

Rules

by Saddletramp1956

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Prologue

“Get this thing out of me,” the woman in the bed screamed as she dug her nails into her husband’s arm. “Aaaarghhh,” she screamed as another contraction hit. Her body thrashed back and forth as the being inside her fought to make its way into the world.

Dan Jenkins tried in vain to make his wife, Judy, breathe as she had been instructed in her birthing classes, but she paid him no mind. They had been informed that labor was hard and could be protracted, but this had been going on for hours.

“Shut up!” she yelled. “I’ll breathe when this... THING... is out of me!” Turning from Judy’s outburst, Dan watched the doctor work feverishly between Judy’s outstretched legs. Eventually, the child worked her way through Judy’s birth canal, and the doctor was there to snip the umbilical.

Holding the child up, the doctor administered a slap, and the little child began screaming as she inhaled her first breaths of air. He handed the child to an assistant who cleaned her up. Once done, the assistant gave the child to a robed priest who, until now, had stood quietly in one corner of the room.

The priest inspected the child as he chanted something in a low voice. Dipping the end of one long pointed fingernail in the pool of blood between Judy’s legs, he placed an “X” on the child’s forehead, then inscribed some marks around it.

Once finished, the priest handed the child to Judy and turned to the doctor. Dan saw the afterbirth and thought he detected the remains of another child, but that couldn’t be. Judy only had one child inside her.

“Dispose of... that,” the priest ordered.

“Yes, Excellency,” the doctor responded. The priest turned to Dan, who shivered as the piercing blue eyes of the robed cleric bore through him mercilessly.

“I have done my duty. I provided the divine seed. Your wife has done hers by giving birth to the child,” the priest told him. “I will file the birth certificate and you will be listed as the father. Now, you must do your duty. Raise our girl right.”

“Yes, Excellency,” Dan responded quietly, afraid to meet the priest’s gaze. He already knew what the priest and his proctor were capable of and dared not disobey or question the man’s directive. However humiliated he felt, at least he was still alive

“Look at me, Daniel Jenkins,” the priest commanded. Dan looked up, fear in his eyes. “I know all you want is a happy family with children to carry on your blood line. Unfortunately, that is not the Divine Lawmaker’s will for you. Sometimes, one must... sacrifice... for the common good and be content with what we have been given. Do you understand?”

“I... understand, Excellency.” The priest accepted Dan’s response with a slight nod, then turned and strode out of the room. Dan turned to see the newborn baby snuggling into Judy’s breast.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Judy asked, suddenly a completely different woman.

“Yes,” Dan answered, hoping Judy wouldn’t ask him to hold the child.

“She has her father’s eyes,” Judy observed. Dan noticed the girl’s eyes were just as blue as the priest’s. He wasn’t surprised. It angered him to the core, but there was nothing to be done about it.

“Have you decided on a name for your child?”

“His Excellency has chosen to call her Sara,” Judy said. “Sara without an ‘h.’ And she will be raised to embrace her true and rightful place in the church.” Dan nodded, resigned to the fact that he was already denied the right to name the child he would have to raise as his own. He worried that he might live long enough to regret his allotted life.

Chapter 1: Prima Nocte

I stood on the sidewalk, looking up at the burned-out shell of what used to be one of the largest churches in my hometown. The exterior walls were all that remained of the structure, and those were overgrown with weeds and covered with graffiti.

The property was fenced off and posted to keep unwanted intruders out unless they ignored the signs and were mildly athletic. Still, it seems some enterprising individuals had already breached the wobbly wire barricade quite thoroughly. Other signs declared the property to be condemned.

It was hard to believe that it had only been a bit more than four years since I had seen – heck, been inside – this building. I felt responsible for what happened to this place and those who died when the church burned to the ground. That included the girl I had once loved with all my heart. No, I didn’t set the fire myself, but I may as well have.

I got back in my truck and headed for the Marriott, where I would be staying for a few days. Once in my room, I tossed my bags on a chair, took off my shoes, and fell on the bed, exhausted after a long drive from San Jose.

Let me start from the beginning. My name is Jon Carlson. Like so many others here, my story revolves around a girl. Let me rephrase that – not just a girl, THE girl – the girl I loved since the first grade and once thought I would spend the rest of my life with. Her name was Sara Jenkins.

I first met Sara on the first day of school. She had long, blonde hair and the most beautiful, piercing blue eyes. Her smile could light up the darkest room, and her dimples were so deep you could almost disappear in them. Even at that young age, I knew this girl would one day be my wife. I remember running home that first day, telling my mother I had just met an angel.

Sure, like most boys that age, I thought girls were “icky” and infested with cooties. But that only applied to other girls, not Sara. We became fast friends early on and spent much time together over the years.

