

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

WHAT REMAINS OF US

J.H. Knight

Table of Contents

Love's Landscapes.....3
What Remains of Us – Information.....5
What Remains of Us.....6
Author Bio43

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

WHAT REMAINS OF US

By J.H. Knight

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

What Remains of Us, Copyright © 2014 J.H. Knight

Cover Design by Goodreads M/M Romance Group

Photographs from Public Domain Pictures.net

[Sunset](#); [Sunset on the beach](#); [Smooth sunset](#);

[Morning mist background 6](#);

[Blue sunset and boat](#); [Sunset](#); [Sunset 15](#)

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

WHAT REMAINS OF US

By J.H. Knight

Photo Description

Two men in early 20th century clothing are standing outdoors together. One has his arm around the other's shoulder and he's tweaking his mustache.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It's been a year since the earthquake. With San Francisco burning around us, we were sure we'd lost everything. With nothing left to lose, we turned to each other. The world didn't end that day after all, and we've lived every day since rebuilding—together. We're finally ready to tell our story.

Please make the story as sweet or as sexy as feels authentic to you, and feel free to get as history-geeky as you like.

Sincerely,

Vanessa

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: drama, hurt/comfort, in the closet, natural disaster, family

Word Count: 16,138

WHAT REMAINS OF US

By J.H. Knight

Sunday, April 15, 1906

Martin laughed when Roger leaned in with his flask of gin and whispered, "Make it a Tom Collins?" He was already dumping a healthy splash into his own lemonade.

"So you can beat me at croquet?" He put his hand over his glass when Roger tried to tip his flask over it.

"So we can forget how dull and forgettable this garden party is turning out." Roger's tone played between disgruntled and amused.

With another laugh, Martin reminded him, "It's *your* garden party." He knew the party was only supposed to be a small get together of their close friends to show off Roger's new home, but the guest list had gotten away from him. Martin almost felt sorry for him. He watched the ladies cluster together near the tables of refreshments, their long dresses swaying softly with the breeze as it shifted the leaves in the trees. The men mostly gathered at the card tables under the pavilion canopies, betting, chatting, and laughing. A few others were making fools of themselves with lawn tennis. One man stood out, though. Motioning across the yard with his drink in hand, Martin remarked, "Not sure I've seen him around."

"I wondered how long it would take for you to notice him." Roger's answer was full of teasing with only a hint of smugness.

Hearing the friendly jibe, Martin nudged him with his elbow. "Can you blame me?"

With an undignified, but at least hushed snort of laughter, Roger said, "Hardly." They both glanced at the man lying luxuriously in the grass. He wore his dark hair cropped short and parted down the middle, not unlike Martin's own. On the other man, however, it appeared more stylish and, at the same time, nonchalant. Even with his well-manicured mustache—another thing they had in common—and impeccable suit, he seemed casual and at ease where Martin felt buttoned up and starched within an inch of his life.

“From what I’ve gathered,” Roger went on, “he’s a good bit younger than us, twenty-four or thereabouts.” He paused to take another sip from his drink, as if to let the eight-year age difference register. “He’s from somewhere back east, the south, maybe, but he doesn’t have much of an accent.” Martin took the information in with a thoughtful nod. Before he could ask the question most on his mind, Roger added, “He’s one of our sorts of fellows. If the rumors are true, at least.” He could only mean the sort of fellow who liked other fellows. “Should simplify things, I would think.”

Roger had answered his unspoken question. Martin shot him a quick grin and said, “Or complicate them beyond measure.”

“I can’t decide if you’re shy or simply uninterested.” Martin stood over him, casting a shadow from the high sun.

“Neither,” he said, glancing up at Martin. “And, it doesn’t matter.” He smiled as he sat up in the grass. “I’m doing it all with a dignified air, as if this is exactly what we’re supposed to be doing. If you wait long enough, others will plop themselves down on the grass too.”

Martin laughed and took a seat next to him, tugging the legs of his trousers up as he did it.

“See? I’ve already got one following my lead.” With another broad smile, he extended his hand to Martin. “Hugh Jones.”

Setting his glass down beside himself and planting it securely, he turned to Hugh and introduced himself, shaking his hand. “Martin Conrad. Pleased to meet you.” In the comfortable silence that followed, the two of them watched as a small group of children ran across their path, chasing a ball with a stick. “Roger tells me you’re new in the area.”

Hugh nodded, a smile lingering in his eyes. “Yes, from Virginia.”

“Far from home.”

Hugh huffed a laugh, not quite a happy sound. “Not far enough.”

Martin leaned back on his elbows and shifted to face Hugh better. “Sounds like there’s a story there.”

“Not much of one, I assure you. Or if it is, it’s been told a hundred times.” Hugh picked at the blades of grass, plucking them with his fingertips and rolling them together before dropping them and gathering more. He seemed

thoughtful and Martin didn't want to intrude. Before long, Hugh explained, "I just wanted to get out from under the old family money and make something of myself. It didn't feel possible so close to home. Mother holds to a firm belief that the best thing for me is to marry and start a family, that it's the natural course. Father feels I should go into business with him, make a small fortune, and then marry and start a family." He shrugged and glanced at Martin. "I'm all for making my own small fortune, but I'm not as comfortable with the rest of it."

With a laugh, Martin nudged him. "At least you're comfortable with your own small fortune." Hugh smiled warmly at him, but didn't say anything else. To break the silence, Martin asked, "Have you set up house yet, or are you still looking for a place to settle down?"

"I'm at The Palace for the moment, still trying to decide if I want to build or buy something closer to town." The Palace was a grand hotel, the finest in the area. With that simple statement, Martin understood exactly how affluent Hugh must be. His own family wasn't exactly bad off, but theirs was ill-gotten new money. Martin and his father had worked hard to legitimize it, but the stain of their history still lingered around the edges.

Martin forced a grin and tried to shove aside their class differences. "Rubbing shoulders with royalty, then?"

The look Hugh gave him was pleasant, warm, but a hint of embarrassment flitted across his features. "Father booked my trip west," he admitted, tugging rather sharply at the grass. A moment later, two ladies across the yard shook out an old blanket and placed it on the lawn before kneeling on it. Hugh's mood lightened then. He pointed in their direction and grinned at Martin. "See?"

"I'm glad we didn't wager on it."

Hugh leaned in, only slightly, and met Martin's eyes. "I'm not a betting man," he said quietly, but he held Martin's gaze just long enough for Martin's pulse to quicken.

"Neither am I." Martin's voice had gotten husky, a nervous energy skittering to the surface. His throat felt oddly dry, and he wanted to reach for his drink, at the same time not wanting to look away from Hugh.

Before he could say anything else, Hugh broke the spell with a sigh and another glance across the picnic. "I do enjoy a friendly game of billiards from time to time, though." It wasn't quite an invitation, but it seemed like one, dangling there mid-conversation. Martin was about to suggest a place they

might go for a game, but Hugh looked at him again, smiling that bright, crooked grin which was already ensnaring Martin. "If you're up for it, perhaps tomorrow evening you could stop by the hotel for a game?"

Hugh's tone wasn't weighted with suggestion. Nothing he said, no look in his eye, could make Martin think anything else was on offer, but still Martin was hopeful. Alarmingly hopeful, to be honest. He was about to accept the invitation when he remembered what day it was. "Unfortunately, tomorrow's no good." He caught the flash of disappointment in Hugh's expression and rushed to explain. "Family dinner every Monday. I'd have to be on my deathbed to get out of it."

Hugh looked uncertain, but he nodded in understanding. "Another time, then." He smiled as he said it, but the warmth had left his eyes. Martin nearly panicked.

"I'm free Tuesday evening, if—"

"Yes," Hugh cut him off cheerfully. "Tuesday, then."

Martin couldn't stop his own grin, glad Hugh seemed as eager as he felt. "Tuesday." He said the word again, as if sealing a promise, his heart already stuttering with anticipation.

Martin had only asked the serving girl to bring him a small snifter of brandy. The meal was finished, or near enough, and there was no need to stand on formalities with his family. He'd forgotten that his younger sister, Emily, had recently taken up with a few women—*sisters*, they liked to be called—in the temperance movement. She was nearly twenty-one, and some days Martin wished he could marry her off to an unsuspecting young man.

"If you had seen what I have seen, Brother, you might not be so dismissive." She'd been telling him for the better part of five minutes how his finger of alcohol was all that was wrong with the world. "Women and children beaten bloody at the hands of those who should protect and treasure them," she said with a disgusted huff. "All because of that *demon liquor*."

Martin rolled his eyes, he couldn't help himself. "Yes, and, sweet Sister, what you don't realize is that not every drunkard would beat his wife, and not every man who beats his wife is a drunkard. All I'm saying is pick your cause. Is it to protect women and children? If so, then drink is not your enemy." As the only man in his family, sitting at a table surrounded by his four sisters and his

mother, he could have been severely outmatched in this debate. Thankfully, only Emily had taken up that particular cause.

