

Chapter 5

By the time Al Cypher had checked Pamela into the last unoccupied suite in Detention Suites, his anger had cooled. His dislike for Earl Clark was nothing new, of course, and Clark's taking his son out of the game was predictable, for the feeling was mutual. Under normal circumstances he would have brushed off Pamela's indiscretion and simply driven away, leaving her standing on the sidewalk, rather than enforcing the law she was violating.

Now it struck him: he had jailed one of the town's leading citizens over a triviality. He had been consumed with evil thoughts about Earl Clark and had made a dreadful mistake with a foreseeable outcome.

"Pamela, I'm sorry about this. You caught me at a bad time. I would take you right back to the ball field if I could. But the system has picked up your biometrics, and I won't have the means to cancel your residency until Monday. In other words, you're logged in as a prisoner, and all kinds of bells and whistles go off if you try to leave by yourself. You can go out with me as your escort for a limited time, but you have to stay with me until we come back. I think you would rather remain here. But if you have an errand to do, let me know, and I'll take you. Call Phil if you like, and I'll let him in to visit you. But the bell goes off after an hour, and then he'll have to leave for the day.

"I'm really sorry this happened. At least the jail is a pleasant one. But I'm afraid you have some bad company. The other suites—I almost said cells—are occupied by a bunch of rough guys: the homeless gang the cops rounded up yesterday morning.

"It's time for the noon meal, and since I'm warden, cook, and waiter, I'm going to be taking the food to the table. I'll let the guys out into the dining area to eat. It works better that way and keeps the rooms clean. You can join them if you wish. So make yourself at home if you can, and let me know if there's anything you need."

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Having finished his discourse, Cypher walks out, leaving Pamela alone. Her door closes with sounds of secure latching.

She takes out her phone and calls her husband.

“... It’s plush. In fact, it’s nicer than our house.”

“*When can I come up to see you?*”

“Whenever you can get away.”

“I’ll need to go to the baptism since nine of our employees plus one spouse and a child want to be baptized; so I really should be there. I’ll come right after that.”

“That’s wonderful! ... I see you’re back at the store.”

“It’s giving me a chance to explain things to customers. I’m having a conversation with one of them right now.”

“You can tell me about it when you get here. I’ll let you go now. Don’t forget to find yourself some lunch.”

She picks up the remote control for the entertainment center and sinks into the easy chair.

The News button produces a menu of stories:

Poll: Majority Say Something Will Happen
Media Planning Live Coverage
Celebration Parties Scheduled
Olympia Shrine Mobbed
Pope Announces Full Cooperation with UN
ET Threat Focuses on Evangelicals
Flights Canceled
Gridlock in LA

She points to the third headline. It brings up a woman at a news desk reporting on this growing phenomenon:

Around the nation, politically active people on the left are waking up to the likelihood of the removal of the remnant of the religious right. The awareness is spreading rapidly, and we’re seeing hundreds of websites announcing massive cannabis parties tomorrow afternoon.

The *Live Coverage* menu item brings back the same

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newswoman:

All major media outlets are making arrangements for live coverage of the Rapture event—which is no longer being called the Rapture but rather the Removal, keeping in line with the Vatican view and also the majority interpretation of the apparent UFO presence.

As one would expect, it is proving difficult to find individuals who are both sure of their disappearing and willing to have reporters capture their convictions on camera. Consequently, the focus will be on the three largest East-Coast churches where regular services are scheduled at times that include the Hour.

The audio cuts out, and Cypher's voice comes over the speakers: "Your soup is ready, Pamela. I'm unlocking your door."

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Grace Bible Church's fellowship hall has become a banquet room. Ellen Miller, the bride's mother, is fussing about the flowers being late even as Flo is bringing in vases with the blooms fully arranged and setting them on the linen-clothed cafe tables. With only half an hour before the ceremony begins in the sanctuary, Ellen is striving to have everything perfectly in order before the first guest arrives.

The string quartet is setting up after she had them move to a different corner of the room—again. She has just discovered that artificial strawberries are part of the table decorations while chocolate-covered strawberries are included in the dessert, and she is pressing the caterer for an immediate remedy while keeping an eye on what the florist is doing. She wants to rush over and advise Flo, but she must first make sure that the caterer will be following through with a suitable solution to the strawberry conflict.

