

## In the Breaking

I walked hastily down the hallway of the old private school, my dreaded cowboy boots clacking along the hard cement floor. The only reason I was wearing cowboy boots was as a request of my twenty-one year old sister, even then, only for her wedding. As I turned the corner into what was once my sixth-grade classroom, I saw Allison and her new husband standing alone at the front of the room. As I entered, I saw her dressed in her cream-colored wedding gown, lace and silk cascading around her. Jeremiah was wearing his black jeans, button up shirt, and cowboy vest, tie and hat. They were cramming sandwiches into each other's mouths. I looked at Jeremiah inquisitively. "Where the fuck is your family? They have been gone for too long; the reception should have started an hour ago. My family and all of Allison's guests have been waiting for the rest of the wedding party. This is unacceptable."

Jeremiah looked at me incredulously. I'm not sure which offended him more: my tone or the use of curse words which he would never use in his life. I doubt he is used to women being as abrasive and outspoken as I usually am. He stammered out something about them going to get food. After he got the first sentence out, he straightened and I could hear a little snark in his voice as he gained a bit more confidence to push back. He said that it wasn't his problem that they were late.

"Not your problem? It's your family; you bet it's your problem! You better call them or something, and tell them to get their asses here, quick!"

I couldn't help thinking all of this would have been prevented if the wedding had been planned better. I turned and left the room before I caused more damage. I know myself well enough to know that when I am angry, I often say things I will later regret. Allison started crying. Too late. I could feel the weight of what just happened drop into the pit of my stomach. I could hear her sobs as I walked across the hall back into the decorated gymnasium where my parents, siblings and at least a hundred other guests were waiting. I think my uncle walked into the classroom only moments after I had left in attempts to smooth things over. I know that things with Jeremiah and his family could have been handled differently on my part. I don't regret confronting him, or even what I had said. Perhaps it shouldn't have been in that moment, or in front of my sister. I just didn't know what else to do. The wedding was a mess and every single person in my family was stressed to their limit. On top of the chaos of the event, my heart was breaking for my sister and the man that she had chosen to marry and the life that she had chosen to live.

Marrying Jeremiah would mean the possibility of being a plural wife. Although Jeremiah had not yet married at all, it was still a future prospect. Allison had once told me she believed that was what God was asking her to do and that she would be okay with living polygamy. I was convinced she had no idea what she was getting herself into. I am still convinced that she has lied to herself in unfathomable ways to believe that she would be okay with such a life. This marriage would also mean that her children could be assigned spouses from within the Kingston community—relatives, sometimes as near as their half siblings. It would mean possible genetic issues: dwarfism, such as Jeremiah's sister's children had.

Jeremiah's family are leaders of a fundamentalist Mormon community, in which they believe in keeping their bloodlines pure. They believe they are the chosen people of whom God has given the one true religion. In order to be worthy of such a role, they take the concept of purity to extremes. She knew all of this of course. Yet here we were on her wedding day. As we might have predicted from the moment Jeremiah placed the engagement ring on her finger, things were not running smooth.

I had arrived home after dark about four months prior and looked down at my phone as I walked through the front door. I had a picture message from Allison. I opened it to see her elegant left hand, accessorized by a simple diamond ring. Jeremiah proposed! it read. My first thought: That's funny. Typical Allison, to do something crazy and see who will believe her. She hadn't even been dating this guy, and had hardly even spent time with him due to the fact that they lived in different states. He had been visiting my parents' home frequently as of late, which seemed understandable considering our families have known each other for years. As quickly as I thought this was a joke, another more rational voice inside me told me it was not. My roommate looked my direction as I put my purse down on the counter. I'm sure I looked dazed because she asked if everything was okay. I told her that I wasn't sure and needed to call my mom. I told her about the text as I dialed.

I had learned long ago with my mother that if I wanted to get answers for something, I had to be bold and pointed. I didn't even respond to her greeting. "What's up with the ring picture Allison sent me? Is this real?"

Mom responded in an exasperated voice. "Yes, it's real. Jeremiah asked Dad and me last night if he could have our blessing to pursue Allison. We assumed that he wanted to court her, so we told him that we were okay with it. Today after we all had dinner for her birthday, he asked her to go on a walk with him and she came back engaged!"

