

Chapter One

Friday night, five to seven, Michelle stood next to the kitchen's wall-mounted telephone, one hand holding the hung-up receiver. She could not be late for Philip's nightly call. Once, she'd stayed late at the park, flying kites with her little brothers and missed it. When she'd dialed back, Philip refused to accept the collect caller fee. She wasn't inconsiderate like that anymore. She was a better person now.

Three months ago, her family moved from Texas to Reno to be near Melissa and Morgan, Michelle's newlywed sisters. The family, with all seven siblings, would be together again, except her brother Michael, who was in the Army. Philip said her parents were keeping them apart, actively sabotaging their relationship. He said the whole world was against them, and they must defend their love. He sent Michelle flowers weekly, mailed letters daily, and phoned nightly. Thousands of miles wouldn't keep them apart. He loved Michelle. He really did.

Promptly at seven, the phone's ring trilled Michelle's spine, tailbone to skull. She answered promptly to get credit for having been right there, waiting, and covered the receiver to again ask her little sister to turn down the TV. As before, Meagan ignored her. Michelle stomped her foot and asked a third time, mouthing the words in exaggerated teenage frustration. Meagan did not move. Mother never enforced her *No Contention* rule, so there was no use in summoning her. In the Mitchell household, there were no consequences.

From the receiver, Philip's voice hummed along apparently unaware that when he spoke, the world did not set its knitting aside. Michelle covered her ear and stretched the cord as far as it

would go. She squeezed herself into the pantry, closed the louvered door, and crouched to the floor, trying to not sound winded.

“I’m sorry, Philip, what’d you say?” She loved his name in her mouth, the slight pop at the end like a kiss.

“I *said*, I have a plane ticket for Sunday. Want to get married Wednesday or Thursday?”

Married? They’d talked about God’s plan for them, but *married* so soon? Married next week? She was supposed to start at her new high school a week from Monday. It was finally her senior year.

“I’m free,” he said. Those two small words changed everything. After an excruciating year, riddled with stolen encounters and the heft of ensuing guilt, he was divorced. No longer hindered by promises made to his bishop and to her parents to distance himself while still married. It was thrilling, wasn’t it? That Philip Davis, her Mormon Sunday school teacher, wanted to marry *her*? Wednesday or Thursday—he said it was her choice.

“Thursday,” she said, thoughtful to grant her parents the extra day.

#

On Saturday, Michelle shadowed her mother in a childish clingy mood. She helped with laundry, vacuuming, and later, dinner, waiting for the right time to tell her the happy news. If she told Mother before Daddy got home, Mother could be the one to tell Daddy. Not that Daddy would get mad or anything. Her father never got mad or anything. It was Mother, who laughed even when angry, who needed convincing. But Daddy would give Mother that look—the one that killed Michelle. The one that said *We moved all this way for nothing*. But they’d moved to keep her away from Philip *while* he was married, and he wasn’t married anymore.

In less than an hour, when Philip called, he'd ask if she'd told them yet. And here, she'd wasted the entire day, waiting for a bout of bravery to overtake her, which left her no choice—she had to tell Mother this instant. Michelle slid the peeler over the length of a russet bigger than her fist and let slivers of its skin slip onto newsprint splayed to protect the clean counter. By the stove, Mother chopped onions.

“So,” Michelle said, sliding the slicer. “Philip called.”

Mother continued chopping.

Michelle slipped the naked potato into a pan of water and let her fingers drip. Rippled rings from each drop collided. “He’s coming here.”

Mother’s knife stopped. She wiped her eyes—from the onions—and continued chopping.

“We’re getting married Thursday.” Michelle rubbed potato starch from her hands onto the thighs of her jeans and, sideways, watched for Mother’s reaction.

Mother put down the knife, dried her hands on her apron, and walked to her bedroom. Michelle followed, catching the door with a splayed palm before Mother closed it completely. Mother’s onion-agitated eyes scolded through the crack until she ceded and let her daughter in.

