

CITY OF ROSES



The red rose whispers of passion,
And the white rose breathes of love;
O, the red rose is a falcon,
And the white rose is a dove.

But I send you a cream-white rosebud
With a flush on its petal tips;
For the love that is purest and sweetest
Has a kiss of desire on the lips.

A White Rose by John Boyle O'Reilly

From Chapter 22, City of Roses

Margaret leaned against the wall of the utility room, wishing she could curl up and hide there for the rest of the day. Through the partially-open door she could see Florence and Claire, one of the other nurses, standing a few feet away.

“Poor Margaret, it must be so embarrassing,” Claire was saying.

“Well, she’s very young, and he shouldn’t have given her so much special attention,” said Florence. “She was bound to fall for him. I’m really angry with him. He should have known better.”

They were interrupted by the phone, and Margaret quietly resumed stocking her cart. After a moment she heard Florence’s voice on the overhead page. “Margaret McKenna to the nurse’s station, please.”

“Rats.” Margaret paused, rubbing her temple, then came out of the room. “Yes?”

They looked embarrassed. “Margaret, Dr. Holgrave is on the phone,” said Florence. “He asked me to have you take it in my office.”

Margaret went into Florence’s office and picked up the receiver. “Hello,” she said.

“Meggy, this is Byron. I talked to Dale in Human Resources. He said the picture was e-mailed from his computer, and he has no idea who did it.”

“Oh.”

“It’s my fault. I’m beside myself. The last thing I want is to embarrass you. Please tell me what I can do.”

“No, it’s okay. Don’t do anything. I just want to let it blow over.”

They were silent for a few moments. “It’s one of the first things I noticed about you,” Byron said in a quieter voice. “You’re completely transparent. You can’t hide your feelings.”

“That’s not your fault.”

“You’re suffering as much as I am,” he said after another pause.

Margaret couldn’t speak.

“Meggy...”

“Dr. Holgrave, I’m sorry but I have to go now.”

“Meggy, please wait...”

“Good-bye.”

“Meggy...”

She placed the phone back on its cradle.

CITY OF ROSES

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To Linda

With a full heart, I wish to acknowledge...

- ⌘ My heavenly Father for showering me with so much when I deserve so little.
- ⌘ My husband, Don. My in-house medical consultant, tower of support, *and* severest critic. I know that in the history of the world no woman has ever loved her husband more than I love you. It's not possible.
- ⌘ Our three wonderful sons who have graced our lives with three beautiful new daughters.
- ⌘ Our grandchildren who constantly remind me where we are headed.

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- ⌘ Kathy Norquist and Sue Keels, two busy women who gave their time and expertise to a complete stranger. When I compare myself to their selflessness and generosity, I come up sadly short.

P R O L O G U E

June, twenty-two years ago

The father-daughter dance is a time-worn tradition, reserved only for the worthy — a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a man to demonstrate that his newly-married daughter is valued, cherished, and esteemed. It is how he tells the world that he is proud of his little girl.

It was a mild June afternoon, and Portland was gearing up for the annual Rose Festival, but a majestic Navy ship slipped past Colette Cook's riverside wedding celebration virtually unnoticed. That was because all eyes were on Ed Cook dancing with his daughter, the perfect blonde girl in white. All eyes, that is, except Angela McKenna's.

"She always was a daddy's girl." It was Sharon Cook's voice, the mother of the bride, but Angela kept her back to the sentimental scene and sipped a third glass of champagne as she watched the massive destroyer, its decks bristling with white-clad figures, slowly pass by.

A little later, when it was gone, Angela finally turned around. The band was now playing some sentimental tune, and the dance floor was alive with young, lovely, happy people. As usual, Angela was not one of them. She would not be asked to dance, and she knew that the reason was obvious to everyone.

A camera flashed, and Angela noticed that her sister, Lesley, was posing for a local newspaper photographer. Lesley,

Colette's best friend, was maid of honor *and* that year's Rose Festival Queen, so she was getting her share of attention.

She can have it, Angela thought as she moved reflexively away from the camera. Attention was something Angela did not want. Then, when she caught Sharon's eye, she was seized with an urge to escape. She knew what she was thinking. How could a lovely girl like Lesley have a messed-up sister like Angela?

Nobody really wonders — they know, Angela suddenly realized. *Everybody knows the truth about me*. That was why she harbored no bitterness toward Ed. She really couldn't blame him; he had just figured it out before everyone else. The truth about Angela was that she was trash, pure and simple. Temporarily useful and then disposable, like the now-empty plastic champagne flute in her hand.

Angela tossed it into the river and walked over to Sharon. "Congratulations, Mrs. Cook. Thanks for inviting me."

"Angela! You're not leaving!" Sharon extended her hand.

Angela briefly clasped it, searching for an excuse, but then found that there was no need because Sharon was already walking away. She turned and followed the path around the side of the building, through a gate, and down a Southwest Portland street.

O N E

December, eleven years ago

Margaret McKenna was a quiet girl with large grave eyes who held her back very straight and never gave up trying to tame her rebellious mass of thick curly hair into submission with clips and rubber bands.

There was a gold bow in her hair tonight as she sat on the living room floor, attempting to wrap a present while being repeatedly poked by her little sister. “Is it time yet, Meggy?” six-year-old Jasmine was asking for the dozenth time.

Margaret finished tying the ribbon and stood up. “Okay, all done. It’s finally time.” She picked up the wrapping paper and tape, then paused and surveyed the little shabby room with a critical eye. It was spotless, the stockings were hung, the Christmas tree looked beautiful.

Jasmine ran to the kitchen and opened the drawer that held the special stash of candy canes, and together the two girls began to hang them on the Christmas tree. “We’re not going to go to Grandma’s?” Jasmine inquired, even though she already knew the answer. “We’re going to have our own Christmas, just our family?”

“Yes, Mom said we’re going to have our own special Christmas Eve party tonight, and we’ll even get to open our presents.” Margaret smiled as her little sister’s eyes brightened

with anticipation.

Margaret walked into the kitchen to make sure everything was in place for the big evening. All the dishes were washed and the counters wiped; the teakettle only needed to be turned on; and mugs, cocoa packets, and cookies were neatly laid out on the counter. She had even found an old Elvis Christmas tape, and it, too, was waiting in the machine.

“Dylan’s crying,” said Jasmine from the living room. “I’ll get him.”

Margaret hurried through the living room and followed her sister’s tiny form into the room that the two girls shared with their six-month-old brother. “Be careful! Let me get him out of the crib, and then you can hold him.” She went over to the crib and picked up her brother. “Oh, you’re soaked!” she said, patting him on the back.

“I can change him,” said Jasmine.

“Okay, I’ll let you do that while I get his bottle.” Margaret laid Dylan down and returned to the kitchen. After she had poured the last of the milk into the bottle and placed it in a pan of water, she looked apprehensively at the clock. She had been worried all afternoon that Angela wouldn’t come home that evening. She didn’t know what she would say to Jasmine if they were forgotten tonight of all nights.

“There are no more diapers,” Jasmine said five minutes later when Margaret returned with the bottle.

“I know,” said Margaret. “That was the last one.” She brought a blanket and some toys into the living room and spread them on the floor for Dylan. Then she carefully laid him down and gave him his bottle.

Jasmine stood next to her as they looked at their baby brother. “What time is it?” she asked.

“Six-thirty.”

“Never mind, Meggy. She’s not coming home tonight.”

Margaret glanced at her sister. Sometimes she didn’t sound like a six-year-old. “Of course she is! Now sit on the couch with me, and I’ll read you the Christmas stories out of the Little House books.”

“Yal!” Jasmine ran into the bedroom to get the dog-eared paperbacks.

“Why couldn’t Santa Claus find them?” Jasmine asked. It was eight-thirty, and they were cuddled on the couch with a blanket over them. As was her custom, Jasmine was peppering Margaret with questions.

“Because they were way, way out in the Indian Territory, and their little cabin was just a little tiny speck in all the miles and miles and miles of prairie,” said Margaret.

“And there was no snow?” said Jasmine.

“No, there was no snow, and Laura was worried that Santa’s reindeer couldn’t travel without snow. But Pa went out and shot a turkey, and he said if it didn’t weigh twenty pounds he would eat it, feathers and all!”

