

# **LIFE, LIBERTY AND...**

A Novel

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## Life, Liberty And - Chapter One

David Stonewall had been a journalist all his life. Right now, what he wanted to be was at home, in bed, watching TV. It was one of those things about being on television one's entire career: it made you watch more of the same. He didn't know why, but the constant sitting on one side of the camera - the business end of that cyclops always bearing down on you, always focused on *you* - that made you want to watch what other people did in the same spot. He didn't give a shit about drama, sitcom, anything - but he loved to watch the news. He obsessed about it, would sit and fantasize about some other reporter being on camera when something major happened, would sweat with anticipation while he flipped through the endless stream of news media that tiny coaxial cable put at his fingertips. He would hope and pray for something big, something that would put someone else under the gun while he got to spectate. David was an exhibitionist's exhibitionist: a voyeur.

The sheer number of possible gaffes - the only thing which had finally allowed him to wrap his mind around the non-numerical number of infinity - was staggering. What if one's makeup ran? What if one lost a contact and suddenly couldn't read the teleprompter? What if one's hairpiece slipped, one's co-anchor farted, what if one puked all over one's script? What if someone had a heart attack on set? What if he had a heart attack on camera? What if he

suddenly got stage fright?

The truth of the matter was that David had gotten bored. He had spent the better part of thirty years covering local news, local murders, local trials, local schools, local sports, local politics, local, local, local. It was all local and although he was very, very fucking good at telling people what was going on around them, none of it went on around him. He was terrified of something really local happening, something between him and that omniscient eye that a union cameraman pointed at him every damn night. They were both waiting for something to happen. They both knew it.

Right now, he was on camera. Nothing new about that. The sheer lack of anything happening might be about to drive him mad but there was nothing new about that, either. Right now he was covering - no, moderating, not covering, it was such an important difference they had told him, but to him it seemed to be the same thing, the camera pointed in at them, he talked, they talked, but nothing happened - right now he was moderating a debate.

It was a very important debate, they had told him. Very important that these sorts of open fora happen, important to the candidates, to their parties, to the state, to the people of the state, to democracy. He was to ask them tough questions - he needn't worry, the questions would be provided ahead of time, no homework and they had all laughed ha ha ha - and the candidates would answer and by this the people of the state would learn what the candidates believed important. The people of the state might make their

whole decision based on this debate, and what a boon to the station!

Everyone in the state would see David moderate this debate, ask his tough questions, and then they would decide. They would see David, their anchor, and it would be like getting paid to advertise one's self. Hell, it was on PBS, they didn't even need cable to see this, they didn't need anything but some tin foil and a wire. It would be very, very important for everyone.

Still, nothing was happening. David could have told them that. He wasn't retarded, he wasn't stupid, he might be a little heavily medicated since the divorce, since he had left the car running that one time when he fell asleep in the garage, he might be a little weird in conversation but he wasn't stupid. He knew nothing would happen. Nothing would ever happen.

It had been a rough campaign. The candidates hated one another. Their backers hated one another. By this it shouldn't be taken that the voters hated one another - this was North Carolina, and despite disagreements on the finer points of policy, despite the occasional local row over zoning or school system merger or Planned Parenthood clinics, this was still the state of Sheriff Andy Taylor. This was a state of good manners, of politeness, of grace. We are forgiving folk, and when one's extended family is so large that it would defy millenia of mathematical study for one not to include a few bad apples, people bad to the core, bad seeds, simply bad, then one is forced to be a little nicer, a little more forgiving. It's simply a fact.

No, the backers of the candidates were not people, they were groups of people, and groups of people hate each other with a passion for absolutely no reason at all anywhere in the world. A group, a mob, transcends all standards of geography, familial relation and good behavior. The mobs that backed these candidates were angry and vengeful and absolutely livid at the mere thought they might not get to pick the next governor.

The Republican had his usual sentries: rural churches attended by whites with too much or too little money, people who blamed the state for taxes and for schools and for crime and for anything that stood between them and their very different ideals. The Republican had planned for an easy campaign. He was the incumbent, which certainly didn't hurt. He'd talked about keeping the lid on taxes, he'd talked about helping the little man, something he'd have done his first time around if he'd been able to keep those special interests at bay. He'd talked about how special interests were trying to hijack the business of the state, he'd talked about what was the business of the state: from where he sat, it seemed to be keeping preachers political, but instead of that simple truth he'd said it was to stay out of people's lives, to let them just live for a change, to make sure that morality had room to blossom in the simple lives of this great state. He'd wished desperately that people would leave him alone about his stake in lumber companies. All in all, the talking seemed to be doing its job: he was ahead, very slightly, and he knew his people had gotten churches organized. In every district of every county, there

was at least one preacher on the metaphorical payroll. A lot of church vans were going to roll on election day. A lot of diapered old bitches were going to vote for the handsome man they saw leading prayer breakfasts for the last year.

The Democrat on the other hand had a bit of a mixed bag. In North Carolina, a state which ritualistically elected a Democrat to anything but governor, it was tough as nails - tougher - to pull together the right coalition to acquire a mailbox in front of the governor's mansion. He had worked for two years to get his name out there, to show up at the right times to the right things. He'd waded ankle-deep in the rainy, sloping streets of Asheville to attend Belle Chere. He'd played that goddamn rifle game at the State Fair over and over until his people could get a shot of him winning it. He'd ridden in parades, trod in marches for cause after cause. He'd talked corn crops with farmers in the Piedmont, tobacco with farmers Down East, apples with farmers in the mountains. He'd railed against the sitting governor's appointment of an old friend to the Lieutenant Governor's office when the sitting Lt. Governor had died in a car accident. The Democrat was trailing, just barely, but his people told him he had a good shot. The polls could never be trusted, and there were more than enough minority residents to be roused into voting in his favor. It was tough getting them to sit still, put down their crack pipes and their tequila and pretend to speak English long enough to register, but the drive was going fairly swimmingly. He hoped desperately to ride the backs of

the already beaten all the way to Raleigh. A tiny part of him actually gave a shit about these people, but that part of him was suffocating. It was in the ICU of the soul. It had been ground up and drawn out, let like blood from a poorly slit wrist, while he'd raised money and sat with bankers and factory owners and those poor sacks who thought they might get a union organized at their factory because they didn't know that the factory was already destined to go under in a year. That tiny part of him felt bad for those people who had put their faith in him, but it didn't feel too bad. All he really wanted was their vote. Their faith could go somewhere else for four years.

Tonight was their only debate. Nothing ever happened in debates, but the people liked them, they got to do some good, honest cheer leading, and so both the candidates were in fine form.

The election was one week away.

Gladys Stone was sitting on her back porch, under a blanket, watching the debate on a tiny TV she had brought out with her. The lights of Asheville were visible in the distance, the occasional plane coming in to land at the tiny airport, the cars on the highway streaming by. Gladys was very slightly afraid that if she watched them too long she might be hypnotized by them, zone out and be discovered a week from now dead of dehydration by drooling. It was a silly thought, she knew as soon as it crossed her brain, and the objective examination of it made her realize she'd started to fall asleep.

She loved to sit on her back porch and fall asleep. It was like camping, without all that mud and rock to sleep on or the lack of a timed coffee maker just inside.

I'm getting soft, she told herself, and she laughed.

The debate had been deadly dull. Nothing ever happened in debates. Not debates with Democrats and Republicans, anyway. Oh, sure, Gladys remembered some pretty good moments in debates - there were always interesting fights in local debates, she remembered with a smile - and she remembered the whole "I knew Jack Kennedy, and you're no Jack Kennedy" moment in '88, and she remembered the damn lockbox thing from 2000 and she remembered the old Admiral and his "Now you see why we have gridlock in Congress!" epiphany. That had been some high hilarity. She'd wished desperately that they could get Perot involved in the Party, but he wanted one of his own.

It was for the best, she told herself. He was one bat shit old fucker if there'd ever been one.

Gladys was, herself, a Libertarian. She was even a Libertarian politician and, best of all, she was one with marks in the win column. She'd been elected to office - more than once - under the Libertarian banner, and she was proud as hell of her accomplishments. It took a little effort, given the late hour and the sleepiness the autumn night always brought on, to remind herself that she was a candidate at that very moment. She was a candidate in the



race she was watching on television. Her temper nearly flared for an instant - she should be on that stage with them! But of course the “real” parties wouldn't let a third party on their stage. They did a very good job of making sure of that. Hell, she thought, I'm lucky to be on the ballot. I'm lucky they'll even count votes cast in my favor. That's democracy for you.

A moment of self-pity almost set in. She started to rail at no one but herself about the injustice of the system, a system that had put her in the no-win circumstance of having at best a hope of stealing a few votes from the Republican governor. It wouldn't cost him the election, it wouldn't get a new guy in office and it wouldn't help her would-be constituents or her party one whit. The very best she could hope for was to have no effect at all.

Oh, the Party was young, her campaign manager said.

The Party's been around for ages, she countered.

Yes, he had told her, but it takes time to undo a couple hundred years of bipartisan dominance. The major parties had become a duopoly, a trust that artificially maintained their market. One day, the people of the state and of the nation would wake up and realize they were being had the entire time, and then it would be the hour of the Libertarians, the Greens and all the rest. A real multi-party system would flourish and there would be a reigning circumstance in which all had to work together. It was the parliamentary principle, that all sides would need one another to rule and thus all opinions would matter. All would effectively be equal. For now, they had to keep the

faith, be the vanguard of free thought, be the protectors of real democracy.

Protecting democracy bites, she had told him, and that had been the last conversation they had on the matter.

Now here she was, sitting on her back porch, watching two handsome devils very politely poke each other from a safe distance. The ten foot poles of ideology were out and they were both waving them around meaninglessly. They were afraid to say anything real, anything controversial. They had scripted meticulously, she had seen enough of her competitors and her challengers do the same thing to know it when she saw it. They were absolutely mired in the comfort of their situations. The incumbent Republican played the kindly grandfather, the Democrat played the lovably forgiving uncle. They were both as familiar as their archetypes in their manner, their patterns, their utterly predictable platforms. Gladys had originally railed that there was no difference between picking one of them consciously and simply throwing darts at the ballot, blindfolded and drunk, that both of them simply wanted the adoration, the glory that came from having one's face on signs all over the state. Their policies might sound different in spirit but would be the same in effect: there'd be a whole lot of nothing going on in the state capitol. They were standing there so smug, so glad to be there, so glad to be alone up there, so glad to have an opponent so familiar, so safe.

Gladys Stone, Libertarian for Governor, was so jealous her teeth ached.

David Stonewall had fallen asleep twice during the debate. Each time it was during a break in the debate, a set-change to facilitate the Democrat's Clintonian preference for the sit-on-a-stool-then-walk-around style. He called it his “connecting mode.” The down side to this approach was that the Republican was just as good at it. Everyone had to be these days, Clinton had seen to that. After the country had gotten a taste of Bush 41 sitting there looking uncomfortable and Dole sitting there looking crippled, everyone who was serious about office had someone to coach them on “connecting mode” debates. It was just another fact of politics these days, like height and hair color and draft records. It didn't make it impossible to win if one wasn't able to get into the “connecting mode” zone, but it sure helped. People liked to vote for someone who stood there with one hand in his pocket and the other gesturing at them. They liked to be lectured to comfortably. Everyone liked a charismatic preacher who could march the stage, up and down, hand in the air, hand in his pocket, voice rising and falling to let you know that the noise coming out of his mouth was important, was wise. It was as much a part of the campaign as baby-kissing and bribes.