She was the one who gave me my first kiss when I turned 16. Sara didn't ask – she simply put my head in her hands and kissed me, full on the lips. She smiled as she pulled back, telling me, “Happy birthday.” I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

Like many others in our town, Sara's family attended this church – the “Church of the Divine Word.” My parents attended a local Baptist church, but not regularly. Almost everyone here was familiar with the “Divine Word” church and either loved it or hated it. There didn't appear to be any middle ground.

I went to Sara's church a few times when she invited me. I couldn't understand anything the priest said and wasn't interested anyway. My attention was on Sara, my angel, who, by this time, had become part of the primary choir. She was so beautiful in her robe and sang like she was part of the heavenly choir. She would ask me what I thought of the service, and all I could say was, “it was beautiful.” That always put a smile on her face.

We dated steadily throughout high school, stealing kisses and hugs whenever we could. Sure, I often went home with a case of the “blue balls,” but just being with Sara made it worthwhile. She told me several times that her church forbade sex before marriage and wanted to keep herself pure for her husband – which I knew would be me.

I joined the Army after graduating high school, since there weren't a lot of jobs with a future in town, and became what was called a “25 Bravo,” an Information Technology Specialist. Sara stayed home and attended advanced courses at her church, hoping to eventually become a language teacher specializing in Latin. She also took sign language courses and received her certification.

We promised to stay exclusive and wrote to each other almost every other day. When we weren't writing letters, we emailed each other or chatted on Facebook. We also communicated by Skype at least three times a week.

My Army buddies used to rib me, call me “pussy-whipped” or “henpecked” when I refused to join them at local strip clubs or bars. They stopped, though, when I showed them a picture of Sara. It's not that I wasn't tempted to join them. I am an average, red-blooded American male, after all.

The truth is, I loved Sara and didn't want to do anything to hurt her, and I also wanted to look her in the eye and honestly tell her I had remained faithful to her. So I spent much private time with

my right hand and my fantasies about Sara. What can I say?

After spending a year in Iraq, I finished my four-year tour in the Army and came home. Thanks to my father's contacts, I had a job waiting for me at the fairly new Empire Tech Solutions, doing pretty much the same thing I did in the Army.

When I got home, Sara and my folks met me at the airport, and we had the best night of my life. There wasn't any sex, but it was the night I proposed. Sara's eyes grew wide as she threw her arms around me.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she shouted with joy. “I'll be the best wife a man could ever want.” We spent the night kissing and cuddling. The next day, I told my parents while we ate breakfast.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Jon?” my father, Nils, asked.

“Of course, Dad,” I said. “Sara and I have been together since the first grade. I love her and I want to spend the rest of my life with her.”

“I don't doubt that,” he said. “Sara's a sweet girl and of course, we'll welcome her into the family. You know that. It's just that church she goes to.”

“What's wrong with the church?” I asked.

“Nothing I can pin down for certain. It's just that I've just heard some things, that's all,” he said. “I want you to go into this with your eyes open.”

“Of course, Dad,” I said. “I got it under control.”

“I hope so,” he said. “But look, no matter what happens, we've got your back. You're our son. We love you and we're damned proud of you. And we love her, too.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said. “I love you guys, too.”

A couple weeks later, Sara invited me to her house for dinner, so I could ask her father for permission to marry his daughter. Sara said it wasn't necessary, but I insisted. Her parents and I had always gotten along well, and I felt it was the right thing to do.

Her father, Dan, was generally a quiet man and always seemed to have something on his mind. That night, he appeared more pensive than usual. His brow furrowed even deeper than normal as I asked him and Sara's mother for permission to marry their daughter.

“Isn't that wonderful?” Judy, Sara's mother, asked, putting her hands together with a little clap. “Dan, our little Sara's going to be married.” He said nothing for a few moments, then looked at me with a bit of sadness on his face.

“Are you 100 percent certain about this, Jon?” he asked.

“Of course, Mr. Jenkins,” I said. “I’ve loved Sara from the day I first met her in school.” He nodded his head and wiped a tear from his eye.

“I know you have, Jon,” he said. “And you’re like the son we never had. Of course, you have our permission to marry Sara. I know your parents are Baptists. Will you be getting married in their church?” I hadn’t thought about that, but I didn’t get a chance to respond as Judy spoke up.

“Of course not, Dan,” she said. “You know the church won’t sanction their marriage unless it’s done by the rules. And that means Sara **MUST** get married in the church, in a ceremony performed by a high priest.” I saw the look of consternation on Dan’s face but didn’t get a chance to ask about it. Judy looked at me before speaking again. “Is that okay with you, Jon?” I shrugged my shoulders.

