

# PROLOGUE

## THE WAY IT WAS

I storm in the house and throw my coat on the floor. My husband, Michael, shakes snowflakes from his bushy blonde hair and drapes my coat on the sofa before locking the front door. He's still carrying that stupid plate of cookies one of my sisters-in-law managed to foist upon us before we left.

Michael helps Blake, our five-year-old son, pull off his winter coat and boots while I pace the kitchen just beyond the front room, back and forth. "I've had it with your brothers!" I scream. "After everything we've been through, after everything we've done to try and put things right with them. I've had it with this shit!"

"Mommy?" Blake asks as he and Michael follow into the kitchen. "You still haven't told me what slut means."

I rip the plate away from Michael and throw it down. Chocolate chip cookies and fancy white porcelain shatter on the floor tiles. To be honest, it doesn't make me feel better.

Blake starts crying, and I realize he's wet his pants again. "Ugh, *Blake*," Michael groans. Predictably, Blake pushes Michael away and tries to bite his hand like he usually does with us when he's embarrassed. Blake really shouldn't be biting people at his age, but he doesn't get upset that often. Like Michael, he's pretty subdued most of the time.

I turn away and brace against the counter for a moment to get a grip. I need to stop screaming, even if I'm mad at someone else and not my boys. Blake is so sensitive and he's been having some sort of recurring nightmare lately that makes him wet the bed at night. Every once in a while when something startles him—like this—he has an accident.

"Is that a bad word, too?" Blake asks grouchy.

"Yes," says Michael. "It's a bad name for a girl." My husband's voice is calm, as though me smashing one of his family's fine Thanksgiving platters that probably came across the plains in a covered wagon on our kitchen floor isn't a big deal. I can hear Michael sweeping and throwing chunks of porcelain in the trash bin.

I feel horrible. It's been a long time since I've flat-out destroyed something while losing my temper, though I could've done a lot worse than a plate. I wonder if Blake was looking forward to one of those cookies. *Damn*. I'm so angry with my husband's family right now, not just for the way they treat me but for the way they treated Blake tonight. There was no excuse for that charade.

"If it's a bad word, why was it okay for John and Riley to call Mom that, but it wasn't okay for me to ask what it meant?"

"You mean, 'what the *hell* is a slut?'" Michael says with a bit of a sarcastic bite to his voice this time. Good, he's still angry too.

"Well, *I* didn't know," says Blake.

"It's okay, Blake," I say, trying to soften my tone as much as I can at the moment. "Your uncle is very selective about which 'bad words' he thinks are okay and which aren't."

“He obviously doesn’t have his priorities straight,” says Michael.

“We’re not mad at *you*, Blake.” I sigh and turn back. Blake’s face is rosy, probably with embarrassment of a few different kinds, and his cheeks glisten with tears.

I squeeze Michael’s shoulder as I pass to get him to leave the shattered plate, and he stands next to me while I crouch in front of Blake.

“Mom,” Blake says. “I peed my pants again.”

“I know, sweetheart,” I say. “Are you okay now?”

“Yes,” he says.

I hug my son. I feel a little better. “I’m sorry I threw the plate on the floor in front of you,” I say. “That was bad behavior and I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I’m sorry I peed my pants,” he says.

“It’s okay,” I say. “It’s not your fault.”

“I’m sorry I said a bad word, too.” Blake snuffles, sounding much more contrite. “I didn’t...I didn’t mean to call you a bad name.”

“You didn’t, Blake,” I say. “And ‘hell’ really isn’t...” I decide to think through my reply carefully. Since I’ve joined the LDS Church I’ve had to shift my perspective on the language I normally use and it hasn’t been an easy adjustment for me. To be honest I still don’t think about it that much unless I’m talking to other members of the Church or to Michael’s family out of respect. “You were just copying me because I say ‘what the hell’ sometimes,” I say. “But you could’ve said worse words than that.”

“Am I in trouble?” Blake asks.

“No,” I say. “Never.” I know Michael is going to say something to me later about coddling our son too much, but I can’t help it. I don’t care about the pee, or the biting when my son is upset. I really don’t. Blake is my little miracle. If my son hadn’t come into my life when he did, I may never have found God or joined the LDS Church. The gospel of Jesus Christ has changed my life—blessed my life—so much for the better that it’s hard for me to imagine living without it now.

