

Chapter Eight

Kevin Butcher:

God looked just like Gunnery Sergeant Hartman from the movie *Full Metal Jacket*. Don't ask me how I knew this was God. When it's your turn to meet him, trust me—you'll know. God wore a green Class A service uniform complete with a campaign hat. His ribbons, and he had a *lot* of ribbons, were unlike any I'd ever seen before.

He said, "I would have appreciated a little help back there." God even sounded like R. Lee Ermey.

"Sir?"

"You froze instead of moving, and, son, you know better."

"Sir, no excuse, sir!"

He sighed and snapped his head to the left. His eyes tracked something off in the distance. I wanted to turn my head as well, but I didn't dare. When it's your turn to stand tall on God's own quarterdeck, you can rubberneck all you like.

Before I knew it, God faced me again, and this time his eyes bored into mine. A firm, but gentle awareness riffled through my memories. Long forgotten experiences flickered past like a high-speed slide show. The recent memories of my time with Rebecca seemed to draw the most interest. The slide show ended with a memory of doctors and nurses lifting me onto an operating table.

God smiled and said, "Son, you've done well."

The vision faded away.

Late Sunday Night, Berks County Hospital:

Scuffling footsteps sounded from the hallway, and a man entered the waiting room. He carried a clipboard and wore sweat stained and rumpled hospital scrubs. Without looking up, he called out, "Mrs. Rebecca Butcher?"

Rebecca glanced at her mother who shrugged. Rachel said, "We can sort out your name later." They both stood, and the man stepped up to them.

He said, "I'm Doctor Ed Boddicker. Mrs. Butcher, your husband's heart stopped shortly after we got him on the operating table."

Rebecca gasped. Her knees weakened, and she would have fallen if her mother hadn't caught her. A second later, the doctor also reached out. He and Rachel eased Rebecca back down onto the plastic chair.

"I'm so sorry. It's been a long day and I..." The doctor's words came out in a rush. "Mrs. Butcher, your husband is fine. Yes, his heart stopped, but we revived him right away. We gave him several units of whole blood, repaired the damage, and pumped him full of antibiotics. Right now, our main concern is an infection. He'll need physical therapy, of course, but his physical condition is excellent. I believe he'll have a full recovery."

Her face tight, Rachel asked, "When can my daughter see her...husband?"

"We'll transfer him to a room when we're sure he's stable. I'll ask a nurse to come and take you to him."

"Thank you, Doctor."

The doctor nodded, and with his obligations fulfilled, scurried away.

Rachel glared at the surgeon as he left. "Bless his heart," she murmured. It didn't sound kind at all. She turned back to her daughter. "Praise God. Kevin is alive!" She sat and squeezed Rebecca's hand.

A short time later, a surgical nurse stepped over to Rebecca and Rachel. "Mrs. Butcher?"

"Yes?" Rebecca said. She and Rachel stood.

"Your husband is fine. They'll be taking him to his room in a few minutes. I'll take you there if you're ready?"

Early Monday Morning, Berks County Hospital

Kevin Butcher:

There was no light, but sound approached complete with a Doppler shift as if it came at speed from a great distance. BEEeep...beep.

The beeping sounds reminded me of the night when I found Rebecca playing a game on her iPhone. Earlier in the day, she had found an old stash of scented candles. After lighting most of them, the inside of our trailer smelled like fresh baked sugar cookies. Rebecca, clad in nothing but my old, red USMC T-shirt and her white footie socks, lay across our bed playing Gummy Drop.

Beep...beep.

I could smell the sugar cookie scented candles. The beeping sounds from the game were loud, but everything was black.

As if someone threw a switch, cold, dry air registered on my face and arms. The sweet vanilla scent of sugar cookies vanished, replaced by that of...disinfectant? Not wanting to lose Rebecca, I reached for where I thought she'd be, but my arms wouldn't move.

"Kev? Kevin? Momma, he's waking up," Rebecca said.

I opened my eyes. Rebecca and her mother stood next to me, and I lay on a hospital bed. The beeping sounds came from a cardiac monitor.

"Hey." I croaked. My throat felt so dry it hurt.

"Oh, Kevin!" Tears ran down Rebecca's face. She bent over and kissed me. Her tears smudged against my cheek. I remembered getting shot and I felt like shit for making her cry.

Rachel said, "I'll tell the nurse Kevin is awake."

My sore throat caused my voice to sound hoarse and raspy, I said, "Don't cry."

Rebecca straightened up and dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "You almost died. I can be upset about that." She blotted my cheek with the damp tissue and smoothed my hair back. "How do you feel?"

How did I feel? The question made me focus on myself. My left thigh throbbed with each heartbeat. Everything else merely ached, and I desperately needed a drink of water. "Thirsty and a little tired."

Rebecca reached for a plastic water glass. "Here," she said and guided a drinking straw to my lips.

While I sipped the ice-cold water, Rachel reentered the room. The water eased the pain in my throat. I asked, "Is everyone OK?"

Before Rebecca could answer, Rachel said, "Only you and Rebecca were hurt. She—"

"What?" I tried to sit up, but the tubes and wires made it difficult to move. I reached for Rebecca.

"You're hurt?"

"I'm fine, Kev." Rebecca set the plastic cup of water on the nightstand. Then she glared at her mother.

Rachel said, "She is not fine. Rebecca sprained her foot when she kicked the handgun away from Mr. Hanslein. She'll wear a support boot for a few weeks."

A nurse came in. She took my vitals and asked me about the pain. I admitted my leg hurt. A few minutes later she came back and gave me a shot of morphine. "This," she said, "might make you sleepy."

Within a few minutes, I felt warm and loopy. I fell asleep a few minutes later. Well, I thought I fell asleep, but I found out later: before I fell asleep, I invited Rachel to join me in bed.

After Kevin fell back asleep, Rebecca straightened out his blankets. She said, "I'm sorry about what Kevin said, Momma, he wasn't himself."

Rachel smiled. "The important thing is that he's out of danger."

Rebecca reached out to a dispenser on the bedside cabinet and removed another tissue. She wiped her eyes. "But Kevin died. They brought him back, but...Momma, I'm not so sure I want to wait to start our family."

"Well, I think you should put it off until he's out of the hospital."

"Momma!" Rebecca's ears turned pink. "I didn't mean we'd start today."

"I'm glad to hear that." Rachel put her arm around her daughter and kissed the top of her head. "You've always been my bright ray of sunshine. Kevin will need your help if he's to get well. Wait until the right moment, and tell him you want his baby, that'll get his attention."

Mother chuckled while her daughter blushed an outrageous shade of red.

Early Monday Morning, Schmidt Farm

Major John Pittsenbargar searched for and found Jonathan Schmidt. Schmidt stood in the pool of light at the taped-off entrance to his milk parlor. The light over the door had about a bajillion bugs flying around it. Pittsenbargar approached the farmer and introduced himself. As they shook hands, Jonathan studied the state trooper and said, "We've met before, haven't we?"

"I'm surprised you remember, it must have been twenty years ago."

"You married Verna Miller, Naomi's cousin."

Memories of Naomi kept both men silent for a few moments. Then Pittsenbargar said, "Naomi would still be alive if she had married you."

"You think she's dead?"

"We both know the man her father forced upon her. What do you think?"

Jonathan shook his head and looked out into the darkness. "Naomi deserved better." He turned back to Pittsenbargar. "What's going to happen now?"

"Well, I expect our friend Klaus will have a bad time. His pet lawyer will put up a fight, but we have a strong case, and it's going to get stronger. One thing you may not be aware of concerns your future son-in-law. If he survives, he may be in some trouble as well."

"Why is that?"

"He killed two men and seriously injured two others. We have a rough timeline of the events, and it almost looks like a military operation. Mr. Butcher took out three sentries with a brutal efficiency. I'll

write my report saying he didn't have any other options. It'll be up to the DA though, he may choose to prosecute."

"I'll pray the District Attorney doesn't do so. Kevin is a good man. I think God intended Kevin and my daughter to be together."

Pittsenbargar glanced at his watch. "I still need statements from your wife and daughter, and a Deborah Barie."

"Deborah should be in the kitchen. Go around to the back and knock on the door."

"Mrs. Barie? I'm Major John Pittsenbargar, and I need to take your statement."

The woman looked him up and down. He must have passed her inspection because she nodded. "Well, you better come in then. I have chores to attend to, but you can ask questions or whatever, while I work."

John smiled as the woman turned her back and walked to the stove. He found himself liking her no-nonsense attitude. Sure, she may carry a few extra pounds, but some women were built for comfort and not for speed. Mrs. Deborah Barie looked comfortable.

She said, "Take a seat at the table if you like. Should I call you Officer, or something else?"

"Actually ma'am, it's Major or Trooper, but I wouldn't mind if you called me John."

"Major Pittsenbargar then. Would you like something to drink?"

"Thank you, but I have coffee." He sat, and spread out his writing materials. While Mrs. Barie waited for him to begin, he opened his thermos. "I'd offer you a cup," he said, "but it isn't fresh." There also wasn't enough to fill his thermos cup, and it was cold.

Mrs. Barie noticed his grimace. She stepped over to him and held out her hand. "Give me your thermos, I'll refill it."

Bemused at her no-nonsense command, he passed her his thermos.

John asked his questions while the woman worked. She filled an old metal stove-top percolator with water, ran fresh beans through a hand-cranked mill, filled the basket, and set it up on the stove. Then she rinsed out his thermos, then set it to soak with hot water and a spoonful of baking soda. Mrs. Barie noted his curiosity and told him, "The baking soda removes old odors and freshens the inside." While doing all this, she fielded his questions and found the time to make him a damned fine meatloaf sandwich.

It turned out that Mrs. Deborah Barie was thirty-four years old and widowed. An unprofessional twinge of interest popped up when he learned of her marital status. Before the coffee finished percolating, Deborah again rinsed out his thermos, filled it with boiling water, and set it to soak up the heat. She did all this while detailing the entire evening from her perspective. When she finished speaking, she turned and saw him staring at her with an expression of frank interest.

That look made her feel uneasy. It wasn't proper. A man should not leer at a married woman, widowed or not. Still, she noticed a slow, but unwelcome buildup of warmth inside of her. Well, soon enough she'd shoo this man out the door. Later perhaps she'd take a shower, a cold shower.

Monday Morning: Hanslein Hunting Cabin,

Several hours later, Pittsenbargar stood outside of the "alleged" Hanslein hunting cabin. He remembered his thermos and opened it. The aroma of good strong coffee wafted up to tickle his nostrils. John had to sip it with care to prevent burning his mouth. The coffee tasted heavenly, rich and roasty, smooth with hints of dark chocolate. "My God, he exclaimed aloud, "this coffee is fantastic."