I shouldn't have had that drink before the debate, David thought. But it was so important to make sure nothing happened.

The effect was that he let the candidates run over their time limits, he let the audience applaud whichever horse they had in this race, he let the candidates run the show just like they wanted. He was a little spaced out, but

it didn't seem to come across on camera. Rather, he seemed all the more objective, docile, placidly moderate. That's why I'm the moderator, he thought. I'm so smooth.

The second time he'd fallen asleep was during the station break for set-change back to the podia. The candidates would come back for one final question and their closing statements.

The final question was a doozie. It was about the death penalty moratorium, and neither of them wanted to talk about this but the newspapers - the goddamn newspapers that would never just give up and quit printing, the only things left that asked real questions and thank God that no one was answering them - that had kept the heat on the death penalty moratorium. Well, the newspapers and NPR, but neither of those were real news anymore, it's not like anyone watched them or read them. That was, unless it was about the death penalty moratorium. It had come up every legislative session for fifteen years. There was one group that was against the death penalty - People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, in fact - who said that it was administered unfairly and unjustly, that minorities suffered it more frequently than whites, that it was ineffective as a deterrent and that the state simply shouldn't be in the business of killing people. It was a hard argument to counter, except by illusion. The fact was that more black men were killed by the state every year, and that no governor in twenty years had gone out of his way to pardon anyone. Everyone knew the public defenders were for shit, the

inmates were disadvantaged, the whole system was tilted against them. But these were killers, people who deserved punishment. Not killing people for killing people, the governor said, was being soft on crime. The Republican Party loved the death penalty, loved the appeal of the public spectacle, loved the claim they could make for being the will of the people, destroying those who have demonstrated their own capacity to destroy and staying the hands of others who might in a fit of anger righteous or otherwise try to take the life of their fellow man. This argument was carefully designed to need zero in the way of supporting facts. The governor was very good at talking about the need for a deterrent to crime, the need for justice for victims and the families of victims, the need not to support killers for the rest of their natural lives on the tab of those who worked so hard and so honestly to support their own families and the state itself. This attitude did not take polling to support. It did not take focus groups. No one in their right mind would get up and say that the state should cut killers a break and let them sweat out the rest of their fevered and guilty days in a concrete block in the middle of Raleigh.

No one except People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, who had a lot of statistics on their side. The thing was, everyone knew numbers lied. Everyone knew that statistics could be manipulated to support any argument. Hell, statistics were used to sell toothpaste, they couldn't be worth a damn. Everyone knew this. Everyone knew this because the governor and his party told them so on a regular basis. Even Democrats got behind this, that statistics

about the death penalty and its application were worthless, that not having a death penalty would be like outlawing baseball or apple butter or hunting season. It was unAmerican to have a system that didn't seek justice. Even statisticians could be paid to commentate on the matter and say that People of Faith Against the Death Penalty were simply wrong because the numbers were worthless, the sample size too small to be meaningful. Sociologists could be paid to say that the people on death row were disadvantaged, yes, but that they were disadvantaged their whole lives, right from the start, and hell, who wasn't? Everyone had some mark against them, if you took a long enough view, but that didn't make them kill people, they didn't let it turn them into monsters. So, in the end, it was easy to come up with an argument that no matter how bad one's childhood might have been, one couldn't blame it for their being a murderer, one couldn't claim that the system was racist or classist, one couldn't blame the poorly paid and underqualified and overworked public defenders or the hanging judges or the poorly instructed juries or the lengthy and labyrinthine system of appeals or the re-election jitters of a state Supreme Court that had no desire to take on the issue of the death penalty and risk being voted out on their defrocked butts the next time around. The death penalty was popular - more or less, a slim majority of the population approved of it and didn't give a shit what the statistics said, everyone knew the numbers lied - and no one was going to do away with it.

Except that People of Faith Against the Death Penalty kept holding

rallies. They kept writing letters. They kept getting on NPR and talking about the injustices and unfairnesses, they kept talking and talking and talking and eventually you couldn't help but hear them. They'd managed to shift the pendulum a bit on the issue, and now, every year, the state legislature considered (and rejected, if anyone knew ahead of time that it would be up for debate and paid attention) the issue of a moratorium on death sentences. It wouldn't do away with capital punishment, but it would pause them, put them all on hold while someone hired to be objective about the whole damned mess could work out whether it was really unfair, whether the statistics might be telling the truth after all.

They'd been at it again this year. They'd gotten fifty thousand signatures on a petition to have the governor commute all death sentences. They'd gotten the speaker of the state house and the president of the state senate to promise to put it before their respective branches in the spring. It had turned into a big deal, and it was going to be the last question of the debate. David Stonewall blinked twice when the cameraman came over and poked him on the shoulder to warn him they'd be going live again in thirty seconds. He looked at his papers, reminded himself of the question and then rubbed his forehead.

The producer of the debate was in the production room, as the title might have suggested. He warned everyone that the show was over in four

minutes, and then he and the sound guy sat back. Everything had gone smoothly, the whole thing was practically on auto-pilot. The party handlers who were there to watch them like crows on a battlefield were out back having a smoke or talking on cell phones, checking polling, checking ratings, checking their numbers. When the ON AIR light flickered back to live, David Stonewall was as solid as a rock, the candidates in position behind their podia, their ties straightened and their hair checked.

“Gentlemen, one last question for the night. You’ll each have one minute to respond, then one minute for closing statements. There is a growing movement within the state, and has been for many years, to establish a moratorium on the death penalty while it can be studied. There are charges that it is an unfair and unjust system of retribution against those who are disadvantaged, financially and culturally, in their ability to defend themselves against charges of murder. There are some who go so far as to say that the death penalty is state-sanctioned racism. What is your response? Will you allow a moratorium on the death penalty for study and, if that study finds these charges accurate, will you commute the sentences of those currently on death row? Will you work to abolish it in the state of North Carolina? We’ll hear from Governor Richardson first, then Mr. Watts.”

“Thank you, David.” The governor turned to the camera and smiled. “There are those who agitate against the death penalty on grounds of religion and fairness in this state, and I want them to know that I consider these same



values every bit as important as they. I respect their difference of opinion and I am glad that we live in a society which allows and encourages this sort of open discussion of a matter so important. However, my position remains that the death penalty is an important deterrent in our war on crime. Knowing that there are consequences for one's actions is a vital part of discouraging crime and maintaining the safety and quality of life that we enjoy in this great state. While I am always open to improvements in our governance, I will not allow the state to back down from the important duty and responsibility of protecting our citizens from harm. Maintaining a vigilant stance against violence is job number one for keeping us all safe.”

“Mr. Watts?”

“Thank you, David. While I respect my opponent's attitude, and I agree that we must maintain a vigorous deterrent to crime in this state, that we must protect our citizens and we must allow the families of those we lose in such tragic ways to seek justice in an open and accountable forum, I maintain that I would follow the wishes of the legislature, should a moratorium pass. I believe in the death penalty, but I will never object to an examination of its fairness. I believe it would pass with flying colors, and would welcome that study should the state's lawmakers see fit to expend effort on it.”

“Thank you, gentlemen.” David Stonewall settled back in his seat very slightly. “And thank you for watching the gubernatorial debates on Public Television. I'm David Stonewall, and good night.”

Everyone sat still and in silence for a moment. The producer stared at the monitors. There were still two and a half minutes to kill, and the moderator had skipped the closing statements. The candidates remained locked in place, nailed to the floor in a moment of calm confusion. The whole stage was frozen in a tableau of placid provenance. The board operator looked at the producer, who looked at his watch. “Kill the cameras,” he said, and the operator hit the button to switch off the ON AIR sign.

The camera operator didn't notice. He kept rolling.

“The hell you would,” the governor said to his challenger.

“I'm sorry?” the Democrat said with a smile.

“The hell you'd stop the death penalty.” The governor, confident that no eyes were watching, unable to know himself that the mikes were still on, that the cameras were still rolling, smiled back. “You'd throw the switch just the same as anybody else. Too many people in this state loves the idea the death penalty protects them. They don't care how many retards or niggers get fried in Central Prison. They want those bastards getting roasted as long as it isn't them. Hell, they'd throw the switch on their own neighbors just to have a show.”

“Yeah, and?” Challenger Watts seemed unimpressed with the governor's frankness.

“So you're a fucking hypocrite. You're too pussy to own up to being a fake pinko, pinko.”

“Yeah, and?” Watts smiled more broadly. “You want the truth? I’d throw the switch on every retard and nigger in this state if it got me enough votes to take your house from you. I don’t give a shit, you’re right, but there are a lot of bleeding hearts out there whose flows are staunch by the thought I might give a damn.”

“You’re a fake.”

“So are you. You just like killing the mouth-breathing trash you manage to rake in off the welfare rolls. I’m surprised you don’t throw the switch yourself to keep from paying some fucker.”

“Who says I don’t, cunt?” The governor’s smile was just as broad as his challenger’s, two friendly men having a polite after-debate chat.

Everyone heard the producer scream: I SAID KILL THE FUCKING CAMERAS AND MIKES YOU STUPID SHIT!

In Asheville, Gladys’ phone rang.

“Yes, I’m watching the debate,” she mumbled into it. It didn’t matter who it was, there could be no other reason to call her at 11:30 on a Monday night. “Oh my god.”

“I’m on my way. Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my fucking god, fucking GOD, Gladys, they SAID THAT on TELEVISION oh my FUCKING CHRIST.”

It was her campaign manager.

He has a cousin at the *News & Observer*, she thought.

“OH MY GOD,” she screamed at the television. Her campaign manager - Darryl, bless his heart - had already hung up but she screamed it anyway. “OH MY GOD! The campaign is BACK ON TRACK!”

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Two

“They've got to give us some time to get a statement together,” Darryl raved at the inside of the refrigerator. “They've just got to, it's just the only thing that's fair.”

“Shut the damn refrigerator or get something out of it, Darryl,” Gladys yelled from the back porch. “You trying to chill the whole damn kitchen?” Gladys was still awake, and it was now 2am. There was a stack of sticky notes on the picnic table and three phones next to them: her land line, her cell and Darryl's cell. Hers was the “official” campaign number - this had been one of her gimmicks when she was running before, that she would be the person called anytime the media wanted to get a statement. No spin doctors, no spokespeople. That had been her motto the first time she ran for city council, and they had eaten it up. Of course the number wasn't publicly available, or every fourteen year old who couldn't find Prince Albert would have run her phone bill through the ceiling, but the reporters got direct access to the candidate herself. It was a gimmick, but it was one the home team liked. She'd used it this time around, and noticed an unending succession of calls that never came. They just hadn't cared about her once she set her sights on the governor's office. It was a pipe dream, and everyone knew it.