“He’s not coming here,” Mother said, her back turned as she walked away.

“He has a plane ticket for Sunday.”

“Tomorrow?” Mother sat on her bed and grasped the bedpost, her other hand dead in her lap. “Do you even know what it takes to be married?”

“We’re in love.” Michelle stepped forward, supporting her weight on the post too, her grip near, but not touching, Mother’s. “We really are.”

Mother shook her head, exhaling toward the open palm in her lap. Michelle recognized the slow, childlike huffs, the too much swallowing, the warning signs that Mother was fighting off a cry. “If you’re really in love, you’ll be in love next year. Finish school.”

“You barely knew Daddy when you got married. But you prayed about it. We prayed.” Michelle checked the nightstand clock.

Mother looked up, the rims of her now puffy eyes red, and laughed a not-real laugh.

“I’ll be eighteen in February.”

Mother’s eyes narrowed. “Then what? Then you’ll run off?”

That wasn’t what Michelle had meant. It was something to say when she didn’t know what to say. It was something Philip had said. And such an implication was cruel after her brother Michael ran away two years ago, after Mother and Daddy had pushed him to serve a Mormon mission when he’d said he didn’t believe. Of course he believed, Daddy had said. They’d raised him to believe. Daddy filled out his paperwork and set up the interviews. Told his son to be there. Late that night, after Michael didn’t show, he called. They’d left him no choice. He’d married that Pentecostal girl and joined the Army. They hadn’t seen him since.

Mother rubbed her eyes with the skirt of her apron. “I’m tired, Michelle. After this year, after what you’ve put this family through, I’m just so, so tired.” And her body looked tired. Its roundness, deflated. She braced her palms into the mattress and with effort, pushed herself up. She stood next to her daughter without looking at her. “I don’t care what you do.”

Mother walked into the bathroom and locked the door.

Michelle hung to the bedpost and stared at the closed door. There was more she wanted to say, more she wanted her mother to say. All her life, Michelle had been cheerful and compliant, fearful of upsetting her parents, whose anger registered in silence. They’d never

raised their voices—never had to—just a look of disappointment set Michelle crying and apologizing. But if she wanted to grow up, she'd have to get used to this sticky, mired feeling. This lump in her throat.

At seven o'clock, she'd tell Philip she'd told her mother, and he'd say he was proud of her. That she'd done good. But right now, doing good didn't feel so good.

#

The following afternoon, Michelle drove the station wagon to the airport, finding her way all by herself. She parked, got through security, and found Philip's gate twenty minutes before arrival, like a real adult. She sat at the edge of the hard plastic chair, her feet flat on the floor, an inch apart, careful not to scuff her new white pumps. A young mother two chairs over said, "We're picking up my in-laws. Who are you waiting for?"

"My fiancé." It wasn't quite official, he hadn't exactly asked, not the way a girl expects, but he was coming to marry her on Thursday, not in the temple like good Mormons do, but they could fix that later, so yes, they were engaged. They really were.

"You look awfully young to be engaged," the young mother said.

"We know what we're doing." Michelle stood and walked to the wall of windows to check on the plane she knew wasn't due for another ten minutes. She smoothed the front of her dress in a gesture she thought looked dignified. Womanly. Once the young mother saw that Philip was a thirty-six-year-old man, she'd see they weren't stupid teenagers running off like her brother. She'd see she assumed wrong.

The florescent lights cast Michelle's reflection onto the glass, overlaying the darkening tarmac outside as catapillered luggage dollies scuttled to unload. The bow on her low-waisted,

sailor dress had gone askew. She straightened it, then the matching bow in her hair. She did look like a girl from a French boarding school. But Philip liked this dress. That's why she'd worn it.

