

Bill of Human Rights

WRONGS

Congress

The Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, passing this Act, do hereby declare that the rights of the people of the United States are hereby protected by this Act, and that the rights of the people of the United States shall be held for all time to come.

ARTICLE I

Tick Tock...

5.0 out of 5 stars Epic!

--A.J. Alberts, Designer

5.0 out of 5 stars Imagine a political thriller

-- written by Rod Serling!

--Stephen Cody, Author

BY **C. Michaels**



BILL
OF
HUMAN
WRONGS
by
C. Michaels

Bill Human of Wrongs

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First eBook Edition –November 2012

Printed in the United States of America

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

A Warm And Special Thanks To Rani, Stan, Meli,
Vicky, Dawn, PJ, Sean, Tom, My Mom, and the
Mazatlan Writer's Group.

•
Lastly, A Special Mention To Jeff.

For Camilla and Isaac

Books by C. Michaels

Cross Roads

NO FEAR!

Bill of Human Wrongs

You can read complimentary chapters from all my
books at www.cmichaelsbooks.com

Table Of Contents

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31

[32](#)
[33](#)
[34](#)
[35](#)
[36](#)
[37](#)
[38](#)
[39](#)
[40](#)
[41](#)
[42](#)
[43](#)
[44](#)
[45](#)
[46](#)
[47](#)
[48](#)
[49](#)
[50](#)
[51](#)
[52](#)
[53](#)
[54](#)
[55](#)
[56](#)
[57](#)
[58](#)
[59](#)
[60](#)
[61](#)
[62](#)
[63](#)
[64](#)
[65](#)
[66](#)
[67](#)

[68](#)
[69](#)
[70](#)
[71](#)
[72](#)
[73](#)
[74](#)
[75](#)
[76](#)
[77](#)
[78](#)
[79](#)
[80](#)
[81](#)
[82](#)
[83](#)
[84](#)
[85](#)
[86](#)
[87](#)
[88](#)
[89](#)
[90](#)
[91](#)
[92](#)
[93](#)
[94](#)

1

Thursday

Claire recognized the faint stinging sensation creep along her skin, her blood pressure forced a flush to her face. Her vision panned in a swirl of circles until it found a dim light exposing the dismal apartment where she would begin the nightmare trek into the darkness of pain and sorrow... again. Her body felt detached, but she was aware, her mind was intact. She knew the cruel and ugly event that was destined to transpire. Maybe, just maybe she could change the outcome this time.

She stood helpless at the side of the room and watched as she always did. It was the only way for it to end, to endure it, to get through it. The nasty smell in the air permeated into her throat, making its way to her tongue, presenting a sickening taste in her mouth as the images surrounding her began to flourish into focus. Imminent death tore through her veins.

Claire observed the pretty young girl who sat on the couch. Her mascara was smeared against the wet skin below her eyes. She was drunk. Picking up the phone, the girl dialed, but her sloppy coordination slowed her down. It seemed an eternity before she spoke into the receiver. "Where are you? Damn it. I need to talk to you. I can't take it anymore. Pleas..." The phone slipped out of her hand. She crossed her arms around her ribs and began rocking her body. "I'm sorry, please know that I'm sorry."

The girl stood, she walked slowly toward the door, picking up her bag from the table. Turning to look at the room one last time, her lips trembled. In a slur, she announced to the emptiness that had held her captive, "I must do this. Everything's going to be better soon." Then she looked directly at Claire and said, "Do something about this. Be strong and use your life to

stop all this.” She took a deep breath and exited her personal chamber of hell.

Claire shuddered, a sudden jolt stung her insides. My God, she knows I’m here. My God, she knows. She closed her eyes and tears spilled down her face. Did she see me? Did she really speak to me? Hope radiated from within, but when she opened her eyes, she was in the back seat of the girl’s car. “Don’t do this, Trista. Hear me, just don’t do this.” Claire knew it was of no use, but had to try. She choked on her words, desperation in her voice, “Please. Hear me!” She reached over the seat to touch the young woman, but the car seemed to stretch to the length of a limousine, leaving her range far from the woman. She put her head down and screamed, “NO. Please!”

The car was moving, darkness had settled in, and smoky clouds had erupted with rain that poured in a steady stream of... of what? Claire couldn’t tell, the slow motion behavior of happenings had become surreal. She watched as the driver turned on the radio, her fingers fumbling with the knob until she found the perfect tune. She cranked up the dial and sang. Then, she laughed, an uncontrollable sound filled with anguish. Claire had heard it many times before. But each night she reacted as if hearing it for the first time and would think, how can a laugh sound so painful, be so full of suffering?

Trista pushed the button to stop the music. She leaned forward to see through the window only to realize that rain was ruining her view. “When did the rain start?” She flipped the handle and the wipers began performing with a rote rhythm. The night’s weather was filled with sickening gloom, clouds hovering over the town, the torrent of rain. And then she said it, “Are you enjoying your dream tonight, Claire?”

Fear struck throughout Claire’s body. She pulled herself closer to the girl and tested this new development, “My God! You can see me, Trista.

Can we stop this?"

The girl howled, obviously amused. Then she spoke, "You've become such a smart woman." Her head wobbled and her body began to sway in her seat. "I really did love you. Yes, so much love." Her voice faded away as she slowed the movement of the car.

Claire saw the house in the distance.

They pulled up to the handsome manor where Claire heard the engine die. The wipers continued their concert, destroying rain pellets that beat against the windshield.

The home was a stunning feat in architecture, announcing to the town that it was the place where important people lived. Trista had parked on the street where she stared at the large front window. The happy family was gathered around the formal dining table. They were laughing at something. Her head jerked as a tormented sound escaped from her mouth, "Claire, let's see who the boss is now." She reached for her purse and pushed the door lever that opened the gateway into the abyss of darkness. Nearly falling out of the car, she stumbled to her feet, and began her sloppy march. The door was left ajar, the metronome sound of the wipers purred on.

Claire followed behind the girl, she gasped for each breath. "Trista, damn it. HEAR ME. I'll take you home with me, I'll make you feel safe." She tried to grab her arm, but couldn't quite reach. She never could quite reach.

Once on the porch, Trista turned to Claire and gave her a twisted smile, her eyes had a wildness in them. "You know it's too late for that, right? I have to do this so you can become you. This is how it's supposed to play out." She turned to face the house, but spoke again, her tone had become malevolent. "Always did like this porch, the pillars alone shout to people like you and me how prestigious its owners are." An evil sound released

from deep within her. The doors opened with a servant standing tall with pride. Trista's expression seemed dazed, but then she said to him, "Did I ring? I don't remember ringing, why are you looking at me like that?" A wicked quality in her voice, a lost woman stood eye to eye with the man who was shaking his head.

"You know you can't be here, Miss. Winslow. Now you just turn around and go home. Things will get better for you soon."

The man's voice had a hint of compassion, but Claire could see the mistrust in the girl's mannerism. She shivered at how the butler looked right through her. This was how it was each night, Claire wasn't there and yet she was.

"Don't do this, Trista." Again, Claire reached for her arm, but when the tips of her fingers closed in on her, distance stretched between them as if they each held opposite ends of a rubber band. But they weren't the ones in control of the strange elasticity bonding them together. Defeat, agony emitted through Claire's insides, she had been so close this time. She believed that she could stop the inevitable if she could just touch the girl.

Claire knew what was next, she watched as Trista hurled her fist into the door, giving her the advantage of surprise, permitting her to force herself past the nice man. She looked strong, stronger than she'd been in over a year. This was her medication and it was working. Soon, everything would be good, no more pain for Trista. Standing in the entrance to the splendid dining area, Claire studied the girl as she gazed at the family. Her chest heaved, her body wavered. Tears made her vision blurry. An intermittent jerking of her head forced a horrid gulping sound to escape from her trembling lips.

The husband looked up and stood, his arm flinging in the air toward her while he cried out in anger, "Jesus Christ, Trista. How did you get in

here?” He looked beyond her and yelled, “Frank, what the hell is going on? Get in here and take this bitch out of my home.” Looking at his wife, he pointedly gestured toward the phone, “Call the police.” She froze with horror. He shrieked his next order. “NOW!”

Trista silently slipped her hand into her purse, and pulled out the pistol that would take care of everything. She could no longer hear sounds around her, everything had become a blur. “Funny, so this is what it’s like to have complete control.” Closing her eyes, she gripped tightly to the gun’s handle with both hands. Claire watched helplessly, and then heard the wife scream at the same moment the girl’s finger drew back on the trigger.

Claire knew what was next. Believing this time was different, she pushed herself, making strides toward the girl. It did feel different, she was making headway. Reaching, reaching. Stretching her fingers, the tendons in her arm, all of her. “Trista, NO...” The girl raised the gun to her head and fired.

Claire screamed and sat up in her bed. Her breathing was heavy, her body wet. She got up to splash her face with cold water. Outside, the rain streaked against the window. Her body trembled. She raised her head as she leaned against the wall and screamed with agony. She had been closer this time, she’d felt it. Slowly, her form slid down into a crouched position on the floor. This is where she always finished her nightly event, crumpled on the cold tile flooring and sobbing until she passed out. This was the nocturnal life of Claire Winslow.

2

“Three, two, one!”

Claire sat in her assigned chair, smiling at her host, more nervous than normal. She was a pro with interviews, but this one was different. She’d chosen a smart suit, its pinkish tweed against her pale skin enhanced by her dark hair and green eyes aided to boost her confidence. The discussion was being led by a smart lady, a lady who wasn’t shy with her questions. Claire knew it, and hoped it would end sooner than later. She’d already put in a long day, but needed to forge ahead in order to tell her story. Her story, that’s why she was in this studio.

The bill was about to be released. Claire knew she’d have to wade through the irrational, senseless questions about its contents, a bill she hadn’t even yet read.

“Welcome back. Tonight I am pleased to interview Claire Winslow, the Senator from the great state of Washington.” Rachel smiled. “I don’t get the chance to sit across from many Republicans so this is one I have been excited about.” She turned to face Claire. “Welcome, Senator. And thank you for being brave enough to come on my show.”

Claire smiled and said warmly, “Thank you. I’m actually a fan of yours.” She laughed. “Not that I agree with many of your ideas, but I do admire your brains and courage to put yourself out there. You’ve made a real name for yourself, Rachel Ross. And it’s impressive.” She watched her host laugh.

“Good start, just two brainiacs having a cordial conversation.” Rachel paused and then started the interview. “Let’s get right to it, Senator. There’s a bill that will soon be released for the public to read.”

Claire added, “And for us Senators to read, Rachel.” Her voice was strong, she felt good about her delivery. Yes, this was going well, she could sense it.

Claire was an attractive 40 year old with exquisite taste in clothing. Her dark curls combined with green eyes were stunning, her figure was trim, but with womanly curves. And, she was a solid interviewer. She kept her eyes on Rachel, construing each question before it was asked.

Smiling, the interviewer continued, “Yes, of course. Now, this bill, SB 1257 it’s called. The changes in the bill terrify me. It aims at amending the Constitution, a revision that strips many rights from women. Do I have this correct?”

“Well, yes. But it’s not just women. Nonetheless, we can address that part of it if that’s what you want. The party that I’ve chosen to affiliate myself with, the Republican Party, has a bill that’s nearly ready for release. The wording of this bill could cause women to feel like their rights are being threatened, the operative word here being *could*. That needs to be clear. But, may I repeat. This bill, if the rumors are correct, is not only threatening women’s constitutional rights, but also the civil liberties of many groups in this country.”

“So you’re broadening the scope of what’s in this bill. Am I hearing you correctly?”

“We need to read it, Rachel. But it appears that some of the bill’s contents, according to the media, inject religious morals into the government. And it extends privileges for gun ownership as we know it.” Claire was out on a limb, her nerves began to fight her confident manner. “We have to wait and see, Rachel. Without knowing its actual substance, it’s a waste of time to dwell on this.”

“But why, if this bill bothers you, do you belong to a party with ideas so demeaning and dangerous to this country? I mean, really, Senator. I can easily site numerous changes over the last decade that provides obvious evidence that your party has already taken our country further to the right. Is this new bill what they have been working up to?”

Claire wore her *cat and mouse* smile. They were playing a game in front of the camera, a game between two fighters from opposite spectrums of the political system. She lived for chances to engage in such public forums.

“Don’t get me wrong. I believe in the Republican philosophy. I am a true conservative. You know, the fight for individuals, smaller government. Let’s put the real power in the hands of individual states. However, it’s true that my party may be reaching too far to the right with this bill.” Claire

proceeded with care, she’d known that this interview wouldn’t be easy.

“Now, with that said, I, like most of the Senate members have not yet read this bill. My remarks tonight are coming from what I’ve heard through leaks in the press. But, Rachel. You and I both know that hearsay can be just that. I simply hope that my speaking out will encourage the authors of this bill to temper its contents. In the event that the leaks are accurate, that is.” Claire leaned toward her host and spoke with an authoritative tone.

“This is how things happen in the Senate. You have to start with an idea, but then it gets revised until it makes sense to a majority.” She watched Rachel fidget in her chair, anticipating what the next question would entail.

“Senator, I want to change courses now,” she paused. “If I may, and forgive me if I’m getting too personal with you. But,” Rachel lowered her head for a moment. When she looked up, she proceeded. “Something happened to you 20 years ago that prompted you to become who you are today. Would you care to share it with our viewers?”

There it was. Claire was ready. This, after all, was the reason she had accepted the invitation to be on the show. She hesitated, and took a sip of her water. Then she raised her head, making eye contact with her host. “It was 20 years ago when my sister killed her rapist and then took her own life.”

“The rapist, he had been found guilty in a court of law?”

“No. He was the CEO of a prestigious electronics firm. He had money and influential friends, his attorneys were able to keep his name clean by publicly humiliating my sister. They were able to make this man out to be the victim, leaving my sister helplessly lost in her pain.” Claire took another drink of her water. “Until she snapped.”

“So you went through this ordeal and it left you knowing what you wanted to do with your life?”

“No. Not then. I mean, I kind of did. I knew that I needed to help with the injustice many rape victims are put through. I became an attorney. So in that respect, it threw me in a direction to provide me with a public voice. But it wasn’t until years later when it occurred to me that I needed a national platform. To really make a difference, that is.” Claire wasn’t happy with the way she had stammered through her message, but held on to a solid expression to hide her thoughts.

“Forgive me, but I’m still confused why you chose your party.”

“Rachel, as I said before. I believe in the traditional conservative values. It’s just that... Well, let me put it this way. This issue shouldn’t be partisan. This is a human rights concern, and should be treated as such.”

“Senator, I know it can’t be easy talking about this. I am deeply grateful for having the chance to hear what you have to say.”

“Thank you. I know you have a lot of viewers so I’m appreciative for the attention you give this topic.” Claire saw Rachel move into her closing

posture and felt relieved.

“Senator, thanks for joining us tonight, I really value it. And if I may ask, do you think I could convince you to come back after this SB 1257 is made public?”

Claire returned the request with one of her famous smiles. “Of course, Rachel.”

Turning into the camera, Rachel finished with, “Claire Winslow is a Senator from the great state of Washington, and is the chair of this year’s National Committee for Women Against Violence.” She clasped her palms together and finished. “We will be right back.”

The break for the advertisement came and Rachel turned to Claire. “Listen, I would love to continue this conversation with you. Do you have time for a cocktail in about an hour?”

Claire stood and shook her host’s hand. “I’d love that. But let’s make it a coffee. There’s an old coffee house on C Street, the one that looks like an abandoned fire station. It’s called The Old Mill House.”

“Yes, I’ve seen it. Always wanted to try it out, actually. Why don’t we meet there in say,” Rachel looked at her watch. “How about 10:30?”

Claire lost her control, allowing her expression to give her thoughts away. She sensed the host picking up on it so was not surprised to hear Rachel’s next words.

“Sorry about the late time, maybe we should do this in the afternoon. I sometimes forget that my shift doesn’t always jive with day workers.”

Quick with her return, Claire said, “No, no. I’m fine. But Rachel, if we’re going to share a coffee date, you must call me Claire.” She smiled and left the studio, leaving Rachel to wrap up her show, and knowing that she’d just made some powerful men very angry.

3

The office was dimly lit where the four Senators sat in front of the television, each with a fine glass of Johnnie Walker Blue. By the yelling at the screen, it appeared they were watching a thrilling game of football, but undeniably, it was not a game. It was the Rachel Ross Show, a black-balled news show for all elected Senators in their party.

Bill was the youngest in the group, a promising up and rising Senator from the state of Maine. He always watched and listened, hoping to learn at each event. He thought about the luck he had stumbled upon, being invited into the *den* with these three influential men. It wasn't just his handsome looks that had put him in this room. He was ambitious, willing to do almost anything to become one of them. And here he was, now a member of the *Sanctioned Four*. Elated, he watched the others as the show rambled on with Claire Winslow shooting herself in her foot.

Ryan, a Senator from Ohio was angry, shaking his fist at the screen. "I warned Claire not to do this, I told her it would damage her. Stupid woman!"

Another Senator in the room, Dirk, laughed. "Well, I for one am enjoying this. I've always wanted to stare at that face and those great tits, but didn't want to draw attention to myself. Just to have a few minutes with that bitch would make me a happy man. Hey, are we recording this show? I want a copy to take with me."

Bill waited to hear how the senior Senator would handle Dirk. He observed, knowing he would learn from it.

"Stuff it, Dirk. This isn't porn." Clancy was a Senator from Florida, a big man, one of the most powerful Senators on the Hill. And, the co-author,

along with the other three gentlemen in the room, of SB 1257. His tone told the others to watch and listen, and shut up.

Bill obeyed and observed silently until the show finished. Clancy told Dirk to switch off the television and took another sip of his fine drink. Bill watched. Moments went by before he turned to face the others, and in a solemn voice, he asked, “What are we going to do about her?”

4

Claire had decided to wait in the studio for Rachel. She had a car and offered to drive to the coffee house.

“Rachel, I’m overdressed.” Claire laughed. “I have to be careful how I act around you because of the politics, but now that we are alone... Well, I just have to say that I admire the way you don’t care about what people think.”

Rachel lowered her head to check out what she was wearing and gave Claire an odd expression. “I look that bad?” She had very short dark hair and black-rimmed glasses. She often received hate mail from viewers of the show, telling her that she looked like an overgrown boy. But Claire was right about her. She didn’t care what people thought and proudly wore her jeans to the show each night. At the age of 35, Rachel had proven herself by guest hosting on several of her network’s shows. She had been labeled the *vacation girl* until one of the more prominent shows lost their star, leaving Rachel at the right place and right time. The Rachel Ross Show was born. She did let the network fuss with her makeup and wore a blazer to dress up her torso. She knew her attire wasn’t the normal choice for a professional news woman and was grateful she was given this freedom. A little makeup and jacket was a small price to pay.

“No, not at all. I really do admire your guts. I could use some of what you have. I believe you’re not only the gutsiest news person around, but the smartest as well. I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say anything on your broadcast without backing up your words with facts. It doesn’t matter if I agree with your politics, I like your sassy ways.” Claire smiled, “We’re almost there, you’re going to love this place.”

“Claire, don’t underestimate yourself. So, you have to appear more professional. Other than that, I see your work as overt and spirited. You’re what’s needed in the Senate and I’m grateful for your work.” Rain was now bubbling on the windshield. The neighborhood they drove through was barren of people, and it seemed darker than the average night. The car tires rumbled as they rolled over the iron of abandoned rail tracks, adding to the mood of the empty night. “Speaking of gutsy, are you sure this is a safe place to be at this time?”

“Am I hearing a nervous twinge inside that bold frame?” Claire slowed down, and parked in front of the coffee shop, a building that had a funky Bohemian appearance combined with the style of an old Fire House. “We’re here. And trust me, this is your type of place. Let’s go.”

5

Eve Hart had been walking for what seemed hours when she spotted the dim lights seeping to the top of the stairway leading to the underground subway system. Grateful, she followed the inviting glow, the alluring ambiance, knowing that it would help to clear her head to sit and think. The late hour didn't matter to her. Her husband was in New York City for another day, the kids away at college. She was free to wallow in her pity.

Free. Funny expression to Eve.

Down under the streets of the D. C. neighborhood, she felt uneasiness, a fear of being alone in a dungeon at such an ungodly hour. She knew that the trains ran all night, but didn't hear any sounds of hope. She saw a ladies room, and certain that she must look terrible, decided to freshen up. Surely, she would hear the train in time.

Inside the little room, she looked at her reflection only to confirm her thoughts, she was a mess. She applied some lip stick and played with her blonde curls before hearing the sound of chatter outside the door. *Good*, she thought. The train, the friendly sounds were inviting. But when she opened the door, the shock made her freeze in her steps.

She felt as if she was peeking through a window, but what she saw couldn't be real. She braved it by stepping into the room, inside the warm confines of a coffee house. She stared, an obscure observer standing at the back of the room. It was a sight like none she'd ever experienced before. *Am I dreaming?* Eve slowly walked deeper into the setting and found a booth to rest her aching body.

She looked up to see plants hanging over the beams. Above them was a glass rooftop that gave an open appearance, presenting a wonderful view of bouncing raindrops. *I must be dreaming. It's so beautiful.*

The place was ancient, it had a wonderful old feeling to it, and made her smile in spite of herself. There was a long counter that ran along the depth of the south wall, complete with stools like she'd seen in old movies. *What did they call it, a fountain?* The booth was surprisingly comfortable. Each table had an old machine sitting at its far side, a machine full of labels for music. Eve wasn't sure what to make of that so she let her eyes continue to wander.

The inner guts of the room took on a cavernous shape. The walls were made of concrete with graffiti subtly sprayed over the back portion of its chamber. There were several carved out archways opening into smaller sections of the expanse, the space giving the illusion of what Eve perceived as a cove of den-like fragments. Taking a closer look, there were exposed bricks that provided the impression of age. Or was the timeworn apparition real? At the back of the room's cavity was a delightful wall with a large, maybe 15 foot tall painting displayed with tiny white lights that hung perfectly to give the delusion of an arch over the image. It was masterful trickery, an enchanting vision.

Next, she noticed an old tree trunk that crawled against an inner wall, as if it had tentacle arms reaching to dominate its space. The tree delighted her, it made her laugh. However, Its smell disturbed her nose slightly, the faint scent of mildew forcing her to rub her face. The dim lighting completed the old-style look, making Eve feel as though she'd gone back in time inside the restraints of its old walls. There was a magical feel, a mystical flavor to the scene.

The perfect setting for Eve to reflect.

She heard an unexpected amount of background chatter for such a late hour. Sighing, she thought back on the events of her day with a feeling of contentment, a foreign, but welcome sensation.

“Penny for your thoughts,” the waitress looked down on Eve with a warm smile. She wore a wonderful old fashioned apron over her plain dress. Again, right out of the old movies. They hadn’t missed a beat. She was old and wore too much makeup, her lips were painted bright red, her dyed blonde hair tied in a bun that sat clumsily on the top of her head. Her thin, lengthy body stood tall over Eve.

“Oh, I know I look terrible.” Eve played with her hair, managing to rearrange the few misplaced curls. “Could you bring me a cup of espresso?”

“Lady, I’ll bring whatever you like. As far as your looks go, you’re a stunning beauty.” She turned to pan the room of patrons, showing Eve the impression she’d made on the other coffee consumers.

Taken aback by gazing eyes, Eve fumbled in her purse for sunglasses, anything to hide herself. She needed to be invisible, yearned for obscurity. Then she pointed to a nearby wall and said, “So many old photos. I especially like that one.” Eve singled out an old Mustang convertible. “I remember those as a kid, they were so popular.”

The waitress laughed at her. “Honey, that picture was taken just last year. You just don’t get it, do you?” The woman placed her hand on the name tag pinned over her heart, “My name’s Donna so you just let me know if you want anything more.” She left Eve alone, and went to fetch her order.

Penny for my thoughts? When does anyone talk of pennies anymore? Eve hadn’t heard that saying in over twenty years. *And that photo?* The lady was playing with her. Her mind wandered again. She had traveled to the D.C. area for anonymity, knowing that she would be a stranger to all. She

remembered the doctor's horrid words he'd said earlier that evening, "Mrs. Hart. I have good news, you are pregnant."

"God, no!" It just came out. Startled, Eve searched the room and was thankful that the people had gone back to their conversations, allowing her to think. She needed a plan. This news could potentially be the end of her if she couldn't take care of it. *But how?*

The little bells above the front door rang, interrupting her thoughts. Eve looked up to see two distinguished women enter the room. Following their movements, she saw them take the booth in front of where she was sitting. She was in hearing distance. *Good, she thought. This might help me overcome my distress. Sure, eavesdrop on others, just what I need to get my mind off my troubles.*

The apron lady returned, and laid a small plate in front of her, enticing Eve with a homemade scone. "Honey, you don't look very happy. This is on the house, best scones in the city always promise to pick up down spirits." Then she put a cup in front of Eve and tipping the coffee urn, Eve watched the liquid fall from above. But it was slow, like molasses, taking on the appearance of a beautiful water fall. Before Eve could speak, the waitress winked at her and went back to her work.

Eve took off the sun glasses, amused at herself. She sipped from the cup, delighted with its taste. She hadn't experienced such a rich flavor in years, maybe never.

The two ladies in the booth next to her began their talk. Eve listened, hoping to get lost in their exchange.

"Senator, I mean, Claire. As you probably know, I'm more of a cocktail fan, but this place..." The woman looked around. "This place is something else." It was apparent that the talking lady was taken with the ambiance of the coffee house.

Claire responded to her confidant, “Rachel, this is where I meet with women who are in trouble. I give them options, places to go for help. That sort of thing.”

The woman called Rachel leaned into the table, and said softly, “Claire, I am sorry for the loss you endured as a young woman. But I’m also deeply grateful for your work in this cause. My show can help, so please. Call on me whenever you want.”

Claire reached into her purse and pulled out a silver case with her initials embossed over the top. She opened it and pulled out her business card. Then she reached for a pen to scribble her personal phone number on the back. “Rachel, please don’t share this with anyone else, but I would like to use your TV show if I may.” Then she added, “I have your number, and I’ll use it when I need you.”

Smiling, Rachel took the card, and placed it on the table to her side.

Eve continued to listen to their conversation, entranced with the work that Claire did for women. She heard Claire tell Rachel how she helped those who needed abortions, she talked about working with battered women. Women this, women that. Mostly, however, Eve was struck with the knowledge that Claire was a Senator. *What did that mean?* She’d never heard of a woman holding such a position. Sadly, she saw their conversation come to an abrupt end, Claire evidently needing to leave because of an early morning meeting.

Raising her hand to the waitress, Eve asked for her bill, knowing that it would take at least an hour for her to get home. Donna obeyed her request by laying a receipt on the table that simply said, *Thank you, and please come back again. First time is free.* Eve thanked her for the generosity and stood to make her exit.

When she walked by the table where the ladies had been, she saw the business card sitting on the table. The Rachel lady had forgotten it. How lucky. It was as if she'd left it for Eve. Looking around, it appeared that no one was aware of her anymore. She slowly reached for the card. Her fingers made contact, *yes*. She had it in her grasp. Snatching it up, she placed it in her purse and left the warm setting where she'd spent her last hour. This Claire woman who answered to the name of Senator. It made no sense, but a tingle of serenity flowed through Eve's insides. *I might try calling her. What harm could it do?*

Eve started for the front exit when she felt a hand grasp for her arm.

"Honey." The waitress pointed to the door in the back of the room. "You may want to freshen up first." She winked again.

Staring in the direction where the woman had motioned, Eve complied with her orders. Slowly, slowly, she walked, keeping her eyes focused on the door's shiny brass handle. The tentacles of an old tree had grown over much of the entry since Eve's arrival, but she still sauntered toward it. She hadn't seen this tree before, only the one growing on the inner wall. How strange. Slowly, slowly. When she was in reach, she put her hand out for the brass knob. The overgrown limbs were strangling the exit, but still, she forced her hand to make contact. Her senses became dizzy, eyesight blurred. She could see the extremities of the ancient tree shrivel, allowing the portal to open with ease.

The other side of the entryway coaxed her to travel across the threshold. And when she did, the subway was waiting for her. Its doors slid to the side allowing her to enter where she found a comfortable seat. There, she closed her eyes, permitting the hum of the train to tickle her brain. Eve sensed safety and let the coach take command, something telling her that everything would be ok. She couldn't begin

to understand what she had witnessed in the coffee house, but for now, she was tired, she felt slightly drunk. The movement of the car felt smooth, the sound was mesmerizing as she felt herself slipping away.

6

Friday

Claire had her hands full of papers, her mind somewhere else when she walked right into the Senator. The carefully organized documents fell to the floor, scattering everywhere. Bill Hancock, the dashing new headliner, the new darling of the Republican hotshots leaned over to help her. But in his gentlemanly attempt, he tipped his coffee mug, leaving a nasty brown splash on her work. To her dismay, Claire looked at the mess, realizing that she'd been left with only one solution to her debacle.

Reprint most of it.

“Oh, Jesus. I’m so sorry, Senator.” Bill scrambled to put her work together before handing it over to her. “I’m afraid that I’ve messed up your day. I really am sorry.” His head tilted to the side like a dog’s, trying to communicate with its owner.

Bill was tall, tanned, and had penetrating blue eyes like she’d never seen before. His coy smile mesmerized Claire, leaving her in a state of unease. She wanted to scream about the mess, but was taken aback by her sudden shyness. She had of course, seen him many times, but never at such close range. His stare stabbed through her for a moment, giving her insides a flash of anxiety. She took a deep breath to recoup and smiling, she replied abruptly, “Don’t worry about it, Senator. It was my fault. I get going and forget to look out for obstacles.” She put her hand up to her mouth, realizing how she’d sounded. “No, I didn’t mean...”

He grinned. “Obstacle, huh?” Senator Hancock’s charm was oozing out of him as he flirted with her, “Saw you on the Rachel Ross show last night.

You are some gutsy lady. Impressive, actually. Listen, Senator, I owe you for this.” Looking at the cluttered papers he’d handed her, Bill winced. “Hope you aren’t headed toward a meeting where you need these.” Claire was surprised to see him laugh. He must have read her mind, her expression of panic. He replied to her silent words with, “Oooh, I understand. My office is just around the corner.” He paused, “My secretary will reprint these for you. That is, if you have one of those memory pencils.” He laughed, knowing that he was showing off his lack of computer knowledge. “Seriously, it is the least I can do. Have you got enough time?”

Shaken by both his looks and the fact that she did need some order for her next meeting, Claire said, “Lead the way, Senator. Let’s do this so I don’t make myself look like a flunky in the next hour.”

He promptly followed her order, but while they walked, he asked with a smirk in his tone, “People are talking, you know. Did you not get the memo to ignore requests for that show?” Bill mocked his next words while shaking his shoulders and head to appear superior to the average person. “*Don’t tell me what I can’t do.*” He slowed down his pace and whispered his next words, “But you might not want to make some of those old geezers too angry.” He looked into Claire’s eyes and winked.

She didn’t particularly like his warning, and began to let him have it. “Senator…” He motioned for her to suspend her words while he opened the door.

Entering the office, Bill handed the papers to the white-haired woman sitting behind her desk. “Helen, I need you for a few moments. Would you reprint these documents?” He turned to Claire. “Got that pencil thing?” Taking it from Claire, he handed the memory stick to the secretary, “We’ll be in my office. Please ring when these are ready.”

Before they left, the secretary asked Claire, “What’s the name of the file, Senator?”

“Oh, right.” Claire told the woman what she needed to know.

Bill took Claire’s arm and guided her into his office where he closed the door and invited her to take a seat at a small table. He selected a chair opposite hers.

“I’m going to be really honest with you. I’m delighted that I was able to be such a klutz, gives me a chance to get to know you a little.” He laughed at himself. “Listen to me go on. I’m supposed to be more mysterious, aren’t I? I mean, why would you ever think of going to dinner with me if I don’t act a bit more cool?”

Claire was surprised, and felt her face flush. “Senator.” She shook her head, feeling somewhat confused. “There’s no need for that, you’re saving my meeting as we speak.” She hesitated, but was determined to get her dig in at his earlier comment, “And as for your warning me of the…” she pretended to think of his words, “old geezers, I believe you called them. Well…”

Bill cut her off, “So, what time do I pick you up, Senator? Oh, does tonight work? I need to know so I can make reservations.” They heard the secretary knock at the door. Bill smiled and went to see what she wanted. “Thanks, Helen.” And then to Claire, “Your documents are as good as new. Shall we meet in the Senate lobby at 8pm?” Smiling, he took her arm again and led her to where Helen handed her the nice stack of newly printed papers.

Claire thanked him before leaving the office. But before she disappeared, she turned around one last time and nodded, “Ok, see you then.” When her face was hidden from his, she beamed. Forty years old, and that giddy school girl feeling had erupted inside her. So what if he’d

been out of line to warn her, it did seem innocent on his part. She had a date with the powerful newcomer, the Senator with sensual blue eyes and a great flirty manner. *Why not?*

Eve spent the morning going through photos of her boys. As much as she loved them, her life had not been the one she'd desired. Her four boys were now in college and she was proud of them. But she couldn't stop thinking how different things would have been if she'd had a daughter. Everything would have been more problematic, and yet, wonderful.

She was feeling a mix of anxiety with the news from the doctor, and her strange experience at the coffee house she'd stumbled upon the night before. She wondered, *was that place real? Perhaps not, it could have been an illusion brought on by her apprehension of the pregnancy. But it had appeared genuine. The waitress, the two women.* The last thought elated her. *What if?* She thought of the business card. She grabbed her purse, and feeling inside, touched it, held it.

There it was. Claire Winslow ~ Senator from Washington State.

It made no sense. She felt low again, and sat at the kitchen table turning the card over and over while her mind drifted to the memories of the previous night. The portal, the branches from that ancient tree growing over the door during her visit. The molasses coffee falling like a slow action flick. Her hands grabbed the side of her head, her fingers digging deep into her scalp. She looked down to see the card staring up at her. Why was there evidence telling her that the freakish dream was actually her reality?

It was early afternoon when the doorbell rang.

Eve answered the buzzer to see her good friend standing on the porch. Sandy was short, with a few extra rolls around her midriff. Her

expression threw Eve for a loop, like they had plans or something.

“Well, are you going to let me in, Evie? I know I’m a little early, but I’d like to ask your opinion about this dress.” Eve was struck by her friend’s bewildered expression. “Come on, Eve. Let me in before the others get here.”

Eve pushed the door ajar to invite the woman inside, but seemed out of sorts. “Sandy, I’m sorry. Did we have plans?” Then she remembered. “My God. I totally forgot!” Looking beyond her friend, she saw the others coming up the drive. “Well, too late for idle talk, look who’s coming?”

It was their reading group, Eve didn’t have any refreshments prepared, and worse, she was wearing jeans instead of the usual show-off attire. She ushered Sandy in, and then waved for the others to join them. These women were her life line, how could she have forgotten?

“Sandy, please get the others settled in the parlor while I put together some drinks, I think I have a pâté that we can snack on.” Eve scrambled to the kitchen, in shock over her amnesia. This was the most important event of her week, a time when close friends got together to talk about their latest read.

They called themselves the Scarsborough Ladies. They lived in a posh neighborhood called Scarsborough Meadows, a gated community full of beautiful homes. The households were situated around a small man-made lake, and a serene golf course intended for use by only the privileged. The groomed yards in the neighborhood matched the lush greens of the course, manicured perfectly with a shit load of fertilizer and installed by a professional who used a special subsurface drainage system that lowered the water table in the green. The result rendered a superior turf growth.

The vegetation throughout the community was organized with a combination of imported hybrids, some of which needed an underground heating system to grow in the cooler climate, and award-winning roses of all colors whose smells infused the air with subtle pleasing aromas. Banana trees had been one of the imported growths, the wide leafy branches gave a flattering sight to the eye, especially when there was a slight breeze that facilitated them to swirl with the same beautiful weaving motion the American flag exhibited in a light wind.

Each home in Scarsborough Meadows was a unique creation, the work of a prestigious designer who entertained the use of pillars, large-paned windows of all shapes, but rarely squared, and high ceilings. He'd used tall doors that towered in height over the usual design as one of his signatures, that and the unusual rooftops that defied the normal shapes found on most homes. Eve's roof was made from tiled sheets of glass, giving an open feel to an already large space. The effect was a stunning feat in architectural design that had been featured in magazines for the entire world to admire.

These women were the lucky ones who married into the life of luxury. But each of them hated that they hadn't been entitled to a formal education. Hence, they had formed this wonderful reading group that inspired intelligent critiquing. They had found a back door, in a sense, to educate themselves.

Their current book? *Atlas Shrugged*.

It didn't take long for Eve to compile a tasteful platter of snacks along with her best crystal and fine wine. She served the women who had made themselves comfortable in her favorite room, now realizing how grateful she felt to have the company.

“Ladies, what do you think of Sandy’s outfit?” Eve knew how important it was for them to notice her friend’s weight loss. The dress was one that she was now able to squeeze into. She had a way to go, but she was getting closer to her goal.

Sandy twirled around to show off her figure, “Not bad for a woman in her forties, eh?” She frowned at their expressions, “Listen, I know I have more to lose, but at least I’m working on it. We can’t all look like Eve.” She smiled at her host, “What I wouldn’t give for those long legs and your face. That bone structure is something that a diet won’t bring me.”

“Sandy, I may have more height than you, but you are by far the cutest one in this room. Don’t you think so, ladies?” Eve grinned, “And why are we so stuck on our appearances, what about our brains? Isn’t that why we’re all here, to stimulate thinking?”

“And to drink, my friends. To spend the afternoon with this tasty potion.” Marian held up the bottle of fine wine, and with an intense gawk, she kissed her fingers to gesture her admiration of the bottle.

“Eve. When is that good looking husband of yours coming home?” Marian filled the five goblets full to the brim while she made idle conversation. They always used goblets for these occasions, using their female retreat as an excuse to go through a few bottles of wine, or so.

Eve smiled at her friend and replied, “He’s due back later this afternoon.” Her voice trailed off, thinking of the doctor’s voice from the day before. Once again, his words flashed through her mind. But she smiled, and sounding strong, asked the others, “Have any of you ever heard the name Claire Winslow?”

It was Tina who spoke while the others just nodded. “I have. But I don’t know why. Who is she?”

Eve proceeded to tell them about the unusual coffee house she'd found, and the conversation she'd overheard. She did, however, leave out the mystical happenings she'd seen. After much thought, Eve believed that she must have somehow been drugged, maybe something the doctor had given her. But that Claire lady. She had been real and Eve had her business card as proof. She looked at her friends and started to tell them about Claire. "The lady she was with called her Senator. And she..."

"Stop right there. You're playing with us, right Eve?" Sandy eyed the others, and then a smirk slipped over her mouth. Within seconds, they were all laughing, leaving Eve's story fragmented.

"Hey, laugh all you like, but that's what I heard. And, get this. She supports women who need abortions."

The laughing stopped.

An uncomfortable quietness permeated the air before Tina bravely broke the silence. "Eve, you know it's forbidden to talk about such things." She looked around the room, then scribbled some words down in her notebook. Holding it up, she put her finger up to her lips to silence the women. Her words said simply, IS IT SAFE TO TALK IN THIS ROOM?

The phone rang so Eve excused herself, leaving the others in a confused state.

"Hello." Eve felt tightness inside her stomach.

The friendly voice on the other end of the line didn't help the nausea that was threatening her with a swift trip to the bathroom. "Honey, we're having company tonight. I should be back by 5pm. Peter and Heather will arrive about seven. Would you make that French chicken dish? I know it's a real crowd pleaser." Jonathan was Eve's

husband. He was a founding partner of Fremont Hart Capital LLC, and Fremont Hart Capital Management. He'd found fame by appearing on news shows throughout the past few years. He was a media star, an important name, and he and his friend Peter were co-writing a book that already had the movie rights bought. Eve should have been thrilled to be married to such an important man.

And his partner, the mere mention of Peter's name made her ill.

She struggled to finish the conversation, "Sure, Jonathan. I'll see you later." She hung up and ran to the bathroom to throw up.

Jonathan put the receiver down and turned to the woman lying next to him. He kissed her and fondled her breasts. No words were needed as he began caressing her, making her hot once again. He would devour her just one more time before his next appointment.

8

When Eve entered the parlor, only Sandy was left. She was informed that the others felt she needed some time to prepare for her dinner party, and that they were concerned with her frail disposition. Sandy had been elected to stay, to help fix their friend.

“Evie, you don’t look so good. What’s up?” Sandy got right to the point, something that Eve admired about the woman.

Eve looked at her, a strong desire was erupting inside her head to tell Sandy everything. She was going mad and needed to confide in someone. But how could she? And if she did, it might put Sandy in jeopardy. *No*, she thought. “It’s nothing, just a little bug. And now Jonathan has invited his partner over for dinner. I really should get started in the kitchen so if you don’t mind, could we get together at another time, Sandy?”

Her friend shook her head, thought a minute, and replied, “I do believe that I am a better cook than you. Let’s get started.” Without waiting for a response, Sandy headed for the kitchen, leaving Eve with a dumbfounded expression. But she followed like a child knowing that this was a lady she could trust, believing that she might just tell her everything. It gave her a sense of strength and the color returned to her face. *Yes*, she thought, *this is a moment that has to be.*

The two women worked side by side, preparing the inviting dish that would feed Jonathan and that man who dared to come into her home. It festered inside Eve’s body until she could take it no more. She walked over to the sink and turned on the faucet to its fullest extent. Next, she went to the kitchen radio, turning the knob until she found

some great old fashioned rock and roll. She twisted the dial to its maximum volume.

Sandy nearly screamed at her, “What are you doing, Eve? I can’t hear myself think!”

Eve grabbed the woman’s arm and pulled her head close to her mouth. She then told her the entire story, everything.

9

Eve had made up her mind to trust her friend, there was no going back. With this decision, she let it out, telling Sandy even the most gruesome details. “Jonathan’s partner, Peter. He came here last month pretending that he was here to see Jonathan. God, his breath, he reeked of whiskey. I can still smell his nauseating breath. When I told him that we were alone in the house, he began to put his hands on me. In an inappropriate way. I told him to stop, but he didn’t. I fought him, but he punched me.” Eve was sobbing. “I fought him with all my might, Sandy. He wouldn’t stop.” She grabbed her middle, hanging on as her gut ached. Her mouth tasted the terror, she wanted to throw up, but she continued, “He raped me.” The last words shrieked out of her mouth. A sickening sound of desperation, a strong woman turned into mush. The cry for help was deafening. “Sandy, I am, I am,” She put her head down in shame. “I’m pregnant.” Her body quivered uncontrollably when Eve began taking deep breaths trying to regain her composure. Then she became silent for a moment. The next words expressed her shame. “Sandy, I erased the videos and audio recordings after he left.” She winced, “I covered it up!”

Eve watched Sandy walk over to the sink. She turned off the water. Then she went to the radio to switch it off, making the kitchen a quiet and serene room once again. She motioned to Eve to laugh, to mimic her sounds. “Eve, you have to be one of the funniest people I know. Tell me another story, but first. Find us another tune to enjoy while we do this work.” Sandy turned on the radio. Again, at full volume. She gestured with her index finger, beckoning Eve to join her.

“Eve, I know of a place you can go to take care of your problem.” Sandy’s mouth was nearly touching Eve’s ear so she could be heard. “You’ll need to wear sunglasses, a wig, lots of clothing to hide your appearance, but it can be done. There’s a hospital in Latino Town and there are doctors there that will do this for you.” She pulled back from her friend and just stared at her.

Eve was in shock, she had no words for quite some time. The loud bellowing sound coming from the receiver was giving her a headache. A single tear released itself from her eye, making its way slowly down her cheek. But she smiled at her friend. She felt a warmth infuse her insides, and nodded her head, giving Sandy the permission to give her more instructions.

When they finished the preparations for Eve’s dinner, she walked her friend to the door. The two women had a new secret so sacred, so trusting that they were bound together forever. The closeness melted into their hug, they both felt it. And with it, they had become different women, they had become sisters. In a sense, they were richer, more enlightened. When the embrace ended, they stared at each other when finally, Eve spurted her final words. She should have cleared her throat first, but Sandy could decipher them, “So this is true friendship.”

10

Bill felt smug about his accomplishments for the day when he arrived at the office of Senator Clancy Alexander. Standing in his doorway, Bill could breathe the air of power coming from the Senator. It stimulated him, thrilled him to be a member of the Sanctioned Four.

Clancy was behind his desk, his head down. He appeared to be in deep thought over the papers on his desk so without looking up, he said, “Shut the door and sit down. You had better have something for me, Bill.” Then he considered the young man’s presence, with his size adding to his daunting physique. “This is going to make you someone on the hill if you don’t screw it up.”

Bill felt secure with his report, and taking the chair across from the large man, he began to give him the fine points of his plot. “I have a date tonight with the Senator. That may not sound like much, but I know what I can do with the ladies. I’ll have a lot to tell you after tonight.”

Clancy stared at the Senator for what seemed a few minutes, the silence was forbidding. Bill knew what he was trying to do. Intimidate him. He’d seen the man do it successfully many times before. Clancy would use this skill to get the upper hand during sessions with Senators and other colleagues. Bill sensed him prying into his mind, quietly sizing up the message, the arrogant plan Bill had just laid out. He knew he was in the man’s mental grasp and recognized that he must be transparent with Clancy or he’d be seen as a traitor. And that wouldn’t do for Bill. He had high aspirations to someday be the powerful Senator sitting across from the weak ones. Of course, he would keep his looks, vanity was one of his precious tools. No, he would hold on to his features at all cost. Never would he allow

himself to become a lard face like the powerful man sitting across from him.

Clancy slowly smiled, an evil smirk of an expression that nearly shook Bill's confidence. "Ok, Hotshot." The eye contact continued to penetrate through the young Senator. "You'll have lots to talk about with her, I'm releasing SB 1257 in a few hours."

The words made Bill choke, but it was only a split second where he lost his composure. Confidence, arrogance, self-esteem must be present at all times around this fat man. Collecting himself, he responded, "I'm surprised, Senator. I didn't think it would happen until next week." Then he laughed. "Of course, it's Friday night. This is how we do it, isn't it? You know the press will eat us alive for our clandestine methods. Get it out just before the weekend. Memorial Day, no less." Bill was elated, "You are the master, Senator. Glad I'm learning from a legend such as yourself."

Clancy took his eyes off Bill and went back to studying his papers. Bill could tell that the man was above his adolescent schmoozing and made a mental reminder to himself to cool it in his future meetings with the bastard.

"Ok, Senator. I presume you have selected a proper restaurant. I might add that your confidence is astounding. You have until next Friday to woo her vote. Report back to me tomorrow."

Bill had been dismissed. A sickness in his gut told him that the man could get to him. He would have to be stronger in the future with the powerful Senator from Florida. Without saying a word, Bill rose from his chair and quietly left the room with only one thought in his head. *The son of a bitch could have given me more time!*

11

It was 4pm. Claire sat on the comfortable sofa across from Dr. Sheridan. She'd been prompted to talk, the usual request that began each of their sessions. "Tell me about the nightmares, Claire."

