the Heavenly Father. Here was a chance for her to start over. She didn't want to mess it up.

Michelle was overwhelmed by her new sister-wives curiosity about her relationship with Duke. She wished Duke had prepared them with the details of it

himself. She wondered why he had told her so much about his four wives, yet told them nothing about her. Their whirlwind romance was all still very vivid in her mind and while she could recall every moment, she censored her account to the wives as she thought back to the first time she saw Duke Stead. They didn't need to know that she had come here to get away from the way Edna made her feel, but looking at the thin soft line stretched across Cheron's thigh, she knew it wasn't going to be easy.

She offered up one more silent prayer before she told them her story. "Lord above, hear the psalm of Nephi: 'Oh, wretched am I! My heart is sorrowed because of my flesh and my soul grieves because of my iniquities.' If I am to fulfill the plan as you have laid out, please stay close to me in my new life." She looked at Cheron who was smiling at her, making her feel welcome and at home, waiting to hear how she met Duke. "Real close," she silently added and smiled back.

“When Joseph Smith was 14 years old, he wanted to know which church he should join, so he asked God in sincere prayer. God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph and told him the true Church of Jesus Christ was not on the earth and they had chosen Joseph to restore it.”

– “The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith”
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Pamphlet, 1999

CHAPTER TWO

He had come into the Stop-N-Go one Saturday in early September. Michelle noticed him right when he pulled his truck right up to the front door. That’s one nice looking man she thought and dashed into the bathroom to look at her hair. By the time she wrapped the elastic holding her ponytail tighter and returned to the counter, he was standing in front of it.

“Tin of Copenhagen,” he said. He was wearing jeans and boots, but he wasn’t a farmer. His boots were too clean and so was his truck.

“How’re you liking Warm Springs?” Michelle had asked him as he handed her a five.

He acted surprised. “How do you know I’m not from here?” he asked.

“I know everyone, that’s how. It’s not hard when everyone in town goes to the same school. And we only have one ward here, so I see the entire population every Sunday.”

“You’re pretty smart,” Duke said. “Must be why they made you manager of this place.”

Now it was Michelle’s turn. “How do you know I’m the manager?” she asked.

He pointed to her plastic nametag with the Stop-N-Go logo. “Says so right there,” he said. He smiled a little half-smile that was more for himself than her, as if he found her amusing and it made him chuckle.

Michelle’s hand went to her tag and she felt clammy. She fidgeted with the boxes of Juicy Fruit on the counter, consolidating them into one pile and then separating them back again. Was this man flirting with her? He looked just a little younger than her dad, but he was handsome with his thick sandy hair and clear blue eyes. They were the color Michelle imagined the ocean to be, but she didn’t know because she’d never seen it.

“You like working at the Stop-N-Go?” he asked. His hands were in his jean pockets and Michelle thought he looked like a cute little boy standing that way.

“It can be a bore, gets kind of lonely when we’re slow, you know.”

“All your friends working at the mill?”

“I don’t have lots of friends,” Michelle said, keeping up a steady stream of chatter, too fidgety to stop. “I’m not one of those popular girls you know, like the blonds that always get picked to be cheerleader. I think it’s because of my hair.” Michelle’s dark hair had always been a source of discomfort for her, mostly because it was so different from everyone, even her family. Because of this, her brother had been able to convince her she was adopted, something she took to be the God’s honest truth until her mother found out and showed Michelle her birth certificate.

She regretted that confession as soon as it was out. But Duke said, “Your hair’s beautiful. It makes you stand out, like one of God’s favored people.”

Michelle liked that.

Duke came back the next day, this time for a package of beef jerky. Michelle saw him get out of his truck, but this time she didn’t have to check her hair in the bathroom. She’d already checked it three times that morning. He hopped out of his truck and Michelle saw his boot heel catch on the running board. It propelled him forward and he caught himself on the door. Michelle wanted to run to him and put her arms around him.

Duke paid for the jerky with a twenty, but made no effort to be on his way, instead making small talk and asking about the area. So when he said “lunch?” she was ready. She took off her apron and hollered to Garth to come out from the back and mind the counter; she was going to get something to eat. Duke was waiting for her in his faded red pickup. They decided on the Lunch Box, out on Route 40, across from the mill. Duke drove with his window cracked and the brisk mountain air, occasionally perfumed with wood smoke, then stinking of the fumes from the paper mill as they got closer, ruffled his shaggy hair.

Duke asked about her family and she heard herself rambling again, this time about Edna.

“My best friend is my cousin Edna. She’s my age and she’s very smart. Much smarter than me in fact. We both want to move from this flippin’ town, but you know what? I think Edna’ll do it.” Michelle knew she was babbling but she couldn’t stop herself. Duke seemed to be interested though, so she continued. “She wouldn’t surprise

me if she moved to New York City. I bet she'd even do it without a husband. Can you believe that? She'd just up and move to get out of this God-forsaken town." Duke made a sharp left and Michelle slid closer to him. She quickly adjusted herself so he wouldn't think her too forward.

She sucked in air and offered up a silent prayer. "Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing this very nice man into the Stop-N-Go today. But *please* help me not make a fool of myself. I swear, if you give me better things to talk about and keep me from spilling anything on me or him, I'll never ask you for anything again. Today. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

"So what are you in town for? Business with the mill?" she asked.

"You know a lot for being such a pretty little thing," Duke said.

So he thought she was pretty. And here she was in a pair of torn jeans and a tee shirt from the ward's last road show performance. 'The Psalm of Nephi' her shirt proclaimed in red and showed the two tribes from the Book of Mormon story. The kids in the ward had been divided into the wicked, idle followers of Laman and the happy, industrious followers of Nephi. Michelle had not been pleased to be cast as a Lamanite.

"Mill business is what most people come to Warm Springs for," she said. "Not many other reasons."

Duke slowed but didn't stop at the blinking red light at the intersection of Mountain Road and 1000 West. He was telling her about his business; a food storage company that he purchased several years ago with a loan from the bank. The previous owners had established the business, buying food in bulk and packaging it for the many

Mormons in the Salt Lake Valley who practiced the doctrine of their Church: that one was to keep a one-year supply of food on hand for the apocalypse or any other disaster that might come their way. With his hard work and business savvy, the company had not only recovered, but had become very profitable for the family.

Duke talked about why the mill was so important and why he needed the proper containers to maximize the life of the grains, dry milk, sugar, salt, and legumes his Mormon customers put away, but also how important it was to make sure the containers were designed to take up the least amount of space.

Michelle could tell he was proud of his company. She could also tell that he wanted her to know it. A handsome *and* successful man.

“Things took off when I started marketing food storage to newlyweds,” he said.

Michelle thought of newlyweds, sitting next to each other at a kitchen table, maybe one of those cute pine ones with white painted legs. He would have a pencil and paper and a copy of the family budget, she a list of food items they hoped to put away. Maybe a baby would be on the way and they would have to allot more of their budget to food storage for baby food and formula.

“I make them think they have to have their one-year supply of food and they have to have it now,” Duke said. “And I provide financing so they don’t have to come up with more cash than an average trip to the grocery store. They’re good customers, they rotate their food like the Church says to, and they come back year after year. I just keep financing them.”

As far back as middle school, she'd fantasize about what kind of husband the occasional boys she would have a crush on would be like. They were always incredibly romantic, calling her all day to tell her they loved her and bringing her flowers. As Duke talked of newlyweds, she planned their courtship and his proposal. She'd pictured introducing him to her parents over her mom's grilled dove breasts. She'd imagined their meeting with the ward bishop to discuss a Temple marriage but she put that out of her mind because she couldn't picture telling the bishop about Edna. And in front of Duke! All he would have to confess would be the snuff. She colored just thinking about it. What if she wasn't worthy of a Temple marriage? She hadn't figured out how she was going to tell Edna she was getting married either. That would have been the hardest of thing of all.

Duke pulled into the Lunch Box parking lot and jumped out to open Michelle's door. She watched him cross in front of the truck, noting his rugged features that made his face look like it was carved from a weathered piece of hardwood, and his broad shoulders. He held the door to the diner for her. It was almost empty on a Saturday afternoon after the breakfast crowd. The sign said to seat yourself and Duke led her to a seat by the window. She slid into the booth and that's when she noticed the thin gold ring on his left hand.

The waitress dropped menus and silverware wrapped in paper napkins with a band of white paper. Michelle started to ask about the ring, but the waitress was back again, this time to deliver two short glasses of ice water. Michelle couldn't look at the ring on his hand while they ordered. Here, finally, was not a boy who was interested in

her, but a man, and he was married. It was a breach of the most sacred of God's covenants. She was cold, even though it was early September, and she hugged herself to keep from shivering.

She worked her courage up to ask him about it over her grilled ham and cheese sandwiches and french fries, which Michelle liberally dunked in the diner's homemade fry sauce, a thick pink mixture of mayonnaise and ketchup.

"Are you married?" she asked, still shivering.

"I am," he said simply.

Everything Sister Wells had warned the young women of the Church about was sitting right here in front of her. No wonder she couldn't stop shivering. "Should you be having lunch with me then?" she asked, folding her napkin up and laying it on the table.

"Why not?" Duke said simply. He acted like it was the most natural thing in the world to have asked her to lunch.

Michelle was dumbfounded. She leaned back in the booth, her jaw slack. She believed that exaltation in the celestial kingdom was only available to a man and a woman who entered into and were faithful to the covenants of an eternal marriage in the Temple. She had assumed Duke was Mormon and believed this too. She'd heard Episcopalians had affairs, but not Mormons.

She tried to imagine what his wife looked like. Would she be like her mom, small and trim, careening around in her jogging suit and mini-van, usually on Church errands? She was always off to the printers for a hundred copies of the Relief Society newsletter she would have been up all night typing or planning the next Enrichment Night program

for the ward. Her best program was her Book of Mormon murder mystery, which, after causing the brethren of the Church some hesitation, proved to be a fun way to promote the Book of Mormon stories and catapulted her to Society president for a year.

Or maybe Duke's wife had exotic looks with almond eyes, cappuccino skin and hair as dark as her own. She would never wear a jogging suit, no, she would lounge around the house in a pair of silky pajamas, not bothering to clean or cook, preferring instead to decorate the house through the home shopping network and a credit card. Michelle liked that image.

"What would your wife say if she knew you were here with me?" she asked.

Duke forked a pile of corned beef hash and sopped up the yellow of his fried egg with it. "Which one?"

Had he been divorced and remarried? Michelle liked this less and less. Did his current wife, who Michelle now envisioned pregnant and home watching Lifetime-TV-For-Women, know he was out wandering the country asking girls in roadside convenience stores out to lunch for his next score? She felt a curious betrayal, not for the unknown wife, but for herself.

"How many are there?" Michelle said, trying to make light of her disappointment in the fact that not only was he currently married, it sounded like it wasn't the first time. She looked around, her pride turned to shame. Two teenagers and an old couple sat across the diner, no one she knew, thank God. Nobody, after all, gets a divorce once, much less several times. She'd only ever even known one or two families who'd ever

experienced a divorce. Everyone she knew in her ward was married if they were over eighteen and if they weren't they were looking to be.

"I have four wives," Duke said.

It took Michelle a half-second to register what Duke was saying. She leaned into the center of the table so the other diners wouldn't hear her. "A polygamist?" she said.

"I am."

"Isn't that against the law?"

"Not the law of the true Church."

The waitress appeared out of nowhere and Michelle turned her head to the window and pretended to study something in the parking lot while she cleared their plates and refilled their water.

The second she was out of earshot, Michelle slid out of the booth. "I think you better take me back to the Stop-N-Go," she said. The powers of darkness were very active today and creative too. To send such a handsome man, rugged like Michelle's own daddy, into the Stop-N-Go to tempt her. A man who was filled with sin and wanted to pull her into the abyss with him.

"Whatever makes you happy," Duke said. Michelle waited in the truck while Duke paid the check. They drove back in silence, Duke whistling along to the songs on the radio.

Duke dropped her off, again smiling that little half-smile like she'd just said something fantastically witty. She pushed through the double glass doors, mad at Duke for leading her on and mad at herself for starting to fall for him. Michelle worked the

counter while Garth went to lunch, but mostly she thought about Duke. What sort of woman married a polygamist anyway? Someone who didn't care where her husband laid his head at night, that's who.

She was driving home from work four days later when she saw Duke's truck parked in front of the feed store. She pulled in. Her mom would be proud of her for thinking to stop and pick up a couple of fifty pound bags of Purina for the dogs.

Duke spotted her immediately and approached her. She feigned surprise at seeing him again.

"Still in town?" she asked.

"Getting ready to head back tomorrow morning," he said. He drug the toe of his boot through the pieces of hay that always littered the floor like a kid on the playground. "Maybe we could get a bite to eat tonight before I shove off. Finish our conversation."

A wave of goose bumps swept up Michelle's back and spread out through her dark hair. She wanted to finish the conversation that she had been obsessing over since she slid out of the booth and demanded that he take her back to work. Because a small part of her wondered if it were true . . . that maybe there was more than one way to salvation. Especially for those like her who had chosen a crooked path.

She heard herself agreeing to dinner and told Duke she'd meet him at the Lunch Box; which also served dinner in spite of its name. She left, forgetting the dog food.

Duke was already in a booth when Michelle arrived. She had taken longer to get ready than she anticipated, mostly because she changed clothes four times before settling on a pair of jeans and a white button down shirt that her mother had embroidered.

Two salads and two glasses of water were already on the table. Duke stood up while she slid into the booth.

They chatted about Warm Springs and Michelle's family while Michelle picked at her salad. She wasn't very hungry and wanted to save room for the restaurant's famous meatloaf. She willed Duke to bring up something about his marriage – or is that marriages? – but he didn't. She finally couldn't stand it any longer.

“Tell me about your church,” she said.

“The Reformed Church of Latter-day Saints,” Duke said. “The true Church of Joseph Smith.”

“That's my Church, not the Reformed Church,” Michelle said.

“No,” Duke said, “the modern Mormon Church keeps getting farther and farther from the original gospel of Joseph Smith.” Duke put his elbows on the table and squinted at her. “You do believe that Joseph Smith is the true prophet, don't you?” he asked.

“Of course I do,” Michelle said. What church would she belong to if not for the prophesy of Joseph Smith? She'd probably be Catholic and drink.

“Then why doesn't your Church follow that gospel?” Duke asked.

“It does,” Michelle said.

“The Church today is just trying to fit in,” Duke said. “And you know why?” Michelle shook her head. Duke took his wallet out of his back pocket and tossed a pile of bills on the table. “Money. It's all about money today.”

Michelle stared at the money. She had never heard her parents or anyone at Church say any of these things and they prayed together every night, had family home

evening every Monday, and spent the better part of Sunday in meetings at the meetinghouse. They would know if that was true, wouldn't they?

"I don't know what you mean," Michelle said after a long silence.

"The Church changed to conform to an immoral world," Duke said. "Do you agree we are living among sin?"

"Oh, yes," Michelle said. According to Sister Wells, who taught their Young Women's group, girls especially had to watch out for the temptations of the devil at every turn. She cautioned them to stay modest, in thoughts and dress. She warned them not to abuse their bodies with drugs, strong drinks, or smoking. Then there was the peril of falling in love with someone of a different religion, race, or even economic background. Or worse: someone not worthy of the Temple. One couldn't have anything to do with sex, especially if it was before marriage or 'misused' in marriage. That was the word Sister Wells used to indicate 'kinky' and all the girls had laughed when she wrote it on the board.

The worst things of all though, were "misusing' oneself or being a homosexual, which Sister Wells also spelled out on the board. On that subject, Sister Wells said, "Sexual relations are proper only between a husband and wife within the bonds of marriage." So that meant no adultery, fornication, or homosexual behavior. It simply couldn't be. It was the only way to stay innocent in the eyes of God.

That used to make Michelle worry about what God thought of her. She'd had impure thoughts, mostly about Edna, but sometimes about the occasional boy at school. If she tried real hard, she could almost convince herself that she hadn't acted on them.

What she did with Edna was just ‘kissing cousin’ stuff, right? Certainly Sister Wells and her lecture on the inclinations of so-called homosexuals didn’t mean her? Or Edna? Because to act on abominable sins was to ensure that one would be shut out of God’s eternal kingdom. Forever. What boy would want to marry her and even if one did, she wouldn’t be able to marry in the Temple. And she wouldn’t see her family in heaven even though they were all sealed for eternity through her parent’s Temple marriage. Then her parents would be really mad at her.

She had said a prayer to be sure. “Father above, you give me so much that I’m thankful for. But if I have a mortal weakness, you need to show me a way to live that won’t prevent me from attaining Your eternal goal. I’m sorry to put that all on you, but in the end, it’s for a good cause. In Your Son’s name I pray, Amen.”

Sister Wells had never warned any of the girls about polygamist men telling one about the true gospel in the middle of a diner. Maybe it just seemed dangerous.

“Look,” Duke said, “the Mormon Church abandoned their doctrine, *revelations from God*, to fit in to this world.” He held up a finger. Michelle chewed on a hangnail and listened. “One, the manifesto banning polygamy in 1890. Polygamy was a revelation from God to Joseph Smith, our prophet, not something a proclamation can take away. A believer can’t just abandon the truth.”

He held up another finger. “Two, to allow blacks to hold a Church position is in direct opposition to the original gospel as it was set forth.” He held up a third finger. “And it’s not only the prophet of the Church who can receive revelations from God, all men can. The Church just doesn’t want to admit that the power of God may reside

outside the Quorum of Twelve.” Duke took a big drink of water, then reached out and took her hands in his. They were cool and wet from the condensation on the glass.

Michelle looked not at Duke’s face, but at his hands. She studied the thin gold band on his finger. She loosened a hand and traced the ring with her finger. “You shouldn’t be holding my hands,” she said.

Duke gathered her hands back in his with a force that sent a shock wave to the bottom of her stomach. Or maybe it wasn’t her stomach. Maybe it was what Sister Wells had always been talking about. She didn’t move her hands.

“Why not?” he said.

“You’re married,” she said.

“It’s the gospel of the Church.”

“It’s wrong.” She didn’t even know if she believed that but she felt like she should.

“Only to those ignorant to the Gospel. They’re the ones offended based on their own incorrect beliefs. It’s not wrong to those who know the true Word of the Lord.”

Duke looked patiently at her and she felt as if he were teaching a small child a lesson of some kind, like don’t go in the water alone or don’t run out into the street. It wasn’t in a condescending way, but with care and love like when you really want the child to understand the importance of your words. Like her parents would talk to her if she told them she were seeing a polygamist. They were as mainstream Mormon as two people could get, dedicating the better part of their lives to having and raising devout children. Michelle doubted that they’d ever even taken much notice of the few polygamist families

around Warm Springs, so single-mindedly did they pursue their own church activities. But Duke was as single-minded when it came to his beliefs, the same beliefs as her parents, really, Michelle told herself. He pulled his wallet out from his back pocket and withdrew a small, worn piece of paper, its edges curling inward with wear.

“Trust me,” he said, “I’ll show you.” He placed the paper on the table between them, but kept his hand on it. “I can trace my priesthood back to John the Baptist. Look here.” He pointed to the beginning of a list of men’s names. “Joseph Smith received the priesthood from the resurrected John the Baptist. He conferred it on Orson Hyde, and he conferred it forward, see?” he said, his finger running down the list. “All the way down to my granddaddy, who conferred it on me. Do you know any other man who can trace their priesthood like I can?”

Michelle didn’t, but she knew her daddy would be impressed. She reached for the list to study it in more detail but Duke placed it carefully back in its place of honor in his wallet.

“These men gave me the keys to the priesthood and I intend to honor it. And that includes practicing the Most High Principle of polygamy right here on earth, as it was intended to be.”

“I think my Daddy would have a heart attack right then and there if any of us kids did that.”

“I’d like to think him a better man than one who would punish someone who sought the true grace of God. Is that what kind of man he is?”

“No, he’s just a little old-fashioned.”

“Old-fashioned? What’s more old-fashioned than a plural marriage? You said so yourself. It’s Joseph Smith’s original gospel and some day it will be restored to this earth.”

He spoke with such conviction that it scared Michelle. But that fear was followed by a wave of excitement that had been growing all along. She’d thought of polygamy as something the Mormons used to do and that only a few large families wouldn’t give it up. She’d never thought of it as original gospel that should be believed and she felt like maybe she’d been deceived all these years. There just might be other options than the one her parents had been preaching to her for eighteen years, options that the Mormon Church itself couldn’t dispute.

Two days went by. Michelle’s mind was obsessed with thoughts of Duke and, for some perverse reason, with his wives. Were their lives like hers, and her mom’s, and her aunts’? Were they right now maybe teaching their children the same five-finger testimony song that helped Michelle learn the Church’s tenets? Holding up one finger at a time, just like Duke had done at the Lunch Box, she could remember reciting that God is our Father in heaven and he loved her; that Jesus is his Son and the Savior; that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God; that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the Lord’s Church on the earth today; and that the living prophet is the President of the Church.

So even as far back as Primary class, she knew Joseph Smith was the prophet. Her confidence in her faith, in fact the faith of all Mormons, came down to one thing and

that was belief that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. So why was the Church so quick to discard the very tenets sent to him from God?

The next day she was refilling the cold drink cooler at the Stop-N-Go, dropping cans of Coke and Sprite into the slots where they fell like nickels in a gum machine, and she kept thinking she saw Duke come in. She'd rush out from the back, but it would be Jack Gauche, who ran the feed store behind main street. Or it would be Smitty Horsley, who drove a cement truck. He always had tiny blobs of dried cement all over his work shirt and jeans, giving one the impression he'd been salted. She questioned how she could have ever mistaken either for Duke Stead.

She had to tell someone about Duke or she was going to burst. She thought about talking to her mother, but her mom was never home with Relief Society on Tuesday, visiting a new young family rumored to be in need with some food from the church storehouse on Wednesday, and a planning committee meeting for the next church enrichment night on Thursday. And she couldn't talk to her dad. He wasn't home much either with his duties in the bishopric and as a visiting teacher, plus he'd have her in front of the bishop for a full confession and a good talking to in no time.

She knew Edna wouldn't be happy, but she decided to talk to her anyway. When Edna came over that night to pick her up for Young Women's group, she waited until she turned out of the long drive, then said, "A man came into the Stop-N-Go the other day and I went to lunch with him."

"Why?" Edna asked. Her voice sounded casual, but Michelle knew her well enough to know that wasn't a good sign.

“I liked him,” Michelle said and she saw Edna wince, just like the time Michelle had spilled a bucket of cold water on her when they were kids and one of the hogs they were watering had startled. “He’s smart. Good-looking too in a rugged way. He knows a lot of stuff about the Church.”

“So? So do you. So do I.” Edna’s hands, firmly at ten and two o’clock on the wheel, tightened even more. It irritated Michelle the way Edna held the wheel like it was something that would run away from her if she loosened her grip.

“I mean stuff like how it used to be,” Michelle said, trying to sound casual. She adjusted the heater from defrost to high. “Way back when Moroni gave the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith. Way back then.”

“Again, so? You and everyone else’ve known that story since they were two.” Edna snapped the heater off and the car quieted again.

“But he believes in the Church just like Joseph Smith organized it. Exactly how. He’s very religious, much more so than anyone I know. I think he might be the first person I’ve ever met who’s really thought about what it means to be Mormon and made a decision to live the right way. Not like all of us.” Michelle wondered if her tone conveyed the fact that she was trying to convince herself as much as she was trying to convince Edna.

