THE SECRET WIFE

by

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ABSTRACT

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This master's thesis project is the first half of a historical novel concerning the involvement of Elvira Field Strang Baker, the first plural wife of James Jesse Strang, with the "Beaver Island Mormons" who followed Strang from Nauvoo shortly after the death of Joseph Smith in 1844. The events portrayed are historical, although fictionalized. This portion of the novel contains a brief introduction to her childhood in Chapter One and follows her involvement with the Strangite movement beginning in April 1847 to the coronation of her husband in. Elvira was the first plural wife of James Jesse Strang who to this day is the only crowned American king. She married Strang in July 1849 and kept her marriage a secret for one year until Strang announced her as his wife during the above-mentioned coronation ceremony. Elvira was a woman ahead of her time. She was educated and had the opportunity to enjoy professional success which was rare for a woman of the mid-eighteenth century. She was a teacher, a trained tailor, an author of articles for her husband's newspapers, and one of his most capable administrators. While this portion of the novel focuses primarily on the early days of Elvira's acquaintance with James, his subsequent courtship, and the early days of their marriage, it also follows Elvira's movement within this unorthodox community that was supposed to be Zion.
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For the past two and a half years, I have been on the hunt for a ghost, a woman named Elvira Field Strang Baker who died ninety-two years ago. I remember seeing her portrait hanging in Central Michigan University’s Clarke Historical Library. Dressed as a young man, her hair is cut to shoulder length and smoothed into careful waves. You wouldn’t know she wasn’t a young man without the caption beneath the painting that declares, “Elvira Field Strang Baker as Charlie Douglass.” Her eyes are bright and clear. On her lips, she wears a small smile, a Cheshire cat grin perhaps. She is a woman who kept many secrets and wore many disguises. She lived an extraordinary life as the first polygamist wife of James Jesse Strang, the leader of the Strangite Mormons, who broke off from the main body of Latter-Day Saints just after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith. She met James Jesse Strang in April 1849 and agreed to become his first plural wife. She married him secretly, and for over a year, disguised herself as a young man, Charles Douglass, in order to be with him. She survived two husbands, gave birth to six children, and more remarkably was an educated woman who taught school and kept church records as well as weather notes for the Smithsonian Institute. But no one outside a small circle of historians or descendants seemed to know about her. She left no journal or diary, no body of letters, or personal history, but I became obsessed—or possessed—with knowing her. I had to tell her story. In this critical introduction, I hope to introduce my reader(s) to Elvira Field Strang Baker, describe the historical research I undertook, and introduce my creative process in order to demonstrate how I delivered her life to the written page.

While Elvira’s life spanned eighty years, the novel primarily covers the eight years (1848-1856), and for the purpose of this project, I have chosen to detail only the first several years of her involvement (1848-1850) when Elvira was an active member of the Strangite religion. While the early and later years of her life were eventful, her story during those years demonstrates the complex relationship between faith, individual identity, and community when she was actively participating with the Strangite Mormons and her husband, James Jesse Strang.
I came across her for the first time in the pages of Doyle Kirkpatrick’s *The James Strang Story*. Having been raised in Michigan, I had heard the tales of the Strangite Mormons, but they were folktales. Call it an epiphany, but when I read Kirkpatrick’s Chapter Five on Elvira and her role, I knew I had found a story worth pursuing. Her life read like a hero taken from the pages of one of the Bronte sisters. However I hesitated using her as my protagonist. I worried about the gaps I’d find in the historical record, but I knew before I even started my research that I wanted to remain as faithful as I could to the recorded events of her life. How could I approach her and do her life justice as a novelist because, after all, I was interested in the story not the history?

She left little information written in her own hand, some private letters, professional correspondence as Charlie Douglass, and articles written for the *Gospel Herald*. Historians take very different positions regarding her role and persona. In fact, almost everything I have learned about her has come from biographies on her first husband, James Jesse Strang, who was a self-proclaimed prophet, and, to this date, only the crowned American king years earlier in 1844. At the request of his brother-in-law, James Strang investigated the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints during the winter of 1844, traveling to Nauvoo and meeting Joseph Smith himself. A lawyer by trade and insatiably hungry for power, he asked Joseph Smith for permission to start a stake of the church in Burlington, Wisconsin. When Joseph Smith was martyred in June 1844, Strang found the opportunity he had been searching for his entire life. He manufactured a letter that he claimed came from the hand of Joseph Smith, naming Strang as his successor. Strang took advantage of the confusion following the death of Joseph Smith to lead away approximately seven to eight hundred Saints from Nauvoo to Voree, Wisconsin in the middle of the White River Valley in central Wisconsin.

In most historical accounts, Strang is portrayed as megalomaniacal. In Voree, Strang began to refer to himself as prophet, proclaiming that he had received revelations and had seen angels from the moment of Joseph Smith’s death. Strang also supposedly found two sets of brass plates in Voree. He claimed the first was written by an ancient man named Raja Manchu who supposedly had walked in the Americas thousands of years earlier. Strang said the other set were the plates of Laban that Strang claimed comprised the missing portion of the Book of Mormon. In 1848, James Strang announced that his people would move to Beaver Island located thirty miles off the northwestern coast of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula in the middle of Lake Michigan. Beaver Island was to be the location of Zion, and Strang ruled there from 1848 to 1856 as prophet. In July 1850, he had himself crowned King
of Beaver Island. During this time, Strang also held positions in the county and state legislatures. He was shot to death in June 1856 by a ring of apostate members of his own church.

While an abundance of material from direct correspondence to pulp novels exists on James Strang, as I stated earlier, Elvira exists only in a few chapters. She was born on July 8, 1830 on her family’s farm near Kirtland, Ohio. Her father, Reuben Field, was introduced to the church by Joseph Smith in 1832 and converted with his family soon after. Elvira was raised in the church but moved to Milan County in southeastern Michigan with her family after the martyrdom of Smith in 1844. Historical fact shows that she experienced persecution at the hands of her neighbors, and after the move to Michigan, called herself a Presbyterian for four years at the request of her Uncle Israel Field. During that time, she was out of contact with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. We also know that she was very talented. From the age of fourteen, she worked as a seamstress while finishing her education and later as a schoolteacher in Milan County. Her father taught her to ride, hunt, and shoot as well. At a time when most women didn’t dream of the right to vote, Elvira was following professional pursuits. Why then did she leave Milan County to join herself with Strang’s Church? The historical record doesn’t relate how Elvira heard about the Strangite Church, but we do know that she was introduced to James Strang and his church during the winter of 1848. She left her position as schoolteacher to attend a Conference of the church in Voree, Wisconsin that April with her family.

Many of the Saints followed Strang because he preached vehemently against Brigham Young and polygamy. He made that his principal draw in attracting Saints from Nauvoo who were uncertain about whom to follow. However, by all accounts, James Strang was immediately smitten with eighteen year old Elvira who was impressed enough to take the Oath and Covenant Ceremony—slightly resembling the LDS endowment ceremony—and make the decision to move to Beaver Island thirty miles off the northwest coast of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula.

I believe she moved to Beaver Island because she fell in love with the people who did call themselves Latter Day Saints. I don’t believe she expected to marry James Strang when she arrived on the Island shortly after the Conference. There is a gap in the record between the conference and her marriage in 1849. However, whether she fell in love with James Strang or simply was mesmerized by his power and position, Elvira agreed to become his secret, first plural wife in July 1849. Strang was not ready to reveal his second marriage to his people, and he asked Elvira to hide her identity. She became a boy for nearly a year in order to be with her husband, posing as his nephew.
and secretary, Charles Douglass. She traveled with him from Buffalo to Washington, D.C., and they returned to the Island together in the late spring of 1850 where he announced he would crown himself King of Beaver Island. He also publicly announced his marriage to Elvira at this time.

All in all, Elvira bore James four children and continued her professional pursuits, writing articles for the Gospel Reveille and The Northern Islander as well as taking meteorological notes for the Smithsonian Institute. She was twenty-five years old when James was shot on the fishing dock on Paradise Bay in June 1856. Elvira stayed behind while the other wives traveled with Strang's body to Voree, Wisconsin where he died ten days later. After learning about his death, she burned most of his papers and then fled, eight months pregnant, and with three small children in tow, when the federal and county officials arrived to force the Strangite Mormons from their homes.

She left her husband’s church upon his death, nearly died from illness, gave two of her children up for adoption, and then married a second time to John Baker, giving birth to two more daughters. She was on amiable terms with the Strangites for the rest of her life, but she refused to raise her children as Strangites or participate herself. Wingfield Watson and Lorenzo Dow Hickey, who took over the leadership of the Strangites, both repeatedly wrote to her, asking her to return to the church. She refused, stating until the end of her life in 1910 that she had loved James Strang and had believed in his dreams, but she no longer believed in his church. In fact, in a letter written to Wingfield Watson shortly before her death in 1910, she openly expressed her doubt in the Strangite church. She believed in James’ dream of Zion, but in the end, she believed that religion had failed her.

**Historical Background and Research**

Bringing Elvira’s life to the page was a literal journey. I started with historical research, devoting an entire year to finding her and knowing enough about her to bring her life to the written page. For me, Elvira stands in for the countless numbers of silenced voices I simply cannot know in my lifetime. These voices belong to women like Elvira who have lived remarkable lives, but whose stories will never be told. Elvira presented with me the challenge of not only deciphering the historical record, but more importantly, telling her story, which incorporated not only my historical research but a creative interpretation of it as well.

In her historical novel Possession, A.S. Byatt argues: “All history is hard facts and something else, passion and color lent by men”(542). I would dispute with her about the hardness of facts, but I do not doubt that facts, especially as they relate to detail, contain power. The more I incorporated the actual historical details into the novel,
the stronger it seemed. Before I began my research, I decided that I would learn as much about Elvira as I could and remain as faithful to the historical details as I could, and I've found that the stronger the details, the better the novel.

Cynthia Bass writes in “You Don’t Need A Degree to Write History”: “A historical novel is successful if it makes you feel you are living in the period” (21). Therefore I’ve never questioned the role that verisimilitude should play in the good historical novel—even the postmodern ones. By verisimilitude, I am referring to the fidelity or spirit of the times, or event, literary critic Russell Nye’s “Ambiance.”

In order to convey this verisimilitude, I traveled back to Michigan, spending several days on Beaver Island and more time in the various research libraries that had special collections of documents, photos, and other information on the Strangites or James Strang himself. I logged countless hours researching her life and her times, searched for letters, journals, any sort of record I could find. I started by reading the four major biographies written about James Strang, his diary, and articles from various regional, historical journals on Strang and the Beaver Island Mormons. I also had to research the Mormon history of Kirtland, Ohio as well the mid-nineteenth century East Coast. I considered all of this background or secondary research.

Thanks to the Beaver Island Historical Society, I was able to meet other fellow Strangophiles and asked questions of them as well. Most importantly, I spent several days actually visiting the places Elvira lived. As I began researching the life of Elvira Strang, I realized that not only would I need to find facts, but I would also have to visit the area in which she lived. I saw her birthplace, and Kirtland, Ohio, the town in which she grew up. I toured Beaver Island and walked in the house on Beaver Island. I traveled the path to Font Lake that she and her husband took dozens of times. Finally, I located the Strang Correspondence microform at the Bienecke Library at Yale University. This collection of letters provided most of the important detail and information I’ve gleaned on Elvira. I focused on this massive collection as my primary research.

Through this research, I focused on recreating the world in which Elvira lived, to make my reader experience her life through an authentic, albeit fictional, recreation of time, place, and character. As Emerson states, “You shall make me feel what periods you have lived” (qtd by Nye, 141). I wanted the story to feel authentic to my readers even if I am writing it in the twenty-first century. I saw my task as writer to do two things: 1) Provide accurate as possible historical background information and 2) Make my readers feel the historical era in which the story takes place. Warner Berthoff in Fiction, History, and Myth states: “Both history and literature are records of
internal and external experience. Both attempt to gain from experience some kind of insight into the quality, mood, tempo, and personality of life—not just the fact of the past but the feel of it” (272). The specific details lend that verisimilitude to a work of historical fiction. Therefore I tried to remain as faithful to the recorded events as possible. For example, in Chapter Three, I detail the Oath and Covenant Ceremony. The actual proceedings of the ceremony are published on the James Strang Correspondence microfilm that Yale University’s Beinecke Library has compiled. Written in the hand of James Strang himself, the record is very specific as to the words and actions of the ceremony. It resembles a thinly veiled version of the Latter Day Saint endowment ceremony, but it was published. This kind of historical detail forms the backbone on which the fictional story takes place.

**Invention**

Despite my desire to be faithful to the historical events, I found that there were gaps that I needed to fill. Even though I had amassed hundreds of pages of information, I found that I couldn’t account for everything. For example, I couldn’t find any information regarding Strang’s actual courting of Elvira. Therefore I had to invent the courtship scene between James and Elvira. And even when I had all the facts, I found that that’s what I had, facts, and not a story. The history in the end couldn’t give me the full story. As Russell Nye explains, “The problem of pastness is peculiarly the historian’s limitation. He must deal always with an event that is forever gone that survives only as memory or record, neither of which is the event itself” (146). While Nye is referring specifically to historiography, or the writing of history, the statement applies as well to the historical novel. I didn’t hesitate to invent because after all my research, I found that I had to fill the gaps first, and even when I had the facts, they couldn’t tell the story by themselves. I worried more about the feel of the story, but I never pressured myself with the idea that I was writing a privileged account. I felt that postmodern historiographers like Nye gave me disclaimer that allowed me the freedom I required to tell the story. I could use the historical events as my background from which I dramatized scenes, characters, and dialogue.

I knew my novel would follow the historical record as far as it could, but where there were gaps, it diverged. In those spaces where I found gaps, I invented. I turned to the tools of fiction to create a character. I turned to E.M. Forster’s and Virginia Woolf’s essays on the creation of character and took what I knew about Elvira’s life and applied to it the tools of fiction, worrying if she were round enough. I didn’t want her to be two-dimensional and flat because I saw her as a real person with complexities. I wanted the experience of knowing her as a character to be
immediate, which is the effect the historical novel desires. Therefore, returning to Chapter Three, while I had a
detailed record of the Oath and Covenant Ceremony, I had no record that told me what Elvira thought or felt during
those intense hours. I imagined a dreamlike, almost surreal setting not unlike my first experience through the temple.
I worried more about her voice and feelings than I did remaining strict with the historical record. In fact, for my
purposes, I ended up not using most of the specific detail of the ceremony, but focused on Elvira’s impressions of
the ceremony instead.

In fact, Elvira didn’t start to speak to me until I let my imagination begin to spin the facts I had collected.
Through my imagination, I glimpsed her personality and character. She became a round character with complexity
and emotions; someone I felt I knew. Only my imagination limited the possibilities. Avrom Fleishman’s states:

> Our present world becomes historical; it is not merely the given world, an immediate flow of
> sensation, but one of a number of historical possibilities that happen to be present, temporarily.
> The men of the present are enabled to give historical stature to their actions…to discover…that
> they have been living history all their lives. (qtd by Janik, 163)

As the experience of writing is immediate, or situated in the present moment, I could temper Elvira’s
character in any light I chose once I had established my historical framework. Aristotle in *Poetics* contrasts the
historian and poet: “the historian can only speak of what has happened, of the particulars of the past; the poet, on the
other hand, speaks of what could or might happen and so can deal more with universals” (145Ia-b). In this passage,
Aristotle creates a binary opposition that I question. I’ve determined that it is possible for the particulars and
universals to commingle. Linda Hutcheon comments in her essay *The Pastime of Past Time*:

> It is part of the postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive versus historical
> representation, the particular vs. the general, and the present vs. the past. And its confrontation is
> itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is
> willing to exploit both.”(475)

Historiography and historical fiction are messy genres, yet scholars like Hutcheon ask why deal with tying
the problems into one neat package when the messiness can lead to great, creative insight. For example, I know that
Elvira and James Strang were married on July 13, 1849. Every historical source, both primary and secondary, has
confirmed that date. From there, they honeymooned in Sault Ste Marie. The historical record reflects the fact that a
marriage and honeymoon did occur, but what about the details that happened in between? What transpired during their secret marriage, and how did Elvira feel? As a novelist, I created my own picture of Elvira, comprehending for the first time the complexity and danger of her situation. She has just turned nineteen years old and is very much in love, but she knows she is a second wife, and more importantly she can’t tell anyone. I imagine the thoughts and feelings that must have coursed through her mind when he finally comes to her that first night they spent together. I imagine her internal struggle as she reconciles her love for James with the reality of her difficult situation.

Elvira will never be present to tell her story to me directly. While I feel I can give her life this new meaning, I’ll never be able to know what she thought or felt about her husband, Beaver Island, or the Strangite Mormons. There have been moments when I have longed to hear her speak directly to me, but her voice is ultimately my own. Throughout this writing experience, that is the most important lesson I have learned. I’ve realized that no matter how many facts I know about Elvira, the voice is still mine. I am the “Great I,” although I’ve struggled at times restraining my own sensibilities and opinions. I certainly wouldn’t put up with many of the decisions her husband made for her, but this is her life, not mine. I can think of no better example of this than in Chapter Six when James asks Elvira to disguise herself as boy for him. What would I do if I were in her position? I’d react with horror and disbelief. I’d feel betrayed, and certainly, I’d cry. I don’t believe that Elvira’s response would have been different from mine, although I don’t think I’d ever make the same choices she did.

Once I felt I was starting to know her, I found myself questioning those presumptions made by earlier writers – even the historians – and coming to my own conclusions about who I think she was. Knowing what I know about Elvira, I could not see how with her education and strength she would have the reactions historians have traditionally attributed to her. Historians, such as O.W. Riegel, Roger Van Noord, and Doyle Fitzpatrick, have emphasized her faithfulness and willingness to do whatever Strang asked of her. Riegel and Fitzpatrick also refer to her as simple and naïve. She was faithful, but she was a woman ahead of her time. For example, in one of the well-received historical texts on Strang, Roger Van Noord writes: “Elvira was known as the dark lady, mysterious” (266). She was a quiet woman, intelligent, yet she was also naïve. I believe she possessed a simple, almost blind faith in her husband. In fact, most historical accounts agree that the older, wiser Strang seduced the younger Elvira. That phrase alone colors her character, hints to a darker, seductive nature I am convinced she did not have.
I cannot believe that she was a doormat and that she simply followed along with her husband’s whims as he took more and younger wives. I doubt she would have blindly accepted all of her husband’s decisions. Roger Van Noord (1986) also discusses Elvira’s reaction to James’ third marriage to Betsy McNutt as one of passive acceptance. I imagine Elvira, eight months pregnant with her first child, sitting at a Feast of Love while her husband flirts with a spinsterish, haughty Betsy. According to Van Noord, Strang’s engagement to Betsy happened when someone at a Feast of Love challenged her to marry any man in the room. She said she’d only marry James, and he agreed. Elvira was present at this exchange. Did she simply hang her head and accept his decision? What could she do? Van Noord attributes to her only one reaction, passivity. She “was perhaps startled for a moment, but accepted the engagement with calmness” (286). I have a very difficult time indeed believing that turbulent emotions didn’t boil within her. I imagined she was shocked, angered, hurt, embarrassed. She had no inkling of what her husband would do, but she was willing to go to what I consider insane lengths to please her husband. She possessed an unbreakable spirit, and she was not crazy, nor was she a fool. She knew her mind well enough at nineteen that she risked everything to marry a man nearly twice her age with a Napoleon complex who crowned himself prophet. People called her crazy for loving him. Perhaps her faith and love for her husband blinded her for a time to his true nature, but she survived and thrived despite her difficult life.

When I stated earlier that I felt she had come to life, I use “life” in a figurative sense. I’ll never know everything that ever happened to her, but I don’t need to tell the truth. She lives now in history, and history is porous and slippery at best. I can only hope to represent who she might have been, and I picture her as an innocent who dreamed of belonging to a safe community and was fooled by a brilliant, older conman. I believe James Strang was nothing more than a master manipulator and conman, but he convinced nearly two thousand people to follow him, and he talked a beautiful, bright nineteen-year old into tying her future in with his. So in a sense, this is my way of vindicating Elvira. She did live at one moment of time, but does that mean that her life is lost forever? Viktor Shklovsksky states: “We theoreticians have to know the laws of the peripheral in art. The peripheral is, in fact, the non-esthetic set. It is connected with art, but the connection is not causal. But to stay alive, art must have new raw materials. Infusions of the peripheral” (qtd by Hutcheon, 474).

Elvira no longer exists on the periphery. I see her sitting in a small hotel room in Buffalo, New York in October 1849. Married secretly for three months, she sits on the narrow bed while her husband clips her long, black
hair. She cries as the strands fall on her knees, legs, and feet, and then to the floor. He has asked her to become a man to hide from the world until he can figure out how to announce their marriage. She submits, but what he asks is difficult. For another nine months, she poses as James’ nephew, Charlie Douglass, the personal secretary and waits for acknowledgment. I imagine the weight of this charade pressing down on her when she had moments of clarity and realized the full measure of what she had done. She believed in James, but I also think she had to have struggled with her conscience. She must have felt as if she were drowning, powerless to untangle herself from the web in which she had caught herself. I don’t think many people would blame her if she had exposed her husband. Today we probably would have wanted her to, but she was in love with him then, and she kept her secret from almost everyone.

I acknowledge her. The empowerment gained from the creation of a meaning for her life is heady stuff. I feel like Viktor Frankenstein when he realizes he is capable of reanimating dead matter. I can bring the dead back to life. Is Elvira watching over my shoulder as I write her “story”? Again, I remind myself that this is her story. In a sense, it is. These aren’t the words from her mouth, but they recuperate the events of her life.

After two and a half years, I’ve learned that I can’t bring her literally back to life. Only God can bring to pass the Resurrection and Judgment Day, but I have built a monument with this text that tells Elvira’s story. I can’t rescue her, but I can show that she was a woman ahead of her time. She was intelligent, faithful, strong, courageous, and devoted. I run out of superlatives. As I have written the story, I have taken steps backward and seen the patterns of her life in this narrative. The Elvira of this story is my representation of what I believe she sounded like, felt like, thought like. It’s mine, and I privilege it as such. My representation has helped to recuperate the eventful life of a remarkable woman, and I have done my job. So, I build my monument— her story—that has been recuperated from the fallen leaves of microhistories, scattered under the tree that is the historical record. When she smiles at me from that black and white photograph, I think I know why you’re smiling; I know you. If she’s anything like I think she is, I know she’d be pleased with the result.
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Chapter One

“What do you think he’s going to be like, Father?” I asked on that cold day in April 1848 when I turned my face westward, away from Michigan and Ohio, the two places I had known so far in my almost eighteen years on earth.

“Who?” He smiled down on me as we stood together on the forward deck of the steamer Chicago that was carrying us to Green Bay, Wisconsin. Father knew to whom I was referring. In my mind, I heard those words he had spoken once so tenderly, “Nothing much matters except for the Kingdom of God.” He wanted me to admit again that I believed. To tell the truth, I wasn’t certain at all what I believed. I hoped, and that had to be good enough. I was leaving because I was tired of pretending, not because I was escaping anything. I was going towards something.

“You know who,” I said. “The new prophet, James Strang.” I held the end of my tongue against my teeth to keep them from chattering. Springtime along the Great Lakes could be anything but predictable, and no one was surprised that the temperature had dropped. It was most likely too cold to be standing outside, exposed to the elements, for long. Heavy and leaden, the skies threatened snow squalls, but at least the lake was open. I’d never before been on open water. Exhilarated and a little fearful, I grasped the iron railing to balance my body, swaying against the heaving of our steamer Chicago, her engine loud and deep under me. She was bulling her way from St. Joseph, Michigan north by northwest. I watched as the last bit of channel and then, the lighthouse appeared, and then disappeared. This is no lake, I thought. This is more like a never-ending sea. There was nothing ahead of me but cold, lonely Lake Michigan. I was leaving behind the world as I knew it.

“I imagine he is like Joseph Smith,” Father said, and his words brought some comfort. I knew he believed the new missionaries knocking on his door had been nothing less than messengers of God himself, and the past four years of worry and disappointment seemed to slip off Father like a snake shedding its skin. He had been so quick to cast aside any doubt when the two men had lodged with him and Mother. “They say he is not very tall, but when he preaches, he roars. They say he knows his scriptures as well as Brother Joseph— perhaps better—and he is always revealing.”

“Oh,” I said. I’d never be able to forget Joseph Smith, the Prophet. No one who met him could. One of my first memories was of an evening when he’d come to our home during the cold winter of 1837-38. I’d been seven-years old at the time, peeking through the wood slats of the banister at the top of the stairs, too timid to approach this man of God. He must have had important business with Father because Brother Joseph was not in the habit of
making unannounced house calls. He was always on the run from the mobocrats who would have liked nothing better than to throw him and his leaders in jail, or worse.

I pressed my nose against the smooth cherry wood. From my position, I had a clear view into the sitting room where Mother and Father sat with the Prophet. I was awestruck at this man who despite his youth and handsome appearance had seen God. I remembered the tales Father had told me about his bravery. They were my childhood bedtime stories. I liked to think that Brother Joseph was invincible; no one could best him—not even the mobbers who had dragged him from his bed while his wife and children and children watched, held him to the ground, and covered his body with scalding pitch and chicken feathers. He’d marched to the meeting hall the next morning and preached to us. His face was still pocked in places where the flesh had been pulled out with the tar after the ordeal, and his voice was deep and rich, full of confidence, although Brother Joseph had to whistle through a tooth the mobbers had chipped. We’d all thought it was charming the way he’d whistle all his S’s.

“I’m asking as many Saints who will go to move to Missouri Territory. It’s time, Brother Field,” Brother Joseph’s words hung in the air. Many of the Saints were leaving for Missouri Territory, feeling that Kirtland had become too unsafe. I didn’t think we’d ever leave, though. We had a prosperous farm and comfortable home. Father looked at Mother, and both bowed their heads.

“Are you asking us to leave Kirtland?” Father said, his voice reaching a higher, nervous pitch.

“You must decide whether to follow or not, Brother Field, but soon I’ll go myself, and the temple will be truly empty,” Brother Joseph replied, leaning forward in the chair across from Mother and Father, his thumbs locked together, his eyes burning.

“We can’t abandon the Temple!” Father cried. “We built that house to the glory of God. You saw Jesus Christ there!”

“I know, but we must do what the Lord commands,” Brother Joseph said softly and reached out to grasp my mother’s hand. I could tell that she was trembling, and tears coursed down her face. Oh, Father, I thought. What will we do?

Never one to be sad for long, Brother Joseph straightened and looked up, smiling. He must have known I was listening the entire time, for he looked straight at me. “What have we hear, a little mouse with big ears?” He laughed, calling, “Little Sister Elvira, come down here.”
I scampered down the stairs, my black pigtails bouncing on either side of my head, and stopped before him, not knowing if I was in for a tongue lashing. I’ll never forget the way his blue eyes, kind and sincere, searched my heart. “Are you a good Mormon girl?” he asked.

“Yes, I am,” I replied.

“Then come here,” he said and patted his lap. I climbed up, so I was facing him with my legs dangling on either side of his. I was so close I could have touched the shiny scars that lined either side of his handsome face. Something about those puckered lines of skin made me sad, and great tears welled in my eyes.

“Now, now.” Brother Joseph wiped the drops from my cheeks and danced me up and down on his knee. He seemed like a big child himself, tickling me, getting me to laugh with him.

“She’s getting too big to be playing like that,” Father said. I turned my head to look at him and found he and Mother were smiling, although their expressions were strained.

“It’s all right, Brother Field. I like nothing better than rejoicing in the future of Zion,” Brother Joseph said, tilting my chin so I was looking at him once more. I gazed up at him from my perch on his knee and loved him with all of my young heart. His eyes danced as he stroked my dark curls away from my face. “Promise me that you’ll be faithful, forever, Elvira. That’s the only way you can get to Heaven and see me again.”

“I will, Brother Joseph,” I lisped, my heart swelling with devotion. “I promise forever.”

Not long after that visit, Brother Joseph rode out of Kirtland for good on a bitter, cold winter day in January, 1838. Father and I happened to be in Kirtland that day. We didn’t expect to see Joseph Smith. He and the rest of the leadership of the church had been on the run from mobs for years. It seemed they’d never have peace. That bitter, cold January day, he was sitting on his horse in front of the Newell K. Whitney store. As we made our way across the muddy street, I gripped Father’s hand, for I’d recognize Brother Joseph’s noble figure anywhere.

“Father,” I said, excited to have spotted the prophet. “It’s Brother Joseph.”

He squinted into snowflake-filled air. “I do believe it is.”

Brother Joseph had been looking at us too. Reining in his horse, he waved to us. “I’m on my way to Missouri Territory,” he said. “Neither I nor the Lord will forget you, Brother Reuben Field.” He clasped Father’s hand. Something in Joseph Smith’s eyes that day that spoke to me of sadness. Deep and melancholy, they lacked their usual sparkle. Instead they drank us in as if Brother Joseph meant to freeze us in his memory.
"I won't let you down, Brother Joseph," my father said. Joseph Smith patted in his anxious horse and released Father's hand. Then he turned to me. The snowflakes were falling so fast and thick they coated my upturned face.

He smiled down upon me, the one bright ray in an otherwise dark day. "I haven't forgotten our promise, have you?" Brother Joseph asked. I would never forget the way his kind eyes reached into my heart.

"No," I said. "I'll be a good Mormon girl for all eternity."

"That's our covenant then. Don't ever forget it." He clucked to his horse, and we watched him until he'd vanished, turned into a phantom in the snow-blurred air.

"Come, Elvira, let's go home," Father said helping me onto the buckboard of our wagon. I didn't want to leave the streets of Kirtland. Even though I was only seven, I huddled deeper into my winter cloak and knew that this day was different. Peeking out from beneath my cape, I looked up into the sky and remarked that even the gray heavens above seemed to know something had changed too. I'm never going to see Brother Joseph again, I was thinking. I looked up at my father, his face straining against the sadness I realized he too was feeling. "I've feared for sometime that this might happen, but we'll stay faithful, won't we? If no one else will keep the Temple, I will," he said softly. "And Brother Joseph will come back." I kept nodding, believing in Father's words with all the innocence of my young heart. Of course we would be faithful, and we could go months without seeing Brother Joseph. We were always fine. I had to believe he'd return to us. I didn't know if I wanted to be a Saint if Brother Joseph was never coming back.

For the next six years, I waited for Brother Joseph to return to Kirtland. Every time we'd travel in Kirtland, I'd hold my breath as Mother and Father talked with fellow Saints, anxious for any word that he'd come back to us. He sent his apostles to preach to us, but he was a busy man establishing his new headquarters in a marsh infested swap in Illinois called Commerce. We heard from the apostles that he'd renamed it "Nauvoo" which meant beautiful. He never came our way again, though. Every time I left Kirtland, I'd sit at the back end of the wagon with my legs dangling over the side so I could see the Temple standing strangely empty as the wagon carried me back to our farm in Streetsborough which was only two hour trip from Kirtland. As weeks, then months, then years passed, I grew to feel only a numbness that spread around my heart. I remembered Mother donating several of her good China plates to make the alabaster walls glitter in the sun. The walls had taken on the dull, gray hue of the winter sky.
Whether they would shine again in the spring, I didn’t know. I liked to think that those walls had glistened for Brother Joseph and the glory of God that had obviously departed.

I turned fourteen in 1844, and only a couple hundred Saints remained to keep the town going. I’d given up hope of ever seeing Brother Joseph or the Saints again, and my faith. I never gave up wanting to believe, but it became much harder when the prophet was so far away. During those years that Brother Joseph was in Missouri and Nauvoo, we still heard about his comings and goings. Apostles heading east on missions still stopped and spoke to us. In fact, Brigham Young, the president of the Quorum of the Twelve, came to Kirtland only months before Joseph Smith’s death to rally our spirits, but Father always said that Brother Young was a windbag, chuckling as he whittled longs strips of willow bark, “Half of what the man says is pure fiction.” I’d never known Brother Young very well. I’d gone to school with several of his daughters before they too had left to move west. Brother Brigham had always been away on missions. Father had said he’d never follow the man when God had put a prophet on the earth. Of course, we’d never seriously considered the fact that God would take Joseph Smith from us.

Then Brother Joseph was martyred in Carthage, Illinois in June 1844, and I wanted to give up on Mormonism. I knew I’d made a promise to Joseph Smith, but he was dead. Father decided to move us to Michigan. Why should we stay when there was no prophet? We packed the wagon and moved to Milan County in southeastern Michigan where Father’s brother, Israel, lived. We had a chance to start over again. While my parents struggled to establish a farm in Eaton Rapids—a day’s journey from Uncle Israel— I stayed on with my aunt and uncle to finish my schooling and do what I wanted, teach. I’d never exactly fit in with any community. I guess that finishing my schooling and then teaching in Henrietta for two years was the closest I’d come. I had a good life in Henrietta, even if Uncle Israel had told me in no uncertain terms that I was never to refer to myself as Mormon, or preach my “devilish brand of religion in his house.” As long as I was the obliging Presbyterian niece and schoolmistress, people were kind to me, although every once in a while, Uncle Israel would still threaten me with a sly “Just see what’d happen if they knew you were Mormon.” I’d kept my mouth closed.

Part of me agreed with Uncle Israel. If casting aside that Mormon part of me was what it took to be accepted, I’d do it, but I found out I believed Brother Joseph’s teaching more than I thought I did. I was living my life as if I were dancing in a masquerade ball. For two years, I maintained my disguise. I didn’t miss much about Kirtland except for Brother Joseph. I certainly didn’t miss the neighbor boys who had chased me when I was younger, pinning me down on the side of the road and pulling my braids until my scalp bled. “Horns! Horns! Show
us your horns!” They’d yelled while I tried to fight them off with my fists. I never did know where they got the idea that Mormons have horns. For me, the only good thing about being a Mormon was Joseph Smith. But, even my promise to Brother Joseph—that I never forgot—couldn’t keep me from hiding those four years I spent in Henrietta with my aunt and uncle. I knew I was guilty; I’d not been faithful. I attended the Presbyterian Church the four years I lived with Aunt and Uncle Israel, but I always knew in the back of my mind that I was Mormon, which hung like a humid summer day over my heart. Sometimes I prayed to God to ask him to help me forget, but he never did. I always felt more ashamed, the harder I tried to forget. My aunt and uncle’s community welcomed me and treated me with a measure of kindness and dignity I’d never experience, but I always felt guilty about denying my religion and Brother Joseph. I wanted to believe in something, even if I had to picture Brother Joseph in my dreams.

Father claimed God gave us another chance. He came unannounced in November 1847 to tell me about the heavenly messengers who had found him and Mother again. These missionaries had claimed that a new prophet named James Strang was leading the church from a small city in Wisconsin called Voree.

“I want you to believe!” he cried, walking with me down the quiet path behind Uncle Israel’s house. “I won’t leave you behind, not you who always believed.”

“But,” I interjected, not knowing how to tell him that I wasn’t sure if I still believed. His words were a colder slap in the face than the winter air, though. I didn’t want to believe he could see through me. Gulping, I pushed my hands into the pockets of my coat. Despite my desire to hide from my religion, I was still a Mormon.

“We may never have another chance to join ourselves with the Saints again, Elvira,” his voice was tender and fervent. I looked into his tear-filled eyes and wanted so badly to know if this new Prophet and his Church were true.

“All right, Father, I’ll go.” I bent my will. I had belonged to the Saints once. I craved the hope that perhaps we could be among friends and a prophet again. I had believed in Joseph Smith, but God had taken him away. So what did that say about my God? I had prayed so many nights to understand why he had taken Brother Joseph from us and why we had had to leave Kirtland and the temple. We had been faithful. I wanted something true and good to hope for again. Perhaps my faith wasn’t as strong as my father’s, but hope, like a little bird, fluttered in my heart and told me I should go.
When I’d told my Aunt and Uncle I was leaving, they looked at me as if I had announced I was marrying the King of Siam. “You’re what?” They exclaimed in unison.

“I’m going to Voree, Wisconsin with my parents to see this new church for myself.”

“Well,” Uncle replied, biting his lip. He glanced at my father. “Reuben, if you’re intent on ruining her.”

“It’s her decision, and she’s made up her mind,” Father said, seemingly pleased with himself. Both men turned to me, and I would have gladly fallen into a deep hole and disappeared.

“What am I going to tell the town council?” Uncle asked me. “You’re the schoolmistress, and school’s not out until June.”

“I know,” I said. “but I have to do this.” I looked over at my father who nodded and smiled. “I have to.” What else could Uncle Israel have said? I was almost eighteen, a grown woman. He couldn’t stop me from making my own decisions, neither could my father for that matter. At that moment, I knew I’d never be able to return to my teaching position. I saw Uncle Israel’s point. No one would hire a Mormon woman anywhere. Outside my faith, I was a pariah. That’s why they had begged me to disguise myself as a Presbyterian. They knew what would happen if anyone found out. I couldn’t stop the truth from coming out. Once I gave the town council my notice, I’d never be able to return.