“It doesn’t matter to me, Mrs. Jenkins,” I said. “Just so long as Sara and I are married.” She smiled.

“Good,” she said.

“I’ll call the proctor tomorrow morning and arrange our meeting,” Sara said. Judy shook her head.

“No, dear,” she said. “You know that’s my job, and I’ll do it first.” Sara told me later that the proctor was the local church’s administrative head. He wasn’t a cleric but ran the church’s administrative side, handling finances, business dealings, and other administrative matters, freeing the clerics to do their job. It was also his job to perform premarital counseling.

“Yes, mother,” Sara said. Dan looked at me sadly.

“Jon, I really hope this works for you,” he said. “We just want our little girl to be happy.”

“I understand, Mr. Carlson,” I said. “Thanks.” My “Spidey-sense” was tingling at this point, but I put my concern aside. After dinner, Sara and her mother went into the front room to discuss the wedding. Dan pulled me into his home office, handed me a drink, and invited me to sit in one of his oversized chairs.

“Is everything okay, Mr. Jenkins?” I asked.

“Please call me Dan,” he said. “I just wanted to spend a few moments alone with you.”

“Sure, Dan,” I said.

“How much do you know about our church?” he asked. I shrugged my shoulders.

“Not much,” I said. “I’ve been there with Sara a few times. I couldn’t understand anything that was being said, but I thought the service was nice.” He nodded his head.

“Yes, Sara is a wonderful singer, isn't she?” he asked. I smiled and nodded my head in agreement.

“Yes, she is,” I replied.

“Judy and I have been members since we were children,” he explained. “Our parents were members so it just came naturally that we would remain. We married in the church, you know. We've spent our whole lives following the church's rules and regulations. Sometimes, it wasn't... easy for us to do that. There were times I thought about leaving. But we stuck it out, and we now have Sara as a result.”

“Why did you consider leaving?” I asked.

“The church has a very strict set of rules we must follow to remain members in good standing,” he said. “They have rules about everything, including marriage. There were times when I wondered if perhaps those rules went a bit too far.”

Surprised, I asked, “Did you actually try to leave?”

“Yes, I did,” he replied. “But I was made to realize the sin I was about to commit. Please understand, Jon, the rules are there to guide us – emotionally as well as spiritually. For us, disobeying the church is the same as disobeying God. And those who disobey God spend eternity burning in Hell. You don't have to believe as we do, but it helps if you understand what we believe and why.”

“Dan, I was raised to respect all people regardless of race, creed, or religion,” I said. “I've worked with Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Catholics, people with all sorts of beliefs, and even people with no religious beliefs at all. The Army taught me that we all bleed the same. I don't care what people believe. I try to treat everyone fairly.” He smiled and nodded his head.

“I'm glad to hear you say that, Jon,” he said warmly. “That's quite a mature attitude to have.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” I asked.

“That's a fair question,” he said. “Sara is a fifth-generation church member. Her great-great-grandparents were founding members and it's been part of our family ever since. It's all Sara's ever known. A lot will be expected of her. And some of it may be hard for you to accept.”

“Like what?” I wondered with a touch of trepidation.

“I'm not allowed to say,” he told me. “But I want you to know that I'll be here for you, no matter what. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” I told him.

“Good,” he said, finishing his drink. “Well, I think it's about my bedtime. I have to get up early for work. It's been great having you over, Jon.”

“Thanks, Dan,” I said, putting my drink on the end table. Sara met me as I prepared to leave. Wrapping her arms around me, she kissed me deeply.

“I love you so much, Jon Carlson,” she said. “And I promise to be the best wife you could ever want.”

“I love you more, Sara Jenkins,” I said. “And I promise to be the best husband you could ever want.” She smiled again. God, I loved those dimples. “I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered warmly, hugging me one more time. “Sweet dreams.”

I got home and went to my room, thinking about what Dan had told me. I remembered some rumors I had heard about the church growing up – strange things involving weird rituals and orgies. Surely, Sara wouldn't be part of anything like that.

I did a Google search but found next to nothing that answered my questions. There were a couple of old blog posts by former church members upset with what they said were unfair practices, but that was it. I knew every church has its share of disgruntled former members and thought nothing more of it.

I put it out of my mind and went to bed. The next day, Sara called me at lunch to tell me her mother had arranged a meeting with the proctor the following day at 4:30 pm.

“You'll need to bring a few things with you,” she informed me.

“Like what?”

“Something called a DD-214, your most recent bank statement and paycheck stub,” Sara replied.

