

METTE IVIE HARRISON

"A chilling mystery and nuanced look at the intimate workings of the Mormon church. Spellbinding in its unflinching examination of marriage, family and faith."

—Julia Spencer-Fleming



THE  
BISHOP'S  
WIFE

A NOVEL

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BISHOP'S  
WIFE

Mette Ivie Harrison

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For Sue Gong, who is the best and most devout part of Linda Wallheim—I hope she, and I, will always have your blessing.

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# CHAPTER 1

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Mormon bishop's wife isn't an official calling. "Bishop's wife" isn't a position listed on ward documents; there's no ceremonial laying-on of hands or pronounced blessings from on high. But if the bishop is the father of the ward, the bishop's wife is the mother, and that means there were five hundred people who were under my care I was used to the phone calls in the middle of the night, to the doorbell ringing far too late and far too early. I was used to being looked past, because I was never the person that they were there to see.

This morning at the six thirty doorbell, I shook Kurt. "They'll be wanting the bishop," he said. I was already out of bed and putting on my robe.

"I'll be there as soon as I can, Linda," he said sleepily. He hadn't been to bed before midnight last night, I was sure. I hurried downstairs, sure that something terrible had happened. It was late January in Draper, Utah, and as picturesque as the snow on the mountains was, it did not mix well with our modern lifestyle. My fear as I stood hesitating at the door was that someone was here to tell us that a teenager from the ward had skidded off the road and was on his way to the hospital. The doorbell rang again, and then the door was knocked on, impatiently.

When I finally opened the door, I saw Jared Helm, one of the newer members of the ward, carrying his five-year-old daughter, Kelly. She had curly blonde hair that always seemed messy, no matter how often it was combed. The remains of breakfast (oatmeal) were all over her chin. She was still in her pajamas, but she'd been bundled into an inside-out snowsuit. How her father had figured out how to get the zipper up without putting it on the right way around, I didn't know.

"Can I see Bishop Wallheim?" asked Jared.

Not an accident, then, I thought with relief. "Come in from the cold. He's awake, and he'll be down in a minute," I assured Jared. So would Samuel, the youngest of my five sons, who was a senior in high school; I could hear his alarm going off upstairs and knew he'd be rushing out the door soon.

I led Jared and Kelly to the front room, where my neglected piano waited for me to practice. Mostly, the room was used now for people waiting to go into Kurt's office.

Jared Helm looked terribly strained, though he was well-kempt. His hair was darker than his daughter's, but it was clear where she got the messy mop. His was wet now, the curls ruthlessly combed around a side part. He was dressed in a button-down striped shirt, cable-knit sweater, and neatly pressed khakis. I wondered if his wife did that pressing or if he did it himself.

I wished I knew the Helms better, but I had only a general impression that he and his wife were unhappy, although devoted parents to Kelly, and that they were struggling financially, as a lot of people in the ward were currently. Maybe he was here because he was in monetary trouble? Kurt could send him to the bishop's storehouse for some basic food supplies, but many people were unwilling to take that kind of help. The stigma wasn't insignificant. More often, people wanted Kurt to write them a check.

I got out a toy for Kelly to play with, but she held it limply in her hands, uninterested.

They were all trucks and building toys, things my sons had enjoyed. I'd never had a chance to build a collection of toys for girls, though I sometimes imagined what I would have bought for a daughter. Dolls? Faux cooking supplies and a tiny stove?

I found a picture book and read it quietly to her, but after several pages I put it down. Kelly's eyes were wandering all over the room. I finally sat her on my lap and let her plunk on the piano keys, which she seemed to enjoy. None of my boys had been interested at that age, except for Samuel.

But after a few minutes, Kelly's piano playing earned the attention of her father, who had been staring silently at his lap. "Stop that noise," he snapped. "You know how to behave better than that." He didn't seem to see me at all.

The little girl immediately went still and folded her hands together. The moment Jared looked away, Kelly slipped her thumb into her mouth, her eyes intent on her father, and I had the sense that she would be in trouble if he caught her doing that, too.

I moved slightly to the side, protecting Kelly from her father's critical gaze with my body, and I thought, as I so often did, about the daughter I had lost. Too often, I knew I judged other parents for not treating a daughter as I imagined I would have treated mine, had she lived.

I could hear Kurt's feet thumping on the floor of the bathroom. He was out of the shower. "The bishop will be down in just a minute, I'm sure," I said again to Jared. It wouldn't take Kurt long to dress. He had become quite efficient at putting on his daily suit. He didn't use to wear one to work every day, but since he became bishop last year, it had seemed that there was no time when he could wear casual clothes.

Samuel rushed past Jared Helm and out the front door, hair still wet, a piece of bread between his teeth. "Love you, Mom," he mumbled as he headed out to the bus stop.

"Love you," I said, still seated with Kelly on my lap. I gave up on the hope of giving my son a hug and kiss goodbye this morning. He wasn't exactly unwelcoming if I was waiting by the door and it was easy for him to stoop over me, but he wouldn't kiss or hug me back.

After Samuel had gone, I noticed that Jared was wiping tears from his eyes. He was in distress, that much was obvious. Where was his wife? If this was a financial problem, as I had first thought, why weren't they here together? I had seen Carrie Helm last Sunday at church and she had been sitting a clear distance from her husband, with Kelly between them. It had been obvious that they were in the midst of an argument, but I hadn't thought much of it at the time. Married couples fight.