"I agree with Martin," Kitty said. She was a handful of a different sort. Already a firebrand at seventeen, her passion was for medicine and suffrage. Truth be told, she was his favorite. "If a man is a brute, he doesn't need to be inebriated to show his true colors. And, likewise, if he's naturally kind at heart, then drinking isn't going to make him less so."

Martin lifted his glass and beamed at Kitty. "Well said, Kitten."

Their youngest sister, Molly, spoke then. Only five, but always ready to let her own views be known. "I agree too," she said, rising up on her knees to make herself taller. "If Martin says it's all right, then it's all right."

"Of course Kitty would agree with you. She always does." Emily crossed her arms over her chest. "And Molly is too young to understand." She looked at Evelyn, the quietest of them all, for some support. "Don't you have anything to say, Eve?" Her tone was more accusing than pleading.

Evelyn looked up from her plate. She had been pushing the remaining bits of food around with her fork since before the debate began. It would take her a moment, Martin knew, to choose her words. Not because she was dimwitted, but quite the opposite. She was likely the smartest person he knew, man or woman.

Evelyn took a small sip from her water glass and then dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin. Martin couldn't guess what she was going to say, but it was clear on her face she was trying to decide the best way to state her feelings without giving anyone offense. She was barely nineteen, but he thought her soul might be ancient, deep, and rich with wisdom.

"A piece of cake doesn't make someone fat or lazy," she said slowly, as if feeling the weight of her words on her tongue. "Money doesn't make someone greedy." Martin couldn't help smiling when he saw where she was going. "And liquor doesn't make a man into a devil. I worry for the world when we claim to be controlled by that which we should be in control of." Martin thought she was done, but she added, "I would be slow to trust anyone who feels they should have the right to tell us what we can and cannot do with our own bodies, Emily." As if to illustrate her point, she reached for Martin's glass and took a sip from it. He'd never seen her drink before. Judging by the way her face reddened and the surprised cough she let slip, it was the first time in her life.

Even Emily laughed with the rest of the family as Evelyn waved her hand in front of her mouth.

His mother, who had been silent up until then, said, "Eve, darling, I think you might want to start with a nice glass of wine before you try to keep up with your brother." Evelyn smiled at her, but her cheeks were rosy and Martin had to wonder if one sip was enough to go to her head. She seemed as bold and bright as Kitty in that moment. Martin realized he didn't have a favorite after all. He loved them all for many different reasons.

As if she sensed her moment to change the subject, his mother asked, "Martin, how was the party yesterday? Marjorie tells me there was quite a crowd."

All but Emily seemed grateful for the new topic. Martin leaned back in his chair as Molly climbed down from her own seat and came to him, wanting to sit on his lap. He lifted her up and kissed her blonde curls before answering. "It was lovely, quite a turnout." He started to trot his leg, bouncing Molly on his knee as she giggled. She had been a surprise, born after three miscarriages when his mother thought she was past childbearing age. Molly was the last gift their father had given them and Martin cherished her. "There were some new faces as well. Met a man by the name of Hugh Jones from Virginia, seems like a good sort."

Kitty cast him a questioning glance at the mention of Hugh. He wondered if there had been some hint in his tone to tell her what Martin really thought of him. Kitty was the only one in the family who knew his dark secret, having stumbled across him one evening nearly a year ago when he was entertaining someone in the garden. It had been awkward and terrifying, but Kitty had only looked at him in stunned silence as his acquaintance made a hasty retreat. She seemed puzzled at first and then, when recognition set in, she looked at the ground before lifting her gaze to his. She swore she'd never tell anyone. She actually apologized for frightening him. He moved into his own house the following month. One of four sisters had reacted as best as he could hope, but he didn't want to press his luck with the others.

"Virginia, did you say?" His mother's voice pulled him out of his thoughts and he nodded in answer. "I wonder if he knows the Montgomery family."

Martin couldn't care less if Hugh knew the Queen of England, let alone the Montgomery family, but he said, "I'll ask him tomorrow. We're getting together for a bite to eat and a round of billiards."

Kitty's look was less questioning and more knowing then. She smiled at him, and his secret felt less dark.

Martin was early, as was his habit when he was nervous or looking forward to something. Tonight he was both.

The clatter of horse hooves coupled with the rumble of motor cars greeted him as he turned down Market Street. The heat had been rising steadily all afternoon, but he chose to linger outside once he reached The Palace. The sun was beginning to set and the sky was turning a brilliant pink as he watched the cable cars make their way up and down the road. Men, women, and children passed in front of him, and a newsboy stood on the street corner trying to peddle the last of his papers for the day. There was nothing special about the afternoon, nothing remarkable at all, except he was going to see Hugh in a few minutes. He couldn't have explained it to anyone. In fact, he barely understood it himself, but Hugh woke up a different kind of desire in him. It went beyond the simple animal lusts he'd indulged in with other men. And, for the first time in his life, he didn't feel the cold specter of disapproval standing behind him whispering, *this is unnatural*. Wanting to spend time with Hugh felt like the most natural thing in the world.

He took out his pocket watch for the fourth time and let out a disappointed sigh. He was still nearly fifteen minutes early. After another moment passed, he decided to go into the hotel, laughing to himself as he thought, *I'm beginning to feel like a vagrant*.

They were to meet in the Palm Court, but Martin didn't expect Hugh to be there yet. He took a moment, as he always did when he visited The Palace, to enjoy the grandeur of the hotel. From the marble floors, thick carpets, and electric lighting throughout, to the large palm trees and vaulted ceilings, it was a lovely space. Greenery surrounded clusters of tables and chairs, lending an intimate feel for small gatherings, despite the vastness of the room.

Due to the early hour, they had agreed upon casual attire, but Martin couldn't help wondering if the decision had been a mistake. Even in the public rooms, most everyone dressed as if they were meeting international dignitaries.

To his shock and delight, Hugh was already waiting for him. He had slicked his hair back and wore a dark blue sack coat and matching trousers with a

rather busy-looking checkered waistcoat. Martin smiled when he saw him, struck again by how similar their styles seemed to be. Hugh wore a winged collar and bow tie whereas Martin had opted for a high collar and a simple four-in-hand knotted tie, but otherwise they were looking quite the pair. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

Hugh jumped, obviously startled at the sound of Martin's voice. "Not at all," he said as he slid his own watch back into his pocket. "Looks like we're both running early." The smile Martin got was enough to knock him over. It dazzled him, in the same pure way the white-capped sea in a storm or the sun rising over a mountaintop could dazzle him.

It took him far too long to respond as a rush of heat and curiosity and maybe even yearning charged through him. "Better than one of us running early and the other running late."

With a laugh, Hugh said, "I couldn't agree more." He glanced around the room and then looked at Martin again. "I was thinking we could start with a light supper? Unless you've already eaten, that is."

"Actually, I'm famished, so there's no need for it to be light," Martin joked. There were plenty of choices for dining in the area, some of the best in the city at the hotel itself. "The American, or...?"

"I was thinking the Men's Grill Room, if that's all right." Hugh placed a hand on Martin's shoulder, already guiding him towards the lobby. The Men's Grill Room at The Palace had a reputation, even overseas, for being superb. "I could eat their porterhouse morning, noon, and night and not tire of it."

"Excellent," Martin agreed, trying to ignore the way his blood heated at the feel of Hugh's palm still resting comfortably on his shoulder.

Martin was grateful Hugh wasn't a betting man. He would have cleaned Martin's pockets at the billiards table. They'd enjoyed a pleasant dinner, chatted long and happily. As it turned out, Hugh did know the Montgomery family, but only in passing. When they'd lingered far too long in the dining room, Hugh suggested they move their conversation into the game room. From there, Hugh proceeded to trounce him in no less than five out of six games. It was quite a sight, and they both shared a few laughs over it.

"Are you as good at cards as you are at billiards?" Martin asked before taking a sip of port.

Hugh flashed him a devilish grin. "Better."

With a boisterous laugh, Martin told him, "It's a good thing you're an honorable man. I'd say your fortune would already be made twice over if you were ever to use your skills for ill."

The crowd from earlier had started to thin and the cleaning staff lingered on the edges of the room. It had been a lovely evening, and was turning into a lovely night. Especially when Hugh caught his eye and said, "I'm not certain how honorable I am, sometimes."

He couldn't expect a better opening than that, but Martin was still unsure. "I think everyone is entitled to a few vices."

Hugh flashed him an uncertain grin in response. After a short pause, he nodded toward the staff around them. "I think they'd like to be rid of us."

It was well after midnight, Martin realized. "I suppose we should let them get on with things." He wasn't sure if the game room stayed open all hours or if they were only accommodating Hugh—and by extension, Hugh's father. Rather than question it, Martin picked up his bowler hat and followed Hugh toward the lobby.

Hugh was silent for a moment as they walked together. Martin was starting to feel a bit let down, not wanting the night to end, despite the late hour. Before they reached the door, Hugh asked, "Do you live far? I didn't think to ask..."

"Not at all." Martin was smiling still, wondering if it would be appropriate to set another date for later in the week. "I'm only around the corner, actually, over on Howard Street. A pleasant stroll from here."