“What do they need that for?” I asked, a bit irritated. “That's none of their business.” The DD-214 was proof of my military service and showed I received an honorable discharge after four years. It also summarized my service history and the awards I received. I saw no reason for the church to have that, but I grabbed a copy nevertheless.

“They just want to make sure you're financially stable enough for marriage, that's all,” she said. “They do that with everyone.” I didn't like it, but her excuse seemed plausible at the time.

“Okay,” I said. “I'll go there straight from work. I'll meet you there.”

I met Sara at the church, and we went in together. A worker escorted us to the proctor's office, and the receptionist ushered us inside. A somewhat portly man in his early fifties stood up behind his desk and extended his hand. I accepted his handshake and noted his nameplate: Andrew Gamble, Proctor.

“Mr. Carlson,” he said. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance. I've heard so much about you.” He looked at Sara and shook her hand as well. “Sara, my dear,” he said with a smile. “It's always great to see your bright, shining face. Please, have a seat.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Proctor Gamble,” I said.

“Please, call me Andy, Mr. Carlson,” he said. “Don't let my title intimidate you. I'm just a humble servant.”

“Thank you, Andy,” I said. “Please call me Jon.”

“Very well, Jon,” he said. “So, did you bring the documentation we requested?”

“I did,” I said, opening my briefcase. I handed Andy a folder that had copies of what he had requested. He accepted the folder and looked through the papers inside.

“Very impressive, Jon,” he said, looking at my DD-214. “According to this, you received the Good Conduct Medal, the Army Commendation Medal, the Army Achievement Medal and a slew of commendations. You served in Iraq as well. Overall, an exemplary record. I'm impressed.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“No, thank YOU,” he said in response. He set the DD-214 aside and pulled out my pay stub and bank statement. I watched as he looked them over for a couple minutes.

“I see you just started your new job,” he said evenly.

I nodded my head. “Yes, I did.”

“And it appears you're making a respectable salary,” he added. “You've managed to save a considerable amount over the last four years. Are you still living at home?”

“Only until the first of the month, when my apartment will be ready,” I said. Andy nodded his head.

“Do you plan to rent or buy once you're married?” he asked.

“Our plan is to buy once we've saved enough for a down payment,” I informed him.

“An excellent plan, especially in this economy,” he said. “Purchasing a home is far better in the long run than renting in my opinion. And your credit rating is high enough that you should be able to secure an affordable loan.”

“You checked my credit rating?” I asked, surprised. He looked up at me.

“Of course, Jon,” he said. “We also did a local records check to make sure you haven’t had any run-ins with the police.” Andy saw the shocked look on my face before he continued.

“We monitor the credit ratings and local records of all our members. We’re not trying to be nosy, but so many young people today get married without any concern for things like finances. You’d be amazed at how many couples divorce over money. We don’t want that to happen, now, do we?”

“Of course not,” I said. He nodded his head.

“Good,” he said. “From what I’ve seen so far, Jon, you appear to be an excellent mate for Sara. You seem to be responsible with your money, have a stellar record and a stable job with growth potential. Those are all points in your favor.

“Furthermore, once you become a fully-credentialed member of the church, you should easily handle the ten percent tithe we expect from all members,” he added. “However, we still have a problem.”

“Problem?” I asked, concerned. “What problem?”

“Well, Jon,” he began. “The truth is, the church normally doesn’t sanction or bless mixed marriages.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, getting perturbed. “Is this some kind of racial thing?”

“Of course not,” Andy said with a nervous chuckle. “Our doors are open to everyone. By ‘mixed,’ I mean, the church doesn’t normally approve marriages between members and non-members. We may be willing to make an exception in your case, however.

“I’ve talked with Sara at length, and she tells me you two have been close since you were six years old. Her parents have told me the same thing. Additionally, her church lineage is quite impressive and is a factor in your favor. You know her great-great-grandparents were charter members.”

Trying to calm down, I replied, “I’ve heard that.”

“Please let me explain,” Andy said. “Our church operates on a set of strict rules that were put in place a long time ago. Rules that Sara’s ancestors helped create. These rules dictate how we deal with nearly every aspect of our lives. They give us meaning, direction and a purpose. We don’t have to worry about how to deal with issues because the rules set down in the divine book tell us what we must do. You’re an Army man, so I’m sure you understand how important rules are. Am I right?”

“I suppose,” I said evenly.

“I’m glad you understand,” he said. “So, do you think you can live with these rules?” I thought for a while before answering. I figured that since this was a church and not a government entity, the rules would be based on the Bible or perhaps on the Ten Commandments I learned in Sunday School.

