

HIS RIGHT HAND

Also by Mette Ivie Harrison

The Bishop's Wife

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HAND

Mette Ivie Harrison



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*To Neca, David, and Grayson,
who invited me along on their journey*

CHAPTER 1

One Friday night in May, in lieu of our regular couple's date, my husband, Kurt, and I were going to the annual bishopric dinner. Kurt was the bishop of our Mormon ward in Draper, Utah—it was the second year of his five-year calling, so this was the second annual dinner I'd attended.

I wished that I were looking forward to the dinner more, but it was just another one of the tasks of being a bishop's wife. Tasks like playing Mrs. Claus at the annual Christmas dinner, coming up with excuses for Kurt when he was constantly late for family functions, and keeping a vigilant eye out for problems in the ward so I could alert Kurt to them. This dinner was going to be a little awkward no matter what. Kurt and his counselors would probably hint at all kinds of church matters that the wives didn't and couldn't know about, and we women would be left trying to make small talk.

There would be six of us coming to dinner: the first counselor, Tom deRyke, who was in charge of the adults and the Primary, and his wife, Verity; the second counselor, Carl Ashby, in charge of the Young Men and Young Women and the Primary, and his wife, Emma; and of course, Kurt, the bishop, and myself. We were going to Texas Roadhouse to celebrate

surviving another year of performing the hardest jobs in the Mormon church—jobs which, I should mention, are completely unpaid, since we Mormons have a lay clergy. Kurt, Tom, and Carl served in the bishopric because they had been called to do so, and they performed their duties in addition to working full-time jobs to support their families financially.

As a bishop, Kurt was in charge of making sure that the whole ward was staffed, officiating at funerals and weddings, organizing the finances of the ward, conducting annual spiritual wellness interviews for all the youth, and holding church courts for discipline issues. He did a thousand other things, but those were the ones that he couldn't delegate to his counselors. Tom deRyke and Carl Ashby handled a lot of the oversight of meetings, extending callings, girls and boys camp visits, dealing with tithing donations and missionary interviews, among other things. Without them, the job of bishop would have overwhelmed Kurt. They were his right hand in more than one way.

"Ready?" asked Kurt, poking his head into our bedroom.

I was wearing a nice blouse and slacks. "Do you want me to change into a dress?"

Kurt was wearing his standard button-down plaid shirt with khakis. He had told the other members of the bishopric that tonight was to be "business casual," but the problem was, they didn't always listen.

"No, you're fine," he said.

I slid into the passenger seat of Kurt's truck and he drove down the mountain, past the temple and onto the freeway. I thought about the strange juxtaposition of the state prison on the western side of Draper, across the freeway, and the temple on the mountain by our neighborhood. The temple is

the symbol for eternity for Mormons. It is where we are sealed forever as couples and as families. I was sealed to Kurt and our children there.

Kurt and I were unexpectedly early, and as he paced and sent text messages to the counselors who were probably driving and shouldn't be reading them, I observed the families waiting to be seated—husbands and wives with small children who would have been happier at home with macaroni and cheese. But it was so difficult to find babysitters these days. And this might be their only night out. The parents were tense with each other, and their body language showed anger rather than love and caring. Being in an eternal family was supposed to bring more joy to everyday chores, but sometimes it just added more stress.

The deRykes arrived next, and Kurt and I stood to greet them. Verity and I gave each other hugs. The men shook hands. I thought how beautiful Verity was, at nearly seventy. Her hair was perfectly white, and she wore it long, nearly to her waist. She had strong cheekbones that seemed to get better with age. Tom was slightly shorter than she was, which always struck me as unusual.

The waitress came over shortly after six and asked if we wanted to be seated and order appetizers or drinks. Kurt said that we would wait until the rest of the party arrived. He texted Carl Ashby again, then tried him on the phone. No response. We chatted with Tom and Verity about their landscaping project. They were redoing their entire front lawn, adding in rocks and bushes around the edges, and taking out a huge tree in the middle that had died on one side when it was hit by lightning. Ten minutes passed and Kurt tried Carl again.

Finally, I got up and went outside. I said I was going to stretch my legs, but what I really did was call Emma separately to see if I could get her to answer. It worked.

“Hello?”

