

## OUR FATHER

### CHAPTER 1

Michael searched the airport for a signal, some evidence that she was here, knowing he wouldn't be disappointed. He stood still in his wanton exasperation, except for rustling his keys in the pocket of his jogging pants. Only his eyes paced. He scanned the blur of raincoats and saris and transition, watching an awkward jostling of the crowd for some time before recognizing its significance. Finally, as was customary in the gratuitous world in which he lived, awareness slowly dawned, a little bell going off beside his ear, the shadow of a sound that to most was a wallowing, banging foghorn. But he looked at the unusual flow of people for a moment more before committing to movement. After all, he wasn't sure. It might be her, but then again . . .

He checked his watch. Then again, where the hell *was* she? He made one unnecessary, technically perfect turn to verify this was the only attraction before weaving through travelers, and there he found Jesse, asleep against her bag on the airport floor, oblivious to the sea of people that parted at her head and swarmed down either side to continue united at her feet.

He stood over her, looking down; she looked like a goddamned vagrant. He kneeled down next to her, his hands hanging limply over his expensive size-thirteen jogging shoes, "Do you know how long I've been here?"

Jesse blinked at the shoes, knowing that there was something oddly significant about them and looked up to see if they were connected to a face. Oh yeah. *Him*. The filing cabinet that was Michael crept back into her vernacular: man, older, hairy chest, big shoulders, big feet—shoes; the sole benefactors of his generosity. She opened her mouth and yawned.

The alcohol wafted up and clung hungrily to Michael's mustache; he winced as he fell backwards, one hand pushing against the terrazzo floor to right his fractured posture. "I even had you *paged*."

Jesse listened to the angry hum in his voice, which was so subtle, so innocuous that it would go unheard to the inexperienced ear and be hidden by the tight smile hovering just below its mustache umbrella. She opened her eyes wider, ignoring the buzz of his ire as she tried to focus on the man beside her. Michael. His head was cocked to one side like a dog waiting in anticipation of a promised walk.



long as it was wide, with a pair of tired French doors at one end. These provided the only light to outside and opened onto two broken stone steps, which lead to an orchard and garden beyond. Across from the fireplace was the large iron bed, placed haphazardly as if it had been arbitrarily dropped from the sky. From the bed a narrow path had been excavated out of the maze of books, antique armoires and dressers, the random placement of the furniture paralleled by their inconsistent styles and finishes. The path exited at an intricately carved rectangular piano, which sulked in the absence of a nurturing musician. Each stack of books or piece of furniture was crowned with the handmade pottery Michael collected, filled with ready cash, the discards of coat pockets and Michael's cynicism for conventional banking. The logic of the room's size and lack of fenestration was lost to the past, leaving only a hidden tomb to house his treasure and reluctance, a room so shut off from the pulse of life that even in late summer warm blooded animals needed protection from the cold.

Jesse pulled up the heavy quilt around her shoulders and nudged Michael again. "Can't we turn up the heat in here? I'm *freezing*."

"It's barely September, Jesse. And I *am* talking to you."

"Are you going to be mad at me all night?"

Michael's arms flapped once in controlled fury as he threw off the covers and stood up, a stark white figure against the bed. Jesse scanned his body, knowing its form, until her eyes stopped at the set mouth and folded brows. She waited obediently.

"Oh that's *rich*," he snapped a shirt against the old iron footboard. The skin on his face peeled back as he talked through gritted teeth and he continued getting dressed in furious little spurts of movement. Anger was not an emotion he wore well; it was like a borrowed glass bowl he was afraid would crack if handled too frequently.

"C'mon . . . Don't be like this. I didn't think it was that big of a deal—"

"What do you expect me to be like? I don't even know anything about this . . . this *thing* in Tofino."

"It's not a thing, Michael. It's my father."

"Exactly!" He blew hot air through his moustache. "Why the hell do you have to go back up there?"

"Because there's no one else—."

"What about your cousin?"

"Nick has two little kids, a full time job and no wife. He doesn't have time to take on a dying man. Besides, it's all worked out; Geoff's okay with it and my father's okay with it so why aren't you okay with it?"

"Geoff? Your new boss?"

"Client—new client. I told you about that—."

"—But that was a design job, Jesse. You have no qualifications for design."

She swallowed the comment, her stomach gnawing it into tiny pieces before she looked up at him again with eyes that were now round and sore.

"Well, what the hell do you want me to say?" He walked midway across the room and was lost in a dusty wave of books and dressers; she could not see him below the waist. "How're you even going to live off that job, Jess? It's part time at best—."

She shrugged, "I'll get a job waitressing or—."

"—Fine, just take off." He flung his hand in the air at her, a visual slap in the face.

"But it's only for a few months and you can come up whenever you—."

"Yeah? Where *is* Tofino?" he smirked, "*What* is Tofino?" He returned to where she sat, still huddled beneath the covers and leaned in towards her, balancing his weight on the confidence he held in his ability to modify her, like a verb.

Jesse breathed in slowly, carrying on. "Please, can't we just—?"

"—Can't *he* just go into palliative care?"

"It's a tiny hospital in a tiny town; they don't have those kinds of resources, and he doesn't have the money for private care, unless you want to—."

"No," he said abruptly. "I am not spending my grandmother's money on a dying man."

In seven years, Jesse had yet to see evidence of what Michael believed the money was worth being spent *on*, but she kept that to herself. "Well, then I don't have any choice."

"When does the job start?" Michael's head slid back as the timing set in.