"Major?" One of his investigators asked.

"I think I'm in love. I found a young, attractive widow who makes great coffee."

"Major?" a different voice called out from the heavily wooded back yard. With regret, Pittsenbargar set his cup down inside of his cruiser and walked to the back of the property.

The two K9 officers, along with their dogs, stood back in the trees. One of the officers held a shovel. "My dog alerted on this patch of ground. I thought the perps might have buried a cache, but...." The trooper pointed into the hole with his flashlight.

In the bottom of the foot-deep hole, Pittsenbargar saw a shredded layer of plastic tarp. Underneath the torn plastic lay a skeletonized human hand.

John said, "Well, well, well. Klaus Hanslein, you have made my day." He straightened and issued orders. "Everyone currently on site stays here until I release them. I do not want this leaked to the press." Everyone nodded. "Fine, I have to make some calls."

Monday Morning, Berks County Courthouse:

District Attorney Jefferson hadn't yet touched his cup of coffee when the desk phone rang. He considered taking a quick sip, but duty overruled his desire. He lifted the handset and said, "DA Jefferson, how may I help you?"

"This is Pittsenbargar. I'm at the cabin, and I need another search warrant."

"Would this be the cabin 'allegedly' owned by Klaus Hanslein Senior?"

"Yes sir, one of the detection dogs alerted on a patch of ground behind the cabin."

"Major, you already have a search warrant for drugs."

"Yes sir, we partially excavated and instead of drugs, we found human remains."

When it rained, it poured.

District Attorney Jefferson couldn't speak for a moment. He shook his head. "Major, I woke this morning thinking the case against Hanslein couldn't get better."

"What should I do sir?"

"I'll talk to a judge and get you another warrant. Hold tight until then."

"Yes, sir."

Monday Morning, Berks County Hospital:

The Pennsylvania State Police took over security for Klaus Hanslein Senior. Three troopers, commanded by a lieutenant, displaced the single local police officer.

Klaus Senior scowled but said nothing as the troopers shackled his ankles and wrists to the bed frame.

John Waters arrived an hour before the official visiting hours began. He identified himself and stated his intention to speak with his client.

The lieutenant said, "Major Pittsenbargar told me to expect you. I'll search your briefcase, and Trooper Todd will pat you down."

Waters nodded and waited while the police carried out their search.

The battered condition of his client caused John Waters to stop and stare. Bruises, livid blue, yellow, and a sickening shade of purple covered much of his client's exposed skin. The doctors had bandaged and immobilized Klaus's left shoulder and leg. Senior looked as though he'd gone head first through a car's windshield and then had the same car flip over on top of him.

"Oh my God! Klaus, did the police do all this to you?" Waters waved his free hand to indicate the entirety of his client's injuries.

"That fucking maniac Butcher did it." The stitches in Senior's upper and lower lips made his words difficult to understand. "I want charges pressed against him, and I want to sue him. Make it happen."

"We can talk about a lawsuit after you're acquitted. The Pennsylvania Castle Doctrine will protect Mr. Butcher until then."

"Shit, how soon can you get me out?"

"You'll need to stand in front of a judge first. If the doctor releases you in the next hour or so, they may arraign you today. If not, you'll have to wait until tomorrow. Don't get your hopes up, the DA is not going to want you to post bond. He'll say you are a flight risk. This is not going to be easy."

"I don't pay you for easy. You got to get me out, before..." Klaus didn't finish, they both knew he would be tied to the drugs at the cabin soon enough.

"I'll push for bail during the arraignment, but the DA's office has fourteen days to write the charges against you. I expect they'll petition for a grand jury. My best guess is you'll be looking at false imprisonment, extortion, and involuntary manslaughter. They may add more. I can't even begin to plan your defense until they finalize the charges."

"What have they charged Butcher with?" Klaus snarled. "That maniac killed at least two men, not to mention what he did to me."

Waters sighed. You couldn't reason with Klaus when he behaved like this. The lawyer stood and walked towards the door. He stopped before opening the door. "I'll check with the doctors. What about Junior? Is there anything I need to do about him?"

"Nah, I took care of it the other day."

Waters nodded and left.

Kevin Butcher:

My lawyer arrived at 8AM. He looked me over and tsked several times. I introduced Rebecca and invited him to have a seat. Before he sat, he nodded towards Rebecca. He asked, "Have you two married yet?"

"No, not yet," I replied.

He turned towards Rebecca. "I'm sorry, but would you mind stepping out for a few minutes? As you and Kevin aren't married, a court could compel you to testify against him." Rebecca nodded and left. She said she'd take a walk.

My lawyer took out a notepad and grilled me. We went over everything that happened. We spent the most time discussing the two men I killed and the third who died later last night. We also discussed the fight with Senior, and I had to remember everything said during the fight.

"I'll interview everyone else who was there and prepare your defense," he said.

"Why do I need a defense? I was defending the Schmidts. Pennsylvania has the castle doctrine."

"True, and if necessary we'll use it in your defense, but it doesn't prevent the DA from bringing charges. Until I tell you different, do not say anything to the police. Do not make a statement. Refer them to me, got it?"

I got it.

Early Wednesday Morning, Berks County Hospital

Kevin Butcher:

The rock skipped across the driveway, and the man spun towards the sound. I launched myself towards his unprotected back and triggered my stolen switchblade. At the crunch of my foot hitting the gravel, the man stopped his spin. My other foot crunched down, and he began to turn towards me. He was too slow, and it was all too easy. With brutal efficiency, I clamped my left hand over his mouth, and my right hand thrust the knife blade into his throat. The tip of the blade scraped against bone, and I sawed the blade out and away from me. Hot blood sprayed into the cool night air. Droplets speckled my arm. The man may have tried to scream, but all I heard was a gurgling choking exhalation. Finished with the knife, I dropped it and rode him to the ground. He made a few feeble attempts to unseat me. I ignored his death sounds while I planned the next step.

"Kevin? Kev?" Confusion set in. Rebecca's voice didn't belong here. Nor did the warm form pressed against my back. The dry, cool hospital air replaced the hot, coppery, reek of blood. My eyes opened. Rebecca had snuck into bed with me again. She must have felt me stir because her soft lips pressed against the back of my neck. She slipped out of bed, and my sweat dampened back felt chilled. I rolled over and caught her hand as she straightened out my covers.

"Hey," I whispered, "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize."

I sighed. "Was it bad?" Sometimes I could get kind of loud.

"I didn't let it get bad." She paused, then asked. "Was it the new dream?"

"Yeah, the new dream," The scent of blood so strong I could taste it. I thought of a question I had been afraid to ask. "How are your parents dealing with me killing those men?"

"Hmm, they haven't said anything to me. Even Aunt Deborah's been quiet about it."

"What about you, does it bother you?"

"I don't worry about it. Momma and I are safe. You're alive. That's all that matters."

"What about your foot? Does it still hurt?"

"It's getting better." She bent down and kissed me. "You worry too much."

"That night, I kind of went berserk because I was afraid of losing you. Now I'm afraid of losing you because I went berserk."

She didn't say anything right away. We both knew the specter of Mennonite pacifism waited in the wings. "Kev, my eighteenth birthday is only a few weeks away. If anything like that happens, I'll leave home and move in with you. We can marry anytime, or not." She grinned. "I'll even be your kept woman. If anyone doesn't like it, they can...they can go to heck!"

My surprise must have been plain because Rebecca leaned down and kissed me again. She said, "I worry about your dreams, you should talk to someone."

"The Navy doctors told me the same thing. I could call the VA and see what they offer."

"Good, but you know..." She bent and kissed me again. "I don't mind getting in bed with you. To help with your nightmares—or for anything else."

"Ohhh, I need to get out of here."

Thursday, Schmidt Farm

Interlude:

Jonathan and Rachel stepped off their front porch to meet the late middle-aged couple walking towards them. "Mom, Dad," Rachel said. "I'm so glad you could come up to visit."

Sarah and Abram Weigel embraced their daughter and then their son-in-law.

Sarah said, "We had hoped to be here and help celebrate Rebecca's wedding."

"However," Abram said, "we're glad to be here in case you need help with anything." He turned his head to inspect the area. He noted the patch of fresh gravel near the opening to the lane. "We read about Sunday night in the newspaper. It must have been a terrible trial."

"It would have been a tragedy if Kevin hadn't been here," Jonathan said. "Abram, I have work to do. You're welcome to come along."

"Rebecca isn't here?" asked Sarah. She glanced around the kitchen while her daughter fixed their tea.

"She's at the hospital visiting with Kevin."

"Deborah isn't here either. Is she chaperoning Rebecca?"

"Goodness, no. Deborah is attending a church fellowship. She doesn't chaperone Rebecca and Kevin any more. Those two are fine left alone together."

Sarah's eyes narrowed. "Like you were with Jonathan?"

"Mother! Jonathan and I behaved ourselves."

"Those nights when Jonathan called on you, Abram and I would set the kitchen timer to remind us to check up on you."

Rachel blushed remembering those nights. "I remember the timer going off. Jonathan thought you were baking."

Sarah smiled while taking a sip of tea. She said, "Back when you and Jonathan were courting, there were times that I couldn't wait for you to have a daughter of your own."

"Jonathan and I weren't that bad, until the end—were we?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "Growing up, you exhibited all the signs of an intelligent and sensible young lady. Then you met 'Jonathan.'" Sarah's voice mimicked her daughter's playful pronunciation of Jonathan's name. "Once you met him your sensibility packed up and left. Your father and I had bets on whether you'd stay out of trouble before getting married. I'll let you guess who won."

"But, it wasn't...we didn't...until..."

"I will say that your idea to allow Rebecca and Kevin to bundle might be one of your more sensible ideas. They'll keep out of mischief with you and Jonathan right down the hallway."

"Well, about that..."

"You didn't have them in your guest bedroom?"

"We did at first, but with Jonathan's sister visiting, we allowed Rebecca to bundle with Kevin out in his travel trailer."

"Oh...well, I guess that horse has left the barn."

Rachel lifted her cup and took a sip of tea. "No, Mother, that horse is still in its stall. Rebecca and I have real talks. She and Kevin decided to save their horseback riding for after the wedding."

"Hmm, Rebecca must have inherited her father's sense. Abram and I should pay Rebecca and Kevin a visit."

Thursday, Berks County Hospital

Nurse Thompson looked up to see the nice young woman "married" to the gunshot patient in 515. She said, "Mrs. Butcher, what can I do for you?"

"My husband needs a shower."