When the plane pulled into the gate, she wanted to wave, but grown-ups didn't do that. She shivered, suddenly needing to pee, but stayed so he could find her face as soon as he stepped off the plane, like in the movies. Passengers spilled out at the gate, greeting and hugging, some hurrying on to connections. So many people. A clown car of people. Then a lull. A trickle. And still no Philip. Today was Sunday she was certain. She'd gone to church that morning with her family. Worn her same good dress. She'd gotten a blessing from the bishop, like Mother had asked her to do, to request the power of discernment. Michelle walked down the hall to check the arrivals board. Had his layover been in Dallas? Phoenix?

Back at gate B7, she saw him, searching for her. She'd missed it, that eye-locking moment when he first stepped out. But he was here. He really was. She ran to him. He dropped his bag. They embraced, his body solid under her arms. He smelled like the ground floor of Macy's. He held her face in both hands, his slender fingers lacing around her ears, and kissed the tears away from the corners of her mouth.

#

Michelle pulled the station wagon into the driveway. From outside, her family's living room looked like a diorama. This was the nicest rental they'd ever had. Michelle had even arranged the furniture to show Philip what a good homemaker she'd be. But he didn't look. He rubbed the nape of her neck and leaned forward, his pepperminty mouth hungry, and kissed her dizzy. Marcus, Matthew, and Meagan watched from the window. Too many wide, glossy eyes.

"We. Better. Get. Inside," Michelle said between kisses.

Daddy met them at the door. Philip set his bag down and offered his hand, but Daddy did not shake it. “He’s staying at your sister’s,” he said to Michelle.

“Which one?” she said.

“The only one who’d take him.” Daddy walked Philip’s bag back to the station wagon.

Mother wagged a finger at Philip, who was closer to her age than Michelle’s, and said, laughing, “I told her ‘He better not be coming here.’”

“Well, here I am.” Philip held out then dropped his arms, laughing along. “It’s partly your fault you know, for raising such a wonderful daughter.”

“Not so sure about that,” Mother said, still laughing. “I didn’t get all these grays for nothing.”

#

On Monday, Philip took Michelle and her family to a restaurant with tablecloths and waiters. All through dinner, Mother and Daddy, stiff in their Sunday best, employed their holiday manners. Her young siblings, seemingly distressed by their parents’ discomfort and unsure how to approach their Pisa towers of pasta, asked for boxes and took everything home, where nothing they did was wrong, and they could devour their food without judgement. Thankfully, Philip had secretly taken Michelle to such establishments twice before and taught her how to carry herself, when and how to drape her napkin, and not to ask the waiter to translate items on the menu, as Mother had done.

On Tuesday, Philip took Michelle, Meagan, Marcus, and Matthew to Circus Circus. Michelle watched her brothers craning their necks, mouths agape, as acrobats evaded the clutches of gravity, and a shock of sorrow cinched her throat. When school started, she and Philip would be living in Texas—who’d help the boys with their homework? Who’d take them

to fly kites? Mother and Daddy worked until six, sometimes seven. Meagan wasn't helpful. Ever. Taking care of them after school had been Michelle's thing. She was the oldest at home now.

On Wednesday, Philip and Michelle went to the Washoe County clerk's office to apply for a marriage license. Michelle was too young to sign for herself, so Daddy went too. She wore her good pair of jeans and no bow in her hair. They took a number and waited, like at the butcher. A lot of people got married in Reno. Philip held Michelle's hand and got her father talking about the church. Daddy liked talking about the latter days. The couple sitting across from them had had a hard night, Michelle could tell. They were far too old to be dressed for prom, and dried mascara streaked the woman's cheeks. Both looked what Michelle imagined hungover looked like. Neither smiled back. The woman had probably cried until the man drove them there, leaving him no choice. Michelle hadn't had to coerce Philip. He'd come all the way from Texas, all on his own. The clerk announced the couple's number, and they shuffled to the counter. After all Michelle and Philip had been through, they were next. They really were.

