

# Tribulations

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*“Kindness is the sunshine in which virtue grows.”*

*Robert Green Ingersoll*





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# Chapter 1

## *Today*

Small beams of sunlight sprayed through the cracks of the deteriorated barn's roof, as Clare Chestwick sat at the edge of the loft, gently rocking underneath the middle of five looped ropes. Several feet below rested a padded dirt floor and a few rusted tools no one in the family bothered to use or repair. Standing, Clare gripped tight to the noose, leaning back and taking account of the four people gagged and bound on wooden chairs. Ropes coaxed their necks, only to be tightened if they made a fuss. Throughout the barn, the smell of mangy wood and feces from invading wildlife mixed with the cool mist of morning, permeating the pores of the sodden prey as Clare reflected on her adolescent memories.

To bring together this modest congregation, Clare had drugged each participant with a tranquilizer obtained from a city vendor. She had asked what might happen if she pierced herself—inadvertent curiosity. The elderly gentleman, a slip of chew pushed against his lower lip, laughed at the scenario. Bits of his addiction slipped onto his chin without concern, telling her that such a predicament would be unfortunate, and would cause her to sleep for a few hours.

“Make sure you have someone with you, pretty lady, while you chase whatever you fancy. Just don't hurt any of those boys.” He laughed until

a coughing fit caused him to gag his wad into a neighboring can. Solemn, she did not partake in his jest, merely nodding and pocketing the needles.

Clare could not wait anymore, planning that night to stab, duck, and wait for the effects of the shots to take place. She tried the concoction on herself as a test, wincing at the self-administered injection, waking three hours later in a daze. Satisfied, she chose her father, Kelvin, as the first.

A rail of a man these days, despite hitting the tip of six feet, he had begun to relax now that he was in his mid-thirties, allowing the roving patches of wispy brown hair to reign wherever they lay, often fretting over the beginnings of a receding hairline. He wore only boxers this night, so once the tranquilizer took effect, Clare placed his ratty red sweatpants and generic black shirt on his body before proceeding to her mother.

Rhonda lay curled in a ball in the neighboring bedroom, wearing clothes that rarely changed. Her wavy brown locks were splayed over her pillow, unkempt by indifference. Clare's mother did not shy away from vocalizing her desire to maintain distance from Clare's father. At one time, her mother may have allowed her father's prick near the inner sanctum, pushing and driving its point until feeling his completion, saturating her God-given womanhood. Now, a divorce imminent, her mother enjoyed rest without sexual irritation. Clare placed her mother into deeper unconsciousness, aching to punch and wail the peaceful look off her face.

Though its inhabitant was gone, she walked up the stairs to look upon the haunting room of Tristen, a sixteen-year-old whiff of a boy, like his adoptive father, though smaller in frame and mind. He basked in mediocrity, trying to find the best way to make life passable; to make himself invisible enough to move through each day without strife; to make his way home in the luxury of isolation, telling her of his ecstasy in his masturbation escapades by trying to outlast or beat a record of staving off the final spurt. Clare missed the time when he was younger—innocent.

Walking into his room, she quivered in disgust of this pervert—no, rapist. She crept in, worried he may still be lingering in some hidden corner. She imagined his loose black curls, feeling his jagged bones pointing in furious directions. The ever-present smell of his relentless habits pierced her nose as she neared his bed. Sickened, she left without renewal.

Clare contemplated acquiring the other two for her plan, dragging all four bodies to the barn in quick succession, but she worried how long the tranquilizers would last given the hour that had already passed. She hoped the barn's distance would be enough so that the others would not be disturbed by any noises. She had thought far enough ahead to disconnect the security lights. Her grandmother, Edna, sleeping next door, rarely checked on night nuisances.

She hauled each with precision, careful to keep their heads from bouncing as she transferred them into the simplicity of her old childhood wagon. Upon wheeling one then the other to the barn, she began the arduous task of dragging them up the gently sloped stairs. After much deliberation, she had resorted to the use of a plywood board placed over a majority of the stairs to utilize the wagon. She also crafted a makeshift pulley system partially wrapped around a beam then around her waist in an attempt to keep the wagon from drifting, tugging them up to the loft.

Once they were situated upon their respective chairs, she bound nooses around their necks, the ropes then thrown over a horizontal roof beam and secured on a vertical support at the other side of the barn. She tied their hands to the armrests and ankles to the legs of the wooden chairs, wrapping neckerchiefs over their mouths. She wanted them to witness and listen, to know what they had done to her without giving incessant excuses.