"Same as usual, Doctor." Claire held her head high in spite of the personal matter. She'd trained herself to look confident at all cost, to never show her whimpering side to anyone, not even the doctor. "Well, there are some changes, actually."

Claire knew she could trust this woman, but still felt squeamish telling her the truth. But then, why was she here? After all, it was Claire that had sought the doctor out. For two years now, she'd been coming for her weekly afternoon session. She wasn't sure if it was helping, but it did somehow give her relief to talk to someone.

"She spoke to me. I mean my sister looked at me and spoke. Not like before when she looked through me."

If Claire had shocked the doctor, it wasn't evident. The woman was a virtual stone face. Dr. Sheridan, with her calming voice asked, "Did that frighten you, Claire? Tell me how that made you feel."

"Frightened? Well, no. It was quite the opposite, actually. I was thrilled, ecstatic. I felt hope that I could stop her and change everything. If I could have touched her, I know I could have stopped it." Claire could hear herself getting emotional. She swallowed, hoping the lump she'd choked on would dissipate.

"Claire, we've already talked about your physical contact with her. I'm more interested in hearing what she said to you."

“She told me to use my life to stop people like her monster. And later, she knew I was in her car. She asked me if I was enjoying my dream.”

Claire’s phone rang once, then silence, but immediately, it sounded off with another single ring. She fumbled for her purse, angry at the timing.

“Claire, you know better than to leave that on during our talks.”

“I know, Doctor. But this is different, a lot’s going on with work now.” *Damn*, she thought. *Where is it?* Finally, her fingers grasped the gadget. She pulled it out of her bag in an instant, knowing that it must be important news. She’d left strict instructions not to call unless there were significant developments about SB 1257. She waited with the dead phone gripped in her palm. The code was two single rings, followed by the actual call.

When the phone began buzzing again, Claire flinched in spite of herself. “Yes? Ok, I’m on my way.” She grabbed her bag and coat. “Sorry, Doc. I have to go, please pencil me in for next week.”

Without waiting for a response, Claire left the room.

12

When Claire arrived at her office, her assistant was waiting. Without stopping, she had pulled off her coat and handed it to Ken as she whisked into her office. The assistant silently closed the door to give her some peace and quiet so she could begin reading the newly released Senate Bill 1257.

It was 7pm before Claire finished scanning the bill, with its many pages of convoluted text. It was just what was needed to confuse its readers and make them miss what it was really saying. Her body was pulsating, her head ached. She stood and went to the bathroom to splash cold water over her face. Then she located a small bottle of aspirin and threw a few pills in her mouth. It was as bad as the rumors had claimed.

Claire went to her phone and dialed a number, but before there was an answer, she hung up. *Don't act hastily, give yourself some time to think.* She paced the room for some time, but went back to the phone. Hitting the redial button, she waited for the call to go through.

A quick-witted voice sounded over the line. "Hello, this is Rachel."

Claire put her head down as if there were people watching her, people in her empty walls. With one hand holding the phone, and the other cupped over the mouth piece, she said in a near whisper. "This is Claire. Can you meet me at the coffee house at midnight?"

"I'll see you there." The line went dead.

13

The valet handed Claire her ticket. She turned toward the entrance of Marcel's to see a doorman exquisitely dressed in a red suit complete with a top hat. He was standing, waiting, looking for her. In a gentle manner, he took her arm and ushered her to the other side of the door. There, he passed her off to a distinguished character dressed in a tuxedo, the maître d'. The handoff from the doorman to the maître d' felt ceremonial to Claire, she was at one of the finest restaurants in D.C.

Her next escort led her to a table in a back corner of the restaurant where Bill sat patiently with anticipation of her entrance. He had changed into expensive attire that was fitting for this award winning French cuisine.

It had been a delightful call from Bill when he instructed her to meet him at such a fine restaurant. She had been to Marcel's once before so she knew the dress code. She'd spent the last part of her day changing into a respectable, but mildly alluring dress. She was a poster child, or in her case, woman for the setting.

Bill stood to receive her, "Claire, so nice to see you."

She greeted him by extending her hands to his. "Senator, you have good taste. But in light of the timing, we might want to discuss SB 1257."

He shook his head. "Lady, I have no intentions of discussing business tonight. Not after all the anticipation of sitting across the table from you."

The maître d' pulled out a chair next to Bill's for Claire. Instantly, a waiter appeared and opened a bottle of fine Cabernet, handing Bill the cork. He raised it to his nose and nodded his approval.

"I hope you don't mind that I made the decisions for tonight's dining, but I did some research this afternoon." Bill raised his glass and gently

rolled it, lifting the claret to show his date the legs on the glass. “This is a good wine. From Napa Valley, this Kathryn Hall Cab has a splash of Merlot that rounds out its texture, it heightens the aromatics.” He added, smiling, “I certainly hope you like a good vintage.”

Claire watched him adoring the wine as he spoke, wondering if he was really who she perceived him to be. She had recently spent time with him on a committee and had been impressed, but she’d never had a personal conversation with him before now. A red flag flashed in her mind, her inner voice cautioning her. *If it’s too good to be true, then maybe...* “Bill, this is delicious, thank you.”

“You know how to tell a fine wine, Claire?” Without waiting for an answer, she was amused to see him respond to his question. “Swirl, sniff, and use your tongue. The swirl will tell you if she has nice legs, the sniff will tell you if she smells nice, and the tongue... well if the flavors stay on your tongue for some time, you’ve found yourself a winner.”

Claire began to find his chatter uncomfortable, “You are still talking about wine, aren’t you, Senator?”

Bill straightened his body and set his glass on the table. “I could be, but of course, I’d be a fool not to use the same methods when assessing a beautiful lady.”

Claire quickly added, “I believe that exquisite stemware also improves the wine experience. Let’s toast to this pleasant dinner, Senator.”

She could see that Bill got the message when he started talking about some funny stories. In spite of herself, he made her laugh. She soon forgot the prickly warnings she’d felt and found herself adding to the conversation with her own oddities. They both enjoyed themselves immensely for the next two hours. Bill had arranged for them to be served the six course tasting menu. The chef had a reputation for being one of the finest in the

city, and by ordering from this menu, they clearly understood the recognition he'd received.

Late into their date, Claire was startled by a loud voice behind her. "Hey, Billy. And am I seeing right? Is this Claire Winslow?" It was Senator Ryan Peters, one of the co-authors of SB 1257.

Claire turned and shook his hand, feeling repulsed at his touch. "Good evening, Senator."

Bill also seemed agitated at the intrusion, "Ryan, nice to see you. Great place, isn't it? Listen, if you will excuse us, we were just leaving." He stood and helped Claire with her chair.

They were on the street within minutes, leaving Claire amazed at the speed he'd used to whisk her away from their beautiful setting, and the Senator from Ohio.

"Claire, I don't want this night to end, it's been so enjoyable. How about a walk? It would give us a little more time to get to know each other."

Feeling somewhat embarrassed, Claire looked at her watch, and replied. "I know how Cinderella felt. I'm beat, Bill. My energy is running down and my car will turn into a pumpkin soon." She hesitated, "But I have a little time. Yes, I'd like that."

He took her hand and they walked toward a nearby park. They came to a bench, and he coaxed her to sit with him. She saw it coming, his manner, his movements. Her heart beat picked up several paces, and then she felt his warm lips over hers. They were wet, and lovely. She couldn't help herself melt into him. It was her that began to play with his tongue, it just happened. Her breathing became short, her body hot. He became more passionate with her and she responded with the same emotion.

Then the old clock tower sounded off, it was 11 o'clock.

She pulled away from him. “My God, Bill. Please forgive me, but I have to go.” She shot up and looked down at him, shaking her head. “I must look crazy to you, but I really need to get back to my car.”

He stood and took her hand. “So be it, but Claire? We need to see each other tomorrow. This is too good to ignore. Brunch?”

“Yes, I’ll meet you at the Belga Café. It’s lovely. Say 11am?”

Bill answered her with another luscious kiss. “Yes, I’ll be there. Maybe I’ll go there now and just wait for you.”

Laughing, Claire thanked him. They walked back to the restaurant where the valet handed her the keys. She left, leaving the handsome man with that wonderful smile pasted on his face. “Ahh.” She hadn’t been with a man for some years, but Bill had woken something up inside her and it felt delicious.

14

Jonathan arrived home in time to help Eve with the last minute preparations for their dinner. He met her with a kiss and a bouquet of long-stemmed pink roses. She took them to the sink to prepare them for the table while he began talking to her. She turned to see the expression of a loving man, her loving husband.

“Honey, have I told you recently how much you mean to me?” He looked around their beautiful home and made a deep sounding sigh. “You have made our time here so wonderful. I miss you when I’m on the road, you know that?” He laughed at her expression, and pulled her close to him.

“Jonathan, I missed you more than usual this time. Why don’t we cancel the dinner and spend the evening alone tonight?”

“Eve, there’s nothing I’d like more, but we can’t. Honey, they’ll be here in less than an hour.” He stood back, and still touching her, said, “You are so beautiful, I don’t know what I would do without you in my life.”

Eve loved this side of her husband, his kindness, the love he had for her. It was more welcome to her this night than it had been in some time. She felt a renewed feeling inside her, knowing that everything would work out for them. A scent in the air grabbed their attention, and they both ran to the stove.

The soup had begun to boil over the pot. Jonathan reached it in time to save the savory liquid from over-cooking. He picked up a ladle and scooped some of the heavenly fluid into the spoon. Blowing into it, he smiled at Eve, and took a sip. He walked to her and put the spoon to

her mouth for her to finish their soup toast. The smell, the closeness between them. Memories flooded Eve's head, reminding her how much she loved her husband.

They heard the sound of the clock telling them that it was the top of the hour. Jonathan made a sad expression with his mouth, but then smiled. "I wish I could grab you and carry you to our bed, but my dear lady, I need to change before our company arrives."

Eve smiled to hide her sadness. "Go ahead, I'll finish in here. Tonight will be fun, Jonathan. Just don't get too tired, I want you to make good on that thought after they leave."

"Ha! I'm running. See me, Eve? I will run all night long to make it end. I will talk fast, eat at great speed, anything to make the time pass. They will be gone in a flash and I will make love to you until you scream with delight."

Eve watched him sprint off. Her smile was back, he could always do this to her. He was an endearing man, the love of her life, and she felt a surge of strength inside her. *I will do whatever it takes to protect him, we will get through this. I love you, Jonathan.*

15

Sandy sat in her favorite chair recalling the afternoon she'd shared with Eve. The warm tingle in her body made her smile, she couldn't remember feeling so close to a friend before. Ever.

"Señora." Sandy looked up to see her cleaning lady, Conchita. "I finish for today. Do you need more from me?"

Sandy stood to say goodbye. She wasn't supposed to think of this woman as a friend, but in all honesty, she was fond of her. And Eve was too. She and Eve had mentioned in private their admiration for Conchita. *Such a hard working woman, so loving, caring.* "Thank you, Conchita. I'll see you tomorrow." Then a thought popped into Sandy's head, "Wait. Could you help me with some baking? I can't believe that I forgot the ladies are coming in the morning." Sandy smiled at the woman. "Tell you what. You stay and help me cook up some luscious treats for my morning quilting group, and then you take home a bunch of the food to your family." Sandy gave her a pleading expression. "Could you do this for me, Conchita?"

The woman smiled in spite of the request. This would make her day long, and take away valuable time with her children. But her boss was a good lady and she knew it was wise to comply. She took off her coat and rubbed her hands together. "Let us go cook, Sandita." She was officially off the clock, and the women were alone. These were the times when Conchita called her boss the affectionate name she had coined a few years ago. The friendship was constrained, and yet, tender.

In no time at all, the ladies were laughing and telling stories while they worked to make beautiful sandwiches and miniature pie dough

cups that they filled with a delicious mixture of spiced pumpkin custard.

When they finished, Conchita gathered her belongings for the walk to the bus stop. But time had passed quickly, it was dark outside.

Sandy frowned when she realized the time. “Conchita. Wait until my husband comes home and he can drive you to the bus. It’s dangerous for you now.”

Looking outside the window, Conchita shivered. Her boss was right, but the Mister wasn’t due back for some time. She had already missed out on her family time. “Sandita, do not worry. I be careful, I get to bus in only 5 minutes walk.” She picked up her umbrella and left, thanking Sandy for the bag of food. She was several hours late, but knew her husband would forgive her when he tasted the goodies she had. Just the aroma leaking from her bag would excite him. “See you tomorrow, Sandita.”

16

Jonathan and Peter had retired to the office to enjoy a cigar, leaving Eve and Heather in the kitchen to clean up after dinner. Eve worked hard to hide her discomfort over entertaining the woman's husband, her rapist. They were conversing over idle chat when the shots were heard outside the house.

Eve's heart pounded with fear. She saw Jonathan run for his gun, and yell to her, "Call the cops, Eve!" And to Peter, "Here, we need to arm ourselves. Let's go, Peter."

Eve grabbed the phone and spoke to the voice on the other end, relaying what she could see from her front window. She watched as Jonathan and Peter rushed outside to join the crowd of neighbors that had already congregated in the street. Jonathan pushed his way through the people, exposing the slain body with blood draining from its head. Eve went to the front porch where she could get a better look, the incident had happened in front of her home. She heard her husband take the lead, she could hear the alarm in his voice. "What the hell happened?" Jonathan looked around the group. Each was armed, ready to protect their community. "Somebody speak up. The cops will be here soon and I need to know what the story is." Jonathan used the barrel of his beloved Winchester 94 along with his foot to roll the body over.

Eve couldn't see beyond the forms standing around the scene. She finished the call and walked toward the site, looking between the people, peering through the thin aisle they'd made. She wanted to get a glimpse of the body. Finally, she was close enough to recognize the person, the bloody face of the woman lying in the street.

“Conchita!” Eve fell to the ground, screaming from a source deep inside her gut. “No! Not Conchita. Oh God!”

Eve felt someone lifting her, it was Peter. He had his arms around her and attempted to lead her back to her house. His touch made her made ill, cringe. She fought him. “Get your hands off me!” She flung her arms at him attempting to repel him. She was fighting him again, the memory of the rape fierce in her mind. He became angry with her and dug his fingers into her skin as he forged on to the house where he handed Eve over to his wife. He then returned to the crime scene. Eve heard the siren. Looking up, she saw the blur of blinking lights through her wet eyes.

The uniformed men stepped out of the car to inspect the incident. “Who’s in charge here?”

Eve saw Jonathan step up to take the lead. “Officer, this woman was walking through the neighborhood, it was an honest mistake. We take care of each other here and to see a Border Bunny at this hour, well...” He laughed. “You can understand.” Eve winced at her husband’s words. Conchita was a woman, her friend. Jonathan knew her and yet, he spoke as if she wasn’t human.

The officer smirked and winked at him. He went to the radio and called for an ambulance. When he came back, he shook Jonathan’s hand. “Mr. Hart. This is truly an honor, I see you on the TV all the time.” He fished into his pocket and pulled out a small piece of paper. Eve wanted to run into the street and scream at him. “Say, would you mind giving me your John Hancock? Nobody’s going to believe me when I tell them that I spoke with a celeb tonight.” And then to the others, “Folks, that’s enough excitement for now. All of you, go back to

your homes. As far as I'm concerned, my report will say that you felt threatened."

Eve scrutinized her husband, watching as he put his head closer to the officer, as if they were chums. She strained to hear his words, his ugly words. "Listen, we don't want any trouble with the townships." He pointed at the fastened umbrella clenched in the dead woman's hand. "Look at that. God knows that anyone could think she had a weapon. What the hell, she's not supposed to be walking in our streets after dark anyway."

Eve felt sick. She saw the officer put his hand on Jonathan's shoulder, he smiled and said something, but she was done listening. She ran to the bathroom to throw up.

When she returned to the porch, there were men lifting Conchita's body into the back of a van. *Where's the ambulance? What are they doing? God, no. What are they up to?* Eve knew they were covering up the crime. There would be no wrongdoing when the reporters relayed the story in the morning's news. Her friend would be perceived as a thug who deserved what she got. They would spin the events of the night so there would be no upheaval from Latino Town. This was beyond wrong, this was beyond evil. Eve ran for her hand bag and keys. She couldn't take any more if it. She had to get away from it. SHE HAD TO GET AWAY FROM IT.

The garage door opened and Eve stepped on the accelerator. She could hear Jonathan yelling at her as she drove into the street. In the rear view mirror, she saw him wave her off in disgust, and then turn his back to her. The men were laughing at something.

17

Claire was 20 minutes late for her date with Rachel. Upset at her tardiness, she walked into the coffee house, and scanned the room for the news woman. Fortunately, Rachel was in their booth, jotting some ideas down, a stack of papers sitting in front of her.

“Dear God, I am sorry, Rachel.” Claire slid into the booth and took a few breaths to relax. “Thanks for waiting.” She caught a whiff of the smell of gourmet coffee and raised her head to ingest it, using her nose like a catcher’s mitt. “Hmm, this place does it for me, I can taste the coffee by its rich smell.” She smiled. But when she looked across the table, her attitude rapidly sobered.

Rachel looked up, adjusting her black rimmed glasses, she showed disdain for Claire’s apparent giddiness over the café smells. “This bill is an atrocity. Have you really read it, Claire? I mean, it can’t pass, you understand this. Right?”

Claire stared across the table for some time before responding. “Yes, I have read it.” She didn’t know Rachel well enough to unleash her feelings about the bill. She wanted to confide in this woman, but couldn’t, wouldn’t. Her training stopped her from reacting, the voice in her head fighting her urge to speak her mind. “I understand your reaction, Rachel. But this doesn’t have to be, here’s the way it works. I need to find others to help me amend it. I will work on this, but you have a job to do too. That’s why I called you. Your show. You must use it to harp about this every night. I mean it. Each night you must have a segment about this. You get Dems on as your guests and you get the word out. That’s what you need to do.”

Claire took a deep breath and sat back.

Rachel's mouth was frozen in a constricted position, her eyes angry. "Really, Claire? You know how wrong this is and you want me to get others to fight this? What about all the work you've done for the past decade or so? You're the front runner for exposing crap that women still have to endure, the unfair ideas that some want to impose on us." Rachel picked up the notes she'd taken and began reading, her tone furious.

"Freedom of Speech; the people shall have the right to express their religious beliefs in all venues of life, and shall be permitted to refuse to conduct business with people whose intent is to harm."

"Really, Claire? Gee. Does that mean this country will include religion in our government? Whose religion will that be, Claire?" Claire felt the stab pierce through her body when Rachel jerked her head up to glare at her. But her reading continued with such nastiness, so much anger. "Oh, and let's talk about the rest of that little snippet. The people shall be permitted to refuse to conduct business with people whose intent is to harm. What if *these people* are in fear of a different race than theirs, fear of a different nationality? And this is to be based on their religious rights?" Rachel slammed her papers on the table. "This is ludicrous, Claire. This wording takes us back decades." She extended her body across the table in an aggressive stance. "You do understand this, yes?"

"You can stop with the condescending tone, Rachel. I think you know that we are on the same page here." Claire winced at her response, angry at herself for reacting.

Rachel was relentless and continued. "Let's see. Oh, there's more here." She glared at Claire.

"Right to Bear Arms; the people have the right to form a militia if and when they feel this right is being seized by an unfriendly entity. These rights extend to allowing the choice of a citizen's weaponry to ensure said person's

safety. The people shall have the right to protect themselves without risk of imprisonment, deeming their rights to determine the safety of their person.”

Rachel stopped for a few moments, but didn't take her eyes off her notes. "What does this mean? The people can form a militia against the government if they aren't happy? Oh, wait. It also states that they have the choice of ammunition? What is this saying, Claire? No more need for the NRA, I guess. These people have full killing constitutional rights with this. A regular wild wild west." Claire stayed silent while Rachel raged. "The people shall have the right to protect themselves without risk of imprisonment, deeming their rights to determine the safety of their person." She paused to catch her breath. "The citizen is a judge and jury now, Claire?"

"Rachel." Claire tried to get a word in.

The woman across from Claire put her hand up to stop her. She was in an anger zone and couldn't be stopped. "No. Don't you dare say a word, Claire. There's more. In fact, I believe I've saved the best for last." She looked at her scribbles, and worked at spitting out her next words.

"Rights Reserved for States; the rights of the people of individual states shall be determined through said state's congress, where said states can impose rules and regulations for all citizens, the intent being to ensure the safety of all."

"Isn't this language a little loose here? I mean, couldn't this be interpreted as saying the states can impose rules and regulations for women's reproductive rights, immigration stances, gay rights, and regulatory demands for local commerce, the intent being to ensure the safety of all?" Rachel put her head down, ignoring Claire, trying to compose herself.

"I believe you need to hear what I have to say, it is my turn to talk."

“Oh really, Claire? You lived through this terrible thing with your sister. You’ve fought for women’s rights all your adult life. And now your Party wants to make it the law to set regulations for women, gays and lesbians. Immigration stances? What the hell does that mean? What country is this? Your Party wants to turn it into a fucking all white culture with men making decisions for us all. Yea, let’s keep the women home to have babies and take care of the husband. Maybe we’re too dumb to vote too?” She shook her head and Claire could tell that she was out of steam, she could see that it was finally her time to speak.

“I called you because we are in agreement about this, Rachel. We need to collaborate, but in a way that works. We need to stay calm and figure this out in a smart way. You and I both know that if this were to pass, it would be the end of our society as we know it. You, me, anyone who represents a threat to people in the government would inherit a miserable existence, to say the least. It is unthinkable what could happen.” Claire threw her hands on the table, a whacking sound echoed in their ears.

“Now, Rachel. I can keep you informed, but you need to think of me as,” she grimaced. “Your private Deep Throat, if you will. Your informant.”

“Coffee, ladies?”

The mere sound of the waitress standing over their table shook the women. Both their heads jerked up to see her smiling down at them. She held up the coffee urn, and began to pour without waiting for an answer. “There you go, ladies. You two enjoy.” Donna smiled and left them.

Rachel began to start in, but was hushed by Claire. “Please, let me continue.” Claire flinched, a sigh escaped her mouth. “Powerful Senators are going to put a spin on this bill to sell it. Rachel, this is not the Party I joined, this isn’t what we stand for. But unfortunately, some zealots have kidnapped us and are imposing a strong set of standards that exclude most

of the citizens in this country. You and I need to stand together. As you said, this bill would affect non-whites and virtually all women. And you are correct. It would be taking us back by over 100 years.” She looked down at her cup and picked up a swizzle stick to stir her black coffee, a nervous habit she’d acquired in the last hour.

In a cautious manner, Rachel broke her silence. “Ok, Claire. I’m game. What do you have in mind? My show. Of course I’ll use it. I’ll use it every night to get people educated, but we need more. We need to declare war on this thing.” She paused to take in some air.

Claire took her break as an excuse to talk, “I’ll be working it from my end. I know that currently, most of my Party has agreed to vote for it. There are enough votes to make it pass if everyone in my Party agrees to it. But without my vote, and if no Democrats vote for it, the bill will die. That’s all I have for now. We need to build our own militia of sorts.”

The two women settled down, bonding with the rage they both felt for the bill. Their heads were together, they began to devise a strategy full of names they would use to ignite the country, expose the bill for what it was. Rachel wrote madly, recording all their ideas. Claire thought of Bill, wondering if he would vote for the monstrosity or if he would think about what was best for the country. The two women had blocked out anyone, anything that surrounded them, totally unaware of the newcomer who would soon obliterate their existence as they knew it.

18

After driving for over an hour, Eve's face was smudged from streaming tears that were finally under control. She didn't know where to go, but did recognize one thing. She couldn't go back to her home. Everyone, but her small group of friends made her ill. "Conchita. How could they do that to you?"

Watching the men with her husband in the lead lift the woman's body into the van had been a turning point for her. That, and serving dinner to her rapist had sent her over the top. Her mind was spinning while compiling a strategy that she'd use to change her life. Eve was in such deep thought that she didn't realize where she was. It was a little past midnight before she recognized the buildings around her, the district she'd been to just a day ago. She passed the street where she'd seen the doctor. Up ahead was where she'd walked, "The coffee house. I know it must be over here."

Bending forward as she slowly drove down the deserted street, she strained her eyes looking for the peculiar dwelling. Finally, she parked the car where she knew the coffee house had to be. She stepped out into the night and stood, staring at the front of the building. It was an abandoned fire house with a sign that read Engine House No 5 over the large arched garage doorway. The building was old, made from brick. It had been kept up nicely, but it was its ambiance, architectural design that filled Eve's insides with hope. She sensed warmth from within herself in the cool night air, a safe and welcome sensation she needed so desperately. Hearing a noise, she turned to look.

A short distance away, she saw the stairway that led to the subway system. Like before, there was a faint glow from some yellow lights below. Almost in a trance, she followed the sunny rays, and soon found herself below the street standing in front of the ladies room. Without hesitation, Eve turned the knob and entered the room where she proceeded to clean her face, wash away the pain and anger from the evening. The door had automatically closed behind her, giving her privacy where the peaceful feeling saturated through her system. No fear. Only harmony. Looking into the mirror, she felt presentable and turned to the door.

She stood looking at her portal, hoping for it to open and expose the room with an invitation for her to enter, leaving her ugly life behind. Laughing at herself, she said, “So I have to do this myself, huh? No magic until I get to the other side?” Then a blow of anxiety struck her, “What if you’re not there? It may destroy me if you are not there.” She slowly reached for the brass knob and turned it, terrified that it wouldn’t take her to her enchanted Bohemian world.

Eve heard the chatter, smelled the coffee and scones. Elated, she stepped into the dreamlike expanse. Within seconds, she felt the grip on her forearm, the waitress who had been so kind to her before.

“Good to see you so soon, Eve. Come, I’ll show you to your booth.”

“How do you know my name? I mean, you told me yours, but...”

The woman stopped and grinned. “Don’t you remember, Honey? I asked and you replied. You really were distraught last time.” Laughing, she led the way. “Shall I get you the same as usual?” Donna had a habit of asking questions, but delivering her chosen outcome before people could answer. She ushered Eve to the same booth she’d had before. “I know what you want, honey. Give me a few minutes. I do believe we have some scones

about to come out of the oven. Your timing has been very good, I must say.”

Eve sat scanning the room as she'd done before. It was as if she was in a museum. There were so many paintings, photos, interesting artifacts to study. And of course, the old tree with its tentacle-like branches. She quickly leaned to her side which gave her a view of the ladies room where she could see that the tree had begun its growth over the door as before. It took some time before she overheard the conversation in the next booth, but when she realized who it was, she was elated. The events that had taken place in the past hours had given her strength. Without thinking, she stood to face Claire and Rachel. Looming over their table, she appeared taller, felt resilient. Seeing she had their attention, she spoke.

“Excuse me, Claire Winslow. I need your help.”

19

Claire and Rachel looked up, shocked by the intruder. Rachel spoke first, irritated by the interruption. “I’m sorry, but we’re in the middle of something. Could this wait?”

Eve barely heard her and still staring at Claire, said. “I understand that you call yourself a Senator, that you help women in trouble. I don’t understand your title, but I am certainly in need of help. I don’t believe I can return to my home after tonight.” Eve suddenly felt a surge of euphoria. She put her arms out and raised them as if she were a runner at the finish line, her jubilation over the foreign feeling taking control. “I must sound crazy to the two of you. I sound crazy to me. But I don’t remember feeling so enriched. I think I need to talk to you tonight. Please, may I sit?”

Something about the woman intrigued Claire. She scooted herself over and reached her hand out to offer Eve a throne at their table. “My friend is correct, we are in the middle of a meeting. But we can take a few minutes for you, what’s your name?”

No sooner than Eve had joined the women’s table, the waitress came over with three scones. Hot beautiful scones that sent an aroma into the air so enticing, so perfect that all three ladies regressed to young girls instantly. They’d been thrown into a ritual, breaking bread together. A ceremony they were unaware of at the moment.

After the scone feast, they made their introductions and Eve began her story. She didn’t understand or maybe didn’t care, but she trusted both of them and told them everything. The rape, the murder of Conchita. She didn’t stop until she had it all out in the open.

“So you’re saying the police were in on the conspiracy to hide the murder?” Rachel had her reporter radar focused on the insanity of the story. “Where is this Scarsborough Meadows place? We’ll find the person in charge, maybe the police chief for that region. This can’t be all that difficult.”

Claire was concerned for Eve. “So you saw the event? Your husband, the others, they know what you saw and they just let you drive away? Honey, you might be in danger. They can’t let you go to the authorities. Where will you stay tonight?”

“I don’t know yet. I have some money scanners. I’ll stay in a hotel. My friend, Sandy. She told me I can get an abortion in Latino Town.” She shook her head in dismay. “That’s the township where Conchita and her family live.” She choked. “I mean where Conchita lived. How can I go there when I know what happened?”

Claire and Rachel reacted at the same time, but it was Claire who made the first exclamation. “Latino Town? Township? Are you putting us on?” Eve saw her look around the room, perhaps searching for cameras. Then Claire said, “You had us going, Eve. Nice prank.”

Shocked at the turn of events, Eve watched her two new friends gather their papers. Rachel looked at her and said, “Eve, this was an interesting evening, but now that you’ve taken up our time with your little scam, the relationship the three of us cultivated tonight is over.” And then to Claire, “I’ll be in contact.” She laid money on the table and stood to leave. “Oh, and Eve? This is on me tonight. First time is free.” She frowned at Eve and exited the coffee house.

Eve moved to Rachel’s side of the booth only to watch Claire finish packing her personal affects. “Claire, why are you both angry with me? I

told you what happened tonight, no one can make that up. Why on earth would you even doubt me?"

"Come on, Eve. Township for Latinos'? Really?" Without saying anymore, she left as Rachel had done.

Eve's good feelings had been erased, leaving her sick inside. What had just happened? She picked up her purse and began her trek to the exit, following in Rachel and Claire's footsteps.

But Donna rushed to stop her. "Eve. You haven't figured it out yet, have you? Sorry, honey, but you can't use the front door." She pointed to the back where the tree covered her portal just as it had done before. "I look forward to seeing you again." She left Eve standing, lost, and alone.

Saturday

After a wild night with her nightmares, Claire was up and running with the new day. She was on her way to meet Bill at the Belga Café, but her thoughts were raging with images of the strange evening at the coffee house.

Minutes after going over the bill item by item, Eve had appeared at their booth. *Was she a plant, a scam to throw them off point?* What made her most angry was how she'd been drawn to Eve. *Did the woman remind her of her sister? And that Conchita woman. The story of that horrible incident.* Claire was agitated over the recollections of the event, and those expressions she'd never heard before. *Latino Town, townships? What was she saying? Was it from a script, was Eve a hired actor?*

To get her mind off her nightmare, Claire had spent time searching for clues on her computer. She'd looked up phrases such as *Scarsborough Meadows* and the other strange vocabulary she'd heard. She had even tried looking for, *missing woman Conchita from Latino Town*. She'd found nothing, not one word from Eve's story had checked out. So why couldn't she get the woman's words out of her head?

"Claire, over here." She saw Bill flagging her down from a table outside the Café.

She felt immediate relief from her coffee house memories, his warm greeting dulling Eve's disconcerted story. "Bill, this is nice. I'm glad we decided to do this." Claire's thoughts were suddenly replaced with the memory of their delicious kiss.

“I can’t get the smile off my face, so obviously I think it’s nice too.” Bill saw the waiter approach them, “This place makes a great omelet with baby grey shrimp, tomatoes and cheese. Would you like to try it, Claire?”

“Sure, Bill. Listen...”

“Hold on, pretty lady.” Claire didn’t like the way he seemed to always cut her off. She watched him hail the waiter and order for the two of them. Then he reached across the table and took her hands, “Now, where were we?”

“Bill, have you ever heard the term, Latino Town?”

“No, what is it? A new restaurant?”

Claire laughed, “No. Well I mean that I don’t know. I heard the phrase the other day, and was just curious what it was.”

“Forget that, I have a special day planned for us. I hope you don’t have to be anywhere because,” he smirked as he reached into the pocket of his coat and fished for an envelope. His cute demeanor made her grin as he pushed the packet to her side of the table. “Open it, Claire.”

She did as he asked, and inside were two club box tickets to a ball game. “How did you know I liked baseball?” She took a closer look and was delighted to see that they were playing the Red Sox. “But can I cheer for Boston? They’re my east coast team. Mind you, you would really have me going if we were playing the Mariners.”

Bill was enchanted with her, he had a sparkle in his eyes, and her excitement thrilled him. “We have just enough time after we finish here to get to the stadium and have a drink at a hidden little bar. It’s only a few blocks away from the ball park, it’s my favorite way to start a game day.” Claire saw him reach for a second envelope. “And now, I present you with a gift so rare, so prestigious, so grand that I may just win over your heart in an instant.”

“Oh yea? Hurry, the suspense is killing me. What, what?”

“Hmm, little lady. I’m seeing a new side of you. So you like gifts, huh?”

“Sure, but I like nice surprises more. What is it?”

This time he reached inside the envelope and pulled out its contents. Holding up two fabulous tickets, he flirted with her. “These little treasures are tough to come by so you have to be someone in this town to get your hands on them.” He turned to look at the paper gems he held in his hand. “It requires you to dress up in the most sophisticated garment you can find, me to wear my best, most expensive suit. I will be treating you like a queen tonight.” He stretched his arm in the air waving her surprise gently in the breeze.

Claire waited until his confidence got the best of him, and then she reached forward to grab the trophies. “Ha! Never get too arrogant, Senator. That’s when you’ll miss a chance to see what’s coming your way.” She looked down to see what the hype was all about. In shock, her hand covered her mouth while a sound of delight escaped her lips.

“How did you…” She replaced the tickets safely inside their protector, and handed the envelope back to him. “Please accept my joy and appreciation for such a wonderful invitation.” She put her head back and laughed. “We’re going to the White House tonight!”

Eve sat in the hotel restaurant sipping her late morning coffee while thinking about the disastrous way her evening had ended. It had been a cruel sequence of events. First, Conchita, then feeling relieved to tell Claire and Rachel her story. Finally, their rejection. What had she said to make them distrust her? And yet, thinking back, Claire had told her. *Latino Town, the township*. But why did she act as though she'd never heard of these places?

Then Eve thought of the last words coming from the coffee house waitress, her preposterous notion. *Why couldn't I leave through the front door?* Just remembering gave her an urge to do it. To do what she wasn't allowed to do. *But why? What would I see? What is this forbidden experience?* Suddenly, she needed to know. *Is that lady looking out for my best interest? Or, is there something out there worth seeing, some kind of ownership that I deserve?* So many questions. She sighed. There would be time to explore her new life. But now, today she would take care of her pre-imminent problem, she would go to the Latino Town hospital. After fearing it her entire life, she was about to learn about existence in a township.

In a way, she was elated. Her viewpoint was changing. She would follow through with the trip, in spite of her knowledge of Conchita. In fact, she would do it for Conchita. She owed it to the woman. After today, she would better understand time in this foreign land.

Eve's adrenaline was waking her up, prompting her to treat her reality as a daily adventure. She picked up her purse, the only possession she now had, other than her car, and paid the bill with one

of the money scanners she had escaped with. Her decision was made up, she'd go to Latino Town and find a doctor who would help with her problem. Baby steps, yes. That's how she would handle her new life. Baby steps.

Eve saw the line of cars ahead and stepped on the brake to slow the car to a stop. She was at the border gate. The ominous wall of stone surrounding the town terrified her. It signified an evil she'd always known, a terrifying wickedness she'd learned at a very early age. There were people on the other side that were dangerous, people that wanted to hurt her.

“What am I doing?” She touched her stomach with her palm. “Why don't I feel anything for this innocent child?” Her thoughts exploded with rage, remembering. It was her first rape. She knew women who'd been through it numerous times. It wasn't that uncommon for this sort of thing to take place. She had an urge to pull her car out of the line and go back to Jonathan. “I can pretend that nothing happened, I can suppress my anger. But the child. Oh, God. I'm sorry, little person.”

The cars slowly rolled forward, toward the entrance to the town. “If I go back, what then? In a few months, he'll banish me anyway. He'll think I'm a whore. I'll be an embarrassment to him.”

The cars rolled forward again. She could now see the man in uniform peering into the window of the frontrunner, the lucky one who had the privilege to enter next. “What is he asking? God, what should I say? I need a story.” Eve's face flushed with fear, she strained her mind to think of a reason for entering this foreign land. “Ok, I have a cleaning lady that's ill. I'm just paying a visit to her. Yes, that ought to do.”

The cars rolled forward. She was now second in line. Tears were begging to be released, tired of being blocked behind her eyes.

It was finally her turn. “Stay calm, you can do this.”

The guard leaned over and scrutinized Eve, he panned his eyes around the interior of her car. “Have a nice day, lady.” He waved her in.

She held her breath until she was several blocks inside the township, the ghetto as some called it. Then she let out a silent scream of joy before taking a deep exhale, releasing her anxiety so that she could begin her new undertaking. Proudly, she directed her car to follow the signs to the hospital.

There were shanties all along the roadside, the side streets were paved with dirt. When she came to a stop light, the traffic changed to a heavily traveled thoroughfare where there were lots of busses, the pollution pouring out of their rears. The pollution, she’d seen it everywhere, each year it got worse since the government’s aggressive deregulation program had been enacted. “So many people. What am I doing?” She saw the tall building ahead, the prominent letters on its face said HOSPITAL. “Why is it in English?” Then she laughed at herself when she recalled that the same word was used for both languages.

She turned down a side road looking for a place to park. After several attempts of driving up and down the smaller streets, she drove back to the hospital, and found a parking lot for patients. “God, I’m not thinking clearly.” Her chest heaved with some deep breaths. “Relax, you can do this.”

Eve sat in her car for several minutes, suddenly afraid to enter the building. The stress of finding the hospital had taken her mind off her task, but now that she was staring at it, she was terrified. She took another deep breath and blew air out of her mouth.

Looking down at her tummy, she shook her head. “Baby, you didn’t have a chance. I am sorry, but I have no choice.” A tear fell. She finally allowed the flood gates to open, releasing a storm of wet, apologetic tears.

Nearly an hour later, Eve left the confines of her car, and bravely entered the building. Her outward strength was courageous, but her inward forte held a dismal collection of weakness, frailty, insidious emotions that were making her ill. Eve was confused about her mission. It went against all she believed. It was selfish, immoral, wrong.

Eve sensed that all eyes were on her. Her broken Spanish was surely going to make this more difficult, but her attention quickly switched from self-consciousness to that of amazement. There were so many people, countless lines that wrapped around the walls of the huge lobby. It was a struggle, but she succeeded to find a place to stand, to wait her turn. She needed to register herself before having the status to use the hospital.

After managing to squelch her inner feelings, she knew she had to forge on, using what strength she could muster up.

It took over an hour for her to reach her destination, but as luck would have it, the person behind the window knew English. His first question was an easy one. “What is your name?”

Eve’s first reaction was to blurt it out, but something stopped her. After a pause, she said, “Eve. My name is Eve Winslow.” Then she told him that she’d forgotten her driver’s license for proof of her identity.

The man smirked, “That’s funny, an undocumented white lady.”

Within another 10 minutes, she had a little medical book the size of a passport; she was ready to see the doctor. Eve followed her instructions well and found her next line. She was struck by the attitude of the people. In spite of the standing, waiting, they were smiling and laughing. No one seemed to be testy, no one was trying to cut in front of another. These folks had managed to treat a horrid experience as a social hour.

Like before, whenever she established eye contact, the expressions were kind. *Why don’t they hate me? God knows that outside this town,*

there are many racists. And the law even gives them the right to shoot anyone whom they fear. She knew this kind of animosity must exist in this town, but the laws here didn't help them carry out their rage.

That was the difference.

Her husband and others had created a class separation, a belief system, a religion that included only one set of values. If you didn't fit, you were banished, shipped to Latino Town, Black Town, Asia Town. The list went on and on. Yes, these were the townships.

Conchita. Eve felt sick at the thought of her.

Finally she reached the front of the line where a woman checked her in and said, "Tome asiento." She pointed to a nearby group of chairs.

Relieved to sit, Eve scanned the room, taking in its details. There was a partitioned wall lined with doors, each had a number. She'd been assigned to the doctor behind #15.

Eve was surprised to see a white couple chatting near her.

"Hey, come over and join us." The lady gestured for Eve to sit with them. "Honey, my name is Christine, this is my husband, Ron. We haven't seen you around here before, first time?" Christine had a charming disposition, an obviously contented woman. She and her husband were in their early sixties, a retired couple who had emigrated from White Town.

Before Eve could say anything, Christine jumped up. "My turn. Ron will keep you company." But there was a hesitation, so she stopped and turned to face Eve, "What's your name? We don't see a lot of white folks around here."

"Eve, it's Eve Winslow."

Left alone with the woman's husband, Eve fidgeted. She felt a little uncomfortable so was relieved when Ron spoke.

"So, do you live near here?"

Shocked at his question, she stared at him for a moment. "I didn't know we were allowed to live here. Are you telling me that you..." Her eye caught the movement of two men attaching a large poster to the far wall.

Conchita. Eve felt sick at the thought of her.

Ron noticed her reaction to the poster and said, "It is sad, isn't it? Conchita never came home from her job last night. Her family's awfully worried."

"Do you know what it says?"

"Sure, that she's missing and the family's looking for her." Ron gazed at Eve's expression. "Hey, do you know Conchita? You seem upset."

Eve forced herself to take her eyes off the sign. "No, no. I just feel for the family, they must be frantic." She knew she should have gone to the authorities with her knowledge of Conchita. Her guilt along with her other problems were making her feel nauseated.

She regained her composure and asked, "Where do you live? I'm actually looking for a place to stay. I've never been here before, but it's a nice surprise to see how friendly everyone is."

Ron told Eve about the neighborhood they lived in, and asked if she'd like to join them for dinner. "We have a guest room if you'd like to stay until you get your own place."

Christine returned, and said, "Your turn, Eve."

"Honey, Eve is homeless for a few days. I told her she could stay with us until she finds a place."

“This is wonderful news, are you thinking of settling in Latino Town, Eve? We just love it here. You go see the doctor and we’ll be here when you get out.”

Inside door #15, the doctor and her assistant were very attentive. They listened to Eve’s account of the rape, and made a phone call. “I want you to go upstairs now. Someone’s coming to take you up there.” She scribbled something down and handed the paper to Eve. “Give this to the doctor upstairs. The procedure is quick, and then I want you to go home and sleep for the rest of the day, don’t get out of bed until tomorrow morning.”

Eve was led to the next doctor. She knew there would be no looking back. That day, she became a real citizen, a person of substance. In spite of the fearful next couple of hours, she had a fresh insightful pride brewing. This pristine sense of being was new to her, was welcome to her. She was home. If only she could rid the guilt of Conchita, and what she was about to do. A voice in her head screamed, *I’m so sorry little baby.*

24

The White House Correspondents' Association Dinner was a month late this year. It was the one time of the year that the Washington event raised money for scholarships while recognizing people in the media business through humor. Stars who used their popularity to push their politics were there, a few Senators, members of Congress, but mostly this was an event for the press. In a sense, it was a roast for the media people. This year's top comedian was Mathew Latta, a seven-time Emmy winner for his late night comedy show. And of course, the president would speak. This president had good timing, a regular comedian in his own right. It was going to be a night to remember.

Claire looked stunning in her new dress. They hadn't had time to go home to change so they'd both raced through a store, managing to find beautiful clothing, shoes, and accessories. Claire didn't worry about what she spent, this was a once in a lifetime event for her. She wanted to shine as one of the few Senators with a ticket to the party.

They entered the building and were instantly in the lime light with Hollywood types and media stars; cameras were flashing as the beautiful people congregated. Claire was aware of Bill's popularity, but was still taken aback by his notarized admiration. He had become a powerhouse in such a short time. They socialized in the cocktail party atmosphere with Bill maintaining his attentive way with her. He was dashing, he was getting to her.

When they entered the dining room, they headed for their table. All seating arrangements had been pre-assigned, and she and Bill were to sit

with the great Alan Stewart and his date. Stewart was one of the most handsome and talented actors in Hollywood.

They walked through the room toward their table, passing the many media celebrities. Each table was arranged for a particular news network.

Then she saw Rachel.

Their eyes met, Claire could see the woman's look of shock and she knew it was because of Bill. He was one of the so called Sanctioned Four, the power group responsible for writing SB 1257.

As they passed Rachel's table, Claire put her hand on Bill's arm and said, "I need to say hello to Rachel. Please go on, I'll catch up with you." She smiled, ignoring the fact that he didn't like her bold relationship with the woman.

"Rachel, so nice to see you, this is truly an unexpected pleasure." She leaned over and began to whisper, "I did some research on Eve and couldn't find anything to support her story."

"Me too. But I have no idea who put her up to it." She turned to watch Bill, comfortably seated at their table, he was already in deep conversation with Alan Stewart. "Interesting company you keep, Claire."

"Why, yes. It is, Rachel." She held her smile while she continued. "We need his vote, now don't we?" She patted Rachel on her back and finished by saying, "Let's meet again, say tomorrow. Same place and time?"

Rachel nodded, and shook her hand. "Good to see you, Senator. Enjoy your dinner."

Claire found her place next to Bill where they enjoyed conversation with the others at their table and when the dinner was served, they appreciated the beautifully orchestrated three course meal.

It began with a fabulous Cabernet. Then, bread... white, wheat, and sourdough rolls. Next came a crab salad, complete with tear drop tomatoes

and artisan greens. The main course was an herbal rubbed filet with a calvados sauce, served with red curry jumbo shrimp and risotto. Everything was perfect.

They finished with coffee and a chocolate truffle mousse layered with almond macaroon. And of course, more wine for the show that was about to start.

Finally the president stood at the podium and began his part of poking fun with the press. As usual, he gave them plenty to laugh about. Claire almost felt sorry for the headliner, Mathew Latta. Tough act to follow. But the laughs did continue when Mr. Latta began. The entire night was a wonderful success.

The mingling didn't stop after the show, the after parties were about to start. Bill had received several invitations, including one of the toughest tickets, the Bloomberg and Vanity Fair party taking place at the residence of the French Ambassador.

There were dozens of parties in town that night, but Bill had selected just two. When they left the Bloomberg party, he took them to the FOX News party. Claire danced the night away with the handsome man, and laughed over his jokes when they took their breaks. It was a happy time for them both.

In the wee hours of the night, Bill whispered into Claire's ear, "Please come home with me tonight, Claire. I'm so taken with you, I don't want to say goodnight." He placed his palm on her face and looked into her eyes, happy to see her silent answer. He added, "This is the best night I've had in years, and it's only going to get better. Come, let's go."

Claire hadn't been with a man for some time, but this was comfortable. They were good together. She gladly stepped into the cab with him, her

anticipation full of good thoughts. After all, what could go wrong when everything was so right?

25

Inside Bill's apartment, he turned on some music and poured them each a glass of wine. Claire watched him and laughed, "I don't believe we need any more of that, Senator, but I do admire your stemware." She picked up the beautiful claret and raised it in the air to enjoy the way the ruby colored liquid caught the dim light through its deep-cut etching.

She glanced around his apartment, taking in his obvious good taste in design. "I like what you've done with your place, Bill."