Jasmine bent over laughing.

“But Mr. Edwards found Santa Clause in town, and Laura and Mary each got presents in their Christmas stockings.”

Jasmine examined the picture of Santa Claus on horseback, leading a pack mule on the snowless prairie. “Tell me about the snow cave,” she said after a moment.

“Well, it was a few years later, and Pa knew he had to go to town to get Christmas presents for Laura and Mary and Carrie. It was very cold and snowy, and he brought the whole woodpile in the house for Ma before he left.”

Jasmine chuckled. “But Ma was worried about him,” she said.

“Yes, Ma was afraid he would get caught in a blizzard. She made him wear two pairs of socks!”

“And then there was a blizzard!”

“Yes, just when Ma and Laura and Mary knew he was probably walking back, there was a blizzard, and they were worried that he would never come home again.”

“But he did.”

“He did. He burrowed into the snow and made himself a cave and just stayed there until the blizzard was over. Pa always came back, and he always took care of Ma and his little girls.”

Dylan began to stir on the couch cushion beside Margaret. She picked him up and rubbed his back, wishing that she could lose herself forever in the world of Laura Ingalls, but she knew that she couldn’t escape the disappointment and uncertainty of the real world, and there were problems that she had to deal

with before the evening was over.

She stood and looked at her sister who stared solemnly back. Jasmine knew that there would be no Christmas tonight, but there were no tears.

Margaret jiggled Dylan, wondering what she should do. She couldn't call Grandma because there was no phone. "We're out of milk, Jasmine," she said after a moment. "I'm going to have to go borrow some from the neighbors. Can you stay with Dylan alone here for just five minutes?"

Jasmine's brown eyes looked very big. "We don't know them," she said.

It was true. They hadn't lived in that complex very long, and they didn't know anyone. Margaret was frightened to go out of the door. She knew that in the area where they lived, doors were kept locked at night, and children didn't venture out. She felt all alone, and if Jasmine hadn't been there she would have wept with disappointment because Angela hadn't come home. The joyful Christmas celebration had turned out to be a mirage, and it was now apparent that this would be no different than any other ordinary, worry-filled night of the week.

She went to the kitchen and stood for a moment inside the doorway with her eyes closed. She bowed her head, and her lips moved along with her silent prayer. *Dear God, I pray that I won't have any trouble borrowing the milk, and you will be with Jasmine while she baby-sits Dylan, and that you will be with Mom tonight and keep her safe. Thank you, in Jesus' name, Amen.*

She took two clean bottles out of the dish drainer and returned to the living room. "He will need one in the morning, too," she explained, trying to make her voice sound casual as she put on her coat and opened the door.

The wind was swishing the bare-limbed trees eerily against the night sky as Margaret ran down the walk and across the front of the building. The apartment next door looked dark and deserted. She ran over to the next one, which had the porch light on, slowing apprehensively as she approached the door. She was shaking inside but managed to maintain what she hoped was a pleasant, neighborly smile as she knocked.

A woman opened the door. "Hello?"

"Hello, Merry Christmas. I'm Margaret McKenna from next

door.” To her dismay she heard her voice tremble. “I was wondering if I could borrow some milk for my baby brother?”

“Oh, of course you can! Come on in.” Margaret followed her into the entryway, and the woman disappeared with the bottles. The apartment was almost identical to theirs. The living room was nearly dark, but she could see an artificial silver Christmas tree and a teenage boy was leaning forward in an overstuffed chair, peering at a sober-looking woman on the television.

“Byron Holgrave had served nearly four terms as the senior senator from Oregon and was chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee,” the reporter was saying. “He leaves behind a wife and two sons. The president interrupted his holiday activities a half-hour ago to issue a statement and offer condolences to the Holgrave family.”

“I still can’t believe it.”

Margaret turned around. The woman was standing behind her, shaking her head. “What?” she said.

“Senator Holgrave died. A heart attack, they think. So sudden...”

“Oh.” Margaret couldn’t think of anything else to say.

The woman handed her the bottles. “Well, here you go,” she said, then walked with Margaret to the door. “Umm... is your mother...”

“Oh, she... She’s fine,” Margaret turned the doorknob and let herself out. “Thank you! Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas.”

“See, no problem,” said Margaret brightly as she re-entered the apartment, and Jasmine smiled with relief. “Now, I’ll start heating his bottle, and we’ll have to find something to use for a diaper tonight.”

“I’ll go look,” said Jasmine.

Dylan’s fussing awoke Margaret at about six the next morning. She rolled over groggily and then remembered. Angela hadn’t come home last night. Margaret had waited until nearly one o’clock before she had fallen asleep.

She jumped out of bed and ran to her mother’s room where she apprehensively opened the door and looked in.

“Oooh.” She sighed with relief at the sight of Angela sleeping soundly. With her was a man that Margaret didn’t think she had seen before. She carefully closed the door, even though she might as well have slammed it. She could see that nothing would awaken either of them for quite some time. There would be no Christmas celebration that morning, either.

T W O

June, present day

So far it had been a dull work day for twenty-one-year-old Margaret, and later on she would wish that it had remained so. She always felt small when alone in the grand entryway of the Holgrave family mansion, and that feeling had been strong early in the day, because she hadn't yet realized that someone was there with her.

It wasn't until after she finished the floor and had begun to polish the glass dome that protected the White Rose, a large crystal figurine, that she heard a small sound and whirled around. "Kevin!" she said to the younger Holgrave son. "You scared me!"

"Just making sure you don't miss anything," he said over his shoulder as he walked away.

"How long were you standing there?" Margaret demanded, but a closing door was the only answer. Seconds later the entry door opened and Clarice Holgrave, the late Senator Holgrave's second wife and widow, sidled through laden with shopping bags. "Hi," Margaret turned to her, "how did it go today?"

"Well, not very well, as you can see." Clarice walked toward Margaret, her brow wrinkled with worry and vexation. "Look at me!"

"Ummm..." perplexed, Margaret obeyed but found nothing amiss. *What is it today?* she thought. *Earthquake? Meteor? Nordstrom*

is closed?

Clarice stared incredulously back for a moment, then dropped her bags and gestured wildly about her head. "My hair! My hair!" Her voice rose. "Look at it! What was Anton thinking?"

"Well..." Margaret's voice trailed away. Clarice's hair looked short, stiff, spiky, an improbable peachish color, and very much the same as it always did.

Clarice snatched her bags with an exasperated sigh, gave Margaret an annoyed look, and rustled up the stairs.

Margaret watched her for a moment, then gave the glass dome one more wipe and paused to admire the way the sunlight caressed the cut crystal rose with its falling petals that increased and then transformed into a cascade of small papers, made of gold, piled up around the base.

The gold papers represented anti-Nazi leaflets that some members of a secret group called the White Rose, mostly medical students, had thrown off of a stairway landing at the University of Munich in 1943. It was that impulsive act that had led to their betrayals, trials, and executions.

After she finished polishing the glass, Margaret once again read the inscription engraved on the gold base, "And the White Rose breathes of love - John Boyle O'Reilly." The figurine was one of only a few ever made, and she knew that thirty years ago it had been presented to Senator Holgrave's now dead first wife in the memory of her uncle, one of the martyred medical students.

"Margaret. Where *are* you?"

Margaret looked up. Clarice standing in the bedroom doorway behind the second floor railing that overlooked the entry. "Coming!" She picked up the dust cloth and hurried up the stairs where Clarice was now seated at her vanity table, the bed strewn with the boxes and bags from that morning's shopping excursion.

"Look at my hair!" Clarice waved a comb about. "It's too short! Anton knows how I want it... What was he thinking? Look at it!"

Margaret picked up another comb from the table. "It's not too bad, Mrs. Holgrave. Maybe I can soften it a little..."

“Good luck! He used too much hair spray.” Clarice dropped the comb, lit a cigarette with agitated fingers, and puffed rapidly. “You’ll need a hammer and chisel!”

Margaret nervously bit her lip as she extracted a lock of hair and tried to comb out some of the stiffness. It wasn’t a good time, but she couldn’t put it off any longer. “Mrs. Holgrave, I’ve been needing to talk to you. I’ve applied for a job with the ballet school that I go to.”