“I know what it means to be Mormon,” Edna said and the indignation seeped into her voice.

Michelle let Edna get a couple more miles down the road. They passed the McKay farm on the right. The farmhouse sat close to the road, its front door shut tight

and shades half drawn like they were every time Michelle sped past. “He’s a polygamist,” she said.

Edna slammed on the brake, almost running the car into the ditch on the side of the road. Michelle’s seat belt tightened across her chest. Edna slowed the car to a stop. “Are you nuts?” she said.

“I don’t know. I like him.” Michelle’s voice tapered off like she was pleading and maybe she was. She wanted Edna’s permission to see Duke. She wanted Edna to say ‘yes, I understand why you would like a handsome, smart man that happened into the Stop-N-Go and paid some attention to you.’

“Don’t do this, Michelle.”

“You would like him.”

Her fist pounded the steering wheel. “I won’t like him. I don’t want to meet him.” Edna fumbled in her purse for her sunglasses and put them on, even though the sky was gray from a low winter cloud cover, before restarting the car without another word and continuing on.

Later, during the Young Women’s meeting, Edna sat away from Michelle, instead of next to her like they usually did. Edna looked deep in thought, which would please Sister Wells, who probably thought she was considering with great contemplation her lesson about using one’s free will along with the spirit of revelation to make life choices. Kind of a double-whammy for choosing the right. But Michelle knew what Edna was thinking. Edna wanted their relationship to stay exactly as it was, and that included their games. She didn’t want Duke or, for that matter, any man in the picture.

On the third day, Duke came into the Stop-N-Go. Michelle was in the men's room, mopping up the floor, which was always the most disgusting job of the day. As she backed out, mop in hand swabbing the floor, she ran right into him. It startled her and she jumped before realizing that Duke Stead was again standing in the Stop-N-Go.

"Back so soon?" she asked. She wished her mother hadn't been up when she had left for work. She would have liked to have a little blush and mascara on, but her mother frowned upon make-up for her girls and that was a battle Michelle never seemed to win.

"I haven't left yet. Been over in Pocatello meeting up with a farmer I buy from. Grains, seeds, stuff like that."

Michelle excused herself to put the mop in the back room, pushing it past Duke in its dirty water on wheels. He followed her.

"What time you get off?" he asked.

"I've been here since six this morning, so early today. Two-thirty."

"Want to ride over to Rexburg with me after you get off? I have to meet with a beekeeper who's going to cut me a discount on bulk honey."

"Pick me up at two-forty-five," she said. Her stomach felt the same way it did when her dad drove over the big bump out on 300 West too fast and the car lifted into the air for a moment.

"It's a deal," Duke said and left without saying good-bye.

On the drive to Rexburg, Duke told her about his life in Salt Lake City, his four wives, all of whom grew up in polygamist families, and his eleven kids. He made her laugh with stories about the kids. There was the time Little Duke hid in the crawl space

of the house for hours because he put crayons in the dryer and knew he'd be in trouble. And Lois would only wear a pink tutu from the time she was two until she was almost five. He made her somber when he told her about Natalie's difficult birth, which scared them all, even the midwife.

"They sound adorable," Michelle said. She was deep in the middle of baby lust. Most of the girls from school had married within a month or so of high school graduation and were now pregnant or new moms. Michelle couldn't pass a baby without stopping to admire it. She'd even taken to using baby lotion and powder on herself, just so she could smell it every day. "I love babies. I want eight, four boys and four girls. I already have all their names picked out." She paused, but Duke just crinkled his eyes in expectation. "Baden, Ren, Eddie, and Blake for the boys," she said.

"And the girls?"

"Amber, Jennifer, Terilyn, and Emma Jane."

Duke covered her small hand with his large one. Michelle stared at it. "I love kids like you do. It's a man's responsibility to build up the kingdom of God on earth," he said.

"And they're cute!" Michelle said.

Duke was in town a lot after that on the pretense of buying some new container for the wheat, oats, and other foods he bought in bulk and divided up among them. It seemed like there was always a more economical carton shape to investigate or samples of coated or uncoated cardboard that had to be compared.

He took Michelle to dinner, for drives up the canyon, he even took her to the state fair. They ate Indian fry bread and corn dogs with mustard down the side and listened to Ronnie Milsap, swaying together slowly in the aisle.

While Ronnie crooned, Duke put his warm mouth to her ear. “I want to make you happy,” he said.

“I am happy. I’ve never been happier than right here, right now.” She leaned into his warm leather jacket, drunk on the lyrics of the song and the lights of the distant midway and Duke. When he kissed her, Michelle knew it was different than with other boys. Gone were the dry quick pecks of boys like Lanny Leatherwood, who were more interested in getting a hand around her breast than kissing her.

“I might be falling in love with you,” he said.

After she had seen Duke four or five times, Michelle knew she had to tell her parents about him. She couldn’t keep saying she was over at Edna’s and expect Edna to cover for her. Edna though, appeared to have made peace with the idea of Duke and didn’t mind covering for her. Michelle knew she didn’t see Duke as a serious threat to her, with him being a polygamist and all. One night she had even told her to go ahead and see him all she wanted, get it out of her system, confident Michelle would tire of him, come to her senses, or get the brakes from her parents soon.

Before Michelle could gather the nerve to talk to her mom and dad, Duke brought the subject up.

“I think it’s time I got to know your parents,” he said. “It’s not right, you and I seeing each other all this time and me not having a face to face with your dad.”

Michelle agreed to set up a meeting, maybe have Duke over for dinner or something. Her mom loved to cook and would welcome the chance to show off her culinary skills to someone new and appreciative. And once her parents got to know Duke, understood his conviction and his beliefs, they'd probably even like him. She could picture her dad and Duke discussing one of their mutually-favorite subjects: how the government ruined farming in America with all their programs, subsidies, and, as her dad said as if it were a dirty word, with their control. They were so alike, her dad and Duke. So alike and yet so different. She would talk to her parents that night.

She did it during dinner. She figured they couldn't get really mad at her while they were eating. Didn't they always say dinner was supposed to be civilized with no fighting or arguing?

Like the Weavers did every night, they were going around the table, taking turns telling the best thing that happened that day. Michelle's dad, Bud, said he'd gotten the last of the fields cleared today. Her mom, Norma Jane, said she received word that Sister Christensen had recovered from her bout of pneumonia after a laying on of hands and anointment with oil from Elder Rodgers. It was Michelle's turn.

"Well . . .," Michelle began, unsure on how to proceed. No one noticed her hesitation, they were busy serving up big spoonfuls of hot tamale casserole and refried beans. "I met someone at the store a while back." She put too much food on her plate and it sat there, a mountain of casserole and a mountain of beans, rising up from the plate's valley floor.

The favorite game of telling the best part of the day was over. Her parents exchanged a brief glance. There was an entire conversation in that glance and it went like this:

“What does she mean, she met someone? A boy?” her dad would say.

“I don’t know, I suppose so,” her mom would say.

“Why don’t we know about it?”

“That’s a good question.”

“Do you want to take this or do you want me to?”

“I will. And that boy better be Mormon.”

“Who is this boy, hon?” Bud said, his fork posed halfway to his mouth like an acrobat interrupted.

“His name is Duke Stead. He came in the store the other day.” Michelle left out the part that it was last month and that he’d come in to buy snuff. She said a quick prayer of forgiveness for that. “Father in Heaven, I’m just trying to keep the peace and I know peace is Your will and Your way. Amen.”

Julie, her youngest sister, chanted under her breath, “Michelle’s got a boyfriend, Michelle’s got a boyfriend . . .” Michelle kicked her under the table to make her stop. Her siblings were interested. This would be the most entertainment they’d had at dinner for a long time, and Michelle could tell they were relishing it.

“I don’t believe I know any Steads,” Bud said. “Who’s his family?”

“He’s not from around here. He lives in Salt Lake City, does business with the mill.” Michelle’s appetite was gone, but she forced herself to keep eating anyway, the corn of the tamales dry and gritty in her mouth.

Now her parents’ glance said this:

“Successful.”

“Mormon.”

“Salt Lake, huh?” Norma Jane said. “He’s Mormon then?”

“Of course,” Michelle said. “Would you please pass the bread?”

“Must be successful if he comes all the way up here for paper,” Bud said even though it was only three hundred miles from Salt Lake.

“Oh, he is,” Michelle said. “He has a food storage business.” Michelle buttered her bread from the tub of margarine in front of her.

“Can’t fault a boy who helps the saints follow the Word of the Lord, can you?” Bud said and he looked quite pleased. He swirled the cubes in his glass of water and Michelle imagined icebergs floating in the ocean. She thought of sitting on an iceberg when it cracked loose and drifted away from the others, taking her farther and farther out to sea, alone.

“He’s not a boy exactly, Daddy.” Michelle took a bite of the bread, the spongy white Wonder Bread sticking to the top of her mouth. Her dad put his glass down and waited. “He’s a man,” she said.

“A man? Meaning?” Bud said.

“Meaning thirty-six.”

“Thirty-six!?” Norma Jane said, shocked. This time her glance said this:

“God in Heaven, how did this happen? If that man’s laid one finger on my daughter I swear to You I’ll . . .”

And her dad’s glance back said this:

“How could you let this happen, Norma Jane?”

“Duke is very religious,” Michelle said. She knew this would please her parents in its most basic sense. And it was true.

“Good. You know we wouldn’t approve of any other who wasn’t,” Norma Jane said. She went into the kitchen to refill the water pitcher.

“Even a little extreme,” Michelle said. “Fundamentalist you could say.”

“Fundamentalist?” Bud said.

“What?” Norma Jane said, returning to the dining room with the still empty pitcher in her hands.

Her brother pushed his plate back and settled in like he did when watching the Denver Broncos, his favorite football team, on TV.

“He believes in the original gospel of the Church,” Michelle said. “He thinks it’s wrong that the Church has altered the gospel over the years.”

“In what way?” Bud said. His words ended on a high note, as if he were an actor exaggerating his only line.

“Like polygamy,” Michelle said. She gulped some tamale casserole and could feel the weight of it in her stomach.

“Oh, oh, I know what polygamy is,” said Eloise, her oldest sister. “I saw it on TV.”

“Shut up,” Bud said to her. Eloise bowed her head and started crying soundlessly, tears dripping onto the design of the plate, flowers strung together with a leafy vine, landing like dew drops on the blue petals. It was a rule in their house, enforced strictly by both parents, that no one was allowed to say ‘shut up.’ They had to say ‘be quiet’ instead. Her father’s shout made Michelle want to cry too, but she didn’t, choosing instead to wrap a strand of the tender hair from the back of her neck around her finger and pull it until she felt a sharp pain travel down her spine.

“So, does this man, this Duke Stead,” – Bud punctuated his words by bringing his fists down on the table, making his dinner plate jump – “just believe in polygamy or are you telling me he practices polygamy?”

Michelle smashed her beans underneath the tines of her fork. “Practices,” she said. “What the hell?” Bud said, rising from his chair.

Eloise, Brenda, and Julie let out a collective gasp. “Daddy swore, daddy swore,” they chanted.

“Bud, please, don’t swear in front of the children,” Norma Jane said.

Michelle squeezed her eyes shut. If she couldn’t see her dad’s rage, maybe it would go away. She gathered every piece of courage she could find. She searched her soul for it, she prayed to the Holy Ghost, she conjured up Duke’s image in her mind. It came to her; the knowledge that she was on the right path and she found her strength

there. The Heavenly Father always revealed the correct way if one just believed that he would.

“He’s a polygamist. He has four wives,” Michelle said. Bud advanced toward her and she jumped up from her chair. He had never laid a hand on any of them, so Michelle didn’t know why she had a sudden vision of Bud throwing her to the ground. She backed up. “He knows the true way, Daddy. It’s been revealed to him. The gospel of Joseph Smith is true, you know it is yourself,” Michelle said.

“I forbid you to see him,” Bud said.

“Daddy, please,” Michelle said.

“Bud, calm down,” Norma Jane said. She too was on her feet and ushering the kids upstairs. They filed past Michelle, their usual style of picking on which ever one was in trouble abandoned. They didn’t even turn their heads to look at her. Michelle knew her mother, who would never say a word to cross anything her father said, their respective roles were too well-defined for that, was managing the situation as Michelle had seen her manage every crisis situation: by getting the kids out of the way and attempting to calm Bud down. In the past, Michelle had heard her mother say anything her father wanted to hear and for the first time in her life, Michelle now welcomed whatever she could come up with to appease her father’s wrath.

“You’re going to bust an artery or something,” Norma Jane said. “Let’s just meet him.” She laughed and it came out more like a choke. “We’ll have him for dinner. It’s not like Michelle’s going to marry him or anything.” She looked at Michelle. “Right, honey?”

Michelle was backed up against her mother's prized possession, the glass-shelved breakfront that matched the fake mahogany table and chairs of the dining room suite. Norma Jane had filled it with both decorative and sentimental pieces. A crystal bowl that had been a wedding present from Norma Jane's parents twenty years ago sat next to a miniature glass deer that Michelle had given her for Christmas last year.

"Right," Michelle said as she stepped away from the glass, her hip hitting the breakfront and toppling the deer. The minute the words were out of her mouth, she knew they weren't true. She wanted what Duke had, the very thing her parents wanted, the thing she thought she'd given up for Edna: the key to the Celestial Kingdom. She felt they were within her reach. It was like everything she had been taught, everything she'd ever experienced, everything she'd seen, had all been to show her what to do at this very moment.

The sound of the glass breaking made Bud stop in his tracks. You're going to be sorry now, Michelle thought, breaking one of Mom's favorite pieces. But her mom was nonplused and her dad seemed to be considering her words. Maybe he just didn't want to get into a fight later over the broken deer, which they all knew Norma Jane would silently blame on him. He glanced at her and she said nothing, but refused to drop her eyes. His glance said:

"Yeah, why get all upset? He doesn't stand a chance with my daughter."

"You're right," he said. "Dinner tomorrow."

“We understand that we are to be made kings and priests unto God, if I be made the king and lawgiver of the family, and if I have many sons, I may become the father of many fathers and the king of many kings. This will constitute every man a prince, king, or lord, whatever the Father sees fit to confer upon us.”

– President Brigham Young
“Discourses of Brigham Young,” 195

CHAPTER THREE

It was decided that Duke should come at seven for dinner. Norma Jane made two pans of her speciality, chicken tetrazzini, a creamy mixture of chicken, spaghetti, and Campbell’s cream of chicken soup. She served one early to the kids and banished them upstairs, where Michelle knew they were more than happy to remain, the image of their father pounding the table and backing her up against the breakfront still in their mind. She could picture them lined up by age in the hallway, their backs pressed flat against the wall, listening, for the rest of the evening.

Michelle found her mother in the kitchen. “Will Daddy be nice tonight?” she asked just as Bud came in the back door, stomping the dirt of the farm off onto the mat.

“Ask him,” Norma Jane said. She sprinkled the green onions she was chopping on top of the casserole. They made Michelle’s eyes water.

“I have a few questions I want answered,” Bud answered.

“Daddy, you can’t go interrogating him like a *boy*, you know. He’s a *man*.”

“I don’t care how the hell old he is,” Bud said, “I have a few questions. Some married man coming around. I want answers.”

Michelle prayed for help. “Lord, let my Daddy be a good father like you are. Bestow on him a good dose of restraint. And please, please, please don’t let him embarrass me. I ask this in Your name, amen.”

Duke arrived in freshly creased jeans and a striped shirt, its sleeves buttoned at the wrist instead of folded back like he usually wore them. His boots were new. Michelle wished his snuff can hadn’t made a faded ring on his back pocket.

The dinner conversation was stilted and consisted mostly of Duke praising her mother’s cooking. He ate with enthusiasm, winning her over with his zealously.

“This is the best meal I’ve eaten in a month of Sundays.” He looked at Michelle. “You cook like your mom?”

Norma Jane didn’t let Michelle answer. “I’ve tried to teach her everything I know,” she said. Michelle hoped she wouldn’t feel compelled to go into detail of just how bad of a cook she really was. And that was even after three years of 4H Club cooking classes. But her natural inclinations had never been domestic and she could usually be found outside with her dad, helping with chores. She’d feed the chickens in the morning before school and now they didn’t see her without running to her, ready for a treat. She liked driving the tractor through the hops field and once her dad was confident in her ability, he let her drive it in the spring, when the hard unplowed earth made it more dangerous. She even helped him to repair the tractor until he bought a new one and neither of them recognized a thing on its new-fangled engine.

After dinner, they moved into what Norma Jane called ‘the formal living room.’ It was off-limits to the family and only used when Norma Jane had the women from church over for a meeting. She’d saved for years to purchase the blue and brown flowered sofa, blue velvet chair, and off-white plush carpet. A large framed picture of the Salt Lake Temple was above the sofa, the angel Moroni wrought in gold presiding over it.

Michelle sat on the sofa and Duke sat next to her. Her father looked pained, as if someone somewhere were sticking pins into a little voodoo doll that looked like him. Norma Jane came in, her hands still visibly damp from rinsing the dishes. She was carrying a chair from the dining room. She set it next to Bud and the room took on the appearance of a battle zone, with lines drawn, Bud and Norma Jane on one side, Michelle and Duke on the other. Michelle took it as a good sign that the Temple painting was above her – Moroni was in her camp.

“So Duke, Michelle tells me you’re a polygamist,” Bud said. Michelle could see the blue veins in his neck bulging down both sides. “That interested Norma Jane and I and we wanted to make sure you’re not polluting our daughter’s head with any strange ideas. Clear?”

“Yes, I am,” Duke said and settled back into the sofa, arranging the stiff pillows her mother kept at either end until he was comfortable and Michelle didn’t know if Duke meant he was a polygamist or was clear on her father’s message. “My parents, and their parents, and their parents too were polygamists. My granddaddy too far back to count settled the Salt Lake Valley. Came to Utah in 1847 when the Mormons left Nauvoo.”

His eyes stared out over the top of Bud's head. "He never would've dreamed that his Latter-day Saints are the same ones that refuse my way of life today."

"There's a reason for that, you know," Bud said. "It's against the law. And it's morally wrong, an unholy practice."

"It was holy at one time, Daddy," Michelle said, paraphrasing information she had gleaned from Duke over the last couple of months. "The only reason the Church doesn't allow polygamy anymore is because of pressure to change. Legal stuff, nothing to do with the Church."

"I'd like to hear what Duke has to say about that," Bud said, dismissing Michelle as if she was still seven years old and trying to convince him that the lost city of Atlantis was real and it was in their pond and the only reason nobody had found it is because they hadn't looked there.

"The law of God should take precedent over the law of man," Duke said. "But people are ignorant." His eyes got misty. "The day after my tenth birthday, the Salt Lake County sheriff arrived with deputies from two surrounding counties to arrest my father. We kids huddled in the cellar, afraid of that sheriff. He was an instrument of Satan himself. That's what the law is."

"What'd you do?" Norma Jane asked, adjusting her chair.

"I prayed, asking the Holy Ghost to show me what was true. Why was my daddy arrested if he wasn't wrong? What'd the law know that he didn't know?" For a second, Michelle thought Duke looked like he was still in that cellar and ten years old. His heavy eyes told her everything she needed to know about that day: his struggle to keep his fear

from overflowing into the cellar and drowning them all, his brave attempt to be the man of the family, and a child's desperate attempt to find an answer to what was happening that would make sense. Michelle blinked and it was gone.

“And?” Michelle said, sitting on the edge of the sofa.

“I received a revelation right there in that cellar, with my brothers and sisters huddled around me, crying. I heard the Holy Ghost tell me what my daddy already knew, that the only way to be accepted into the Celestial Kingdom was through polygamy. And I wanted that Celestial Kingdom.”

Bud looked incredulous. “We all want to attain the Celestial Kingdom,” he said, “but that don't mean we all become polygamists.” He laughed and threw his head toward Norma Jane. “I got my hands full with one wife. Not sure how I'd take care of three or four, if you know what I mean.”

“Daddy!” Michelle felt herself color.

“It's the only way to create a heaven on earth,” Duke said, “with wives and children to love and take care of, just like Jesus took care of his followers, and with wives and children serving the husband, like those who loved Jesus served Him.”

Bud snorted. “I have a wife and children and I don't feel like Jesus.”

“Daddy, you know Jesus wants his saints perfected,” Michelle said. “He's pleased when we try to become like him.” Bud ignored her again and she looked to her mother for support, or agreement, or any sign, but there was nothing. Her face was blank and her body stiff, her back straight in the chair with feet planted flat on the ground. The battle line was once again clear.

Duke propelled himself forward, clutching Michelle's knee in the process. Bud noticed his hand and Michelle could see his distress. It was like his eyes were going to pop out of his head any moment. Norma Jane reached out and patted his hand.

"Polygamy makes me more like Jesus right here on earth than you'll ever be," Duke said. "I have experience watching over my children, just like God does. When I get to the Celestial Heaven, me and my wives and children, for they're coming along too, I'll be ready." He sat back and folded his arms across his chest. "Will you?"

"I'm ready. I've got my faith and I've got the Church. That's more than I can say for you with your half-baked ideas on salvation," Bud said, his face now turning red.

Michelle had seen her dad challenged about his beliefs lots of times. He routinely fielded questions from non-Mormons like "Do you believe in Jesus?" to which he would respond, "It is called the Church of *Jesus Christ* of Latter-day Saints," as if the person were lamebrained. An inquiry from the unsuspecting as to why Mormons wore 'funny underwear' always got a long lecture on the honor and privilege of being able to wear such sacred garments that the asker would inevitably start nodding their head in understanding just to get away. But Michelle had never seen him challenged by someone who had such command of every tenet of the Mormon religion, especially someone as self-confident as Duke. It was unnerving to see her dad's anger so luminous against Duke's peaceful demeanor.

"Faith alone won't get you into the Celestial Kingdom, that's a false teaching," Duke said.

“Bullshit,” said Bud. He gripped the arms of the chair as if to keep from falling out of it. His fingers made a pattern like swirling clouds reflected in water in the crushed velvet.

“Daddy, don’t swear,” Michelle said. “Please try to understand. Duke says those most ignorant to the Gospel are the ones most offended by it.”

Bud looked right at Michelle. “Bullshit,” he repeated. He tossed his head toward Duke. “You don’t know what’s true or what’s false. The Mormon Church hasn’t practiced polygamy since 1890 and you think it’s the only way to attain glory? Tell that to the real Mormons, we’re the chosen ones, the true Church.” With this, Bud thumped his chest with his fist.

Duke looked perturbed, like he had to go over it all again with a forgetful child. “Not everyone can be saved when Jesus returns to reign on this earth again,” Duke said. “In the millennium, only the ones who have prepared like I have will walk with him. Me and my wives and my children.” He turned away from Bud for a second and looked at Michelle. She gave him a subdued smile.

“How do your wives feel about that?” Bud asked, clearly not as impressed with Duke’s speech as Michelle was.

“I love my wives and respect them more than most men you know,” Duke said. “And I respect family. How many men can say that in 1999?”

Bud ignored his question. “What exactly are your intentions with my daughter?” he asked instead. It was the question that had been in the room all evening. It had

swirled around them like fog rising off the lake, covering the floor that divided them.

And now it was out.

Duke took so long before he spoke that Michelle was uncertain if he knew what his intentions were . . . maybe he had never planned on having her for a wife . . . maybe he got lonely and just liked her company all this time. She felt dizzy and had to lean her head against the back of the sofa in the silence.

“Whatever makes her happy,” he said.