“I think so,” I said. “But I’d like to see them first.” Andy nodded his head. “Do you have a copy of these rules I can look at?” He reached behind his desk and pulled out a large book that looked to be about four inches thick. The words “*Quod divina Libro legis*” were engraved in gold leaf on the front cover.

“Here is a copy I can let you have for \$350.00,” he said.

“Three hundred and fifty dollars?” I asked in a voice louder than I intended. Sara looked at me, shocked at my tone. “Aren’t these available on the Internet?”

“No, that goes against the rules,” he said officially. “Only members and those studying to become members are allowed access to them. They are not available to the public. I do have a slightly used paperback version here I can let you have for \$75.00, however. The print is smaller but still readable. Would that work better for you?” I nodded my head, and he handed me the book.

I opened it and thumbed through a few pages. What the hell? I asked myself. I couldn’t read a single word on any page I looked at.

“What’s this?” I asked, confused. “I can’t read anything in this book.”

“That’s because it is written in a specially-crafted dialect of Latin, the language of the Church,” he said.

“I don’t know Latin,” I said.

“No problem,” he said. “We have language courses right here and can sign you up. The next class starts in January if you’re interested, plus Sara has just finished her advanced training and can help you.”

“Okay,” I said nervously.

“We also have membership classes that will start in April,” he said. “I strongly suggest you sign up for that as well.”

“My father and I can help him with these,” Sara said. Andy looked at her, his eyes momentarily narrowed.

“I would prefer that you and your mother work with Jon,” he said. “I know you’re fully credentialed to teach these courses, but it must be done by the rules. Of course, he’s free to ask questions of any credentialed church member, including you and your father. But it must be done

properly and there can be no appearance of impropriety. I'm sure you understand." His words were gentle, but his intent was clear.

"I understand, Proctor," Sara said quietly.

"Wonderful," he said, smiling. "Now, when would you two like to get married?"

"We had talked about getting married on May 15 – next year," I said.

"Hmm," Andy said. "I don't know about that. You wouldn't be a credentialed member by then."

Surprised, I asked, "How long does that take?"

"Depending on the situation, it could take one or two years to complete," he informed me. "You wouldn't be anywhere close to that on May 15." Gamble's demeanor softened, and he gazed at us a moment before adding, "However, I could make a special dispensation given your history with Sara and her church lineage. I see that May 15 is on a Friday. Good choice. We can hold the ceremony at sundown, as is our tradition. I'll pencil that in and start the arrangements."

"Thank you, Andy," I said.

"Any questions so far?" he asked.

"Just curious," I said. "Does anyone ever really learn all of these rules?"

"No," he replied, laughing. "Frankly, I don't think it's possible for anyone to know them all by heart. I've been in the church for over 40 years and I don't know all the rules. That's why we have the book. Sara here knows our timeline and can help you understand the basics. As you learn our language, you'll be able to read and understand more of the rules yourself. Any other questions?"

"Just one, for now," I told him.

"Yes?" he prompted.

"What benefit do I get from becoming a member?" I questioned. "I mean, besides marrying Sara? Suppose I was just some guy on the street who came in here looking for answers to the meaning of life."

"An excellent question," he responded, nodding his head. "For starters, you would have a life with a direction, a purpose. We all face trials from time to time, and you'll never have to wonder how to deal with those trials. The rules will guide and direct you. And the church is here to give whatever support you need to understand and obey the rules. Plus, you'll be part of something much bigger than yourself. You may be called upon to do or accept things you may not understand. The rules will help guide you through those times. Does that make sense?"

"I guess so," I said.

“Excellent, Jon,” he said. “Any other questions for me?”

“Not right now,” I said. “I may have some later, though.”

“That's okay, Jon,” he said. “Feel free to ask Sara or you can call the church and speak to a trainer any time you need to.”

“I may do that,” I said.

“Wonderful,” he said. “Now, one last bit of business, and then we're done. We have you signed up for two courses, plus the paperback rule book, and I've booked the sanctuary for your wedding to take place on May 15, six months from now. That will be \$775.00 total.

“We can take cash, check, debit or credit card or PayPal.” My jaw dropped as I looked over the sheet he printed out for me. I looked at Sara, shocked. “You understand these things cost, and we can't operate at a loss. It's plain business. I'm sure you don't work for free, do you?” Andy reasoned.

“Uh, no, I don't,” I said, handing him my credit card, grateful that I still had about \$2,000 left on it. He ran the transaction and gave me a receipt with the card.

“I look forward to seeing you here on January 15 for your first class, Jon,” he said. I nodded my head.

“Thanks, Andy,” I said. We shook hands and left the church. I felt like I had just been raped in the ass without the benefit of Vaseline. Sara noticed my mood and put her hands on my shoulders.