

# THE 19TH WIFE

A Novel

David Ebershoff



**RANDOM HOUSE**  
TRADE PAPERBACKS

Acclaim for  
*The 19th Wife*

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A *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year and finalist for the British Book Award and the Ferro-Grumley Award

“This lyrical yet fact-packed epic is both timely and transporting... Ebershoff’s exhaustive research and deft prose combine to make [*The 19th Wife*] a literary tour de force.”

—*People* (four stars)

“Ambitious ... fascinating ... Ebershoff demonstrates abundant virtuosity, as he convincingly inhabits the voices of both a nineteenth-century Mormon wife and a contemporary gay young man excommunicated from the church, while also managing to say something about the mysterious power of faith.”

—*The New York Times*

“[*The 19th Wife*] evinces a respect for the difficult mysteries of faith as well as the importance of the family, however that might be defined... The multiplicity of perspectives serves to broaden Ebershoff’s depiction not only of polygamy, but also of the people whose lives it informs. And this gives his novel a rare sense of moral urgency.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“As timely as it is engaging ... Fascinating in its documentary detail, [*The 19th Wife*] reads like a memoir and ultimately serves to enlighten more than it condemns... [Its] snappy pace and easy-to-read prose allow us to fall deeper and deeper into the world of a modern Mormon polygamous cult and the twisted logic of plural marriage.”

—*Elle* (Reader’s Prize 2008 pick)

“Funny, profound, and utterly transporting.”

—*Marie Claire*

“Dryly comic and fearlessly honest ... *The 19th Wife* swirls around what it means for an individual to turn his back on faith, and what it means for a religion—Mormonism—to deny the contemporary effects of its own, long disavowed past... A compelling portrait of the beginnings and ends of Mormon polygamy, and a marvelous examination of its effects on women (the obvious sufferers) and men (also brutalized, the author shows). *The 19th Wife* is an exploration of how and whether community is possible after a loss of belief.”

—*Newsday*

“Highly personal and completely engaging.”

—*New York Daily News*

“A skilled ventriloquist, [Ebershoff] gives voice not only to his spirited protagonist but also to her dismayed family members, an indignant, vexed Brigham Young and impartial modern historians.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Pitch-perfect ... rich and full ... a book to get lost in ... a lot of fun to read.”

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“Compelling, well-written ... [Ebershoff] uses fiction, like many before him, to show deeper truth, with a much wider scope, than any separate (‘real’) look at polygamy could.”

—*The Denver Post*

“Wonderful ... Like A. S. Byatt, whose brilliant novel *Possession* also split the narrative between time periods, Ebershoff uses a series of fictionalized documents to add depth and perspective to his tale.”

—*Sacramento News & Review*

“Part ‘documentary,’ part detective story ... [*The 19th Wife*] goes to the heart of questions raised by polygamy.”

—*The Dallas Morning News*

“As the mystery in David Ebershoff’s novel *The 19th Wife* unfolds, so does the complexity of understanding what it means for an individual to turn his back on faith.... A compelling portrait of the beginnings and ends of Mormon polygamy.”

—*The Detroit News and Free Press*

“Epic ... smart ... Ebershoff’s novel has created a national stir in a mostly quiet literary season.”

—*The Salt Lake Tribune*

“*The 19th Wife* succeeds in illustrating how the same issues have spanned great temporal changes in polygamist culture ... the arguments supporting it, the original Mormon custom that sustained it, the less exalted problems it created and the legal issues that eventually drove it underground.... [David Ebershoff] has replicated ... powerfully ... the turbulent history of polygamy in America.”

—*The New York Times*

“A contender for The Great American Novel. If jazz is the only truly original American art form, Ebershoff sees that Mormonism is the only homegrown religion that has succeeded on a massive scale.... He sees the myriad storytelling possibilities that flow from this grand native myth of upstate New York farmer Joseph Smith.”

—*Pasadena Star-News*

“An exquisite tour de force ... Ebershoff brilliantly blends a haunting fictional narrative b

Ann Eliza Young ... with the equally compelling contemporary narrative of fictional Jordan Scott.... With the topic of plural marriage and its shattering impact on women and powerless children in today's headlines, this novel is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the subject.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred and Pick of the Week)

“Reminiscent of Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose* in scope and ambition ... Many historical events intertwine in [*The 19th Wife*], and many voices are heard from, ranging from the stately cadences of Victorian steel-nib prose to the most modern lingo.... Ebershoff takes a promising historical premise and runs with it.”