“Goodbye, Elvira, it’s too late to turn around now, I’d wager,” Aunt Field said as they wished me goodbye. She gripped me tightly in her arms and honked loudly into her handkerchief. The town council had reacted just as I thought they would with surprise and suspicion. Uncle Israel and his fellow councilmen had surveyed me with narrowed eyes over the long wooden table in their meeting room and then cursorily released me from my teaching responsibilities. “Silly goose, you don’t have to do this,” she said and blew her nose again.

“Oh, Auntie, I know you don’t understand, but I have to,” I said, squeezing her hand. I had nothing to lose in the end except a job.

So I was chasing new beginnings. A sharp wind came up, reminding me that I was standing on the deck of the steamer Chicago heading for Voree, Wisconsin to find out if this James Strang was a prophet or not. I sighed, my chilled fingers fumbling with the laces of my bonnet that strained against my chin every time a gust threatened to blow it into the lake. My mind fumbled with the doubt that kept niggling away at the small seed of hope that wanted to bloom, There can never be another Joseph Smith. Things can never be the same.
“Elvira, life will be better now. We’ve been found again.” Father placed his hand on my shoulder.

“I hope so,” I replied.

“We’re blessed to have a new beginning.” His eyes searched the far horizons, and I’m certain he saw nothing but the beauty of Zion again. All I could see was an endless expanse of cold, dark water.

“New beginnings,” I murmured, hoping he was right. The sky was darkening, and soon we’d have to go below deck to our stateroom. As long as I could stand the cold, I wanted to remain on deck and think.

“Elvira, I’m relieved I didn’t have to kidnap you to make you see my point,” Father said.

“Well, I can’t let you experience Zion by yourself while I learn all about it in your letters,” I replied. If James Strang really was a prophet, then there was something to hope for after all. My head and heart weren’t completely trusting; they were hopeful. I was like the apostle Thomas, a doubter who believed when he saw. I wished I could have the faith to believe without seeing. I believed in Joseph Smith, but I didn’t see how the Almighty could ever make another just like him. There was only going to be one Brother Joseph, and he had been killed. Who was to say that this James Strang was a prophet? I hoped he was for me as well as for Father.

Once we arrived in Green Bay, we were to look for a Brother Stephen Klim who was to meet us and escort us to Voree, Wisconsin. After the three days on the lake, the rest of the passengers, as eager as I to stand on firm soil again, pushed me forward down the gangplank. I wanted to stoop and kiss the muddy ground, but I kept moving. Mother and Father were somewhere behind me. My eyes searched the crowd below for this Brother Klim. I wondered how I’d know him. Father always said you could pick a Mormon out in any crowd just by looking for the sparkle in his eyes. Everyone milling around below looked the same to me.

“Ah, there he is. He looks just like his brothers,” Father called and pointed to a tall, thin man standing quietly by his wagon. Brother Klim’s two elder brothers, Josiah and Abel, were the missionaries who had found my parents. They had stayed only several days, long enough to recover their strength and send letters to Voree, telling the Church about us. They had continued to write to Father and Mother after they had departed, though, and had made arrangements with Stephen to care for us during our stay.

“Brother Reuben?” The young man returned the wave once Father had caught his attention. Out of habit, I straightened my bonnet and hoped I looked presentable, although my appearance probably wouldn’t win me many admirers after three days “at sea.”
Brother Stephen Klim tipped his cap when I approached him. He blushed when he spoke. “I apologize, miss, but this wagon’s all I’ve got right now to carry you. There’ll be blankets and a few straw bales to keep comfortable and warm though.”

I was to ride in the rear of the wagon with the trunks. Honestly, I didn’t care. “I’m very appreciative that I don’t have to walk,” I replied.

“Ho there, fellow Saint. It’s been awhile since I’ve been able to call anyone that,” Father said.

“There are more than me where we’re going,” Brother Klim said, helping Mother and Father settle their trunks in the rear of the wagon, and then helping Mother climb onto the buckboard. I liked this man. He didn’t say much, but he had a quiet, gentle air about him. “Are the rest of the Mormons as kind as you are, Brother Klim? Because if they are, I think I’d like to stay for a while.” The words came out like a joke, but I judged him good immediately. I found myself curious about the rest of the Mormons we would meet.

“Oh yes, they are the best people you’d ever care to know, and I hope you do.” He blushed furiously and nodded his head. I wanted to ask him about President Strang too, but Father had engaged Brother Klim in conversation about his farm. I kept my question to myself and wondered if the people were so kind because they had to be, or did they really choose to be so open and charitable? In my experience, strangers didn’t treat one another that way.

We traveled the entire day when I saw Voree for the first time by starlight. I expected another Kirtland, small, tidy, and prosperous. In truth, I didn’t remember much about Kirtland itself when the Saints had been there, but I clearly remembered the temple standing dark and empty the day we’d left and had felt the emptiness that had settled over the town like a thick blanket once the majority of Saints had departed. Voree looked quiet and serene.

“The prophet says Voree means Garden of Peace in some ancient language,” Brother Klim told us as we rolled down the final hill into the White River Valley. Tucked in the hollow of a dell along the White River, the sleeping town spread in neat, white-framed lines on either side. The Saints had done well for themselves in this place. I didn’t need much light to realize the prosperity of this town. After a full day of riding in an open wagon, I longed to enter one of those homes with candles burning in the front window and rest my weary bones in a warm bed. Instead, I looked up into the sky that arched over me, an endless, velveteen dome. Stars twinkled with astonishing brightness, but their light didn’t reach far enough to warm me. I exhaled, and my breath appeared in wisps. I had no idea how far we still had to go, but I prayed we would arrive soon, for I would certainly freeze to death if we didn’t. Even
though I had wrapped myself in one of Brother Klim’s blankets, the chill seeped through the fabric and into my bones.

“We’re nearly there,” Brother Klim tried to reassure me with a smile. “The Smiths are the salt of the earth, the most hospitable people you’ll ever meet,” he continued to talk, each word breaking the monotonous creak of the wagon wheels. He’d told us earlier that the Levi Smiths lived on a large farm outside of town and had agreed to take us in for however long we decided to stay.

“All right?” Brother Klim looked back at me, his even, white teeth revealed between his smiling lips.

Did he ever stop grinning? I had never met another man who smiled quite as much. Did he have a secret to the universe no one else did? He must have been as cold as I, yet he never stopped smiling. I tried to return the gesture, but I could only manage a grimace. I wasn’t about to argue about where we would spend the night. I’d gladly sleep in the barn with the cows and chickens, just to be inside out of the bone-chilling air. Who would have thought mid-April could be so cold? No one could predict the weather that time of year in this part of the country. The air sweeping south from the Canadian arctic over the Great Lakes didn’t fully release its grip until May during some years. I tried to keep myself awake, counting stars, focusing my mind on anything.

“Here we are,” Brother Klim announced, and I roused my achy joints to see neat rows of white fence on either side of us that seemed to stretch for acres. Ahead of us, the Smiths’ spacious farmhouse rose startling and white. A welcoming lantern burned in the window. I pressed my hands together, wishing I had brought my winter gloves; my fingers ached so. My stomach growled with hunger, and I remembered I had had nothing to eat since a brief stop for lunch hours earlier. I doubted my exposed nose and cheeks would ever thaw. As we drew nearer, I saw a woman’s face peeping around the corner of the curtains. I stared back, and she disappeared.

The lantern in the front window flickered and moved. The front door opened, and a tall man came from the house into the night. He moved towards us, the stern lines of his face illuminated by the lantern’s glow. Tugging on his full, dark beard, he surveyed us with unsmiling eyes. Bedraggled and weary from what felt like a lifetime’s worth of traveling, we resembled nothing better than a band of beggars. I’d take the place he offered in his barn. His angular face softened into a smile; he grasped Stephen Klim by the hand and pulled him into an embrace. They seemed to me like long lost brothers, and they weren’t even neighbors. Stephen lived closer to town.

“Ah, you made it safely. I was a might concerned. Sister Smith and I couldn’t sleep till we knew you’d arrived.” Brother Smith’s voice was warm and low; it reverberated through the night air. I didn’t wait for assistance,
but climbed over the edge of the wagons, my skirts and petticoats flying around my hips. I didn’t care. My feet touched the hard ground, and I swayed for a moment, my body numb and stiff as a fencepost from sitting in the wagon.

“Ay, Brother Smith, one can’t turn down an opportunity to serve fellow Saints nowadays.” Brother Klim reached over to steady me with one of his hands. I allowed him to lead me into the house, grateful for his strength. Brother Smith set to work assisting my father and mother with the trunks.

“Tis only too true, Stephen, too true,” Brother Smith agreed. Clapping his hands, he pointed the way to the house. “Well, it’s cold out tonight. Sister Smith is waiting inside. We have warm porridge and a fire and beds turned down. I’ll wager you’re more than a little worn after such a journey.”

I was the first to agree with him and entered first. Sister Smith waited for us inside the house. Colorless as a ghost, her ashen face, etched in deep lines by illness, was made memorable by what was her one beautiful feature, wide doe-like, golden eyes. “You must be half-starved, poor things,” she said and ladled us all large bowls of steaming porridge. I wolfed down my first bowl; I could have eaten another, maybe more. The oatmeal concoction topped with a spoonful of honey tasted like heaven itself. Father ate with gusto while Mother spooned her porridge daintily from the bowl. She sat in her chair at the Smiths’ table, her back straight, her eyes closed. With the warm gruel filling my stomach, I stretched my stiff muscles and yawned. It had been so long since we had known such friendship. I was not much in the habit of trusting strangers, but these people felt like friends already. They asked for nothing and gave us shelter and food in return. I looked at Brother Smith, a genuine smile on my face. I wondered how to properly thank him for his generosity.

“We take care of our own,” he said. “Welcome to Zion, young sister.” His face softened with his smile, and he too smiled often. Did these people really know a secret to happiness that had escaped the rest of us? Here was a man who wanted for nothing, and yet he radiated a quiet joy I had seen only before in the eyes of Brother Joseph. He knows what it’s like to feel the sun shine on his soul, I thought. Did he have bad days?

“We have to get these ‘uns off to bed, Levi,” Sister Smith said, a smile cracking her lips, revealing a kindness that made up the better part of her soul. She placed her hands on my shoulders and motioned for me to follow her to a room just off one side of the kitchen area. The house was quiet except for an occasional creak or rustle as the night air settled around us. I got a rough cot while my parents shared the narrow bed. I didn’t particularly care as long as the room didn’t roll and sway or jounce me over rough, muddy wagon trails.
"God bless you," Brother Smith said, standing in the doorway with one arm around his wife's waist. Together, they looked in over us like guardian angels. Perhaps they were. Then they turned away and left us to sleep. I wanted to fall fast asleep, but I couldn't. The dreams refused to come. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the Smiths bid goodnight to Stephen Klim who had to return to his own wife and child before the night was over. But questions crept in at the corners of mind. Could I trust these people? Was their kindness genuine, or was this a complicated ruse? The children around Kirtland had acquainted me with hatred and suspicion in all its ugliness. Father had sat by my bedside night after night when I was much younger, trying to comfort me with bits of wisdom from the Bible. "They're afraid of you because they don't understand you." I didn't care; I only wanted to be accepted. I was tired of having my braids yanked until my scalp bled. I'd never learned where they came up with that notion that we had horns. I had no mark of the devil on my body. I looked the same as anyone else.

As I drifted towards dreams, I remembered the day shortly after Joseph Smith's martyrdom when our neighbors came to scare us into leaving, their faces blackened with boot polish. "Just give up your contemptible religion, and we'll let you be." Cowards! I recognized their voices when they shouted, "Go away, devil lover! I'll teach ya true religion!" They were the fathers of the boys who tormented me. They swore and cussed, spitting great gobs of chaw on the ground, and they went to their churches and supposedly worshiped God.

"Now that Joe Smith is dead, your damnable religion will go to hell with him in a matter of weeks," a small man growled from the rear. The rest shouted "Yeah!" and pumped their fists in the air.

"Whoa now, wait a minute." The man on the horse in front held up his hand. The group silenced. "We ain't here to do no harm if we can avoid it. We'll give you two days to make your decision, or we'll burn your farm to ashes. Either give up Mormonism or leave Ohio." He leered at Father and threw a burning torch into the trees near the house for good measure, to make sure we made the right decision. The torch landed in the dry grass at the base of one of our tall oaks. The mob yahoed and hoorayed and rode off calling to one another in loud voices, "That'll teach em to take over our land. They'll be gone for good now."

With the image brightly before my eyes, I sighed and rolled over onto my side; I tried to close my eyes, but I remembered the smell of burning grass, and my father's ranting afterwards, and couldn't rid my mind of those images. I lay quietly, conscious of every sound from the creaking floorboards to the sigh of night air caught between the rafters. I smelled the faint aroma of yeasty bread from the day's baking mingled with the sharp scent of crackling wood. "You're too young to remember the good times in Kirtland when the Saints were strong and people opened
their homes to strangers,” Father loved to remind me. If you were a Saint, everyone was a brother or sister.

Certainly, Brother Smith and Brother Klim seemed genuine. What a kind gesture to travel miles over rough, muddy roads to fetch strangers from Green Bay and take them into their home. What if we were criminals intent of robbing them of all their property? How did they know to trust us? I wondered at their geniality. In my experience, strangers didn’t treat strangers with kindness. I remembered contention, but peace was here. Something told me I had found a haven for myself, or at least, I wanted to believe it so badly, I found myself looking for every good excuse to trust these people.

Exhausted from the long day’s journey, sleep pressed heavy against my eyelids, but I couldn’t give in. I wrapped myself in the quilt Sister Smith had provided and wandered into the main room where Brother Smith was still sitting before the hearth, a lantern in his hand. I stood next to him for a moment and saw his eyes were closed, his breathing slow and regular. In repose, the lines of his face seemed softer, kinder than my first impression of him. “I’m not asleep, young sister. Is something on your mind?” His voice was gentle though it still startled me. When he opened his eyes, they were kind.

“No, I just couldn’t sleep,” I replied. He reached out and patted my hand. “Well, I tell my children to try counting sheep or goats. My youngest loves goats.”

“All right, Brother Smith,” I said, the image of nanny goats flying through the sky over pine fences making me giggle. Having seen whatever it was I needed to see, I returned to my cot and fell asleep to the creak of his steps on the floorboards, then the stairs. I listened until he reached his own bed. I wanted to trust this man. I was safe under his roof. Then, I slipped into dreams and heard no more.

The next morning, I awoke with my head full of questions to ask the Smiths. First of all, Why are you so happy? What is your secret to life that you can smile all the time? Do you have bad days? And, do you trust everyone? I couldn’t find anyone in the house, I dressed and wandered outside. Father and Mother and Brother and Sister Smith were setting out to tour the Smiths’ farm. I hadn’t noticed the previous night how far the Smiths acres stretched, but they rambled for many yards to the river bank that made up the western border of their property. I didn’t appreciate land the way Father did, but I recognized value everywhere. From the fat cows grazing near the barn, to the rich brown soil crunching under my feet, I thought, Here was prosperity.

“When I came up from Nauvoo and bought this land, it was wilder than the western wilderness of Missouri.” Brother Smith ran a toughened hand over a section of pine fence. “It was no more than a sea of pine that
needed to be timbered." He pointed towards the White River that bordered his property. I could tell from Father’s hungry expression that he would have sold half his soul for just an acre of that land. He had struggled to make the farm in Eaton Rapids produce any kind of crop, having suffered through drought, infestations of grasshoppers and crickets, and a deadly blight that killed almost all of his past year’s winter wheat crop. One reason I was never going to regret staying in Henrietta with Aunt and Uncle Field was that I couldn’t watch my father start over again even though in his stubborn heart, he believed he could do it.

“I’d give every red cent I owned for some acres on Beaver Island though,” Brother Smith confided as we headed back from the fields to change for Conference. Yessir, I’d give my right arm to have half an acre of the poorest land on Beaver Island.”

“Beaver Island?” I interrupted before I could keep the question from escaping. The four adults turned to me as if they had forgotten I was there in the first place. Father cast me a look that clearly said, Be quiet. He always did think I was too inquisitive for my own good. However, I had asked a question.

“Young sister,” Brother Smith began with a wistful grin. Sister Smith nodded and grasped her husband’s arm. “The only reason I remain in Voree is to tend to the Church’s affairs here. President Strang, his family, and many of the Saints have sold their homes and settled on an island in the middle of Lake Michigan. It’s a three day trip there by steamer from Green Bay in fair weather.”

“Why?” I asked. “What’s it like?”

“Well, I’ve been there a few times to help with resettlement and all, and it’s like the Garden of Eden. Sandy beaches, clear water, plenty of good soil, fresh water, and enough game to keep thousands of Saints for a good, long while.”

“Zion? Finally!” Father echoed. He pulled Mother close to him, his eyes full of the idea of Zion, the perfect place.

“Yes, Brother Reuben,” Sister Smith broke in. “I think this is finally it. The Brighamites swear up and down that they have found Zion in the tops of the Rocky Mountains, but Brigham Young is no Joseph Smith, and James Strang is.” She looked up at her husband who was nodding heartily. Father laughed with them, but I had more questions and wanted answers. “Why are the Brighamites different from the Saints who followed James Strang? Why don’t we all go to the Rocky Mountains? Why aren’t we all on Beaver Island?” Why? Why? Why? I could have kept the Smiths occupied all day with my questions.
Brother Smith stopped me with a wave of his hand, but his eyes twinkled. I was glad he was clearly amused. “My, but you have a feisty daughter, Brother Field.” Father nodded, agreeing that I was a bit too big for my britches. I could never stand to be left out of anything. “Sister Elvira,” Brother Smith addressed me. “You’ll receive answers to all your questions if you’re patient until this conference weekend.”

Patience, the word thrummed in my head like a drumbeat. Patience, my father’s hand on my shoulder steadied my steps. Line upon line, precept upon precept, I heard Father’s voice remind me over and over. I prayed that Brother Smith was right. I had never known such kind souls as the Smiths, and if their religion made them that way, then I would have to be patient to learn more.
Chapter Two

We arrived in Voree with just enough time to find seats in the imposing Synagogue. “They call it the Synagogue because it is our place of worship, like the Jewish temple where the ancient Children of Israel went to praise Jehovah,” Brother Smith explained. The interior looked to me like any other meeting hall, all contrasts of light and dark from the white walls to the dark wood trim of the beams overhead and the lintels around the doors and windows. There were no delicately etched stain-glassed windows depicting the life of Jesus or his passion. This place is austere, I thought.

We all sat on long rows of heavy pine pews. They ran the length and width of the hall with a break in the middle for an aisle. From the raised stand at the front of the hall, I imagined a speaker could see the faces of the entire congregation, see into the people’s minds. Like the Puritan preachers in the East, they had their God’s eye view. I wondered what they would think if they could see into my thoughts. I was willing to believe, but I didn’t know about being convinced. I wasn’t yet what I considered one of the faithful ones. I looked behind me astonished at the crowd of people still waiting to enter the building. I hadn’t dreamed so many Saints actually existed, and Brother Smith had told me earlier that these weren’t all. Some of them had already moved to Beaver Island.

“The settlement of Beaver Island is only beginning, Sister Elvira. Until the Saints are safely there, the Church will be officially run from Voree,” Brother Smith said. How was he able to anticipate my thoughts? Was it some trick of the Spirit? He excused himself to sit with the other leaders assembled on the stand. I wanted to see President Strang, finally, for myself. He had to be one of the starched, official looking brethren sitting on the front row on the stand. Which one was he? Certainly not the enormous brute of a man with flame-colored hair and fierce, piggish eyes crackling like hot chips of coal. His lips curled back, and he sneered at us. I could feel this man’s contempt.

“That’s President George Adams,” Sister Smith said.

“Which one is President Strang?” I asked and craned my neck to examine the men one last time.

“He’s not here, but he’ll be present this evening.”

“Why not?” For that question, I received a stern look and a shush from my father. The meeting was about to begin. I bowed my head to keep myself from indulging in further distractions.

“Let us begin by invoking a blessing from the Lord,” the red-haired giant boomed. A sallow-faced man who looked as if he had survived several bouts of the yellow fever stood to offer the prayer. I folded my arms but
did not close my eyes, surrounded as I was by a sea of worshipers. With their heads bowed and eyes closed, they resembled dark flowers, all blonds and browns and reds. The men seemed stern and uncomfortable in their Sunday suits, and women prim in their best bonnets. No one made a sound. The silence was deafening to me.

Partway through President Adams’ long-winded remarks, Sister Smith leaned over and whispered, “George J. Adams is the second-in-command to President Strang. He used to be an actor.”

*Used to be?* I nodded as if I had known that all along. President Adams’ face grew mottled shades of red as he chastised the Saints for their lack of faith in not paying their full offerings to support the church. He spat and pounded the pulpit with his ham-sized fist, declaring blights and curses on those who were disobedient to the commandments of the Almighty. This was a fine performance, but I was certain he hadn’t meant a word he said.

“May the Lord rain down condemnation upon you who will not heed his Holy word. He demands what is rightfully his.” His fists crashed down again upon the lectern. He stopped for a moment, catching his breath, and I stifled a giggle. Father cast his stern look in my direction. I covered my mouth with my hand to catch any more noises that would attract unwanted attention.

“He was renowned in the East once,” Sister Smith whispered again.

“Really?” I turned to stare at her. “Famous, you say?”

“My husband doesn’t like him, says he has the morals of a barn cat, but he is one of the more entertaining orators, and he’s proven that he’ll do anything for the cause.”

I had a difficult time picturing this man doing much in the way of piety. He seemed like a sham to me, but then, I had to give him the benefit of a doubt. Perhaps he was simply illustrating his God given talents, and in his heart, he was a great believer. He continued to bellow, bawl, pound, and even broke out in tears. Then he was finished. As he took his seat, he cast one last look at his congregation, a grin smacking of self-satisfaction twisting his features. I thought we should have stood and applauded him. I looked around and noticed that everyone else was sitting and listening. No one so much as moved. I wondered how the Saints could follow such a man.

After the benediction, Father smiled down on me, taking Mother’s arm. “Shall we go forward and shake this man’s hand?”

*Of course,* I nodded. I wanted to know more about the great orator. Sister Smith had been right; he had provided great entertainment. At least, as I had looked around me, I had not seen eyes droop, or mouths slacken.
Everyone had listened. I didn't believe anyone could have slept through his speech. One of those fists slamming
down on the pulpit would have been enough to wake the dead.

"Ah, come and meet President Adams, our first counselor." Brother Smith reached out one hand and helped
me forward from the crowd. Still flushed and breathing heavily, he smiled and placed a hand on my shoulder. He
reeked of perspiration, stinking like onions.

"Who have we here?" His grin widened. I couldn't help myself; I took another step backwards as his lips
parted, revealing cracked, yellow teeth. He gripped my hand and pulled me closer. I recognized the smell of stale
tobacco on his breath. So he liked his chaw. I stepped backwards to give myself a bit more room before I fainted
from his odor.

"Sister Elvira Field, this is George J. Adams, First Counselor of the Church." Brother Smith proudly took
my other arm. I tried to shimmy around Brother Smith, to use his body as a shield. Unfortunately, there wasn't
room. For a long moment, President Adams and I locked stares. I didn't waver or like the coldness I saw in his eyes.
His grin died from his lips, and his eyes narrowed. Uppity little thing, I'm sure he thought of me. Who was I to
challenge him? He finally smiled again; his eyes narrowed. He nodded his head, and said, "Well, it's a pleasure, but
Brother William, a word if you will." He turned away from me to speak with the ailing man who had offered the
invocation. So went my first meeting with an official of the church.

"Do you allow yourselves to be led by such a man?" I asked out loud as soon as we had left the building.

"Elvira!" Father shouted. "Mind yourself."

Brother and Sister Smith smiled at one another. Brother Smith spoke, "not all of our leaders are perfect, but
they are faithful men. President Adams is a capable leader and a necessary one despite his obvious shortcomings.
The Lord looketh on the heart, Elvira."

I couldn't argue with that. I knew what I had felt when I had looked into President Adams' eyes; I knew I
shouldn't judge him. The church was a fledgling, barely off the ground. It needed all the strong leadership it could
find. Besides, hadn't Brother Joseph taken in his share of questionable characters and made them his counselors? I
remembered hiding with the rest of the children when Porter Rockwell rode through Kirtland, his face fierce, his
hair matted and wild around his shoulders. The Smiths were right. I shouldn't judge. I couldn't know what was truly
in the man's heart. Perhaps Brother Adams' dramatic character was a front for a more faithful heart. That didn't
mean I had to like the man, but I followed the Smiths and my parents with an easier conscience.
Our meal that afternoon was truly a spectacle to behold. Sister Smith took my arm and steered me from the street into the Voree Inn. “We call this a feast of love, for every soul who hungers shall be filled here,” she said.

“Feast of love?” I imagined a room full of beautiful beings, draped in white cloth, supping from golden cups like the Last Supper. As I entered the Inn, I understood why they would call a gathering like this a Feast of Love. The Inn had one large banquet room, and this day, a group of people milled around inside chatting amiably. They smiled, embraced, and ooh-ed and aah-ed over new babies. I found myself surrounded as if by a large family.

“This way.” Brother Smith showed us to the dining room, delicious aromas wafting from the kitchen beyond. Eager bodies were already filling the spaces on the benches along the long tables, helping themselves to large portions of steaming venison stew from large, round tureens and fresh bread, hot from the oven. As we walked to the main banquet table laden with the sumptuous spread, people parted and welcomed us. “Hello, how are you?” They called as if we were long lost friends. Their faces were so open and pleasant when they reached out to shake our hands, I couldn’t help myself but smile and nod back. I found myself thinking this was what heaven must be like. Everyone was kind and happy, relating like intimate family members. I could call any of these people brother or sister. Father must have been thinking the same thing; he was grabbing each man and woman by the hand. “Good to meet you. So happy to be here,” he told each person.

“Brother Levi!” A hearty baritone carried over the din of the crowd. People by the door parted to reveal a small man officially crisp in his black suit, his hair the color of warm chestnuts, wavy and loose around his shoulders. He beamed, his eyes crackling, his small mouth parted in a welcoming smile. I had to look twice to make sure I was looking at a grown man and not a boy of twelve or thirteen. Although he was small in stature, he managed to draw all eyes to him. His presence commanded our attention. I knew I was looking at James Strang.

“President Strang!” Brother Smith ran forward and clasped the man’s hand. I stared unashamedly—and most likely immodestly—at President James Strang of the Church of Jesus Christ, self-proclaimed prophet and savior of his people, the true Latter-Day Saints. I have to admit I was expecting someone taller and more handsome like Brother Joseph. President Strang stood as tall as a twelve or thirteen year old boy, but no one else seemed to find him odd in any way. In fact, everyone had stopped their conversations and turned to look at him. Our normal activities ceased until he waved his hand, and people resumed what they were doing.
Taking President Strang aside, Brother Smith inquired, “Any word from our brothers in Salt Lake City?” He emphasized the word brothers with an ironic twist as if the two men shared some private joke. I assumed they didn’t realize I was present. I looked to President Strang; a sly smile crept over his face, his warm eyes twinkling with good humor. He placed a hand on Brother Smith’s shoulder. “I did as a matter of fact receive another letter from Brigham Young. He still harbors a belief that I will eventually see things his way and bring my flock west, despite the fact he excommunicated me back in ’44. We don’t see eye to eye on some very important issues, that being one of them.” Those words he addressed towards me. I didn’t know whether to feel pleased that he was looking at me, or embarrassed for calling attention to myself. I had been staring boldly, so I looked down, studying my hands. He probably thought I was shameless, staring at him like I was.

“Why don’t you invite Brother Brigham to repent and bring his flock to Beaver Island?” Brother Smith’s chortle rattled in his chest.

President Strang smiled, extending his hand to my Father who had come to stand next to me. “Brother Brigham doesn’t seem to understand that he can’t excommunicate me from a Church I do not recognize. The true church exists alive and well here in beautiful Voree and on Beaver Island, not in the middle of some Godforsaken scrubland outside of civilization.” His smile vanished from his face for a moment like a passing thundercloud then brilliantly reappeared. He stuck out his hand to greet Father. “Welcome to Voree, Brother Reuben Field,” he said.

“It’s an honor, sir.” Father looked at Brother Smith, as confused as I. How did he know who Father was? They had never met before.

“Ah, the missionaries report well to me. They are good spies,” he said. I gaped at him a moment and wondered if he were serious, but the twinkle in his eyes told me he was joking. “You have a lovely daughter, Brother Field. “ His voice was full of kindness, and I found myself breathing a little easier. I felt flattered. I found myself liking this new prophet even if he didn’t tower over us like Brother Joseph, and that surprised me. He had the same charismatic appeal that like a magnet drew people to him. President Strang then turned his eyes on me again. I remember well studying insects under Uncle Israel’s magnifying glass, examining their many legs, their antennae, and furry mandibles. James Strang held me under his stare as if I were one of those tiny insects I used to trap in glass jars and study for hours. He looked at me as if he knew the deepest secrets of my soul, even if his eyes did twinkle as if he knew a joke the rest of us couldn’t share. I lowered my eyes to the ground.
My father wrapped a protective arm around my shoulder and pulled me to his side. “Thank you,” he said. I looked at him as if to say, I don’t require your protection. I doubted that President Strang would do anything unprophetlike and didn’t sense the insincerity from him that I had from Brother Adams. However, Father seemed to feel as if I needed him.

“I hear you’re a skilled schoolmistress, Sister Field.” President Strang’s eyes again penetrated me. If my father hadn’t been holding me to his side so tightly, I would have started to squirm. I felt exposed. Truthfully, he looked at me as if he could see through my dress to my shimmy and beneath. His expression told me I know you. I know everything about you. James Strang wasn’t what I expected at all, but I remember something that someone said once about Joseph Smith, that he had Presence. James Strang had that too. He was impossible to ignore even in a room full of chattering people. He drew me to him. I felt like a helpless moth drawn to a bright flame. I supposed I should have wanted to resist, but I couldn’t.


“So I hear,” he laughed again. “We have many children in need of a good schoolmistress. We’ll have you settled in a new classroom soon, I trust.”

Was that a promise? I remembered Brother Smith’s description of Beaver Island and thought I’d like nothing better than to see it. I thought of the opportunity to teach again in my own classroom. I was a good teacher. Everyone in Henrietta had thought so before they’d found out I was a Mormon.

“Yes, do teach on the Island.” A small, plump woman, obviously with child, appeared at his side. She made me think of a bird, a quail perhaps. From her gentle face to her hair not quite blonde, or brown, she wasn’t plain, but not handsome either. “This is my wife, Mary,” President Strang introduced us formally. Upon our first meeting, I thought of Mary as everyone else did. She was the true Saint, willing to help anyone with anything. Sister Smith had told me a little about her during breakfast. Mary Strang was an angel, and if the Saints revered James, they loved their Saint Mary. Sister Smith had said, “She has no guile.” When James frowned at her, Mary simply rested her hand on his shoulder, and he seemed to calm. So many years together, and they still affected each other that way. She seemed to be his anchor, even if she only came up to his shoulder. Her smile lit her gray eyes, and she watched me from her protected roost at her husband’s side. I could tell she was cool-headed and rational whereas he was fiercer, full of fire. I felt I should have turned my eyes away, intruding on a private moment as she leaned in close to whisper something in his ear.
A frown creased James’ forehead. He had to leave. “Important matters,” he said. With that, he left me with his wife in tow. Relief washed over me when he left. I didn’t think he was unkind at all, but he’d looked at me as if he knew about my fears and doubts. He most likely knew that I didn’t know if I believed in him or not. I’d been holding my breath, hoping I would not say or do anything to give myself away. Despite the warm greetings, I still felt like an impostor among these kind people, and not even my earlier experience with George Adams could keep me from thinking of them as a whole as the best people I had met.

Brother Smith must have noticed my silence, for he rescued me. “President Strang is a busy man. He’s the President of the Church, and the postmaster general for Voree, and he’s a certified lawyer,” he explained.

“When does he make time to rest?” I wondered. The Feast of Love waited for us, but I had no appetite. The President’s gaze had told me in no uncertain terms that he could see to the depths of my soul. I couldn’t forget the way his eyes had searched me, uncovering more than I cared to expose. “And how did he know so much about us?” I asked. I had to chatter to distract myself.

Father looked up from his bowl of soup. A slice of sopping bread in one hand, he replied with a sparkle in his eye, “Perhaps God told him.”

I understood Father was joking. The missionaries had told the leadership about us, but part of me wanted to believe that James Strang had foreseen my coming, my every thought and movement, that God whispered in his ear and told him where I was. There was something divine involved in bringing me to this place.

“So they told you about all of us?” I asked. Father glanced up again and tried to silence me with one stern brow cocked, but Brother Smith intercepted his look and set his spoon down in his bowl. “We can’t have any lost sheep running around in the wilderness, can we?”

“No,” I admitted. Brother Smith sighed, but his expression was tender as if he were explaining something very simple to a young child. “Don’t worry, Sister Elvira,” he said. “The Lord will have us account for all his sheep, or the sins be on our heads, not yours.”

“Oh.” I was silent for a moment. I never was much of a patient person, and Brother Smith had promised me answers. I felt I knew almost everything I needed to know about the goodness and sincerity of the Saints here, but one question remained, I turned to Brother Smith. Not sure of what answer I wanted to hear, I was going to ask anyway. “He has a powerful presence, but is he a prophet?”
Brother Smith smiled. “You’re a headstrong girl, young sister.” Father frowned at that remark, but somehow, I knew it was a compliment. “James Strang is a Prophet of God. I’ve witnessed some of his miracles, and I believe that angels anointed him, and the Prophet Joseph himself named him as his successor.”

I was only a young girl when the Saints left Kirtland in 1837, but I remembered how divided they were. The harmony and peace that had existed for a short while had seemed to evaporate in a stream of never-ending apostates. Joseph Smith had exposed them and proved they were nothing better than wolves in sheep’s clothing. I imagined that the Saints in Nauvoo had felt the same way after the death of Brother Joseph. Whom should they follow? Brigham Young? Sidney Rigdon? Lyman Wight? James Strang? Each group had their reasons for believing.

I remembered in Kirtland a young boy named Clark whose mother claimed she had conceived him by the Holy Ghost one evening in her barn. She had wandered through the streets for months, howling about the end of the world. I guess the Church would always have her apostate children. I knew if I could believe in James Strang, I’d follow him anywhere, even out of the continental United States like the Brighamites if he asked.

As we were walking out of the Inn towards the Synagogue for the next session of Conference, I caught a glimpse of President Strang in the crowd. People flocked to him, shaking hands and speaking words of praise and encouragement. I pictured him for a moment throwing open the doors of the Kirtland Temple, like Christ ridding the temple in Jerusalem of the wicked vendors. James Strang would roar into the Temple and return it to the Saints. It’d be a place full of light and glory as I remembered it. He didn’t shine like Joseph Smith, but I imagined him terrible and dark in his fury. Perhaps Jesus would appear to him too if He hadn’t already.

_Do you hear yourself, what you’re saying?_ I thought and continued to watch him, despite his small stature. He was the type of man whose presence one could never miss. _Are you saying you believe?_ He moved through the crowd, parting them like the waters of the sea, with his head held high although the crowd threatened to engulf him with their yearning for one private word from a holy man. He beamed at them, showered them with solicitude. They, in turn, rewarded him with their adoration. I stood on my tiptoes, pushed and prodded by anxious bodies trying to make their way through the streets towards the Synagogue. _He is drawing all men to him, just like Christ_, I thought before I lost sight of him.

People parted to let Brother Smith through the queue extending well into the street. We followed closely. The building burst with bodies streaming in from every corner. I couldn’t see more than two or three feet in front of me. “Brother Field! This way! Come this way!” Brother and Sister Smith had stopped in front of a relatively empty
That’s for the Apostles and their families. You’re sitting with us this evening,” said Sister Smith. She had returned to their farm to fetch their children, and now, the entire Smith family sat tidily in their chairs, perfectly still. Sister Smith smiled at Mother and offered the seat next to her. Father was next, then me.

“Well, I’ll be seeing you,” Brother Smith said once we were settled. His seat was empty on the stand. I noticed the group of men, looking very distinguished and dignified, mulling around on the raised platform. From the earlier session, I recognized some of them as apostles. They were no doubt discussing great and important matters like how to save more souls and build the kingdom. I remembered sitting on my father’s shoulders the day Brother Joseph had dedicated the Kirtland Temple in 1836. He had stood on the steps of the building, and hundreds of Saints had sung the hymn written for the dedication, The Spirit of God Like A Fire is Burning. The hair on the back of my neck had stood straight in the air. “Are you feeling the Spirit, Elvira?” Father asked me. I’d nodded, entranced by the chorus of voices and the anticipation in the air. Father had told me, “It’s the Spirit, Elvira. You know it’s true.” Brother Joseph had spoken that day of angels and heavenly blessings, and I had felt the Spirit of God in my bosom.