He took the glass from her and set it on the table, then stroked her hair. "No more talk, pretty lady." He put his moist lips against hers and began caressing her mouth with his tongue. He murmured to her, "Claire, I've watched you from afar for a very long time, you are so beautiful." She felt his kiss crawl down her neck while he pulled her dress strap over one shoulder.

Claire sighed. The sensation she felt was hypnotic. The heat inside her was mounting and made her head feel light. Then she felt him unzip her dress, her second strap now loose. Moans came from the man as he exposed her breasts, and his mouth fondled her.

Claire's breathing was out of control. The ecstasy, the pure state of pleasure. Her dress fell to the floor, and she kicked her shoes across the room. Then, without thinking, she pulled his head to her lips and kissed him. The tenderness had been replaced with a wild, wonderful aggression.

Bill suddenly grabbed her and carried her to the bedroom where they devoured each other, hungry, thirsty, surrendering to their temptations.

Claire's night of love making didn't stop her from having her nightmare, and nothing had progressed in her dream. Other than the few words her sister said to her each night, she hadn't broken through their barrier, she hadn't been able to reason with her.

She watched her sister raise the gun to her head and pull the trigger. Claire jerked up in bed, her body drenched. It took a few moments to realize where she was, the memory flooding back to her evening with Bill. He lay sleeping next to her.

Carefully, she stepped onto the floor, and left the slumbering man. She found his shirt on the carpet with the tie still dangling around its collar, a promotion for memories of their wild night. She smugly put the shirt on and let the tie act like a scarf. It smelled good, felt right against her skin. Then she went to the kitchen and splashed cold water on her face, a relief that was so desperately needed.

As she always did, she searched her memory of the dream, hoping to recall something that was different. Anything.

Eve.

How could she have forgotten such an important alteration? She saw Eve in her dream. But why? She scanned the room for paper to write on, she needed to record this new event. There was a large desk at the end of the living room, there had to be something to write on. She began leafing through the papers, hoping to find a notebook to write down her thoughts.

It was there that her eyes saw the bound manuscript entitled *Take Back Our Country ~ SB 1257*.

She slowly sat in Bill's chair, and began reading, learning of the plan the Sanctioned Four had devised to promote the new bill. To deceive the public. The bill that would change the lives of the people of the United States as they'd known it for decades. She ran her index finger to and fro

across the pages, scanning the fine points of their document. Looking toward the bedroom, it was quiet. She was ok, but she could feel a storm inside her chest, her heart beating violently while working overtime.

Claire's eyes quickly perused the apartment in search for her purse. It was across from her, lying on the couch. *God!* Quietly, she tip toed, worried he would wake. When she reached it, she thrust her hand inside feeling for her phone.

Back at the desk, she began using her phone to shoot photos of the different pages.

Inside the bound book were lists of slogans, the text was an outline for what they wanted all Republican Senators to repeat during interviews prior to the vote. The twists and turns in their talking points were carefully construed to confuse the issue of the bill's intent. She madly turned the pages, clicking, clicking, terrified that Bill would hear her. Then she saw it, a memo stuck to a new page, an instruction that made her shiver with fear.

Claire gasped when she read it.

Claire Winslow, Bill Hancock assigned to problem.

The sudden light from the overhead fixture momentarily blinded her. She jolted her head to see Bill standing across the room.

He had a frown on his face and shook his head. "Claire, Claire. You have been a naughty girl tonight. Don't you know it's not polite to go snooping through someone's papers?" He took a seat across the room from her. "Now why did you have to go and ruin all the fun? You were hot in bed. And quite frankly, I was rather looking forward to more of that. But now..." Bill laughed, "And just look at how cute you are in my shirt." His head nodded, "We could have fucked every night for days and I think I

wouldn't have been bored. This is a real shame on many different levels.” He picked up his phone and dialed a number. “She knows, she's seen the manual.”

Claire saw him take his eyes off her, his attention devoted to the person he was talking to. Her heart was pounding. Slowly, she picked up her purse and let her phone slip into its side pocket. She couldn't let him see the phone!

Then he raised his eyes to address her. “Please excuse me for a moment, honey. I need to take this in private.” He walked toward her and snatched the bound document, the documented notorious plot he had helped design. A book full of trickery they would use to convince the public to support their hideous bill. He turned his back on her and closed the bedroom door behind him, leaving her in shock.

With Bill out of the room, Claire jumped to her feet and fumbled with her dress, shoes. Her hands were shaking so hard, she couldn't get the zipper to work. It didn't matter, she had to get out of there. Her body was quivering. She looked toward his bedroom where she could see Bill's shadow under the illuminated crack of the door, moving from his obvious pacing.

She scrambled toward her exit, but froze when she heard his voice.

“Going so soon? And after all the fun we had with this sleep over?”

Claire turned to face him, but he no longer seemed handsome to her. He looked and sounded like a monster. She spit out her words to him, “You were pretty convincing last night, so where were you going to take it from here, Bill? Did you really think I'd fall so deeply for you in just a few days that you'd convince me to vote for that monstrosity of a bill?”

He stayed calm, but his voice had a nasty undertone. “You do have choices, Claire. No one can force your vote, now can they? However, you

might want to think about your future.” He grinned, “When you want to hurt a candidate, turn their strengths into a weakness, Claire. You’re up for re-election and we can smother the air waves with negative attacks on you. The press are puppets, we put out a good story and they run with it. We can get them to spend a week talking on anything we like. In fact, that will take away the real story.” He glared at her.

“The contents of this bill.”

He put his head back and laughed. “There’s nothing you can do about it. And the story they will be talking about is you, Claire. The one week when they should be talking about this bill, they will be shocked by the news of Claire Winslow. Do you realize how forgetful the voters are? Everything you ever did that you are proud of will be gone from your record.” She heard another evil laugh escape his mouth.

Bill walked up to her and brushed her body, she shuddered. He reached around her and slowly pulled her zipper up, his eyes fixed on hers. Then she heard the motion of the door’s handle, her escape hatch. Before he let her out of his grasp, he put his face close to hers and said one last thing, “If you don’t vote for this, you are fucking ruined, Claire Winslow!”

She pushed him aside and ran, she kept running until she reached the street.

Outside, she stopped to catch her breath, and then called Rachel. “I need to see you. Please get this message and come to our place. This is urgent. It’s 3am and I’m headed there now.” She ran to a cab parked on the street and gave the driver instructions. She headed in the direction of the coffee house.

26

Eve woke up around 1am. She'd slept for hours and was now wide awake, too awake to sleep anymore. Her body felt sticky and then she remembered the dream, or the nightmare.

Conchita.

The guilt she suffered was eating her alive. That poor family, they deserved to know.

She looked around at her foreign surroundings, wondering what her new life would be like. She became more agitated, more restless. She was thirsty.

When it became clear that she wouldn't get back to sleep, she got up and dressed. Her purse was sitting next to her bed and fiddling with it, Eve felt inside for some paper to write on. She needed to go for a drive, do anything to get her mind off the shame of staying silent. She'd leave a note for Ron and Christine. Pulling Claire's business card from her purse, she stared at it. The temptation to use it for her message was overwhelming, but she hesitated, and then replaced it back in her purse.

Venturing downstairs, she found a fresh notebook pad and wrote a short letter to her hosts just in case she didn't return before they woke.

Ron and Christine,

I can't seem to sleep so I'm going for a drive to clear my head. Don't worry if I'm not here for breakfast, will connect with you soon. Thank you for your hospitality and helping me through yesterday.

Eve

Eve enjoyed driving. She opened the window and let the fresh air gently blow against her face. She loved their little neighborhood, the clean streets, the cute and well-kept houses, it was charming. She remembered Ron saying that they lived on the north end of town, a more desirable part of the settlement where they didn't worry about vandalism or robberies. She saw the guard at the neighborhood gate and slowed down to a halt. When she told him she was staying with Ron and Christine, he smiled and opened the gate for her.

For the next hour, she drove around inspecting the different districts. However, once she left the north end, she noticed that the cleanliness had dissipated somewhat, there were some unpaved side roads, and she saw graffiti on many building walls. It was similar to the sites she'd seen the day before. Still, she felt comfortable, cheerful.

The light on her gas gage turned red, it didn't take long to find a gas station. While the man filled her tank, she went into the attached convenience store to look around, but stopped when the glaring headline in the local paper caught her eye. The bold font shouted at her, *CONCHITA Se Busca*. Her lack of knowledge for the language wasn't an obstacle this time; she knew it must be saying that the woman was still missing. Picking up the paper, she paid for it along with her gas. She slipped it into her purse, and resumed her night drive. As she slowly drove down the street, she noticed the posters nailed to many of the power poles. Conchita had been loved by this town.

Up ahead, Eve noticed some large gates, she was approaching the border. She slowed the car to where the patrolman waved her through, he probably assumed she was harmless since she was white.

Now in White Town, she looked in her rear view mirror. She was outside the confines of her new home, but this time, was struck by the wall built around the township. Barbed wire was attached to the crest of the stones, giving the illusion that signified a prison to those people she'd known all her life. It was scary for them to think about what might be on the other side. But to her, it no longer affected her in a negative way. It suddenly represented a new start for her, a new beginning where she could make a good life for herself.

Eve smiled and patted her stomach. She had made the right decision at the hospital, she was happy, maybe better-off than she'd been in her lifetime. She was going to have this child and love it. It was innocent. That vile act of beastly aggression had nothing to do with this baby. She now saw the child in a different light, a wonderful retake on what had happened. This child was the product of Eve, just Eve.

She spotted an all-night eatery and stopped for coffee. It was there that she braved it and tried to call Claire. The idea had been nagging at her during the day, she had to try leaving a message. Claire and Rachel had been rude to her, but she still had a strong desire to understand their problem with her story. When she got a beeping sound with the number she called, she tried again. The second time, a recorded voice told her that the number didn't exist. She tried a third time and got the voice again.

She laughed, but sounded cynical, and then became angry. She ripped Claire's business card in two and threw it on the ground. Then, guilt took over. She wasn't the type to throw her garbage around. She picked up both pieces and tossed them into her purse. She couldn't believe those women. *They dared to be angry with me, and it was Claire who was the fake.*

She was livid.

An urge came over Eve, an overwhelming urge to find Claire and let her have a piece of her mind. She headed for D.C. in the off chance that she would find the woman in her special coffee house. Incensed, she thought, *Senator, huh? Well, lady. I don't know why this turns you on to call yourself a Senator, but you're going to find out that I know you're a phony.*

It took nearly an hour and when she saw the Engine House No 5, she pulled over to park next to it. She walked up to the main door and tugged on its handle. It was locked. She kicked at it, then pounded her fist. "I know you're in there, let me in!" She stepped back and gazed at the fire house, and then all around it. Her thoughts again were hearing the waitress tell her she couldn't use the front entry. *This has to be it, why won't they let me use this door?*

She turned toward the subway steps and saw the glow. Angry, she ran until she reached the ladies room in the lower level. She entered the room and waited for the door to close. "One, two, three. That should do it." Turning the knob, it opened into her Bohemian escape.

This time when she entered the room, she immediately saw Claire sitting in her regular booth.

The waitress walked up to her on cue, and blocked her view. "Eve, good to see you."

"Why can't I use the front door, Donna? Tell me why!"

The woman smiled, and spoke softly to her, "You'll know soon enough, honey. Why rush things? I'll get you your coffee and scone. I believe they just came out of the oven." She left Eve, exposing a bull's-eye take of Claire.

Eve marched down the aisle and stood at the end of Claire's table.

She didn't think before speaking, but instead blurted out, "Claire Winslow. You are a fraud."

Claire looked at Eve in disbelief. What were the chances they would be here at the same time again, at this crazy time of night? And this anger, it made no sense. Claire wasn't in the mood to hear it.

"Eve, this isn't a good time to yell at me, I've had a tough few hours. You can sit if you decide to be cordial. Otherwise, please go away." Claire's voice sounded tired, not from lack of sleep, but rather, stress.

She watched as Eve sat and stared at her intently. Eve threw her purse on the table in front of her.

"So tell me your problem, Eve. But be nice."

Eve dug through her purse, finding the two halves of the business card and pieced them together on the table. "This is yours, isn't it?"

Claire's eyes looked down at the puzzle pieces and nodded. She picked them up and noticed her handwriting, her personal phone number written on their backs. "How did you get this? I don't remember..." Her recollection of the night she met Rachel played in her mind. "I gave this to Rachel, how did you get it?"

"She forgot it. I heard you talking." She pointed to the booth behind Claire. "I listened to the two of you the first night I came here, she called you a Senator. I heard her say that you are an advocate for women's issues. And I needed help. So I picked it up as I was leaving. You were my hope, Claire. So you must understand my disappointment, my anger when I called the number only to discover that it doesn't exist. All my faith in you turned into despair." Eve's voice was growing with agitation. "Even after the two of you were so rude to me last night, I still couldn't get you out of my mind." A tear fell over her face. "Why? What possible reason would you

have to carry around this fake promotion for something you're not? Not that I ever bought into the Senator title. We all know that there are no women Senators." Her head jerked with a little gurgle, a choke in her throat that convinced Claire of her agony. "The danger in your game is that there are people in trouble that might need someone like your fantasy character. I am one of those women, Claire. And I'm telling you that it was cruel of you. First, you accuse me of lying; now I learn it's you who is the phony." Her lips constricted to hold in her sounds of pain. Then she ended her lecture with, "Why?"

"I don't understand any of what you're saying, Eve." Claire turned to the booth behind her, and patted the person's shoulder to get his attention. "Sir, could you do me a favor? I don't think my phone is working and I'm expecting an important call. Would you mind calling me for a test?" She handed the torn pieces of her card to the stranger. "Would you mind terribly? Here's the number."

Claire sat, her eyes fixed on Eve's in a cold stare. Her phone sat on the table between the two of them. They waited, seconds went by.

The man doing the calling laughed, "Sorry, I misdialed. Let me try again."

Both women stared at the phone as if it was alive. It had become an alien creature sitting between the two of them.

Then, the ringing made their phantom vibrate. Claire grabbed it and answered.

"Lady, I don't see a problem." The line went dead.

Claire turned and thanked him, taking back the pieces of her business card. Then she turned to Eve and smiled. "So, now who's the phony?" She sat back in her seat. "Eve, you told us you were raped, you told us that you watched a crime take place, you used language we'd never heard before,

you say strange things that I don't understand. I wanted to believe your story, but none of it checked out. There is no Scarsborough Meadows. There is no Latino Town. There is no Conchita lady missing."

"Excuse me ladies, Here are your scones. Right out of the oven." Donna poured Claire some fresh coffee, and then raised the urn up high to pour for Eve. As before, thick brown liquid fell dramatically from above. "You ladies enjoy." She scurried away to attend her other customers.

Claire leaned forward and peeked into Eve's cup. "What was that?"

"I don't know, some trick she's learned."

Claire poured cream into her cup and raised it for a sip. "I don't usually use this stuff, but it's rather good." She leaned into the table and started in on Eve. "Come clean, lady. Who put you up to this? What the hell is your reason for this? God, just leave me alone. I don't want any more confrontation tonight." She put her head down to play with the stir stick. She knew Rachel wasn't coming, there wasn't any reason for her to be here at this ungodly hour.

"Come clean? God, Claire. What do I need to do to convince you?" Eve slid out of the booth and reached over to grab her bag. "I don't believe we're getting anywhere, it's been nice." She tugged at the side of her purse, tipping it so that its contents fell onto the table. "Damn it!" She began throwing her things inside, her anger intensified.

It was the big red font that caught Claire's attention. While Eve was tossing her things back in her bag, Claire picked up the newspaper that had fallen out with the other items.

Interrupting, she blurted, "What is this, Eve?" She held the paper up, and pointed at the headline.

Eve glanced at it. "My God, I forgot about that. I bought it at the gas station a few hours ago." Then she erupted with laughter. "Well, Ms. Fancy

Pants. Looks like I have proof after all.” She sat again, and smiled. “Read it, Claire, and please read aloud so I can hear.”

Claire stared intently at the headline, then slowly raised her head to look at Eve. “I don’t speak Spanish.” Claire moved to the end of her booth so she could stand, and raised her hands in the air to make an announcement to the room. “Does anyone know Spanish in here? I need an interpreter.” She looked around, disappointed. There were no takers. She sat, somewhat frustrated.

Then, a man sitting in one of the alcoves stood and made his way to their table. “Ladies, what can I do for you?”

Claire handed him the paper and asked him to read the headliner article.

The man picked up the news paper and stood over them reading, translating. “Conchita – Still Missing.”

28

The man translated as he continued reading. “Woman was last seen leaving her place of work in a posh neighborhood called Scarsborough Meadows in White Town Friday night. Her employer, Sandy Phillips testified to driving Conchita to the 9:50 bus that was headed to Latino Town. Said vehicle went missing en route. Indicators suggest this may be a kidnapping crime, but no suspects have been identified as of this afternoon. If anyone has information of the whereabouts of bus number 986, report to the authorities in Latino Town.”

Claire watched Eve’s reaction when the man read Sandy’s name. In horror, Eve thanked him and grabbed the paper. “Claire, this is a lie. Sandy’s my friend, why would she say this? Conchita walked to the bus, she was shot in front of my house. The men put her in a van to dispose of her. I saw this with my own eyes! Claire. What am I going to do? I can’t live with myself this way. I have to tell the authorities.”

Claire reached over, grasping the woman’s arm. “Can I see the paper, Eve?”

“Claire, I’m sorry. I have to get home. I have to do something about this.” She stood, then tossed the paper to Claire. “I hope I see you again. Maybe we can stop these games and have a real conversation.” She dug into her purse for some money, but Claire put her hand out to stop her.

“Don’t worry about this, Eve. First time is free.” Claire smiled and added, “I’ll be back tomorrow at midnight if you want to talk.”

“What did you say?” Eve felt ill. She wasn’t thinking clearly. “Sorry, I have to go.”

She turned toward the front exit and stared at it. Looking to see if the waitress was watching, she saw that it was safe. Each foot step felt like her body was moving in slow motion, her shoes filled with lead. But she did reach it. She was there. All she needed to do was push it open.

Eve struggled with the handle and threw her weight against the forbidden door. It was locked. “God! Why?” She tried again, but to no avail. Giving up, she headed for the back of the room where she would find her way out.

Claire saw the panic in Eve’s face. Worried, she stood and followed the woman toward the back of the café. “Where are you off to, Eve?”

Eve stood where the tree had grown over her exit. She turned around to see Claire watching her with an odd expression on her face. “Oh God, I’m going to throw up.” She reached out for the shiny brass knob protruding through the tree’s appendages, and just as before, the branches shriveled up to expose her exit. She grabbed at it and in a panic, dashed through the portal.

Claire stood in shock, she’d witnessed the tree wither and expose a door where the strange woman had disappeared. But now there was no exit, only a wall covered with limbs of a very old tree. “God, am I dreaming?” Her worries about her perception of reality had nagged at her over the years. Her nightly dreams were so real to her. She went back to the table and grabbed the paper. It was real. She studied it, she read the name Sandy Phillips, the name Scarsborough Meadows, all the key words that she hadn’t found with her computer searches.

Then her eyes saw it.

Claire dropped the paper on the table, she slowly sat, her head felt light. After a few heavy breaths, she looked again. The date. The publication date on the top corner of the paper.

It read 2045, 30 years in the future.

29

Sunday

Claire woke up around six am and in a panic, reached for the newspaper that was sitting on her nightstand. It hadn't been a dream, it was real, she could see it, smell it. She scrambled to get ready for the day, and with coffee in hand, called her friend; an ink expert.

“Tony. Yes, it has been a long time. I've got a favor, one that will be exciting for you if the tests come out positive.” She filled him in on the story of Eve, and of the newspaper she wanted him to test. Tony had the testing lab in his home and seemed intrigued.

Claire stopped at the bakery to buy some pastries and coffee for the two of them. She was on Tony's porch by ten in the morning, waiting with her gifts, feeling somewhat nervous about the test.

The door opened for her to see the wonderful face of her old friend, his pony tail had greyed in the couple of years since their last reunion. He still wore his glasses that rested near the tip of his nose, and had that familiar smile. He had that goofy big smile that reached across his face. Her friend was a wonderful geek. He put his hands out for her, and pulled her in for a hug. “It is good to see you, Claire. It's been far too long.”

“Tony, you're looking fine. Thanks for seeing me on this short notice.” Claire raised the bag of donuts in the air and smiled. “I have coffee too. Just the way you like it.”

“Well, you sure know how to get to me. Come on in, I'm actually quite anxious to see this document you told me about.”

The two of them sat and Claire told him about the newspaper, the oddity of how it had come into her hands. “Tony, I know this sounds crazy, but I have this nagging feeling about it. I just need for you to tell me that it’s a fake so I can dismiss this as a prank.”

She handed him the paper, and watched him skillfully examine it. “Come on, you can watch me do this, it’ll be just like old times.” He took her to his lab, a little room that would normally work as a second bedroom. “There’s two ways to do this, non-destructive and destructive. Obviously, we’ll try the first way, it’s called micro-spectrophotometry.” He laid the paper down and picked up a tool-like device she’d never seen before. “I’m going to scan the ink with this ultraviolet light to record its spectrum. That means it will record the wavelengths of light it absorbs.” She watched him scan the paper with the wand. “Some inks emit light on exposure to ultraviolet, while with others, the uv disappears. The spectrum of the ink on the document can therefore be compared with the continuums of standard inks. Starting with the 1990s, ink manufacturers added a chemical identifier to their products to indicate the year of manufacture.” He pointed to the number that came up on the instrument. “Look at this.” He pounded the information into his computer, and found the table of elements with their descriptions. It was then that Tony became silent and began working as if Claire wasn’t standing beside him. She watched as he became lost, at times frantic with his work. Finally, he looked at her and said, “I need to use a more destructive method, Claire. The results I’m getting so far don’t make any sense.”

“Do what you need to do, Tony. I’d like to preserve the front page if you don’t mind, but I don’t care about the rest of it. I just want to know what year this was printed.”

Tony seemed disturbed, he put his hands on her shoulders, and looked her in the eyes, “Claire, you’d better be sure what you’re saying. I may give you an answer that’s difficult for you to believe.”

“What do you suspect, Tony? Just tell me, please.”

“Give me another couple of hours, come back here and I’ll have what you need.” He ripped the last page of the newspaper off and handed her the rest. “Give me some time, please.” He glanced at his watch, and said, “Come back here after lunch. I need to concentrate on this and I think I can do that better if you leave me alone.”

Claire kissed the side of his face, and found her way out. Two hours, she had to waste two hours. Tony lived near a shopping center, so she walked a few blocks hoping she would find a place to sit, maybe have another coffee. Then she heard his voice, a sound that made her skin crawl.

“Sweetheart, wait a minute.” Bill was with one of the Senator’s from Nevada. Catching up to her, he gave her a quick kiss, and smiled, an obvious act for the other Senator. “Honey, Matt and I are off for a quick lunch, come join us. We’re going to discuss the bill. And I know you enjoy talking about this sort of thing.”

“You must have me mistaken with someone else, Senator. My name is Claire, but to you, I’d prefer to be called Senator.” Turning to the other man, she smiled, “Nice to see you, Matt. I have a few hours to kill and would love to hear what you have to say about it.” Claire mustered up what she could, to sound cordial, and let the two men lead her to a quiet spot where they could analyze the contents of his hideous document. She thought that maybe she could talk logically about its contents with Matt at the table, anyone could see how wrong it was. She had a great amount of respect for this Senator.

They found a small table at a garden patio restaurant where Bill promptly ordered wine for the three of them. The weather had been unusually dry for May, the sun was shining with promises of a warm day. Claire took in the aroma from the many roses surrounding them, their intoxicating smell helping to make the company tolerable. The colors had been tastefully planned by a master gardener; pinks, reds, yellows. It was enough to make a person forget about the ugliness of the town.

“Claire, these asshole Dems have got us by the balls on this one, their timing is remarkable, which means we have to work harder than ever to pass SB 1257 on Friday.”

She was taken aback by Bill’s comments, his voice having interrupted her session with nature. “I seem to be at a loss, what are you talking about?”

Matt spoke up to join the discussion, “You haven’t heard then. There’s a vote coming up on Wednesday.” He laughed, “The same old bill we keep denying them, the Paycheck Fairness Act. It’s to embarrass us right before we vote on 1257.”

Claire was stunned, both at the news and the fact that they chose to discuss it with her. She had consistently been the only Republican to vote for this bill. “Gentlemen, this is the first I’ve heard of this, but you’re right, it is a brilliant move on their part.” She leaned back and smiled. “Tell me boys, what has happened to our Party? How did we let ourselves get hijacked by extremists? What the hell is wrong with men and women getting equal treatment for their work?”

Both men laughed, but Claire kept her eyes on Matt. When her expression finally got the best of him, he became more serious and said, “Claire, you know the economy can’t withstand something like this. It’s a stupid ploy to make us look bad, it’s that plain and simple.”

“I think you boys are looking at this all wrong. Why not amend the bill to lower pay for the men so it matches my gender? Now, what do you have to say about the economy problem?”

Bill seemed to waken from his silence with her comment, “Why do you call yourself one of us? Like it or not, lady, you are in on this, and you’d better not think about letting us down.”

Claire stood, looking down at the two men, she smiled with poise. “It’s been a pleasure, gentlemen. I’ll see you in the chamber on Wednesday.” She turned and confidently left the two of them to wallow in their anger, but heard Bill express his feelings before she was out of hearing distance.

“Bitch, let her go. We’ll get her in line.”

Claire took a chance that Tony would be done with his work in spite of her early arrival. He answered the door with an odd expression. Grabbing her arm, he pulled her into his home, then stepped outside, and looked both directions, scanning the street to be sure that she wasn’t followed.

“Tony, what is it? I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Sit down, Claire. I have incredible news for you.” His hands were shaking, his voice nervous. He went to the table where his page of the newspaper was and held it in his hands. “This is absolutely incredible, Claire. Do you understand what you have? Tell me more about this Eve.” His voice was excited, louder with each word that left his lips. “This is real, Claire, it is fucking real!”

She sat, staring at him, speechless for some time.

Tony rushed across the room and sat next to her, grabbing her hands. He was losing himself over his news, laughter came from deep within him, then tears formed in his eyes. “I must meet her, Claire. She is a miracle. Think what we can learn from this woman!”

“Tony, are you sure? If we make this public, we have to be absolutely certain.”

He stood and began to pace. “No, we don’t say anything. We have a gift here, and need to use it, we need to learn everything we can. Tell me how to find this coffee house and I’ll meet you there tonight.”

Claire stood, her head ached like it did each night in her nightmares. She wrote down the address for him, and told him to be there at midnight. “She’s been there the last three nights, but I don’t know, Tony. She was so stressed last night, she might not show. I just don’t know.”

He walked her to the door, saying he’d be there. “We must try, Claire. She’s the biggest phenomenon I’ve experienced in my lifetime.”

30

Bill watched Claire and Tony embrace each other as they parted. He waited for her to disappear down the street before ringing Tony's bell. This was going to be perfect. He would be a victim by association. *Yes, that's this man's crime. He's her friend.*

The door opened with Tony believing Claire had returned. "Oh, hello. I thought you were someone else. What can I do for you?"

"My name is Bill, I believe Claire is expecting me." He stretched his body, pretending to check out the address on the side of the flat. "Yes, this is the place. Don't tell me I've missed her."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, man. She's already gone, but I'll tell her you rang." He proceeded to shut the door, but Bill's hand stopped him.

"This is very upsetting to me. I'm afraid my cell is dead, or I would have called her to say I was late. Say, could I use your phone? As soon as I reach her, I'll be out of your hair."

Tony reluctantly let the man in, slightly irritated to have his euphoric mood interrupted. "Look, I'm quite busy, so if you would make it quick, I'd appreciate it."

"Thanks, this is very kind of you." Bill entered the home, and was shown to the phone. Turning his back to Tony, he reached into his coat pocket to remove some leather gloves. He pulled a glove over one hand and dialed a number. He began speaking into the phone. "Claire? I'm sorry I was late. I know, but my phone is dead. Ok, sure. I can meet you there in 20 minutes." Bill turned to address Tony, and asked for a glass of water. "I hate to be such a bother, but I am thirsty."

Tony went to the kitchen with Bill following close behind. Both gloves were now snugly fitted to his hands, making them free to grasp the knife sticking from the wooden holder next to the stove. “So, how do you know Claire?”

Tony filled the glass, his back still to the stranger and told him how he had done some work for her when she practiced law. “She’s a good lady, that one.” He turned to hand Bill the glass of water only to see him staring wild-eyed, knife in hand, a crazy expression painted on his face. “What the hell?”

Bill stuck the knife into his stomach, then he turned it upward to dig at multiple organs, twisting it back and forth. He held it inside the man until he went limp. The glass hit the floor, making a shattering sound. Finally, Tony fell, the water from the glass turned red and seeped to the low spots of the flooring.

Bill took a few deep breaths and carefully stepped back so his shoes would avoid the blood. He shook his head as if to let the manufactured breeze blow away his fear. Walking into the front room, he leaned on a chair, and again took some deep breaths. He’d never done this before, and it bothered him. But this was a good cause. He needed for Claire to be frightened, he needed her vote, and this was how he was going to get it. He thought he’d be able to do anything for his prominent place in the Senate, and on this day, he had proven it to himself. Carefully, he looked through the window, glad the street was empty. Just before leaving, he saw something that caught his eye.

“Well I’ll be damned.” He walked over to the object that was protected inside a small glass box. It was a baseball autographed by the great **Bill Buckner** with 1980 scribbled below his name. “Jesus, this was the year he became someone. Chicago Cubs.” Bill smiled and knew he had to have it.

He looked toward the kitchen and laughed. “Well, whatever your name is, I don’t think you’ll miss this now.”

Bill scanned the room, searching for something to wrap around the trophy, when his eyes saw a newspaper on the desk. He removed the ball from its container and carefully covered it with the paper, not noticing that its printed words were in Spanish.

He stuffed it in his pocket, knowing that he’d hit the lottery. Taking one last look around the room, he left, closing the door, ensuring that it was locked.

As luck would have it, the street seemed to be abandoned. Bill felt a pleasant strut in his walk, shocked at how easy it had been to kill a man. He knew he could do it again if necessary, he knew that with this new skill, nothing could hold him back from his desires.

31

Eve woke up after a few hours of sleep. Once she prepared herself for the day, she went downstairs to join her hosts.

“Hey, we got your note, Eve. Everything all right?” Ron stood to greet her when she entered the kitchen.

She poured herself coffee and joined them at the table. She seemed tired, forlorn. Her spirits were down, she knew she must do something to make her guilt go away. After time passed, she looked up, wondering if she could confide in them. She needed to tell someone and they did seem nice.

Christine was the first to break the silence. “Honey, I don’t have kids, but I know what a toll a pregnancy can be on your body. Ron and I have discussed your living here and we both agree that it would be a good idea for you to stay with us. You shouldn’t be alone during a time like this. Think of it as living with family.”

Her warm message, her smile was too much for Eve to handle. She put her head down and began to weep uncontrollably.

Christine reached out to her, offering comfort, “Hey, everything is going to be fine, I promise.”

“No, I’m sorry, but you don’t understand. There’s something terrible I’ve done and I can’t keep it inside anymore.” She looked up at her new quasi family, and then, uttered the next word. “Conchita.”

Ron and Christine stared, wondering if Eve’s hormones were talking. Why would she be suffering so much over a woman she didn’t even know?

Eve continued. “I lied to you. My real name is Eve Hart, my husband is Jonathan Hart.”

Ron put his hand on his chin, a thinking habit he’d acquired many years ago. Soon, he recollected the name, “I’ve seen him on TV, he’s some kind of hot shot rich guy, isn’t he?”

Eve looked at him, the tears in her eyes turned to anger, hatred. “He’s a snake, a hateful man. And his business partner,” she choked on her words. “And, his partner raped me, I’m pregnant because he attacked me. That horrid man raped me!”

Christine gasped. “Then why didn’t you go through with the procedure, Eve? Why on earth are you putting yourself through this?”

She looked at her stomach and a new tear fell from her eye. “The baby is innocent, Christine. I just couldn’t go through with it.”

Ron slapped his hand on his thigh. “Well then. It’s settled. You are staying with us. You’ll stay as long as want.” He looked at his wife for confirmation.

“Of course you will. This is a loving home, evidently something you really need, honey.”

Eve wanted to leave it at that, but she knew the guilt would ruin everything. She had to let them know, someone had to know the truth. “Last night, I stopped for gas and bought a newspaper. The headline was about Conchita. She was my friend, and my best friend’s cleaning lady.” She peered at the couple with guilt, but continued. “The article had a false story. It said that Sandy, my friend, drove her to the bus and that the bus is now missing. That isn’t how it happened.” She went on to tell them the story of the shooting in front of her house and how the men had hauled the body away in a van, that the police had been involved. “Jonathan was the ring leader. I saw it and heard everything.

It made me ill, so I grabbed my purse and took off. I haven't been back since. I'll never be able to go back."

The silence in the room was staggering. Eve didn't know if she would be told to leave or not? Ron was in his thinking position, Christine now sitting with a look of horror on her face.

Eve finally stood, and looking at them, said, "I have a few things in the bedroom, I'll be gone in 10 minutes."

Ron reached for her forearm when she was near enough and pulled her toward him. "You're not going anywhere. You're going to stay right here and the three of us are going to fight this together. You ladies need to give me a little time to think. But not a word of this to anyone, you hear?"

He left the women alone, but returned shortly. "Eve. What is this Sandy like? Would she have lied?"

"No, not Sandy. I'm sure that she's miserable now, but doesn't know what to do."

"Contact her. See if she'll meet you today, and while you're at it, get whatever money you can from your bank. You'll need some money and that bastard won't be thinking generous thoughts. Say, does he know what his partner did to you?"

"Of course not, but if he did, he'd blame me. He'd have to throw me out on the street to preserve his reputation."

"Ok. Now, let's make a list of what you need to do today. Eve, you'll need to tell the Latino police. Conchita's family deserves to know the truth."

Christine had been listening to the conversation, but was suddenly worried. "Ron, the truth will stir things up between our town and the Whites'. It might mean we have to leave here."

“Honey,” he knelt next to her and stroked her hair. “We all have to do the right thing.”

Eve suddenly realized the magnitude of what was happening. “My God. If I go through with this and tell them what I know, then you may be in danger. How can that be good?”

Ron seemed sad when he replied, “We left White Town because of the leaders’ hateful ideas. Now? I realize we can’t get away from it.” He looked down, his final words spoken with a faint quality. “Together, we will be strong. You will tell the authorities what really happened, and we will protect each other.”

32

Eve called Sandy from a phone booth in White Town early that afternoon.

Sandy's voice answered the phone, and realizing it was Eve, she immediately spoke in a whisper. "Eve, is that you? We can't talk, I'm being watched. They're looking for you. Ditch the car, wear a disguise. Meet me at Macy's in the toy department at 4pm." The line went dead.

Eve stared at the receiver for several minutes, numb. She looked around the street to see if she could recognize anyone. She couldn't. "Think fast, what do I do?"

She was on a main thoroughfare where the buses ran. She left the phone booth and reached the bus stop just in time. When the bus reached the downtown area, she pushed the bell to stop the vehicle. First, she needed money. It was Sunday.

Eve spotted a cash machine next to a convenience store. Nervous, she could barely remember her pin number. She asked for the maximum amount, terrified that her request would be rejected. Then she heard the friendly beeping sound from the machine as it spit out her bills. She let out a sigh of relief.

Inside the store, she bought a box of hair dye, and some reading glasses. She went to the bathroom and locked the door where she nervously opened the box and frantically brushed the dye into her roots, changing her from blonde to brunette.

Then she heard a knock.

"Hey, I've been waiting for a long time, is someone in there?"

Eve made her voice sound weak, “Sorry, I think I’m going to be in here for a while.”

She checked the time on her watch. “God, 15 more minutes.” Time had never dragged on so long. Finally, she was able to rinse her hair, hoping the color had done its job. Looking into the mirror, she was taken aback. *Who is this woman?* She applied makeup to her eyes and lips, dramatically changing her looks. When she finished, she tossed the evidence into the garbage and looked at her reflection. It was a shock, she was a different person. She frisked her hair with her fingertips, making a mental note to change its length when she returned home. Putting on the glasses, she left the store, striving for an invisible demeanor. It was nearly 4pm.

33

Eve stopped at a discount clothing store to purchase a few things that were different in style from her normal attire. She was in a hurry, but found a few skirts and some tops that would mix and match with each other, giving her an enhanced wardrobe. She had only a few minutes before meeting Sandy, but Macy's was just down the street.

She was careful to not draw attention to herself when she glanced around the store, making sure there were no faces she knew. Then, her turn came, she handed the sales lady the items and gave her a money scanner. Her heartbeat was distraught.

Each minute seemed like many, Eve watched the woman scan the tickets from the clothing. Finally, she processed the money scanner. Eve froze. Watching, hoping there wouldn't be a problem. Then the clerk moved her body to hide the cash register. She was taking too long. Eve saw her pick up the phone, her back still to her. The woman then turned around, and said something, what was it?

"Sorry, Mrs. Hart. I'll be right back with you."

Eve's instinct was to run. But she stood, frozen, thinking. *What shall I do?* Then she heard the girl talking.

"Yes, the sale is good through today. We're open until 9pm tonight." She turned around with a ticket for Eve to sign, "Sorry about that, Mrs. Hart. We're shorthanded so I have to help with the phone as well as the register." She laid the receipt on the counter, "Please sign and you can be on your way. Oh, let me see... yes. You saved eleven dollars on these items," she smiled proudly.

Eve rushed out of the store and down the street to Macy's. She was on time. She found the toy department in the basement where she looked for Sandy.

No Sandy.

She picked up some toys and turned them over, inspecting them as a serious buyer would do. She couldn't read the price tag with the glasses she was wearing, everything was blurry. Then she heard the voice. She looked up to see Sandy, a short distance away, talking to a clerk. Eve slowly walked toward her friend, carrying a little electronic toy.

When she was next to Sandy, Eve held the toy out to the clerk and asked, "Sorry for interrupting, but I'm in a dreadful hurry. I can't find the price on this. Could you check it for me?" Eve stood next to Sandy, looking ahead as if they were strangers while knowing her friend had recognized her voice.

"Eve. Don't look at me. I'm supposed to lead them to you. They're watching me now. God, I am so sorry. You know how I love you, but I have to take care of myself first." She took an envelope out of her purse and laid it on the table next to the dolls. "Take this, and please forgive me."

Sandy put her hands in the air and said, "Lady, I was here first!" She turned around and left. A man in a hat followed closely behind, working his best to stay inconspicuous.

Eve waited for the clerk to return with the Wizard Electronic Game. "It's on sale for \$89.99. These are popular, you'd better get it now or you'll have to wait for months."

Eve gave her a money scanner and asked her to wrap it for a young boy.

Outside, Eve walked until she found the bus that would take her to Latino Town. Once boarded, she finally felt safe enough to look at the contents of Sandy's offering.

Eve,

I would do anything for you, but my hands are tied. You've become a problem to Jonathan and the others, and they know I'm the one you'll contact. Here is \$10,000 dollars. It's money I've saved over the years, so it won't be missed.

You need to dump the money scanners, they're tracing your steps by your charges. Do not come near the neighborhood again. These men are angry and who knows what they will do to you.

I'll tell your boys that you're fine, and that you will contact them when it's safe.

This is all I can do for you. If I see you again, I will alert them. I can't live with the idea of turning you in so please stay away!

Forgive me for Conchita and for what I am doing to you now. I wish I had your strength.

Love, Sandy

Eve put the letter back in its envelope and shoved it in her purse, she put the glasses back on after wiping the tears from the corners of her eyes. She hadn't noticed that the bus had entered Latino Town, her mind had been elsewhere.

She was on her own. Her past was gone. Her actions could put innocent people in danger. She looked out the window, seeing the police station in the distance, pushed the buzzer to stop the bus.

She walked to the front of the bus, and handed the wrapped toy to a woman sitting with her young son. “This is for you.”

Stepping onto the street, Eve took a deep breath and walked toward the entrance of the police station.

Inside, she went to the counter. She looked the officer in the eyes and said, “I need to speak to a detective who speaks English.”

34

Eve was instructed to take a seat in one of the chairs lined against the wall. It was over an hour before her name was called.

She looked around nervously and said, "I must speak with you in private."

"Lady, what is this about?"

"Conchita."

"What about her?"

"I'm a witness to what happened to her."

The detective froze, his eyes squinting to scrutinize her. A white woman in his town saying something so daring? Could it be? He abruptly put his hand on Eve's lower back to usher her to a private room.

For the next hour, two detectives, along with the police chief, took turns going in and out of the room where Eve was taken. There seemed to be anxiety in the air. But it was clearly a sacred secret at this point. Only the finest in the precinct had been chosen to partake in the screening of Eve's statement.

Eve had become a precious commodity to them. This brave woman had put her life in jeopardy to do the right thing, now it was up to these men to keep her safe. She was their witness, and could possibly convince Sandy Phillips to join in on the good deed.

This was a very delicate situation. This woman was telling them a story that would inspire hate to erupt throughout Latino Town. The consequences could be deadly.

After more than two hours, the door opened with Eve in the lead. The detective motioned to a young officer to join them, and said to Eve, “This is Officer Marquites. He’ll take you home to your friends, but if the situation becomes dangerous, we’ll need to put you somewhere else until things blow over.” He smiled while nodding, “You’re a brave woman, Mrs. Hart.” Then to officer Marquites, “I want you to stay with her and let me know if you see anyone suspicious in her neighborhood.”

Eve was driven back to Ron and Christine’s. She rode in silence, wondering, reflecting, *have I done the right thing? What Pandora’s Box have I just opened?*

35

Claire had been summoned to Senator Clancy Alexander's office late Sunday afternoon. It was a highly unusual request any day of the week, but on a Sunday?

She arrived at his office at 4pm and was told to sit in the lobby until he was ready for her. Ten minutes went by and Claire had had enough.

She stood and went to the Senator's secretary, stating with an indignant tone, "The Senator can call me when he's ready, I'll be in my office."

Walking down the hall, her thoughts were spewing with contempt for the man. *What's his game? The Bill Hancock debacle, these two yahoos are in this together. Running scared, they are.* The realization hit her hard, the fact that she was suddenly a powerful woman. These men *needed* her vote.

Just as she sat at her desk, the phone rang, "Senator," Clancy cleared his throat. "You must forgive me. I know how valuable your time is, so if you would give me just a few minutes, come back. There will be no wait."

When Claire entered his office, Clancy stood to shake her hand, a smirky expression planted on his face. "Claire, please." He put his hand out, gesturing for her to sit on a sofa. "Good to have you come on such short notice. I hope you like my home-like setting." He poured her a glass of wine, whiskey for himself before joining her. Sitting next to her, he handed her the wine, and made a toast. "To many more times together." He clicked his glass against hers, and tasted his drink. "My wife is out of town for the week. I'm afraid we haven't been getting along too well lately." He moved a little closer to her. "I like your style, Senator. I want to spend some time with you, if you know what I mean?"

Claire felt a rush of anger erupt inside her. She jumped up, spilling the wine over Clancy's trousers. She set the glass down on a table, and glared at him. "What do you want, Senator?"

He stood and walked to her, he put his hands on her shoulders. "Come on, Claire. It's obvious now, isn't it? I only want what you've given so generously to other men."

She stepped back in horror, shocked, not understanding. After regaining her composure, she said, "You are out of line, sir. I'll forget this ever happened if you apologize and agree never to do this again."

"Claire, I was talking to my granddaughter the other day. She and her mom were vacationing in Mexico. She was talking from the balcony of their hotel, and said to me, *You know what, Pappy? From my window, I can see colorful birds, an iguana, two deer, and the most amazing vegetation. Palm trees are everywhere.* Claire, you want to know how I responded to this beautiful child?" He waited, but heard no response.

"I told my granddaughter, *Honey, that is wonderful. I too have something unusual. I have a mole in my house.*" Clancy put his head back and laughed. "How's that new friendship going with Rachel Ross, Claire?"

He went behind his desk and pointed to a nearby chair. "Sit, Claire. We have some business to discuss. You obviously aren't in the mood for a sexual encounter this afternoon."

Claire stood near the door, ready to run. His actions were insidious, gross, ugly. "Senator, I need you to stop speaking to me that way. I don't know what's going on, but it needs to stop now." She turned to leave, but stopped when she heard his response.

He raised his voice. "Sit down, Senator. I have some pictures to show you. Oh, you're going to love these." He handled some documents that lay on his desk. "Oh, here's a good one of you and the Ambassador to Chile.

You remember your pricey sex excursion in Colombia last year, using tax payer dollars? That poor man's wife, this will indeed be devastating if word gets out. Now, forgive me if I came on too strong with you, but after seeing these photos, I thought you'd be game to help out a lonely old man such as myself with my desires. After all, you were there for Senator Hancock. I mean, you're single. It makes sense that a woman with your beauty would have sexual needs that aren't being met."

Claire turned around, showing contempt, hatred for the man. "Anything you have will be easy to disprove, this is a joke. A sick joke that isn't going to get you anywhere."

"Ah, I just love the 24-hour cable news, don't you? They love this stuff, it will be at least a good week of gossip for them. Do you really think your version of the story will be as much fun for them to discuss? I can hear them now, the pundits on every network going over and over their surprise at the secret life of Claire Winslow. By the time they finish with you, it will be too late for anyone to hear the truth. That's the beauty of the media. My God, they've made themselves so easy to manipulate. Poor poor Claire, what will happen when we run another candidate against you? We'll have to do that, you know. The public will understand why you need to go. All those disappointed fans of yours, what a shame."

Clancy pushed a button on the phone and asked Bill Hancock to join them. He smiled at Claire, "Checkmate, Claire. Now sit down."

Bill entered, and took the seat next to Claire. "Hey, sweetheart." He leaned in close to kiss her.

Claire slapped him and looked at Clancy. "You boys have made your point."

"No, Claire. I don't believe we have, not yet anyway." Clancy smiled at her. "Our bill is going to the floor on Friday. We have the votes for this to

pass, with your help of course. All I want from you is a simple yes. Without it, you will be defeated in November, I guarantee you that.”

She couldn't be in the same room with these men anymore. She stood, her voice strong, “You make up a hideous scandal, make me out to appear like a sex-craved woman who uses her position as Senator to gallop around the world with different men, all financed on the backs of the tax payers,” she sneered. “It's ugly, but hardly original, Senators. You could have impressed me with something a little more clever.” She left the room without confirming her vote.

36

Claire sat in her apartment feeling numb from the experience she'd had with Clancy. She slowly sipped her tea. Her life was off kilter, the stress almost unbearable. Yes, tonight she would look for Eve, maybe even get some answers. Tony would meet her at the coffee house, and together, they'd share their incredulous discovery with Rachel.

"Rachel. God, what do I say to her?" She thought of the photos in her phone, proof of the deception her colleagues had planned. How could she keep that secret?

"But if I don't get re-elected, I'm useless for my cause." She heard her sister's voice in her head, *I have to do this so you can become you. This is how it's supposed to play out. Do something about this. Be strong and use your life to stop all this.* "Become me, I know I'm supposed to help others from being victims. God, Trista. Help me understand what is most important here."