Carrie Helm was one of the voices I most enjoyed in Relief Society, the church women's group. Carrie was intelligent and she wasn't afraid of saying something that might sound controversial. She was earnest about what she said, too, and didn't do it purely for the sake of causing a stir. But I'd always had the feeling her husband's viewpoints were more conservative than hers, and had wondered how that affected their marriage.

Last week in Sunday School, with Jared sitting beside her, Carrie had made a comment about the priesthood not belonging to men, but rather being God's power that men had access to. Jared's expression was livid. He'd leaned over and whispered something to her, and after that, I saw her flinch when he tried to touch her. Four days later, and apparently Jared Helm had still not apologized to her sufficiently.

And now he sat here crying silently in the hall at 6:50 on a Thursday morning. "Are you



hungry?" I asked. "I can get you something to eat." Food is the first thing we Mormons tend to offer. Sometimes it helps and sometimes it doesn't, but the offer is a way of showing concern, at least.

"No, thank you," said Jared, clearing his throat. "I'm fine."

"I'm hungry," said Kelly, taking her thumb out of her mouth.

"You don't need to eat again. I already fed you breakfast at home."

Kelly looked at her thumb and said nothing.

"Growing children are always hungry," I said. "I don't mind fixing her something. It will make me feel useful." I put Kelly down, covering up the hand with the damp thumb as I led her into the kitchen.

"Behave yourself, Kelly," said Jared.

I wasn't sure if he was always like this with her or if he was simply overly anxious about being in someone else's home. I hoped it was the latter, and I could show him that I didn't mind the trouble.

In the kitchen, I set Kelly on a stool by the counter and set out six separate jams for her to choose from as I made toast. A few minutes later, I heard Kurt come downstairs. He spoke briefly to Jared in the front room, then invited him into his office. I breathed relief and focused my attention on Kelly. After she had chosen a separate jam for each slice of toast and worked through three full pieces, the little girl drank a glass of milk and burped.

"Are you too hot? Maybe I could help you get that snowsuit off," I offered.

"Daddy put it on wrong," said Kelly, glancing in the direction her father had gone, as if she wanted to make sure he couldn't hear her.

"I can see that," I said, fighting a smile.

"Mommy never puts it on wrong, but Daddy always does."

I smiled at the echo of Carrie's spunky attitude. "Daddies are sometimes good at other things," I said.

"I know. But Daddy says Mommy is bad," said Kelly. Her lips quivered. "He says that I shouldn't want her."

"But all little girls want their mothers," I said. "Of course they do." Was Kelly telling me that her mother had left them? I supposed this was the answer to the question of why Jared was here. Poor Jared. Poor Carrie. But most of all, poor Kelly. The children were the ones who always suffered the most when parents had problems. "Your daddy loves you very much," I said.

Kelly put her hands to her hair. "He forgot to brush me," she said.

"Well, let's deal with that right now," I said, and led Kelly to the upstairs bathroom. I didn't have any ribbons or hair elastics suitable for a young girl, but I used what I could. In the end, the hair was well brushed, and I had a few tiny braids in it that were holding. By the time her father came out of Kurt's office downstairs, Kelly was giggling and making faces at herself in the mirror.

But then Jared called for his daughter and Kelly tensed, all the happiness erased from her face. Just like her mother at church last week. What was going on here? I'd thought it was simply a case of an unhappy marriage, but was it more serious than that?

"I have to obey Daddy," said Kelly.

"Yes," I said, and led her downstairs to her father's arms.

Jared didn't say a word to her or to me, simply took his daughter and left.

Kurt closed the door behind them.

"Can you tell me anything?" I asked. Most of the secrets Kurt found out were to be held in confidence, but there isn't the same kind of strictness in a Mormon bishop's counseling session as there is with Catholic confession.

Kurt shrugged. "It will come out soon enough. Carrie has left him."

"Last night? Did they have an argument? Why didn't he come then?"

"Apparently she left him in the night. He woke up and found her gone. She left a note saying she wasn't coming back."

"I'm surprised she left Kelly," I said. I was more than surprised. I was in knots about it. A mother leaving a child, it was—unfathomable to me. What pain had she been in? What had she been thinking? It was one thing to file for divorce and to ask your husband to leave the house. Or even to take your daughter and find an apartment. To leave her behind, and in the middle of the night without a proper goodbye ... I shivered.

"It's hard to know what goes on in the mind of a woman," said Kurt.

I hated when Kurt said things like that. "It is not that hard. Women are just as sensible as men," I said. "If you understand what their lives are like."

"Then how could she leave her daughter? I never would have thought it of Carrie Helm, of all people. She loved that little girl so much."

Yes, she had. She had always walked Kelly to Primary and made sure she had a big hug. "She might not have felt she had any choice." It was the only answer I could think of. Kurt, a bishop, was the one who should know more of the inner workings of their relationship than I did. But then again, Carrie and Jared had never come to see him together, so now all he would have was Jared's side of the story. Jared had a calling as an instructor in the elder quorum and fulfilled it faithfully every month. As far as Kurt was concerned, he was the one who was reliable and trustworthy.

"I asked him if there was any hope they might still reconcile. I wish they had come to see me earlier. I might have been able to help." He looked toward the kitchen, the smell of toast and jam drawing him, and we moved in that direction. I put new toast in the toaster and he got out a plate.

Along with his big appetite, Kurt had enormous faith in the power of prayer. He thought any marriage could be saved with enough work and help from God. I am sad to say I am not as believing. Some marriages aren't meant to last, and it was quite possible that Jared and Carrie Helm's was one of these. They did not seem like a particularly good match. There were marriages that worked despite disparities in character, but not many.

"He said she was very final about it. She said she was never coming back. He thinks there may be another man involved."