When Duke said ‘whatever makes her happy,’ Michelle’s mind drifted to a house in Salt Lake City with her in it. She saw a house full of women and kids and salvation and a man, a man who could show her the right path, and she leaned her head back on the sofa, her eyes closed.

Bud was silent when Duke said ‘whatever makes her happy,’ as if the wind was knocked out of his sails. He had been ready for a fight, for the real fight, not over religion, but over his daughter. But Duke hadn’t claimed Michelle and it was pretty hard to argue with someone who says ‘whatever makes her happy.’

Bud stood and said, “I think it’s time we called it a night.” It amazed Michelle how he could say so much while barely moving his lips. He looked directly at her. “We’ll talk about this later,” he said and left the room before Duke could even get up from the sofa.

Norma Jane and Michelle tried to make up for Bud’s abruptness, offering another piece of Norma Jane’s rainbow Jell-O cake and making small talk, but Duke begged off. Michelle walked out to the front porch with him.

“I’m sorry about my daddy. He doesn’t understand,” she said.

“Not many do,” Duke said in a regretful manner. He shook his head slowly. “I know persecution, like those before me.” Michelle stood close to him, afraid to touch him on her own front porch. He smelled of hay warmed by the sun and Michelle breathed it in. Duke quickly kissed her, then leaned back and took her face in his hands.

“I’m offering you a gift,” he said.

“I know.”

“You just have to be open to receiving it.” He started down the stairs, then called back over his shoulder, “Remember, a kingdom can’t be delivered to Jesus when he comes back, unless it’s prepared for him now.”

Michelle smiled and waved. I’ll help you prepare, she thought as she went back into the house, closing the screen door noiselessly behind her. You sure could say Duke had conviction. He stood up for what he believed and didn’t conform for the sake of the Church, or what people thought, even Michelle’s daddy, or even the law. There weren’t many men like that in Warm Springs, at least none Michelle knew.

Not that she’d dated that many boys to compare Duke to. She knew she wasn’t considered pretty by the boys she went to high school with, not with her strong jaw, full eyebrows she refused to pluck and her wild hair, dark and to her shoulder, hanging in long spiral curls, like a black person’s the kids used to say. Not that they really knew, there weren’t any black families in Warm Springs, so the extent of their knowledge came from pictures and movies. But that didn’t stop them from taunting Michelle.

“Hey, Blacky, where’d you get that hair?” stupid Rob Carter said.

“Afroturf,” Tracey Weeks whispered in her ear as she descended the steps of the school bus.

It was a rare boy who did ask her to drive to Rexburg to see a movie or who wanted to go up to Pineview Reservoir to neck. She told herself that she didn’t need to fit in, to be popular like the blond girls, to have even one other best friend beside Edna, who didn’t count since she was related, but deep down, it did matter. Now with Duke, she felt pretty and smart. He listened to her, wanting to hear every word she told him about the things she’d done and the things she wanted to do.

Michelle found her mother in the kitchen. She was sitting alone at the metal table, a pile of wet kleenex in front of her. She was the peacemaker of the family, the referee, and the liaison between Bud and the kids. If Michelle could make her understand, woman-to-woman, she might be her ally with her father. Michelle sat down.

Norma Jane spoke before Michelle could. “I’m just going to say one thing, and that’s this: you will kill your father if you go off with that man.”

Before Michelle could think of how to proceed, her mother gripped her shoulders and shook her out of her silence. “Do you understand?”

Her grip was hard and her nails dug into Michelle’s shoulders. “Stop, Mama, you’re hurting me.” Michelle wormed out of her grip.

“Do you understand me?” Norma Jane said again.

“Yes. I do. But will you listen to me?” Michelle said.

“No, I won’t. I can’t. I had him over for dinner, I gave him due course . . .” She stood up and attacked the counter with a dish rag. “He’s a married man,” she said, her back to Michelle.

“He’s a polygamist, for heck’s sake, not an adulterer. You make it sound all dirty and it’s not.” Michelle twirled a strand of hair around her fingers, making it curlier than it already was.

Norma Jane whirled around. Her eyes had a thin rim of red around them. “Do you think a woman who has to share her husband can be happy?”

“What about the Needhams out behind the dealership?” Michelle asked, referring to a polygamist family that occasionally showed up in church. They were well-known in town, despite their attempts to remain low-key. “They look happy.”

“How do you know? They don’t talk to anyone.”

“Yeah, because they have each other. I always see them whispering and giggling. And the kids are the best behaved in church. You know it.” Michelle thought of them stretching across the last row like the lines on a bar graph. First a few small ones, then a group of taller ones, then some mid-sized ones, and finally, back to more small ones.

“Probably under threat of death. Polygamist don’t like undue attention called to them, you know. Is that how you want to live?”

Michelle didn’t answer. She arranged the items that were on the table into a circle: a salt and pepper shaker, a pair of dice, her mother’s compact mirror, and a piece of wood one of the kids must have picked up outside and liked the shape of.

“Where do you think you’re going with this?” Norma Jane continued.

Michelle closed her eyes and breathed in deep. “I don’t know,” she said, but she did. “I don’t want to be stuck in a monogamous marriage, all by myself, like you are. I want a sisters and girlfriends and a celestial marriage. Like the kind Duke can give me.”

Norma Jane sat up straight and wiped her eyes. She looked as if she just realized what it was she was fighting. “It’s not about sisters and girlfriends, Michelle.” Her mother faced her squarely from across the table. She reached out and took Michelle’s hands. “You need to find a nice Mormon boy back from his mission and get married in the Temple, like your dad and me,” she said. “Sealed for eternity, along with you kids. You don’t get that with sisters and girlfriends.”

Michelle knew that, that was the problem. She took her hands away. “There are no nice Mormon boys for me, Mom, haven’t you noticed?”

“Give it time.”

“I’m eighteen! You were married by now and pregnant with me. I hear people talk at Church and in town. I know what they think.”

“Maybe if you gave the boys a chance . . . if you and Edna weren’t so tight, always together . . . maybe both of you could find a—”

Michelle interrupted her. “Nice Mormon boy, yeah, yeah, yeah. I’d have to leave Warm Springs to do that.”

“Then leave, go . . . just not with Duke Stead. And not with Edna either.” Her mother’s eyebrows arched and her mouth made a little ‘o’ and she flapped her hands in excitement. “I have an idea,” she said. “Why don’t you go to Boise to the Community College? You’ve always wanted to and I bet there’s plenty of nice boys there, too.”

“We don’t have the money,” Michelle said.

“I’ll talk to Daddy. I’m sure we can scrape the money together for a good cause.”

Norma Jane trilled like a bird, making plans, her voice reverberating in Michelle’s head.

“I’ll ask the bishop for a recommendation of a good family you can stay with. That way you won’t have to live alone in Boise. I bet Boise has a singles ward too, won’t that be fun? No more . . .”

Michelle quit hearing her mother’s plans even though she went on. She stared at the circle of objects she’d arranged on the table, the salt and pepper shakers, the dice, the mirror, and the wood, and the rest of the room darkened around them. Had there been money all along for college? Why was she only hearing about it now?

Michelle stood. “I’m going to bed,” she said. She left her mother in the kitchen, still making plans for Michelle in Boise.

Michelle couldn’t get to sleep. She stared up to the ceiling in the dark. When she was a kid, she had stuck glow-in-the-dark stars across the ceiling and she now pondered the constellations she had made at eight years old.

She had never seriously considered the possibility that her parents wouldn’t be supportive of anything she chose to do, especially if the decision was based on religion. She never considered the possibility that they wouldn’t be a part of her life forever, they were all sealed in the Church as a family unit, after all. But she couldn’t picture them visiting her under Duke’s roof. Her dad would have a major heart attack before that happened; she didn’t need him to tell her that to know it. Not after tonight. Would her mother not be there when she had her first baby? Would her father not hold the baby

when he was blessed as a newborn? Would he not baptize his own grandchild when the time came? Michelle didn't want to think about the answers and she buried her face in the pillows.

She must have drifted off to sleep. It was fitful and she woke to a damp pillow. One-forty glowed the red digits of the clock radio. She found her childhood Hollie Hobbie blanket at the foot of the bed and pulled it around her. Its smooth fabric was always cool. She flipped the pillow over and prayed for sleep. She studied the stars. In the corner, she'd pasted a little crescent moon. It was so bright for a minute she forgot it wasn't the real moon and was awed by its power to move oceans.

Boise was sitting on her chest and making it hard to breathe. She once approached the subject with her mother, who looked as if she wasn't quite sure what Michelle was asking for.

"College? Isn't that expensive?" Norma Jane had said.

"I guess. They passed out some information about it at school. Mr. Anderson said it's the only way to secure your future."

"Well no one in this family has gone to college. Are you saying no one has a future? You want to tell that to your daddy or your grandfather?"

"I thought Uncle Bert went to school in Boise."

"He didn't finish. He dropped out to secure his future with a good job, a job on the railroad. Those don't open up every day, you know."

"I'm not going to get a job with the railroad, Mom. I want to go somewhere like Boise for college. Like Uncle Bert."

“Do what you want. But don’t expect your father and me to pay for it. Then we’d have to do that for all four of you . . .”

Michelle had quit listening. She knew that despite her mother’s claim that the family had a future, a lifetime of farming barely pays the bills, much less lets a family put money into savings. Her dad was always saying his money was in the land, and that it was. Michelle just didn’t know what good it did there.

So her future was entirely up to her. Her grades didn’t warrant a scholarship, she could be as lackadaisical as she was smart if she wasn’t interested in something, sometimes not even going to class at all in order to take on extra hours at work. Skipping school put her outside the radar of the school’s guidance counselor, who also served as the assistant principal and coach. He barely had time to worry about students getting through each day, much less about the future of one farm girl who could have qualified for a scholarship if anyone at all had taken an interest or motivated her.

Michelle snapped on the light and her stars disappeared. ‘Don’t expect your father and me to pay for it,’ her mother had said and ‘I’m sure we can scrape the money together for a good cause.’ They were liquid words; made up and moved around to suit their purpose, and they reverberated in Michelle’s head like the slow drip of water on stone.

Michelle turned the light off and fell asleep. She dreamed she was at the beach. It must have been low tide because miles of ocean floor was exposed and Michelle could see out to the coral reef. The water lay just beyond it. Hundreds of items lay in the uncovered ocean floor; some treasure, like a green glass buoy encased in rope, and some

trash, like the tires so encrusted with barnacles they looked like sculpture. Michelle walked along, picking up shells and a marble egg and even the jump rope she used to have when she was a kid, when she realized she was alone. Where were all the beachcombers? Who cared? She had this whole treasure chest to herself.

Duke visited Warm Springs more frequently over the next few months. It was difficult to see him, as Michelle's parents had forbidden it and Edna had quit covering for her. She didn't think Michelle's interest in Duke was just a passing phase any more. Michelle was forced to be creative in her alibis, which was difficult because she didn't have a lot of friends to fall back on. She'd take huge risks, like saying she'd be at work then go with Duke all day. On those days, she could barely climb the stairs of her front porch, not knowing if today would be the day her mom or dad had stopped in the mini-mart, discovered she wasn't there, and were now waiting for her inside the door.

With every visit, Michelle wanted to know more and more about Duke's home life and she questioned him incessantly about his wives.

"Tell me their names again?" she asked all the time, just to hear him say the names. She liked to pretend she could read his feelings for them into the way the syllables rolled from his tongue.

"LaRae, GayLynn, Cheron, and Rhonda," he'd said.

"Do you love one more than the others?" Michelle couldn't help but feel like he must, or that it was possible to, otherwise, why would he be paying all this attention to

her when he had four wives at home? She liked the feeling of being special that his attention gave her. But he always insisted he loved them all the same.

She tried it from a different approach. “Don’t they get jealous of each other?” she asked.

“Absolutely not. Every one of them is confident in how much I love them. I have a tremendous capacity to love, Michelle. Every time I think I can’t possibly love any more, I meet someone like you and I can.”

Michelle would turn his words over and over in her head at night as she tried to fall asleep. She missed having Edna to talk to. Nor could she confide in her parents. And the lies she had to tell were eating at her very soul. She even felt isolated when at Church because she blamed the Church for her torment. She didn’t feel guilty over seeing Duke, or being in love with him, and in love with him she was, but she felt guilty because her Church, the one she’d had faith in her entire eighteen years, told her it was wrong when she knew it wasn’t. Sometimes she wanted to leave it all behind.

The thoughts of getting out of Warm Springs and moving to a real city like Salt Lake, giving up her job at the Stop-N-Go, living in a big house with lots of sisters to share the work, babies . . . it sounded like a welcome relief from the indecision Michelle faced over her future in Warm Springs.

Despite her mother’s past protestations about school, Michelle knew she hoped for more for Michelle than Warm Springs offered. Michelle was her favorite, and she knew she’d be stifled if she stayed. But Norma Jane’s idea of success was anything off the farm and she often talked of Michelle getting a job at the country club in Rexburg,

she'd once driven by and admired the way the employees dressed in crisp black and white, or maybe seeing the world working on a cruise ship. But so far, Michelle'd just worked at the Stop-N-Go, first as a clerk, then on the midnight shift, and finally working her way up to manager six months after she graduated from high school.

And now here was a man, a man with talk of babies and big towns and a house full of women like sisters and fulfillment of God's plan, right here on earth! When he stopped in the mini-mart and asked to see her tomorrow, she agreed. It was Sunday and that would take some scheming, but she came up with the perfect plan.

The next day, she made herself late for Church. As everyone rushed out the door, she called down to her mom that she'd take her own car. After the sacrament meeting, she feigned illness in order to drive herself home.

Her mother put her hand to her forehead, smoothing her inky hair off her face. "You don't feel hot," she said. "But you can never be too careful. Good thing you drove."

Michelle looked around for Edna but couldn't find her. "Tell Edna I went home sick," she said and ducked out the door, trying to appear lethargic and tired.

When Michelle got home, Duke was right behind her. She knew they only had two hours alone before the rest of the family would be home from Sunday School and meetings. She showed him in.

He leaned against the counter in the kitchen and watched Michelle make lunch. She was extremely grateful that her mother had a pot of chili in the fridge and all she had to do was heat it up. That she could handle. When she turned to put the steaming chili

on the table, Duke was on one knee on the floor. She froze, a bowl in each hand. The spicy aroma of the hot peppers her mother put in the chili stung her nose. He reached out, took them from her and set them on the counter, and took her now empty hands in his.

Michelle thought back to all those afternoons with Edna, sitting on the path waiting for the other kids to get back from Kay's Cross, or stretched on big towels on the swell next to her brother's baseball field, pretending they were at the beach and not half a field away from her family, or down by the creek that wound behind Michelle's house. They would talk about what it would feel like when someone proposed to them and what the appropriate reaction on their parts should be.

"I'm never going to get married," Edna said, shaking her bobbed hair. The sun glinted off it and made it look more red than brown.

"You have to," Michelle said. "What else would you do? And you want kids don't you?" She was painting her bare toenails frosted cream. "Like it?" she asked and lifted one foot toward Edna.

Edna nodded her approval and stretched out, pretending she was at the beach in the sun, not at a ball field in Idaho. She had on her favorite outfit, white capris and a red bandana print top. Michelle had on the same outfit, only her capris were denim and her top a navy bandana.

Edna considered the marriage issue. "Are you going to get married?" she asked.

"I think so. Depends on who asks me and how they ask."

“Like this,” Edna said and threw herself on her knees in front of Michelle. She looked more like she was going to pray than propose.

Michelle cracked up. “Ask me,” she said, sitting up.

Edna took Michelle’s hands. “Michelle Beth Weaver, I love you to the top of the sky and the bottom of the ocean. Will you marry me?”

Michelle couldn’t keep a straight face, Edna looked so funny play-acting at being so serious. She wiped the smile from her face with her hand and pretended to be solemn herself.

“Will I have to live on a farm?” she asked.

“No, I’ll take you to a big city. Maybe even Denver,” Edna promised.

“Will I have to do the dishes?”

“No, I’ll find someone else to do the dishes. And the cleaning.”

“Can I have a cook?”

“I’ll cook.”

“You can’t cook. You’ll have to go to work.”

“We’ll be rich and I’ll spend every day with you.”

“You will? Oh, we can be just like now. We’ll have a blast, we’ll be able to do anything we want, even stay up all night talking . . .”

“Eating whatever. . .”

“Nothing green, please.”

“No green. But chocolate.”

“I’ll do it. I’ll marry you.”

“Now we seal it with a kiss,” Edna said. She kissed Michelle and pulled her down on the blanket. It was a good kiss and Michelle kissed back. Then they did it again. Michelle hoped her mom would just think they were lying down if she looked up from her brother’s game. Good thing there were several large trees in her line of sight. They stayed there a long time, kissing, then stopping, then deciding to do it again, until the loudspeaker announced the end of the game. Their game was over for the day too.

Michelle could still hear that loudspeaker, only now it was broadcasting Duke’s voice. “Michelle,” he was saying, “will you be my wife?”

It occurred to her that Duke didn’t even know her middle name to toss in there but she dismissed that thought. Edna was her cousin, of course she would’ve proposed with Michelle’s full name. She started to say “yes,” but Duke interrupted her before the single word was out of her mouth.

“Don’t answer yet,” he said. “I want you to be sure. Pray.”

Michelle didn’t want to pray. She didn’t need the Lord to show her what to do to find eternity in Heaven and babies on Earth. But Duke pulled her down next to him and she prayed. “Holy Ghost, come to me now and share in my joy of this new and everlasting covenant offered before me. Make me worthy to accept the highest of the high and to use my free agency to do your will. Prepare me to know God the Father and Jesus Christ in eternal life in the world to come. Show me a sign that the celestial glory put forth here is rightfully mine. Amen.”

The room was quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator motor. Michelle popped opened one eye to steal a look at Duke. His eyes were shut tight and he mouthed

a silent prayer she couldn't make out. Her knees started to ache from kneeling on the hard floor. Right when she thought she couldn't take it anymore, it was replaced by a soothing feeling of tranquillity. She was warm. The feeling started in her hands that Duke still gripped and spread from there. Her eyes flew open.

Michelle knew she had only one choice. Marrying Duke was the only way for her to achieve eternal life in the Celestial Kingdom that didn't involve having to confess her sins to the bishop. Which she would have gladly done if the sin wasn't a mortal sin that would get her ex-communicated. If only her parents knew the embarrassment she was saving them, they'd be grateful and not mad. And maybe she had these feelings for Edna because she didn't have a boyfriend or because Edna herself was to blame. She needed to be away from Warm Springs to figure that out. And babies . . . she wanted lots and lots of babies.

Duke was kneeling in the kitchen waiting for an answer. Edna was sitting in Church, probably wondering if Michelle were okay.

"Can I give you an answer tomorrow?" she asked and Duke said, "Take all the time you need."

She needed one more time with Edna. She needed to know that she was doing the right thing. One part of her wanted Edna to beg her to stay, and if she did, Michelle would. She would forget about babies and the Celestial Kingdom and the whole bit. Another part of her wanted Edna to get mad and let her go. She asked Edna to come over the next night since both her parents would be at the Stake Leadership meeting at church.

She was in her room packing when the door knob jiggled. A rap on the door was followed by Edna calling her name. Michelle let her in and locked the door behind her.

“I thought you guys weren’t supposed to lock your doors,” Edna said. Of all the rules in the Weaver house, this one had been the most irksome, forcing Michelle and Edna to be very creative with their clandestine games. “Anyone home?”

“Not that I know of,” Michelle said. When she turned around, Edna was standing next to her. She leaned into Michelle and pinned her gently to the door. Edna kissed her and Michelle let herself feel it this time, really feel it. Edna’s lips were soft and her tongue was strong. It tasted faintly of licorice. Edna broke away and looked at the pants Michelle was holding in her hand.

“What’s up?” she said, then saw the open suitcase. “You’re going to marry Duke,” she said without a trace of uncertainty in her voice.

Michelle folded the pants into the suitcase. She nodded, afraid if she spoke she would cry.

“He’s a polygamist, Michelle, for Christ’s sake,” Edna said. Michelle had never heard Edna take the Lord’s name in vain before. It seemed like everyone was losing their principles.

Michelle sat on the bed, still quiet. Edna kneeled before her on the floor.

“Look, if you have to do this, if you feel you have to get married—” Edna said.

Michelle interrupted her. “I want babies. And I want the fulfillment of God’s plan. And that means an eternal marriage.”

“But why marry Duke? Find someone here. Please. I swear, I won’t stand in your way.”

Michelle put her arms around Edna and Edna lay her head on her lap. Her copper hair covered her face and the way it moved, all in one motion, reminded Michelle of the beaded headdresses Cleopatra wore in Michelle’s favorite movie.

Michelle wanted Edna to accept that she couldn’t stay in Warm Springs forever. Her prospects for a Temple marriage were tainted. That didn’t matter to Edna, because Edna never planned on getting married. But Michelle had never thought she would do anything but get married from the time she was a toddler playing house. After her sisters came along, she’d cart them around like dolls, thrilled to have a babydoll that really did eat and wet. But she couldn’t say all that to Edna because she knew that wound would cut too deep.

“Look, I can’t stay here,” Michelle said. “My parents say I can go to college in Boise, but I know the minute Duke’s out of the picture, they won’t be able to come up with the money. They’re just saying that to keep me here. Where they can control me.”

“You don’t think Duke’s going to control you?” Edna rose up.

“It’s different between a man and a woman,” Michelle said, randomly tossing clothes from the pile on the bed into the suitcase. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She picked up a striped orange shirt and folded it with perfection.

“Just that. You’re not interested in finding out about men. You never date or anything.”

“I’ve been busy with you.” She clutched the shirt to her chest.

“I’m your cousin.”

“That didn’t seem to bother you before.”

“It was just games to me. Kissing cousins.” When she said the words, Edna looked like Michelle had ripped her heart out and was holding it in her fist. She sat next to her. “I have to go Edna, you know that. I can’t stay here with you, working at the mini-mart, playing our games—” She’d been over this speech in her mind at least four times a day for the last week but it wasn’t sounding as convincing as she’d hoped.

Edna interrupted her. “They weren’t games to me,” she said. “And they weren’t games to you.”

“You’re right, Edna, they weren’t games to you.” Michelle came closer to Edna. “Because I think you’re a *lesbian*.” Michelle let the word unfurl like a flag. She had never said it before in her entire life.

Edna wasn’t as phased by Michelle saying it as Michelle was. “And you’re not?” she asked.

Michelle was horrified. “Of course I’m not. I want to have children, so I want to get married.”

“Do you love me?” Edna asked. She collapsed on the bed, the shirt still balled up in her hand. Michelle took it from her and tossed it into the suitcase. She put her arms around Edna and felt the steady convulsions that her silent crying induced. Michelle couldn’t take feeling her body like that, racked with despair, and she knew it was now or never. One word from Edna and she would turn back.

She ran her hand up the back of Edna's shirt and played one of their favorite games. "Tickle, tickle, tickle," she said while running her fingertips lightly over Edna's skin. "'Scratch, scratch, scratch,'" she said, scratching where she'd tickled, knowing that made the tickle feel even better. "Rub, rub, rub," she said and kneaded the small of Edna's back in time with her palm.

Edna burrowed into the bed wanting more and Michelle laid down next to her. She kissed her tears and rolled on top of her. She wanted to make Edna feel better, she wanted to make everything right. She wished they were just kids still.

Edna rolled her over and kissed her with renewed vigor, her teeth pressing against Michelle's. A surge of excitement went through Michelle's body, landing between her legs. Edna unbuttoned Michelle's jeans, slipped them off, and wiggled her fully-clothed body between Michelle's legs. Then she was on her knees, rubbing her cheek against Michelle's lacy beige bikini.