Claire began rocking in place on her sofa. "I vote for this thing, and ruin entire lives for people like Eve. I don't vote for it, and keep my power to help women. Maybe keeping my power will stop the harm the bill can do." She stood and went to make a drink, ignoring what it would do to her aching head.

She began pacing her living room, drink in hand. Her breathing was heavy. "How did this happen? Why am I responsible for this outcome?" She stopped for a moment. "What outcome? I'm making this too complicated. Ok, no decisions yet. I play this thing. Not even Rachel can know." She thought of how ugly the town had become to her.

“The paper, I can tell Rachel about the paper. Yes, Tony will be there to help with that. It will buy me time with her.” She laughed, “What am I saying? The paper’s bigger news than any vote. Of course, that will take the conversation off the vote.” She looked up as if talking to God, “Forgive me if I don’t make the right decision, Trista. Please forgive me.”

She looked at the clock, and grabbed her purse. She had a date with Rachel, and had news that she would deliver with incredible delight. If Tony was right, Eve was their miracle woman.

Claire suddenly stopped, the thought of Eve’s life suddenly sounding foolish to her. “This is too much to comprehend.” Tony’s excitement had affected her, the newspaper had given them so-called proof of the impossible. And, she had believed it. “What’s wrong with me? There has to be another reason for his test results.” She laughed, shook her head. “Well, Rachel, let’s see if you can be a believer, let’s just see.”

37

Late again. Claire felt relieved to see Rachel sitting at their booth. “God, Rachel. It seems I’m always keeping you waiting.” She sat, wondering how this woman would react to Eve’s newspaper. “I was here last night, hoping to talk to you. You probably got my crazy message in the middle of the night. Sorry about that, Rachel.”

“Why did you want to talk to me so badly last night?”

“I was disturbed by my dream. It was nothing.” Claire’s mind thought of the photos in her phone. She wasn’t ready to share them. Not with Rachel. She’d have to use them, she was a news woman, and would not accept keeping them secret.

Rachel could tell something was bothering the Senator, but listened intently hoping to identify it. “Claire, stop rambling. We need to talk about the bill. Can you be on my show tomorrow? I have only one week to let the people know. We need them calling their Senators about this. I want the phones to ring all week.”

“Yes, you’re right. But there is something else I want to share with you. Something so big, Rachel; if it’s as it seems, there are no words for this. I realize the bill is important, but this, well...” Claire turned to face the front entrance, wondering where Tony was. “I have a friend that’s supposed to join us, someone who can help explain.” Her nerves then got the best of her, and not able to wait any longer, she shoved the newspaper across the table.

Claire watched her new friend scan through the article.

“I don’t know Spanish, Claire. But I see Conchita’s name. Are you telling me that Eve’s story about that poor woman is real? What does it say? And more so, where did you get this?”

Donna approached their table, and asked them if they wanted to order anything with their coffee.

Rachel looked at Claire with a twinkle in her eye. “Do you have any scones fresh from the oven? Those are the best in town.”

“We don’t serve scones.” She handed the women a menu. “I’ll give you a chance to look over our selection.”

When she was out of hearing distance, Rachel laughed. “What was that all about? That is the same lady that brings us our scones each night, isn’t it? That is Donna, right?”

“Rachel, the article says that Conchita was driven to a bus that night and that the bus has disappeared. Either an accident or kidnapping. It’s still unknown where the bus is. But look closer, look at the date on the top of the paper. What do you see?”

Claire’s nervous energy was driving her mad, waiting for Rachel to make the discovery. She watched the woman peruse the top of the periodical. Then her eyes landed on the one bit of information that would surely blow her mind. The color left her face, her expression showed shock, curiosity.

“What is this? A joke? This paper’s a fake, we were right about this woman all along.” She looked across the table. “Where did you get this?”

“From Eve. She was here last night, and very distraught. She’d tried calling me only to discover that my number didn’t exist. Didn’t exist, Rachel.” She pulled her cell out of her purse and shook it at the woman. “Maybe not for her, Rachel. Maybe not to a woman living 30 years in the future.”

“Listen, you’re a bright woman. How could you fall for this? People can have these kinds of things printed at an amusement park, Claire.”

“I took it to a friend this morning, an ink specialist. He ran a test on it. It’s not from today.” An incredible sound of delight slipped through her lips. “This is unreal, but my friend believes it.” She lowered her head, and said softly, “Rachel, I don’t know anymore. I believed it earlier, but I’m not so sure now. But, but, but…” She looked across the table, and scrunched her face into an odd expression, “If it is true, think about what it means.” Claire turned her head toward the back of the café. “Where is she? She’s been here every night since we started meeting here. Where the hell is she? Eve doesn’t know. I discovered the date after she left. I don’t believe she knows we are from her past. God, listen to me. One minute I say I don’t believe it, the next I sound as though I do.” Claire mused. “And, Rachel,” she pointed to the gangly branches of the old tree growing against the back wall. “Call me crazy, but last night, Eve became very agitated and ran out of here. She left through the door at that back wall.”

Rachel turned to look and laughed. “You’ve been under a lot of additional stress lately. Why don’t you plan for some time off after the vote? You can be sitting on a beach somewhere this time next week, reading a romance novel or something.”

Claire left the booth and marched to the back where the branches seemed to suck into the wall like ivy would to a brick building. She reached her hands through the maze of growth, feeling for the brass knob.

“Can I help you, honey?” Donna stood behind her, a portentous stance about her.

“Yes you can. You saw what I saw last night. I know you saw it too. Where is the handle that Eve used?”

The woman shook her head and turned to leave. Claire stood next to her friend who looked befuddled by the incident. “Come on, Claire. Let’s sit and talk some more.” Rachel’s voice was kind, soothing.

Claire was ready to resign her search when she spotted a tiny flash from a shiny object behind one of the branches. She ran to it and dug her hand around it, tearing some foliage away to expose her prize. She pointed to it, “Look. I told you it was here.” She turned it, both terrified and excited to see what would happen.

Nothing opened. It was an ornament on the wall, a long lost decoration that had been covered years ago by the overgrown tree. Claire exploded. She shouted at the waitress, asking her to explain last night, tonight, every night they’d been at the coffee house.

Rachel apologized, and gently walked Claire back to their booth. “You have to control yourself. Why are we discussing this outrageous theory of yours when there’s a pressing matter at hand? Let’s sit and talk about the bill. I’ve got you scheduled to be my headliner tomorrow, but you need to get ahold of yourself. I need that woman of substance to be on the air. Claire, are you hearing me?”

“You’re ignoring the date, Rachel. What about the date?” Claire turned her head, looking for Tony to walk through the door. “When Tony gets here, he’ll explain it to you. He knows.” Claire began tapping her index finger on the table, “Where the hell is he?”

“Claire, I don’t believe in God. So how am I supposed to believe in a time warp? That is what you’re implying, isn’t it? This coffee house has somehow intersected two parallel time periods? You watched too many Twilight Zone shows in your youth. I mean, I always did like that show, but really. It’s just great entertainment. I’m hearing you suggest that our Eve is from the future, a terrible future, if I may add.”

Claire continued on with her case, and said, “Yes, that is what I’m suggesting.” Her memory of Tony’s exuberance, his *proof*, had her believing again. “Something has happened to put us together, the three of

us, that is. Why? Forget the how. But why? Remember Eve's description of her world. Remember how we thought someone had hired her to say those crazy things." Her voice was getting louder, "Remember, Rachel!" Claire hesitated, recalling more details of her night with Eve. "Rachel, I remember how Eve tried to leave through the front door, but it seemed locked. She actually used her body to push it open, but it was stuck. What would happen if she were to go out into our world? Would she be a child?"

Claire looked around the room for the waitress, then called to her. "Please, could we get some help over here?"

"Yes? What can I get you ladies?"

"You served my friend and me last night, didn't you?"

The lady smiled, and said sweetly, "Of course, that Eve is quite a lady isn't she?"

"How well do you know her? Why can't she leave through the front exit?"

Donna shook her head, showing pity for Claire. "Honey, you need to settle down. If you have questions, perhaps you should take them up with Eve. I just work here. Now, can I get you ladies something?"

Rachel intervened, "Thank you, but I believe we're fine. Hey, I do wonder why we can't get a scone tonight. What's with that? We know you serve them. Why, you even push them on your customers."

"I'm afraid you misunderstood me, we don't have them on Sunday. Come back tomorrow and I'll have them waiting for you. Now if you ladies will excuse me, I have people to keep happy."

Claire's anger flared, "Donna, tell me why she can't go through that door." She pointed to the front of the café.

"That poor girl is dealing with a lot now, she doesn't need any more shocks. Now, if she is a friend of yours, as you suggest, I hope you can keep

that in mind.” She whisked herself around and was soon lost in the kitchen.

“Rachel, that woman knows things that would help us with Eve. Why won’t she level with us?”

“This talk is crazy, Claire. You actually believe that this intersection...” She looked around the room. “This intersection between two *epochs* is happening so we can see what could happen based on... based on what? Political decisions that are implemented today? That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it? This bill is driving you crazy, so crazy that you’re seeing things that aren’t there.”

Claire listened to Rachel while her mind wandered. *Yes, the bill. Its changes could influence so many people, the possibility that it was enough to cause hideous results to their lives, a bill that could wrong so many.* Her breathing increased with intensity, her body began shaking again, her face flushed. Rachel’s voice kept going on and on. Claire felt as though she was ready to burst. She thought back to Tony’s reaction. She’d never seen him like that. Her fingers dug into the table, Rachel’s voice still ringing in her head. She really needed Tony with her. He might help to ground her. He might help her to believe in the impossible. She needed his enthusiasm, his outrageous delight. Her head felt light, Rachel’s face seemed blurred. Then, something cleared her thoughts. A calm sensation filled her senses. She knew she believed it, it was the explanation for Eve’s stories, she had concrete proof. A euphoric awareness took over her.

She looked across the table, her voice was steady and cool when the words came out, “Just say it, Rachel. SB 1257 could have created Eve’s world!” Her expression was gripping, sturdy. “Eve’s Bill of Wrongs!”

Monday

Eve sat in front of the television with Ron and Christine listening to a popular Monday morning news show from White Town, an interview that terrified them all. An interview with Jonathan Hart and Eve's four boys.

"Ouch," a thin trail of blood ran slowly down the left side of Eve's neck.

Christine was mortified, "Eve, God, I'm sorry." She'd nicked Eve's skin with the scissors. Eve turned to see her new friend running to the sink to dampen a towel. She returned and grabbed Eve's hand, placing the wet towel in her palm. "Put pressure here. I really am sorry." She continued snipping at Eve's hair, with the newly darkened locks falling to the floor in a choppy shower.

Ron rose from the table and walked to the TV to turn up the sound. "Ladies, please." They all froze as the camera zoomed in with a close up of Eve's youngest son, Trent.

The boy had tears in his eyes, "Mom, if you're out there, please call me. I know this can't be true, you would never do this to Dad."

The camera panned into David Huntsly, the newsman. He was holding up the morning paper to show the headline to the viewers, **EVE HART – TRAITOR – TURNS IN HUSBAND TO LATINO TOWN POLICE.**

David laid the paper on the table they had congregated around. His show's format was an *around the kitchen table* style of news where he

would invite guests to discuss the latest in politics. “Jonathan, this must hurt deeply, are you angry with your wife?”

“No, of course not. I just want the mother of my boys to return to us so we can get her the help she needs. I think she believes what she said, but you know? Even if it were the truth, which it is not, but if it was, the incident would have fallen within the zone of reasonableness. Our constitution clearly states that we have the right to protect our neighborhoods from intruders. So, I repeat, if this Latino woman had been walking our streets at such an hour, there would have been every reason for the citizens of our community to fear for their safety. Now, with that said, my wife has been under a lot of stress lately. She’s become delusional. Even her best friend has testified to driving this Latina to her bus. The real question is, where is this bus? I see this explosive piece in the paper and I have to ask myself, why believe this crazy story when there’s a witness that took that woman to her bus? Why aren’t these Latino folks combing the streets to find out where the bus is?”

Eve threw her fist in the air and shook it at the television. “You lying snake! I detest you!”

Ron put his hand on her shoulder and said tenderly, “We know, Eve. No one doubts you, you must know that.” He looked at Christine with pity in his eyes, and then returned to watching the devil on the screen.

Jonathan’s voice quivered with his last comment. He raised his hand to his mouth, forming a fist, unsuccessfully attempting to hold in his emotions. “I just want my wife back, I miss her so much.” He looked at his boys, tears in his eyes, and then at the camera. “We all want you back, honey.”

David put his hand to his ear piece. It was obvious that he was getting something from a voice in the receiver. “Folks, I have breaking news.” He looked across the table at Jonathan, showing him a compassionate expression. “It seems that the bus has been found. I repeat, the bus has been found. Hold on, folks, we’ll have some video shortly. The bus has evidently been found in a trench near Black Town.” He paused to listen to more news.

Eve’s insides felt a jolt when Ron jumped to his feet and yelled at the screen. “You fucking sons of bitches!”

“Honey, please.” Christine put the scissors down and brushed loose hair from Eve’s shoulders. “Eve, forgive him. He rarely speaks like that, but this is just too much.”

“I can’t think of better words, actually.” Eve began taking short breaths, and the tears gushed from behind her eyes. “How did this,” she sniffed some tears up her nose. “How did this get so out of hand?”

David continued, “Ok, you’re now looking at film live from the trenches where they found the bus. The woman they are carrying out on the stretcher, hold on, folks. Yes! It is the Latina! They’re checking her out.” David squirmed, “Sorry, wish I could have had time to warn you, folks. This may be difficult to watch.”

Jonathan had leaned forward to see the video clip. “Jesus, how the hell did the bus get out in that district?”

“Yea, you snake, how did you get it out there without being seen?” Christine put her arms around Eve in an attempt to settle her down, but Eve flung her body to the side to deflect her. She stood next to Ron, and stared at the screen, her eyes blurred from tears, her cheeks puffy. She could see the innocent looking Jonathan, the fake look of shock on his face. She cocked her head as a dog would do when asking for a

treat. It was then that she noticed her reflection, an image in the screen of a woman she'd never seen before, the new her. Eve put her hands to her head, her fingers massaged her scalp through her short, dark hair. She stood motionless for a while when finally, she said, "Meet Eve Winslow."

She turned to her friends, and in a monotone voice, said, "I'm going to find Sandy and bring her here so we can record her story."

"We're with you, Eve. When do you ladies want to leave?"

39

Joe White and Tina Evans hosted the morning's most popular news show. When they asked Claire to join the kitchen table format on Monday morning, she graciously agreed, in spite of her reservations.

She knew she would be analyzing SB 1257 along with Bill Hancock and Ryan Peters, another of its co-authors. Clancy Alexander had summoned all three of them to meet with him when they were finished. She was losing more sleep than usual, there were too many things on her mind. Foremost was the realization about Eve, but the bill with all its nasty spillover was also making an impact. She knew the loss of her election could be detrimental for women's rights, and also knew that if the sham of Clancy's scandal hit the airwaves, that would be exactly what would happen. But to vote for the bill was unthinkable. Or was it? This question was nagging at her more and more. She felt as though she could change the outcome of the bill if she kept her position of power. The words from her doctor flashed through her head at the thought. *Touching your sister in your dream will not change the outcome.*

"Claire, over here." Tina was smiling at her, prodding her to take a seat where they could set up her mic. "Great to see you again, Senator. I know the show is going to be a good one this morning, what with the Fair Pay Act vote coming up on Wednesday." She winked, "Give those guys hell, Senator." She turned to an intern and told him to get Claire a cup of coffee. "You like it black, right Senator?"

Claire's head was already spinning from Tina's over-zealous personality, that and the over-active voices talking in her head. "Actually, I've taken to a little cream, if you will."

“You heard the Senator, now scat. Get her coffee.” Tina laughed, and whispered into Claire’s ear, “I just love having control over these guys. Funny how that makes me a bitch though. When Joe does it, he’s seen as self-assured.” She looked up to see Joe walking toward them to greet Claire.

Putting his hand out to her, Claire did see him as confident as opposed to finding Tina rather irritating. Why was that? “Senator, I’m so glad we could get you to come on our show this morning.” He looked past her to see the other guests and walked off.

After the greetings, the order was given for all the participants to take a seat around the table, the music started, and Joe began talking into the camera.

He began the show, his voice sounding secure and content. “Good morning, it is Monday, May 28th. We welcome you to a special edition on this Memorial Day holiday. With us on set, we have Senators Claire Winslow, and two of the co-authors of the bill we want to discuss today, Ryan Peters and Bill Hancock.”

“Yes, this is going to be a good show, Joe.” Tina’s co-hosting job was to ensure that the viewer felt as though they were friends with the folks around the table.

“Tina,” Joe put his hands together and began his silly talk. He believed it to be a good method for starting each morning, creating the façade that he and the others were just a few friends enjoying small talk and coffee. “I don’t know who’s more excited this morning, whether it’s Bill Hancock, you know about the concert with teen singer Justin Tempist, or,” he was rubbing his hands in a pretense of excitement, “or whether it’s Claire Winslow who once again gets to vote for the Paycheck Fairness Act.” Joe laughed and addressed Claire directly. “So, Claire. Don’t you agree that this

is just plain politics to run this through the Senate days before the important bill that can make some real differences for this country?”

Claire heard the voice of her host change from confident to arrogant. “Come on, Joe. You know this is senseless talk. My two colleagues here,” she gestured to the Senators across the table. “They’re convinced that if we raise the pay for women to match that of men, our economy will be destroyed.” She laughed and said, “I have a solution, Joe and Tina. Let’s see, the latest figure is that women make 77 cents to the dollar. The solution is too easy for us to recognize at first glance, but I say we lower any man’s pay by 23 cents where this practice is going on. Very easy, everyone is happy, and the economy doesn’t take a hit.”

Tina laughed, and patted Joe on the back. “She’s got a good point, Joe. You be careful how you answer her, remember that you work with a woman.” She turned into the camera. “And folks, please pick up my book. I’ve written about this and Senator Winslow is exactly right. How can we still have this sort of inequality going on?”

Joe turned the conversation into a baseball discussion for close to ten minutes until he saw the look of discontent on his partner’s face.

When he saw her body language, Joe pretended to appear frightened of Tina and said, “Ok. So instead, let’s talk about this SB 1257 bill. Ryan, you helped write it, tell us in a nutshell what it does for the average American.”

“Well, Joe, this bill is all about safety for the American people. In fact, everything in the bill addresses this issue.” He nodded, recalling his childhood. “Joe, I remember growing up in a small town in Ohio. No one even thought about locking their doors at night, or even when they went to the store.” Proudly, he looked around the table. “That was the thought I had in mind when I helped orchestrate this bill’s contents. It’s an amendment to the Constitution that will outlaw thugs. Even in the city, this will cut the

crime rate down. We've spoken to many of the Governors around the country. We listened to their biggest fears and constructed this bill, not only to reduce crime, but to eliminate it over time."

Joe asked, "And when do you guys vote on this, it seems like a no-brainer to me."

Ryan smiled and added, "On Friday, Joe. The Dems are picking it apart, so this is going to be a partisan vote. We should be fine, though. We have enough votes to make this work."

Tina looked at Claire, "What about you, Claire, do you support this one too?"

Bill looked across the table at Claire, his eyes speaking to her in silence. "I think it's safe to say that we are solid, aren't we, Claire?"

Claire's insides were churning, she kept her stare focused on Bill while answering. "Actually, I haven't decided yet. Some of the language is too loose for me, and may be giving too many rights to those who live in fear. For instance, gun rights are expanded in this bill, making it easier for vigilantes to take the law into their own hands. I need to do some more thinking before I feel confident that it does what Senator Ryan is hoping to achieve."

The room became silent for a few minutes before Joe spoke, "Bill, can this pass without all your Republican members?"

"Probably not, Joe. But, I have every confidence that Claire will see that it is as Ryan stated, a change to our Constitution that will ensure the safety for all Americans."

"Well, ok then." Tina looked into the camera. "Don't go away. When we come back, we will have Jamie Star here to talk about his new book, *Time To Take Back Our Country*."

The music played, and the camera lights went out. “Hey guys, thanks for coming, we’d love to have you all back after this vote. It sounds like a good one to me.”

Claire shook each of their hands, and made her exit before Bill could get away from their chatty host. Outside, she checked her watch and hailed a cab. She’d go to her office to get work done before the meeting with Clancy. She pulled her phone out of her purse to call her secretary, but just stared at it. *The photos, they’re still in the phone. What am I going to do with the photos?*

Ron was driving, the women were worried. It was the first time in his life that he had to wonder if the color of his skin could get him and Christine into trouble in their beloved city. They approached the border gate, and stopped behind the line of cars waiting to enter White Town. People selling the latest edition of the local paper went from car to car, each driver giving them their coins to read the news of Conchita. Word was out, Conchita's body had been found in the bus near Black Town. They drove in silence until they were safely over the border. Ron drove to a restaurant where he parked and went inside to get breakfast for three. To go.

When he returned, they sat in the car while Christine read to them, interpreting as she went. "Ron, this doesn't sound good. The officials in Black Town are now under suspicion, this is really bad, guys. I mean if more ghettos get into this brawl, it could be dangerous for everyone. I mean all the townships might speak up, they might finally fight back."

"Honey, we've talked about this day coming, we can't be surprised. If a revolt does happen though, I want us in a safe place. Ladies, I'm not sure it's a good idea to go home until all this has blown over. I should have told you before we left, but I wasn't sure then. I am now. This news is not good for any of us." He paused before continuing, "You know? Folks don't even understand the word, 'ghetto'; they think it's a place where thugs live. I guess it makes sense, now that history has been erased prior to the new Constitution. What really bothers me, is that I know there is another meaning for the word, but it's before our history began, a time that never existed as far as we know. I try to

remember but I just can't quite put my hand on it. Like a dream that you can almost remember, but it's just out of reach. It makes me sick, what has happened to this nation?"

Eve uncrossed her legs to prevent a cramp that was attempting to take over her right foot. She wanted to get Ron's mind off his anger, so she spoke up, changing the subject. "I know of a cheap hotel in the city, I stayed there the other night. Let's go check into it, Ron. I have the money that Sandy gave me."

Ron was taken aback, "What the hell, Eve. Why are you carrying that wad around?" He laughed at himself. "On second thought, you're brilliant to have brought it."

Eve giggled, "Hey, isn't Friday Constitution Day? We can think of this as a holiday to enjoy the event."

Christine had been unusually quiet after her translation. The news had made her ponder ideas she and Ron had talked about for years. "It's never made sense to me that we have no history prior to 30 years back, starting with Constitution Day. Eve, have you spent time wondering what could have happened to erase the past? Was it so horrific, so terrible that the government intervened and somehow wiped an entire population's memory banks? I mean, what the hell could it have been? Does anyone know or remember what it was like before? The President, maybe?" She turned to face Eve in the back seat, "What are you, 40 something, Eve? I mean, I would guess younger, but I know you have grown boys."

"Yes, Christine. I'm in my early forties. Why do you ask?"

Ron watched his wife go on, his love and admiration for her overwhelmed him.

“Don’t you wonder why you can’t remember back, I mean over 30 years back? Doesn’t that bother you? Ron and I have had talks about this many times. I guess it makes us sound like conspiracy theorists, but if it doesn’t make sense, there’s usually a reason for that.”

“I don’t understand what you mean, everyone knows this. Our country began then, it’s pretty simple. Our leaders wanted this to be a safe and prosperous country, and the only way they knew for that to happen was to forget the ugliness and war prior to that. It must have been a terrible place, people not going out at night, locking their doors. Always afraid of thugs wanting to hurt them. Why should we remember those ways? That kind of knowledge can only teach the future to be ugly too. Listen, what are the chances that this Conchita cover-up will be taken care of by Friday? I want to enjoy fireworks and a nice BBQ.”

Ron looked at Eve, totally surprised by her ignorance. “Eve, you don’t really believe any of what you just said, do you?”

She felt sick inside, and looked at him sadly. “No Ron. I’m sorry, you guys. I’m so used to pretending. Actually, I don’t know what is real or not. I have the same thoughts as you guys. I read a lot, and discuss books with friends. The book we’re currently reading is Atlas Shrugged. Now why does the government let us read books that were written prior to the day our Constitution was signed?” She thought for a few moments. “Come to think of it, the books I read are fiction, I don’t know of any non-fiction out there that talks of times prior to our founding date. They must have destroyed records. At least those dealing with the accounts of history.”

“I think we do have history books, but we’ve been told they are fiction, made up by some fantasy in a writer’s head.” Ron’s last words

trailed off, he just sat for a moment. “I don’t even know if there are people alive who remember what happened prior to our Constitution Day. I guess we’re just supposed to believe, not think for ourselves.” He put his hand out and laced his fingers through Christine’s. “I’m just lucky I found you, honey. All these years, and you’re still my best friend, someone to open my heart to, someone to have thoughtful conversations with. I would go nuts if I didn’t have someone to confide in.”

Ron suddenly changed his mood. Gathering the food wrappers, he bagged them up to throw in the outside cans. “I’ll be right back and then we’re going to find your hotel, Eve. We’ll get settled, then call Sandy. We’re going to get a confession recorded today if it’s the last thing we do.”

He returned, and began driving, following Eve’s instructions to the hotel. Her thoughts were making her nervous. *Sure, I can get Sandy to talk, but she’ll have to come with us. She won’t be safe anymore. But then, is anyone safe? Is this as serious as it seems?* She knew that the news would leak from Latino Town soon, secrets were hard to keep. She wanted the papers to print Sandy’s story as well as hers, she wanted them to know the truth. Black Town had nothing to do with this. She knew it. Jonathan knew it. What she didn’t know was how anger and hate could spiral out of control so rapidly. The suppression people had been constrained with for 30 years was something that was unsustainable. Something big was brewing that would change the people’s lives in the United States forever. She couldn’t yet understand that hate and fear were two deadly emotions that were about to collide and erupt in all towns of America.

Ron watched her expression from his mirror and worried about her, worried about all of them. He hoped he would be able to save the three of them from any danger.

41

Eve couldn't stop thinking of Claire, the coffee house was just down the street from their hotel. It made her feel warm to know that she would be able to go there again and hopefully have a serious conversation about the pending doom. Rachel's prominence as a reporter might prove to be very helpful, get more information so Ron could figure out their next move.

"Yes?" Eve heard Sandy's voice on the other end of the line.

"Sandy, it's me. Please don't hang up. We need to meet, you need to tell the truth. I don't think you're any safer than I would be in that neighborhood. Sandy, you're a liability to them. Meet me at three this afternoon. There's an old fire station in the city, it's called Engine House No 5." Eve gave her instructions how to find it, and then added, "Bring Trent, please. I need to see my son." She hung up without waiting for a response. Sitting, she sighed. *How did we get to this?*

"She coming?" Christine was rubbing her hair with a towel, another towel wrapped around her dripping body.

Eve looked up, stirred from her thoughts. "I hope so, Christine. I can only hope so. She's to meet us up the street at 3pm and I asked her to bring my youngest son. Hope you don't mind, but I really need to see him, at least hug him and tell him this will all be over soon."

Christine sensed Eve's sorrow, "It must be hard to be pregnant during all this. How have you been feeling? I mean physically, that is."

Eve waved her off, and laughed. "That hardly matters anymore, does it? I'm off for my shower, hope you saved me some water. I scream loud when hit with a downpour of cold water."

Eve stood in front of the fire house, her body ready to erupt from her adrenalin rush. Ron and Christine were watching from the car a block away. She was ready with a recorder, anticipating that Sandy would tell her what she needed. Her story would be absolute proof of the lie the White Town paper had released. *Where is she?* Five minutes turned into ten. Eve waited. Hoping, hoping that she would come, and have Trent with her. She looked down the street to see Ron's car. No heads. They must be hiding. More time passed, *she isn't coming!* Her nerves continued to make her body pulse out of control. *Am I right to trust her? Is this a trick?* A voice in her head was blaring at her to cut and run. She looked down the street again, then turned to look again for Sandy. It was so quiet. A terrifying lack of sound. *That's it, she's not coming.* She was ready to run when she heard the familiar voice.

"Eve, I'm around the corner. Follow my voice."

Struck with fear, Eve looked around the empty neighborhood. Slowly, she walked toward her friend, and when she made the final cut around the building, she let out a cry of delight. "Trent, you came!" She ran to the boy and threw her arms around him. "Honey, are you alright? Oh, there's so much I need to say to you, to help you understand what is happening." She ran her hands through his hair, down his arms. He felt so good to her. She'd take him back to the hotel, and would then figure out how to find her other boys.

"What did you want from me, Eve? We don't have much time."

Her words were sobering. Eve looked at Sandy, and with tears in her eyes, told her what she needed. "Sandy, you can't go back to your home until this is over. Come with me, I'll keep you safe."

“You already told them what happened and look what it got you, Eve. Don’t forget, it’s my story that contradicts yours.”

Eve was overcome with compassion for her friend, and putting her hand on Sandy’s face, said, “I know, honey, but don’t you see? The truth needs to be told to get past all this.” She stared into Sandy’s eyes and slowly started the question, “I don’t understand. Why was Conchita at your home so late that night?”

A painful sound of guilt and anguish came from Sandy, she embraced her and clawed her nails into Eve’s skin. It was difficult to understand her words, but she spilled her guts. Everything, it all came gushing out.

“Sandy, Sandy... you did nothing wrong. This was no one’s fault. Conchita was headstrong, if she didn’t want to wait for a ride, there was no way of making her. Don’t you see that?”

“But Eve, I didn’t tell the truth when I saw the paper. I let people believe the lie!”

“No. Stop it. You know how dangerous Jonathon and his vigilante friends are. Stop this now.”

Trent had been silent during the confession, but hearing his mother say ugly things about his father mounted an eruption of emotion against her. “What are you saying, Mom? God, what they’re saying about you is true. God!” He put his head up and began screaming, “Help! She’s over here! Help!”

Eve heard the sound of running, people yelling. The chaotic confusion was terrifying. Without thinking, she grabbed for Sandy and Trent’s hands, coaxing them to run with her. “Come, we’re not safe. Follow me!”

Trent yanked his arm, disengaging himself from her. He ran for his own cover. Sandy ran, following Eve, but in their rush, they lost physical contact with each other.

“Stop! This is the police. Stop, or we will shoot!”

“Sandy, keep up with me!”

Ron had seen the mess develop and was on it. He handled the car as a get-away driver would in a bank heist. Slamming on the breaks, the door flew open, **“Get in, Eve! Hurry!”**

Safely in the car, Eve extended her hand out to Sandy to help pull her in. Their hands touched, she had a grasp on her. **“Jump, Sandy. I have you!”**

The shot was ear-piercing.

Their contact was jerked from them. Sandy fell to the ground, the tears in her eyes speaking to her friend. She smiled and then became motionless.

Trent could be heard, he was howling. **“Mom, I’m sorry!”** He lay crumpled on the ground sobbing like a baby. **“I’m sorry, please hear me!”**

Christine yelled at Eve. **“Shut the door! We can’t help her now, Eve.”**

The car raced through the streets, Ron was hopeful that it wouldn’t turn into a chase. He wasn’t prepared to be this kind of hero. He didn’t have the same energy as he had once had.

“Trent, go back for Trent. Ron, please go back for my boy.”

He ignored her.

The wheels spun as he rounded the next street corner. Ahead, Ron saw an open garage door, he knew it was their only chance. Pulling into its hollow compartment, he jumped out and dashed to where the rope

was hanging over the door. He pulled on it to see the large panel roll down to hide the light from the day.

Commotion could be heard outside. Cars, people running. Yelling. They were close, they were very close.

Slowly, he stepped into the back seat of the car where Eve sat. He told the ladies to keep quiet. He really needed peace and quiet. He needed for his heart beat to slow down, but he allowed them to think it was because they were hiding. They all sat in silence for nearly an hour, afraid to move.

Finally, Ron looked at Eve, and whispered, “Did she say anything?”

She nodded yes, her face covered with a look of tormented grief.

He let out a sigh of relief, it hadn't been for nothing. “We sit here until dark and then we walk to our hotel. I'll make a file from the recording and email it to the chief of police in Latino Town. They will finally know everything.”

“Trent didn't know what he was doing. He saw them kill Sandy.”

He smiled at Eve, and stroked her hair, smoothing it out as he spoke. “You did good, Eve. That's what you need to remember, you did good.”

Chief Rubio called the mayor into his office. The recording was a stunning piece of evidence, proving the lies coming from White Town.

The mayor listened and when the chief finished, he said, “This is all we need. It’s an important time for us, no more repression. They have the law on their side, but guess what? They wrote the law. It’s time to put an end to this.” Mayor Peña had heard everything and he knew he had few options. He’d been pushed for years by the White Town authorities, but never like this. “Make a public statement and have your men ready to act on this. We’re going to declare an end to ghettos today.” He stood and solemnly left the room. He had calls to make to officials from other ghettos across the country. He needed their cooperation.

The chief called a meeting to let his men know the story, he arranged for a patrolman to pick up Eve from Ron and Christine’s house. “In fact, take the couple she’s living with too. They all need to be in a safe house.” He told the men what he wanted them to do, to be prepared for riots and possibly an open war.

The news reporters were notified of his pending press conference. Everything was set. Within an hour, Chief Rubio walked out to meet the crowd, to deliver a message that could send the country into a tail spin. He had always known the day would come, but still wasn’t prepared.

Guns were illegal, except for those issued to officers of the law. But everyone knew that there were plenty around that had been bought on the black market.

Within hours, gun fire could be heard, flashes lit up the sky from heavy artillery. The fights started in White Town, just outside the community of Scarsborough Meadows. It had been a tribute to Conchita to begin their war near the street where she'd been killed.

In Latino Town, Asia Town, Black Town, all the townships, there were protesters in the streets chanting. "Death to the people who killed Conchita!"

Communications spread throughout the country over the internet. Within hours, a technical team from Black Town had set up a social network called Operation Conchita, exposing the war for the entire global community to follow. Every state in the union was involved, the organization took place within a staggering short period of time. It demanded the end of suppression, asking for cities across the nation to take part, and march through the White Towns of America. To claim their government buildings, and take prisoners if necessary. This was the beginning of a new Civil Rights Movement. This was the beginning of the end of dominance over citizens of the country. In the name of Conchita, all states in the union declared war on their own nation.

News analysts debated on the semantics of it all. Some called it Civil War, others argued it was just a *social movement* and would be over within a few days.

Protesters in D.C. were on foot, armed with bats. They planned to infiltrate Liberty Square just outside the municipal buildings in White Town. Their intention was to take over the mayor's home, and finally the President's. Some of the demonstrators were assigned to march to these different residences, some were aiming for Liberty Square. Their numbers before splitting off were impressive, tens of thousands of them.

The township army was armed, unlike the protesters, and had instructions to take all officials as prisoners. Prisoners that would be tried by heads of government from various ghettos. It had been 30 years since many of the people had lost their rights as citizens of the United States, 25 years since they had been banished to their townships. This day was the beginning of the end of their suppression. This was a day for all to unite and destroy White Town, the day to make the fears of people who lived in a place like Scarsborough Meadows come true.

In the small hotel room in D.C. the television was on. Ron flipped the channels to see protesters from all the townships chanting Conchita's name as they progressed toward the square.

"Ron! Give me that remote, you're driving me crazy." Christine tried taking it away from him.

"Honey, we need to get the full story. Listen, we give each channel two minutes. Ok compromise?"

Eve sat motionless in her chair, sick. Finally, she spoke, but in a forlorn tone. "I did this, I created this war. What do we do to help?"

Ron and Christine looked at her in shock, Ron took the lead. "We stay in this room, that's what we do, Eve. One. They're looking for you, and want you dead. Two, you didn't start this. That nut case husband and his cronies did. And three? What the hell can we do? This is out of our control, honey. You leave here, you put us all in danger, you understand?"

"I've never seen anything like this before. Those people marching in the streets are going to be killed. Our army will be killed. This isn't a fair fight, we don't have the military to defeat these people."

Christine stood and went over and began rubbing Eve's shoulders. "Honey, we know how you feel, we're scared too. But you must listen to Ron. There isn't anything we can do. Our part is done, we got the truth out there. You must listen to us, Eve. You scare me when you talk like this."

"Shush." Ron had another station on, one from White Town. The reporter was standing in the middle of a deserted district with lights flashing in the sky a few miles in the distance.

"I've never seen anything like this before." He was yelling, using his words to drown out the terror inside his own mind. A loud screeching sound could be heard in the distance, a shrill noise that made the newsman jerk his head in the direction it came from. "I'm being told those sounds are from the zoo. Those damn poor animals don't understand this anymore than I do." He paused before continuing. "There are marchers coming from all directions, hoping to infiltrate Liberty Square. Our army is waiting for them, they've established a safe perimeter to protect the square. They have orders not to shoot unless the hooligans don't listen to them. They're coming from every ghetto, they've formed a united front, and should be confronted by tomorrow if they march through the night." The man put his head down for a moment, but continued with his voice quivering. "If they don't listen to the authorities, there will be a blood bath."

New billows of smoke could be seen in the distance, the sounds of combat had intensified. The reporter turned to see what a war looked like and shuddered. "The armies have started their battle on the north end of town." Tears were streaming down the man's face. "Leave your homes, this is massive, it's going to cover miles of the city. Keep your children hidden, especially your daughters. I don't need to remind you

what these brutes are capable of.” The man was sobbing with his last remarks. He could be seen shaking his head and waving his hand to motion for the cameraman to shut it down.

Within minutes of the reporter’s announcement, panic sounds in the streets were noticeably different. The silent lanes were soon filled with cars loaded with citizens attempting to leave the city. But where could they go? The scene became chaotic within minutes.

Eve sat and watched, her frame frozen, the look of terror coating her face. There was nothing else to do, to say. She had started this, but someone else had to fix it. Ron was right, it was beyond her control. Only a few days ago, she and Sandy had spent time together. Now her friend was dead and she was the cause for thousands of others that would soon lose their lives... her sons, she’d already lost them. Jonathan had taken care of that. “Damn monster!”

Christine turned, “What, Eve?”

“Jonathan, he’s a damn monster.” Then she choked on her next thought. “The fireworks have come early this year, Constitution Day isn’t until Friday.” She put her head down and sobbed.

43

The cab driver slowed the car as they approached Claire's office. Protesters for and against SB 1257 had taken to the streets. The morning news shows had talked about the bill, now the people were angry. Claire rolled down her window, amazed at the showing. Signs for the bill displayed key phrases. *Safeguard My Family, Protect Our Gun Rights, Keep the Government out of my Wallet, Protect Babies From Murdering Mothers, God is Good, Kick the Queers Out, Go Home Aliens.*

The crazies were out in force. But it wasn't just one-sided. A closer look exposed to Claire the other viewpoint. *Keep the Government Out of My Vagina, Don't Shoot Me Because Of My Skin Color, Religion – Church Not Government.*

Claire had never seen such fast organization. Then the idea came to her. The instruction book for SB 1257, this must have been pre-planned. She threw her hand into her purse, groping for her phone until her fingers felt its cool metallic surface. *Yes, God. I have to unload these photos.* She checked the time, she had an hour before her meeting.

The clouds opened up, rain pounded on the windshield of the taxi. The driver stopped the car, unable to move anymore, people were everywhere. "Lady, you got an umbrella?" He twisted his neck, tilting his head to look at the sky. "This ain't gonna stop anytime soon. An' these protesters don't seem ta' care. What do ya want me ta' do?"

The rain grew heavier, a virtual downpour. It seemed to rally the demonstrators, their shouting escalated to a severe volume. Claire pulled her umbrella out of her briefcase, gave the man some money, and stepped out into the street, realizing it was the only way for her to get anywhere.

Sirens could be heard in the distance, the sound meshing with the rain was ominous. She had six, maybe seven blocks to go. "Excuse me." She smiled at the people, as she gently pushed her way through them. "Please, excuse me." Someone grabbed her umbrella, and laughed.

Throwing it in the air, the man chided her. "Lady, you gotta do this like the rest of us." He shoved a sign in her hand.

"Stop it. Let me be." She felt herself being shoved. *Why did I wear these heels?* Knowing the danger if she fell, dread filled her insides. She used her left foot to push down on her right shoe until she felt the freedom of its release, then she did the other shoe.

Her feet were bare.

The crowds were relentless. The rain drenched everyone, but it didn't slow them down. Claire pushed forward, terrified with each step, making slow progress. It was just as she had read about, kids at a concert getting crushed in a mob.

She felt a hand grasp her arm. It was pulling her to the side of the street. Her knuckles were white from the tight grip she had on her briefcase. "Senator, don't fight me." The man was yelling to be heard over the sounds of sirens, chanting people, the rain. Claire's fear was suddenly replaced with hope when she realized it was a reporter she knew. Finally, she was nearing safe territory, a clearing where a news crew had set up their equipment to get the scene on film.

"Frank, you are a Godsend, thanks." She still had her briefcase, her purse, her body intact. Only her precious shoes were missing. She heard thunder and a new discharge of water dropped from the sky. But she was safe, away from the masses. "I'm trying to get to my office, any suggestions?"

“Sure, Senator. I’ll help you get there. These folks like to be on TV, they’ll let us get around as long as we have a camera on them.” He chuckled. “But, Senator, can I ask you a few questions first? Our viewers want to know how you are going to vote on this bill.”

This was her payment. She knew she’d have to be interviewed before getting her magic carpet ride to safety. “Which bill are you referring to, Frank? We have two important ones coming up this week.”

“You are a funny one, Senator. I’ll go out on a limb and say that you’re going to vote for the Fair Payment Act. Am I right?” His white teeth glistened with his broad smile, the contrast to his dark hair astounded her.

“You’ve got me there, Frank. As for the other vote, I don’t know yet. I need to study it some more, it has a lot of things in it. And I’m a pretty slow reader.” Another bolt of lightning struck over their heads. The storm was now directly over them, hovering in slow motion. The stubborn tempest was stuck in a loop.

Frank let out a grunt. “Senator, that’s all I get for saving your life, eh?” He took her arm and led her to the van. He tucked her into the back and took a seat next to her. Then he directed the driver to start their voyage. His cameraman leaned out the passenger window with his camera to let the people know they would be on the evening news.

It took some time, but finally they reached the Dirksen Senate office building. Claire had never felt so happy to see the stately structure. It was the second office building constructed for the members of the US Senate, named after the late Everett Dirksen in 1972. It had been approved for construction by the Senate in 1949, but didn’t get built until 1958. Claire had never thought about why it was named so many years after its construction, but after today, she would make the effort to find out. She had a newfound love for her working home.

“Thank you, Frank. I do owe you for this.” She noticed him looking at her feet. Chuckling, she said, “A small casualty, don’t you think?” She laughed at his expression.

“Claire, if I see your shoes, I’ll have them returned to you.” He smiled, then turned to his driver. “Ok, let’s get back out to the trenches.” He waved as they drove off.

Claire took a deep breath, straightened her back, and with her head held high, marched into the building. *Confidence is everything*, she thought. *So I look like a drowned cat with no shoes. So what?* Then she laughed at herself. *Since when do cats wear shoes?*

She first went to her office where she gathered dry clothes, a towel, and toiletries. By this time, she didn’t care if she would be late to Clancy’s meeting, she needed to freshen up. *That old pig can wait on me. Him and his precious Sanctioned Four.*

44

Claire was received by the men in a stately manner; she was only a few minutes late. “Well, Claire. You’re looking fresh, how do you do it?” Clancy stood, and gestured for her to sit in one of his living-room style chairs.

She sat and looked at the four scoundrels, “Gentlemen? Good to see you made it back in one piece.”

Clancy didn’t waste time getting to the point with her, “Claire, I was disappointed to hear that your mind is not yet decided for the bill. Very disappointed indeed. I thought we had an understanding.”

“Well, Senator. I didn’t realize my interviews warranted your scrutiny, but I guess I have become somewhat of a valuable asset to you, now haven’t I?” She smiled at the men.

“Claire, you mock me.” Clancy looked at the others and snorted, prompting them to laugh in return. “What are your intentions? I need to know now, and before you say anything,” he held up a file folder, “I’m ready to release the news of your sexual activities.”

“Senator, I’m leaning toward the vote you want from me, but I need a little more time to think it through. Say, until tomorrow?”

Clancy smiled, took a deep sigh, and nodded in approval. “I thought we could come to an arrangement. Tomorrow works just fine.” Then to the men, “Do we have the other votes wrapped up?”

Dirk spoke up, “Yes, Sir. Claire is the only stray cat amongst us.” He smiled at her, taking a peek at her chest at every opportunity.

“Well good. Let’s have a drink. It is after noon, isn’t it? I want you all to handle this with strict, but gentle scrutiny. Keep an ear open just in case

anyone has a change of heart. Send me a list of the line-up for those being interviewed.” He winked at Claire. “As you know, dear. We have a document full of the catchy phrases the news media will enjoy. We all need to stick together and keep on track with our message.” He poured liquid into five tumblers. “Now come and let’s toast to our new constitutional rights.”

Claire took a taste of his whiskey, and put her glass down. The four men were on to the topic of sports with their conversation, she was ready to leave.

Until Bill did something that got her attention.

“Speaking of baseball, you have got to see what I found at an old pawn shop.” He removed from his pocket a crumpled up wad of newspaper. Carefully he unwrapped it, letting the paper fall to the floor, exposing the prize baseball he had acquired. “Just look at this beauty. The old man didn’t have a clue what he was sitting on, I got it for almost nothing.” He turned the ball over in his hand, excited to hear the delighted sounds coming from his colleagues.

Claire picked up the wrinkled paper from the floor, her head aching from stabbing rushes. *Tony, what the hell has he done to Tony? God, you didn’t show last night! Why didn’t I check in on you before this?*

She picked up her purse, and without saying a word, hastened out of the office. She had to get to Tony, find out why Bill had Eve’s newspaper. She ran down the hall to get her coat. She put on some flats, she needed to be better prepared for the hordes in the streets this time. She called Tony, no answer. It didn’t matter, she needed to get there, find out what had happened.

In Clancy’s office, the Sanctioned Four stared at each other, “What the hell was that? I tell ya, that woman is weird.” Bill laughed, then noticed the

newspaper missing from where he'd let it fall. "Hey, what the hell? She took my wrapping." The others laughed in agreement about the evaluation of the Senator, but also admitted that she was a looker.

Bill snickered too, but something bothered him, he was figuring it out. *She knew.* That had to be it. *They say a killer often returns to the scene of the crime. I guess that's true.* The idea of returning to that man's flat didn't sound good to him, but of course, if she was there as he anticipated, it might be fun.

Bill slipped the baseball into his pocket and said, "I think things are progressing fine now. So, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I have work to do." He left them, with a sickening storm developing inside his gut.

45

Claire was once again drenched, she rang Tony's bell, but nothing. "Tony, it's Claire. Are you in there?" She fumbled for her cell and dialed his number. She could hear his phone ringing on the other side of the door. She stared at her cell, *Damn, I have to unload these photos.* She shook her head, ashamed to be thinking of anything, but Tony. Something wasn't right.