"I see," I said. If Carrie Helm had realized how mismatched she and Jared were, and she had found someone who was less of a mismatch—well, it almost explained things. It was selfish, but people are sometimes selfish. Sometimes even mothers. Perhaps mothers especially, since they spent so much time being unselfish.

"He's going to have to deal with divorce papers and child-care issues, along with custody agreements," Kurt was saying as he opened his favorite jam jars and began to stir the contents. Why he did that, I never knew. "But he wasn't up for talking about any of that. F

just wanted to hear me say that he wasn't to blame for what had happened, and that God still had good things for his future."

Well, I was glad that Kurt hadn't insisted on reconciliation, as most bishops would have felt obliged to do to keep the family together. "Poor Kelly," I said.

"The whole ward will have to band together to help Jared and Kelly. She'll need a lot of substitute mothers." Kurt was looking at me then. I would do what I could, of course, but I wasn't sure I knew what Kelly needed.

"I'd like to talk to Carrie. Do you think Jared might have a number for her?" I asked.

Kurt shook his head. "He said she didn't leave any way of contacting her. We'll have to wait and see what happens in the next few days." He stopped short of saying he hoped that she came back, and that all of this could still be fixed.

"Carrie is a good woman," I said, hoping it was true. I had thought I knew her, but obviously I had not known her well enough.

"Well, I suppose God can find good in any of us," said Kurt. That was as close as he came to saying he considered this situation to be Carrie's fault.

Didn't he remember those years when I had been at home with all five boys, Adam, Joseph, Kenneth, Zachary, and baby Samuel? I had never said it aloud, but there were times when I had had fantasies of walking away, going out and getting a job, finding a life of my own again, where I wasn't on call twenty-four hours a day and responsible for tiny lives. It was too much for any one person. Maybe more so for someone who had reconciled herself to not being married and never having children. And then Kurt had come along and changed all my plans, made me believe again I could have the whole Mormon dream. Husband. Children. Temple sealing. And all that went with it. We lived in a city that had once been known for the state prison at the point of the mountain and was now known for the Mormon temple that had just been built. But it seemed that the Mormon plan of happiness with a perfect family full of forgiveness hadn't worked out as well for Carrie Helm.

## CHAPTER 2

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Cheri Tate's second daughter was to be married the next day at the church. Kurt would be there to officiate, but Cheri needed support. She was Relief Society president, and very good at that job. Give her a list and she checked off every item on it. She was in charge of making sure the bishop knew about the practical needs of all the women of the ward. No one who had a baby or was in the hospital ever went without a week's worth of hot homemade meals delivered by the Relief Society sisters, all coordinated by Cheri Tate.

Her children were younger than mine, and I had married later in life, so I suspected I was nearly fifteen years older than she was. That made me feel a little maternal toward her. I could see her flaws, but I could also see her attempts to grow. She wasn't a listener and she had no sympathy for whining, but at least she was not a hypocrite. She wasn't whining about her daughter's wedding. She was just doing what had to be done.

The wedding colors were gold and silver, which I thought was a little over the top, but I had seen worse. I went early in the morning to help with the decorations. The wedding and reception would both be held in what was called the "cultural hall," but it looked more like a gym than anything else. It had hardwood floors and was polished every year so that now the polish was as thick as the wood itself. It was also painted with basketball lines underneath the polish, and there were hoops overhead.

The cultural hall was behind the chapel in the standardized, streamlined church design that allowed three different wards to share the same building for Sunday and weekday meetings. Around those two central large rooms were hallways that led to a ring of smaller classrooms and the offices for the bishopric, Stake Presidency, and High Council. There was also a kitchen—only to be used for warming up food, since no one in the ward had a state food preparation license—on the side of the building, so it could be ventilated easily if something burned.

I found Cheri in that kitchen, with her daughter, Perdita, who was wearing jeans and an old T-shirt. Obviously she hadn't headed off yet to have her hair and makeup done at a salon.

"How can I help?" I asked.

"Oh, Sister Wallheim! I'm so glad you're here. The gazebo isn't set up yet, but the pieces are in the gym," said Cheri. "Do you think you can manage it? I asked my husband to come but he can't get here until four and we'll only have two hours until the wedding then."

"I'll see what I can do," I said.

There would be no elaborate dinner, nor even a luncheon for this. The reception was after the wedding itself, starting at seven, just as it had stated on the original invitations.

Perdita, who was eighteen, and her fiancé, Jonathan, had been dating steadily since they were sixteen, despite Cheri's lectures. The Mormon church's rules on dating were clear. No dating at all before sixteen, and no steady dating until after a mission. But apparently Perdita always said she was going on group dates (which she was) and promised her mother that she and Jonathan weren't going to have sex before they married. Cheri thought that meant they would wait until after Jonathan went on a mission, but Perdita and Jonathan had declared they were too much in love to wait for two years.

They might still have been married in the temple without Jonathan going on a mission. But when it came to their premarital and temple recommend interview, it turned out that Perdita and Jonathan had come so close to having intercourse that Kurt told them they couldn't get married in the temple unless they waited another three months. And kept their hands off each other until then. Completely off. Kurt hadn't told me specifics about what they had and hadn't done, but it was his right as bishop to determine who was worthy for a temple recommend and who wasn't.

In the end, Perdita and Jonathan decided to go ahead with their original wedding date. They had already sent out the invitations. They would have had to send out a set of cancellations, and then new invitations several months later. It would have been confusing and expensive. But most of all, it would have been embarrassing. The words "sealed in the Salt Lake Temple" were embossed in gold on the wedding invitations, but since only thirty or so people were allowed into the sealing room—the closest of family members with temple recommends themselves—few people would know about the canceled temple ceremony.