Ellen's husband is in the foyer, where it is relatively peaceful, passing the time with the ushers. They are standing by the glass-paneled entry door, watching the parking lot for early arrivals, some of whom will have come a long way.

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The cloud layer that dominated the sky earlier today has thinned and is becoming broken: small patches of blue have expanded and are merging together. A freshening breeze out of the south promises good sailing.

Leila arrived early, as she planned. Expecting that Earl is readying the boats, she walks around to the side of the house. From her vantage point there she surveys the bay and lake. There is a spit, a low point of land, jutting out from the shore on the right to form the harbor, and just beyond it, in the main body of the lake, is a police boat. Down on the dock, Earl is stepping off the float onto one of his sailboats.

The brick-paved walkway that Leila is on leads from the driveway down three broad steps under the sprawling limbs of a yellow-leaved maple tree. From there the path branches to the right, sweeping around the corner of the house to the side yard and on down to the beach.

The house is known as the Beach House. Earl rents it from Ken and Karen Martin, who reside in the other dwelling on this little bay at the north end of the lake. The Beach House was built by Ken's grandfather in 1930 when the town was thriving on timber and gold and when no building restrictions were in effect. The back of the two-story structure is barely twenty yards from the water's edge. To the right are the dock, a sandy swimming beach, and the shop in which Earl builds his boats. It is a delightful property, and the beach makes a perfect baptistery in good weather.

Earl is bailing rainwater from the cockpit of the boat as Leila steps onto the dock, and as she approaches the floating portion to which his boats are moored, he stands up, squeezing water from a sponge.

"Hi. I came a little early to see if there's anything I can do to help you get ready. If not, I'll understand and stay out of your way."

"Leila, you're something. Sure, you can help. It looks like

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you're dressed for it too. Boat shoes?—great. Here, take the sponge. There's a bit of rainwater in each boat—not enough to use a bucket for; the sponge works fine. It's against your environmental rules to squeeze it overboard; but since I'm already a rulebreaker, I'm not concerned about that. Shall I get you a bucket?"

"No. It's an insulting rule. I'll ignore it too even though they're watching us with telephoto video."

"They've been out there since I got back from the game. Can't you call them off for a while?"

"I could try, but I don't think it's worth the risk of getting them into trouble for violating procedures. My surveillance officer is on board, and he will discourage the policeman from taking note of our illegal bailing activity."

"I'm going to get the oars. After you finish sponging, I'll let you remove the mains'l covers."

Earl expects to be using four boats. He likes to have two students in each one. Five have signed up for the lesson today. If they all come, it will work out just right for Leila to be paired with one of the more capable women.

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The bride is late, and Ellen is frantic. It is one o'clock, the hour of the wedding. The stream of guests has dwindled to a trickle, and all have either been seated or are being seated. Ellen has come to the foyer. She is looking in at the doorway to the auditorium, surveying the audience. Her husband is staring out through the entry doors, watching for the bride.

"Adva thinks if she's on time she's early," Ellen whispers to the usher standing beside her. "The groom is here, I assume."

"I think he's with the pastor."

"Go and find out," she commands.

She goes to help her husband watch the parking lot.

"Do you see her car? That girl! Late for her own wedding!"

The usher reappears.

"Apparently, the groom isn't here yet," he reports.

"That explains it," Ellen declares. "They're together against my orders. She's always late for everything."

"I'm sure they'll be here in a moment," her husband assures her.

"Go tell Asaf he can start the music," she instructs the usher. And to her husband: "I hope she's wearing her dress. There's no time for dressing now."

"She had it on this morning," he replies. "I told her she looked nice. But I won't be surprised if she comes in wearing pants after all."

"It wouldn't surprise me either. I'll bet that's what she's doing: leaving her dress at home and coming late so there will be no time to change."

"We should have insisted she wear dresses to church when she was younger," says her husband as if his insight solves the problem.

"I know. But she always hated dresses."

Alice appears, smiling brightly. Alice loves weddings.

