

Blake's dead.
His wife killed him.
The question is...*which one?*

BLACK WIDOWS



CATH QUINN

Black Widows

CATE QUINN



ORION

Cate Quinn was a travel and lifestyle journalist for *The Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*, alongside many magazines. Prior to this, Quinn's background in historical research won her prestigious postgraduate funding from the British Arts Council.

Quinn is the author of the bestselling Thief Taker series. *Black Widows* is her first modern thriller.

@CathWritesStuff

Also by Cate Quinn

The Thief Taker
Fire Catcher
Dark Stars
The Changeling Murders
The Bastille Spy
The Scarlet Code

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Orion Fiction,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd.,
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Cate Quinn 2021

The moral right of Cate Quinn to be identified as
the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior
permission of both the copyright owner and the above
publisher of this book.

All the characters in this book are fictitious,
and any resemblance to actual persons, living
or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 9695 2

ISBN (Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 9696 9

ISBN (eBook) 978 1 4091 9698 3

ISBN (Export eBook) 978 1 3987 0353 7

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Somerset

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



www.orionbooks.co.uk

To Ben and Natalie

I

Rachel, first wife

Lord forgive me, I lied to a policeman today. I told him Blake had never raised a hand to me. I'd like to say I was protecting his memory, but that would be another lie. The truth is, I simply couldn't stand another judgment from an outsider about our way of life.

I was at the ranch when the officers came. I'd laid out my jars, neat and clean, and was filling them with cut salted potatoes. We had a big rain this year and more crop than average, so there was plenty to can.

The routine always did soothe me. It reminds me of being a little girl canning food for winter, my brothers and sisters all barefoot in the kitchen. I was humming a little tune, wiping the rims, screwing the lids. My pantry had grown steadily full, with brightly colored vegetables and corned beef. Never could get the meat to look pretty, but it sure tastes good.

I guess the Nelson ranch looks plain to city folk. It's an old smallholding of a few acres, which held a handful of cattle in the fifties. Blake fitted out the dilapidated farmhouse with a stove and basic plumbing five years back. Nothing out here for one hundred miles but the desert and some big old turkey-vultures. To me, it's a paradise on earth.

The weather was still warm for fall, so all the doors were wide

open. I could already feel the beginning of change in the air. That sudden slip in heat that brings the storms and sends fat white clouds scudding into the deep desert sky. I'd closed my eyes, letting the sun beat down on my face through the little kitchen window. When I opened them again, a pack of police was standing at the farmhouse door.

'Mrs Nelson?'

I looked up, knife in hand. I must have looked quite the picture to those city officers, in a shapeless prairie dress with long wing-shouldered sleeves, buttoned neck to ankle, my blond hair plaited down my back. I wiped the white potato starch from the blade. Set it down.

'Which Mrs Nelson do you want, sir?' I looked at them each in turn.

A few of them were openly taking in the ranch. Outside is a little shambolic, with our decrepit outbuildings, dry-goods storehouse, and half-finished vegetable beds. Inside it's neat and cozy, with a good deal of home-crocheted items. There's a little couch, with two cushions I made myself, with 'Home is Where the Heart is,' and 'God is Love,' in big bright colors. Our kitchen is a basic worktop and sink. There's a shelf with a little gas stove for when we heat our food and some food-preserving equipment that Blake bought me for our second wedding anniversary.

To the back is the old hayloft, where we've put our beds. Two singles for two wives. A master, for Blake and whomever is favored that night.

One of the officers picked up a family portrait. A photograph taken shortly after Blake married Tina. The three of us stand behind our husband. Me, the oldest, my blond hair blow-dried for the occasion, pink lipstick, a flowery blouse that skims my broad hips. Emily, slender, looking even younger than her nineteen

years, green eyes wide like a rabbit in the headlights, wispy pale hair curled for the photo. Then Tina, cat-that-got-the-cream smile. Straight black hair, tight dress showing cleavage, heavy makeup.