"Husbands often do. One moment please, and I'll check the shower schedule." Nurse Thompson lifted a clipboard and examined the top sheet of paper. "The shower room is free for the next hour. Your husband may use it, but I don't have an aide available to assist him."

"Oh...what about me, can I assist him?"

The nurse thought about the question. The nurses maintained the Mr. and Mrs. Butcher fiction because they liked the young couple, but "Mrs. Butcher" clearly belonged to one of the more conservative religious sects. Nurse Thompson said, "I don't have a problem with it, but will you be all right?"

Mrs. Butcher's cheeks tinted a bit, but she said, "I'll be fine."

"Avoid spraying water directly onto his wound. There are plenty of clean towels, pajamas, and robes on the shelves. There are even scrubs you can wear." The nurse touched her own scrub top. "If you wear scrubs, you won't get your clothing wet."

"Thank you."

"Please put the used towels and linens into the marked bins. Oh, one more thing, the shower room door has a lock."

Kevin Butcher:

"Shower time, Kevin."

I looked up to an apparition of Rebecca dressed as a nurse. Blue hospital scrubs replaced her pretty pink patterned A-line skirt and off-white blouse. My pulse quickened; until now I didn't know I had a thing for nurses. "Nurse" Rebecca helped me stand and handed me my crutches. I navigated into the hallway, my unfamiliarity with crutches made it slow going. I said, "This will be a first,"

"You've had showers before."

"But not with you. It might be more than I can handle."

"I'm going to wash you, not shower with you. Don't be a goose."

We crossed the hallway, and after Rebecca opened the door for me, I crutched my way inside. The lights snapped on after I passed across the threshold. "Whoa!" I said. This room held the largest shower stall I had ever seen: large enough to accommodate the transfer of a patient from a wheelchair to a shower chair. The shower stall itself resembled a large, high-ceilinged, ceramic-tiled alcove. The walls featured multiple shower heads, both hand-held and fixed. The ceiling supported two mechanical lifts. I glanced at Rebecca and said, "I wonder if we can borrow this shower while we're on our honeymoon."

She turned to me, and with exaggerated concern said, "You promised we'd have a simple honeymoon. There better not be anything weird in our bathroom."

I waggled my eyebrows and Rebecca blushed, then we both laughed.

Wire shelves with stacks of clean hospital-issue pajamas and scrubs stood against the wall. After ensuring I wouldn't fall over, Rebecca turned to the shelves. As she bent over to pick up some towels, her scrub bottoms pulled up tight across her buttocks.

"Oh my...goodness," I said.

"Is something wrong?" She glanced back over her shoulder. I didn't look up in time, and she caught me ogling her behind. My blunder earned me a stern look, but I noticed the hint of a smile. While helping me undress, she asked. "What is so fascinating about my bottom?"

I said, "I think it's an evolutionary thing. The cavemen who liked nice butts sired more babies, and I'm descended from those cavemen." Rebecca helped me keep my balance. I stepped out of my pajama pants and pushed my boxers down.

Her eyes dropped to my groin for a long moment, and then back up. She said, "Does that mean I'm descended from the cavewomen with the nice bottoms?"

I hobbled into the shower and completely failed to consider my reply. "Oh yeah, you and your mom both have fantastic bottoms."

Silence.

I turned around and faced back out of the shower. Rebecca hadn't moved. In a flat tone, she said, "You've checked out my mother's butt?"

Uh oh. Rebecca wouldn't kick me, would she? *L'audace, L'audace, Toujours L'audace!* I said, "Well yeah, if you want to know what your girl will look like when she's older, just check out her mother. I'm lucky because your mom is an attractive woman."

"Oh," her expression softened. "I guess that makes some kind of guy sense."

Mounted to the wall were several sets of shower controls. Rebecca turned each knob until water sprayed from the hand-held shower head. Whether by accident or on purpose she sprayed me with the cold water. She continued talking. "Or you might be as depraved as Aunt Deborah thinks you are."

"Me? Depraved? Well, what about you, you always stare at my penis."

She glanced up from where she had been staring at my penis. "I do not!"

"You just did it."

"Well you can't blame me, it's the only real one I've ever seen." She returned her gaze back down to my penis. "Why is it so small and wrinkled?" As if to emphasize her question, she blasted my groin with more cold water.

I half turned and covered up with my hands. "Cold water causes shrinkage."

The water spray stopped, and Rebecca gave me a suspicious look. "Well, you need to turn around and face the wall. I want to start with your back." She chuckled about "shrinkage" while adjusting the water temperature.

To help prevent further shrinkage, she had me test the water temperature. After deeming it hot enough, I stood with my hands braced against the rear wall of the shower. Rebecca's strong farm-girl fingers worked across my back, and I groaned in pleasure. I vowed this would be a regular event.

The feel of Rebecca's hands on my body made holding still a near impossible task. Her hands scrubbed my skin and worked the knots from my muscles. When her wash cloth covered hand thrust between my legs, the surprise invasion caused me to lift up onto my toes.

"Hold still!" she said. "I don't want you to tear your stitches." She scrubbed up and down with vigorous motions then withdrew the washcloth.

"Yes dear." With care, I settled back onto my feet. "Maybe warn me the next—"

Her hand thrust back between my legs, this time without the washcloth. Her fingers...let's just say she was very free with her fingers. She said, "You're always being bad with my bottom, how do *you* like it?"

Actually, I liked it a lot. "Becks, you are so going to get it."

"You'll have to catch me first, and you can barely walk." She reached for another washcloth and after soaping it up worked her way down my legs to my feet.

Sometime during the shower, the dregs of morphine in my system gave way to the pain from my leg. The throbbing, no longer muted, caused me to wince and favor my leg. Rebecca must have noticed the shift in my stance because she rinsed my back in a rush and helped me to turn around.

The tile covered wall felt cold and raised goose bumps when I leaned against it. The soapy washcloth worked over my arms, chest, and abdomen. Rebecca's washing technique more than reversed the shrinkage. It began to feel interesting, and endorphins pushed the pain away. I closed my eyes with a sigh.

Someone knocked, and a moment later the door opened several inches. A woman who looked a lot like Rachel stuck her head through the opening. Her eyes widened before she averted her gaze.

Rebecca said, "Grandma?"

The woman said, "Your grandfather and I couldn't find you, so we asked at the nurse's station. The nurse told us that Mrs. Butcher might be assisting her husband with his shower. We'll be waiting in your husband's room, Mrs. Butcher." The woman stepped back, and the door closed.

"Oh, darn it," Rebecca said in a low, low voice.

"What? That's your mother's mother, right?" Sudden alarm set in. "She's not like Aunt Deborah, is she?"

"Grandma Sarah is a proper lady. I'm going to hear about this."

"I'll deal with her!"

Rebecca's hands seized my waist, holding me in place. She said, "What are you doing? If you tear those sutures...."

"I won't let anyone—"

Her hands on my waist tightened, and she pushed me back against the wall. "Kev, she's my grandmother, not someone you need to fight. You stay out of it."

My back to the wall, I sagged in defeat. I said, "Yes, dear."

"Mmmm, I like hearing that. You'll want to practice." She lifted up on her toes and kissed me. "Now hold still while I finish washing you."

As I crutched my way into my room, the two-people waiting there stood. I said, "Hi, I'm Kevin Butcher, Rebecca will be along in a minute."

The man said, "Mr. Butcher, I'm Abram Weigel, this is my wife, Sarah."

I shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. Weigel. While I shook Mrs. Weigel's hand, her blue eyes studied me with a fierce intensity. I studied her right back. Sarah Weigel wore little if any makeup. She had perfectly clear skin and symmetrical features. Add in high cheekbones and lapis blue eyes. Her beauty made my lips bend up into a smile.

Those blue eyes missed nothing. Sarah quirked an eyebrow and said, "What is so amusing, Mr. Butcher?"

I glanced over to Abram and tried to look apologetic before turning back to his wife. I said, "Mrs. Weigel, I just realized how lucky I am."

Mrs. Weigel glanced at my crutches. She said, "Other than by not being dead, why do you feel lucky?"

"Because seeing you, I realized Rebecca will someday look as beautiful." Sarah turned red, and Abram chuckled. I turned towards my bed and crutched my way to it. The Weigels stepped to my sides and helped keep me upright. "Thank you," I said.

"How bad is it?" asked Mr. Weigel.

Before I could answer, Rebecca's voice came from the doorway. "His wound is bad enough that he died on the operating table." The Weigels and I turned towards the doorway and Rebecca, dressed in her modest skirt and blouse, stepped in. She hugged and kissed both of her grandparents. I sat on the edge of the bed and recalled my meeting with Gunnery Sergeant God. Rebecca sat next to me and took my hand in hers.

I said, "The surgeon didn't say anything to me about dying."

"It only lasted a few seconds before they resuscitated you."

"Rebecca," Mrs. Weigel said, "I realize I'm an old fuddy-duddy, but I don't think you should be here without a chaperone, nor should you be giving Mr. Butcher a shower. Neither is proper behavior."

"Grandma, I'm sorry if I've disappointed you."

"But you're not repentant, are you?"

"No, Grandma." Rebecca squeezed my hand. "Momma and Daddy understand."

"I'm trying to look out for your best interests, young lady."

"I love you too, Grandma."

Abram put his hand on Sarah's arm, and she quieted. My respect for Abram went up. I had no doubt he'd hear about it later. Abram said, "Kevin, after you're out of the hospital, we'd appreciate hearing about Sunday night, from your perspective."

Until now, other than to my lawyer, I hadn't spoken about it much. "Until my lawyer tells me otherwise, I can't talk about it."

"I understand," said Abram. "Rebecca, your mother would like you home for dinner tonight. You can ride with us." Rebecca frowned, but before she could object, Abram said. "I'll bring you back after dinner, I promise." Sarah didn't look happy, but she nodded in agreement.

"Go ahead, sweetheart, spend some time with your family. I'll nap until dinner," I said.

The Weigels stayed for another twenty minutes before leaving with Rebecca. I received a most improper goodbye kiss. In return, I promised to rest until she returned.

I waited ten minutes before getting up and crutching my way into the hallway. The nurse looked up as I approached her station. She asked, "Do you need something?"

"I'm getting some exercise," I replied. "It's OK if I work my way up and down the hallways, isn't it?"

She smiled and nodded. "Most of the time we have difficulty getting patients up and moving. Don't over-exert yourself."

"Thank you," I said.