After situating her parents, she continued on the light dirt path her family used to reach the backyard trailer where her ex-lover, Nick, resided. A rustic pissant of a man who had pined after her for years, his recent attempt at maturity had drawn her in until he'd reverted to his old bullish and careless attitude. After setting the creaking wagon next to the front door, she squeezed the syringe in one hand, ready to bring him into the fold.

Her limbs sore from dragging her parents up the stairs to the loft, she contemplated how she would place Nick upon the wagon, knowing this to be one of the worst parts of her plan to act alone. She had wanted to tell her friend Ryan of the plan. Though he may have respected the premise, Ryan would have kept her from going through with this task, never understanding the internal demons that tracked Clare.

Thankfully, Clare, at nineteen, 140 pounds, five and a half feet tall, with some lingering strength, fueled herself through willpower and adrenaline. She waited the obligatory time for the tranquilizer to work through Nick's system after pricking him in the thigh and hiding near the bed. She tied both ends of a rope around his legs, wrapped the rope around her waist, and heaved on the rope, dragging Nick through the living room and down the wooden steps, then an exhausting toss into the wagon.

Her ex-boyfriend now sat in the fourth chair, dirt and grime covering his back, a few bruises developing on his limbs. She doubled the amount of rope she used to tie his hands and legs. Despite his modest muscle tone, if any of them were able to attempt to escape in a fit of rage, he was the one. She inched Nick's chair away from the hayloft edge, having almost tossed him over as the chair scooted away with his heaved body. She pulled it back to the two feet of distance from the edge she had determined to be safe.

Clare took a break, breathing heavy against the back wall of the hayloft, her limbs blazing from this last endeavor. If she didn't hold tight to her conviction, she would probably stop and sleep. She inched herself back up, looking at her phone. Almost five in the morning. She would need to hurry before her grandmother woke, if she was not already disturbed by the noises.

Clare hastened to the abutting house, her grandmother's means of separation from the floundering marriage of her parents. She turned the doorknob, blessed that her grandmother had not woken and locked the front door from unknown fear. She walked up the familiar stairs, stepping over the sixth with a small creak.

"Kelvin, is that you?" Clare heard from her grandmother's room, though no light emitted under the door. Clare remained quiet, not wanting to stick the needle in her grandma while she was awake. "Whoever is out there, please identify yourself."

Clare wavered near the stairs on the second floor, waiting in silence for her grandmother to return to bed. With the click of the door, Clare knew she would have to improvise. "I'm sorry, Grandma. I didn't mean to wake you."

Unlocking and opening her door, Clare's grandmother, Edna, eyed her granddaughter. "Why are you up at five in the morning, Clare? You feeling okay?" Her grandmother smoothed her nightie, the light-blue frock swaying with the touch.

"Yes," Clare said, squeezing the syringe tightly in her hand, contemplating the recourse of stabbing her grandmother right here and now. This woman was the kindest and the cruelest, a tool of selfish idiosyncrasies, refusing to take honest responsibility for the neglect, the rape, Clare's loss. Her grandmother desired peace and ensured everyone knew. Every time a problem arose, Edna would make immediate efforts to smooth over the matter in secrecy. Clare knew her grandmother wondered why her granddaughter brought about such trials on the family.

"Well, what did you want then? I want to go back to bed, but I would feel better knowing you were tucked away first."

Clare breathed in quickly, then lurched the needle toward her grandmother. Edna fell back, stumbling to run to the other side of the bed. Edna prided herself on her youthful, firm physique in her fifties. Though she spurned most advances by men and kept an internal vigil for her long dead husband, Clare knew her grandmother still enjoyed the idea of being courted. Clare tried to ease the shot into her grandmother's rump, an area Clare thought would be safe to jab.

Edna cried out, falling forward, landing on both her wrists. "What is wrong with you, child?" The drug was working too slowly. "Why would you do this, Clare?"

Clare held the nose and mouth of her grandmother until she passed out. Clare fell to her side, exhausted by the lasting struggle, yet knowing she needed to finish this remaining task before the others woke. She embraced the body, taking a break at the bottom of the stairs, then managed to get her the rest of the way to the final chair. She tied and gagged her grandmother, then set herself back at the crowning epicenter of the empty middle noose.