A police officer at the back pushed through at that point. A lady officer in tight pants. She had that kind of wholesome outdoorsy look some Salt Lake City gals get, if they're not the religious type and spend their weekends doing sports and what-not. Shiny brunette ponytail. Very striking light-brown eyes. Right away, I knew she wasn't in the Church.

'I'm Officer Brewer,' said the lady officer. She extended a tanned hand.

I shook it. She had a warm, firm grip.

'Are you telling us that there's more than one Mrs Nelson here?' she asked.

'Um. No, Ma'am.' For some reason, I glanced at the knife.

Brewer narrowed her eyes slightly, as if she'd caught me out in a lie.

'I mean,' I continued, 'the others aren't here right now.'

She cleared her throat.

'Are you Mrs Rachel Nelson, married to Blake Nelson?'

'Yes, Ma'am, six years Tuesday.' I smiled. 'It was our wedding anniversary yesterday, as a matter of fact.'

This seemed to wrong-foot her. She glanced at the wedding picture.

'You folk are Mormons?' she asked.

'We prefer the term Latter-day Saints,' I agreed tightly. 'May I ask what your business is here?'

'Mrs Nelson,' she said, taking a breath, 'I'm afraid we have some bad news, regarding your husband.'

It isn't the words but her tone that rushes up to meet me like a slap.

CATE QUINN

'Is he under arrest?' I feel my face grow hot.
She shakes her head. 'No.'
'Am I under arrest?'
'It's better if you sit down.'

Tina, sister-wife

I gotta hand it to her. The Wicked Witch of the West came into her own that morning. Rachel was the only one of us with the guts to go inside the morgue and identify him. You see that shit on the police shows. TV dramas. Relatives all cryin' and sayin', 'That's it, that's him.' You never see anyone sayin', 'I can't do it.'

The cops pulled me in, as I was about to get my first fix in a year and a half. Like a junkie homing pigeon, I'd found my way to Rio Grande, Salt Lake City's two-block drug district. Which is actually pretty funny, to someone like me from Vegas. Where I grew up, the whole damn *town* is dedicated to this shit. An' here everyone gets all uptight about a couple a roads with some hobos.

Anyways, when the cops took me in, I assumed they were bustin' us all for bigamy. So we get to the station. To one of the rooms they take you to before you're officially in trouble. Where they're being all nicey nice and nothing's on tape.

So here I am in this Salt Lake City police department, thinkin' not much has changed, apart from the charge. Which is some joke, right? In Vegas, I got busted for soliciting. Here they're bustin' me for being married.

Then this good-looking woman comes in. Tall, well put together. She got brown hair, in a plain ponytail, but very glossy,

like her body can't help but tell everyone about her good health. Hardly any makeup, mountain-hiker suntan, sorta amber eyes. Golden, almost.

She reminded me of the tourist pictures Blake used to send me. Clean-living people in sportswear, advertising Utah's outdoor lifestyle – snowboard in winter, mountain bike in summer.

She introduces herself as Officer Brewer. I don't like women like her, as a rule. They think they understand what it's like to grow up poor, but they don't.

'You're Mrs Tina Nelson?'

I shake my head. 'I'm Tina Keidis.' I give her a mean glare, so she knows she can't fool me into sayin' I am Blake's wife, 'cause that's against the law. I lean back in my seat. 'You cops get these tables and plastic chairs wholesale?' I ask. 'They got the same ones in Vegas.'

I was making a point. I've been downtown a million times, so there's no sense tryin' to intimidate me.

'Miss Keidis,' a cop says. 'A body has been found out in the desert. We believe it to be your husband.'

That shuts me up.

That's when Brewer tells me what went down. How some soul-searching' city-type was driving out in the middle a nowhere, saw vultures circling near the river where Blake liked to fish. Then she explains about the body. How it could be suspicious. Despite how it appeared, Blake sustained injuries they're not certain he could have done to himself.

When she told me the details, I felt real sorry for the guy who found him.

'I hear the officers picked you up in Rio Grande,' Brewer added, 'You don't see many Mormons on that block. You get lost?'