Clarice stared at Margaret in the mirror. “But I just got you trained to do everything the way I like it.”

“This would be a job doing what I love,” Margaret began, “teaching ballet to children—”

“You finally got my dead sea bath mixed right, and now you want to *leave*?”

“But they have medical insurance, and I may even be able to extend the coverage to my mother, sister and brother—”

“And *who*, may I ask, will block my sweaters?”

Margaret finished combing out one curl and began working on another.

“Well?”

“I’m sorry Mrs. Holgrave. Remember when I told you about my mother? And I’ve been worried about my younger sister and brother not having insurance.”

Clarice abruptly stood and demolished the remains of her cigarette into an ashtray with three violent jabs. “Okay,” she said, snatching her new purchases off of the bed, “run along and finish your work.”

Margaret laid down the comb. “He’ll be calling you for a reference. Maybe this afternoon or tomorrow. A man named Robert Franklin. You will remember? It’s the Laurelhurst Community Ballet.”

“I said, okay. Now go on.”

Margaret didn’t know she was being observed two hours later as she ran the dust mop up and down the polished rosewood floor of the second-floor balcony and absently hummed a section of the score of an upcoming ballet performance she was in, *Romeo and Juliet*. Eventually reality receded and she became Juliet as she extended her arm and

began to lightly form the graceful, intricate patterns of the dance.

She paused and leaned the mop against the balcony's rail. Whispering to herself, she retraced some of the difficult steps, "One, two, three, four... Oh!" She ended with a yelp of alarm when an unseen person caught her from behind.

Flushed with shock, she spun around. "Kevin! I thought you left!" Margaret tried to back away, but his arms felt like steel bonds entrapping her. "What d-do you want?" she stammered in a pitiable attempt to act casual even as she struggled to hold her head away from his face. She felt like she was straining for oxygen as waves of irrational panic washed over her, panic that was rapidly being replaced by near terror.

Kevin merely smiled, and as he grinned down at her, Margaret was suddenly thirteen again, a time in her past when danger and uncertainty were her daily companions. The oriental rugs, mahogany, and china faded from her consciousness and were replaced with ancient scarred linoleum, overflowing ashtrays, and empty beer bottles.

Larry, her mother's most recent love interest, had reeked of beer as he held her against him, much the way Kevin was holding her now. Margaret felt the blood leave her face and nausea well up in her throat as she relived the fear and horror of that previous attack. And afterward... Larry unconscious on the living room floor, his blood adding another stain to the worn carpet.

"You're not like me," Angela had told Margaret after it was all over. Margaret remembered being astonished by the intensity of her mother's manner. She had grasped Margaret's shoulders and stared into her eyes, something she never did. "If any man *ever* assaults you, you fight, and you tell him that you're not a piece of trash to be used and then tossed aside."

Kevin kissed her then, but his teasing grin soon disappeared under the impact of Margaret's steely gray eyes boring into his. "Get away from me," she said, then placed both palms against his chest and strained with all her strength. Kevin released her, causing her to careen backwards and smack her knee into the dust mop. A series of crashes followed as the mop hit a table, knocked over a tall vase, which in turn teetered over the rail

and made contact with something below.

Margaret appeared calm as she knelt on the cold marble entry floor ten minutes later, but tears were running down her face, and she valiantly struggled not to actually sob. As she carefully picked up the shards of glass from the broken dome that had once surrounded the now also fractured White Rose, it was impossible not to overhear Clarice's phone conversation with her stepson, Byron Holgrave, Jr. She sounded like a maniacal opera diva singing a shrill soprano. "Where are you? On foot? Good grief, Byron, why don't you drive a car like a normal person?" There was a pause, then Margaret heard her tell Kevin, "Byron and that dog are jogging in Washington Park. He will be here soon," just before she reappeared. She said nothing to Margaret as she bustled through the room and disappeared up the stairs.

Margaret sat up and rubbed at her wet cheeks with both sleeves. She quailed at the thought of the older Holgrave son, the famous Dr. Byron Holgrave. *Maybe I can get out of here before he arrives*, she thought, remembering last Saturday when Byron had stopped in while she dusted the family room. He had given her a disapproving look and then informed her that the kitchen trash was full. She shuddered to think of what that cold, exacting man would say about the broken White Rose.

She resumed picking up the glass and then looked up again when Kevin came into view. "How could you?" she said quietly.

"Why did you go nuts like that? You just freaked out over nothing!" Kevin punctuated the scorn in his voice by turning from Margaret and walking toward the stairs.

"You called me a liar!" Margaret addressed his retreating figure and then looked away with a sigh. It was no use.

The ringing of the telephone cut in, which Kevin picked up from a nearby table. "Hello? Yes she is. Just a second." He called up the stairs, "Mom! Telephone!"

Clarice came down the stairs and took the phone from him. "Hello? Oh, yes. Oh, yes." She paused for a moment. "Yes, Mr. Franklin. I'm not surprised that Margaret is looking for a job, since she no longer has one with me. Yes, I think I can provide you with the information that you need." She gave Margaret a

malignant look. “I would wholeheartedly recommend Margaret McKenna as a member of your staff if the qualities you desire in an employee include destructiveness and deceit. I regret the day that I ever allowed that girl into my employ and into my home. That’s all I have to say on the subject of Margaret McKenna. Thank you. Good-bye.”

Margaret stood and laid the pieces of broken crystal on the table. Bitter disappointment and humiliation now joined the shame and grief she already felt, but she wasn’t conditioned to fight for justice because she had accepted the opposite for as long as she could remember. Under Clarice’s icy stare she went to the closet and removed her backpack. The stare was still there when she turned and walked toward the front door; however, Kevin had disappeared.

T H R E E

“Come on, Barnaby. You’re going to get me in trouble.” Byron Holgrave Jr. ran a hand through his thick chestnut-colored hair and beckoned to his dog by slapping his thigh. Washington Park had strict leash laws, and normally obedient Barnaby had been teased into running off by imperious-looking squirrel. “Even the squirrels in Arlington Heights are snooty. Must have old acorns,” said Byron as the dog returned to his side.

Byron had been headed toward the Holgrave house anyway, even before he received his stepmother’s strident request for his immediate attendance. Byron often jogged the miles of paths near the ancestral Holgrave home, which was near the International Rose Test Garden at the north end of Washington Park.

The Rose Garden, with its thousands of Portland’s trademark rose bushes, was Byron’s favorite place to be on a beautiful June afternoon. Positioned loftily on a hill overlooking downtown Portland, it was arguably the City of Roses’ greatest treasure. He especially craved those serene surroundings after a long day at work — the best antidote he had found yet for the grinding stress of his job as an emergency room physician.

They were walking through the Rose Garden toward the

Holgrave house when Barnaby darted off again, this time to a slender girl with long, wavy brown hair. “Hello Barnaby,” the girl said as she rubbed the boxer’s head. “Hello, Dr. Holgrave.” She glanced briefly at Byron and then looked away as he snapped Barnaby’s leash to his collar.

Unable to remember her name, Byron only said, “Hi.” He had seen her before, working in his stepmother’s house. “On your way home?”

“Yes,” she said, picking up her backpack.

Byron paused for a moment to enjoy the view. It was one of those clear days when Mount Hood seemed close enough to touch, and the sky... “Blue dome of heaven—” he began but then stopped because the girl abruptly turned back and stared at him.

“That guards the living world,” she said. “Wordsworth. I was just thinking the same thing.”

Byron looked down at her large gray eyes and wondered why she had been crying... and there was something else that he couldn’t quite identify. *Fear?*

She turned away again, and as Byron watched her walk toward the bus stop, he wondered if the tears were somehow connected with whatever had prompted Clarice’s semi-hysterical phone call and summons. After a moment he looked down at his dog. “Come on Barnaby, let’s go face the music,” he said.

They jogged through the rows of rosebushes, past the amphitheater where a string quartet was tuning up — there would be no stopping today — and up the two flights of stairs that led to the north exit of the park. They then trotted down the narrow, winding streets that conformed with the geography of the hills overlooking Portland and then turned down an even narrower lane that led to their destination.