Stepping to the window after their number was called, Michelle stood behind the men, both leaning an elbow on the counter, as they answered the clerk's questions. Daddy offered her date of birth, their new address, and his information as guardian. Philip answered for himself. The clerk asked for her ID, which Michelle handed to Daddy. His hairy hand paw-like as he slid it across the counter. The clerk confirmed her details and slid it back. Daddy held it up between two fingers like he was getting the check. Michelle plucked it from his grip and returned the ID to her purse. Stepping forward, she signed where the clerk pointed and returned to her place behind the men. The clerk pointed to a different line, where Philip signed before handing Daddy the pen. Without looking at Michelle, not even a backward glance, Daddy signed the paperwork, full middle name and all, and the two men shook hands.

#

When Michelle woke Thursday morning, she didn't bounce out of bed. This was the last time she'd wake up like this, a child in her parents' house. A house just becoming familiar. Drowsy light caressed her drawn curtain, an old sheet she'd converted with Mother's sewing machine. The matching fitted sheet had torn beyond repair, and it was a shame to toss both out when only one was bad. On the upper bunk, Meagan, always so rough, harumphed over in her sleep, rattling the entire frame. On Monday, they would've started high school together—Meagan a freshman, Michelle a senior. But now, she was getting married. Married today.

Down the hall, easy listening oldies sang softly from the kitchen radio. The fridge smacked open and closed like a pair of sticky lips, and Daddy's slippered feet shuffled to and from the counter. A wire whisk tsked the sides of Mother's good bowl. Because it was a Thursday, her parents would miss their shifts at the diet cookie factory. They would have to work doubles to make it up. Maybe Thursday had been a bad choice.

Above Michelle, pinned to the underside of the bunkbed's top mattress, Philip had stuck a note: *Good Morning, Sunshine!* She would not see him today. Not until the wedding. It was bad luck to see the bride. Bride? Sounded so weird. Last night when she drove him to Morgan's house, they'd sat in the station wagon, talking. She'd been thinking. Thinking about what Mother had said. Thinking that maybe there was another choice.

"Maybe, you could move here," Michelle had said. "We could finally go on dates. Get married *after* I graduate."

"Everyone said you'd do this," he'd said. "God, what an idiot. You told me you wanted to be together."

"If you moved here, we *would* be together. Dating is together."

“Everybody said you were too young to know what love was. They asked why I’d risk my heart, risk *everything*, on a teenager who’d change her mind without thinking.”

“But you’re looking for a job anyway. Why not here?”

“I’m looking for a job because of *you*. Because my father fired me. Said I wanted to marry *a child*. Those were his exact words, but I can see his point now that you’re acting like one.” Philip had never used this tone before. His face had never twisted. No one had ever spoken to Michelle like this, ever, so all she could do was blink, mask little huffs, and swallow.

“We hurt a lot of people to be together,” he said, his voice restrained in volume only. “But maybe that doesn’t matter to you. But it matters to Sarah, who was devastated when I asked for a divorce. It matters to little Jacob, who won’t grow up with a full-time dad now. It matters to my father, whose name has been scandalized. So, maybe it doesn’t matter to *you*, but it matters to a lot of people who matter to me.”

Michelle was sobbing now.

“And you’re backing out so you can go to prom? Great. Well, just great.”

But that wasn’t what she’d said. That wasn’t what she’d said at all, but she couldn’t say anything with this swelling in her throat, with barely getting any air, with being such a horrible, horrible homewrecker.

“I thought we were in love,” he said.

Michelle nodded, snotty-nosed, quivering lip. They were. They really were.

Philip did not kiss her goodnight. He opened the car door and started to get out. “Well, I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t show up tomorrow. Show up or don’t show up. Your choice.”

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At four o'clock, Melissa and Morgan arrived with their husbands. One brought a cake, one a camera. Mother made hoagies and potato salad. Their Mormon bishop came to officiate. Michelle heard Philip among them, all busy in the kitchen and setting up lawn chairs on the patio while she sat on the lower bunk, waiting in her room alone.