I mumbled some shit about not knowing the city well. But they're not stupid. Most likely they've already pulled my inch-thick record from Nevada.

The truth? After the night of the wedding anniversary . . . I just cracked, I guess. Went downtown looking for trouble. Blake warned me it would be hard. Sharing him with other women. But I don't think he really thought it through. The other two, they were raised to it. Brought up godly, to this man-is-head-of-household stuff. To me it's new. I never even had a household. I was dragged up halfway between foster carers and my mom, if she was in town.

So I can ask Lord Jesus for strength and God for forgiveness, but every day at the ranch felt like someone was treading on my heart. I swear I could actually *feel* it, this bruised, pulpy mess in my chest.

Rachel told me it gets easier, but I don't believe she ever had that kind of love in the first place. Her and Blake were college sweethearts. Two wholesome Mormon kids, doing the right thing. She likes to do what's expected of her. And to win. She hides that part. But Mrs Mormon bed-corners has a competitive streak a mile wide.

That's why she allowed her husband to take more wives, I guess. It wasn't enough for her to be a good Mormon. She had to be the best.

So Rachel doesn't understand how it was, for me and Blakey. How he used to look out for me, in the rehab center. Try and save my soul. We'd joke about it, in actual fact. I'd tease him. What's a handsome young guy doing with a load of meth heads? That kinda thing. He told me he'd never completed his mission and wanted to make amends by volunteering at rehab centers. I ripped him on that too, how us recovering addicts were low-rent converts, so desperate for a new life we'd believe anything. He

laughed at that, and said I wasn't all wrong. We laughed a lot, me and him.

The plain truth is, Blake saved me, in every sense. And that first time we danced, at that lame rehab Christmas party, my head against his warm chest, Blake had whispered into my ear that he never felt about anyone the way he felt about me.

I cling to that, in the darker times, when I'm sleeping alone, and Blake is with another wife.

Truth is, the worst time is at sunset, when Rachel starts preparing one of her God-awful Mormon canned dinners. The atmosphere sorta . . . smolders. I swear that double bed has an electric current. You see Rachel, looking everywhere but the hayloft. Emily would go even more quiet than usual. Me, I'd get antsy. Twitchy. Say mean things. Same as when I was high all the time and couldn't get my fix.

Sunset was always when we wives had our worst fights. The gardening and the cleaning and the other chores had been done. There wasn't much lighting in the ranch, no TV besides a little portable that Emily swore blind she never watched but somehow ran down the batteries on daily. Blake liked us to read the Bible together, but he wasn't always home. So I suppose we should have all seen it coming. The anniversary.

Blake had picked me three nights in a row. Things were simmering. I have this image, of us three wives, sittin' on the couch, waiting to see who would be asked. Rachel, with this weird Mona Lisa smile, tryin' to seem like she didn't care. Me doin' that thing I learned on the streets, where you make it look like you're thinkin' of somethin' real dirty. Wispy little Emily, terrified.

Funny, now I think of it, the more frightened Emily seemed, the more often she got chose.

3

Emily, sister-wife

He's dead, he's dead, he's dead, he's dead.

You know that thing people say? You don't know whether to laugh or cry? That's how I feel, sitting in the back of the police car, watching the desert road bump along.

'How do you ladies get back home after a shopping trip?' asks the policeman driving the car. 'We could barely find the place, even with the satellite picture.'

I shrug rather than answer. I'm more interested in staring out the window.

The ranch was supposed to be a place we could all feel safe. Be ourselves. On account of the Utah law against adultery.

'One husband, three wives, right?' tries the male officer. 'You were the youngest?'

I don't say much, so they stop eventually. I figure they would have already seen the wedding pictures in any case. The first shows Rachel with her blond hair flicked out at the bottom, arm in arm with Blake like she's won a prize. She was skinnier then, but not by much. Then Blake a few years later, his red hair a few shades darker, grinning down at me, like he knew something I didn't. Rachel hovering behind us with a possessive hand on the cream jacket Blake wore to all three of his weddings. Then the last picture, of all three of us. Tina, face made-up like she's

ready to shoot for *Playboy*. Rachel with this weird dead look in her eyes. I look relieved.