Sitting in this Synagogue, surrounded by a sea of unfamiliar faces, I felt the same. The air around me was charged with energy and excitement. We were packed together like canned sardines, but no one complained. Everyone faced to the front, waiting for the word of God.

It seemed we had waited for hours when President Strang and his counselors finally entered from a door near the rear of the stand and took their places on the front row in the very middle. Even among the taller, heavier apostles, it was difficult not to look at him. I lowered my eyes and stared at my hands.

I have never heard so many people wait so quietly. As President Adams stood to begin the meeting with a vital “Ahmmmm,” everyone, even the babes, hushed. I didn’t laugh at the man this time. He seemed genuinely serious as he welcomed us all to the meeting and announced the program. With wide sweeps of his arms, he was still the overblown actor, but he was considerably calmed from the morning session. I wondered if this change was because of President Strang’s presence behind him, watching. I noticed that his eyes never left his counselor.

Evidently, George Adams was intelligent enough to know when his performances required restraint.

During the singing of the opening hymn, I knew someone was looking at me. I didn’t want to raise my eyes because I knew the gaze was coming from the stand. It’s just your imagination, silly girl. I wasn’t sure if I was singing. I wanted him to look away, but as we began singing the last stanza of Abide With Me, I looked up from Father’s worn hymnal and met the President’s stare.
He’s not looking at you, so stop this nonsense! Perhaps his sister or parents sat behind me, and I happened to be in his line of sight. Surely he was looking at someone else. I turned around in my seat, but saw only unfamiliar faces, illuminated by the light cast by the lanterns hanging from the ceilings. I willed him to look at someone else, anyone else. There was no mistake. He was looking straight at me, watching every movement I made. Did he possess the mind of God? I bowed my head and closed my eyes, willing the song to end. I prayed for the invocation to happen soon to draw his attention away and ease my discomfort.

I had never been so thankful when Brother Smith rose to offer the prayer, and President Strang turned to look at his apostle, instead of me. I couldn’t have been mistaken; he was looking straight at me. When he rose to address his congregation, his voice boomed. “My dear brothers and sisters, I have a message from the Almighty to deliver to you this evening. I do not doubt that the Lord has a special mission for his children. I don’t fear that we will accomplish that mission.” His words were forceful and sure. He radiated with the strength of his character. I had heard of this happening before; it was a sign of the Prophetic office. He stood on his tiptoes, pointing to us, summoning our support and requiring our faith for his own. “I will not leave you or forsake you. Did not the Lord Jehovah himself promise to Joseph Smith that the fullness of the everlasting gospel would never again be taken from the earth?”

Heads all around me bobbed, yes. We soaked in his words and glowed with them. I felt myself drawn to him too; he seemed to be telling the truth. At least, his words had the feeling of truth. I don’t want to be left alone again, I thought. Brother Joseph had once told us he would never leave us. I want to believe you too, I wanted to cry.

His words rang in my ears as if the Almighty knew what to say to my heart that evening. “I was anointed by the hand of God to lead this people to freedom. We have our kingdom on earth, my brothers and sisters, and the Lord will never take it away from us even if we must die for it. We will fight, and we will overcome our enemies.”

He glowed from behind the pulpit, his body seemed to have grown and expanded until the stage could no longer contain him. I had heard of this happening to Joseph Smith when he was in the Spirit. Supposedly, he had been so radiant that people swore he was an angel rather than a mere human. I half-expected James Strang to levitate off the stage, sprout wings, and fly away, taking his celestial city with him. I remembered Brother Joseph preaching in Kirtland telling us about the glories God would grant to the faithful. I remembered him infused with light, brighter than the sun. I had wondered if he were not truly an angel. James Strangs’ voice echoed off the rafters and walls, suffusing even his congregation with his vision. I know I should have departed as spellbound as the rest of the Saints.
in the congregation. I should have echoed the “We are so thankful for a powerful prophet like James Strang!” I tried to put off the memory as imagination, but the feeling of his eyes on me, telling me, I know you better than you know yourself, frightened me, and I couldn’t clear them from my mind. His attentions didn’t feel holy, but I told myself, He’s the prophet! I wanted to feel thankful and sure like the Saints around me, but I never remembered feeling so acutely present as I had during those moments when his eyes had examined me as if he were taking my body apart piece by piece.

After the meeting, we fought our way with the rest of the crowd to exit the hall as quickly as possible. There was no room to mingle with Church authorities, so we waited for Brother Smith in the chilly evening air. I was silent, still puzzling over the experience. Father was buoyant enough to talk for all of us, though. If he’d had any doubts before, he had none after. “Well, that was one of the finest prophetic orations I’ve ever heard.”

Mothered shivered slightly under her shawl. Father drew her near to him, but addressed me, “Well, Elvira, what do you think of the prophet?”

“I don’t know, Father. He seems genuine.” I was still trembling on the inside, remembering President Strang’s eyes resting on me. I was eighteen and innocent, but I knew enough to know that the President had sought me out in the congregation. I feared his intentions were amorous, and I sincerely hoped I was misinterpreting the exchange. That was a possibility. Perhaps he was simply testing me. After all, he’d looked at hundreds of people, examining their souls too.

“You must pray for revelation from God himself then. Pray and ask for a witness.” Of course Father decided what I must do. No questions at all about my course of action. I should just get on my knees, humble myself, and ask the Lord to send me a vision telling me that James Strang was the prophet of the true church. If I really wanted an answer, the Lord would send it. At that moment, if God himself came down to tell me to believe unequivocally in James Strang, I’d do it, but I didn’t believe for a moment that God would send me any such vision. He only visited men like the prophet and my father. I still wasn’t sure he was the prophet, even if my experience in the Synagogue had been real. President Strang had looked upon me as if I had heard his voice and felt the Truth. He had radiated with the power of his words. Could his gaze be nothing more than a sign that God heard me? Perhaps, that was the answer to my questions, my prayers. Still, I departed the Synagogue that evening with mixed emotions. Part of me admitted that I had had a powerful, spiritual experience, the other couldn’t quite settle the discomfort that pressed against my heart because of the way he had looked at me.
Later that evening, I sat on the floor of our bedroom, still puzzling. Mother had sensed I was quieter than usual that evening. Not pretending to understand why, she beckoned to me to sit against her knees while she brushed my long, black hair. “Don’t worry, Elvira, don’t worry,” she whispered, almost chanting as she pulled the stiff bristles through my hair until it swung freely in black waves around my shoulders.

“Mother?” I asked her, not knowing how best to state my thoughts.

“What is it, daughter? You’ve been quiet all evening. Are you still worrying about the Church?” Her voice was gentle and soothing. I let myself relax against her knees while she continued to brush my hair.

“No, it’s not that. It’s—” I paused and waited for the right words to suddenly come down from heaven and fill my mouth. “President Strang’s attentions felt strange. He was gazing upon me as if he could see me without my petticoats.” There, I said it. I kept my eyes closed and leaned my face against my knees, my hands palm down on the floor. If anyone would understand what I was feeling, perhaps my mother would.

She put down her brush, took me by the shoulders, and pulled me around to look her in the face. “What do you mean, Elvira?”

“I mean, he looked at me as if I were a dish to devour.”

Mother’s brow puckered for a moment. I knew she struggled with Mormonism at times. As she had done her entire married life, she had quietly followed Father, supporting him and keeping him from too much worry. She’d even admit that she’d been baptized to make Father happy and not because she believed especially strongly. I didn’t remember ever hearing her complain against him though. She’d never utter a word contrary to him.

She surprised me. Instead of alarm, she started to laugh, something I hadn’t heard her do in a very long time. “Child, you nearly frightened the wits out of me. Don’t be a goose! He is the prophet, and you have too much imagination.”

I considered what she said. She knew me well. I did have an active imagination, and I could have misconstrued his intensity of Spirit for affection. That explanation seemed simple after all. I was young, and what did I know of matters between men and women? I had never had a suitor. I was Elvira, the strange, dark schoolteacher, never belonging to anyone, anywhere. I hoped I’d belong here. I lay back against Mother’s knees once more.
“Elvira,” she whispered to me before she snuffed out the candle. “You’ll know when a man’s attentions are in earnest. You have too many fantasies.”

I tried to sleep. James Strang’s expression still wandered in and out of my thoughts. “I will never leave you, nor forsake you.” I heard his voice as it had echoed off the rafters. I wanted so badly to believe that. How powerfully had he preached! I did possess an overactive imagination. Mother was right. Her words had soothed me. If he truly was the prophet, there was no telling what he knew.

“I know you’re wrestling with your testimony, young sister,” Brother Smith said to me the next morning at breakfast. My parents were out strolling, and I was alone with our hosts. Brother Smith’s expression was earnest. “I don’t know how I can help you, but I know you came here to this house looking for answers. I can tell you this. You can’t reason your way through life. Sometimes you must simply learn how to accept and feel good about your decisions.” He began peeling an apple with a small knife, removing the peel in one, curly layer. “When you feel good about what you have seen, then, that is the voice of the Almighty telling you that it is right.”

“I only wish I could feel good or bad,” I said, willing to be led at this particular moment.

“Give it time, young sister,” Brother Smith smiled at me over his apple and reached out to pat my hand. Patience, there was that word again. Time. I wondered how much time I had to make my decision. Do I truly believe this or not? I thought about moving to Beaver Island. The idea of living among people like the Smiths appealed greatly to me, but I didn’t know if I should go if I didn’t have a witness of my own that James Strang was a prophet. Could I hide behind a smile and pretend to believe until I did have that conversion of my own? I knew someone would find me out eventually.

Brother Smith’s eyes were warm and crinkled at the edges. “You think too much,” he said. “We’ll have a chat with President Strang today, you and I. Perhaps he can arrange for you to go to Beaver Island. If anyone can, he can answer the prayer of your heart.” I accepted his handshake with a squeeze of my own. He was right. I had the tendency to worry a thought out of its right sense. I had to start acting like I believed if I really wanted to know for myself that this was God’s Church and his people.

That afternoon, we made the journey into Voree and found hundreds of Saints still milling around the town, anxious for more word from the prophet. “He’s not formally scheduled to speak, but on Conference weekend, you never know when he might decide to share a few words,” Sister Smith said as we passed down Main Street.
We didn’t have to wonder for long if President Strang would speak again, for a few moments later, word rippled up and down the street that there would be an impromptu gathering for all Saints on the main green just off the town square. Almost instantly, hundreds of bodies dropped their activities, dressed in their warm cloaks, and flooded the streets. We too joined the crowd to hear what news from God President Strang would deliver that day.

Even though the morning was rainy and cool, we waited under the shady elms that stood as sentinels. Hundreds of eager Saints pressed forward towards a makeshift dais from which President Strang would address us. The atmosphere was as charged as the evening before, perhaps more so, as no one knew what President Strang would say. From somewhere in the crowd, a high, lovely voice broke into a hymn. Fathers placed their children on their shoulders, so they could see over the crowd. I found myself envying those children for the simplicity of their faith.

When President Strang finally did arrive, cheers and hosannas and hallelujahs joined together in one great roar. He spoke of Zion. “The Lord has spoken to me, and it has infused in me a desire to see all my fellow Saints come safely to Zion.” His voice boomed over the crowd and carried clearly to where I was standing in the middle of the throng. “Amen!” “Hallelujah!” once again echoed across the green. Brother Smith nodded at me and grinned, Don’t you see, Elvira. His eyes shone as he turned again to listen to the Prophet.

I wanted to go to Beaver Island. As I listened to President Strang describe his Zion, I decided I had to go there. If he had a place for me, that is. I reminded myself of all the good things that would come of being on the Island. I’d have a teaching position again and position in society where I wouldn’t have to pretend to be someone, or something, I wasn’t. I wasn’t Presbyterian. I was a Mormon, a Latter-Day Saint, and Brother Smith was right. If anyone could make room for me in Zion, then James Strang could. I looked around me, still startled by the adorning faces that beamed when their prophet pounded his hand against his heart. He didn’t look in my direction as he spoke. I became more convinced that Mother was right and I’d misconstrued his attentions. Besides he had impressed me first with his kindness and generosity. I’d liked him.

“As soon as the meeting is over, we’re taking you to talk with President Strang, Elvira,” Sister Smith whispered.

“I can’t wait,” I replied, my eyes on the beloved prophet. Even from our places far back in the crowd, I could hear his voice choking with his love for Zion. “So,” President Strang ended his talk, mopping his brow with a kerchief. “The time has come for all Saints to follow the Law and pack their belongings. Those who are able are to
move to Beaver Island. I have said these words before, but this time, thou shalt heed them. I love Zion, and she is real and pure and true, and only those who are good and pure and true in this world shall inherit her blessings."

*If Zion is for the good and pure and true, then perhaps she can make me good and pure and true as well,* I thought as we made our way across the green towards the stand. My footsteps felt light and sure over the slick ground. *Perhaps I needed her to convert me too.* People were running to escape the rain that was falling harder now, but I didn’t mind the wetness. It felt cleansing and cool against my skin.

“I’d love to go to Beaver Island,” Sister Smith sighed. “Really, Elvira, it would be like living in heaven.”

Images of angels skimming over dark waters passed through my thoughts. I imagined a paradise of tall, green oaks and elm and stately birches, cool, calming breezes from the lake, and sunshine. There would always be sunshine to warm my face. I was picturing something like the Garden of Eden in the middle of Lake Michigan.

“I want to remain with the Saints,” I replied honestly. “I’m still waiting for my answer if James Strang is the prophet or not, but I know Zion is true.”

“Don’t worry, Elvira, you’ll know,” she said and squeezed my hand.

President Strang himself was dealing with a group of recent converts who had just arrived from the East. “The Lord will care for his own. Mark my words, brethren.” He clapped a tall, lanky fellow on the back. “Come, my wife will show you to the Inn. Tonight, you will dine with us there.”

I caught the glance Mary gave her husband; concern furrowed her pale brow. I wondered if she were well. She wasn’t about to question him or complain before us, though, and took one of the women by the hand. “Yes, I’ll show you to the Inn, poor things.” Her voice was barely a squeak, and her face was white as a sheet.

“Here is Sister Field, whom I believe you remember from yesterday.” Brother Smith pulled me forward. A sudden attack of timidity gripped me, and I stood before President Strang, unsure of how to begin. Or, did he begin? I waited, mutely, for his direction. I prayed he would have a space for me on Beaver Island.

For several long moments, he didn’t acknowledge me. His eyes searched the ground near my feet as if for some secret meaning. When he finally did look at me, his smile filled his face and lit in his eyes.

“Sister Field, can I ask you a question?”

“Yessir.”

“Do you believe the Church is true?”
I believe in Zion, I thought. I dreaded my answer to those words, but instead, they rolled easily off my tongue. “I don’t know.” I couldn’t lie to the prophet and smilingly deny the doubts that plagued my heart. I had so much hope, though.

“Do you believe in me? I know there are those who think I’m a fraud.” His eyes searched mine, and his tongue dripped the word “fraud” like bitter acid.

I couldn’t lie to him, and again, I shook my head. “I don’t know.” I fully expected him to turn to Brother Smith and order him to take me away. I was no Saint and definitely not fit for the Kingdom of God, on earth or Heaven. Instead, he motioned for me to walk with him with the Smiths following. I hesitated for a moment, glancing back at Brother and Sister Smith. Both of them nodded at me to go ahead and take his arm. We started off across the green as if it were the most natural thing in the world to walk with the prophet. Even though I was several inches taller than James, it didn’t seem to matter. Strength emanated from him, and I leaned closer. Somehow that seemed the right thing to do.

“God works in mysterious ways,” he said while we walked. “Sometimes, those who seem the most faithful are truly the weakest, and those who wish in their hearts more than anything to believe become the strongest. I can see in your heart that you want more than anything to believe.”

“I do,” I replied. “I just want to know where I belong.”

He stopped and faced me, taking one of my hands in his. His expression was fathomless. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. The world felt like it was stopping around me, and I was frozen in this one moment. Brother Smith was right. Here was the one man who could make sure I never had to worry about belonging again.

“Will you go to Beaver Island if I send you there to teach at my school?” He continued walking, and again, I took his arm. I knew what Father would have done. He’d have said yes. I needed only a moment to make my decision. “I will go,” I said.

“Whether it is through the voice of my servant, or mine, it is the same.” He was grinning under the wide brim of his hat. His hand was warm against mine as we returned to the place where we had left my parents. I hadn’t noticed that we had left the Smiths behind as well. “The Lord has brought you here for a purpose, Sister Elvira. Never forget that. We must all find our purpose. We all have individual missions, and I sense yours is very great indeed.” He stopped one last time and with one hand, tentatively reached out to touch my chin. His hands were warm against my face. “I’ll never lie. I promise you will find yours.”
I felt the prick of tears burning at the corners of my eyes and studied the expression in his eyes, trusting the tender sincerity I saw. How I wanted to believe him. His words flattered me. If anyone could protect me or save me, he could. "I'm going to trust you," I said.

"As you rightly should," he replied and smiled at me before taking his leave. "Tonight, you and your parents will take the Oath and make the Covenant." I nodded as if I knew all about it. In truth, I knew only that if I had to make a pledge of allegiance to be formally accepted, I would do it gladly. "We will see you this evening, Sister Field. Zion is indeed fortunate to have such a lovely flower in her garden."

I blushed at his parting words, but I had started to bloom a little in his presence. The Smiths caught up to me, and I was still watching James Strang. I clasped my hands, my fingers still tingling, and watched him hustle towards town. His legs worked furiously. He walked with purpose, but of course, he had a church to run. He was God's servant. Men deferentially removed their hats, and some women nodded; others curtsied. Children jockeyed with each other for a look, just one little glimpse of the man they called Prophet. These people loved James Strang, and he had been so kind to me. The feeling of his eyes on me, his knowing me, passed through my mind, but I pushed it away.

"Brother Smith, what exactly is the Oath and Covenant?" I asked.

"It's the most sacred promise you can make on earth, the final test of loyalty to the Church, James Strang, and to God." He caught my arm at the elbow. I didn't know if I exactly believed in James Strang, or the Church, but the Saints had surely taken me into their lives. I saw my opportunity, fluttering over my head, to finally belong. I'd go through with the Oath and Covenant Ceremony. If God had shown me anything the previous two days, at least, he had shown me kind people and hope. Perhaps I didn't have as far to go to becoming a believer as I'd feared.
Chapter Three

A dense fog had settled over the valley obscuring everything, and not even the lantern at the top of the Synagogue shed light on our path. We were almost to the front door before the building appeared as if out of nowhere. My hand reached out and pressed against the rough wood. I felt submerged in this murky world, as if I were going under the waters once more. I wasn’t frightened. Anxious, yes, frightened, no. The street that had been full of conference goers that morning now stood empty around us. The Saints were resting in their homes except for those of us who were chosen to participate in the Oath and Covenant Ceremony. Standing before the front doors, Brother Smith knocked and looked down on me. “Only a select few are initiated in the Order of the Illuminati. It is the most sacred ceremony. I can only mention that it is the highest honor President Strang bestows on those he chooses to admit into the circle of the most faithful.” His whisper shattered the quiet that surrounded us. He thinks I’m the most faithful? I thought. I didn’t know whether to find the honor laughable or be genuinely touched.

A little voice in my head whispered, you don’t have to do this, Elvira. You have nothing to prove to them. I brushed it aside; I was going to go through with the Oath and Covenant ceremony. The night air around me was misty and cold, and I shivered clutching my cloak tighter about my body. I did have something to prove. I wasn’t going to be left behind, and my heart was willing to believe in these people, in Zion. James Strang was a very powerful man who obviously lived close to God. His people adored him. I had seen nothing bad here except for Brother Adams, but then again, humans aren’t perfect. Even a bad actor could be faithful. I certainly had my fair share of faults and weaknesses. I didn’t consider myself spiritual material at all although my father and the Saints I had met seemed to think I was. I hoped to reward them for their faith in me.

I remembered my baptism in the millpond in Kirtland. I had been eight years old, just before the last, main group of Saints had departed. I remembered Father standing calf-deep in the water, beckoning to me to come to him. In my white dress, I walked out to him, holding out my arms in case I slipped and fell beneath the muddy waters. “You’ll be fine. Come to me, child,” Father had said, beaming at me. I turned to look at Mother standing with Anna and Albert on the bank; she smiled and waved too. Then, Father took me in his arms, said the short prayer, and gently dipped me under the water. When he lifted me from the bottom of the cool, murky pond, I remember seeing sky and feeling the morning air against my skin. Those few Saints who were still in Kirtland gathered at the pond’s edge to celebrate my baptism and broke into a hymn as I made my way back to shore with Father right behind me. August, I was baptized in August.
I’d thought of Brother Joseph that day and wished with all my heart that he could have seen me go under the waters and come back out again, pure and saved. He’d only been gone a short time then. I didn’t know what was going to happen in the Synagogue, what I would be asked to do, but I heard Father’s counsel again, *Line upon line, precept upon precept, take small steps, Elvira.*

“Father, what do you think is going to happen?” I asked. He stood behind me, his expression eager.

“I don’t know, Elvira. I’ll have to wait and see myself.”

“You’ll be making a sacred covenant with God and his holy prophet,” Brother Smith spoke softly. Once you undertake this vow, you swear yourself to God for life, young sister. Are you willing to do that? Because once you go through with this, you will never be able to turn back. You are sworn to God and his church.”

Brother Smith’s words sunk in. I could still turn back and stop, if I chose. My mind told me that I didn’t need to do this, but my heart told me that I wanted to belong to these people. And, in the back of my mind, I thought if this ceremony was so sacred, perhaps I would find God for myself inside the doors. I wasn’t as strong as my father, but I could be someday. I could finally prove to him that I had the faith to step forward and leave my doubt behind once and for all. I would be a Mormon in word and deed. I turned my eyes to Brother Smith and touched his hand, “I want to belong. Do I need to be baptized again?”

“Perhaps if you feel the need to receive remission of your sins later, but not now. Go inside,” he said when the doors finally opened. I stepped inside to escape the chilling dampness. Inside, light and warmth waited for us. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from shouting, *how much longer do we have to wait?*

A portly, rosy-cheeked fellow ushered us inside. He was dressed in a maroon coat with brass clasps.

“Ah, Brother Savage, thank heavens for you,” Brother Smith said and clasped the man in his arms.

“Welcome,” the man said. Brother Smith introduced him to us as Jehiel Savage. He was a watchman. He shook each of our rounds in turn and led us into the foyer. I noticed an exotic, spicy scent in the air, and a long curtain the color of ripe mulberries separated us from the rest of the building, but the Synagogue was transformed into a world of shadows and dim candlelight. It seemed once I stepped beyond that curtain, I’d end up in a strange, lost, mystical land. Once I walked through the curtain, I wondered what reality I’d find, or if it’d be just the Synagogue disguised. From somewhere on the other side, I could hear the low murmuring of voices, but I couldn’t discern words or phrases. The only light came from lanterns casting their narrow beams against the walls. Above me, I saw only the silhouettes of the ceiling beams in the darkness. Shadows seemed to dance on the walls around
me and then flicker away. I wondered if I touched the curtains around me if they would pass through my fingers like water, or air. I doubted the substance of everything physical around me. I felt like I was entering a dream.

While I watched the shadows form and reform on the walls, I inhaled through my nose, pleasantly surprised that my nervousness seemed to evaporate. The curtain was heavy, and I couldn’t see beyond it to whatever was happening; the murmuring seemed to grow louder and multiply. I heard men’s and women’s voices blending together in almost mystical chanting. I hesitated to blink as I knew if I did either the room around me, or I, would cease to exist.

“Shall we begin?” Brother Savage looked at Brother Smith, and both looked at me. I was to go through first. Brother Smith took my hand one last time, a soft smile played on his lips. “Don’t be frightened or worry now,” he said. I squeezed it, smiled, and followed Brother Savage. Everyone else behind me seemed to fade away, and I felt utterly alone as I moved further into this strange dream.

I walked through the partition where Brother Savage directed me, and as I did, a small question formed at the back of my mind. God, are you here? Beyond the curtain, I found myself alone in another curtained section.

Brother Joseph, are you here?

The mix of spices and herbs was growing stronger, and I felt a little drowsy. Somewhere on the other side of the new colored curtain I stood facing, the muffled voices grew stronger, but I could not hear the words. I didn’t know where I was standing, what direction I was facing. Was I to move somewhere else or wait? I felt twinges of panic and tried to calm myself by remembering the lessons that my parents had taught me about the Kirtland Temple. Jesus Christ himself had appeared in there. Only the purest and most worthy could enter into the ceremonies there, and no one spoke of them afterwards. I still didn’t believe myself capable of such visions although I asked again, God, are you here? Was I to wait here until I received an answer?

Don’t be silly. You’re not going to find him here. I was eighteen. What did I know about life, or God? I knew nothing except that I couldn’t turn back from wherever this journey would take me. What if this were false? What if I were about to participate in something sinister and unnatural? The temptation to turn and leave before that winy curtain parted again and admitted me to the next level of its mysteries nearly seized my me, but my feet were rooted to the ground, and my parents and Brother Smith were somewhere behind me. I couldn’t flee even if I wanted to. I was a prisoner before the mysteries of Almighty God. Not against my will. I had to see what lay beyond.
I have heard of guardian angels, but I never expected to find one myself that evening. I thought I had stood alone in the middle of the sectioned “room” for what felt like eternity when a small, smiling woman my mother’s age with curls the hue of burnished copper appeared from the other side. She motioned for me to follow her, and something inside me told me I could trust her. My feet moved forward of their own accord, and I don’t remember what she said or did, but I remember her eyes reflected serenity. I could find no evidence at all of any hint of trouble in her soul. She’d obviously had a peaceful life, or else she had found something to ease her troubles so completely that she no longer had to dwell on them. Her eyes drew me to her, and she said, “You won’t understand what will happen next. Just feel the Spirit of truth and learn your way with my guidance. I will be at your side the entire way.”

I can only describe the rest of my journey as if I were indeed dreaming. In fact, I have had dreams that felt more real. My guide led me through a series of curtains. At each one, she prompted me to say certain words that allowed me to pass. I realized I was being asked questions about my faith, my integrity and loyalty. My guide was true to her words; she never left my side. I wondered if I wasn’t imagining her. Perhaps she was a guardian angel in her soft, blue robes. I didn’t understand what the unusual questions, and stranger responses, meant, but I knew that with each successful passage through the curtains, I was closer to passing this test. This ceremony was nothing more than an elaborate examination to see how much you truly wanted to serve God. Perhaps even the answers were irrelevant. You either knew what was in your heart before you started, or you didn’t go through with it. Perhaps it wasn’t for me to know the answers. I had made my decision when I walked through the first curtain.

The final curtain, brilliant, royal blue strewn with gold suns, moons, and stars, swayed before me. “This is the last curtain. The Master of Ceremonies will come for you and seal the ceremony. God bless you for your faith, sister.” My guide turned to leave me, and I grabbed her arm. This could be no dream, for I would not feel so panic-stricken. “Wait! Sister, what do I say? What do I do?” She shook her head gently and reminded me again to wait. “You’ll be fine,” she said and, like some kindly phantom, vanished through the curtain behind us.

I was once again alone, my heart pounding in my throat. After a few moments, I heard rustling on the far side of the blue curtain, and then a man in a red robe entered and faced me. George Adams was the Master of Ceremonies. His smile slipped from his face at the sight of me. Whether he was surprised or disappointed, I couldn’t tell, but he was the last person I would have chosen to see at the moment.

“Well now,” he said. “Sister Elvira Field? Is that right? You have passed the initiation into the Order of the Illuminati.”
“Yessir,” I replied and hung my head, not wanting to return his gaze.

“Only one thing remains then, the last sign. Then you will be a Saint in every sense of the word. Does that sound all right to you?” His voice was slurred and thick again, whether from a liquored stupor, I do not know.

He led me quickly through the final part of the ceremony, seeming as eager to end our encounter as I. The final part did require some touching, but I endured knowing that it would soon be over and I could move onto whatever was left to experience that evening. Still I looked into his face and wished I were dreaming. With his own eyes closed, he wore a rapturous smile as he pressed his body against mine. I bit my tongue, partly wishing this were a bad dream. I was shivering.

This part of the building was draftier, and I didn’t feel the warmth that had suffused my body earlier in the ceremony. The entire scene didn’t take more than a minute, yet I felt as if I had lived through eternity in that minute. His sweaty palm against my waist had left a mark on my dress, and I’d shivered when he had brought his right knee to rest against the inside of my left one. Once his eyes opened, he looked at me, disdain flashing in his eyes as small and hard as chips of coal. Had he expected me to enjoy this experience? I wanted to wash everywhere he had touched me. Now that he had finished, I made certain I kept my distance from him. I couldn’t help my feelings of dislike. How could he be second to the prophet? He seemed more animal than human. Kissing me on the cheek, he said in a cold, high voice. “Welcome to the fold of God, Sister Elvira Field. You’re done.”

Hallelujah! I would have joyfully shouted if I had a singing voice at all, and I didn’t look back as President Adams parted the final curtain for me. I stepped quickly through before he had a chance to say more or reach for me again. I heard my mother’s voice and my guide’s, on the opposite side, waiting for their turn. I’m sure Father was somewhere close behind, most likely questioning some young guardian on the significance of various points of the ceremony. I had to laugh a little to myself. Then I realized what I had done. I had survived. I had completed the Covenant ceremony. I was one with God. I hadn’t seen God or heard him, but perhaps he had sent my guardian angel to walk me through this dream instead.

I was standing in a large, dark area illuminated by a single lantern in the window, next to the north end of the Synagogue, in front of President Strang’s office. “Congratulations, fellow illuminata,” Brother Smith was the first person to greet me. Somehow he had managed to skirt ahead, so he could welcome us.

“I did it!” I said and embraced him. He patted my back and pointed to my parents who were just coming through the final curtain. Both of them were beaming. The four of us stood for a moment in a tight circle, just
looking at one another. I knew it would take years, perhaps the rest of our lives to understand the meaning behind it all, but I knew we’d never be forgotten again.

“Brother Smith, am I truly one of the fold now?” I had to ask the question aloud. He chuckled and placed and arm around my shoulders.

“You’re a clever lady. Always remember that God requires complete faithfulness, and what the Prophet asks is the same as what God asks. If he wants you to do something, then you do it.”

“I guess I haven’t had the Church’s influence in my life.” Those Saints who had the prophet in their lives for years were truly fortunate. I thought of my father keeping the temple from mobbers; his faith had never wilted. He had never surrendered hope, even though Brother Joseph had left him behind too. “It’s easier to believe when you have the centerpiece of your faith standing in front of you every day reminding you.”

“I knew the Prophet Joseph too, but James Strang is every bit his successor. I know he is, Sister Elvira.” Brother Smith pressed my hand between his before releasing me to stand with my parents. “Don’t ever forget you made a covenant with God and the prophet, but a covenant is a promise with two parts, and they will never forget you.”

*My faith is the size of a mustard seed. It’s so small that sometimes, I can’t see it,* I thought. Didn’t anyone understand how badly I wanted to believe with all of my heart? I wanted to give it all to the Saints. If I could do that, I’d believe anything. I now belonged to them. I had shown that I trusted them. My loyalty was to Zion.

I was ready to be done with the ceremony, take the oath, and prepare for what was next. “Come,” Brother Smith said and ushered us inside the last, small room. President Strang was waiting for us in his private sanctuary. Perched in a tall chair, his face glowed in the light cast by the candles lit in the windows. He trailed long yards of luxurious crimson fabric. If it had been anyone else, I think I would have laughed, but he commanded our respect, even our awe. He surveyed our small group like royalty on his throne, and we waited for his command.

He couldn’t contain an infectious smile. His eyes twinkled at me under his crimson cap. “I’m very glad to see you all made it through.”

“It’s been an enlightening experience.” I didn’t mean for the words to come out with a sarcastic edge, but they did, and it was too late to take them back. Of course, I was thinking about the last part of the ceremony where George Adams had touched me. I wasn’t about to forget the way my skin crawled. I wanted to bathe and scrub everywhere.
“So it is,” James Strang said. His eyes met mine, and I knew he understood. I believed I wasn’t the first woman who had finished the Covenant part of the ceremony, scratching at her skirts as if she needed to be deloused. He laughed, rich and infectious. I couldn’t help myself but warm to his charm. We all shared in the laugh as if we were old friends.

I’d never met such an endearing man as he asked after my mother’s health and bantered with my father and Brother Smith over their farms. I relaxed, forgetting about President Adams, enjoying this very opposite moment. While I could never forget his authority, he seemed like any other man conversing with his friends. His expression was warm and kind, his questions sincere, and his compliments generous. With me, he simply turned to look at me, and his gaze was sympathetic. He said, “You will be fine, Sister Field. You did a great thing this evening.” I knew I had too, and I basked under his approval. I had taken a long leap of faith. I’d started in the mire of doubt and discovered I was now standing in the meadow of the believers. I’d never go back, nor did I want to.

President Adams finally burst through the door with a hearty “We’re through!” He motioned for us to form a circle around him. James Strang even descended from his throne to join us to explain the serious nature and words of the Oath. We had made the Covenant, now the Oath.

His voice was gentle, but it echoed through the chamber. “The last part of the ceremony which you have participated in this evening will seal the Covenant you have made with God, me, and his Church. Only those who wish to take their places alongside myself as illuminated ones should remain in the circle. If you doubt, step back now.”

I glanced at my father, mother, and Brother Smith. No one moved. President Strang smiled and continued. In his hand, he held a copy of the Bible open to the gospel of John and on the pages rested an ornate, gilt cross.

“Please place your right hands on the Bible and cross and repeat after me.”

He rose from his chair and joined us, taking his place in the circle across from me and next to Father. I spoke the words, but my voice seemed to come from somewhere else besides my lips. I said I believed, and as I said the words, I believed what I said. I believed in God the Father and Jesus Christ, in the Holy Apostolic Church, and in James Jesse Strang. I prayed that he was the true prophet. The words continued for a while, and I don’t remember all of them, but I do remember the rhythm of our voices breathing in and out, declaring fealty to the small man who sat upon his throne. The words did make me think of subjects swearing loyalty to a king. He did look like a sovereign testing our devotion. His smile grew wider with each line of the Oath. He seemed to thrive on those
words. I imagined it must have been like hearing sheep’s bells as they returned to their shepherd. There we were, we were safe, and body, mind, and spirit, we belonged to him.

_How does he do it?_ I searched him out. I studied his face, delicate bones, large eyes now closed as he listened to the homage being paid to God and himself. His body, invisible under the robe that hid his feet, seemed to float on the air. His eyes fluttered open, clear and piercing, and looked deeply into me. I didn’t waver and returned his stare. His lips parted in a smile, an eyebrow arched perhaps amused. Bold girl, he was probably thinking. I wondered what trick of the hand he used to set himself apart so effortlessly. He didn’t seem to need to do anything differently in order to command our awe. I hardly knew him, and yet I hoped he approved of me. I wanted him to believe in me as much as I believed in him.

“Well, then, the ceremony is complete. You are now all members of the Order of the Illuminati. Remember that you have covenanted before God, his holy Prophet, and his angels to be loyal to him and me before all.” With a wave of his hand, we were dismissed.

“Sister Elvira?” He called as I was leaving the building with my parents and Brother Smith. Once again, he read my thoughts. “I’ve made the arrangements for you to accompany us to Beaver Island. Do you still want to come to Zion?”

I didn’t contain the smile that spread from ear to ear. “I do. I want to go,” I said. You remembered after all, I thought. I shouldn’t have doubted the prophet.

“You will have to leave your parents again.” Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed my parents exchanging confused expressions. _What is he talking about?_ I saw my mother mouth to my father. He shushed her with a wave of his hand. _Wait and see_, his look said.

“I’ve been away from them for two years already.”

“Excuse me, President Strang,” my father said. He patted my mother’s hand, telling her he would take care of everything. “We weren’t aware of our daughter’s arrangements to go to Beaver Island. She’s said nothing to us, and we are her parents.”

I knew I was in trouble. James Strang looked from my parents to me, then addressed himself to Father, “I’m very sorry indeed, Brother Field. I’d have thought Sister Elvira would have sought her good parents’ approval from the first.”
I flinched at the disapproval dripping from his voice. Father moved to my side taking my hand in his own. For a moment, he looked at me as if he had never seen me before. “I love my daughter. I only want her to be close to the faith. I knew Joseph Smith, God rest him, and stayed behind when he left Kirtland. Elvira was only seven when he left us there. She’s never known life in a community of Saints. I want that for her.”

I stared at my father. He was sacrificing me. I heard again the pain in his voice as he had cried out to me at Uncle Israel’s only months earlier. “Believe! I want you to believe.”