As if something had been decided, Hugh grinned. "Excellent." He nodded politely to the doorman who had pulled the heavy door open for them. "I'll join you then. I could use some fresh air, I think."

A shroud of humidity covered them as they stepped out into the nearly abandoned streets. Hugh tugged lightly at his collar, almost fidgety next to Martin. He could understand the restlessness because he felt much the same. It was no cooler than it had been earlier in the evening and now the night air was thick and strangely tense, as if the whole world were holding its breath with Martin, waiting to see what would come of this friendship.

As they turned a corner, a baker's wagon made its way toward Market Street. It nearly collided with an automobile as it slowly trotted through the

intersection. Hugh motioned to the car whose driver was furiously honking its horn. "Have you got one?"

"A motor car?" Martin laughed. "No, I haven't seen the need for one, really. The trollies do me just fine and I rarely need to go farther than they do."

"True." Hugh nodded. He was walking close to Martin, their shoulders bumping casually as they strolled to the next block. "Though, the idea of a nice long drive down the coast with the sun shining and the wind in my face is appealing sometimes. It rings of freedom."

Thinking for a moment, Martin had to agree. It did sound like a lovely idea. Especially when he entertained the thought of running his hand over Hugh's thigh while they cruised down the coastline. Or the hidden spots they could discover together along the way. He let his mind drift to an isolated sand dune somewhere, tucked away from the world, his arm around Hugh's shoulder, the two of them kissing, embracing. He had to clear his throat before he could speak again. "Well, now you've got me considering a motor car." They both laughed softly, Martin grateful that Hugh couldn't read his thoughts.

When they came to his own small house, nestled between two others, Martin motioned towards it. "This is me," he said before adding, "I'd invite you in, but I'm afraid it's going to be stifling in there. I don't have a live-in, so the house has been closed all day." The shutters were pulled and not a single light was on. The house he'd come to love for its anonymity and freedom now seemed like a lonely little shell.

Hugh glanced at him and smiled. "I don't mind it being stuffy. This is nothing compared to summer in Virginia." Martin considered that and was about to start up the front steps when Hugh suggested, "We could take another turn around the neighborhood, though, if you like."

Their interaction was starting to feel like a dance. One of them advancing and then the other, nearly meeting in the middle before one of them stepped back, the other following. Martin enjoyed it, the way he felt unsure of his footing, but secure with his partner. "I'd like that very much." Martin smiled and walked past his front stoop.

They took another turn and then another, chatting quietly as the city slept around them. A few cars and carts were starting to make their way here and there, but for the most part, it was as if they were alone in the world. "Tell me more about your sisters," Hugh said, adding, "Kitty sounds like she's got some claws."

Martin couldn't help but laugh and agree. "She does. Father always called her his wild kitten because she would never do as she was told, always asking questions, always curious. I think she paved the way for the rest of them, even though she's younger than Emily and Evelyn." He smiled fondly at the thought of them, his girls. "I think he gave up on turning them into proper ladies shortly after Kitty learned to speak." He didn't mention that his own mother was far from proper or that Kitty came by it naturally.

"Is she planning to take over the world yet?"

"Not yet." Martin thought Eve was more suited for world domination than Kitty. No one would see it coming, but before they knew it, they would be converted to her way of thinking without a single gun being fired. "She's got her eye set on medical school."

"Nursing?"

"*Surgeon*," Martin said with some emphasis.

The look on Hugh's face was almost comical. His brows shot up toward his hairline as he asked, "I... Is that done? I'd think nursing or a... woman's doctor maybe, but surgery?"

Martin couldn't help his laugh as he gently clapped Hugh on the back in mock comfort. "I can't say if it's been done before, but if any woman can, Kitty will."

"A kitten with claws, indeed." They both laughed again before Hugh went on to say, "I'm not entirely comfortable with the idea of my mother driving, let alone cutting into someone with a scalpel."

"I was thinking of inviting you to family dinner next week, but on second thought, you might not survive the night if you said something like that."

Hugh paused to pull his cigarette case from his inside pocket, offering one to Martin who declined with a smile. "I promise to keep my opinions to myself, should I ever meet them." He spoke around the bare end of his cigarette as he struck a match and lit up.

"Impossible." Martin laughed again as they started down the street once more. "Emily will watch you like a hawk to see if you take so much as a thimble of port, Kitty will want to know where you stand on women's voting rights, and Eve will observe quietly until you say something that requires correction."

With a grin, Hugh asked, "And Molly?"

"She's your safest bet. She's trying to talk us into riding lessons. Get her started on horses and she's yours eternally."

They continued their walk for far longer than Martin had realized. He told Hugh about his grandfather who'd moved to San Francisco during the gold rush and made a sizable sum for himself—how he'd lost a great deal of it on bad investments, how his own father had managed to recover a good bit and keep the family going. He left out the fact that their real money was from his mother's side of the family and that it was useful, but tainted. There was a somber mood over them when Martin talked of his father's death, nearly five years ago now, Molly having just been born when he died. "Surrogate father as well as brother, then?" Hugh asked, a sad smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Essentially, yes. I'm afraid I might be spoiling her rotten, though. Those riding lessons she's trying to talk us into? She's getting a pony for her birthday in June."

Hugh beamed at him. "She's got you wrapped around her little finger, doesn't she?"

"It's a sad state of affairs," Martin joked with a furrowed brow, getting another laugh from Hugh. When he looked up again, he realized they were back in front of The Palace. "Looks like we're back where we started."

Hugh seemed surprised, as if he'd been paying even less attention to their surroundings than Martin had. He pulled his watch out and looked at it, whistling when he saw the time. "I've kept you out all night. It's after five in the morning." Martin had guessed at the time when the gas street lamps went out, but he'd been enjoying himself too much to mention it.

The sky was an inky blue. The sun hadn't quite risen, but it was clearly near dawn, the birds singing a greeting to it. "I think it's the other way around. I've talked your ear off." They'd spent hours together and there hadn't been a single break in conversation. They were comfortable in each other's company and that seemed more important than any other attraction he felt for Hugh.

Meeting his eye, Hugh said, "This is the most fun I've had in a long time."

Martin couldn't have stopped his smile if he'd wanted to. "For me as well." After a brief pause he said, "Perhaps later this week if—" Martin felt a faint

rolling under his feet, as if the world had shrugged in complaint. At first, he wondered if he were more tired than he realized, if it was some kind of dizzy spell, but then the sense of familiarity struck him. He'd felt his share of tremors. It seemed to pass quickly and he couldn't help but laugh at the look on Hugh's face.

"What on earth was that?" Hugh asked with wide eyes. He looked around them, as if he might find the source of the disturbance.

Before Martin could tease him, there was another, much stronger shift. The windows of The Palace standing behind them started to rattle. A sound like a locomotive on broken tracks roared all around them and Martin reached for Hugh, pulling him out toward the street. It couldn't have lasted a minute, but it seemed endless as they tried to keep their balance and fight wave after wave of heaving under them. The ground shook and rumbled as people in all states of undress rushed out of the surrounding buildings. Mothers in dressing gowns with their hair spilling over their shoulders carried confused children on their hips. Women in half-laced corsets and petticoats, men in pajamas and bare feet... everyone was filing out into the predawn San Francisco morning. Martin watched a dog huddle under a wagon and wondered if they shouldn't join him.

Before it was over, he could hear the distinct sounds of brick and mortar collapsing, small crashes, glass shattering.

When it finally ended, Hugh looked at him, clearly astonished, and said softly, "That was an earthquake."

Time seemed to pass slowly, everyone looking on in quiet shock. Martin felt as if he were dreaming, moving in a dazed wonder as he and Hugh stepped over a crack in the sidewalk. There were noises of all kinds, but it was as if he couldn't hear anything, only the wild beating of his heart. He hadn't realized at first where they were headed, but Hugh was guiding him down the path they took earlier that night, toward Martin's home.

He stood frozen in front of the building. It had tipped to one side, looking like a drunk leaning on his pal for relief as they left a saloon together. The roof had caved in and a pile of bricks covered the door. "I've got to get to Nob Hill." Just like that, he was waking up from the dream and into a living nightmare as reality crashed into him. If his home were falling down on itself, what condition would he find his mother's in? Were the girls safe and unharmed, or had one of them—*all* of them?—been hurt?

Before he could follow that tract any further, he heard a muffled cry nearby. Hugh seemed to hear it as well. He stood straighter and turned his head, as if trying to find it. "There," he said, pointing toward one of the neighbors—Lancaster, if Martin remembered right. They were a family of three. Husband, wife, infant son, and a maid who always seemed cheerful.

Hugh stripped off his coat and left it in a heap on the cracked ground. He was jerking his cufflinks free, rolling his sleeves as they followed the thumping sounds and cries for help.

"We're here!" a voice called from behind a fallen wall. Martin could hear the baby crying, a sharp scream rising above the busted rafters. "Is there anyone there? We need assistance!" Such an understatement might have been amusing in other circumstances.

Without a second glance, Hugh was already climbing over the debris and making his way closer. "I think if we can get some of this moved we might be able to get them out."