I let go and brush the tears from Blake’s face as I stroke his cheeks. His sandy-colored hair is a little disheveled like it often gets at the end of the day. He probably needs another haircut soon. “You shouldn’t bite people, Blake,” I say. “There are better ways of letting us know when you’re frustrated. Tell your father you’re sorry.”

“Sorry, Daddy,” says Blake. He hugs Michael’s leg.

Michael looks a little uncomfortable about the prospect of getting Blake’s pee on his own pants and I’m not sure I like it either, but he patiently strokes our boy’s head. “Just trying to help you, son,” he says. “I forgive you. Love you, buddy.”

“Love you too, Daddy. Do I have to tell Uncle Stew I’m sorry, too?”

“No,” I say. “You can bite Uncle Stew any time you like.”

“Angela,” says Michael.

I shrug and Blake giggles deviously. “He was putting soap in Blake’s mouth,” I say. “As far as I’m concerned, he had it coming.” I wipe the corner of my own mouth and cringe. I thought I could still taste the Lever 2000 Stewart shoved in *my* face after I cussed him out.

“You’re a big boy now, Blake,” says Michael. “Can you change your pants by yourself?”

Blake looks up at Michael and nods.

“Good. How about if you go change, give Mommy and me a minute to talk, and we’ll go out for pie and ice cream, just the three of us. We’ll have our own Thanksgiving fun tonight.”

Blake gets a big smile on his face and wipes his tears on his sleeve. “Okay,” he says, and he scampers off to his room.

“Make sure you put on clean underwear, too,” I call after Blake.

After I take care of the puddle Blake left on the floor, I get to my feet and Michael pulls me into him. He just holds me while I huff out my remaining anger into his chest. “I’m sorry,” I say finally. “I don’t think I’ve been this upset since I was pregnant. Was that plate, like, part of a family heirloom set or something?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Michael says. “I always thought they were ugly, old-fashioned pieces of junk, anyway. Too many pink flowery things on the edges.”

“They were yellow flowery things.”

“Whatever. I can’t tell.”

He runs his fingers through my hair and squeezes me a little tighter. I wonder if he’d like to have sex tonight. After today’s drama I certainly do.

“How are your knuckles?” I ask.

“Not as bad as Stew’s face,” says Michael. “His lip will probably be swollen for a week.”

“I do *not* want to spend Christmas with your family,” I say. “I’m sorry, but I’ll go crazy if I have to put up with that again in a month.”

“Well, what if we just hopped on a cruise liner and sailed around the world without them?”

I try not to, but I smile. Michael is the master of changing the subject, and making me feel better in the process. “Mm, wouldn’t that be nice?” I say. “Wish we could afford it.”

“What about the cabin?” he asks.

“The cabin?”

“Yeah. It’s out of the way, no extra fuss or expense, no one to bother us. Zion’s is just next door. Or we could go four-wheeling, have a bonfire, eat out at that little restaurant down the way.”

“Could be romantic,” I say. “We’d just have to make sure the furnace is working up there so we won’t freeze our butts—”

Michael pinches me and I push him with a giggle. “Who needs a furnace,” he says, “when I have an amazing, gorgeous woman like you?” He tickles the last of my indignation out of me, then kisses me.

“I’m ready!” Blake interrupts.

Michael and I pull away with a sigh.

“It’s good to know somebody loves me,” I say.

“I love you, Mommy,” Blake says, joining our embrace. He’s got a clean pair of pants on and he looks proud for getting changed by himself.

I tussle my son’s hair some more. “You are one crazy man for marrying me, Michael Thornley.”

“I love you too, Angela.” Michael says it with a sexy gleam in his eye like he’s the luckiest man in the world. He pecks my lips, takes my hand and Blake’s. “Let’s go get some ice cream and pie.”

**PART I**  
**THE DAMAGE IS DONE**

# 1

## TRAPPED BENEATH THE SURFACE

**H**e kept me in a box underground for a week. At least I think it was a week. It might have only been a few days, but when your only companions are the smell of dirt and urine; the clicks and whirrs of the vile equipment that's both filling your lungs with oxygen and streaming cold serums through your veins to keep you paralyzed, and the inescapable darkness of a coffin that's slowly going to suffocate you when that machine stops working, it feels much longer.

"Mommy?" Little Blake gingerly squeezes my hand. The nurse told him not to touch me, I think, but he can't help it. "Your hands are cold," he says.