James Strang surprised us all. It had been a strange evening to say the least, but he placed his arm around my father’s shoulders and said, “I too am a father, and I’d rather die than see my children lose their faith. If they did, I’d think I’d failed them and God.”

My father looked as if he were on the verge of tears himself. “Then, you do understand,” he said.

“Brother and Sister Field,” President Strang began. “Do you want to come to Beaver Island too?”

No, Father shook his head. “Sister Field and I have a farm to run. If I were younger, I’d give it a go, but I’m too old to start again. We have to return, but Elvira is free to go if she chooses.”

President Strang looked from my father and mother to me. His compassion startled me, tears welled in his eyes, and he gripped my father’s hand, pulling him into an embrace between brothers. He was a father, and he knew what it was to make a father’s sacrifice. “God’s will be done, brother,” he said.

“I’m going then,” I said.

Father gazed upon me sadly. “Can I ask you one thing?” He asked President Strang.

As if he already knew what my father was thinking and had anticipated everything, he put a hand in the air. “I know, Brother Field. I’ll look after your daughter. We’ll find her a good home, a satisfying position, and a good husband.”

I sensed that beneath my father’s sorrow was pride that I was chosen. “Just take care of her,” he said.

“That’s all I ask.”

“I will.” The president smiled, and I was passed from my father to the prophet. I was leaving my Father’s house for James Strang’s. Had I just experienced some sort of exchange? And, if so, was this truly the way of things? As a woman, I could not have hoped for anything better. James Strang had volunteered himself to be my benefactor, and I was going to Beaver Island.
“Sister Elvira, are you sure this is what you want?” He called after me as I departed with my parents. We were new Illuminati, never to be forgotten again. Lighter than a feather floating on a current of air, I felt my whole life had been clarified.

I looked up at the night sky before I answered his question. The fog had lifted, and a chilling wind whipped through my clothing as I walked into the night air. All above me, stars glittered like sharp diamonds. I’d never seen so many before.

“Yes,” I said. My parents were walking ahead, leaving me to follow.

“Then you believe in fate, or destiny as the philosopher calls it?”

“If you mean, am I meant to go to Beaver Island? Is there a reason for everything? Yes, I do.” We stood facing one another in the frosty air, yet I felt the touch of spring, a breath of warmth on my cheek. Renewal, change, was coming soon.

“God be with you, Sister Field. I’ll send Brother Smith tomorrow to secure your passage. Look to him to take you from here.” James Strang bowed low over my hand, raised his eyes to mine. He took me in and seemed to know me, every inch of me, even points I didn’t know myself. My parents had stopped a ways ahead, watching.

“You’d better join them,” he sighed. I nodded and walked away knowing his eyes were on my back the entire way. He didn’t leave the street until I was riding away in the wagon behind my parents and Brother Smith. I knew he was still standing in the street, waiting and watching.
Chapter Four

Home, I thought, standing on the foredeck of the steamer when I saw the island for the first time, sparkling under the sun like the back of a jeweled whale. I had never seen anything so beautiful and half-expected it to sink at any moment beneath the waters and disappear forever. I wasn't alone in my reaction. The small group of Saints who had traveled with me also cried heartfelt "Hosannas!" We were come home at long last.

As the steamer cleared the narrow lip of Paradise Bay and plowed towards St. James, I had to keep myself from jumping over the side and swimming to get to land faster. From the moment I had stepped onto the steamer at Green Bay for the passage northeast to the island, I had felt only anticipation, no doubt, no fear, only the feeling that I was finally going to where I belonged. At the oddest times, I'd find myself thinking of President Strang's piercing gaze. I knew I'd see him again, and for the first time in my life, and under the eyes of God, I knew I had made the correct decision. This was where I was supposed to be.

"Welcome! Welcome!" Eager faces waited at the pier as the steamer docked. A goodly sized group of curious Saints were ready to assist us newcomers down the plank. I lifted my trunk and waited my turn. The scene could have turned into complete melee as newcomers made their way off the boat and Saints pushed forward, looking to help, but several young men held signs over their heads, reading Enoch Village, St. James, Font Lake, and South End. The men were already organizing us into small groups. Their shouts of family names, Miller, Saunders, Post, and Laughlin, carried over the din. I listened for my name, but heard nothing. Had they made a mistake or forgotten about me?

I didn't know what to do if no one claimed me. Setting my trunk down, I found one of the young men with a sign that read Enoch Village and tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me? Do you know where I belong?"

His pale eyes twinkled in his face, browned from what I assumed to be long summers farming. His expression was open and kind. I trusted him immediately. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Sister Elvira Field," I said and fussed with the rumpled skirts of my navy travel dress. He consulted his list for a moment, and a smile broke even wider on his face.

"Here, you're with me in Enoch Village," he said. "I'm Brother Anson Miller, one of the captains."

"Pleased to meet you." I stuck out my hand. He took it in his, and his grin widened until it threatened to engulf his entire face. "You too," he chuckled.
When Anson Miller organized everyone going to Enoch Village, we loaded our trunks into a cart pulled by a smart dun-colored pony and started off down a wide road towards the small settlement. I fell into step with him as he started whistling some bright tune I didn’t know.

“You’re coming to the Celestial Kingdom, you know,” he said after we had been walking for a short while.

“Oh, really, I thought the Celestial Kingdom was somewhere above us,” I jibed back, liking this man even more.

“No, it’s about an hour’s walk inland,” he said and continued to hum his unfamiliar tune when another woman hurried forward.

“Anson,” she scolded. “You didn’t introduce me.” Anson blushed to his roots and muttered, “Sorry, dear.” I stifled a giggle as the woman gave me a sympathetic look as if to say, I am still trying to properly train him. She had to be his wife. If I took to Anson swiftly, I felt as if I had known his wife, Catherine, forever. We didn’t exchange a word, but the companionship between us didn’t need to be voiced, and her quick smile told me she was glad to meet me as well. Her pretty, round face shone in the mid-morning sun, and she hummed the same little tune her husband had been whistling. She seemed like an angel, so good and pure. Even though she dressed a little strangely, I thought she was the loveliest person I had ever seen.

I don’t know if I would even call what she wore a dress. It was more of a uniform, consisting of a gray apron that covered a simple muslin shift that fell to the knee, a scandalously short length revealing her pantaloons that ruffled to her ankles. Most of the other women in our company, except for the newcomers, wore similar costumes. Where were their corsets and stays? How could they not feel exposed? I felt conspicuous among them in my navy dress and bonnet.

“Do you dress like that all the time?” I whispered.

“Yes,” Catherine said, nodding. “All the women wear this. The Prophet wants us always to remember that the ways of the world are wicked. The flesh is weak and wants only pleasure and fineries. This way, we aren’t tempted to vanity.”

“Oh,” I said. I felt as if I were a newborn, knowing nothing. The ways of Zion were not the ways of the world.

“Besides, how would it be to pick strawberries or corn all day long in a tight, hot corset and long skirt to drag in the dirt,” Catherine laughed; her voice was like tiny, tinkling bells. I imagined her in a ball gown, stooping
over endless rows of strawberries, her blonde hair straggling from its chignon, and I laughed too. I doubted that she’d ever let herself become too much of a mess.

“Well, you’re coming with us to stay for a while,” Catherine said as we approached Enoch Village. The entire settlement had perhaps five homes clustered around a crossroads called Four Corners and several outlying farms. Ours was the only settlement within an hour’s journey on foot, and I soaked in the wild beauty of the tall grasses and green forests spreading around me as far as I could see. The earlier settlers had cleared several large tracts for farming, and now, the neat, gray board homes bespoke the coming of the Saints to this part of the island. Anson and Catherine lived in one of the small homes closest to the crossroads, and Anson had already cleared what appeared to be several good acres. It looked like he was expecting a fine late spring crop. A breeze promised a warmer season to come. I’d never known a place I’d have called perfect until I saw the Island. From St. James to Enoch Village, the entire place was the Celestial Kingdom. I’d landed myself in paradise.

That evening, Catherine let me borrow one of her costumes until we could go into St. James to purchase my own. Attired in the Beaver Island dress, I turned round and round in front of Catherine’s mirror, examining myself from every angle. I saw her point. The costume was comfortable and practical. I had worn corsets and stays for almost four years, and the feeling of my bosoms and belly unencumbered by whalebone and canvas was very liberating once I accustomed myself to this newfound liberty. I looked like a Saint now, set apart from the world. Like Catherine, I was a woman of Zion.

“My father is the Bishop in Voree. President Strang asked him to have us personally look after you,” Anson remarked while Catherine was plaiting my hair by candlelight.

“Hold still.” She separated my long, thick strands to make perfect plaits. “You can stay as long as you wish. We’re honored to have you here, and the children really need a schoolmistress.”

“I can’t believe I’m truly here on Beaver Island. It feels like a dream.” With my hair now coiled tightly into a knot at the back of my head, I stared at myself again in the mirror and wondered if I had ever looked at myself like this before. Perhaps I had always been afraid of what I knew I would find. The girl smiling back at me had wide, flashing eyes and flushed cheeks. She was lovely, and she startled me. I looked like a taller, darker Catherine; I was an Islander. Catherine came to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. She smiled at our image in the mirror, one light, one dark—two sides of a coin.
“You two are the heights of Island fashion.” Anson slapped his leg, laughing.

“You look beautiful. All the young men will be calling for you in no time at all.” Catherine’s face beamed in the wandering light cast by the dying fire. No, you are the beautiful one, I wanted to say, but didn’t. I squeezed her hand instead.

“I do believe it’s time to retire,” Anson called. He came over to join our tableau and touched his wife’s hand. A sudden blush crept to Catherine’s cheeks, only making her lovelier. She reached up with one slender, white arm and touched his face, rewarding him with a look of such devotion and love. My heart broke for both of them. I hoped they would stay sheltered here forever, that they’d never have to remember the persecutions in the world.

Their home had only two rooms and a small loft above. I climbed the ladder and settled into the bed they had prepared for me, grateful for the kindness of these Saints, for I believed they were the best of people.

“If you need anything at all during the night, don’t think twice about calling for me,” Catherine added before snuffing out the candle and sending us all into peaceful night. The world was far away as I listened to the dripping rain on the roof and Anson and Catherine’s soft words coming from below. Did James Strang have any notion as to how good his people were? They were Zion themselves. I finally understood what Father meant when he talked of Zion, and why we called one another brother and sister. We loved one another like that.

Everyone worked on the Island. Even when we played—which consisted of sewing circles, canning parties, and other such activities—we worked. Fortunately, almost anything could be turned into a social occasion. "Idle hands are the work of the devil," was often passed about in cheery tones. I didn’t have time to miss my parents, although I did write as often as I could, filling them in on all the goings on. I’d protested to the Millers about imposing on their hospitality, but Anson had stamped his foot firmly and declared, “As long as President Strang says you’re staying with us, you’re staying here.” I’d not pressed the argument further. It was so convenient to live so close to my school. Unfortunately, there was a delay in the construction of the building, so I met with my eight pupils in a makeshift shanty. When all six of them showed up, we barely had enough room to move, but fortunately, we enjoyed a fine, mild spring, and I spent most of my time taking them on walks through the woods, teaching them about the plants and animals along with basic reading and writing and arithmetic.

The children came to class with that idea burned into their brains, Idleness is the work of the devil, and they took to their schoolwork with the same stubborn diligence I noticed when I saw them at their homes, doing their
chores. Their parents had raised them from the cradle believing that everyone worked. It wasn’t uncommon for one of the older girls to miss several class days because her mother needed her to help in mending fences, and when the late spring planting came, I gave up holding class altogether. Even the youngest two children at age six had responsibilities during that time of year.

I turned myself over to God’s time and couldn’t do what I wanted the most, which was to read. The Saints were social people. We loved working together, dancing, singing, and especially eating. Every occasion called for physical as well as spiritual nourishment. As everyone knew I was the unmarried schoolmistress away from my family, cast on the goodwill of strangers, my pupils often came to class carrying small jars of homemade jam or loaves of fresh bread from their mothers. Once, one of the older boys brought a brace of pheasant he had shot himself as a gift. “Thank you,” I had proudly accepted them, and Catherine and I had plucked them and roasted them over a hot fire for dinner.

We women had a weekly meeting every Wednesday morning in St. James to discuss our own affairs. Mary Strang usually directed that meeting under the blessing of her husband who was rarely on the island himself. When we could, Catherine and I would walk into St. James and listen to whatever prattle happened to spread around the settlement that day. Because of my education, I was often called on to help supervise the monthly sewing bee since I had trained as a tailor’s assistant. I learned never to teach for more than twenty minutes as the Island was small, and the sisters were always more interested in gossip than the gospel. News could make a full circuit around the Island in less than a day thanks to the good-natured prattle that went on during our women’s meetings.

Fortunately, our talk was usually harmless, revolving around James Strang’s latest whereabouts as posted in the Gospel Herald. He was out saving souls and preaching hell fire and damnation to anyone who opposed him or the church. I sat in awe and listened to one after another bear witness of his prophetic calling. He was the closest being to God that we knew. He had made miracles happen in the sisters’ lives. One after another, the sisters would stand and bear their witness in high, clear voices. One sister, sobbing, even related how she had conceived after James had touched her womb and ordered her to be fruitful and multiply. She had since borne two children in three years. Everyone had a story to tell about how marvelous the prophet was.

How could he be far from my mind when talk inevitably turned to him? During that first year on the island, everywhere I turned or looked, something remarking on James Strang. Our lives seemed to revolve around him like planets around the sun. Even during our women’s meetings, talk inevitably turned towards what we could do as
women to lessen the burden of the prophet. How could we be more obedient to him? Were we too worldly or vain? How could we make him the proudest of us?

Aside from the meetings, at the oddest moments, I’d find myself thinking about him, recalling the way he had looked at me over a year earlier. I could still feel his eyes boring into me, discovering my secrets. I knew he’d be pleased if he saw me, and I had put so much of my doubt behind me. I had worked myself completely into Beaver Island society. I was a Saint, and I knew it. My life was an open book here. I found myself profoundly grateful for his intervention. He had brought me to Beaver Island. He had read the desires of my heart, and he had granted me my wish. I belonged; I was safe in this community. I didn’t tell anyone about the doubt and fear that had been in my heart as I had traveled to Voree. I didn’t think I had truly converted until after I had arrived on the Island. I had told Anson a few stories of the Kirtland days as he had been born there too. His family had been among the first to leave Kirtland for Missouri. We’d never known one another. Mainly I kept to myself.

As far as the Saints knew, I had come to Beaver Island through the good graces of the prophet. Somehow, word trickled out as it did in small communities that I was an official ward of the prophet, but no one seemed to mind that. I was Sister Elvira, the schoolmistress and fellow Saint, and that’s just as I would have it be.

Even the lewd remarks of the whiskey trading Gentile fisherman who lived in the Whiskey Point settlement on the northern edge of the island couldn’t dampen my enthusiasm for my newfound home. As the post office was in Whiskey Point, I had to make the walk through the north end of St. James, past the line of ramshackle shanties that made up the majority of their settlement. They claimed they were fishermen, but we all knew they made their living brewing the harsh rye whiskey they sold to the Peaines, the local Indian tribe. If the fishermen were sober, they’d set out with the Peaines in their shallow boats and fish most of the day in the open waters off Paradise Bay. Mostly, it seemed that they were drunk, and they waited for young women like myself to come along so they could shout their crude “Bonjour, petite fille, you look like you need to go for a swim today?” I heard one young sister claim that she was attacked by several of them as she was walking from the post office. They would have done worse than grab her braids and shawl, but a young brother, who happened to be walking to the post office at the same time, spotted the group circling her and disrupted the encounter. Despite their drunkenness, I never felt fearful of the Gentiles, not while I was among the Saints. For the first time in my life, I walked straight and proud and said to them, “You cannot harm me now.”
It was on a crisp, cool Saturday morning that James Strang finally returned to my life, one year after my arrival on the island. Mists lay heavy on the Miller’s fields as Anson and I walked back from our early hunting excursion into the woods making up the northern boundary to his property. He had a couple of plump pheasants, and in either hand, I carried my kill – two, fat rabbits – for stewing. Anson liked to claim he was the better shot, that he had felled his first deer when he was five, but I always held my own with him. In fact that particular day, I had shot my rabbits well before he had shot his first pheasant.

“You were lucky,” he sighed when we were within eyeshot of his house.

“Every time we go hunting?” I asked and laughed at the frown creasing his brow. He wasn’t really angry. I found myself laughing often those days. Anson had become like a second brother to me, and we jostled a bit as we came up the final rise. Dressed in a pair of his old breeches, white shirt, and coat, I reveled in my freedom to be able to tramp through the woods and claim the whole country for my own if I wanted. I had no idea that anything was amiss until Catherine appeared at the back of the house. She must have been watching for us.

“What is it?” Anson asked. “What’s wrong?”

Catherine looked from Anson to me; her eyes were wide with surprise. “The Prophet is in our home.” Her words were serious. President Strang was most likely sitting in the house right now, waiting for us. I wondered if he’d come bearing sad news. I could only think of my parents falling ill or something devastating like a fire destroying the farm. There was no way Father would be able to recover from such an event. My heart started pounding so hard I thought it would jump from my throat. I prayed nothing had happened to my family.

Anson didn’t seem upset at all. “Well then, what are we waiting for?” he asked. Catherine whose middle was beginning to swell with her first pregnancy looked positively ashen. In no condition for such a surprise, she glared at her husband and said, “you knew he was coming, didn’t you?”

Anson didn’t have the opportunity to respond.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, he did. I told him to save my visit as a surprise.” We turned to find James Strang walking from the house toward us. I can only imagine how I must have looked, covered in residue from the Pennsylvania Trade Rifle Anson had lent me, all dirt and perspiration. What’s more, I was dressed like a man, and my hair had come undone from its hastily plaited braid. I knew I looked like a field hand. Wishing the earth would swallow me up, I ran a grimy hand over my hair and face. Trying to do so without calling attention to my actions was impossible. He stared at me, his eyes wide, most likely wondering what he had turned me into, sending me to
this island in the middle of Lake Michigan. Covering his mouth with one hand, he surveyed me for a moment, and then, started laughing. “I see I’ve found Sister Field, and I’ve come to honor my promise to her father.”

“Oh, uh, may I clean myself up first?” The squeak that came out of me barely sounded like my voice. “I don’t usually look this way.”

The prophet continued to chuckle, shaking his head. “Of course, please do so, but don’t spend all day. We have some business to discuss.”

I sprinted to the house as fast as my legs would carry me, changed into my dress, combed my hair, and managed to wipe most of the grime off my face. I hastily replaited my hair into something resembling a braid and splashed another handful of water on my face for good measure. Looking at myself in Catherine’s mirror, I thought Good enough, it’d have to do. I heard voices below, and I leaned over the loft to listen.

“She hunts too?” the prophet asked.

“Well sir, that’s my fault. You see, she’s better than me,” Anson replied. I knew his cheeks would be flushing from the embarrassment I heard in his voice.

“I admire a woman who is self-sufficient. That’s good. She’s strong. Thank you for letting her stay with you for so long.”

“I knew this would happen, but I’ll miss her so much. She’ll be better off in St. James,” Catherine said. And like that, I found I was moving to St. James.

“I know you’re listening to us, Sister Field. Come down. I’d like to hear your thoughts on the matter,” he called to me. Feeling like the small, seven-year old child summoned again to the prophet’s knee, I climbed down the ladder and stood, looking at Anson, Catherine, and President Strang. I supposed I should have felt angry, or betrayed even, but I didn’t. I was bewildered by the situation, but I had known that I couldn’t remain with Anson and Catherine Miller forever. “So I’m changing schools again,” I said. The words were weak, but they summarized my emotions perfectly.

“Does that please you? Your children will now come into St. James for lessons in the new schoolhouse I have commissioned, and I need you there.” The president’s voice dropped off, and he took a step towards me. I bowed my head. I was his ward; I didn’t feel like I could disagree. At least, I was staying on the island. I feared I might have run from the house if he had told me I was to be exiled from Eden.
Catherine broke the silence, throwing her arms around my shoulders. “We’ll miss you, Elvira, but we all knew this was only temporary. You need a home of your own.” I embraced her, feeling her soft weight in my arms. 

You’re right, I thought. “Besides, we’ll still see one another all the time,” I replied. She wiped a tear from her eyes and kissed my cheek.

Over her shoulder, I noticed the President looking at me with a bemused air. “Come along,” he said. “Let’s get you packed. You are wanted in St. James immediately to start your school.”

Anson helped me move to St. James several days later. President Strang saw me settled into a room in a house owned by a sweet, old widow, Sister Evans, and visited me often with a length of ribbon or trinket he thought I’d enjoy. He never forgot to remember me. I began my days in St. James still thinking of him as the prophet. I was in awe whenever I saw him walk down the street, people coming from their homes to talk to him in the street. I didn’t realize at first he was courting me. I thought he was paying due attention that any good guardian would give to his ward. Everyone knew I was under his care, so no one questioned his intentions least of all me. After all, everyone agreed, “He’s a great man, the Prophet!” He started escorting me on my walks as I searched for new plants and trees to show my students. I told him about my childhood, the persecutions and nightmares, about disguising myself as a Presbyterian. I told him I still didn’t think I was very faithful, but how I loved Beaver Island and the Saints. I had found peace here. He patted my hand and said, “The Lord has great things in store for you, Sister Elvira. I can tell it.”

Our walks were never long, but I found myself looking forward to those days more than any other. One day, we walked all the way to Font Lake where we stood together in the sunlight, staring at the sparkles reflected on the lake’s glassy surface. During special days, the prophet baptized people in that lake. That gentle June evening, he told me for the first time about his visions. He took me into his confidence, and I think I knew then that something was changing between us. He had been unusually solemn, hardly speaking.

“President Strang?” I asked, sensing that something was wrong.

He placed his hand gently over my mouth and bade me to be quiet. “Shush, call me Brother James,” he said. I’d never heard him ask anyone to address him as anything else except President Strang. His voice was familiar and gentle, but underneath, there was a sternness I had rarely heard. I looked at him, my eyes wide. Calling him Brother James seemed so intimate, even if I had addressed Joseph Smith in the same manner. Brother James felt
different, as if he were admitting me into a circle of friendship that only a privileged few enjoyed. Why me? I asked myself and stared at my hands, hoping he would do all the talking, and I could listen and try to keep my cheeks from burning. He said, "I don’t know why I’m doing this, but I feel I’ve got to share something with you that I’ve only shared with few others."

“What is it?” I asked

“Do you realize what it means to walk and talk with the Almighty?”

I shook my head, transfixed by his words. Even though I considered myself a believer, I’d never pretend to hear the voice of God in my ear.

“I have the power to command the winds and the waves. I have the power to rebuke Satan completely from my people’s presence. The Lord himself guides me with his hand. I am his warrior, his servant, his earthly king.”

Perhaps my eyes played tricks on me, but I vow he glowed, and this light seemed to come from within him. His eyes focused on some far away point, and he took my hand gently in his and pressed it with his own.

“Elvira, the Almighty has given me new scripture. He has led me to new plates like the plates of Joseph Smith from which the Book of Mormon was written. These plates have the fullness of the gospel. The Almighty comes to me in my dreams and shows me visions.”

I knew I was in the presence of something extraordinary. If I had doubts before, I had none now. “Why are you telling me this?” I asked.

“Because, Elvira, you are one of God’s chosen daughters. Remember that scripture, Many are called, but few are chosen?”

Again, I nodded. I knew that scripture well. My Father had often read it to me when I was a child. Whether it was from the cool, night air or sitting in the presence of the prophet, I started shivering.

“I feel that you are chosen in my bones. I knew it the moment I met you.” He turned away from me, his mouth set in a firm line, his eyes distant. I didn’t want to know what expression he wore, but the thought crossed my mind, Was this a personal revelation? No angel had appeared to me, but the prophet was sitting next to me, telling me these things.

For a while, we sat together on the rock outcropping. James kept his eyes downcast, searching for signs in the still waters below. When he found the words, they came out in little, mournful sighs. “I’m not a happy man right
now, Elvira. My wife and I don’t live as husbands and wives should. I’ve feared for sometime that God would bid me to put her away as she isn’t faithful in her wifely duty. Can you understand what I’m saying?"

He stopped for a moment, allowing his words to settle into my brain. My mouth dropped in a sheepish "oh." I hadn’t yet celebrated my nineteenth birthday, but I had heard my mother mention something about “wifely duty,” the same as the sisters on the Island when they discussed their pregnancies and the habits of their husbands. I knew that it entailed private relations between man and wife in their bedroom like Anson and Catherine. I had heard my parents underneath me for years and guessed that’s what he meant. I’d never actually raised my voice to ask the questions of how it actually happened, or what married people actually did.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked. I didn’t want to know about his relations with Mary.

He didn’t answer my question, but continued to sigh and search the waters for his answers. “God will show me the way, my dear Sister Elvira. He will. I must have faith.” I had no idea how to answer him, so I didn’t. We sat wordlessly side by side looking at the moonlight streaming on the lake and listened to the night birds calling to each other from the trees.

Were we coming to some sort of agreement? I didn’t understand what had just happened. I didn’t understand how God would permit James to leave his wife unless he caused a ship to come crashing into Mary Strang’s house, or drowned her while she waded in the shallow water behind her home with her children, unless he were referring to divorce. But I didn’t think a prophet could do that. At least I wasn’t sure. Divorce carried with it all kinds of ugly heartbreaks. Mary was too good. I’d never believe that God would cause James to put her away, simply to be free of her. I believed he was an honorable man, husband, and father. He’d never do that.

“I don’t understand,” I said, breaking the silence between us.

“I know,” James replied. “I know God will show me the way if I am strong enough. He will move mountains for me.” His eyes brimmed with tears, threatening to spill onto the rocks. I wanted to put my arms around him, but reason told me not to. He was the prophet. Instead, I sat riveted in my place, my hands in my lap. 

“Well, I think we should leave.” James composed himself and smiled at me, patting my hand. He seemed to be himself again. We walked back into town, and things seemed normal once again between us. I tried to soak in the cool evening air that seemed to hum with songs of crickets, tree frogs, and the wind. I tried to shut the intrusive worries out of my mind and enjoy the beautiful evening. But before he released me to go to Sister Evans’, James pulled me towards him, his eyes once again very sad. His melancholy seemed to run to his core.
“Sister Elvira?” he asked. “If the Lord were to give me a revelation, any revelation asking you to do something that could possibly heap scorn upon you forever, perhaps even cause your friends and family to turn against you, would you trust me?”

“Is this a test?”

“Answer my question.”

“Of course.” Hadn’t I taken the Oath and made a covenant with him and God? I had spent many evenings listening to James Strang declaim direct conversations he had had with the Almighty. I had made what I thought was my leap of faith and crossed over to his side. I was a believer. What more would God ask of me?

“God may test you in unforeseen ways, Elvira. I hope you are as strong as I believe you are.” And before the watchman turned the corner and swung his narrow lantern beam down my street. The light flashed through the darkness, illuminating silent porches and the trunks of the tall maples and birches that graced front lawns.

“Farewell, Elvira, God will make a way,” he said, his eyes were deeper and darker than the night. Before the lantern could catch us in its glow, James disappeared into the shadows. I waited until I heard the crunch of the night watchman’s boots against the road and went indoors, crawled into bed, perplexed, wondering what on earth the Lord might ask me to do.

Two days later, George Adams appeared. Sister Evans’ greeted him and asked him to wait in the parlor. “Elvira,” she called. “You have a visitor.” I assumed she meant James. I had been sitting on the back porch, watching the small fishing boats float lazily at anchor in the bay. I remember the day was unseasonably hot and humid, almost unbearable. I was thinking about James’ words to me. The Lord may ask you to do very difficult things. I had passed through the most difficult test of all in linking my fate with the Saints. I assumed anything else would be easy compared to my life before coming to the island. The only test I could imagine was being asked to quit the island. I couldn’t imagine anything more difficult that having to abandon paradise. I would have sooner lived as a wild woman in the woods around Enoch Village than leave Beaver Island.

I didn’t pretend to hide my fallen countenance when I saw it was George Adams in the sitting room. Why was he there?

“Sister Adams, would you be so kind as to give us some privacy? I’d like to speak with Sister Elvira alone,” he said.
“Oh, oh, of course,” Sister Adams replied and refilled President Adam’s glass of lemonade.

“Sister Field, I have a grave question to ask you. Before you give me an answer, I need for you to consider carefully what I’m about to say.”

“Yes?” I half-expected him to tell me I was leaving on the first boat leaving St. James. I had become too great a distraction. I knew it. There was no way to work things out, so I would be cast out of Eden. I would have to leave.

“Our prophet has received a great revelation which in due time will be revealed to all the Saints, but this revelation involves you.”

“Go on.”

I didn’t expect George Adams to start declaiming doctrine, but he inhaled and spoke his words at me like gunfire. “Two nights ago, the Lord himself spoke to our prophet and revealed that it is time for the Holy Priesthood to again partake in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage. His spirit children need bodies, and man cannot be saved without a fullness of increase.”

What was he talking about? What new and everlasting covenant of marriage? What spirit children? I was in no mind to be polite. “What are you trying to say? And why are you telling me these things that make no sense?”

“The Almighty has revealed that certain men holding the Holy Priesthood of God may take multiple wives.” His eyes dropped to the floor, and he gulped nervously, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his flushed throat.

“What?” My ears burned. How could a man marry more than one woman? How could this be true? God’s law was monogamy, one man, one woman. I swallowed to moisten the cottony dryness in my mouth and throat. My heart beat so fast I felt the pulse pound in my fingers and toes.

“You took the Oath and Covenant, dear sister,” he reminded me. “James Strang wants you for his wife. He’ll be by this evening for your answer. I urge you to consider very, very carefully what you will say.”

I don’t know how I managed to speak the words. “Very well, I shall wait on him.” I felt faint and needed to sit down before I did anything. Me, the wife of a prophet? What was James thinking? Was he mad? Was this a joke?

“Look at it this way,” President Adams said as he was leaving. “Your husband will be a crown prince of heaven, and you, his queen. Your children will be the heirs of God himself. What more could you ask for, my dear?” He left me flabbergasted in Sister Evans’ sitting room. I watched him disappear down the walk beyond the birches planted along Main Street. I tried to sit and think but ended up pacing back and forth between the sitting room and
the kitchen. Minutes were hours. I had no idea what to say to James, and he was coming that evening for an answer. What could I say? Yes? No? If I said yes, I'd be his wife, but I had no idea how it would be possible to hide such an event. If I said no, then I most likely would have to leave the island. James would cast me from his presence. That thought appealed to me as much as a good tar and feathering.

Sister Evans, so careful to mind my privacy, peeked in on me from her curtained sitting room where she had been rocking silently, but mercifully, she said nothing to me. I had no idea how much she had heard. I finally decided to leave, to walk to Font Lake. I grabbed a shawl from my bedroom and told Sister Evans where I was going. She smiled and nodded at me. She was accustomed to my comings and goings.

I walked as fast as my feet would carry me on the familiar path through the dense, green foliage, the sandy path soft under my feet. Usually, I would take my time and enjoy the flowers now in lush, full bloom and the old oaks, elms, and birches towering over my head. I’d notice the Indian Village where the Peaines lived with their families in rusted, tin shanties. I’d listen to the breeze that when it whispered through the trees sounded like the sea. On any other day, I’d notice that this was probably the perfect day, but I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that all escaped me. *Tell me what to do! I don’t know what to do.*

I stopped when I came to Font Lake and sat down on the rock outcropping. We had walked that path so many times. As the shock wore off, I found I could think more clearly, and James’ words echoed in my mind, “Will you do whatever the Lord would ask of you?” I had said yes. Did that mean I was already bound, and the proposal had been a formality? I couldn’t deny I was fond of him. He had been so good to me. I had little experience with men, but the more I was with him, the more I thought about him and wanted to be with him. He could offer me eternity, and comfort and safety too. More than anything, I trusted him. He knew about my childhood, my doubts and fears. He knew more than anything I wanted to belong to the community of Saints. Was this his way of offering me communion here?

Perhaps if the Lord had sent me an angel to assure me that James had indeed received revelation that I should marry him, I wouldn’t have struggled with the decision. But the Lord wasn’t going to send me an angel. He had sent me George Adams. I had to make this decision on my own. I still didn’t know how we could be together. I know what my father would have said. “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, Ellie, and lean not unto thine own understanding.” Knowing full well the limits of my understanding, I prayed fervently that the Lord would still intervene.
No one was going to stand for James to have two wives. What about Mary? What about his children? How would this revelation affect them? I pictured their heartbreak, their tears. I would destroy their home. I thought of gentle Mary Strang, and my stomach turned over until I feared I would vomit. I could destroy everything, but I didn’t want to. I only wanted to live in peace. And what about James? He wouldn’t be able to walk the streets with his head high. The Saints would surely turn against him; they’d leave. He had always preached monogamy, one man and one woman. He followed the words of the Bible. I had never known him to go back on his convictions, unless he truly had received a revelation from God himself. He had told me that God spoke to him, and I believed him. Who was I to question the revelations of a prophet?

James was waiting for me in the parlor with his hat in his hands, head bowed. I hadn’t decided on an answer, but I had prayed the entire walk home that I would have the presence to say the right words.

“Ah, Sister Elvira, we were just discussing your whereabouts. You shouldn’t be walking alone even in the daylight. You never know what those damnable Gentiles will do.” He was worried, and I sensed that he wasn’t as upset about my walking alone as he was about the reason that had forced me to walk in the first place. We stood facing one another across the parlor while Sister Evans, delighted to have the ear of the prophet, prattled on about her sewing and rheumatic shoulder. His gaze, steady and bright, burned into me as it had during our first meeting. I needed to see the assurance in his eyes that he knew what he was doing.

“Yes, yes, Sister Evans. Go and see Dr. McCulloch for that. He’ll take good care of you.” James finally dismissed her with a wave of his hand. Then, he turned to me. “Sister, care to take a turn?”

I took his arm, and we once again departed into the early evening. I inhaled deeply and prepared myself for the inevitable. I smelled rain and looked up to see clouds filling the sky. James didn’t say anything for a moment. He remained with one arm locked around mine.

“So,” he started. “I sent George Adams to see you this afternoon.”

“I know.” I tried to calm my racing heart. I wanted to extricate my arm from his embrace to wipe my sweaty palm on my skirt, but he held me fast.

“Elvira,” he said. I wanted him to say my name again. “Elvira, do you believe that God allows random events to simply happen?”

“No,” I said.
"Then might it be possible that God has brought you into my life because you’re the only woman on earth who is strong enough to merit this revelation?"

"I suppose." I hadn’t considered coincidence. According to God’s law, he does nothing by chance. Everything is arranged. If that weren’t the case, he wouldn’t be omniscient.

"Then I know that God has brought you into my life to be my wife." He knelt in front of me on the path. Light rain pattered on our heads, making it appear as if tears fell from his eyes down his cheeks, or he really was crying. "What say you?"

"I" my mouth began to form the word "No," but I whispered instead, "Yes." The answer I had feared all afternoon—that had felt like such a struggle—came to me so easily that I feared it startled him and me. James began to tremble. Climbing to his feet, he pulled me toward him. His hands on my shoulders, he pressed his lips against mine, binding us. Good Lord! I prayed. What have I done?

"Then it is settled." With the lightest of touches, he reached up to cup my chin, so that I looked squarely down on him. His most tender smile was enough to quiet some of the unease that still rattled around in my head. "We will be married in three weeks."

My first thoughts were of my family. They needed to know. I wanted my parents there to celebrate. "I have to tell my parents."

His eyebrows shot up. "No! You can’t tell anyone."

"But they’re my family." What if they heard the news from someone else? Once again, I didn’t understand. If this were revelation, why couldn’t I tell the whole world? I’d always dreamed of my family being at my wedding. I knew Father had always dreamt that I’d be married by the hand of a prophet. Well, I had agreed to marry the prophet. Did that count?

James drew me towards him again, stroking my shoulders, my back, my hair, but I remained tense. "If you love me at all, you’ll keep this a secret. No one is ready to receive this revelation. For now, you must trust me." His expression turned grave. "Elvira, Joseph Smith was murdered because he had more than one wife, and God told him to do it. The people weren’t ready then to accept the open practice of plural marriage. See what has happened to Brigham Young in Salt Lake City? He had to flee the United States. I can’t risk that, not now."

I was still struggling with the notion of my Brother Joseph having more than one wife. His words sounded true, but my mind reeled as I tried to understand him. Brother Joseph had had more than one wife? I remembered his
handsome face and his piercing blue eyes after all these years. I’d believed he’d loved Sister Emma with all his heart. Certainly, moony young women had followed him everywhere. We’d all loved Brother Joseph, but did the women on Beaver Island feel the same about James? Everything we did, we did with an eye towards satisfying him, being the women he wanted us to be. James couldn’t lie. It had to be true if James said it was. He wouldn’t lie about something like that.