They worked for long minutes, hauling and shoving things aside. A few other men came to help and soon they were able to wrench one last piece of lumber from its place and push a door open. Mr. Lancaster stood behind his wife and gently guided her through before he passed their son to her. He turned then and offered a hand to the maid to see her safely outside. He was the last one to exit, just as a housecat darted out and disappeared into the chaos. Barely a second later, the house groaned and then collapsed more fully. The structure was reduced to nothing more than a pile of cracked brick and splintered wood.

Even as the sun began to rise around them, time seemed to stand still. Their day was one excavation after another. They were making their way north as quickly as they could, but every step seemed to bring another call for help.

Then the fires began. At first, it was only a sound like a clap of thunder, and then the smell of smoke carried on the air, a faceless threat that seemed to be following them. Before long, though, they could see their real enemy bearing down on them. It seemed hungry, a ravenous, spitting adversary that devoured everything in its path.

"This can't be real," Hugh said as they stood for a moment, watching as the flames jumped and contorted, spreading faster than Martin could have ever imagined. "How can this be happening?"

In a quiet, steady voice, Martin answered him. "I don't know how, but it *is* real and it *is* happening." He reached for Hugh's hand and gave a light tug, drawing his attention from the fire swiftly scourging the street behind them.

People were starting to run as the air grew heavy with smoke.

As they hastily continued north, Martin saw something he wished he hadn't. From a collapsed building, off to their right, he saw someone reaching out a window that no longer faced forward, but up. The hand was moving frantically, waving a strip of fabric. With another glance behind them, already able to feel the heat from the blaze only a few yards away, Martin muttered a curse under his breath.

Hugh stopped when he did, but didn't seem to understand why.

"There," Martin told him, pointing toward the building. "Someone's in there."

After less than a heartbeat of consideration and his own look at the fire crawling up their path, Hugh shouted to some of the people passing by, "Stop! We've got to get them out!" He and Martin were already running to the building, but a few others followed them as well.

The climb felt like a mountain expedition. Bricks and other bits of clutter shifted under their feet as they clawed their way to the top. By the time they reached the window where Martin had seen the makeshift flag, a small child stood there, clearly having been pushed out by someone inside.

The men had made a line up the side and Martin handed the child down to the one behind him, the group passing and carrying the child to safety. Hugh leaned close and shouted through the broken window, "How many?"

Martin could see a woman trapped in the dark ruins, her face streaked with tears, her hair a tangle of brown curls. "Six more!" she called back. "And my husband, but I don't think he's..." She began to cry then, but that didn't stop her from pushing another child out the window.

Hugh took the toddler and passed him down the line while Martin took another. He paused briefly when the building closest to them took spark. Smoke swirled through the air as the flames hissed and crackled around it. The fire was going to eat them alive too if they didn't hurry on.

The next child, a small girl who made Martin think painfully of Molly, clung to her mother as the woman tried to push her out. Her terrorized screams lifted over the din surrounding them as Hugh slipped his hand under her and

yanked her from her mother's arms. The rescue was unceremonious and might have looked unkind, but they both knew what the real cruelty would have been.

Two more children were passed up to them and carried quickly down. The last one was an older girl, maybe twelve if Martin had to guess. Rather than cry, she had a look of grim determination on her face as they pulled a few bricks free, trying to make a space large enough for her. When she was out, she looked down at her mother. "Find your brothers and sisters," her mother told her. "Find them and find your aunt; she'll take care of you." The girl nodded and reached a shaky hand to Martin. "I love you. Tell them I love them, always," her mother said at last. Her expression was one of torment, as if she knew this was goodbye and couldn't bring herself to say it. Her daughter turned away from her with a solemn nod, away from one hell and very near another.

The smoke was unbearable by then and one side of the remains they were standing on had caught fire as well. Orange and yellow ribbons of heat were popping, clawing their way up toward them, looking as if they were reaching for Hugh. Martin felt a wave of panic when he heard Hugh say to the woman still inside, "Now you."

He meant to dig her out as well. He meant to stand there, with his fingers bleeding and rip her from the building. Martin thought he might die trying, thought they both might.

"There's no room for me," she said with a shake to her head.

That didn't deter Hugh. He looked at Martin with his chin jutting out defiantly, as if waiting for an argument. Fearless or driven mad, Martin couldn't guess, but whatever was going through Hugh's mind in that moment, Martin couldn't bring himself to stop him. He hoped someone, a mile or so up the road, would do the same for his girls if they didn't make it there in time.

Smoke was starting to billow up from the inside, spilling out around the woman who was now wedged through the opening. The fire was smoldering somewhere deep within the remains but Hugh was as resolute as ever to pull her out to safety.

Martin noticed that every brick they touched seemed to be growing warmer. Their actions were becoming frantic as the blaze heated their skin. The bright glow was nearly surrounding them now. It felt angry, maniacal, as if it planned to punish them for stealing so many of its victims.

Sweat poured into Martin's eyes and he couldn't breathe, only choke and sputter and cough, but still they tried to dig the stranger out.

He could hear rubble shifting behind him, but Martin was afraid to look. Then he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder before a hulk of a man suddenly pulled him back. "There's no saving her," he shouted, giving Martin a push before he reached for Hugh.

Hugh seemed to ignore him until the man jerked him away from the opening. "You'll get yourselves cooked if you don't get out of here!"

He could see that Hugh wanted to resist, but the fire had gotten closer than either of them had realized. They were nearly surrounded with only one small path still available to them. Hugh's face twisted as if in pain, but he didn't say a word and neither of them could look at the woman they were abandoning as they picked their way clumsily down the mound.

When they reached solid ground again, they could hear her scream, but neither of them looked back.

They continued to Nob Hill, Martin looking neither right nor left.

"This is madness," Hugh whispered, raking a bloodied hand through his hair. All day, panic had seemed to rise and fall like a tide with every aftershock or explosion, but now they walked in disbelieving calm. People staggered together in quiet clusters, some crying, some looking straight ahead as the occasional breeze would blow smoke toward them, like a spiteful reminder of where they'd just been. When Martin didn't respond, Hugh glanced at him, his brow furrowed in concern. "I'm sure they're all right. We'll find them, all of them."

Martin could only offer a curt nod. His jaw was set, making his teeth ache and his head hurt, but he was afraid to loosen his hold on himself, fearing what he might say or think. He wanted to cry out, to rage, to shake his fist at the unforgiving sky, but he only plodded along, putting one foot in front of the other.

Every now and then, a horse and cart would pass them, filled with people, some injured, and others looking just as Hugh and Martin most likely did: battered and broken, but still carrying on.

They had both shed their waistcoats and shirts at some point earlier and were now trudging through the stifling heat in nothing but their undershirts and trousers, their suspenders hanging down about their waists. In a vague way, Martin was aware of how odd it was to see so many people on the city streets,

disheveled and half-dressed, but it also seemed fitting. Their beautiful city had been torn apart, and apparently, so had her citizens.

They passed one collapsed shamble after another, but the fire was mercifully behind them. Martin allowed himself to hope it wouldn't reach as far as Nob Hill.

The crowd that had been with them closer to Market Street seemed to have thinned somewhat. Many people had turned other directions, possibly seeking their own loved ones or a safe harbor from the terror they'd left behind.

Despite his exhaustion, Martin found himself walking faster, his long strides eating each step eagerly. Courage and fear warred inside him, but he focused all his attention on the one goal of getting there and finding them all safe.

Forcing himself up another rise, Martin lifted his head at the sound of his name being shouted in the most familiar and lovely voice he'd ever heard. His heart leapt in his chest when he looked up and saw Kitty standing on a corner with Molly on her hip. "Martin, is that you?" she called out, walking closer. The house behind her looked like a giant had crushed it under its feet. Only the iron fencing around it seemed to be intact. She herself looked like an avenging angel, as if she had wrought all this destruction in a righteous fury. Her dark hair was braided and falling over her shoulder, her white corset undone over her underthings. She looked magnificent.

Martin and Hugh began to run then and when he reached Kitty, he barreled into her with both his arms securely around her and Molly. She laughed when he nearly knocked her off her feet, but he couldn't bring himself to let go. "You're safe," he whispered into her hair, kissing her and Molly again and again.

"Yes, we're safe." She laughed again before pushing his shoulder. "But you're about to kill us both. Martin, I can't *breathe*."

He pulled back to give her some air, but he kept his hands on her bare shoulders, looking at her, trying to prove to himself that this was real, she was there, not a ghost, not his imagination. Kitty put a hand on his cheek and smiled at him. He sniffled as he turned his face into her palm and kissed her there too. He hadn't realized he'd shed a few tears of relief until she laughed again and said, "One little earthquake and you're as misty as an old woman."

Martin gave her a teasing shove. "Mother and the girls? Are they all right as well?"

With a nod, Kitty answered him, "Yes, all well and safe." She looked at Hugh then. Martin hadn't exactly forgotten he was there. He'd been grateful for Hugh's quiet strength all day and awed by the fact that Hugh stayed with him rather than make his way for the ferries like so many others had.