"Next week. Not a lot of time, I know. But that's how I got it. They can't get anybody more qualified until next season, especially when it's just temporary. But *I* can do it, Michael—especially if I'm up there anyway. I might just have a B.A. but I'm not completely unqualified. I do have some design experience. Not at this level, but *still*."

"I don't know," Michael said warily, "are you sure you're going to be able to handle it?" He waited until his words landed on her, watching her posture deflect and then absorb. "At least you could've given me time to think about it."

"I don't have time! My father doesn't have time and Geoff doesn't —," she shook her head, dejected. "Can't you just have my back—just this once?"

"*Once?* If it wasn't for me—."

"—I know," she said quietly, unable to be to his debt anymore. "I know."

"What about the weather, huh? Do you know what it's like that far up the coast? You sure you can handle the storms?"

Jesse stared at his face, "How far down are you going to reach?"

Michael walked slowly to the far entrance to the room. He plunked on the piano he didn't know how to play and stared intently into space, the long hair of his eyebrows knotted, a canopy to shadow his concern. He was thinking, reviewing, considering the weight of it, carefully, as if this were a Middle East Peace Summit. Jesse watched time stand still as Michael postured. This was his game; her obligation was to play, but having already made the decision gave her the advantage, an unusual sensation she celebrated from the position of quiet observer.

"You are really something," he said finally, looking back at her, "just making a decision like this, as if it doesn't affect anybody else."

"Oh, be realistic. Nothing we do affects anybody else." Jesse got out of the bed and stood naked, pulling a large sweater over her head. It hung down on her shoulders and eclipsed her thighs; her thin body was lost against the massiveness of the bed, the darkness, the fireplace, and could easily have vanished into the hollow of this room without a trace.

"Besides, I don't see how this is different." She stepped into underwear as she searched the

floor for a pair of jeans. “You take off all the time to go play basketball or research some company or—.”

“Well, there *is* a difference. I’m not going off on some useless . . .” he circled his hand around while he searched for words, coming up empty. “What do you think it’s going to change? What’s going to be so different in a few months, huh?”

“You just don’t understand because in a few months nothing will be different for *you*.”

Michael’s face shot up, instantly alert.

“Aw, c’mon, you know what I mean. All the investments, all the projects you look into—nothing ever goes anywhere. You just play until you it gets complicated and then you—.” She paused, putting her hand to her head to stop herself. “Y’know what? I don’t want to do this.”

She tried to contain her frustration as she pulled on a pair of jeans, but the movement tripped her balance, knocking her into a stack of books and onto the worn hardwood floor; another acquisition lost beneath the rubble.

“Argggghh!” she screamed from the floor, “I am so *fed up* with all this junk! Our whole life is like this! Piles of stuff we never use and books we never read—.” She picked up a book and threw it across the room. It fell several feet short of Michael, who remained unmoved by the piano. “When did you last read any of these books? And all those jars with money in them. What are you going to do with it? Are you ever going to use it? What are you *hoarding* all this stuff for?” She stood up and leaned against a dresser, pulling her pants up with one hand as she brushed the hair off her face with the other. “We just seem to suck up the planet, you and I. Don’t you get it? I just want to do something good for someone else—to make a difference to someone else—even if it’s him.”

“Someone other than me, is that it?”

“Michael—.”

“I thought after last summer—.” He stopped, leaving his sentence unfinished. She should know what he was going to say, anyway. She should *know*.

Jesse ran both hands through her hair and they hovered, one on each side of her face, sustaining the pressure. “What last summer made me realize is that life is in motion. Get on or get off. I’m sorry if you don’t get it, but I don’t want to just drift anymore.”

His mouth set and he watched her, waiting for his rebuttal to hit its designated target.

“Look, you have this house and your investments and your games—,” she spun around in a circle, “and all this stuff—and you’re still so *miserable*. I don’t want to be just one more thing in your life that collects dust. Besides, I’m not doing anything for you here; I’ll be back before you even notice I’m gone. And what would I do if I didn’t go?” The thought of it crushed her, and she slumped back against a piece of furniture. “I’d just do what I’ve been doing, and it’s just so damn depressing.”

“Do yours Masters. That’ll give you something to do if you’re so bored with your life.”

“Explain the point of another degree to me, will you? You never even finished one. All that’s going to do is keep me in Vancouver—.” She realized as she spoke that was his intent. “Why can’t you just say it? That you don’t want me to go?”

“I thought I *was*.”

She walked over to where he stood and sat down on the piano bench, taking two of his fingers, holding them loosely in her hand. “I know things have been rough since—.” She looked up into the discussion he no longer wanted to have. “But I . . . I need to do this.” She looked up into his pout. “Are

you telling me to stay?"

He shrugged, wrapping his fingers around hers, unable to commit to his indifference. "How're you going to get there?"

Jesse pressed her forehead into his chest, acknowledging resolution. "Fly, I guess; it won't cost me anything, so . . ."

He looked down at himself, aware of the impact her decision would have on him; he bobbed his pelvis up and down. "What about sex?" He wiggled his furry eyebrows until they spelled out the potentially woeful neglect of his penis—*what about me?!*—in hairy little letters across his forehead, like sex-starved spiders.

Bugs, she thought. They look like bugs.

He waited on the pile of Jesse's mixed emotions until he realized she would not answer.

"Maybe I'll bring your car up in a couple weeks . . ."

"That'd be nice."

He looked down at himself again, arms hanging limply at his sides and back up at Jesse. It was a silent asking and they both understood. He wanted her to dive to her knees and swallow their conversation.

"I'd better go pack," she said instead.