"What are you doing?" Michelle said and tried to pull her up, but Edna sunk lower down. Edna moved Michelle's panties to the side brushed her lips across the lips between Michelle's legs.

"Don't you want me too?" Edna said, looking up.

"We never have."

"But we can," Edna said and with that she spread Michelle's lips apart with her face and burrowed in. She was like a squirrel looking for an acorn and her tongue flicked back and forth until she knew she hit the spot she was looking for. Michelle's back involuntarily arched and her head slammed into the headboard. Michelle knew it was

wrong, but she couldn't think about that now. Edna's body convulsed with Michelle's and she clung to Michelle's hips with a fierceness that Michelle had never felt before. Her body kept convulsing long after Michelle's stopped and Michelle realized it was because Edna was crying, her tears mixing with her own saliva and Michelle's fluids.

When it was over, Michelle was surprising how quickly shame replaced pleasure. Edna was still fully-dressed, her face shiny. The down comforter was wet and covered in clothes from the piles they had kicked over. Michelle found her jeans and slipped them on over her wet and crumpled panties.

"Don't get up," Edna said.

"That was wrong." Michelle got up anyway.

"You liked it. I liked it. Please"

"That's the problem, Edna, don't you see. We've gone too far. You always go too far."

"Me? Everywhere I've gone, you've gone too." Edna picked up another one of Michelle's shirts and held it.

"Not this time. I want more out of life." She wished Edna would wash her face. Michelle could smell herself all over both of them.

"And you think you're going to find it with Duke? With a polygamist?"

"Yes."

"He won't be able to give you what I can."

“He’ll be able to give me more.” Michelle knew the words would be hurtful but she had to say them. After what happened, she knew if she stayed, her fate would be sealed in Hell. That was not an act that could go unrepented.

Edna stood up, the shirt falling to the floor. She went to Michelle’s dresser, the top of which was covered in framed photos of them both. There was a picture of them at the Ponderosa Steakhouse on the occasion of Edna’s mom’s birthday. They were smiling for the camera over Edna’s sirloin tips and Michelle’s chicken breast on rice. Michelle had framed it in a twig frame intertwined with pieces of bark and moss. There was a picture of them in prom dresses from the year they decided they didn’t need dates for the prom and they would go together. Michelle’s dress was long and navy, trimmed in white daisy rickrack. Edna’s was dark green and silky. Michelle had framed that picture in a silver frame sprinkled with glittery silver stars. Michelle’s favorite was a picture of the two of them in the pond, just their heads above water, hair slicked back. When Michelle looked at that picture, she liked to pretend her hair looked smooth and flat like that all the time.

Edna picked up a picture and waved it at Michelle. “You bitch,” she said and flung the picture against the wall. It hit the wall with a thud and landed on the floor in pieces.

“Stop,” Michelle said. “Let me be with a man.”

Edna didn’t hear her. “I love you, do you hear me? Love you and you were just playing games,” she said and threw another picture, this time with all her might. The glass shattered and sprayed out into the room. Michelle instinctively covered her head

but Edna stood frozen in the center of the room, her toes dug into the faded blue carpet. Michelle looked up. Edna's face looked glossy in the light from her tears.

"It's my only chance . . . I need to be away . . ." Michelle couldn't say 'from you.' She couldn't say that she'd felt like she'd been caught in a whirlpool for years. Duke had held a hand down into the whirlpool and pulled. Edna took aim and threw another picture.

Michelle quickly surveyed the damage. Just when she was about to offer up a prayer of thanks for not letting the flying glass hurt either of them, she looked at Edna. Small pinpoints of blood were rising from her arms and face; two on her cheek and three on her forearms.

"You're hurt," Michelle said and started toward her.

"Yeah," Edna said and she was gone.

Michelle stood in the middle of the room. Go after her, she thought. But no matter what her mind said, she stayed standing in the middle of the room, too scared to walk through the broken glass. The back of her neck felt sticky and she reached her hand through her hair to two spots of blood forming where her neck must have been exposed when she cowered. Her fingers felt the bright plasma mixing with her darker hair.

Duke and Michelle decided to marry at the end of the week. Duke was to pick her up on Friday morning. She was almost finished packing except for the things that would make her mother suspicious, like boxing up the stuffed animals that had lived in a hammock above her bed since she was six years old. She hoped to do that after she broke

the news to them, but she had a small bags of her most precious items ready to go and most of her clothes in suitcases under the bed.

On Monday night, the Weavers had family home evening like they did every Monday night for the last twenty years. Michelle loved family home evening because her mom always made something good to eat and they got to stay up a little later. Tonight, the lesson was on the value of work.

Julie and Brenda started by singing ‘A Happy Helper.’ Brent went next with a prayer. Bud read a scripture from the Book of Mormon about how Nephi taught his people to work. Michelle read an article from the Church magazine called ‘The Day the Dishwasher Broke’ about what happened to one family when everyone had to pitch in in the kitchen. Norma Jane led the lesson by putting up a big poster and making a chart of the family’s talents and responsibilities. They then brain stormed ideas on how to make work fun.

“Share yucky jobs with others,” Michelle said from the floor where she was stretched out barefoot. A big bowl of caramel popcorn with nuts was by her side.

Michelle was anxious to get through the lesson tonight but her mom seemed to keep going, even planning out a work project that they could all do together. They settled on reorganizing the basement Saturday morning. Finally, Eloise said the closing prayer and it was over.

Michelle lingered behind after her brothers and sisters cleared the room. Her mother turned the TV on and was picking up the family room, as if putting all of the kids stuff – the coloring book, the purple marker, the solitary sock – in a pile would make the

room look neater. Her father was already reading the newspaper. He was a very precise newspaper reader, taking only one section at a time, which he would then refold neatly and replace before moving on to another section.

“Mom, Dad,” she said and sat on the big ottoman in the middle of the room that also served as a coffee table. “Can I talk to you?”

Bud folded his newspaper neatly in his lap. Norma Jane turned the TV down, but left it on. She had on her ‘attentive mother’ look that signaled her children were important and she was going to take the time to listen to what they had to say. She used it mostly when one of them wanted to talk to her while she was in the middle of an activity she didn’t want to stop, like making dinner or cutting out a pattern on the dining room table.

“Duke asked me to marry him,” she said. She could feel the blood pounding in her temples.

“Been expecting that,” Bud said. The paper was now on the floor and Bud didn’t make a move to retrieve it.

“We told you not to see him,” Norma Jane said. Michelle knew that in her mother’s mind, disobeying ranked high, probably right along with marrying a polygamist.

“What’d he do, come into the Stop-N-Go and propose over the counter? Did he hold up the line?” He laughed at his joke.

Michelle flushed and it turned to indignation. Duke wasn’t a man to make fun of and it mortified her to see her daddy mock him. She rolled her hands into fists, unaware of the action.

“I told him ‘yes,’” Michelle said. “I’d like your blessing.” She was clenching and unclenching her fists as if to the rhythm of the moon pulling the tide.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” Bud said.

“I don’t know,” Michelle said. She couldn’t look at either of her parents and rested her eyes on a spot on the carpet in the shape of a lopsided star. “I want to marry him,” Michelle said.

“Well tell him ‘no,’” Bud said.

“No, Daddy,” Michelle said. “I’m going to marry him.” She lifted her eyes. “He’s picking me up in the morning.”

“Over my dead body,” Bud said.

“I’m eighteen. You can’t stop me,” Michelle said. She was sweating now and could feel her shirt sticking to her underarms.

“Eighteen is hardly old enough to make a decision like this. You’ll do what I tell you,” Bud said. “I don’t need to remind you that I am the presiding authority in this family.” He punctuated the words ‘presiding authority’ with a fierceness that made Michelle recoil.

“You and Mommy were married when you were eighteen,” Michelle said.

“Honey, that’s different,” Norma Jane said. Michelle didn’t look at her. She couldn’t bear to hurt her and Norma Jane had hurt all over her face. And it was all Michelle’s fault.

“And if I were marrying some returning missionary,” Michelle said, “you’d be okay with it.”

Norma Jane blew her nose, but Michelle still didn't look at her.

"But you're not, are you?" Bud said.

"No, I'm not," said Michelle, "because I'm marrying Duke. He loves me more than anyone ever has, even you."

Norma Jane sobbed. Michelle still didn't look at her.

Bud stood up and pointed to the crumpled figure of Norma Jane on the sofa.

"Look what you're doing to your mother," Bud said. "What kind of monster has he turned you into?" He took Michelle's face in his hands and turned her head.

"Daddy, don't say that. I love you and I love Mommy." Michelle knelt on the floor by her mother and clung to her legs like when she was a child. Norma Jane ran her fingers through Michelle's heavy black waves, but Michelle knew from the weight of her touch that she wouldn't, or couldn't, save her from her father.

"He doesn't love you," Bud said. "You're just a commodity to him. Someone to have babies, and cook his food, and defile you." Bud stood over her while he raged, gesturing with his fist on every point.

Michelle felt like she was drowning. The air in her lungs was slowly being replaced by a hot liquid, making it harder and harder to breathe.

Norma Jane cried out, as if the image of Duke abusing her daughter's innocent body was seen in a dream, floating in and out of her consciousness. She turned to Michelle. "Honey, listen to your father, I'm begging you." She wrapped her arms around Michelle. "Do what he says. For all our sakes." Her eyes said what they all knew; that Bud was the head of this house and his word was law. Even if it was about

one of her kids. Even if she didn't agree with it. Even if it meant she would never see Michelle again.

"Don't beg her," he said, then turned to Michelle. "You want to go off with some filthy false prophet who'll use you until there's nothing left, someone who'll steal your babies and your soul?" Bud took a step back and for a moment she thought he was going to kick her. She could almost feel her flesh crumple from the force and she winced like a beaten dog.

Instead, Bud said, "Go ahead then. Marry him."

Michelle looked up through watery eyes. "I need your blessing, Daddy, please."

"Never. You walk out that door and I'm finished with you, you hear me?"

Finished." He was at the door.

"No," Michelle whimpered.

"Don't ever come back."

"No, Daddy, please."

"You're no longer my daughter."

"Mama, stop him."

"You're dead to me."

"Michelle, just say you'll stay," Norma Jane said.

"No, Mama, I can't stay, I won't. I love Duke and I'm going to marry him."

"Then go now," Bud said.

"Duke's coming in the morning."

Bud pulled Michelle up by the arm and tried to move her to the door, but Michelle dug her heels in the carpet like her dog Puddin' did when she didn't want to go out in the cold or the rain. Bud pushed harder and she felt a jolt of pain run through her arm.

“Stop, Daddy, you're hurting me,” she said as Bud shoved her out the door. She screamed. She wanted her mother. She wanted to say goodbye to her brother and sisters. It was in vain. Bud got her to the door and she gripped the frame as he tried to push her out. In the end, he was stronger than her and her hands slipped from the door frame. She landed on her knees. Bud slammed the door and she heard the deadbolt latch.

Michelle pounded on the door for a few minutes but then her pride took over. She knew her dad would have forbid anyone, especially her mother, to open the door and let her in. It was cold, but it wasn't like she would freeze out here. She would sleep in the hayloft. She used to sleep there lots with Brent and Eloise when they were kids. They'd pretend the hay was water and dive into it, swim under it, or play lifeguard where one had to pretend to drown and the other would be the rescuer. Michelle liked to be the one who was drowning because she could stretch it out for a long time before she went under. She folded her body into herself in the hay and prayed to God. “Father above, please hear me tonight. I am thankful that you have offered me a chance to obtain eternal marriage and I will repay you for that by bringing lots of souls to Your mortal kingdom. Please put forgiveness in my daddy's heart so I can see him before we all reunite in Your kingdom above. And make him come to see that what I'm doing is right so he's not still mad. In Your Son's name I pray, amen.”

If Michelle could have seen her father later that night, she would have seen him refuse to go to bed with his wife for the first time in his life. For twenty years, they'd had a rule: no matter what was happening, they could be arguing or busy, and they went to bed together. But tonight, Bud sat in his chair in the family room, the TV test pattern lighting the room with an unearthly illumination. He cried. Bud hadn't even cried at his father's funeral. He was the stoic one, the strong one, the one who was a pillar of his family, his community, and his Church. And tonight he cried like a baby. Hunched over, his body shook with the kind of sobs that come from deep in the gut and can't be held back no matter what.

If Michelle could have seen her mother, she would have seen her in bed, lamp off, eyes wide open, hands curled like a squirrel under her chin. For the first time in her life, she was torn between loyalty and unquestioned obedience to her husband and love and concern for her daughter. It was her duty to support and agree with Bud, but he'd thrown, *actually thrown*, Michelle out of the house. She sat up several times to march downstairs, a prepared speech ready to go, but in the end she was powerless. She curled up like a baby. Tomorrow Michelle would be gone and Norma Jane might never see her again and she knew there wasn't one thing she could do about it.

Michelle was almost asleep when she heard the barn door creak open. Muffled voices overlapped each other and a flashlight switched on. Michelle looked down and saw Brent, holding Julie's hand. Eloise and Brenda stood behind him. One by one they climbed up the ladder until they were all in the hay with Michelle.

"Don't go," Eloise said and she wrapped her arms around Michelle's neck.

“Dad’s mad now, but he’ll get over it,” Brent said. He leaned toward her, hands folded in front of his chest. He looked like an angel with the beam of the flashlight lighting up the golden hay around him.

“You guys care,” Michelle said, wishing they could have been as close as she felt right now for their whole lives.

“Of course we do,” Brent said as if all the years of locking her out of his room and ducking from her in the halls at school didn’t exist. “Talk to the bishop tomorrow and everything’ll be back to normal.”

How easy it would be to tell the bishop what he would want to hear. She could even use her father’s lecture that she was sure he would deliver as he drove her to the bishop’s office. She wouldn’t have to say a word about Edna.

“I don’t want it back to normal, don’t you see?” Michelle said. In the end, they didn’t see, but they let her go. They kissed her and hugged her, then went down the ladder the same way they’d come up, one by one. As soon as Michelle heard the door latch, she fell back into the hay. Dust and chafe drifted up from the hay around her body and she thought it looked like her soul leaving her body, like she was dead or something. Her pride was gone and she cried big, hot tears until she couldn’t cry anymore.

In the morning, Michelle woke to the sound of Duke’s truck coming down the drive. Her hair was a tangled mess and her eyes swollen. She jumped down from the hay and raced to the house. She tried the door, but it was still locked. Next to the door was her purse, her small suitcase, and one suitcase of clothing. There was no note. She was unsure if she should take her luggage as a send-off or as a final rejection. She opened her

purse and found two Hershey chocolate bars. Only her mother knew her weakness for chocolate. She climbed into the warm cab of Duke's truck.

"They disowned me," Michelle said, but she was pretty sure he knew that from looking at her. "They won't let me come back if I marry you."

Duke pulled down the long drive and Michelle imagined what her parents would do with her gone. Norma Jane would scramble eggs like she did every morning, along with bacon and sausage made from their own hogs. "She'll be back," her mother would say softly to the sizzling frying pan. "No she won't," her father would answer. Michelle's didn't know if it was because he really didn't want her back or because he knew she was too stubborn to come back if she failed.

She and Duke married on the way to Salt Lake City in a polygamist church; the Reformed Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints outside of Twin Falls. The ceremony was exactly like the sealing ceremony performed in the LDS Temple, but this one was officiated by Brother Herschel Thompson, a Melchizedek Priesthood patriarch of the Reformed Church.

The two witnesses required had to be male so Brother Thompson had two fellow brothers from church join them. Michelle always thought Edna would be there when she got married. Michelle kept turning to look at the space where she should be and the nothingness of it repeatedly surprised her. She wasn't even out of Idaho yet.

Michelle and Duke both wore white to symbolize their shedding of both clothes and thoughts from the outside world and to celebrate the purity and sanctity of the ceremony. They knelt together at a make-shift bench.

Brother Thompson stood before them and began. “Today is the day Duke Stead takes Michelle Weaver as his spiritual and everlasting wife. When you were born, invited to this earth, it was for the purpose of recreating God’s Kingdom to prepare in the latter days before rejoining our Father.”

“God has called you to choose the most sacred and essential principle of the gospel. It is the hardest law to live, but gives the most rewards. You will live together in the highest form of heaven, in suspension for those who don’t believe, until the millennium.”

“Duke, you are the perfector of the Kingdom and have everlasting supervision over all your posterity. It is by divine appointment that you are the head of this household and it is a matter of divine origin that the order and authority in the households of the people of God is understood. It is not our mortal wishes, but one of law and order.”

“Michelle, today the course of your eternal destiny will change. You will be rewarded with thrones, kingdoms, power, dominions, glory, immortality, and eternal life. Your desire shall be to your husband and he shall rule over thee. Choose to bless his power and decisions as he acts as a conduit of the true gospel of Joseph Smith.”

Brother Thompson finished his counsel, then performed the sealing ordinance that would unite Duke and Michelle for eternity. When Duke kissed Michelle at the end, a quick symbolic kiss, it seemed to Michelle that the ceremony had just begun. She was surprised at how quickly it was over and that one could change the course of their destiny

in forty-five minutes, because here she was now, sitting in a kitchen surrounded by four very curious sisterwives.

“There is a distinction between immoral thoughts and feelings and participating in either immoral heterosexual or any homosexual behavior. We plead with those involved in such behavior to forsake it. Such thoughts and feelings can and should be overcome and sinful behaviors can be eliminated. This can be achieved through faith in God, repentance, and persistence effort.”

– “Standards of Morality and Fidelity”
by The First Presidency
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
11/14/91

CHAPTER FOUR

Michelle didn't mention Edna calling her a bitch or her parents disowning her as she told the wives her story of meeting and falling in love with Duke. She preferred thinking they hadn't really disowned her. When she finished, they sat with chins propped on elbows, or heads cocked with interest, as if they had just heard a chapter from a great love story. Everyone but LaRae, that was, who continued her needlepoint, the black background closing in on the red rose.

Michelle was exhausted and anxious to get on with her wedding night. She stood and announced her intention to get ready for bed. The sisterwives rallied around her, drying their hands and hugging her. She kissed LaRae, like a dutiful daughter would kiss her mother. She kissed GayLynn and felt her thunderous expanse. She kissed Rhonda and said goodnight to the baby in her stomach. Cheron and her amber eyes walked her to the stairs.

“We’re glad you’re here,” Cheron said and Michelle really felt it this time.

“Goodnight, Cheron,” she said as she mounted the first step. Michelle leaned over and kissed her, her lips barely touching Cheron’s soft cheek. Cheron pulled back. “Sleep tight.”

She took a quick shower, then dressed, first in a fresh set of her new garments, excited to finally have the privilege of wearing them. The garments were a shield, like an armor of God, that from now on would keep her safe from the influence of Satan. They could not be removed day or night except to participate in activities such as swimming or bathing and sexual relations.

She looked at herself in the garments, snowy white and with the feel of the long underwear she used to wear on the farm. They came to her knees and had short cap sleeves. A small cross marked her nipples and groin and stood for the gospel principles of obedience, truth, life, and discipleship in Christ.

They had to be worn directly against the skin to protect, so Michelle slipped her best panties, a pair of leopard print bikinis, over them. She decided against a bra since she didn’t have one to match the panties. Satisfied with the look of the panties over the garments, she put on a white cotton nightgown, short-sleeved to cover the garment sleeves and trimmed with small white roses around the neck.

Michelle could hear the kitchen door open when Duke and Little Duke came in from the evening chores, or maybe she just felt it, as if the house was trying to shake off the cold they brought in with them. By the time Duke came upstairs, she was in bed, cold and shivering. She had to force her teeth not to chatter.

She was scared, but not as scared as she had been the time Edna had wanted to practice for when they got married and she had laid on top of Michelle and put her finger inside her. Michelle had liked it and when it was her turn to be the husband, she kissed Edna's neck while gently rocking against her thigh, which resulted in an unexpected pleasure for both of them. After that, they practiced marriage all the time.

Still, this was a man and she was unprepared for his penis. She'd only seen one, again a cousin, this one Bill, who, alone with her in the barn one summer, had convinced her to rub his and see what happened. It started off nice, Bill's penis was smooth and it slid through her hand softly, but then Bill closed his eyes and gripped her hard so she couldn't have stopped if she wanted to. When he did finally explode she wasn't sure he remembered she was there at all.

And now Duke. He stripped naked, tossing his clothes and garments into a pile on the floor. Michelle couldn't look straight at him and how much of a man he was. Everything seemed so big, his chest, his thighs, his penis. He didn't say anything as he crawled into bed next to her. Neither did she. Her teeth were chattering uncontrollably and she willed them to stop.

Duke kissed her once, then twice, then ran his hand under her garments to find her small breasts, which she hoped he wouldn't compare to those of his fuller breasted wives. With the other hand, he removed her panties and garment bottoms. When he entered her it was only painful for a few seconds.

“I love you,” she said into his neck as he moved on top of her. She gripped his shoulders, wanting desperately to feel his love for her and wanting more acutely to feel her love for him.

“I love you too,” Duke said.

It was over quickly and Duke rolled off of her. Michelle was on her back, Duke’s sperm leaking onto the sheets from between her legs. She didn’t like it at all and thought of how she and Edna hadn’t practiced for this part of marriage. She went to the bathroom and peed. Duke’s sperm smelled musty, like mushrooms in the dark. Not like Edna, who smelled of salt and the sea down there.

By the time she got back to bed, Duke was asleep. So this was her wedding night. She and Edna used to laugh and talk after they practiced marriage. Sometimes they ate. Edna would sneak downstairs in her robe and raid the refrigerator of chicken legs, apples, and chocolate milk for them to feast on, naked in her room with the door locked. Occasionally Edna’s mother would bang on the door and ask what they were doing in there, but they only had to yell out “nothing” to make her go away. Not like at Michelle’s house.

She had expected that her wedding night would be even more pleasurable than practicing marriage with Edna, Duke was a man after all, but right when she felt the familiar tingling she got with Edna start to form, Duke had finished and the feeling had vanished. Maybe one of the seeds Duke had planted in her would take hold and grow.

Looking at Duke’s sleeping profile, Michelle missed Edna. She turned and faced the wall and closed her eyes, thinking of how soft Cheron’s cheek felt compared to

Duke's when she had kissed her. When she dreamed, she dreamed of Edna, or was it Cheron? They were floating naked together in a large body of warm water. It was the Dead Sea. The night was black and the stars were reflected in the water, so Michelle couldn't tell where the sky ended and the water began. Michelle's skin was on fire, but she didn't know if it was the touch of the stars or the touch of the Edna-Cheron-of her-dream that made her burn.

Michelle woke the next morning when she became aware of Duke's breathing beside her. His lips were parted in his sleep and every few breaths blew out in a puff. She was married. And home with four sisterwives. She prayed to the Father that she would be worthy of this appointment, then slipped out of bed. The wooden floor was freezing and she scrambled for her slippers.

She heard water running. Someone else was awake. Michelle checked the clock. Four-fifty. Back home, she never woke before five-thirty, but she was too excited to stay in bed. Setting the table for breakfast would be a good way to prove herself worthy. But when she pushed through the kitchen door, there were all the wives, already dressed, Rhonda beating a bowl of eggs, GayLynn stacking dishes for the children to use, Cheron feeding the baby with little Bell on her lap, and LaRae, working on her needlepoint again and distracting Bell until food was ready. At least half of the kids were in the kitchen. Still in their PJ's, they swarmed around the table like bees or clung to LaRae's housecoat.