Before they could make a formal introduction, Hugh looked closely at Molly and said, "Looks like you've had a run-in with something." Martin had been so overwhelmed with happiness he hadn't even noticed the small bandage over Molly's left eye. There was a bit of blood in her blonde hair.

"A picture frame hit me on the head." Molly wasn't at all shy around new people. She said the words as if she were mentally cursing the picture frame.

Martin laughed and took her from Kitty. "Does it hurt?" he asked gently, giving her a light bounce on his hip.

"A little," she admitted with a nod.

Kitty, brazen as ever, looped her arm through Hugh's. "Looks like you've got a few battle scars of your own."

Martin really looked at Hugh for maybe the first time since the quake. His hands were bleeding, which he'd noticed earlier, but one of Hugh's fingernails had ripped off as well. *That must have hurt like the devil*, he thought with sympathy. His own hands were similarly injured, but not nearly as bad. Scratches littered Hugh's face and arms under the layer of ash and soot clinging to his skin. Hugh's hair was falling limply over his brown eyes and his mustache was drooping on either side of his lips. Martin wondered if he looked as rough.

"I'm Kitty, by the way."

Hugh somehow managed to grin at her. "I thought you might be," he said kindly. "Martin has told me so much about you, I feel as though I already know you."

"Well, you're ahead of me, then. I only know your name and that you're from Virginia." She shot Martin a teasing look and then added to Hugh, "I'm assuming you're Hugh Jones, since my brother has decided to let us flounder along without an introduction."

"You assume correctly." When Hugh laughed and smiled at her, when the worry lines on his face seemed to smooth out, Martin thought Kitty really ought to be a doctor. Her presence alone had a healing affect. With some formal training, she might be able to bring a man back from the dead.

“Were you able to get a telegram off to your family?” Kitty asked him. Martin knew if she were far from home when a disaster struck, her first priority would be getting word to them.

Hugh's brow creased again, and Martin wondered if it hadn't occurred to him until then to send a message to his parents. “Not yet,” Hugh responded. “Things are chaotic and I'd be surprised if the lines are still open.” He cleared his throat and smiled at her again. “I'll get word to them as soon as possible. I'd hate for them to worry.” The words sounded hollow, more like a dutiful response than genuine regard, and Martin wondered why. Kitty shot him a glance, and he knew she had caught it as well. It wasn't the time or place for that conversation, though, so Martin let it go.

They were making their way back toward the house when Martin asked, “How bad is the damage?”

Kitty shrugged. “Not as bad as some, but worse than others. It's hard to tell. When I left to take a look around, Mother was still working with the servants to pull a few useful things from the house. We've got an aid station of sorts set up and one of the neighborhood children was able to squeeze into an opening to the kitchen and retrieve some food.” She laughed then. “He's quite the little industry lord. His charge is one quarter of anything he could retrieve.”

“Let me guess, young Richard from down the block?”

“Would anyone else be so mercenary?” Her tone was teasing rather than condemning. “He has four other boys working under him, doing the same thing at other houses. When this is all over, his little gang will be better off than the governor.”

Hugh looked concerned and said, “Best warn them when you see them. There's a shoot-to-kill order for looters.”

Kitty's face changed in a heartbeat from amused to outraged to devastated. “Do you really think they would shoot *children*?”

“Without mercy were their exact words.” Hugh's expression was grim.

That seemed to stoke a different kind of fire. Kitty's eyes narrowed and her lips turned down into a thin frown. “It's times like these when mercy is what we need most of all.” She was winding herself up, Martin could tell. “Looting, thievery, taking advantage of people in crisis... those things should be punished, of course, but not like that.”

Martin could understand her feelings. On some level, he agreed, but he also understood the importance of taking tight control from the beginning, making a

hard point with a few lawless men early on to prevent total anarchy. To calm her, he said, "If they're truly scavenging for homeowners, with consent, then they're not in danger, but we'll spread the word just the same."

Kitty only nodded in response. Martin was trying to change the subject when he asked, "Did the staff make it out unscathed?" Theirs wasn't the grandest home on the hill by far, but they did employ two cleaning girls, a serving girl, a cook, a girl for the laundry, an old man by the name of Willis and his orphaned grandson for the horses and carriage. While they weren't his first thought, he was concerned for their safety as well.

Kitty sighed, concern knitting her brow. "All but Deloris. Her leg was crushed as she tried to get out, but I was able to splint it and staunch the bleeding. She's in a good deal of pain, but I don't think she's in any real danger." Kitty's medical knowledge was self-taught from dozens of books and articles she'd read, but she was likely the closest thing to a nurse they had available.

Martin winced at her words, but he said, "It could've been much worse." He and Hugh had seen much worse with their own eyes, but he didn't tell Kitty that.

"You have no idea." Kitty's tone was grave. "A wall fell right on Molly's bed. If she'd been in it at the time..." He could see a small shudder run over her. Hugh laid a hand over hers and gave it a squeeze.

"Why weren't you in bed?" Martin asked Molly, kissing her head again with a quiet prayer of thanks.

"I was chasing Princess Penelope. He'd run away and I was trying to find him." *Prince* Penelope would have been a slightly more appropriate title, but no one in the family had been able to convince Molly he needed a boy's name.

At the questioning look on Hugh's face, Martin said, "Her cat." God bless that damned cat. He had the strangest personality of any animal Martin had ever encountered. He would hiss and spit at strangers like a guard dog trapped in a feline's body, but he was always tender and careful with Molly. "Did you find him?" Martin asked finally as they turned a corner, nearly at the house.

"He found me," Molly explained. "I was hiding when the house started to shake, and he came and got me." Martin made a mental note to find a tuna for Princess Penelope as soon as possible.

Martin's heart nearly stopped when they got to the house. A large portion of it had caved in and a column slanted over the front door. He found his mother climbing through the small opening as a bit of plaster fell near her feet. She had a bundle of linen in one hand and a candlestick in the other. "Mother!" he shouted, exasperated. When he put Molly down and rushed forward to help her, she smiled at him as if she'd just seen him on the street after a day of shopping.

"Martin, darling," She lifted up on her toes to kiss his cheek even as he was trying to tug her away from the house. "Would you stop pulling on me," she scolded him before passing the things in her hands to him. "Take these over to Emily. I need to go back in."

In times of crisis, men are likely to say and do things they would regret later. Martin was no different. "Mother, I absolutely forbid you to go in there again." His tone was firm, deadly serious. He cursed himself when she laughed at him.

"You *forbid* me, Martin? *Forbid*? I'm going to assume you've got some kind of head injury and we'll never speak of this again."

He could hear Hugh snort a laugh from behind him, and Kitty said in mock-whisper, "Martin forgets that forbidding Mother is the only way to ensure she'll do whatever she pleases."

Before Martin could say another word, he heard a shifting and scraping sound from the doorway. A boy crawled through before turning and dragging a large basket behind him. "Mrs. Conrad," he said excitedly. "Look what all I've gotten this time."

She turned from her son and went down in a crouch to sift through the contents. "This is excellent, Richard." The boy was obviously pleased with himself when she praised him. "Take the linens to Eve and the food stuff to Emily, then pick your reward." Richard got to his feet and started to drag the basket to the yard. "Remember, if you choose any picture frames, carefully remove the photographs and give them to Eve before you add them to your pile." He nodded and went on his way.

"You're actually encouraging him to do this?" Martin asked her, his tone carrying disapproval with each word.

She arched her brow at him and planted her hands on her hips. "Of course I'm encouraging him. That child is more like a ferret than a boy. He's been able to squeeze himself into spaces and pull out food, wine... he even found a carafe

of milk.” With her own sigh of exasperation she said, “Richard is the only reason we’ve had anything to eat or drink in the last several hours and he’s more than earned his fee.”

“Don’t you think it’s... it’s... *dishonorable* to take advantage of people in times like this?”

Rolling her eyes, she told him, “I couldn’t care less about his honor right now. And, frankly, I think it would be far more dishonorable to let him put himself in harm’s way on our account and then not reward him for his efforts.”

“Yes, but this isn’t a reward, it’s a *toll* he’s exacting from you.”

She waved her hand, as if she were trying to shake his words from the air. “What difference does it make, Martin? People are hurt and hungry and he is helping us take care of them.”

Martin couldn’t bring himself to argue further with her and, honestly, she did have a point. Desperate times truly did call for desperate measures. “So be it, Mother, but would you at least”—he had to stop himself before going on, consider his words wisely—“allow us to go in and survey the damage while you take a much needed rest and tend to some of the things that require your attention outside the house?” He’d found them safe enough, but his mother seemed committed to being buried alive inside the house now that he was there.

He could see her considering her answer before she said, “I don’t need a rest, but if it will make you feel better, I’ll stay out here for a time, all right?”

Genuine gratitude welled in him. “Thank you, Mother.”

Her smile was placating and Martin felt like a frustrated child. When she noticed Hugh standing behind Martin, she asked, “Did you collect a refugee on your way here?”