They had nearly arrived at the gate outside of the Holgrave house, when a short, bald man suddenly appeared in their path and extended his hand. “Dr. Holgrave, Jack Thomas from *Portland Weekly*. I’m sure you’re aware that you’re on *American Profiles*’ Most Eligible American list again this year. As the only local personality ever to make that list, would you mind answering a few questions for the local press?”

Instead of shaking his hand, Byron pulled a card from his pocket and handed it the reporter. “Nice to meet you, Jack. I’ll answer questions regarding one or both of the following research organizations that I’m involved with. Those are the Byron Holgrave Sr. Heart Institute and the Christina Holgrave Lymphoma Foundation. If you’d like to discuss those subjects, and only those subjects, go ahead and give me a call.” He began to walk up the steps to the house. “It’s on the card,” he said over his shoulder as he approached the door.

“You and Amanda Marshall broke up three years ago. Is there anybody else?”

Ignoring him, Byron entered the house. The broken figurine was the first thing he saw as he stepped into the entry. The second was his stepmother coming down the stairs. “How—how did it happen?” he stammered after he recovered from the initial shock.

“Margaret! You know, the maid?” Clarice managed to speak and puff rapidly on a cigarette at the same time. “She was dancing on the balcony — dancing of all things! — and she knocked over that vase.” She pointed to the remains of the shattered porcelain vase, still lying on the marble floor.

Byron realized that he was gaping and closed his mouth. “What did you do?” he asked, picking up the broken crystal rosebud from the table where Margaret had left it.

“I fired her, of course. She left about twenty minutes ago. I didn’t tell you everything. She tried to weasel out of it by lying. She said Kevin accosted her on the balcony and caused her to tip over the vase.”

Byron needed a moment to absorb the shock and process the information that he had been given. He also felt the need for more oxygen than Clarice’s smoke-filled surroundings could afford. After freeing Barnaby from his leash, he walked through the kitchen, grabbing a bottle of water on the way, and sat down on the black leather sofa in the family room.

He took a swallow of water, unconsciously clenching his jaw. He had cherished the White Rose as much as his late mother had, perhaps more because it was a remembrance of her. He felt almost nauseated with the shock of seeing it broken. He fingered the broken crystal rose in his hand, careful not to

touch the sharp, raw edges. “Margaret,” he murmured. *So, that was her name, the girl in the Rose Garden.*

Kevin followed Byron as far as the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. “What about this Margaret, Kev?” Byron inquired. “What’s this about dancing?”

Kevin emerged from the refrigerator, a jar of mayonnaise in his hand, and grinned. “She only does it when she thinks no one’s around.”

Suddenly it all became clear. Byron set down the broken rose and picked up a magazine. “You’re such a pig, Kevin,” he said as he flipped through the pages.

Kevin completed his sandwich, took a giant bite, and said, “Oink, oink.”

Ignoring him, Byron dropped the magazine, strode into the kitchen, and pressed a button on the wall. “Clarice?”

“Yes?” Came the answer.

“Would you come down here please? We have some things that we need to discuss.”

Byron released the button and walked over to the sink. “So, unlike so many others, she didn’t respond to the caveman approach, huh, Kevin?” Filling a small sauce pan with water, he glanced at his unrepentant half brother who was devouring the remains of his sandwich. “Well, just think of how lucky you are. She won’t go around telling everyone she’s your girlfriend, knitting you sweaters... planning the wedding. Those things can get so messy.” He laid the pan of water on the floor for Barnaby.

Clarice entered the room holding a cordless phone to her ear. “Yes, I have to reschedule because I completely forgot that the thirteenth is that thing at the Schnitz. No, the seventeenth is out because Alexis Carter and Jeanine Knapp wouldn’t be able to come... Okay. Okay. I’ll call you back.” She turned off the phone and looked at Byron. “What?”

“Clarice, you’ve had this Margaret into your home. She’s seen... She knows you’re wealthy.” Byron threw off his casual facade and looked earnestly at his stepmother as he spoke.

“So?”

“So, you gave her a very good case should she decide to sue you—” He broke off in frustration. “Clarice, Holgrave is still

known as an honorable name, and I intend to keep it that way.”

“Well, really. You have no idea what I put up with, Byron. You should spend one day in my shoes; you’d see that I don’t have an easy life.” She glared at Byron who folded his arms and turned away. “Margaret was going to leave me anyway, just when I had finally gotten her broken in, and now I’m having a terrible time rescheduling my Botox party. Anyway, what on earth would she sue *me* for?”

Byron turned around. “Sexual harassment, slander, and wrongful termination for starters.”

“What? Why?”

“Because she was telling the truth about Kevin. He just admitted it. Really, Clarice, we’ve been through this before. You need to take the blinders off.” He walked into the family room and flopped back onto the sofa. “I noticed that Margaret when I was here last Saturday, and with Kevin’s track record, I couldn’t imagine what you were thinking even bringing her into the house.”

If the squirrels in Clarice’s neighborhood were tainted by the old-money snobbery of its occupants, then the squirrels in Northwest Portland, where Byron lived, were chic, artsy, and trendy. After returning to his condo, changing, and taking care of Barnaby, Byron grabbed his keys and jogged out to his Range Rover. He deactivated the alarm and then rubbed at a speck on the pristine paint with his finger. He had only had it a month, and since it had set him back eighty thousand he felt he had a right to be a little obsessive.

As he drove toward the Fremont Bridge, Byron thought over the revelations of the past hour in the context of the task before him: cleaning up Clarice and Kevin’s mess. His chat with Clarice had provided the amount of frustration that any such debate with a person devoid of insight would provide. Two telephone calls after that had been more fruitful, however, and had armed him with some information: legal advice from Dennis King, the family lawyer, and the intelligence from somebody who answered Margaret’s phone number that she would be home soon and, yes, he could stop by later that evening.

Byron gave the string quartet in the Rose Garden one last parting thought as he threaded his way through rush-hour traffic, across the Willamette River, and into Portland's broad, flat East Side where the squirrels were mostly blue collar.

He was merging onto the freeway when the cell phone shrilled, and he reached over and pushed the button. "This is Byron."

"Hello, Byron, this is Dennis." It was the lawyer.

"Hi, Dennis."

"I've been thinking, and I just want to make sure that you understand how nasty this thing could get if we aren't careful."

Byron rubbed the bridge of his nose and then merged into the middle lane. "I know."

"You better just hold off. I think I should be there."

"Dennis, I'm not waiting. I don't like it just... hanging out like this," said Byron, remembering the expression in Margaret's eyes. "The sooner this is resolved one way or another the better."

"Okay, but remember what I told you. Don't concede fault, just try to..."

"Dennis, I'm going to go to that girl, be completely honest with her, apologize, and ask what I can do to make it right."

"Why do you want to do that?"

"Because it's the right thing to do. It's what Dad would have done."

"Okay, I hope you still feel this way six months from now. I wouldn't be surprised if this is being picked up on some shyster lawyer radar frequency, and she has ten sharks banging on her door this minute."

Byron activated the turn signal and pulled onto an exit ramp. "Thanks for your concern, Dennis. I'll let you know how it goes."

Ten minutes later, Byron turned onto a narrow road that paralleled the east-west MAX tracks. "You're dead if anything happens to my car, Kevin," he muttered as several boys stopped tossing a football and watched him slowly bounce past over the washboard asphalt. After a few blocks, he began to peer at the numbers on the clapboard forties-era homes. They were small houses with small front lawns. *Well, some of them have lawns, he*

noted. There was a fair amount with just weeds or dirt.

A few minutes later, Byron parked the Range Rover in front of one of the no-lawn houses. This one had four crudely-fashioned dog shelters with a corresponding large, menacing canine chained to each one. Luckily, that house wasn't his destination, or he never would have dared to enter the yard. Nevertheless, Byron kept a close eye on the dogs who snarled and strained fiendishly against their chains as he approached the home next door — a house, he noticed as he rang the doorbell, with not only a lawn but rose bushes and pansies.

Margaret's eyes were large and apprehensive when she opened the door. "Dr. Holgrave, please come in."