—*Kirkus Review*

“Great fun to read with its enticing characters, swift dialogue, and neatly structured plot. Ebershoff’s sensitive and topical tale of hijacked religion and sexual tyranny, true community and freedom, provides much food for thought in the mode of such seriously popular writers as Jodi Picoult, Anna Quindlen, and Andre Dubus III.”

—*Booklist* (starred)

“Wonderful ... *The 19th Wife* is the heir apparent to *The Red Tent* and, like *The Da Vinci Code*, is that rare book that effortlessly explicates and entertains all at once.... Ebershoff masterfully moves between two narratives that ultimately become one: the memoir of Ann Eliza Young, Brigham Young’s 19th wife ... and a riveting modern murder mystery as taut and deft as any whodunit.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, “Galley Talk”

“Timely ... Ebershoff has clearly done his research, as the extensive bibliography shows, but the book never bogs down in dry, factual detail. *The 19th Wife* subtly relates the way Mormon history continues to affect present-day policies and realities with a surprising amount of insight and sensitivity, creating an entertaining, sympathetic and sometimes very funny novel.”

—*Bookpage*

“A timely tale ... Ebershoff alternates between the modern-day mystery and an array of historical documents tracing the introduction of polygamy in the 19th century. Sound dry. It’s anything but.... Because [*The 19th Wife*] centers continually on the humanity of the people involved—including the humanity of the early church leaders who originated the custom of Mormon polygamy—it’s a good story even if you’ve never felt a driving urge to learn all about early Mormonism.”

—*The Charlotte Observer* (four stars)

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A NOVEL

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DAVID  
EBERSHOFF



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NEW YORK

*The 19th Wife* is a work of historical fiction. Apart from the well-known actual people, events, and locales that figure in the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental.

2009 Random House Trade Paperback Edition

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Originally published in hardcover in the United States by Random House, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., in 2008.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Ebershoff, David.

The 19th wife : a novel / David Ebershoff.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-1-58836-748-8

1. Mormons—Fiction. 2. Utah—Fiction. 3. Young, Ann Eliza,

b. 1844—Fiction. 4. Polygamy—Utah—Fiction.

I. Title. II. Nineteenth wife.

PS3555.B4824A615 2008

813'.54—dc22 2008000074

[www.randomhousereaderscircle.com](http://www.randomhousereaderscircle.com)

v3.1\_r1

~~Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.~~

—SAINT AUGUSTINE

Like all the other arts, the Science of Deduction and Analysis is one which can only be acquired by long and patient study, nor is life long enough to allow any mortal to attain the highest possible perfection in it.

—ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men.

—The Book of Mormon, translated by JOSEPH SMITH, JR.

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I

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**TWO WIVES**

# THE 19TH WIFE

FEATURING,

ONE LADY'S ACCOUNT OF

## Plural Marriage and Its Woes

BEING

THE CHRONICLE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF

### ANN ELIZA YOUNG—

19<sup>TH</sup> AND REBEL WIFE OF THE

LEADER OF THE UTAH SAINTS AND

PROPHET OF THE MORMON CHURCH,

### BRIGHAM YOUNG

WRITTEN BY HERSELF

---

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

**MRS. HARRIET BEECHER STOWE**

AND INCLUDING STEEL-PLATE ILLUSTRATIONS

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EASTON & CO.

NEW YORK

1875

# THE 19TH WIFE

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

In the one year since I renounced my Mormon faith, and set out to tell the nation the truth about American polygamy, many people have wondered why I ever agreed to become plural wife. Everyone I meet, whether farmer, miner, railman, professor, cleric, or the long-faced Senator, and most especially the wives of these—everyone wants to know why I would submit to a marital practice so filled with subjugation and sorrow. When I tell them my father has five wives, and I was raised to believe plural marriage is the will of God, the sincere people often ask, *But Mrs. Young—how could you believe such a claim?*

Faith, I tell them, is a mystery, elusive to many, and never easy to explain.

Now, with the publication of this autobiography, my enemies will no doubt suspect my motives. Having survived attempts on both my life and character, however, I stand unconcerned by their assaults. I have chosen to commit my memories to the page neither for fame, the trough from which I have drunk and would be happy never to return to, nor fortune, although it is true I am without home and have two small boys to care for. Simply, I wish to expose the tragic state of polygamy's women, who must live in a bondage not seen in this country since the abolishment of slavery a decade ago; and to reveal the lamentable situation of its children, lonely as they are.