“Emma, this is Linda Wallheim. We’re at Texas Roadhouse, waiting. Are you on your way?” I tried to be as pleasant as possible, making sure not to make her feel guilty about putting the rest of us out, though that was precisely what she was doing.

“Yes, we’re on our way,” she said in a tight voice. “I’m sorry we’re running a little late.”

I heard a loud beep, as if Emma had pressed a button on her phone. When I heard Carl’s distant voice in the background, I realized Emma probably thought she had hung up already. Carl was saying, “There are some decisions that are simply mine to make as a man and as a husband, and if you’re not going to respect my authority in that role, then I wonder why we ever married in the first place.”

“Oh, God,” Emma said. I suspected she had just realized I was still on the phone. “I’m so sorry about that, Linda,” Emma said in embarrassment. “Carl and I will be there as soon as we can.” Then she hung up.

I felt my chest go heavy. I couldn’t imagine what Carl and Emma had been arguing about, but the tiny snippet I’d heard made me worry that this wasn’t just a throw-away spat. This dinner was going to be even more difficult than I’d expected.

CHAPTER 2

I went back inside the restaurant, and in another ten minutes the Ashbys had arrived and we were seated in a separate, small room, away from the noise of the families in the main area. It was dimly lit and decorated with oversized caricatures of celebrities I probably should have recognized but didn't.

I was watching the Ashbys carefully. Emma was a few years younger than I was, blonde and very petite, which made Carl, who was more average in height, look quite tall. Emma didn't look like she worked out, but was one of those women who fidgeted their way to increased metabolism. Carl had thick, dark eyebrows to match his thick, curly hair, and a square chin, clean shaven now that he'd been called in to the bishopric. He looked like he did work out considerably. Even in his forties, he was very attractive.

I hadn't known either of them before Kurt was called to be bishop, but Kurt had worked with Carl in the Young Men's Presidency and had been impressed at his devotion to the church. Carl was always there, doing whatever he was asked, even the least-liked jobs like the midnight cannery cleanup. He was a passionate speaker when it came to doctrine,

although his opinions were a little black and white for my tastes, and I sometimes felt sorry for Emma, though I'd never noticed her struggling with their relationship before now. They both struck me as rather reserved, to the point of being cold. There was nothing wrong with taking a long time to warm up to other people, but I'd always felt they were holding something back, even with us, their good friends.

After the waitress left us with our menus, Kurt had decided to add a spiritual note to the event by asking each of us to read a scripture. I wished sometimes we could just put aside the church and be friends, but Kurt and his current counselors didn't seem to think that was possible.

Kurt had chosen a passage from the Book of Mormon about the zealous Nephite missionary Ammon (also known for cutting off the arms of those who were trying to steal the king's sheep), who had been visited by an angel and told to repent for his early life full of terrible sins. As a sign of repentance, Ammon and the other sons of Mosiah were called to preach to the Lamanites, a difficult mission since Lamanites were so antagonistic toward the Nephites because of a history of abuses between the two.

Kurt read to us from Alma 17, when Ammon tells King Lamoni, *"Yea, I desire to dwell among this people for a time; yea, and perhaps until the day I die."* When the king offers Ammon one of his daughters to wife, Ammon says, *"Nay, but I will be thy servant."* The message was obvious here, that Kurt and his counselors were servants to the other members of the ward, not above them in any way.

I read part of 1 Corinthians 13: *"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then*

shall I know even as also I am known." I said I liked it because I felt like sometimes we thought we understood everything about this life and the next one, but in my opinion, we were still unable to really comprehend God or heaven or even the true nature of the gospel.

Tom and Verity both quoted from Joseph Smith—History in the Pearl of Great Price. Tom chose to discuss how Joseph Smith said he saw that in many religions the seemingly good feelings of people preaching *"were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions."* Tom added, "I sincerely hope that we are not like this, that we keep disagreements out of our meetings, and remember to have the Spirit of God with us always." Verity quoted the much-used scripture in James that had sent Joseph Smith to the Sacred Grove to pray to know which church to join, which had led to a vision of God and Jesus Christ: *"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not and it shall be given him."* She added that she believed God gave to all of us, men and women, black and white. We had only to ask and the revelation would come. I agreed with her, though I wished sometimes that understanding personal revelation didn't leave so much up to interpretation.