Now it wouldn't stop ringing, even after she'd talked to every reporter who knew her name. She'd told them she'd get back to them. She had to have

some time, she said, to absorb the awful truth that had been revealed at the end of the gubernatorial debate: that both candidates were a sham, that their whole election personalities were fake, that they were actually entirely terrible people.

Of course, everyone knew that, but they didn't want direct evidence.

“Gladys,” Darryl said, and he strode out onto the deck with his hair wild and a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, “This is unbelievable. They have to give us to the morning! It's just not fair otherwise!”

“Darryl!” Gladys resisted the urge to slap him and scream, GET A HOLD OF YOURSELF, MAN, but just barely. Now was not the time to reenact cliched scenes. “Darryl, it doesn't matter what's fair, this is important. I've got to call these people back. I know what to say. Just give me enough quiet to be able to call them back. It's really damnably late right now, but I've thought about what to say. Just...just be quiet. Please. Be quiet.”

“Okay,” Darryl sighed. “Okay. Okay, I'll be inside.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Gladys' phone rang and they both nearly leapt from their skins. Gladys swept a hand around and scooped the phone from the table like a gull all over a fish in the water. She'd hit the SEND button before it was even to her face. “Gladys Stone, Libertarian for Governor, at your service!” Her voice was crisp and sharp, like a cadet practicing his salute. Darryl could hear some garbled

squawking from the other end of the line, and Gladys trying to insert assent - uh-huh, yeah, yes, yeah, OKAY. She cleared her throat. “Okay. Yes, I understand what it costs for you to hold the presses. Send your people around. I’m ready to address the media.”

She hit the END button before there could be any objection and then she let out one huge breath all in one go.

“You’re holding a press conference?”

“Yes.”

“Here?”

“Yes, Darryl.”

“On the deck?”

“Yes, Darryl.”

“In your bathrobe?”

Gladys looked down at herself. “No. I need to go change. The *Citizen-Times*, the *Times-News*, the *Mountaineer* and WLOS will be here soon. I need to go change. Yes. A press conference. Holy shit, Darryl, can you believe this? The Republican said ‘cunt’ on PBS.”

“The Democrat said he’d kill every retard and n...African-American in the state if it got him elected.”

Gladys stared off into space for a moment, then turned to look at Darryl. He had never seen whatever was in her eyes. He was too young to have worked on her campaigns for city council or her campaign for State House. He

was too young to have voted for her in any election she had won. He was too young.

“Darryl, we are going to win this campaign. We are going to win it when I speak to the media, such as will be here, on this very deck.”

Darryl kept looking at her, listening to her, mouth half-open.

“Darryl, I am going to be the next governor. The gig is up. You were right. One day the people of this state will wake up and realize what a sham it all is, and that's going to be today.”

“Yes, Gladys,” he breathed - half panted, more like it. He was breathy, almost gasping. His chest felt awfully tight, everything sounded extremely loud. He couldn't believe this. It was happening.

“Darryl, do the dishes, I don't want them seeing my kitchen dirty.”

“Yes, Gladys.”

Gladys Stone opened the sliding glass door into her dining room and disappeared in the dark to change into something suitably astonished.

There were three reporters and a cameraman at the “news conference.” Gladys had shown them tremendous hospitality - rather, Darryl had done so at Gladys' bidding. They'd all refused a drink, though Gladys had offered them anything they could do to gin given what she had on hand. She'd laughed when she offered it to them, they had chuckled. Darryl had looked scandalized. That simply made Gladys laugh harder, and then she had finally reigned herself



in. She was giddy, she told him when he ushered her into the kitchen to help pour glasses of tea and cups of coffee. He didn't need to look so damn serious, there was *nothing* she could say out there that would top what had happened at the end of the debate. He had tutted at her, clucked like a mother hen and seemed terrified, and she had patted him on the shoulder and said, it's okay, kid. What have we got to lose?

He hated it when she called him "kid."

"Alright," Gladys said as she swept back onto the porch. She was dressed in one of her pant suits, her hair swept back in a bun. She looked professional enough to receive Darryl's blessing but she didn't look like it wasn't 3:00 in the morning. That was important to her, not looking too perfect. She hated the Ken dolls on TV who always looked so together unless they had gone somewhere with the express purpose of looking disheveled, something that had been all the rage since Desert Storm. Wolf Blitzer had looked so good on camera without a shower or a shave, and Dan Rather had that whole weird era of rolling up his sleeves and signing off with some power to the people bullshit, and then all of a sudden Walter Cronkite had looked like a stuffy old git sitting there on camera with his tie done up and his pleats perfect.

The other people on the deck - two women and two men, one of them with a camera on his shoulder and a couple of questions he'd been told to ask - sat uncomfortably at the picnic table. They were very obviously glad that the interviews could start, and that coffee had arrived. Gladys set down her glass

of tea at one end of the table, stayed standing and said, “Who wants to go first?”

“Um,” said the woman from the *Times-News*, and then she smiled very, very discomfited. She had no clue what to say. “I think we're all wondering: what do you think of what was said in tonight's debate?”

Gladys chuckled. It still set them all on edge. She took a sip of tea and then set the glass back down, folding her hands behind her back to keep from fidgeting. “I think that both the Democrat and Republican showed their true colors tonight. I think it is a terrible truth that they confirmed, something we all have always suspected: that those people, and I use the word generously, want nothing but to be in power. They do not care what they have to say or do in order to achieve that goal. They do not care about their constituency. They do not care about their supporters. They do not care at all, about anything, save for power. They will say anything and do anything to have that. They spent two hours saying nothing and two minutes speaking from their hearts, and those two minutes contained the most offensive thing anyone has ever heard on television. I'm sorry PBS spent good money on broadcasting it.”

“We hear,” the cameraman spoke up, and everyone looked at him in a bit of surprise, “Sorry, but we hear it was a mistake, the cameras were supposed to be off.”

“Obviously,” Gladys agreed, and she nodded her head gravely. “Doesn't that make it all the worse? They thought no one was listening. They only

spoke the truth when they thought no one would hear them. Well let me tell you, I certainly hope that more than just us were watching and listening. I think there are going to be a lot of shocked conversations around the water cooler tomorrow, and I think their little game is finally over.”

There were a number of scribblings as she spoke. Three miniature tape recorders whirred softly in response to her voice. The red light that indicated the camera had rolled was on.

The whole state is listening, though Gladys. Not right now, but they will be. It's so strange, the time difference, the delayed *now*. What I say now is what I'll be saying in three hours on the early morning news and at noon and at six o'clock.

“Challenger Watts' campaign manager was saying an hour ago that his candidate was being sarcastic, that he was 'obviously trying to draw out the governor to admit his own callousness.' Do you believe that?”

“No.” Gladys' voice was sharp. There was no room for doubt in the mind of anyone who heard her at the moment. “No way was he being sarcastic. He was being honest. That's the *problem*, they can't be honest because the truth is so terrible.”

“Obviously,” said another one of the newspaper reporters, “You're saying you don't share their sentiments.”

“I'm not just saying I don't, I don't share their sentiments.”

“So what would you do about the death penalty moratorium?”

Gladys took a deep breath. It was now or never. If she was going to get her foot in the door on this issue, get some air-time, it was going to be with the next thing out of her mouth. They were already getting past her indignation quotes - gods, but she hated politics sometimes - and they wanted to know what *she* thought, not about the candidates, but about the issue that had seen them both circling the bowl.

“I'll tell you, they've both got it all wrong.” She took another sip of tea, and then dug for a cigarette. Eight eyes at the table went wide. Politicians hadn't smoked in public in forty years. No one knew how to react. Gladys lit her cigarette and then sighed at them. “I know, the night just gets better and better, doesn't it? Here's what I think. We need deterrents to crime. Obviously. The death penalty isn't working, though, because murder still happens. There are unsolved cases every year. There are cases where suspects who look guilty as all hell get off on some technicality. There is a tragedy that happens every time someone is killed in cold blood, and the state's solution - to point at the chair and say, hey, buddy, you kill your neighbor and we kill you - it isn't working. If it worked, we wouldn't have any more murders in this state, but here we are, talking about what to do with murderers. It's stupid. The state shouldn't be in the business of putting people to death. The government's job is not to make moral decisions - that's the whole point of my party's platform, that the individual must be trusted to make her or his own decisions, that we cannot legislate lifestyles, we cannot

legislate personal conduct, we cannot legislate morality. Of course we want people to live morally, we want safety, we want security. Everyone does. But telling everyone to sit tight while the state takes care of murderers hasn't done the trick, and it never will."

"Are you against the death penalty?" The woman who asked was with the *Citizen-Times*, the closest thing the mountains had to liberal media. They'd been the first news source to cover Gladys' campaign for city council. She'd never forget that.

"No. I think that the people should have the power to do what they will with someone who has broken the greatest taboos of our society. The mechanism of government is not an effective tool of the will of the people. Its only usefulness is in enabling individuals to enact their own individual will."

Silence reigned. They were not following her, but she'd started down the path and there was no going back now.

"What do you mean?" The kid from the *Mountaineer* looked tired. He just wasn't getting it. No one was.

"I'm talking about making the deterrent something other than the idea of the electric chair or a needle full of toxins in a big building far away from the murder itself. We have concealed carry laws in this state already - I've got my license, and I take a gun with me wherever it's legal or where a proprietor hasn't posted a no-weapons policy. I think we need to strengthen the rights of individuals to defend themselves from assault. We need to put the deterrent

force in the hands of the victims before they're victims. When someone wants someone else dead, or raped, or a child molested, when they stop to consider how likely they are to get away with something awful, one of our worst crimes, I don't think the question they ask themselves should be, 'How likely am I to get caught?' I think the question should be, 'How likely am I to come home from this right now?' I want the entire state-supported apparatus of endless appeals and tax-supported free rides taken out of the matrix. I want them to worry for their lives. That, I'm here to tell you, would be a real deterrent.”

There was more dumbfounded, hour-dulled silence from the table. The miniature tape recorders shut off in the quiet. Those eight eyes, now somewhat glazed and quizzical, took her in.

“Are you saying you want people to kill murderers?”

“I'm saying I want would-be murderers to worry they may be killed.

Listen, where have you been? Do you know how many shotguns in the hands of how many farmers have saved how many cattle? Do you know how many handguns under counters have stopped convenience store robberies? Have you ever been to a gun show?” In the ensuing silence, Gladys snapped, “It wasn't rhetorical! I know it's late, but this moment is important to the future of this state, and you people are the ears of the state right now. I am telling you, a heavily armed and immediately defensible society is a polite society. Everyone at gun shows are very, very nice to one another, and it's for a damn good reason. It's because they know there could be *immediate* consequences if they

try anything funny. The consequences our state attempts to impose are so far-removed they might as well not exist to the atrophied attention span of your average killer or rapist. I want men and women in this state to be able to defend themselves as vigorously as need be, and *that* will slow down some criminals right quick. We've got a second amendment for a reason, ladies and gentlemen, and I want North Carolinians to know that if they need to exercise those liberties in order to feel safe and to be safe then I as their governor will support them in that. I will never let the state encourage crime by making sure the process of punishing offenders takes years, wastes money and erases the tragedy, the sting of loss, from anytime that our basic rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness are impinged by some asshole with a knife. I want to expand our legislation to include a greater definition of self-defense, including circumstances in which the state must respect one's right to defend one's self and property and those one loves.”