Waiting until Thursday had not been enough days. Not enough days to ask her older sisters if they hadn't felt ready when they got married either. Not enough days to practice walking the route to her would-have-been school. Not enough days for her father to speak up, if he was going to speak up. If this were really wrong, he would've spoken up, right? He would've shielded her against the tide of Philip's love, which both thrilled and overwhelmed her, but dragged her farther and farther from known shores. Moving to Reno hadn't been enough to wrench her free. And in two days, Philip would take her back to Texas anyway. Away from her family. To live in the house where he'd lived with his family. With Sarah. With their baby Jacob. Where Michelle had babysat. But why not Reno? Why not her choice? He hadn't said. Hadn't even prayed about it before saying no. But he was the man, the priesthood holder, her former Sunday school teacher. What did she know?

Daddy knocked. "Darlin. They're ready for you."

She checked herself in the mirror. Powdered the spattering of stress acne on her usually clear skin. Checked the baby's breath in her hair and opened the door.

#

After the ceremony, the photographs, the hoagies, and the cake, it was time for Michelle and Philip to go. Michelle hugged Melissa, Morgan, their husbands, then Meagan, Marcus, Matthew, and Mother, saving Daddy for last. He hugged her hard and whispered in her ear, "He better take care of you," which set her crying, and she couldn't let go. From Daddy's shoulder,

she watched Philip walk their bags to his rental, open the trunk, put them inside, and slam the lid closed. He walked back to the house and opened the storm door. “We better get on the road before dark, Mrs. Davis.”

Did he mean her? He held her elbow as she kissed Daddy’s cheek and waved goodbye all the way out to the car. Her family waved from the curtain-framed window as the rental car backed down the drive. Michelle memorized them. She wouldn’t see them again for a long time. Daddy wrapped his arm around Mother, as she hid her face in his shoulder. His other hand stayed buried in his pocket. Seeing him in the window, straight-faced and grim like he was fighting a headache, Michelle was close to running back to say she was sorry. Sorry for disappointing them. For disobeying. She had wanted to make everyone happy, but she’d had to choose between being good for them or being good for Philip. And Philip had pulled harder. He hadn’t let go.

She waved and wiped her nose on a soggy tissue.

Philip squeezed her knee. “You’ll be alright,” he said. “I’m your family now.”

#

Lake Tahoe was a forty-five-minute drive, winding up, away from the desert, to trees, to cooler air. They didn’t talk much, but it had been a big day. For a year, all they’d talked about was how the world was against them but someday they’d be together. And someday had come. They were together. They’d have to find new things to talk about. They really would.

It was dark by the time Philip parked next to a row of backed-in motorcycles in front of a two-story motor lodge. Old and brown. The sun-worn sign boasted a private beach. The Lincoln Log façade boasted a bargain.

“Here we are,” he said. “Well, the Yellow Page ad did say *Rustic*.”

Michelle stayed in the car while Philip went to register. Guests, grilling and drinking beer, gathered on the upstairs balcony, overlooking the sandy shore below. Their radio played loudly. Bugs flapped frantically into incandescent lights.

Philip walked back to the car, holding up their room key. "All checked in." He got their bags from the trunk and ushered her up the exterior stairs. He was still in his suit, and she in her ivory dress. It wasn't a real wedding dress with its knee-length pencil skirt, but the barbecuing guests still congratulated them as they worked through the crowd to their room only a few doors down. Michelle wouldn't suggest being carried across the threshold now with everyone watching. She just wanted to hustle inside. The crowd quieted, but their radio stayed loud as Philip set the bags down to open the door. She could tell what they, in their jeans and leather vests, were thinking: the newlyweds were about to have sex. As Philip unlocked the door, Michelle smiled politely at the men leaning their plastic chairs against her room's window. They raised their beers in reply.

She followed Philip in, and he flipped on the overhead light. She shut and locked the bolt, hoping the men wouldn't hear it and take offense. Philip set their bags on the twin bed across the small room. The other bed was a double, pushed up against the window where the men sat on the other side, leaning back, only inches from the mattress. The closed door didn't do much to shield the party from leaking in.