I promise my Dear Reader I shall recount my story truthfully, even when it distresses me to do so. In these pages you will come to know my mother, who by religious duty welcomed four wives into her husband's bed. You will encounter the old woman forced to share her husband with a girl one-fifth her age. And you shall meet the gentleman with so many wives that when one approaches him on the street, he answers, "Madame, do I know you?"

I can, and will, go on.

Under what circumstances does such outrage thrive? The Territory of Utah, glorious as it may be, spiked by granite peaks and red jasper rocks, cut by echoing canyons and ravines spread upon a wide basin of gamma grass and wandering streams, this land of blowing snow and sand, of iron, copper, and the great salten sea—Utah, whose scarlet-golden beauty marks the best of God's handiwork—the Territory of Utah stands defiant as a Theocracy within the borders of our beloved Democracy, *imperium in imperio*.

I write not for sensation, but for Truth. I leave judgment to the hearts of my good Readers everywhere. I am but one, yet to this day countless others lead lives even more destitute and enslaved than mine ever was. Perhaps my story is the exception because I escaped, at great risk, polygamy's conjugal chains; and that my husband is the Mormon Church's Prophet and Leader, Brigham Young, and I am his 19th, and final, wife.

Sincerely Yours,

ANN ELIZA YOUNG

Summer 1874

# WIFE #19:

## A DESERT MYSTERY

By Jordan Scott

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### PROLOGUE

*Her Big Boy*

According to the *St. George Register*, on a clear night last June, at some time between eleven and half-past, my mom—who isn't anything like this—tiptoed down to the basement of the house I grew up in with a Big Boy .44 Magnum in her hands. At the foot of the stairs she knocked on the door to my dad's den. From inside he called, "Who is it?" She answered, "M BeckyLyn." He said—or must've said—"Come in." What happened next? Nearly everyone southwest Utah can tell you. She nailed an ace shot and blew his heart clean from his chest. The paper says he was in his computer chair, and from the way the blood splattered through the drywall they're pretty sure the blast spun him three times around.

At the time of his death my dad was online playing Texas hold em and chatting with three people, including someone named DesertMissy. He spent the final seconds of his life in the exchange:

Manofthehouse2004: hang on

DesertMissy: phone?

Manofthehouse2004: no my wife

DesertMissy: which one?

Manofthehouse2004: #19

Sometime later—a few seconds? minutes?—DesertMissy wrote: u there??

Later she tried again: u there????

Eventually she gave up. They always do.

When my mom pulled the trigger my dad had a full house, three fives and a pair of ducks. He was all in. The paper says although dead, he ended up winning seven grand.

I once heard someone on tv say we die as we lived. That sounds about right. After my dad was shot the blood seeped across his gunsandammo.com t-shirt in a heavy stain. He was sixty-seven, his face pre-cancerously red. Everything about him was thick and worn from a life boiled by the sun. When I was a kid I used to dream he was a cowboy. I would imagine him out in the barn saddling his roan with the white socks, readying himself for a ride of justice. But my dad never rode anywhere for justice. He was a religious con man, a higher-up in the church of lies, the kind of schemer who goes around saying God meant for man to have many women and children and they shall be judged on how they obey. I know people don't really talk like that, but he did and so do a lot of the men where I come from, which is—let's ju

say—way the fuck out in the desert. You might've heard of us. The First Latter-day Saint but everyone knows us as the Firsts. I should tell you right off we weren't Mormons. We were something else—a cult, a cowboy theocracy, a little slice of Saudi America. We've been called everything. I know all that because I left six years ago. That was the last time I saw my dad. My mom too. I know you know this but just in case: she was wife #19.

His first wife was more than willing to put the rap on my mom. For someone who was supposed to talk to nonbelievers, Sister Rita had no trouble telling the *Register* everything. "I was up in the keeping room with the girls' hose," she blabbed to the paper. "That's when I saw her come upstairs. She had one of those faces—it looked funny, all squished up and red like she'd seen something. I thought about asking but I didn't, I don't know why. I found him about twenty minutes after that when I went down myself. I should've gone down the minute I saw that face of hers, but how was I supposed to know? When I saw him in his chair like that, with his head, you know, just hanging in his chest like that, and all that blood—it was everywhere, I mean all over him, everything so, so *wet*, and *red*—well I started calling, just calling out to anyone for help. That's when they came running down, all of them, the women I mean, one after the next, the kids too, they kept coming. The house shook, there were so many running down the stairs. The first to get there was Sister Sherry, I think. When I told her what happened, and then she saw for herself, she started crying, screaming really, and the next one, she started crying too, and then the next after her, and so on. I never heard anything like it. The shrieks spread up the line, like fire, catching and spreading, one after the next and pretty soon it seemed the whole house was on fire with screams, if you know what I mean. You see, we all loved him just the same."