On my second circuit of the hallway, I watched the nurse get up and stride briskly into a patient's room. I sped up and turned down the connecting hallway towards the other side of the floor. The hospital reserved the fifth floor for acute care. I beat old man Hanslein up pretty bad, and he might be on the fifth floor as well. I didn't have much of a plan, but if I could slip into his room and suffocate that bastard with a pillow, Rebecca and her family would be safe. I didn't think I'd mind adding a Hanslein to my dreams.

One of the elevators dinged, and the door opened ahead of me. Two uniformed Pennsylvania State Troopers stepped out. Both men glanced at me as I approached. The taller of the two troopers turned towards me. His name tag read "Pittsenbargar." He studied me a moment and said, "Ah, Mr. Kevin Butcher, I presume." I stopped in surprise. Pittsenbargar said, "I've seen your service record. One wonders what you are doing headed to this side of the hospital?"

"Ah...exercising?"

Without taking his eyes from mine, he gestured to the trooper accompanying him. "Go on and wait for me, I'll be along in a few minutes." Pittsenbargar stepped up to me and held out his hand, "My name is John Pittsenbargar." We shook, and I noted the gold oak leaf on his collar. "Walk with me, Mr. Butcher. You'll be better off if you stay on your side of the hospital."

I turned and crutched back towards my room. Pittsenbargar kept pace with me. After a few seconds, he said. "We have Mr. Hanslein under guard. You wouldn't have been able to 'visit' him."

Thinking innocent thoughts, I said, "He's here? I thought he'd be in jail."

Major Pittsenbargar smiled, he didn't buy my bullshit. "Hanslein would be in jail, except that you beat him so severely he required hospitalization. Which room is yours?"

"515."

"I'll escort you there. Senior's orthopedic surgeon said that his patient may never regain use of his arm and that he may never run again."

"Gee, that's too bad."

"After what I read in your service record, I'm surprised Hanslein is still alive."

We entered my room, and I leaned my crutches up against the wall. Pittsenbargar stood close while I limped to my bed. I said, "My lawyer told me not to say anything to the police."

"I understand. Someday after this is all over, I'd like to talk to you about it, off the record."

I shrugged. "OK, I guess."

"We'll be moving Hanslein to the jail in another day or so. Until then, please stay on this side of the floor."

Anger surged up, and I couldn't keep my mouth shut. "He's a fucking monster. Did you hear what he wanted to do with my fiancée and her mother?"

"I wrote the report myself." Pittsenbargar sighed. He looked me in the eyes and said, "Mr. Butcher, I get it, you're concerned with Hanslein posting bail, or otherwise getting out, and coming back for revenge." He held up his hand to prevent me from replying. "It hasn't been released yet, but we've found human remains buried on Mr. Hanslein's cabin property. One body has already been identified as his wife's."

I remembered Jonathan's story about his ex-girlfriend. I said, "Naomi?"

Major Pittsenbargar nodded. He said, "Naomi and my wife were cousins and best friends until that fucking monster married her. Pennsylvania still has the death penalty. When they test the next batch of lethal injection drugs, I hope Klaus Hanslein is the crash test dummy."

Keeping my mouth shut has never been one of my virtues. I said, "With all due respect, Major, I'm not willing to risk the life of my fiancée on a bunch of lawyers."

"Mr. Butcher, Kevin, I swear if Hanslein gets off, I'll take an early retirement, and we can track him down together."

It seemed that Major Pittsenbargar and I had an understanding.

Friday Morning, Berks County Courthouse

District Attorney Jefferson met with his Chief Deputy District Attorney and his Chief Investigator, Police Detective Robertson. They met to discuss the possibility of bringing charges against Kevin Butcher. DA Jefferson started the meeting. "Detective Robertson, what do you have for us?"

"Yes sir, on September 18th, Klaus Hanslein Senior...." Detective Robertson detailed the events from Hanslein's day spent extorting other farmers to the climactic fight in the milk parlor. "While acting in defense of his fiancée and her parents, Mr. Butcher killed two of Hanslein's gang members, critically wounded a third, and seriously wounded Mr. Hanslein. The critically wounded gang member later died while in surgery. We do not yet have the autopsy results, so we cannot determine an exact cause of death—"

DA Jefferson interrupted, "My guess would be acute hickory poisoning."

"Detective Robertson nodded. "As you say, sir. I received a response from Headquarters, Marine Corps. They sent a summary of Mr. Butcher's service record. Mr. Butcher was highly decorated for actions in Afghanistan. He is a certified war hero."

"Do you have a copy of the summary with you?" Detective Robertson opened a folder and passed copies to the DA and the Chief Deputy DA. Both men took out glasses and began to read.

Minutes passed before DA Jefferson finished reading. He removed his reading glasses, rubbed his eyes, and sniffed. "That was...that was one heck of a summary." He sat up straight with his hands flat on the table. "Let's cut to the chase. I do not wish to bring charges against Mr. Butcher. As Detective Robertson noted, Mr. Butcher is a war hero, and the Pennsylvania Castle Doctrine is clear. Our citizens have a right to defend themselves and others from criminal aggression. Competent legal representation will be able to show this to a jury."

The Chief Deputy DA lowered his copy to the table and tilted his head back. "I could, I think, prosecute Mr. Butcher, and gain a conviction, but it wouldn't be easy." He reached out and tapped the summary. "Once this got out, empaneling an impartial jury might be difficult."

The DA nodded. "Do I need a show of hands?" Both the Chief Deputy DA and Detective Robertson shook their heads.

Friday Afternoon, Berks County Hospital

At a tap on the door frame, Rachel Schmidt looked up to see Detective Robertson standing in the hallway. She smiled and stood. "Come in, Detective. It's good to see you again."

Another man followed the detective into the room; he smiled warmly.

"Mrs. Schmidt," the detective said, "this is District Attorney Jefferson." Mrs. Schmidt and the DA nodded to each other. "We're here to see Mr. Butcher."

"Kevin is in physical therapy right now, but he should return soon."

DA Jefferson glanced at his watch, then spoke. "We'd like to wait if you don't mind."

"No, not at all. Please have a seat." After they sat, Rachel said. "I hope, Mr. Jefferson, that your presence doesn't mean Kevin is in any kind of trouble."

Kevin Butcher:

With the physical therapy over, I looked forward to Rebecca giving me another shower. If we locked the door this time, perhaps we might play around a bit. The physical therapist escorted me back to my room, and Rebecca brought up the rear.

As we approached my room, I heard voices. Men's voices I didn't recognize. I turned the corner and found two men speaking with Rachel. Both men wore suits, and their appearance screamed legal problems. The physical therapist made sure I safely sat on the edges of my bed before leaving. Rebecca sat next to me.

My suspicions were confirmed when Rachel introduced me to my visitors. We shook hands, and I asked if I needed to call my lawyer.

District Attorney Jefferson said, "Mr. Butcher, Berks County has no intention of bringing charges against you. The Pennsylvania Castle Doctrine protects citizens who defend themselves and others. I'm here to thank you for helping us apprehend a dangerous criminal, and because it isn't every day, I can meet someone who's been awarded a Silver Star."

I blanched at the mention of my combat decoration. The Schmidts' weren't supposed to know about it. Rachel and Rebecca exchanged glances before Rachel spoke up. She asked, "What is a Silver Star?"

Before I could think of a safe answer, the District Attorney reached into his coat pocket and removed a sheet of paper. He said, "I have a copy of Mr. Butcher's citation. Here, you can read it." He smiled and handed the paper to Rachel. Rebecca left my side to stand behind her mother and read over her shoulder. After a few moments, Rebecca began to read aloud.

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the SILVER STAR MEDAL to Corporal Kevin T. Butcher, United States Marine Corps, for service as set forth in the following citation...

...Corporal Butcher reflected great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

Rachel looked up from the citation and said, "I've never read anything like this before. Did you do all of those things, Kevin?"

I glanced up to Rebecca, then back to Rachel before answering. "It happened pretty much like you read."

"I think Jonathan should read this," said Rachel.

District Attorney Jefferson said, "Ma'am, you may keep that copy if you like." He stood, and walked over to me. I stood, and he shook my hand again. "You've done well Mr. Butcher, both in the service and here at home. Call my office if you need anything." He said goodbye to Rachel and Rebecca then left with the detective.

I gave voice to my biggest concern. "If Jonathan reads that, is he going to be upset?"

Sunday Morning, Church

After the church service, Deborah ran into the former Pastor, Luke Martin, and his wife, Mary. "Deborah," Luke said, "it's good to see you again." Both Luke and Mary shook her hand. "There is something, Deborah, of great concern we need to speak with you about."

"Oh? What is it?"

Mary said, "We were so distressed, Deborah, when we heard about the murders."

"Yes," Luke added, "I had warned your brother, Jonathan, about that violent young man. His name, Butcher, is all too appropriate, isn't it?"

Deborah looked back and forth between Luke and Mary. She said, "The police say Kevin acted within the law."

"Man's law, not God's law. Deborah, we need to talk." Luke and Mary and Deborah went off by themselves and continued their conversation.

Sunday Afternoon, Schmidt Kitchen

Interlude:

As the eldest male present, Abram Weigel recited the prayer. He asked God to grant wisdom and forbearance to those present. Those present included Abram and Sarah Weigel, Jonathan and Rachel Schmidt, Deborah Barie, and Rebecca Schmidt. After everyone said amen, Abram turned to Deborah. He said, "You asked for this family meeting. It seemed to be quite urgent."

"Something came up after the service this afternoon," Deborah said. "Former pastor Luke Martin and his wife Mary caught up with me. They expressed their concerns as well as the concerns of unnamed others about the murders committed by Mr. Butcher." Everyone around the table spoke up at the same time.

When no one quieted, Abram tapped his knuckles on the table. The sudden sound quieted the group. He said, "What is this about murders?"

Rebecca said, "She," pointing at her aunt, "is always stirring up trouble for Kevin and me." She looked at her grandparents. "You would not believe the things she's done."

Sarah glanced at her husband before turning to Rebecca. She said, "What has she done?"

Tilting her head back, Rebecca blew out a puff of air. "Oh, where do I start? While I visited with Kevin, she called one of his ex-girlfriends and invited her to visit. Deborah told the ex-girlfriend that, 'Kevin is dying to see you again.'"

Sarah's mouth dropped open. She said, "What happened?"

"The ex-girlfriend, Kristen, showed up."

"Oh my, you poor thing."

"Well, her plot backfired because Kristen and I got along fine. Kristen is *very* worldly, but also, very nice. She and Andrew seem to have hit it off and will be here for the wedding."

"Andrew?" Sarah looked towards Jonathan. "Don't you have a nephew named Andrew?"

"I do. Andrew and Rebecca used to play together. That's why my sister called him and also invited him to visit Rebecca at Kevin's home."