He rushed on despite my confusion. “Joseph Smith tried to prepare the Saints in Nauvoo, and he struggled mightily for a long while against taking more wives. He even gave them a revelation on the New and Everlasting Covenant that is plural marriage. The Saints weren’t ready to accept it then, and my people aren’t now. Do you want to destroy the Church and me? Can you understand that?”

“But,” I protested. That didn’t seem like a fair question. I couldn’t be expected to carry that burden by myself. James put a finger to my lips before I could say another word. “Elvira, we’ll be married in my office at sunset on the eve of July 8,” he whispered into my hair. I’ll arrange everything. It will be all right. I promise.”

I didn’t feel as I had another choice, but to trust him. I had given him my word I would become his secret wife. Brother Joseph had given the Saints many difficult commandments to follow, and I knew that the Lord’s way was definitely never the easy way. The Lord would always try his people. What about this? Marrying more than one woman was a crime, and if what James said was true, then our lives could be in danger. If we had children, what then? He was the prophet though, and if God truly had told him to marry me, I had to capitulate.

“I’ll trust you,” I said and took a deep breath.

“That’s all I ask, darling girl,” he said, kissing me again. With his warm lips covering mine, I felt more certain of my decision. As long as he was close to me, I felt I could balance any burden placed on my back. I leaned against him, absorbing some of his confidence, and let him hold me close.

The thought I had been pushing back from the lake crept forward though. “James, what about Mary? What’s going to happen to her?” I couldn’t avoid the question. Did he think he could avoid informing me of this point in his plan? I had to know. The rain was still falling, and I wondered if it could wash these thoughts out of my mind and replace them with pure faith and trust in this man who was to be my husband. I shivered through damp layers of clothing.

“I still love her,” he said as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a man to have two wives. “But not like I love you. I love you with my body, mind, and spirit, but she is the wife of my youth, and I can’t put her
away.” He wouldn’t meet my eyes, but swung himself by an arm around the maple tree growing in front of Sister Evans’ home.

“When are you going to tell her?” I knew I would have to share him, and I didn’t like that at all. At least, I had the consolation of knowing I owned his heart. I fastened my eyes on the maple trunk and imagined the welcome Mary might give me. “Welcome, you backstabbing ingrate of a harlot,” she’d say and slam the door in my face. We would at least have separate homes, I hoped.

“I have a plan, but it won’t be easy,” he sighed and faced me once again.

“I know,” I said, perhaps a bit too forcefully, but I thought I could protest a little under the circumstances. “But, didn’t you say that God will provide a way?” If God intended for me to marry James Strang, then at least, he’d provide for us a way to live in peace. I trusted James knew at least that much.

Like a sleeper waking from a doze, he looked at me and smiled, reminded of his own doings. “We will be married in three weeks. I swear it to you, Elvira. You are so good and strong and—” His words trailed off as he left me. I waved goodbye and barely caught his last words. “Trust me.”

I watched him disappear into the fog that was rolling in from Paradise Bay. I listened to the night sounds, the clang of the bell at the dockside, and the call of darting swallows. The rain had ended, and the air smelled sweet and fresh. The humidity of the day was washed clean. I loved him, and love is supposedly a strong cure-all. I believed in it. I also hoped with all my heart that James Strang was as strong and righteous as I believed him to be.

I sat up that evening, watched the street below shimmer with slickness from the fog and rain. James’ voice returned to me, “What if the Almighty asks you to do something you think is impossible, would you do it?” As I stared at the ceiling, I reflected on the evening and had to admit there was a certain element of inevitability. Had I lived all my life to be married to a prophet? James was a great spiritual leader, and he had chosen me. Me! Elvira, O she, who once had little faith! If I didn’t believe in him and his revelations, I was nothing more than a common adulteress. This had to be the great test because if James was right, then a marriage could bring both of us down. It could destroy the church. James had literally promised me that God was going to test the strength of my faith as if I could choose a more difficult trial. As sleep overcame me, I tried to wrap my mind around the enormity of the situation and ended up swearing “It has to be right, God. It has to be.”
Chapter Five

“Here we are, miss,” Louis, my young driver, said, stopping his team in front of them print shop that housed James’ official office. Today, I’m going to be a wife. I remembered how I’d felt on the deck of the steamer that had carried us to Voree for the first time and how exhilarated and nervous I’d been to face the unknown. I felt the same thing now. I’d be with James for eternity. If I had doubts about James, or his revelations, I figured I would have refused him long before. Forever, I thought, sounds like a fairly binding contract to me.

I’d said farewell to Sister Evans. The dear woman had been so kind and discrete. I’d told her I was going home to see my parents, “I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, or if I’ll return.” If she’d had any notion of what I was about to do, she’d said nothing. “Whatever God brings you, my child, I wish you all the happiness under heaven.” She’d kissed my cheek with her soft, wrinkled mouth. James and I had been so careful to disguise even the hint of affection between us. In fact, I’d hardly seen James since the evening of his proposal, although he found clever ways to deliver notes to me, detailing his affections. I’d hold the paper to my nose and breathe in the traces of his scent, counting the days until I would be his wife. While I wanted him to be with me, I understood he was embroiled in several vicious land dispute cases, and there was Mary. No, I wasn’t going to think about Mary on my wedding day. Good heavens, today, I’d be a bride, to a prophet!

“Miss?” Louis asked, holding his hand to help me from the buggy. I stared at his hand as if I’d never seen one before, and then, the world of activity jolted me back to my senses. From the high blue sky above to the calls of the fishermen back from their morning runs down by the docks, the activity shocked me. I’d been absorbed in thinking about my wedding; everything else had seemed irrelevant.

I didn’t notice the man exiting the print shop as I entered. He stopped when he saw my face. “Sister Elvira?” Almost upsetting a tall stack of missionary tracts on the porch, I whirled around to face Brother Smith smiling down on me. His weather-worn was face brown and healthy, and he shook my hand, beaming as if he hadn’t seen me in longer than a year. “My, aren’t you a pretty sight for these tired eyes. You’re lovely as a June bride today.”

“Excuse me?” My words caught in my throat. Did he know something? How could he possibly know anything? We’d taken every precaution. Choosing between lying to an apostle and denying a direct revelation from God (and I knew either could send me to Hell), I chose what I considered the lesser sin and decided if asked, I’d lie. I couldn’t even hint at my imminent nuptials.
“Oh, I just meant that you look lovelier than ever.” Brother Smith must have caught the look of horror on my face, for he changed subjects. “Are you going to visit your parents this summer?” He smiled and kissed my cheek; I released the long breath I was holding. He didn’t know, and I hadn’t had to lie.

He didn’t give me time to respond. “Well, it’s good to see you. I’m in a hurry. Got to get these tracts to the missionaries leaving on the boat. I’m returning to my farm in one quarter of an hour myself.” His smile grew wider. I knew he was thinking about his own home and family. “Anyway, got to run, but give my greetings to your folks and take care of yourself now.”

“I will, Brother Smith, thank you,” I said and released another long breath. Get a hold of yourself, I thought, but I knew I wouldn’t feel calm until I was safely in James’ office, married.

I faced the flight of stairs that led to James’ private office. With each step, my heart beat louder in my ears. My footsteps were thunderous claps against the boards, yet I managed to smile. Somewhere, behind that closed door at the top of the stairs, my husband waited. Husband, I tested the word. And Wife, I thought. That’s me. My feet worked independent of my thoughts. Despite my nervous stomach, they carried me to the top of the stairs, and I knocked softly.

“Sister Field, are you ready?” Brother Samuel Graham, the second counselor in James’ presidency, opened the door as the clock struck six o’clock. He was a surprisingly youthful man, round faced and rosy cheeked. I’d always thought of him as kindly, cut from the same cloth as Brother Smith. Brother Graham extended his arm to me, and I took it, smiling at him.

Dressed in a new broadcloth suit, James was seated behind his desk. When our eyes met, I felt my trembling knees steady a bit. He could have lit a dozen rooms with his smile. James stood, took his place in front of the desk, and motioned for me to stand next to him. From his seat in the far corner, George Adams rose and greeted me as well, his face unusually grim. I inclined my head so as not to be faulted for not acknowledging him. I took my place and accepted the bouquet of wildflowers that Brother Graham proffered to me.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Brother Adams asked. James remained silent. To answer his counsellor, he took my hand in his own. George Adams sighed, “very well, it’s on your soul.”

I’ve heard that at moments of greatest importance, a feeling of calm comes over a soul. As I stood next to James during the brief ceremony, I felt as if my spirit were detached from my body. I observed everything dispassionately and felt nothing, no pain or nervousness. I clutched my wildflowers to my breast and tried to focus on the words. They sounded hollow and wooden in the large room. Perhaps it was the acoustics, but George Adams
did not lend this piece of oration his usual flair. “Cherish one another, trust in God in all you do, and hold faithful to one another to the end, and you will exalt one another on high when the end is come.” The promises seemed to die on his lips. He’d come to my home and seemed to confidently propose a glorious eternity to me, so I didn’t understand his lack of enthusiasm. George Adams searched my husband’s face. Perhaps he was fearful of this new commandment. I thought of James’ words, This could bring us all down. I glanced down at the bouquet of flowers in my hands and thought, It’s what God had ordered. You know this is true!

He joined our hands and pronounced us—under his authority—man and wife. James’ fingers closed over mine, and I felt as if he was taking me as his own. When I looked into his eyes, I saw my eternity. I believed I’d never be alone again. He’d claimed me as his wife.

“You will always have a home in my arms,” James His eyes glittered with tears. More than anyone, he knew what I wanted most.

“I love you,” I replied, close to tears myself. I’d never had preconceptions about my wedding ceremony. Most of what Mother and I’d planned to include in my trousseau had been left behind in Ohio. In fact, I’d never thought much about marriage until he had proposed to me, but I wouldn’t have changed anything about the day. I came to James with no dowry, no famous family name. He’d taken me alone. My husband – for I could now officially refer to him as such – turned to smile at his counselors.

“That’s that,” Brother Adams said. With the flat of his hand, he wiped beads of perspiration from his brow. “Oh, wait.” He pulled something from under the desk. “A small gift. It’s from a Mackinaw vineyard.”

James stared at the bottle and then pushed it back. With coldness, I hadn’t witnessed before, he said, “You know I abhor spirits.”

I intercepted the hurt in George Adams’ eyes and, for a moment, felt pity. Did he feel left behind? The thought momentarily crossed my mind and then left. “Shall we go?” James asked.

“Yes,” I said. Wife, was it really true? I was married and felt like either the boldest or maddest woman on earth. I was most likely both.

Before he pushed open the door to the print shop, James stopped and looked at me. “We become strangers once we walk into the print shop, and we walk separately into the street,” he said. In the semi-darkness, I stared at him.

“Why?” I asked.
His voice possessed a hard, impatient edge. “Because our marriage is secret, and I can’t jeopardize my kingdom. Can you understand that?” He didn’t look back as he opened the door.

“I guess so,” I said. “What do you want me to do?”

When he pushed open the door at the bottom of the stairs that separated the print shop from his private office, I had to walk several feet apart from him as if we happened to be on the same street but not in the same company. “Meet me at the dock. I’ll be there as soon as I can,” James said and walked to the desk of the printing shop where he picked up several long rolls of paper. I left the shop and walked into Main Street, only another woman on her way to Dr. McDonough’s General Store for some flour or a length of ribbon. I stopped after a few hundred yards and watched as James descended the steps of the shop several minutes later. People seemed to come from nowhere to meet him. With the long rolls of paper under his arm, he nodded at the familiar faces recognizing their beloved prophet and bowing reverent heads. “Off on another trip to save souls, President Strang?” A kindly old fellow with stooped shoulders and a toothless smile tipped his hat to James, and for some reason, the old man grinned at me. “Good day,” I mumbled, hoping my face was sufficiently hidden by my straw bonnet. Surprise wrinkled Brother Taylor’s brow as I pushed past him and hurried down the street before the crowd could completely engulf my husband.

Before I was out of earshot, I heard James say, “Brother Taylor, what a sight for these old eyes!”

I continued walking, pretending I didn’t know the man I’d just married. I reached the St. James dock and found my trunk waiting to be loaded onto the small steamer, The Chippewa, the steamer taking us to Mackinaw Island, and then St. Ignace. From St. Ignace, we’d travel north and east to Sault Ste. Marie. I’d heard the land north of St. Ignace was wild, raw, beautiful country. I couldn’t imagine anything lovelier than Beaver Island, but I also hadn’t set foot off the island since arriving the previous year.

I sat on my trunk at the dockside and waited for James, still making his way up Main Street, greeting his devoted followers. He walked among them, shaking hands, slapping backs, leaning close to elderly sisters to catch their whispers. He beamed at several pregnant sisters who proudly displayed their bellies under their gray dresses. They seemed to line up to have him bless their unborn babes. He delighted in them and took his time, learning each of the sisters’ names, and fondly placing his hands on each womb, pronouncing “Well done, Sister Doran, or Sister Baines, another son for the kingdom of Zion.” His laugh boomed across the street. I hung my head, wishing I could be on his arm instead of waiting with his luggage, and tried not to attract attention.
“Elvira? I thought that was you.” I never thought I’d be so happy as to hear Catherine Miller’s warm voice. She broke away from the crowd and made her way towards me. I blinked, my eyes focusing on her approach. She was lovelier than ever, her pale complexion blooming in the mild air. Her belly was high and round with her unborn child, although she didn’t yet walk with the hampered gate that some women experience when they have almost reached their confinements. I longed to embrace her, swollen belly and all. She reached out to me first.

“Catherine, I’m so happy to see you.” I fell gratefully into her arms and wished she would hold onto me forever. I wished she were James. Her strength fueled mine. “How is Anson?” I asked.

“Oh, fine as ever. All I need now is a safe confinement and delivery, but I’m healthy as a horse. Are you going home for a visit?”

“Of course I am. Where else would I be going? Why else would I leave the island? My mother is unwell, and she needs me.” I cringed as I lied to Catherine, but I couldn’t tell her the truth. James had made me swear to keep our marriage secret. I hoped that my mother was well, and God wouldn’t strike her down because of my dishonesty.

“I’m sorry, Elvira, truly I am. Can I do anything?” I longed to smooth her brow that was wrinkled with concern. I didn’t want to lie to her, not to Catherine who was my dearest friend. She smoothed a stray hair from my forehead, my skin tingling where her cool fingers had lovingly touched me. I gripped her hands in my own.

“I,” I started to explain, but out of the corner of my eye, I watched James approaching, separating himself from his crowd with one eyebrow cocked, his lips parted in a half-smile. He’d finally come to claim me at last. He looked self-satisfied after his royal parting of the street, his smile smug. I felt a flash of anger knowing he was enjoying this charade, but I couldn’t remain angry for long. After all, we were only playing our roles. He’d be different once we were truly alone; I knew he would. I turned quickly to Catherine. “I have to go now, but I’ll come and see you when I return.”

“Promise?” She asked. “I miss you so.” I nodded. Catherine squeezed my hand and left to find her husband, leaving me with mine. I wished with all my heart that my happiness in marriage would equal that of Catherine and Anson Miller’s. They were so dear to one another. Of course their situation wasn’t the same as ours. I truly couldn’t compare any one else’s circumstances to ours.

“So, how is Sister Miller?” James waited until we had crossed the gangplank of the Chippewa before taking my arm.

“She’s fine.”
“So I see. Well, one more warrior for the army of God. May he be valiant and serve his God well.”

Resembling a small tomcat satisfied after a particularly successful hunt, James stretched his arms and smiled at me. I didn’t say it, but I hoped Catherine was carrying a daughter. If James wanted all boys for the Kingdom of God, I smiled at the idea of Catherine going against orders and giving birth to a baby girl.

The steamer’s engines shuddered to life, and the boat gave a mighty lurch under my feet throwing me against James. He caught me and settled me on my feet. Thinking of Catherine, I blurted, “I lied to my best friend.”

James looked at me, his eyes tired. “I know. I don’t like it any more than you.”

I wondered if he did. I had to walk on the other side of the street and pretend I didn’t know him. I couldn’t be angry, though. Standing next to him, I was aware only of James’ closeness, and my pulse that seemed to race whenever he looked at me with those eyes that knew the secrets of the Almighty. I inhaled his warm, earthy scent mixed with the crispness of the fresh, deep waters of Lake Michigan, and I felt a drunken giddiness. I couldn’t stay angry with him. I resolved to be more patient. At least, we were together. Perhaps James would receive a revelation while were on our honeymoon that he could tell the world I was his wife. I could always pray for that.

Our steamer docked at Mackinaw Island shortly before ten o’clock in the evening. A carriage and driver were waiting to carry us to the Inn where we would spend our first married night together. I was growing a little nervous as I thought of what would happen. I hoped I’d be the perfect wife. I was trying hard not to think about Mary, and I hoped I could make him happy in every way. Certainly, I knew we’d sleep together in the same bed, but I tried to push the anxious thoughts from my mind and focused instead on the stars in the clear, night sky. A million diamond points of light seemed to sparkle in the sky.

“What are you thinking about?” James asked as he climbed into the carriage and pulled me close.

“The stars,” I said.

“They’re wonders, aren’t they? Like you.” He looked at me with a grin, although I watched the shadows play across his face and knew underneath, he was serious. A kind of heat seemed to emanate from him that drew me closer to him.

“Don’t say such things. You’ll cause me to have vain thoughts.” I finally managed to squeeze out a few words.

“But I don’t lie,” James said. “And you are exceptional. I need to tell you those words more often.”
I had never been adored like this before, and I had never enjoyed a moment as purely as I had that moment alone with my husband. Despite all the talk against vanity, I wanted more of these moments. Each beat of my heart seemed to say, *Tell me more! I want to hear more!*

When James spoke again, he talked of himself. "When I was young, I knew I was destined for greatness. I know I have greatness in me that other men don't. I could be a king, and I am a prophet." His eyes misted, and he drew off some place far from me. A small, thin smile played on his lips. "I almost died on a river in New York when I was seventeen. My brother and I were playing on the bank, on a pile of logs, and the logs started to give way, pulling and trapping me under the water. I thought I was going to die; I nearly did." His grip on my arm tightened, his gaze boring into me. "I knew at that moment that God had saved me to establish his kingdom. There's no other explanation. He has a great work for me to do."

I shivered, but not from cold. He had shared with me many of his revelatory experiences, and each one confirmed to me more and more what I believed, that he was genuinely who he believed himself to be, a great spiritual leader. I felt as if I had infringed on something too personal, as if I had violated, in some manner, this sacred experience. This was his personal witness.

"Are you cold?" he asked when I didn't respond for a moment.

"A little," I admitted. He hugged me closer to him, and I felt safe with his arm around my shoulders, his breath so close I could feel it on my cheek. Even during the summer months, the evenings along the Great Lakes still grew quite chilly, I wished I had brought my warmer shawl with me. Sitting by side-by-side in the buggy, I leaned my face against his chest and listened to his heart, the steady thump, thump through his jacket. "Thank you for telling me that," I added.

"Hmmm," he said and closed his eyes. It was nice to pretend that I was any other newlywed bride.

We arrived at the inn, resting at the top of the hill near Fort Michilimac. We weren't going to have much of a rest, as the following day; we'd begin our journey by stage northeast to Sault Ste. Marie. James tipped the driver for helping us with our trunks, and arm in arm, we walked into the hotel to secure our room. I sniffed the musty air inside, and despite the fancy gilt trappings on the chairs in the lobby, I sensed the strangeness of this other world. Beaver Island was so pure and good, and this was the kind of place from which I had escaped. There were no other Saints here, just a mix of the whiskey traders and fur trappers who came to trade their goods and the soldiers who were garrisoned at Fort Michilimac. Fortunately, it was late in the evening, and no other guests milled around. From the look of the night clerk, dozing behind his counter, I didn't think we had to worry.
“Evenin’.” He roused himself, his sleepy eyes as droopy as his mustache.

“I’m James Strang. I have a reservation.” My husband’s voice was firm with an undertone of steel. The man’s eyes widened with recognition.

“You that Beaver Island Mormon, that Strang?” His pale eyebrows shot up over his face, giving him the look of a surprised rabbit.

“Yes, that would be me,” James replied.

“This your wife?” The clerk gave me a good sizing up and turned to make a mark in his books. I was more than a little embarrassed; my cheeks were aflame, and I didn’t like this man who gazed at me as if I were a prize heifer.

“Yes, she is,” James said. He gave me a sideways glance that told me clearly to remain quiet. I kept my eyes on the edge of the red and gold carpet under my feet.

“Here, room seventeen is on the top floor.” Smiling at me again, the clerk made a little bow and handed over the key to our room. He shook his head and looked straight at me. His grin widened, and he winked. “You’re a lucky man, Mr. Strang. She’s a fine looking lady.”

“Please, let’s just go to our room.” I made my expression as cold as January ice. James didn’t argue with me. He took my arm, and we walked away. I heard the clerk snickering as we left.

“Phew! Pretty lady, pretty indeed.” I could hear his hoots all the way to the stairway. “She’s a might young, but she’s pretty. Oh, is he a lucky fellow.”

I remembered the jokes spread around Kirtland and its neighboring villages about Mormon women. We were tender, virginal, young things, and they hissed they’d like nothing better than to strip us of our virginal pride. Even on Beaver Island, the whiskey traders loved nothing better than to leer at us whenever we had to make the trip to the post office. I was sure they’d like nothing better than to defile a saintly Mormon gal. We had to make a joke out of it amongst ourselves, placing small, friendly wagers on who could get lewdest offers during those walks to Whiskey Point. Not this evening, though. I followed James, climbing silently up the stairs, and settling into our room where the thunder gathering behind James’ brow finally broke. Eyes snapping, he shouted, “Gentile fools! When will they learn? When will they ever learn to respect me?”

I sat down, every bone in my body as weary as my thoughts. The clerk had insulted me, not him. I was too tired to care about retribution. While James vented against the injustices of the Gentile world, I examined my residence for the evening. The room was plain and clean, but my eyes only noticed the bed. I remained rooted to my
seat, unable to think of anything but the mattress on which I was sitting. Set in the middle of four tall posters, it seemed more like an altar than a piece of furniture. Any additional thoughts I had about the night clerk vanished as I thought only about what this bed meant. The notion dawned on me that I wasn’t a wife, at least, not yet.

James had begun undressing himself first, still muttering about the night clerk. He removed his coat and vest, loosening his tie. I watched him, unsure of what part I was supposed to be playing now. Was I supposed to be undressing myself too? My trunk was in the corner of the room. Should I go to it and change into my nightdress?

His eyes were on me, intense and famished, as if he had been starved for days. “Well, what are you waiting for?” he asked. His smile twitched on his lips; his eyes watched my every move, anticipating.

I worked slowly, removing my light shawl, releasing my hair from its net, letting it cascade around my shoulders. “Aaah,” he sighed and reached for me, burying his face in my locks.

“You smell like the island, the wind and water and sunshine in your hair. It’s the better than any perfume concocted by man.” His hands found my collar, and they worked to unclasp the buttons at my throat, my chest. His scent was rich and musky. “Now, lie back. It’ll be alright.”

I did as he said, and even though I was several inches taller, he was still a little heavier. He eased himself on top of me, our faces only inches apart. My heart was pounding so hard I thought it would come out of my throat. My mouth was dry, and I wanted to tell him to stop. I closed my eyes and willed myself to remain calm. He was my husband, and this is what husbands do. I sought his eyes, wanting to know what he was thinking.

“Mmmm, you taste like the island too.” His lips sought my throat, his kisses burning small paths from my face to my neck.

“Tell me what to do,” I whispered. He didn’t answer me, but kept his hands moving over my hair, then my neck, my breasts, and belly. He acted as if he wanted to climb inside my skin. I didn’t know if I should continue to lie still or touch him back. My thoughts floundered as he worked my dress down from my waist, and I lay almost naked beneath him. My breath was coming shallow and rapid. “Tell me what to do,” I whispered again and pressed my mouth against his ear.

His eyes clear and kind again, he propped himself on his elbows over me. “Elvira?”

My name sounded sweet and loved when he said it. “Yes?”

“Will you promise me something?”

“Anything.”

“Will you always honor me even if you think I’m wrong and a failure? Because you might.”
“Of course, I will always love you.” I’d never said those words to another man except for my father. James looked at me as if he doubted me, but if he doubted my sincerity, it only lasted a moment. He was too hungry, and with that, he pressed his weight against me. Pulling my body against his, he whispered into my ear “Wife, oh, my wife.”

Disoriented and tangled in bed sheets, I woke the next morning to sunlight streaming in through the east window. “James?” I called several times to no answer; I was alone. Running fingers through my tousled hair, I sat up and looked down at the white sheets beneath me, blood-stained from the night before. My blood. I was sore in my female parts, but I rose from the bed and located my trunk. I fastened the stays of my corset that pinched me after so many months in the comfortable Beaver Island costume. I buttoned myself into the navy traveling dress and plaited my hair. I looked at myself in the mirror. So I was a wife now. I didn’t look different. I wondered if the previous night had been a dream, but it hadn’t. I had the blood-stained sheets to prove that. I somehow expected to feel richer, fuller, but I was still me. James called what we had done, lovemaking, the purest union between man and wife. When he had pressed into me, our breath had come in unison and a deeper rhythm seemed to seize him. The lovemaking had not hurt much. James had been very gentle, but he had also promised me that I’d learn to enjoy it more. The next time, I’d feel more at ease. He’d been married for a long time, and I trusted him on that.

The single window was open, white muslin curtains fluttering. I pushed back the curtains and looked outside at Lake Huron spreading to the eastern horizon beneath a bank of clouds. A rose garden bloomed under the window, and a neatly trimmed lawn reaching to the edge of the bluff where a white gazebo stood. I found James sitting in the gazebo, his head down, his hands folded on his chest. I went to him.

“Hello,” he said, looking up when I stepped through the lattice-worked gate. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes and good morning, my husband.” I smiled, relishing that word as it rolled off my tongue. Let the whole world know I was his wife; I didn’t care.

He made room for me on the wooden bench. Reaching over, he stroked a strand of hair that had come loose from its hastily woven plait. “You are so beautiful.” His eyes were deep, thoughtful. His voice was haggard though “I’ve been out here a long time thinking.”

“About what?” I had the distinct impression that I wasn’t going to like what I was about to hear.

“What we’re going to do with you when we return from the Soo,” he said.
“I don’t care as long as I can be with you.” If my day had started with sunshine, clouds were rolling in and promising rain. In my mind, the matter was clear. We were married, and we couldn’t be separated. I didn’t care how James had to manage his household to make room for me.

There wasn’t a hint of humor in his voice. “You have to leave Beaver Island and return to your parents for a while. It’s the only way.”

I stopped as if he had doused me with a glassy of icy water. “I don’t want to go.”

James sighed and stared into the dirt. Was he looking for signs again? “I’ll work it out. I promise you. I’ve been supplicating the Lord all morning. He’ll show me the way.”

“I feel like I’m being cast out of heaven for being obedient,” I said. I had done nothing wrong. At that moment, I resisted the Lord’s terms. Surely, there had to be some other way. It wasn’t fair. I had finally found love and a home, and now, was I going to have to give them back? When was the Lord going to stop testing me? I've done everything you’ve asked, I thought.

“I promise everything will be fine. You’ll get to return. I’ll not let us be separated for long.”

His promises didn’t appease me. “James, we’ve been married for one day. Do you honestly think I’ll accept this? You asked me to trust you when our relationship could destroy the church. I did. Now you want to send me away. Forgive me, but I don’t understand this.” I didn’t want emotion to get the better part of me. I always considered myself a rational person, not prone to fits of swooning and sobbing, but I had done nothing to merit banishment from Beaver Island. I felt frustrated and bewildered. More than that, I thought both James and the Lord owed me an explanation. “This isn’t fair,” I said.

“I know, Elvira, but I think this is the only way. We’ve got to pray and be strong. I told you this isn’t going to be easy. I told you that before you married me.” He cupped my chin with one hand and forced me to look at him. My lips were quivering, and I wanted to cry. He sounded just like my father. Faith first, always faith first. When was God going to give me a moment of happiness without snatching it away? I didn’t voice my thoughts. I muttered a small, sad, “All right, I’ll pray.”

And I did pray. I spent the next five nights on my knees, asking God to make some sense of this new revelation, if it really was. The answer never came. On my own, I came to understand it more as common sense. The island was a small place. If James returned with me, then people would be sure to talk. How long could we keep this a secret anyway? If James thought this was wise, then I trusted him. He’d told me that the Saints weren’t ready. They wouldn’t accept it. I bowed my head and tried to think of ways to raise my spirits. At least, I was comforted
with the knowledge that I'd be able to return when the Lord gave my husband further instructions. At least, my exile (I referred to it as such) wasn't permanent.

The night before we left the Soo, James returned late from his meetings with the Land Office. Drenched from head to toe from the driving rain outside, he shook himself in the entry and proceeded to retrieve two cream parchments from his leather mail pouch. His smile could have lit ten lanterns alone. “Come here,” he said. I twisted my hair around my hands and examined the layouts of Beaver Island. He showed me the plot of land where we would build our home. One day when he had been out walking, he had passed a plot of land just west of Whiskey Point. In his mind, he had seen a grand, white house with fifteen rooms, standing on that land. Tall birch and elm surrounded it, and the ground was good enough for a small garden.

“I’ve seen my mansion, and you will be its mistress.” He held me close and intertwining my fingers with his, we traced the lines of our demarcated property. It was ours. He had just signed the papers to purchase it. No one lived there now. I dared to dream a little. It was so easy to share his view of heaven on earth. I saw our children playing in the grassy back yard and myself planting tomatoes and corn, maybe begonias and roses too. I’d have a garden as grand as my mother’s.

“Where will Mary live?” I asked. How could I forget Mary? I’d be a liar if I said I didn’t think about her at least twice a day especially when James was gone, leaving me for hours at a time with thoughts.

“Well,” he paused for a moment. “I’ll speak to the architect, but I’m planning on building a separate wing for each of you. Mary and the children will live in one section, and you and our children in another.”

He made everything sound so clean, no worries, arguments, or contentions. I wondered if he was strong enough to prevent the envy and hurt Mary was sure to feel when she was eventually told. He couldn’t hide from her forever. There was going to be a battle. I wasn’t so naive as to expect her to understand and comply perfectly with what James had done to her. I couldn’t believe that even Mary was that much of a Saint.

“Do you think she suspects anything?” I inquired that evening, the last of our honeymoon.

“I don’t think so,” he whispered.

We were scheduled to return to Beaver Island the next morning. We lay together under blankets and listened to the rain pattering on the roof over our heads. I dreaded the morning that meant we were separating. I was going to Eaton Rapids, and James was returning to Beaver Island alone. I had mailed a letter to my parents telling them I was coming for a visit. They were to expect me within a fortnight. I drank in the sight of James lying next to
me, one hand over his face. I hoped he was fearing our separation as much, or worse, than I. I pressed myself as close to him as I could. Silently, he held me in his arms, tears in his eyes.

I brushed the tears from his cheeks and felt a little sympathy for him. “Why are you crying?”

“This has been much more difficult than I had expected,” he said. “I assumed that the Lord would simply manage everything, but I didn’t think he’d leave me to my own wits in this matter as he has done so far. I didn’t fully realize the implications that my actions have had on the lives of those I love, Elvira.”

And now, you are what? I thought. I was only beginning to find my way. “Do you still love her?”

“Yes,” he said, appearing suddenly much older and wearier than he was. I felt the blood drain from my face, but I remained composed. I had asked that question several times, and always, he had answered, “My heart belongs to you.” He was in my bed with me, not with her. He loved me. However, he was asking me to leave, not Mary.

“I never felt for Mary what I feel for you, but you have to understand, love takes many forms.” He rolled onto his side, so he could face me, his face still tear-stained. “The human heart is capable of loving limitlessly, and I do love Mary.”

“If you love Mary, then why did you marry me?” I could have reached out and grabbed hold of the question. I needed to know; I needed to have something, some kind of promise, to take with me as I was sent to my parents.

James considered me for a moment before answering. “All I do is for the glory of God and you.”

“And Mary,” I reminded him. “How can I forget that you are sending me away when she is in your house.”

His voice was full of weariness. “I know, I know. Be patient, Elvira, and God will show you that this makes sense. I don’t want you to go either. Please, be patient with me.”

The waves of sadness started in my chest, and the emotion overwhelmed me. I sobbed harder than I ever had before, saying over and over again, “I don’t want to go away. Don’t make me, please.” James folded me into his arms as if I were his little child and rocked me there. I cried for my entire history, the endless cycles of comings and goings, never feeling truly settled in any one place except for the island. I truly felt that I was being exiled from Eden. It didn’t matter for how long. I was Eve all over again and had bitten the forbidden fruit. My one-week anniversary would be the next day, and I would return to my parents. I cried in great, heaving gulps, my body convulsing with each stream of tears. I hated common sense, hated obedience. I only wanted to return to the island where I belonged with my husband.
Sometime before dawn, I took James into my arms, and some of the pain eased. We finally fell asleep just as the first hint of dawn sent streaks of light over our hotel room walls. While he dreamed, I watched him, his face relaxed and haggard at the same time, deep furrows running across his forehead. Even in dreaming, he strategized. I was determined to pick my battles too. He loved two women now. Naked, I slipped from the bed and dressed in a thin, cotton nightdress. Rain on the windowpane obscured the street below, but I could see the night watchman trudging alone with his lantern swinging. *This night isn’t going to last much longer and then what?* I thought and looked back upon James’ sleeping body. Perhaps after a week or month apart, he’d forget all about me. In several hours, we were going to return to our great masquerade. I wrapped myself in a blanket and sat in a chair, watching my husband sleep. For a little while longer, I could pretend that the world outside didn’t exist, but I wasn’t successful. I’m going to have to be stronger than I thought, I told myself. And I’m going to be very lonely.

Several days later, we were standing on the pier at Mackinaw City. The day was gloomy and gray like my mood. While James went to secure my passage south, I huddled on a hard, wooden bench and tried not to look as miserable as I felt. Above me, gulls screamed, their voices shrill and lonely. *I know how you feel*, I thought. At James’ bidding, I’d sent a letter to my parents, informing them I would be coming home for an extended visit. I hoped and prayed they wouldn’t ask too many questions about where I had been – or what I’d been doing. I couldn’t tell them I was married. James had forbidden that. I gritted my teeth and watched my husband greet two men. From the way he shook their hands and slapped their backs, I guessed they were elders from the island, going east to preach the gospel. *Was I any less important than a pair of elders?* I was his wife. *I don’t want to do this*, I thought. I knew there was nothing I could do. Even if I thought there was a way to convince James, I couldn’t say anything in front of the elders.

“Brethren, see that Sister Field reaches home safely. I’ll see you personally stripped of every honor the Almighty can bestow if anything happens to her,” James told both of the men. They both looked at me, and I was certain they were wondering why the prophet would care about taking special pains for a woman. Who was this woman? The men were polite. His eyes shifty and nervous, Elder Van Deusen tipped his cap. Elder Barmuller was tall, broad, and slow as an ox. I liked the way his smile crept from his mouth to light in his eyes.

“Have a safe journey, Sister Field,” James said. His expression was distant as if he were saying farewell to someone he hardly knew. He helped me into the back of the wagon. “Have faith in me,” he whispered close to my ear before stepping back. I nodded, fighting against my tears. James was walking towards his own boat. I raised my
hand to give a listless wave as the driver gee-hawed to his team, and we started to roll south. If I could have jumped out of that wagon and run to the lake, I would have, but James had already turned his back and boarded his ship. I believed James when he said he’d summon me. I knew he would, but soon could mean anything. I could wait a month, a year, and then what?

Chapter Six

I stepped off the steamer at Buffalo, searching the crowd for my husband. At the bottom of the gangplank, a crowd of unfamiliar faces milled, but no James. I descended into the crowd, my spirits sinking lower as I pushed my way through the sea of bodies. The scene of confusion didn’t help to ease my growing anxieties. “Oy! Watch where you’re going!” one man yelled when I was bumped against him by another stevedore hauling large sacks of what looked like flour. I turned to offer a feeble apology, but he had already disappeared. Where was James? I wondered if he had been waylaid somehow. He wouldn’t have forgotten me. Perhaps he had a special meeting to attend. I thought of all the excuses for why he hadn’t come. None of them comforted me. I found myself feeling more panicked as each moment passed.
I remembered the heartrending expression on Father's face as I'd departed on the Stage from Eaton Rapids.

“Red sky at night, sailor's delight,” he’d called as I’d climbed into the coach.