The next morning the Lincoln County sheriff handcuffed my mom: "You'll have to come with me, Sister." I don't know who called him in, he usually didn't get out to Mesadale. There's a picture of her being guided into the backseat of the cruiser—the rope of her bra flat against her back as she ducks in. The paper says she didn't resist. Tell me about it. She didn't resist when her husband married her fifteen-year-old niece. She didn't resist when the Prophet told her to throw me out. "No point in making a fuss"—she used to say that all the time. For years she was obedient, believing it part of her salvation. Then one day I guess she went *pop!* That's how these things go, you hear about it all the time. Except because of the suppressor it was probably more like a *phump!* than a *pop!*

Did Sister Rita do her in? Actually, it was the chat session. The *Register* loved the irony. VICTIM NAMES HIS MURDERER BEFORE SHE PULLS THE TRIGGER. Technically he didn't name her, he numbered her. But really, Rita's statement didn't help either. It gave the sheriff enough. The next day my mom was booked and that picture was up on the *Register's* home page, my mom sliding into the cruiser, her hair a heavy chain.

That's how I found out. I was at the library with my friend Roland. We were tooling around the web, checking out nothing in particular, then all of a sudden there it was, the story about my mom:

## WIFE #19 KILLS HUSBAND

---

SIGN OF STRIFE IN RENEGADE SECT?

In the picture she's shackled at the wrists. Her forehead is white and glossy, reflecting camera's flash in the dawn, and she has a look in her eyes. How to describe it? Should I say her eyes were dark and damp, the eyes of a small snouted animal? Or will you know what I mean if I say she had the scared-shitless look of a woman busted for murder and about to spend the rest of her life in the can?

**II**



**WIFE #19:**

**THE RED IN THE DESERT**



## WELCOME TO FLIPPIN' UTAH

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Before I go any further there are a few things you should know. I'm twenty years old but a lot of people say I look younger. In the last six years I've lived almost everywhere between southern Utah and LA, five of them with Elektra. For two years we lived in and around Vegas out of a beat-up florist's van with a bunch of hydrangeas stenciled on the side. I still have the van but now Elektra and I live in Pasadena, in a studio apartment above a garage.

I probably should tell you a little something about Elektra, because she's the only reason I made it, given the circumstances. She's got rich brown hair that turns red in the sun, yellow-gold nearly electric eyes—you'd swear there were bulbs behind them—and the kind of long long legs that make people turn around and whistle. Roland likes to say she's got the legs of a supermodel, but that's just him. I found her in a parking lot off Industrial about a year after I was kicked out. Her snout was in a Taco Bell bag, which is pretty much what I was doing to eat. I don't know what she is exactly—some sort of hound/bird-dog mix with a few drops of pit bull. That gives her cred with some people but I'm not into things like that. All I care is she's my girl. For the record she came with that name tattooed to the underside of her left ear. It looks like this:

ELEKTRA

BITE ME!

If you want to know what I look like I should tell you what a customer once said: *You got a face like a fucking doll.* That old guy, as he was paying me fifty bucks, he said, *Kid, you got some fucking roses in your cheeks. I like that.* In addition to the roses, I've got a high kind of girlish voice I used to wish was lower but I don't bother worrying about anymore. A priest once went to (mistake) said my eyes reminded him of the blue sea glass he found on the Jersey shore when he was a boy. I left before he could look into them any deeper. Someone else, a loser with a wife and twins, said they were like two little sapphires, little gemstones, he said, then paid me to put my arm somewhere it should never go. But I don't do that anymore. Those were my lean & teen years. Now I make a living in construction, which I'm actually pretty good at. It's the only thing I can thank the Prophet for. I'm especially good at framing and roofing, which means I work outside a lot. Roland likes to say, "Another year under the sun, Jo-Jo, and you'll be old like the rest of us." He's the only person who calls me Jo-Jo. I don't know why he does it. My name's Jordan. Jordan Scott.