“Are...” The cameraman was the one talking again. “Are you saying we should get rid of cops and arresting people and prosecuting them for violent crime?”

“No,” Gladys said, and she finished her cigarette - which she'd hardly smoked anyway - and stubbed it out in an ashtray Darryl had produced from the kitchen. “If someone is a victim, or the representative of a victim who is unable to speak - say, they've been murdered, brain damaged, or otherwise incapacitated - I want that person to have the option. If they choose to

defend themselves from a threat and they can get up and convince the rest of their community that they were within their rights, they were threatened, that this was something they had to do, then that should be okay. Or they can let it happen the way it always has. Son, you can't tell me this doesn't happen from time to time already. There are official versions of justice and unofficial versions. I think we'd all agree that the unofficial versions are messy and unfair, but I'm not wanting to legalize a lynch mob. I want to make sure that we protect one's right to defend one's self."

Gladys took a deep breath and drank the rest of her iced tea. They were in shock. They still weren't getting it.

"I'll give you a for instance. In 1988, Mike Dukakis was against the death penalty. He was asked whether he'd want dead anyone who raped his wife. He said no, he didn't think it was right. And that is one hundred percent his purview. Mike Dukakis gets to decide his own opinion on things and how to handle his business. But if someone raped me, I'd want him dead and I'd kill him myself if I had to to keep it from happening again. I think I should have the chance to get up and make that case to a jury of my peers and they should have the option to agree with me and let me go. The government stinks at making moral decisions. We know this. We've known this since the Warren Commission, since Watergate, since Iran-Contra, since Kenneth Starr and since the Iraq War. If the government won't get off its duff and do something about the question of the death penalty, like anything else, then I say we put the



power in the hands of the people. I want the residents of North Carolina to make their own decisions. I want the power in their hands, not bureaucrats.”

“Do you have some official statement of this?” It was the girl from the *Times-News*. She wanted out of this press conference so bad she'd chew through barbed wire if she had to. It was on her face.

“No,” Gladys sighed. “But by the time you people go to press, I will.”

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Three

It would at this time aid the reader were someone to explain why Gladys' opinion was considered at all important, why members of the media had contacted her at the time of the tremendous bipartisan gaffe which closed the gubernatorial debate and why she had been able to attract the sort of attention that draws any reporters at all to anywhere at all at three o'clock in the morning in late October. This, however, requires accepting one very important fact: for nearly two centuries in America, "third" parties have been irrelevant. There have been many attempts at starting them or sustaining them, and many of them exist: the Communist Party America, the People's Party, the American Socialist Party and the Socialist America Party. The two best-known are of course the Libertarians, whose appeals to geeks, gun nuts and stoners have won them devoted if lonely devotees, and the Green Party. The Green's are the Left's Leftists, hardcore environmentalists, labor advocates and social progressives. The Libertarians are the Right's Right: in favor of nothing so much as a government that does nothing. Its federal platform has for years been the abolition of the income tax and a government stripped down to serve only two purposes: protect the borders and enforce laws aimed at personal security. Every other social program, they say, is unnecessary or ripe for privatization. Welfare is the job of charities, social security the job of investment firms and retirement planners; the government need be nothing

but an army and a prison system, and anything else that is desired is up to the citizen who wishes it - the Constitution assures us certain basic rights and freedoms, and anything which stands in the way of those is not only unnecessary, it is actively undesirable.

It is important to note that not all Libertarians are *lessez faire* fanatics. While their platform certainly speaks to a business' right to conduct its own affairs as it sees fit, those who register and vote and petition and speak out on behalf of the Libertarian cause are neither callous nor impractical. Rather, they believe with the same passion and in the same proportion as anyone else that a society has certain responsibilities. Those responsibilities are not best served by politicizing them in a legislature or litigating them to death in state courts. Those responsibilities are best served by the people who care passionately enough to do something about them.

This is, in essence, the reason why so few people vote Libertarian: people stink at accepting responsibility.

This is, in essence, why so few people vote for any third party: they hate taking responsibility, and they hate being held responsible. The two-party system was extremely comfortable for everyone. It was predictable and it engaged just enough of the one-on-one sports mentality to get enough people to vote to keep the whole system running without actually demanding much from the populace.

Nothing ever happened, and everyone liked it that way.

“So who is Gladys Stone?” The girl - and really, no one else present could think of her as anything but that, “the girl” - from the Hendersonville *Times-News*, circulation 30,000, asked the woman from the Asheville *Citizen-Times*, circulation 200,000, in the driveway. The girl was tired, more than just some wilted flower she looked as though she'd had her petals glued back on. She wore baggy jeans and a man's white Oxford shirt, her dark hair pulled back into a messy ponytail and her glasses drooping down her nose. The woman whom she asked was dressed for business, kept a suit hanging in the closet for the explicit purpose of being thrown on at a moment's notice. Her hair was sculpted into a storm trooper's helmet that no amount of sleeplessness could undo. She was a businessperson. Her business was being a reporter and looking like one was just a part of the job.

“You don't know who Gladys Stone is, kid?” The woman nearly laughed, but thought better of it. Interns, she thought. God, what are they teaching these kids in school these days? “Gladys Stone is a local somebody. Think of her as a kinder Boss Hogg, but in drag.”

“Abraham Lincoln Hogg,” the cameraman from WLOS 13, the only local channel. He was putting his camera in the back of his van and securing it when he spoke. Both the women looked at his back as he finished up and turned around. “He was Boss Hogg's nice-guy brother.” The cameraman shrugged and spat off to the side. “Just sayin' is all.”

“Right,” said *Citizen-Times*, and she looked back at *Times-News*. “She got elected to Asheville City Council years ago. She was in her thirties then. It's kind of a long story, but you know how Asheville politics are. The most successful coalitions are the ones that are most surprising.”

“Actually,” *Times-News* mumbled, then tried to smile cheerfully, “I'm from Hoboken. I'm here as an intern. My grampa and gramma live here in the summer, so they recommended the place. I graduate next semester. Anyway, I uh, I don't know Asheville politics.”

*Citizen-Times* blew some air out between her lips with a flutter and then cocked an eyebrow. “Well, here's the deal, kid.” *Times-News* winced every time she got called “kid,” and *Citizen-Times* was loving that.

“Asheville's got everything. Rednecks, hippies, goths, college kids, retirees, farmers, bankers, geeks, writers, New Agers and Old Fogeys and everything you could line up between them. It's the perfect place to be anything, in its own quaint way.”

“And which one of those is Candidate Stone?” *Times-News* was trying to whip out some professionalism. *Citizen-Times* smiled back at her.

“She's a little of everything. At least, that's what it seemed to all those people. The main thing is, she said she was interested in staying out of people's way. Do you have any idea how easy it is to sell a line like, 'Don't worry, being jobless and being oppressed and being pushed out of the cultural mainstream by your neighbor isn't your fault, it's the government's, so I'm going

to get it out of your hair?' It's really damn easy to sell that line. She got the gays, the stoners, the gun freaks, the everybody. Not all of them, it's not like they built a pagan altar to her in the middle of Pack Plaza, but she got just enough of every different faction in this town to get elected."

*Times-News'* eyes were wide and she leaned forward to whisper, "There are gay people? Here?"

*Citizen-Times* lowered her lids enough to look disappointed. "Honey, Asheville's the San Fran of the East Coast. Twenty years ago some Hollywood producer wanted to stage a gay pride parade for a movie he was doing. So he came here. Took out a full page ad in the paper advertising what kinds of extras he needed to show up. You know, 'tall drag queens, butch lesbians dressed as Andy Taylor,' that sort of thing. Hell, there were too many people who showed up in drag for the All-Dorothy Marching Band so they tried to send some home. Picture rednecks dressed up as Dorothy and carrying every kind of candidate for Toto that you can imagine, flooding the intersection in front of the civic center, getting in fistfights to see who gets to stay and who gets to go home. I nearly showed up myself. They'd advertised they wanted African-American post-op male-to-female transsexuals as contestants for a 'Miss Reconstruction' pageant, and I figured as long as no one checked under the hood then I could probably pass for a tranny." *Citizen-Times* smiled again as *Times-News'* eyes went wide and her mouth dropped open. "Sugar, you'd better close that thing unless you're trying to catch flies. Don't sweat it,

nothing but X chromosomes here, if that matters to you.”

*Times-News* tried to pull herself together, roughly adjusting her shirt and her glasses. “I was going to compliment you on the, uh, effectiveness of your surgery. I don't have any problem with you at all. Wouldn't have, that is, if you'd been an African-American...” She paused, trying to remember it all. “African-American post-op male-to-female transsexual. I'm from Hoboken, I've got just as open a mind as anyone else.”

*Citizen-Times* covered her mouth delicately and giggled as *Times-News* sat there stammering. Finally she waved her hand at the girl and shook her head. “Anyway, Gladys got elected to City Council. It was kind of a fluke, but shit, you should have seen the way her party carried on. Those Libertarians love it when they manage to get someone in office. It's not like she could do much on the council to get done their whole deal, the no taxes and no social programs schtick, but she was up there in the winner's circle so the party turned out in force to welcome her in. A lot more gun shows came to town after that - I think the Libertarians are in pretty tight with some NRA types. And of course she blew the lid off the APD drug scandal.”

“The APD drug scandal?”

“Asheville Police Department,” said the cameraman, whom neither of them realized was still there. “Sorry,” he added when they both seemed surprised to hear him speak again.

“Drug scandal?”

“The APD's dirty,” said *Citizen-Times* with a shrug. She'd kicked off her heels already and leaned down now to pick them up and stretch her toes against the asphalt of Gladys' driveway. “They always have been, always will be, it's just one of those things about small-town life. The Sheriff's Department, the county wing of enforcement, they're dirty too but not as thoroughly dirty as APD. Anyway, the APD got caught getting a kid to be their mule. They'd been doing it for years, busting some kid for dealing a little something and then they'd tell him, look, you work for us now. We supply you and you do our business and then we look the other way. Only, they never did look the other way forever. Eventually the kid would get cocky and the APD would bust him and they'd find a new door-to-door guy. One of the kids managed to videotape the cops coming to strong-arm him when they finally turned on him, and the tape got out.” *Citizen-Times* looked sidelong at the cameraman, who was still listening, and then said to him, “We were the only ones who'd cover it. But Gladys wouldn't let it go.” She looked back, now, at *Times-News*. “Another tip, kid: the TV people are in tight with anybody who's got money. Our friend here seems very nice, but never trust them.” The cameraman snorted and rolled his eyes dramatically. *Citizen-Times* went on, undisturbed. “Anyway, we covered it. Gladys got wind of it. She made a huge stink, got the city council to pass a resolution against the use of any more funds for local drug enforcement until an independent inquiry could happen. She wanted the State Bureau of Investigation to open a case against the APD on



corruption charges. She couldn't get much in the way of column-inches anywhere but us, so we got everything she had to say. She also got right out on the street with it. She set up a soapbox, a real, honest-to-God soapbox out in front of the Vance Memorial and she stood on it every day for two weeks yelling at the top of her lungs.”