Abram said, "While Rebecca visited Kevin, did she have a chaperone?"

"She did not," Deborah said. "That is why Jonathan called me, he asked me to visit and provide chaperonage. When I arrived, Rebecca was in Mr. Butcher's bed, dressed like a hussy. I felt an intervention was necessary."

Sarah Weigel began to laugh. She took her husband's handkerchief from his shirt pocket and used it to dab away her tears. "Oh, my goodness. Abram, see what we've missed?"

Abram busied himself patting Sarah's back.

Deborah said, "I didn't ask for this gathering to rehash my objections with Mr. Butcher's suitability as my Rebecca's suitor." She paused a moment to see if anyone raised an objection.

Rachel noticed her daughter's intent to speak up. She reached over and put her hand on her Rebecca's arm. She murmured, "Let your aunt finish."

When no one spoke, Deborah continued. "While listening to the Martins, I remembered Mary Martin's maiden name is Hanslein. I've not hidden my dislike for Rebecca's suitor, but I think they intended to manipulate me. We, as a family, need to be aware of their efforts."

The conversation began again around the table. Rebecca waited until it began to slow down. She said, "Last week after I helped Kevin with one of his nightmares, he expressed his concern that he'd lose me because of the violence, but most of all, because of the killings." Rachel reached over and squeezed her daughter's hand. No one else at the table spoke. "Kevin said if losing me was the price for keeping me safe, he'd pay it." Tears ran down Rebecca's cheeks, and Sarah passed her Abram's handkerchief. "Thank you, Grandma." Rebecca dabbed at her eyes, then took a breath, determined to finish. "I assured Kevin that no matter what, I would stay with him. Either as his wife or as his woman, no matter what. That if my parents forbade me from marrying him, I'd leave home and move in with him on my birthday."

Rachel coughed. "I don't think your father intends to forbid you from marrying Kevin," She looked at her husband. "Do you?"

"Most definitely not. The sooner those two marry, the better. I can use some peace and quiet."

Monday Afternoon

Kevin Butcher:

Before I left the hospital, they put me in a wheelchair and took me straight to the hospital cashier. The total amount of my bill made me glad I'd bought into one of the better health insurance plans. The copayments and deductible were easier to pay. I wrote checks to the hospital and to three different doctors. Crutches in one hand and a folder full of wound care instructions in the other, I rode the wheelchair while the male nurse pushed me out to the curb.

Jonathan climbed out of his van and helped me into the back seat. He laid my crutches on the floor behind me. On the way home, Jonathan asked if I would continue to stay at their home until the wedding, or if Rebecca and I would head back to my home.

"Ah, take Rebecca home with me?" Had I taken too many painkillers? Jonathan didn't ask what I heard him ask, did he?

"My soon to be an adult daughter made her intentions towards you quite clear. She will marry you even if Rachel and I forbid it." My expression must have given away my sudden concern. Had I committed too much violence? Jonathan glanced at me using the mirror. He said, "I know of your concerns regarding the violence. Rachel and I have discussed it several times. While we cannot condone it, we are also relieved you saved us. We are not perfect and will continue to pray for God's forgiveness. Rest assured that Rachel and I still support your and Rebecca's marriage."

"Thank you. You know, I've never hurt anyone without reason."

"I pray you never have reason to do so again."

"Me too."

"I've read your citation. Rachel didn't understand it's significance. You are a brave and competent individual. Be aware that Tommy sees you as a hero. He refers to you as a 'Bad Ass.' Don't be surprised if he asks you about joining the Marine Corps."

"What do you want me to do if he asks?"

"Answer his questions honestly. Tommy might choose a different path when he comes of age. He is my son, and I'll support him, whatever he chooses." Jonathan didn't speak while he negotiated a congested intersection. When the traffic cleared, he said, "Concerning you and my daughter, it would keep things simple if you'd stay here until the wedding. Have you two set another date?"

"Not yet, but we might wait until my contract is finished at the end of January." The recruiter at the contracting company called last week. He assured me my job would be there as soon as my doctor cleared me for work. Their contract ran until the end of January. He also reminded me they'd hire me full-time as soon as I finished school.

"Jonathan, I almost forgot to ask about Rebecca's birthday. Do you celebrate birthdays?"

"We don't make a fuss like the English. Rachel will bake a cake, and we'll sing, 'Happy Birthday.'"

"You know I want Rebecca to go back to school. She's interested in nursing, and I want to get her started. Does she have a secondary school diploma or a GED?"

"Like most of the girls her age, she took the test and passed it, but they won't mail her diploma until she's eighteen."

"I'd like her to enroll in a college class."

We drove in silence for a few minutes. Jonathan said, "We have a good community college here. One of those farmers you saved from Hanslein has a son-in-law who works in admissions. I'll give him a call this afternoon, see what we need to do."

The formal dining room had become Deborah's sewing room. Bolts of fabric leaned against the walls. Deborah's Bernina sewing machine whirred as she pushed the fabric through it. I stood in the doorway unsure of how to approach her. How can you dislike someone who saved your life? I owed her a debt, didn't I? I needn't have worried because Deborah spotted me watching. She continued to sew while speaking. "It's good to see you up and about, Mr. Butcher. When I visited you in the hospital, you looked like you were on death's doorstep."

"Thank you, Mrs. Barie." I gestured towards the table. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

The sewing machine stopped. "Do you sew, Mr. Butcher?"

"No, but I'd like to help if I can."

Deborah's eyes met mine. She said, "I understand your desire to help, Mr. Butcher, but it isn't necessary." Her eyes softened a tiny, tiny, amount. "Perhaps, someday, God will give you an opportunity to test yourself as he did for me. I'm closer to him now because I chose to aid you."

I stood there in the doorway not knowing how to respond.

Deborah sighed. "Mr. Butcher, Kevin, do not expect things to change between us. You corrupted my niece, and I am not so close to God that I can forgive you for it." Her tone of voice changed, and she asked, "Did the hospital give you instructions for your care?" I nodded. "Give them to me; I will review them and discuss your care with Rachel." While Deborah read through the hospital's instructions, I laid down on the living room couch and promptly fell asleep. While I slept, I dreamed.

Kristen and Andrew stood next to the front door. Our twin daughters, Rachel and Carolyn, each gripped one of their Aunt Kristen's hands. Uncle Andrew carried their matching Hello Kitty overnight bags. The girls were excited because they would spend an entire weekend with their Aunt Kristen. They'd been talking about it all week. Aunt Kristen knew how to have fun. Of course, I've been teasing Rebecca that Kristen would teach them how to pole dance.

Twins didn't run in our families. When the obstetrician showed us the ultrasound images of two babies, we couldn't believe it. Rebecca gave birth on schedule, and we had our twin daughters. As the girls grew, they looked increasingly like their mother. As I'm a fan of the Star Wars movies, I referred to them as the clone troopers.

We followed the troopers out to their mother's minivan. They would use Rebecca's vehicle, so we wouldn't need to move the car seats. Andrew and I buckled the girls in, and everyone waved goodbye. As the sound of the minivan faded, the quiet set in. I haven't heard the quiet in years.

My wife's fingers entwined with mine, and she pulled me back into the house. This weekend we would try for a boy.

"C'mon Kev, I'm ovulating soon. You need to get busy and fill me up."

My mouth dried when Rebecca pulled her dress over her head. She proved my suspicion that she hadn't worn anything underneath. I hurried to match her state of undress.

Rebecca scooted over to the center of the bed and arranged a pillow under her head. She said, "Aunt Deborah suggested I stay on my back and hold my legs up against my chest. She said this is the traditional way to make a boy baby." As she spoke, Rebecca matched her words with actions.

I surveyed the glorious tableau on our bed. My lovely wife, on her back, with her bottom on display. I said, "Now I know why Mennonites have such large families. There isn't a man alive who could resist this."

Rebecca blushed, but she wiggled her bottom. "You best get busy then."

When I woke, it took a few seconds to gather myself. The dream had seemed all too real. Instead of a pillow, my head lay on Rebecca's lap, and she read through the hospital's instruction sheets. She put her hand on my forehead and peeked under the papers to see me. She said, "How do you feel?"

I said, "Good. I'm glad to be out of the hospital. You know, I think I had the best dream ever."

"Not one of your bad dreams?"

"No. I dreamt about us. We had twin girls named after our mothers. Both of our daughters looked exactly like you. We sent them to stay with their Aunt Kristen and Uncle Andrew for the weekend. We had the house to ourselves, and were trying for a boy."

Her voice wistful, Rebecca said, "It's too bad twins don't run in my family." Then she became all business. "How is your leg?"

The wound ached, and when I stretched, the still healing muscle felt stiff. I replied, "It's fine."

"According to this," she rustled the instructions, "you're due for some pills. Let me up, and I'll get them."

I tried to sit up without grimacing but failed miserably.

"You are not fine, Kevin!" Rebecca slid out from under me and quickly stuffed one of the couch cushions back under my head. She bent and kissed me. "Listen, tough guy, you need to be straight with me. If not, I'll ask Aunt Deborah to see to you instead."

I raised my hands in surrender. "Okay, I give up. My leg hurts. It hurts pretty much all the time."

She frowned while I told her about the pain. She gave me another kiss and said, "I'm sorry it hurts. I'll be back with your pills."

Schmidt Farm, Kitchen:

Rebecca Schmidt:

When I stepped into the kitchen, Momma asked, "How is he?"

"Like you expected, he didn't want to admit his leg hurts."

"He doesn't want you to worry."

"I told him to be straight with me, or I'd turn him over to Aunt Deborah."

"Very funny," said Deborah. "I'm too busy making curtains to play nurse for him."

While dispensing Kevin's pills, Rebecca told her mother and aunt about Kevin's dream.

Deborah looked thoughtful. She said, "What do you think Rachel, is it time to talk about the ways of making a boy or a girl baby?"

October 2016

Kevin Butcher:

One fundamental difference between Rebecca and me was how we resolved conflicts. For example, following Klaus Hanslein's attack on her and her family, she prayed for him. I wanted to stare into that evil bastard's eyes and revel in his defeat. My fiancée refused to hold grudges. I waited until they died of old age, then had them stuffed and mounted.

Today, the aforementioned evil bastard would be arraigned. My new friend and maybe ally, John Pittsenbargar, had offered to give me a ride to the courthouse. Both of us wanted to see justice done, and he could flash his badge and park anywhere.

My fiancée and I stood in her kitchen waiting for Pittsenbargar to arrive. I wore my all-purpose suit, and Rebecca wore a light blue dress and had pulled on one of my old gray sweatshirts. She looked warm,

comfortable, and completely adorable. In one of her hands, she held a piece of sticky tape. With her other hand, she directed me to spin around. "There," she said. "Hold still."