She turned, ran down his stairway, and looked for the pot where the key was. She had taken care of his plants several years ago, using the hidden key in the pot under the stairs to gain entry. *Please, Tony. Let it still be here.* There were four pots, she didn't remember so many. Her adrenalin rush had her in a near panic, she searched under the first two. The third one gave her the prize she wanted.

Running up his stairs, she opened his door slightly, enough to poke her head through the opening. "Tony, are you here? It's Claire. I need to know that you're ok."

No answer.

She stepped into the flat, her fear mounting. It didn't feel good, something was amiss. "Tony, are you in here?" She scanned the living room, then walked down the hall to the bedroom. Everything was neat and tidy. She turned and headed toward the kitchen. The smell began to make her nose quiver. "Oh my God." She stood in the entrance and saw her friend lying in a puddle of blood. She screamed.

"God, no!" she ran back into the living room, and grabbed his phone to call 911. "My name is Claire Winslow, I'm at my friend's home at 432 C Street. I think he's dead, blood is everywhere! Oh my God, oh God." A voice spoke to her. "Ok, yes. Please hurry, blood's everywhere. Oh God."

She hung up. One hand was over her mouth, the other, gripping her cheek, hoping to stop herself from screaming again. Pacing, she waited.

Then she heard his voice.

Turning sharply, she saw Bill. “Honey, are you alright? I’m here for you, Claire.” The sirens could now be heard in the distance.

He hurried over to her and reached out to put his arms around her, to comfort her.

“Get away from me, you animal!” She used her strength to push him away. “Why? What did he do to you? You don’t even know him. Why?” She stepped back to stare at the monster in the room.

“Claire, you’re upset. You don’t know what you’re saying. In fact, I don’t know what you’re saying. What’s wrong? Why are you upset?”

“Why are you here, Bill? You tell me that, Senator.”

“Honey, you seemed upset when you left, so I followed to see what was wrong. I still don’t know.”

The commotion outside the apartment interrupted his thoughts, a fear came over him. “Claire, I’m not going to play games with you anymore. Let me just be clear with you. Ok, honey? Are you listening? We won’t have any more mishaps with people you care about if you just sign the pledge promising that you will vote with us on Friday.” He laughed. “I realize this may seem extreme to you, but I take my work very seriously, and as you now know, I’ve been assigned to encourage you to see this our way.” He turned around to see the rescue people running up the stairs. He had time to make one last point, “Let’s see, Rachel Ross has become a pal of yours, hasn’t she?”

“Sir?” The patrolmen had their guns in hand, “Please step over to the side of the room, sir.” And then to Claire, “Madam, are you the one that called?”

Claire was stunned, in shock. Any sounds of communication were locked inside. She nodded and pointed to the kitchen. She felt Bill's arm around her, as if he was comforting her. Jerking, she looked at him wild-eyed.

A detective walked into the apartment in time to see her reaction to Bill, "Are you Claire Winslow? Senator, is everything ok in here?" He checked out Bill, then an expression of recognition came over him. "Senator Hancock, right?"

Bill jaunted over to the man and shook his hand. "Yes, sir. I'm afraid Senator Winslow has had a terrible shock. Her friend is in the kitchen with the officers. She was the one to find him there." Bill's concern sounded impressive. Claire felt such disdain for the man, and now he'd shown a side of himself that terrified her.

"Detective, I need to get out of here. I'm afraid I'm going to be sick if I don't." She ran to the exit, down the stairs, and under the porch where she bent over and threw up. When there was nothing left inside of her, her body continued to extract dry heaves. Finally, she stood and realized there was a woman detective standing nearby holding out a tissue for her.

"Senator, I'm sorry for your loss. I know you must have a busy schedule, but I need you to come downtown with me for a statement. Can I get you to come with me, Senator?"

Claire took the tissue from her and dabbed her mouth. "Can we go now, I mean this second? I need to get away from here."

Claire followed the detective to her unmarked police car. "Sit in the front, Senator. You're not a criminal."

Claire obeyed the woman, and rolled down the window slightly to get the air she desperately needed. She was struggling to breathe and needed

the breeze. Her phone vibrated in her purse. Looking at the screen, she saw a text from Bill. *I know I can count on you, Claire~kisses.*

Her mouth constricted. A gurgling sound escaped her lips. She swallowed, then gulped only to completely lose it, sobbing for the next few minutes. Finally, she gained control of herself, wiped her forehead, and dabbed the tears. It was humiliating.

The detective was kind, she parked the car in the back of the station, and motioned for Claire to follow, taking her in through a rear entrance. She led Claire to a private room where she told her to wait until another detective came. “In the meantime, can I get you some coffee?”

Claire stared at her, but said nothing. The detective left, leaving her alone.

Claire knew these kinds of rooms. She’d been on the other side of the mirror many times during her days as an attorney. It was just a formality, but knowing that didn’t seem to help with the knot in her stomach.

The door opened and her interviewer came in. “Claire, it is good to see you again, wish it was under better circumstances. I know what Tony meant to you, I’m deeply sorry.”

Kurt was an old acquaintance of hers, as were many on the force. She had lost contact with most of these people, but the relationships remained that of admiration for Claire, and her for them.

“Kurt, I’m wet and I’m cold. My face is a mess, smeared mascara is not that eye-catching on me. Can we make this quick? I really need to get home to clean up.” Without being prompted, she told Kurt how she had spent some time with Tony the previous day. She had called him earlier today and when there was no answer, she became worried. She arrived at his flat, and used the key from under the pot.

“What was your business with him, Claire?”

She stared at him, and then spoke. “No business, Kurt. Just two old friends spending some time together. We had a date to meet for lunch and I called to remind him. You know Tony. He’s, I mean he was easily distracted. So when he didn’t answer, I went over there to make sure he hadn’t stayed up all night on one of his science projects. I went there thinking I’d have to wake him. This is a crazy week for me, I didn’t have the time to sit at some restaurant waiting for him to stand me up.”

Kurt stood, and told her she could go. They shook hands, and he led her to the detective who’d brought her in. “Susie, would you take the Senator to her home?” And then to Claire, “Thank you. We’ll be in touch.”

Kurt started to walk away, but hesitated, and turned to address Claire. “What about Senator Hancock? Was he in on your lunch date?”

She shuddered, “No. I don’t know why he followed me. You’ll have to ask him.”

The detective’s eyes squinted slightly, an odd expression that stabbed at her. She held herself together, locking her emotions deep inside, revealing nothing to the man. Then she said, “Thank you, Kurt. I mean for the ride home.”

46

Claire walked down the hall wrapped in her extra-large towel. She used a hand towel to rub against her wet hair. The tea kettle was hissing.

Rain was still coming down in sheets, making a wonderful soothing sound in her apartment. She had opened the window slightly so she could hear its fabulous melody as it pounded against the brick wall of her apartment building. *Funny how I love the rain when I'm not in it.*

She turned on the television to a cable news station to see videos of protesters in the streets of D.C. It had now spread to most of the major cities in the country. Seattle, LA, San Francisco, Denver, Chicago, and many more. As she had witnessed before, both sides of the bill were represented with signs, and chanting people.

“Oh my God, Rachel!” Claire dashed for the phone to call her. Looking at the clock on her kitchen wall, it was nearly 5pm. “Rachel, damn. It’s Claire. Please call me asap. I won’t be on the show tonight. I’m so sorry for this late notice, but things have happened today. Please meet me at the usual place tonight and call me when you get my message. I’m sick about this, sorry again.” She hung up, angry at herself for putting her new friend in such a tight spot. She was giving her four hours to find a replacement, not what friends do to one another. “Damn it!”

Claire found her cell phone in the bottom of her purse, and took it to her computer. After uploading the photos, she deleted the ones on the phone. She then copied the photos onto two different CDs and moved the computer photos to a hidden folder on her hard drive. Claire was savvy with the computer, she’d learned much of what she knew from Tony. “Tony.” She picked up her tea and took it to the kitchen. Finding the proper stemware,

she browsed through the bottles of wine in her cupboard. “This one will do. Tony? Let’s have a drink in your honor.”

Her phone rang.

“Rachel? Is that you?” Claire picked up the remote and muted the show. “Sorry, what? Hold on a minute.” Turning the sound on again, Claire saw the news report about Tony.

The reporter was giving a blow by blow of the murder. Claire listened, a tear escaped, it ran down her cheek.

“Henry, are there any leads on this? Any suspects for this heinous crime?”

The reporter, Henry, was standing outside Tony’s flat with an umbrella in one hand, a mic in the other. “The police aren’t calling her a suspect, but evidently there is a witness that saw... get this, Nancy. Senator Claire Winslow was seen leaving the premises shortly after the time of death.”

Claire snapped up the remote and muted the television again. With the phone still in her hand, she raised it and said, “You still there, Rachel?”

“Claire, don’t worry about the show. Can you still meet me later?”

Claire was staring at the television. “Yes, I have something to give you. A present. I’ll see you in a few hours.” She hung up and poured a glass of wine.

A new storm was heard overhead, the thunder not far away. Claire placed her glass on the table and went to the book shelf. Finding a how-to book on remodeling kitchens, she took it to her desk where the CDs were. She printed a label for one of them that said *Kitchen Remodeling For Dummies*. She applied it to the CD, giving it a professional look, and then rummaged through her drawer for a plastic disk cover. Next, she plugged in her glue stick gun and waited for it to heat up. She stood, looking for where she’d put her wine. She picked it up and paced her apartment, sipping,

worrying. Finally, she used the glue gun to dab the hot waxy substance on the inside cover of the book, and pressed the disk with its plastic cover onto it, giving it the pressure it needed to become one with the book. Satisfied, she found a gift bag, and some hot pink tissue paper. Rachel's gift was now complete. She placed it in her purse.

Claire looked at the other CD. She found another plastic cover and some duct tape. She placed the CD under the desk top, and secured it in place.

"How did it get to this? God, Tony. I'm so sorry I got you involved." Then she thought of Rachel. Her stomach felt sick. She picked up the phone and called Kurt.

"Kurt, it's Claire. I just thought of something that may be helpful to your case. It's probably nothing, but Senator Hancock has in his possession a baseball that I believe came from Tony's apartment. Now, I know very little about the game, but I believe it is signed by... God, what was that name? Tony loved it and made a big deal about it. Oh, yes. It was signed by Bill Buckner. I saw the Senator showing a baseball to some of our colleagues today. It probably isn't the same one, but you might want to check Tony's flat for it." She raised her glass for another sip of wine. "Of course, I'm sure it's nothing, like I said before. But I know that you want to know everything I can remember. Yes, no problem. Good night, Kurt."

She filled her glass again, and went to her room to change from a towel to something suitable for the coffee house. "Eve, please be there tonight, just come tonight."

“Thanks to you at home for joining me at this hour. If you haven’t heard this yet, the Senate Bill 1257 was released this past Friday. It’s loaded with amendments to your constitution that you need to be aware of. Let me backtrack for a moment. Happy Memorial Day. I normally wouldn’t be broadcasting tonight, but this bill is something that has the capabilities to change all of our lives. I want to use every night this week to address its different components and what these changes could mean to your life. I don’t mean to disrespect the memory of our service men and women, but I feel that you will understand after the show.” Rachel put her hands to her head, and ran her fingers through her hair. Laughing, she said, “And, I owe you an explanation as to why my hair is completely drenched.” She picked up some papers and played with them. It was a trademark of hers.

“My intention with the coverage this week is to inform you and entice you, all of you, to call your Senator and tell them to vote NO on this bill. The vote of course, is taking place on Friday. In fact, my Friday show will be devoted to this. Yes, that’s right. We’ll have a camera at the Senate chambers. Think of it as the Rachel Ross CSPAN Show.” She laughed. “Oh, yea. My hair. Many cities around the country have had protesters in the streets since early this morning, people with signs for both pro and against 1257. I was out there a few minutes ago to give you a feel for what’s going on out there. It just so happens that we’re having a wonderful rain storm here in D.C. Hence,” she ruffled her hair, “the drowned dog look. We will show the clip of me in the streets later in the show.”

Rachel smiled into the camera, her trademark snarky expression let the viewer’s know how she felt about her next remarks. “But first, let me start

with tonight's topic, a little change to our constitution that brings religion into our government. Oh, yes. You are hearing me correctly. Religious rights would no longer be separate from our government. And, if a person that wanted to buy something from the store keeper down the street somehow made the clerk fear that customer, because of, oh, maybe the color of their skin? Well, you guessed it. The store owner, or clerk, would be able to refuse to do business with them! Wait, what does this remind you of?" An old clip from *To Kill a Mocking Bird* began playing, a scene where a black man was not able to shop in a store. There were signs that said, *Whites Only* outside restaurants and other establishments.

The clip finished and Rachel continued. "It was 1964 when the Civil Rights Act was enacted by Congress." She began using her fingers to count the years. "Yup, it was a little more than 50 years ago. Fifty years, folks! Now, this bill being voted on this Friday, 50 years later, will bring back some of the insane actions against certain groups of people. It will be legal to refuse services to a person who looks scary. Let's see, my hair is mighty short, and when I wear my goofy glasses, I might look pretty scary to someone. So I can't buy a pint of ice cream if my looks frighten the store keeper?" Rachel took a deep breath. "This SB 1257 is the new Bill of Wrongs!"

"Ok, let's get someone in here to settle me down. My first guest tonight is Senator Mund from the great state of California." She turned to face her guest. "Good evening, and thank you for coming on the show, Senator. You've read this bill, tell me if I got this part of it right."

"Thank you, Rachel," he laughed. "I don't know if I'll be able to help you feel better. You laid it out perfectly, and yes. It would take us back 50 years or so. The Republicans are trying to sell this as a bill that will ensure safety to the American public, but safety to whom, and from whom? I've

never seen anything like this in my career. It is important, as you say, to have constituents calling their Senators every day this week, all day long. This bill, if it passes, will take away many people's rights as they know them today."

Rachel leaned into the table that was between them, "This is what I need to hear. Not that you've helped me to feel better. But I did need to know if I had read this correctly. Senator, I want to thank you for coming in on such short notice. I have always had a lot of respect for the way you do your job and feel it's an honor to have you on the show."

"Thank you, Rachel. It's my pleasure to help with this one."

Rachel looked into the camera, "We will be right back. And we'll show you the tape of me in the storm with the people braving the weather. I think you'll enjoy it." She smiled into the camera and gave her signature clap that signaled to her viewers that an intermission was next.

She looked across the table and again, said to Senator Mund, "As you know, Senator Winslow lost a dear friend today, so your coming in at incredibly short notice was awesome. Thank you so much."

"As I said, it's not a problem. I like what you're trying to do, Rachel. We can't let this thing pass. As I understand, it's Senator Winslow who will probably be the deciding vote. This one is partisan right down the middle. I have a lot of respect for her though. In the past, she's taken a lot of heat from her side by voting with her belief system, as opposed to what they tell her to do."

"Well, we can only hope, can't we?" Rachel shook his hand to dismiss him, knowing it was near her time to be back on the air.

She saw her cue, and sat up straight for her next segment. "Welcome back to the show. And now, what you've all been waiting for, the film of me

in the rain earlier tonight.” She smiled and turned around to watch the clip with her audience.

“Good evening,” Rachel was yelling into her mic to be heard over the demonstrators. The rain, the sound of thunder contributed to the disposition of angry people around her. “Signs from both pro and opposing sides of SB 1257 are out tonight. Actually, these brave people have been in this weather since this morning. Can we get the camera over here?” The scene was like a flashback to the late 1960’s when anti-war movements reigned in the streets. Chanting could be heard over the sounds of the storm, police were out redirecting traffic. Many arterials had been blocked off. “I think the most impressive part of all this is the peaceful mood of these folks. They’re mad as hell, but surprisingly serene. Not only are they demonstrating their feelings over crucial political ideals, but also, they’re dealing with an angry Mother Nature.” She laughed. “Perhaps, the harshest activist here *is* Mother Nature. Hmm, that’s a thought. After all, some of this bill’s amendments deal with deregulation. Maybe Mother Earth has had enough of this nonsense. Many of the far-right folks are global warming deniers. I can see where that might upset the queen of elements.” She moved closer to a marcher. “Sir, what is it that inspires you so to stand out in this storm?”

“This bill is going to make me and my family safer, we won’t have to be afraid of thugs anymore. It will give me the rights that I need to protect my family. I work hard to put food on the dinner table. Then, some lazy thug comes along and wants to take it away from me? I don’t think so. Finally, I’ll be able to protect my family.”

“So you’ve had problems with thievery, sir?”

“Well no, but I hear about it in the news a lot. Now I can be ready to take care of my family. I’ll have the right to keep hooligans out of my hardware store so my customers can feel safe. I’ll have the right to shoot

them if they try to harm me. This is the biggest step in the right direction I've seen in my lifetime and I want to be part of helping it pass."

"You must not have been around prior to 1964, sir. Am I right?"

"Don't give that liberal civil rights crap. This is a safety issue." He turned his back to Rachel, dismissing her and their talk.

She found another marcher and held the mic up to him. "Sir, what brings you out in this weather tonight?"

"This bill is a nightmare for this country. It changes many people's rights as we know them. It will suppress many, bringing into law religious views that don't match the way I feel. There's a reason why our founding forefathers wrote the constitution separating church from state. I'm an atheist. Does that mean I won't have any rights?"

"Alright, sir. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with my viewers." She looked into the camera and finished the segment, "There you have it, two opposing assessments of SB 1257. Don't go away, we will be right back."

When the commercials were over, Rachel was dry, and happily sitting in her studio. "Tomorrow, we will discuss another change that this bill offers, one that could abolish the NRA. Yes, that's right. No need for that organization anymore if this passes."

She clapped her hands together. "But for now, I want to finish the show with this next segment about our fallen heroes. Today is Memorial Day, we owe so much to the many men and women who have put their lives on the line. Many who, in war, have lost their lives. I have here with us General McClowd to share some heart wrenching stories of these champions. General, thank you for coming on my show."

48

The rain had finally subsided, making it easier for Claire to drive. She used the back roads to avoid demonstrators. Sadness came over her when she saw the coffee house in the distance. Tony should have been there the night before. Now she knew why he didn't show up. "Well, at least I'm ahead of Rachel tonight."

Claire slipped into their normal booth, her eyes on the back wall of the café. When Donna walked by, she quickly put out her hand to stop her. "Listen, Donna. Have you seen Eve at all? I desperately need to discuss some things with her."

Donna smiled, knowingly. "I'm sure you do, dear. I'll bring your coffee. Scones too." She winked.

Damn, she's a frustrating woman. Claire took the gift out from her purse and set it across the table for Rachel. *There's so much to tell her. I need to organize myself so I sound cohesive.* Her thoughts drifted to Eve and the life she must have. *God, I need to hear more about her, I barely know what her life is actually like. My vote, if my vote can change her future, then why does it matter what I do? If I vote for this monstrosity and remain a Senator, can't I change her world by using my power that way?* Rachel's voice made her jump, she'd been deep in her thoughts.

"Hey, I didn't mean to scare you." She took the seat across from Claire. "I am sorry about your loss, Claire." She looked at the hot pink bag next to her. "What are we celebrating?"

"Open it, Rachel. I think it will help with some of your questions. I know it helped me."

Rachel smiled, "Well aren't you mysterious tonight." She pulled the colorful tissue paper out of the bag, and unwrapped it to discover the book. She looked up at Claire with confused eyes.

"I know you want to get some remodeling ideas. This is the best book I've found." Claire reached across the table and opened the cover. She tapped her index finger on the CD that was glued to the page. "This is why. It's full of photos. Don't you think it's true that a picture is worth a thousand words?" Claire winked at her. "Look at me, I'm taking on the habit of our winking waitress." She laughed.

Rachel wrapped up the book and placed it in the pretty gift bag. "I'll be sure to take a look at this. I know I could use some help." She saw the stern expression in Claire's stare. "I promise. I'll do it before I go to bed tonight."

Claire sat back, feeling relieved. "Good, and if you have any questions, call me. I don't sleep very well anyway. But call my cell, not my home." Claire put her head down and almost whispered her next words. "Oh, and Rachel? You might want to surround yourself with people at all times for the next few days."

She could tell that Rachel was working to understand her code talk. Then, she continued. "If I have shocked you, then good. Tony was supposed to be here last night. Let's see, what were the last words he said to me?" She raised her head, as if thinking. "Oh, yes. *Eve's the biggest phenomenon he'd experienced in his lifetime.*" She looked at the back wall. "I don't think she's coming again. But we can't give up, Rachel. We must be here every night, do you understand?"

"You are good with enigmas, Claire. But I think I'm beginning to understand." She handled the pink bag, wondering about its contents.

"Ladies, boy am I glad to see some familiar faces."

Looking up, Claire's eyes met Bill's. "Senator, I didn't realize you came here."

"Oh, first time for me, Claire. It was tough tailing you tonight, with the crazy route you took and all." He looked across at Rachel and stuck his hand out. "And what an honor it is to finally meet you face to face."

Rachel didn't reciprocate, said nothing.

Bill chuckled, and withdrew his hand, then sat next to Claire in the booth. "Well, that's ok. I really wanted to see you, Claire. That little stunt you pulled tonight didn't work. Yes, it was embarrassing to get a call from your detective friend. And I didn't appreciate having to go down there and be interrogated. But, I shouldn't be so sensitive, should I? I just told him the truth. That I found my prize baseball in a pawn shop. No problem. It's obvious that some thug murdered your friend. And ladies, that's exactly the kind of thing we will stop after this bill passes."

Claire's voice was strong, firm when she replied. "Did the detective ask for a receipt from the pawn shop? Is he going to check out your lie?"

Bill put his head back and laughed. And then, he addressed Rachel. "You've gotta love this woman. She doesn't mince words, does she?"

Rachel found the Senator disgusting. She had been analyzing the man since his arrival. "Senator, we're in the middle of a coffee and would prefer to be left alone. If you need to be here, kindly find somewhere else to sit."

Bill slid himself off the booth and stood over the two of them. "I thought you ladies would be more fun. But, seeing that you're a couple of sticks in the mud, I believe I'll go find me some real ladies. You had your chance to be nice to me." He saw the pink bag and picked it up by its handle. "Well, isn't this cute? Women can be so girly." He let it fall back on the table top and walked away.

After he disappeared outside, Claire told the story about Tony's prized possession that Bill now owned. "I believe he's dangerous, he's threatened me, Rachel. Well, not me, but you."

"Don't worry about me, that jackass won't get near me. But thanks for the warning. Let's go, Claire. She's not coming tonight, and besides, I have some research to do for my remodel job that can't wait any longer."

They stepped out into the night only to discover a new rain storm. "This is crazy weather. Get in, I'll drive you home."

Rachel stood tall, pointing down the block. "Thanks, but I've got a rental. Drive carefully, Claire."

"You too, and remember. If you have questions, call me tonight. I don't care what time."

They said goodbye and Claire watched Rachel walk down the street to her car. She waited until her friend was safely inside before turning on her engine and heading home.

49

The rain was relentless, making the visibility dangerous. Rachel's thoughts went back to the strange conversation she'd had with Claire. And Eve. She remembered how she'd reacted to the story, but was coming around. It wasn't possible, and yet Claire hadn't told her how excited her friend, Tony had been, until tonight.

She saw the stop light turn red ahead, and put her foot on the brakes.

No response.

She began pumping as fear flashed through her. "God, no!" She heard the devastating sound of the car slamming into something before hitting her head on the steering wheel. The emergency bag burst open to protect her, but she was already unconscious. The car she rammed into was void of passengers, just a car sitting on the side of the road, a car that was now totaled. It's metal crumpled, the way a beer can implodes when crushing it for its next life of recycling.

Sometime later, Rachel regained consciousness. She saw the puffy bag hanging loosely around her body, its gassy insides having escaped after doing its job to protect her. She knew her phone was on the passenger seat. She moved her arm ever so slowly, reaching to grasp it. She could hear the rain thrashing on the windows. Finally, she had it in her possession, she hit the emergency key that dialed 911.

"I've been in an accident, send an ambulance." Her voice sounded weak, talking through her pain.

"Yes, mam. I have your coordinates, help will be there in a few minutes. Can you stay on the phone with me?"

"Yes." She couldn't move.

Soon she heard sirens, she sat motionless, waiting.

The medics were efficient in getting her out of the car, and into the ambulance. The police were on the scene.

“Lady, you got a purse in there?”

Rachel couldn't move, they'd restrained her head with a neck brace. But she could still think. “Please, my phone and a pink gift bag. I need those things.”

“Sure, lady.”

When they were en route to the hospital, Rachel asked one of the medics to call Claire. “Just do a redial. She's the last person I spoke to. Tell her to meet me where you're taking me.” She closed her eyes, and everything faded out.

Tuesday

Claire had made herself comfortable, one chair to sit in, another to rest her feet on. She'd been reading through SB 1257 and taking notes for over three hours, using the time while she waited for Rachel to wake up. Looking at her new friend lying in the bed covered with bruises made her sick to her stomach. No one close to her was safe anymore, at least for the week. Bill was a monster, but had covered himself well. She couldn't prove anything that would tie him to the atrocious attacks on Tony and Rachel.

The bill was a sham. She'd tried to see it as something she could live with. But it was so loosely written that the zealots could ingratiate their beliefs into law, insist that all Americans conform to their philosophies. Could this really affect the country enough to create a living nightmare for Eve's world? She had to speak to Eve, she had to learn about Eve's history. Her future.

Claire couldn't stop thinking how she might be able to change life for Eve if she kept the power she held as Senator. Or, was that even a problem? If she voted against the bill, would she get the support she needed from enough Senators in her Party to fight Clancy? So many questions. She heard moans coming from Rachel.

Her feet pushed the mocked up foot stool away so she could move her chair closer to the bed. She smiled when Rachel opened her eyes, she could see how the woman was fighting to adjust her sight. She seemed confused, discombobulated.

“Hey.” Claire smiled and stroked her friend’s hair. “Welcome back.” She pushed the call button to summon a nurse.

Rachel put her hand to her head, “Ugh, my head is killing me.”

“No, Rachel. Killing you is out of the question. You’re a tough cookie. Do you remember what happened?”

She closed her eyes to think back, “The brakes wouldn’t work, it was raining.” She swallowed hard. “Could you get me a cocktail? I sure am thirsty.”

“Ha! Sure, let me help you with that.” Claire poured from the water decanter and placed a straw in the plastic cup. “Here, if you have a good imagination, this will taste like a mango flavored Tequila concoction.” She tipped the drink to help Rachel with her fantasy drink.

A nurse came into the room and asked Claire to give her some space with the patient. “Ms. Ross, do you know where you are?”

“Sure I do. Where are my clothes? I need to get out of here.”

Claire and the nurse’s eyes locked, both amused by the comment.

“The doctor will be in soon, we’re going to wait to hear from him.” She reached for Rachel’s arm so she could take her blood pressure. “You sure are lucky, Ms. Ross. And popular. There’s a group of people waiting to see you out in the hall.”

Claire’s phone rang, the display telling her it was Kurt, her detective friend. “Excuse me, I need to take this. Rachel, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Out in the hall, she answered his call, “Kurt, I’m at the hospital.”

“Claire, is she awake yet? I need a statement from her.”

“Yes, but the doctor needs to check her out first. Why are you getting involved with this?”

“Claire, we’re friends, so I’m going to level with you. Her car was tampered with. This was deliberate. What the hell is going on with your friends? Is there something you want to tell me?”

Claire noticed an employee approaching Rachel’s room. She was rolling a cart full of flowers and a gift box wrapped in bright pink tissue paper. “Kurt, hold on a minute.” She walked over to the lady, and pointing to the box. She asked, “Who brought this? When did this come?”

The young girl seemed frightened by Claire’s anxious tone, “I don’t know, it was on the counter with Ms. Ross’ name on it. So I put it with the other things that came for her.”

“Don’t take these in yet. Could you put the cart over to the side of the hall?” And then to Kurt, “There’s something here that doesn’t feel right, Kurt. I think you need to get down here now, and bring someone who can analyze a package.”

“Coming!” The line went dead.

51

Claire saw five of Rachel's friends sitting, some reading, some chatting. "Excuse me, did any of you send Rachel a box wrapped in pink tissue paper?"

"Hey, it's the Senator. Is she awake yet?" The friends from her work stood, hoping to hear some good news.

"Please, the package. Did you send it?"

"No, we brought flowers." The producer of the Rachel Ross Show sounded worried. "Why, what's going on?"

They heard troops enter the hall, one of the men went straight to the flower cart. He wore gloves and was dressed in a special suit one would expect to see in a sci-fi flick. He held a suitcase sized device. After dusting the pink gift box, he placed particles from the brush into the device, and pushed some buttons on the outside of the gadget. Claire watched suspiciously, dread mounting with each moment. Then she saw him meticulously pick up the tested box and put it in an airtight container. Without saying a word, he left. The other men were there to evacuate the floor. Doctors and nurses with masks on their faces were running from room to room, retrieving patients and disappearing in the elevators with each gurney.

One of the men in a Martian suit was yelling at everyone to leave the floor, "People, this floor is being evacuated, I want you all to follow the authorities to the basement. Until further notice, you are all to be quarantined until we've finished testing."

Claire and the others were terror-stricken, but did as they were told. In the basement, where they congregated, there was a television broadcasting

their incident. Outside the hospital were police cars, bomb squads, fire trucks. Yellow tape was already hung, indicating the forbidden area. All workers were wearing hazmat suits for protection.

After a few hours of unknown trepidation, people in the basement had become unhinged. “Jesus Christ. What the hell is going on?” The fear in the man’s voice was terrifying to listen to. The scene outside, the evacuation they’d gone through, made no sense to him.

“Can someone tell me what’s going on here?”

Claire turned to see Rachel standing at the back of the crowd, bruised, but standing. She’d removed the IV, and released herself from patient status. She was still wearing the hospital gown, but that was a detail she would tend to in time.

Claire wanted to take her aside and let her know what was happening, but her friends had her surrounded. She heard their questions, the chatter of delight that she was doing as well as it appeared.

Claire turned back to the television to hear that the threat the police were concerned about was inside a small package delivered to one Rachel Ross, who was recuperating from a car accident at St. Mary’s Hospital. The threat, it seemed, was anthrax.

Claire’s hand flew up to cover her mouth in horror. “God, no!” The others heard her, and turned to the TV where they watched with intensifying fear. Claire felt a hand on her shoulder and she jumped, screamed. Turning, she realized it was the famous patient. The woman who the pretty little package had been sent to. “Rachel. You should be lying down.”

“Then take me back to my bed, Claire.”

The women left the crowd to find a private place where they could talk.

“He’s gone mad, Rachel. I saw a box wrapped in the same color tissue paper as the book I gave you, so I told my friend at the police station. And

now this.”

“So, they think it’s anthrax?”

“They’re just being cautious, that’s all. Kurt, my detective friend, is worried. First, Tony is killed. Then your accident. He has to be careful.”

“They don’t think my accident was just that?”

“No. The brake fluid had been drained, Rachel. You’re not to be alone for the rest of this week. That’s my order, not Kurt’s.”

Rachel’s face flushed with her next thought. “Claire, the book. Where is it? I told the police to bring it with me, but now I don’t know where it is.”

“Relax, I saw it in your room.” Claire started to say more when they heard cheering in the main hall.

The news reporter was telling the public how there had been a powdery substance in the box, but that it had tested negative. “I repeat, the threat is a hoax. The police will be looking into this, but for now, this is a happy ending.”

The doors opened and people were leaving the dungeon they had gathered in, thankful for the speedy outcome. Patients were being wheeled back to their rooms, the face masks had been removed by the doctors and nurses.

On the television, men could be seen removing the yellow tape, many of the emergency vehicles had already left the premises. Claire watched, thinking how wonderful it was that life was now back to normal after the chilling scare. But, a different voice told her to beware of danger. Not really for her, but Rachel. And anyone else that was important to her.

She turned to Rachel. “Let’s get you signed out of here so I can take you to your office. Tonight, I’ll pick you up after your show to drive you to the coffee house.” She was pleased to hear a silent acceptance from her friend. “Come on, I’ll help you to your room where you can dress.”

Kurt saw the two women in the hall, “Hey, Claire. I want to have a few words with you.”

“Let me get her to her room and then I’ll tell you what I know.” She realized how she sounded, and added, “Are you going to be in your office later? I can come there after I get Rachel taken care of.”

“That will work, but make it fast. I need some answers.” His stern tone said more than his message. He left them, feeling frustrated. She wasn’t leveling with him, he needed more.

Eve's phone rang, the display showed Jonathan's name. "Ron, it's him, it's my husband."

Christine was in the shower, Ron couldn't take his eyes off the television. "Don't answer it, Eve. They'll trace where we are and that will be the end of us. You're probably the most wanted person in White Town."

"I want to talk to him, Ron. There's a computer in the lobby, can they track us if I use that? I want to know if my boys are safe."

Ron thought for a few minutes, he knew how to manipulate computers. It had been a hobby of his for years. "Eve. Maybe you're on to something. You'll send him an email telling him that you will talk, but via the computer. You will dictate the rules; tell him you want the conversation to be a public one on the news channel he's aligned with. First, I need to do some magic so they won't be able to trace us." Ron was thrilled with his idea, it would get him away from the television. He'd have a purpose in the upside down life they'd been thrown into.

He turned to face her, his expression full of hope and exhilaration. "Come on, Eve. Help me go steal the equipment. I'll set it up so that they'll never know where the broadcast is coming from." He looked at her, "Come on, woman!" He ran to the bathroom door, "Honey, Eve and I are going to borrow the computer equipment from the lobby. Don't worry, we'll be fine."

"What? Ron, what did you say?"

He pulled at Eve's arm, and the two of them left the room.

They felt as if they were spies in a flick, Ron took the lead and peered around each corner before running to his next safe spot. Eve followed. When they reached the stairs, he opened the door quietly and then waved for her. Putting his index finger to his mouth to motion silence, she shadowed his lead. Three flights down, he opened the door a crack to look for movement of any kind. There was none.

Eve saw a cart on wheels in a storage room. The door was wide open. She tapped on Ron's shoulder and pointed at it. Seeing his smile of approval, she tip toed over to it, and tested its movement for sound. The wheels seemed quiet.

Ron put his hand out to stop her, and looked around the corner to where he could see the registration counter. No one. The computer room had walls made of glass. He couldn't see any sign of life.

He sprinted across the lobby to the reception desk and stooped so he couldn't be seen. Scanning the area, he made a quick assessment. The cash register was open, the on-sight worker must have fled with its money. He put his hands on the edge of the wooden counter top and eased himself high enough to peer into the empty room. It seemed abandoned. Spotting a pen on the floor, he lowered himself, picked it up, and hurled it like he would a Hail Mary football pass.

No sounds.

Still not completely satisfied, he crawled to the end of the bar-like counter, stretched himself to see the open area, and froze. Waiting. Several minutes went by. Finally, he decided to give it the ultimate test. "Is anyone there?"

Silence.

He stood, his head perusing the room in search of movement. Then he ran back to Eve and motioned for her to follow with the cart.

Inside the computer room, he feverishly worked on disconnecting the equipment with Eve standing guard. They didn't speak to each other. When he had everything he needed on the pushcart, Eve covered the equipment with towels she'd found in the storage room. They were ready to take it up, but this time they'd be using the elevator.

Slowly, they pushed their precious cargo, working hard not to make any unnecessary sounds. They rolled it onto the elevator and Ron pushed the button. The doors began to close, but suddenly changed their direction, an abrupt change that nearly stopped both their hearts.

Outside stood a tall man, somewhere in his twenties with dried blackened blood on the side of his face. He held a gun.

Eve screamed, Ron froze.

"Tell me who you are. Are you armed?" The man held them at gun point.

Ron raised his arms in the air in a defenseless manner. "No, we're hiding from the war, we're innocent people trying to stay alive, that's all. We mean no harm to you."

The man studied them both for a few minutes, then joined them in the elevator. "Prove it, take me to your room."

Ron's eyes told Eve to follow his lead, not to select the button. But, the light on the number three button was still lit.

"Hit that button again, so the doors close." He was agitated and scared, a lethal set of emotions for a person holding a gun.

Ron and Eve stepped onto the third floor, pushing the cart, the man following close behind. "Take me to your room or I'll shoot, I swear."

It was this last message when Ron detected fear in his voice. He turned around and boldly said, "I can't do that, sir. If you want to

shoot us, I suggest you do it now, but I won't put the rest of my family in danger."

The man lowered his gun and began sobbing. "I'm sorry, but I had to be sure. I can't trust anyone anymore." He looked at the gun. "I took this from a dead man on the street. I too have a family. I've hidden them, but I need to get back so I can be sure that they're still ok."

"Help us get this to our room and I'll go with you to get your family. You can stay with us." Ron shot Eve a look, "There's an attached room to ours, you can stay there. But we'll all be together and that makes me feel safer to have numbers. And," he looked at the gun, "that thing might come in handy."

"Ok. Lead the way." The young man rubbed his face, an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

The three of them rolled the cart down the hall, still cautious of any sounds. They passed a room where they heard a television broadcasting from inside. Ron and the other man stopped and stared at each other.

Ron went to the door, and knocked, "Hey. Open up, this is an emergency."

They waited, but no sounds other than the voices from the television were heard. The young man told Ron and Eve to back up. He aimed at the handle on the door, ready to shoot at it, but was stopped by Eve.

"Wait!" She held up a key card. "I found this in the lobby, it may be a master."

Ron laughed, and grabbed her, kissing her cheek. "Let me try."

The door opened and the man with the gun entered. There were open suit cases, but no people. He wandered in and checked the bathroom. It was clear.

Eve turned off the TV set and they all took a deep breath. “I think the entire building must be abandoned.” Then she said to Ron, “Christine must be going out of her mind. Let me take the equipment to the room and you help,” she looked at the man. “What is your name?”

“Stephen. And I really would like to get my family.”

Ron introduced himself and the two men left.

Christine was relieved when she learned what had happened. It was no more than 20 minutes before the others returned. Stephen had a wife, Glenda, and a young daughter. They settled in the adjoining room while Ron played with the computer.

Ron knew how to network his call to make it jump from one hub to the next, making it nearly impossible for them to be traced. It was a fruitful time for them all. They had new friends, they were ready to make a hit on the news by boldly calling Jonathan, and they had a gun.

Eve sent Jonathan an email telling him that she would call into the news station in an hour. That would be his only chance to have contact with her. When she hit the send button, she sat back, suddenly realizing that she needed to think about what she wanted to say to the monster.

Ron, sensing her fear, smiled from across the room. “Don’t worry, we’ll be here with you. I’ll be here to help, Eve.” He smiled, “My past hobby just paid for itself, I am sending them off on a goose chase.”

Jonathan was at the news studio. They had a mic attached to his blazer. He was able to see the clock from where he sat, each minute seemed like an eternity. His news buddies were giving the latest details about the rebels. Viewers had also been told that a call was to come in from Eve Hart, the traitor that was responsible for the outbreak of fighting.

Martin Scromski broke into the broadcast, and began the show most people were waiting for.

“Hello and good evening. Tonight is going to be a whopper. If you haven’t heard, Eve Hart is set to call into the studio tonight.” The newsman turned to Jonathan. “I have here with me, Jonathan Hart, who of course, needs no introduction. Jonathan, how long has it been since you spoke to your wife?”

“Oh, Martin. It seems like weeks ago, but it was actually last Thursday. We had a dinner party that night, but of course, you know what happened after that. Everything was going well. We had company for dinner, but soon after we ate, she just snapped in front of me and my friends. She took the car and drove off, never to be seen again.”

“This must be hard for you. I mean for her to be missing, and then find out that she’s the one who turned you into the police. The Latino Town police, I might add.”

Jonathan blew a breath of air from his mouth and nodded, “My life has been turned upside down since she left, but you know, Martin? I don’t care. I miss her and our boys miss her. We just want her to come home again so we can be together and heal. I mean, not just us, but this

whole situation. I believe that we're all fighting over a misunderstanding. I mean, the reports and video don't lie. That dead woman was found on the bus. But, you have to understand, my Eve was friendly with her. Since she's been under a lot of stress lately, I think that's why she contrived this ludicrous story."

"Jonathan, if I could. I am sorry to interrupt, but I'm being told that the call is coming in. It's being broadcast via a computer line, but we have it coming through speakers so we can all listen in."

"Jonathan?" He could hear her voice, he wore his best acting face to appear compassionate to the viewers.

"Honey, is that you? Are you ok? Eve, honey, where are you?"

"Where are my boys, Jonathan? You told me they would be with you."

Jonathan's earpiece sounded off with a voice telling him that he needed to keep her on longer, that they were close to having her coordinates.

"Jonathan, tell the people the truth. You saw Conchita in the street and covered up the murder. You made up the story about Sandy driving her to the bus. Please, just tell the truth. Maybe we can stop this war if you try to make amends with the Latino police."

"Eve, you need help. Tell me where you are so I can come get you and give you the help you need."

"I'm pregnant. Your partner raped me."

The shock was startling. Jonathan showed his viewers the sting he was feeling. Martin immediately took over, calling the interview over.

"I'm sorry folks. This interview has gone terribly wrong, I can't let my friend do this anymore. Jonathan, if you need to leave, I'm sure that everyone will understand."

“Yes, I believe I’ll take advantage of your offer. This is all so shocking that she would go to such lengths to hurt me. I love her and just want to help her. Thank you, Martin, for trying to make this work for us.” He lowered his head and left the studio.

In the next room, Jonathan went to the technician. “How’d we do? Did you get what we need?”

They looked up and smiled. “The police are on their way, sir. We should have her in custody within minutes.”

The truck pulled up to the address they’d been given and six uniformed men hopped out, guns in hand. They were a special team used in cases like this. Eve Hart was a wanted woman, a traitor. Slowly, they surrounded the premises. One of the men, the one wearing a mask, used the butt of his gun to break through a window and toss a gas canister inside. He went around the side of the building and repeated his efforts.

They waited for her to come out.

After several minutes, the other men were issued gas masks, and they stormed into the house. Methodically, they charged through the entire structure, room by room. When they were satisfied that it was empty, they backed out to the street to watch the fireworks. The firemen had arrived, their task was to burn the house down.

The neighborhood had been abandoned. Ron had sent the message to the Latino police chief, letting him know that he’d be sending these thugs to his home.

When the flames erupted in the house, the men cheered. What they didn’t know is that the Latino police had barricaded off the exit at the

border gate. Troops waited on the other side of the access for what would become a bloody battle.

Martin was finishing his show when he was given the word that Eve Hart had been killed while fighting off the police. “This is a sad day when a woman strays so far from her mind and good life. On my behalf and the people of this station, our condolences go out to Jonathan Hart and his boys. If you’ve been watching us through this entire broadcast, you know that Mr. Hart was with us, but had to leave. He’s agreed to come back tomorrow during this show, so we can learn what we can about this poor woman, Eve Hart and why she lost her way. We’ll have renowned psychologist, Dr. Brink with us. I hope that it will be a discussion that will indeed help our dear friend begin his healing process. Until then, thank you all for joining us.”

Claire went to the station to see Kurt after dropping Rachel at her office. They went to a private room where he could drill her. “I’ve known you a lot of years, Claire. Tell me what’s going on. First Tony, then Ms. Ross, and now an anthrax hoax. You and I both know this isn’t a normal couple of days for the average person. You seem to be the common link for all of it.”

“I wish I could help you, Kurt. If Rachel had really been hurt, I don’t know what I would have done.”

“Do I need to post an officer to protect you?”

“Well, no. I think Rachel’s the one who needs protection. If I can, I’ll have her stay with me for a few nights, but she’s stubborn. If she insists on staying at her hotel, I think she’s the one who will need a guard.”

“I can do that, but it would be good if I knew what I was protecting her from... or who, in this case. I know there’s more that you know, Claire.”

“Kurt, I wish I could help you. You know that I would if I knew more. But at this point, I just want to be sure no one else gets hurt.”

Claire’s phone buzzed. “Excuse me.” She pulled the phone out of her purse to see Bill’s name on the display. Dropping it back in her bag, she looked at the detective. “I’m sorry, Kurt. Do you have any more questions for me? This week is a hectic one, with these bills coming up for a vote and all.”

He stared at her with a look of frustration. “No. I can see that I’m not going to get anything out of you now. I’ll make sure that an officer is at Ms. Ross’ hotel tonight.” He stood and went to the door. “Claire? I need you to level with me if you have information to help me solve Tony’s murder.”

“Of course. Thanks, Kurt.”

Claire was on her way to work when her phone buzzed again, but this time it was her office. “Yes, Ken?”

“We have trouble, a story has broken out about you, Senator. There’s a lot of reporters waiting for you. I think you should stay away if you don’t want to be ambushed.”

“Ok, Ken. Thanks.”

“Senator, don’t you want to know what the story is?”

“I think I know. Oh and Ken? It isn’t true.”

“I never thought it was, Senator. I’ll keep you informed of what’s happening here.”

“Good.”

Claire turned the car around and headed for her apartment. Maneuvering through the streets wasn’t easy because of the protesters. She took the back roads, but when she was a few blocks away, she saw the vans parked outside her building. “Damn, he really did it. Damn you, Clancy.”

She turned at the next corner, knowing that her home wasn’t an anymore an option than her office. She wasn’t in the mood to answer their questions, wasn’t in the mood for the circus.

The White police left the blazing house and were en route for the border crossing. They caravanned; fire trucks and police cars. The lead detective had just called it in that Eve was dead. This had been the biggest break in his career. He knew there would be a celebration and he would receive an honor, probably a promotion. He knew it was a brilliant move on his part to proclaim her death. *Who knows, maybe she really is dead? Why not get credit for it?*

They slowly drove through the streets as a parade would on a happy day. The message to the on-lookers was clear. They were in charge and that hadn't changed. The traitor was now dead, according to their fabrication.

Ahead, they saw the entrance to White Town. They knew they would still have many battles to take on with the thugs marching through their streets, but things were different now. They felt infallible.

They stopped and waited for the cars ahead to move, watching the guard ask the usual questions as people passed from the ghetto to the other side. What they couldn't see was the Latino policeman hidden in the booth with a gun aimed at the White border guard. The sham was working, the cars progressed through the gate as if everything was normal.

There was one car left before they would leave the God forsaken Latino Town. Then one of the White police caught the expression on the guard's face. He was trying to warn them.

A shot was heard and the border guard dropped out of sight. The lead detective yelled for the driver to stop and jumped out of the car.

“It’s an ambush! Everyone, ready yourselves!”

Shots hurled both directions, cans of gas were thrown over the wall, but both sides wore protective gear. Troops ran in a frenzy to escape the smoke filled area so they could see their targets. It was a battle of alien looking men, all dressed to protect themselves from the gas. A command was screamed from one of the Latino leaders.

A small rocket was fired into the mass of White police. Its explosion caused an eruption of cries, men running for refuge, many of them dead in the street.

Marching from the other side of the gate, the Latinos barged into the massacre, firing off their guns with each step. They saw the runners trying to escape and cornered them, slapping on handcuffs as each was caught.

It took no more than 20 minutes for the battle to conclude. Bloodied bodies lay in the street on both sides of the wall. But this one was hailed a triumph by the Latinos as they took the few live prisoners, and headed toward the Latino Town prison. It felt good to the soldiers to finally have the upper hand, in a battle that had really begun in their hearts 30 years ago.