"It smells wonderful, by the way," I told Cheri and Perdita. The kitchen was filled with cinnamon, ginger, and allspice.

"It's a kind of post-Christmas theme," said Perdita. "I love gingerbread."

"Ah," I said. That explained it. I gestured at the twenty-gallon pot on the stove. "And this is?"

"Wassail," said Perdita. Nonalcoholic.

"It's pretty adventurous, doing it all yourself," I said. "You weren't tempted to go to the caterers?"

Perdita shrugged.

Cheri put in, "We told them that if they did it themselves, they would get the money we saved to live on."

"Do you know how much caterers cost, Sister Wallheim?" asked Perdita, her mouth open wide.

"Actually, I do." I had two married sons, and even if I'd never had to do as much work as the mothers of the brides, I had paid for half the catering to be fair. I also thought it was worth every penny. A wedding was stressful enough—all the family members coming in, the emotional difficulty of letting go. I didn't think anyone should have to put more on the plate.

Cheri, for instance, looked like she had spent the last two weeks in a clothes dryer. Her hair was frizzled under the curlers she had in, and her skin was worse than the normal Utah winter desert crack.

"Well, we can live for three months on that, if we scrimp," said Perdita.

I glanced at Cheri, who looked away. I was more and more impressed with Perdita and her good sense. She might be just out of high school, but she knew who she wanted and she knew how to survive. That was more than I could say of myself at that age. I had been a disaster and had spent six years figuring out how to move on with my life.

"I'll come back when I'm done with the gazebo," I said with a nod toward the cultural hall.

"Don't hurt yourself," said Cheri.

The gazebo wasn't heavy, but it was tricky to put together. I painstakingly put part A in slot B, then part C in slot D. And the gazebo went up. When it was taller than I was, I got

some chairs to stand on. I heard a door open and saw an unfamiliar face bringing in flowers.

“The Tate wedding?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s here.”

He nodded and carried in several boxes of flowers, then left again.

The silver and gold ribbons were wrapped around cardboard in a pile by the door. I got them out and tried twisting them together and arranging them on the gazebo. I wasn’t an interior designer by any means, and my house was proof of that. But ribbons I thought I could manage. I poked around in the flower boxes and found some garlands to put over the top of the gazebo, as well. It wasn’t going to look like a summer wedding, but it would be nice.

Just as I was finishing, Cheri came in and stared at the gazebo. “Thank you so much,” she said. “I really didn’t think that was going to get done. I was so worried.”

“Now you can go home and take a nap before the wedding,” I suggested.

She began to cry.

Cheri Tate. I had honestly never seen her cry before, not even when her older son was in the hospital with double broken arms from a skateboarding accident. She had mostly been angry then.

“It’s all right,” I said, moving closer to her. “It’s going to be fine.”

“I just—never thought that Perdita would be married like this. It feels so wrong. It should be at the temple. I talked to her all those years about being married in the temple. A white dress, a white tuxedo, and pictures at the temple to put on her walls forever. And now this.”

A church wedding also required the couple to make certain promises about their religious beliefs. But a temple wedding is the symbol of extreme righteousness. Perdita and Jonathan hadn’t had any problems with the tithing, Word of Wisdom questions, or attending church every week and supporting their leaders. But the chastity outside of marriage question had been the stopper. I tried to make Cheri see the bright side in all of this. Her daughter was getting married and this should be a happy day. “She still has a beautiful white dress. And Jonathan seems like a nice young man. He loves her deeply and they seem sensible.” Not that either of those qualities would make marriage easy. But at least they would get through the first few years, which could be the hardest.

“They won’t be sealed for time and all eternity.”

“But there’s nothing to be ashamed of. They’re marrying, not living together. They’re still going to be good members of the church.” Perdita and Jonathan’s marriage would be for “time only,” until they waited the requisite year to be sealed in the temple eternally. The year wait was supposed to make people more eager to marry in the temple in the first place, but it could feel like a punishment. I knew, because Kurt and I had been sealed a year and three days after our own church wedding. It wasn’t something that Kurt brought up a lot, but a handful of people in the ward knew about it. “But what if something happens? What if one of them dies before the year is up?” asked Cheri.

“Come now,” I said. “If one of them dies, you’re going to be worried about whether they were married in the temple or not?” Surely there were more important things to deal with in those circumstances.

“Yes. It won’t be binding in the afterlife.”

“But you can have the sealing done after death,” I said. Wasn’t that what temples were a

about? Doing vital ordinance work for those who couldn't do it themselves? "Or what if they leave the church, either of them? Then they won't be sealed, either."

"People leave the church who marry in the temple, too. It's not a guarantee. And the sealing is broken as soon as they disobey their covenants anyway."

"Maybe you're right and I'm worried over nothing," said Cheri. "I don't know." She wiped at her eyes. Then she glanced around to make sure that no one else was there.

Mothers never worry over nothing, but it is true that sometimes we worry over things we can't control. But I knew Cheri would never have had this conversation with me if I weren't with her here, in her time of need, and if I weren't the bishop's wife. "Is Perdita still in the kitchen?"

Cheri shook her head. "She went to get her hair done. Jonathan's sister is doing it."

"To save money again?"