Her hands pressed the tape against my suit capturing another spec of lint. She bit her lip and searched for more. Watching her do this, made my heart skip a beat. "How many days until the wedding?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said distractedly. While I watched, she concentrated, spotted another bit of lint, and lifted it with the tape. Satisfied, she glanced up at me. "Why?"

A quick look around told me Rachel and Deborah weren't near. I lowered my voice and said, "I don't know if I can wait that long."

Her eyes sparkled, and she took a half step closer to me. Tape held off to the side, she reached up and adjusted my tie. The faint scent of wildflowers tickled my nose. In an equally low voice, she said, "Wasn't last night enough to hold you?"

"It was until a few seconds ago. You look so good right now, and...when you bite your lip it drives me crazy."

Her eyes softened, and she bit her lip. My knees felt weak, and I reached to wrap her in my arms. Laughing, she stepped back out of my reach. "You are so easy. Now behave. Your ride will be here any minute."

It pleased me so much when I had opportunities to show Rebecca how much I loved and desired her. For a goody-goody Mennonite girl, she appreciated my appreciation of her charms.

Finally satisfied with my appearance, Rebecca asked, "Why do you hate Mr. Hanslein so much?"

"Because he threatened you and your family. I can't forgive him for that."

"I wish you would let it go."

"I'll feel better if that bast..." I looked around to see if anyone other than Rebecca caught my lapse. Rachel and Deborah worked on their curtain project in the dining room. "Sorry, sweetheart. Look, I'll feel better if Klaus Senior knows I'm watching him. If the judge offers bail, I don't want him coming back here."

Rebecca shook her head. "If Klaus Senior is dumb enough to come back here, you'll just get him off again."

I blinked. Sometimes Rebecca's lack of worldliness manifested in unexpected ways. "Um, sweetie, I think you meant to say, 'take him out.' If I 'get him off,' he may never go away."

Her brow furrowed for a moment while she processed my words. "Ewww, Kevin, that...that's just awful. You know perfectly well what I meant."

"You took care of me and see how I keep hanging around?" I gave her my best "cute Kevin" look.

"Kristen told me that all men are dogs, but she thought you and Andrew were nice dogs. Ha. I know better."

The openings kept rolling in. "Does that mean I can bury my bone in your back yard?"

Rebecca shrieked in feigned outrage. At least I hoped she didn't mean it. She spun me around and shoved me against the back door. "Go," she said and pushed me again. "You'll be lucky if I ever let you anywhere near my yard, front or back."

I fumbled with the door knob and swung the door open behind me. With a final shove, my beloved, the future mother of my children, pushed me past the already open screen door and out onto the back porch. I might have fallen if Jonathan hadn't been there and caught me. Jonathan steadied me, and Rebecca passed me my cane. I blew her a kiss goodbye. Looking confused, Jonathan stepped into the house and asked what was going on.

From the dining room, Rachel called out, "Don't mind the children, they're just playing."

Somehow, Pittsenbargar arranged for us to have a pair of seats immediately behind the podium where Klaus and his lawyer would stand. Even though Pittsenbargar wore civilian clothing, his hulking intensity prevented him from blending in with the reporters and curious citizens crowding the remaining seats.

Pittsenbargar looked me over and shook his head.

"What?" I asked.

"Try to look less threatening, Kevin. You look ready to vault over the bar and murder someone. Here," he handed me a piece of gum. "Chew this and think nice thoughts about your pretty girlfriend."

A few minutes later a door opened, and three deputies entered the courtroom. One of the deputies pushed a wheelchair containing Klaus Hanslein Senior. Klaus wore a bright orange jail jumpsuit. The color contrasted with the off-white sling supporting his right arm. Enough time had passed that his bruises were now a sickening yellow-purple. I watched as his eyes scanned the audience. With quick flicks he dismissed each audience member, then he spotted me. This was the moment I waited for. What would I see? It took but a moment for his eyes to tell me everything I needed to know. I saw hate, frustration, and rage. Then the fear welled up, and Klaus looked away. He reached up with his sole working arm and tapped one of his escorts. The procession halted while the deputies and Senior shared a brief discussion. The three deputies glanced over at me, then at Pittsenbargar. One of the deputies shook his head. If I were to guess, Klaus had objected to my presence and asked them to remove me.

The actual arraignment took little time. Klaus's lawyer did most of the speaking. Klaus himself did most of the listening.

The magistrate said, "Does the district attorney's office have an objection to bail?"

"We do, your honor. Klaus Hanslein Senior is a career criminal with a violent history. Mr. Hanslein is a flight risk with access to significant financial resources. If he is allowed bail, we think he will harm the state's witnesses. Therefore, we recommend Mr. Hanslein be remanded."

"Very well." Mr. Hanslein, based on the seriousness of the charges, and on the affidavits, bail is denied."

As the deputies pushed Hanslein's chair towards the exit, he turned to me and scowled. I smiled and flipped him off. Pittsenbargar reached over and pushed my hand down. "Don't be stupid. That's contempt of court. How are you gonna protect anyone while you're in jail?"

Back at the Schmidts home, Pittsenbargar parked and got out of his car when I did. I glanced over at him, and he said. "I need to have a word with Mrs. Barie."

I couldn't understand why anyone would want to speak with Aunt Deborah, maybe he needed to update a report or something.

We walked around to the kitchen door, and I let us in. Rachel, Deborah, and Rebecca sat at the kitchen table having tea. Rachel stood and greeted us. She offered tea and asked us to tell them about the arraignment. We accepted and sat. Rebecca brought us each a cup of tea and told us to help ourselves to the cookies.

John's eyes lit up. He took a bite. "Are these homemade?" You'd think he hadn't had homemade cookies in a long time.

Rachel said, "Yes, they're sugar cookies with a few drops of peppermint oil."

I noticed that Aunt Deborah looked everywhere, but at Pittsenbargar. Wait, was she blushing?

Rachel asked, "Is there something we can do for you Major?"

"Actually," He said, "I'm here to see Mrs. Barie."

"Mr. Pittsenbargar," Deborah said, "I've already told you no. I am not interested in having a cup of coffee with you." She definitely seemed flushed.

Pittsenbargar finished his cookie and his tea. He thanked Rachel and stood. "Mrs. Barie, I am a persistent man. I'll ask again soon. Good day." I saw him to the door.

I can't say who was the most surprised. Rachel stared at Deborah. Rebecca 's gaze alternated between her mother and her aunt. Deborah stared at me. "Hey," I said. "I had nothing to do with it."

Rachel stood and shoed Rebecca and me out of the kitchen. She said, "Go inspect the barn or something, just be back in time for supper, and don't be covered with hay. Deborah and I need to talk."

October 14, 2016

Kevin Butcher:

The Schmidts are traditionalists and Rebecca's birthday cake had eighteen separate candles. All of us sang "Happy Birthday" while Rebecca sat flushed with embarrassment.

Jonathan stared at the cake for a moment. He asked, "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes," said Rachel. She turned to me and said, "This was Rebecca's favorite cake until at age thirteen, my daughter announced she was too old for kiddy cakes." She lifted out the first piece. The cake, white with deep red streaks, smelled of vanilla and berries. Rebecca smiled as her mother placed an extra-large piece before her.

"What is it?" I asked. Rachel and Deborah began serving pieces to everyone at the table. My piece was nearly as large as Rebecca's.

Rebecca said, "It's a strawberry Jell-O poke cake." She took a bite, a bit of the white frosting stuck to her upper lip. "Momma, it's delicious."

I took a bite, the topping turned out to be Cool Whip.

After we ate, presents came out from a closet and a small stack formed in front of Rebecca. "I don't know where to start," she said.

Her father said, "Start with this." He brought out an envelope and passed it to his daughter.

Inside of the envelope, she found a single sheet of paper. I watched her quick eyes scan the text. Her brow furrowed as she processed the words. She looked up and said, "I have an appointment to take a placement test?"

"It's time you got back to school," her father said. "Kevin and I agree. This is something we both want for you."

"What if I want to start a family first?"

Everyone's eyes turned to me. I reached across the table and squeezed Rebecca's hand. "Sweetheart, if you want to start our family first, then we'll get started on the family."

"But you want me to go back to school."

I nodded. "I want you to realize all of your dreams."

"It would be easier if I went to school first, wouldn't it?"

The bad part of me suggested I mention if I wanted easy, I'd still be dating Kristen, but this wasn't the time for levity. Deborah had been quiet concerning me; I didn't want her to go on the warpath again. I said, "Yes, and you might be able to finish school faster. If you still want to pursue a nursing career, you'll be a Registered Nurse in two or three years. One more thing, registration for the spring semester begins in three weeks. But there's no pressure."

Late October 2016

"Kevin?" Rebecca called out from the kitchen. "I'm going to help Momma with dinner."

"Ok, sweetheart, I'll hang out on the glider and read." Due to my medical issues, the university allowed me to take my finals late. Now I waited for the scores. Finally, I could spend my spare time reading for pleasure. I scrolled through my available eBooks. I heard footsteps on the wooden steps and glanced up from my phone to see Tommy walk over and sit in the closest chair.

"Hey, Tom, what's up?" Since Tommy saved my life, he deserved an adult's name.

"Hi, Kevin." Tom fiddled with the band on his new Casio G-Shock watch. I got it for him a few weeks ago. Every man needs a watch. "This watch is great, it lights up so bright, I can use it as a flashlight."

"I'm glad you like it. I have one too, back home."

Tom looked fidgety, and he never fidgets. Most of the time, he can be easy to overlook, but if you need him, he's as useful as having the right tool for the job.

"Kevin, I was wondering...."

"About what?"

"Joining the Marine Corps."

Jonathan warned me this might come up. I said, "I'm not surprised. Every man thinks about joining the United States Marine Corps."

"They do?"

"That's what they told us in boot camp. My senior drill instructor said that most men decide it will be too tough, and they join the Air Force or the Navy instead."

"Do you think I'm tough enough to join the Marine Corps?"

I needed to handle this conversation with care. Mennonites do not join the military; they rarely commit violent acts. Also, Mennonites do not swear, and that includes oaths. I'm uncertain, but that might be a problem.

I held out my hand. "Shake my hand, but squeeze it as hard as you can." He squeezed, hard. Ouch, he had a grip. "Well, you're strong enough, can you run five miles without stopping?"

Tom blinked, "I don't know."

"Well, you can come with me in the morning. You can run one-mile laps while I walk. We'll see how far you can go." I thought about it. "Do you have sneakers? Or running shoes?"