“Bye, Papa,” I’d replied. “Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.” I’d waved until he was out of sight, shedding only a few tears before I thought again, I’m going back to my husband. I’d enjoyed the visit with my family, but the days and weeks away from him had felt like years. My soul had threatened to fly apart when James had bidden me farewell at the Mackinaw City docks. I had endured the journey south to Eaton Rapids with the two elders. Increase Van Deusen had asked me dozens of questions about why I had been traveling alone. He’d been persistent the entire journey, confused as to why President Strang had seen me off at the docks. Why had I warranted such special attention? I’d laughed and tried to divert his attention by suggesting that we sing hymns or revisit the latest gossip. Elder Van Deusen seemed to know everything about everyone.

I’d kept our secret from my family. Not being able to tell my parents had been more difficult than I had expected. If one person in the world would have understood what I’d done, it would be my father. We’d worked together in the fields, harvesting the early corn crop. He hadn’t asked any questions if he’d noticed anything different about me, but I’d governed my tongue. Only once did he ask me if I had any beaux, I’d been able to answer semi-truthfully, “No.” I didn’t think James qualified as a beau. So many times, I had almost slipped and let an incriminating word or two loose, but James’ voice was always in my head telling me “Have faith in me.” If I confided my secret in my family, I knew I’d lose his faith which was worse than his wrath. As much as I had missed him, I had to believe he’d call for me soon, and I’d return to him with our marriage tucked against my heart.

“Sister Strang!” A voice jerked me from my pensiveness. For a brief moment I wondered if Mary had—for some reason—come to meet the boat as well, and the voice was calling for her. No one had formally addressed me as Sister Strang. I dreaded turning my head for fear of what I would see. “Elvira Strang, over here!”

George Adams? I finally located the voice belonging to the unmistakable form of Brother Adams waiting just beyond the crowd with a hired cab. I should have felt pleased to see any familiar face, but George Adams was the last person I expected. He was smiling pleasantly enough and offered his hand to help me into the cab. Brushing his arm aside, I climbed into the cab and pressed myself against the far door.

“Nice to see you too,” he said and settled himself next to me. I didn’t turn to look at him. “Brother Adams, I want to see my husband,” I said.

“He’s waiting for you at the Bristol hotel.” George Adams gave some instructions to the driver who clucked to his horse, and the cab set off at a sprightly pace. I tried to think only of being with James again. Brother
Adams kept clearing his throat as if he wanted to say something to me but didn’t quite know how to begin. When I finally turned to look at him, I saw he was working his hands together as if he were kneading bread dough, and drops of perspiration glistened against his forehead. “Are you ill?” I asked.

“I don’t know how to tell you this,” he replied.

“What is it? Is it James?” I tried to keep my tone even. Was my husband unwell? Had something happened? “Brother Adams, why didn’t my husband come to meet me?”

“I was hoping against hope that you’d never come,” he said and looked straight at me, his small eyes full of fear.

“Why did James send for me then?” I asked. He’d promised to send for me as soon as he could.

“Do you know what a danger you are? The work is suffering because he can’t concentrate.” His words were meant to pierce me like daggers, and I looked at George Adams as if I were seeing him for the first time. He appeared tired and old. Slumped against seat, he had closed his eyes. He might as well have been speaking a foreign language, for I didn’t understand how I could have been a danger to the work. Yes, I was keeping my marriage a secret, but what did that have to do with James and his preaching? I couldn’t be held accountable for a lag in baptisms. Staring at Brother Adams’, whose haggard face looked completely beaten, the thought dawned on me, we had been competing for James’ attentions this entire time.

“Brother Adams, do you think we have been involved in a rivalry?” I asked. Did he think I wanted his power and position? Was it possible that he was jealous of me? I never thought I was participating in some sort of competition.

He didn’t answer me for a long while. Finally, he turned his head and looked at me with bloodshot eyes. “I don’t know. You tell me.”

I didn’t have time to respond to him. The hired cab pulled up to the Bristol Hotel on Erie Street. I had to see James. I nearly flew the last few steps to the door of the hotel room, my heart pounding so hard and fast, I feared I would fall dead in a faint the moment James opened the door. I wanted to tell him about my stay with my parents, my journey, and the odd conversation with Brother Adams in the car. I definitely wanted to know if he knew his first counselor considered me the enemy.

James answered on the first knock. We stood staring at one another. For my part, I had hoped for a more enthusiastic greeting. He didn’t open his arms or even smile. His eyes were dazed as if he had just wakened from a troubled sleep. “Hello,” I said first, trying to make my voice light. “Did you call for me?”
Whatever spell that possessed his soul seemed to break when I said those words. A familiar smile warmed his face, and I flung myself into his arms, kissing his eyes, nose, lips. He had to untangle himself from me and pushed me far enough away to look at me. Something in his expression troubled me. Even though he was smiling, his eyes hadn’t lit the way they usually did.

“What is it? Are you happy to see me? Don’t you like my dress?” I asked, trying to think of all the reasons why he wouldn’t have wanted me there. For some reason, my mind latched onto my costume, my apple green and white striped traveling dress with the straw bonnet James had allowed me to purchase before our wedding. I had worn it especially to please him. I couldn’t have traveled from Beaver Island to Buffalo in my island uniform. James himself had told the women that it wasn’t time to introduce the world to our ideas yet. We could live as we chose on the Island, but on the mainland, we weren’t to stand out.

His eyes cast to the floor, he muttered so softly I could hardly hear him, “No, you’re beautiful.”

“Then what is it?” There couldn’t be another reason why he had sent George Adams to meet me. He couldn’t have changed his mind, or why would he have sent for me?

His words were barely audible. “I brought Mary and the children with me.”

“Pardon me?” I pushed him away and backed towards the window. “Mary is here in Buffalo? Both of us together?” I wondered if he were joking, although I didn’t think for a second he was playing a game. The look in his eyes was guilty. I prayed he had thought of a good plan to help us out of this situation.

When he spoke, his voice was steadier. He reached for my hand and grinned. “I’ve sent her to Colesville to stay with my family there.” He took an envelope from the small writing desk and placed it in my hands. “Here, open this,” he said. Warily, my fingers worked the sealed edge. Three pieces of paper, a birth certificate for Charles Douglass, a passport, and a letter from David Strang, printed on official stationery, slipped into my hands.

“What is all of this? Who’s Charles Douglass?” I asked, not understanding.

“This is my plan, Elvira,” he began. “Didn’t I promise you the Lord would reveal to me a plan?”

“Yes,” I said, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hear more. He rushed on, regardless of my hesitation.

“I want for you to become my private secretary, Charles Douglass. I want for you to disguise yourself as a boy, so you can be with me every day.” He stopped and allowed the weight of his words to sink into my brain. He looked at me with such confidence as if his plan was the simplest, most logical recourse anyone could consider. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.
“What?” My jaw hung slack on its hinges. My mind reeled as I stared at James who was smiling even broader now. I swallowed hard and fought against the temptation to flee. I wished I could have felt anger and run from the room, but I could only stare. I was so confused that—for a moment—I didn’t think I was capable of rational response.

James’s words continued to tumble out as if he was discussing preparations for a dinner party. “Now we’re going to need to cut your hair short like a boy’s and change your clothes, a suit and tie will do.” He moved to his trunk and retrieved a pair of dark trousers and a white shirt. Carefully, he set them on the bed. From his pocket, he withdrew a pair of shiny shears and laid them on the clothing.

I saw nothing except for those scissors, and with a sickening, dropping sensation in my stomach, I realized that he was serious about his plan. I backed towards the door. Me, become a boy? It’d never work. I’d never be able to carry off a plan like that. I wasn’t a little girl. I had hips and busoms. Anyone would immediately be able to look through the disguise and see that I was no boy. I stood with my back against the door. My feet didn’t seem to want to obey and held me rooted in place.

“Come now, Elvira,” James said approaching me like he would a fractious filly. His voice was cool and rational. “It’s only for a little while until I can make our marriage public. It’s only another masquerade.” He folded the trousers and shirt over his right arm. Just a disguise? They didn’t seem so innocent to me. “I promise it’ll be all right,” he said again in his best fatherly tone.

My fingers curled protectively around my locks. I was proud of my beautiful hair. I knew he’d lecture me on vanity if I told him that, but at the moment, I thought I’d rather lose an arm than my hair. It was my defining feature. I loved the smell and weight of it against my neck. I clutched one of my braids and weaved my fingers into the plait as if to protect it from those shears still sitting on the bed. James was looking more determined, a little less patient. I wondered how much longer I could hold out against him.

There was no madness in his expression. “No one will miss your beautiful hair more than I, but it will grow back. It won’t be long; I promise,” he said and reached out to unhook my fingers from my plait.

“I’m not a man, James, I’m a woman,” I said.

“It’s just another disguise. I know who you are, and that’s all that matters,” he said.

This didn’t feel like another costume. This felt like something very different. I scrambled for any excuse to delay him.
“What will I tell my family now, that I am dead?” I tried to stop my trembling. I couldn’t disappear. Even if there was a great distance between us, I couldn’t vanish. There were people who would miss me. My parents would certainly worry. I was accustomed to sending them regular letters. I had no other way of getting word to them. My friends on Beaver Island would ask questions, although they might have already been told that I was staying on with my family in Eaton Rapids.

“They don’t need to know. You won’t be Charlie long enough for anyone to notice you’re gone.”

I started to cry, tears dripping down my cheeks. Through my sobs, I managed to choke out, “I don’t understand. Why would you ask me to do this?”

He was growing tired of my hesitation; his eyes glittered like hard ice. “Elvira,” he said. “Do you remember what I told you before I married you?”

“You’ve told me many things,” I said. “But I don’t understand this.”

“I told you that God will test everything in you. Do you love the Almighty as much as I?”

“Yes, but—”

“No, buts,” he said. “You either are with me or not.”

“I, I’m with you.” I let him gather me in his arms and sit with me, my head on his chest. I felt a measure of composure return, and my sobs subsided to hiccups. He stroked my head and back, waiting until I was quiet before speaking again, “I promise you, Elvira, that this is the Almighty’s will. If you do what I say, you will be blessed without measure.” I didn’t want to hear preaching, but James gazed at me with such sorrow and love. I crumbled like dry clay. If I wanted to be his wife and be with him, I had to accept his terms.

“Trust me.” He picked up the shears again. I bowed my head to signal defeat. “Good. Now,” he said and helped me to my feet. I slowly undressed to my shimmy and petticoats so the hair would not ruin my good dress. He picked up the scissors and held them out to me, so I could see they weren’t as menacing as I had previously feared. Then he began to cut. I held a hand mirror on my lap as my husband clipped my locks. I felt each strand fall from my head to the floor. Like a great storm of feathers, the hair fell and fell until I had to reach up and feel if there was any left. I didn’t dare look into the mirror, for I didn’t know who I would be when he was done. “The Almighty gives us great tests, Elvira,” he preached as he cut. “Sometimes we don’t know the purpose, but there is always a purpose to any of Lord’s commands. Our minds are so limited and finite.”
“James, please! No more of the Lord this or Lord that,” I pleaded. I remembered standing in the Synagogue and promising during the Oath and Covenant ceremony that I would do anything and everything to support the kingdom of God. How did God feel about switching sexes?

He ran his fingers through the curls that now only covered the top of my head like a wavy cap and bent to kiss them. I flipped the mirror to face and looked. Staring at myself, I could not think straight. Who was this boy? It was my face, but it wasn’t me. “James, how can you want me now? Isn’t this strange for you?” I asked, brushing fingertips over my eyes, nose, and mouth. He laughed, although his eyes were serious. “God and I know who you are underneath. Try and remember it’s only a disguise. You’re talented when it comes to disguises.” James put away the shears. I took one last glance in the mirror. Those were my eyes staring back, but there was so much face. I was painfully conscious of the lack of the familiar heft of my plaits down my back. The cool air circulating in the room raised gooseflesh on the back of my neck.

“Please don’t ever ask me to do anything like this again.” My eyes and cheeks were tear-stained and swollen. I must have warranted the pitiful look that James gave me. Handing him the mirror, I sighed and raised my chin. What was done was done, and I was no longer going to cry over this. “Hand me the suit,” I said.

“This is to go underneath your apparel.” From his trunk, James retrieved a piece of what looked like canvas sail he had cut out to flatten my curves. Pulling the makeshift corset around my waist and over my chest, I inhaled until I could feel my stomach caving inward. While I didn’t miss the sharp points of whalebone from my corset, jutting against my ribs, the canvas still made breathing more difficult.

“We’ve got to lace the stays tightly enough to hide yourself. I don’t want to give anyone cause for suspicion,” James said, taking hold of the laces and pulling them together as tightly as he could. The new corset succeeded in smoothing over any noticeable bumps or curves, making my feminine form as flat as a boy’s. Only for a little while, I kept repeating to myself as I pulled on the trousers and crisp white shirt.

“Well?” I asked.

“Come and sit down,” James said, and I obeyed. His words echoed off the beams on the ceiling. “You’ve shown your obedience to the Almighty, and he’s aware of this great sacrifice. Elvira, you’re going to be blessed.”

“I hope so,” I replied. “Am I going to have to do this right away, or do I get a few moments more to practice?” I asked, serious. I lifted my feet in the bulky shoes and took several awkward steps. How did men walk in these contraptions? They were too long and a bit wide. I shuffled around the room, curling my toes to keep my feet from sliding out. I practiced my walk and talk for a moment. “Hello, I’m Charlie Douglass,” I said. The name
sounded unnatural. I looked at James who was sitting on the bed, staring up at me with an expression of wonder.

“We can actually do this,” he murmured, more to himself than me.

I knew how to ride, hunt, and shoot, but would I have what it took to spit in the street or what about using the toilet? Men relieved themselves standing up. How would I manage that? Surely they’d notice something missing there. Perhaps I was wrong, though, and there was much more to being a man. I swung my legs wide and hoped some of my husband’s optimism would rub off on me.

I missed Beaver Island badly at that moment, and I wanted life to be simple again. I didn’t see how it ever could be. Our marriage was becoming more and more knotted like an enormous ball of tangling twine. I felt powerless under its relentless motion. James noticed my crumpled face and pulled me towards him kissing me lightly on the forehead. “Come along, Charlie, try and look as much of a man as you can. We need to go downstairs and introduce you to your public.” If I had to be a man, I wanted to be a credible one. I had birth certificates and other documents attesting to my newfound identity. I imagined myself as one of those sensitive boys who loves his mother and helps elderly women across busy streets. If I had to be Charlie, at least, I’d be Charlie according to Elvira. I was sure James would teach me everything I needed to know. After all, he was risking his kingdom for this mad venture.

It wasn’t easy to hobble down the hallway in the over-sized shoes, and the coarse fabric against my legs caused me to itch like a madman. I managed to half-walk and half-wobble to the lobby where George Adams was holding court with several buxom women, actresses also staying at the hotel.

“My dears, the Mormon religion has changed my life. Not long ago, I was a starving, penniless actor in New York City, and today, I am second-in-command of God’s own army.” He took great gulps from his dark drink and laughed heartily at his own sense of importance. The women twittered and pressed closer to him, eager to get closer to this Man of God.

“Brother Adams, look who I found.” James cleared his throat. George’s brows flew up, and he spat a mouthful of his beverage into his glass at the sight of me transformed. I remembered our earlier conversation and wondered if he still wished I’d never come. “May I present Master Charles Douglass, my nephew from Colesville?”

“Well, ah, well, nice to meet you, sir.” Brother Adams shook my hand as any man would. His eyes were wide for a moment then narrowed again. The actresses were too busy chattering amongst themselves to notice his reaction to me. After all, he could have exposed me with one word, but he’d be mocking himself too. This could
have been his plan. Now that I knew his true feelings, I was sure he’d have done anything to humiliate me and strengthen his position. I still didn’t understand why he thought I ever wanted to take his place, though. Whosever plan it was, it certainly had enough drama. I bowed politely and tried to hide my coldness.

George Adams’ eyes were still on me as he shoed the actresses away. He walked towards James, his eyes still on me. “Mary sent word she would meet you in New York City if you wanted her to. She’s been detained. Apparently the children and your parents are ill. She’ll come, though, if you want her.” He held out a newly arrived letter. James took the note, briefly skimmed its contents, and turned to me with a shrug. For a brief moment, I wondered if James would entertain the idea of bringing Mary to Buffalo to travel with us. That thought didn’t seem as mad as the notion of disguising me as a man. Bringing Mary here was bad enough, though. I envisioned the potential disasters, coming face to face with her, the horror of recognition. I didn’t look so different, even if I did have cropped hair and wear a suit. Mary would know the truth.

“Let her stay in Colesville. As long as she and the children are all well, I’ll not worry at all. Write back and tell her to remain there. I’ll join her in a little while.” James crumbled the letter as if it mattered nothing to him and tossed it into a nearby waste bin. “Shall we find some dinner? I’m half-starved to death.”

“Excellent idea,” Brother Adams agreed and tipped his hat at the actresses who were still giggling from the other end of the lobby. They waved their handkerchiefs at us as we three walked out the front door of the Bristol Hotel onto Erie Street in the middle of Buffalo. “Did you see the young one? He was a handsome fellow, wasn’t he?” one of the girls said. I ducked my head and tried to hide the flush creeping up my neck to my scalp. Hadn’t I been through enough that evening? The last thing I needed was overt attention from three actresses. If only they knew who I really was, they’d be asking me for performance tips.

James intended to put me to work. Over dinner, he handed me a list of responsibilities to oversee while I was Charlie Douglass. Since neither of us knew how long the Lord would have me remain a boy, he thought it best to keep me busy. After all, I was now his private secretary. I was to take notes at all meetings, transcribe his speeches into print for the Saints on Beaver Island to read in the Gospel Reveille, run errands, and make travel arrangements. I would also oversee all of our daily arrangements and, by default, would become the right hand to the right hand of the Almighty. I’d trained as a tailor and taught school, but administering to the kingdom of God was a new experience. I’d never considered myself a leader of anything, but I saw a page of my handwriting outlining the president’s latest message to the saints, and I truly felt blessed in some measure to be able to participate
in the masculine world. I felt a newfound respect as ministers and journalists curious about James came to me to discuss his life and affairs. "I've every confidence that you can manage things as well as a man," James told me regularly. Besides, I liked Buffalo's earthy texture, a combination sea-faring and farming community. Rough German, Dutch, and French-Canadian stock helped move the barges and boats through the Erie Canal locks, farmed the nearby areas, ran the stores and offices. They were rough but kind people who were still accustoming themselves to the new ways of America. They were curious about everything American, even this strange, new religion.

One evening after several weeks had passed in Buffalo, we sat in the dining room in our hotel. Since I had arrived, work had picked up considerably. George Adams couldn't claim that I was the cause of their problems. I found I'd solved many of them, allowing James and him to focus on their ministry. The tension was thicker than usual that evening. James was scheduled to speak in a Congregationalist church on Erie Street in several hours. He had made particular friends with the Congregationalist minister.

"I still can't imagine converting an entire congregation," I said, even though I had seen people flock to question James following his fiery sermons. Flattering words always pleased him. His grin widened until it reached cheek to cheek; his eyes beamed, and his hands went naturally to his lapels.

He looked at me over his dinner plate. "My dear, if Elders Wilford Woodruff, Heber Kimball, and Brigham Young could convince thousands of your relatives in England to foresake home and family for God's cause, then I should be able to bring my own people into the fold of God." James was indeed in fine form. I could sense he had practiced and prayed until he had worked himself up into a proper mood for roaring at a congregation of potential converts.

"Hmmph," George Adams snorted and shot a pointed look at James who silenced him with a wave of his hand. I knew he was displeased with every decision James made, especially the ones concerning me. That evening though, I sensed something more than his usual disgruntled harrumphing.

James glanced at him. He had thought of every contingency, every possible crisis that could arise. He had written to his wife and family in Colesville and on the island that, on his journey, he had met by divine fortuitousness his brother David's illegitimate son here in Buffalo. He'd written that he was so taken with me that he was keeping me on as his personal secretary Of course, David Strang had agreed to all of this beforehand, although anyone who knew David Strang would have a difficult time swallowing such a notion. James' brother was as close to sainthood as Mary and he too had taken the Oath and Covenant. James had prepared him to swear to the truth that
he had had an affair as a young man with an older woman, and that the older woman had recently passed on, leaving 
poor Charlie Douglass orphaned and penniless at the age of sixteen. What good uncle wouldn’t intervene? “I can’t 
think of a more loyal soul than my brother.” James closed the matter with his utmost confidence. If he passed down 
his word as the law of God, his brother would follow it to the letter. I prayed for all of our sakes that my husband’s 
faith in his brother was right, but I felt a measure of safety. No one knew about us in the East. They remembered 
Joseph Smith, but they were just beginning to hear about James Strang who was doing everything he could to orate 
and charm his way into the hearts of these people.

James stood and excused himself to prepare for the evening’s meeting. “Take good care of our Charlie,” he 
said, shooting a pointed look at his counselor and touching the tip of my nose with his finger. George Adams’ eyes 
narrowed as he cast an anxious glance around the room. “You’ve got to be more careful. We’re in public,” he said.

James dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “I’ve told you before, George, that you’re a fool to question 
God, an enormous fool. Don’t make me tell you that again.” I’d rarely heard his voice so cold. He turned crisply on 
his heel, and before Brother Adams could close his mouth, James was gone.

George Adams took his opportunity to strike at me. His words were acidic, meant to burn love out of me. 
“Obviously, madam, your husband is too much in love to control his manly urges; therefore, as the woman and more 
spiritual one in the relationship, you must exert your influence over him. He is more important than any man. He is 
almost as important as Christ himself.” His voice was so low only I could hear him, but I noticed his trembling 
hands that closed around his water glass, causing the liquid to spill slightly on the table. The couple at the next table 
stared at us, and I smiled hastily wiping the water with my napkin.

If he meant to persuade me not to love James, he was much too late. I didn’t move from my seat. I glared at 
him, willing myself to stay calm. He was insufferable. “You married us, George. If you had such a concern about 
this, why didn’t you say anything before now?”

“I --- I had no choice.” My question had the desired effect of deflecting some of his venom. His shoulders 
sagged; he looked down on me with tired, bloodshot eyes. “He wanted you so badly I could no longer argue with 
him.”

I stared at him, my face flushing. My ears rang with his words. James had wanted me so badly he would go 
against the counsel of his chief advisor? It wasn’t true. He had married me because God had told him to. What was I 
hearing now? Our marriage was a ruse? I wouldn’t entertain the notion for a moment, and I returned George Adams’ 
glare with my own. I’d never believe him. But the tiny thread of doubt crept in at the corner of my mind. Was it
possible? It wasn’t. Father had told me once that God would strike down his prophet if the man attempted to lead his people astray.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, boldness driving me forward.

“There is nothing remotely spiritual about your union. James had no interest in you spiritually, and he is smart enough to know that if the Lord commanded him to take you, you’d be blind enough to follow him.” He paused for a moment, searching for the right words as if his entire life depending on making his meaning clear. “Sister Elvira, you are a strong woman with strong faith and you will follow the prophet. He knows that. He can manipulate you with this religion like all the rest.”

*James, a lustful demon? And me, blind?* I could not listen to him any longer. His accusations flew in the face of everything I believed. I stood up and threw down my napkin; I’d heard enough for one day. “I’m leaving,” I said.

“Suit yourself,” he replied and rose to his feet, throwing his napkin on the table. His eyes were snapping with his contempt. “Ask yourself this question, though? What do you really believe, Sister Strang?” He spat my last name like it was poison and stormed out, leaving me alone.

“I don’t believe you,” I hissed under my breath. “And the name is Douglass if you don’t mind.” I tried to calm my trembling fingers before he decided to return and subject me to more of his insanity. If he did, I hoped he could feel the force of my hate, for I despised him more than any Gentile. I slumped down into my chair, and the thought chimed again at the corner of my mind, *But what if he’s right?* He might have been a fool, but he wasn’t stupid enough to challenge James directly. I passed him off as a raving lunatic and pretty well succeeded despite my heart pulsing in my throat. I sat at the table, calming myself and trying not to encourage the tiny thread of doubt. *But, what if?* Stubborn, the thought wouldn’t go away. I wanted James to come and tell me George Adams had been lying.

I wasn’t a fool. I believed James. No man would have been able to do what he had done without the power of God behind him. He’d never lied to me or taken advantage of me. He’d always been honest in every way towards me. I could see that George Adams had played out his part. He’d been acting this entire time, and he’d exposed himself for the power hungry fraud that he was. But James was genuine. He wanted me, but that wasn’t a terrible sin. Men and women must desire one another. I’d learned that much in marriage. Joseph Smith had had scheming men try and take advantage of him too. They were like wolves in sheep’s clothing, but they revealed their true characters eventually. *Was James acting too?*
I went to see James preach that evening. He was in his element, proclaiming God’s word to a crowded hall. “You may feel a bit confused about the Mormon Church, but I tell you, as God’s holy witness, that the truth is restored, and you will find if you will follow me. The Lord Jesus Christ asked his disciples to do the same thing, so I ask you, will you take up your crosses and follow me now?”

I was still thinking about President Adams’ accusations, sitting in the back of the church, watching my husband exhort and plead, and trying his best to raise emotion in the hearts of his audience. I noticed a few heads bobbing and nodding. These were steady, good people, and some of them were agreeing with James. As he pounded the pulpit and shared his witness of God, I couldn’t help but wonder if he had manufactured the revelation. It made sense. I didn’t want to believe it, but what was plainer, that James Strang had received revelation from God telling him to take a second wife, or that he had seen me, desired me, and manufactured a revelation to seduce me into marrying him? He hadn’t ever lied to me, but I made up my mind to ask him.

People stood for a long while afterwards applauding and buzzing with questions about this Mormonism. I wandered outside and found a quiet spot to mull over my thoughts. James would be inside for a while answering questions. I caught snatches of conversations floating from the open door. One elderly woman’s voice quavered, “I thought Brigham Young was the new Mormon prophet?” A recent convert puzzled, “Are there two Mormon religions now? How do I know I joined the right one?” They had so many questions, but James thrived in that environment with all of their attentions centered on him.

When he had finished answering questions, he stepped outside the church, nearly tripping over me. “Hey!” He looked tired but exultant. “These lambs are blind without a shepherd. They are helpless prey for the wolves that would tear their souls to pieces,” he told me, pulling me to my feet. “Where have you been?”

“Here,” I said and exhaled slowly, watching my breath make solid puffs in the cold, night air. It was going to snow again soon. Clouds rolled in from Lake Erie and covered the dark sky. The stars disappeared one by one.

“I need to return to these people. Stay with me?” he asked. I shook my head. I had had enough for one day. This wasn’t the right place to confront him. I wanted to wait until we were alone in the hotel room. I also wanted to prepare myself for the answer I’d receive.

“Very well then, I’ll be back late,” he said. If he noticed my glum state, he didn’t remark on it. It was just as well. A marital confrontation in front of a hundred questioning souls wouldn’t do either of us any good. I had to remember I was acting in disguise.
I made my way back to the hotel alone. It wasn’t far, and the walk restored most of my humor. The cold air and exercise helped to clear my troubled mind. I wished I could have walked about alone as a woman. Men had such freedoms they probably didn’t recognize. George Adams’ words echoed in my head, “Love had nothing to do with your marriage. It was pure lust.” Had James lied to me about the Lord commanding polygamy? Was it just an excuse to bring me to his bed? Was I nothing more than a common harlot? I felt dirty even considering these notions. Who did I trust after all, my husband, the Prophet, or a clearly foolish George Adams? I tried to choose my husband, but that didn’t erase the doubts from my mind. In fact, the more I entertained the niggling threads, the more anxious I felt.

I was still awake when James returned, although it was very late. He was in exceptional spirits. I heard his footsteps down the hall, accompanied by his voice humming an unfamiliar tune. He entered the room, undressed in the dark, and climbed into my narrow bed. I quickly lit the wick in the kerosene lantern and sat up to face him.

“You’re not asleep,” he commented, the laughter disappearing from his voice, replaced by something between a sigh and a groan. “I wish you would have stayed. I need you to stay with me.”

“I need to ask you something.”

“What?”

“Why did you marry me?”

He was silent for a long moment. I waited, fearing his response.

“What did George Adams tell you?” His eyes were tired but a quick, angry light kindled at the thought of the damage his counselor had done. Had he known George Adams was going to confront me? That thought irritated me more than the question of marriage. If he had known, why hadn’t he protected me?

“You didn’t answer my question,” I said. My heart was beating so quickly beneath my nightshirt that I feared it would jump from my throat. I didn’t know if I wanted his answer.

“What did he tell you?”

“That you married me to seduce me. That there was no other way for us to be married, so you concocted this plural marriage revelation.”

He took a long time in replying. I could see him thinking as he lay on his back with his arms behind his head, a faint shadow of a smile playing on his lips. “Do you think he’s right?”
I stared at him and wasn’t going to let him sleep until he answered my question. James looked deeply into my eyes, took my hands in his, and in his gentlest voice asked. “Do you believe I love you?” Most of me trusted him, but there was doubt too, and it was driving me mad. “Yes, I guess. I’m not certain.”

He looked at me, disappointed, and I felt shame flood me. I knew he loved me. I heard my mother’s voice scold me, *You’ve got too much of an imagination.* He had made his feelings abundantly apparent to me over the past several months despite our arrangement. Even now that I was in disguise, he’d never revealed accidentally that he’d concocted this plot to hurt me. He’d it to protect us. “Do you believe I am a prophet?”

“Yes.”

“Would a prophet of God lie to satisfy his own whims?” No, I remembered Brother Joseph, how he had sacrificed his time, money, home, everything for the church. James was the same. He was sitting now, grasping each of my hands in his. His eyes were burning as he leaned over and kissed me tenderly.

“No,” I replied. He was right. I had let my imagination get the best of me. I was a fool for entertaining George Adams’s lies. Why hadn’t I seen through him? I had been weak to have such doubts. I couldn’t deny that I had imagined the worst, but I’d seen my way through the trap this time.

James lightly touched my face with one fingertip. “You need to trust your instincts. George Adams is a fool. He has doubts, and I fear he’s going to betray me one day to my death.”

Shivering under my blankets, I didn’t want to hear his death omens either.

“Are you going to do something about him?” I asked, hoping that James would excommunicate him—certainly he now had grounds to do so—or send him far away.

“He’s still has his uses, Elvira. I’ll have to think on it tonight,” James sighed. “I’ll concern myself with George Adams. You trust your instincts next time.”

I was silent. George Adams wasn’t a good man. I’d never liked him. He’d lied to me, tried to manipulate me out of jealousy. I was beginning to understand his rationale. How could he influence James if I was in the way? Therefore he had to rid himself of me, even though I’d never seek after his position or power. That’s why he had tried to poison me against James. That too made sense. I trusted that notion more than the Adams’ lie. James had risked Heaven and Hell to bring me into his life. He was risking his church. George Adams only wanted power. Everything to him was a performance, and he saw a great opportunity to seize a major role in causing this drama. I saw that clearly, and I resisted him.
“James?” I asked; I had one more question. He didn’t answer. I heard his slow, even breathing and knew he was asleep. I finished my thought anyway, even though only the walls heard me. “Do you believe in this yourself?”

“Charlie! Arise and shine forth. We’re leaving for New York City today.” Morning came too soon. James threw open the curtains and flooded the room with brilliant sunlight. I blinked and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. He had packed for us, and the trunks were stacked in neat rows against the wall, ready to be moved downstairs.

“So soon?” I asked.

“Yes, we’re catching the stage south a few days early,” James explained. His voice was cheerful, but his eyes were wary probably wondering if he were in for another interrogation.

“I’m sorry I’m weak,” I said, still shamed for doubting him.

“It’s all right, Elvira. The adversary has a firm grip on George Adams’ heart right now. It’d take a more powerful being than me to completely resist those doubts.” If he hadn’t said those generous, gentle words, I would have most likely burst into tears again. All is well, I repeated to myself over and over again as I dressed and prepared for our departure. I was strong. Even the firmest of believers can doubt.

We couldn’t have asked for a more perfect day to travel. The sun was bright and still warm enough to take the cold bite out of the air. I climbed into the coach and watched James give George final orders.

“Farewell and good luck in Boston. Don’t forget my commands, Brother Adams.” James waved from the stage as we rolled from the platform.

“I won’t, my President. I won’t.” George Adams raised his gloved hand, holding his top hat in the other. He seemed weary that morning, surveying us from the street. I hope you wept, wailed, and gnashed your teeth all night long, I thought. He wouldn’t meet my eyes. George was being sent to proselytize in Boston, and that city was a good several hundred miles from us. Good riddance, I thought as he disappeared. If he thought I’d seriously consider what he had said, he was a bigger fool than I imagined. You tried to manipulate me once; it’ll never, ever happen again. I spat on the ground, cleansing my soul of the foul ideas he had planted there. When James climbed into the coach next to me, I was able to focus my mind on what I knew was true. James was; we were. The city surrounded me on either side. The canal barges and their workers filled the vicinity desperately trying for one more run before the Erie Canal froze for the winter. Farewell, Brother Adams, I thought, feeling brighter and happier than I had in days. Yes, James, I thought. You’re right. We need to be more careful in picking and choosing our battles.
Chapter Seven

If I loathed George Adams, I feared Lorenzo Dow Hickey from the moment I met him. The man was a zealot, tall and so thin, I wondered if he were starving. His lantern eyes bulged from their sockets as he surveyed me stepping from the coach. I had heard about him on the island, although we had never formally met. I knew his wife, Mariah, a thin woman prone to alternating fits of hysteria and deep sadness, from our sewing circles. "My husband's a commandment keeper," she liked to tell us. She always seemed to be babbling about how righteous and holy her husband was. Even though I was never formally introduced, I was a little afraid of him, listening to his wife's tales about her husband. According to Mariah Hickey, her husband believed that breaking any commandment of God was tantamount to heresy. He loved the Old Testament with its eye-for-an-eye philosophy. He also loved nothing better than seeking out apostates and false converts, those saints who joined the church for asylum or financial profits. He liked nothing better than a church disciplinary court where sinful members were made to recognize and confess their transgressions before him and the Almighty. I thought his ancestors must have participated in the Salem witch-hunts, so fiercely did he believe in the purity of the fold of God.

"He's such a zealot that I doubt he'd hesitate to bring me up on charges if he suspected me of anything," James murmured as our hired cab stopped in front of the building where we'd be staying.

"You?" I asked, incredulous that anyone would dare to challenge James' authority.

"Even me," James replied, his eyes and voice sober.

The cabbed stopped in front a brownstone tenement only a shout's distance from the East River in lower Manhattan where Elder Hickey had rented several rooms. He was waiting for us in his room.

"Brother Lorenzo!" James boomed, shaking Brother Hickey's hands and clapping him on the back. "Good to see you!"

"Welcome, Brother James, to New York City," Elder Hickey said with a smile that never quite reached his eyes. When he looked on me, I felt something akin to vermin – something to be stomped out. Likewise, I nodded and tried to ignore his gaze fixed intently on my face. I swear he never blinked. I could see his mind churning out judgments.

James didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. He started and turned to me. "Oh, this is my nephew, Charlie Douglass. I've hired him on as my personal secretary."
I bowed deeply, respectfully, from the waist. No sense in making an enemy of Elder Hickey or getting uppity over nothing. He was most likely suspicious of everyone. He moved closer, eyes narrowing, testing me. I stared back. I have nothing to confess to you.

"It’s about time Brother James had a personal secretary, right, Brother Douglass?” Elder Hickey asked, his thin lips stretched tight over his gums. The forced civility obviously pained him. Why do you dislike me? I longed to ask him. Why are you suspicious of someone you know nothing about? I held my tongue, reminding myself that in saying the wrong word I’d be stirring up trouble I knew I didn’t want. “Yessir, I’ve appreciated working so closely with my uncle.”

"Now which is your parent? Where did you come from? I didn’t know David Strang or his sister, Myraette Losee, had a son by the name of Charlie.”

"I’m a son of David’s. Father doesn’t talk much of me. I’m the fruit an unfortunate accident.” I knew the routine and executed it without a flinch.

"Really? Brother David Strang is one of the most upstanding members. Who would have thought he’d commit such a heinous sin.” His Ss seemed to slip off his tongue like the hissing of a snake, but he was also seemingly satisfied. If he was going to question James’ motives, he wasn’t going to do it in front of me, or perhaps he did care more about his position than even James believed. I hoped that was the case.

Elder Hickey motioned to the door. “Shall we go upstairs and settle in?” I nodded and followed the man at several paces. Our room was on the third floor, and from the third floor window, I could spit into the East River. Me, spitting! Only a month earlier, I would have shrieked rather than be caught committing such an act. Now I did so without a second thought. I had stood with my husband and George Adams in Buffalo and hocked along with them. At least, I knew my manliness made me less conspicuous.

Elder Hickey was staying with another missionary in the next room. I stared at our bare room with its whitewashed walls and two iron bed frames and shuddered. Lorenzo Hickey’s Bible lay open on his bed. “I was staying in here, but that one’s yours now.” He pointed to the bed against the window with one finger. His eyes remained shrewd and cold. He was one of the few Saints I’d met whose expression was so frosty I didn’t think warmth would ever thaw that ice. Running one finger over the coverlet, he picked up his Bible and said, “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll leave you to settle in. I imagine you’re fatigued after such a long journey.” As he backed out of our
room, he took in every corner as if he were searching for something. He turned quickly on his heel and, without so much as a farewell, departed.