Cheri nodded and wiped her hands on her apron, which was on top of a skirt and nice blouse. I had worn jeans and a T-shirt, anticipating hard work, but I think Cheri felt like she had to wear Sunday clothes every time she was inside the church. "But I feel like I'm walking around naked. Everyone in the ward knows every problem in my life. Every mistake I made in raising Perdita. Every time I indulged her when I should have been more strict—even time—"

I put a hand on her arm. "Stop," I said. "No one is looking at you like that. No one is judging you." I knew it was a lie. I knew there were plenty of people who were doing just what she was afraid of. Those same people had made judgments about me when I lost my daughter. They told me I hadn't chosen the right doctor, that I hadn't gone to the hospital soon enough, that I should have taken better care of myself while pregnant. But I chose not to let them have power over me. And I didn't think Cheri should let them have power over her, either.

"But—"

"Perdita and Jonathan may end up as one of the best, most moral couples we have ever seen, deeply in love, and devoted to the church. How do you know they won't?"

"But this is such a bad beginning."

"It's not a bad beginning. It's just not the beginning you imagined." But of course, Mormons have to have absurdly high standards. Other people try not to drink to excess. Mormons refuse to drink at all. Other people cut back on their coffee at Lent. Mormons drink neither coffee nor tea, ever, and I know plenty of Mormons who think it is wrong to drink hot chocolate, or herbal tea, or decaffeinated coffee. Or anything that could be mistaken for tea at a casual glance. Or anything coffee-flavored. Or rum-flavored. Or even vanilla extract.

"What if they have children?" asked Cheri.

I thought of Kelly Helm. A temple marriage hadn't saved her parents' marriage, or her. What was sealed in heaven often didn't make a damn bit of difference on earth. "Let's focus on the good things right now," I said, "not all the bad things that might go wrong in the future. Perdita and Jonathan love each other. They're going to be happy together. They both have strong testimonies of the church. Do you believe that?"

Cheri nodded, then started to cry again.

"This is their wedding day. You're supposed to be happy for them," I reminded her.

She nodded again, and straightened. "You're right. I can't indulge myself. I have to put o

the face they expect to see. All of them.”

That wasn't precisely what I had meant, but I guess it would have the desired effect.

She started getting out the tables that were stored under the stage on the north side behind the basketball hoop. We set chairs around the tables, and I found the nice lace tablecloths in the Relief Society closet. Silver and gold horns, jewels, and links went on the center of every table, along with flowers in a silver and gold vase.

Other women came in then, and I excused myself. The plates would have to be set up, and the photographer would show up at some point. There would need to be signs on the through street outside directing people to the right building. In Draper, Utah, there were many Mormon churches, and they all were built on the same plan, so they looked nearly identical.

In the meantime, I went shopping, watched the news while I cleaned the house, and spent some time with a good book of the sort that Joseph Smith was thinking of when he said that “anything that is lovely, of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.” I attended the Relief Society monthly book club regularly, and we were frequently giving each other recommendations for books without bad language, bad moral values, or explicit sex.

I hadn't had a job since I was pregnant with my oldest son, and I kept myself busy. But lately, I had begun to wonder if I ought to be contributing to the world as more than a wife and mother. It wasn't that we needed the money, but with Samuel about to leave home, I would have more time on my hands.

Being a bishop's wife wasn't a full-time job and it certainly didn't pay. But then again, neither calling in the Mormon church does. Bishops, stake presidents, and all the other leadership positions were unpaid. That meant if you were called to go on a mission, you had to pay for it yourself. The prophet and the apostles had their travel expenses paid for and were sometimes given a stipend, but usually not.

Kurt was an accountant, and would continue to work as one through his years as bishop and whatever came afterward. His life was particularly difficult during tax season, when he had to balance double business hours as well as his church work. We didn't see him for much of March and April. Kurt had been bishop through one tax season already, and that meant he would likely be four more until he was released as bishop and another man from the ward would take over.

I CAME BACK to the church with Kurt that evening for Perdita and Jonathan's ceremony. Kurt had put on a clean white shirt and tie and I was wearing one of my best dresses, a shell pink sheath that everyone said looked good on me. It made me slightly uncomfortable because pink had never been a color I liked much, but this was a wedding, and it was not about me being comfortable.

Inside the cultural hall, under the gazebo, Kurt waited for people to arrive (Mormon standard time meant ten minutes after the wedding was supposed to begin). I sat quietly in the front row, listening to heels tapping and squeaking on hardwood. Tom deRyke and Kaia Ashby, the first and second counselors in the bishopric, arrived next with their wives, Veri and Emma. I greeted them with a nod. More people arrived by the ten minute after mark, which was pretty typical of Mormon standard time.

Then Kurt brought the couple up to the front and gave them advice. This was the longest part of any Mormon wedding ceremony, in a church or in the temple.



“Jonathan, you need to think of Perdita as the most important person in your life now. You give her one hundred percent because no marriage works unless both people are giving as much as they can. And if it feels like Perdita isn’t giving as much as you are, get on your knees right at that moment. Ask God to show you what you aren’t seeing. Because we are all blind. We see what we sacrifice, but we take for granted what other people give up. And that is true nowhere more than in a marriage,” said Kurt.

He turned to Perdita. “Perdita, Jonathan is your top priority now. I don’t mean making him happy or pretending to agree with him.” Kurt’s eyes slid toward mine and I couldn’t repress a slight smile. “I mean, his real well-being. If he is wrong, I don’t want you to think that being a good wife means ignoring that. Being a good wife means telling him the truth as best you can. It means dealing with the hard stuff together. It means having courage to face the world and having even more courage to face God together.”