Then Carl read from the Family Proclamation, which he had loaded on his phone's screen: *"All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose. . .*

"The first commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and

wife. We declare that God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife."

The Family Proclamation had been given by the First Presidency of the church when Gordon B. Hinckley was the prophet in 1995. It had quickly become the most commonly quoted piece of Mormon doctrine, as it supposedly explained why gay marriage was impossible in the Mormon temple. God doesn't so much give us our gender as affirm it is real and not a social construct. It is part of our spirit, which was created at the beginning of the universe and will continue to exist in one form or another for the rest of eternity.

It didn't surprise me that Carl had chosen to read the Family Proclamation, however often we had all heard it already. Carl Ashby was a TBM, a True Blue Mormon. The church was everything in his life.

"And Emma?" asked Kurt, since she was silent for a long while after Carl spoke.

Emma's lips thinned and she shook her head. "I just feel a little wrung out today. If you don't mind, I'll just listen and learn."

"Of course," said Kurt. "I hope that you feel better soon." He looked at me, clearly meaning that I should add Emma Ashby to my list of people who would need a friendly, informal "bishop's wife" visit in the future. Kurt didn't know yet that I'd already added Emma to my list, after having overheard that telephone conversation.

After this exchange of spiritual thoughts, the waitress came and we ordered. I got the small Dallas filet, the same thing I

always ordered. You can't beat a good, tender filet, and I liked the one here medium rare.

After all the orders were taken, Kurt began a conversation with Tom and Carl about an upcoming service project and which people in the ward he thought could use help in their yards. That left me to make conversation with the wives. I asked Verity about any suggestions she had for dealing with an empty nest. She and Tom already had grandchildren who were starting college at this point, and had plenty of advice.

"Do you ever feel like you have nothing to do?" I asked.

"Never," said Verity. "That's the wonderful thing about children. Just when you think you're finished raising them, they come back. Or they need you desperately. Don't worry about that part. They don't ever really fully leave you."

That was not reassuring to me. I had enjoyed being a stay-at-home mother, but that didn't mean I wanted my children to remain dependent on me forever. "You never considered getting a job or going back to school?" I asked, thinking back to the waiting college application on my computer.

"Not really. I had plenty of things to fill my time," said Verity.

"What about you, Emma?" I asked. "Your two kids are teens now, too. You must be thinking about what you'll do when they're gone."

But Emma didn't have a chance to answer, because Carl cut in, "A woman's proper place is in the home, whatever her stage in life." He had turned away from the bishopric to speak to us women.

I could see Kurt close his eyes briefly. He was worried where this was headed—he knew I wasn't good at biting my tongue when I disagreed with someone.

“Maybe women should decide for themselves where they belong,” I said, “once they’ve taken care of their responsibilities.”

Carl was silent for a long moment. “We don’t decide for ourselves what is right and wrong,” he said finally. “We look to God for that, surely. Isn’t that what religion is?”

“Of course,” Kurt intervened, “but there is always individual revelation. Not every woman’s path will follow the same route.” There was an apology in the hand patting my shoulder.

“I think women’s paths diverge less often than men’s, though,” said Carl. “Women are meant to be the compensation for a difficult day at work, a comfort after the battle against Satan and the world itself, the softness when everything else is hard.”

Compensation? I looked at the other two women. Verity had a faint, condescending smile on her face. Emma, on the other hand, seemed about ready to explode. I didn’t blame her one bit.

“Am I not soft enough for you, then?” asked Emma. Her voice was hardly audible above the background noises of the restaurant.

“We could all do with improvement,” said Carl, looking at his wife as though he was about to give her a more complete list of the ways in which she could do better.

Kurt said, “Perhaps now is not the time for this.” I could see his discomfort with the situation. Clearly Carl and Emma were still engaged in whatever fight they had been having before they arrived. What did you do in a bishopric when the leaders were the ones who needed the counseling?

But Carl Ashby wasn’t done. “*By divine design,*” he

persevered, *“fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families.”* He was quoting from the Proclamation again. *“Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. That is their sacred duty,”* he spat, staring his wife in the eye. “Fathers provide and mothers nurture.”

It sounded like he was saying that Emma was not doing her divinely appointed job, that she was an unnurturing mother. I was too stunned at this open criticism to say anything. Kurt also seemed unable to speak.