*Citizen-Times* leaned in a little, as though they were at a party and she wanted to make sure her young friend heard every word. The wind picked up briefly and the leaves shook back and forth so hard it sounded as though it had started to rain.

“She'd stand there, a block from the police department's offices, a block from city hall, preaching a sermon for two, three hours on how the APD was dirty and how this was what unmonitored, unquestioned authority became in time: corrupted. She still wasn't getting any traction in anybody else's news, but she was sure as shit getting some redneck fuckers who already hated anything that might be termed the 'gubmint' talking, and the hippies, and anybody else who'd ever had cause to run into the law in town. It ended up working. Enough people wrote enough letters to get the SBI here to take a look at things. Gladys was a hero.”

“Wooooooow!” *Times-News* was wide-eyed and rapt. This was better than a story around the campfire, at grampa's own right hand. “So did the APD get cleaned up?”

*Citizen-Times* laughed so abruptly and so loudly that *Times-News* jerked

backwards. Her cackle was almost hysterical in its sudden violence and equally sudden cessation. “Kid,” she said a bit unevenly, still amused, “The guy at the SBI who was in charge of investigating police corruption used to be Sheriff of this county. That makes him dirty, too, remember? Cleared the APD whole hog, though they did get some orders on the DL that they should keep it quieter from now on, do less messy turning on their own sort of shit.” *Citizen-Times* laughed again. “Man. Gladys was stunned. She should have done her homework on that one. But you live and learn. She turned it around anyway, ran for State House on the platform that she'd sponsor legislation to make everything more transparent, end the corruption that ran through the whole state, etc. She nearly won, but not quite. Two years later, she ran for the US House. Managed to squeak out a win that time. Damn, but the Libertarians went crazy for her then.”

*Times-News* was still interested, but *Citizen-Times* was clearly winding down, so she stabbed a question in to get more of the story. “She made it to the House of Representatives?”

“Yes, what, you deaf? Were you not here for that sentence?” *Citizen-Times* was starting to get irritable and tired, deeply cranky. “She knocked off this asshole Republican, big ol' white guy who owned a lumber company that was busy leaving stumps all up and down the side of every mountain around here.”

“So...Gladys is an environmentalist?”

“Maybe so, kid, beats me. She didn't tackle him on that, she tackled him on being a shitty businessman. His company hired illegal immigrants, had an awful safety record and was bleeding cash from both eye sockets, and he didn't even have the balls to push for any legislation that would make it easier for him to operate. Gladys ran one ad that just showed his picture and over it some stats about his firm. The stinger at the end read, TOO STUPID TO BE CORRUPT. It worked.”

*Times-News* couldn't wrap her brain around it at four in the morning, so she shook her head. “I don't get it. You said Libertarians don't like government getting involved in social issues.”

“Right. They don't. Her own party's platform stated that it wasn't anyone's business if the guy was a bad capitalist with bad policies and dying workers and red ink all over the bottom line. She couldn't go after him on labor relations, environmental concerns, nothing. So she went after him for failing to go all the way with his own corruption. It gave her the chance to point out all the things that she knew would piss people off about the guy, but she could come at it from another angle: if he's going to be corrupt he could at least be good at being corrupt. It was a tricky argument, most people didn't get it and that's probably why it worked. But by that point, she was a local crusader. She did her two years, got bumped out by a Bible-thumping son of a bitch next time around, and that was...” *Citizen-Times* looked at the cameraman for help. By now he was firmly entrenched as responsive scenery.

“What? Eight years ago?”

“Yep.” WLOS nodded his agreement. “Something like.”

“She made her splash and all of a sudden it was over. Since then she's done a lot of smiling and waving at the Libertarian get-togethers, but she's not run for anything. I think they nominated her for governor as a victory lap kind of thing. So there you have it. Her back story, in a nutshell. Gladys is a weird bird, a tough nut to crack. I'm not sure whether she really believes that Libertarian stuff about no taxes, no welfare, no corporate oversight, but she does believe people ought to know what's going on in their government. She's got a good heart, I think. Too bad she's running for a bunch of wacko junkies.” *Citizen-Times* chewed her lip and looked contemplative for a moment or two, looking into the woods over *Times-News'* head. “We'd never have asked her what she thought if she didn't have so much local history. She seems to think this is going to make a difference for her, that any body's going to care what she said tonight. It's too bad, but what those jackasses in Raleigh said is going to suck all the oxygen out of the news cycle tomorrow. It's just a fact of life.”

“Yep.” WLOS agreed again. “Something like.”

“So go on home, kid. Nothing much to report on here. I'll write it up, I guess, but I doubt my editor will do much with it.” *Citizen-Times* yawned very dramatically, one hand in front of her mouth, the other clutching her notepad hard, like it might try to get away from her.

“Yep,” WLOS mumbled. “Reckon I should get back to the studio and

turn in this tape so they can wipe it.” He turned slowly and began very carefully locking up his van, then taking one painfully slow step at a time towards the driver's door.

“It is awfully late,” *Times-News* sighed. She tucked her pencil behind her ear and stuck her notepad in the breast pocket of her shirt. “I guess I should go home. I can turn this in tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah,” *Citizen-Times* agreed, eyes full of the kindness of elders. “Not much of a story here. Hell, *Mountaineer's* already gone. They're a weekly, anyway. He's in no hurry to print anything big.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

And then, as one, they broke and ran for their respective vehicles.

*Citizen-Times* was the first one to hit speed-dial on her phone. “Jimmy! Jimmy, hold the presses!” She tore down Gladys' winding, mountainside driveway at top speed, weaving like the town's own drunk to keep WLOS from passing her and getting to town first. Tree branches scraped the sides of her car and wildlife scattered in every direction as she rocketed through Gladys' neighborhood. “I've got a statement from Gladys Stone and she thinks she's back in it. Jimmy, this could be *huge!* Gladys Stone has an *issue again!*”

Inside Gladys Stone's home, things were remarkably more docile.

“Gladys, that was genius.” Darryl was sitting in smug satisfaction on her

couch, perhaps somehow convinced that his candidate had managed to pull together four news sources at three in the morning on her own back porch because he had been there, that this was in some bizarre way to his credit. “Gladys, I’m talking GENIUS here. That was the sort of hot, commanding presence that we’ve been trying to demonstrate you could have the entire time! The party is going to love this one. They’ll love it.” He continued to bask in his own glow, a big mug of coffee spiked with bourbon in his right hand, his left flipping channels as he perused the all-night news. Every now and then there would be a mention of the unbelievable accident that had been the debate’s final minute. It wasn’t much - but each time it was mentioned briefly, a talking head would note that everything would become clearer in the morning, when there was reaction from the state’s populace.

It was a beginning. It was something they could milk for some bandwidth, at least, and that meant it would be something he could put on his resume. He was in heaven.

“Stop sitting there jacking off your future, Darryl.” Gladys Stone could have been a mind reader. She set a stack of papers in Darryl’s lap and dropped her own miniature tape recorder into his lap. “Get on the horn with the folks at headquarters. I need this tape transcribed and turned into something readable by six o’clock to go on the website. I need my good suit pressed, we’re almost out of eggs and I’m going to have to get up in two hours to prep for the morning news.” She had taken her hair down, and now gray streaked

with black here and there hung messily around her neck. Her suit looked frumpy now that Darryl saw it in better light, and her eyes were very tired. Tired, yes, he thought, but there's something in them that wasn't there yesterday.

“I've done this gig before, Darryl, and I have got to make some waves right now. I've got to strike while the iron is hot. When everyone is standing around their water coolers or their wheelbarrows tomorrow, I want them talking about the guys who would have been governor and I want them talking about *me*. We have got a shot at something huge, Darryl. This isn't about getting some notice, this is about getting the governor's office.” She drew herself up and her pupils practically sparkled at him. “Get that yahoo they dredged up to run for Lieutenant Governor out of bed and tell him what's gone on. Get him on board with this statement. Get everything *together*, Darryl, because I want the state of North Carolina to hear in three hours and all day after the early bird reports that I have gone on record as (a) condemning the sacks of shit who were on TV last night for being the hollow husks of men that they are, and (b) that the first thing I will do as governor will be to expand the definition of justifiable homicide to allow people to make their own decisions about this, to take back the question of the death penalty from the government and put it in the hands and pockets and purses of North Carolina itself.” Gladys was pacing the floor now, her hands behind her back, her face twisted in thought, age suddenly showing itself in lines and creases here and

there. “Damn it, why didn't I work harder on this before?”

“What do you mean, Gladys?”

“I mean,” and she stopped, and looked around, and then looked at him directly. “I mean, why didn't I realize that this could work? Darryl, I've won two elections in my life. But that's two more than almost anyone else, much less any other Libertarian. I thought I was over, that I'd been a fluke, an oddity, a one-hit wonder. But Darryl, what you've said yourself is really happening. I said it earlier and I'm saying it now: it's *happening*. The two big candidates can be beaten, and I'm the woman to do it!” There was fire in her eyes, and Darryl was never so grateful as when she looked away and addressed the TV. “I believe in this party, and I believe in my platform, and tomorrow I'm going to get to stand on a soapbox one more time, and *I can't wait*.”

The Asheville *Citizen-Times* and the Hendersonville *Times-News* both hedged their bets. They ran headlines about what the candidates had said in the debate, but that the subhead simply said, “Local Candidate Reacts to Statements.” *The Mountaineer* wasn't due out for two more days, but it went to press early. POLITICIANS STILL STUPID, read its headline. *No One Especially Surprised* was the subhead. A framed copy of that front page sat on the wall of the editor for the rest of his career.

It was WLOS, surprising almost everyone, who picked up Gladys' statement and ran with it. EXCLUSIVE VIDEO, said every TV tuned to that



station that morning, and there it was: the first time they'd seen the face of Gladys Stone in years. A lot of people had thought she was dead, probably, or moved away, retired, in a home, somewhere other than in politics. She had just enough of a hint of familiarity - and just enough of a grandmotherly face now - to swell a little bit of fond remembrance in the minds of those who remembered her fevered campaigns against corruption in the city of Asheville and in the state bureaucracy. She was a loser, ultimately, but a lovable loser, and everyone likes someone who doesn't seem too much better than they are.

The Party chiefs had to admit, this was one striking opportunity. We must do this carefully, however, they had said to Darryl. Can we even do that, expand the definition of justifiable homicide? What's she claiming she'll do, give out licenses to kill? Legalize revenge killings?