I knew very well what Kurt was doing here. He hadn’t said a word about the temporary marriage ceremony or the secret endowment ceremony that these two would have gone to if they’d ended up marrying there. But his advice was filled with allusions to temple doctrine. The Adam and Eve story might be about women making the wrong choice in other religions, but in Mormonism, it is all about Eve making the right choice, even if it meant facing difficult consequences. She was the one who reminded Adam that they couldn’t obey the third commandment to multiply and replenish the earth unless they ate of the fruit, and Joseph Smith argued that she spent a thousand years thinking over the decision before she finally had the courage to face the consequences of being sent out of the Garden.

When Kurt was finished with his advice, the simple wedding ceremony was merely a yes-or-no question, at which Perdita and Jonathan agreed to marry each other with a single-word answer: “Yes.”

They exchanged rings after the words were said, but it wasn’t a necessary part of the ceremony.

The couple turned around to the family members watching from their chairs. There was some light applause as people tried to decide if it was appropriate or not. The couple kissed a second time, this time a lot longer. The photographer zoomed closer, but I had the sense that this was a real kiss, not one extended for show. It gave me a good feeling. I was glad to see that what I had told Cheri earlier wasn’t a pleasant lie. These two had a better chance than most couples.

Cheri came forward and hugged her daughter and her new son-in-law. No tears in her eyes now.

More photographs of the extended family were taken. I watched with some satisfaction as they posed under the gazebo I had put together. It didn’t fall on anyone.

Kurt came up behind me and put his arms around me. He leaned close and I could feel his breath in my ear.

“Happy memories?” he asked.

I was a little choked up. I nodded rather than trying to speak.

“I was a lucky man then. I am an even luckier man now.”

“I frustrate you to no end sometimes,” I said. “And I have as loud a mouth as ever I did.”

“I frustrate you, too,” said Kurt. “And as for your mouth.” He slid his arms around me, then kissed me gently. “I have always loved your mouth, open or closed, full of words, full of

love, or full of sharp barbs. I love it all. I love all of you.” We held hands for a little while until he was called away.

I stayed through the end of the reception, and after the couple had gone, I helped Che clean up in the cultural hall, the halls around the church, and finally in the kitchen.

“Their car was kept safe?” I asked. That was one tradition I had never approved of.

“My husband had it in the garage. He came and brought it to them, so no one could cover in slime.”

“Good for him,” I said. He was helping sweep the polished wooden floors of the gym.

I stared at the place and thought how strange it was that we could repurpose the same room for so many different things. This cultural hall would see everything in the course of its life. Funeral luncheons, weddings, basketball games, monthly Relief Society meetings, a Road Show or Stake Pageant, music practices, Sunday School, Young Men’s and Young Women activities, Boy Scout meetings, and the overflow from sacrament meetings and stake conferences.

In many ways, this hall was the most Mormon place of them all. Didn’t that make it holy in its own way? Maybe more holy than the quiet, white temple that was not part of our weekly worship?

This hall was where God came, if you believed in God.

And I did. After all this time and all my doubts, I did.

## CHAPTER 3

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Kurt went to church two hours early on Sundays, at six thirty. We shared our building with two other wards in the same neighborhood, and since we had the nine o'clock schedule this year—instead of the more envied eleven o'clock schedule or the nap-stealing one o'clock schedule—that meant his meetings with our other ward leaders were mighty early. He sometimes tried to get home for fifteen minutes before church started so he could spend time with the family and get some food.

I had started making breakfast when he called. I sighed, knowing the fact that he was calling meant he wouldn't make it home before church this week. It was likely he wouldn't be done meeting with members and giving callings until late afternoon. And he would have to go back in the evening for a fireside or other activity.

"Brother Rhodes called to ask me to talk to him," he said.

Brother Rhodes wasn't an "official" member because he lived outside the ward boundaries. He had argued with his own bishop and thus had come to our ward as a kind of rogue member.

I made a small sound—not quite a groan. "You know he isn't your problem," I said.

"He feels like my problem," said Kurt.

"At some point, someone needs to tell him to go back to his own ward and mend fences."

"I tell him that every time he talks to me," said Kurt. "But he has some genuine grievance. You know he does."

Brother Rhodes was a stickler for historical fact. This did not always go over well in gospel doctrine classes, which were designed to give people a warm feeling about the church, and perhaps a bit of a kick in the pants to work harder and stop criticizing so much. But Brother Rhodes had a PhD in history and he could not bear inaccuracy. When polygamy came up, he had to explain every date in detail, every bad story about Joseph Smith that had been told, and what he thought was likely or unlikely about it. A number of ward members found these kinds of frank discussions about the founder and greatest prophet of Mormonism unsettling.

"I hope you take notes," I said. "I want to hear all the details of what we're doing wrong."

"I'll do my best to remember, but I don't want him to think that I'm taking notes for use at a church trial. You know he is paranoid about that."

"Ah, well," I said. A church trial is convened if membership privileges are at stake. It doesn't necessarily end in excommunication, but it is the church's only way to discipline its members.

I called Samuel downstairs, and he and I talked while we ate. Samuel wasn't in gospel doctrine class, which is for adults, but he knew Brother Rhodes from his testimonies. Testimony meeting came once a month. It could be dangerous, and Kurt had to sit on the edge of his seat, ready to interrupt if someone went too far astray.

"Is he going off on the Mountain Meadows Massacre again?" asked Samuel.

"No," I said.

"Must be polygamy, then," said Samuel.

"You know, we should all thank Brother Rhodes. He works as a wonderful inoculation"

against anything anti-Mormons might say about the church. No literature you read on your mission will compare to the real facts as he offers them, completely unvarnished.”