On the drive back to the city, the police have been asking me all kinds of questions about Blake. About his sales job for the canning machine company. Why he's on the road so much.

The lady officer found me wandering, a mile or so from the ranch. I think I hoped to have some kind of revelation, like Jerome in the wilds of Syria. But I didn't get too far. My legs got tired.

It grows on you, the desert. I hated it at first. All those yawning miles of nothing. Having to bathe using a cup and a bucket of water. Measuring out all your heat and lights so you don't blow the generator.

After our wedding, Blake drove me out of Salt Lake City and over to the ranch. I felt as though more and more little pieces of me were falling away with every mile we rode deeper into desert.

Coming from the city, it was unbelievable to find all this land out here, just *empty*.

'There's nothing here at all,' I told Blake. 'It's deserted.'

He winked at me. 'Guess that's why they call it the desert, huh?'

I folded my arms and pressed my face to the window, watching the yellow and tan landscape flash by. If you watched it for long enough it made your eyes go funny. Everything got pixelated like on an old computer game. Nothing for your eyes to grab a hold of. Just the same huge mountains, layered rock like pumpkin pie, yellow-orange sand and fluffy tufts of pale green grass flying by, zoom, zoom, zoom.

'You can be your own person out here,' Blake told me. 'No laws to bother you. Nothing but mountain, sand and sky for a hundred miles in each direction.'

I think what he really meant was I could be *his* own person.

What made the journey worse was Blake was so proud, like he'd built it himself. Kept pointing out the lumpy red rocks, mountains, the circling birds of prey. I swear, if the car door had been unlocked I would have popped the door and run all the way back to Salt Lake City.

One of the first things I did when we arrived at the ranch was go touch one of those little poufs of grass. I figured it would be soft, like a little cushion, but it wasn't. The blades spiked my fingers.

Blake told me there was no cell-phone reception and the landline was restricted use, since it was expensive. If I wanted to make a call, he'd drive me to a nearby town called Tucknott. Or I could give him a letter to mail. Rachel sent a lot of letters, apparently, to brothers and sisters scattered all over.

'Rachel doesn't see her family,' he told me. 'But it's a great comfort to her, to write.'

I never thought to ask why Rachel didn't see her relations. Guess it was sinking in, I had no one to write to. No one to call. I'd made my bed. Now I had to lie in it. I only found out later, Rachel had been lying about who she was.

In fact, I did try to telephone my mother soon after I got married, but as soon as she heard my voice, she hung up. It was right after the wedding night. I still shudder at that. Don't laugh, OK? But at the age of nineteen I didn't know. Swear to God and hope to die. I had no idea what husbands and wives did together in bedrooms. It was quite a shock when I found out, yes siree.

But you know the second hardest thing about being wifey number two? You'll find it funny, when I tell you.

Matter of fact, the biggest adjustment was the food. Lordy, Lordy, that woman is a bad cook. I wasn't raised on Mormon cuisine. I grew up in the part of town where immigrant families live. We ate pasta and meatballs.

My first night in the ranch, Rachel served mystery can soup for starters, some mashed potato from a packet with bone-dry meat for main and a kind of green Jell-O and cream construction for afters. Jesus on high, what a mess.

It was only at the end of the meal when Blake muttered something about it being a fine feast, and he was proud she'd gone to the effort, I realized. This was her idea of a banquet.

The police car corners onto the freeway, headed to Salt Lake City. I draw a breath to see it. The green road signs, the giant mountains in the background, not flat-topped and shades of brown like the desert ones, but gray and peaked. In the winter, the city mountains are frosted white with snow, but my favorite time is the spring thaw when the dark parts show through. It looks exactly like someone tipped a pitcher of milk over the top.

