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The Justice Conspiracy

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# *The Justice Conspiracy*

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**F** *eeding time at the zoo; and me, the head zookeeper,"* the woman at the podium thought in disgust. The glare of the klieg lights seemed especially harsh that morning, causing the woman's topaz-green eyes to stand out more than usual. She had been focusing for the last several minutes on a stain that darkened a faded, blue tablecloth on a long table in the middle row of the hotel casino's Grand Ballroom. She used this focusing technique when she wanted to convey only the appearance of facing down the barely tamed denizens of the Fourth Estate, who gathered around her more often than she liked, lately, in an atmosphere of a feeding frenzy that more than ever characterized the press conference in these troubled times. The technique worked, because appearances had always counted for so much where these interlocutors were concerned.

From the right rear corner of the room, a man with a brash voice shouted, "Hey! Francesca, over here! Can you confirm the rumor that you're losing a million dollars a day since the work slowdown began?"

Another faceless voice cried out from another part of the big room, "Is it true the union guys are walking off in droves from your rail link project?"

A man with a distinct East Coast accent yelled, "Yo! Francesca! How long can Tannah afford teh lose a million bucks a day? He's got his hands full back East just tryin' to keep tings tegedah. And, don't tell me I'm wrong about dis. I know... I'm from duh Northeast Region!"

*"I would never have guessed,"* Francesca groaned, internally.

A catty-sounding, female voice sailed above the male voices of the rowdy assemblage. "Yeah, Francesca...and speaking of the men in your life, what does your wonderful Mister Grant Sinclair have to say about all this? Is he

surprised that the new regional governor for the Southwest was able to act as quickly as she did to slow you people down?"

\* \* \*

The newly elected governor of the Southwest Region, Mozelle Brasheer, sat 266 miles nearly due west of the gaudy, but venerable in its way, hotel in Reno, Nevada, where Francesca was facing down a particularly vociferous pack of press wolves. She was ensconced in the comfort of the lavish, new Governor's Mansion in the city of San Francisco, surrounded by her cabinet members, political advisors, and the ever present Dickie Bamber, her number one advance person. Governor Brasheer had wanted all her key people with her to witness the carnage of Francesca Ferosce at the hands of the press.

"Slow 'em down, hell!" Mozelle shouted. "What's that female tawkin' 'bout? Ahm not jes' gonna slow 'em down, Ahma gonna take 'em down ... permanently. Put 'em outta business, thas what! Don't these people who wraht for newspapahs evah bothah teh read 'em?"

"Apparently not, Governor," Dickie Bamber replied, when no one else did.

"Well, boys," she bellowed, in the heavy drawl that had become one of her distinctive trademarks, "what'd Ah tell ya. The great Francesca Ferosce of the Tanneh Organization scramblin' 'round up theah in front of all them reportahs and TV people... wonderin' what the hell she's gonna say next teh squirm outta this one. Look at her tryin' teh look so calm, and cool, in the face of all that heat. And, Ah don't jes' mean from the lahts!" Mozelle Brasheer laughed a loud, boisterous laugh and slapped her thigh. "Doncha jes' love this, boys?"

Muffled cheers, laughter, clapping, and some foot stomping could be heard coming from the darkened gallery

just behind Governor Brasheer and Dickie Bamber, who sat next to her raised dais near the wall-sized television screen.

After the sudden death of Governor Ellis A. Richardson, followed by her success at the polls in the first democratic elections to take place on the North American continent in more than a generation, Mozelle Brasheer had ascended to the position of Southwest Regional Governor. At fifty-nine, she was the people's choice, or as she liked to say, the "folks'" choice -- the most politically powerful person in a region that included the southwestern states of California, Nevada, and Arizona of the former United States of America.

Shortly after the Collapse, Governor Ellis A. Richardson had seized power in the region for himself, and for a handful of his cronies, who were flagrant opportunists of the worst sort. Power grabs such as this had occurred all over the North American continent to such an extent that Balkanization had become the new order. The now-dead governor's rule had been anything but benign or democratic. In fact, it was well known that he detested democratic institutions, blaming them as he did, in speeches that always turned into tirades, for all human ills, past and present, including the Collapse. Governor Richardson had been vain and paranoid; so paranoid that no successor had ever been named or even considered. He was going to live forever, or so he thought. Then, one day he died, suddenly, creating a huge, political power vacuum. His staff had rushed to find a suitable replacement to run in the quickly called election, but it was too late. Mozelle Brasheer and her campaign staffers were already in place. She had won handily against the best of the worst of one of Richardson's hastily picked straw men, with the usual political rhetoric, coupled with her own "down home" charm. She had also capitalized on a major fear of a huge portion of the new electorate, and what many considered was the former governor's weakest point: his borderline obsession with

protecting the world's first Major Proprietary Environment, which he himself had permitted to be built in the high desert of Southern California. In dozens of campaign speeches throughout the Southwest Region, Mozelle Brasheer had promised she would put an end to what she scathingly referred to as "that little pipsqueak of a godless, lawless, renegade city-state pretendin' legitimacy within the borders of our great and glorious, God-fearin' democratic region!" It had worked. Scarcely ninety days after her inauguration, she had set in motion the new state machinery that would allow her to fulfill a major campaign promise: that of putting an end to the first Major Proprietary Environment and its embryonic equivalent, Tanner City, located in the state of Nevada.

\* \* \*

Francesca continued to listen passively to the stream of questions, acknowledging nothing and no one. They were not questions at all but taunts and thinly veiled insults that revealed a great deal about the state of mind of the questioners.

Suddenly, the opening she had been waiting for came in the person of the distinguished William Mathers of the *Southwest Sun Times*. He rose to his feet slowly, adjusted his spectacles out of habit, to read from his reporter's notebook, which he held at nearly arm's length from his face and at a slight downward angle. The room settled into a nearly acceptable silence as his first words broke over the crowd.