"Maybe you misread the ad. Maybe it said *Rust-y*," she said, trying to make light of the dark paneled interior, the mismatched bedcovers, the gurgling minifridge.

"What matters," he said, wrapping his arms around her waist, kissing her, "is that we are here together. As man and wife." He kissed her again, and outside, the party revived its momentum, squashing any chance for setting a romantic mood.

“Maybe they have another room?” she said. “A quieter one?”

“This was it. I wanted a lake view.” He kissed her again. “You want to change?”

“What are our choices?” She tried to remember the places they’d passed.

“No,” he laughed. “I meant into something more comfortable.”

She nodded and went to the twin bed to open the suitcase she’d borrowed from Morgan. Maybe this was what he could afford right now. She shouldn’t ask about money; they’d never spoken of such things. Philip hung his suit jacket over the desk chair, then sat on the double bed to unlace his shoes, which were new and expensive looking. And her ring had been more rock than she’d expected. But it wasn’t her place to ask, especially when she wasn’t contributing. But she was just a k—. She stopped herself. She wasn’t a kid anymore. Not for long.

She pulled out the silky white nightie she’d bought at JCPenney with her babysitting money and held it to her chest so he wouldn’t see. It was a surprise. She retreated to the bathroom and closed the wood accordion door behind her. Should she shower? He might think she was stalling. Or dirty. She took off her dress and hung it on the robe hook. She removed the bra she barely needed and her pantyhose, which had left an unseemly red dent across her belly. Was she supposed to leave her panties on? Take them off? She opted for on. Taking them off felt weird. She needed to pee, but didn’t want him to hear, so she turned on the faucet and hovered over the toilet to avoid getting an imprint of the seat on her behind. She wanted to brush her teeth, but her toiletries were in her suitcase on the bed. She could ask him to get her toothbrush but remembered she hadn’t packed toothpaste. Everyone shared the toothpaste at home. It wasn’t hers to take. She pictured the tube by the sink in the hall bath. Marcus and Matthew were probably getting ready for bed and squeezing it wrong right now.

“You okay in there?” He wasn’t at the bathroom door. Maybe still sitting on the bed.

“Mmhmm,” she said.

“I need to get in there when you’re done.”

She knew what came next. Mother once voiced her concern that Philip had “already been to the well.” Now Michelle stood at that well, peering in. She knew it would hurt. That there’d be blood. There was this movie about Vikings or a prince, who on his wedding night, cut his own hand and smeared the blood on a sheet when his bride protested, then went out and waved it to appease the rowdy wedding party. What had happened to the bride after that?

“You fall in?” The accordion door rattled.

She squeezed the door latch. It was stuck. Philip pulled from his side and she from hers, but the door clattered without budging.

“You didn’t lock it, did you?” He said *Shit* low and hard as he shook the latch. Michelle stepped back.

“Hang on,” he said, clearly annoyed. “I’ll get the manager.” It sounded like he was dressing. The music and crowd noise rushed in before he slammed the door behind him.

The manager? He couldn’t see her in a nightie. She wrapped a towel around herself like a shawl. The heat didn’t seem to work either, and she was cold. There was a timer dial on the wall. She turned it, and a red heat lamp in the ceiling clicked on, buzzing, which made the room more red than warm. Red on white tile, dramatic like in a play when someone’s done something bad. Bad and hell-worthy like murder or premarital sex. The prophet said it was better to die fighting a rapist than for a girl to lose her virtue. Did that bride fight off the prince? That was dumb to think—they were married. And she and Philip were married, which was strange to think, but they really were.

The motel room door opened, and Philip and the manager came in, and the music and the noise came in and kept coming in.

“We’ll get you out of there right quick,” the manager said. He wiggled the door. He pounded the latch.

“Did your bride lock herself in the bathroom?” a woman’s smoke worn voice scratched.

A man laughed. “Hey! His little lady locked herself in!”

“No, no,” Philip said. “The door got stuck.”

“What’s the problem here?” a different man said.

“I need to grab a tool,” the manager said.