Elated at her feats, Clare held the noose with affection, swaying in comfort, slipping at the loft edge, her right foot hovering. At the cusp of death, her body acted without pause, holding tight until she fell backwards onto the safety of the loft. She let the rope drift off, rocking back and forth over her head. She remained there, studying the cracks in

the roof, considering how this decaying barn still stood over the years, conscious of her grandmother's concern that someone's ill touch would destroy its charm.

She was exhausted, unwilling to leave her design, drifting to sleep in satisfaction. She awoke to the sun glittering in patches on her shut eyes, exuding a soft red glow. She heard groans from beside her, along with intense moaning and shuffling.

After stretching and easing herself up, she said, "I assume all of you are awake at this point." Nick continued to fight in his chair. "I'll wait until you are done with your fit, Nick." A few more tugs, then he stopped. "As you can tell, you are able to hear me, but none of you can speak or move. A noose is wrapped around your necks, and you are in a chair hovering at the edge of the hayloft. You'll be safe as long as you listen and refrain from struggling. I'll allow each of you a turn to tell me your apologies and the reasons that you have murdered my soul but left my body to rot. You are to bear witness and understand the consequences of your destructive behaviors."

Clare felt tears on her face. She hit her thigh to increase her resolve, to feel the sharp pain of bruises patterned in that spot, dark black splotches of focus on her body. "I shot you all with a tranquilizer. If you cause any issues or try to escape, I will use another. Each episode will result in everyone waiting a few more hours until you regain consciousness. You will only be the source of suffering for the others, as I will not feed or provide any of you water until this is over. We could finish within the hour, or we can elongate this into a week. Eventually, you will relinquish and allow my final resolution—simply an apology for how you wronged me."

Her mother let out a muffled cry, but Clare knew the tears stemmed from discomfort, not from the pain she had caused her daughter. Her grandmother was quiet. Clare would not have known whether she had recovered if not for the occasional twitch of her neck or itch of her finger.

"Dad, you're first." She walked to him, undoing the bandana twisted into his mouth.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing, Clare? Get us the fuck out. Once I get out of this chair, you'll be sorry. How dare you!" He



looked over at the others. “You’ve tied up your grandmother. What is wrong with you? This is how people go to jail. What do you hope to accomplish in kidnapping us? Do you think this will make me change my mind? Are you even my daughter anymore?”

With gritted focus, her father tried to burrow his hands out of the ropes. He pulled up, as if to break the arms of the chair, though his efforts did little but chafe his forearms and wrists. Clare was furious that he did not consider her base accusations, adamant that he knew of his role in her shattered life.

Relaxing, he said, “Clare, come on. This is not like you. Please let us out, and we’ll pretend this never happened. I’m sorry for whatever you think I did.”

“No, Dad. There are reasons you are here, and you very well know that.”



## Part I: Father

**“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Ephesians 6:4**



# Chapter 2

*Clare has not been born*

Kelvin's eyes glazed over the dark graveyard. He sat in his truck near the local church, just up the hill from his house. There was only one light, near the back entrance of the parking lot; he and Rhonda would not be seen outright. Kelvin tended to drink and get stoned here with his buddies. Even brought a few girls in his better attempts. He had yet to be bothered by any police officers, the closest house being a quarter of a mile around a twisting bend. This had been one of his favorite places, where he finally lost his virginity to Rhonda in a rapid action of his hips. Kelvin thought the condom would stifle the sensation, but he had been unable to help himself within minutes. Now, Rhonda's admission sullied that memory.

"How did this happen, Rhonda? We've been careful. We have to get you an abortion right now."

Kelvin hit the steering wheel three, four, five times, his hand pulsing with pain. He could not have a kid while still in high school, readying for college. Sure, no college had picked him for a soccer scholarship, but he could still try to attend, despite his failure to submit applications. Now he really saw no way out. Rhonda and his seed would root him to this damn town for the rest of his life.

"You know we've not used condoms sometimes. This is not my fault." She kept her eyes down, fingers locked in her lap.

Kelvin welled in guilt over his reaction. Four months of dating, and now he was to have a child with her. "I thought you were on the pill. That's why I felt safe."

She looked at him, her right nostril flaring. "Oh, come off it, Kel. You came in me. Begged each time." She looked down, twisting her fingers, lacing them back and forth. The pattern made Kelvin angrier. She needed to control every situation, even her emotions, with these ridiculous tics. "I guess the pill is just not fully effective. This is not my fault, so quit acting like an ass and let's deal with the situation."