I'm telling you all this because people always get me wrong. I know what they see: hustler, twink, whatever. But I'm not some precious stone or some fucking doll. I'm just a guy who got totally screwed when he was fourteen and by all odds should be in jail or dead or both but actually is managing just fine. That's it. That's all you need to know.

Oh, and this: once I was at the library in line checking out a book on the history of God and this finger tapped me on the shoulder: "What is someone like *you* doing with a book like *that*?" That's how Roland and I met. We don't have much in common except we hang out at the library a lot. It's a nice library, the Pasadena Public. I've never seen them bother anyone who doesn't have a place to go. Once the librarian, Sue, once she even let Elektra into the

children's room to meet the kids. She liked that—Elektra, I mean. But this story isn't about Sue and it's not about Roland or Elektra and it isn't even really about me. It's about my mom and I guess my dad, and about this bullshit Prophet who I used to believe could speak to God. I know, can you believe it? Unfortunately it's all true.

I was at the library when I saw that picture on the *Register's* home page. "Oh my God, Roland," I said. "That's my mom." He was too busy studying last month's *Vogue* to hear me. "Roland, look." I had to kick him to get his attention. "My mom."

"Who? What?" Then he looked up. "Oh my God. Your *mom*? Really? How'd she get on the home page?"

"It says she killed my dad."

"She *what*?" He leaned into the screen for a closer look and his eyebrows shot up. "Come on, honey, you told me it was bad out there, but you didn't mention that awful braid." He said something about my mom's Little House on the Prairie dress, but I stopped listening. The picture—I can't explain it. I couldn't look away.

"Jo-Jo.... Jordan? You all right?"

"Where do you think they're taking her?"

"Well, let's find out." Roland scooted over and began googling. "What's the name of the county out there in Utah?"

"Lincoln. Why?"

"Lincoln County ... Utah ... corrections ..." He typed gently, as if protecting a manicured nail. "Uh-huh, this looks right.... OK, Jo-Jo, I think we're going to find her. Give it a sec." He clicked the mouse. "Yep, this is it: inmate inquiry. Her name?"

"BeckyLyn, capital B, capital L, no space."

He pursed his lips, like he'd heard something tacky. "All righty, let's see what we can find. Capital B"—click click click—"capital L. Scott, like the tissue. OK, just give it a second: there she is!"

And there she was, not her picture, but her name on a list of inmates:

BOOKING NO.	INMATE ID	LAST NAME	FIRST NAME
<u>066001825</u>	207334	Scott	BeckyLyn

He clicked her booking number and an hourglass turned on the screen. Then it came up: Inmate Information for BeckyLyn Scott. "Remember, Jordan, no one looks good in a mugshot. I'm speaking only from experience."

He was right. She was in a mustard jumpsuit, standing before a board that measured her height in inches (62) and centimeters (157). Her complexion was gray and cloudy. Her eyes pleaded from their sockets. "It's her," I said.

"Let's see her profile." Roland clicked the screen. Her right profile showed the hard tendons in her throat, her left revealed an ear as small as a shell. But it was the first shot that did me. That's how she looked the last time I saw her. Like she was in a trance.

"I don't want you to take this the wrong way," said Roland, "but I see a resemblance."

I hope you know what I'm talking about when I say every once in a while, not very often, I don't know exactly what I'm supposed to do with my life, even if I can't explain why. The trick is to tune in for it, like scanning the radio for a favorite song.

“I’m going to Utah,” I said.

You should’ve seen Roland’s face: “You’re going to Utah? *Now?*”

“She’s my mom.”

“I thought you said you’d never go back there.”

“I need to see her.”

“After what she did to you?”

Right before we looked at the *Register*’s home page, Roland had been checking out this di website with a banner that kept flashing LATER IS NOW! So cheesy, I know, but I couldn’t get it o of my head. It was Sunday afternoon, I just got paid, I had a lame job installing a vanity o Monday I could get out of, and Elektra was always up for a road trip. “Later is now,” I said.

“Oh please, later is later. Besides, I thought we were going to celebrate your birthday.”

“Next year.”

“Jo-Jo, what’s gotten into you?”

“Look at her—her eyes, I mean. I need to see her. I’ll be gone a day, two max.”

“Sweetie, before you get in that van of yours and drive all the way to Utah, can I remind you of two small but highly relevant facts? One—and I’m sorry to put it like this—your mo dumped you on the highway in the middle of the night when you were—what?—fourtee Not a nice thing. And two, she just popped off your dad. Are you really sure a fami reunion’s such a good idea?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going.” And then, “Want to come?”