"I have my gym clothes."

"Ok, wear that." What do Mennonite kids wear to gym class? I imagined a group of kids wearing rubber barn boots in gym class. "Why the interest in the Marine Corps?"

"I want to be a bad-ass, just like you."

I smiled, "Have you talked it over with your parents yet?" He shook his head. "Your religion might be a problem. You can't swear an oath, and you can't do violence. You'll have to swear an oath to join, and Marines do violent acts. War is all about doing violence."

"What if I don't want to be a Mennonite anymore? You're not, and you seem to be OK."

"You'll want to talk to your father about it. I'll help where I can." I thought about Tom's reason for joining the Corps. I said, "As far as being a bad-ass, I saw how you swung that axe handle, you already qualify." Tom beamed.

November 2016

Kevin Butcher:

This afternoon, John Pittsenbargar stopped by and somehow managed to talk Aunt Deborah into sitting on the porch with him. After he left, Deborah stomped back into the house.

"Will that man never cease pestering me?" She said. Everyone at the kitchen table stared at her. Rebecca giggled, then covered her mouth and forced a cough. Rachel and Jonathan shared muted smiles.

I, of course, never knew when to stay quiet. "John is a very honorable man. You should go out with him."

"You—what do you know of honorable intentions?"

"I'm just saying, all he wants is to have a cup of coffee with you."

"Ha, a man will never be satisfied with one cup of coffee."

I turned my head and gazed into Rebecca's eyes. "I could never be satisfied with one cup of coffee." Rebecca's cheeks colored slightly, and she kicked me under the table.

Jonathan coughed and rapped on the table. "I think we're getting off the subject." He said, peering at Rebecca and me before turning to his sister. He said, "Deborah, I think you should go and have a cup of coffee with Mr. Pittsenbargar."

"You cannot be serious!"

"I am serious. Go and have a cup coffee, it will do you good."

After dinner, Rebecca and I bundled up against the cooler weather, and we slipped outside to the glider. Even with the late fall weather the glider still provided a quiet spot for us to relax together. Rebecca had her new tablet and scrolled through my, now our, eBook library. "You have a lot of books."

"Before I started school, I read all the time."

"Would I like any of these?"

One book came to mind. It would be a stretch, but Rebecca might enjoy the love story hidden within.

"Here, sweetheart, take a look at this one. It's one of my favorites."

She opened the file and studied the text. With a questioning tone in her voice, she read the opening lines out loud. "I did two things on my seventy-fifth birthday. I visited my wife's grave. Then I joined the

army. Visiting Kathy's grave was the less dramatic of the two." She glanced up at me with one eyebrow lifted.

"Technically, it's military science fiction, but I'll tell you a secret. It's a story about a man who loves his wife." I bent down and kissed her. "We're not married yet, but I know exactly how he feels."

Rebecca nodded and turned back to the tablet. She read fast.

The Schmidts did not mess around with Thanksgiving dinner. A member of their congregation raised turkeys and Jonathan purchased a fresh eighteen-pound turkey. Two nights ago, Deborah asked me to make a double batch of anise cookies. She and I made them together. Our baking project worked out well. Neither of us sniped or back-stabbed or taunted each other. The honest joy on her face as we pulled the sheets of cookies from the oven made me wish her husband still lived.

Today, Rachel allowed me to prepare a foil pan of stuffing using my maternal grandmother's recipe. Deborah took notes with the intention of adding the recipe to the family cookbook. Once I placed my foil covered pan into the oven, Rachel chased me out of the kitchen. I could come back and help with the cleanup.

They served dinner in the formal dining room. Grainger and Tommy had worked like crazy throughout the day to relocate Deborah's sewing equipment. The ladies set the table with the old family china. And their antique flatware.

"Kevin," Rebecca whispered. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, sorry." I flipped my plate back upright and returned it to the table. "I think this is bone china and it looks old."

"Are you a tableware expert, Kevin?" Aunt Deborah asked. She had a skeptical look on her face.

"Everything I know came from watching *Antiques Road Show*."

"Sarah and I watch that show," said Abram.

Jonathan said grace. His prayer touched upon all of us at the table. I think he made it up on the spot.

The dinner itself was a blur of turkey, stuffing, and gravy. Everyone enjoyed my grandmother's stuffing.

After dinner, we stayed at the table sipping iced tea and eating pumpkin pie. Most of us were suffering from tryptophan and carbohydrate overload.

Sarah surprised me with a question. "Kevin, I wanted to ask you about your experience in the hospital. When your heart stopped, did anything unusual happen?"

Deborah snorted. Everyone but her seemed interested. I said, "Well, I'm not sure, I woke with a memory of a dream or something, but I never thought it was real."

Sarah leaned forward and asked, "What did you see, Kevin?"

"This is going to sound crazy, but I met God." Everyone at the table stared at me. "He told me that I should have ducked, but that otherwise, I'd done well."

Everyone, except Deborah, asked me questions and I went over the dream in detail. No one but me had watched *Full Metal Jacket*. I used Rebecca's tablet to show screen shots. I didn't dare play the movie.

After the conversation moved on, Rebecca stood and pulled me with her into the kitchen. We put on sweaters and snuck outside to the glider.

Later, Rachel found us there; she reminded us about the kitchen cleanup.

Later that night while we walked out to our bed, she said, "I've never read anything like that story you gave me. I don't like the fighting."

"You don't have to read it if you don't like it."

"If this is one of your favorite books, I'll read it. I'm almost halfway through."

December 2016

Kevin Butcher:

The small electric heater in my trailer kept the chill night air at bay. Rebecca wore a thick flannel nightgown and long thick socks to combat the cold outside. I've questioned why she needed to wear heavy winter night clothes while inside of our snug heated trailer, but since I'm male, I couldn't understand.

"The inside temperature doesn't matter, Kevin, I know it's cold outside, and that makes me feel cold!"

This afternoon, a low-pressure system moved in bringing a late fall storm along with it. I could hear the rain pelting the outside of the trailer. Rebecca shivered and huddled even closer to me.

Rebecca said, "Why are you always so warm?" She rolled over to face me and pressed her cold fingers against my chest.

"I think it's an evolutionary thing. Um, is evolution taught in Mennonite schools?"

She sighed and tucked her sock covered toes under my legs. "We're Mennonites, not cavemen. They teach evolution during the comparative religions class. What does being warm have to do with evolution?"

My brain bogged down processing the concept of teaching evolution in a comparative religion class. I shook my head and replied, "The warmer cavemen attracted the most mates, and sired the most children. Cold cavemen were slowly bred out of the gene pool."

"Hmm, well, don't get any ideas about attracting other mates. I'm the only one you need to keep warm."

"If we have another ice age, it would be my civic duty to help perpetuate the species. My warm genes might be all that keeps the human race from extinction."

"Now I know why you're so warm, you're full of...manure." With her front warmed, Rebecca rolled over and snuggled her back against me.

We both lay quiet listening to the rain and now the sleet pelting the outside of the trailer. I remembered a question I needed to ask. "Sweetheart?" I said.

"Mmm?"

"What do we do for Christmas?"

As it turns out, a Mennonite Christmas isn't significantly different from other Christian celebrations. We'd go to church, enjoy some holiday treats, and exchange small, simple gifts.

"Don't buy me anything fancy, and especially don't buy me anything I can't unwrap in front of my family!"

"No jewelry?"

"Better not." She paused, then. "What kind of jewelry would you buy?"

Ah, I was on to something. "Well, it would have to be gold. You're far too lovely for anything less."

"I'm not lovely," Rebecca protested. "You shouldn't say things like that."

"You're right, of course. If I think you're beautiful, it's just evolution making me want to mingle my genes with yours."

"Mmmm, mingle." She reached back and patted me through my shorts. "Our wedding day will be here before you know it, you better be ready to do a lot of mingling."

"I hope the wedding is the only thing coming before I know it," I deadpanned. Rebecca stilled for a few moments while she parsed my words.

Her head turned back towards me, her eyes gleaming. "I figured out what you meant! You better not let that happen." She paused a moment. "I could wear a bracelet, but it would have to be plain."

"I think a simple gold bracelet would be perfect."

"What can I get for you?" she asked.

"You mean besides you, wearing nothing but a bow around your neck?"

She reached back and rapped my hip. "It has to be something you can unwrap in front of my family."

"How about a peek at the miniskirt pictures?"

"No!"

"Then how about a jar of homemade elderberry jelly?"

"Jelly? You want a jar of jelly?"

"Elderberry jelly is the only thing I love almost as much as you."

"So, my competition for your affection is jelly?"

"Pretty much. I wouldn't worry though; you're way ahead of jelly."

January 2017:

Kevin Butcher:

"What happened to our plan for a simple family-only wedding?" I asked.

"We have more time to plan for it, and I've been reading about weddings. Besides, it's only a few more people. We'll have the ceremony in the late morning, then a reception, and then we'll leave for our honeymoon," she said.

I reminded myself that weddings were for the bride, and the honeymoons were for the groom. Rebecca could have whatever kind of wedding she wanted. The honeymoon, on the other hand.... Yeah, this would work.

When I didn't reply to her right away, Rebecca rolled over to face me. She said, "Are you OK, is your leg bothering you again?" She put her hand on my forehead and then onto my leg checking for signs of a fever or an infection.

Before my injury, Rebecca always slept on the side of the bed closest to the bathroom. In our trailer, this placed Rebecca on my left. Until I healed more, we reversed our normal sleeping positions.

"I'm fine, sweetheart. We can have whatever kind of wedding you want."

She looked at me with suspicious eyes. "Are you sure?"

I leaned in and kissed her. "I'm sure. Whatever you want."

After she satisfied herself that I didn't have an infection or an ulterior motive, she rolled over and snuggled back up to me.

"Remember," she said, "you promised a simple honeymoon. No indoor pools or jungle gyms. Momma will want to see pictures." My left hand found its way to her thigh, she reached down and pulled it up to a more appropriate location. We had both promised to be more discreet with our activities. Rebecca interpreted this to mean we'd fool around only once a week.

February 2017,

Kevin Butcher:

On the morning of my wedding, Tommy woke me with a breakfast tray and a large cup of coffee.

He said, "Mom wants you to stay out here until Rebecca goes upstairs to get ready."

We squeezed into my dining nook, and I turned on the television. My set top box pulled in a strong enough signal from the Schmidts' kitchen Wi-Fi. "Still interested in joining the Corps?"

"Sure."

"I got some movies for us to watch. The first is the one I mentioned at Thanksgiving. *Full Metal Jacket* will give you an idea of what boot camp used to be like."