"I can probably get a few hundred from Mom," he said. "Not sure how I'll explain why I need the money. Don't suppose you can get any from your folks?"

"Not without telling them what I need the money for. Kel . . . I'm not getting rid of the baby."

He swung the door open, scrambling out of the truck, and slamming the door shut. He would never lay a hand on Rhonda. He did not have the heart to be physically cruel. However, he had a harder time keeping his words at bay. Rhonda stayed in the truck, looking to him for sympathy.

He yelled through the closed window, "Why would you want to have my kid at seventeen? Rhonda, we can't keep this thing. I love you, but you must be realistic." He saw her mouth moving but could not hear the soft undertone of her voice. He threw open the truck door. "What did you say?"

She snorted, indignant. "Unless you are saying you will forcibly murder this child, then I will be having this baby."

"So, I get no say? You get knocked up, and I deal with the consequences. How selfish are you, Rhonda? How can we possibly become parents in high school and expect a bearable future?"

She stared through the windshield, refusing to look him in the eye. "Baby won't be born until after graduation, Kelvin. You don't have to take any responsibility. I'm merely telling you the situation."

Kelvin gazed at the graveyard, the chipped headstones, most more than fifty years old. The congregation for the church had slowly died off, a few stalwart families keeping it afloat with their weekly pittance. Once Reverend Shephard died, none of the parishioners knew who would take

over the church. In this sparse area, few remained that felt obligated to praise God with minimal means. Kelvin's mom had gone to the church in her youth but drifted off after the death of Kelvin's father. As she told it, she did not feel supported by the church, some speaking ill of her predicament of living in her country house all by herself with an infant. Kelvin's mom persevered but refused to acknowledge the church's existence, ensuring her son knew exactly the hardships she endured and enemies she would never forget.

Oh, Kelvin's mom knew he came here for out-of-sight activities, but she minded her business if he did not cause trouble. Now with this growth inside Rhonda, the graveyard became his mom's business. He despised bringing his mother into his personal life, as she never found a solution that included his say.

How would he possibly keep this from his mother without her encouraging something preposterous? Would she see the matter his way? Encourage Rhonda without alarm? Her son knocking up some seventeen-year-old girl would not reflect well on how she raised him. She would need to help him somehow and keep the problem quiet. A mother's reasoning could sway Rhonda.

Once he soothed his thoughts, hoping his mother would fix his problems, he reminded himself that he loved Rhonda. She had been supportive when he failed to nab any soccer scholarships, saying they would manage and suggested they attend the same college. She wanted to study journalism, not caring where she went. She would allow Kelvin to decide the destination as long as she decided her journey. He loved the passive way she controlled situations. Until now. Now, she held both their futures in the forming hands of a mistake.

The wind whipped against the truck, rocking them on the side of the hill. He stepped inside the cab, away from the cold breeze. Kelvin did not fear tipping, but Rhonda held to the door, stabilizing herself. The quiet lingered as Kelvin had nothing more to say. She knew what he wanted.

"It's not that I want to have a child at this point in my life, Kel. And I'm not against a woman's right to choose an abortion."

Kelvin did not speak, hoping she would convince herself. Any words from him might spoil this beautiful one-sided conversation. True, he did not particularly care for the idea of an abortion, but he knew the chains

of a baby would ground him to this spot. His ideals immediately expanded once the situation concerned him, but he dismissed the thought.

"I never saw myself needing an abortion. I've been so careful. Patrick and I never had a pregnancy scare for the year we had sex, so maybe I thought myself invincible." She started crying. "I don't know how I could have let this happen. What are we going to do?"

Kelvin adored this woman and became ill at her pain, watching her rare soft tears flow down her face. He wanted her to be happy, find fulfillment with him, but could that possibly include a child? She must realize the choice to be obvious. He scooted over to place his arm over her, unable to stop himself from consoling. He gritted his teeth as she shoved her face into his chest, sobs shivering over his plaid shirt, snot and salty tears seeping through.

"Do you think your mom would help us?" she sputtered, her head drifting closer to his crotch. His dick quivered as she drew near, but he fought the urge to pat her head down. Damn thing never quit, even when he supported its best interest. "My parents will throw me out if they know. I have no doubt. I'm torn too, Kelvin. Some part of me will always have regrets, no matter what we do."