“Oh, no thanks, honey, I’m going to hell in my next life. I see no point in dropping early.”

Outside of Barstow I called the jail. Turns out there’s a twenty-four-hour rule, so I couldn see my mom until the next afternoon. I tried to talk the officer into a morning visit, but she cut me off: “It’s not going to happen, all right?” She went over the visiting rules, r interaction with other inmates, that sort of stuff, and how I couldn’t bring anything into th jail except my clothes. “That means no jewelry, earrings, or body rings of *any* kind. If yo weren’t born with it, don’t bring it.”

“What about my dog?”

I don’t know why I said that but it’s a good thing I did, because by chance she was a do person. She asked me what I had and I told her about Elektra. “Sounds like a beauty,” she said, then went on to describe her own pair of corgis. “If you have any questions, you can ca me back, I’ll give you my direct. But I have to warn you: your mom has the right to refus your visit and she doesn’t have to give a reason. If that happens, I’ll give you a ring.”

I kept driving east on 15, looking at my phone to see if Officer Cunningham had calle while I was out of signal. Somewhere past Vegas, Elektra became anxious, trembling an whimpering in my ear. I let her out to pee but that wasn’t it. She’s really good at picking u how I feel even before I know how I feel. She climbed into my lap and draped her head ov my shoulder. I stroked her with one hand while steering with the other and I realized I was little bit scared.

When I reached the Utah Welcome Center there was a message on my phone. I feared might be Officer Cunningham telling me my mom didn’t want to see me, but it was Rolan checking in. “Honey, if it gets bad out there, promise me you’ll come home, all right?”

The next day at the county jail I handed over my ID to Officer Cunningham. “Where Elektra?”

Quick version of a long story: I met this goth girl at an internet café who agreed to wait for me, and right about now she was probably eating cookies on a couch. I could tell the officer thought less of me for leaving my dog with a stranger, but it was 115 outside and around here you need to look hard for a scrap of shade.

Officer Cunningham passed me through the metal detector, punched something into her terminal, frowned, punched something else. “OK, here’s the drill,” she said. “Your mom’s staying on secure visits, which is never any fun. Go on through the door to the left, you’re in the cubicle at the end. Officer Kane will bring her out in a few.”

The cubicles looked like a row of phone booths, the kind you sit in. A small stool with a round red plastic seat. A yellow phone receiver mounted to the left partition. The room was pretty crowded, several women waving pacifiers and squeaky toys in a vain effort to keep their babies from exploding into tears. Visits were limited to two people but babies under one didn’t count. It seemed everyone had brought as many infants as they could carry. A sign on the wall said, MOTHERS: KEEP YOUR CHILDREN UNDER CONTROL!

As if.

I waited on my stool, staring through the thick glass screen. In my reflection I saw the red patches in my cheeks. My eyes looked small and dark—they were my mom’s eyes, anyone could see that.

After I was kicked out (they call it excommunicated, but whatever), I honestly thought I’d never see her again, and I have to say I didn’t really care. I was mad, starting with God, then the Prophet, but my mom was next up on the list. I’m still mad at him—God, I mean—because my mom tossed me on the highway at two A.M. in his name. Trust me: that can mess you up. Instead of bawling about it, I vowed never to think about any of them again. You have to remember I was fourteen. I’d never left Mesadale. I knew jack about the world. In my backpack I had a sweatshirt, some sacred underwear (don’t ask), and seventeen bucks. In my pockets: nada. In all fairness my mom took a risk slipping me the money, but it didn’t feel like much at the time. I was real lucky that trucker hauling bedding picked me up after about an hour. He could’ve wanted a blow job or something, but really all he wanted was to talk about his wife. She had recently died in a fire and he couldn’t keep the memories of himself. I rode with him to St. George. Together we watched the sunrise behind us in the sideviews. You ever see the sun come up over the Utah desert? Imagine the coals of hell burning in the clouds. “Man, check that out,” the driver said at one point. “It’s like God took a torch to the whole fucking sky.”

On the other side of the glass, a corrections officer escorted my mom to the stool. Our eyes met, and it was like following your gaze in a mirror. Wherever I looked she looked. At the stool, at the wall clock, at the phone.