“Isn’t it strange to see your death announced on television?” Eve looked at her new family, a twinkle in her eye. “No, really. Stephen? Ron? How about you, Christine? Just internalize such an experience.” She went to the bathroom to wash her hands. From there, she continued, raising her voice to be heard. “It’s not so bad, you know. I feel like they can’t hurt me anymore, I’m already dead, for God’s sake.” She walked into the room where the others just stared at her, a towel in her hand. “Glenda, why don’t you and I go find some clean towels? There’s a supply closet just down the hall.”

Ron and Christine were holding hands, both subdued, the color gone from their faces. “Oh, Jesus.” Eve ran and knelt down beside them. She put her arms around both their legs and then her head against their knees. She swayed and said with sadness, “I’m sorry I came into your lives. Your beautiful home is gone, your life is ruined as you know it.” Hearing herself speak gave her an idea, an amazing idea. “Wait, I may have an answer.” She looked up at them with renewed hope.

“I know of a place, a very special coffee shop.” She thought for a moment. “I need to go alone tonight, I’ll find out some answers from a lady called Donna. Tomorrow night, we all go.”

Christine seemed worried about her new friend. “Eve, you can’t stop what has happened, and you must not feel any guilt. Our lives were on an unsustainable thread, it was just a matter of time.”

The baby began crying. “Honey, do we have enough formula?” Stephen looked at Glenda. “Ron, we need to find more supplies today.”

Eve became agitated. “Listen to you guys, you’re all thinking about survival for today, I’m talking about a safe house. You don’t understand. This place is beautiful, downright majestic. I believe it’s a secret place and I know how to get there!” She stood and began to pace again. “I need to find my boys, Ron. They need to come with us.”

Glenda was giving her daughter a bottle, and said in a gentle voice. “Honey, your boys don’t even know you’re alive.”

“And besides, they’ve been brainwashed by that husband of yours.” Christine had to contain the anger in her voice. “You must not forget that Trent gave you away. When you think about it, Sandy’s dead because of him.”

Rage engulfed Eve, the sting hurting more than seeing her death announced. “That is so not fair, Christine. You and I both know that Sandy was a target regardless of what happened. They weren’t going to let her live no matter what.”

Stephen’s interest perked at the mention of Sandy’s name. “You guys aren’t talking about the lady connected with that Conchita woman, are you? Is she really dead or is she dead like you, Eve?”

Christine’s voice softened with a reply, “Dead for real, and Eve? I am sorry. You couldn’t be more right about her fate. I’m stressed, that’s all. I didn’t mean what I said.”

Ron jumped up and took charge. “We will all stress each other to the limits if we don’t figure something out. Maybe Eve is right about this being a short-term home for us, but while it does provide safety, we need to organize.” He pointed to Stephen, “You and I are going out for supplies. Christine, you and Eve replace the dirty linens. And, Glenda, if you get the baby to sleep, maybe you can straighten the place up.” Smiling, he continued, “We are going to do what we can to make this

living arrangement as good as it can be. Hey, Christine, look for some books in the lobby, and check the rooms for anything that will entertain us and help pass the time. We all need to accept that this is it for now, and make the best of it. Eve? Do you still have that master key?"

"Yes." She went to Christine and gave her a hug. "I know you didn't mean to hurt me."

"Now this is more like it. We all have to work overtime not to irritate each other. Look at us, we're still here. We're the lucky ones." Ron sadly rested his eyes on the television to see the shots of ghetto people lying in the streets. "Those are the really brave ones. Out there on the front line, seeing their neighbors slaughtered, and yet they keep on walking. I am proud of them. They may make it to Liberty Square, but a lot of lives will be sacrificed. No one likes war, but the alternative has been to shuffle people off to townships to keep them in isolation. This had to happen sooner or later."

Ron looked at the group. "Ok, as for us, our war is called survival. Are you all with me?"

His timing for the pep talk was warranted, and it seemed to work. The men left to gather food supplies, the women left for linens and books. It was Glenda who was left feeding the baby, her eyes glazed while she watched the images on the television.

Smoke filled the sky from the military's use of gun powder, the thugs from the different ghettos had illegal guns. And now she and her family were living with the most famous traitor in history. She was not comfortable about Eve, she needed to think about her family. She couldn't believe how cruel Eve had been to her husband, to say that his friend had raped her on public television! The look on that poor man's face flashed through her mind. She'd have to discuss her fears with

Stephen next time they had some privacy. They had the baby to think about, their safety needed to be their number one concern. Living next to Eve didn't seem like they were on the right track. Yes, she would have that talk with her husband.

The CNC studio broke into their regular broadcast with one of their more senior people having the honor of telling the juicy details. “Breaking news.” Sue Morris smiled into the camera. “Senator Claire Winslow has made a lot of news the past couple of days. Today is no different. In fact, it gets more scandalous for her each day. This just in, photos of the Senator in some rather compromising positions with the Ambassador to Chile... in Colombia, no less! Rumors put the Senator and the married Ambassador together on what some are calling a sex excursion last year. And, yes, on tax payer dollars!” A photo appeared on the screen behind Sue. “At this time, we have not been able to reach the Senator for comment, nor have we been able to confirm this report. But in the past few days, this Senator has been at the core of several big stories. The discovery of Tony Geradelly, a longtime friend of the Senator was found dead in his apartment yesterday. Now CNC has learned that Senator Winslow is the last person to have seen him alive. The police say that she is not a suspect, she’s being treated as a witness at this time. Next, Senator Winslow was seen this morning at St. Mary’s Hospital where Rachel Ross had been taken after a late night car accident. Ross has now been released with minor injuries. And this morning, that same hospital had an anthrax scare. I can happily say that it was tested as negative.” Sue turned away from the camera to face the panel of three news pundits.

“What do we really know about Senator Winslow, Tom?”

“Sue, I can tell you right now that she will be in the news again tomorrow when the Senate votes on the Paycheck Fairness Act. Predictions are that she will be the only Republican to vote for this bill.”

Nancy, another panelist chimed in, “Some are saying that the vote tomorrow is nothing but a sham to embarrass the Republicans.”

Peter, the third analyst found his voice and said, “Sue, it’s very common for the Parties to play against each other, especially when there’s an important vote coming up like the one on Friday. And, speaking of Rachel Ross, she’s pledged to make her show unveil different parts of SB 1257 each night this week, leading up to Friday’s vote. As for the Wednesday vote? It doesn’t have a chance, they’ve put this forward several times already and it doesn’t have enough support.”

Sue continued with the new story. “The photos of the Senator in Colombia are not very clear. Peter, what word do you have on this? Have we got a statement from the Ambassador yet?”

“Sue, this is a shame if there is any truth to it. Senator Winslow is considered one of the cleanest on the Hill. She’s an advocate for women’s rights. So, you can imagine what a blow this will be for her career if it is true. Of course, using tax payer’s money is wrong, but a sex scandal with a married man will ruin her.”

Tom added, “The Senator is running for re-election this fall, the timing for all this negative publicity couldn’t come at a worse time for her.”

The host and her guests spent several minutes bickering between themselves about Claire’s career and her chances of winning the re-election for her seat.

Finally, Nancy changed the narrative to Tony’s story. “I think it should be mentioned that Tony Geradelly was a long-time friend of the Senator. Now we hear that Senator Bill Hancock purchased a baseball at a pawn shop yesterday that came from Mr. Geradelly’s home. The police are looking at this as a burglary gone bad. Probably a break-in from a drug addict.”

Music started playing to let Sue know they had to switch to a commercial.

“I want to thank my insightful panelists for joining me today.” Sue went around the table, listing each of their achievements before the camera lights faded.

“Sue,” the show’s producer came running to her. “We’ve got the Senator on the phone. We’re going to switch back to you right away.”

Sue was good at her job and only needed seconds to be ready.

“Three, Two, One.” The cameras lit up again, and she began.

Sue turned toward her virtual audience, and held her hand up to her earpiece to show off for an animated appearance. “I understand that Senator Claire Winslow is on the phone. Senator, can you hear me?”

“Yes, Sue. So what is this crazy stuff you’re saying about me?”

“Some photos have been leaked to our network, Senator. It appears that you and the Ambassador to Chile were together in Bogotá last year.”

“Sue, I would love to say that I had a love interest, but unfortunately for me, it’s not true. And, as you know, I would not select to date a married man. That would hardly match my life long goal of fighting for women, would it?”

“But Senator, these photos...”

“We have known each other a long time, Sue. Quite frankly, I’m astonished that you haven’t tested this evidence before inferring that your photos are credible. Your guest mentioned, only minutes ago, that I’m up for re-election. This is the silly season for pranks, Sue.”

“Senator, are you suggesting that the Democrats have fabricated this story?”

Claire could be heard laughing, “Not at all, Sue.” And then her final dig, “I would not dream of making such allegations without checking it out first.

Sue, I see a tunnel coming up so I'm going to hang up before we lose each other. I hope this has helped you with your story."

"Senator." The line went dead. Sue smiled, "Well, there you have it. We will be discussing this more as we learn the truth about the Colombian Sex Scandal." The cameras cut out and they went to commercials.

"Damn her and her higher than thou attitude. How dare she mock me on live TV, she knows we have to run with a story before someone else beats us to it." She stormed off the set, but yelled to her producer, "Get some fillers on the show, I need a few minutes."

58

Claire was headed for a meeting with Clancy just outside of town. She spotted the café he'd told her about and parked at the end of the lot. When she entered its doors, she spotted Bill sitting in a booth at the other end of the room. Immediately, her face flushed with anger as she marched to his table.

"Senator, you have a lot of explaining. Where is Clancy?"

His face wore a smirk, his attitude was disgusting. "Claire, you didn't really think he would consider you important enough to drive all the way out here, do you? And besides, he's not very happy with you." He put his finger to his chin, his eyes squinting in thought. "What is the word he used? AWOL?" He patted the seat next to him. "Come on, Claire. Sit here so we can have a quiet little talk."

She slid into the seat across from his without taking her eyes off him. "This sham is so easy to disprove and you know it. So why waste the time and effort? Why get the Ambassador's wife upset about nothing?"

"Are you really that innocent? Claire, we could have had so much fun together, I enjoy your little girl façade. In fact, I'm having a wonderful vision now. You're dressed up as a high school cheerleader, complete with braids. And that wonderful set of, that wonderful chest of yours is protruding in your thin, tight sweater, showing just a hint of those great nipples. Woa, I'm getting hard."

"You're repulsive, Bill." She stood, "Unless you have a message from Clancy, I'm done here."

He waved his hand, gesturing for her to sit, "Ok, Ms. Innocent. Get off your high horse. It's not as if we haven't done it, you know."

She looked at him with scorn. “Tell Clancy to send a man next time.” She turned to leave, but then heard him finally say something worth listening to.

“Clancy will go on FOX and give them first crack at the resolving story of Claire Winslow. You heard me, Claire. Clancy will himself go on the set and denounce this story to defend you in front of the country.”

“What? That’s all he has to offer?” A cough released from her throat. “You guys are a joke, Bill. This is not that tough to disprove, I think I’ll go it on my own.” She started to walk away from him, but stopped. “Oh, and Bill? Give the fat slob this message. I’m thinking of changing to a Democrat.”

“You know, I agree with you. You probably have proof that you weren’t anywhere near Colombia last year. Actually, this story is only meant to be a message to let you know how easy it will be to put you out of a job in November. The big man already has a name picked out to run against you, lots of money to back him up. So it’s that simple. Vote yes on Friday and keep your job. He doesn’t even care how you vote on Wednesday. That’s it, one vote for your job.”

She looked down on him and let a little snorting sound release from her throat. Without saying anymore, she went to her car and called to see how Rachel was fairing at the studio.

Inside the hotel room, the TV continued to show the battles in the streets of D.C. Eve and Christine had found some cards and started a game of Hearts with the others. Their food supply was now ample and the baby was peacefully sleeping.

Glenda had opted out of the game and was watching the news.

Protesters had progressed through the night, they'd made headway toward Liberty Square. Thousands of marchers were in the street. The sun was setting, it was the most dangerous time of the day.

Then it happened.

Gun fire erupted and the leading demonstrators dropped to their knees. Screaming could be heard. The air exploded with smoke from gas canisters being hoisted at the crowd. People scattered, fleeing for their lives.

The card players turned in horror at the screen. Glenda wiped the wet smudges from her face, "You did this, Eve." She pointed at the dead bodies appearing on the screen, the gassy air clearing to show the massacre. "You are going down in history as the most prolific traitor ever! You sit here smugly, knowing that you're safe. But your selfish attitude is astounding. Look at it, Eve! These people are dying, and for what? A Latino woman? She's so important to warrant an outright war?"

"Glenda, if it hadn't been Conchita, it would have been someone or something else that made this happen."

They heard more shots. A mob had infiltrated a group of White soldiers and confiscated their guns. They were now shooting.

“Oh my God! Now the heathens are armed.” She looked at Stephen. “It’s the end of everything, the end of us. We’re all going to be killed! The baby,” she ran into the next room.

Stephen shook his head in sorrow. “Eve, it’s not personal. Glenda’s scared, that’s all. And frankly, we don’t understand people like you, your ways and all. I’ve tried, but my wife is right. Life was good until you started this.” He picked up his gun and left to join his family, closing the door behind him.

Ron grabbed a chair and leaned it against the door so that it was blocked. “Ladies, these folks are beginning to worry me. Tonight, we need to move. The news is disturbing to say the least, but on a more personal note, I think its effect on our neighbors is a little scary.”

“Ron, there’s an old abandoned fire house a few blocks away. If we can break the lock, it might be a safe place to hide.” Eve knew it would be a safe haven for them. And if the building was the coffee house, as she suspected, they would be around friendly people.

Ron looked at Christine. Their years of camaraderie had taught them to speak a silent language. “Right now? We’re going to change rooms. We’ll go up a few floors and hope that Stephen doesn’t get aggressive. Come on, we all need to take what we can, the food is most important.” He took some food out of the bags and placed it on the counter by the formula. “That should hold them for a few days. Leave the TV on and follow me.”

They went out into the hall, walking in a single file until they found the stairs. They climbed three flights before Ron pointed in the distance. He wanted to take them to the other end of the building. Christine went ahead and selected a room a little more than half way

down the corridor. She removed the master card and slowly opened the door for them to enter their new home.

“Honey, give me that thing. I’m going to turn on all the televisions on the two floors below us, then I’ll be back and do the same on this floor. I wish we had another card, but that’s ok. You two make us some diner.” He winked at Christine. “I’ve got some wine in one of those bags.”

He turned and left, his mission was to make noise in every room of the hotel.

60

Ron, Christine, and Eve huddled in their room, their television broadcasting the anguish in the streets. It was a little after ten when they heard the gun shot. A few minutes later, another shot could be heard. The shots began on a lower floor, but now were sounding closer.

Ron told the women to hide under the beds. He ran around the room and gathered their possessions, hiding everything in pantries, closets, whatever he could find. He froze when he heard the voice in the hall coming closer. Silently, he went into the adjoining room, and closed the door behind him.

“Oh Evie, I know you’re close. You can’t escape us, traitor.” A sickening hoot could be heard from Stephen. “Evie, I have plans for you. Christine? Don’t worry your pretty head off, I have no grievances with you and Ron. But your little friend? She has to be punished, you know I’m right.”

The next shot broke the lock to their suite.

Stephen ran around the room, poking his head in the bathroom, the kitchenette, he scanned the main living area. He chuckled, and sat down on a chair. The hotel phone rang. Surprised, Stephen looked at it, bewildered. “What the heck.”

He went to the loud apparatus, picked it up, and looked at the receiver as if it were a newly discovered species. He raised it to his face and spoke into it. “Yea?”

“Thank God. Stephen, I’m in the lobby and I’ve been calling every room to find you. Jesus, Stephen. Finally I can speak to you alone. Glenda’s right about Eve. We need to turn her in and I need your help.

After you left, she saw the way Christine and I looked at her, and it made her run. She knows what she did is wrong, and I think she knows she needs to be punished. But I need your help. Are you in, Stephen? I thought I could do this on my own, but now I've lost her. Damn, I had her believing I was with her, but she knows now and she's on the run."

"Ron, of course. Is she still in the hotel? Forget about turning her in, I want her dead. She's ruined everything and deserves to die for it. My Glenda is good at reading people and she knows this woman is bad. There's a demon inside her, Ron. I mean a real demon. The devil has ahold of her. God, she had it all. A good husband, nice home. Only a demonic person would do what she's done. She had me going for a while. She seemed so nice and sweet, but that isn't what she is, is it, Ron?"

"That's right, but we need to find her. You can do whatever you want to her, but I fear for our lives with her on the run. You've seen what she's capable of, Stephen."

"What's your plan, Ron? Just tell me and I'll do what I can to help. I can bring her back to mess with her or I can just shoot her. Name your game."

"Listen, I've hidden Christine in one of the rooms on the fifth floor and want her to stay there until we find her. I can meet you in your room in a few minutes and we can make our plan there. Are you with me, son?"

"You bet I am. I'll see you there. Glenda's going to be relieved to hear that you're with us. The Lord will protect us all from the demon in Eve." He hung up the phone and left the room.

Ron waited until he saw the elevator doors shut, taking Stephen down to the room where his family waited. He crept over to where the

women were, and entered their room. “Come out. You’re safe for now. But, Eve, you need to get out of here and hide. Maybe that Fire House. We’ll all meet up tomorrow after dark.” He put his hands on Eve’s shoulders. “Can you keep out of sight until then?”

She nodded, “You guys meet me in front of the ladies room under the street at 11pm tomorrow. The subway stairs are across the street. At the bottom of the stairs is where I’ll meet you. Trust me, I’ll be fine until then.” She kissed Ron, then embraced Christine and kissed her. She ran out of the room, knowing that the coffee house would be her refuge. She peeked behind her several times, but no Stephen. Across the street, she dashed down the stairs, and into the bathroom. Suddenly, her confidence left her. Her hand shook when she tried the knob, but her fears melted away when she smelled the coffee, the scones, and heard the friendly voices on the other side of her precious portal.

61

Claire was set up with her mic, the show was in progress for several minutes before they began with her. Her old friends were asking questions about the Colombian scandal.

“I’ve already told the public, this is a ridiculous story. I can of course easily prove where I was during the time the photos suggest that I was with the Ambassador. What I find unfortunate with this story is that there are people who are getting hurt by this. At this point, it doesn’t matter what happened. The Ambassador’s family has to put up with the humiliation of this lie. And for what? To hurt me and perhaps my re-election? Innocent people are getting hurt. This is an outrage.”

“Have you handed over your evidence to disprove this, Senator?”

Claire shook her head and laughed. “Scott, I thought that was your job. What do reporters do today? No more investigating? Has your position become so simple that you just take rumors and throw them out there? Come on, Scott. I know you’re better than that. This is a no brainer, easy.”

Scott was taken aback by her tone, so with a surge of anger, asked his next question. “We also have photos of you and Senator Hancock in compromising moments, Senator. You can get all righteous on me in front of the camera, but you seem to have a habit of parading around with married men. I call that unprofessional, but you? You always talk about the poor little woman. Is that your way of throwing them off the path with you? Women with husbands should think seriously about letting them spend time with you.”

Claire could not believe what she was hearing. She stood and fussed with her mic. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Scott. But this has

gone beyond rumors. I don't make appearances on shows to be insulted." She pulled the wire and threw it at the newsman. Then she paused and snatched it back. She put the mic up to her mouth and said, "I will expect an apology from you and your network within the next 24 hours. In fact, I'll have my attorney insist that you no longer work here." She threw the wires on the desk and stomped out.

Claire walked across the street and went into the studio where Rachel worked. She was already on the air, so Claire went to the lobby where she made her first call.

"Bill, what the hell was Scott talking about? And don't tell me you didn't see it."

"Claire, should we be talking? My wife is very upset, so if she sees this call on my statement, I'll have to try to explain you again to her."

Claire's head was spinning. "What wife? People talk about you, the *single* dashing Senator. Where is this coming from?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Claire. I told you how hard it was for me to be with you. My emotions are confused. You, my wife. I love you both, honey."

Claire hung up on him and called her attorney.

Claire and Rachel went to their booth in the coffee house and waited in silence for Donna to bring them their coffee, each with hopes of some fresh scones.

Claire finally opened up to Rachel, her anger raging. “I dated the Senator for a full day, and yes. I spent that night with him. I woke up the next morning before he did, and that’s when I found the manual they call *Take Back Our Country*. I didn’t know he was married.” She shook her head, and stared across the table. “Why am I even explaining this, I haven’t done anything wrong. It seems like every day brings a new assault on me and I’m letting it get to me.”

“My people are working on the photos, it will be my story tomorrow night. It would make a really really big impact if you were to come on the show, Claire.”

“I can’t do that, Rachel. Honestly? You don’t want me. The truth of the matter is this. I still don’t know how I’ll vote. It’s perfectly clear to me how my reputation can be damaged by these folks. It’s perfectly clear that I won’t have a chance of re-election if I vote against this bill.”

“Yes, but Claire, what about Eve? What if your hypothesis is right-on about her world? What if the bill is the beginning of the changes she eventually has to live with, endure? Not just her, all the citizens of this country.”

“That’s my point. We don’t really know what the future holds, or how the future becomes what it is. Maybe it’s my working as a Senator that changes her world.”

“Yea, maybe you become the next President. Claire, a lot of maybe this, maybe that in this conversation. Voting against this bill seems like the most likely way to stop all these wrongs. You can have a voice on my show every night if you like.”

“If I’m not a Senator, I can’t vote though, can I Rachel? I need to remain a Senator so I can vote to keep things sane.”

Rachel removed her dark-rimmed glasses and rubbed them with a napkin from the table. When she replaced them to their rightful position, she nodded in approval. “That’s better. I can see you now. For a minute, I wasn’t sure it was you across the table.”

“Funny, ha! Hey, I’m sorry for not asking, how are you feeling?”

“Just a little sore, that’s all. I’m going to live.” Then Rachel smiled at her.

“Those photos from your camera? One of them wasn’t centered on the manual. Your hands were probably shaking. Anyway, it was a lucky break. That photo shows in its background, a portion of a personal photo Mr. Hancock has sitting on his desk. It’s of him and his buddies who wrote the bill. Now that’s a stroke of luck, I would say.”

Claire straightened her back and smiled for the first time in hours. “This is great news, I didn’t notice. Rachel, why did you wait so long to tell me this?”

“I wanted to know how you plan on voting first. Listen, Claire…”

“Hello Claire, Rachel.” Eve stood at their table’s end, looking forlorn and tired. “Can I sit with you?”

The sound of her voice enticed both women to look up, their expressions undoubtedly showing interest. Their evening was certainly about to take a turn for the better.

63

No sooner than Eve had taken her place next to Claire, Donna appeared with three coffees. “Ladies, your scones will be here soon.” And then to Eve, “It is good to see you again, Eve. These ladies have been here every night looking for you. Oh, and I like the new hair.” She smiled and left them alone.

Eve looked at her company and said, “She is a strange one, isn’t she?” Then she looked around the room, taking in the many people engrossed in conversation, noticing the apparent lack of anxiety. “Why are you all so calm? With the war escalating each hour, how can you all be acting as if everything is fine?”

Rachel looked at her in shock, “War? Eve, what are you talking about?”

She continued on as if she hadn’t heard the question, “Rachel, you’re a reporter. At a time like this, I should think you would be living at your studio. And speaking of that, what network are you using as your platform? Believe me, the channel clicker has been active these past few days and never once have I seen you broadcasting.” She put her head down to secretly rub a new tear. “Constitution Day is on Friday and it’s unclear to me that there will be any celebrating. Each day, the ghetto militia is being slaughtered for us all to see on TV. Why aren’t you telling our side of this?” She looked at Claire, and then back across the table. “You call yourself women who defy the ways, and yet, what are you doing to stop this?”

Donna showed up with their order. After serving them, she placed a jar of strawberry jam in the middle of the table. “I made this myself. The best you will ever taste. I suggest you try it on these hot scones.”

Eve stood, her nostrils flaring. “Scones? Jam? What is all this? I need to get out of here!” She turned toward the back of the room, but felt a gentle hand on her arm.

Donna smiled at her, a warm, delicious motherly air with her gesture. “Eve, you may use the front door tonight if you like. You have earned it, dear.”

All three of them stared in disbelief at Donna. When the shock wore off, Claire asked, “What do you mean she’s earned it?”

Donna responded with a cold expression, “Why, she has put an end to what you started.”

64

Eve sat, staring at the waitress as she scurried away to the kitchen. Then to the others, “What is she talking about?”

Claire’s voice sounded soft and compassionate as she began, “Eve, there’s something we have to tell you. Please, hear us out.” She shot a glance at Rachel and continued, “The newspaper you brought the other night. It was dated 2045.”

Rachel fumbled in her pocket and pulled out her wallet. Opening it, she pulled out her driver’s license and handed it to Eve. “Eve, look at the date on this.” She was still undecided about the time warp theory, but knew how much Claire needed her. *Undecided, funny thing to think. Does that mean that I might actually buy into this crazy notion?*

As Eve inspected the writing on the card, Claire continued, “We don’t understand how this can be, but we’re convinced of it. We’ll give you what time you need to get through the shock, but we have questions for you, about your history, about the war you speak of. We want to know anything, everything we can.”

Eve sat in silence for some time, her stare fixed on Rachel’s driver’s license. She finally stood, and walking around the room, found the newspaper stand. Pulling the top newsprint from the stack, she stood, reading the headlines, dates. Her hand covered her mouth, all eyes seemed to be on her.

“Eve, let me help you back to your seat.” Donna had her arm around her as they walked. She gently eased her back down where she again sat next to Claire, across from Rachel.

“Donna,” Claire started her question.

Holding her hand up to stop Claire, Donna said, "It just is." She left them in her usual brisk style.

"What does that mean? It just is?" Claire looked at Rachel for some intellectual insight, but got nothing.

"Are you trying to tell me that the two of you are time travelers?"

Rachel laughed, but redeemed herself quickly, "Eve, we believe it's you who is the time traveler." She looked toward the kitchen, "And Donna is the only one of us who understands, but it doesn't look like we're going to get anything out of her."

Claire reached over, placing her hand on Eve's, "What did you mean that Friday is Constitution Day? What does that event represent, Eve?"

"What's with Donna? She's forbidden me to leave through the front entrance every time I've been here, but now it's ok. What does that mean?"

Rachel asked her, "What's happened to your world since Thursday night, Eve?"

"My *world*? What kind of question is that, Rachel?"

Claire tried again, "Eve. Granted, Rachel and I have had time to digest this, but I don't think we have a lot of time for questions we can't answer. What we need to do is tell each other about the lives we live outside of this coffee house. Please, Eve. We need your help."

Eve was confused, but began telling about her world, "Constitution Day is the day our forefathers signed into law our country's make-up. It's the beginning of life as we know it. It defines the common wealth areas, the ghettos for the lower races, the..."

"What do you mean the lower races?"

Eve glanced at Claire, "The township people, of course."

Rachel motioned for Claire to keep silent so she could ask her questions. "What year was this constitution signed, Eve? What date are you

celebrating on Friday?”

Eve laughed. “Rachel, 2015 of course. The beginning of our history as a nation.”

“What do you mean the beginning of your history? What happened before this time?”

“Before June 1, 2015? No one knows. It’s not documented, Claire. I used to question it, but I don’t anymore. Obviously, there was something. Look at me, I’m 42 years old. I was 12 when this happened, but I can’t tell you anything about that time, I’ve forgotten it all.” She smiled at Claire and Rachel. “By the looks of it, the two of you would be somewhere in your 60’s in my world, as you put it. But I don’t know if you exist there, I haven’t seen you on TV, Rachel. And Claire, there are no women Senators. So if you are in my world, as you put it, I don’t know what you’re doing.” Eve lowered her head, pondering over their incredible story. It was a ludicrous suggestion.

Claire looked at Rachel, and then said to Eve, “Don’t you have internet? I mean, you should be able to Google history prior to 2015.”

“No, there isn’t any information before that time, our history starts then.”

Rachel added, “That would be easy, the country could regulate that, post misinformation.” She couldn’t believe what she was saying, this entire theory was too crazy to be true. But Claire, she had become so fragile. *Yes, I am playing along for Claire, that’s what I’m doing.*

“Oh my God.” Eve’s hand flew up to her forehead where she massaged a pain that shot through her head.

“What is it, Eve?” Claire knew it was too much for the woman to take in. They had to slow it down, let her get used to everything.

Eve ignored her, but instead, glanced down at the newspaper. She put her index finger on the date, all color had left her face. “June 1st is this

Friday. If what you say is true, I'm looking at a paper that was written before time as I know it exists." She then put her head back and laughed, she became silent and her expression became stern. "Ok, I've played your game. It's time for the two of you to stop this. You must think I'm a fool, and your cruelty is beyond comprehension. We have real problems, people are being killed in the streets. And yet, here we are having coffee and scones in this sweet little shop talking about... about what? Are you writing a book?" She turned to Rachel. "Is this some kind of experiment?" The look on her face was full of contempt. "We have people killing each other, there is an outright war going on and our country is destroying itself. So tell me, ladies. What on earth is this all about?"

The front door of the café blew open and Bill walked through the door. Spotting Claire with Rachel brought a broad smile to his face. He marched over to their table and looked down at them while addressing Claire. "So, is this how you handle your damage control, Claire?" He laughed. "My wife has taken pills, she died earlier this evening. This just doesn't want to go away, does it?" He turned to Eve and put his hand out to her. "Now, who might you be?"

The look of horror on her face even threw Bill off, "Cat got your tongue?" He withdrew his hand and stormed out.

"What is it, Eve? What's wrong?" Both Claire and Rachel were asking the same question. But their answer was a gurgling sound that came out of Eve's throat, a terrifying sound that frightened them both.

Finally she rose and looked down at them. She spoke in a strange, almost whisper, "I believe you now. I have my proof." She turned to look where Bill had exited from. "That man, I know him from our history books. He's one of our founding fathers. That man is William Hancock, one of the four who signed our Constitution. That man is one of the monster's that

made my country what it is today.” She turned and ran to the back of the café and disappeared through the wall as she had done each night before. Not thinking about the danger she was walking into, forgetting that she could finally leave through the front door.

Rachel sat in silence while watching the scene. When Eve was gone, she turned to Claire, her eyes screaming at her with her new understanding. She could barely get the words out, but finally said, “I’m sorry, Claire. I’m sorry it took me so long to be with you.”

Wednesday

Eve took several deep breathes. The newspaper date, her friends from the past, William Hancock; was she in a nightmare, soon to awake? Had she lost her grip on reality? She looked around her surroundings, realizing that she was in the subway channel. She listened. No sounds. She needed to break into the Engine House. She knew she'd be safe there. Then she remembered.

She was dead.

Only Stephen and Glenda knew what she looked like. To the rest of the country, she was just a nameless woman trying to survive the war. Suddenly, she felt relief. What were the chances that they felt safe enough to leave the hotel? She slowly climbed the stairs, and reaching the street, she looked around. It was early in the morning, maybe two or three. The war hadn't reached this neighborhood, the destruction hadn't taken out the street lights, hadn't destroyed the buildings yet.

She began walking down the street looking for a store that might sell a tool she could use, something to help her break the lock on the Fire House. *Yes, I need a hardware store. I have to stay safe until tonight, until I can lead Ron and Christine into the coffee house.*

In the distance, she heard a rumble. The sound increased, the windows in the stores next to her began to move in and out of their frames. Across the street, she saw one of the large windows explode. The roaring sound became more prominent with each second, something was approaching. Something of great magnitude. The sound

became so great that she had to cover her ears. She backed into the depression of a building that led to its doorway and waited. Stretching her neck to see beyond her safe haven, she watched. The street curved in a way that stopped her from seeing beyond a block of city structures. Louder, louder. The sound made everything around her vibrate, shake. A smell in the air caused her nose to quiver. *What was it?* A memory of driving through a territory where cows grazed flashed through her mind. *Maybe pigs? The county fair?* Then the front of the line came around the corner, its massive thrashing sound rumbled, and then came into sight. It was a spectacle beyond any she'd ever laid eyes on.

Elephants were heading the stampede, charging down the road. Close behind were tigers, then giraffes, monkeys, every animal she could think of. They seemed to be moving on instinct, nowhere to go, and yet followed their leaders because they couldn't help themselves.

Eve looked on with a feeling of ecstasy, she couldn't help laughing. Her sounds were drowned out by the thunderous clomping of hoofs. She suddenly realized that she was jumping up and down, screaming with delight. Catching herself, she froze and watched with pure pleasure as the parade of exotic creatures promenaded next to her.

It took forever for the bizarre, the extraordinary creatures to blow past where she was standing on the sidelines, but finally, the sound became muted. Eve stepped out into the street, her head looking in the direction where the herd had disappeared. She turned to the other direction to see if another mass of beastly beauties could be heard, seen. Could there be a second show coming? The night became silent, safe again.

She began walking down the sidewalk in search of her hardware store, in search of tools. She heard a clomping noise in the street ahead

that caused her body to jerk, her eyes to look in its direction.

She laughed and held her hand out while approaching the proud stallion. “Hey Fellow. Did you get lost?”

The stunning creature looked at her and made a snorting sound while it shook its mane. His lips quivered, his nostrils trembled. “What are you saying to me Mr. Horse?”

The horse answered her by raising its head in the air and letting out a fabulous whinny sound.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you. I’m afraid your clan has probably got a good mile on you by now. But maybe you’re an independent cuss, huh?” She put her hand out and stroked the middle of its head. Carefully, starting between its eyes, and moving her hand slowly down toward its nose. “My, you are a beauty. I sure wish you could tell me what happened. There must be a zoo near here, right? You poor thing, all the crazy war games going on. Pretty scary, isn’t it?”

Her friend stared at her and then shook his head, making her jump back. He continued past her as if he was on a mission. She watched for a while as he sauntered on down the street, as if he knew he would find his friends if he stayed on target. “My God. The country is so upside down that this probably won’t make the news. Doesn’t that say it all?”

Eve came to a hardware store. She found a sizable rock nearby and threw it against the window. The sound of the alarm sent her running to a nearby ally where she could watch, wait for the authorities. After several minutes without hearing sirens, she approached the store with the newly missing window and crawled through.

Walking down the aisle was spellbinding. With the smell of the livestock still in her nose and the knowledge that she could pick up anything she desired and just walk out the door... well, it was

something she'd never dreamed of as a possibility. But then again, the country was off kilter. She didn't want to be greedy so looked only for a crowbar.

She began laughing out loud when she realized that she was looking for a clerk to ask where she could find what she was after. "How did I get to this place in life?"

When she found what she needed, she grabbed it and carefully exited by walking on broken glass and raising her leg to step through the new opening she'd created. Once in the street, she ran toward the Engine House. She felt that it would be the safest place for her to wait the day out, she knew there must be cots where she would be able to sleep away at least four or five hours.

She reached the front door where the padlock had given her grief a few days before, but this time, she was prepared. Surprised how easily it snapped, she opened the door and entered. It was as she had expected. The safe, serene feeling that incased her body was a welcome sensation. But, unlike her theory, it was not the coffee house. "Ah, but maybe you are my mystic café. You just didn't last for 30 years." She looked around, and thought of Donna. "Funny lady, you're running around with your coffee and scones, probably right where I'm standing. So unbelievable, the whole story, but that was him. Hancock was my proof."

She took an elevator to the top floor and found a bed. She would explore after some sleep. Yes, rest was what she needed most. She crawled onto the cot and laid her head against the goose-feathered pillow, feeling herself fall into a conscienceless state. Her eyes nearly closed, but still barely focused on the surroundings that seemed to move away from her at a rapid rate. It was as if she was on a train with

its speed picking up, taking her closer to a soundless seduction where she could forget the terror for a few hours.

66

The war was now into its third day. The protesters had gained ground, it was common knowledge that they would reach Liberty Square within another day if they continued with the same progress. Marchers from all the surrounding townships were in the streets, an estimate of over 10,000. They had no weapons, just their will. To help keep their strength and motivation, they had taken to singing. The sound of their voices could be heard from miles away. It appeared to be a cry of happiness for finally banding together to end the suppression and isolation that had plagued them for nearly 30 years.

It was just after eight in the morning on Wednesday when one group of activists entered the neighborhood where the Mayor's mansion stood in its proud and stately manner. As was the case of the other places in D.C. where the demonstrators were making their way through the streets, these people were also singing. When they came within reach of a four block radius, they saw military men ahead.

“Stand back or we'll shoot!” One of the guards shouted through a megaphone. Another man repeated the warning.

“We're cautioning you, we have orders to shoot. Stand back, you thugs.”

The singing continued, the decibels increasing with each warning. They marched, full of fear, but beyond the capability to respond to any logic that would normally induce them to halt.

“Stop in the name of the law. We are within our legal rights to fire our arms!”

The marching continued, the singing grew in intensity.

One of the men in charge of the White army signaled to his front men and they began hurling canisters into the crowd.

The song turned into screams, people wiping their eyes to take away the sting. Those with bottled water poured the liquid into the injured marchers' eyes. The demonstrators had turned away and were running, the weaker ones were trampled.

A young man, Tommy was his name, stood facing the heathens, the hatred inside him filled his gut. "Pagans, that's what you are, you're all a bunch of Christian hating pagans!" Raising his rifle, he aimed. He didn't care if the order hadn't been given, he knew it had to be done. These people needed to learn their lesson, they needed to go back to their ghettos so he could have his life back. Sweat dripped down the sides of his face, but he stood strong, proud to be helping to save his country.

Tommy fired, a popping sound emitted from his weapon. He fired again and again.

Others around him assumed that the order had been given and they fired their weapons.

The screaming bodies began to drop. The sting from the gas was no longer their biggest problem. They ran to escape, but the gunmen marched toward them, shooting as they approached the runners.

Screams, yelling, helter skelter was in the streets. Then it happened, the final kick that ended the bloody battle at the Mayor's mansion.

Tommy pulled the safety lever off a grenade, and tossed it into the crowd. The explosion wiped out the people near where it dropped. He continued to march toward the people, pulled another grenade, and launched it into the crowd.

Within the hour, the battle was over. Bloodied bodies lay in the streets. The marchers that had fled had been captured, and now they were designated to dispose of the corpses. The residue of smoke filled the air, the smell of death choked those who lived.

The Mayor's Mansion Massacre was the deadliest battle to date in the D.C. area. The war had escalated to heights that were out of control. Hate was at an all-time level. But Tommy was a hero to his White comrades. Life was out of control, the country was in trouble. Finally, someone had taken a stand to stop these thugs. Finally, they would be able to stop these heathens and get back to their serene, prosperous life.

Ron sat at the television with Christine. The D.C. massacre was on film, they watched in horror. He looked at his wife, and took her hands in his, “Chrisy, we have to trust Eve. Be ready to leave here tonight, we’re going to be at her meeting spot.”

“Did you hear?” Stephen stood in their doorway, his voice sounding ragged. “The West Coast is practically gone, I just heard it! There’s nothing left but devastation! Some kind of nuclear bomb was launched. Oh, man.” He sobbed, “Seattle, LA. Oh, Jesus. They fucking did it!”

Ron didn’t like the young man’s tone. The man with the gun needed to be handled with care. “Stephen, settle down. We can’t do anything to help, all we can do is concentrate on staying alive. As cold as that might sound, we have no choices.”

A news show came on, announcing the death of Eve Hart. Her name caught the attention of Ron. “Shush, everyone.”

Stephen looked at the screen, “They already announced her phony death yesterday. What the hell is this all about?”

“The death of Eve Hart has been confirmed, the people she was living with evidently were not at the home when it was destroyed. This is an important update, I repeat. Eve Hart is now confirmed dead.” The reporter turned to his side to address his guest. “I have with me, Jonathan Hart.” And then he added, “I am sorry for your loss, Jonathan.”

“Matt, I have mixed feelings about it. It was obvious that she had become quite dangerous, to the point that I didn’t want her around my boys. I am deeply saddened that it came to this, but I’m here to attempt

to help the people of this fine country see that there is no more reason for all this violence. Eve's paranoia and lies caused the uproar. I'll just say it, Matt, this war is destroying us all. We have now lost the western states of this fine country. I'm pleading to all of you in the streets to go home to your townships. You've made your point and I'm sure that the officials will be able to work out a better living environment for you all."

Matt nodded, "You make a good point. Maybe she didn't die for nothing, perhaps we can come to some better agreements so that these people will be more satisfied." He looked into the screen to announce a commercial break, "Please don't go away, things are chang..."

Ron, Christine, and Stephen stared in horror at the television. Christine screamed. Glenda could be heard screaming in the adjoining room.

It happened in a split second. Like watching a Hollywood thriller. The studio where Jonathan sat, smiling into the camera was blown to fragments. And then, the screen went dark.

They sat, staring. No words came to any of them for several moments.

Then Stephen began to giggle. Its intensity grew to where he was doubled over, his stomach aching. Finally he spoke.

"Jonathan? You're a dead man. Your wife? Not yet." He looked at Ron. "I believe we are the only ones on this earth that are aware of this little anomaly." He pulled his gun from the back of his pants and played with it, making a dramatic sound. "When I kill her, I'll be making an honest man out of her poor dead husband." He laughed again, an evil sound that terrified both Ron and Christine.

Ron stared at the gun and then said to Stephen, “Son, for all we know, she is dead.”

68

Rachel woke up in Claire's bed, moaning. She put her hands to her head to apply pressure, but it didn't help. Rolling to get off the bed without straining any part of her tender body, she went to the kitchen to find the drugs she'd been sent home with. There, on the couch, she saw Claire curled up, sound asleep.

She whispered, "I could have taken the couch." But then she smiled, knowing that she would be in more agony if she had. Finding her pain pills, she tossed them down and began her normal morning chores, the first of them, to make coffee.

Rachel rummaged quietly through the kitchen, dismayed that there was no coffee, but worse, there was no coffee pot! She glanced at Claire sleeping peacefully on the couch, and went to shower so she could go out and get their breakfast.

Ready to leave for her shopping, she was surprised to see her friend still sleeping. She decided to wake her when she returned, knowing that there was an important vote for Claire in just a few hours. *How could anyone vote against Fair Pay for women?* It seemed absurd that the vote would not get the yeas it needed for passage.

She tiptoed to the door to make her silent exit, but when she pulled it open, she was surprised by the man sitting in the hall. "Oh my! I didn't know there was anyone here."

The man stood and put his hand out for her. "Ms. Ross. Sorry to scare you, I've been assigned to keep you safe." He smiled sheepishly.

"Ah, I see. Well, are you going to let me go for coffee? Tell you what, I'll splurge for yours too." She took another look at him. "Hey, you hungry?"

Why don't you and I go together?"

"Rachel? What's going on?" Claire was up and folding the blankets on her makeshift bed.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty. This man," she glanced at the guard again, "say, what is your name?"

"Ladies, it is an honor to meet you both, my name is Mac. And Ms. Ross? I'll be happy to join you for shopping, but I won't be able to go home to my wife if I don't get your autograph." He raised his head to look past Rachel, "That, of course, includes you too, Senator."

Mac was a mild-mannered cop in his late 60's, rather round in shape. He had a remarkable smile and disposition, what some women would describe as a "teddy bear type". When he was told of this new assignment, he was elated. Boring as it was to spend hours protecting their front door, he took it on as his important mission to protect the ladies, these two very important prestigious women whom he respected greatly.

Rachel laughed, "Claire, get ready for your day, and we'll bring back the coffee and bagels."

As the door was closing, Rachel said to Mac, "Her kitchen has nothing, the woman doesn't eat here. Let's go, Mac."

Only two blocks away, they found a coffee shop where they selected a beautiful assortment of doughnuts. When they reached the head of the line, Rachel said, "We need six coffees, cream on the side." She smiled at Mac's expression, "One cup isn't enough for me, how about you?"

Mac took the tray of coffee and bag of goodies while Rachel paid the bill. "My wife and I record your show, Ms. Ross. We're real fans of yours."

"Come on, Mac. Don't you think you know me well enough to call me Rachel yet?" She winked at him and chuckled at her Donna impression.

Sirens zoomed past the bakery, they walked into the street to see smoke escaping from the building a few blocks away. People were running, screaming. “Fire! Get away from here, fire!”

Mac stared, dread overcoming his instincts. “Rachel, take these.” He handed her the food, and took out his cell. “Sir, we have a problem here. Ms. Ross is with me, but we left the Senator alone for a few minutes. It appears that her apartment building is now a blazing inferno.” He listened to the man on the other end and replied, “Yes, Sir. Ok, Sir. No, I won’t let her out of my sight, Sir.”

Mac was holding on to Rachel’s arm, stopping her from running toward Claire’s apartment. “You can’t help, now quit making my job so hard.”

The mild mannered man suddenly took on a rough façade, his tone stopping her from barging through the people on the street, the *fire lookers* as she called them. The road was now blocked off, but the crowd that had congregated was thick. Some had signs about SB 1257, some had signs about the Fair Pay Act. Most were there to see the impressive flames shooting out of Claire’s apartment building.

“Jesus, Mac. We can’t stand here and do nothing. We have to let them know what room she’s in. We have to do something!”

“They know, Rachel. They know what they’re doing so let them do their job. Hold on to that coffee, she’s going to want at least two of those cups shortly.” This time he winked at her, hoping that his premonition would come true.

69

Claire turned off the shower and reached for her towel. She could hear the sirens outside in the street. “What now? For God’s sake, can’t we have one normal day?” She picked up a second towel and rubbed her hair with it. She used the same towel to wipe the steam from her mirror. Her reflection disturbed her. The stress of the past few days had taken its toll, her eyes didn’t have their normal vibrant shine.

She reached for her makeup and began hiding the damage. Her phone rang from the other room. *It must be Rachel, probably wants to know what I want with my coffee.* She mused at her new friend’s personality. Her phone continued to sing *Moon Shadow*. She let it go to a message, and continued to prepare herself for the day.

It was an important one, the bill had no chance of passing, but it was a strong symbolic message to send to the country. She’d get through the vote, then go watch Rachel do her show. A warm feeling came over her. “Then we get to go see Eve.” Her smile faded when *Moon Shadow* sounded off again.

“Damn, I’m almost done.” She finished the face paint, then combed through her hair while thinking of the perfect suit to wear for the vote.

She left the bathroom and heard more noises from the street. Looking out the window, she saw the fire trucks, police cars, and then her eyes zeroed in on her friend, Kurt. Fear struck through her, and then she smelled the smoke. Finally, she smelled the burning fire!

Kurt was waving at her, holding up his phone, pointing at it. *Moon Shadow* began playing again. This time she raced for her phone, where was it? She followed the sound, and saw it lying on the kitchen counter.

“Kurt, what the hell is going on? Is the fire in my building? Tell me what’s going on!”

“Listen to me, Claire. Do not open any windows, do not open your door. Use towels to block any air seepage. You’re going to be fine until we can get someone up there to take you out. Do not panic, dear lady! You’re invincible, you got that? I’m not about to lose you today, understood? Stay on the phone, Claire. I’ll keep you informed.”

She heard him yell an order at someone. She could hear it all with the connection open. She put the phone on speaker and ran for towels.