“I think it’s safe to call all of us refugees at this point, Mother.” He cleared his throat and looked at Hugh. “This is my mother, Martha Conrad.” Martin was grateful for the gleeful look of amusement on Hugh’s face. “Mother, this is Hugh Jones, of Virginia.”

When Hugh nodded and went to take her hand, Martha said, “Quite the welcome you’ve gotten from our fair city.” Even standing in nothing but a dressing gown and slip with her hair pulled back in a rough knot, Martin was struck by how dignified she managed to look. Hugh laughed and then flinched when Martha took his hand and turned it in her own. “Go with Kitty and get your wounds bandaged. Seems you boys have quite a tale to tell.”

Not a tale Martin felt like repeating, and he was sure Hugh felt the same. "I think it would be best if we went in first, see what can be done," Hugh said amiably.

"I think it would be best if you didn't argue with me." Martha was polite but firm.

God, she was a formidable woman. How could Martin forget so easily?

Kitty laughed loudly at the expression on Hugh's face and pulled him along. "If you're shocked now, you should have seen her earlier when she was fresh."

As it turned out, they all took a rest and cleaned up. Their injuries were mostly scrapes and bruises from digging through the remnants of buildings, but Kitty tended to both of them with gentle ease, as if she'd been doing it all her life. She noted that neither of them seemed in need of stitches, confirmed that neither of them had hit their heads, and when she was done with Martin, she kissed his forehead and smiled at him. He decided then that she was going to go to medical school if he had to establish one himself.

After having a bite to eat by late afternoon, Hugh and Martin stood inside the house. Shafts of light filtered through broken windows and cracked walls, highlighting dust motes on the air. Furniture had toppled over and parts of the floor were broken beneath their feet. A large chandelier had crashed down from the ceiling in the center of the main room. They could hear beams creaking as plaster fell around them. "We'd best make this the last trip," Hugh said. "I think it's getting ready to collapse."

Martin felt the last trip should have been hours ago, but his mother had insisted on pulling as much out as possible. He nodded and said, "Mother's photo album," as he walked through the room toward a toppled shelf where the book had once been. It seemed foolish, standing there in the wreckage that had been his family home, to dig for a book of pictures, but all else was lost, it seemed. He decided the best thing he could do would be to retrieve her memories.

Thankfully, the leather-bound book hadn't been trapped under the heavy shelf. Instead, it lay on the ground as if it had tossed itself out in the hopes of being found. Several of the other books had been collected earlier in the day, and Martin was grateful he'd found this one so easily.

"Where does your mother keep her important papers?" Hugh asked from his side as Martin stooped to pick up the album.

“Important papers?” he repeated stupidly, not understanding.

Hugh smiled at him. “Insurance records, bank books; things like that.”

How could he have been so thoughtless? Their home was ruined, the fires still weren't out down the hill, and Martin had never thought for a moment about something so practical. Instead he clung to a book of pictures. “My father's study. If we can get to it.”

Hugh stepped back and let Martin lead them through the rubble.

As a child, when his father would sit at his desk reading a paper or making notes, Martin would hide near his father's feet and play with his wooden train. The memory sent a pang of hurt through him when he saw the desk tilted to one side, the chair his father used to occupy crushed from a fallen beam.

Funny how such a small thing—a broken chair—could bring up so many emotions for a grown man. Martin was suddenly aware of all they had lost and all they came very near to losing. His entire family could have been taken from him in one crushing blow and there wouldn't have been a damn thing he could do about it. It was getting hard to breathe.

Hugh was sifting through some files in a drawer. Martin must have made a sound because Hugh glanced up and looked at him curiously. “All right?”

Martin nodded and clenched his jaw, turning away from Hugh. He was afraid he was about to have some sort of breakdown, and he certainly didn't want Hugh looking at him when it happened.

Suddenly there was a bandaged hand on his shoulder and Hugh was at his side, turning Martin to face him. “Take a slow breath, Martin,” he said softly when he met Martin's eye. With another nod, Martin tried to do as he was told, but the exhale came out a shuddering sob. This was too much. Too much devastation, too much kindness, too much closeness. It was all more than he could bear.

“I just can't help but wonder...” Martin whispered, his voice frayed and paper-thin. “What remains of us?”

Hugh shushed him softly and pulled him into an embrace. Not the passionate kind Martin had imagined earlier in the night, a lifetime ago. Instead, the sort a father might give his son, or a dear friend might offer when delivering terrible news. Hugh held him, fiercely strong, and said quietly,

“Everyone is all right, Martin. There’s nothing in this house that can’t be replaced.”

Hugh made a valid point. Nothing in this shambles mattered anymore when he compared it to his sisters and his mother being alive, unharmed even. They had lost their father years earlier. There was no reason for the pain of it to be hitting him now, as if it were fresh and new, not a hollow point inside himself he’d let close over. “I know,” Martin murmured, swallowing down his emotions. Hugh’s arms loosened, but didn’t fall away. “I was just a little... overwhelmed for a moment.” He actually managed a broken laugh at that. So many understatements for one day.

Hugh drew back enough to press their foreheads together and ran his damaged hand through Martin’s hair. “I think we’ve all earned a little of that today.” Yes, Hugh was younger than him, but in that moment he seemed much stronger and wiser to Martin than a man of twenty-four ought to be. Martin could only huff a breath, something close to another laugh, at Hugh’s words. Then Hugh asked him, “Are you collected now? I don’t need to try and find some smelling salts, do I?”

The wonderful bastard was actually making fun of him. Martin did laugh then, a genuine, healthy one. He pushed Hugh back and said through unshed tears, “I can see you’ll fit in quite well with the rest of my family.”

With a broad grin, Hugh said, “Good, I was already hoping your mother would adopt me.”

They managed to find some of the more important documents including the bank books, his parents’ marriage certificate—which Martin took more for sentimental reasons than sensible ones—and the insurance policies. He also found a small stash of money his mother kept. It wasn’t much, barely a hundred dollars, but it was better than the seventeen he had in his own pockets.

They stepped carefully back to the door and crawled out into the early evening.

“I was beginning to wonder if I should send someone in after you,” Martha said as Hugh handed her a folder containing the papers. She smiled in thanks to him, but when Martin handed her the album with photos and both family trees in it, she—for the first time in Martin’s life—burst into tears and threw her arms around his neck. “Thank you, you sweet boy,” she whispered into his ear.

The pragmatic items they'd recovered would be far more useful in the coming months, Martin was sure, but he didn't have to guess which she would have chosen if she'd had to.

The sun dipped down behind the hills to the west as Evelyn started putting together crude shelters. Kitty seemed perfectly comfortable running around in her unmentionables, but the rest of the girls had found more clothing for themselves. Emily served food to the people who had collected on the lawn, neighbors and their employees alike. Everyone had rallied together, and many had brought some of their own food to share. With half the city burning, no one dared to light a cook fire, but they all enjoyed cold meats, cheese, bread, and fruit. Mostly, they enjoyed the security that came with company.

Feeling his exhaustion deep in his bones, Martin turned to his mother and said, "We've got to get you and the girls out of the city." The idea of losing them to some new horror after having found them spared sent a chill through Martin.

He should have known it wouldn't be easy to convince her. She narrowed her eyes, the way she always did when she was about to lay down the law. "You've forgotten who you're dealing with, Son. I might have married a Conrad, but my father was a Robber Baron and my own dear mother was a dance hall girl in cahoots with the Sydney Ducks when she was still a child. My family robbed and pillaged this Barbary Coast. You think I'm going to run from her now, simply because she's decided to exact her revenge?"

The shameful history of his mother's family and fortune wasn't news to him. It was well known, something she almost took pride in. His own father had nearly been disowned when he fell in love and married her. Still, he could feel the flush of embarrassment creep up his face knowing Hugh had heard every word. Martin cleared his throat and collected himself. "It's not running, Mother, and this isn't a battle you're retreating from."

"And this isn't a topic for debate." As simply as that, the conversation was closed. Martin knew, come what may, no matter what adversities lay ahead, his mother had dug her heels in, prepared to stay until the bitter end.

His sigh was heavy and carried with it all of his irritation at her stubbornness. "Would you at least consent to me finding safe passage for the girls? They could go to New York and stay with your sister-in-law." He nearly reminded her that—with his father gone—he was technically the head of the family, but he knew if he did, he'd have his mother arguing with him on one side and Kitty on the other. God help him if Evelyn overheard as well.

Martha's laugh was unladylike, bordering on scornful. "Not even Emily would be allowed over her threshold." His aunt wasn't the most forward-thinking woman in their family. In fact, she was likely the most backward. In her eyes, children should be seen and not heard, and the only duty a woman had was to her husband and family. They need only be educated well enough to run a home, and they were certainly not supposed to have opinions or be informed about what she referred to as men's business. If Kitty were forced to share a roof with her, one of them would surely not survive. It would be a shame for Kitty's dreams of medical school to end with her in shackles. "Though," Martha continued, "if she's ever thrown together with my girls, I only pray I'm there to see it."

Damn her, he was laughing with her.