She looked more or less the same—the tough jaw, the small snout of a nose—but they’d cut her hair into a dense ugly shrub. I’d never seen her with a haircut. She could tell I was staring at it because she touched it, as if she were wearing a wig about to slip off. What else can I tell you about her? She was fourteen when she married my dad, which means she’s now thirty-five. Her voice is small and girlish, kinda like mine. She has those same roses in her

cheeks. What else? For the record, she's my dad's niece *and* his first cousin. Which makes me ... oh, you figure it out.

"Jordan? Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"My goodness, look at you: you're all grown up."

"I heard about Dad."

"It's a tragedy."

"It sounds like a mess."

"I knew you'd come to see me. I've been praying for it."

I stopped, holding down a little rage. "Mom. Don't take this the wrong way, but that's not why I'm here."

"Yes, Jordan. Yes, it is." She was leaning in very close to the glass, her face done up in the pink and blue of irrational excitement.

"Look, Mom, can you tell me what happened?"

She sat back, the color wiped from her face. "I have no idea."

In the next cubicle a baby was gagging on sobs and tears. The baby's mom or aunt or whoever kept saying it's all right, everything's going to be all right—which in this case was a total lie.

"Was it how Sister Rita described it?"

"Why, what'd she say?"

As I recapped Rita's statement, my mom's eyes filled with tears. "It wasn't like that," she said. "That's just not the way it was."

"Then what happened?"

She hesitated, as if gathering up the memory. "You've never seen so much blood. I saw them take him out on the stretcher. That's when I knew—" But a sob got the better of her and she couldn't finish. "Jordan, I know everything's been hard on you. Us saying good-bye like that. And now you seeing me like this. I never thought it would be like this. I always thought, well, I just thought—" Her voice cut off and she pressed her eyes with the heels of her hands.

When she calmed herself down she said, "Tell me what you've been doing all this time where you've been, where you live. Are you married? Maybe you're a father yourself? I want to know if your life's at all like I imagined."

Call me crazy, but it seems to me if you throw out your only son because some con man Prophet told you to, well, it just seems to me you really don't have a right to know who comes after. "It's a long story," I said. "I live in California and everything's fine."

"Are you on your own?"

I told her about Elektra, and that seemed to brighten her up. "But Mom, that's not why I'm here. Can you tell me what's going on?"

"All I know is there was some sort of hearing this morning. It only lasted a few minutes. I told Mr. Heber—"

"Who's Mr. Heber?"

"The lawyer they gave me. I told him I wanted to speak to the judge, but he said it wasn't the right time, just tell him your name. They were talking about bail, the judge didn't want to set any and Mr. Heber said that wasn't fair and he won, but it doesn't matter. Where am I?"

going to come up with a million dollars? Then they brought me back here.”

“At least you’re out of Mesadale.”

She switched the receiver from her left ear to her right. “It was your birthday yesterday. I kept thinking of you all day. Isn’t it amazing how God works? I was thinking of you and you were thinking of me.”

You know what, maybe Roland was right: I shouldn’t be here. Maybe later was later. Maybe later was never. If I left now, I could be back in Pasadena before midnight. He and I could meet for a late-night coffee and a doughnut at Winchell’s.

“Remember how you used to love the birthday parties?” she went on. “I can picture you when you were just a little guy, waiting in line with a paper plate for a slice of cake. You were always such a good boy, Jordan, always so patient and good.”

“To be perfectly honest, those are some of the worst memories of my life.”

“What? Why?”

“Those parties were for the Prophet.”

“I know, but that’s what made it so much fun.”

“Fun? Mom, they made us celebrate our birthdays on his. You realize how screwed up that is?”

“I don’t know, I think it’s nice, everyone celebrating together like that.”

I caught myself. “OK, Mom, let’s not do this.”

“Do what?”

“Go over the past.”

She paused. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Look, Mom, before I go, is there anything I can get you?”

“You’re going?”

“It’s a long drive home.”

“Jordan, you can’t go now. I need your help.”

“What kind of help?”

“I need you to talk to Mr. Heber.”

“About what?”

“About when I can get out of here.”

“You should probably do that yourself.”

“I did. And he said he couldn’t say, which is unacceptable as far as I’m concerned.”

You know how when you’re away from your mom you miss her, and the minute you see her she starts driving you crazy? Multiply that feeling by a million.

“Mom, let me ask you this: why now?”

“Why now what?”

“I mean after all this time? Something must’ve happened. You always seemed so sure of everything. When you said good-bye to me that night, you told me you had to do whatever God said.”