"Ms. Ferosce," he began, glancing up briefly at the podium to establish eye contact, "it has become obvious to one and all that within the last two weeks some kind of work slowdown has occurred at the site of what is to be the world's second, I believe you say, 'Major Proprietary Environment'?" The speaker raised his voice in a mock

questioning tone at the words "Major Proprietary Environment," and squinted in the direction of the podium. "For the sake of clarity and simplicity, I shall refer to it by its more popular name, Tanner City. My colleagues and I," he intoned, removing his spectacles and waving them in a lazy arc at the room, "would be very grateful if you could shed some light on these newsworthy events. In particular, what is your personal reaction to all of this, as well as that of your employer, Mr. Chase Tanner, and of course anyone else you might wish to include. I suppose what we all really want to know, Ms. Ferosce," he continued, letting the notebook fall to his side, "is whether you will accede to the new government's demands, or whether you will press ahead in the face of what appears to be a very daunting, and -- I hope you will forgive me for being so blunt -- probably insurmountable opposition to your project?"

William Mathers had spoken in a deep, resonant voice, and with the authority that befitted his status as one of the last of the grand old men of journalism. He had, for the moment, at least, calmed the agitated throng.

Francesca wasted no time jumping into the ensuing silence, as William Mathers retook his seat near the front row. Speaking directly to him, as if the others did not exist, she said, "Thank you, Mr. Mathers. It's refreshing to know that certain members of your profession, if I may still call it that, are capable of forming a cogent and well thought-out question." Her eyes briefly swept the entire room and came back to rest on William Mathers. "One that merits a like response."

With that, the room erupted into catcalls and whistles, hoots and hollers, and a long "Whoooooooooah" that seemed to go on forever.

\* \* \*



"That's it, girlie!" shouted Mozelle Brasheer. "Piss 'em off! Yeah. Piss 'em off real good, so they crucify ya in the headlahns and on the six ah'clock news! Christ ahmighty, I thought this girl was smaht," she said, looking down at Dickie Bamber from the dais.

"I've been telling you for a long time, Mozelle, she's just a shit-for-brains puppet," Dickie said. "She's no match for you," he continued, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. He waved his left arm up and down rapidly behind Mozelle's back several times. The gallery got the message. Came the refrain from the shadowy figures in the gallery: "SHE'S NO MATCH FOR YOU! SHE'S NO MATCH FOR YOU!" Mozelle waved them off without looking back. "All raht, boys. That's enougha that. I wanna hear the rest of this Francesca Ferosce fiassco."

"What do you expect from someone who's never had to run for anything in her life?" Mozelle recognized the voice as that of her lieutenant governor, Archibald "Buzz" Weeks. Like the straight man he had always played during their rise to power, Buzz Weeks was forever providing her with openings like this.

"Oh, she's runnin' all raht, boys. You betchyur tush she's runnin'. Runnin' fer her lahf, thas what!" Mozelle slapped her thigh again and grinned. The room was quickly drowned in laughter and hand-clapping.

\* \* \*

It took a full minute for the room to return to its brief post-Mathers's calm. Francesca's full attention was now on her interlocutors. No more appearances. Her direct gaze was enough to silence even the most persistent heckler. She was prepared to use podium power on these ruffians.

She began in a low, clear voice without the slightest trace of anxiety or anger in it: "Someone once told me, and I believed him, that what we humans don't understand we

come to fear, sooner or later. What we fear, we tend, ultimately, to hate. I'm not happy that it's like this, but it is...at least for now. This is the nature of the misunderstanding that exists between the new government of the Southwest Region and those who are involved in the building of Tanner City. That this misunderstanding has been turned into a political issue, I find personally reprehensible, but hardly surprising given the lackluster quality of the candidates the voters had to choose from in the recent election."

\* \* \*

"Wahh, that little bitch!" cried Mozelle, half rising out of her chair. "Who's she callin' lacklustah?"

"Now, now," came of the soothing voice of Dickie Bamber. "You said it yourself. The girl's running for her life. What do you expect her to say? She's got to throw a lot of crap against the wall and hope that some of it sticks, or she's finished. And she knows it. Besides, I've prepared a little surprise for the disrespectful Ms. Ferosce," he said with a knowing wink and a grin.

"Is it what we tahked 'bout las' week?"

"Uh-huh," Dickie confirmed, a half-smile still on his face.

In a low voice Mozelle started, "So Virgil and..."

"Shhh!" putting his index finger to his lips. "Indeed they are, governor," whispered Dickie. "Don't you worry, now. I've seen to everything."

\* \* \*

"And so," Francesca continued, "don't confuse work slowdown with work stoppage. Neither Mr. Tanner, nor myself, have any intentions of bowing to this latest round of political pressure. We are operating within the parameters

of long-established agreements. We will continue to do so, and the project will be brought in on schedule. I regard the events of the last couple of weeks as a minor nuisance -- a bit of saber rattling, at most; something that was bound to come up one day, but which can and will be handled."

\* \* \*

"She said *handled*. Did ya hear that, boys?" Mozelle Brasheer exclaimed, still looking at the TV screen. "Jes' lahk they handled that silly ol' coot, Richardson, before he croaked. Well! Ah ain't no Gov'nuh Richardson. He'da walked ovah his own dead grandmutha teh git atta dollah. No siree! These people gotta go, an' Ahm the one teh do it!" she shouted. With that she stood to face the gallery which was, by then, also on its feet clapping, stomping, and whistling. Dickie Bamber started up one of her better known campaign chants: "THERE'S NOTHING TO FEAR WITH MOZELLE BRASHEER!" The others began chanting in unison: "THERE'S NOTHING TO FEAR WITH MOZELLE BRASHEER! THERE'S NOTHING TO FEAR WITH MOZELLE BRASHEER!"

\* \* \*

"So, what does Mister Grant Sinclair have to say about all this, Francesca?" came the voice of the earlier, female questioner, her tone still catty.

"I don't know. I don't speak for Mr. Sinclair. You will have to ask him yourself."