"What is she thinking? She barely knows him, at least not on a personal level! You don't just get married if you haven't even been on a single date."

"I know."

"Furthermore, you and Dad should have told him no. He's nearly twice her age! What is he thirty-seven?! I'm not okay with this."

"Yeah, He's thirty-seven. I know. We didn't think he was gonna cut right to marriage."

"Mom. He's a Kingston. I guess we shouldn't be surprised."

"I know..."

"I guess I should call my sister and tell her congratulations, but I am gonna tell her what I think about it. This is not a good situation at all."

I hung up the phone and dialed my sister. I gave her the obligatory congratulations, and then asked if she had thought about her answer before she agreed. She said she had. Her consideration had to have been mere moments at best. She was convinced that she could change him and make him join my parents' church instead, not that I believed that was much better.

My parents church is also a part of a small fundamentalist Mormon community, nestled away in the mountains in the Bitterroot Valley of Montana. Although the community doesn't believe in forced or arranged marriages, they are often still okay with girls as young as sixteen getting married. They are still okay with the men having plural wives. There is generally great pressure for them to do so. Apart from there being a distance as far as keeping the bloodlines within the family, there are a few major differences between my parent's church community and Jeremiah's. Neither life would be what I would wish upon my sister if I had a choice. Her belonging to the Kingston family was something that made me cringe with every fiber of my being. Not because they were bad people, I had in fact dated Jeremiah's younger brother when I was in high school. Even for me at 15, Ben was five years older. Our families had already begun pressuring us to get married at that point. Ben and I broke up for that reason, but we still are good friends to this day. I love Ben's family, I just had a deep concern for the things they believe to be truth, and the ways they structure their lives accordingly. I have always been doubtful that Jeremiah was capable of being open-minded enough to consider what my sister still hopes.

I told Allison with full honesty that I didn't like the idea of them getting married. I had a bad feeling about the whole thing, but if she was truly sure that this was what she wanted, then I would support her in any way I could. She is my sister and I love her. I still stand by my word. "Thanks Megan, that means a lot. So, you will be a bridesmaid in my wedding then?" "I would be honored to. For you. Not for him." Within seconds of hanging up the phone the tears came.

Now here we were four months later, after lots of prayer and tears on her behalf. I had one almost answer to these prayers when she broke off the engagement after two months. The reason Allison gave was that neither was willing to compromise in their stance on which of their churches was the right church. A few weeks after they broke it off, she agreed to move to Utah to work for him on his ranch. For my adventurous, horse-loving sister who had grown up riding and grooming the animals, this job was everything she had hoped. I knew she was still hoping her cowboy would change his ways. I couldn't see the relationship lasting on a merely business level for very long. Sure enough, they were back together within a week of her move. She called me to tell me the wedding date, less than a month away.

The next weeks held a flurry of dress fittings and Mom exchanging sleep for the whirl of her sewing machine as she worked her own miracles to make 14 bridesmaid gowns. Each dress was fashioned out of a teal silk fabric, with short flowy sleeves and long skirts extended to the ankles of each girl. Each of the dresses was designed the same, except the maid of honor. Chelle, Allison's best friend since grade school, had long sleeves. Being the only married one, she had to cover her priesthood garments (or as some refer to as sacred underwear) that the married couples in Mormonism are required to wear. Fittings were challenging since all the bridesmaids, except Allison's five sisters, lived in Utah. On top of the bridesmaid's dresses,

Mom also made two flower girl dresses and the wedding gown itself. Her dream of giving her daughters a handmade gown for each of their weddings turned into a nightmare of stress and worry.

Our entire family stepped in to help in any way we could. The weekend of the wedding was my younger brother's birthday. He wordlessly stepped aside to make room for the last-minute wedding preparations, which were many. The rehearsal "dinner" was scheduled only a few days before, as I asked my sister what the game plan was. She hadn't thought about it. There was no dinner planned. Again, Momma stepped up to make rolls and pot roast and mashed potatoes to serve the wedding party. We spent the day decorating and putting together boutonnieres and handmade corsages in place of bouquets. Among the six of us—our mother, and us sisters we still found ways to laugh about it all.