The room grew crowded with suggestions and laughter and jests. Michelle crouched into the bathtub and watched the accordion door from behind the plastic, soap-scummed curtain.

“We’ll help get your little bride out.” More footsteps. More voices.

“No, no,” Philip said. “The manager’s getting a tool.”

“Use my crowbar.”

Michelle heard a shift in the crowd and listened for Philip’s voice, but only heard strangers talking, laughing, heavy boots shuffling, bed springs whining with the weight of sitting, and classic rock blaring.

“Stand back,” Philip shouted through the bathroom door. She reached through the clear plastic curtain, yanked down the other towel, and covered her legs. Wood crunched, and the end of a metal bar poked through the crack near the latch. She should’ve put her ivory dress back on. Why hadn’t she put her dress back on? Wood splintered. The latch popped. Everyone cheered.

The heat lamp timer clicked off.

Philip stood over the tub. “You okay?”

She looked up, nodded. He pushed back the curtain and held out his hand to help her climb out. Drops of blood plopped onto the white towel covering her lap.

“End of the crowbar must’ve got me.”

Michelle handed him the towel. He pressed it against his cut palm. She stepped out of the tub, binding her towel tightly around her shoulders, and hid behind the broken partition until Philip shoed everyone out, closed the door, and secured the chain. “I need to rinse off. Call the manager and tell him I got the door open. Ask him for a first aid kit instead.” Philip kissed her forehead, went into the bathroom, turned on the shower, and began to undress.

Maybe before calling the front desk, she could call home real quick. Catch her parents before they went to bed. Apologize. Make sure they weren’t disappointed in her. She picked up the olive-green phone. The paper sign said long distance calls required a credit card. You had to be eighteen to have a credit card. She pushed 1 for the front desk but nothing happened. No dial tone. No buzz. No ring.

She didn’t want to walk through those bikers, all thinking about her losing her virginity, to fetch Band-Aids, and then walk back through them again, back to her room, as they hooted and hollered their encouragement. But Philip had asked her to go. She was his helpmeet now.

She put on her jeans, BYU sweatshirt, and tennis shoes. Hid her white nightie in her suitcase. She held the knob and leaned her forehead against the inside of the door. Her head bounced as heavy boots stomped the balcony to Bob Seger’s “Old Time Rock and Roll.”

Doing things you don’t want to do makes you an adult, Mother once said, but Michelle thought that’s what had made her a child. Maybe being an adult meant doing things you were scared to do. Being terribly, terribly afraid and choosing to do it anyway. She held her breath, opened the door, and stepped out.

“There’s the little lady.”

“Don’t lock yourself out!”

“That was quick.”

She kept her head down and headed for the stairs. Someone held out a beer, but she brushed by, kept walking. On the sidewalk, the manager was coming toward her with his toolbox.

“We got it open,” she said.

“*You’re* the bride?”

“Can I use your phone?”

He pointed to a payphone by the vending machine. She asked about the first aid kit, and he went to the office to look. Michelle dragged her finger inside the payphone’s coin return, but it was empty. She lifted the receiver and pressed 0 even though she knew initiating a collect call cost a quarter. She hung up and walked from under the pines to see the sky. The moon wasn’t full, but it was bright, and it felt good to be outside. She stepped out to the private beach, past the cracked plastic lounge chairs to the lake’s edge until the tips of her tennis shoes sunk a little into the wet sand. Until she couldn’t walk any farther. The moonlight skid across the dark water, big as a sea. She closed her eyes to better feel the breeze kiss her face clean.

“Who you trying to call?”

Michelle hadn’t seen the woman leaning on an upturned kayak, but she recognized her smoke worn voice from earlier. It scratched like old vinyl. “Home. You know, to let them know we got here okay.”

The woman sucked her cigarette, glowing its tip bright, then exhaled, looking out at the flat water. “You pregnant?”

Michelle choked on her laugh. “Goodness, no.”