We'll worry about that once she's elected, Darryl had told them. We'll word it all very carefully, but she is convinced that this is her chance. You have to get on board now if we're going to get anywhere. Darryl was very adamant. He didn't want to disappoint his candidate. Gladys is the candidate, he had told them, and I am her campaign manager, and this is where we are going. You are welcome to come along, but it's happening either way.

The campaigns of the Democratic challenger and the Republican governor each had statements ready by the beginning of the news cycle. Democrat Watts' campaign manager tried to play it off as sarcasm, that he was

baiting the governor to 'fess up to his own callousness, his own lack of concern for the state, but then the challenger himself broke into audible sobbing just off-camera. Everyone knew the person screaming and crying behind the curtain had to be the candidate himself, given they could hear his shouts of, "BUT I WAS GOING TO BE GOVERNOR! THEY HAVE TO CLEAN THIS SHIT UP! THIS CAN'T HAPPEN TO ME, I'M GOING TO BE GOVERNOR!"

His campaign was dead in the water.

The governor appeared in person at his own press conference at 5:30am. He looked worn and haggard. He was full of a strange, almost alien bravado. He shook his fist and said the Democrat couldn't take the heat, couldn't handle the sorts of tough decisions and demanding discipline it took to be governor. He weaved a little as he spoke, though he managed to more or less stay on-message: being governor is a tough job and it takes a tough guy to do it, and he was a tough guy. He'd take on anybody who had a problem with what he said!, he said. It wasn't a pretty press conference. Reporters were standing in a chairless room in the lobby of the office building that housed the governor's campaign offices, and they had all begun to edge away from the podium very slightly. The governor's red-rimmed eyes and the stench of cheap booze had pushed them back like squirrels trying to scoot away from the desperately vacant gaze of a rabid dog in that terrible moment when they both look up and first see one another.

Then the governor threw up all over his podium and passed out in a dead

faint. The footage played over and over again for the next six days.

David Stonewall was not fired. His producers and his managers and his News Editors all paced up and down their boardroom and talked about him, but no one was talking to him. Ratings would certainly be up, no one doubted that.

David had a very good night's sleep.

By noon, the polls were out. Watts, Democratic Challenger, had 17% support in the polls. The governor had 18% support in the polls. There were 61% "Now Undecided," the story went, and 4% for "Other."

"We're up a whole percentage point," someone at headquarters had said to Darryl on the phone, but he assured them that Gladys knew what she was doing. The website was updated. The video was out there.

The Raleigh affiliate for WLOS' network picked up the footage from WLOS by lunch, as did an affiliate in Wilmington and one in Charlotte.

By that night, new numbers were out. With the election six days away, Gladys Stone was in the lead. 47% for Gladys, 21% for the Green Party, 11% for the Democrat, 12% for the Republican and 10% for "Other, or Undecided."

The winds had shifted.

Gladys Stone watched the sun set from her back porch. She'd be in Raleigh tomorrow to address the Young Libertarians group at North Carolina

State.

They'd had seven hundred students join their club since two o'clock that afternoon. Their phone line was busy all day - they took it off the hook eventually. Lines formed leading to their "office" on campus, a dorm room referred to by their Area Director as "The Pachouli Zone." County Elections Boards all over the state had plead for patience - they were out of party registration forms. Everyone wanted to switch affiliations now.

Gladys watched the sun set and smiled at the world.

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Four

At the last minute, Gladys' speech was moved from the NCSU student union's biggest meeting hall to a larger venue. There were too many people who wanted to hear what she had to say. The news was still hot with the scandal of the governor's race, the election was six days away and a wealthy alumnus had called the Chancellor to let him know, very sternly, that if the University wanted that new laboratory in the aging facilities of the Chemistry Department, or they wanted their annual and unarguably sizable annual donation, they would put Gladys Stone in Carter-Finley Stadium.

Gladys had not been there since she was in college herself. She'd been in the pep band. Twenty hours had passed since the last sunset, and now she was getting a little nervous.

"You can do this," Darryl told her through the locked bathroom door in her room at the Holiday Inn, a giant spike in the skyline of Raleigh, the hilt of some '60s era architectural stab wound right in the heart of downtown.

"Gladys, you're running late. We need to leave in five minutes if we're going to get to the stadium on time, okay?" He jiggled the knob again. "Gladys? Don't make me break this door down, Gladys!"

Gladys sat in her bathrobe, on the floor of the bathroom, chewing on a Pop-Tart. She loved Pop-Tarts. They were second only to peanut butter cookies, in her list of comfort foods. Heck, she could think of a lot of things

she'd really like to be munching on right now: salt and vinegar potato chips. Peanut butter cups, of course. Some nice, broiled salmon, with a little lemon juice and some white pepper. A ding told her the hotel's tiny coffee maker was done brewing. The smell was delicious.

A weak thud against the door and a yelp finally snapped her out of her self-imposed reverie. Damn him, Darryl was really trying to break the door down. All one hundred thirty pounds of him would probably break in two if he did it one more time. The door would doubtless survive without issue, and then she'd be out one campaign manager.

Darryl fell awkwardly through the door when she yanked it open just before his second attempt.

“Don't try that again,” Gladys snapped as she reached down to take one of his thin hands in hers. Every bit of his wiry black hair was standing at a different angle from every other one, and his gray, pinstriped suit coat had flipped up over his face when he fell. He looked like a broom dressed up as a man for Halloween, just a wig jutting out of the top of a mound of fabric.

“I'm sorry, Gladys,” he panted as he tried to pull himself together, got his vision back from the dark tomb of his own mussed clothing. “But you can't back out on this now. I've got to motivate you when you're down, that's my job, remember?”

“Yes, Darryl,” Gladys sighed, and with a heave she leveraged her weight against his to lift him to his feet. She swallowed the last of her Pop-Tart and

shrugged off her bathrobe. Underneath she was already dressed for the speech, ready to go, hair again in the bun that she'd worn in the video footage from her back porch. Everyone in the state had seen her in that hairdo now, so she was stuck with it for a while. "Now pull yourself together and let's go tell the nice people from NCSU that I've got laryngitis and I can't address twenty thousand people in an hour."

Darryl brushed his hair back into place with his hands and gave her That Look. A mirror-check later he was wagging his finger at her. "There is no backing out now, Candidate Stone. None whatsoever. You were the one who said we were going to roll with this. You were the one who said that we were going to ride this wave all the way to the beach, that this was your chance to get back on that soapbox."

Gladys listened, her eyes on Darryl's face, and after a moment she let out her breath and turned away to walk across her hotel room. "I know," she said quietly. "But this - this isn't the street in front of the Vance Monument anymore. I'm running for *governor* now. I'm...I don't know what to do."

"Everyone gets the jitters," Darryl said with a smile. He walked towards her, hands out to try to comfort her but she shook her head and put a hand up.

"It's not stage-fright. I'm not afraid to talk to these people. I'm not afraid to get up in front of anyone who will listen and tell them what I think. It's that I'm not sure about this situation. This whole thing with the other candidates - yeah, they were very bad people, we know that now, we all

suspected it all along, no problem there - but is it right for me to take such advantage of that blow to everyone else's confidence? There are people who will be at Carter-Finley tonight, not because they believe in the Libertarian platform or in me, but because they're desperate to have someone they think they can trust again."

"And they can trust you, Gladys. We both know that."

"Yes, but they don't." Gladys set her face in a rictus of grim consideration. "They're just betting on me. They're gambling with their ideals. What if I'm taking advantage of them just the same as those other fuckers took advantage of them up until two days ago?"

"Gladys," and here Darryl did his best to smile patiently, "Two days ago you were barking orders at me to make sure we got some traction on this death penalty thing before it died down. Why the crisis of conscience now?"

"Because I've had time to stop and think," she said quietly. "Now I'm worried I'm no better. I slipped in while the gates were down. There's a part of me that feels like I've...cheated. Like I'm an infiltrator into the system. Like I've hijacked the process to take advantage of the end of two other careers. That feels dirty somehow."

Darryl took his time chewing on that one, then lifted both hands, palm up, and both shoulders, very slowly. "Shit happens, Gladys. This is the future of North Carolina we're talking about. It's not always going to be pretty getting things to change. Look no further than the American Revolution to realize



that. The men who wrote the Constitution took up arms when the time was ripe for rebellion. They dug their heels into centuries of precedent to throw out a bunch of corrupt and corrupting bastards who wanted nothing more than power. Did they themselves want power, too? Yes, or else we wouldn't have had so many of them as Presidents. You want to worry about grabbing opportunity when it's available? General Washington told his wife he didn't want to command the Continental Army, then he spent over 80 of the 110 days attending the first Congress in his *military uniform*, knowing he was the only person there with military experience. He ran the best silent campaign ever, bar none. Do you consider him immoral? He saw a need and he filled it. You're doing nothing different.”

“You have a vested interest in making sure I get out there tonight. You're biased.” Gladys still wouldn't look at him.

“Gladys, you are not a hypnotist. You are not a mesmerist. You are not going to get on that stage and dupe anyone. They want to hear what you have to say, so *fucking say it*. Let them make up their minds on their own, isn't that what this Party is all about?”

Gladys stood still for another moment or two, then drew a deep breath and, with it, her shoulders up and her back straight. She adjusted her jacket, buttoned it checked her collar. She did so out of habit, no mirror needed. She had done this before and would do this again. She knew the scripted routine. She'd done it every morning before walking up to Pack Plaza with a soapbox in

her hand and a brain full of rage at the corruption around her, the hollow, subconscious fear of those in power she'd managed to tap over a decade ago. She imagined the people in that stadium, and wondered for a moment how she could order them to think for themselves, and would it work again? Would her exhortation for independence lead them to follow her?

There would be only one way to find out, wouldn't there?

The next day, the Party had announced that there were not twenty thousand people in Carter-Finley. There were sixty thousand.

It had taken the banks three days to get behind Gladys. They had of course kept their eye on the various parties - variables in anything were to be avoided. They maintained a regular assessment of the parties and their candidates and their platforms. They focused on the Big Two, because everyone else did and because the odds worked out to be so minuscule that anyone else would be elected, but they had stepped up their monitoring of other parties after Ventura had taken Minnesota. It was an anomaly, almost impossible to predict, but it was worth noting. It could be finessed into their equations, and the Libertarians had been of particular interest.

Regulations were tremendous wastes of resources.

Two days after Gladys had first appeared on the news programs of almost every station in the state, one day after she had appeared to a roaring

crowd at Carter-Finley, one day after polls showed her support surging past the all-important 50% mark, one day after the news had been leaked that the sitting governor was under a suicide watch, the banks had started calling the party's headquarters in Raleigh.

They were interested in making contributions, they said. Did the Party need signs? Volunteers? Air time? They felt it was important to support the progress of democracy. They were of course apolitical. They had donated to everyone, they said.

They had to donate to everyone. It was their duty.

Citicorp, Wachovia, First Citizens, Bank of America - they were all headquartered in Charlotte. The banks were as North Carolinian as anyone else, Tar Heels born and Tar Heels bred. This was part of the responsibility of having money. They had to give back.