"Why do you surround yourself with these men?" I asked James after Elder Hickey was out of earshot. I thought about kind, honest Brother Smith who seemed like the exception in a group of men who valued their power and positions over Christian charity. I couldn't imagine Christ acquainting himself with men who didn't love and serve. I understood that we were all flawed beings, but how could a man like George Adams be inspired? I'd thought that from the very beginning. Even if he was devoted to the cause, he'd certainly proved that he was more interested in preserving his position than converting souls.

"They all have their uses, Elvira," James replied, unlacing his shoes. He lay back on his bed and stared for a moment at the ceiling. "They may seem less than celestial at times, but I believe they are all devoted in their own way to the kingdom of God."

"But--"

James didn't allow me to finish my objection. "Elder Hickey will never waver. He may be strict in his devotions, but I don't believe he would ever betray me. I know that he thinks his mission in life is to root out evil. He is not above accusing me, and he'll believe every hint of scandal. His wife has told him that I've made advances towards her for years," he muttered. "As if I'd stoop so low."

"What do you think he's accusing you of now?" I was still a little chilled from Elder Hickey's expression and the early cold snap that had gripped the city.

"Who knows?" James pulled me to him, kissing me lightly. "You think too much and must learn to follow."

"I try," I replied.

"Try harder," he said, and the mild scolding was finished in his mind. "Mmmmm, you are so alive and different from Mary."

"Am I?" I pulled back from him, but not so far that I couldn't look into his eyes.

"Oh yes, you are so good, Elvira, so good and trusting. Mary is so cold with me. She hates me."

I thought of Mary stuck in Colesville with her three children and James' elderly parents and thought she had a good reason to complain. She had grown up in the southwestern corner of the state as well, but she was also conveniently kept out of James' way. She hadn't seen James for almost six weeks since he had left her to travel to
Buffalo and meet me. That didn’t stop her letters from arriving promptly each week wherever we were staying, always complaining about his being away for so long. I never read the letters, but James never failed to tell me what they contained, subtle worries about “the children, his parents, the weather, her aches and pains,” and always ending in “It’s been so long. When am I going to see you?” Was that her accusation? I heard her voice between the lines on the paper. She might as well have said, “Why did you leave me?”

“I think if I were in her shoes I’d feel the same way. She never sees you. You’re always gone.” I stopped, my smile disappearing as James began to read Mary’s latest. I felt badly for her. She didn’t deserve to be hidden away in the southeastern corner of the state. “Do you think she suspects anything?”

“Oh no, dear heavens, no!” James laughed again throwing his head back. “She may be cold, but she’s a good soul, and she’s too timid and trusting to accuse me outright of anything.”

“You have strong faith in her.” I hugged him closely, resting my cheek against the coarse fabric of his coat. It felt like forever since we had stood holding one another in the daylight. We had succeeded in fooling Buffalo, but Mary and Lorenzo Hickey would prove a different challenge altogether. George Adams would go to the grave with our secrets despite his personal objections. He was so afraid of losing his power and position. No one else would give him the authority that James had granted to him. But what would the zealot do? Or worse, a scorned wife? James had complete faith in Mary, but I couldn’t believe she’d be so understanding when he finally told her, or she discovered the truth on her own.

“James, footsteps,” I whispered as Elder Hickey’s heavy footfalls echoed down the hallway. My husband released me from his embrace just in time for Elder Hickey to peer into the room.

“Ah, President,” he said, bowing low. “I’m pleased to report the work is progressing so well. Converts pleading to enter the fold every day.”

A smile flickered over James’ mouth, amused at this man’s blind, trusting obedience. I imagined him asking his apostle to jump through a hoop or sit up like a trained dog. I’m sure the man would have done it. James bowed his head, acknowledging Hickey’s report. I thought the numbers of people being taught and converting were impressive. James had every right to be pleased with the report. “New York is a great city. We’ve got to do better,” James said frowning. His reaction surprised me. I’d have thought no one could expect more, but apparently James had been hoping for better results. “Give all reports of this kind to Mr. Douglass and press the missionaries to work harder. They’ve got to preach more and do better.”
James' voice was cold, but Elder Hickey bowed from the waist as if the president had done him the greatest
honor. A ripple of fear passed through his eyes when he blinked but was soon replaced by his watchful, smooth
mask. I didn’t miss that momentary hesitation and thought, “You’re not invincible.”

James turned to me. “I am going to take some dinner soon with Charlie. Brother, would you like to join
us?”

Hickey’s eyes lit with pleasure. “Your invitation does me honor, but I must decline. I have a speaking
engagement arranged in front of a group of Evangelists before Conference tomorrow morning, and I must prepare
my remarks.”

“Oh? Very good. Perhaps we will join you after dinner.” James smiled and looked at me.

“Hmmmm.” A smile trembled on Hickey’s thin mouth. His eyes flicked to me, measuring me again. I don’t
know what he hoped to find. Determined to keep the peace, I returned his side glance with an innocent smile and
shrug of my shoulders. “That would be a great honor indeed.” He wrote an address on a slip of paper and passed it to
me. “I will be speaking this evening at the Evangelical Church at LaFayette Square.”

“We’ll see.” James nodded to Elder Hickey. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to write a few words of comfort to
my ailing wife.”

“Please pass her my regards. I do so love Sister Strang.” Hickeys’ eyes followed James as he closed the
door to our room. Before the door swung completely shut, I could feel those twin lanterns on me, mistrustful and
suspicious. He couldn’t know anything. That would be impossible. Perhaps his talent was intimidation. He used his
mind to let me know exactly where I stood. I wouldn’t let him threaten me, although I knew he would perhaps love
nothing better than to start on a new witch-hunt.

That evening, we attended Elder Hickey’s speech. The Evangelists met on the second floor over a bank.
James and I trudged up a narrow flight of iron stairs at the end of a dark alley and found seats near the back of the
room. Surprise was inadequate to describe my shock and horror when I met Increase Van Deusen’s watery eyes. He
looked as worn as his badly patched suit, his hair grown stringy around his ears. He flushed at the sight of me and
turned back to listen to Lorenzo Hickey. He had recognized me. I was sure of it. I sat trembling in my seat, tempted
to dash from the crowded room before the meeting was over. He turned several more times to stare at me, his face
unreadable. I looked straight ahead focusing on Lorenzo Dow Hickey’s fiery words as if they were the most
fascinating I had ever heard.
Immediately after the closing prayer, Increase found James and pumped his hand. “President Strang, what honor brings you to New York?” James calmly detached his hand from the elder’s and patted the man on the back.

“How is the work, Brother Increase?”

“Well, very well. My companion is out teaching tonight. I thought I would come and support Elder Hickey in case there were many interested inquiries.”

“Well done, sir, well done indeed. We must never forget that the kingdom of God will roll forth like the rock Daniel saw in vision. It will crush the kingdoms and treacheries of this world. I promise you.” James’ smile brightened at the people gathered around Elder Hickey asking questions and demanding tracts with more information.

“Who is this?” Increase turned to me, extending his hand. I shook it hard in return.

“My personal secretary and nephew, Charlie Douglass.” James pushed me forward.

“Ah, Mr. Douglass. I’ve heard about you.” Increase smiled, his teeth yellow and cracked. He sized me up.

“You look familiar. Have you spent any time on the island?”

“No sir,” I coughed. “I’ve never been there. Sounds lovely though. Uncle James has been filling my head with stories of her beauties. Maybe he will take me back with him after his tour is over.”

“Beaver Island is the most beautiful place on earth. If Voree is the Garden of Peace, then Beaver Island is the Garden of Eden, paradise.” The word paradise slipped off his tongue like a hiss. He surveyed me with his hands laced behind his back for a long while until I excused myself to rejoin my uncle.

I looked over my shoulder at him once. Increase was still standing at the back of the room staring at me and shaking his head. “Remarkable,” I heard him say in a soft whisper. “But it cannot be.”

“Elder Hickey, what a wonderful, inspirational speech! I’m sure you’ve converted the entire room!” I rushed forward to shake Hickey’s hand. I hoped that he would absorb as much attention as possible until I could leave.

“My humble thanks, young sir. I do think many of the fine people in this room will be converted shortly. I personally handed out more than a dozen tracts declaiming our basic tenets and accepted four addresses from fine gentlemen who expressed a good deal of interest.” He beamed with success and a heated rush of emotion. His long, thin face was ruddy, and his glowing eyes flashed around the room and then settled on me.
“Perhaps you’ll want to ask your uncle here to send you on a mission before too long.” He clapped me on the back. “Oh, Charlie—” He started again. “How old did you say you are?”

“I’m eighteen, sir,” I replied.

“You’re a little young, but your uncle should see to sending you out on a mission. Can’t wait too long. I always say, send them young when they are still so honest and impressionable, not like us hardened old men.”

If you only knew the whole truth, I thought and forced a laugh as Elder Hickey chuckled on his way out the door. An arm brushed mine. I turned to find James standing next to me. The congregation was leaving the room. I followed James, sorely tempted to grab his elbow and hang on for dear life. Once we had left the room and were out in the street, the cold air revived me a little. I felt I’d survived a veritable snake pit.

“Are you ill?” Some color had flooded back into my cheeks, but my heart still pounded like thunder in my ears. I nodded, for I did feel a bit unwell, although it was from shock more than sickness.

“That elder, Increase Van Deusen, I know him. He rode with me when I returned to my parents,” I whispered.

James laughed so hard tears came to his eyes. His reaction surprised me, brought another rush of heat to my cheeks. I swayed and grabbed hold of an iron railing to keep myself from pitching headfirst into the street. “Why are you laughing at me?” I stopped, looking down at my husband. We were in peril, and he was laughing. His eyes twinkled at me, his mouth still curled in a smile as he attempted to compose himself.

“I am not laughing at you. How can you be so sure that Increase Van Deusen suspects anything? He may be a questionable character, but he believes in the church and me too strongly to accuse me of anything like whoredoms.” The word echoed for a moment in the windless air. James kicked a pile of dead leaves heaped in the front of a tidy milliner’s store. This isn’t all about you, I thought. I didn’t think Increase Van Deusen would do anything to defy James, but what would he do to me if he placed my face? He’d accuse me of being a harlot, not James. I didn’t. Would knowing we were married help the situation any?

“Yes, you are laughing at me.” I said. “He looked at me as if he recognized me.”

“Charlie, where’s your faith in me? There is no chance that he would know you,” James said. “No more of this now.” His reprimand was soft, but I heard the steel underneath. We walked a block in silence under the smoky glow of the gaslights.
“But—” I started again. Whether James wanted to listen to me or not, Increase Van Deusen had frightened me. I thought he’d recognized me. I hadn’t seriously considered before how precarious was the tightrope I was walking. Now it felt dangerous and real. One step, and I’d fall. I looked at James and wondered if he would save me.

“No more of this talk. You weary me with your baseless fears.” His smile drew inwards on itself until it had faded to a narrow slit. He placed his hand over my mouth. I could taste the perspiration on his palm and didn’t press the matter further although the doomsday thoughts didn’t leave my head.

Later that evening, I lay in my bed. James had promised to take me to Madison Square Garden to see the circus and international exhibits. His kindness felt like a bribe to pacify me as if I were one of his children. For the first time, I wondered what would happen if I told someone the truth. I didn’t want to hurt James. That was the last thing on my mind, but I had seen the complications of this life I was living spread before me, staring at me. The deception had been easier in Buffalo where no one knew us, but I knew the more contact we had with the Saints, the greater the chance of someone recognizing me. Perhaps Increase Van Deusen was only a minor concern to James, but I still had the same face and eyes and shape underneath my masculine exterior. One of these days, someone from the Island was going to recognize me, and then the masquerade would be over. I was honestly beginning to believe that the ruination would be worse than James ever anticipated.

What would Elder Hickey think if I told him I was a nineteen-year old woman dressed like a man to be with my husband who happened to be the Prophet and President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints? I reached up in the darkness and felt my shorn head. The curls were growing past my ears again, and I knew James would want to cut my hair again. I also suspected that – as much as he loved me – he’d decry me as worse than a Judas. Not even I was as important to him as his position as Prophet and President. He’d defame me in front of the entire church, and I imagined him turning me out. He’d deny ever knowing me. My worst fears would come true; I’d be banished from Zion. The Saints would shun me as the seducer of their prophet. James, after all, was holy and blameless. I’d be the one they’d crucify, not him.

He was the prophet. He had promised me over and over that the Lord would take care of me. The Lord had to prove his faithful. This was obviously my test of faith. I had to believe and follow. I heard my father’s voice, something he said to me before leaving Streetsborough, “Elvira, the Lord will chasten whom he will. The Lord will always test those he loves.” The Lord must have loved me more than most because he had sent me so many trials. It didn’t seem as if I could escape them.
Towards dawn when the darkness gave way to the first gray streaks of light, I still couldn’t sleep. Unfolding before me as if in a vision, I felt and saw the ugliness of the situation before me. If a person can walk through a private Gethsemane, then this was mine. I knew I’d keep my secret. I’d remain Charlie Douglass at least until James felt his flock was prepared to know the true word of God. I was very much in love with James; I believed him, but I understood what James saw. I knew why we had to keep our marriage a secret, why we had to play such an elaborate game. I’d told myself that I believed what I had done was right in the eyes of the prophet and God. I’d known the situation was going to cause many people pain and sorrow. James had told me that; I’d prepared myself for that. I knew when I married him that it wasn’t going to be an easy thing. This was what could happen. This was what I had done to Mary. My heart groaned. I felt sorrow for myself and for these women. Oh Lord, what have I done? I knew James loved me, and he loved Mary, although even he admitted that love was not equal. Once again, I pictured Mary sobbing as James told her about me. I saw loving wives betrayed by once trusted husbands. I thought of Catherine Miller with tears coursing down her cheeks while her Anson married another pretty, young wife. I saw her washing her home and caring for her children while this new wife, perhaps named Laura or Sarah, picked flowers in the yard. I saw sisters fighting amongst themselves, old men choosing younger wives, and all in the name of Zion. I was the betrayer; this was what I’d done.

The vision caused me to shiver under my blanket. I drew myself into a ball and lay there, wishing James were near to comfort me. Then somewhere between waking and dreams, I heard his voice, “Elvira, the Lord may ask you to do difficult things.” These tests weren’t possibilities but the reality of my life. But what if this is too difficult for me? What if I can’t do it? As dark as the vision was, I still loved my husband. He was sleeping in the other bed, his breathing soft and regular. I crawled out of bed, knelt on the cold, hard floor, and begged God to take the vision away. I wanted to be surrounded by that rosy light that had blinded me to everything but my love for James. Please give me strength to do what I must, I pleaded.

It was very cold, but I ignored the gooseflesh raised on my arms and legs clad only in the thin nightshirt. On shaky knees, I stood and wrapped my arms around my middle. Silvery moonlight fell in slanted patterns on the floor and cast a milky, light pool on James’ bed. I looked down at him for a moment and thought, He’s still here. His face was peaceful, a mirror of the faith he felt in God’s plan. He never questioned. I leaned over him and brushed a stray lock of chestnut hair away from his face. A tenderness filled me, and I knelt once more by the bed my cheek
close to my sleeping husband’s, and I asked God to forgive me for being faithless. I’d do better. After a long moment, I slipped back into my own bed and, exhausted, fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

It seemed I’d just closed my eyes when a knock sounded on my door and woke me. I roused and looked at James’ bed. He was already gone. The rap of knuckles against bard wood echoed again, and I pulled a shirt over my head and stumbled to open it. “Charlie? Are you coming?” James’ eyes glowed in his lean face. His cheeks had color, and he had fastened a posy into his neat lapel. I imagined him as a young bridegroom of twenty-two with Mary on his arm. She must have been a pretty young woman when her cheeks were rosy, and her glossy, brown hair fell around her shoulders. She must have clutched James by the arm, her expression worshipful, so deeply in love with him— as much as I was if that were possible. At one time, she must have been like me. Yes, as foolish and insane and in love as I. I leaned in to receive his kiss.

I gathered my toiletries and freshened myself in the bathroom at the end of the hallway. I was still immersed in my thoughts from the night before when I returned to my room. The door was open. I peered inside. Elder Hickey was scrambling to his feet. His eyes were cool and appraising, but that flicker of fear passed through them before growing cold again. He thought I was only a boy. What could he possibly have to fear from me?

“What are you doing here?”

“I left an important paper here last evening,” he replied without pausing as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to be caught in someone else’s room.

“Nothing is here,” I said. What was he hoping to find? I knew he trusted no one, but I didn’t think he’d actually search my room.

“I was wondering if perhaps President Strang had kept copies of the Herald with him. I haven’t heard much news from the Island lately except from my wife,” Elder Hickey’s voice was smooth and conciliatory. I crossed my arms. Was he looking for something of James’? Did he really think James was courting his wife? Was he searching for some sort of love letter? I thought of Mariah Hickey’s puckered, sour face and shriveled, skinny shape, and a dry laugh escaped my lips, even though I was in no mood for mirth.

Changing the subject, Elder Hickey spoke briskly, “We’ll be late for Conference. Are you prepared?” For an instant, I thought I espied fear in him again. All he’d find under my bed was a box full of stationery and several
clippings from the *Gospel Reveille*, and I’d have been glad to show him my articles. As for myself, I’d kept no reminders of Elvira.

"Of course," I said, smoothing my tangled curls with my fingers and then running my hands over my wrinkled pants and shirt.

"Are we ready?" James interrupted the standoff. He appeared perfectly crisp and well rested in his black suit. He couldn’t have ignored the tension in the room between Elder Hickey and me, but he said nothing. Elder Hickey’s eyes flicked from me to James, and he nodded curtly and set about straightening his tie. "Brother George Adams is expected shortly. He will room with me." A thin grimace of a smile wrinkled his lips.

"Oh, good." My spirits sank lower. George Adams was the last person I wanted to see.

"Hallo?" A voice called next door into Hickey’s room. "Brother Lorenzo, are you here?"

Elder Hickey’s grin widened. He had invited Increase Van Deusen to attend conference with him. The two stood side-by-side, pale, suspicious human beings. If Elder Hickey’s sneaking in my room had startled me, I wasn’t prepared in the least to find Increase Van Deusen standing in the doorway. I don’t know how I managed to move my feet. I could only stand and gape. If the day had started badly, it only seemed to be turning worse by the moment.

Lorenzo Dow Hickey cleared his throat. "Ahemmmm, excuse the interruption, Brother Strang, but we should be going." James cast one look at me as we left the building. *What is wrong with you?* He mouthed. I shrugged my shoulders. I couldn’t tell him that I felt I was descending into the farthest region of hell. *Having a cankered tooth is more pleasant than this*, I thought, feeling that the day was only going to get worse.

The October 21st church meeting was held in the same upstairs room off Broadway. This time, a hundred or so faithful Saints, mainly brand new converts, crowded the room, all craning their necks and standing as tall as they could to catch a glimpse of the Mormon prophet. When James walked in with me at his heels, a hush fell over the room. He and Elder Hickey took their seats at the front while I sat directly across from them on the first row.

Increase Van Deusen sat near the back but in the line of Elder Hickey’s eyesight. I faced front, trying to ignore everything.

The meeting started well enough with a rousing hymn and a long prayer offered by James himself. Then my husband spoke on his carefully prepared text, "I Will Not Know A Wicked Person." I didn’t notice the change in Elder Hickey at the beginning. He sat ramrod straight in his chair, his eyes moving restlessly over the crowd. I thought he was searching for Increase Van Deusen in the back, but as the meeting wore on, he began to fidget,
clasping and unclasping his long fingers. Something was going to happen. I remembered coming upon Elder Hickey in my room. I hadn't noticed if he'd taken anything. Had he found something among James' belongings? His eyes returned to James; he leaned forward in his seat as if he would spring out his chair at any moment. James was thundering away over the powers that righteous people always possess over the wicked, completely absorbed in his preaching.

He paused for a moment, and several people rose to applaud him—among them Elder Hickey. The man wasn't smiling though; he was running his tongue nervously over his lips, like a snake about to bite. A hunger to purge the church of evil burned brightly in his eyes, and it was consuming him. He had found evil. Even though James said he was sure no one would dare accuse him, I'd never believed an apostle would actually point his finger at the prophet.

As the final hymn ended, Elder Hickey rose to his feet and moved to the podium. He retrieved a letter from his coat pocket and started shouting "I can prove it! I can prove the wickedness! Here is a letter from my wife."

He began to read from the piece of paper. "Dearest Lorenzo, you are constantly in my thoughts lately. The situation here on the island is becoming precarious. There are rumors flying everywhere that the leaders are engaging in adultery in the East. Some of the sisters have even heard Caroline Adams say that her husband has taken a new woman up in Boston. Worst of all, there are reports that the prophet himself is philandering. Some say there were secret doings on the Island last summer, but we don't know anything more than that. Please tell me you haven't sunk to this. It would crush me."

My only thoughts were for James who fell back into his chair, stunned. The blood had drained from his face, and he clasped the arms of his chair to support himself. Bewildered, all I could do was act. I rushed to his side and helped him to stand. All around me, the congregation sat dumbstruck as Elder Hickey continued to wave the piece of paper in the air all the while yelling, "The prophet is guilty! He has broken every commandment! He is guilty! My wife is an honest woman, and if what she says is true, then our prophet is a fraud, an impostor, and a dangerously wicked man!" Hickey wailed.

Increase Van Deusen appeared suddenly at his side, shouting over the melee of panicked voices and pointing at James, "You are guilty of adultery and fornication! You are guilty! You are guilty!"
James hadn’t moved from his place in front of the congregation, still staring at the two men who were now quiet. Everyone in the room had turned to look at James, and I pleaded, “Come away, come away.” I didn’t see how he could win this battle today. Instead he gripped my arm and thundered “No!”

He squared his shoulders and placed his hands on the podium. In a voice meant to shake the roots of evil itself, he began, “Those letters that Elder Lorenzo Dow Hickey possess that supposedly contain evidence of those abominations of which I stand accused are nothing more than the ravings of his wife. Sister Hickey is afraid to be alone and has not seen her husband in quite some time now. What she has said is hearsay, gossip, and conjecture. She’s offered no proof.” James’ voice boomed across the room.

“But my wife?” Elder Hickey’s voice sounded very thin and small next to what seemed like James’ thunder.

“She offered no evidence to support any accusation against me or my counselors, Brother Hickey,” James said. Pausing for a moment, he looked around the room, meeting perplexed brows and timid eyes. His expression softened, and he smiled. His eyes found Lorenzo Dow Hickey cowering. He’d tried to move to the back of the room, but the aisles were narrow, and every time he tried to move backwards, he tripped.

“Come now, Elder Hickey, let us be friends. I know your wife means well, but that’s no excuse to accuse an innocent man. I’m willing to forgive and forget. That’s what the gospel means, repentance and change.” I admired my husband more for his conciliatory gesture than for his wrath, although both were effective. The congregation chuckled. Frozen, Lorenzo Dow Hickey gripped the back of a chair and refused to move. Several times, James attempted to call him out, each time resulting in another shake of the head from his apostle.

“There, it is as I suspected. This man speaks of the matter as if it’s nothing. Well his lies are nothing to me. I do not fear the lies of evil men and apostates. If I can confront them in any well-ordered assembly, I shall strike them down. For my brothers and sisters, righteousness will triumph.” James stopped, gazing around the room. He seemed to understand that the congregation had once again sided with him. He stretched out his hand to Lorenzo Dow Hickey who sat with his head in his hands. Increase Van Deusen had disappeared.

I let out a long breath as the meeting continued. James had taken command again, and the congregation settled back into their seats to hear what else he had to say. I was very proud of my husband that day for his mercy. He had had the chance to quash his apostle and had chosen not to. I glanced at Elder Hickey several times during the rest of the meeting and felt moved to offer him a kerchief. Poor man, he seemed broken and exhausted, sitting
crumbled in his chair with tears streaming down his face. I understood what James had told me earlier about the man’s devotion. I was frankly awed that Elder Hickey would believe in the church so strongly that he would call out the prophet in front of a congregation. *Had his faith driven him insane?* I wondered if he possessed a very unsound mind. That would certainly explain much of his suspicious behavior.

“My prophet, I was overcome by an evil spirit,” he said. James took his outstretched hand and pulled him to his feet.

“I know. The adversary is very powerful. You must watch more carefully and pray more fervently, Brother Hickey.” James’ voice was kind, but his eyes were hard. I thought, Elder Hickey is not going to escape punishment that easily, even if he’d unintentionally made James look more benevolent than when he’d entered.

Elder Hickey only heard mercy, though. He looked at me and smiled. This time, his eyes shone with a queer, unsettling light I’d not seen before. *He is mad*, I thought. “Praise the Lord,” he cried. “President, you are too merciful.” He collapsed into tears once more. James nodded to me, and we helped Lorenzo Dow Hickey back to his room where we made certain he would rest comfortably until James could decide what to do with him.

I woke the next morning to find James at breakfast. He looked up from his meal and said, as if he were deciding to buy flowers, “I’m excommunicating Van Deusen. I never want to see him again, and as for Lorenzo Hickey. I’ll suspend him until he produces those letters, so I can burn them. I’m going to teach these apostates a lesson they will never forget.”

“What should I do?” I thought of Elder Hickey still sleeping in his room. His apology had seemed genuine. Had James meant what he’d said about becoming better through repentance? I wondered about his definition of mercy if he still planned to punish Elder Hickey.

James’ brow was stern. “First find a physician. Then you’re going to write a retraction authorized by Elder Hickey and another article explaining the truth of the events as they happened last evening. Then you’re going to find as much information that I can use to damage the reputations of these men.”

This was James’ version of justice. He threw the apostates out of his holy presence, although he eventually planned to admit Lorenzo Dow Hickey back into the fold as soon as he was deemed worthy. As I performed my research, it wasn’t difficult to find damaging testimony on the two men. Increase Van Deusen and Elder Hickey both had lived less than immaculate lives. In Nauvoo, Van Deusen had been involved with several anti-Mormon groups.
and was rumored to have been a spy. I pitied Elder Hickey as I read through several testimonies from close acquaintances, stating that he had suffered from mental instabilities for years. He had been placed in a sanitarium once.

I did what James asked and wrote the articles, but I tried to be as temperate as possible, especially with Elder Hickey. “Poor devil,” the physician had told me upon examining him. “He needs a good, long rest. He’s not made for such mental exertions.” I’d sat by Elder Hickey’s bedside at James’ request and watched him, giving him draughts of the laudanum the physician had left behind. James had no intention of keeping him in our rooms for long, though. When the physician returned several days later, James and he conferred, and it was determined that Elder Hickey would be assigned to the “Tombs,” the New York City jail, until he could be moved to a sanitarium for that rest. James had told the physician about the outburst during the meeting, and the doctor had shaken his head and agreed, “It’s for the best then.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Elder Hickey cried when the wagon came to bear him away.

“It’s for your own good,” James replied and waved the policemen to go ahead. “You need the rest.”

I looked at my husband and puzzled again at his definition of mercy. His eyes were small and cold when he turned to me and said, “Righteousness will always prevail over wickedness, Elvira. Don’t ever forget that.”

“I won’t, James,” I sighed as the wagon carrying Elder Hickey moved away into the twilight. Apparently there would not be much mercy for Lorenzo Dow Hickey after all. I wondered what he’d do to me if I ever disobeyed him and shuddered. “I promise.”

Even though I had penned several strong, pro-James accounts of the events of the October 21st meeting, we had to leave New York City. Samuel Graham was sending almost daily letters telling us of the worry and unrest among the Saints. He had no idea how to handle the “woman fiction” as he called it. Most of the Saints who had followed James from Nauvoo remembered similar rumors that had fluttered around Brother Joseph, and apparently, the Island was abuzz with whispers of spiritual wifery and adulterous evil doing. On Beaver Island, Sister Hickey’s letters and outbursts and her insane husband’s ravings and accusations had done their damage. I was flooded with letters—questions and concerns—from the Saints. Was Elder Hickey truly deluded? What were these rumors about plural marriages and spiritual wifery anyway? Had Brother George Adams had got himself a second wife up in
Boston? James read Brother Graham’s words aloud to me. “Tell me what to do? I don’t know how to act. There is no one here to see my letters; you can write as plain as you please. I want to act in unison with your feeling.”

“What do you want me write?” I asked.

“Tell him not to worry. The righteous will believe me, and the wicked will apostatize and be cast out.”

Even though I penned another powerful, positive account of the event in the Gospel Herald for the Saints on Beaver Island and kept frequent correspondence flowing between Brother Graham and James, stubborn rumors take time to die.

“Shouldn’t we go home?” I asked James as we packed and left for Philadelphia. I missed Beaver Island badly and would have liked nothing better than to return immediately.

“No,” he replied. “I have to finish this trip. The rumors aren’t going to go away.” He was right. The gossip didn’t die. It followed us to New Jersey and then to Philadelphia.

I don’t remember much about the journey from Philadelphia to Maryland other than brash images and a bumpy, painful ride. I was burning with fever, so ill I could hardly move, but we had to travel on. James had to get to Washington, D.C. So I continued, trying to keep down the gruel and soups James fetched for me at our stops. I passed between swooning and sleeping, and nothing much at all seemed to matter at that moment. The only thing I could think about was the aching and fever that felt as if it would consume me like a candle.

I remember being brought in a carriage to a white house at the end of a street lined with tall trees, their bare branches reaching into a winter sky. It was snowing. A large woman with hair like flames ambled out of the house and helped James bring me inside.

“Carolyn Llewellyn is an old friend from my childhood. She’ll take good care of you,” James told me. “I’ll only be gone a week or so. Rest up and when I return, we will start back for the Island.” He kissed my feverish brow. I looked up at him through rheumy eyes, trying to understand his words. I frankly didn’t care. “Just make the buggy stop,” I begged, not realizing I was already in the house.

The red-headed woman settled me into a bed under a layer of warm blankets, muttering “Lands alives, James, he’s burning up! Poor creature, what were you thinking hauling him all over the country?” She hollered so loudly that I winced with each word. I wanted to give myself to the darkness that seemed to press so heavily on my eyelids. A splash of cold water revived me temporarily and James’ voice calling, “Charlie? Charlie, can you hear
me?” I didn’t remember James’ leaving, although Carolyn later told me that I woke up several times shouting, “James! Where are you going? Take me with you!”

My first few days with Carolyn Llewelyn passed in a haze. She hovered over and around me. Her wide, freckled face came at me, interrupting dreams of James, Beaver Island, and me standing on the western shore in a white dress hurling pebbles into the waves. She pressed warm rags soaked in vinegar against my forehead. Apparently I protested but was no match for her strength. Vaguely, I remember her undressing me and placing me in a hot tub to try and break the fever. “Oh, good God!” She swore when she found I wasn’t a boy at all. “What has James Strang got himself into this time? What’s he doing to this poor girl?”

While I went in and out of consciousness, I was surrounded by strange dreams of Beaver Island and James, and I don’t know if it was the future or not, but I saw a big, white house, and I lived in it. Even Mary was smiling and welcoming. I wasn’t not one to believe in omens, but when I woke, I clung to those dreams.

“It’s good. You’re starting to come round,” Carolyn said when I managed to stay alert for more than a few hours at a time. I wanted to lapse back into those dreams.

Once I started to heal, I begged Caroline to let me help her with her chores. They kept my mind off of James and gave me something to do besides think. Three weeks passed before I heard from him. I could tell that Caroline wanted to know why I’d gone through all this trouble. Why on earth was I pretending to be a boy? Nothing about James surprised her, but she had never expected to find me dropped on her doorstep.

“It’s okay. You know I’m not a boy,” I said one afternoon when she was drawing my bath in her kitchen. I slipped out of my shirt and into the metal tub, the hot water soothing my weak body.

“I know you’re not a boy, Charlie, and I’m not a believer in your religion,” she said, her flaming hair piled into a messy bun on top of her head. “Let’s just say nothing the man does ever surprised me.”

“Oh?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me. James had told me a few stories from his childhood, but here I had the opportunity to learn more. I pulled my knees to my chest like I’d done as a little girl and soaked up the anecdotes about my husband as a young man.

“I remember him when he was a wee lad and, even then he was concocting strange schemes.”

“Like what?” I asked.
Carolyn laughed, a great, deep rumble starting in her belly until she shook from head to toe with merriment. "When he finally comes for you, ask him about his plot to marry Queen Victoria and become King of England. That should shock him. He’s probably thought I’ve forgotten all about that one, but I haven’t."

My husband wanted to be the King of England? I tried to picture him with Queen Victoria, and the image almost sent me into convulsions of laughter. I started coughing so hard that Carolyn had to hit me several times across my back. I’d have to remember to ask James about that one. Carolyn also told me he was a lover of women. He’d had many amours during his youth, although Carolyn swore he’d settled down once he’d met and married Mary. “She’s a little thing but tough enough to handle Mr. Strang. Don’t underestimate her. She’s a bright, strong-willed woman.”

“I know,” I said, thinking of her pale face and quiet demeanor. I’d always known she was stronger than James believed.

“Are you going to tell why you came to me dressed like a boy?” Carolyn fingered one of my short curls and, her green eyes twinkled with the possibility of learning more intrigue. She knew I wasn’t a boy, but I hadn’t yet told her the story of why I had disguised myself in the first place.

I told her the entire narrative from my arrival on Beaver Island to the present moment. Carolyn became my confessor. The words spilled from my mouth like sour milk poured from a stone crock. The confession was liberating. I was grateful to know that at least someone else on the planet knew my secret. My cheeks flaming, I watched her broad back as she bent over her washtub, scrubbing my breeches and shirt. She didn’t say anything about me being a second wife. “Anybody with good sense could see you’re too pretty to be a boy,” she muttered, not turning to look at me. I heard the good humor in her voice. “I can’t believe there are fools out there who’d ever think you’d be a boy.”

“I haven’t worn a dress in almost four months.” I was accustomed to the scratch of wool slacks against my bare legs and the smell of starch from my white shirts. I was still too weak in Carolyn’s estimation to go outside, so I remained sequestered in her home, spending all day in one of her enormous, tentlike nightdresses. Per James’ request, Caroline did cut my hair again as it had grown out considerably. This time, I didn’t fuss.

“Well,” she mused in her lilting Welsh accent when she had finished, “I don’t know if I would mind wearing pants instead of worrying about flaunting my petticoats all the time. I imagine there are advantages to dressing like a man.”
We laughed at the image of Caroline Lewellyn spinning around—her wide, mended skirts flying revealing starched, lacy undergarments. I splashed water from the tub over my legs and my bosoms. I was still—a woman. The months of disguise hadn’t changed me into a man, even if I had picked up some of their habits out of necessity. Fundamentally, I was still Elvira, and that fact made me happier than I had been in a long while.

“I guess I need help learning to be a woman again,” I laughed. I was a little sallow from illness, but I was mending. I enjoyed having my body for my own and feeling like a woman again.

One afternoon as she was telling me stories about her late husband, Jack, I interrupted her. “Carolyn? Doesn’t it bother you that you’re housing the second wife of a polygamous man?” For a moment, she considered me and then scratched her chin. “When your husband returns, I’ll tell him he’s a fool for making you dress like a man and not being brave enough himself to face the music he’s created.”

I wished I possessed her courage. Now that I’d had the taste of being myself again, I wasn’t sure how eager I was to return to breeches and men’s shirts. I wanted to be like Carolyn who had such a full life, growing up in Wales and moving as a young girl from Cardiff to Liverpool and from Liverpool to New York. She’d met her husband, Jack, a shipbuilder from Newcastle, and they’d settled in Baltimore. She’d given birth to ten babies, and all but three had died in infancy. She’d worked as a sailmaker, a seamstress, and a cook for various and sundry establishments and had never managed to lose her good spirits.

“I want to be just like you,” I said.

“Then do it,” she replied. “It’s not hard.” I wished that her answer was that simple.

When James finally did return for me, the weeks had turned into a month. I ran out the door and threw my arms around him, nearly knocking him off his feet. Carolyn smiled at us from the kitchen, one eyebrow raised in amusement. “Eh, you’re husband and wife. What can I say about that? Go and have your way with him if you want.”

That evening, unaccustomed to our freedom, James and I sat together in Carolyn’s parlor. Although we were free to act as husband and wife, we held hands nervously as if we had newly met. James had so much news. His face was broad and beaming from his success in Washington.

“Elvira, Congress is going to build a lighthouse on Beaver Island!” He exclaimed.