I watch as pale, square-windowed buildings rise up, thicker and more crowded together as we reach the middle of the city.

There's a sports field with a neat red-and-white sign proclaiming: No Sunday Play.

We drive through a back street, near where I grew up. I catch a glimpse of Caputo's Italian deli downtown where my momma would sometimes buy cheese and tomato sauce from jumbled-up shelves of bright labels.

'You OK, Mrs Nelson?'

I notice I'm touching my fingers to the glass. Slowly I curl back my fist.

'I'm fine,' I say. 'I was raised here, is all.'

It occurs to me I would have been too nervous to eat on my wedding night, even if Rachel had been a good cook. The look she gave me, when I came home, I honestly thought she was going to kill me right there, on the beige vinyl floor, my blood soaking into her awful homespun knotty rug.

BLACK WIDOWS

It was like she'd only just figured out what Blake and I would be doing in the bedroom.

A flashing blade of realization slices suddenly through all the other thoughts.

I will never have to do that again.

There's a strange noise and at first I think there's some animal sound coming from the police radio. A goat or a piglet. And then I realize, it's me. I'm laughing.

He's dead, he's dead, he's dead, he's dead.

4

Rachel, first wife

Tina tried to come with me to see him in the morgue, God forgive her. She really did. But she nearly passed out when we started down that dark corridor with its stench of chemicals. It wouldn't have been right to put her through it. Tina has had a tough enough life as it is.

So it fell to me. The hard stuff always does.

I'd managed to grab some regular clothes before they drove me to the station. T-shirt and jeans, a little snug around the waist nowadays, if I'm honest. I unplaited my hair, let it fall down my back. I saw them puzzling over me, the way people do. With loose hair, you can see the blond highlights, home-dyed but nicer than the kitchen-sink hairdresser a lot of Church moms resort to.

Officer Brewer stops at a small room.

'We'll take a break here,' she says. 'I'll explain what you can expect, going inside the morgue.'

She pauses, and I know what she's thinking. I still haven't asked how Blake died. The old fear of police has kicked in. I was raised never to talk to authorities. And I mean, *never*.

I swallow and take a seat. It's a hard-walled little room, not unlike the one I grew up in. There's a fake-leather couch, like someone has tried to make it look comfortable. The lighting is harsh.

'That's a nasty set of bruises you have there.' Brewer is looking at my forearm. Five dark marks.

I pull down my sleeve.

'You're college-educated?' asks Brewer.

I'm wondering how she knows that. Then I realize I'm wearing my old Brigham Young University shirt. The brand is along the arm.

'Yes, Ma'am.' My eyes keep glancing up to the door.

'You don't see a great number of graduates in polygamous marriages,' she observes.

Makes sense, I guess. They found me in a prairie dress, bare-foot on the ranch with no running water. They probably think I'm one of those cult victims.

'Maybe the smart ones stay away from the police,' I say.

My voice comes out small and cold. I'm struck by how much like my mother I sound. That blank-faced woman, raising children in a cellar. I remember thinking the same thing, the first time Blake brought Emily home. We'd talked, she'd seemed so shy and humble. I'd thought I could help her. Bring her out of herself and into God's love. I had imagined us all friends together. The bedroom aspect, I had decided, would be gracefully undiscussed. River water, flowing prettily around a rock.

Then Blake and Emily came back from their wedding. I hadn't prepared myself for how he would look at her. God forgive me, I'd cooked a feast for my new sister, made her bed, put fresh flowers in her room. I'd planned to stand, hug her warmly, tell her how welcome she was, how loved I meant to make her. Then I saw Blake's eyes. Wolf eyes. And my mind froze on a single thought.

He never looked at me like that.

The husband I thought I knew so well had changed into a predator. A slavering animal thing. My embrace turned stilted,

the kind words ashes in my mouth. And Emily, the second wife I'd invited into our home, had looked actively frightened at whatever she saw in my face.

I realize Officer Brewer is talking.

'Identification is a formality,' she says quietly. 'His body will be covered. I will draw back the sheet enough to see his face. Just nod when you've seen enough, and it will then be replaced.'