It had taken the lawyers four days to get behind Gladys. The details were sketchy, but the suggestion floated so far was that the definition of justifiable homicide could be widened to include situations other than an armed and aggressive intruder in one's own home. It would not be a rubber stamp on revenge killings, but anyone who felt that their life was in danger would be able to defend themselves. If they were investigated, they would be able to initiate proceedings against the person from whom they had defended themselves. It might complicate matters, but they would have the chance to

justify their actions - if a jury of their peers agreed with them, with the argument that they had needed to defend themselves, that a threat was imminent, then so be it. If they could prove that they were threatened, they wouldn't even have to go that far.

The lawyers loved it. It would double the number of cases to be tried.

Judges were not so hot on the idea. Their workload would be doubled, but their salaries would not. They were, however, elected officials. It was very difficult for them to seem soft on crime, or uninterested in victims' rights. These were not popular stands to take. Besides, with a handful of days before the elections, the vast majority of them wouldn't have time to say anything one way or the other. For candidates, judges did precious little campaigning.

State legislators gaped in wonderment. Those who had been up for re-election were desperate not to be associated with their parties' candidates for governor. They were clamoring to distance themselves from anyone and everyone, and that was far more entertaining for the voting populace than hearing what they thought about a minor aspect of a law everyone agreed with: that one should be able to defend one's self, one's family.

Those not up for re-election were in the enviable position of being unruffled, safe ombudsmen. Most of them were engaged in spin control for their parties. Those that weren't backpedaling as hard as they could and still

look casual about it were of course trying to discredit Gladys or her Green Party counterpart, a Social Studies teacher from some swampy village Down East. Given that it was far easier to spend time painting the Green as a Communist in sheep's clothing, and given that a handful of legislators were positively aroused by the idea that they could finally give back to their more corporate campaign contributors, that they could suddenly claim to be free of the yoke of debt, both financial and spiritual, that many of them felt hung around their necks, it was pretty simple to ignore Gladys. If she got elected, it would be on her own - they might not go out of their way to attack her, but they wouldn't help her, either. She was on her own. As an unknown quantity, they could give her a brief honeymoon were she elected governor, then mire her down with budget issues. If she proved herself useful, they could play patty-cake. If she proved a stumbling block, they could just as easily run her out of town on a rail.

With Gladys' picture on roadsides and TV screens all over the state, it was an easy week. The parties tried smear ads. They went nowhere.

On election night, she addressed her supporters and staffers - rather more of them than she'd remembered having a week ago - from a stage in a ballroom in Asheville.

"I want to thank the people of North Carolina," she said, eyes moist, hair still in that damned bun, a black business suit wrapped around her with a

giant, gem-encrusted penguin lapel pin weighing down her left side and an enormous, embossed state flag failing to balance her on the other. “I want to thank them for this chance to serve, and I most of all want them to thank themselves. Today, the people of North Carolina took back their government. We will all remember the better course we started today. Thank you!”

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Five

Russell Madstone was the first person in the state of North Carolina to be legally murdered by someone other than the state itself. He was a fifty seven year old white man, his head shaved to conceal his natural baldness, with a giant mustache that hung below his triple chin like the tusks of a gargantuan walrus. That was, in fact, what the kids in the neighborhood called him: the werewalrus. By the light of the full moon, they had whispered and giggled, he took his true form and zealously bit the heads off puffins who wandered by. It was a joke the parents found amusing, but worthy of a light scolding. That's not a nice thing to say, they would tell their children. He's not a nice man, their children would counter.

One of the children was a girl in middle school. She would have been played by Winona Ryder, thirty years earlier, had they made a movie of her life. She was petite, physically unremarkable, polite but quiet. She observed everything. She also knew that Werewalrus watched them - watched her and the other girls in the neighborhood when they walked to school. He took pictures of them, through the sheers that hung in the bay window in his front room. If it was a very quiet morning, the girl would hear it as if from very far away: ka-chik, ka-chik, ka-chik, ka-chik, ka-chik. It was the noise of a camera, she knew that noise. He was taking their pictures more and more frequently as the autumn ran on into winter.

Russell was new in town. No one knew him. He worked out of his home in some capacity, sending large packages frequently. It was a small town, people talked a lot and mostly about one another. He shipped packages, some large, some small, several a week. He received packages, several a week. His back yard in their quiet, downscale neighborhood of brick ranch after brick ranch was bordered by an eight-foot privacy fence. Some of the more curious boys had investigated thoroughly and discovered this: that the packages he received and then carted to the back yard were often big boxes containing other, smaller boxes. There was furniture sometimes, sometimes what looked like electronics - things the boys' families could never afford, things with funny pictures on the side. One boy's father had told him the pictures were Korean letters, he recognized the style described by the boy from some of the things his own father had brought back from a war there. The boys were immediately suspicious of this sort of wealth, flowing in and out of Werewalrus' yard at such a high pace.

Eventually word got around to explain the transactions: Russell's mail carrier noticed that he was receiving lots of envelopes from an online auction site. Looked like checks to him, he said. So that was the werewalrus' business: he sold things online.

Probably cheap chink counterfeits, the neighborhood said. He's probably a cheat, or a thief. I'd bet they're all stolen. Stolen from chinks, that's desperation.



It didn't help that Russell rarely spoke to anyone. He was quiet, and they were insular. No one was going to invite anyone around for a barbecue anytime soon.

The girl kept hearing it, ka-chik, ka-chik, ka-chik, all autumn. At first it was just once or twice a week, and she wasn't sure she was hearing it. Then it was almost every day. Then it was every morning on the walk to school and every evening on the walk back. She nearly started crying when she heard it, ka-chik ka-chik ka-chik, in the middle of soccer tryouts.

The second week of November, she had to go door to door to sell gift wrap for a school fund raiser. No one else would go to Werewalrus' door, and she sure as shit wasn't planning to, but when she tried to hit every house on that block but his, he was out in his yard cutting the lawn.

What are you going around about, girl?

Hey, miss, don't be afraid, I wanted to know what you were going around for. You selling something? Let me see, I might want some.

Hey, this is nice stuff, I think I want to buy some. Do you take checks? Good, come in, my checkbook is inside.

You want a soda?

The girl's mother was a card-carrying member of the National Rifle Association. As a weird kind of joke, one in which even she acknowledged there was a degree of absurdity, she kept an old print-out of a still from

“Planet of the Apes” on her refrigerator. It was a shot of Charlton Heston in a net suspended from a bar, face twisted towards the camera and an angry snarl as his expression. Underneath it was printed KEEP YOUR PAWS OFF ME, YOU DAMN, DIRTY APE. It was silly and weird, and the girl's mother knew it, but she liked it nonetheless. She'd heard that pictures of Charlton Heston posted in a visible place like that could make a burglar think twice. She'd never admit to putting it there as any sort of sympathetic token, a protective ward, an icon of a modern hearth god, but it was there nonetheless.

Her daughter came home crying. Werewalrus invited me inside, she told her mother. He said he wanted to buy some wrapping paper and stuff, and then he did, but he had all these pictures everywhere. Pictures of what? Pictures of me, of my friends, of the soccer tryouts, mom they were everywhere, and then he...

He touched me.

Russell Madstone opened his door to see who was knocking so insistently. A small woman with her hand in her pocketbook was standing there, and there were tears running down her face. Her mouth was twisted into something Russell could neither have forgotten nor described, something more than a frown or a scowl, something that looked like it could turn into a scream, a squiggle of pursed lips and wrinkles flesh like a dried apple doll.

What do you want?

The girl's mother lifted the pistol out of her purse. It was small, six bullets in a rotating chamber, easy to clean, easy to hide. She had a concealed carry permit for it. It was licensed. It was legal in every way. She kept her receipt for every box of bullets. She regularly led classes in gun use at the shooting range outside town. It beat the hell out of crochet.

Russell Madstone lifted his hand towards the girl's mother, his eyes wide. His mouth puckered, a word of protest about to be born, his eyebrows high.

The girl's mother pulled the trigger.

Russell's hand stopped, hung in mid-air, trembled slightly. Smoke obscured her view of his face, but she imagined it could not be pretty.

The girl's mother pulled back the pin. The chamber rotated. A new bullet spun into place. The girl's mother pulled the trigger again.

Russell's hand disappeared from her view when his corpse fell backwards.

The girl's mother pulled back the pin. The chamber rotated. A new bullet spun into place. The girl's mother pulled the trigger again.

A piece of electronics exploded dramatically on the far side of the room.

The girl's mother shifted the gun to her off-hand and reached into her purse. She had a cellphone there for emergencies. She pulled it forth, turned it on, waited while a telecom logo appeared, then the phone found a signal. She pressed 9, then 1, then 1, then SEND. She pressed the phone to her ear. A woman answered, and told her that he worked for 911 Emergency, could he

help her?

Send the police, she said. A man just tried to rape my daughter. I've shot him. I think he's dead.

The neighbors came out of their homes, no one speaking to one another for the first time in weeks, months. They walked to the edge of Russell Madstone's yard. They could see the soles of his boots just inside the open front door. The girl's mother stood there still, the phone in her hand, the gun in her other, smoke still clearing.

He tried to rape my daughter, she said. He tried to rape my daughter. There are pictures in here. Pictures of soccer tryouts.

The wife of a Sheriff's deputy was in the crowd.

When the deputy arrived, he sealed the yard. The crowd was pushed back, other cruisers came with other deputies, then the Sheriff himself arrived in his own cruiser. The ambulance came, and left again, with Russell in the back. They didn't use sirens when they left.

The Sheriff asked the girl's mother what had happened. Then, after hearing what she said, he asked her to stay right there with the deputy helping her while the Sheriff took a look inside.

The Sheriff came back a few minutes later and said to another officer, go inside and get the computer that's on that desk. Grab any pictures you find, and grab any cameras. Let's get that shed open in the back. I want to see what all we have in there. Then he turned to the girl's mother and said,

Ma'am, there are some new laws now. I could arrest you on murder charges right now, unless you claim this was a defense killing. Do you believe that he presented an imminent threat?

Yes. The girl's mother stuttered, but everyone heard her.

Would you like to initiate assault proceedings against the deceased?

Yes.

Do you understand that if these proceedings find the deceased not guilty, that you will be charged with murder?

Yes. He tried to rape my daughter.

Deputy, said the Sheriff, escort this woman home and contact Victim Services.

Is she under arrest, Sheriff?

No, deputy. Just take her home and get a counselor sent over.

A preliminary hearing was scheduled, eventually. The District Attorney, an elected official, knew this: he would be up for reelection in the fall, Russell Madstone had not been a popular man in his community, people were talking and the girl's mother had public sympathy on her side. In order to prove that the girl's mother was guilty of murder, he was going to have to prove that Russell Madstone was not a child molester, and the evidence in favor of that conclusion was very, very slim.

I don't think this is how supposed to work, he told the Sheriff. I know what the law says, but the law is vague. The legislature isn't made up of

attorneys, it's made up of businessmen. I don't think they knew what they were doing when they passed this. This guy was obviously up to no good, but is every murder trial going to have two defendants, one proving they didn't do it and one proving they didn't deserve it? If Russell Madstone was a child molester, and although it doesn't look good, it's still iffy, it's not *known*, do I have to drop charges against the girl's mother? What if the evidentiary hearing doesn't find enough evidence against Russell Madstone to have brought him to trial for sexual assault on a minor were he alive? Is that the same as finding him not guilty?