Kelvin rubbed her back, shifting his lap so he did not bump her. He worried she would turn on him if she knew of his untimely desires. Maybe, just maybe, his mom could bring a better sense to the situation. His mom's indifference to Rhonda had not gone unnoticed, but that had been her best reaction to a girl so far. His mom had said that his prior girlfriend, Sheryl, was wearing "whore's clothing" the first and only time they met. Sheryl did not take offense, her skirt three fingers shy of the prize, but his mom still had no right. His mother took a different approach with Rhonda, barely acknowledging her existence, as if Rhonda was a minor annoyance that would drift off if ignored. He suspected Rhonda cared little for her either, though Rhonda never spoke an ill word of his mother. Rhonda was passive and kind until cornered, at which time she became strong-willed and stubborn. That's why he needed her to fight this battle within herself. If he pushed too far, she would sit there, arms crossed, fingers twiddling, until she had the baby on the floor of his truck.



“Let’s go see her,” he said. He did not expect this encounter to go well for anyone, but his mind floundered for a better plan. He pulled his arm from behind Rhonda to get his keys out of his pocket. She remained limp without helping, muttering incoherently, followed by pitiful whimpers. She drifted her face, still a swamp of distress, against the dashboard.

“Jesus, Rhonda.” He grabbed the tissues from the center console, handing them to her. “You can’t see Mom looking like that. She’ll know something’s wrong before we even utter a sentence and be on high alert. We must be careful in how we approach her. She’s quick to judge.”

Rhonda turned on the light over the rear-view mirror, wiping her face, then the dashboard. “I thought your mom liked me. She seems like a levelheaded woman. Raised you on her own, didn’t she?”

“She raised me on her own because she had to. I was already born when Dad died. What are you talking about? You just said your own parents would never accept this. I have no idea what she’s going to say.”

“Stop it, Kel. You’re being cruel. Let’s talk to her and get this done with.”

“Fine.” The truck roared as he reversed out of the lot, swerving recklessly down the hill. He took a left turn too sharply, tossing them both as the truck rolled into a ditch and then back onto the road.

“Damn it, Kelvin! I’m pregnant!”

“Sorry, I honestly didn’t mean to,” he said in a dismissive tone.

They left North County Road, returning to paved roadway as they ventured deeper into the country; Illinois appearing barren and colder than normal. He turned right three miles later onto a gravel-pitched path named Granite Peak Road. The county talked about paving this area as more people moved into the farmlands from the city. The town committee was tired of people complaining of rocks beating up their misplaced vehicles. Kelvin hoped they never changed the road. Driving these few miles on the rustling and shaky gravel made him feel welcome, ready to be home.

Neither spoke the remainder of the ride. He made a final left, then maneuvered down the quarter mile driveway to his house. He weaved around the larger potholes out of habit. He filled them up every year, but more always seemed to develop near or at the same place. A two-story

house with a large patio came into view. The security light went off, and Kelvin could hear his Labrador mix, Shelbie, barking around the truck.

He parked next to his mom's pale red Subaru, careful of Shelbie, who would not stay more than five feet away. He opened his door so he could grab Shelbie and keep her from Rhonda. The dog would never hurt anyone, but Shelbie never understood her size, barreling over everyone in excitement. Rhonda hurried into the house while Kelvin rubbed Shelbie's belly.

"Good girl. How's momma feeling today? I hope you have plenty of love left because she's going to be pissed. Yes, she will."

Shelbie's tongue lagged to the side as her feet shifted in excitement. Kelvin heard a familiar whistle, and Shelbie ran to the backyard to Kelvin's grandfather. He let out a long sigh and dawdled toward the house.

"Kelvin, you better have a good excuse for missing dinner. The pot roast is simmering in the cooker if you are hungry. I told Rhonda to set herself up with a plate."

He held on to the door handle, considered leaving. His mom would never scream at Rhonda, but she sure as hell would still scream at him in front of her.

"What are you doing standing in the doorway? It's cold. Come sit down with your girlfriend. She says you've something that you want to talk to me about."

Kelvin slowly closed the door, sulking past his mom. She gave him a pat on the back, grabbed a plate, and started loading it with slops of food. He sat at his normal place next to the head of the table. His mom never liked the idea of them sitting across from each other, so they always sat next to one another. She thought they could have better conversations with less distance between them.

Rhonda looked at him, her face scrunched. She was confused why he sat on the exact opposite side of the table from her. Kelvin motioned his head to the seat across from him.