"Thank you." Byron stepped into the living room. He noticed a fireplace and an upright piano, and a fan blew softly near an open window. A gray-haired man arose from a recliner and switched off the six o'clock news. Through a doorway he could see a teenage girl and a boy seated at a large wooden table strewn with papers and textbooks. A sixtyish woman appeared at the kitchen door and smiled tentatively.

The gray-haired man strode across the room and extended his hand. "Frank Settlemyer."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Settlemyer," said Byron. Frank then picked up a newspaper and what appeared to be a fishing tackle box and disappeared down a hallway.

"Dr. Holgrave, my grandma, Peggy Settlemyer," said Margaret. She motioned to the woman in the kitchen doorway and then beyond to the pair at the table. "And these are my brother and sister, Dylan and Jasmine."

The boy smiled, but Jasmine looked up from her book and gave Byron a chilly, appraising look. "Hello," she said.

"Hello," said Byron. "Half sister or adopted?" he asked, referring to the obvious racial difference between Jasmine and her two siblings. He didn't show the astonishment he felt when he first saw Jasmine's face. Not because she was African-American but because she was easily the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

"We all have different fathers," explained Margaret.

"Meggy hurt her knee," Jasmine abruptly announced. She looked accusingly at Byron.

“Is Meggy your nickname?” Byron inquired as he bent down to examine Margaret’s leg. “Which knee?”

“No—no, it’s nothing...” said Margaret.

Byron straightened. “Did you injure it when you ran into the table this afternoon?” The dogs next door began to bark at some unseen entity.

“Never mind. It’s fine. Please sit down.” Margaret turned back into the living room, motioned him to a chair, and sat on the sofa across from him. On the coffee table Byron recognized an old issue of *American Profiles* that had featured the Holgrave house a few years back and had a photograph of the White Rose.

He leaned forward and took a deep breath. “Margaret, I’m sure you know why I’m here. I want to be completely honest with you. I’ve spoken to my stepmother, half-brother, and our family lawyer within the past hour. I’ve done this because I feel that what happened this afternoon was serious and should be dealt with carefully.” Her eyes if possible seemed to get even larger, and Byron noticed that the fear was back. He hastily continued, raising his voice to be heard over the cacophony that was now filling the room via the open window. “I’ll be frank,” he said. “I know that you were telling Clarice the truth this afternoon regarding Kevin’s actions. I came here to apologize for the way you were treated today. I would also like to offer you restitution in several ways. First, I understand Clarice gave you a negative job reference. She would be willing to rectify that if it’s still possible.”

“No, they gave the job to someone else.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What I’d like to offer you, then, is restitution in the form of a cash settlement and assistance in getting a different position to replace the one that you didn’t get today. I’m assuming you don’t want to come back to work for Clarice?”

Margaret shook her head.

“I know you’re a good employee. It’s possible I can assist you in getting a job at the hospital where I work; it would have good benefits. As for the settlement, I’ll write you a check for ten thousand right now if you would sign a paper releasing my family from any legal liability stemming from Kevin and

Clarice's actions today." Byron produced an envelope and his check book, and as he waited for her response the canine demons continued to bark.

Then Margaret smiled, and Byron felt an illogical rush of euphoria to see that the fear was gone from her eyes. "I had no idea what you wanted to see me about — I was imagining all sorts of things," she said. "Thank you for taking the time and caring enough to come here. That's enough restitution for me."

"But—"

"I'll sign your paper, but I can't take the money. I didn't earn it." She lifted her chin slightly. "We get along okay. The Holgrave family doesn't owe us anything."

Byron said nothing. The racket coming in the open window made conversation difficult.

While Margaret was signing the release, Jasmine passed in front of him, and Byron noticed there was something unusual about her gait. She was wearing ballet shoes, and her feet were oddly turned outward. She stopped when she reached the open window and said with exaggerated politeness and decorum, "Please excuse me," before bending over and bellowing through the screen, "Rocky, Sheldon, Toby, Charlie.... *shut up!*"

There was a stunned silence and then laughter as the dogs transformed from demonic curs to caricatures of goofy canine supplication. Hanging their heads, they put their tails between their legs and wagged apologetically. Jasmine then turned from the window, curtsied sweetly, and trotted back into the kitchen.

"That's our Jasmine," said Peggy from kitchen.

Smiling, Margaret shook her head at Byron and passed the paper back to him. "She's breaking in a new pair of pointe shoes—"

"No, I wear these all the time! You should try them, they're so comfortable!" Jasmine called from the kitchen amidst more laughter.

Byron was aware that the tense atmosphere that had marked his arrival had dissolved into a relaxed friendliness. *And all because of a simple, old-fashioned, face-to-face apology*, he thought. He felt rather proud of himself.

"Can I get you some coffee, Dr. Holgrave?" Peggy asked.

“No thank you.” He took a pen out of his shirt pocket and picked up a piece of paper from the coffee table. “May I?”

Margaret nodded, and he wrote down his e-mail address and then the Internet address for the job board of the Lewis & Clark Regional Medical Center. “Take a look through the job offerings at this address and then e-mail me if you apply for any.”

Margaret took the paper and nodded again. As they stood and walked to the door, Byron was a little perplexed at how glad he felt to see that the troubled look was gone from her gray eyes. When they reached the door he couldn’t resist another look. Her eyes were... familiar.

“Dr. Holgrave,” she said, “I feel terrible about the White Rose. I can’t imagine how much it must have meant to you.”

“Clarice is contacting some people who restored art pieces that were broken in the San Francisco earthquake in 1989.” He allowed her one of his rare smiles. “There’s a good chance that it can be repaired.”

The warmth of Margaret’s answering smile stayed with Byron down the walk, to his car, and all they way back home.

F O U R

Margaret stood at the bus shelter outside of the Lewis & Clark Regional Medical Center and waited as the great, hulking bus wheezed up beside her and stopped with a jerk.

“Meggy!” she heard Jasmine’s voice from somewhere within as she climbed up the stairs and showed the driver her pass.

“Hello!” She spotted her sister and made her way awkwardly down the aisle as the bus careened back into traffic. “That worked out good!” she said as she plopped into the seat next to Jasmine.

“I was hoping you’d be on this one.”

“Did you see Mom?”

“Yes, just before this.”

“How...”

“She’s doing okay today.”

“Good,” said Margaret, “because I’m just not going to have time to get over there today. Not with this new work schedule and ballet class—” she stopped because the bus lurched madly up to another stop and nearly threw her out of her seat.

“No, don’t worry, she’s fine...” Jasmine began and then stopped. Two young men were coming down the aisle, and they had already spotted her. Jasmine returned their glances with

what Margaret called her “Queen Jasmine look,” a cold, condescending stare which served her well in discouraging would-be admirers, and the boys looked away as they passed by. With that potential problem dispatched, Jasmine addressed Margaret again. “How’s the new job at the ER going?”

“Fine. I mean, what can I say, I’m mopping floors and cleaning up bodily fluids!”

Jasmine, distracted by some voices behind her, didn’t reply. The pair that had just passed were sitting behind them and having a loud conversation.

“Jasmine, just never mind...” Margaret said nervously as Jasmine turned around.

“Excuse me,” she said sweetly to the pair. “My name is Jasmine; what are yours?”

“Shawn and Jose.”

“So, Shawn and Jose, have you considered getting help for your sex fixation?” she asked.

“Ohhhh...” sighed Margaret and slid down in her seat.

Shawn and Jose laughed incredulously. “What?”

“Your sex fixation. You can get help, you know.”

“How do you know I have a sex fixation,” said one of them.

“Oh,” said Jasmine, “very subtle signs. Maybe because you say an offensive word that means ‘sexual intercourse’ in between every other word that you utter?”

The two snickered nervously.

“Why don’t you try some other adjective before every noun? You know, add a little variety?”

“Uh...”

“Don’t worry, it was just a rhetorical question.” She gave them a sugary smile and turned back around as Margaret reached up and pulled the bell for their stop.

They were nearly to the front of the bus when someone called, “Madame!” They turned back and saw that one of the young men had stood. He pulled his hat off of his head, swept a theatrically gallant bow, and said, “We humbly apologize for our boorish behavior!”