GayLynn turned. "Good morning, sister," she said. "Sleep well?"

"Yes, thanks," Michelle said. She sat on the bench next to Cheron. "Am I late?"

“Late?” LaRae said with mock disbelief in her voice. “You sleep as long as you want.”

“No, no, I want to help. You’ll see I’m good with lots of things.”

“Like what?” asked LaRae.

Here was a chance to prove she could be part of this family. “Well, I have a green thumb in the garden and I don’t mind the hard work or working outside. And I love babies; I tended my sisters from the time I was six or seven. And the wash, the wash is easy.”

“What about cooking?” asked LaRae.

“Cooking?”

“And baking? Can you bake?”

Michelle thought about all her blackened biscuit bottoms and chocolate chip cookies that always spread into one gigantic cookie on the sheet. “I’m not sure God blessed me with a gift for baking,” she said.

“Hmm. That might be a problem. Because I was hoping to put you in charge of all the cooking.”

“I thought Rhonda did the cooking,” Michelle said, panicked at the thought of having to feed the whole family.

“She did,” LaRae said, “but she’s going to take care of the laundry and cleaning.”

“I was doing that,” said GayLynn, “but today’s my first day in my new position.”

Michelle could tell she was proud to be going to work with Duke by the way she emphasized the word ‘position.’

“I used to have a job,” Michelle said, “at the mini-mart in Warm Springs.”

“Hmm,” LaRae said, as if she was mildly amused.

“This is my first job. How do I look?” GayLynn asked, twirling around to show off her outfit, a long dress, mid-calf, in a navy flowered print, still bright from not too much wear; a pair of navy pants under her dress; flat shoes; and a long, dark cardigan.

Michelle thought she looked like someone who couldn’t decide what to wear, so she just put everything on.

“It’s perfect,” she said, not wanting to hurt GayLynn’s feelings. “But why are you wearing those pants under your dress?”

“It’s cold out,” GayLynn said. “You don’t like it?” she asked, looking down at her outfit.

“No, no, I like it just fine,” Michelle said.

“Really?” GayLynn said.

“Really, you look great. And you’ll be toasty!” No need to spoil GayLynn’s first day of work, there’d be plenty of time to work on her fashion sense later.

LaRae ignored them both and continued, “So I need you in the kitchen.”

“But Rhonda’s pregnant. Isn’t it bad for her to do all the cleaning? I’ll do that. I don’t mind,” said Michelle. From the expression on Rhonda’s face, it looked like she agreed with Michelle.

LaRae disagreed. “She can’t stand on her feet all day in the kitchen,” she said.

“What about Cheron?” Michelle asked. “I could take over the kids for Cheron.”

“No, Cheron home schools them, teaches them the scripture, Sunday school, everything,” LaRae said. She put her needle down, jabbing it through the red rose to keep it in place, and gave Michelle her full attention. “You can cook, can’t you?”

Michelle was confident she could do this. Desperate, but confident. “Well, I can learn. I was raised on a farm after all.” She wished she hadn’t always begged off from kitchen duty by offering to help her father with the outside chores. But he was so willing to have her help and her mother was so willing to have Michelle and her burnt food, spilled bowls, and culinary accidents out of the way.

“Just remember your reward for accepting your duties with a worthy attitude,” LaRae said.

Michelle looked down at her CTR ring she’d worn since Primary, first on her ring finger and now on her pinky. The phrase ‘choose the right’ echoed in her head, as it had a million times before in her life. “Crowns, thrones, and principalities,” she said with resignation. It was pointless to try to look for a way out of her sacred purpose and she needed to accept what the Lord had in store for her. Duke would be proud of her.

“When should I start?” she asked.

“Today, right after breakfast,” said LaRae. “It’s just us today for lunch, not GayLynn of course—”

“I’ll make us a lunch to take,” GayLynn said, interrupting LaRae’s instructions.

“—the sisters and the kids, except for Little Duke, Dee, and Lois. They go to public school,” LaRae finished.

“I only home school the kids until they’re eight or nine,” Cheron said, “then they go to the local elementary.”

Soon, everyone was up, Duke included. When he came into the kitchen, both Michelle and LaRae straightened up, waiting for a morning sign of affection; Michelle, because it was her first full day married, and LaRae because of her position as first wife. Duke stooped to LaRae, Michelle was unsure whether it was because she was sitting closest to the door or out of genuine affection, and kissed the top of her head, before moving on to Michelle.

Duke and GayLynn left after breakfast, all the sisters standing on the porch waving goodbye, more to GayLynn than Duke, and the older kids set out for their bus stop. The work of running the house began. Michelle found herself alone in the kitchen by six-thirty in the morning. She poked around, aghast at the lack of a microwave or even an electric can opener.

She was really going to look forward to fast Sunday from now on. Bread, sugar, Crisco, lots of canned and dried vegetables and fruit. Eggs, milk, and margarine in the fridge and a jar of honey with a piece of the comb suspended in it. Venison and chicken in the freezer, plus more vegetables. She had no idea how to put any of these ingredients together into a meal. She needed her mother. No, she needed God. “Heavenly Father, thank you for blessing me with my new family. Please help me to nourish them and keep them full, and please keep this kitchen free from disorder. And fire. Especially keep it free from fire. In the name of your Son, I pray, amen.”

Her search turned up a portable radio in the back of a cupboard and she pulled it out. It would be nice company in the kitchen, but the batteries were dead. She rummaged around in the laundry room for batteries and found a bin with several sizes, including the double A's she needed. She set the radio to a country music station and continued her hunt, this time singing along to her favorite songs.

She spied a thin cookbook nestled between the stove and the pantry. It was the Salt Lake City 5th Ward Relief Society Cookbook from 1975. It would do. She leafed through the pages looking for ideas, then she set to work.

At eleven-thirty, the kids were more than ready to eat and they burst through the door, followed by the sisterwives.

“Where'd you get the radio?” Cheron asked, looking toward the kitchen door.

“I found it in the cupboard,” Michelle said.

“You better turn that down,” she said, indicating the radio. “I'm not sure LaRae will like it.”

Before Michelle could ask why not, LaRae was in the kitchen, hands on hips.

“We've never had music on unless it's Cheron teaching the kids a hymn or a song,” LaRae said. “I don't like it.”

“Well, it's not like it's against any rules. We're not Baptist you know. I'll keep it low,” Michelle said.

“I don't think Duke will like it. I don't want you to play it when he's around, hear?” LaRae said, clicking the radio off in the middle of the song.

“No, I don’t. Duke likes music just fine. And he likes to dance, too,” Michelle said.

“And just how do you know that?” LaRae said.

“I’ve danced with him,” Michelle said. Disbelief crossed both Cheron’s and LaRae’s faces. “At the state fair.”

LaRae looked like she didn’t want to talk about it any more. “Just keep it off when he’s around,” she said with finality in her voice.

Michelle returned to the stove to serve her meal of creamed eggs on toast. When she removed the lid from the eggs, the white sauce was no longer white. It was brown, a dark brown. It had been white when she put it on the back burner to stay warm. Suddenly, she didn’t have much of an appetite.

Cheron hung around the kitchen after lunch.

“I’m not the best cook, can you tell?” Michelle said as she dumped the rest of the scorched eggs in the trash.

“It’s not hard to figure out,” Cheron said and Michelle could hear the tease in her voice.

“Do you think LaRae hated it?” Michelle asked. She thought it important to impress LaRae.

“Probably, but once you got past that scorched aftertaste, it was okay.”

“LaRae acts like she doesn’t like me. Like she doesn’t want me here,” Michelle said.

“That’s not true,” Cheron said. “She’s just being the first wife.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means she has to keep an upper hand. And she likes the household run smooth. So don’t forget Duke and GayLynn will be home for dinner at five-thirty.”

It soon became apparent that the problem with planning dinner was that she hadn’t taken anything out of the freezer to thaw. She found some ground beef that she could thaw as she fried it and turned it into a hamburger and green bean casserole by using lots of soy sauce to flavor it. She’d found a handful of soy sauce packets in the cupboard that looked like they were forgotten from a long-ago trip to a Chinese restaurant. She started to feel quite gourmet with her oriental invention as the skillet dinner bubbled away, filling the kitchen with the salty tang of soy. She added in sprinkles of this and that she found on the spice rack: season-all, that smelled good; salt and pepper; and paprika. That smelled good too.

“Looks good,” Duke said when Michelle placed the pans on the table.

“Smells delicious,” Cheron said while Michelle scraped the boiled rice the cookbook said was good to serve with casseroles from the bottom of the pan it’d stuck to.

“I call it Green Bean Casserole,” Michelle said, sitting down next to Duke. She’d asked the Lord to help her and He had responded.

Michelle took a bite. The taste of salt was so strong she didn’t know if she would be able to swallow. It was supposed to be perfect! She’d worked hard to get all the seasonings in total harmony and now this! She looked around. Duke looked puzzled and moved the hamburger around his plate with the back of his fork. Cheron had a pained look on her face. GayLynn kept chewing for a long time. Only Rhonda ate with

enthusiasm, not even looking up to see that she was the only one. Michelle didn't look at LaRae.

The kids started to complain, making gagging noises and punctuating the silence with 'yuck' or 'eewww,' causing Lois to snort milk out of her nose.

"Order," Duke said and they returned to silence.

"Family recipe?" asked LaRae.

"Yes, do you like it?" said Michelle, putting her fork down with an elaborate gesture.

"Immensely," said LaRae. "What about you, Duke?"

Duke said, choosing his words carefully. "It's not like anything we've had before."

"It's not, is it?" LaRae said. Michelle wished LaRae would just say how awful it was rather than sit there and mock her. They ate the rest of the meal in silence.

LaRae said a closing prayer after dinner. "Heavenly Father, we are thankful for this day, thankful for your generosity in providing your people with nourishment so we can fulfill your commandments. You give us all things that come out of the earth to strengthen our bodies and enliven our souls. But your Saints are weak. Please help us in our time of need, watch over us, and keep us strong with the substance we need so Your will can be done on earth. Amen."

That night, when Duke entered Michelle, she didn't think about Cheron's soft cheek. She thought about chicken stew with dumplings floating on top, yeast rolls with golden crusty tops, and banana pudding made with vanilla wafers and custard. Duke

moved faster and faster, both hands on her breasts, pinching her nipples hard in rhythm with his strokes. Right before he spilled his seed into her with a moan, Michelle remembered she needed to take something out of the freezer to thaw for dinner tomorrow. Duke rolled off her. She waited until she heard the already familiar pattern of his breath telling her he was asleep before making her way quietly downstairs.

On Sunday, Michelle was surprised to learn that the entire family didn't go to church together.

"We don't often all go out together to anything," LaRae said.

"But what about family things?" Michelle said. She was thinking of all the picnics and movies and camping trips her family had taken when she was growing up and couldn't imagine all these kids not getting to do that.

"No, none of that," LaRae said. "We don't advertise that we're polygamists. Understand?"

"Yes. Well, no," Michelle said. "No one ever bothered the polygamists in Idaho. I don't remember one time anything happening like Duke said happened to his daddy."

"Look, most people here do ignore us," Cheron said. "There's a whole community of families on the other side of the valley and more spread out in between and stuff like that rarely happens."

"But when it does happen it's bad," LaRae said. "Husbands go to jail. How would we pay for food? Kids end up in foster care."

That scared Michelle. She hadn't thought of the realities of living a life that was against the law. That aspect had sounded so idealistic, so brave, when Duke had talked of it. This was just plain reality.

"Mainstream Mormons are ashamed of us," said GayLynn. "They want to keep us quiet and in the background."

Michelle looked confused and LaRae explained. "Polygamists are a constant reminder that the Mormon's failed in winning that battle. It still shames the Church, and people like us, who refuse to give in, are easier for them to ignore than claim," she said.

An unwanted legacy. It didn't sound quite as utopian.

"But that works in our favor," Cheron said. "No one really wants to make a big scene when families are involved as long as we don't take advantage of that and become conspicuous."

"Yeah, like that family in southern Utah," GayLynn said. "They're always on TV and doing interviews. They're just asking for trouble."

"They must have a hundred kids," Rhonda said. "Can you imagine all those kids taken away? Babies too. Sad."

"Or like that family up in the mountains who wouldn't pay taxes and when the sheriff came to arrest him for that it got turned into a big standoff over polygamy," GayLynn said. "They just busted in after three days. Some of the wives were even killed."

"That's not fair," Michelle said. "You can't just go in and kill innocent people."

“You can do anything you want with the law on your side,” LaRae said. “So it’s heads down and don’t call attention to yourself. Got it?”

Michelle did. Not that it mattered. So far in her newly married life, she’d hardly stepped foot outside, much less had an opportunity to create a ruckus. But LaRae, Cheron, GayLynn, and Rhonda were committed to remaining unobtrusive, so she would be too.

Church was no exception. Even if they could all go together, it was impossible to transport everyone in the winter with just one pick-up truck. Duke usually stayed home, only attending church on the rarest of occasions, such as when the kids had a Primary program during the meeting and one of his wives could talk him into it. LaRae and Rhonda attended the Reformed Church across the valley that other polygamist families around Salt Lake belonged to, as did their kids, Little Duke, Dee, Dallas, and Callie. They were up early on Sundays because of the long drive. GayLynn and Cheron attended the local Mormon Church with their kids, Lois, Ogden, Natalie, Shane, Billie, Bobbie, and Bell. The meetinghouse was an easy walk through Whitefarm Estates. Michelle wanted to go to the Reformed Church since she’d never been, but with no room in the truck, it was decided she’d go with GayLynn and Cheron.

They sang Michelle’s favorite song, “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” for the opening hymn, then the presiding bishop offered an opening prayer. Michelle’s mind wandered like it usually did during church. She thought about Duke at home alone and hoped he didn’t get hungry before they all got back. She mentally composed a letter to Edna, detailing how Duke was the best husband, how much she loved her sisterwives, and how

much she was missing her. She thought about LaRae, at another church far way. What was she doing right now? Singing? Maybe she would offer a testimony. A testimony in thanks for Duke's bringing a new spiritual wife home? Michelle could just hear her testifying, "May the Lord bless all my beloved sisterwives, and may we view each other with the spirit of inspiration, and walk together to the Promised Land."

Michelle payed better attention during the passing of the sacrament and the several testimonies to the trueness of the gospel. The meeting was then over after a closing hymn and prayer. Afterwards, Michelle went to Sunday School with GayLynn while Cheron helped to teach the Primary. They all joined up in Relief Society with the other women of the church.

There were lots of younger women in the ward because of all the new subdivisions and Michelle felt right at home. She looked around at how similar they looked, just like at home, they mostly had blond or brown hair and petite features. Except for one, a dark brunette whose hair fell in shiny waves on her shoulders. She bent her head forward to peer at a passage in her study guide and a piece of hair fell forward, blocking Michelle's view of her face. I'd be okay with dark hair if it were all soft like that, thought Michelle.

Today's lesson was about developing one's talents. Sister Johnson stood at the front of the room in front of a table. On the table, she'd arranged a plate of muffins, a baby sweater, a jar of canned apricots, and a small chalkboard with chalk.

“Everyone has special talents and abilities that were given to us by our Heavenly Father,” she said. “We brought these talents with us when we’re born, and we must develop and use them to glorify the Heavenly Father.”

She held up a muffin. “Sister Smith uses her talent to provide nutrition for her family,” she said. Michelle needed that gift.

“Sister Clegg uses her gift to clothe her family,” Sister Johnson said, holding up the petite sweater in a variegated pink, blue, yellow, and green yarn. Good thing no one was counting on her for that one, Michelle thought.

Sister Johnson held up the jar of apricots. Whoever canned it had trimmed its lid with a pinked square of calico and a few strands of raffia. “Sister Dietz plans for the future with her talent.” Michelle imagined a whole pantry with the decorated jars in rows, a different color calico for each fruit and vegetable. It would sure be pretty, but Michelle needed talent today, not tomorrow, so she didn’t covet it too long.

“Sister Baker’s talent is teaching,” Sister Johnson said. She held up the chalkboard and wrote ‘truth restored’ on it. “She helps all of us by spreading the word of the Lord.” Michelle didn’t so much care about that talent either, right now she just wanted to learn to cook. And fast.

The women oohed and ahed over the baby sweater and they all had a muffin. Michelle was starving after one of her customary bad breakfasts and the crunchy top of the apple-cinnamon melted in her mouth.

Sister Johnson talked about ways to develop talents and warned them that one will be judged according to their works. “But the Lord also gives everyone weaknesses to overcome and develop into strengths,” she said.

“She’s talking about my cooking,” Michelle whispered to Cheron.

“My stomach looks forward to you developing that into a strength,” Cheron whispered back. Michelle punched her lightly on the arm. She felt Cheron’s flesh yield under her knuckles and Michelle laughed a little too loud.

“Eve was given the identity of ‘the mother of all living’ . . . before she ever bore a child. I believe ‘mother’ is one of those rich words – with meaning after meaning. I believe with all my heart that it is foremost a statement about nature, not a head count of our children.”

– “One Thing Needful: Becoming Women of Greater Faith in Christ”
by Sister Patricia T. Holland
Ensign, 10/87

CHAPTER FIVE

The next day Michelle had a new resolve. The lesson on developing talents was fresh in her mind and she’d spent the day working on a dinner she knew everyone would like.

By five-forty-five, she was finishing up with setting the table. The kitchen became a hub-bub of activity; GayLynn and Duke came home from work, the kids started lining up on the bench, beating out tunes with the silverware and blowing bubbles into the milk. Cheron and Rhonda wandered in with offers of last-minute help, but Michelle refused them, instead telling them to have a seat. Duke said the blessing and Michelle served. Everyone stared at the meal on their plates.

“It’s Chicken Marabella,” Michelle said, trying to remember how it’d been spelled in the cookbook so she’d pronounce it right.

“Why’s everything brown?” Bobbie asked.

“It’s supposed to be brown. It has prunes in it. And honey,” Michelle said.

“That’s a waste of God’s good bounty if I’ve ever seen one,” said LaRae.

“Eat, you’re not Korihor,” Duke said. The children recognized Korihor from their Gospel study, who, according to the Book of Mormon, had been cast out and had to go from house to house, begging for food. They followed Duke’s lead and began to eat the chicken.

At first, it seemed like Michelle had succeeded with this meal. The prunes and brown sugar had cooked down from a slow simmering in the oven, very slow as Michelle was afraid of burning it, into a rich, thick sauce that glazed the chicken. But the slow simmering hadn’t cooked the chicken and inside the meat was not only pink, but red next to the bone. The sight of it made Michelle ill.

Duke didn’t seem to notice and the others followed his lead. This is where I need a microwave, Michelle thought, and made a mental note to stick that request in her next conversation with the Heavenly Father. She concentrated on eating the sauce and the outer side of the chicken.

Later, when she cleared the table, red tendons of chicken meat was all that was left of her meal. Hungry, the family had wiped their plates clean with the bread they had used to catch every drop of sauce. All but LaRae’s that was. Her plate was untouched, marks still showing in the sauce where she had drug her fork idly across her plate.

Twice a month, LaRae and another sister did all the shopping for things they didn’t grow, raise, make, or hunt. Before Michelle’s arrival, LaRae was the only wife with a driver’s license, so she would drop Duke at work, then spend the morning on

errands before returning home around lunch time. Michelle thought her new sisterwives would welcome her driving; that way LaRae wouldn't have to go every time, but she soon learned LaRae *wanted* to go every time. Who went with her was a first wife privilege of choosing.

The first Friday of the month was always a visit to the farmer's market in the same Salt Lake suburb where the Reformed Church was. There, the sisters could buy, trade, and gossip with other polygamist wives, comfortable that they could be themselves without fear of the law. The other trip was to the Wal-Mart Supercenter, the Scratch 'N Dent Warehouse or Big Lots, and then Deseret Industries, the LDS Church-run thrift store that LaRae favored for everything from kitchenware to clothing. She was always saying, "If DI doesn't have, we don't need it." Sometimes they stopped at the ceramic shop not too far from the house and dropped off their painted items to be fired or picked out new projects.

A list was kept on a chalkboard in the kitchen with not only needed supplies such as toilet paper and shampoo, but with special items, such as red construction paper and a package of paper doilies for the kids to make into valentines for Valentine's Day next week. Michelle had been hard at work making up menus for the last several weeks. It was hard for her to tell what would turn out good and what wouldn't, so she restricted her menu items to recipes that had six ingredients or less. This didn't always assure success, but at least it cut down on food being wasted. She added lentils, walnuts, and lasagne noodles to the list on the board.

Cheron was accompanying LaRae this month. Michelle had wanted to, trying to convince LaRae that she would be a help since she could drive. She really wanted to see the area, in her month in Salt Lake City she'd only left the house twice, once when she went to the warehouse with Duke and GayLynn to see where they went every day, and once when she drove Cheron, Billie, Bobbie, and Dallas to the doctor for the kid's check-up. LaRae was supposed to take them, but she'd a bad case of the flu, which no one else caught mercifully.

Michelle consoled herself by trying to cook a special breakfast of pancakes. Everyone except Rhonda was up early for breakfast and the trip to town. Rhonda's pregnancy continued to exhaust her and some mornings she didn't get up until past six. With Cheron gone, Michelle would have to look after the kids.

"Don't worry about trying to do any schooling," Cheron said. "It'll be enough to keep them all in one place."

"And enough to keep them from messing up the house behind Rhonda," said Michelle. Rhonda's biggest complaint was that the kids could mess up a room faster than she could clean it. "Don't worry, Billie and Bobbie can help me get dinner ready, it's not too early to learn and Ogden can tend the little ones here in the kitchen with us." She glanced out the window at the drifting snow. "It's a stay-inside day today."

Michelle served the pancakes, hot off the griddle. They were hard, but they were edible. She longed for something good to eat, something like a Village Inn pancake, with lots of hash browns. Oh, that would be good. She had lost four pounds eating her own cooking. Everyone else looked a little less bloated too.

Duke left to warm up the truck. The kitchen was noisy and loud. Dee whined that she wanted to go shopping too, only to be met with a strict lecture from LaRae on calling attention to the family by being out of school. LaRae appeased her with the offer of a ride to the bus stop and Little Duke, Dee, and Lois scrambled into their coats, hats, and gloves. Duke stuck his head in the door and announced that the truck was warmed up. As Michelle and the kids left behind waved and sang out their good-byes, Shane started crying from his crib upstairs. Michelle raced up the stairs to get him before he woke Rhonda. She picked him up and carried him to the window.

“Wave bye-bye.” She moved his little hand up and down in the direction of the truck. “Say bye-bye to Mommy.” Shane wasn’t interested in the departing truck, its windows still too foggy to see his mother inside. Michelle changed Shane and got him into clean clothes. She then stripped his crib and piled the sheet and blankets on the floor to give Rhonda a head start on the laundry. “How ’bout some breakfast, pook?” She scratched his tummy and he giggled.

She opened the door to Rhonda’s room to check on her before going back down stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, she felt a rush of cold air. Maybe the heater went out. She rushed into the kitchen. The back door was ajar; the cold air rushing into the warm kitchen. Michelle shut it and yelled for Ogden and the kids.

Michelle wrapped Shane in the afghan, then lit the oven and opened it. She lit all the burners too. Anything to help warm up the kitchen. She cut up a pancake for Shane and gave it to him on his tray with no syrup and a bottle of milk. He knocked the bottle to the floor. “You missed your mom this morning, so you gotta have this.” She put the

bottle back on the tray and wiped up the small puddle of white milk that had spilled onto the floor.