"Ellen, you look delightful. ... Is there a problem?"

"Kids are so irresponsible. The bridesmaids should be out here

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right now. Would you please go see what's taking them so long?"

"You know how it is, Ellen. Every hair has to be in place. I'll be right back."

"Is Adam ready with the groomsmen?" Ellen inquires of the usher.

"I don't know."

"Please go make sure they're ready."

"They're here: there's her car," Adva's father announces. "Probably, you could be seated now, so folks won't be wondering."

Ellen walks briskly across the foyer to the sanctuary doorway.

"You may escort me to my seat," she says to the remaining usher.

As Adva's father watches, a strange couple emerges from the car and heads for the door.

"Uh-oh," he mutters.

Adam comes around the corner from the hallway.

"Have you seen the groom?" he asks. Adva's father is peering out more intently than ever, trying to find another car like his daughter's.

"No, we haven't," he answers, without turning to look at the pastor. "We haven't seen the bride either. We think they're together."

Alice is back.

"I can't find the bridesmaids. I don't know where they could be."

Asaf is repeating the prelude.

Adam has the groom's number in his phone and is trying to call him: no answer. Adva's father is calling his daughter's phone: no answer.

Both ushers are watching them, and Adam can see through the doorway that people are looking around and talking in whispers. He sees Ellen sitting stiffly in the front pew, her head motionless.

None of the groomsmen is known to Adam. "Can you call the best man?" he asks Adva's father.

"I don't remember what his name is."

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Adam is about to ask Alice to try to contact one of the bridesmaids, but she already has her phone to her ear.

“Janie, this is Alice at church. Where are you? ... You’re at home? ... It’s canceled? ... Who told you that? ... Adva did? ... Oh, no!”

She drops her phone into her purse and bites her lip.

“It sounds like they called it off without telling their parents,” observes Adam.

Asaf has turned up the volume of the music. The whispering in the auditorium has broken out into chatter. Family members in the front rows are looking back and trying to explain the delay to each other. Except Ellen. She remains as still as stone.

Adam motions for one of the ushers to come over.

“It appears that the wedding has been called off by the bride,” he informs him. “Please go tell Ellen, and ask her if she would like you to escort her out.” Turning to Adva’s father, he asks, “What shall we do?”

“Might as well go ahead with the reception—er, let’s call it the party.”

Ellen is coming back up the center aisle with the usher. Her face appears to be carved stone. If anger and embarrassment rage within her, there is no sign of it.

Pastor Murphy walks down the side aisle on the left and takes the microphone as Asaf quiets the music.

“We have had a change of plans,” he announces. “The wedding ceremony has been called off but not the party; the best part is still going to take place. I’ve seen the tables and the food, and I assure you that you will not be disappointed. The ushers are coming to conduct you out.”

Asaf launches a rousing recessional as the ushers march down the center aisle to release the family.

The word whispered and somewhat embellished has spread from the ushers to the ears of everyone: the bride and groom eloped. Reactions are mixed. Some of the women are sympathizing with Ellen and are nearly as stern faced as she. The

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younger folk are taking it lightly, some of them apparently extolling the wisdom and courage of the couple in their secret rapture. Some of the older men are shaking their heads; others are grinning.

Ellen and her husband have been seated at a table for four at the far end of the banquet room where hors d'oeuvres have been brought to them. Adam and Alice hurry in ahead of the crowd and join them. The strings are playing a baroque piece as family and guests file in and take places at the tables. The caterers are bustling in and out, bringing trays of food and arranging the buffet table. The omission of the ceremony is having no effect on the way people respond when food is present. But Ellen's stony face has not softened, and she will not eat.

It is an awkward time for Adam and Alice. Ellen's husband is silent as well. Regardless, the spirit in the rest of the room is undampened. The brief catastrophe has bound the guests to a single purpose, which is to let Ellen know that they have forgotten the original reason for being here and are appreciating the party. It is beginning to affect her a little. She takes a bite of an olive and a sip of water.