"Aww, come on, Francesca...you know that's not fair," someone whined in a voice that might have belonged to a petulant child. "Sinclair is one of the most reclusive guys on the continent -- maybe the whole damned planet. He hasn't granted an interview to anyone in over twenty

five years. What we know about him you could write on a postcard. Same for your boss, Tanner, the invisible man!"

"That's your problem!" Francesca snapped. "Perhaps if you learned to be a bit more civil, men like Mr. Sinclair and Mr. Tanner would agree to talk to you now and again."

"Oh yeah? So, why do you still hold these press conferences Wondah Woman?" It was the man from the Northeast Region.

Francesca could feel the atmosphere in the room starting to turn from manageably hostile to outright nasty. *"Feeding time is just about over. Time to get the hell out of here."*

"I can assure you it certainly isn't for my health or personal enjoyment," she said aloud. "It's because I have to. It's in my job description. And besides, I make a better zookeeper than either Mr. Sinclair or Mr. Tanner. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a project that needs my attention."

\* \* \*

Mozelle Brasheer watched the trim-figured Francesca Ferosce as she descended the speaker's platform and glided past the stunned and furious faces of the reporters. She was the picture of determination, elegantly draped in Chanel and silk.

Even Mozelle had to marvel to herself at Francesca's last statement. *"How often have Ah wanted teh smack them scoundrels up 'long sahd the head lahk that? But, oh no...Ah cain't do that. Ahm a politician. Ah need 'em on ma sahd. So Ah hafta make lahk Ah lahk 'em."*

"Did ya heah that last one, boys?" Mozelle said aloud. "Ah nominate Francesca Ferosce for most valuable playah on our team."

"I'll second that!" chimed in Dickie Bamber.

With the sound of laughter coming in waves from behind her, her chin resting in her left hand and her eyes fixed on the big TV screen Mozelle watched the last image

of Francesca Ferosce disappear behind the big double doors of the ballroom.

*"Goddammit!"* Mozelle Brasheer thought. *"No one has the raht teh be that young, that beautiful, and that braht, all at the same tahm."*

Francesca made her way back to her suite through the vast old casino, walking quickly past dozens of empty gaming tables. At this early hour, the charged atmosphere that usually ran through the place, evenings, was absent. Nevertheless, an occasional yelp of instant gratification could be heard coming from a faraway corner of the casino as metal coins clanged into the stainless steel trough of a slot machine being worked by somebody's grandmother getting an early start on the day, or a matron whose husband handled the real gambling at the tables. There were also muffled shouts and a large column of cigarette and cigar smoke emanating from a huddle of mostly male shooters who had managed to keep at least one craps table hot all through the night.

Francesca slowed down briefly to touch the table top of one of the out-of-play, blackjack tables. She ran her fingertips lightly over the green baize. It was smooth, rough, and slightly padded all at the same time.

*"I wonder how they do that?" she thought. Then, "If we ever do get the city built, and my projections are even half right, we'll make a fortune. People just can't seem to get enough of this. We'll definitely give Vegas a run for its money and probably turn this 'biggest little city in the world' into a ghost town. These people think they know about glitz and glamour; wait'll they see Tanner City."*

Back in her suite it was quiet except for the faint hum of the in-room fax machine, a relic that had caused quite a stir in its day, now reduced to the status of a so-so come-on in certain hotels. At the moment it was disgorging yet another message. Judging by the fullness of the tray that held received messages, the machine had already seen a lot of use that morning. It was only ten-thirty.

Francesca walked briskly over to the machine to read the latest stack of bad news. What else could it be? For the last two weeks all her messages and telephone calls had been heavy with gloom and doom. She got there just as a message dropped into the tray. It was on the Tanner Organization letterhead and it read:

---

(702) 638-2732 Date: Wed. 03-15-20-- Time: 10:30 a.m.

**THE TANNER ORGANIZATION**

Date: March 15, 20--

To: Francesca Ferosce, V.P. - Special Projects.  
Fax: (702) 332-WIN1

From: Skip Timmins, Chief Project Manager  
Tanner City Project, Nevada  
Fax N<sup>o</sup>: (702) 544-4766

Francesca:

The situation here continues to deteriorate faster than ever. This morning, 142 more workers failed to show. Obviously, someone has whispered in their ear. The heavy equipment (all leased, as you know) is starting to mysteriously disappear from the site. My calls for material go unanswered from our usual suppliers. The same "someone" has spooked them too. If this continues, I can't hope to bring the project in on schedule.

I don't want to believe this, but maybe the bastards really do have us this time. I await your advice.

Skip

P.S. - Caught your press conference this morning on my PCU. You looked and sounded great! -S

---

*"Oh, my dear Skip," Francesca thought. "If only looking good and sounding good were enough. But they're not. These people are playing for keeps. It'll take all we've got, and more, plus a little luck. Luck... No better than your word 'hope' I'm afr --"*

Francesca heard the door buzzer sound. With the fax still in her hand and its bleak contents still churning in her brain, she went to the videophone next to the door and removed the receiver. A woman's image came onto the screen. She was young and wore the hotel's light brown uniform trimmed in white. A rectangular plastic badge was pinned just above her left breast. It read: HOUSEKEEPING.

Francesca spoke to the image on the other side of the door. "May I help you?"

"Yes ma'am," came the polite reply. "I must come in and finish cleaning the big window."

"That's okay. It looks clean to me," said Francesca after glancing briefly over her shoulder at the enormous window that ran the entire length of the suite and looked out over the city's skyline.

"You don't understand, ma'am," said the image, speaking in a voice that was a mix of mild panic laced with a heavy Middle Eastern accent. "I just found out there's going to be an inspection today. If everything isn't just right, I could lose my job. These are hard times, ma'am. Please let me in," the girl pleaded.

Thinking better of giving this girl the why you should *always do the job-right the first-time* lecture, Francesca answered instead, "Will you be very long? I have a lot of work of my own to do."

"Oh no, ma'am. It will only take me a few minutes."

Francesca looked hard at the girl's face. The girl, a deep wrinkle now installed between her thick, black eyebrows, looked back at the blank door.