I want to laugh. It doesn't seem real.

'A quick look at the face is all we need. We've already made a positive ID based on the contents of Mr Nelson's wallet. Given the circumstances, if you're unable to identify him, we'll use a DNA match.'

'The circumstances?'

'Mrs Nelson, you need to be prepared for what you're about to see. I'm afraid your husband . . . There's been some damage. To the body.'

Tears well up. My Blake. So gentle and so good.

'We think your husband's death may have been suicide,' she continues, gently. 'But we're not ruling out other possibilities.'

It's like the floor beneath me has vanished, and I'm tumbling into the void. I'm seized with a sudden, animal urge to slap her face.

'My husband is a member of the Church,' I say.

Her expression doesn't change.

'Taking the life God gave you is a sin,' I add, pointedly, wondering how stupid she can be.

Brewer nods calmly.

'You don't believe he would have committed suicide?' she confirms.

I speak very clearly. 'I've never been more certain of anything in my life.'

'Would there be any reason for someone to harm Mr Nelson?'

BLACK WIDOWS

For a full five seconds this doesn't make any sense. Then I understand.

'You think my husband could have been murdered?' My voice comes out all throaty. Like the words can't get past the grief. 'Everybody loved Blake. Who would want to hurt him?'

Brewer exchanges glances with her officers. And even as I say the words, I know they're not exactly true. Everybody loved Blake. Except his wives.

Sometimes, we hated him.

5

Rachel, first wife

‘Please be prepared, Mrs Nelson. I’m afraid it isn’t a pretty sight. You’re certain you don’t want someone with you? A relative . . .’

‘Better we get it over with,’ I say, and I mutter a little prayer under my breath, asking for strength. I don’t scare easily, seeing the things I’ve seen. Though there’s a first time for everything, I suppose.

‘The way he died,’ continues Brewer, ‘has an effect on the facial features. There’s some coloration, distortion. You might find the remains really look nothing like the person you remember.’

Remains. I guess police have to use language like that. Distance themselves.

I’m moving like a sleepwalker, one foot in front of the other.

You’d think I’d be reluctant. But it’s actually the opposite. I’m mad to see him. It’s the strangest thing. The feeling is so strong, it’s almost reminiscent of our college days, when I would hope to bump into him in the corridor. That first year as a student, I get a tingle on my skin just thinking about it.

Brigham Young University was my first real encounter with the outside world – the place we’d all been warned against, growing up on the Homestead.

It was the first time I had ever seen a property more than two stories high, or technology beyond farm equipment.

These were things whispered of, or glimpsed in the contraband magazines my sisters used to smuggle home. Buildings crisp with glass. Wide paved sidewalks set with pretty flower beds.

More striking than my modern surroundings, though, was the fact I was alone. The way I was raised, we girls were never outdoors unaccompanied, not for a second.

Yet there I was, walking around, wherever I pleased, probably with my mouth open. There were beautiful snow-capped mountains in the middle distance, like a grounding force. I honestly felt, if it hadn't been for those mountains, I might have floated away.

It took me a full ten minutes to go through the sliding doors of the main building. I thought there might be a trick to making them glide apart and spent a good deal of time watching the other students as they strode confidently in and out. Eventually I snuck in, close as I dared to a girl in a long dress, and sort of folded myself amongst the beehive of students running back and forth to class.

In the wide vestibule, there were machines that vended drinks when you put coins in. I'd seen these at the police station, after the Homestead was raided, and had been told such things were evil. Devices to take your money.

Summoning my courage, I decided to take a step toward independence, and buy myself a soda.

Salt Lake City State, as part of my rehabilitation into the community, had given me a new outfit from the local thrift store, and thirty dollars, in box-fresh bills. I had them in my faux-leather purse, alongside the state sponsor papers which I carried like an amulet. As if someone might retract my scholarship at any point if I couldn't produce them on demand.