Hugh was sitting on his other side. Martin felt him lean close before he whispered, "Let's go take a look over the ridge. I'll be falling asleep soon if I don't move."

As they walked carefully down the block and into the street where they would have a better view, Hugh said, "Your mother is quite a character."

"Is that the word for it?" Martin asked with a laugh. He loved her dearly, but he didn't find any joy in her rebellious nature like Kitty or even Evelyn did.

"Every one of us has some sordid detail in our history. My own family built their lives on the backs of slaves and fought in the Civil War—as *Confederates*. After the war, they were involved in all sorts of underhanded dealings to keep their lands and such." Martin turned to look at him as Hugh spoke. "At least your mother is honest about it. It's not a dirty secret she'd rather disappear."

When they turned the corner, they found several other people there as well, watching the city burn. The flames that had seemed so menacing earlier now looked oddly beautiful as they lashed against the darkening night. How could something so brilliant be so deadly? Nothing else seemed to matter when he looked at it.

Martin's stomach churned as he remembered the woman they'd had to leave to the fires. He knew it was the only option, but he didn't imagine he'd ever forgive himself. When he glanced at Hugh and saw the tortured expression on his face, Martin wondered if he was thinking the same thing.

Staring wide-eyed at the wasteland below, Hugh said, "I can't think of a single word that could possibly cover this, to convey..."

“Horrific.” Martin said flatly, looking out at the ruined city.

“Is that possibly enough? One word isn’t enough to sum this up.”

“I’m not sure anything will ever be enough again.”

After a pause, Hugh turned to him and said softly, “If we survived that, I think we can survive anything.”

“I think maybe you’re right.”

They watched in silence for another moment before turning back toward what was left of his family’s home.

Most of the people they’d shared dinner with had gone back to their own lawns, or crawled into one of the shelters that had sprung up all around the block. It wasn’t even eight, but Martin was ready to drop. Then he remembered he and Hugh hadn’t slept at all the night before. Small wonder he was so tired. He didn’t imagine anyone would sleep well tonight, but he thought they should at least try.

Eve quietly showed them to a small shelter she’d put together. Martin couldn’t call it a tent. He thought of it as a child’s play fort. Eve had draped blankets and sheets over a table, one side pulled back so they could climb under. But a soft pile of clothing and bedding waited for them to rest on and that seemed like more than enough. So many people would be sleeping under the stars tonight, or in their own little lean-tos, Martin was grateful they had more than the hard earth as a mattress. He could understand his mother’s fondness for Richard then, and he begrudgingly—silently—agreed the boy’s fee had been fair after all.

Martin climbed in without a thought and started to fluff an actual pillow. He was so pleased by the sight of it, it took him a moment to notice Hugh was still standing outside—as if uncertain where he belonged. “There’s plenty of room if you don’t mind sharing.”

He could only see Hugh’s feet from where he sat, but one moved and then the other, then he took a step back before crouching down to look at Martin. “Are you sure? I can find a spot to rest my head somewhere...”

“I’ll be asleep so fast, I won’t notice who or what is in here with me.” That statement probably wasn’t true. Martin had allowed himself a few moments of weakness after he’d met Hugh, wondering what it would be like to share a bed with him. Of course, the circumstances in his fantasies were quite different, but he was certain, even if he did manage to sleep, some part of him would be more

than aware of Hugh next to him, occupying the same space, the simple intimacy of sleeping—*only* sleeping—next to him.

Hugh was halfway inside when he said, “If you’re sure,” as he kicked off his shoes.

They shuffled and shifted for a moment as they both got comfortable. Martin pulled one of the blankets out from under himself and threw it across both of them. They were cloaked in darkness inside the thin fabric walls, but Martin could still feel Hugh next to him. As they tried to find a better position, their arms or legs would touch briefly, and it would send a small shock of want through Martin, which he tried to ignore. Rumors were one thing and even his own intuition about Hugh could be false. Moreover, given the circumstances of the day, he thought it would be best if he pushed all else aside. *Sleep is what I need.* That was what they both needed, wasn’t it?

As Martin tried to force himself into rest, Hugh whispered in the darkness, “This reminds me of hunting trips I took when I was a boy.”

Martin turned on his side to face Hugh, despite the fact that he could only see an ambiguous outline. “You’ve had some god-awful excursions, then.”

Hugh’s laugh was quiet, but long, and Martin could feel him turn over as well. The warmth from his body was tangible, and Martin thought he must be closer than he had been a moment ago. “I only meant the sleeping outdoors part,” Hugh said finally and they both laughed again. “I’ll admit, the company here is much better, though.”

Unsure what to say to that, Martin asked, “Do you hunt often?”

“Not really, no. You?”

Martin grimaced, glad Hugh couldn’t see it. “I enjoy duck hunting occasionally, but I’m a terrible shot, truth be told.”

“I’m a fair shot, but I like to observe the animals, rather than shoot them.”

He agreed with a nod, forgetting Hugh couldn’t see him. Martin laughed a beat later and whispered, “You should see Evelyn with a rifle. She’s a crack shot. Father used to say it was a pity she’d been born a girl.”

“I bet your mother was quick to defend her sex.”

Martin grinned. “You’ve already got the measure of her.”

“I’d have to be deaf *and* blind not to.” Hugh’s tone was hushed, but cheerful and Martin thought Hugh must really like her.

“What about your family? You don’t speak about them much...”

Martin could hear him sigh, as if he wasn’t sure where to begin. Finally, Hugh said, “My family is all manners and decorum, Southern gentility. If something happens, even a grave tragedy, it’s simply never mentioned.”

“That sounds...” Horrible was the only word Martin could find, so he didn’t finish his thought.

“It’s suffocating,” Hugh murmured. The humor of a moment earlier had disappeared and left in its place a weighted silence. After a minute passed, Martin struggling to find something to fill the void, Hugh finally said, “I had a sister. Well, I still do, somewhere.”

He was afraid to ask, but Martin couldn’t help himself. “What happened to her?”

Hugh took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m sorry, I really shouldn’t have brought this up, I...”

Martin reached a hand to him and found his chest. It was a gesture of comfort and nothing more. “In case you haven’t noticed, Mother tends to put everything, even our tragedies, out on display.”

Hugh slid his hand up over Martin’s and grasped it gently. Martin could feel the bandage around the tip of his finger, the scabs and callouses from the day. “She was... violated. She had been taking a walk around the grounds and someone, some drifter, crossed her path, abused her, took advantage, and left her broken and sobbing.” Martin gasped, thinking of one of his own sisters. The idea filled him with grief and rage as Hugh went on. “Mother cleaned Helen up herself and told everyone she was ill, confined to her room. By the time the cuts and bruises had healed, it was clear she was with child.” Martin was afraid to ask what happened to her after that. He didn’t have to. Hugh said, “Within days, Mother had a trunk packed full of Helen’s things. She told everyone in town that Helen was going north to help a distant relative who had fallen on hard times, taken ill, something of that nature. I haven’t seen her since.”

“How long?” Martin hated asking, but the question was out before he could stop it.

“Six years.” Hugh said quietly. “I got a letter a few months ago, found it in the post before my parents had gone through it. She said she missed me and hoped I would find it in myself to *forgive* her and talk to our parents on her behalf, to get them to let her come home again. She said she knew she had

brought shame on all of us, but hoped that enough time had passed.” Hugh was silent for a moment, but then he went on bitterly. “She actually thought that *I* was ashamed of her.” He made a small sound, gruff and breathy, and when he spoke again his voice was an angry rasp. “When I confronted my father and insisted that he bring her home at once, he took the letter from me, threw it into the fireplace, and told me I was never to bring it up again.”

Martin was dumbstruck for a moment. He tried to imagine what his own mother would do. He thought, even if one of their girls had willingly fallen into bed with a man, she might parade the child around town and tell everyone in earshot how wonderful it was to be blessed with a grandchild without the inconvenience of another man underfoot.

“I like your family.” Hugh whispered the words as if they were an admission of guilt.

Martha’s willfulness, blunt honesty, and disregard for societal constraints were suddenly more palatable, even welcome. Martin wanted to crawl outside and find her, tell her what an amazing, wonderful creature she was. But Hugh was still holding his hand. Martin didn’t know what to tell him, so instead he pressed closer, only meaning to offer some human contact, some security that might remind Hugh he wasn’t alone.

Martin thought he might have drifted off to sleep until he felt a warm rush of breath against his face as Hugh slid his leg closer. Martin followed him, just like earlier, a thousand years ago when they did their dance on the city streets, but there was no retreat this time. Each of them moved silently closer until their bodies pressed together. He could hear hushed conversations outside, occasional laughter, and even weeping. When he leaned in and found Hugh’s lips in a tender kiss, he knew it was the biggest risk he’d ever taken, but possibly the most worthwhile.

To Martin’s great relief, Hugh met him with a sigh full of longing. Martin parted his lips, enjoying the feel of Hugh’s mustache as it brushed against his unshaven cheek. Their tongues touched briefly, slick and warm, and then Martin closed his teeth on Hugh’s bottom lip, a light teasing touch.