With no further thought, Francesca reached up and unlatched the door in two places. She then opened the door while turning away from it to walk back to the fax machine. With her back to the open door, she said in a quiet voice, "Please, don't be too long."

"Awwwwhh!" came the half-shout, half-scream from behind her. Francesca whirled around to see the girl in the brown uniform kneeling on the floor in front of the door, holding her shoulder in pain. She had been trampled down by two men -- one short, one tall -- who, in their haste to enter, had knocked her to the floor.

The tall one was on Francesca before she could react. Now it was her turn to be on the floor with him on top of her, his face only a few inches from her own, a very large hand over her mouth, a knee pressed firmly into her abdomen, making it hard to breath.

From where she was she could see the girl get up slowly from the floor, still clutching her shoulder. The short man took a fistful of black gaming chips from his pocket and jammed them into the girl's hand -- the one that dangled at the end of the injured left arm. He grabbed her abruptly by the hair and shouted fiercely into her face, "Here's what we promised you! Now get the fuck outta here and forget you ever saw us, ya hear?"

Without waiting for an answer, he pushed the girl through the half-opened door and shut and double-locked it behind him. Then, he swiftly pulled a handheld video cam from a leather case on his belt and strapped it to his right hand.

By now the adrenaline was pumping furiously through Francesca's body. She kept looking for a way out of the hold the tall one had her in, but he was too strong and too heavy. Besides, struggling might send this brute the wrong signals. She tried to calm herself as best she could.

*"Try to observe everything for later," she thought.*

The short one put the viewfinder to his right eye, closed his left eye and activated the camera by pushing buttons designed for much smaller fingers. With her peripheral vision, Francesca could see a tiny green light on the camera that had begun to flash slowly.

*"They're going to film this? Why?"*

The tall one finally spoke. He spoke menacingly through clenched teeth and rolled his eyes for effect to accompany the rhythm of his speech. "We're here today to deliver a message from someone who'd just love to be here in person but can't. You know how it is. She's a busy lady and all, like you."

He turned his face from Francesca's and looked directly at the camera for a few seconds. Turning back to her, he continued, "The message is real simple, sweetcakes. You abandon your little tinker-toy town in the desert, or we'll make you wish you had. Oh...and me and him, we don't believe in asking a second time."

With that he lifted Francesca off the floor by both shoulders with a deft move and carried her easily into the dressing area where he slammed her up against one of the mirrors so hard she thought it would break. Miraculously, it did not.

While in transit to the dressing area she had thought about screaming, but then she thought better of it. The walls of the suite were soundproofed and she didn't have enough air to make a proper scream, anyway. Besides, these two were pros. They could kill her at any time, and she knew it. Something like an ill-timed scream might push them over.

The short one with the camera had followed them into the dressing area. She could see the tiny green light on the video cam still methodically flashing -- a constant reminder that this nightmare was being recorded.

She was in a half-seated position now with her back against the seemingly indestructible mirror. The tall one's hand again covered her mouth. He reached down near his

ankle and produced what appeared to be a large, plastic knife. He placed the tip of it just under her chin and again glanced up at the camera and grinned.

*"A plastic knife? What the...Plastic or metal, it's sharp as hell!"* she thought, as she felt the pressure of the tip of it against her chin.

Up until that moment Francesca had been in a state of numbed panic. But, with these last two gestures -- the bringing out of the knife and her attacker's second diabolical grin into the ever present video cam -- she began to come out of the numbness she had been in. Her body's attempted lapse into shock was rapidly giving way to anger.

*"That's how this animal gets his kicks...filming his victims! Son of a bitch!"*

She frowned, and then screamed, into the tall one's hand. The sound went nowhere, but the message was received.

"I think sweetcakes has something she'd like to tell us," said the tall one.

The short one reacted to this by going to "close up" with the video cam, squatting to eye-level next to his two subjects. Only their faces, very close now, and the tip of the strange knife against Francesca's throat, just below her chin, were framed in the video cam's viewfinder.

The tall one removed his hand from Francesca's mouth. She took in a couple of much-needed gulps of air.

With her breathing starting to return to normal, she yelled directly into the tall one's face with all her force: "HOW FAR INTO THE SEWER DO THEY HAVE TO GO BEFORE THEY FIND A COUPLE OF RATS LIKE YOU?"

The next sensation Francesca felt was a sharp pain in her solar plexus from a knee that had been shoved into it with great force. She was now completely without breath and powerless to move. With the same movement he had used before, the tall one picked her up from her half-seated

position and carried her the short distance to the bed where he flung her onto the silken bedspread.

*"Jesus. This is it! He's going to rape me,"* she thought.

Francesca was only vaguely aware of being shaken by the shoulders, her head, whip-like, going back and forth -- the tiny green light still flashing. From somewhere far away, it seemed, she could hear streams of abusive language that were punctuated by repeated slaps to her face. Finally, she lost consciousness.

After a time, Francesca could hear laughter and someone breathing with an effort. She realized the breather was her. With all that had happened, she had not been raped.

*"Probably not his style,"* she reflected through the awakening sensation of pain in every region of her body. *"This one's a real sickie. It's strictly about violence for him. Probably never had any real sex in his life."*

Francesca's attackers had positioned themselves opposite her at the two corners of the oversized bed. The tall one still brandished his strange-looking knife, the short one the video cam -- its green light started to flash as he pointed it at her again.

Raising herself up slowly on one elbow, she said, "You have no idea what you've done, gentlemen."

"Well... so, now we're gentlemen!" exclaimed the tall one, the video cam back on him.

"A few minutes ago we were rats. Now that's what I call some kinda improvement. Next you'll be telling us you're going to shit-can tinker-toy town or whatever the fuck you call it."

"Never!" said Francesca, anger smoldering in her green eyes.

"Never? Don't you know you shouldn't never say never, sweetcakes?" the tall one said, sliding across the bed in her direction.