“Yeah, but I think a lot of people just turn a blind eye to the problems in the church.”

Samuel might get flak in church for expressing these views, but at home I didn’t mind questions. I believe strongly that God wants us to learn and make our own decisions about our lives.

“Turning a blind eye can be dangerous,” I said. I was thinking of Carrie and Jared Helm. It had been three days since Jared showed up on the doorstep, and so far, we’d learned nothing more about where Carrie had gone. Jared had taken several days off work, but how long that could continue, I didn’t know. He would have to find at least part-time care for Kelly, who was only in half-day kindergarten.

“You know, Mom, I worried a little bit when Dad was called as bishop.”

“I worried, too,” I said.

“No, I worried about you. I thought you might go to another ward or something like Brother Rhodes.” Samuel played with the curl over his left ear. He had lighter brown hair than Kurt and my other boys, but in every other way looked like his father’s son. The same height—six foot—and the same rugged build with wide shoulders and chest. The same narrow, long face and thick nose. But in other ways, I knew he was mine.

“I don’t have a problem with your father as bishop, you know,” I said. None of the other boys would have said something like this, and even if it made me a little uncomfortable, I didn’t want to cut him off. “I would have thought you saw enough of our relationship to know I would support him in whatever he did.”

“I thought maybe you wouldn’t want to put him in a position where he had to tell you that you were wrong publicly.”

“You mean, unlike all of the times when he has already done that?” I asked, smiling, thinking about how we had argued in front of the kids over politics. Kurt had voted for both Bushes. I had voted for Clinton and Obama and even for John Kerry. And at one point, Kurt had tried to tell me that my cooking wasn’t good for his cholesterol, which I hadn’t appreciated at all.

“It would be different with him as the bishop,” said Samuel. “If he had to tell you that you were wrong in front of the whole ward.”

“Ah,” I said. I hadn’t thought about that from Samuel’s angle, but I could see now why he had worried. “Most people think I’m fairly conservative,” I said. I didn’t talk politics in church because I thought that was rude, and since I attended church and generally supported church activities, ward members probably thought I believed the same things they did.

Samuel rolled his eyes. “Most people are idiots,” he said. Which was a direct quote from me, I think.

“I try not to make waves,” I said.

“And you do a good job of it. It lets you see things that Dad doesn’t. You understand people in so many ways. You don’t judge them.”

It was an unexpected compliment, the kind of thing you don’t get often from a son, or from any child. I teared up a little, and then Samuel got embarrassed, and I knew that was the end of this conversation. Samuel might be more empathic than my other sons or than Kurt, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t a teenage male.

“Well,” I said.

He stood up and put his dishes in the dishwasher, not the sink, then went to get his scriptures and his tie.

I helped him with his tie, not that he wasn't perfectly capable of doing it himself. I liked to remind him that I was still in his life, still watching out for him, even if he was nearly grown up.

We walked to church together, since it was only three blocks away. Then he went off to his priesthood classes, and I went to Relief Society.

The lesson was on the priesthood, the power and authority from God that was bestowed on men of the right age and worthiness. It was not my favorite topic. If only Brother Rhodes ever came to Relief Society. I was sure he had lists of women who had been ordained to various offices of the priesthood in the old days of the church, or women who hadn't been ordained but had nonetheless called on the priesthood power from God to give blessings of healing, even using the holy, consecrated oils that their husbands had left behind.

But since Brother Rhodes wasn't here and I was biting my tongue as bishop's wife, I looked out over the women in the room and wondered how many of them were dealing with problems no one knew anything about. How many of the women were being abused? How many were having affairs? How many of them didn't know if they would have enough money to make a house payment next week or to buy medications they needed?

Midway through the lesson, I got up and went into the bathroom. I took my time about it, too, hoping the poor teacher hadn't been offended by my abrupt departure. It was while I was washing my hands that I saw Gwen Ferris step into the bathroom and slip into the first stall. She was red-faced and I could hear her breathing heavily through the stall door.

I turned off the water and got a paper towel for my hands. Then I sat there in the nursing mothers' chair, wiping at them for a long time to avoid going back to class.

Gwen came out of the stall and started washing her hands. She had thin, faintly curly dark hair and a perfectly heart-shaped face that made her pale, large eyes stand out even without makeup. She looked up at her reflection and seemed to consider the puffiness around her eyes. She turned to get a paper towel and then she saw me.

Her eyes immediately fell. “Excuse me,” she said. She pulled off a towel, dipped it in the cold water, and pressed it onto her eyes. After a moment, she looked back at herself, and then at me.

“Am I in your way?” she asked, and stepped back from the sink.

I stood up and threw the ripped and worn paper towel away. “Not at all,” I said. “I just wondered—if there was anything I could do to help. You seem upset. Was it something in the lesson?”

“I'm fine,” said Gwen. She still hadn't met my eyes.

“Is it about women and the priesthood?” I asked. “Because—” I don't know what I was going to say, but Gwen interrupted me.

“No, not that. It's—everyone always talking about how it's a woman's true calling to be a mother. About how children are such a blessing. And that's just—some days it really gets to me.”

I stared at her, cut at the reminder. Fertility problems can be very painful in a church that still believes in the commandment to multiply and replenish the earth and still promotes the

idea that a woman's place is in the home. Gwen had a good job and she was moving up the corporate ladder, as far as I knew. Until now, I had assumed that was what she wanted.

"I'm sorry."

Gwen finally looked me in the eye. "It's not your fault."

I put an arm around her and felt rather awkward patting her nearly skeletal form.