The bus broke out into laughter.

“Apology accepted!” Jasmine curtsied regally and then

followed Margaret out the door.

“Oh, my feet hurt,” Margaret moaned about two hours later. Now back at home, she was sitting at the kitchen table watching Jasmine spoon leftover spaghetti out of a Tupperware container.

“It’s your new shoes. You should have let me break them in for you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Nobody could break in pointe shoes like Jasmine.

Jasmine put the bowls into the microwave, and they walked into the living room where Dylan and Frank were going through their fishing tackle boxes.

“Can I go see *Teen Dolts*?” Dylan addressed his question to both of his older sisters.

“What is it rated?” asked Margaret.

“R.”

“Why did you even ask then?”

“All the kids have seen it.”

“I’m sure you’re the first kid to have ever said that,” Jasmine smiled at Dylan and took his hand. “Come on, lets go look it up on *Christian Answers*.”

“So you didn’t get a chance to see your mother today?” Peggy asked Margaret after they left.

“No, I just couldn’t fit it in. Did you?”

“No.”

“Well, thank goodness Jasmine made it over there.”

“Oh, I almost forgot. You got a letter from Jeff.” Peggy took an envelope from the desk and handed it to her.

Smiling, Margaret opened the letter from her fiancé, who was a missionary in Peru, and sat down to read it. “He might be coming home earlier than he expected,” she said after a minute.

“Glad to hear it.”

Margaret had just finished the letter when Jasmine walked back into the room, examining a piece of paper. After a moment she turned to Dylan and said, “Are you sure *all* the other ten-year-olds have seen this? I wouldn’t even let you read this review, let alone see the movie.”

“I think we get the picture,” said Frank.

Jasmine crumpled up the paper and threw it in the fireplace. "Grandma, I'm going to go out tonight for awhile if that's okay."

"Where are you going?"

"A guy from the Willamette Ballet Company wants to get together and talk about a possible summer apprenticeship after I graduate next year."

"Really! Meggy, did you know about this?"

"Well, I knew that somebody from the WBC was at class today. George said that he had seen *Romeo and Juliet* at the Eastside Performance Center."

"I just got an e-mail from Cory," said Jasmine. "He asked the guy, his name is Aaron, if he would give us some tips for the audition, and so we're going to meet for coffee tonight."

"Cory e-mailed you?" Margaret raised her eyebrows at Jasmine, and they both began to giggle.

"Oh, Jasmine!" Dylan walked up to her clutching his chest. "Can I trust you with my tender little heart—" He broke off when Jasmine pushed him down onto the sofa.

"Horrible little brother!" she said.

"Jasmine, have you been unkind to someone?" said Peggy.

"Not me, Grandma! Dylan!"

"Who, me?" Dylan managed to say, then fell back against the couch as Jasmine began to tickle him.

"Okay, what happened?" said Peggy.

Jasmine sat up. "The other night when Cory brought me home after the performance, he said he wanted a drink of water, but then once he was in the house, he just wouldn't leave. Then he starts telling me he wants to give me his heart and he feels so vulnerable and can he trust me with it and will I be careful with it, blah, blah, blah..."

"Oh, please," said Peggy.

"I know!" said Jasmine. "He must think I'm so stupid. It just drives him crazy because I'm probably the only girl who hasn't just melted the second he condescends to honor her with his attention."

Peggy pulled Dylan up from the couch and put a protective arm around him, "Well, I hope you weren't *too* brutal."

"He's a classic narcissist, Grandma! He was just trying to

manipulate me. You can't actually hurt a narcissist's feelings... can you?"

"That's a good question," said Margaret.

"Anyway, I never did get a chance to break his poor little heart. I was going to say, 'Well, Cory, that's very sweet, but any heart that's been around as much as yours must be pretty tough by now, so I think you'll survive,' but then Dylan came out of the bathroom."

"Dylan! What were you doing up at that hour?"

"I forgot that I left Ratty in the bathtub, and I was getting him."

"You left..." Peggy stopped and put her hand to her forehead.

"Never mind, I don't want to know."

"All right... now tell her!" Jasmine poked Dylan, and they began to laugh again. "Go on! Tell Grandma what you said."

"I didn't... I wouldn't..." Dylan broke off laughing, and Jasmine pushed him back down onto the sofa.

"Okay," she said, "Dylan goes up to Cory, holds Ratty out in his face, acts all emotional, and says, 'My beloved rat, Ratty, holds my heart in his little paws,' and then ran up the stairs." She turned back to Dylan who was cowering on the couch, shielding himself with a coffee-table book. "I was shocked!" She began to tickle him. "I was appalled! Terrible! Terrible little brother!"

Jasmine found Cory sitting alone in a booth when she entered the coffee shop an hour later.

"Hi," she said, sliding in across from him. "I wanted to thank you for including me in this."

"I only did it because Aaron asked me to." Cory glanced at her and then turned away as a meticulously dressed, dark-haired man approached them and sat down. "Hi Aaron. Jasmine McKenna, Aaron Hunter."

"Nice to meet you, Jasmine."

"I'm glad to meet you, too, and thank you for giving us your time like this."

"It's a pleasure." Aaron took the slightly food-spattered menu between two long, perfectly-formed fingers and gave it a perfunctory glance before laying it aside and reaching into his

pocket.

“Coffee?” The hostess approached and held up the pot.

Aaron gave her a wary look, pulled a tea bag out, and said, “Just some hot water please.”

“Don’t like coffee?” said Cory.

“I don’t like increased catecholamine and dopamine levels, attention deficit disorder, cerebral allergy, and toxic dementia, so, yeah, I don’t like coffee,” said Aaron. He turned to Jasmine who was staring, and held up the tea packet. “Detoxifying herbal tea. This is enough for two; do you want to try it?”

“I guess.”

“Two hot waters then?” said the hostess.

“Yes.”

She turned to Cory, but before she could speak, the heavy brown mug was clunked down in front of her. “Fill it up, and keep it coming,” he said.

“I’ll tell you right now that Ernie, our choreographer, is very old school, prefers classical ballet, so that’s the inside scoop there,” Aaron said some time later.

“My feet are starting to hurt just thinking about it,” said Jasmine.

“From what I saw in *Romeo and Juliet*, if you work very hard, you’ll pull it off.”

“Oh yeah. Piece of cake.”

“They’ll give you a small solo part in a classical ballet to see what you do with it. They’ll want to see adagio, good partnering skills. You two could pair up for that.”

Jasmine jotted a few words in her notebook. “Is Ernie one of the judges?”

“Yes. There’s a panel of four, including our artistic director, Nina, and two others.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, what do you do?”

“I’m one of the principal dancers, and I do some choreography.”

Jasmine paused, laid down the pen, and began to pick at a cuticle.

“Any concerns, Jasmine?” Aaron smiled at her.

“Does it show?”

“What?”

“I guess, I’m a little scared, and it’s kind of a foreign feeling for me.”

Cory snickered.

“Yes, Cory?” said Aaron.

Cory smiled amiably at Jasmine. “I just thought fear was an emotion felt only by mortals, not ice goddesses like you.”

Jasmine smiled sweetly back. “Well, Cory, you could be wrong, but I’m afraid you’re never going to know me well enough to find out.”

Cory picked up the desert menu. “As you have made so abundantly clear,” he said and then began to look around for the waitress. “I wonder if they have apple pie?”

Aaron’s brooding dark eyes rested on Jasmine for a long moment. “Tell me about yourself,” he said after Cory had put in his order.

“You mean personally?”

“Personally.”

“I’m seventeen, a senior at Buchanan High, I have an older sister and a younger brother, and we live with our grandparents.”

“Your older sister was Juliet...”

“Yes.”

“I understand she’s not interested...”

“No. I’m afraid Meggy’s talent far surpasses her ambition.”

Aaron took a sip of tea. “Why don’t you live with your parents?”

“Well, my mom... Actually, just don’t ask. The scuttlebutt is my dad lives in Yakima, but I don’t know for sure.”