Ogden led the kids back in, all in mismatched sweaters or jackets, hair still uncombed from bed, some in pajamas, some dressed, Callie with clothes layered over her pajamas in either an attempt to get warm or because she couldn't dress herself and she knew not to wake her mom for help.

“Let's start with a prayer,” Michelle said.

The children raced to kneel along the bench. Michelle turned the chair at the head of the table around and kneeled there. “Heavenly Father, thank you for the blessings of our children. You gave birth to them as spirit children, taught them your ways in their premortal existence, then gave them physical bodies and sent them to earth for us to care for and to teach. Please help us ready them to one day be with you again. And help them remember to share all things, get along among themselves, and most important, to mind their Aunt Michelle today. Amen.”

Michelle patted the table and the kids lined up. She opened her cookbook to a recipe for water biscuits, theorizing that anything with water as a main ingredient couldn't be too hard to make. She pulled out a twenty-five pound sack of Pillsbury flour and set it on the table. A light dusting of flour spilled from its seams and coated the table like snow.

Michelle looked around. Something was different, wrong. *Where was Natalie?*

Somewhere in that place that Michelle wasn't able to look directly at, a thought wanted to take form. She tried to stop it, but it wanted to bubble over like a boiling pot

on the stove that she would lift from the heat just in time to simmer the contents back down. The open door.

“Ogden, go get Natalie. I hope she doesn’t wake up Aunt Rhonda.”

Ogden went upstairs, but Michelle only had a chance to get the Crisco down before he was back.

“She’s not upstairs,” he said.

“Well, find her.” Michelle gathered the salt and baking powder. “Go look in the living room.”

“She’s not there. I already looked when I came down the stairs. I don’t know where she is.” Ogden perched back on the bench, unconcerned.

The thought wouldn’t simmer back down. She jerked the door open and looked outside. The porch was empty. She shut the door quickly, her hands already icy without the protection of gloves.

“Does she hide? Has she done anything like that before?” she asked Ogden.

“No, not really,” Ogden said. He quit making patterns in the spilled flour with his fingers and paid attention to Michelle. It must have been something in her voice.

Michelle turned off the stove and instructed Ogden to stay in the kitchen and not to let one child out of his sight.

She looked in the living room, even taking the time to turn on the two lamps that illuminated the dingy room in order to check the shadows. Nothing except an old balled up afghan, its yarn pilled with age. She looked in the school room. Two containers of Play-Doh, red and white, sat on the center table, their lids missing. That looked like

something Natalie would do. At three, she would be much too busy at trying to make pink than with putting the lids back on. But she was not to be found. Michelle snapped the lids on and ran up the stairs.

She looked under each bed and under the cribs. Nothing. Maybe she was up in the attic rooms. Michelle started up but the door was stuck. She pulled and it released, sending her tumbling backwards for a moment. From the looks of the things on the attic stairs, the kids had never made it any farther than this with all the stuff they transported up every day. She could barely make it over stacks of books; a basket of laundry, clean but unfolded; shoes of all shapes and sizes; more baby dolls than she could count; and several dirty plates and glasses. The rooms were just as messy and Michelle had to wade through a pile of papers, clothes, and toys to look under the beds. She pulled back the blue corduroy bedspreads of the unmade beds to check there. Duke had fashioned closets out of the end of the room with vinyl bi-fold doors on a sliding track and she checked there. Nothing.

Please be safe, please be safe, please be safe, she prayed. She raced back downstairs. How much time had elapsed since she noticed Natalie missing? Michelle didn't know, but she knew she couldn't waste any more time looking inside. If she was outside, the cold would attack her tender little body in no time, like an iceberg closing in around a ship in the ocean that she'd once seen on TV.

"I'm going to go look outside," she said to Ogden, pulling on her coat. "All of you stay here." The panic had now worked its way up from her stomach to her voice and it came out distorted, like a staticky radio turned too loud.

“Why’re you yelling?” Bobbie started crying and Callie joined in. Dallas stared at them, trying to be a man and not cry, but his bottom lip trembled. Shane beat his fist against his tray in time to the wails. Ogden looked perplexed.

“Are you mad, Aunt Michelle?” Billie asked. Billie didn’t wait for Michelle’s answer, instead, she instinctively moved to pick up Bell as if to shelter her from harm. At six, her mothering instinct was already finely-honed.

Michelle stopped and took a deep breath. Stay calm, she told herself. She went to Billie. “No honey, I’m not mad. I just want to find Natalie, okay? Will you be a big girl and help Ogden watch the kids?” She kissed the top of her head, hopefully restoring some kind of confidence in her abilities with kids.

“Is Natalie lost?” Callie asked.

“No,” Michelle said, “I’m just going to check outside.”

“Is she frozen?” Callie asked. She started crying again.

“No, no, baby,” she heard herself saying, but not entirely believing her words. Keep saying them and they’ll come true. “Aunt Michelle’s going to find her. You stay right here, okay?” Michelle gave Callie a hug, more to reassure herself than Callie. Callie clung to her for an extra second and Michelle didn’t want to let go.

Outside, she looked around the entire porch, before noticing the outside entrance to the basement. Maybe she was there. It was full of things for a kid to play with, and it would be warm. Natalie right now was probably balled up in a corner, stacking old pans like blocks, using the canned goods like toy soldiers, and munching on the dry cat food. Natalie had a penchant for putting anything that looked interesting in her mouth. Please

be in the basement, Michelle prayed. If she were, and Michelle was sure she was, Natalie would be fine. But to be safe, to be extra sure, Michelle would continue her search of the outside.

She examined the snow for prints. A brick walkway, misshaped from bricks that had come loose and not been replaced, led from the back porch to the gravel drive. The barn sat on the other side of the drive, just a little ways back. Little Duke had shoveled after the last snow, so the path to the driveway was clean, as was the driveway itself, where the snow had melted in the gravel from the salt he applied.

She spotted a little pair of prints in the snow at the top of the drive circled around the front of the pickup. They ended in the gravel. Michelle rushed to the barn, pulled open the double doors and called Natalie's name. Before her eyes even adjusted to the darkness, she left the barn and screamed Natalie's name all the way back to the house. It was a desperate, primitive scream.

Would she even be able to see Natalie's blond towhead against the albino bleakness of the landscape? Snow covered the landscape, blurring the edges between the sky and the land, turning it all into one big ocean. An ocean where a small child would be doomed if they went out too far.

Michelle tried to remember what Natalie had been wearing but couldn't. Her little footed and furry pink pj's? Or had it been one of those mornings when Billie or Bobbie would have helped her get dressed? If so, then she might be in her favorite Pooh Bear sweatshirt and dungarees.

Michelle prayed. “Father, if I have ever needed you, please help me now. Keep Natalie safe, keep her warm, and bring her back to her family. She is one of your saints, Lord, but please leave her with her earthly family. I swear if you leave her, she will serve you well. She will bear testimony to your goodness. Please give us the chance to teach her your true word. Please let me find her. Please.”

She trudged through the snow back to the house. The kids were still huddled around the kitchen table. It was the first time Michelle had seen them being quiet. She flew past them and up the stairs, not stopping to take her coat off or talk to them. They watched her go by.

“Rhonda, Rhonda, wake up!” she said, bursting into Rhonda’s room. Rhonda stuck her groggy head out from the pile of blankets and a patchwork quilt fashioned from leftover scraps from the kids clothing. Rhonda said she could see the kids growing up every time she looked at it by tracing their progress from baby prints, to calicos and chambray, and finally to sturdier materials like denim and corduroy.

“I can’t find Natalie!” Michelle said. “She’s gone! Wake up, you have to help me look for her.”

Rhonda shot out of bed, the patchwork quilt thrown to the floor. “Whatta you mean, you can’t find her?”

“She’s gone! LaRae and Cheron left with Duke and GayLynn and I got all the kids together in the kitchen ’cause it was so cold, we were going to start the biscuits, and I was going to let you rest some more, then we prayed, then she was gone.”

“Was she ever in the kitchen?” Rhonda said. Michelle was surprised to see how fast Rhonda slipped into her clothes, which had been piled in a chair. She’d only ever seen her move in slow motion and now it was like someone had turned a knob to high.

“I think so. Yes. No . . . I don’t know. I had to come up and get Shane. I don’t know if she was there when I got back or what.” Michelle let the tears she’d been holding back go and they fell like a dam had burst. “I don’t know,” she said, but she knew Rhonda couldn’t hear or understand her strangled words.

“Where’re the kids now, Michelle?” Rhonda was dressed and on her way out of the room.

“Still in the kitchen.”

“I’ll look in the house. You look outside, okay?”

“I already did,” Michelle said. She had to run to keep up with Rhonda’s new gait.

“Let’s do it again. Real good this time, okay?” She took Michelle by the shoulders at the bottom of the stairs. “It’ll be okay. Just stay calm. Kids do these things sometimes. She probably crawled under something somewhere and fell asleep. She couldn’t have gotten far.”

Michelle fell into Rhonda’s embrace, drawing strength from it like she had Callie’s. She wiped her face, snot and all, on Rhonda’s shoulder. “Thank you,” she squeezed out.

For the next hour, the sound of all of them, Michelle, Rhonda, Ogden, Billie, Bobbie, Dallas, Callie, and even Bell could be heard calling Natalie’s name. Outside, it

froze in the air the minute it left their mouths, as if it were made of ice, and it went nowhere, crackling and falling to the ground like a snowflake before melting.

Michelle, Ogden, Billie, and Bobbie searched the barn again. There was an old white station wagon in the middle of the barn floor. Faded wooded panels ran down both sides. Michelle ran to it and jerked open the front door. No Natalie. She struggled to open the back end, but she could see Natalie wasn't there through the back window. Still, it was like she had to put her hands in there, had to breath the stale car air, had to look at the empty floor without glass between her and the nothingness of an empty back seat, save for a hole that looked like it housed a family of mice.

“Look in the hay,” Michelle said, remembering how she had slept in the hay the night her father had locked her out in the cold. Billie and Bobbie climbed up to the hay loft while Ogden looked in the stalls, but no Natalie.

They left the barn and headed toward the field behind it. Ogden helped Michelle and the girls over the barbed wire, knocking off the little cupcakes of snow that sat on the top of the fenceposts, then he carefully crawled in between two wires. He emerged unscathed. He'd been doing that since he could toddle after Little Duke.

The snow was spotty in the open field. The sunny days and freezing nights had formed crusty craters of ice that Natalie's twenty or so pounds wouldn't leave a trace of evidence on, as if she were gliding over them in snowshoes. Last night's snow was already forming drifts around these ice masses and with no trees or even bushes to block the wind, the entire field reminded Michelle of the Bonneville Salt Flats she'd studied in her high school InterMountain Geography class. Just miles and miles of salt so blinding

it looked like the moon during the day and nothing but blackness at night. The new snow wasn't melting, it was much too cold for that. If Natalie had stumbled into this arctic landscape, Michelle knew her little legs would soon be tired from navigating the ice, her eyes would be snow-blind, and her body numb with cold. Michelle couldn't feel her own ears or nose and she'd only been out here a few minutes. Or had it been hours already?

If Natalie'd made it this far, maybe she'd gone on to the row of houses that marked the edge of Whitefarm Estates. Maybe she was playing in one of these back yards right now or sitting in a warm kitchen eating cookies and having some milk. Michelle was hopeful.

She sent the kids home to let Rhonda know she was going to knock on all the doors that backed up to the farm. She knew it meant a risk of exposure, and the thought of arrest for Duke and all of them clouded her mind as she made her way across the field, head down partly to look for signs of Natalie, and partly to shield her watering eyes from the stinging cold.

In the distance, closer to the backyard of the houses, she thought she spied a Natalie-sized lump curled up on the ground. It was covered with a fresh layer of snow as if a sheet had been pulled up over the lump. Michelle ran to it, tripping and stumbling over the uneven field, shouting "no, please God, no," but when she reached the lump, it was just a pile of brush, nothing really. Michelle caught her breath, her heart beating wildly, before continuing on.

She cut through a backyard and approached the closest house. It was a small and square and had a carport to the side. In the front yard, the owners had made a mound

toward the side and filled it with shimmery quacking aspens and large gray rocks, that rose like snow-capped mountains from the bed. The trees' slender trunks were almost indistinguishable from the surrounding snow, both were so white and patchy. The wind blew through their leaves whispering a quiet trill.

As Michelle approached the front door, she smelled the warmth of fresh laundry drying wafting from the carport. Back home, laundry had been one of her chores. She especially liked to do it when she was home alone, which was rare, moving the different loads through the wash, dry, and fold while watching TV and talking to Edna on the phone.

She knocked on the door. It was answered by a woman a little older than she was. It was the woman with the dark hair from Church. Michelle remembered her, but she must not have noticed her.

Michelle stumbled into the living room and rubbed her hands together, trying to get warm. It was a pretty room, with a plaid sofa on dark brown carpet. A white satin photo album was displayed on the coffee table. There was a picture of the woman and her husband in their Temple clothes on the cover. The album was trimmed in lace and tied closed with a satin bow. It was their wedding album.

Michelle could see into the kitchen from where she stood. It was bright with ruffled café curtains on the window above the sink and a matching canister set on the cupboard. Fat red strawberries strung together with vine spilled over both. Then Michelle saw it. A small child's foot, in a footed pajama, the kind with white rubber soles on the bottom to keep from slipping, swinging from the kitchen table chair.

Michelle rushed past the woman and burst into the kitchen. She was almost on her knees at the table, thankful, grateful, when she comprehended that Natalie was not among the three children, two boys and a girl, at the table. They were eating breakfast. The littlest, the blond girl in the pink footed pajamas, screamed when Michelle rounded the corner. Her Golden Grahams tipped over and sugary milk slid across the table.

The woman was right behind her; the front door still open. Pointing to it, Michelle explained that she lived in the neighboring house and her daughter was missing. Had she seen a three-year-old in pajamas? The woman said no.

Now what? Michelle turned to go, ready to knock on each and every door in Whitefarm Estates if she had too.

The woman stopped her. "Wait," she said. "I'll help you. Are you going to all the houses on this street?" she asked.

"Yes." Michelle said. Her skin was starting to tingle as it warmed up.

"Why don't I just call?" the woman said. She pulled a thin telephone directory out of the kitchen drawer closet to the phone and waved it at Michelle. "I have everyone's phone numbers, we all know each other."

The woman guided Michelle to the empty chair at the table with the three kids. She offered her hot cider to warm her up, but Michelle refused, unable to allow herself to get warm and comfortable while Natalie might be frozen in the snow. She sat at the table, paralyzed, as the woman called the neighbors, asking the same question over and over: "Have you seen a three-year-old, yes missing, blond hair, blue eyes?" And probably with a milk mustache and traces of toast crumbs in her hair, Michelle added in

her mind, thinking of how when Natalie ate, she left a trail of food over her entire body. Smashed peas on her shoes, gravy down the front of her shirt. In the short time Michelle had been married to Duke, she already loved the kids like they were her own. She thought of Natalie's pink cheeks and her face loomed in her mind as if it were frozen deep inside an ice-age glacier. She cried soundless tears and the children stared at her, too scared of the wild woman sitting at there table to speak. She must have looked mad with her crazy hair she hadn't pulled back and that was now bushy and full and her bloodshot eyes.

The woman hung up the phone for the last time. "Nothing," she said and she glanced at her own children safe and warm in the protective shelter of her kitchen.

"Thank you," Michelle said and got up to go. She felt her muscles tighten as she lifted herself out of the chair and she walked gingerly.

The woman walked her to the door. "Give me your phone number," she said. "We'll form a search party. You'd better call for help."

Michelle realized she didn't know her phone number. She hoped the woman would take this for confusion on her part and not think it odd. She took the woman's phone number and said she'd call as soon as the police arrived. For the first time in her life, Michelle felt like part of a community.

The woman stepped out on the porch and hugged her when she sent her on her way. "My name's Sherry by the way," she said. "What's yours?"

Michelle was so touched that this stranger saw her as an individual, not as a collective lost in a big house with lots of kids and wives, that she wanted nothing more

than to go back into Sherry's nice warm house; into her cozy kitchen that looked exactly the way she always dreamed her own kitchen would someday look. She wanted nothing more than to pour three bowls of cereal for breakfast instead of the three pounds of bacon and two dozen eggs she cooked every day. She'd think about that later. Right now, Natalie was lost and she had to find her. Michelle trudged back home.

"I can't find her," Rhonda said when she came into the kitchen.

"Me neither." Michelle knew there was only one option. "I'm calling the police," she said. Rhonda agreed and Michelle called. Within moments, they heard a car in the driveway and Michelle followed Rhonda out the door.

It wasn't the police, it was LaRae and Cheron, home from shopping. And in the truck, sandwiched in the middle, with powdered sugar from some farmer's market snack mingling with her runny nose, was Natalie.

Michelle stared, then stumbled to the truck. LaRae and Cheron piled out, Cheron pulling Natalie with her.

Michelle fell to her knees. "Oh, Father, you are great, thank you for bringing Natalie home. Thank you for hearing my prayer. You are the true being, a just being. I will live in your service for the rest of my mortal days. I will serve you and spread the word of your goodness. Thank you, thank you, thank you for bringing Natalie home."

LaRae looked at her. "What's she doing?" she asked Rhonda. Not waiting for an answer, she yelled for Ogden to come help unload the truck.

"We couldn't find Natalie," Rhonda said. "We didn't know she'd gone with you."

“Didn’t know?” said LaRae.

Michelle rose up from the snow. “We were scared to death. We’ve been searching all morning. The kids are terrified, right now, you should see them, they haven’t moved all morning.”

LaRae grabbed Michelle’s shoulders and shook her. “I should of known not to leave you in charge,” she said. “You can’t do one thing right. You don’t even listen. I told you myself Natalie was going with us.”

Michelle shrugged LaRae off of her. “No you didn’t,” she wailed. “I didn’t know.”

“You waved goodbye to us,” LaRae said. She pointed to the upstairs window. “I saw you.”

“But I didn’t see you,” Michelle said.

“You need to pay more attention if you’re going to part of this family, do you understand? You’ve been nothing but trouble since you’ve been here, you don’t share, you can’t cook, you spend all morning looking for a child who’s not even missing”

LaRae’s voice turned into a steady droning rhythm in Michelle’s head as she continued to list Michelle’s faults. “Cheron, tell her I told her,” LaRae said.

Cheron stepped forward. “I didn’t hear you tell her, I just assumed . . . I didn’t think . . .” She went to Michelle. “You thought Natalie was missing all this time?”

Michelle nodded and Cheron reached out to stroke her dark hair. “You poor thing. Everything’s okay now. We’re all safe,” she said.

“Except the police are going to be here any minute,” Rhonda said.

“The police?” LaRae asked. She turned to Michelle. “Who called the police?”

“I did,” said Michelle. Her voice went back to the low wail like when she was calling Natalie’s name. “We were worried. We couldn’t find her.”

LaRae’s anger was visible, it seeped from her and glistened on her skin, like sweat on a hot day. “Get in the house,” she said. “Come on everyone. Get these bags, come on.” She stopped before passing Michelle. “The police?” was all she said. She then gave a litany of orders and every pair of hands took something in the house. “Kids, upstairs, in your room and stay there. Rhonda and Cheron, stay upstairs with them, keep them quiet. And don’t flush the toilet.” They started up the stairs. “We’ll come up when you can come down,” she added to their retreating figures.

“When we lived as spirit children with our heavenly parents, our Heavenly Father told us about his plan for us to become more like him and we shouted for joy (Job 38:7). In order for this happen, we needed to leave our Father’s presence and receive mortal bodies. We needed another place to live where we could prepare to become like him. Our new home was called ‘earth’.”

– “The Creation”
Gospel Principles
Published 1978 by
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

CHAPTER SIX

Michelle barely had time to call Sherry and report that Natalie had been found safe, warm, and dry before the police cruiser pulled into the yard. All a big mix-up she said, and she hoped her voice conveyed the grateful words she didn’t want to say in front of LaRae.

Michelle went out on the porch to meet the two officers who emerged from the patrol car. Officer Browning, a small blond woman, and Officer Hulet, a tall skinny man, greeted Michelle. Michelle explained the mistake, that her sister had taken the child with her shopping and had just returned.

“Mind if we come inside for a minute?” Officer Browning asked.

“Sure, come on in out of the cold.” Did she look suspicious or something? Could they tell she was lying? She led them into the kitchen. As she stepped over the threshold, she realized they’d want to see Natalie, make sure she was alright. How would

she and LaRae explain sitting calmly in the kitchen with a baby upstairs alone? Had enough time passed to tell them Natalie was already asleep? Yes, probably.

But LaRae was one step ahead of her. Just as the officers entered the kitchen, LaRae came through the swinging door and in her arms she held Natalie, her face and hands wiped clean and in a pair of footed pajamas.

“Hi, I’m LaRae.” LaRae said. “And this is Natalie. Our little perpetrator.” She laughed. “I should have told Michelle I was taking her. You can imagine how frantic she was.”

“I had the whole neighborhood looking for her,” Michelle said. She waved her hand toward Whitefarm Estates. Would they speculate on why she hadn’t called the police from the moment she thought Natalie missing instead of spending her time searching the surrounding area?

“Most calls turn out this way,” said Officer Hulet. “But you can never be too careful.”

The officers took in the kitchen. Michelle was conscious of their eyes looking around, at the chore list that listed eleven children down its side, at the table with its long bench to seat so many, the stacks of laundry in the open laundry room. Why didn’t Rhonda finish the wash every day? Michelle made a mental note to help her get it all put away each day.

Officer Browning started across the kitchen. Michelle could barely breath. Duke was going to be furious at her. He’d be the one in the most trouble. They always arrested the man for breaking the law, but tended to go easier on the wives, especially

when there were so many children involved. She pictured the kids huddled in the basement with the house surrounded by police cars, just like the scene Duke had described from his childhood. And it would be all her fault. She felt the familiar warm red blotches move across her throat.

“Natalie, did you have a fun trip today?” Officer Browning asked Natalie, bending down to be level with her.

“We went shopping,” Natalie answered in her baby voice.

“With your mommy?” Officer Browning said, looking at LaRae.

“With Mommy,” Natalie said, nodding her head ‘yes.’ Thank God Natalie was little enough to call all the wives mommy.

“Mind if we look around?” Officer Hulet asked.

Michelle didn’t answer. She knew whatever she said would be wrong.

“Sure, go ahead,” LaRae said. “Michelle, show the officers into the living room.”

Michelle pushed through the swinging door, Officer Hulet on her heels. Officer Browning stayed behind still tickling Natalie’s feet and making her laugh.

Officer Hulet looked in the living room, taking in the drab furniture and pulled curtains. He looked in the dining room that Cheron used as a school room.

“Do you have any more children?” he asked.

“My sister does,” Michelle said in a halted voice.

“She home schools?”

As soon as Michelle said ‘yes’ she realized she didn’t have an answer for why the other kids wouldn’t be home, sitting in the school room dining room right now. The

officer nodded his head and didn't ask, instead he eyed her as if sizing her up. She grew hot, her eyes said the truth and his eyes said he knew. She hurried back to the safety of the bright kitchen. Office Hulet followed.

With a final tip of their hats, the officers started to leave. "Call us any time if you need us. These are the kind of calls we like to go on."

Michelle thanked them, shut the door, and crumpled onto the bench. LaRae said nothing.

"I don't think they believed us," Michelle finally said.