When she returned, she heard Kurt screaming from her phone. She threw a towel down in front of the door, kicking it to cover the crack of light beneath it. She grabbed her phone and yelled into the it. “Kurt, what?”

“Damn it, Claire. Keep the phone with you.”

“I was doing what you told me to do, Kurt. What now?”

“I want you to stand under the shower. Wet yourself down. Then wet down a blanket. They’re on their way up. Stay away from the door, do you hear me Claire?”

“Yes.” Her mind was racing, she had to work fast. His tone was saying more than his words. She ran to her room, threw on her clothes, and went to the shower. All her hard work to look good washed down the shower drain.

She stepped out from the water and went for a blanket. After she soaked it, she looked around her home. *What does one grab when everything is about to go up in flames?*

Rummaging through her bottom drawer, she found the photo of her and Trista. They were so young, somewhere around eight and ten. Next she grabbed her purse, and computer. She found a food bag in the kitchen and ran back to the bedroom to load it with her possessions.

Someone was hitting her door, they were here to save her! “Kurt, they’re here, I can hear them striking something against my door!”

“That’s the sound of an axe, Claire. It’s time to wrap yourself in that blanket. Make their job as easy as you can, sweetheart. When that door comes open, you’re going to see lots of flames. Just do everything they say, Claire. This is no time to be obstinate, do you hear me?”

Claire didn’t have time to answer. Her door suddenly had a gaping hole in it with a Martian-like creature in a mask standing outside in the hall. “I’m over here!” She screamed at the man. He ran to her and quickly put a mask over her head. He put his arms around her and lifted her as if she were a child being carried to bed. Swiftly, he took her into the inferno. Claire could hear herself breathing, the sound exaggerated by the constraint of the inhalation apparatus.

She saw massive flames ahead of them and wondered what he would do. *How’s he going to get around them?*

He kept running, her weight seeming to not matter to him. He took her directly into the flames! She pulled the wet blanket over the exposed parts of her body and prayed. Yes, Claire prayed. An absolute agnostic and here she was doing this thing. *Who am I talking to, God?* In spite of her impending death, she laughed at herself. *So this is what it’s like to die, or hopefully, in my case, have a near death experience.*

Claire closed her eyes and saw Trista, Trista with the gun pointed to her head. *Did she not hesitate? What went through her mind?*

Then she heard cheering. Firemen, police were everywhere. She felt her savior gently put her down and take off her breathing mask. He smiled at her and put his gloved hand on her cheek. He had a tear in one eye.

“Claire!” She saw Kurt running up to her.

“Kurt,” he smothered her with a hug. Then he released her and stared into her eyes, “What the hell is happening, Claire? You are a one-woman tornado lately.”

“Kurt.”

He interrupted her. “Come on, let’s get you to the hospital.” He put his hand on her back and began to coax her to the ambulance.

Claire curled her toes so he couldn’t move her, she felt as though she had dug them into the pavement. “Not on your life, mister. Take me to the Senate Rotunda. I have a vote to make.”

“What?” Kurt put his head back and laughed. He knew he would lose the battle so instead, he pointed to where his car was parked. “Come on, Senator. Let’s get going.”

Kurt slowly drove the car through the street, and signaled for his men to let him through the yellow tape and cones that barricaded them from freedom.

“Kurt, stop.” Claire pointed to the side of the road. She rolled down the window and yelled, “Rachel, Mac. Over here.”

They crawled into the back seat, and Rachel began passing out coffee. “I hope you like it luke warm.” She stared at Claire for a moment, and then said, “Jesus, aren’t you a sight. Is that a new makeup job, lady?”

Kurt chuckled, “You don’t know the best of it, we’re headed to the Senator’s Chamber so she can prance in, soot and all, to place her vote.”

Claire worked to hide her feelings from the others. The lump in her throat was threatening to cause an eruption of tears. She knew if it started, there would be no end in sight. Her body would go into convulsions if she didn’t stop the almost inevitable. She took a deep breath, her fear and weakness had to be suppressed. The air filled her lungs, and while she

exhaled, she raised her head, and faced the others. She looked at Rachel and forced a smile.

“Hey, Rachel. Think I can spend the night at your hotel suite tonight, and maybe a few beyond, maybe weeks?”

“Sure, and tell you what. I’ll upgrade to a two bedroom.” She looked at Mac. “What do you say, ol’ pal? Does a change sound good to you?”

Kurt found a place to park, and stepped out of the car with the rest of the entourage.

Claire looked at them, and shook her head. “I can do this one by myself, folks. Kurt, please take Rachel home. I’ll meet you there later, Rachel.” She handed over the treasures that had escaped with her. “Please take these things with you.”

Claire began her walk, no shoes, her clothes torn and covered with soot. Her hair was wet, her face decorated like a chimney sweep. The others followed closely behind. Claire stopped abruptly, causing the trio to run into her.

“Oh, come on! This is about as silly as it gets.”

“Yes it is, Claire.” Kurt put his arm around her and smiled. “Come on, Senator.”

70

Protesters were taking up space outside the Senate Chambers, this time chanting for and against the Fair Pay Act. Rachel was on her phone telling her camera man to get there pronto.

“Sorry, Claire. This is too good to miss. If you won’t come on my show, at least I get to show you in all your beauty during this vote.” She laughed. “Mac, I’ll bet you didn’t see this coming, did you?”

Numerous networks were set up outside the building, and when they saw Claire, reporters ran up to her.

“Senator, we heard about the fire. Why are you here?”

Several people with mics were addressing her at the same time.

Kurt waved them off. “Excuse us, the Senator has a vote to make. If you’ll make room for an aisle for us to walk through, I’m sure you’ll get lots of great camera shots for your stories.”

They walked through the people and into the building, then came to the entrance of the chambers. Kurt stopped and took Claire’s hand. “Go get em’ tiger. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you looking so beautiful.”

Claire smiled at all three of them, and said, “I’ll come to your office later, Kurt. And, Mac, don’t leave Rachel’s side today.”

Rachel told her that she’d be waiting with her camera man when she finished voting. “Then we can get you settled at the Marriott.”

Claire left her three fans and held her head high. *Pretend you’re wearing a Versace suit, a pink one. And Anne Klein Shoes with a matching bag.* She laughed inside her head. *Shoes?* She didn’t have any on, and her suit? *Stop it, voice! I said pretend.*

Claire placed her vote to give women the same pay as men, and looked up to see the people in the upper seats of the chamber. All eyes were focused in her direction, some of them cheering her on. She nodded at them, and began her promenade down the aisle to find Rachel.

She saw Clancy approaching, so stopped to wait for him. “Clancy, so good to see you.”

“What the hell, Claire? Go home and change for God’s sake. I’ve had about enough of your tricks. Have you lost your mind?” He scorned at her, “Poor Bill couldn’t make it today, he’s mourning the death of his wife. You remember, the lady whose husband you had an affair with?”

“Walk with me, Senator. I know a reporter outside that would love to get your story on her show.”

“What the hell? Claire, this week is nothing compared to what you’ll have to endure for months if you don’t vote with us.”

“Don’t tell me, tell the reporter.” They had advanced to the Senate lobby and saw Rachel and Mac with a cameraman waiting. Pointing at them, she said, “Come, Senator. I’ll introduce you and then you can become famous,” she laughed, “I mean, even more famous today than you were yesterday.”

He put his head near her ear and whispered, “Listen, bitch. You’re playing with the big boys now. And you don’t know the rules. You haven’t got a chance in hell of beating us.”

She stopped and faced him, “Clancy, as I told you before, I’m still digesting your bill. At this point, I don’t know how I’ll vote.” She smiled and arranged a lock of her hair. “But, of course, we won’t have to wait too much longer, will we? Isn’t this game of yours more fun when you don’t know how it will turn out? I believe that’s why we love sports, isn’t it? I have got to tell you, Clancy, if I knew how a baseball game was going to turn out, I can’t see myself wasting time watching it.” She began walking

toward Rachel again. “Come, Senator. I’ll introduce you and if she likes what you say, you’ll be on the Rachel Ross Show tonight.” She stopped again and threw her hand over her mouth. “Oh my God. I forgot that you signed a pledge not to be seen on her show. Why, I’m putting you in an uncomfortable position, can you ever forgive me, Senator?”

Rachel stuck the mic in front of his face, “Senator Alexander, can I talk to you for a moment about SB 1257?” The camera was on him.

He waved her mic out of his face, “I have no comment for you. If you want to hear what I think, you’ll have to tune into FOXX.” He glared at Claire and left them standing in the scenic Senate lobby.

Kurt sat at his desk, nibbling at a tuna sandwich and looking at some reports. Tony's death, Rachel's car brakes, the ambassador to Chile, the Senator's wife committing suicide, and now Claire's apartment building having burned down. In all his years on the force, he'd never encountered so many things happening in such a short time period. All of them with one common name attached, Claire Winslow.

The phone rang, it was Claire's attorney. "There's no reason for her to be afraid, Counselor. She's not involved in any of this. Not anymore than you or me. Tell her to save her money and forget about needing your support. Really, the whole idea is laughable. Like she's going to barricade herself in her burning apartment house so she looks like a victim? Yes, we are lucky she's still with us. I'll tell Claire if and when she needs your services. Not at all, and good talking to you too."

Kurt picked up his sandwich and took another bite. *What is it about that woman?* He heard a knock on his door. "Yea, come in."

Joe, one of Kurt's more valuable detectives came in and sat across from him. "Kurt, I'm hitting dead ends with all this crap happening to the Senator. It reeks of a professional. This person is good at hiding tracks."

"I know. The other common name that keeps popping up is Senator Hancock. What do we know about his wife?"

"That's just the thing. I've got a funny feeling about this. I found the court papers for their separation, but I have a friend who works for the county. She told me that these documents didn't exist before yesterday. She won't tell me how she knows, but if her information is correct, it makes your Claire Winslow seem like a victim of foul play."

“Can I see them, Joe?” His friend handed the documents to him. “Who do we have that can authenticate these? You know, a Tony type.”

“Already thought of that. There’s a pretty decent guy in forensics. I arranged for him to get the originals for a test.”

“Good, then I guess we wait.”

Joe sat in silence for a few moments before asking, “How well do you know Senator Winslow?”

“What do you mean by that?” Kurt stood, angry at the thought of anyone questioning her integrity. “She’s probably the only honest Senator we’ve got. She’s there for a damn good reason, and all this other shit is just that. What do you mean by that question?”

Joe put his hand up, and gestured for him to sit. “Listen to you, man. Are you sure you should be in charge of her case or cases in this case?” Joe laughed. “Oh come on, Kurt. Lighten up. I’ve seen you around her and it looks like maybe you’re feeling a little too close to this one. You sure you’re not getting sweet on her? That’s all.”

“See what you can find out about that Ambassador. Check the dates. I want to know where the Senator was during the alleged times. I’m going to talk to the fire chief. I need to know if this was arson.” Kurt stood, grabbed his hat and went to the door. “And see if they have any more to go on about Ms. Ross’ brakes. Jesus, and the anthrax, for God’s sake. Do you hear how ridiculous I sound?”

“Hey, Kurt. Did you want the rest of this?” Joe held half the tuna sandwich up while giving him a goofy expression.

Eve slept soundly, her dreams making her smile in her sleep. She was stroking the beautiful horse standing in the street, its eyes staring at her as if they could communicate in a silent language.

Suddenly the horse's neck twitched, and jerked itself away from her massaging hand, straining to see the intruder. They both heard it, it began with the sound of purring, but then they heard a chirp, hiss, and finally a growl emit from an unknown creature. The horse took off running down the street, leaving Eve alone to defend herself against the new enemy.

Then, a distinct scream emanated through the air, and a large slick coated cat presented itself to her. She froze, the panther stared at her with rage in its eyes. Another scream brought her to a conscious state, her head snapped as she jumped from the cot. She was in the Engine House, she was safe. It was just a dream. Then she heard the eerie scream, the same as in her dream.

Running to the door, she peeked into the hall to see the shiny haired cat staring at her, a sleek black panther. She slammed the door, and found furniture to block it for extra protection. She could hear the hissing on the other side of the door, the sound of a hungry feline.

Eve looked around the room and spotted a refrigerator in the corner. "Damn, these guys lived here, of course." She ran to it and opened the door. No food. Then she opened the freezer to discover several steaks. "God, this will work." She seized them and put them on a nearby counter to thaw. "Ok, little pussy. I have a treat for you, just be patient, little kitty."

She went to the window and looked up at the sky. The sun was a little past high noon, she had about nine hours. “Perfect.”

73

Claire sat in the studio, watching Rachel do her show. Finally, the photos were being exposed to the public. Rachel had set it up as a breaking news segment. As usual, she'd done her homework and showed the undeniable evidence that the manual from which the photos were taken had been sitting on Senator Bill Hancock's apartment desk. Claire enjoyed watching her incriminate him. It wasn't murder she was accusing him of, but at least it would bring the spotlight on him. Next, Rachel showed a video of over a dozen Senators using phrases from the manual in interviews during the past few days. She ended by telling her audience what was really in the bill and pleaded with everyone to call their Senator and ask them to vote against it. It was a masterful job.

The show went to a break and Claire jumped up, clapping. "Well done, maestra!"

Rachel laughed, "You haven't yet seen the segment where you look like a chimney sweep." She put her arms in the air. "Nothing can stop this modern day super woman! She'll run through burning hoops to get to a Senate vote."

"Aren't you in a good mood. It doesn't seem possible that you were in the hospital just yesterday." Claire looked around. "Say, where's Mac?"

"Oh that sweet man? Poor thing hadn't had any sleep. I sent him home." Rachel saw the stern expression as her response. "Don't worry. There'll be someone waiting for us at the hotel tonight. Maybe it will be Mac again." The lights came on, "Oh, enjoy this next segment, my sooty friend."

Rachel looked into the camera and said, "And we are back."

Claire had to cover her mouth to stop any sounds from escaping while she watched the hysterical episode from earlier. She wasn't going to win any awards for her appearance, that was for sure.

She felt her cell vibrate and left the studio to answer, it was Kurt.

"Where the hell are you, Claire?"

"Well, hello Kurt. And where may I ask are you?"

"Cut it out, I don't have someone trying to murder me or my friends. The fire was arson, Claire. That was no accident, the evidence is clear. Now, where are you?"

"Look, Kurt. I'm sorry. I know you're just doing your job. But really, is this news to you? After all that's happened, is this really a surprise to you?"

"I'm not going to fight with you, Claire. But you can't stop me from doing my job, and tonight, you are my job. I went to the Marriott and there's a guard there, but the funny thing is that there's no one for him to protect. Rather an odd situation, don't you think?"

"Kurt, I'm at Rachel's studio. I didn't want her to be alone when she finished. We're planning on going for a coffee after she's done with the show, then we'll go to the hotel. That's it, our full itinerary. Is that better?"

"Now why did it take so long for me to pull that out of you? Claire, you drive me crazy sometimes. Will you call me when you get to your room? I'm worried. Never seen a woman face so many disasters before, that's all. And like it or not, you are now my responsibility."

"Responsibility? Oh darn, I thought you actually cared for a moment. And yes, sir, I will call when we get in. Good night, Kurt." She hung up.

Kurt heard the dial tone, and said into the phone, "Maybe I do care, maybe I do."

Eve had never been so bored in her life, she played solitaire for hours with a deck of cards she'd found. *So this is what it's like to be a fireman when there's no fire.*

There was no television service, nor clocks. Eve could hear a constant reminder of the battle taking place several miles away, and could hear the occasional hissing sound of the feline on the other side of her door. It had been dark for several hours, she kept checking the position of the moon from her window. *Thank God for the clear weather.* She couldn't be late, but early would be acceptable.

It was time for her to leave. She found plastic bags under the sink and used one per steak. She had six of them, and two blocks to travel. She had no choice, it was her best bet. She found a paper bag for all her packages, but left one steak out. She hoped that if she left the steak in its bag, it would take the panther a little longer to get to it. Time was everything to Eve. She needed to get there fast and had used the hours during her wait to plan every step of the way.

She picked up the food, and the single steak bag. Her hands began to tremble. Her breathing became short. She slowly made her way to the door, careful not to make a sound. Putting her ear to the wood, she couldn't hear it. *Don't get cocky, Eve.*

Slowly, she turned the knob, then yanked the door open. The animal screamed, a high pitched sound that made the skin on her back crawl. She threw the single steak bag down the hall and watched the hungry cat chase after it. This was it, she ran the other direction, she

saw the pole, then the stairs. She only hesitated for an instant, then heard the cat coming for her. She screamed, “The pole, woman!”

Unsure how she’d do it, she was out of time. No more time to make a choice. She tossed her bag of food down the hole first, then threw her arms and legs around the shiny rod, and let herself slip down to the main floor of the building. Once on her feet, she turned toward the stairway. She couldn’t see her enemy, but could hear it. She pulled another steak out of the bag and threw it at the bottom of the stairs.

Eve had planned to lock the poor creature inside the Engine House, but could now see that the door was broken, leaving the cat an escape hatch. She had no choice, but to run. She still had four steaks.

Then it occurred to her. *The cat can smell the steaks. So I’m actually leading it to me. Damn!* She had a minute or less before it devoured the second steak. She took off running in the opposite direction than she wanted to go. After two blocks, she saw a way out. She had brought the crowbar, it was stuffed down the back of her pants. She pulled it out and swung as hard as she could against a store window, turning quickly to miss the shattering glass. Looking toward the Engine House, she saw the feline coming toward her. Saliva was dripping from its jowls. His magnificent eyes caught the light from the street lamps. The intensity was disturbing. “So you think I’m your next steak, eh little kitty? Well, I hate to disappoint you, but here’s your runner-up.” She took one steak out of the bag and heaved it through the broken jags of glass. Then a second one, but threw it at the opposite wall. She finished throwing the remaining two with little time to spare.

Eve ran to the end of the block and turned up the street. She kept running in the direction of the subway stairs. “My God!” She put her

head back and laughed with joy, the sign pointed to the left, the sign that said SUBWAY ENTRANCE.

She made it to the bottom of the stairs and almost ran into the ladies room to wash her hands. She stopped. The door would take her into the coffee house. *They won't know where I am.*

She didn't know the time. She couldn't leave without Ron and Christine!

Ron stood over the bed and gently nudged his wife. He put his index finger to his mouth and removed the blanket that was covering her. Christine sat up and moved her legs so they draped over the bed. Her shoes were waiting for her where she'd laid them out. Their moment had come.

He took her hand and together, they quietly walked across the room to the door. He had left it ajar so they wouldn't make noise opening it.

Once in the hall, he motioned for her to follow him to the stairs. They had three flights to descend. Slowly, they took each step with care, praying Stephen wouldn't wake. The corridor seemed to go on forever, the stairs so close and yet not.

Christine thought she heard something from the room. Looking back, her hand caught a vase sitting on a small table. They watched it fall and shatter. They stopped, frozen in the moment.

Then, Ron grabbed her hand and began running. Down the first flight of stairs, then another. Only one to go and they would be in the lobby, out in the street. They would be at the subway stairs in less than two minutes.

"Hey, Ron. Where are you guys going?" Stephen was running toward them.

Ron ran faster, pulling on Christine to keep up.

They were outside, running. The stairs leading to the underground were lit with dim lights.

“Stop! You guys stop right now.”

They raced across the street and descended the steps.

“You know where she is, don’t you. You son-of-a-bitch!” Stephen was outside and saw them before their bodies disappeared into the subway bowels. He pointed his gun in the air and shot. “I’m gonna get you guys! You can’t hide from me!”

Ron and Christine reached the bottom of the stairs. Ron turned a full 360 degrees looking for Eve.

“Over here, hurry.” She had heard the gun shot. She knew they must hurry. She pulled at the door to the bathroom and pushed them through. Looking back, her eyes locked with Stephen’s. She stepped inside and pushed her body against the door.

Ron’s expression was full of compassion when he said, “Eve. This is it, he has us cornered.”

She laughed and pulled on the door handle to expose her magic café.

Christine screamed, “Eve, no!”

Outside, Stephen couldn’t believe his luck. He had them. He slowly walked toward the door where they disappeared, his gun in hand.

Then it happened.

A slick black panther walked into the light and stood between him and the door. It raised its head. It opened his mouth and screamed like a woman. Particles of meat hung from its teeth, drool dripped from its mouth. It was saying something to Stephen, something terrifying. It was telling him that he would be his next meal.

75

The chatter was a friendly sound to their ears, the smells were enticing. Christine reached out and ran her fingers down one of the many trunks covering the inner wall. She looked at Eve with questioning eyes and then spoke. “Eve? Where are we? I don’t think we’re in D.C. anymore.” She grabbed Ron’s hand and squeezed. “Honey?”

“Eve, good to see you.” Donna had a pencil stuck through her hair and wore her normal costume. “And you brought your friends, how nice.”

She led them to Eve’s table and asked if they wanted some hot scones. “They’ll be ready soon. I’ll get you started with your coffee.”

Ron hadn’t said a word. He looked around the room, and then repeated the exercise. He’d never seen anything like it before. The concrete walls, the carved out arched entrances to smaller parts of the café. He felt more secure than he’d felt in a long time. A warm sensation filled his body.

Donna returned with their coffee, but stood at the end of the table without setting the mugs down. “Eve, this just isn’t going to work.”

“What do you mean?” Fear struck through her. They’d fought so hard to get where they were. She wouldn’t turn them back, not now!

“Honey, your friends will want to sit with you and there’s not enough room at this table.” She pointed to a large round table with wrap-around booths. “Do you mind?”

Relief came over Eve, a deep sigh released, helping her body to calm down. “Of course not. Come on, let’s move. I’ll answer what questions I can before Claire and Rachel get here.” She laughed at Ron’s expression. “I’ll tell you everything, Ron. No holding back.”

Eve followed Donna to their new table, but stopped. She told the others to sit. "I'll be right back, I need to get a newspaper."

"Oh let me get that for you, Eve." Donna winked.

"What is this place, Eve?" Ron couldn't think of anything else to ask.

"Here you go, honey." Donna laid the paper on the table.

Pushing it toward Ron, Eve said. "Read the headlines, Ron. Read the date of its publication."

He picked up the printed paper, and squinted.

Christine fumbled in her purse and pulled out some glasses. "Put these on, Ron."

"Thanks, honey." He unfolded the glasses and hung them over his ears. He raised the publication up to his face, his hands stretching its folded paper so it was taut.

Eve watched. His fingers curled into the paper, crunching its edges as he read.

Looking up, he shook his head. "This isn't funny. Why are you doing this? We made you part of our family and now this?"

"What is it, Ron?"

Eve reached out and took his hands in hers. Her voice cracked as she spoke, but she proceeded to tell them about the coffee house.

The front door opened and Eve's friends entered. They saw her and went right to their table. "Eve, who are these people?"

"This is Ron and Christine, my family, so to speak." The pride in her voice said more than her words. "I've been explaining to them what I learned last night. Forgive them, they're in shock." Christine had a strange expression and Ron had no words.

"Please sit. Ron, Christine. This is Rachel Ross, a news reporter with her own show on TV, and this is Claire Winslow. I should say, Senator

Claire Winslow. And, according to my calculations, we are having this coffee a little over a day before our history begins.”

Donna came with more coffee and a plate of hot scones. “Nice to see you ladies again.” She turned to leave, but Eve stopped her.

“Oh, Donna? Please make sure that I get the bill tonight.” She smiled at Ron and Christine before adding, “First time is free.”

Ron was finally over his shock and had many questions. Claire and Rachel took turns answering them. Then they had questions about his world.

“Oh my God!” Christine threw her hand to her mouth and looked at Eve. “Honey, you didn’t see the broadcast today, did you?”

Ron put his hand on his wife’s and took the lead. “Eve,” he looked at the others. “The west coast is in shambles. Nuclear bombs, they said.” His lips quivered and he looked down at his and Christine’s hands. Then he looked straight into Eve’s eyes. “Jonathan was on one of those news shows today when a bomb went off. The building and everyone inside was destroyed.”

“My boys, were they on the set?” She threw her body against the table and stretched her hands toward his. She grabbed at air, her fingers convulsing at the thought of losing her boys.

“No, Eve!” Christine gave her a quick response. “No, honey. They haven’t been on the television since that first time.”

Rachel interrupted, “Who is Jonathan?”

“My snake of a husband. That’s who he is.” She took a few deep breaths and held her head high. Her voice became strong with her next words. “Ron, I want the two of you to leave with Claire and Rachel tonight.”

Claire’s hands went up and she began clapping. “This is such great news. Rachel and I are staying at a hotel for a while. I’ll get you a room

next to ours.”

“We don’t know what will happen if they walk out that door, do we?” Rachel put her head back, and looked around the room for Donna. “What do you think? Will she actually tell us something? Ron, Christine, she’s a strange one. We don’t know how, but she’s known about this *time thing* from the beginning, but did she move things along and let us know? Nothing, we had to figure out everything without her.”

Ron sounded confused when he replied, “Speak English, ladies. What’s the problem with our leaving this place?”

Claire laughed, “Ron, if you go outside that door, we don’t know if you’ll be you, a man in his 60s, or if you will be as you were thirty years ago.”

Ron turned to Christine and threw his arms around her. “My God, honey. Are you willing to chance such a terrible thing?”

Christine’s eyes filled with tears, “This is the happiest day of my life.” She stopped. “Jesus, Ron. Eve might be a little girl. Are you ready to be a dad?”

“Oh, no. Not me. I have to go back and find my boys. This one is all about you guys.”

Ron motioned Christine to scoot over so he could escape the confines of the booth. When he was standing, he looked tall looming over the table. “Eve, here is your first lecture from your dear ol’ dad. You are not going back there. It’s suicide. Your boys’ minds have been twisted, their beliefs about you are not good ones. I’m sorry to be so blunt, but you don’t even know if they’re still alive. Hell, we don’t know how long it will be before they bomb the rest of the country. No, I forbid it.”

Christine smiled with admiration at her husband. “Ladies, Ron and I never were able to have kids, but you know? He sounds like a natural. Eve?”

He's right. We can't let you go back there, you will be killed if you go back."

Eve knew they were right, but how could she leave her boys? If she were to find them, would they turn her in as Trenton had? "I don't know. What about my baby? Will I remember? If I go through that door, will I be a kid with memories of a forty something woman? A woman who had a baby growing inside her? Damn, that's just crazy."

Stephen had the gun. It was in his hand, but he knew he couldn't raise it fast enough. The panther would be on him in a split second. The cat's mouth was sickening to look at. *Were the meat remnants hanging from his teeth from a human?*

He waited, hoping that it would spare his life. He needed a plan, but what? He froze, the cat was only a few feet from him. They stared eye to eye for some time. *An hour maybe? It seems that it must be at least an hour already.*

Stephen was tiring, he was losing his stamina. If only he could sit. He tried thinking of things he'd enjoyed in his life. *Skiing, sex.* Nothing helped.

He felt himself slipping away when he heard a voice at the other end of the block yell, "Hey you! Stop and tell me who you are. This area is now off limits."

The sound of the man's voice excited the animal. It was as if he'd tired of the game with Stephen. He turned and charged toward the poor soul down the street. Stephen could hear the man screaming. He used his great fortune to run to the ladies room and go through the door.

Inside, his shock at seeing an empty room kept his mind confused. "How can this be?" He wept like a baby, his body plummeted until he sat on the floor. When there were no more tears, he looked at the gun. He raised it to his head, the idea of pulling the trigger was too much for him to bear. He could no longer hear the beast outside the door, so he stood. He had to try to get back to his wife and baby. He needed to

protect them from people like Eve. His hand was on the knob, it was turning. Then he quietly pulled it open.

He saw happy people in the coffee shop. He saw Eve with Ron and Christine sitting with others at a large table. He saw a fantasy driven type of design to the room. The walls, the graffiti, the old photos. Never had he seen the likes of such a place. But it was Eve that drove him to step into the strange café. It was pure hate for her that prompted him to step into the room and raise his gun, fire off a bullet to scare the people. It was Eve, the most dangerous traitor in history. He would take her back and turn her in. He would be a hero for saving many lives. She needed to be gone, so people could get back to their normal lives.

He shouted, "I want everyone to get up and empty your pockets. Put your belongings on the tables, then lay down on the floor." *What am I doing?* He'd seen it in movies. He'd go with it until he could figure out how to take Eve back with him.

Donna was behind the counter. She carefully groped for the alarm button. Her fingers tapped it, she put pressure on it. It was silent to them, but it did alert the police. She knew help would be there soon. They had to do as he said, but only for a few minutes.

Sirens could be heard outside, the situation had become bad for Stephen. The phone behind the counter rang.

“You. Old lady. Get up and answer that phone.”

Donna slowly obeyed his order. She picked up the receiver, and meekly spoke into it, “Yes?” She held the phone out to Stephen, “They want to speak to you, sir.”

“Shit!” He waved the gun around nervously, his hands began to shake. He went to her and grabbed the handset. “Listen, I am within my rights. I have Eve Hart in here and she is very much alive. I repeat, I’m looking at our traitor.” As he spoke, his confidence grew. He knew he would be hailed a hero by bringing her in. “What? Oh, my name is Stephen, Stephen Johnson.”

“Mr. Johnson, why don’t you let the people go and then we’ll help you with this situation. There’s no reason to hold the others.”

Stephen thought quickly. This was his chance to make something of himself. “I want cameras in here. I want the country to see what I’ve done.”

“We can do that. And then you’ll let the people leave?”

The response elated Stephen, “Yes, of course. I just want this documented. Eve Hart is in here. She needs to be punished for her crimes. I don’t want any more cover-ups.”

“Give us a few minutes and we’ll get a crew in there right away. Can you do that for us, Mr. Johnson?”

“Hurry.” Stephen hung up.

He looked at the bodies lying on the floor, this didn’t look good for a hero. “Everyone, get up and stand against that wall.” He waved the gun,

denoting where he wanted them. “No one is going to get hurt. I just want Eve.” He looked at Ron, “I forgive you, man. She’s evil and has a hold on you. I will set you free from her. I’m doing this for you, and for our country.”

Claire took Eve’s hand and gripped tightly. She motioned with a nod to hang on. The customers slowly moved to where Stephen wanted them.

The front door opened, “Don’t shoot! I work for the network.”

Stephen let the man in; he waved for him to aim his equipment at Eve. “There’s the traitor. She looks different than before, but look at that face. There’s no mistaking who she is. She’s committed treason, she’s the reason why our country is at war.” He looked at the cameraman. “Are you getting this?” He walked closer to Eve so he could be in the camera’s view.

Stephen nudged the gun under her chin, “How does it feel to have all those lives gone because of you, huh? Answer me!”

He saw Claire clutching Eve’s hand. “What’s this? Who the hell are you?”

“Stephen, my name is Senator Claire Winslow. I believe you have made a grave mistake about Eve. Please put down your gun so we can have a decent conversation.”

“What? Are you crazy, lady?” And then to Eve. “What is this place? Where have you taken me?”

Ron took a few steps toward the gunman. “Stephen, we’ve been through a lot these past few days. Don’t you think it’s time for us all to stop fighting? Come on, son. Put the gun down, this isn’t the way. Enough hate, we can stop this war. We’ll go fetch your wife and baby. Life can go back to normal for you again.”

“We need to take her in, Ron. You know that. Damn you, I thought you were my friend. What’s going on here?” He spun his body around, waving

the gun in desperation. “None of this makes any sense, why are you all looking at me like that?”

Stephen was distraught, agitated.

He looked at Claire again. “Senator?” He grunted at her. “Release the grip you have on Eve at once.”

Claire held her eye contact with him without budging.

“Didn’t you hear me? Let go of her!”

She didn’t move.

Stephen raised the gun and pointed it at her. “I gave you an order, now do it!”

She didn’t move.

Stephen pulled on the lever, the shot echoed within the concrete walls.

78

The phone rang to wake Kurt up. He saw the illuminated display on his clock, it was two am. “What the hell?” He picked up the phone, still half asleep.

“Sir? Turn on your television. It’s the Senator, sir. Claire Winslow has been shot.”

Kurt felt like he’d been hit by a train. “Where is she?” He took a few deep breaths and then asked, “Is she still alive?”

Kurt scribbled down the address and ran around his apartment, throwing on the clothes he’d worn the day before. Within five minutes, he was in his car, his siren screaming to tell the city not to mess with him.

The address was in the outskirts of the city, but he found it within 20 minutes. He stopped the car in the middle of the street, and jumped out, leaving the door ajar. “Who’s in charge here?” He passed several officers, tugging at them, shouting as he went. “Tell me who is in charge here.” Finally, one of the officers pointed to a woman standing behind a patrol car that was in front of the café. He went to her, held his badge out, “Tell me what the status is.”

Wanda Silverton saw him approaching, she knew him from reputation. “Detective, what are you doing here? This isn’t your problem.”

“No, you’re wrong about that. I know the Senator and that makes this my problem. Is she alive?” He looked toward the front of the coffee house. “Who the fuck is this guy in there? Let me talk to him.”

“I don’t think you should, we have this under control. Now let me do my job.”

“Look, let me talk to him. See? I’m settled down. I have experience with this sort of thing.”

Detective Silverton knew of his reputation, he was good at his job. “Alright. Here’s the status. We gave him his coverage, now it’s time for him to give us the hostages.” She dialed the phone and handed it to him. “Talk him down, Detective. He calls himself Stephen Johnson.”

The phone rang inside. Stephen jumped at the sound, then went to pick it up. The camera turned to follow him.

“Stephen, is this Stephen?”

“Yes, did you get it? It really is her, I have Eve Hart cornered.”

“We sure did, good work. Now, why don’t you let the others leave? Then we can concentrate on her.”

Stephen was elated. He was being recognized for his good work. Those were the words he’d heard. “No problem, sir. Has the fighting stopped? Did I stop the war?”

“Yes, everything is now peaceful. Just let everyone out and I’ll come in to take over.”

“Sir, can you send someone for my wife and baby? They’re at the Tempton Hotel just a few blocks from here. I want them to see this.”

“The Tempton? Of course, we’re on it.” Kurt looked at Detective Silverton, she shook her head.

She whispered, “No hotel by that name.”

“Oh, and Stephen. How is the Senator doing?”

Stephen looked at the receiver in disbelief. Anger filled his insides. “Who am I talking to?”

“My name is Detective Kurt Simmons. We don’t want any bad publicity, Stephen. We need to get the Senator some help.”

“What is this, some kind of joke?” He threw the phone to the floor. He looked at Eve and shouted. “Get over here. Get over here now, traitor!”

Eve stepped forward, and when she reached him, he grabbed her arm and dug his fingers into her skin. He put his mouth to her ear and whispered, “You and I are leaving now, and we’re leaving the way we came in. You seem to know this place so you should know how to get out of here. We’re going out the back way.” He looked at her with hatred in his eyes. “Go, now! Or I’ll start shooting.”

Eve looked at Claire, her mouth quivering. Ron, Christine, Rachel, all stared in horror. Then she looked at Donna, “Did you know this would happen?”

“Shut up and move.”

They walked to the back where the tree had grown over her portal. She put her hand out to brush over it and as before, it shriveled up before their eyes, exposing their escape hatch.

Everyone in the room watched, the camera was on them, on them as they disappeared out the exit. Ron ran toward them. He reached the wall, but it was too late. Frantically, he groped the branches that had replaced the door. “No, Eve!”

79

Mac sat in his chair outside their hotel room, determined to guard Rachel and Claire. He felt a responsibility to the women, he would make sure that nothing harmed them.

It was nearly dawn when Detective Simmons brought Claire back from the hospital. He knew he wasn't needed there, but proudly sat guard. *These women may need both of us, who knows?* With Mac outside in the hall and Kurt inside the room, the women would be secure.

Rachel was asleep, Ron and Christine were staying in the adjoining room. Claire sat on the couch next to Kurt, holding her arm out so he could sign her cast.

"It's not a cast, Claire. It's a sling."

She laughed, "Detective, then I want you to sign my sling." Her eyes twinkled. Her good arm was extended, offering him a pen.

He took the bait and wrote something down. "There. Now I have a million questions for you, Senator."

"Wait, I can't see what you said. Kurt, do it again so I can see what you wrote." His writing was hidden, tucked away at the back of the cloth.

"No, you'll figure it out soon enough."

Her mouth curled into a flirty shape, "You like me, don't you Kurt?" She ruffled his hair with her free hand. "You like me, don't you?"

"Of course I do, I've always liked you."

"No, I mean you liikkkeee me."

"Oh, shut up, Senator." He put his hand on the back of her neck and drew her to him. Their lips touched. Her warm, soft lips were so inviting. He whispered, "Oh, Claire."

She responded, their tongues slowly played with each other. Her body felt the heat erupting inside.

His passion got the better of him, he'd almost lost this wonderful woman. He couldn't stop from telling her how he felt by showing her.

"Oh, my. Oh, God. I am so sorry." Rachel stood in the doorway of her room, knowing that her timing had been very, very bad.

Claire and Kurt jumped, giving some distance between their bodies. "Rachel, what are you doing?"

"Look, I'm sorry you guys. But I've just got to ask, what took you so long?"

Thursday

Claire was the first to wake. She lay in bed smiling, feeling different. Then it hit her, she'd slept through the night. *No Trista. Kurt.* Her fingers caressed her lips, the memory of his kiss triggering butterflies inside her. Laughing at herself for acting like a young girl, she threw the blankets aside and looked around the room. Rachel had laid a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt out for her. *I really need to get some clothes today.* She picked up the denims and wondered if she'd be able to squeeze into them. Laughing at the thought of her walking without bending her knees, she went into the shower.

When she was dressed, she looked at herself, proud that the jeans were working after all. She opened her door that led to the sitting room and saw Kurt asleep on the couch. She sat next to him, and wrapped her fingers lovingly around his arm. *You are such a dear man.*

His eyes opened and she jumped, screamed. "My God, Kurt!"

He also shot up abruptly, squeezing his eyes. He tried rubbing them. "Claire, I'm sorry. Guess I was really out of it." He ran his fingers through his hair while playing some more with his eyes. "Ah, that's better. What a pretty site to wake to."

She stood and went to the phone, "Some guard you are. I thought you guys were supposed to sleep with one eye open." She heard a man answer her call. "Yes, please send up a full pot of coffee." A funny look came over her, and she winked at Kurt. "Oh, and do you have any scones, preferably ones that are right out of the oven? And some strawberry jam? Yes, thanks."

Claire raised her head to see Rachel walking out in her pajamas. “Good morning.” She gracefully showed off the jeans as a model would while strutting down the catwalk. “Can you believe it? They actually fit.” A thought came to her and she frowned. “Oh, maybe I shouldn’t push it with the scones.”

Kurt asked if he could use Claire’s shower and left them on their own.

“He’s nice to look at, Claire.”

“Don’t make too much out of it, Rachel.” She grinned, “But you do have something there.” Claire spun around at the sound of knocking.

Mac opened the door, pushing a cart, bringing delicious smells into their room. “Good morning, ladies.”

Rachel gave him a big smile and told him to take a seat. “Mac, how long until you need to get home to bed? I’d like you to go to work with me for a while if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, I’m ok for a while. I really should be home by noon though.” He turned to leave, but stopped when Rachel rushed to him, and grabbed his arm.

“Not a chance, mister. Sit and have breakfast with us. Come on, sit.” Rachel poured their coffees and served the scones. “I gotta tell you guys. It’s rather nice to wake up to a full house. I’m having a ball.”

Mac looked around the room, “Where’s the detective?”

Claire took a sip of her coffee and answered him, “He’s in the shower. He should be joining us shortly. Enjoy yourself, Mac.”

Claire was the first one to mention Eve. “I need to try to find her, Rachel. She’s done a lot for us, for Ron and Christine. We can’t ignore that she needs us.”

“Look, that’s about all I could think about last night, but we don’t know how to find the door. How can we get to her if we don’t have access?” She

tasted the scone. “Hmm, that’s good, but not like Donna’s. I’m taking my show there tonight, but to prove that the door doesn’t exist. I’ll find someone to tell us why the video from last night can’t be what it seems. That sounds pretty crazy to do that, doesn’t it?” She sat next to Claire. “I don’t think this is something that should be known, we shouldn’t mess with it.”

“What about Eve? She needs us.”

Rachel replied with a snarky expression, “Of course she does. So let’s talk to Ron and Christine when they wake up. They might have an idea. Maybe we can get Donna to help us find the portal after the show. Maybe we can go to the future tonight, Claire.”

In the adjoining room, Ron lay in bed staring at his wife. “Christine, you look as good to me at 35 as you did at 65.”

She turned on her back and laughed. “You’re a funny one. I can’t get over this.” She jumped out of bed and pranced over to the mirror, delighting Ron by not putting anything over her nude body.

“My God, you are beautiful! Come back to bed, honey. I’ll make you feel like a woman.” His young face beamed, and he patted the sheets next to where he lay.

She responded by running into the bathroom and turning on the shower. “No way, mister. But, you could join me in here.”

Before she could say anymore, the shower curtain whipped open and he stepped in, surprising her. He heard a delightful scream. “Oh, Ron. I can’t get over what’s happened.”

“Shut up, Chrisy. I promise you’ll say the same about what’s about to go down as well.” He stared at her, then ran his palms up the curvature of her body, stopping at her breasts. There, he worked his fingers in a motion he

knew would drive her crazy. “These fine girls are mighty beautiful, Chrisy.” He put his mouth on them and began running his tongue over her skin.

“Oh, Ron. I still love you after all these years. Oh, Ron. Oh...”

Kurt joined the others for coffee and began with questions from the night before. “I don’t know if you two think your lives seem out of the norm lately, but I for one, do. And, since it’s my job to find the bad guys, I have to get my questions answered.”

Claire and Rachel shot each other a look and put their heads down to sip their coffee.

Rachel finally started in, “Kurt, we know you have to do this. Why don’t you come to my show tonight? I plan on debunking the video that was taken last night. We can’t have people thinking there’s some kind of magic door in that place.” She jumped up and filled her cup. “Sorry, I have to get ready to go. I’ve got a long day ahead of me. I’ll see you both tonight?”

She didn’t wait for an answer, but instead, left the room. Mac felt out of place so excused himself, and strolled out to take his position in the hotel hall. Claire stood and began to pace.

“Come on, Claire. If you don’t trust me by now, you never will. Now, tell me what you know about that coffee shop.”

They heard knocking from the adjoining room’s door. Claire went to it, smiling at the happy faces standing on the other side. Looking at Christine, she laughed, “Looks like you need to go shopping with me today. You lost about 25 lbs since last night, Christine. Come on in. I want to introduce you to Kurt.”

81

Rachel and Mac had left, but only after everyone had promised her that they'd be at the coffee house for the show. Now, they were down to four in the hotel room. It was time to share with Kurt their unbelievable story.

“So, Rachel plans on disproving what we all saw last night.” Kurt looked at the others. “Now why is she doing that? Who is going to let me in on your secret?”

Ron stood up and poured some coffee for himself, then looked at the others, “Anyone for a refill?” He sat across from where Kurt was sitting and started telling him what he knew. He told Kurt everything ending with a question. “Do you remember seeing Christine and me in there last night?”

“No, I don't. Why?”

“I was there, we spoke. But I was 30 years older when we met.”

“Ok, I see.” Kurt stood. Turning to Claire, he scowled. “I won't be your punching ball for jokes. I expect all of you to be upfront with me, but.. Oh, forget it. I'll be at the office when you want to talk.”

Claire raised her hand out to stop him, “Wait. Please, Kurt. Don't you see why we have to cover this up? As soon as we begin to level with you, this is your reaction. I even had a hard time convincing Tony, but he had scientific results to help him believe the impossible.”

Kurt could barely speak, so opted to shake his head. “Tony? Is he gone because of this?”

“Yes. I found a piece of the Latino newspaper on the floor of Senator Alexander's office. It was the wrapping for the baseball Bill was showing off. He didn't get it from a pawn shop, Kurt.”

Kurt felt the hot sensation flow up his neck, his face flushed. Forgetting there were others in the room, his raised voice made Claire's body to shudder. "Damn it, Claire. Why didn't you tell me this before? How the hell can I help you if you don't tell me these things?"

"I'm sorry, it's just that I can't prove it. Tony ran the tests on the ink, his results convinced him. He wanted to meet Eve that night."

"Why? Why kill an innocent man, Claire?"

"Senator Hancock was told to do whatever he could to convince me to sign their dirty pledge. It's all about SB 1257. Tony, Rachel's car, the anthrax hoax." She stopped to catch her breath. "Oh, and that stupid thing about the Ambassador to Chile. And, probably the fire in my apartment."

"What about this thing about Senator Hancock's wife? Did you have an affair with him?"

Claire put her head down, and then took a deep breath. Looking up, she glared at him sternly and said, "Yes, I went with him to the White House Dinner last Saturday, and I went back to his flat with him. The next morning, I found a manual full of talking points us Senators are supposed to articulate to the press. I snapped several photos before he caught me. He didn't know I had the pictures, but he did know I was on to him."

"And those are the photos that Rachel had on her show last night?"

Claire nodded.

"I may have proof that the Senator's wife is a fake. I'll know for sure later today." His head was aching. "And where's that proof of Tony's?"

"I don't know. It has to be in his apartment still." She whipped around to include Ron and Christine in the argument. Her arm was stretched out, her hand waving at the couple. "Just look at them, Kurt. They came through the portal. They are from our future. Thirty years into our future!"

Kurt sat, he held onto the sides of his head and asked Claire for some aspirin. “How can you expect me to believe your story?”

“We did speak last night in the café, Kurt. My wife and I are close with Eve, the woman who was taken last night. Just look at that reporter’s film, for God’s sake.”

Eyeing him, Kurt’s tone sounded deadly, “Oh, I plan on it.” He was angry, stunned that Claire had left him out in the cold all this time.

“So here’s the million dollar question, Claire. How are you going to vote?”

She was surprised by his last question. “Kurt, I’m undecided.”

Christine couldn’t believe her response. “What do you mean? Look at us, Senator!” She pointed at Ron, then back to herself. “What part of this bill don’t you get? Tomorrow is the first day of our history’s existence. This atrocity of a bill is what caused our country to go sideways. Safety? They say it will make us safe? Try hate. Within five years, there were townships across the country. Latino Town, Black Town, every minority you can think of was banished to a ghetto. And women? God. Ron and I fled and lived in D.C.’s Latino Town. No one, but the men in White Town had any rights.” She threw her hands in the air. “Damn it, lady. You saw the paper. They killed Conchita because she was walking to a bus after dark! So tell me, Claire. Make me understand how you could be undecided about how to vote?”

Claire looked at Kurt. She quickly wiped her nose, and sniffled. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything to you earlier. I didn’t tell anyone, it was all getting out of hand. I mean with Bill and all. I should have trusted you, Kurt.” And then to Christine. “We’re going out, just you and me. I’ll tell you what’s on my mind and hear more from you. But you and I are going to

get some clothes and then we'll come back here. We're on the same team, all of us here. So I suggest we work at getting along."

Claire picked up her purse, and said to Ron. "Please talk to Kurt about a plan to find Eve. We owe it to her to do that. Come on, Christine."

The women left, and Ron began telling Kurt his idea. "I don't think the portal works except for late at night. Eve always used it then."

Kurt interrupted before he could say anymore, he took out his business card and pulled out some money. "Ron, I need to get out of here and get to my office. Come by in a few hours so we can discuss this. The address is on the card, give it to the taxi driver. He'll know how to find me."