I reached inside and took out a newly minted five and approached the backlit image of a Diet Coke, with all little buttons

by it. I wasn't sure what to do next. I was pretty sure the vending machine would decide what beverage I needed. That had been my experience of life so far.

Nothing happened.

Then I heard a voice.

'Not sure what soda ya want?' It was a pleasant, low voice, slightly concerned. As though my choice of what to drink that day really mattered.

'I never used one of these machines before,' I admitted, twirling hair around my finger, in a way Blake would later tell me was the reason he asked me out on our first date.

That first time I saw him, I can't say it was thunderbolts from the sky. He had nice eyes. A very deep blue, and long lashes, unusual in a man. Girlish almost. His hair was true strawberry blond. It got a little rustier with age. He had freckles too. The kind you get when your skin is too fair to be in the sun much but you've been raised outdoors.

'Oh, you're from the farm, too, huh?' He moved closer, and I could smell his laundry-fresh clothes. At first I assumed he knew about my awful past and crashing shame hit me. 'Yeah, lot of us grew up in the country and such.' He smiled then, and I saw he had dimples, in his sun-freckled face. 'You're used to the ones that only take coins. Lemme help ya there.' He moved me out of the way, and frowned at the machine. Then he looked at me. 'I think you look like a cream soda girl,' he decided.

Then he took a dollar note out of his pocket and slid it into the slot.

His self-confidence took my breath away. I felt my heart flutter as he reached down and extracted the cold can. He pressed it into my hand. It was icy, but I didn't feel it.

'Thanks,' I said.

He gave a little bow of his head and put out his hand.

'My pleasure. My name is Blake.'

'I'm Rachel.' It was the first time I'd used my new name, to introduce myself to a stranger. I liked the way it sounded.

'Well, Rachel, hope I'll be seein' ya around.' He winked. Then he was gone.

I peeled up the ringpull and drank a little. He was right, I thought. I was a cream soda girl.

Back then, I wondered if I would ever see him again.

I never thought I'd be seeing him laid out in a morgue, under a blue sheet.

'Take your time, Mrs Nelson,' says Brewer. 'Just let us know when you're ready.'

I feel a lump swell into my throat and stay there. The hump of blue-green fabric is in front of me now, with all its telltale undulations.

Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God.

I don't want to do it. I wonder if I can change my mind. If someone else can look for me.

Then I remember Tina and Emily. I have to do this for them. Neither have the state of mind to cope. A bitterness bubbles up.

I had the right husband, and the wrong wives.

If only different people had come into the marriage. People more like me. We could have got along. Shared things.

Tina and I are so unlike. She will tell anyone anything. The way I was raised, that isn't right. You don't walk around with everything hanging out. Private things are private.

And Emily, oh my heck. Well she just straight *lies*. When I first met her in the diner where she worked, I thought Emily was just model-gorgeous. Like someone out of a movie or something, with those huge aquamarine eyes, and wispy blond hair. The glamor fades pretty fast once you get to know her. Now I think of Emily as a funny-looking kid.

I take a breath to steady myself for whatever I'm about to see and wrinkle my nose up, trying to stop the tears. Then I give a quick sharp nod.

'Sure you're ready?' Officer Brewer has a hand on the sheet, her eyes are on mine, concerned.

'Yes.' It comes out mousy, quiet.

She meets my eye, and I realize she is a kind woman. I think, if she were allowed, she'd hold my hand.

'OK.' She nods. 'I'll pull it back. Just give me the nod when you're done, and I'll cover him straight up again.'

The tears make everything blurry. But as she pulls back the sheet, the sight of him hits me like a ten-ton truck.

I lurch back, one hand on the metal gurney to steady myself. My body does an odd thing, folding at the hip. I'm gasping. My eyes seek out the body again, lying inches from where my fingers are gripped white. I yank my hand back on reflex.

'Mrs Nelson,' Brewer is saying. 'Mrs Nelson. Do you need to take a break?'

'What have you done to him?' I whisper. 'What have you done to my Blake? Where are his holy garments?'