"Us?" LaRae looked at her, her head tilted and her mouth tight. "You better get up and start dinner. I need to go get Duke soon," she said.

Michelle put her head down on her folded arms. She was exhausted. She didn't care about dinner. She didn't care about Duke. She didn't care if LaRae hated her. Natalie was home and she was safe. But she did care.

"How am I gonna tell Duke?" she asked LaRae.

"You're not," LaRae said.

"You can't wait, can you? Why do you hate me? Why?" Michelle could just picture LaRae gleefully telling Duke the details of the day. She could even hear her. She'd tell him Michelle was too irresponsible or too ignorant to understand the way they lived. He would agree, thinking he'd made a mistake. He would tell her he had misgivings about marrying Michelle, not even from a polygamist family, and that he regretted his decision. Then what would she do? Go home to Warm Springs? It made her sad to think no one there would be surprised her marriage hadn't worked out, but she

doubted her father would take her back. He wasn't one to go back on what he said. And Duke wouldn't be the first polygamist to divorce his wife, she knew that from the Needham clan back home. Rumor had it that one of the Needham wives had been returned to her family after she'd been married for a year and hadn't had a baby.

Michelle would have thought that her ruminations on being forced out of the Stead household would breed fear in her breast. But instead, it brought an inner peace, the kind she got when she asked the Lord for help and her showed her the way. She felt old already, even though she'd only been there a few weeks. And tired. When Natalie had gone missing, she didn't let her mind consider the thing it wanted to focus on: that maybe she'd made a mistake. Maybe she wasn't cut out for this.

What really made her think that was the glimpse into Sherry's home and life. What looked like a little plain box from the outside, looked like the ideal-to-Michelle home on the inside. When Sherry's husband made love to her, did he do it quickly as if it was on his list of things to do in order to sleep? Brush teeth, undress, sex with Michelle. Or LaRae, Cheron, GayLynn, Rhonda. It didn't matter. Did Sherry face hours of work every day just to survive? Michelle didn't mind the work, it was the lack of sisterhood she felt from the other wives, especially LaRae, that made her miss Edna and envy Sherry. Looking at LaRae across the table, Michelle knew she would never be able to live up to her expectations.

LaRae spoke. "I'm not going to tell Duke," she said. "He doesn't need to know."

Michelle brought her head up in amazement. "Really?"

“You think we tell Duke everything around here?” She picked Natalie up to go.
“He doesn’t know the half of it.”

The next morning, Michelle was alone in the kitchen. Everyone else had long gone their ways, leaving Michelle to think about what to do. Go now? But where? She looked at the phone on the wall by the door to the laundry room. She picked the receiver up and read her new phone number for the first time.

Before she could question what she was doing, her fingers were dialing her home phone number. It rang and rang and rang. Michelle was just about to hang up when her mother answered the phone with a perky ‘hello.’

“Mama?” Michelle said. Her breath formed a layer of vapor on the receiver.

“Michelle?” her mother said, quiet as if she didn’t want to be overheard.

“Mama, I—” Michelle started but her mother interrupted her.

“Michelle, I can’t talk to you. Daddy’ll be in any minute.”

“But, Mama, I—”

Her mother interrupted again. “Michelle, please. You heard what Daddy said, you know how he is.”

“What about you, Mama?” Michelle said. She was standing on her toes, leaning into the phone as if she could get closer to her mother over the line. Crawl up on her lap like she used to do as a child. Hold her hand in the store. Wrap her arms around her knees when she was scared.

“It doesn’t matter, honey, you know it doesn’t matter,” and Michelle heard the click of the line go dead. She stood there for a long time, the hum of the dialtone seeping into her brain like poison. So much for going home.

Michelle didn’t cry. Instead, she started on dinner, which was her version of lasagne. It was really more like spaghetti casserole than lasagne as LaRae hadn’t bought the lasagne noodles Michelle asked for, saying “spaghetti’s a dollar a box, lasagne two for five. We can eat spaghetti.” She was dishing it into large, shallow broiling pans, making thick layers of spaghetti, meat sauce, and cheese when she heard a gurgle and turned to see a what appeared to be a baby in the highchair. She moved closer. Was he real or a vision? Was the Lord sending a message to her that he was sending a soul to her to love and teach His ways?

He was a perfect baby, a boy, still wet with the white coating that clings to newborn’s skin, dark hair that turned to down and traveled down his back, and green eyes . . . Michelle had never seen eyes so luminous. They stared at Michelle as if trying to ascertain who she was. Michelle knew who he was.

The baby spoke. “Mommy,” he said and Michelle felt a tremor go through her. This is what she’d been waiting for. It didn’t matter if Duke didn’t even act like she was his wife any more. It didn’t matter if LaRae would ever accept her as a worthy sister-wife. It didn’t even matter if God knew that she hadn’t been able to escape the impure lust in her heart. He was going to give her a baby. Maybe she wasn’t tainted after all.

“Mommy, where are you?” the baby said. “Mommy, come me home. Can I come home?” His voice was sweet like Michelle imagined an angel’s voice to be.

“Baby, Mommy’s here.” She rushed to the highchair and reached her arms out to sweep him to her chest. She wanted to feel his fat skin against hers. She wanted to smell the musky odor of her own milk mixed with the baby sweat on his skin. Her arms failed at the empty highchair and her toe smashed into it, sending the chair careening against the wall. A bolt of pain shot through her foot.

Michelle whirled around the kitchen, looking for a sign of the baby. He was gone.

She fell down on her knees. “Yes, I’ll bring you home, you can come home to me,” she said from the floor. That’s where she was when LaRae came into the kitchen and almost tripped over her.

“What’re you doing?” LaRae said. She stepped over Michelle and went to the cupboard for decongestant for Callie.

Michelle jumped up and took LaRae’s arms, holding them to her side so LaRae couldn’t turn away. “Oh, LaRae, you won’t believe it. The most miraculous thing’s happened.”

LaRae didn’t ask what, she simply stared at Michelle with a questioning look on her face, as if waiting for her to go on, knowing she wouldn’t have to wait long.

“I’m pregnant!” Michelle said.

“Pregnant? Already? That’s ridiculous.” LaRae’s face darkened, like a sunny day shadowed by a far-away thunderstorm. “Why were you on the floor?”

“I saw him. A boy. He just came to me and asked me to bring him to his earthly home. He’s with God right now, but it’s time to do his work on earth. He wants me to be his mother. I’m going to name him Braden. Braden Stead.”

“I don’t believe you,” LaRae said.

Michelle didn’t know why not, Duke had told her that LaRae knew many women, herself included, whose babies came to them from their premortal existence and demanded to be brought to earth.

“You’re not worthy enough to be blessed with a vision,” she explained.

But Michelle held fast in her belief, talking about the baby often, his red wrinkled head, his curly hair matted into tiny pincurls against his scalp, his voice calling to Michelle, begging to be brought home. She never bled again after that and Rhonda’s midwife confirmed the pregnancy on her next visit. LaRae had no choice but to believe.

Rhonda was the happiest about the pregnancy. She wanted her baby to grow up with lots of same-age siblings around to play with, just like she’d had. Duke prayed, “Father above, hear our prayer of thanks for the child you have chosen to send to earth. When Jesus gave us the Gospel, even the babies and children uttered marvelous things, let this be our utterance to you. Lord, I know you will give if your faithful only ask, so please continue to bless all the mothers with children for your kingdom. All the mothers. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen” But Duke didn’t act as happy as he made it seem to God.

“That’s because he’s down to sleeping with just LaRae and Cheron. And LaRae’s not real happy about you having a baby and not her,” Rhonda told Michelle one day

while Michelle helped her clean the downstairs bathroom. Rhonda theorized that LaRae was taking it out on Duke. Michelle didn't believe her and questioned her as to why.

"I counted the nights. He stayed with LaRae nine nights out of the last two weeks."

"That doesn't mean anything, does it?" said Michelle. She was worried her pregnancy and not being able to be with him would create a rift between her and Duke. But she was more worried about an even deeper rift between her and LaRae. Duke was gone from sun up to sun down and when he was home, he ate, then fell asleep in front of the TV. It was LaRae who Michelle had to live with every day.

"It means either Duke doesn't want to go in there because there's heck to pay or she won't let him in. I've seen her lock him out for two months in a row," Rhonda said.

"At least she hasn't done that this time," Michelle said.

"Not yet," Rhonda said.

Soon after Michelle announced her pregnancy, the midwife restricted Rhonda to bedrest with hers. Her skin was translucent and her hands and feet were swollen and LaRae said she looked anemic. Michelle made her breakfast and lunch on a tray and let her eat in bed. She took over the laundry, finally finding the floor under the endless mounds of clothing that appeared each day. Shane's diapers alone were a load. Michelle had been harping on GayLynn that she needed to use disposables, but GayLynn said she wasn't going to put them on the shopping list. Michelle couldn't blame her, after all, she wasn't home all day, nor did she do the wash. Michelle would have to work on LaRae to

make that happen and in the meantime, her hands turned so red and chapped that even the Cornhusker's Lotion she kept in the kitchen couldn't sooth them.

LaRae pitched in too, taking on the jobs of picking up, dusting, and vacuuming, while leaving the more disagreeable jobs like the bathrooms, mopping, and changing the sheets to Michelle. Michelle hated the extra work, but it kept her mind off worrying about Rhonda and she hoped by helping out more, Rhonda would somehow be miraculously better. And it took her mind off Duke, who she saw less and less every day. He seemed to sense the mood of the house by instinct. As the tension grew and he had only Cheron to seek refuge with, he found work to be an excellent deterrent, even taking Little Duke and going back to the warehouse some evenings after dinner.

Michelle missed private time with him now that he didn't sleep in her room anymore. She knew her own frustration with him was contributing to the strain created by Rhonda's bed rest and LaRae's frump, so she decided to talk to him about it. One morning, she followed him out to the truck, ignoring the look that passed between LaRae and Cheron that questioned her intent.

"Duke," she said, folding her arms against the door and leaning her head into the cab. "Can we talk? I feel like I haven't even seen you for a month."

"Now?" Duke asked. "I've got to get to the warehouse."

"Well when would be a better time?" Michelle asked, her voice edging up.

"Later."

Michelle noticed a thin rim of dirt under his thumb nail and she focused on it.

"There is no later. You get home late, everyone's always around . . ."

“Maybe you need to get down on your knees and pray to God our Father for help,” Duke said, “because if you want me to cleave unto you, you need to be the helpmate God designed. He said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a help mate for him.’”

Michelle didn’t like it when he quoted scripture. He knew his Bible too well, better than any of them, and was always ready with a line or two that supported his point. She’d seen him do it to the kids and do it to the wives and now here he was doing it to her.

The screen door slammed and GayLynn lumbered down the steps. “All warmed up?” she asked.

“Yup,” Duke said and moved the gearshift into reverse before Michelle could move away from the truck. She pecked his cheek, feeling the cold dry air for the first time. She pulled her robe closer to her as they backed out of the driveway. A cloud of oily exhaust choked her and she saw where it had blackened the snow.

“See you tonight!” GayLynn yelled out the window, happily flapping her hand in the wind. Michelle turned and went back into the house.

“Say good-bye to Duke?” LaRae asked.

Michelle just nodded as she started the breakfast dishes.

“Cold?” LaRae said.

Michelle added dishsoap to the sink before spinning on her heels. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she said.

“Nothing. Don’t get all grumpy. I merely asked if it’s cold out.” LaRae said.

“I said, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“And I said ‘nothing.’”

“Hey,” Cheron said as she reached out to Michelle’s sleeve, “what’s wrong? You are a little jumpy.”

“Here, sit down with us.” LaRae patted the bench next to her. Michelle eyed her suspiciously then sat down, but on the opposite side of the table from LaRae.

“Is Duke being a pistol?” LaRae asked. She seemed concerned and Michelle considered that LaRae might be warming up to her.

“I never see him,” she said. Michelle wished she could just cry. “I feel like I married you guys and all I do is work.” She held up her hands. “Look, look at my hands. I don’t even recognize them anymore.”

Billie and Bobbie burst into the kitchen looking for Cheron, but she shoed them back to the living room with the promise of coloring instead of spelling today. “Maybe you just need more time to adjust.”

“I don’t think so. I look at you guys and he doesn’t spend any more time with you all than me, but you’re all fine with it. We eat, we pray, we sleep when he’s around and we work when he’s not,” Michelle said.

“What’d you expect?” Cheron asked.

“What’d he promise you?” LaRae asked.

“He promised me . . .” Michelle thought before finishing. “I don’t know.” The more she thought about it, the more she realized Duke hadn’t really promised her anything or even painted a picture of daily life for her. Everything she’d dreamed of,

she'd thought up herself. All he'd said was how important it was to build the Kingdom with children and how all his wives shared the workload.

LaRae stood and took Shane out of the highchair. "Well, I guess you got what you asked for then." And with that she herded Bell and Natalie out of the kitchen, Shane waddling slowly behind.

"You need to work on getting on her good side more," Cheron said as she gathered up her lesson plan.

"Rhonda says she hates me more because I'm pregnant."

"One, she doesn't hate you, so don't listen to Rhonda. Two, try to understand it from her point of view. She really, really, really wants another baby."

"Then she shouldn't kick Duke out of the bedroom if you ask me."

Dallas pushed through the door, ending their conversation. "Aunt Cheron, Billie's being mean to us. She said we're ignor . . . ignor-ramuses. And Bobbie said that's a swear word."

Michelle fumed the rest of the morning. By noon, she'd put three loads of wash through and heated up some venison stew for Rhonda. The midwife had given Rhonda a giant handbook of natural healing with eight or ten pages tabbed of things she needed to do or take. More meat was one of them. She was sitting on Rhonda's bed, talking, folding diapers and waiting for her to eat. She flung the diapers out of her lap and leaned against the wall.

“You know what I’m going to do today?” she said. “I’m going to take a walk to that shopping center down the road. The one with the drugstore in it. And the clothes store, what’s it called? Mode-A-Day?”

“Mode ’O Day,” Rhonda corrected, fishing a chunk of carrot out of the stew.

“Whatever. I’m going to buy some bath gel and some new head bands and maybe an outfit. Do you realize I haven’t bought anything since I’ve been here?”

“It’s only been two months. And where you going to get the money?”

“Out of the can in the kitchen,” Michelle said. She had discovered the secret stash of household money in her explorations of the kitchen.

“You better ask LaRae,” Rhonda said and settled back for a nap.

That was the last thing Michelle was going to do. She had the chores done and she’d set a frozen casserole out to thaw for dinner. She finished the diapers, took Rhonda’s tray and kissed her on the top of the head.

“I might even bring back a Cosmo for you,” she said.

“Don’t drag me into your evil scheme,” Rhonda said. She rubbed a pain out of the small of her back. “But I wouldn’t mind People.”

Michelle winked at her. “You got it.”

The day was warm for March and the snow was melting. Little rivers of water ran from clumps of dirty snow in miniature culverts along side of the road. There was no sidewalk, so Michelle traversed them carefully, her head down. The ground beneath her was a model-like view of the earth, with tiny rivers and streams springing from nowhere and making their way to a bigger body of water.

The blacktop parking lot of the shopping center was a welcome relief from the muddy roadside. Here, the snow stood in slushy piles. Michelle stomped through one to clean the mud from her boots, then went into the Mode 'O Day.

The store was crowded, with clothing hung on the walls and the center filled with crowded round racks. The displays were put together by color and Michelle immediately went to a center rack that had several pieces in a dark chocolate brown. There was a pair of chocolate trousers, a matching chocolate skirt, a cream blouse with a silky ruffle at the neck, and a tee shirt stripped in cream, peach, and chocolate.

“May I help you?” a too-thin saleslady asked her. Michelle hadn't even noticed another person in the store, customer or saleslady, and she jumped, startled. She told her she was just looking and fingered the chocolate wool of the skirt again.

It was so beautiful, Michelle wanted it all. She could wear the skirt and silky blouse to Church, the tee at home, and She wasn't sure where she'd wear the trousers. They were too dressy for home and she would never wear pants to Church. Well, that would save her money. She added up the other pieces in her head. Seventy-seven dollars and fifty cents! She only had thirty.

Michelle pushed through the other racks to the sale rack in the back. A sign on the top announced ‘thirty percent off.’ Michelle sorted through the mismatched pieces. No four piece coordinated outfits here. She selected a white sweater with a wide square neckline and a navy button-down-the-front shirt in a stiff cotton and ducked into the dressing room.

She drew the curtain and pulled her shirt over her head. Her hair shot up in a explosion of static electricity. She turned sideways and looked at herself in the full-length mirror. If she stood real relaxed, she thought she could see the beginnings of a pooch at her stomach. She put her hand to it. Yes, she was definitely showing. She tried on both shirts and decided on the white sweater. It was soft and warm and no one could say she didn't need it.

Outside she wandered down the walkway gazing in all the store windows. There was a jewelry store, a grocery store, a Hallmark store, and a drug store. It was the drug store that she was interested in.

In People's Drug, Michelle stood still in the middle of the floor for a moment and tried to decide which aisle to look at first. It was dazzling. The endcaps were stacked with colorful products and pictures of beautiful woman using them. Michelle looked at a brunette wearing Maybelline lipstick and inviting her to try it too. She'd never worn much make-up and being around all of it here, alone, made her giddy. She selected a lipstick tester in the color 'Sand' and gently swirled it up. Using one of the disposable applicators, she lined her mouth and filled it in using the small mirror attached to the display. She stood back. Too dark.

She saw her hair in the mirror and realized the static was creating a cloud above her head. She went to the hair care aisle, looking for something to calm it down. She spotted the pink row of Dippety-Do, opened one of the squat jars, and inhaled deeply. A clean, soapy scent came back to her. When she was a kid, every Saturday night her mother would sit Julie, Eloise, and Brenda on the floor in the family room and twist their

hair into pin curls, coating each section with a glob of the gluey stuff. Michelle would watch, her hair too curly for pincurls, secretly dipping her finger in the jar of little bubbles encapsulated in gel. Michelle had wondered how the bubbles got in there. They looked like cartoon bubbles in a cartoon ocean.

She couldn't very well stick her finger in the Dippety-Do now, so she found a tester of a coconut hair balm and ran a glob through her hair. The smell reminded her of the suntan lotion her mother used to slather on her before she let her go down to the pond in the summer.

"We am I the only one who has to put this gunk on?" Michelle would whine to her mother.

"Because you're the only one with beautiful white skin that'll burn and you don't want that, do you?" her mother would answer sensibly as she rubbed the lotion into Michelle's back. Michelle thought it smelled like what the air in Hawaii would smell like and she would pretend she was there when she played on the bank of the pond.

She looked through all the beauty items, shimmery gels, eye pencils, and hundreds of colors of nail polishes. She selected a moisturizing bath gel that smelled like rain. She needed something to help smooth out her skin. Not only were her hands dry, every morning she woke up with her legs and arms flaky white with dry skin. It was like the baby was sucking the moisture out of her. She got a big purple bag of candy-coated chocolate Easter eggs, her favorite, and a People magazine for Rhonda and a Cosmo for her. She was almost to the register when she went back for the rain-scented lotion that had been on the shelf next to the shower gel.

The cashier was young and didn't speak. He routinely rang up Michelle's purchases while she dug deep into her purse for the rest of her money. "Twelve-sixty-two," he said. Michelle couldn't believe it came to that much. She didn't want to spend all the money she'd taken. She would have to make a decision on what to keep and what to put back. She wavered for a moment, until she saw the look of disgust on the cashier's face. Could he tell she was a polygamist's wife? Or that the money she clutched in her sweaty palm was stolen? She stood stiff, knees locked, afraid to move, until she realized his arched eyebrows said he was only looking to finish this transaction and go back to stocking the film behind the counter.

"I'll put back the candy," she said quickly. He moved it to the side with a swipe of his hand and she paid.

She knew she'd have to read the Cosmo before she went home; no way was she going to risk bringing that back in the house. She had lots of experience hiding unacceptable magazines – her father hadn't allowed Cosmo and she was sure Duke or LaRae wouldn't.

She crossed the parking lot to the Denny's across the street. Perfect. The waitress settled her in a booth by the salad bar. Over a Grand Slam breakfast, finally, food she didn't have to cook herself, she luxuriated in what stars were with who, how to get shiny hair in winter, and how to tell if your husband's having an affair. When he moves them all into the house and calls it polygamy, that's how, she thought. But by the time she'd finished a piece of coconut cream pie and both magazines, she was feeling less testy, even indulgent. Her mind drifted to home and she wished she had a watch on.

Rhonda would sure love a piece of pie and she hoped she was okay. And maybe LaRae would be worried about her, instead of mad. Maybe Rhonda would sleep all afternoon and never even tell LaRae and Cheron where she was. She felt a moment of panic, then remembered the morning she'd searched in vain for Natalie. Forget it. She'd go home when she was ready.

She turned back to the Cosmo and took the quiz to see if Duke was her soulmate. She knew before she even answered the last question, 'do you and your mate agree on whether to have children or not?' that Duke was meant to be. She did love Duke, this was the life she picked, and the last thing she ever did was admit defeat. She finished her second hot chocolate and offered up a "Father, thank you for the strength you give me, but you know I need more when it comes to chocolate." She didn't pray for the fact that the Word of Wisdom advised against hot beverages too, she was hoping He wouldn't notice that. It was time to go home.

"Beware of the subtle ways Satan employs to take you from the plan of God [2 Nephi 9:13] and true happiness. One of Satan's most effective approaches is to demean the role of wife and mother in the home."

– by Elder Richard G. Scott
Conference Report 10/96

CHAPTER SEVEN

When she stepped outside, it seemed unnaturally dark. She'd forgotten to ask the waitress what time it was. A mile home, a few snowflakes fell, landing on her hair and coat, where they stayed for a few seconds before melting into her. Over the next mile, the sky blackened like twilight and slush fell from the sky. She picked up her pace, but so did the onslaught from heaven. First it was a thick and wet snow, then it sharpened into freezing rain. Ice stung Michelle's face and covered over her bare head. She hoped she wouldn't catch cold now that she was pregnant. A truck roared by, too close to her, and splattered her with black ice. Looking at her ruined coat, she wanted to sit down and cry, but she knew she couldn't. She kept going, the beautiful miniature waterways she had traversed on her way, gone, and in their place was heavy wet sleet.

There was a gas station up ahead with its bright red and blue fluorescent lights on. She ducked into it and stomped off the ice and snow.

"Not good walking weather," the old man behind the counter said.

"No," Michelle said, "and I've got to get home."

She went into the ladies room. First, she ran her hands under the warm, warm water. When she could move her hands, she splashed her face with it until she could feel her cheeks again. Her hands were streaked with puddles of blue and copper from the makeup she'd tried. She looked in the mirror and saw a distorted face from the smeared colors. She scrubbed the rest of it off and returned to the front of the gas station.

The attendant was still behind the counter. He wore a striped shirt of navy and sky blue and his name was embroidered in navy above the pocket. It said 'Clade.'

"If this keeps up, I'll be closing up early," Clade said. "I'll give you a lift if you want to wait."

Michelle didn't see she had any other choice. She could see the snow falling harder and harder until it was too dark out to see anything but her reflection in the now black window. Her hair was matted from the walk and the traces of eyeliner along her lashes made her eyes look like hollow sockets. She jumped up, unable to keep staring at her contorted image.