The next morning, we rushed to get on our dresses and put together hair and makeup. We were just about to leave for the schoolhouse when Jeremiah was just getting to my parents' house to get himself ready. I rolled my eyes at the ever-faithful lateness. Jeremiah and his family always seemed to be at least an hour late for any event. I have tried to understand it, but there seemed to be no logic behind their tardiness. Jeremiah had told me once, that if it was worth being somewhere; people could accept them being late. This concept is very inconsiderate, in my opinion. Jeremiah was the worst of the bunch. Apparently, he was okay with being late to his own wedding. I nagged him to hurry, telling him we would just have the wedding without him. I didn't tell him that I would have been ok with that.

The ceremony went smoothly enough. Pictures followed and then the reception. There were no caterers, but there was cake and there would be dancing. My older brother Blake stepped in when we got to the schoolhouse, and we still weren't sure who the DJ would be for the reception. In addition, the fact that no one in the wedding party had eaten anything during the blur of preparations caused Jeremiah's family to leave in search of sustenance. We had a small window of opportunity in the half hour after pictures and before the reception began. Since none of us in the wedding had eaten yet that day, we all left to get food. My parents' home was a five minute drive from the school where we grabbed left-overs from the rehearsal dinner the night before and brought some back for the bride and groom. Jeremiah's family went into the nearest town to get lunch. I am certain my family would have been more than willing to share the food, but there had been no communication, which resulted in the present mess. The entire wedding preparation had little communication from the beginning. Allison, young and inexperienced in planning a wedding, was trying her hardest to handle everything on her own. I couldn't help thinking it would have been different if she had been home during those weeks of planning. If there was a more logical influence in the relationship from the beginning, perhaps someone would have thought of the details that left gaping holes in the event. Of course, Jeremiah's family would return, and the wedding would carry on as normal. I wasn't upset that there was a schedule issue. I was upset that there seemed to be no regard from his family on behalf of mine. I felt embarrassed and disrespected. To me this planning issue foretold of so many deeper issues yet to come within their marriage. I could only imagine how my sister felt. Perhaps she was so in love and lost in the embrace of her groom that nothing else mattered. There is still a piece of me that hopes that was the case. At least she could be spared some heartache.

Nearly three years later I sat at the foot of the stairs in my sister's home in West Bountiful, Utah listening to her confront Jeremiah about coming home late. I had visited her on my way to and from California that summer. Earlier that day, we hung out at Starbucks while I worked on writing for my blog. Afterward we had Jeremiah's half-sisters, Amanda and Kami, do our nails. Both girls had recently left the Kingston group and joined a Christian church, which meant being shunned by most of their family and community. It gave me hope to see the ways that my sister loved these girls and reached out to them. Allison allowed one of the girls to stay with her a few days while she was trying to become grounded in a new culture and way of life, in many ways giving them the family support that they had just lost. Jeremiah didn't approve, but Allison stood her ground in this case. Maybe everything does happen for a reason.

Before arriving at Allison's home, we stopped at a gas station about a mile away from the house to dispose of our coffee cups in secret. Jeremiah gets upset whenever Allison has any caffeine, sugar, gluten, tobacco, alcohol, or pork. Some of the dietary restrictions are due to what is written in Mormon scriptures as the "Word of Wisdom" and others stem from the Kingston family's need to control the community "for the sake of health". I guess they have their reasons, but a person should have a right to choose. Whenever Allison is around her own family, we are far less legalistic about such things. In fact, the only thing we really abstain from is tobacco; even then, we have occasions when the men will smoke, such as the traditional cigar when at the birth of a child, when it is deemed appropriate. The community my family is a part of is generally disapproving of this as well. My family is in many ways the black sheep of the community. Not only because of our liberal views on these substances, but also because my father is one of a mere handful of men in our community that has chosen not to live polygamy.