“I see.” Aaron turned back to Cory who was digging into the pie. “Okay, you both know you’re up against stiff competition, but I think you have a shot at this if you focus and work hard. Cory, you’re an athletic dancer, and that’s good. Keep working on those leaps.” He turned to Jasmine and said, “Well, young lady, you’re going to have to focus on this *and* keep your grades up, so you should be getting plenty of sleep. It’s after ten, now, so we better go. I’ll take you home.”

Jasmine looked back into his eyes and was suddenly strangely drawn to him. He was so mature, and by contrast Cory was so

hopelessly callow. She felt a new emotion, and then was astonished to realize it was shyness. She smiled back and picked up her coat. "Okay."

F I V E

I *was born with a silver spoon in my mouth*, Byron thought and then scowled as he carefully pulled the soiled scrub shirt over his head and then hurled it at the laundry bin. He had read that description of himself in a recent magazine article, and in spite of his current ill temper, he could still almost laugh at the notion. Oh, yes, he was straight from Central Casting, your typical good-for-nothing rich kid, coming to this cursed place every day and being anointed by street drunks.

It was the eleventh hour of his twelve-hour shift, and it had been miserable almost from the start. This was his third set of scrubs, and he had been juggling for hours, trying to manage without the three extra pockets that his long-discarded lab coat had provided.

He hastily put on the fresh scrubs and returned to the noisy and chaotic nerve center of the ER, the nurse's station. The constant din was exhausting in itself on days like this — the incessant beeping of various alarms, telephones ringing, raised voices, and for the past two hours a psych patient had been hollering "Help!" over and over.

Byron had just shoved aside a pile of lab reports and miscellaneous notes left over from the morning's rush, clearing space on the cluttered desk to do some charting, when the

ambulance bay doors burst open revealing two medics with a stretchered patient. Byron looked up in surprise and then grimaced. Lewis & Clark had been diverting ambulances for the past four hours, and the presence of this one told him that it was the same at every other hospital in Portland. When that happened the paramedics just transported the patients wherever they pleased.

Florence, the nurse manager, was examining the new arrival and motioned to Byron that she had it under control for the moment. Knowing that he only had a few minutes to spare, he hastily turned back to the chart in front of him.

When he picked up the newcomer's chart a few minutes later, he read the name, Angela Jackson, with a sigh. The patient was a frequent flyer at Lewis & Clark who was known for using his emergency department for her primary care and the ambulance as a free taxi service — tax deductions being the only silver lining for the companies involved.

New onset of seizures was the chief complaint tonight, but she had a history of IV drug abuse, long-term alcoholism, and hepatitis C. She had been seen at Lewis & Clark on numerous occasions for problems such as condyloma, Chlamydia, and pelvic inflammatory disease. She had had two therapeutic abortions, three live births, and a hysterectomy. He knitted his brow at a more recent entry, a low hemoglobin and hematocrit with a positive stool guaiac the last time she was in.

Byron slapped the chart down and stood up. *Somebody's going to sit in the waiting room an hour longer because this woman decided to pickle her brain one time too many*, he thought as he headed toward her room.

"Hello, Ms. Jackson," he said when he got there. He glanced over the vital signs in the chart and then gave her an appraising look. Her facial bone structure revealed the memory of beauty, but she now appeared thin and frail, her skin slightly jaundiced, much older than her years. He placed his stethoscope on her swollen abdomen. "I hear that you had a seizure?"

"That's what they tell me."

He opened the chart and jotted, "Psych: Depressed affect, poor eye contact," and then looked up again. "Are you still drinking?"

"Sometimes."

"How much?"

When she didn't respond, he examined her scarred arms and said, "Do you ever cut yourself?"

"Sometimes."

"Are you still using?"

"No."

"You were referred to a gastroenterologist the last time you were here. Did you ever go?"

"No."

"May I ask why?"

"I didn't have insurance then and I felt okay."

He paused and wrote a few more words in the chart. "Well, we'll need to run some tests, but I think you've probably had something called an alcoholic seizure," he said and then walked out without waiting for a response.

"Tina, I need a head CT, LFTs, CBC, Chem Panel, and a PT-PTT," he told the unit secretary back at the nurse's station.

Tina picked up her pen. "For Angela Jackson?"

"Yes." Byron turned to Florence. "Would you call the pharmacy and order a dilantin drip? I need it running before she goes to CT."

"You got it."

Angela Jackson was still awaiting the CT an hour later when Byron's shift was over. He found Jake Olson, the doctor who was relieving him, to brief him on the case. "CT is all backed up..." he began.

Jake was looking at the chart and shaking his head.

"Pathetic," he said.

Byron couldn't control the cynicism that sometimes welled up in him, especially after shifts like the one he had just worked. "Well, as you see, with all those STDs she ended up with a hysterectomy. Kind of nature's forced sterilization. She's had three kids, but at least that stopped her from bringing any *more* human debris into the world."

"Another poster child for the cause of involuntary sterilization," said Jake, taking the chart.

Byron became aware of a subtle change in the atmosphere. Everybody had stopped talking. He looked at Florence who

glared at him and tilted her head meaningfully at a figure standing several yards to his left, Margaret McKenna. She had been working earlier but was now wearing street clothes. Her normally straight shoulders were sagging, and she was looking down at her hands.

“Meggy!” said an unfamiliar voice, and along with everyone else, Byron turned toward it and recognized Margaret’s sister, Jasmine, just entering the department, her exquisite face etched with concern.

“Jasmine!” Margaret walked over and the two girls hugged. “She’s over here,” she said, and they headed toward Ms. Jackson’s room.

Byron watched them until he realized that he was staring. Margaret and Jasmine together made a charming picture of grace and loveliness. He shook his head, realizing that Angela Jackson was their mother. *Human debris*. He felt like smacking himself on the forehead. Had he really said that?

After he changed his clothes, Byron returned to the doorway of Angela Jackson’s room. Margaret was leaning close and appeared to be speaking to Angela while Jasmine adjusted a blanket over her legs.

“Margaret.” She looked up, and Byron beckoned to her from the doorway.

She followed him out to the hall. “Yes?”

“May I see you for a few minutes in my office?”

“Dr. Holgrave, if this is about what you said, it’s okay. I understand. It’s been a long day.” The graciousness of her words and manner was undermined, however, by a hint of pain in her expressive eyes.

“Please. I’ll only take a few minutes of your time.”

“Okay.” She said a couple words to Jasmine and then followed him down the corridor.

When they entered Byron’s office, she paused just inside the door and then walked slowly over to his bookcase. “Oh,” she murmured and picked up a framed piece of paper. She turned to Byron. “Do you mind?”

“Of course not.”

She stood for a moment, examining the small, yellowed leaflet, covered with crudely printed, ink-smearred words, then

looked up again. "This is one of the actual leaflets?"

"Yes."

"What does it say?"

Byron looked over her shoulder at the German words. "They encouraged resistance against the war, even sabotage, there were quotations from great philosophers, and then it ends with this statement: 'We are all guilty. We will not be silenced. We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace.'"

Margaret looked at the little yellow paper and was silent.

Byron pointed to a framed photograph. "That was him, my great-uncle, Christoph Schmidt."

Margaret examined the slightly blurred photo of a young man, scarcely more than a teenager, and then pointed to an antique stethoscope beside it. "His?"

"Yes," said Byron, taking his chair.

Margaret turned back and sat down across from him. "You must be very proud of your family legacy."

"Thank you." Byron paused and then leaned forward.

"Margaret, about what I said out there. There have been a few moments in my life when I've realized that I've allowed my thinking to take a wrong track, and this is one of them. If the day ever comes that I truly believe what I said about your mother... and about you and your sister and brother, that will be the day that I retire as a physician."

Margaret reached over and briefly put her hand over his, and for some reason the generosity of that small gesture touched him deeply. "A few careless words spoken in a state of exhaustion and discouragement won't change what you prove every other minute of the day by your actions, that you're a very fine doctor."

They were silent for a few moments. "Does your mother live with your grandparents too?" he asked.

"No, she has her own apartment." She was quiet again and then said, "You can imagine we didn't have a great childhood..."

"Her medical history showed drug and alcohol abuse."

"And there were a lot of men around. I think that's why I panicked when Kevin wouldn't let me go that day. I had a couple traumatic experiences when I was younger."