The woman stubbed her cigarette out on the kayak’s hull, pulled a sandwich bag out of her pocket, dropped the butt inside with the others, and tucked the bag back into her jean jacket.

“Then why’d you get married?”

“We’re in love.” Michelle’s voice snagged. “We really are.”

“That only gets you so far. Why the rush, kid?”

“He lives in Texas, and I live—*lived*—with my family in Reno. We want to be together.”

“What else you want?”

Michelle turned toward the woman. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, a man can’t be the only thing you got going. Surest way to get stuck.” The woman walked to the water’s edge too. Stood next to Michelle. “What else you want?”

Michelle had to think. She’d never been asked. “I don’t know. Maybe finish high school, I guess? Have more time with my family?” Michelle nodded at the distant blade-thin edge, where water met mountain, to avoid looking at the woman. To avoid letting her see more than she should see. See her thinking about her parents lying in the silent dark, disappointed. See all the lies she’d told by not telling. See her worry that Philip was surely out of the shower by now. Worry about what came next. The ache in Michelle’s gut unfurled, tender as a day-old bruise.

“I made a habit of bad choices most my life.” The woman glanced over her shoulder to the party on the balcony before facing Michelle. “Not anymore though. Playing it straight now, owing nothing to nobody but me.” She thumbed her chest.

“Seems my bad-choice habit is just getting started.” Michelle laughed her mother’s laugh, but when she saw how the woman looked at her, not believing, her lower lip pushed up, quivered her chin.

“You know what’s great about choices?” The woman flipped up her denim collar. “You can always make another one.”

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Around front, the woman kickstarted her bike.

“Where ya going?” a man called down from the balcony.

“Gonna put some wind in this girl’s hair,” she called back up. “I’ll be back.”

Michelle looked up to their room. The curtain pulled aside, and Philip’s face filled the small bathroom window. He looked hurt. Shaken. Unable to believe what he was seeing. Michelle was not the kind of person who hurt people, and she’d already hurt so many people. She was a good person, a good girl. The woman was wrong about choices. She was married now.

“I better get back,” Michelle said.

The woman looked up to the window, too. “You sure?”

Michelle smiled a sad thanks. She didn’t want to make a fuss.

“I’m two doors down if you change your mind.”

Walking back up the exterior stairs, Michelle kept her eyes shoulder-level to avoid the stares as the crowd cleared a path. Someone turned the radio down. The door to her room swung open, and Philip hopped out, shoeless, yanking on a pair of jogging pants. His hair dripped wet. White gauze was taped around his hand. He saw her and stopped. “I thought you were leaving,” he said, rubbing the palm of his wrapped hand with his other thumb.

She didn’t say anything. She wanted to, but he’d know she was lying.

He pushed their door open, holding it until she walked past him inside. Everyone watched, their necks craned, their ears flickered. She felt it on the back of her ribs, clinching, the

base of her neck, tensing, her downturned face, prickling. The door closed behind her, and the party did not crank back up.

And when Philip eased her onto the bed by the window, lifted her sweatshirt over her head and pulled off her jeans, she would not protest. She would not be that bride. When he pressed his weight against her and kissed her never-been-kissed skin, she would not listen to the men on the other side of the thin glass, inches from her exposed body, tell of first-time victories and fumbles through drunken laughter. She would hold her husband's hips between her parted thighs and envision squeezing tight on the back of the woman's motorcycle. When he pushed into her and made her a woman, she would not cry out, she would not let the men hear. No. She would feel the speed of night, the woman's split ends stinging her face, the fast cold rush of dark sky down her throat in big purging gulps pushing tears from her unshielded eyes. She would feel her own hair blowing, harsh and wild, her bobby pins failing, her baby's breath whooshing away.

And after, while he slumbered, softly snoring into her collarbone, she'd imagine the woman whisking her past motor inns. Past casinos. Past miles and miles of pines like spires. She'd imagine they were heading to Reno, back home, and Mother and Daddy rushing out from the brightly lit picture window to say they were sorry. So very sorry. They really were.