When they broke apart, Martin whispered, “This could be the end of us.” They both knew what getting caught would mean, but Martin couldn’t forgive himself if he didn’t throw the warning out into the open.

Hugh murmured, “Let them arrest us, I don’t care anymore.” That was all the encouragement Martin needed, but Hugh added, “The entire world seems to be ending and if it does, I won’t go to my grave with another regret.”

Martin bit back a groan as Hugh slid his rough palm under his shirt, pulling it free from the waist of his trousers. They mirrored each other for a moment, stripping down silently in the warm confines of their tent, and when they were both free of their clothing, naked and grinding together, Martin had to bury his face against Hugh's chest to keep from crying out.

Their touches were almost sacred. Every stroke of a fingertip, every brush of lips on skin, resonated with life, with gratitude. It made Martin's blood sing and his heart race, his skin warm. Even the smell of smoke and death and disaster clinging to both of them only served as a shining reminder that they were alive, they were well, and they were together.

Their movements were clumsy and messy, even comical at times. In the end, there was nothing more than ragged breathing as they slicked against each other, hips thrusting in a heavy rhythm until their climax was tearing through them. Hugh muttered Martin's name as he spilled hotly between them, and Martin caught the words in a hard kiss that brought him over the edge as well. They clung to one another, panting, as breathy laughter filled the small space.

Life, freedom, love. After they'd cleaned up and dressed again, falling asleep with only their hands clasped together, Martin understood why men were willing to die for it all, to pay so dearly a cost.

June 5, 1907

"No peeking," Hugh teased as he guided Emily up the walkway. Martin was directly behind them, ushering Evelyn and Kitty with Molly on his hip. Martha had refused to cover her eyes, having been to the building site more times than he could count. She had insisted on overseeing much of the work, starting with location, then design, and finally the actual building of her new home.

It was considerably smaller than their house on Nob Hill had been, but it had every modern convenience. Martha had decided not to hire any new staff and decreed this one would be much easier to maintain for the one cleaning girl who remained after the fires. Their cook, Pamela, and Willis's grandson Robin were the only others who stayed on, most having left the city shortly after the disaster. Willis had died from an outbreak of pneumonia in the refugee camps, and the family took Robin in since he was alone in the world after that. Thankfully, the boy was quick to learn and eager to help maintain the two new automobiles as well as Molly's pony, which she got for her seventh birthday, only a year later than Martin had planned.

“If you don’t let me open my eyes, I might be forced to kill you, Martin,” Kitty told him with a laugh as they carefully edged their way up the path.

He set Molly down and said to Kitty, “You can open your eyes now, ingrate.” He kissed her cheek to take any sting out of his words.

Expecting a retort or a jab from Kitty’s elbow into his ribs, Martin was surprised when she only said, “It’s lovely.”

She was right. Smaller, maybe, but Martin thought their new home was much more pleasing to the eye. They had planted saplings in the yard and every border was bursting with flowers. The wraparound porch had been Hugh’s suggestion.

The upper floor had a room for each of the girls and a master suite for Martha, complete with her own bath. The lower floor had two rooms for Hugh and Martin with adjoining doors. That had been Kitty’s idea, bless her. Once construction was finished on Hugh’s home, they would decide how to proceed with the living arrangements, but for the time being the ‘guest rooms’ were theirs and theirs alone.

Their night on Nob Hill had proved to be a short one. Before morning came, the fires were still wreaking havoc, ravaging the city streets. As the neighborhood was evacuated, they packed as much into their carriage as it would hold, and the family made their way to Golden Gate Park, as did many others that night.

The city burned for two more days and, by the end, it was almost entirely destroyed. From the ashes, Hugh and Martin had been building their life together, one step at a time.

Molly was still at Martin’s side, as she had been for most of the last year. “Can we go in now, Martin?” she asked, smiling up at him with a hand raised to shield her eyes from the sun.

“Of course you can,” he told her, leaning down to give her a peck on the forehead. She ran to the front steps and then disappeared inside.

Dropping back next to Martin, Hugh asked, “How long do you suppose it will take for the orange trees to give us anything?”

The others were milling on the lawn, looking around their new yard, all but Molly and Evelyn who were exploring inside. “At least a few years, I imagine.”

Their dogs, strays they had picked up from the camps, were loping along next to them as they went around to the back yard. The animals—Empress

Melanie and Queen Madeline, Molly had named them—had proved to be loyal and gentle. They took to their names like the good boys they were. Princess Penelope tolerated them the same way he tolerated the rest of the family.

“Hugh, sweetheart,” Martha called as she rounded the corner. She had, in fact, adopted Hugh in her own way, treating him just as she treated Martin. “Are you remembering to take your photographs?”

Hugh looked down at the small Brownie camera in his hand as if he'd forgotten it. “No, but I will now.” His bashful smile was met with a tsk and a roll of Martha's eyes.

“Hand it here,” she said, not unkindly, but in a tone that dismissed all arguments. She passed Martin her cigarette as Hugh handed off the camera to her. “You two go over there, near the trees.”

Doing as they were told, Hugh and Martin, along with the dogs, stood in front of the greenery just off the path that was still bare from construction. Hugh slung his arm over Martin's shoulder, but as Martha was snapping the picture, he reached around and tweaked Martin's mustache. “There, perfect,” he said with a laugh.

Martin shot him a playfully annoyed look and as Martha told them to pose for another, he whispered, “Just can't keep your hands off me, can you?”

Hugh straightened his shoulders, as if he were trying to look dignified. “Nonsense,” he said with a laugh. “I only put up with you because you make me look good.”

It was hard for either of them to be serious after that, but with a stern warning from Martha, they finally managed a few pictures that were sure to come out well.

Later that night, as the house slept, Hugh and Martin lay tangled together in Martin's bed. They had made love in all manner of places over the last several months, braving the potential consequences with the kind of stubborn courage born in peril. They had learned they were both, in their own ways, gambling men after all. When the stakes were high enough, at any rate.

Hugh was resting his head against Martin's shoulder, sliding his bare feet against Martin's. “You know what surprises me?” he whispered as Martin fingered his hair in gentle strokes.

“Me, I hope.”

Hugh laughed and lifted his head. "Yes, that too." He brushed their lips together. "But... is this all better than you'd imagined? Better than you'd hoped for?"

Sliding his hand down Hugh's cheek, Martin cupped his jaw lightly, his thumb brushing against Hugh's cheekbone. "You are," he whispered, kissing him again. "You're better than I'd ever dared to hope for."

With a mischievous look in his eye, Hugh climbed on top of him, pressing himself close, grinning into another kiss. "That's because I'm better than you deserve."

Martin's bark of laughter was loud enough to wake the family, but he didn't care. He ran his palm down Hugh's back, seemingly tender until he smacked him on the ass. "And *that's* better than you deserve."

Hugh yelped, but he was laughing as well. "I'm not sure I care for your style of seduction." He kissed Martin again, but then he added, "You're getting brutish in your old age."

Growling as he locked his arms around Hugh, Martin turned him onto his back and pressed him into the bed. "I'll show you what a brute this old man can be," he teased as Hugh's laugh turned breathy and heated.

They were done talking for the night.

Epilogue

It would be another year, but Hugh would find Helen and they would take her in. They would never learn who adopted the child she bore or what became of him.

Kitty would become a doctor, though it would take her over a decade, fighting each day for her place in the world. She would marry a man five years her junior, love him, and lose him too soon when the world was torn apart by war.

Evelyn would become engrossed in politics and help change the face of women's rights for the entire nation. She would also marry, but hers would be an analytical union with its own kind of devotion.

Emily would find she had a taste for the liquor she so sourly condemned. Her battle would be with drink for most of her life, all or nothing.

Molly would treat Hugh and Martin like her fathers and when she was old enough to understand their true relationship, she would feel the same about it as she felt about everything else: if Martin thinks it's all right, then it's all right.

His mother would die, but she would die old and happy, knowing her children were each in their own way rebels and troublemakers, just as she had been.

Hugh would make his fortune, investing in healthy businesses as the city sprang back to life once more, only to lose it all in the market crash of '29 when the world was pitched headlong into a depression. Martin would keep them afloat for a time and Hugh's ingenuity would sustain them. They would rise and fall and rise again, and they would do it all together. They would squabble, they would mourn, they would cry, and they would laugh. There would be tragedies big and small, and there would be love. Always love.

The End

Author Bio

J.H. Knight has been writing love stories since the second grade. When she's not catering to the whims of her imaginary friends (whom she sometimes refers to as "characters"), she's usually found driving her four children all over the planet, working on a school project, or saying things like "Not until your homework is done!"

A Pacific Northwest native, she loves the outdoors in every season whether she's in the city, the mountains, or building sloppy sandcastles with her kids on the beach. On her best days, she's cuddled up with a good book, and on her worst days she's tearing her hair out as she tries to decide if her sentence needs a comma or a semi-colon. She gratefully bows down in awe of editors, since she usually gets it wrong.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Blog](#) | [Goodreads](#)