

Burden of Truth “excerpt”

*Lake Henshaw, CA
Saturday, January 7*

Matt Whelan sat on the edge of the bed shivering from the frigid mountain air that found tiny passageways into the bedroom. He had attempted to turn on the heat. The man with him said no. The cold would preserve his body.

Matt took a hard toke off a nearly done joint, inhaled toxic smoke deep into his lungs and held his breath. An uncomfortable suffocating settled in and he blew it out. THC dulled his mind, calmed the muscle spasms. Too bad it didn't kill the guilt of what he'd done.

The man snatched it. “That’s enough. The scent will linger.”

“I’ll be dead soon. Why should I care?”

“Don’t you care what she thinks?”

“She already knows I’m a stoner.”

“What about the other stuff?”

Oh, that. He did care. A lot. But really, what did it matter now? He already put his plan into motion. The one the man didn't know about.

He picked up a favorite photograph taken the day he met *her*. Birdie Elizabeth Keane. His entire existence twisted sideways the day he met the then fifteen-year-old. It was the worst day of his life. And the best. In the subsequent years Matt never discovered how a teenage girl incarcerated his heart, locking it away from all others. She gave him the best of herself without expectation. He tried to reciprocate, but always came up short in his estimation. Even now, all he wanted was her happiness—more than life itself, and so he purposely betrayed her with a promise he wouldn't keep.

She was first introduced to him as Bird. Her cousin, Arthur, was Matt's new partner. They were LAPD patrol cops working Rampart Division. Matt was twenty seven then and married. By the time Bird reached legal age Matt was divorced and they could pursue a romantic relationship. But by then he was the steward of a devastating knowledge so powerful it could destroy a family and shake the department with another scandal. Because Bird was fiercely protective of her family, he caged his love to spare her the anguish of dividing her loyalties.

Matt felt woozy. He no longer sensed the fingers of cold caressing his bare skin. He looked up wistfully at the man who would execute his penalty.

“You have a few minutes,” the man said.

*Los Angeles, CA
Friday, January 6*

Matt watched Bird standing against the service door, allowing her eyes to adjust to the dark. She had an unerring nose. She'd smell the marijuana, seasoning the moist air of a recent rain. He

didn't usually dope and drive, but this was an unusual circumstance. Something needed to be done and his spine was a broken spring.

He moved into the light.

She approached with an impatient, long-legged trot. "It's about time you showed up. What's up with the surreptitious beckon? Where the hell have you been this past week? You missed a PT session." She grabbed his arm. "Come on. The midnight jig is in twenty minutes."

He captured her in a fleecy hug. "Can't a guy have a quiet moment with the birthday girl without the whole of Molly's watching?"

"It's a private party. Family and friends. The usual suspects."

"I have a special present that requires privacy."

"Oh?"

"But first a Q-and-A." He backed her against the pickup truck and took a step away. The outer rim of the lamplight lit her face but not his; better to veil his anguish.

She exhaled into her palms. "It's cold out here. Get on with it."

He took her hands and rubbed them. "Shush. Why are you always in a hurry?"

"Is that question one?"

"Okay, here goes. Are you in love with George?"

"No."

"Would you be willing to break up with George?"

"For what reason?"

"I ask. You answer."

"Sorry. I forgot the rules."

"Bullshit. It's not in Bird's nature to go with the flow. Now answer the question."

"I'd break up with him for the right reason."

"What is the right reason to compel you to break up with George?"

When they played this game, Birdie always framed her responses to gain more information before answering the original question. Matt counted on this.

"You already know," she said.

"That's not a proper answer." He tapped her chest. "Rules."

Her eyes sought his hidden in the shadow. She nibbled her lower lip in consideration. "If the man I love loved me back I'd break up with George."

"Who is the man you love?"

"You."

Matt thought his heart might break under the pressure. *Courage, Whelan*. He caressed her jaw. "And I love you." He leaned his body into hers and kissed her forehead. "Past." He kissed her nose. "Present." His lips swiped hers. "Future."

"Don't tease me."

He delicately ran the tip of his tongue over her lips—a seductive caress before a nibble. She opened her mouth and accepted him. A breathless sensuality broke loose. They kissed like long separated lovers. Deep. Penetrating. Turbo-charged. The kiss combusted into caressing and

quickly ignited into full-on making out. Matt lifted her and she wrapped her legs around him, gyrating her pelvis against his manhood. His fierce passion broke free of the leash. He wanted to ravage her. Now. Without severing the seal of their mouths he reached for the handle on the cab door. He managed to jerk it open and attempted to maneuver Birdie into the front seat.

“NO.” The stinging echo of the word stopped them both cold.

Matt heard a dull crack—the sound of his heart splitting. He despised himself and was on the verge of wailing. He did what he could to conceal his self-loathing—he bent down and slowly rose with his hands on his chest. “Wow, Bird. You’re gonna give me a heart attack.”

She snuggled his neck and whispered, “Our first time together is not going to be in a pickup truck like fumbling teenagers.”

“We almost got away from ourselves.” And he nearly forgot a vital detail of the despicable plan. He reached into the pocket of his fleece jacket and pulled out a tiny envelope. He slid his hand into the back pocket of her jeans, squeezed her ass, and deposited a message.

“It’s been a long time since we’ve kissed like that,” she said.

“Eleven years. You were nineteen.”

“Was that my present?”

Could she see Matt’s upper lip vibrating with self-hate? He moved into shadow and rubbed his eyes before the welling tears had a chance to fall. He cleared his throat. “This is the prologue. I have business this weekend. Take it to break up with George. Be gentle. Then come to me Sunday night. We’ll be together. Forever after. ’Till death do us part.”

“Forever after.”

Later as Bird jiggled her way back to the birthday party, Matt noted he had never seen her so ebullient. If he had his handgun in the truck he might’ve just put himself out of his misery.

Lake Henshaw, CA

Saturday, January 7

Matt held up another photo. Bird posed in the middle of a lemon grove. The trees were ripe with white blossoms. The first fruits were still tiny green buttons. Matt closed his eyes and remembered the tart fragrance that mingled with dirt kicked up by Birdie’s hiking boots. He heard the buzz of bees and insects and the occasional rustle of leaves.

“It’s time,” said the man, taking the photo and replacing it with a glass of stinky opaque liquid. “Drink it.”

Fetid vapors of rot stung Matt’s nose and eyes. He hacked, nauseous before taking a single swallow. He pinched his nose and gagged down the crap. He sputtered and coughed. His insides were going to explode. He clutched his stomach and groaned, falling back in immeasurable pain—a minor penance for unleashing hell’s devastation.

The man knelt over Matt where a catheter port had already been attached to his chest—the needle mark hidden under a jagged, reddish scar. The man uncapped a syringe, slid the needle into the port and slowly thumbed the plunger.

“Just so we’re clear,” said Matt, already feeling the sedation of the drug injected so close to his heart, “it’s not murder or suicide.”

“Accidental drug overdose.”

As Matt drifted into oblivion he smelt the lemons and began to weep.

“It’s too late for that,” said the man. “Much too late.”