"Thank you," she said afterward. The bell had rung, and soon there were going to be Primary children in here, with their curious eyes and ears.

"You can talk to me anytime," I said. "I don't mind."

"You must be so busy," she said.

"Maybe we were meant to see each other in here," I said. "Maybe you have as much to teach me as I have to teach you."

She ducked her head, and I couldn't tell if that meant she would talk to me again or not.

I had done what I could, I tried to tell myself.

Of course there was no way Jared Helm could know about the conversation I had had with Gwen Ferris, but as if to rub salt in the wound, he raised his hand in Sunday School to answer a question about Adam and Eve. His voice shaking, he talked about the importance of eternal marriage and having children.

"There is no reason to put off having children, not for financial reasons or for emotional ones. God will bless you if you follow His commandments. We need to rely on Him more to support us through whatever difficulties may come as we obey His every word," he said.

I looked back and saw Gwen Ferris get up again and leave the room, her husband looking after her, but not following.

I stayed where I was and made a note to talk to Kurt about the Ferrises.

It was Fast Sunday, a monthly Mormon tradition of going without food for twenty-four hours (or less for younger people and pregnant women) and then giving the money saved from not eating to the poor. It is also thought to be a way to gain spiritual closeness to God through denying the body and seeking spiritual strength instead. The fasting ends with a group meeting where people share their experiences either about the fasting or other things that happened during the month. People simply stand to give testimony as "moved on by the Spirit." Though occasionally bishops have to step in and ask people to sit down, or are prompted to remind members of the guidelines that testimonies are to be largely focused on Christ.

Brother Rhodes got up to bear his testimony after a few other speakers. He tended to be long-winded, and I didn't know if I was glad about that or not. Sometimes, instead of Brother Rhodes we have a line of small children whose "testimonies" are whispered into their ears by older children. I disapprove of this practice, and there are times when church leaders send letters out to wards also discouraging it, but it never seems to stop for long. Parents are too enthused about the cuteness of young children on the stand, their testimony "as pure as the angels."

Finally, Brother Rhodes sat down, and I thought that would be the end of today's fast and testimony meeting. But little Kelly Helm leaped out of her seat and streaked to the front of the chapel before Kurt could close the meeting and announce the final song and prayer.

She grabbed the stool that was off to the side and jumped onto it. I stared at Kurt wondering if he was afraid she would say something about her mother leaving, announcing

private information to the whole ward. But how long was it going to stay private?

I tensed as she began to speak. It was an ordinary child's testimony, full of thanks for her many blessings, her food and her house, to be a member of the church, and to have the Book of Mormon. Then she got to her family. "I'm thankful for my daddy and my grandpa. And I'm thankful that my mommy is my mommy forever and that she will love me forever and that God will make us be together forever. Amen."

I muttered an "Amen," not sure if that was agreement or simply relief that Kelly was on her way back to her father's place in the congregation.

Kurt closed the meeting and we sang "God Be with You Till We Meet Again."

## CHAPTER 4

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On Monday morning when he went into his accounting office, Kurt put a note up on the fridge. It said Anna Torstensen.

I knew what it meant. He was worried about Anna Torstensen, possibly because of thoughts that had come to him during prayer the night before, possibly because of something mentioned in all the church meetings he had gone to on Sunday. He wasn't allowed to tell me why, and he was at work all day today, but he was hoping I might have a chance to go see her.

Sometimes weeks went by without a note left on the fridge and sometimes there were several names all at once. I didn't always have time to see to everyone the day the name went on the fridge, but I did my best. I knew that Tobias Torstensen was ill, and that at his age, any illness was something to take very seriously. Other than that, I wasn't sure what Kurt thought Anna might need.

I did the dishes from Sunday evening (I always wish in the mornings that I was one of those women who couldn't go to bed with dirty dishes in the sink—but of course, the night before, I am always glad I am one of those women who can go to bed with dirty dishes in the sink). After that, I took a shower. I was tempted to go out walking first, but I didn't want to keep putting off something Kurt had thought was important.

I made up a quick batch of cinnamon rolls. After they had baked, I left one pan cooling on the stove, then covered the other in aluminum foil to take with me. As I stepped outside, I glanced at the Helm house just below our hill. The yard was still covered in snow, but Kelly and Jared were out playing on a sled. Jared was dragging Kelly along with a rope around her chest. Apparently she was in afternoon kindergarten.

I waved as I walked by. Up the street, the Torstensens had a large lawn that in summer was beautifully kept. Even now, in winter, three bushes with red berries on them decorated the edges of the yard. Seeing them made me shake my head at our rather dull yard. I could blame it on Kurt's being too busy these days to devote himself to yard work—not that I was willing to give up my books or cooking to pull weeds, either. But even before Kurt was called as bishop, he had preferred to spend his Saturdays with the boys, playing football in the backyard or working on Boy Scout projects. All five of my sons were Eagle Scouts, and I was proud of that, not just for their sakes, but for mine and Kurt's. We'd done plenty of work to earn those badges, too.

I went up the steps and rang the doorbell.

"Sister Wallheim, good of you to come by." Anna Torstensen was tall and fit with thick, bluntly cut dark hair. She was one of the few women in the ward who had a graduate degree and she had worked full time as a banker before she had married Tobias Torstensen. They had never had children of their own together and I didn't know if that had been a choice or not. But Anna had helped Tobias raise his two sons from his first marriage.

Now he was retired and she had worked part-time intermittently when she chose. She had an independence, financially and emotionally, that I admired enormously. It seemed she had been able to manage all the things women are told they can't juggle at once: job, marriage,



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