*Cold...* It was cold in that box. I was shivering. The rusty manacles around my wrists and ankles rattled. My body was covered in sweat and grime and blood. Painful images flicker through my thoughts like shards of glass, cutting and searing my subconscious. Some recollections flash by so quickly I can't really glimpse them.

I remember screaming at my five-year-old to run and hide when The Man broke in and shot Michael in the shoulder. The Man didn't catch Blake, thank God. I looked over at Michael, my poor husband. We were both chained to a couple of gurneys in some dingy little room with an orange light beaming on our naked bodies. I remember screaming while the man I loved stared back at me helplessly, drugged or else convulsing in his own fits of torment. I think there are scars... I hope there are scars on my body that prove somebody tortured me. But I'm not sure why The Man took us or what he did exactly...that's all I can remember.

"Mommy, are you lost?" my boy asks with tears in his voice. Emotions I can't describe tear at my heart. A part of me desperately wants to wrap my arms around Blake while we cry together and I tell him I'm going to be all right now. But I can't even shift my gaze off the cracked door of my hospital room or scratch the itch behind my knee. I can't talk. I can't cry. I'm frozen. A part of me is still trapped in that underground box, smelling dirt, listening with all terror for the life-dependency machine to fail, and peering helplessly into the darkness pressing in on all sides. I *am* lost. I swear that machine failed long before the park rangers found me, and a part of me died underground with my husband.

The authorities found Michael's body buried in a box a few feet away from mine somewhere in the snowy campgrounds of Zion National Park. We were spending the Christmas holiday to ourselves out there at my father's old cabin. The man who kidnapped us calls himself simply that—The Man. He carved his initials—TM—into my face.

He's killed nine people the way he tried to kill me. Married couples all staying in remote areas of that park over the past several months. We had no idea. We didn't watch TV that often and we weren't paying attention to the news anywhere else. We liked our space quiet...I only know all this because I hear the police talk with the people at the clinic about how they've never found one of The Man's victims alive before and whether they've made any progress getting me to talk.

A young woman with glowing dark skin, curly hair, and baby-blue scrubs slips into the room.

“We can only keep him for so long,” I hear the social worker gentleman say to the investigator out in the hall. The social worker is wearing brown slacks and the investigator is dressed in a pale pink skirt suit, holding a clipboard in her arms. “If we can’t find extended family that are willing to take him, we’ll have to find a foster family.”

“Blake,” the nurse says gently. “What did I say?”

I feel Blake’s little fingers slip away. I gasp and grip his hand. “Don’t...” Speaking feels strange, disembodied to my ears. I think I scared my boy. He’s shaking. A sense of panic, of desperation swells inside me as I claw through the mound of my subconscious trying to get back to the surface. The nurse’s eyebrows climb up her forehead in surprise and she watches my struggle intently. “Don’t...take him...from me,” I manage. “Please. I’ll take...I’ll take care of him.”

The nurse nods. “We’ll see what we can do, Mrs. Thornley. How do you feel right now?”

My chest tightens and my breathing quickens. I’m trying to talk, but I can’t.

The nurse puts a hand on my shoulder. “Mrs. Thornley, do you know where you are?”

I feel confused. My vision is hazy like I’m in a dream, and my thoughts are all over the place. I shake my head. The woman tries to tug my son’s hand away from mine.

“No,” I beg again, tightening my grip. “Ple...please...”

“It’s okay Mrs. Thornley—”

“No!”

“Okay,” she says. “Okay. Just relax. Lean back and take slow, deep breaths.”

With some reluctance I obey, sinking into my pillows.

“Are you okay, Blake?” the nurse asks, looking at my son. “She’s not holding you too tight?”

Out of the corner of my eye I see Blake shake his head.

The nurse lets go of his arm. “Mrs. Thornley,” she says. I roll my eyes up to look at her. The room spins around me. Tears run down my face, so warm they sting my cheeks. “You’re at Artano Community Hospital in Saint George. You’ve been through a very traumatic experience, but you’re safe now. I’ll be right back—I’m going to get Dr. Reeder to see if she can help you through this. Will you be okay for a few minutes while I look for the doctor?”

“I won’t...hurt him,” I say. “He’s...he’s my son.”

“Alright. Don’t squeeze Blake too hard. Okay?”

“Oka...okay.”

I’m not sure by what mercy or negligence the authorities keeping my son in protective custody have allowed him to come visit me like this, but if they hadn’t I wouldn’t have found my voice again.