“It must be a comfort to you to know that there is always a scripture you can quote to prove your mastery of any situation,” said Verity deRyke after a moment. I could hear the sharp sarcasm in her tone. Her husband was shaking his head slowly, though he didn’t say a word.

“Wow, look at this dessert menu they have here,” said Kurt, picking up the plastic standing menu advertising giant sundaes. What a ham-fisted attempt to change the subject. “Carl, which one do you want?”

Kurt could have done better. He could have called Carl out, told him to apologize to his wife. He could have gone further and asked for him to repent his arrogance and told him to stop using the scriptures as weapons to launch at other people’s hearts. But he’d taken the coward’s way out, and it made me angry.

I wasn’t going to let Carl off so easily. “We’re all God’s children, here to do His work to serve each other,” I said to him. “The form that service takes surely matters less than the fact that we have a joint purpose.” I watched Emma nod once and set her hands on the table, folded.

But Carl didn't let it go. "We may have a joint purpose, but our roles are entirely different. Women have one path to follow and men have another. We can only find true perfection in fulfilling our roles completely, and accepting that God is the one who chooses who is to have one role and who is to have the other."

I could see Kurt opening his mouth to say something, but it was too late. Emma Ashby was already standing up, placing the cloth napkin carefully on her empty plate.

"Wait!" said Kurt.

She turned to face him. "Excuse me, Bishop," she said.

"Emma," said Carl. "Please sit back down." He sounded calmer now, but he would have needed to act a lot more contrite to convince me he'd be a pleasant dinner companion for the next hour—and Emma had had to listen to him on the car ride down here.

"I can't stay here. I have to go home," Emma called, already on her way to the door.

If she took their car, that would leave Carl to ride with one of us. He had one moment to decide what to do; as far as I could tell, he seemed most likely to just watch her flee.

Kurt finally spoke up. "Go after her, Carl! Take her home and we'll deal with things here."

Carl blinked once, and then did what Kurt suggested.

He took long strides to catch up with her. I caught a glimpse of a flush of red on his face before the door closed behind him, and thought that at last he had figured out he was in the wrong.

"I apologize," said Kurt. "To all of you. This was not the celebration I intended it to be." Verity and Tom were making noises about it not being his fault, but Kurt was looking

specifically at me. He knew I held him responsible for not intervening sooner.

But was it really his fault? I was the one who had overheard their conversation on the phone earlier. I could have warned Kurt there were problems to begin with.

CHAPTER 3

The waitress brought out our food, including what the Ashbys had ordered, hesitating before putting them down at the spots that Kurt indicated.

“We’ll box it up and take it over after,” he said. “Then we can see if there’s still something wrong.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. Did he think an argument like that could be fixed in a matter of minutes? I had no such optimism. Carl criticizing his wife in public like that wasn’t going to be easily repaired. You couldn’t apologize enough for something that arrogant and obnoxious.

As I thought more about it, I realized it wasn’t the first time I had heard Carl take a reactionary position on gender roles. I remembered how unhappy Carl Ashby had been when Kurt had volunteered the bishopric to cook at the Christmas breakfast last year, the first year they were all in the bishopric together. “I don’t know how to cook,” he had said. “I’ll make a mess out of it.”

“That’s half the fun,” said Kurt, and he insisted on it. Carl had refused to wear the apron that Kurt had brought, however, and had, as promised, made a mess of the pancakes. I had wondered if anyone could really be so inept

as to ruin pancakes, or if he had done it on purpose to make a point.

Clearly, gender roles were a strict law for Carl Ashby. And something Emma had done had tweaked him about it.

"Has he mentioned any problems in their marriage before?" I asked. This wasn't gossip. It was an attempt to help.

"No, nothing," said Kurt. I could sense his reluctance to speak about a private topic here. I hoped he and Tom would have a discussion with Carl later on, when they had their next meeting.

"I'm sure they'll work things out," said Tom. "Marriage is the most important thing in the world for all of us."

Did he mean for Mormons, who believe marriage is a necessary ordinance to get into the highest level of heaven, the celestial kingdom? Or did he mean the bishopric specifically?