She pushed the door open, making the little bell above jingle. The cold slapped her in the face. The road was a steady stream of slow moving cars and trucks, the white of their headlights and the red of their taillights refracting on the wet road. It looked like an abstract painting Michelle had seen a picture of in art class. The picture was titled "Polarized" and Michelle couldn't remember the artist. Bands of color had been painted in various angles across the canvas, like a big heap of pick-up-sticks. Michelle had loved it. It was so different from the flowers and fruit and pictures of snowy hills and lakes her mother favored for their house.

Clade came in from the service bay when he heard the jingle. “Just got to do a couple more things, then we’ll be ready to go,” he said and proceeded to refill the ice cream freezer and balance the cash register drawer.

Michelle heard a deafening scream come from deep in her gut, but she knew it was only heard in her mind since her mouth didn’t open and Clade didn’t blink from counting his twenties. She had to get home. She’d planned on only being gone a couple hours and the big clock above the door said it was now four o’clock.

She sat again and pulled the People magazine from her bag and started over, but she couldn’t concentrate and just looked at the pictures of movie stars when they were babies. She wished she hadn’t put Cosmo in the trash so quickly. She checked on her sweater to make sure it was dry and zipped up the boots she’d loosened. Where had Clade gone? She felt frantic, like a cornered animal with nowhere to go. Soon, she would fling herself back out into the snow, even though it would mean sure harm, just like the animal that fights back knowing its going to die.

After an eternity, Clade stuck his head in from the service bay. “Truck’s ready. What about you?” he said.

The ride home shouldn’t take too long, even though the roads weren’t plowed yet. Clade had four-wheel drive and drove with an easy confidence, talking about his grandkids the whole way.

“Byron and Bryce. They’re twins. Identical twins. Had a hard time telling ’em apart at first, then Brenda, that’s my daughter, Brenda, came up with the idea to paint Byron’s toenails red. I didn’t like the idea, I didn’t like having my grandson’s toes

painted like a girl. That kind of stuff can have an effect on 'ya, you know what I mean? But she said, 'Daddy, you got a better idea? 'Cuzz if not, . . .'

Clade droned on but Michelle didn't hear any more. She looked out the window trying to make out familiar landmarks while praying that she'd get home soon.

"Heavenly Father, I need to get home and I don't mean your home. I'm not coming to you yet, so just make Clade feel as desperate to get home as I am. I offer you this prayer, in the Son's name, amen."

The prayer didn't take her mind off of Duke. He had said she needed to be more of a wife, more womanly, hadn't he? And now look at her. Dirty, cold, late, a thief, not a wife and hardly a woman. If not for the life inside her, she'd wonder if she was even female.

Because what does a good woman do? A good woman was like her mom, and her aunt, and LaRae, Cheron, Rhonda, and GayLynn. A good woman doesn't complain. She's home, making sure dinner is ready at exactly five-thirty. She doesn't run off to a shopping mall and lose track of time. The clock on the dashboard said five o'clock. If she made it in time to get the casserole in the oven before Duke was home, she'd be okay. LaRae would be mad because she'd screwed up again, but he wouldn't. And if he wasn't, then he wouldn't be reminded that maybe she wasn't cut out for the Celestial Kingdom. Maybe she belonged back on her dad's hops farm in Idaho. But that was out of the question. She knew it and Duke knew it.

Right when she started to calm down, Clade slowed the truck.

"Looks like something up ahead," he said.

She peered through the icy windshield. It was all the windshield wipers could do to keep it clear. Taillights glowed from the side of the road. As they pulled abreast to them, they saw that a car had slid into the ditch. Clade stopped the truck and jumped out. Michelle sat, staring straight ahead. She took her coat off. It was so hot in the truck, how could she be burning up in the middle of a snowstorm? She leaned her head against the back of the seat. Clade stuck his head back in the door.

“Gonna pull ’em out. Should only take a sec.”

“I’ve got to get home.” Michelle started to cry. “Do you have too?”

“I can’t leave ’em. It’ll only take a sec, I’ll get you home.”

She could see the two brick posts that marked the front entrance to Whitefarm Estates. She estimated that she was less than a half mile from home. It was an easy five or ten minute walk in good weather. She could probably walk it with the storm in fifteen. She jumped out of the truck.

“Thanks for the lift,” she called to Clade, “I only live up there. I’m going to walk the rest of the way.”

“Suit yourself,” Clade said and proceeded to hook the tow line onto the car.

Twenty minutes later she could see the lights of her house from the edge of the field. The pregnancy was making her so tired, she wasn’t sure she would make it the rest of the way home. If only she could sit down and rest for a minute. She was cutting through the yards, toward Sherry’s house, when a dog started barking at her. Another dog from across the street joined in, then another and another. Sherry’s back door opened.

“Mandy, get in here,” she yelled and a yellow lap rocketed up the steps. Sherry saw her.

“Who’s there?” she called out.

“It’s me, Michelle, from next door,” Michelle said. “I was cutting through.”

Sherry came out and peered at her. “Oh, my goodness. You’re frozen,” she said. “Come in, come in and we’ll get you warmed up.”

“No, I can’t,” Michelle said. “I have to get home. Dinner.” The last part didn’t come out in a complete sentence.

Sherry ignored her protestations and led her up the two stairs into the kitchen. She took off her coat and wrapped her in a blanket. She brought a big towel for her hair and wrapped that too.

“You’re always saving me from the cold,” Michelle said when she was warm enough to make a whole sentence.

“Yeah, you’re going to have to give up this habit of yours of running around in the snow,” Sherry said and they laughed. The little blond girl ran in and Sherry shoed her back out with a smile.

“I have to get home,” Michelle said. “I have to get dinner ready.”

“Get warm. So your dinner’s late,” Sherry said.

“No,” Michelle said, standing up. “I don’t want to make my husband mad.”

A cloud passed over Sherry’s face as if to say ‘what kind of man would get upset over dinner when his wife is frozen?’

Michelle hastened to explain. “He works hard all day and is real tired when he gets home. I like to make sure dinner is ready.”

Sherry looked doubtful. Michelle knew she’d already planted a seed in Sherry’s mind. She didn’t like it, but she didn’t know what to do to make it better.

“I’ll drive you home,” Sherry said in a take-charge voice.

Michelle didn’t know how she would explain pulling into the drive in a strange vehicle. Or any vehicle for that matter. It didn’t matter though. Sherry herded her out the door and into a maroon mini-van before she could say ‘no’ one more time. She was home in a minute.

Duke’s truck was in the driveway. She thought of Alma from her Book of Mormon stories, doomed to eternal despair. That was her. “Lord in Heaven, please keep your foe, the angels of the devil, away from this house tonight. They are the carriers of fury and it is not needed here. Uh-uh. Thank you too for seeing me home safely. Frozen, but safe. In Your name I pray, amen.”

Michelle waved goodbye to Sherry and stood on the porch for a long time. Everyone was in the kitchen, she could hear their voices and make out Duke at the head of the table and Dee’s foot in her favorite shoes, an old pair of saddle shoes from DI she thought made her look like a teenager from the 1950's.

If this weren’t her house, it’d be the kind of house she’d want to live in. The kind of house you look into the window of while driving by and it looks warm and homey. Michelle didn’t go in. Cheron and GayLynn would come to her aid, but the thoughts of

LaRae's silence chilled her even more than she was. And who knew how Duke would react, his wife off walking around in an ice storm for no good reason? And with stolen money, to boot.

She moved around to the front door. It was seldom used, but maybe it would be unlocked. Michelle turned the knob slowly. It moved and kept moving. Thank you Lord. She inched the door opened. The house was warm and smelled of her chicken casserole with broccoli and cheese. She slipped in and pulled the door tight behind her.

“Keep yourselves above any unworthy behavior in the tender, intimate relationship between husband and wife. Because marriage is ordained of God, the intimate relationship between husbands and wives is good and honorable in the eyes of God.”

– “Be a Righteous Husband and Father”
by President Howard H. Hunter
Conference Report 10/94

CHAPTER EIGHT

She was on the fifth stair when Cheron came around the corner. Her eyes went straight to Michelle’s shopping bag. She started to say something but Michelle put her finger to her lip. Cheron followed her upstairs and questioned her.

“I went for a walk to the shopping center, then it started snowing,” Michelle said. “The man from the gas station down the road had to bring me home.” She left out the part about Sherry’s warm kitchen.

Cheron took the shopping bag and followed Michelle upstairs. “I’m going to start a hot bath for you. We’ve got to get you warmed up. You’re lucky you don’t have frostbite.”

Michelle went to her room and undressed into her thick robe. She couldn’t remember the soft fabric ever feeling better against her frosty skin. When she got to the bathroom, the tub was half filled with bubbly water and the bottle of bath gel was half empty on the side of the tub. The smell of rain, which smelled sweet like honey to

Michelle, mingled with the steam from the hot water and hovered like a ghost over the tub.

“I found it in your bag,” Cheron said.

“Perfect,” Michelle said and she dropped the robe on the floor and stepped in.

The first thing she did in the tub was to lie back and submerge her entire body under the bubbles, head and all. She held her breath for as long as she could, then came up sputtering for air. Cheron was perched on the edge of the tub watching her. She handed her a washrag to wipe her face off with.

“Who made dinner?” Michelle asked. She reached for a giant orange clip and sunk the teeth of it into her upswept hair to keep it out of the way.

“I did after Rhonda told me where you’d gone. And I told LaRae and Duke you were visiting someone for Relief Society.”

“Did they believe it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Great. Duke’s going to think he married an imbecile who runs off in the middle of a snowstorm. What good reason do I even give him for going to the store?” Michelle stretched out in the water and leaned her head against the hard porcelain. Her nipples, already darkening from pregnancy, rose from the bubbles.

“I don’t know but you better think of something. LaRae told him you the kitchen money was gone.” Cheron reached for the back brush and poured some of the pearlescent gel on it. “I’ll get your back,” she said.

“Figures. You know, I can’t take this any more. She watches every move I make.”

“Why did you go to the store, Michelle?” Cheron moved the backbrush low on Michelle’s back and Michelle involuntarily wiggled into it it felt so good.

“I’m going nuts,” Michelle said. Duke’s not as affectionate to me anymore and LaRae doesn’t want me here. I mean, here I am a newlywed, pregnant, and I feel like a widow.” A loose piece of scripture rambled about in Michelle’s head. “Why do ye build up secret abominations to cause widows to mourn before the Lord?” she quoted Moroni. “That’s what they do to me.”

“Stop already. You aren’t a widow and you don’t need to mourn. Tell him you were visiting someone sick in the ward with the Relief Society. He’ll be asleep soon, never even know when you got home.”

The brush was going in slow circles on Michelle’s skin. She didn’t answer, instead she just sighed quietly from the feel of the coarse bristles. They sat without talking, Michelle with her eyes closed, while Cheron moved the brush along her back, bringing it back time after time to the small hollow at the base of her back.

She stayed in her room until the lights of the house were off before sneaking downstairs to make a sandwich. Duke never knocked on her door or asked her where she had been, but that didn’t bring her much comfort as she tried to fall asleep. She’d rather he get good and mad at her and have it over with instead of silence. At least then she wouldn’t be waiting for an ax to fall.

In bed, she felt a stab of loneliness like she used to get at home. She'd be in a big crowd or with her family and she'd feel detached, like she was alone and standing apart from them. She didn't know if it was because she missed Duke or if it was thinking about Cheron sitting on the side of the tub.

The next day, Michelle decided it was high time to get Duke's attention. She didn't care if he was mad at her and she didn't care if he wasn't supposed to have sex with his pregnant or nursing wives, she was going to seduce him. She missed having someone to touch. She enlisted Rhonda in her plan.

After dinner, Michelle went upstairs and took a shower. She pinned her curls up as best she could. She took her garments off and folded them neatly onto the chair next to her bed before putting on the nightgown she'd worn on her wedding night. Would Duke come to her with the same desire he did on that night? It seemed to Michelle that her wedding night was a lifetime ago, yet it had only been a couple of months.

When she was ready, she asked Rhonda to go downstairs and ask Duke to come up, Michelle needed him. Michelle lay back on the bed, her head propped on the pillow. It was still light out and she stared into the tree outside her room. Its gray branches formed stiff roads through the even grayer sky. Duke didn't come. She was tired so she closed her eyes, just for a minute, but her dreams overtook her.

This time she was trying to get home. But home was a huge red brick mansion built on the ocean. The mansion floated on big steel runners, so there was no danger of it

going under, even during the most furious of storms. The sound of the door slamming woke her and Duke was in the room. The room was dim.

“Come cuddle with me,” she said, struggling to bring herself upright in the pillows.

Duke sat down on the bed and kissed her. “What’s this about?” he said.

“I miss you.” Michelle said. She was fully awake now. She pulled his boots off. “Get up here.”

Duke stretched out and Michelle snuggled into his arm. They kissed and Michelle started to feel like she did back when Duke kissed her at the fair or in his truck before driving her down her long driveway. She slipped her nightgown off.

“Make love to me,” she said. She could feel her body already responding to his kiss.

Duke had his hand between her legs. “I won’t,” he said, but his fingers reached into her and she rolled her hips down onto them. She wanted more.

Michelle sat up and straddled him. “You can.” Duke’s eyes were on her body, his hands against the sides of her waist. She moved up and down on him and could feel him harden. “See?” Michelle undid his pants.

“No,” Duke said, but he held her tight to him.

“You want to.” Michelle could tell he still loved her by the way he held her close.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s not right.”

“Please, Duke? I need to feel you love me. I need you.” As she spoke she stroked him. “You’re ready. Can’t go away hungry.”

“Put it in your mouth,” he said.

“No, I want you inside me.” She’d never put a man’s penis in her mouth and the thought of it alarmed her. She was sure the Lord would approve of that even less than He approved of her games with Edna.

Duke pulled her head down toward his middle, his hand a little too firm on her shoulder. “You get me all excited, then leave me like this? You know that’s not right.” He pushed her to him and Michelle complied, taking him into her mouth.

She held her head still, but Duke’s thrusting made her gag. His hands tightened in her hair, the fleshy tips of his fingers finding her skull. He moved her head in time with his gyrations. “Don’t run off again, Michelle,” he said with a jerk and she squeezed her eyes shut and made herself numb, thinking back to her dream of the floating mansion in the middle of the ocean. The waves were lapping at its foundation. Don’t stare into the waves, Michelle told herself, but she did. She was memorized by the movement.

When it was over, Duke zipped his pants up – he hadn’t even pulled them off his hips – and sat up. Michelle went into the bathroom and knelt by the toilet. She threw up but nothing came out but a thin strand of clear spittle. She wanted to cry, but she was still numb. Nothing mattered except not being sick, she told herself, staring into the rusty water of the toilet bowl.

When she returned to the room, Duke was gone. She got into bed and punched her pillow. She wanted to punch the wall, but she couldn’t even do that without attracting the attention of four wives and eleven kids. That’s all she needed. She took her book, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, from the night stand, and read into the

night, alone. When she heard Rhonda outside her door, knocking and calling her, she pretended to be asleep. She wished Cheron would knock, but she was too scared of running into Duke to leave her room and go find her.

That night, her sleep was sporadic and she was back in the desert with the tidal wave approaching. She was so small compared to the wall of water. She started to run, knowing she couldn't outrun it. But she did! No matter how fast or slow she went, the tidal wave stayed right behind her, but it never tumbled down.

She woke exhausted from a night of running in her dreams. Duke was gone early in the morning, off on a three-day trip, before Michelle even got up. He was going to Idaho, Boise this time, and Michelle had thought about asking if she could go. It might have rekindled what they had when she used to sit next to him as he made his way from town to town to do his business. Now, she was glad he was gone.

Plus it meant the warehouse was closed, so GayLynn was home with them for the rest of the week. Michelle wanted to help her put together some outfits for work, especially now that she wanted to look nice for the customers she'd started meeting with to go over what food plans were available. Since starting in the warehouse, she'd come up with offering three different sized plans, emergency, basic, and expanded storage and she loved figuring out what plan would be best for each family.

"I wish people around her would focus on what's really important, not about clothes," LaRae said when she found them looking through the advertisements in the newspaper. But Michelle noticed that she came back into the kitchen often, listening to their conversation and eyeing the notes Michelle was making. Later, when they were in

GayLynn's closet trying to put together new combinations of her clothes, LaRae found reason to come in there too.

"Look at me," GayLynn said and she twirled around in a pair of black pants, topped with an ecru blouse Michelle had draped with one of her own scarves.

"You've lost weight, GayLynn," Michelle said. "Look at you, all trim and slim."

"Hardly," said GayLynn, looking at her profile in the mirror. "But I do think I look better. Maybe I'll go on a diet."

"Where'd you get the scarf?" LaRae said, then, not waiting for an answer, turned to Michelle. "You haven't been out shopping again, have you?" It was the first time LaRae had referenced Michelle's pilgrimage.

"No. It's mine. I gave it to her," Michelle said. "Share and share alike, remember?"

"Michelle says this a classic look. I think it suits me, don't you?" GayLynn said.

"You know, LaRae, you could use a little updating yourself. Why don't you let me help you?" Michelle said.

"No thank you," LaRae said. "I have better things to do."

But LaRae stayed and watched Michelle make outfits out of what had been just random pieces of clothing for GayLynn. By the end, she agreed that maybe Michelle should look at her closet and see what she could do. She made sure Michelle knew it wasn't because she thought she looked bad, she was just curious. They decided to do it after dinner.

Michelle, like LaRae, GayLynn, Cheron, and Rhonda too, loved the freedom of having Duke gone. She could make anything she wanted for dinner, so tonight she made macaroni and cheese out of the box. It was a favorite treat of the kids and it only took a few minutes to prepare. By seven, Cheron and GayLynn were getting the kids ready for the night and Rhonda was resting on LaRae's big double bed, surrounded by all the clothes Michelle had removed from the closet, her gray wool socks the only thing visible from her waist down. LaRae stood in the middle of the room, wearing only her garments with her underwear over them. Michelle set to work.

By the time GayLynn and Cheron came in to see how it was going, LaRae was dressed in a jean skirt with a white cotton button-down-the-front blouse. Michelle was tying a red scarf through her hair.

"You can wear this on the 4th of July and the 24th of July, you look so snappy," Michelle said.

Michelle knew the 24th of July was bigger in Utah than Independence Day. Utah had made the day that commemorated the moment Brigham Young cresting the mountain above the Salt Lake Valley, saw the lake, and pronounced to his tired Mormon followers, "This is the place," a state holiday long ago and as a kid, Michelle had wished they could have another holiday in Idaho too, after all, they were Mormon too.

"Does the scarf look right, though?" LaRae said. "Look how my hair sticks up around it."

"It could use a little conditioning." Michelle said after examining LaRae's head.

There was a considerable lack of any beauty products or bath indulgences in the house, save for Michelle's bath gel, lotion, and lemon soap, none of which she wanted to share. But it didn't matter, she soon had all four women lined up on either side of the kitchen table while she whipped up what they needed from the home health book. First she made hair conditioner out of mayonnaise, lemon, and eggs that smelled like salad dressing. After applying this goop to everyone's hair, Michelle wrapped them in plastic wrap and set the timer for twenty minutes.

She then made a cucumber face mask for Rhonda to calm her red rosacea. She crushed up some of the mint the wives had dried last summer to put in it and the crisp scent in their leaves wafted through the kitchen. It smelled just like the middle of July. Next, she made an avocado mask for herself and Cheron to moisturize their dry skin, and soaked cotton pads with witch hazel to purify GayLynn's and LaRae's skin.

While the masks were drying, Michelle brought her manicure items down from her room and appraised the wives nails. "That's much more up-to-date," Michelle said, changing LaRae's pointed nails into careful ovals and they all readily agreed. Rhonda's were the most difficult to transform with her ragged cuticles, bloody from picking at them, but once Michelle got past the torn skin, she noticed Rhonda's perfect white half-moons at the base of each nail. She buffed them to a high gloss with cornstarch and a chamois rag Little Duke used when he washed the truck.

Michelle couldn't cut hair, but she could style it, so with the help of her blowdryer and LaRae's curling iron, she worked on everyone's hair, except for LaRae's, which was too long in back and too short in front to do anything with except braid.

“You need to grow that front out, girl,” Michelle said but LaRae didn’t look convinced. She left the kitchen and for a moment, Michelle thought she might have offended her, but she came back with the radio Michelle kept in the laundry room. She placed it on the counter and turned it on, finding the local oldies station. Michelle nodded her approval and swung her hips to the beat.

Michelle pulled Cheron’s hair towards her face, softening it and making her look younger in the process, to the Stone’s “Satisfaction.” She corralled GayLynn’s hair into her version of a career chignon to Aretha Franklin’s “R-E-S-P-E-C-T.” But it was Rhonda’s hair that the conditioner and styling had the biggest effect on. Usually Rhonda didn’t take the time to even get her part straight and now, here it was, shiny and smooth from the big rollers Michelle had tamed it with, with a side part held off her face in a tiny barrette. They all stood in awe around Rhonda, who admired herself in the hand mirror on the table.

“You could be a beauty queen,” GayLynn said.

Michelle whooped and jumped up on the bench. “You go, girl,” she said and danced around her to “Brown-Eyed Girl.” Soon LaRae was on the bench with her. Michelle took LaRae’s hands and they jumped from the bench. LaRae threw her head back and laughed. GayLynn and Cheron joined in and soon all four were dancing, dancing around Rhonda, dancing on the bench, even dancing on the table. They screamed like teenagers when “Pretty Woman” came on the radio, the perfect ending for their make-over night. Even Rhonda joined in on that one, swaying softly back and forth

while keeping a grip on her pregnant belly. Michelle moved with her when “Unchained Melody” played, she then spun her gently to LaRae, who sat her back on the bench.

Michelle reached toward Cheron and they danced, slow, laughing and exaggerating the dance. It felt good to dance again, good to have fun again, and good to feel Cheron’s warm, soft body in her arms.

She had danced lots with Edna. The first time, they had been practicing for a cousin’s wedding. Both were scared to dance with boys.

“Quit leading,” Edna said. “Nobody’ll want to dance with you.”

“I can’t help it,” Michelle said.

“Here, loosen up.” Edna took Michelle’s shoulders between her hands and shook them. Michelle responded like a puppy getting its stomach scratched. They tried again but Michelle again took control of Edna’s movements. Even though Edna was bigger, Michelle was stronger and Edna felt soft and pliable in her hands, like the salt dough their Primary teacher used to mix up for them to mold Christmas ornaments out of. Michelle pulled her closer. Edna came closer. Their bodies fit together. Michelle said “butterfly kiss” and blinked her eyelash on Edna’s cheek. Edna responded by kissing her, first a delicate brush on her lips, then with more force, their eyes and lips open. Later, Michelle would wish Edna had closed her eyes so she couldn’t have seen how much Michelle wanted that kiss.

Now, Michelle was looking into Cheron’s eyes and she thought she saw the same thing she’d seen all those years ago. She twirled her around and laughed, anything to keep from bringing her mouth to Cheron’s lips.

It was past midnight before any of them were willing to leave the warmth of the kitchen for their cold beds. Michelle was too excited to sleep, instead her mind drifted back to dancing with Cheron and the feeling of her hand against Cheron's back or her thigh next to Cheron's thigh.

But she was just as in love with LaRae tonight, for the first time since she'd married Duke. Not in a I-want-to-kiss-you kind of love, but in a feeling of being accepted kind of way. She pulled her Book of Mormon from the nightstand drawer and found a scripture in Alma and whispered it softly to herself. "And now behold, my brethren, if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?" Alma was speaking to her about LaRae. LaRae with her change of heart and yes, it was a song of redeeming love. Oh, yes, Alma, I can feel it now.