"Oh, she's fine where's she's at, Kelvin. I'd like to hear what's so important before you two try to put something over me. You just keep eating your food, dear."

Kelvin looked at Rhonda, her fork swirling through mashed potatoes, clearly hurt at being excluded, as if already accused of some wrongdoing. Kelvin said nothing in her defense. That would only hurt his chances of his mom handling the situation to his satisfaction. His mom came around with her own plate. Kelvin stood and pulled out her chair, then pushed it in gently.

"I'm so glad for this surprise visit, Rhonda. Kelvin rarely lets his girlfriends meet me more than once. He thinks I'm overbearing and judgmental. Told me as much in a few of his adolescent fits." She laughed while Kelvin braced a smile, attempting to enjoy the pot roast. Rhonda returned a pained smile, her right eye twitching, but Kelvin believed his mother didn't notice.

"I like that you've had the bravery of dealing with me twice. Shows how much you must care about my Kelvin."

"I love him very much, Ms. Chestwick."

"Mrs. Chestwick, dear. I did not divorce Kelvin's father. He died tragically, and I still carry that man's name."

Rhonda froze beneath the glare from Kelvin's mother. Kelvin wanted to correct the faux pas but could not fathom words that would ease this slight. He had not prepared Rhonda at all for this second encounter, a damnable meal with his mom in force.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Chestwick," fumbled Rhonda after a pained silence.

"No harm, though it took you long enough to say." His mom took another bite, in clear delight of her wit. Kelvin hated her like this and wondered how many glasses of wine she had drunk this evening. He should have checked, though Rhonda had sprung the whole baby situation on him only hours before.

"Mom, we should just tell you what we need to talk about. No use dragging this out."

"Oh, Lord, what are you about to tell me? You better not have gotten into an accident. Did you hit and run? Dammit, Kelvin! I've told you to watch these city drivers out here, driving in the middle of the road on those hills you can't see over."

"Mom! No one is hurt. My truck is fine. Calm down." He reached out and placed his hand over hers. "Can you just let Rhonda tell you?"

His mom drew back her hand, clasping it with the other. Kelvin hoped she would not be defensive, but his mom never took new information well; she considered herself fully informed of all facets of his life.

Rhonda's gaze dropped to the floor as the room filled with silence, then a jumbled utterance fell from her mouth. Kelvin wiped the sweat off his palms.

"Speak up, dear. I can't hear you."

"I said that I'm pregnant," she said in an outcry, then blushed.

Kelvin's mom studied Rhonda. *As if wishing Rhonda dead*, Kelvin thought. At least his mother appeared to support his side of the problem.

His mom cleared her throat. "How do we know the baby is Kelvin's? From what I remember, you tramped around with that Patrick Holdstader for the past few years. Are you telling me you have not recently slept together?"

Kelvin was also curious about the answer. He did not doubt the baby was his, but he was amused by the vile accusation his mother presented. A good tactic, though Rhonda's anguished face quickly smoothed over.

"I've only been with Kel since September of this school year, so the baby is his. I have no doubts. I'll take a paternity test if you need me to," Rhonda said, as if she had expected to be called a tramp, unable to identify the father. Rhonda would certainly chastise him later for failing to rise to her defense, as if he had accused her of being a cheater. He felt her glare, though he focused on his mother, waiting for her rebuttal.

"Okay. First off, his name is Kelvin. Not Kel. I did not name and raise him for seventeen years for anyone to call him anything but his birth name." She took a bite of her food. Kelvin felt ill. "Now, assuming the baby to be Kelvin's. And I believe you, dear. I needed to be sure. I have no doubt my Kelvin would be stupid enough to thrust his seed inside you, despite my obligatory discussions with him about safe sex. Men can be so insistent, can't they?"

She patted Kelvin's hand. He pulled away, disgusted at his mom's depiction of the relationship he had with Rhonda. Did she not see the difficulty Rhonda had in revealing their situation?

"What do you intend to do about the pregnancy? I assume you've told me for a reason."

Rhonda waited until Kelvin's mom nodded her head, permitting her to speak.

"I want to keep the baby."

"Well, then," Kelvin's mom said. She stood, stacking all three of their plates, though Rhonda only ate half her food. She scraped Rhonda's leftovers into the trashcan and washed the plates.