For all the problems that I have with the church as a patriarchal institution, women have power in unexpected ways, and one of them is as a wife of a member of the bishopric. Men in the Mormon church have to be married in the temple in order to serve in the highest orders of the church. It isn't a man alone who holds the highest priesthood, it is a man-woman unit, a marriage. That is why a wife is always asked if she accepts the calling of her husband into the bishopric. It is one of the few cases in which her vote truly matters. If she is against it, or if the marriage is unsteady, most of the time the calling will be withdrawn. And a divorce for a serving member of the bishopric almost always means an immediate release from the calling.

We ate in silence for a while. Kurt eventually tried to talk about football, a safe topic. But when he noticed me looking at him balefully, he switched the conversation back

to Fourth of July preparations, a topic more likely to involve Verity and me.

It was all a façade, though, and we knew it. There wasn't any real bishopric bonding going on, now that Carl and Emma had left in that state. We were just trying to make it to the end.

Kurt asked me if I wanted dessert, but I declined and excused myself to go to the ladies' room. Verity followed me.

We were the only two women in the ladies' room. I felt old looking at myself in the mirror. There were lines in my face that were recent, and my hair was going salt-and-pepper gray. I knew I shouldn't be vain about it, but I was.

Verity paused in front of the mirror as well. She caught my eye in the glass. "When I see women like Emma Ashby, I think it's too bad we don't know more about Heavenly Mother," she said. "We need a model for how women are to be womanly and still strong, how they use power in a righteous way, even when their husbands are being unrighteous."

If my eyebrows could have flown off my forehead, I think they would have. I'd heard feminists within the church agitate about discussing Heavenly Mother more, even praying to her, but Verity deRyke was not the kind of Mormon I would have thought interested in the topic. "I suppose you're right," I said, wondering if she would say anything else. But she didn't.

After an awkward moment, we each used a stall, then washed our hands and went back out to sit with the men.

As Verity and I sat down again, I was relieved to realize the men were talking about Carl and Emma, which meant they were taking the matter seriously. "Something is deeply bothering Carl," said Tom deRyke, taking a bite of a giant brownie sundae that had arrived while we were gone. "He wouldn't be acting like this otherwise."

"I'll pray about it," Kurt offered.

"I will, too," said Tom, nodding gravely. "Maybe add a fast."

I wasn't happy with this. It wasn't that I thought that fasting and praying for someone couldn't possibly help; I just didn't think that was a cure-all.

WHEN WE GOT home that night, I checked in the living room to find that Samuel had fallen asleep studying for finals. I got him tucked into bed upstairs, then walked over to the Ashbys' place and knocked on the door lightly. The porch light came on first, making me blink rapidly. I held out the food from the restaurant in the takeout boxes, stone cold now. I wondered who would appear on the other side of the door.

I waited for a long minute before Emma opened the door. I looked her over quickly, searching for some sign of abuse, but the only thing I could see was puffy, reddened eyes.

Emma took the leftovers. "I'm sorry about ruining the bishopric dinner," she said hoarsely.

Where was Carl? Was he going to apologize, too, or was he going to act as if it had never happened? I realized Carl reminded me a little of my father, long gone now, and long forgiven, too. But how it used to bother me that the man could never apologize for anything or admit he had done anything wrong. I remembered, when I was a child, my father knocking over a glass of milk and then blaming me for it, forcing me to clean it up. I had struggled so much in my relationship with him, love combined with resentment.

"You don't need to apologize," I told Emma. "I just want to know if I can do something to help."

"We're fine. Really." Her eyes flickered, and I realized that

Carl must be standing behind her. My skin crawled. Had he been there the whole time?

“We’ll talk later, in private,” I told Emma. “You know, everyone has problems. There’s nothing wrong with admitting that and asking for help.”

“No, no. It was just a fuss I made over nothing. I’m embarrassed about it now.” Her cheeks flushed bright red.

“You’re sure you’re fine? You could come over to our house for the night, if you’d like.” I really had a hard time believing she was in any danger from the stuffy, sometimes punctilious Carl, but I could be wrong. I had been wrong before. Too often, when it came to judging marriages in the ward.

“No, that’s not necessary.” She tried to laugh. “Thank you for coming by, though. And thank you for the food. We both appreciate it so much.” Then she closed the door.

I had the feeling she wasn’t very grateful to me at all. She thought I was being nosy, and maybe I was.