When Allison and I arrived at the house, we made sure dinner was promptly on the table in time for Jeremiah. Allison called Jeremiah each time we arrived or left a new location, and informed him of what we were doing, although she left out the part about her drinking coffee. It annoyed me to see her as a twenty-four year old woman being treated as a child. Once dinner was made, we waited an hour for him to arrive, as was his proven standard. We waited the customary twenty more minutes before Allison called to see where he was. He never answered the phone. She left a voicemail and sent a text. We waited another twenty minutes for a response. Nothing. Finally, Allison and I decided to eat our dinner without him. She set aside a plate. We had eaten our meal, done the dishes and watched a bit of Netflix before realizing it was well after dark. We were both tired and Jeremiah still had not called. Allison was fidgety and visibly upset, but she played it cool by not mentioning a word about how worried she felt. She called him again. No answer.

I spent another hour talking with my sister, attempting to ease her of her worries. I had planned to leave early the following morning to head back to Montana, so I said goodnight after a while. Right about the time I reached the guest bedroom, I heard the front door open. Jeremiah came in, moving slowly to the living room where Allison waited. She asked him where he had been all evening. He claimed he got busy with the horses out on the ranch and work took longer than he expected.

"You couldn't have called?" her voice broke.

"Phone was left in the truck, sorry."

“Jeremiah, it isn’t fair for me to have to call you every time I come or go from a place and you can’t even call to say that you will be late for dinner. I know you weren’t at the ranch this whole time either. I saw your truck parked by the fence down the road. You were sitting inside it talking to that girl. If you want another wife, that’s fine, but it’s not ok for you not to include me in the decision. Just tell me what you have going on. All I am asking is the same respect that I give to you.”

“Well, I’m sorry.” That was the end of the discussion as Jeremiah moved on to the kitchen in search of food. Allison put aside her emotions, as she so often did and informed him where she had put his dinner.

I marveled at the maturity with which my sister addressed her husband, and her boldness to say exactly what she was thinking. Even as she told him she was ok with a second wife, I could hear the strain in her voice. I sat awake that night thinking of my sister, carefully choosing her battles and wondering how many times she had absorbed her own hurt in silence. What made matters worse is that I knew my sister had been broken.

When training a horse, the point is to break its spirit, mold it to be weaker willed. Even the process of training the animal is called breaking it. Watching my sister as she has lived through the first few years of her marriage, I knew that Allison’s spirit had been changed in that same way. She was once the young free-spirited girl catching minnows in her bare hands. Allison was the girl with long, tangled hair, running barefoot around the fields near our home. She still carried a bold and quick-witted nature and she really didn’t care what people thought about her.

During that same visit, I had gone with her to the bank and witnessed that very personality in conversation with the bank teller. The teller was commenting on Allison and Jeremiah not having joint bank accounts. Allison didn’t say anything about the fact that Jeremiah wouldn’t let her touch his money, and often used that as a way to control her. She didn’t say anything about not wanting that to be an excuse for Jeremiah or the Kingston family to be able to manipulate her or have further control over her money and her life in turn. She just said they didn’t want to. The teller further pushed the issue, commenting about Jeremiah’s age and profession as a rancher. She warned Allison that she might need access to his money if there was an accident and Jeremiah passed away. Allison just waved her hand, saying, “Oh, we have a big back yard and a shovel, I am sure we’ll be fine.”

I could not hold back my laughter. The nervous chuckle and look of uncertainty in the teller’s eyes is something I will never forget. This is my sister in her full form. Jeremiah often stifled this woman whenever they were in public, he would tell her to be quiet or make other comments to shut her out, while shifting nervously in his seat. I always appreciated this side of my sister. She was always the first of us growing up to go on a scary ride at amusement parks or to be on a stage singing her heart out. She always had a sense of confidence that I still, in many ways, envy. To see the vibrant girl that I grew up with slowly transform into a guarded and fearful woman proved what I had feared from the beginning of her relationship with Jeremiah.

A number of times she has talked about leaving, talked about coming home and staying with my parents for a month or so, to see if Jeremiah might change. My parents have offered to come to get her and when she has visited, we always try to keep her with us a bit longer. It's hard to not want to be her safe place, but we also have to allow her to make those decisions for herself. For now, what we offer her is a reprieve, the freedom to run in greener pastures. If she remembers the girl that she still carries inside of her, maybe one day she will get the strength to return.