“Your mom’s boyfriends abused you?”

“It never came to that, luckily, because of her.” She smiled briefly. “She even laid one of them out with a beer bottle.”

“Really!”

“He was okay — a few stitches I guess. I never saw him again. Shortly after that Dylan, Jasmine, and I moved in with my grandparents.”

In spite of the sadness of the subject matter, Byron was aware that all the tension of the day was draining out of him. As he relaxed he felt an inexplicable desire to prolong the interlude.

“Your grandparents seem like nice people,” he said.

“And you’re wondering what happened to make my mother turn out like she did?”

“Yes.”

“You probably hear stories like this all the time...”

“Stories like what?”

“Well, my real grandpa, my mother’s father, not Frank who you met, wouldn’t win any father-of-the-year awards. He favored my mother’s sister, Lesley, because she was athletic and popular, and Mom was shy and chunky. Mom craved her dad’s acceptance and love and so therefore became his little helper, helping him to hide his bad habits — and he had many — from Grandma.” Her eyes narrowed slightly. “That was how little he cared about her; he exploited her for his own use and then continued to ignore her the rest of the time.”

“And then?”

“And then, after my grandparents got divorced, Mom was still looking for a father figure, and she thought she found one in the father of one of Lesley’s friends. He was a real nice, friendly guy who took her under his wing, so to speak. He seemed to really care about her and gave her a lot of special attention. You can guess the rest. He molested her. After that Grandma says it was like something had broken inside of her and then never mended right. Of course, Grandma didn’t know what had happened at the time, most of this came out just in recent years when we had some family counseling.”

“So what happened to your mother’s sister?”

“They went in completely opposite directions. Mom dropped out of high school, and Lesley went on to be Rose Festival

Queen. The same month that Lesley received her tiara was the month that I was conceived. The only thing I know about my father is that he was in the Navy, and he had come from one of the ships at the Rose Festival that year.”

Neither one spoke for a few moments. It was a cowlick, he noted, on the left side of her forehead that caused the tendrils of her unruly hair to fall about her face in such a becoming manner.

“Well!” She stood up. “You’re surprisingly easy to talk to. I don’t tell *that* to too many people.”

Byron stood and walked to the door with her. “I’m afraid you’re probably going to be here for awhile. How are you all getting home?”

“Grandma and Frank are coming.”

He picked up his briefcase and walked with her out into the corridor where they could see that Angela was being wheeled out of her room. A dark-haired, muscular young man had joined Jasmine, and they were standing beside the Gurney.

“That’s Aaron, Jasmine’s new friend,” said Margaret.

Byron glanced at her. “You don’t approve.”

She met his eyes for a moment, then looked down with a small laugh. “I’m an open book, I guess.”

They were silent until they reached the group. “Ms. Jackson, you didn’t tell me that Margaret was your daughter,” said Byron. “We’re very happy to have her here at Lewis & Clark.”

Her eyes met his briefly and then darted away. “Thank you,” she said.

Byron turned to Jasmine. “Hello, Jasmine. Are you keeping those neighbor dogs in line?”

Two wide-spaced brown eyes regarded him appraisingly for a moment, and then her face relaxed into a smile. *Michelangelo would have sculpted her*, Byron thought.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “We’re good buddies.”

Byron turned to Margaret. “Well, goodnight, then.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“I’m just so tired of worrying about her.” Jasmine leaned forward and rubbed her forehead. It was an hour later, and she and Aaron were sitting in a booth at a Chinese restaurant near

the hospital. "You know, it would be such a relief if I just didn't care anymore."

"You're weary from caring so much," said Aaron.

Jasmine looked at the half-full glass in front of her. She had obediently ordered milk at Aaron's recommendation. "I never stop praying and believing that she'll change."

"And you keep on believing?"

"I know you don't understand that."

"Tell me what it is that I don't understand."

Jasmine looked down. "I know it seems ridiculous to keep believing day in, day out, year after year after year..." she suddenly felt close to tears. "Just forget it. I can't explain..." Her voice faded.

"What's to explain? I believe in faith."

"But you aren't a Christian."

"Actually, you're wrong. I *am* a Christian, but I'm open minded enough to know that what is true for me may not be true for everybody."

She looked up. "Jesus came to save everybody."

Aaron leaned forward with a benevolent smile. "Who taught you that, Jasmine?"

"It doesn't matter who taught me, it's the truth."

"So you figured it out by yourself."

"No, Meggy and Grandma taught me."

"Wonderful women, both of them."

"I couldn't imagine life without Meggy. And Grandma saved me from something horrible." She looked down again. "I could never repay what I owe her."

"So the last thing you would ever do is disappoint either of them."

Jasmine looked up at him. "Aaron, I believe Jesus died on the cross not only to save me, but to save every other human being on the earth. I truly believe it. It's not something I just say because I don't want to disappoint somebody... like they hold some kind of... of spiritual blackmail over me."

"I didn't say that; you just did."

Jasmine picked up the napkin and began to twist it around her finger.

"Look, Jasmine, I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but

I'm telling you this as a friend. You're going to have to cut the apron strings some day and find your own truth. It's part of growing up."

Jasmine twisted the napkin tighter and then let it relax.

"When I look at you I see a spirited, intelligent young woman. You're so full of love, that's why your mother can hurt you like she does. I'd hate to see you sacrifice your own free will and self determination just because you don't want to disappoint somebody."

Jasmine looked at him and realized that his heart was in his eyes. She didn't know what to think about what he had said. That would take time. She was certain of one thing, though, he was sincere. After a moment she reached over and clasped his hand. "You're a good friend."

Aaron squeezed her hand, released it, then ripped open a sugar packet and dumped it in his tea. At Jasmine's astonished look, he said, "I'm suddenly feeling wild and spontaneous."

Jasmine laughed.

"Why don't we go to a movie? A funny movie. You need cheering up."

"Okay..."

"*Teen Dolts*, it's supposed to be hilarious."

"No thanks, I've heard about it."

"I read a review in the paper today, and they said it's okay for mature teens. You're mature aren't you?"

"Actually, you know, I'm tired. I think I just want to go home—" she broke off when Aaron suddenly left his seat and came around beside her.

"Jasmine, will you promise me something? As a friend who cares about you?"

"What?"

"That you'll be true to yourself. Don't allow others to control you because you feel that you owe them something. That twists your love, turns it into a form of bondage. You're an intelligent woman, qualified to make your own choices. Don't ever allow anybody to build a fence around you."

Jasmine managed to suppress a small, irrational giggle that died when Aaron reached out and touched her cheek.

"Will you promise?"

Jasmine gazed back, all the amusement gone. If Cory had said such things, she would have been vastly entertained, nothing more, but this was different. Aaron's sincerity was without question. And there was something about him, something that she was vaguely aware that she had craved all of her life without realizing it. "Okay," she said.

More

P R E C I O U S T H A N



Rubies

By Elena Ives

“To my beloved Miriam, you are more precious than rubies, Gabriel.” The inscription is faint on the antique gold, because Anna Westbrook has worn the necklace for six decades in remembrance of her long-dead parents.

Now Anna’s daughter-in-law, Carolyn, sits on the veranda of her ocean-front summer house and dangles the square-cut ruby by its delicate chain. The necklace represents a tiny spot of comfort in a tragic family history, and Carolyn is furious that Anna gave it to that oddball neighbor girl, Rachel Albrecht, instead of her own granddaughter.

Carolyn winds the chain around her finger, releasing it just before it breaks. She resents Rachel for worming her way into Anna’s heart, but that’s only part of it. Most of all, she despises Rachel because her son, Gabe, soon to graduate top of his class at Stanford Medical School, adores her.

Carolyn pulls the chain until it snaps. She already had to tell a few lies to get the necklace back, but Rachel is still a problem, and Carolyn takes care of problems as she sees fit.

Seven years after lies and manipulation separated him from the desire of his heart, Gabe Westbrook, MD, now a Portland cardiologist, is unmarried and lonely. Then he acquires a new patient, Rachel’s gravely ill husband.

With Rachel back in his life and a new awareness of Carolyn’s deceit, Gabe is faced with a decision. Does he do everything he can to help Rachel’s husband live?

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