She could see sweat beads on his face. The sight of them prompted her to glance down at her silk blouse. It was spotted and rumpled from his sweat.

*"Must have worked himself into quite a frenzy...sick, twisted bastard."*

Francesca's glance did not go unnoticed by the tall one. "What's the matter, sweetcakes? Feeling a bit dirty? Maybe you'd like to clean up...take a shower. Here, let me help you."

In a flash, his knife was cutting off the buttons that held the front of her blouse together.

She felt terrified all over again, and for the first time exposed.

*"Will this never end?"* she thought.

Abruptly, she found herself half-walking, half-tripping, stiff-legged, with her hands over the tall one's hands as he dragged her by her hair back to the dressing area. Again, she could hear the tall one from a faraway place yelling. "C'mon, Virg! The bitch wants to clean up. But first she oughta have something to clean up. Looks too clean to me. Whadda ya think?"

Slam! Went her head against the dressing room mirrors for the second time. Same indestructible mirrors, same half-seated position -- new pain in the back of the head.

*"Mustn't lose consciousness again,"* she thought through her pain. *"Got to observe..."*

"They said you was a tough little bitch!" shouted the tall one, just inches again from her face, the point of his knife positioned as before under her chin. "Well, sweetcakes, you don't know who you're fuckin' with here. This ain't no fuckin' board meeting or one of them fancy-assed parties for your tight-assed friends. We're calling the shots here. You got that?"

*"Yes... for now you call the shot, but there'll be another day, and you'll wish you'd never been born,"* she thought.

"You better hope we don't have to come back a second time! If we do, it's the last time. You hear me, bitch?"

There was no response.

"You know, Virg, I don't think we're getting through here to little sweetcakes," the tall one said in a voice that had suddenly become eerily quiet. "I think we'd best just leave her our callin' card and get the hell outta here. Whadda ya think?"

There was no response from the short one, but Francesca could see a toothy grin appear below the camera that had become his face.

*"A face for a camera or a camera for a face?"* Francesca wondered.

Before she could decide, she felt an excruciating pain just under her chin followed instantly by the warm flow of her own blood down the front of her neck.

*"That's their calling card...disfigurement!"*

In a blind panic Francesca kicked, clawed, and screamed at the tall one on the renewed strength of this realization.

She felt the pressure from the tall one's thumb being applied to a spot just under her ear. The lights overhead seemed to flicker. The room had become alternating splotches of light and dark.

*"Something's wrong with the lights,"* was her final thought before darkness won out over the light.

\* \* \*

On regaining consciousness Francesca was greeted in the mirror by a blood-soaked reflection of her earlier impeccable self in the dressing room mirror opposite her.

"Jesus! What a mess. Got to get cleaned up, but Grant will want pictures. Everybody wants pictures today... the press, the psychos who did this...even the good guys. No one is seeing me like this."

With an effort, she made it to her feet, legs shaking, and turned in the direction of the bathroom sinks. Above the sinks was a long mirror -- another reminder of the violence.

Francesca scrutinized her image in the mirror and mentally made her personal damage assessment. *"Could've been worse, I suppose. Swollen face, cracked and cut lips, swollen left eye that will probably turn all sorts of hideous colors as it heals; black and blue arms and shoulders; a superficial scratch on the left cheek from his ring. No scar, I think. There's the worst of it... a puncture wound. That's going to take some plastic surgery."*

"Damn!" Francesca said aloud to the reflected face that still held traces of trauma from the attack. She reached reflexively for a towel and turned on the cold water.

*"Probably shouldn't be doing this... Probably destroying mounds of clues and evidence, but I can't stand the sight of me like this,"* she thought as she began a restoration attempt.

When the attempt looked about as good as it was going to get, she ran a brush through her hair. A few clumps of hair fell to the floor as the brush passed through it, joining others that must have been pulled out earlier during the fracas. In her other hand she held a royal blue face towel against the puncture wound that kept resisting efforts to stanch the flow of blood. The thick, cotton towel was rapidly changing from its original color to the color of wine.

*"Better sit down...pour a drink...calm down, and stop this damned bleeding before I do anything else."*

With a large snifter of cognac in one hand and the towel in the other, pressed against the source of the blood flow, she eased herself down into one of the overstuffed chairs that faced the huge window -- the same window that had been the physical catalyst for all that had happened to her during the last thirty minutes.

*"Oldest trick in the book, and I went for it! Maybe Chase is right when he says 'trust no living soul'...Don't know about the second part of that saying though...about 'walking carefully*

*among the dead.' He never smiles, or laughs, when he says it. Words to live by? And Grant...Maybe he's right after all. Maybe I do need a couple of gorillas to follow me around. He's been at me about this since the trouble started. Calls it 'a demonstrable change' in my work conditions. Here's all the reason he'll need now to require twenty-four-hour-a-day security. In his place, I'd do the same. This is getting way out of hand."*

Francesca felt the first smooth swallow of cognac spread rapidly throughout her body. It produced a tingling sensation she could feel all the way to her toes.

*"Ah...That's better already,"* she thought as the cognac started to work its magic on her jangled nerves.

A couple of swallows later her Portable Communication Unit sounded off. *"Strange,"* she thought, *"everyone who needs to know, knows my itinerary. They know I'm in Reno. They could have gone through the hotel operator. Unless...."*

Francesca fished the PCU hastily out of her bag with her free hand, her other hand still clutching the towel. It was then that she noticed her wallet was missing.

*"All that and they took my money too! God damned, lowlife scum!"* she shouted.

She activated her PCU on the fifth ring. *"Francesca Ferosce here."* She sounded about eighty percent of her usual one-hundred-percent self, instead of the sixty percent she really felt at that moment -- the newly discovered outrage of the stolen wallet responsible for the twenty-point gain.

*"Francesca. At last! I was just about ready to give up. It's Myriam. I tried to get you through the hotel operator after the press conference, but he said you instructed him to hold all your calls. That's not like you. Are you all right, dear?"*

Myriam's gravelly but feminine voice sounded soothing to Francesca. It was just what she needed to hear after all the curses and shouts.