Without waiting for a response, he left the room. It wasn't until he was in the lobby when he realized why he had to leave so abruptly, *she really slept with the bastard that killed Tony, she really did it.*

82

Claire took Christine to Nordstrom, her favorite department store. It was her little way of giving to the family-owned Seattle franchise; it helped her feel closer to her beloved West coast city. They both needed to be outfitted, Claire because of the fire, Christine because of her overnight weight loss.

Christine was a smaller woman at 35 years old than she had been at 65. Claire couldn't wear Rachel's jeans for the upcoming vote.

"Christine, can you help me with this sling?"

Christine had been silent since her outburst, but her kind, motherly ways were inherent so she gently helped Claire with the clothes. Without taking her eyes away from her work, she said, "You're lucky the bullet hit your arm. I think Stephen has gone mad. That kind of thing can happen when your country is at war with itself."

"You don't like me much, do you, Christine?"

She continued to help dress Claire while answering, "Stephen wrongfully calls Eve a traitor. In reality, she's a hero. Our country may destroy itself completely because of her, but the suppression had to stop. All she did is reveal the truth. The real traitor of this country is the one who allowed the suppression to become legal."

"Christine, I'm not the monster that you believe I am, you don't have all the facts."

"You have peaceful protesting in your streets. The protesters in my streets are being massacred. Why couldn't you answer Kurt's question? How can you not be decided about your vote, Claire? Eve showed you what her life is like. The Conchita incident is the norm there."

Christine finished with her work and stood back to look at her. “There, you look like a distinguished woman in this suit, its perfect.”

“So you think my vote can change the future?”

“I know that you must try, Claire. That’s all I know.” She paused, “I don’t have a crystal ball, how would I know what the future holds?”

“Well, the woman is a comedian. Please help me out of this. I want to get the three outfits you tried on, and this one for me.”

Claire’s phone buzzed, it was Clancy.

“Senator, just thought you’d like to know. Charlie Madsen, a Democratic Senator from Arizona is on board to vote with us. Looks like we won’t need you after all.”

“What?”

The line went dead.

83

Kurt sat at his desk, going over the details of the documents Joe had left him. The phantom suicidal wife of Senator Hancock was just that, but it wasn't good enough for him. He wanted to get him on murder, preferably for the murder of Claire's friend, Tony Geradelly. He hadn't known him as well, but he had been fond of the man. He wondered if there were other victims at the hands of the Senator.

Kurt's thoughts flashed to the previous night when he had Claire in his arms. Her warm lips, her... "Damn it, Claire!" *How could she have slept with that asshole?*

The phone rang, it was the fire marshal. Kurt was filled in on the latest details of their investigation. "Yes, ok. Keep me posted. Thanks." He hung up only for the phone to ring again. This time it was Joe.

"Kurt, I'm at that coffee house. I've got him, Kurt! I have a witness that saw a man tamper with the reporter's brakes. Can you get down here?"

Joe was yelling into the phone to be heard over the sounds in the café. Reporters from every network were trying to make sense of the way Stephen and Eve had disappeared the night before.

"I'm coming now, Joe. Great work." Kurt grabbed his coat and then picked up a photo of Senator Hancock that was lying on his desk. Then he grabbed one of the manuals with photos of known criminals from his book shelf. He removed one of the faces and replaced it with the Senator's.

"Damn you, Claire. You are a damned full time job."

Kurt used his siren to help him get past the protesters en route to the coffee house. The crowds were copious now that the vote was near. He saw

Joe waiting in front of the now famous café, the reporters had turned the street into a chaotic mess.

“Kurt, over here.” Joe was waving at him.

He left his car and managed to get through the people, flashing his badge to encourage them to let him by.

“Joe, where’s this witness?”

“He’s inside, let’s go.”

Inside, Joe led him to a booth in one of the smaller chambers of the strangely designed structure.

“Mr. Jones, this is Detective Simmons. Can you tell him what you told me?”

“How do you do, Mr. Jones. As you can imagine, this is serious. It qualifies as attempted murder. We’re just lucky that the suspect you saw wasn’t successful.”

Kurt looked at the man sitting across from him. He was dressed in jeans and wore an expensive jacket. He guessed the man was somewhere around forty. He was pleased, he knew he was going to need a respectable looking witness for this crime. There would be high-priced lawyers involved if he could manage to get this into the courtroom.

“Like I told the detective, I saw this guy lift the hood of the car. It was raining pretty hard that night, so I was going to ask if he needed help.” He pointed in the direction of the street. “I live in the apartment building across the way so I got a good view of him.”

“What stopped you from helping him, Mr. Jones?”

“Oh, I went down there, but he was already gone. Man, whatever he did to that car, he worked fast.”

“Did you get a look at his face?”

“Sure, it was dark, but there was a street light over him.”

Kurt couldn't believe his luck. He pulled out the book full of head shots and opened it to show him the first page. "Please look carefully at these photos, Mr. Jones."

Kurt looked at Joe as they waited for their witness to scan through the mug shots. When Jones came to the Senator's photo, he stopped. He pointed and said, "That's him. This is the one."

"You seem pretty sure, couldn't it be..." Kurt pointed to a face that had similar features as Bill Hancock's. "Maybe this guy?"

"No, it's this one." He pointed at the Senator again. "You see this guy's haircut? He spends a lot for that look. You see? I'm a hairdresser. I notice these kinds of things."

The satisfied sensation Kurt felt was almost overwhelming. "Mr. Jones, would you be willing to identify him in a line-up? And possibly be a witness in front of a judge?"

"I sure would, I like her show. This asshole was messing with my lady."

Kurt stood and thanked him. "Joe, get the contact information for Mr. Jones. And Mr. Jones? I may need you later today for that line-up. Are you available?"

"Yea, I'll make myself be available." He pulled a business card from his wallet. "And Detective? Don't take this the wrong way, but you could use some professional help with your cut. I'll give you a free one."

Kurt laughed. "Thank you, Mr. Jones. Joe will be in contact with you later today." He slapped Joe on the shoulder and said, "Take care of our friend here, and," he pulled some money out of his wallet. "Buy him some lunch. I'll let you know when you can bring him in."

Kurt exited into the street and saw Rachel and her crew pulling up. *This day is getting better by the minute.* When he was close enough, he called her name.

Rachel turned and smiled, “Kurt, I wake up to you and now here you are again.” She laughed at the expression one of her cameramen gave her.

“Listen, there’s a man inside with my detective. Do me a favor and be nice to him. He’s a fan of yours and an important person for my case. Maybe you could give him an autograph or something.”

“What case?”

“Got to go, Rachel. But I’ll be back here for the show tonight. In fact, I wouldn’t miss it.” He started his car while dialing his phone. “I want you to pick up Senator Bill Hancock as a suspect in the tampering of the Ross car. I’m on my way in.” *Yes, this day keeps getting better and better.* His thoughts of Claire and their kiss returned, but this time, he smiled.

Claire surprised the doctor with her answer. “Trista has left me, I don’t see her in my dreams anymore.”

Dr. Sheridan was confused, “Then why are you here? You should be happy, Claire. Are you sleeping through the night?”

“I’m afraid not. But it’s stress, not the nightmares.”

“Ok, Claire. So tell me what the stress is from.”

“I’m getting a lot of pressure to vote for this bill tomorrow. The wording of this thing could ruin the future of this country.”

“Then what’s the problem? I’ve never seen you question yourself before. What makes this different?”

Claire looked into the doctor’s eyes and stared for some time. *Careful, don’t say too much. She’ll put you in a crazy house.* “Do you think it’s possible to change the future, Doctor?”

“I don’t know the answer to that question. I don’t have a crystal ball. And even if I did, how would I know if it was changed? I’d need something to compare it to.”

“Ha, you’re the second person to mention the crystal ball theory today.” She was quiet again and then asked, “If I don’t vote for this bill tomorrow, my Party will see to it that I don’t get re-elected in the fall. Without my power as a Senator, I won’t be able to help with laws to help women. I made a promise to Trista. I’d be breaking my word to her, but on the other hand, if I do vote for this bill, I could be destroying the lives of not only women, but thousands of others as well. It could be catastrophic. So, Doctor, let me ask you. What if this country changes and becomes a very bad place for many people. And, it’s because of this bill passing. Can I

change the outcome of the future by the way I vote? And if I can, could I also change the future by keeping my job and voting for the damn thing? You see? If I can change things by my vote, I could also change the future by what I do as a Senator.”

“I suppose you could, Claire. But it depends on what you’re fighting, and if your strength can be enough to do what you want to do. As a Senator, you can only do so much. You have to convince others to see things your way.”

“Yes, but I might be successful at that. Maybe start a movement. Create a society whose mission is to fight for the rights of individuals. I already have a reputation, I’m the one to do this kind of thing. If I know what direction we’re headed, I can change the course and save multitudes of people from a horrible life.”

“Claire, where is this coming from?” Dr. Sheridan began writing on her prescription pad. She tore the page off and handed it to her. “You are right. Your stress level is too high. I want you to take these pills to relax. Do you know what a killer stress is?” She stood. “I want to see you in four days, Claire. We need to talk you down before you do damage to your body.”

Claire realized that she’d gone too far, but she had needed to talk it out. Get it out with someone who wasn’t hounding her about how she intended to vote. “Sure, Doctor. I’ll make an appointment for Monday. Thank you, and of course, you are right.”

Claire left, surprised at how good she felt. She headed for her office to get some work done. Then she remembered Clancy’s call. *It isn’t really my choice anymore. They have the Senator from Arizona for their dirty vote.* She needed to talk to Ron and Christine, she needed to know more details about their old life. She changed courses and headed for the Marriott.

85

Kurt had one stop before going back to the station. He parked the car in front of the Pawn shop and entered. He held up his badge and asked for the manager.

“That would be me, sir.”

“I understand that you sold a baseball this past Monday. You know, the one with the autograph by Bill Buckner?”

“Sorry, Detective. I would remember having something like that in here. You’ve got the wrong place.”

“Ok, well thanks for your time.”

Kurt left and went to the next shop on his list. One by one, he was able to eliminate them. Satisfied he had his answer, he went back to the office where he would confront Tony’s killer.

Three police officers walked into Clancy’s office where the Sanctioned Four were meeting. One of them walked up to Senator Bill Hancock and addressed him in a formal way. “Senator, we need for you to come down to the station. We’re here to drive you there.”

Clancy stood. His tone was furious, “What is the meaning of this? How dare you.” He went to the phone and called his attorney.

Bill was in shock. “What’s this about, are you arresting me?”

“No sir, we’re only taking you in for questioning.”

Clancy was off the phone and shot Bill a stern look, “Go with them. Tom Wilkins will meet you there. Don’t say anything to them unless he’s in the room with you, got that? And call me when they’re finished with their questions.”

The officers took Bill to their car and asked him to get in. The station was near Clancy's office so they were there within 30 minutes. Bill was met by the attorney, Tom Wilkins, and they were given a few minutes alone.

"Bill, do you have any idea what this is about? They want you to be part of a line-up. You have the right to deny their request. You have the law on your side, but of course, they may find it suspicious if you decide not to play with them. Is there something I need to know?"

"Hell, I have no idea. Can they charge me with something to stop me from voting tomorrow?"

Tom Wilkins felt that feeling he got when something wasn't right. Bill had come up with that ridiculous thought too fast. He didn't like working with people that held back on him, it was a waste of time for him to work with this kind of client., but it had been Clancy that called him. His head cocked to the side while his eyes stayed focused on his new client. "If you haven't done anything, then we have nothing to worry about, right? Let's do the line-up and that will be the end of it."

The door opened and Kurt walked in with a file tucked under his arm. He took a chair across from the other two and began, "Senator, do you have in your possession a baseball signed by Bill Buckner?"

Bill looked for help from his attorney, but only saw a confused look in his eyes. "Yes, I lucked out finding it at a pawn shop the other day."

"And what shop might that be?"

Bill couldn't believe the questions, "How the hell would I remember its name? What is this anyway? Is it a crime to find a good deal?"

Tom leaned over and said in a calm tone, "No, of course not, Bill." And then to Kurt, "This is a waste of time, Detective. Where are you going with this?"

“I do understand what you’re saying, Senator. I don’t believe I would remember something like that myself. So, let me ask this instead. Where is this pawn shop?”

Bill stood, his face reddened. He looked at his attorney and shouted, “This is stupid, do I need to answer his questions?”

Tom looked at Kurt and said, “Detective, I think we’re done here. Now, that matter of the line-up, my client has said that he will agree to it, but first, I’d like a few more minutes alone with him.”

Kurt smiled, he stood and told them there would be someone by to escort them in ten minutes. He left the room. He knew he had to be smart. Tom Wilkins was a sharp one with a reputation of working with the famous. You didn’t get his kind of standing without good reason. He left them and went to check in with Mr. Jones.

When they were alone, Tom told Bill to sit. He was direct when he started with him. “Bill, let’s get something straight here. I’m not going to work with you if you don’t tell me everything. I don’t like surprises, you got that? Now what the hell is this baseball thing about?”

“Look, I said I got it from a pawn shop because I knew it was hot. This guy on the street approached me and showed it to me. I don’t know. He probably recognized me. People know how much I love the game. I was a sucker for him. He showed me the ball, and of course I wanted it. I gave him a hundred bucks and that’s all there is to it. Can they arrest me for that?”

The first thing Tom knew, was that he was being lied to. Bill’s eyes were not addressing him, his body language was all wrong. Bill was fidgeting with his tie, there was a bigger story here than an autographed ball and he needed to know what it was. “You say it was hot? Do you know where it came from?”

Bill was on a roll now, his words were spitting out anything that might help him. “How the hell would I know that? This guy was just some thug that approached me. I mean he looked like he was on drugs or something. Yes, he was definitely high. I probably could have gotten it for half the price and he wouldn’t have known the difference.” He stood, he needed to stand, stretch his legs. “Where is that escort? I want to get this thing over with.”

“Calm down, I’ll see what I can do.” Tom went into the hall and asked where he could find Detective Kurt Simmons. He didn’t like what was happening, his control of the situation was being obstructed by the idiot inside the room. There was one thing he and his client agreed on though. They did need to get this thing over with.

86

Kurt stood next to Mr. Jones and Joe. They looked through the window as the men filed in for the line-up. Tom Wilkins was in the room with them. Each man on the other side of the window took their turn stepping forward, going through the ritual, a performance for Mr. Jones.

“It’s number three. That’s the guy I saw. No question.” Jones pointed at him, “That’s the asshole that tried to do in my favorite news lady.”

“I know it’s obvious how serious this situation is, Mr. Jones. So I ask you, are you sure, absolutely sure?”

“Yea, I told you. Look at how each strand of his hair sits perfectly on that miserable asshole’s head and then look at the others. That dude has one hell of a hairdresser. I notice things like that. When I saw him under the street light, that was my first thought.”

Kurt shot Tom his gotcha expression. He raised his eyebrows, and a stiff upper lip emerged from his mouth. “Thank you, Mr. Jones. We will definitely be in touch. You can get a ride home with the officer that brought you here.” He turned to a detective in the room and told him to proceed with the arrest.

It was time for Tom to get aggressive, he hated working for worms like Hancock, but Clancy was a powerful entity, one that had served him well over the years. “I’ll have him out of here in two hours, Kurt. This is a waste of our time and you know it.”

“Ok, waste our time. The asshole’s been tagged. Live with it.”

Kurt went to his office and called the DA. “We’ve got a positive ID on the Senator that puts him at the reporter’s car, and I can prove he lied about where he found the base ball. Oh, I don’t know if it’s related, but it could

be. I have proof that Senator Winslow didn't spend time with any Ambassador in South America, and let's see..." Kurt was reading through his notes. "This wife of Senator Hancock was manufactured, she doesn't exist. What do ya think of those apples?"

Kurt listened to the DA, and then said, "Tom Wilkins is here. He'll be working the system today but we've got him, sir. I have some more leads that I'll follow up on to strengthen our case, I'll keep you posted."

Kurt hung up. He was already exhausted and the day was only half over. He heard a commotion outside his office. He was familiar with that sound, it was the press. *Ah, damn it. That was fast.* He followed the sounds of the disorder and there he was, Tom Wilkins doing his job, performing for the cameras.

"This is a sham, and perhaps politically invoked. Senator Hancock will be arraigned in a few hours, and that will be the end of it. He'll be back at his home by night fall, and most definitely will be at the Senate Chambers for the vote tomorrow afternoon. The seriousness of this is beyond my comprehension and I will demand that the DA make a formal apology to my client. That's all for now." Tom's eyes caught Kurt's for a moment, a brief encounter that would be their last on the subject until the arraignment.

Kurt was impressed with his work, knowing that the judge likely had ties with some of the people Wilkins worked for. Most people in this town were bought. No surprises there. His phone rang, he saw her name on the mini screen.

"What is it, Claire?"

"Oh my, a bit grumpy today. Why didn't you let me in on your PI work? Don't you think I have a right to know?"

"Maybe I didn't want to put you on the spot, Claire. I mean, first you spend the night with this guy, then you find your friend dead by his hands."

His line went dead.

Ron and Christine pushed their way through the people in the street to get to the entrance of the coffee house. Protesters, anti and pro for SB 1257 had congregated outside, knowing that they would make the news. Every network was represented. The talk in the street was about this door that was and then wasn't... all caught on video.

Rachel's crew was setting up inside, she'd been given an exclusive to broadcast from the scene of the strange phenomena. Only a few VIPs were allowed access to the coffee house.

Mac was standing guard outside the premises; his life had certainly changed in the past couple of days. "Over here, Ron." He waved to them, telling people to let them by. "Where's Claire? I was told it would be the three of you."

"She had some work to do, but said she'd be here before the show starts." Ron put his arm behind Christine's back to usher her into the place of the hour, the newly famous coffee house that was stirring up all the commotion.

At the back wall where the entire world had witnessed its portal the night before, there were wires, and an assortment of instruments attached to the branches of the tree. Scientists had been at it all day, in an attempt to crack its mystery. It appeared to be a concrete wall, as all the others in the coffee house, but what about the incident from the night before? They were baffled, and now it was nearly time for the show.

They were approaching show time, Rachel seemed worried. She kept glancing at the front entrance in obvious concern about something.

Finally the door opened and Kurt busted in. “Damn, there are a lot of folks out there.” He looked around to see the television crew, the science fair in the back. He saw Ron, Christine, and Rachel. He kept scanning the room, but no Claire. It was almost show time, and still no Claire. He whispered under his breath, “What the hell now?”

His eyes rolled, his left eyebrow twisted into an odd shape when he and Rachel locked eyes with each other. He watched her approach him, he didn’t feel good about it. Something wasn’t right. “Where is she, Rachel? And give it to me straight, I can’t help her when you keep me in the dark.”

“Calm down, she’s on her way. I asked her to fetch my special guest, she’ll be here any minute.”

Claire hated being at his door. The memory of her last time there made her ill, but she took a deep breath and rang his bell. She waited, almost hoping he wouldn't answer.

Then she heard the sound of someone on the other side. Again, a deep breath. *Be confident, damn it.*

“What do you want, Claire?”

“Bill, please let me in. I need to talk to you.”

She heard the sound of him unlocking the door. When it opened, she was eye to eye with him, not the handsome man she remembered from just a few days earlier.

“What do you want?”

“Listen, I know this has been a rough day for you, but I think you might be able to turn that around.”

He laughed, “Now why would you care? What are you up to?”

She pushed the door open and walked in. His place was a mess, a sure sign of his depressed state. “Bill, I know you have signed a pledge to stay away from Rachel's show, but she wants you and me on it tonight. Sort of a point counter-point encounter. You'll be able to give your talking points for tomorrow's vote and debate with me the pros and cons. No one can be angry at you for that. Come on, what do you say?”

“Do you know what your friend did to me today? Do you know what that asshole did to my reputation?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. God, how she detested this man. “You know he doesn't have enough on you, Bill. Being on her show will

make it look like you're doing business as usual. If you stay here and hide, what will people think?"

She could see him thinking, she had him thinking! She no longer had to work at her confidence, he was giving it to her, handing it to her. She was winning.

Bill thought of Clancy, *Will he write me off if I go on that show? But damn it, she is making sense. Clancy will understand that I have to protect myself, I can help with the cause, get the people with us. Maybe he will reward me. God, what do I do?* Bill felt ill, never had he seen this coming. *How had it all gone so fucking wrong?*

Bill looked at Claire, "So she wants us to debate on one of her segments? You know I'll win. I believe in this bill, Claire. I know in my heart that it's the right thing for our country."

"Well, then. It should be a good deliberation, because I believe very differently." She knew that the challenge would get to him. She knew his ego, his disgusting character. She knew he would say yes.

"Give me a minute to change." A snarky remark followed, "Snoop all you like, there are no more secrets for you to find here."

She raised her voice to be heard after he left, "I have my car down below, I'll drive. Did I tell you the show is being televised at the coffee house?"

89

Claire and Bill entered the coffee house minutes after the show began. One of Rachel's crewmen led them to a booth where they were prepped for the show. They were to be her last guests.

Claire was curious how they would set up for the show. Rachel was sitting on a stool near the front entrance. They had brought in a video screen and set it up behind where she sat. Rachel began the show, so Claire listened, not quite understanding where her friend would go with the story. "And now we will show you the video footage from last night's remarkable event." Rachel swiveled the stool to look at the screen.

The video was of Stephen with his gun pointed at Eve. It showed him coaxing her to the back of the room where the branch tentacles withered to expose a door behind them. Stephen shouted at Eve to turn the knob and when the portal was open, he shoved her into the room on the other side, following close behind. The last few seconds showed his hand fumble for the door, slamming it behind them. Then the camera remained on the scene to capture the amazing growth of the tree to encapsulate its wall in seconds, hiding the door behind it.

Rachel turned toward the camera and said to her audience, "And that is why we are here tonight. After this quick break, I will speak with Donna, a woman who has worked here for years, and then I have the pleasure of introducing you to Doctor Norman French a physics professor from Princeton University and Katia Shrivinski, a scientist from the Anomalistic Psychology Research Center in Houston, TX. Don't go away, you are going to enjoy what they have to say."

The lights dimmed and Claire watched Rachel walk toward them.

Rachel nodded at Bill, her voice forced, but polite. “Thank you for coming, Senator.” She put her hand out and he obliged, his eyes squinted slightly, trying to size her up. “The night before the big vote, it will be good to have you both on the show.”

“Rachel, your man said we would be on your last set.”

“Yes, Claire. We weren’t sure when you’d arrive so this works perfectly.” She looked up at her producer and patted Claire on the shoulder. “Enjoy the show. Got to go.”

Claire noticed Kurt sitting against the east wall, his eyes locked with hers for a split second. Ron and Christine were with him.

“And welcome back. Donna Smith is a waitress who has worked here for the past twenty years and remarkably hasn’t missed one night in all that time.” The camera was on Donna, a man standing next to it with a sign that said, SMILE. Claire almost laughed at the odd shape Donna’s lips held, while trying to obey.

“Donna, how does anyone work for all that time and not take a night off? I’ve never heard of anyone so faithful to their job.”

“Rachel, this is my home and I get to know the regulars who come here. Your fans might be surprised at how many people come to The Old Mill House and stay into the early morning.” Donna began playing with her hair, her hand sliding down her neck to where it grasped at her skin. An odd sound slipped from her mouth causing her to jerk and straighten her back. “I’m sorry, Rachel. I seem to be a little nervous.”

“Totally understandable, Donna. Just keep your eyes on me and pretend we’re alone.” Rachel looked at her notes and then continued. “Donna, the film we just watched was of that tree on the back wall.” She pointed to the rear. “What do you make of the *portal*, as it’s being called, appearing and then closing up again?”

“Well, it doesn’t happen every night, but I’ve seen it several times over the years. Especially this past week. It only opens up, oh between 11pm and around two in the morning. I don’t know how it works, I just know that it does.” Donna paused and looked around the room before continuing. “I sense things when the portal appears. The first time I saw Eve come through the door, I could see through her. I knew where she came from and knew what she was capable of. That poor dear, I am worried about her.”

So far, the interview was going just as Rachel had planned. Donna was doing a wonderful job to confirm what the video had shown. It would be the doctors who would give her proof that the whole thing was a charade. That would put an end to all the intrusive people poking their noses around. Ron had been clear that no one should enter through the *magical door*. His description of the destructive war and hate on the other side would put anyone’s life at risk. He had been adamant about it. Claire and Christine had agreed, so that was her undertaking with the show, prove that the portal did not exist.

Claire was taken with the care and respect that Rachel was showing Donna. She watched Rachel put her hand on her guest’s arm, and thank her for coming on the show. Then she announced the next break.

The equipment was set up next to the rear wall, the doctors had been running experiments throughout the day. Both experts were led to the front of the room, where Rachel was set to interview them. They planned on panning the camera to the back section of the room, so the doctors could explain their tests.

Rachel’s producer gave her the signal and she began. She introduced both doctors, and cited their credentials. Then she began asking her questions. She clapped her hands together and then rested them on the stack of papers that sat on her lap. “Dr. French, you’ve seen the video, you teach

this stuff, you've seen that strange tree back there, and you've heard how Donna has seen the phenomena more than once. Could there be anything to this story?"

Norman French looked like a stereotypical professor of physics. Somewhere in his 60s, he wore a rather long, bushy beard, spectacles that clung to the cartilage of his nose, and bushy eyebrows. He was a fun character, who appeared to be smiling constantly due to the shape of his mouth. "The video does seem to imply something, but you know, the physics of such a hidden portal are highly improbable, Rachel. Our tests suggest that there is nothing but a concrete wall behind those branches. And a pretty thick one at that."

"But you have seen oddities before, haven't you Dr. French?"

"Yes, but as Dr. Shrivinski will tell you, it is possible for our brains to manifest these oddities, as you put it."

Rachel turned to ask Dr. Shrivinski for the next set of questions. Katia Shrivinski was an attractive woman in her late 50s. She had trained herself over the years to maintain a serious tone for such discussions. Much of her career had been defending her work, but she had surprised many with the outcomes of her experiments. She'd even turned skeptics into believers on occasion.

Dr. Shrivinski began by explaining her work. "Rachel, I work with the theory of quantum mechanics. That is, a mathematical behavior and relations of energy and matter. It is possible to show that the simple scrutiny of subatomic particles can affect how they work. I believe that the human brain is a quantum device, meaning that we can influence our reality. In simple terms, some people believe that by prayer, they can change a physical outcome. If the brain is a quantum device, it would explain

instinct, or ESP. We can use our brains to create our own reality if trained to do so. Paranormal phenomena can be explained with this theory.”

“Yes, but everyone saw this last night, it was caught on camera.”

“I don’t want to get into the semantics of how atoms work, Rachel.” She laughed, “I’m afraid we don’t have enough time for that. I would say though, I see no reason to disbelieve what happened here last night. It’s just that I also see no reason for it to happen again. The portal does not really exist.”

Claire knew Rachel was trying to get her to speak English, and was amused when she saw her basically give up on that line of questioning.

“Doctors Shrivinski and French, would you take us to your equipment and explain what you have been doing today?”

The camera followed them across the room. Rachel stood to the side and let the professionals explain their science. Dr. French ran his fingers across the tangled mass of branches and told them that the attached wires were connected to his machine that ran numbers that they could analyze. “At this time, we haven’t been able to detect any anomalies.”

Rachel walked up to the wall where they had traced where the portal had been. They had determined its position by viewing the video from the previous night. She ran her fingers over the limbs as the doctor had. Then down the outline of the left line, running her hand to where the knob had been. “So this is where it happened.” Her mind roamed. She felt a twinge of pain for Eve. Just as she was ready to turn and face the camera, the small tube-like branches began to crumble. Rachel screamed and jumped back.

The portal flew open. Eve Hart was standing on the other side, her clothes torn, her face dirty, dried blood clinging to her arms and legs.

“Oh my God.”

Eve stepped out into the room. Her eyes had that wide-open wild appearance as if she were on drugs. She looked around, searching for someone in particular.

A person in the café screamed, “She has a gun!”

People scattered. She raised it, using it as her mouthpiece, and it was telling everyone to back away. She saw Claire and it seemed like there was a tiny curl at the corner of her mouth, maybe a smile, maybe just recognition. Slowly, she walked toward her, her eyes fixed on the Senator until she was standing at her table, looking down on her.

“My boys are dead, Claire. I almost got to them, but an explosion tore their limbs apart. I watched it happen. Oh, and Stephen?” A haunting sound came from deep within her. “Can you believe it? A black panther was hungry and devoured him.” She held up the gun and stared at it. “I guess the panther wasn’t in the mood to munch on metal. So, this is a little gift from that crazed man.”

“Eve, we tried to get to you, but we weren’t successful. I am so sorry you went through all that.”

Her head nodded, lips tightened, her teeth clenched. Eve’s body began to sway, she hadn’t eaten in some time. “Everything is gone, Claire. It’s all gone. Those stupid people blew it all up, an entire country now a charred mess. Nothing is left.”

“You need food and rest, Eve. I’ll take care of you if you let me.”

“You know it’s too late for that, right? I have to do this so you can become you. This is how it’s supposed to play out.”

Claire's head began swimming. Eve's words, she'd heard those words nearly every night for years. Stunned, she said, "Trista." She put her hand out for her. Maybe this time she would be able to hold on to her and stop... *Stop what?*

Eve's eyes squinted, her brows seemed to stretch into a reversed vee. It was an interesting affect. She heard a voice at the other end of the room and looked up. In doing so, she caught her first glimpse of Bill.

"Why, it's our forefather, the famous Senator William Hancock." She turned to Claire. "Are you friends with this monster, Claire?"

"No, he's just here to talk on Rachel's show." Claire couldn't control her voice, she choked on some of her words and tears were making her vision blurry.

"Eve, my name is Detective Kurt Simmons. I was here last night. Let me help you." Kurt was standing, but was careful not to move.

Eve focused on Bill again, then waved the gun, directing Bill to stand. "Get up, my forefather. Stand, now."

Bill slowly put his hands in the air and slid off the booth.

When he was standing next to her, she said, "I am going to do you a favor tonight. How would you like to see what you have done to your country?" She poised herself behind him and pointed the gun in his back. "Walk my forefather. Keep walking."

When Bill was standing next to the outline of the portal, she laughed. "Amazing how this thing doesn't want to make it easy, already grown over." Without taking her eyes off him, she reached for the doorknob and just as it had before, the spindly branches crumbled for the camera. She opened it with one hand and ordered him to enter.

Bill turned to face the people in the room and an anguished cry for help slipped out, "Someone, please!" Eve slammed the door with Bill on the

other side.

She turned to Claire and stood tall, her voice stronger than it had ever been. “Do the right thing, Claire. But no matter what happens tomorrow, I have already changed everything. One of our founding fathers is no longer here to sign The Bill of Wrongs.”

Claire watched her raise the gun to her head. She was living her dream. She screamed at the woman, “No! Don’t do it, Eve!”

She scrambled to get to her. Kurt was running next to her. He reached Eve first and stretched his arm out to yank the gun from her. As he did so, Claire threw her arms around her, as Eve’s body crumpled and collapsed.

Claire screamed, “Somebody, get a doctor!” Her sobs prevented her from hearing the panic in the room, people scurrying around. She’d done it, she had always known if she could touch her, she could stop it. She had finally won!

91

Sirens could be heard approaching the coffee house. Eve was still out, now lying on one of the booths.

Ron watched as most of the people were ushered outside. Knowing that Eve would be seen as a crazed woman in need of psychiatric help, their sensational story would remain a secret between a few of them. *Unless, that is, they take her out of here.* The thought struck through his body like a bolt of lightning. He raised his hand to get Kurt's attention, but he was busy talking to someone on the phone.

He pushed his way to where Kurt stood and frantically motioned for him to listen to him.

"Hey, can you hold for a moment?" Kurt covered the phone and asked, "What is it, Ron?"

The man moved close to him so no one else could hear, "We can't let them take her out of here. Do not let them take her to the ambulance."

Kurt shook his head, not understanding.

"Look at Christine and me. Remember what happened to us once we left here."

Finally realizing what the man was telling him, dread flashed through him. He moved the phone to his mouth again and said he would have to call them back.

The paramedics were at the door. Then they were close to Eve. He had to do something. "Hey, I'm in charge here. This woman is in my custody. I do not want her leaving the premises yet."

Claire looked at him in shock, "But Kurt, she needs medical help." She saw Ron behind Kurt shaking his head, attempting to silence her. He was

pointing at himself, running his hands down his body. He appeared to be playing a game of charades.

Finally, Claire realized what his silent language was telling her and she gasped. She stepped back from Eve so the medics could check her out.

They first looked at her breathing, she was fine. One of them took a bottle out of their bag and tipped it until enough liquid had covered a rag. He put it under her nose to trigger her breathing reflex.

Donna watched him, and when he set the bottle on the table, she picked it up. “Well I’ll be. This is rosemary oil.”

Eve gasped and tried to sit up.

“Wait, let me help.”

When she was settled in a comfortable position, the man asked her some questions. He wanted to know when she’d last slept, last eaten.

Finally, he looked at Kurt. “I see no problem leaving her here with you, but she needs to eat. Soup would be perfect.”

“I can take care of that.” Donna rushed toward the kitchen to fetch Eve’s dinner.

Kurt had been thinking of a plan. He had to arrest her, it was expected. “Ok, the show’s over. Everyone, time to leave. He pointed to Claire, Ron, and Christine. You stay until she’s had time to digest this, and then you can help me get her out of here.”

Claire stood near Rachel. Her crew was packing up their equipment. Then it came to her, “Rachel? Is it too late for one last broadcast? Could I make a statement on your show tonight?”

“What are you talking about?”

Claire whispered something in her ear.

Rachel’s expression was priceless. She began to run around, telling her crew to get ready for one more segment. She told her producer what she had

planned. “It won’t take more than a minute or two, can we cut into the network?”

She got her approval and within ten minutes, they were ready. Other than the crew, only Claire’s close friends were in the room. Eve’s energy level was already feeling the results of the soup and crackers. Claire smiled at Eve, and told Rachel she was ready.

“We are interrupting your regular programming for a special announcement. I am still at The Old Mill House where we shot our show tonight. I have with me, Senator Claire Winslow who would like to make a statement.” Rachel smiled, giving Claire her time.

“Many of you are aware of what has happened the past two nights here at The Old Mill House. Well, tonight, I am going to add to the drama. It is my intention that I will resign my position as Senator, effective tomorrow after the SB 1257 vote. Thank you to all of you who have supported me over the years.”

Rachel took over, “Well that’s it for tonight, please check back tomorrow.” She chuckled, “I can’t say that I will deliver this much drama, but I assure you that the show will be a good one.”

Eve put her hand out for Claire. “That was a wonderful thing you just did, thank you.”

“Hey Rachel, are those cameras off? We have some work to do.”

Donna had called her daughter and asked for her to come to the café and bring Cassy, Donna’s granddaughter. “And bring Cassy’s dress that you want me to mend.”

While they waited for her arrival, the crew finished packing their gear and left. Outside, there were still reporters waiting to film Eve’s exit. Kurt told Mac to let Donna’s family in when they arrived.

They waited, when finally, Mac let Donna's daughter and granddaughter in. It was time for them to act.

Ron, Christine, Claire, and Rachel had Eve surrounded. They opened the door, and each gave her hand a squeeze. Then they walked out into the night. There were lights everywhere, and reporters rushed toward them to ask their questions.

Kurt came to the door and waved for them to return. "Wait, come back, I need your help with something." The group turned, obeying his orders. Kurt held his head outside and said to Mac, "Keep up the good work, we should be finished in here soon."

Donna was there with the dress. They quickly removed Eve's clothes, the ones that she was suddenly swimming in, and put the young granddaughter's dress over her head, dressing her as they would a model in a fashion show. Donna smiled, and nodded in approval.

They opened the door once again, but this time they had a child with them. Donna raised her voice to be heard by all, "Please take her home, it's far too late for her to be out."

Rachel nodded at the reporters, "As you can see, we have a youngster to take home, you'll have to wait and talk to the detective."

Inside, Kurt told Donna to take her family into the kitchen. Then he screamed so that Mac could hear him. "God damn it! Mac, hurry! I need your help."

The panic in Kurt's voice terrified Mac. When he was inside, he saw Kurt at the back wall slamming his fist against the tree. "Damn it! She's gone. I turn my back for one minute, and she figures out how to get through this thing." He turned around to see reporters racing inside.

"Detective, what happened?" Camera lights were flashing. Putting his hand over his eyes, he yelled at them. "Get those damn things off me. She

isn't here. She went through the God damned portal. Damn it!"

Kurt threw his coat on, and walked past the reporters. Shaking his head, he mumbled, "Who would have believed what I saw tonight? I've never! Come on, Mac. I'll drive you home." They went into the street and entered his car.

A reporter watched them drive past him and could hear Kurt shouting, "Damn it!"

Friday

The news of Senator Hancock's disappearance shocked the world. The Old Mill House temporarily closed to allow experts time for more testing. World renowned scientists were jumping at the chance to participate in the study.

Rachel's show had become the biggest block busting news hour in history, the clip showing on every network.

At the Marriott, Claire was working hard to dress without any help. She had the television on, and stopped to stare at the video where Bill entered the portal. *My God, he's now in the country he worked so hard to create.* "Ouch!" Her arm felt the throbbing pain shoot down to her fingertips. She noticed a blood spot on the sling. "God." Carefully, she used her left hand to unhook the strap attached to the main suspension. It was slow work, but finally she had it, and the contraption slipped onto the floor. Gritting her teeth to bear the pain, she opened the box containing the new sling. After several minutes of fighting with it, she took a deep breath, marking the end of her endeavor.

"Claire?" She turned at the sound of a soft rap at her door. It opened and a young girl walked in. "Claire, do you mind?"

Claire felt a warmth, a type of pride and love for this young woman, combined to give her a sentiment unlike any she'd experienced. This wasn't her sister, and yet it was, symbolically. This wasn't her daughter. Yet, she felt responsible for her. This girl was a champion of the world. She knew it,

everyone in the other room knew it. *How sad that this young woman's bravery has to stay a secret.*

"Eve, please come in. I've been messing with this silly arm of mine."

The girl entered and ambled over to her. "Please sit, Claire. You must understand how strange it is that I can't look you in the eyes anymore. It might help if you sit. That will help with our new height difference."

"Ha! Yes, of course. The operative word is *strange*." Claire sat in a nearby chair and looked up at Eve. "There, is that better?"

Smiling, she nodded. "I love Ron and Christine. I don't love you yet, but admire what you did last night, and what you are about to do today. You're a brave woman, you don't care what people say or do. You have integrity. You've done everything you can do for this country, Claire. You're losing your title, but not who you are. I believe you will fight for your causes in a different way and be just as successful. It wasn't the label you wore, but you. Your strength is abundant no matter what we call you."

Eve looked around the room, then glanced down to see the rag with the blood stain. She picked it up and went to the bed where she sat across from Claire. Nervousness came over her, she began playing with the rag, her fingers seeming to massage its cloth.

"Claire? What would you think of me living with you?"

Her words brought an abundance of emotions flooding through Claire's veins. She took a deep breath, and when she exhaled, her lips scrunched together in an attempt to hide their trembling. Claire put her head down for a moment.

Eve raised her hand and covered her mouth. "I'm sorry, Claire. I shouldn't have asked." She rose to leave, but felt Claire grasp her arm.

"Sit down, young lady. Until you get a little older, I am the mom here." Claire wiped her nose. "I want to make it a legal adoption if you don't

mind. And I like a neat house. Each one of us must be courteous of ea..."

Eve pulled her up and threw her arms around her. "Yes, yes, yes! But, Claire, I do have one thing that I demand since we are in the negotiating phase of this contract."

"Just what would that be?"

"I want to go to college."

"Done."

Eve became serious and said, "I lost my baby. I knew that would happen. Funny, Claire. I really would have loved her, but I don't feel anything. That part of me is numb. It is very odd to be so young with my memories. Do you really understand what you're taking on with our plan?"

"Oh, you mean that fact that you are two years older than me?" She laughed. "Yes, it is odd, not what I expected when I woke up this morning. And, of course, there will be the problem of your missing documentation. There is no record of your existence, but I'll work that out. Nothing like a good challenge to start my next career."

When they backed away from each other, Eve still had the arm sling in her hands. "And what about this? Do you need me to dress your arm?" She looked closer at the cloth and noticed some writing. "What's this?" She smoothed out its fibers with her thumbs, and smiled. Looking up at Claire, she said, "He loves you."

93

Claire and Eve left the room and joined the others. There was a feast of colorful fruits and champagne sitting on the table. Donna joined them, she had brought scones and homemade jam.

Ron, Christine, Donna, Rachel, Mac, and Kurt were all there. When the women made their entrance, they stood and clapped. Their motions were speaking, screaming of their pride for both of them.

Kurt had poured the champagne and picked up the two remaining flutes and carried them to the women. When he handed Claire hers, he said, “Senator, we know you have an important vote in a few hours, so I took the liberty of filling yours with tonic water.”

Kurt turned to face the people in the room and raised his glass, “We will be the only people to know this, but we are witnessing a wonderful thing here today. Claire Winslow and Eve Hart, together, are the two most powerful women in history. If no one has any objections, I suggest that we reclaim and rename this holiday, June 1st, 2015 as Liberation Day. Constitution Day just doesn’t cut it anymore.”

All their drinks were raised in the air, a unison cheer could be heard. “Here, here!”

It was Mac who spoke first after the toast. “I don’t understand what’s going on here, but I thank you all for including me.”

Rachel laughed and put her arm around him. “You are a very big part of this, Mac. You are here so we can thank you for taking such good care of us. And besides, you helped Claire find her kid sister or whatever she is.” Rachel winked at Donna.

Rachel then went to Claire. "I hope you don't mind, but I also took liberties today." She glanced at her watch. "In about an hour, a big ol' limo is going to park outside this hotel and we are all going to get into it and deliver you to the steps of the Senate Building." She smiled, and added, "The news is saying that the vote will fail today now that Bill is gone, Claire. I am so proud of you." She put her hand on the side of her head and kissed her cheek. "Ok, I had better get ready." She stepped over to the table, and picked up a scone. Waving it in the air, she looked at Donna, "Thanks for these, you are somethin' else." She left while taking a bite from one of Donna's most delicious scones yet.

Claire was still in a daze over Rachel's comment, *her kid sister? Had she come full circle?* She knew she would always remember Trista, but maybe she had finally left her dreams for good. Maybe Eve was Trista's way to be reborn and enjoy the life she'd been cheated out of.

She heard Kurt's voice. "Where were you, Claire?" He laughed at her, "I want to say that I'm sorry for being a jealous jerk."

She stared at him for some time, then spoke. "How long have you and I been friends?"

"Over ten years, I'd say."

"How many fights have we had over the years?"

"Many."

She moved closer to him and whispered into his ear, her last question. "How many times have you kissed me?"

He smiled and put his palms against her cheeks. Pulling her closer, his lips melted into hers. He stepped back and said, "Ask me that question again in about 40 years."

Their limo moved slowly through the streets toward the Senate Rotunda. The protesters were abundant, a dense surrounding of people chanting with their signs. This was the final moment, the epilogue for their messages. The American flags attached to both sides of the stream-lined limo blew in the wind, a proud statement to send to the people in the streets.

Inside the safe confines of the car, Claire and her entourage conversed with each other; the vote, their futures. They had all lived through a life changing event the past days, but it was coming to an end and they knew they needed to prosper from their knowledge, do their part as leaders in their community to help ensure the integrity of their political system.

Ron and Christine sat together, holding hands. They had been given the chance to live a thriving life without the worries of a corrupted milieu.

Ron squeezed his wife's hand, then looked at the others, "Before we get to our destination, I need to say a few things to all of you." He looked at Christine, and put his hand on her head, massaging her beautiful hair. "Christine and I have gone through a transformation that is unimaginable," he looked at Eve, "and of course, Eve too. But in the course of our getting to the place we are, well, we destroyed a woman's livelihood. The coffee house will be closing now that the portal is a scientist's wonder to study for years." Ron locked his eyes on Donna's. "Donna, Christine and I want to open a bakery, a very special one. Rachel here has generously agreed to front the startup money for us, but we're going to need you. My dear lady, your scones are like none of us have ever enjoyed. Would you accept this offer and come be our baker?"

Donna, a woman of few words, was struck with his idea. It took some time, but she smiled, and then began laughing. They'd never seen her laugh. Soon, the car was full of their delightful sounds, some of them had tears streaming down their faces.

"Ok," Kurt took the floor, "My turn. For the first time in my adult life, I know what it is like to have a family. A strange one, but boy, are you a wonderful bunch of people." He had to pause for their laughter. "Everyone here is amazing. So, I think it's safe to invite you all to my house next year for Liberation Day. Not sure that this holiday will catch on with the public, but for us, it's a necessity. So just say that you'll attend."

"Yes!" They all said at the same time and laughed again at how they sounded.

Kurt wasn't finished, he looked at Claire and Eve. "These two women," his lips pursed, his eyes sparkled, "these two women are heros in every sense of the word. Claire, I'm going to do everything in my power to remind you of how I feel every day for the rest of my life."

"Well, halleluiah!" Rachel clapped her hands, and the others joined in. "If you dopes don't get together, you're just stupid."

"It's my turn." Claire had waited for her friends to say what was on their minds, but needed for them to know what she had planned for the future.

"Eve has agreed to let me adopt her. Now, we all know that she will be a difficult kid to raise. You know, she thinks she's 12 going on 42." Eve laughed.

"I'm going to start my own law practice, so you, Detective, will be seeing a lot of me in your office. We may even have a few squabbles now and then, but I think we'll be ok." Claire took a deep breath and continued, "I care deeply for each and every one of you, but when we get where we're going in the next few minutes, I want to go in there with Eve. Just Eve."

She's the real heroine here. I want her to be with me when I surrender my vote."

Rachel laughed, "I'm not exactly used to taking the back seat, however for you, I would. The problem is, my crew is out there, Claire. So sorry, but I will have to do my job."

The limo came to a standstill. Rachel looked out the window and said, "I think it's show time, folks. Let me get out first, and you two follow me. Think of me as your body guard."

Rachael stepped out of the car, it felt like they were arriving at the Red Carpet on Oscar night. Next, Claire and Eve entered into the mob. Reporters had their mics and were trying to get a statement from Claire. "Who's the kid, Senator? Are you really going to vote against this bill?"

Kurt ignored Claire's request and motioned for Ron and Mac to help him clear the way for Claire and Eve. The two women climbed the stairs to the entrance of the building while holding hands.

Both women held their heads high. Inside, there were protesters and cameras everywhere. They kept up with their promenade until they were inside the lobby. Claire went into the rotunda to cast her vote. She was the last to vote. Eve was still with her. The chatter from protesters became louder.

Claire and Eve, standing, turned to face the people and smiled. The counter board needed one more vote for the bill to fail. She saw Clancy staring at her, a hateful air surrounded him. She looked at Eve and pressed the button to make her decision final. She threw their intertwined hands into the air, and the people went crazy. The chanting was unnerving, the excitement heightened by Claire and Eve's presence.

Their country was safe.

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