I watched Tommy watching Gunnery Sergeant Hartman striding through the squad bay and telling the recruits to "Sound off like you got a pair." I paused the movie and asked, "What do you think?"

"Is that real?"

"It was, back in the day."

"Like when you were in?"

"Kind of, almost forty percent of my platoon didn't make it. It isn't for everyone."

Tommy looked thoughtful. He turned back to the frozen image of R. Lee Ermey and said, "You can help me, can't you?"

I thought about it, we had two years before he could go. Training Tom would be a good way to help me stay in shape. "Yeah, I can teach you a few things. Get you ready. But," He turned to me. "when you go to boot camp, you'll have to stay low key. You can't show off, that'll get you in trouble."

After Rebecca had gone into Aunt Deborah's room to get ready, I got a turn at the shower. Tom had been given orders to keep me from falling. My leg had healed enough I could manage the shower. Tom laughed while I fiddled with my tuxedo. I laughed while he fiddled with his. We had to hurry and go sit on the back porch. The temperature in Berks County today was expected to hit the high sixties with no precipitation. Niagara Falls would be somewhat chillier. I kept my fingers crossed it wouldn't snow.

Rebecca's posse arrived and greeted me. They told me to keep warm and avoid shrinkage, then they giggled their way inside. By this time, I wanted to get it over with. More people began to arrive. The young single men hung out with me on the porch, and a few flasks made the rounds. Not to me though, Rebecca had put out the word, no liquor for me. The older married men hung out with Jonathan, and they had their own flasks. I began wishing for a drink.

Then Andrew and Kristen arrived, and I stood to greet them. She looked lovely in her below-the-knee length dress and flats. Her highlighted brown hair was up in a loose bun. Andrew shook my hand, and Kristen stood on her toes to kiss my cheek. I told her how beautiful she looked. She took a good look at me and told me I looked nervous. Then she reached into her purse and handed me a tiny flask. "Just a sip," she said.

The high powered plum brandy seared my throat; I could feel my face flush and the warmth spread throughout my body. I recapped the flask and returned it to her. "Thank you," I gasped. I glanced around, all of the young single men returned supportive looks.

Rachel came out onto the porch and strode over to Andrew. She said, "Andrew, you finally made it." They hugged, and then Rachel turned to Kristen. "You must be Kristen. I've wanted to meet you. Come inside, and I'll introduce you to everyone." Kristen managed one worried glance back over her shoulder before Rachel whisked her into the maelstrom.

Andrew asked, "Is she going to be OK?"

"Yeah," I replied, "Rachel will take care of her."

Grainger Thomas:

The cars kept rolling in, and I sat alone on the front porch. The front porch suited me because it was a place for visitors. Visitors were strangers who came calling and were soon on their way. All of the excitement and hubbub about today's celebration made me feel very strange and alone.

I turned my head to listen as Mrs. Schmidt called for me from inside the house. Mrs. Schmidt saw through everything. If she found me hiding on the porch, she'd know exactly how I felt and would drag me into the center of the festivities. She'd give me something useful to do. Then, I'd have to mingle and talk to all these nice people. I didn't belong here. These people weren't my people. They openly cared, and loved each other. They went to church and had faith. They had friends.

What I needed was a better place to hide. The barn looked good. If I could get to the other side of the garage without Mrs. Schmidt spotting me, I'd have a good chance of making it.

Ten minutes later I stood in the barn watching the house through the gap between the large sliding doors. All the fussing at the house had settled down, and I heard people singing, the ceremony must be starting. Good, I'd hang out here until it was over. Tonight, after everyone left, might be the best time to split.

Kevin Butcher:

I stood at the far end of the formal living room, my best man Tom standing by my side. Tom and I wore matching tuxedos. Family and friends crowded the edges of the room. Pastor Ken stood to my right holding his bible in both hands.

The song leader raised his hands, and everyone quieted. He began to sing, and almost everyone joined in. I glanced over to where Kristen stood holding Andrew's hand. Like me, she didn't know the words, and both of us had terrible singing voices. When Kristen noticed me looking her way she gave me a smile and a thumbs-up. The singing faltered for a moment, and I looked to see Jonathan and Rebecca standing in the doorway.

Rebecca wore a white chiffon A-line dress with a beaded lace bodice. The dress combined her Mennonite traditions and my contemporary origins. As a result, it might have fit a little closer than a traditional Mennonite wedding dress, but we were not a traditional Mennonite couple. After everyone had turned to watch, her father escorted Rebecca to me. Instead of a gauzy veil, Rebecca wore a small white prayer cap. At the altar, Jonathan kissed his daughter and shook my hand. In a low voice, he said, "Finally! She's your problem now."

Grainger Thomas:

The door on the back side of the barn creaked open, and I heard footsteps scuffing across the wood floor. Had Mrs. Schmidt sent Tom to find me? I stepped out of the shadows as Klaus Hanslein Junior stepped into view.

We saw each other at the same time. Junior carried a pistol in his left hand, and he pointed it at me. I froze and felt my mouth go dry. He stared at me, and I noticed he looked...wrong. When we grew up together, Junior looked normal. It wasn't until you looked deep into his eyes that the crazy showed itself. Something bad must have happened to him. Because Junior looked damaged—damaged and crazy.

Junior broke the silence first. He said, "Grainger?"

I kept still and said, "Y...Yeah, it's me. What happened to you, you look...hurt or something."

He chuckled, it sounded like it hurt. "No shit. Long story, but my old man tried to have me whacked. I killed the fucker he hired, but not before getting messed up pretty bad."

Whoever that guy was, he did a number on Junior. Junior's right arm hung limp, and he leaned to the left as if he favored his right leg. I couldn't tell for sure, but it looked like scars ran down the left side of his face.

I asked, "What are you doing here?"

His eyes narrowed, and his left hand jerked the gun. He said, "You first, what the fuck are you doing here?"

"I work here. It's my job."

"You have a job, here? Oh fuck, that's great." He laughed a couple of times before it became a cough. "Good, you can help me, it'll be just like the old days."

"Whatever you want, Klaus." Junior stood in place for almost a minute before he pointed the gun towards the floor. Then he lurched into motion towards the barn's sliding doors. He walked funny, left foot forward, then swinging his right leg. I couldn't tell for sure, but he may not have been able to bend that knee. "Ah, Klaus, why are you here?"

He didn't speak at first, just walked with his odd thumping step. Only after he reached the gap between the doors did he speak. He said, "What's with all the cars over there?"

I took a chance and stepped closer to him. "They're having a wedding today. Kevin and Rebecca."

He jerked as if someone punched him in the gut. "No shit? I guess I got good timing." He held up the pistol. "We are going over there, and I'm going to kill every mother fucker in the house."

"Klaus, man, I don't think that's a good idea."

He either didn't hear me, or he ignored me. Junior studied the scene across the yard and said. "Listen to the dumb fuckers sing. We'll walk across the yard, and you open the front door. I'll shoot Butcher first, then the rest. All you gotta do is hold the front door open for me." Junior turned to the barn doors.

Kevin Butcher:

Pastor Ken said, "I pronounce you man and wife."

In traditional Mennonite weddings, there is no, "You may kiss the bride." Public displays of affection were a no-no, even for married folks. I didn't care, I kissed her anyway. As our lips touched, there came a loud booming crash from the foyer.

Grainger Thomas:

For the first time, I realized something I should have known: Family isn't who you're born to, but who you love and loves you back. I couldn't allow Junior to hurt Mrs. Schmidt, or Aunt Deborah, or anyone else there. There was only one thing I could do.

Still holding the pistol, Klaus pushed against the barn door. When it didn't swing open, he kicked it and tried again to shove it open. Didn't he know barn doors rolled sideways? Frustrated, Klaus jammed his pistol into his coat pocket and put his hand against the door.

I stepped up behind him and with my right hand, jerked the pistol out of his pocket. Klaus reached for it, but I jammed it into his side and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened, the trigger wouldn't move. Oh, shit. It must be on safe!

Klaus grabbed the pistol and tried to twist it out of my grip. I balled my left hand into a fist and swung it at his head. He ducked, and my knuckles skidded off of the top of his head. Klaus's foot stomped down on my right foot, but my steel-toe work boots protected me. He tried a head butt and I jumped back pulling him off balance. When he fell to his good knee, the force jarred the pistol from both our hands, and it spun across the floor.

"You fucking traitor," Klaus growled.

I felt like a man having to deal with a rabid animal. You couldn't talk to Klaus and get him to see reason. If I let him leave, he'd just come back again.

We surged against each other. Klaus grappled one handed and bit my shoulder, but my winter coat protected me. I took an elbow to my stomach, but I got behind him and took him, face down onto the floor. I worked my left arm under his chin and around his throat. He rolled left and right, but I spread my legs and refused to let him up. Then I locked my right arm behind his neck and squeezed as hard as I could.

Klaus went berserk. He tried to scramble for his gun, but I stopped him. It's a damn good thing his right arm didn't work. Otherwise, I might not have been able to hold him.

It took a long time for Klaus to die. Longer than I expected. The worst parts were his gurgles and muscle twitches. Once, after I let go, he made a horrible rasping sound. I clamped my arms back in place until my muscles burned, and I couldn't hold any longer. This time, Klaus stayed dead.

I slipped outside and drove the pay loader around to the back of the barn. Then I dragged Klaus out and rolled him into the bucket. I shouldn't have looked at his face, but I did. After a moment, I remembered his gun and ran back in to find it.

Fifteen minutes later, Klaus lay at the bottom of a compost pile snuggled up against a recently deceased dairy cow. I used the pay loader to cover Klaus and the cow with old compost. I left the pistol tucked under the edge of the pile. There were some post holes to dig, and I'd put it in the bottom of a hole.

Kevin Butcher:

My wife and I spun towards the foyer to see Aunt Deborah picking up an overburdened coat rack. She noticed everyone looking her way and shrugged. "Sorry, I bumped it, and it fell over."

Rebecca laughed and kissed my cheek. She said, "I can't wait until tonight!"

Jell-O Poke Cake Recipe

1ea. White Cake, box mix.

2ea. Packages of Jell-O. Jonathan - Lime, Rebecca - Strawberry

1ea. Tub of Cool Whip, defrosted.

Bake the cake according to the directions. Allow it to cool slightly. Use a fork, or the handle of a wooden spoon, and poke holes in the cake.

Make the Jell-O using $\frac{3}{4}$ of the water called for on the box. Pour the hot liquid over the cake. Place the cake in the refrigerator for two hours.

Frost the cake with the Cool Whip, chill in fridge for at least one more hour. Serve big slices with plenty of laughter.