Myriam Cantwell had been Grant Sinclair's chief executive assistant forever, and she knew him better than any person alive, including Francesca. If you wanted to know something you asked Myriam, and if it was something Grant did not want you to know, you could never get it out of her. She was the keeper of the castle and its secrets -- a kind of *éminence grise* who was anything but gray -- working her own brand of magic alongside the man to whom she had chosen to devote the last thirty-six years of her life. In their youth, rumors had circulated about a possible romance -- all of them false. The rumors were finally quelled when Grant married suddenly; a lopsided union doomed from the beginning and now long over.

"Yes, I'm all right, Myriam," Francesca lied. "I didn't give that order. It's probably just somebody who didn't like what he heard at the press conference this morning. A little professional revenge maybe. In this city, money can get you anything."

"You were stunning, dear! Just stunning up there this morning," Myriam exclaimed with her usual exuberance. "Grant and I watched the whole thing on one of the screens in his office. Were they as nasty as they seemed on the screen?"

"Worse, if you can believe it. I think they got the message, though, that we're not backing down or giving up."

"I think so too. Listen, Francesca, I've got to go now. The calls are really starting to back up. You know how it is around here. Everybody wants a decision, yesterday. Grant wants to talk with you for a few minutes. Hold the line a sec'...Take care."

There was a brief pause before Grant came on the line. The pause was long enough for Myriam to get Grant on the internal video com screen to tell him she had finally gotten through to Francesca in Reno, and that something -- she couldn't say what exactly -- wasn't right with her.

There was something different about her voice, and, very curiously, the conversation had taken place in the audio mode only. It was Myriam's uncanny ability almost instantly to interpret the subtleties of any situation that made her invaluable to Grant Sinclair.

Grant Sinclair activated the line that put him on with Francesca.

"Hello! This is your favorite apprentice zookeeper speaking," Grant said with an unseen smile. "Where did you come up with a line like that? I almost went on the floor laughing."

"I was improvising. Besides, you saw that bunch. They deserved it," Francesca said, her PCU still in the audio mode only. "Apparently, some people didn't think it was all that funny." There was a slight tremble in her voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, Grant. It's not important. It can keep for later."

"Well, no matter. I thought you were great. You certainly made your point. But are you really that sure of Tanner?"

"Not really, no. I was bluffing for the benefit of a certain Bay Area resident whom we all know and love. Actually, I'm going to have to call him after I've talked with you and probably peel him off the ceiling. Grant... you should know that another 142 workers failed to show at the project site this morning. I got the message from Skip Timmins right after the press conference. Skip's sure to have copied Chase. I don't blame him. Things aren't going well at all for Skip out there. And you know how Chase is. No, maybe you don't, since you two have never met. He might think, 'Fire the project manager and maybe the problems will disappear with him.'"

"But that's mad!" Grant protested. "Everybody knows they don't get any better than Skip Timmins. Besides, it's clear where all the flak is coming from."

"I know that, and you know that, but you don't know how capricious Chase can be at times. He's operating on a wavelength that no one's operating on but him."

"Well, keep me posted on Skip Timmins, will you?" Grant asked. "The guys over at City would give just about anything to have him over there. But only if something like you suggest happens. I don't want Tanner thinking I'm moving in again on his territory. Things are already tense enough over you and me."

"Grant, I had a couple of unexpected callers this morning right after the press conference," Francesca began haltingly, abruptly changing the subject. "They weren't exactly Boy Scout types."

"What happened?" Grant asked, sitting up in his chair.

"They roughed me up a bit."

*"So, that explains why the video mode isn't on," he thought. "It's probably worse than she's letting on. Myriam was right...as always."*

"How bad is it, Francesca?" Grant asked in a voice of forced professionalism.

"Bad enough that I think I ought to file a claim with my favorite insurance man," Francesca said through an unseen, and forced, smile.

"Francesca, if you don't object, I'm going to record our conversation from this point forward. The people in the Claims and Criminology departments will need it."

Francesca recounted the story of the attack to Grant. He listened as calmly as he could, mentally blocking out the annoying little beep that went off every ten seconds in his ear -- a reminder that this conversation was being recorded.

*"How am I supposed to sit here calmly and pretend this is just another claim?" Grant thought. "This isn't just PosLife policy number 2-95263A-16, I'm talking to here, damn it! This is the woman I love. Gotta try though...somehow."*

Ten minutes later, when Francesca had ended her harrowing narrative, Grant began a gentle question-and-answer session with her in an effort to fill in some gaps in the story, and to stimulate her memory as much as possible while the events were still fresh in the mind of -- at least who was for now, he had firmly decided -- his client.

"So," he began, "we're looking for a couple of Mutt 'n Jeff characters in their early thirties, right?"

"Who are Mutt 'n Jeff?" Francesca asked with a little chuckle. This was always happening to them.

"Don't ask. It's too painful a reminder that you and I are separated, chronologically, by an entire generation. Anyway, Mutt 'n Jeff were already ancient history when I was a kid. So, the tall one is very athletic, you said. What sport would you say? Don't worry...I know it's just a guess."

"Well, judging by the small scars on his chin, and the more pronounced ones on his cheeks, and the nose that's been broken more than once, it could be boxing. But his ears looked okay to me. So, I'd say football, maybe. He was certainly big and mean enough."

"And Jeff...I mean the short one. You think you heard the tall one call him 'Virg' at some point?"

"Yes, we were on the bed and I was coming to. Wait a minute! Now that I really think about it, I actually saw his name on his belt buckle! Do you know why I remember? It's because his belly really hung over his belt. You've seen those sloppy beer drinker types with their thirty-two inch waistlines and fifty inch bellies. That was him...wearing one of those wide, Western-style leather belts with a big, brass buckle with the letters 'VIRG' engraved on it. Maybe we should keep talking like this, Grant. Soon you'll have me remembering what I did when I was four years old," Francesca said with a laugh. She was starting to feel better.