“Really?” I knew that had been the crux of his mission. We’d discussed the lighthouse on several occasions. James had had a long march ahead to convince the nation’s leaders that he wasn’t Joseph Smith; he
wasn't going to run for President, and he had no intention of raising an army to defend his land. He had however successfully pleaded his case to build a lighthouse on Beaver Island. The Government had capitulated; the lighthouse would be built on Whiskey Point. That meant more commerce, more trade, and more prosperity for the Saints, even if the lighthouse was to built in the Gentile district.

"Congress is always bogged down in bureaucracy, but I did it," he replied, his smile spreading from ear to ear. I would have loved to have been there with him, standing in the halls of Congress, but I most likely would have died in the process. Besides I'd met Carolyn, and we'd become close friends. I'd never have had the opportunity to learn so many interesting facts about my husband's past, although I determined to ask him about them another time.


"So you didn't intend to have him locked inside his cell for the rest of his life?" I remembered Elder Hickey huddled on his bed, whimpering about being possessed by devils and demon, before the police came to take him away. He was pitiful, and somehow I doubted that he'd ever be able to reestablish himself in quite the same light again, at least, while James was prophet.

"He's been taught a valuable lesson," James concluded.

"Are they traveling back with us?" I asked. I would have rather walked to Beaver Island alone than travel with George Adams or Lorenzo Dow Hickey. The idea of spending long amounts of time with either of them was as appetizing as cold snail. I could probably have managed with Lorenzo Dow Hickey, but I preferred to travel with James, or I'd stay in Baltimore with Carolyn. As much as I loved Carolyn, I knew it was time to return to the Island, though. I was homesick for the lake breezes and dark earth under my feet. I wanted to go home.

James chuckled, patting my hand. The two apostles were staying on in Washington D.C. for a while longer to try their luck and would be home with their families on the island by June. James himself wanted to be home by then too. "Remember that these men still have their uses. As long as they are willing to work in the kingdom, the Lord will use them, Elvira," he said. Even if I didn't understand my husband's choice in leadership, at least we'd be traveling back together alone.

I had another matter on my mind as well, one that we had to discuss. "James, what's going to happen when we get there?" I asked, knowing full well that the danger of being discovered was only going to be more real on
Beaver Island. If our lives were complicated now, I couldn’t imagine them becoming any simpler once we arrived on the island. What about Mary and those rumors? Brother Graham still sent James regular letters, and it seemed that we had succeeded in squelching the earlier rumors. But many things could change in two months.

James’ eyes were tired. He’d been worn down by the constant pressures too. “I told Mary that I’m going to move Charlie into the big house,” he said. My eyebrows flew up, startled. I didn’t say a word, remembering my promise to God to be more faithful.

“I know you’re growing tired of being Charlie, but I have a feeling that it won’t be much longer.”

“Very well,” I sighed, praying that God would pay special attention to us at this moment. It’d felt wonderful to tell Carolyn my story. Perhaps knowing that one person understood me would sustain me until I could set aside my disguise once and for all.

We said our farewells to Carolyn the following morning. Standing on the front porch of her gray frame house, I embraced her with all the strength in my heart. I gave her the best blessing I could thing of, “God bless you and be with you.”

“He has and does every day.” Carolyn winked at James over me. I was going to miss her laughter and expansive spirit. She could have judged us unholy – like most other people would – instead she had nursed me and remained faithful to her friendship with James. She had welcomed me into her life without question or explanation. I judged her to be the best of women. She hugged me to her enormous bosom and shook James’ hand.

“James, you’ve married a good woman,” she said. “She loves you, and she’s following you to the ends of the earth. Don’t prove her faith unfounded.”

“Never,” he replied and kissed her cheek. When he spoke, he turned to look at me. “I wouldn’t leave anyone’s faith in me unfounded.” His mouth was set in a serious line, his eyes flat and cool. When it came to questioning his power, he never joked.

Thank you, Carolyn, I mouthed to her. She nodded, straightening to her full height and appearing very regal. “Go on and believe in yourselves then, both of you.”

I waved once again. The driver was waiting to take us to the Baltimore stage. We’d travel due west across Pennsylvania and Ohio to Cleveland and from Cleveland, board a steamer and sail the open waters of Lake Huron for home.
“Send me a letter now and then especially when you start having them babies,” she shouted as we drove away down the elm-lined street of her quiet neighborhood. James and I waved until she was out of sight, and then, I faced forward, or rather due west. We were returning to Beaver Island together. We had fooled the world except for Carolyn Llewellyn, but she had appreciated the joke anyway.
Chapter Eight

We finally arrived at the port of Cleveland, Ohio to take a steamer back to the Island. I could hardly contain my excitement to be going home. We’d traveled for several weeks westward through Pennsylvania and Ohio. For days, the thought of planting my feet on the island’s black soil sustained my spirits. Even though I dreaded being discovered, the anticipation of talking my familiar walks and smelling the fresh lake air after months in big cities hastened my stride. Many of the people had still looked as if they had a bitter taste in their mouths when James and I stopped in the towns and cities for shelter and supper. James only had to start his proselytizing with the words, I am James Strang of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and friendly faces would freeze into panicked frowns or shut doors in our faces. Many an evening, we were refused supper because these people still remembered Joe Smith and his polygamous followers, and they were right glad that the Mormons had been kicked out of the United States entirely. We spent evenings under the stars in an open field or barn when some gracious stranger offered us a place to rest.

I’d felt uncomfortable with the idea of preaching the gospel to the people we met along the way. I kept quiet. Having told Carolyn the truth, I wanted to be able to clear my conscience. Ever since the conference incident in New York, I’d become more aware of the fact I was dancing on a tightrope. Nothing good could come of my disguise once we were on the Island. Frankly, I was accustomed to the scratch of wool pants against my legs, but I knew I wasn’t a man. The worries weighed my steps, but I tried to keep my mind in the moment and exercise faith. You’re going into the Lion’s Den, but remember what happened to Daniel. He was saved because he believed in God, I reminded myself.

James never failed to amaze me with his strategies. As we waited for our steamer to depart from Cleveland, he said, “the Almighty has told me I should crown myself king.” He’d started planning his coronation ceremony on the road, and the grand event would take place on July 8th, my twentieth birthday.

“Then I should like to be a Queen.” I smiled at him as if he were one of my students, remembering the story Carolyn had told me about his plan to marry Queen Victoria and reign as King of England. I stifled a giggle.
James frowned and took a long swig from his water canteen. “Elvira, I’m serious. I’m going to be an American king. Ever since I stood before Congress, arguing for the lighthouse, I’ve felt inspired that I need to extend my own leadership. The Kingdom of God needs more than a prophet. She needs a king to rule her.”

He’d proven to me that he had the heart and brains to bring to pass anything the Almighty told him. I didn’t doubt him. If he wanted to be King of Beaver Island, I believed he would see it happen.

“Land ho!” Those were the most welcome words I’d ever heard. Beaver Island seemed to call to us like a mother to her wayward children, gathering us back into her arms. James and I stood on the port side of the small steamer from Mackinaw City, waiting for that first glimpse. The sighting even quieted even James. There she was; I could see the small, green mass with my own eyes. Sunlight danced off the tree tops making her radiant. I didn’t remember feeling so stunned the first time I had seen her. I’d missed the Island so much and could only blink away tears. “We’re home, James,” I finally said, my voice catching in my throat. He turned to me, his eyes tearful as well, and agreed, “It was a long winter.”

The steamer docked, and we disembarked. I waited until well after James had officially greeted the crowd of Saints who’d come to welcome their prophet home before leaving the boat myself. I wanted to delay planting my feet on Beaver Island soil again to avoid the moment I’d been dreading for months. As much as I hoped she wouldn’t be there, Mary had come too. There she was, separating herself from the crowd, plump and happy in her Island costume. Her round face beamed as James gently kissed her. Then he turned to me, beckoning me to join him. I took one step and then another, my heart pounding in my throat.

“Mary,” he told her. I kept my eyes on the ground as if I were looking for some lost speck of dust. “This is my nephew I’ve told you about, Charlie.”

Mary’s eyes narrowed, but she stuck out her hand. “Charlie,” she said. Her voice was mild, but her eyes searched me. I hoped she would need a long time before she recognized me. She turned to James and looked at him, silently questioning him. I guessed she’d wait until later to ask him for more details about me.

I shook her hand and tried to wear a bright smile. “Thank you, Aunt,” I said. Aunt? Yes, I was to call her aunt. I was sure my voice sounded hoarse and unnatural. Mary cocked her head to one side, her gray eyes narrowing. “Welcome,” she said. Her soft mouth curled into a half-smile, and she nodded. I sighed and let out the breath I’d been holding. She turned her adoring gaze back to James. She wasn’t going to ask any questions that day.
I could come to the big house too as long as her husband was home. Nothing else seemed to matter as long as her James was back. “Go with Brother Graham,” James said to me. Brother Graham was going to drive me to James’ big, white house. I gathered my things and gladly made my exit. I hoped Mary would stay with James for a long while that afternoon. I didn’t know if I could take another meeting until I’d had the chance to rest first.

“May the Kingdom of God live on forever and forever,” Brother Samuel Graham said when I told him the news of James’ impending coronation. I’d passed my first test with Mary, but I couldn’t see how this arrangement could work for long. Don’t worry, all will be well, I chanted to myself during the drive from the dock to the big house. Brother Graham was chattering about the goodness of God, allowing the Prophet to return safely to his fold. And now, he’d be King! I had to laugh to myself that he seemed oblivious to the quagmire that was my situation. I trusted that James had planned everything out as usual. I hoped that Mary would believe him if she didn’t believe me. She’d never ask too many questions, and I, well, I’d exist until the revelation came to him to announce me as his wife too. I hoped it would come sooner rather than later. Being back on the Island, I didn’t know how I could hide myself for too long. Someone was bound to notice similarities. I knew how to lie, but my talent for deceit was proving more painful than anything.

The interior of the house was cool and dark. I’d only been inside once before when Mary had hosted a women’s meeting in her parlor. I remembered the room was on my right and saw the brass plates that James had discovered in Wisconsin on display against the far wall. They supposedly contained the ancient writings of Laban and made up the missing first portion of the Book of Mormon. Believers, doubters, and frank naysayers could wander in by appointment and admire the thin, bronze sheets. I had to admit that they were crude. I ran my fingers over the chiseled markings. The patterns and figures made no discernible sense, but I didn’t read ancient Egyptian in which they were originally written. They certainly look old and genuine. The plates were very thin, and the bronze looked brittle enough that a child could break them in two. I wondered that God would base his doctrine in something so fragile.

A young woman employed by Mary to help her with the household chores and children showed me to my room, and I set about settling into the small bedchamber at the end of the second floor hallway. Outside my window, the skies were soft and blue, and the weather exceptionally mild for this time of year, I wanted to close my eyes and not think about the complexities of my life. I wanted to push my anxieties far away from me, but I couldn’t rest in this place. I didn’t have long to entertain my anxieties.
“Excuse me, master, but someone has coming looking for the president. Would you be willing to see him instead?” The maid returned.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Says his name is Albert Field from southern part of the state. He’s come looking for his sister.”

I dropped the book I was holding in my hand. Albert, my brother? Come to the Island? I rushed downstairs, leaving the poor maid gaping after me. My own brother was here? Before greeting him in the parlor, I composed myself. I hadn’t see him in so long. Would he even recognize me? I walked quietly to the parlor and peered in. He stood with his back to me, examining the plates, waiting for Charlie Douglass, James Strang’s private secretary to come and greet him and tell him about his sister. I silently watched for a moment or two before clearing my throat, noting that he was as tall, blond, and handsome as I remembered him. “Brother Field?” I said softly. He turned around, his brow furrowed and intense just like Father’s. It took all my might to keep from launching myself on him and smothering him with hugs and kisses.

“I’m looking for my sister, Elvira. She seems to have disappeared,” he said. Even though I was tall for a woman, he looked down on me with such an expression of concern and anxiety that I melted. Please know me, I thought, meeting his eyes. We simply stared at one another for a long, awkward moment—neither of us moving—until recognition dawned on his face; his mouth dropped open. “Elvira? What on God’s good earth?”

“It’s me,” I said and threw myself into his arms. “What are you doing here?” He’d never have come on his own free will. He had his own life in southern Michigan. Then I remembered it had been months since I had written to my family. Albert looked down on me with our father’s eyes, and I felt the weight of guilt and shame on my shoulders. Don’t tell him, I heard James’ voice warning me. I had to tell him. He was standing there in front of me, knowing something very strange had happened. His wore his shock and confusion plainly in his expression. I stood there, battling with my thoughts. I couldn’t think of any other explanation except for the truth, but I had no idea how to begin. He’d think I was mad.

I settled Albert in the kitchen, hoping to ply him with good food and drink and prayed that revelation would fall on me and tell me what to say to him.

“Where were you?” he asked, his eyes serious. “I came to the Island first, and the people here told me you went home to see Mother and Father. I wrote to our parents, and they said you came back here. I tried to return to
find you, but it was too late in the season, and the lake had started to freeze. I've been to Voree and have just been able to return to the Island. I thought you'd disappeared.” His voice trembled with exhaustion.

I grasped his hand over the table. I didn't know the words to convey a true apology. I couldn't make retribution for his months of journeying. The truth seemed like the best option for restitution. I'd never been able to lie to my father except when it came to James, and I didn't want to lie to Albert either.

“Albert, I married the prophet,” I said, and the words spoken aloud still sounded foreign to my ears. I had never uttered them to another being except for Carolyn. Albert rocked back on his heels, his eyes wide, shocked. I'd rendered him speechless.

“Why did you come for me? Why not Father” I asked.

“He wanted to. He felt something was very wrong, but he's not young, and he couldn't leave the farm. He paused for a moment. “When I arrived, no one seemed to know where you were, and I thought the worst. Now that I know, I think you have to leave with me. This is mad,” he choked out the words between bites of a ham sandwich and mug of coffee.

“I can't. I made a covenant,” I said simply. My place was on the Island with James. Although I loved my brother, my allegiance was to James.

“Yes, she did indeed,” James' voice boomed like thunder, catching both of us and washing me with guilt. “James,” I said. “I'm sorry.” I knew I wasn't supposed to tell anyone else, but Albert was my brother. I hadn't been able to think of anything else to tell him except the truth.

“Who is this man?” He asked. His voice was polite, but his eyes were wary.

“This is my brother, Albert.”

James looked from Albert to me, and then back again. Albert had grabbed hold of my hand, prepared to pull me from the room and take me from this man and the island. I wasn't going to leave with him. The two men stared at one another. I wondered if Albert had been out of the church for so long that he'd forgotten who he was talking to. I placed myself between them, hoping I could diffuse some of the tension.

“I'm so sorry,” I said. “But, I had to tell him, James. I couldn't lie to him. He's my family. They think something horrible has happened to me.”

“I know, Elvira, but now more than ever, we've got to be careful.”
James looked from me to Albert, sizing his trustworthiness. A broad smile creased his face perhaps amused by my brother's boldness. "I see why you're related. You've got the same proud spirit as your sister," he said to Albert who still looked stunned. I think he half-expected to have to fight his way out of James' home. James reached out his hand and grasped Albert's.

"I don't understand this at all," Albert said under his breath, but he seemed to have dropped his guard a bit.

"Brother Field, polygamy is a direct revelation from God himself. I'd never have married your sister unless the Almighty had told me to do so," James explained.

"But you're already married," Albert replied.

"I know, but polygamy is a divine law. Can you understand that? I didn't force Elvira to become my wife. She fully assented."

Albert looked to me, and I nodded. I hadn't been duped into marrying James. I'd done so with my free will.

"Well, what do I say to our parents then?" Albert scratched his head, uncertain of how to proceed.

"Nothing yet," I replied. "Wait for a while longer."

"Yes," James concurred. "Listen to your sister."

James gave me leave to wander where I would with Albert. I showed him my favorite haunts including Font Lake and even Enoch Village. It was a strange sight indeed to meet Anson and Catherine and their infant son, Jacob, as Charlie Douglass. As far as they knew, we were two young lads newly come to the Island. They were as kind as ever, greeting us like long lost brothers, but neither gave any inclination that they recognized me.

"I'm Albert Field, and this is Charlie Douglass," Albert introduced us.

Anson looked me up and down and grinned, sticking out his hand. I shook it, remembering the first time I set eyes on him. He and Catherine were good, honest people. They loved one another openly under the eyes of God and man. The sudden guilt that pressed against my heart caused to me cry to myself, I'm sorry.

Catherine's eyes lit on Albert. "Are you related to Elvira Field? She used to live with us."

"She's my sister," Albert replied, casting a sidelong glance at me. I directed my eyes on the ground, studying a patch of grass growing out of the dark soil.

"Well," Catherine said. "This is something! How is Elvira? How's your mother?"
Albert jabbed me in the ribs, and I inhaled sharply. Catherine didn’t seem to notice us. She was too excited to hear about Elvira again.

“Oh, she’s better. Elvira’s hoping to return very soon.” I’d heard the laughter in my brother’s voice as he tried to cover the irony of our situation. Catherine appeared lovelier than ever in the bloom of new motherhood, and her baby was as handsome and healthy as his father. *I’m sorry, and I hope to be able to return to you soon,* I’d thought as Catherine and Anson returned to their farm.

As we made our way back to St. James, Albert asked, “When do you think he’ll be getting his revelation to allow you to be Elvira again?”

“I don’t know,” I said. And I didn’t know. I hoped soon. Now that Albert knew, I knew I’d have to tell Mother and Father. They had to know, and it wasn’t fair to keep the truth from Mary and the children. Everyone needed to know. My heart told me that, and with each hour I spent with Albert, I knew for sure, I wanted to do something. I didn’t want to remain Charlie Douglass forever. In fact, with each day, the desire grew stronger to return to being Elvira again. Taking Albert in confidence had helped assuaged some of the anxiety, but only the word from James’ lips telling me I could return to being Elvira. Then I could feel peace again.

“So you’re willing to keep yourself disguised and hide yourself from him while you’re married to him? This is just damned odd,” Albert said. He was willing to support me, but he still hoped I’d come to my right senses. He had considered James’ arguments about polygamy, and they had swayed him somewhat, but he didn’t trust James’ intentions. He hadn’t yet been able to grasp the vision that I had.

“I believe in him, Albert. I know God gave him a commandment to marry me,” I replied, shivering a little despite the fact the day was warm. I hadn’t offered my testimony of my marriage before. With the evidence before me, I was forced to recognize that my choices were very odd. I only knew what I believed. I’d married James because he was prophet, and God told him what to do. I was tired of wearing men’s clothing, but I remembered my sleepless night in New York City and my vision. No one could tell me I didn’t know what was at stake. Our path was precipitous, but I couldn’t jump off at this point.

“How can you be sure he’s not playing some devilish part, Elvira? You’re an innocent; you don’t know the ways of men.”

“I believe,” I repeated and hoped the sharp edge in my words would close further discussion. We crossed through the final stand of pine separating us from St. James. I could hear the city’s sounds over the rushing of the
wind through the trees. I’d considered what my brother had told me. I’d had the same thoughts myself, and I hadn’t forgotten James’ retribution for Elder Hickey’s outburst, and I was certainly aware of my own situation. “I chose my path. It’s not easy, but I’ll walk it.” I said, believing my words. I made my own choices.

“I think you’re mad, but it’s your life to live, Elvira.” Albert’s expression was kind, although his words possessed an edge of finality. We said nothing more until we reached the city limits.

News traveled fast on the Island. Now that the Prophet was back, everyone twittered with excitement over the upcoming coronation ceremonies. The prophet was going to crown himself king. Hurrah for Zion! I listened to their talk and kept my smiles to myself. James had asked me to design his crown for him, although I knew very little about designing crowns. I borrowed a picture book of English kings from Dr. McDonough who ran the General Store and chose a high, round, gold design that would be encrusted with ruby crystals. I still spent most of my time with my brother who agreed to stay on with us until the Coronation Ceremony was over. He wouldn’t promise me not to tell Mother and Father, although the more he saw me interact with James, the more resigned he became to the arrangement. I’d hoped to win him over, but he seemed resigned to doubting and threw in his two bits of counsel, “You’re mad,” whenever he could seize the opportunity. “I’m not, Albert,” I always replied.

On the eve of the 7th, I returned from my outings with my brother and laid out my good suit for the morrow’s meeting. When I had finished, I went downstairs to find Albert.

“Charlie?” James called from the parlor. I went to him. Pale and grim, he said simply “It’s time. Go and put on a dress.”

“Are you certain?” I asked, mixed relief and trepidation rushing through my thoughts.

“Yes, it’s time to make you my wife publicly.”

I hadn’t worn a dress in six months, and the strange feel of pantalets and skirts gathered around my ankles hampered me a little as I walked back and forth in front of the mirror. My hair had grown out and swung around my chin, but I still looked enough like a boy not to cause too much suspicion. Besides, most of the boys wore their hair a little longer after the fashion of the prophet whose chestnut locks swung around his shoulders. I put away the pants and shirt and cut up the canvas corset I had used to flatten my curves. Instead of joy and relief, my heart twinged with a little remorse. I held the pieces of canvas in my hand and knew a small part of me would miss Charlie.
Then I began the long walk to the hallway mirror and stared, amazed at the transformation again. After all this time, I looked again like a lady, even if my hair was still too short to braid. I ran my hands over my bodice and skirt. The fabric felt smooth and delicate after months of wearing coarse, nubby wool.

I was terrified to go downstairs. If Mary suspected anything, she had followed along with his ruse when he introduced me to her. Her eyes flattened slightly, and her soft mouth narrowed into a displeased pucker whenever she saw me, but she didn’t ask questions. *What was she going to say now?* I had James behind me, to support me, but I would have to deal with Mary Strang every day of my life until one of us left or died.

“Did you tell her?” I asked, uncertain I could handle her quiet scorn.

“Yes, this morning,” James said. From his haggard, beaten expression, I guessed that the experience hadn’t been positive. I hadn’t expected it would. Perhaps she was a Saint and would gracefully bend to James’ will, but I doubted it. I hoped James was right, and I misunderstood the situation. Perhaps she would welcome me into her arms, and we would become great friends. I didn’t think that was very likely.

“So the world is coming down around us?” I asked. He smiled and took my hand in his own, studying it, perhaps searching for the keys to solving all of his domestic problems. *I don’t have your answers,* I thought, reached down, took his hand, kissing the fleshy palm.

“Thank you,” he said and smiled, his eyes almost hollow. He reached up and ran his fingers through my hair. “I didn’t think this would be easy for her, but she told me she’d suspected something like this would happen eventually.”

I thought of Mary out visiting, now burdened with the extra weight of her husband’s second marriage. Was she smiling? Did she manage to keep her head high and chin up, despite the sadness I knew must be welling in her soul. I ached for her, but I feared what would happen when she looked at me for the first time as her husband’s wife.

“We don’t have time to commiserate. Mary will be fine,” James said. He extended an arm, and I took it. Despite what may happen between Mary and I, the Kingdom of God still needed management, and James needed to keep up his appearances.

“Who is that?” I heard voices whisper to one another as James and I promenaded down Main Street to the newly completed tabernacle, where he wanted to oversee the final preparations for the coronation ceremony. He walked with a proprietary arm around my waist, leaving no doubt that we were a couple. I turned my head to see
people nodding their heads together. "Is that— no, it can’t be— Elvira Field went back to southern Michigan last
summer to be with her family. When did she return?" Excited whispers and consequent hushes hovered all around
me. Men and women stopped and greeted their prophet, but to me, they only stared, the confusion evident on their
faces. Just get me to the tabernacle, I prayed.

Just off the south end of Main Street, partially hidden in a green glade of trees, the tabernacle looked
smaller on the outside than the inside. Still it was imposing enough and easily the grandest building on the island
from its carefully cobbled stone and long, cathedral windows to the smooth pine pews inside. “My name is Elvira,
not Charlie.” I longed to say. No one knew who Charlie was, anyway, except for his byline in the Gospel Herald.
They knew Elvira, though. Beaver Island was a very small place, though, and everyone knew everyone. A saint just
didn’t up and disappear and then reappear on the arm of the prophet. I saw heads bob as recognition dawned on
familiar faces. I knew most of these people. I’d attended meetings, socialized, and even shared meals with them. The
Saints were obedient but not stupid. By the time I reached the tabernacle, news of very strange doings had rushed
over Beaver Island like an unchecked brush fire.

The stage where the coronation was to happen was almost finished, three white screens decorated
elaborately with suns, moons, and stars surrounded a raised wooden platform. Twelve chairs, six on each side, lined
an intricately carved high-backed chair that served as a throne. James immediately went to this chair and calmly
surveyed everything in sight.

“Well done, Brother Adams, well done indeed,” he murmured. George Adams bowed low, perspiration
pouring off his brow. His workmen had been laboring for nearly two weeks completing the building for the
complicated display that would take place the following day. Failure on his part would have cost him his position for
certain. The next day was meant to celebrate James’ dream. His entire life he had wanted to be lord and master of
his own land, and now, he would have Beaver Island as his own country.

“Tonight, I am going to announce the revelation to the world that I am married to the most enchanting
woman on earth.” James said to me under his breath, reaching out his hand. I took it feeling more than a little shy
when all eyes turned towards me. I heard more whispers, “Who is that woman? What’s she doing here? Where’s
Mary?” Ears burned for the details. “Isn’t that the schoolteacher?” one elderly sister asked her neighbor as they
finished arranging an elaborate garland of wildflowers along the front of the dais. “It is, I swear so, Sister Hinckle,”
her neighbor whispered back.
“Don’t be afraid. They’ll understand. The Lord will open their eyes,” James said to me. Half in defiance, half in dread, I took his hand and held it gingerly while two artisans exchanged startled glances over a loose floorboard. I felt liberated and thrilled to be myself again, but I prayed I wasn’t about to be lynched that evening when he announced his second marriage in front of the entire body of the church.

“I hope so. I really do,” I said, knowing that every whisper and word from one end of the Island to the other had to do with me. If I hadn’t liked hiding from the public, I didn’t know how much more I’d preferred being in the center of all this commotion.

“I thought that went very well today,” James commented to me late that evening as I passed by his study next to his bedroom. Mary had kept herself out of the way the entire day. There’d been no tears or shouts, only a deathly silence that caused me to tread around the house on my tiptoes.

“It did,” I agreed, even though I would have preferred some emotion to none at all.

James looked at me for a long moment, as if he wanted to say something else, but he told me, “I’ve got to prepare my remarks for the morrow.” With that, he disappeared into his study, leaving me to deal with the event at hand. I shook my head, wondering what was going to happen next. I climbed the stairs to my own room and passed James and Mary’s on my way. I thought I heard muffled weeping coming from their bedroom. Poor sainted Mary was so good and loved by all. I loved her too; I wanted to be her friend, although I had no expectations that would ever be so. I would have had no heart whatsoever not to admire her grace and poise. We didn’t run to James when we were sad or afraid. We worshipped James, but we loved Mary.

Poor dear soul of a woman, she lived with a man she did not understand and who grossly underestimated her. James was never going to leave her, but he was bringing someone new into his home to replace her. She was going to look at me and see defeat and humiliation every time I crossed into her vision. When she rolled over at night and looked at the empty space where her husband used to lie, she would know he was with me. My heart weighed like a lead bearing in my chest, and I listened for a while until the tears stopped. I wasn’t going to wear my wedding dress and add to her humiliation. That must be already complete.
A tentative knock sounded on my door the next morning, and I knew it was Mary. She didn’t wait for me to let her in but shuffled inside and stood staring at me. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying but angry as well. I could feel her loathing emanate from her like scorching rays from the sun.

She started by smoothing the stitches on my quilt, her small fingers working nervously over the seams. “I know. I knew it from the moment he laid eyes on you in Voree. I knew I lost him,” were the only words she mustered. She refused to meet my eyes, and I made room for her to roam around my room. She straightened the suit I’d worn when I was Charlie that still hung over the back of the chair, wiping dust from the top of the small desk. She handled the crown that James had asked me to safeguard, her mouth pursed in a bitter smile. She was refusing to attend the Coronation ceremony.

“You’re his wife now,” she said.

“Mary, I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t want to do it this way.” I was lower than a villain. I was a husband thief. When she finally looked up at me, her normally placid eyes blazed with the betrayal I knew she was feeling. I was the one she chose to hate, not James. I swallowed hard, steeling myself for whatever would happen next.

“You knew what you were doing. You could have stopped it. Don’t you see? Or are you so simple and stupid. You don’t have that kind of faith.” Her words stung worse than any viper bite.

“Would you have had me refuse the prophet and God?” I asked, not wanting to argue with her, but I wanted her to understand me.

“You think you are so young and beautiful now. Wait until the next wife comes long then you’ll see, and you’ll know what I’m feeling.” She cradled the crown in her arms, her eyes still blazing. I remembered what George Adams had told me in Buffalo, This has nothing to do with religion; he lusted after you. I wasn’t a fool. James had never deceived me. I wasn’t the only one who carried the burdens of a demanding God. If anyone, James had cause to stumble. I have more faith than you can possibly imagine, I thought, my mouth twisting into a smile. I didn’t want to return her hate with hate. “Please go,” I said. “I have to make myself ready.”

“As you wish,” she said and softly closed the door behind her. Mary had my pity and sympathy. I would have done anything but leave James, or not marry him, to ease her mind, but as James offered me his arm in the foyer to leave for Conference, stony-eyed and silent, she watched us from the kitchen. We both looked at Mary with sorrow. She seemed to have aged ten years; the glow of having James home again had vanished. As she had said,
she had lost his heart years earlier. She had known it all along. If he hadn’t chosen me, then it would have been someone else. But he had chosen me, and that made me her worst fear and enemy.

“Mary,” James called to her one more time from before we left. “Mary, let’s be good about this.” She didn’t answer him. For once, she wasn’t about to obey.

“She’ll understand in time,” he said, turning to me. I didn’t want to think about what was best for Mary.

“What about me?” I asked. “Don’t you think this is going to be an impossible situation for me? Everyone loves Mary. What about me?” I didn’t want to be selfish, but I wondered if Mary knew how much power she had over the Saints. Did she know she held the Saints’ hearts in her apron pockets? She could turn them against me if she chose. I knew she was a good woman with a good heart, but I didn’t want to be the enemy. I wanted to be loved too. That’s all I had ever wanted.

I pressed close to James as we walked down Main Street towards the Tabernacle. It was early, but already anxious families were joining us to stake out good seats. Over three hundred people could fit comfortably inside the tabernacle. They were going to see some display that evening. I was going to guarantee them that.

“The Saints believe in me. I told my apostles this morning in a special meeting, so the word is most likely all over the island by now. They will come to believe in you and accept you.” James squeezed my gloved hand. Curious eyes riveted on my every footstep. I felt naked, vulnerable, and ashamed. But why should I have felt that way? James was lawfully my husband. God had brought us together. We had been married in the church by his second in command. I had done nothing wrong. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Albert dressed in his very best on the front row. He beamed at me and made room for me to sit next to him. At least I had one true supporter among these people.

The wives of the other apostles, who also sat on the front row with their children, eyed me suspiciously, but not without a good deal of curiosity. *Am I the next one?* They must have been thinking. Nancy Post, the wife of one the newest apostles, a very pale, nervous Warren Post, kept her eyes locked firmly on her husband sitting on the stand. His two brothers also lived on the island, and I caught him exchanging anxious glances with Stephen, the eldest.

“He’s already started leading an outcry against polygamy. Got a group of men who come from Nauvoo together to complain. They say they remembers how awful it was in Nauvoo with all the secret marriages taking place,” Nancy whispered. “They’re calling President Strang a sinner, and you a harlot.”
I couldn’t keep the blood from draining from my face as images of men gathering with blackened faces and loaded rifles crossed my mind. Oh God, help them to understand! I prayed. My voice was shaky. “Does everyone feel that way?”

“No,” she said to me. “It’ll be all right, but I sure as smoke wouldn’t want to be you.” I don’t know if she was prophesying or not, but the confidence in her voice warmed me. I turned to her with grateful eyes, hoping most of the Saints felt like Nancy Post. I looked down the row at the apostles’ wives, tall and short, slender and squat, and noticed there was an empty space for Mary. No one could replace poor, beloved, holy Mary. On James’ memorable night, she should have been there too. *Mary,* I sighed. *You should have been here to share in James’ glory.* I felt she’d earned it as much as he, or I.

A trumpet sounded, and we rose to our feet and turned round to watch the presidency file in one by one. Samuel Graham entered first wearing his yellow robes. George Adams was next, clothed in a bright blue floor length robe that looked as if he had had to take an entire sail to cover himself. Finally, James, in his robes of scarlet, took his place on the stand, wearing his high crown and carrying a metal scepter in his hands. He looked like lord and master of the universe that evening.

I never witnessed a more impressive theatrical scene than I did that evening. The occasion was solemn and resplendent with light and color. The backdrop designed with iridescent suns, moons, and stars glittered against the lantern light. The hall was packed with bodies. Not even a baby cried during the short ceremony as George Adams swore in my husband as the first sovereign king of Beaver Island. No other man in the history of the United States could claim that title.

“My authority comes from God.” James began his speech in an uncharacteristically quiet voice. I strained to hear his words. “I have translated the Book of the Law of Lord that calls me to take my rightful place as your King. We will have a place in this world that we can call our own, and the Lord has granted me authority to defend our Zion at whatever cost. We will fight for Zion. The Gentiles have no power over us.”

All around me, men and women stood and shouted Hosannas. Some of them had lived through Kirtland and Nauvoo, the persecutions, fear, and even deaths at the hands of their own government. They shouted for joy that finally God was delivering them through this small, stern man who was speaking fire from the stage.
Then, true to his word, he announced the revelation that had changed both of our lives. Seven months of deception came to end as he calmly looked over the sea of faces. "My people, the Lord has a word to say to you through me concerning the state of marriage between a man and a woman---"

I was surprised at how calmly the Saints took in the news. There were a few gasps and many surprised looks cast around the room, but no one seemed ultimately disbelieving. No one vacated their seat. They simply waited for the next word. It happened just as James promised. Everyone was calm and accepting. He had given them, after all, the word of the Lord.

"It is my wife, Elvira Field Strang's, twentieth birthday today, and I cannot think of a better gift than for the first time to publicly acknowledge the eternal love that binds us." James’ voice quavered with his last words. He faltered and began to weep. If he was feeling what I was, then he was weeping not just for Mary, but for the joy of our being able to be together at last. Nancy Post actually placed a kind hand on my shoulder and whispered, “It’ll be alright. We trust him.” Those seven long months rolled from my shoulders, and I melted in tears. I cried harder than I ever have, tears rolling down my face into my eyes, staining the bodice of my uniform. It took me minutes of bawling unabashedly with Nancy Post’s arms around my shoulders before I could compose myself. When I looked up again, I saw James looking back at me, his eyes also red-rimmed and teary. In this public gathering, he mouthed the words I longed to hear, “I love you, wife.”

I’d never have another birthday like that again. I stood by his side that afternoon, the air so humid I felt I could grasp it my hands, listening to him present me to the body of Saints. Scores upon scores of saints filed past us at the feast of love, politely nodding to me as James said, “This is my wife, Elvira Strang.” If any were angered by the revelation, they didn’t show it or say anything contrary. Instead I received many requests to share how I had managed to snare the prophet. What were my secrets? The saints also wanted to know “Would there be more plural marriages?” which made the younger brethren guffaw and stamp their feet. Hopefully, there would be, at least for them. A few skeptics must have whispered in small groups, but no one was brave enough to challenge James, not on this day which would forever be known as King’s Day. It was also my day.

James came to my bed late that evening, and we lay awake with our fingers intertwined, listening to the booms of the cannon. Several men had manned the cannon at the south end of Paradise Bay and were firing shots at regular intervals, keeping everyone who lived along the Bay from sleeping. I’m sure the Whiskey Point Gentiles were sitting huddled in their boats with their rifles cocked, ready to retaliate in case something did happen. They had
no idea what James would do to them. We hadn’t informed them about the Coronation ceremony. They would have laughed and called us *foux*, or mad. Perhaps we were. Just in case, though, James had sentries stationed at posts along the Harbor and in St. James. Eri Moore, the dockmaster, was personally checking identification of every passenger debarking from the mainland.

“Welcome back, Elvira,” James said sleepily.

“It’s good to be home, but things are going to change.” I turned my face from the window as another loud boom shook the floorboards.

“Yes, I expect they will. The Saints will get accustomed to this revelation too.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said.

“Of course, I am.” He looked at me as if there should never be a question of right and wrong with him.

Hadn’t I learned that much? I was too happy that evening to worry much. My prayers had been answered, and God was going to have to work out the rest of the details. That night, my night, I was the queen. I wasn’t going to think about the morning, just in case the Saints changed their opinions. I wasn’t going to worry about my parents to whom I was dispatching a letter the very next day. They had a prophet for a son-in-law and could hope for no better than that. My husband was the King of all he surveyed, and I prayed that I’d never have to wear another pair of breeches again. Somewhere in the middle of that peaceful night, I woke, though, and thought I heard sobbing coming from below me. It was the sound of a heart breaking.