Kelvin did not know what his mother planned to do next. Rhonda tried to whisper something to him, but he shook his head with quick inflection, a warning. His mom opened the wine cabinet, embracing a new bottle. She unscrewed the cap and poured herself a glass to the brim.

She considered the two of them. "Either of you want a glass? Appears you both want to play adult, so let's get to it."

"Rhonda can't drink, and I'm okay," Kelvin said, trying to find even ground.

"Suit yourself." She placed the top on the bottle, returning it to the cabinet. She glided to her seat, studying Kelvin.

"So, you want this baby, too? Don't look puzzled at me. You just told me not to offer your little lady a drink. Seems like you care, don't you?"

"No, ma'am," Kelvin said in a low whisper, hoping Rhonda would not hear.

"So, you don't want this baby?" Kelvin's mom yelled out, standing without spilling, slapping the table. "We have a predicament, now. Don't you think my boy should get a say about this pregnancy, Rhonda?"

Rhonda let loose, crying with her hands held tightly in her lap. Kelvin was mortified. The woman he had ached over for years, culminating in these past few wondrous months, now wanted to have his baby. Maybe this had been the Lord's way of leading them down their rightful path. He wanted and should have prayed for an easier test.

"Mom, I want to be with Rhonda," he said. "I just think that we are too young to be having a baby. I don't know the answer. I hoped you could help us find it."

"Well, you surely can't expect this young lady to want to stay with you if you demand she abort your child. Have either of you considered adoption?"

"No, ma'am. If I have the baby, I will find a way to raise her."

Kelvin's mom took a sip, a tic of her lip, then a smile arose. "Oh, Kelvin. I guess you are giving me a grandchild before I turn forty."

Kelvin leered at his mother, watching the hateful red wine tinting her lips. He knew she loved him dearly, but she could rip the worst of situations to the roots. She would ultimately defend him but always made sure he understood who kept him standing.

Rhonda stood. "Mrs. Chestwick, I can leave if you want. Kelvin told me we should talk to you. I'm sorry if this news upsets you. I know my parents will take this even worse, and I expect I will need to find a friend to stay with. I should plan accordingly."

Kelvin's mother walked to Rhonda and placed a soft hand on her shoulder, a light rub of encouragement. "Please sit down, dear. Though you may find this hard to believe, I am fully on your side. You see my son defended you quite admirably, did he not?"

Kelvin saw Rhonda coaxed down, guided like a feather to the fall. Kelvin's mom took a sip as Kelvin waited for the play to end. She had decided his fate at first utterance. "Do you like the ring on my finger, Rhonda?"

Rhonda looked at his mother, then over to Kelvin, appearing unsure of the proper response. "The ring is beautiful, Mrs. Chestwick."

"Oh yes, dear. A family heirloom of the Chestwicks, the ring Mr. Chestwick proposed with. A gaudy thing with its flower pattern of diamonds, weighing me down from the moment I said yes. Never thought I would take it off."

She marched to the other side of the dining room table, twisted off the ring, and slammed the band down, taking out a small chip in the wood. She patted Kelvin on the back and sipped her wine. Kelvin looked at her, then back at the ring.

"What do you want from me?" he said, studying the twisted confines of the band.

"Son, I am not going to have a bastard of a grandchild be raised in this house, nor will I allow this community to think I allowed my son to knock up any girl he wants and pay to have his business tended to. You say you care for this woman and want to be with her. Prove it."

He took the ring, holding it between his thumb and index finger. There never had been a choice. His mother was always the one who

decided. He loved Rhonda well enough. He rose, shuffled around the table, and got to one knee.

“Rhonda. I know this is not what you imagined, but will you marry me?”

He extended the ring, expecting her to slip her finger through. She kept her hands clasped, gazing at the ring. Fury rose in Kelvin. He felt foolish kneeling to someone so unappreciative. His mother began laughing, spitting out a little wine.

“Well, are you going to answer him, girl?”

“Will I be allowed to stay here?” Rhonda said.

“Of course. What else would you expect?”

Rhonda’s breathing quickened, and Kelvin’s knee began to ache. He wanted to throw the damn ring on the ground, ask them to figure the whole mess out and tell him if he was to be married or not, but he kept in position. Rhonda splayed out her left hand, and he slipped the ring on the designated finger only to discover the ring to be too big. He pulled the ring back, unsure how to proceed. Rhonda grabbed the ring and jammed it on her thumb, resulting in a slight cut to her knuckle, causing blood to trickle around the band now firmly in place.