"Okay...let's take the tall one," Grant said. "You said he could be a 'lady killer' if he didn't take the word so literally. What does that mean to you?"

"Yes...well, he has that swarthy complexion and a cocksure look that borders on arrogance. Hell! What am I saying? It's arrogance in the raw. Then there's the slightly asymmetrical face that's somewhere between handsome and rugged, but not pretty. He's definitely not a pretty boy. Coal-black hair slicked down on his head ending in a discreet ponytail and an athlete's butt. All the physical characteristics that activate the hormones in most women. He was dressed completely in black like I said before -- designer stuff, come to think of it. You know... silk shirt, with no undershirt, of course, linen and silk blend pants, a jacket made of the same material. Very Italian. Clothes an off-duty male model might wear.

"I know a bit about these types, Grant. Many years ago, in my university days, I was in a trendy bar and saw one of these lady killer types walk in. He was accompanied by another man -- older and distinguished-looking -- the words 'married,' and 'businessman' written on his forehead. All female heads in the place turned, nearly in unison, I swear, to gawk at this lady killer as he sauntered in. For several seconds it was as if every other male in the bar had vanished. He knew it, of course. After about twenty-five minutes, and a couple of drinks, Lady Killer and his distinguished-looking sidekick started to move toward the exit.

"All of a sudden from the other side of this big room came a young girl about my age then, heading straight toward Lady Killer. I watched her wriggle and jostle her way through the crowd with great effort, finally making it to her destination. She got a lock on Lady Killer's wrist and forearm with both her hands. I'm not exaggerating. By this time, the three of them were close enough to where I was standing that I could overhear their conversation. The girl -- very cute, by the way -- said to Lady Killer, "You're not getting out of here until I at least know your name. Mine's Cindy." The two men looked at each other and back again at

the girl. Lady Killer just shrugged his shoulders and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. I could read his thoughts: *'Happens all the time.'* Lady Killer's gesture seemed to be some kind of a cue to the older man. He mumbled something that sounded like *'Code of the West,'* shook hands politely with the girl and Lady Killer, and quickly left the bar. One drink and ten minutes later, Lady Killer and the girl left the bar together. She was so close to him as they were walking out that I thought maybe I was seeing double from the alcohol, or extraterrestrials with two heads had suddenly invaded the town. I couldn't believe it. True, there was all that give-a-damn post-Collapse fatalism. You remember how it was, Grant. But I've always thought that this little scene I witnessed in the bar was a bit much, even for those decadent times."

There was a long silence on the line.

"Christ, Grant! How did I get off on this tangent? Have I been jabbering long? I'm sorry. This thing has me more rattled than I thought."

"It's normal," Grant replied softly. "But we should be talking about our particular lady killer and his accomplice."

"Oh yeah...Grant, this guy's got to have been an athlete at some time. Might still be one. Something I noticed about his shoes. They were the only things that didn't go with the rest of his macho model look. Nobody, I mean nobody, wears wingtip shoes with Italian designer clothes. But this cretin did! It was such an obvious gaffe. That's why it stuck with me. You know how I'm always noticing clothes, anyway. And get this: they had white salt stains just above the stitching that bonds the top part of the shoe to the sole. Salt stains and wet feet at eleven o'clock in the morning? That's typical of a lot of real jocks with their mega-metabolism rates. Their feet sweat even when they're just standing around!"

"Or, when they're brutalizing their victims," Grant added without humor. "Speaking of shoes and other descriptive details, what about the short one?"

"You have to imagine a short, fat cowboy. Remember the old Marlboro Man ads before they were forced to retire them for good?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, think of the Marlboro Man gone soft everywhere... like the Pillsbury Doughboy in a Stetson."

Grant broke into unrestrained laughter at Francesca's description. "Francesca, this is supposed to be serious. And here you are making me laugh."

"There'll be plenty of time for serious. Maybe if we can laugh a bit, I'll heal faster."

Her last remark brought Grant back down to earth.

*"Damn! How bad is it? I'll need to know sooner or later. Wish she'd activate the video mode of her PCU."*

Francesca went on, "He wore expensive-looking cowboy boots in beige calfskin with ultra-pointed toes and elevator heels. They didn't help. He still looked squatty. About five feet, six inches, as I said earlier. He had on a thick, white, cotton shirt with shiny metal snaps for buttons going down the front and on the cuffs, and what might have been real silver collar tips. Let's see. What else? A black, string tie with a triangular-shaped stone for a slider, made from a delicately veined piece of turquoise framed in silver. He also wore a wide silver watch bracelet studded with the same stone. He had on a dark brown, rawhide jacket trimmed in fringe front and back. The only thing I didn't see was his horse or his spurs," Francesca concluded in an attempt at humor. "Oh...and he only spoke that one time when he was shouting at the young girl from the hotel."

"As he was stuffing gaming chips into her hand, right?" Grant asked.

"That's right."

"Francesca...I'm going to have to have a look at you," he said, his voice flat.

"Oh, Grant! No. I don't want you to see me like this."

"It's strictly professional, Francesca. I've got to have evidence. Fresh evidence, if possible, of the attack. Now, activate the video mode on your PCU, and we'll get this over as quickly as possible."

"You're set up on your end to do this?" she asked, stalling for time.

"Yes, it's a relatively simple technology. If they need more detail, they'll use enhancers in Criminology."

"Is there anything you can't do with that computer of yours?" Francesca asked, still stalling.

"I can't get it to burp babies, yet," Grant replied.

Laughter came from Francesca's end. "Now you're the one making me laugh."

After a short pause Francesca's face came into view on Grant's screen in high-definition color. The same thing in reverse would be going on at her end. Grant glanced reflexively at the silver-framed photograph of Francesca on his desk -- a kind of "before" picture that contrasted sharply with the terrible "after" picture he was seeing on the screen. Except for the voice, which he knew so well, and her basic gestalt, the woman on his screen might have been a stranger.

*"This is going to be tougher than I expected,"* Grant admitted to himself.