Everyone has been fitted into the hall, and Ellen realizes for the first time that nearly all who declared intentions of attending have indeed come and have stayed for the banquet. She expected that her decision to go ahead with the event on the eve of the Rapture would not be respected by everyone. While most of the groom's family is unchurched, many others are believers and have made a sacrifice to be here on their last day on earth. These thoughts are bringing a little life to her broken heart as she stares at the centerpiece on the table. Occasionally she glances up.

One of the women of the church catches Ellen's glance, and she cannot restrain herself: She gets up and goes to express her sympathy. Bending over Ellen's chair, she puts an arm around her. Ellen does not respond outwardly, but she is moved a little by the gesture.

It did not go unnoticed. Others follow. More goodwill is being

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shown to her in this very personal way than she has experienced in a long time, if ever. A major cord of her personality has been stretched to its limit, and it snaps: Ellen suddenly loses her concern for appearances.

She is experiencing something new and of great worth, a thing far removed from the propriety and precision that was her life. Ellen never much appreciated a hug since those long-forgotten days of her great disappointment before her own wedding. Each one she now receives is priceless, worth more to her than her system would have admitted was possible. A trial smile comes to her face, and she cares not that tears are marring her makeup, for a burden has been lifted. The new freedom leaves her feeling at first as though she cares about nothing. Her heart was severely damaged, and it can no longer hold the cold, heavy stuff of her perfectionism. That has drained out and is being replaced with a light, warm, airy substance made of touches and embraces, tender eyes and kind words.

Men and women of all ages are stopping by on their way back from the buffet table with second helpings and new findings on their plates, complimenting her on the fine food, the exquisite music, and the fun company. Their sincerity is partially proven by their laughter heard above the sounds from the musicians. She finishes the food on the plate that was brought to her.

Pastor Murphy is curious about something. He asks Ellen whether Adva talked about the Rapture.

“All the time. I got tired of hearing about it.”

“What about her fiance?”

“He was just as bad.”

The pastor picks up his glass and a spoon and stands up.

Most people in the room remained conscious of the corner in which the bride's parents sit, and they notice Adam's standing and tapping the glass. Others hear the ringing, and the banquet hall becomes quiet.

“Friends, I would like to say a brief word. I'm Adam Murphy, Ellen's pastor. As we can well understand, her heart was broken.

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What you may not know is that it was broken not by her daughter, but by God. Sometimes he does that. Tomorrow, he will be breaking into the lives of every one of us in one way or another. In many cases it will be painful. In the years of my ministry I have seen many broken hearts. One thing I have observed is that when God breaks a heart, it always turns out well. If you belong to Jesus Christ, as Ellen does, you never have to fear what God will do to you. If he breaks your heart, he will mend it, and someday you will be happier than you ever thought was possible as a result of it. Thank you for listening.”

Ellen stands up as the applause dies, and the room falls silent. She is drying her eyes with a handkerchief as she begins to speak.

“I would like to apologize to you all. I wanted to go ahead with the wedding because I thought it was my right, and God had no business interfering with it. Adva, however, did not see it that way. It was her hope of a happy marriage and children, not just a wedding ceremony, that was wrecked by the Rapture announcement. Yet she was happy about the prospect of seeing the Lord, and she could talk of nothing else. I should have known she was right. She had the better attitude.

“So first I’m asking for your forgiveness. I want to tell you that I don’t care about appearances anymore, and I wish I had time to pay you back with kindness for all the stress I have caused by my striving to make everything and everyone perfect.”

Ellen pauses. She knows what the second thing is that she wants to say, but if what she just said was uncharacteristic of her, the next thing is totally out of character. Yet she feels a burning desire to say it. A glow descends upon her, and the words come easily:

“Secondly, since Adva is not here, I’m going to take up her cause and tell you that tomorrow morning at eight o’clock, my family and I are going on an adventure that is beyond anything you can imagine. In fact, we are married to Christ in a way that we can only call mystical now; but when we are with him, every joy we have known will pale in comparison. There will be a wedding

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feast that will make this one seem like we've been eating ... dog food."

Ellen surprised herself with the entire speech, but this final expression—the outrageous incongruity of it is a hit. She breaks out laughing, as does the rest of the party. Cheers and whistles complement the loud applause.

"Your wife hit a home run," the pastor remarks to her husband. James is his name—it just came to me.

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