“That’s right. Of course I didn’t want to leave you like that, I told you that. But I knew it was God testing me. That’s what the Prophet said: BeckyLyn, this is your test, your test from God. It’s not that I didn’t love you, it’s just what God wanted for you, and for me. I thought you’d understand that.”

“You know what I understand: it’s all bullshit. Everything about that place, starting with

God, then the Prophet, then Dad. So when I read what happened with Dad, what you did, was like thank God, she's finally woken up."

"What I *did*? Wait a minute ... Do you honestly think—do you really believe I killed your father? Oh Jordan, no. No no no no no. How could you believe such a thing?"

"How could I believe such a thing? Mom, you're in jail."

"I can understand the authorities getting it wrong, but *you*?"

"Sister Rita spelled it out pretty clearly."

"Sister Rita?" She balled up her fist. "Just so you know: I did not kill your father. He was my husband. I was his wife. Why in heaven's name would I kill him?"

I could think of a million reasons. To tell the truth, it hadn't crossed my mind that she was innocent.

"On the Prophet's life, I did not kill your father."

It's a little weird to admit but I was disappointed by her denial.

And I didn't believe her, not for a second. "Then who did?"

"I don't know. One of the wives. But it wasn't me."

"What'd your lawyer say?"

"I don't think he believes me. He said he had to review a lot of evidence before he could come up with a strategy. I told him, I didn't do it, that's your strategy. I keep telling myself this isn't happening." She said that again: "This isn't happening." She dropped her forehead into her hand to bolster herself, then looked up. "Oh Jordan, isn't it wonderful, you being here, coming here like this."

"I guess."

"It's a miracle."

"Mom."

"I prayed to our Heavenly Father to bring you to me and he did."

Here we go again. "I seriously doubt that."

"Jordan, don't you see? There was a reason he made me send you away. So you could come back to help me when I needed you. We couldn't know it at the time, but now we understand. Look: there you were in California leading I'm sure a real busy life, and you happen to read about me on the, on the, is it the web or is it the net, because I've heard people call it both?"

"The web. The net. It doesn't matter."

"OK, the web. And something *told* you to come help me. Don't you see: if you were still in Mesadale you wouldn't be able to help me. It was God's plan all along. If that isn't proof, then I don't know what is."

"I'm not even going to respond to that."

"Then tell me: why were you looking up the local paper on that day of all days?"

"I don't know, every once in a while I read it online, just to see what's going on out here but every time I do I get depressed."

"See!" She pressed her fingers against the glass, the tips going flat and white. "God told you to read the web yesterday. If it hadn't been for God—"

"Jesus, Mom, cut the God crap. That's not why I was online, I spend like half my life online. When are you going to be free of all of this shit?"

"Jordan, don't speak to me like that."

“Mom, I’m sorry, I just don’t believe any of that.” My throat was clamping up. “No anymore.” I set down the receiver and wiped my eyes. Goddammit, I wasn’t supposed to crack up. That night, years ago, when the trucker dropped me off, I promised myself I would never cry again over any of it. And I didn’t, not once, until now. Now my eyes were wet and there weren’t any tissues in here, there wasn’t anything in this place, just a red plastic stool and a yellow plastic phone and a wall of glass and a dozen crying babies. Fuck me.

“I should be going.”

“Jordan, no. I need your help.”

I took a second to think about what that might mean. “I’ll see if I can make an appointment with your lawyer.” Then I hung up. Through the glass I saw her mouth, *One more thing.* I picked up the receiver. “Yeah?”

“I’m very sorry for doing that. I didn’t have a choice. I only hope you can understand that now.”

“You don’t need to say anything else.”

“You need to know it’s the only reason I would’ve done that to you.”

“Mom, look, fine. It was a long time ago.”

“I like to think you could hear my prayers. I guess you don’t like talking about things like that anymore, but it’s true. The only way I could sleep at night was knowing you could hear me pray for you.” Her mouth darkened and puckered and she set down the receiver to cry. The officer behind her offered a packet of tissues. I could see my mom say thanks and Officer Kane say no problem, you take your time. She was on the heavy side, her uniform tight on her thighs, and was about as threatening as the senior citizen who greets you at Wal-Mart.

My mom picked up the phone again. “You’ll help me, right? I know you’ll help me.”

I told her I’d see what I could do. She nodded. Then we hung up. For a while I didn’t move and she didn’t move, except for her hands, they trembled on the counter. Then they settled down, lying there small and white behind the glass, like a tiny pair of unclaimed gloves.



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