Francesca was still holding the blood-soaked towel against her chin, her PCU propped up on its built-in supports on the table next to her chair. She sat with both legs tucked up under her in the chair, her body twisted sideways so she could look directly into the tiny screen. She was wearing a thick, hotel-issue bathrobe.

"Well, how do I look, Mr. Sinclair?" Francesca said in a voice of false bravado.

"Want me to lie?"



"Hey! It's not that bad," Francesca retorted. "In a few days, after the swelling goes down, I'll be able to cover everything over with makeup. You'll see. It will mean an extra fifteen minutes in front of the mirror in the morning; but, what price beauty, huh?"

She was trying to be brave for Grant's sake, but it didn't wash. He'd seen far too much of this kind of thing over the years to take this lightly.

Grant thought, *"Anytime a two-hundred-pound, physically mature male attacks a one-hundred-twenty-five-pound female -- especially if it's a psychopath who does this for a living -- the female is going to come out on the short end. No question about it."*

"Francesca, I've got to see that puncture wound up close," Grant said abruptly. "Remove the towel, please," he continued, trying to sound like a doctor doing a routine medical examination.

"It's still bleeding, I think," she said.

"Probably. It will just take a few seconds. Now, take the towel away, and tilt your head back."

She did as Grant asked, finally revealing her chin wound. It had all the characteristics of a classic puncture wound: a hole whose borders widened into a half-inch-long gash, surrounded at the edges by tiny blue-violet bruises.

Francesca was right. Blood still oozed from the wound in a rhythm that kept time with her pulse. Enough thickening dark blood had already accumulated at the opening such that in a few seconds it would reach a critical point, and then gravity would take over -- making an already unpleasant situation even worse.

"Francesca, dab your chin with the towel, will you? It is still bleeding."

"Well, how does it look? I really haven't had a good look at it. I was more concerned with applying pressure to get the bleeding stopped."

"Nothing that some well-placed micro-stitches won't take care of. I'll send a set of stills to Dr. Sterling. He's the best plastic surgeon in the city. I've seen his work."

"I won't ask where or under what circumstances," she teased.

"Strictly professional, I assure you."

"Uh-huh," a look of feigned doubt on her face.

Grant began the rest of the examination by asking Francesca to switch her PCU to wide-angle and stand at a distance from it, so that her entire body could be seen. He asked her to remove the bulky bathrobe. Beneath it, she still wore her skirt and bra.

"Grant, if this was anyone but you."

"I know. It's not pleasant. I'm almost finished. Now give me a series of slow quarter-turns. I want to get close-ups of the bruises on your shoulders."

"You know, Grant, I can't remember when I've felt so powerless as when that creep picked me up like that by the shoulders."

"Well, he had a tight hold on you. He actually left his paw prints on your arms and shoulders. You won't like hearing this, but they might prove useful in identifying the guy who did this."

"I can't say I'm thrilled, Grant. All I know is, I hurt all over."

"Now Francesca, I have to ask you a tough question."

"No, I was not raped. Does that mean I can take a shower and get this creep washed off me?" she said rapidly.

"I'd rather you didn't just yet."

Grant explained that he would have a forensic team and a doctor in Reno within the hour. There were sure to be clues in the suite and possibly some still on her body. Under no circumstances was she to report the attack to the local police. All they would do is get in the way and bring the

press into it. She should return to the city with the forensic team, have the plastic surgery done...

"...and then join me for dinner on Friday night at the Ça Va Mieux restaurant."

"Oh, Grant, do we have to go there? Don't get me wrong, I love the place, but I sometimes get the feeling we're dining with a ghost. Why don't you come to my place for dinner? I'll have Mrs. Valentin make you one of her specialties. You know how she loves to cook for you. And we can be alone; just the two of us."

"You don't have to ask twice, Francesca. I'll be there. Check with Myriam for details on your appointment with Dr. Sterling and the Claims and Criminology people. They might want to see you in person. Oh...and there's one other thing."

*"Uh oh," she thought. "Here come the gorillas."*

Francesca was right. Grant was going to find her a team of bodyguards who would see to her safety whenever she traveled outside the city; should have insisted on it before and all that. When asked how much this was going to cost her, Grant replied that it was going to cost a whole lot less than the probable huge premium increase the actuaries would recommend on her policy if she didn't take this precaution now. Besides, it would only be temporary; until the present danger passed.

"I hope they are competent *and* cute. I don't like the idea of being followed around everywhere by a couple of Neanderthal types in baggy suits," she teased.

"Sorry, my first and only concern is competence, but I'll see what I can do," Grant replied with a broad smile, confident in his relationship with Francesca.

"Now remember," Grant continued, "don't touch anything, or walk around the suite too much, or take a shower, until the doctor checks you over. She's more than a medical doctor. She's a forensic specialist as well."

"What's her name, so I'll know if it's the good guys at the door and not a Mutt 'n Jeff redux?"

"Her name is Dr. Berenger. Felicity Berenger. You'll like her. She's been through all this before. Knows what to do. Right now I've got to get these images into the hands of the people who can start doing something with them, so..."

"Grant, darling, there's something I want you to do for me."

"Anything, Francesca. Just name it." He was barely able to hold onto the professional tone he had forced himself to assume.

"It's something really simple. Switch off the video mode on your PCU."

"Done." Francesca's face dissolved on his screen as instantly as it had appeared, but voice contact remained.

"Now... look at the photograph of me that's sitting on your desk."

Grant's eyes fell for the second time on the photograph of a ravishing woman with short blond hair in her early forties, her face full of life, and -- if the eyes truly were the gateway to a person's innermost self -- very much in love.

"Now it's your turn to listen, Grant Sinclair. But I've only got three little words I want you to hear: I love you. See you Friday night at about eight. Bye."

Before Grant could respond, she severed the electronic link between them.

Grant leaned far forward in his chair and with the fingers of his right hand, reached across the expanse of his desk and lightly touched the face in the photograph through the glass. He sighed and said softly into the silence, "And I love you too, Francesca."

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