You're the lawyer, handle it one case at a time. All I know is what the crime scene and the witness told me.

The witness *is* the suspect. And now if I do have to charge her with murder, I've got against me that you let her go from the scene of the crime when she was standing there telling you she did it and *holding the murder weapon in her hand*.

This wasn't murder, the Sheriff said. It was self-defense.

Justifiable homicide, the DA said.

If you don't believe me, said the Sheriff, ask her neighbors.

A jury ruled that the evidence against Russell Madstone, deceased, would have been enough to bring him to trial on charges related to sexual predation. The District Attorney dropped the murder charge against the girl's mother, stating that in his legal opinion this was justifiable homicide as

currently defined by state law. She had acted to protect herself and her child from an imminent threat.

He should have known there would be consequences for such actions, the Sheriff said when a local newspaper asked him to comment. In this case, they were just a little more immediate is all.

The talking heads had spent three months in overdrive. They were nearly talked out. Everyone was sick of hearing about it, plain and simple. Newsweek sold a lot of copies the week they ran REVENGE KILLINGS - WHY THEY'RE LEGAL IN THE TAR HEEL STATE. The article wasn't thin on details - it discussed a history of small-scale violence in North Carolina, a history of lynch mobs, a discussion of the Klan killings of the 1970's. Greensboro was referred to over and over as a flash point. The bottom line, they argued, was that propriety reigns supreme in North Carolina. Public violence is so rare and so looked down upon that when it happens most people want swift and immediate retribution against those who would initiate any disruption of the placid lives enjoyed by 99% of the populace 99% of the time. Even violence closer to home, the quiet kind, the kind no one spoke of openly, was only tolerated for so long. There were anecdotes about abusive husbands killed by wives, men suspected of rape who disappeared after charges were made, listed officially as having fled the law. There were women who had beaten their children until, one day, the other women of their family showed up at their door for a

talk. Sometimes they talked with their mouths, sometimes with their fists and feet. Then the children would be shuffled off to be raised by a sympathetic uncle or cousin or grandparent in the next county. New guardians, new schools, new friends, new lives.

The bottom line, the article said, was that everyone admired the Andy Taylor approach to law enforcement, but when that didn't work, they were glad to keep it quiet and get the job done themselves.

TIME of course ran an identical article, though it tried to suggest that the phenomenon was more recent and had been romanticized beyond its actual occurrence. The news analysts talked at length with legal correspondents. Murder was a state charge, and 49 other states were watching North Carolina to see what would happen. It was the California recall or the Ventura campaign or the Florida recount all over again. The nation sat forward in its seats to watch what one state would do because it was entirely possible, in the long run, that this could determine some of their own future. There were countless naysayers. Polls showed that a significant minority of the nation thought that what North Carolina was doing was worth a try.

No one was willing to get on television and say that Russell Madstone didn't deserve to be shot. Assuming, of course, that he was guilty, and it was a little late to argue that point now.

Some people did say they had a problem with that, that no one would ever know, and they were usually shouted down.



Meanwhile, the state was trucking right along. The legislature had passed a bevy of inarguably popular legislation the first week they were in session, the first week Gladys was governor and had called a special session to float what she was calling the Liberty Acts: a series of bills that proposed to do away with the state income tax, do away with the food tax, do away with state income tax and increase state tariffs to fund what was going to be left of state government. The Council of State, almost entirely Democrats and all elected officials, opposed much of the plan. Many of them would have almost no job at all if Gladys got her way. This was slowing down her progress a bit - the legislature could mire her down on any detail if they felt like, so she was having to give some ground. Some, but not all.

They had passed the justifiable homicide bills. That one had been fairly easy to push through, in retrospect. There was money on the table and a lot of hungry wallets wanting to split it, and the budget and the reorganization of state government and state services that Gladys had proposed were going to steal both the momentum and the time of anyone involved in the process.

Gladys occasionally was interviewed by television and radio and newspapers. She was always quick to point out that the easy stuff had been done already, how easy it was to get rid of something, privatize something, auction something, once the budget was out on the table.

“They're addicted to taxation,” she would say of representatives from

both parties. “Of course they're trying to shut down what I want to do. I'm trying to liberate the people of North Carolina from the yoke of government, and these fat cats are each watching their *per diem* and their pork barrel and their pet projects get flushed right along with all the rest of the crap in the bowl, and they don't know what to do but throw up their hands and scream and protest. Anything else they say is just a smokescreen. Your mama raised you smarter than to buy what they're selling you, I hope.”

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Six

Jeff Franklin murdered his girlfriend in early March of 2013, in broad daylight, in public, with witnesses, and no one even noticed.

Susan had talked him into going to Chimney Rock for their three year anniversary. He hated heights, he hated hiking, he hated leaving the city and he hated his girlfriend, but she had insisted and Susan was someone who always got her way. Susan had gotten her way when they started dating - she had walked up to him at a bar in Charlotte and said to him, you look like you need a girlfriend. What do you do for a living?

I'm a medical student, he said.

So you're going to be rich eventually? You definitely need a girlfriend. Those puppy dog eyes are going to get taken advantage of one day. I'm Susan. I'll have another Fuzzy Navel, if you don't mind.

Susan was very pretty. Jeff had been amazed - he couldn't have fantasized an easier first date. He bought her drinks, she talked. She did eventually ask his name, and then she told him to take her back to his place, and they would have sex. Jeff had always been a little shy, but not dangerously so. He had been with lovers, had girlfriends, had relationships. He was still getting over his last one, and here was a rebound relationship walking up to him and forcing him to say yes, and there was simply nothing easier than falling into the old habits. He made her breakfast, she stayed at

his place most of the time, he did what she said. It was all incredibly reassuring, incredibly comfortable. Susan had been pretty incredible.

She was intense - there was no other way to describe her. Everything with her had been *intense*. She had curly brown hair that drizzled down her back and fell in front of her face in a way that Jeff had only seen in movies. Jeff was sort of plain - tall, thin, gawkish. He had thick glasses as a child but had replaced them with contacts when he got to college, and all of a sudden he realized he was entirely adequately attractive. Together they made a fine couple. Jeff set off Susan's beauty amazingly, like a plain, black matte around a beautiful portrait. He framed her radiance. When they were meeting one another's families, everyone said, what a happy couple they make. Do you see that smile? He loves her. She *loves* him. She paid extravagant compliments to his parents, talking about how lucky she was to have found one of the good ones, a man who wouldn't take advantage of her, a man who respected her. A gentleman, she said.

Jeff was a gentle man, there was no doubting that. Susan was not so gentle. After a few months had passed was their first fight. Susan wanted eggs for breakfast, and Jeff didn't have any eggs. Let's go out, he said to her. Let's just go get some breakfast at the diner down the street.

I don't *want* to go out, she said. I want *eggs*.

I don't have eggs, he said.

You're gonna have something a lot worse if you don't get eggs.

What do you mean?

And she had hit him. She didn't slap him, she punched him right in the eye. It had started swelling before he'd even hit the floor. She was immediately sorry, she said, she didn't know what had come over her. She cried and begged his forgiveness, and put a steak on it and put him to bed and went and got breakfast from a drive-through and brought it back. She made him promise never to tell anyone. She said it would never happen again.

A month later, his grip had slipped while washing dishes, and he broke a glass. She stood there and fumed while he swept it up, and then she said, well, what next?

What do you mean?

What's your next trick? You going to break every glass in the house?

It was one glass, Susan, chill out.

Those things cost money, you know.

It was *my glass*, he said.

Don't talk back to me, she had screamed, and then she had hit more more than just once. She had picked up ladle and had hit him and hit him with the spoon end. It had caught him so off-guard that he had simply ducked and covered. When her anger was finally spent, he was bleeding from a cut on his forehead and his skull felt like it was going to burst. Lumps emerged under his hair and he had to tell the other people in his classes that a high shelf had broken and cans of food had fallen on him. They all laughed - what kind of

klutz was he turning into? Better hope he was more graceful with a tongue depressor, and then he'd joined in while they all laughed.

That time, Susan apologized less dramatically, and said, if you tell anyone, you'll really get it.

He told no one.

For two and a half years it went that way. Sometimes the beatings were worse, and sometimes they weren't as bad. Sometimes they started playfully and got out of hand. Sometimes - always when he had all weekend to get better, when he had plenty of sick leave from class, right at the beginning of a semester or during the summer - she'd just walk into his house and start kicking him, punching him, biting him. Sometimes he thought she was just being a little kinky when she started, and then he realized that no, she really meant it, and it was too late.

Sometimes she beat him for wearing a condom. I want to have your child, Jeff. I'm *going* to have your child, if I have to pump you full of Viagra and beat you retarded to make you fuck me, and then he wouldn't be able to get it up and she'd start in on him again.

It's amazing what a person can get used to.

Is this how women who are beaten feel? He would wonder this when he sat at home watching talk shows and nursing a bruise somewhere, a cracked rib, another black eye. He would call radio shows, but then he would chicken out when he reached the screener. How do I tell them that my girlfriend beats

me up, he would ask himself. What's wrong with me?

In February, three women had killed three men. These were clear cases of self-defense, to Jeff's mind. No one at all doubted the justifiable homicide pleas. None of them were convicted, and social workers around the state were reluctantly admitting that domestic abuse appeared, at least anecdotally, very unscientifically, to be on decline. At the very least, it was being reported less. There were a lot of real assholes out there who were thinking twice before taking out their misplaced aggression on a woman they assumed was defenseless when confronted with the hormonal firestorm of testosterone-fueled rage their men could summon out of thin air. Jeff felt a little bit of satisfaction with each case. A mother of three had beaten her lover to death when she caught him hitting her sixteen year old daughter. A wife who had been beaten for forty years of marriage ran her husband over while he stood in their yard waving a shotgun at her. A teenage girl had told her boyfriend she didn't want to have sex yet. He had broken up with her, told everyone at school that she was a slut, he was too good for her, who knows what he'd catch from her if he had done it like she'd demanded, and then he left a dead dog in her unlocked car with a note that said, You're next, bitch. She drowned him in the showers in the boys' locker room and turned herself in to the principal.

Murder is never pretty, one of the experts on a talk show said. Violence solves nothing. Violence just fosters more violence. What are the lessons that are being learned in North Carolina, right now? That murder is okay? That

there's no way to fight fire but with fire? Don't we as a society have other options? Isn't there a way to get these women to seek protection some other way?

We might be able to if the budget debate hadn't tied up every penny the state has. And it's only going to get worse. The governor, as a Libertarian, believes that drugs should be legal. She wants to defund enforcement efforts, let the federal government come down and round up drug dealers if they want to. She wants to cut out the social programs that might let these women get information on other options. She wants to get rid of the social programs that would help them get to safety, get their children to safety. What kind of woman is she?

One who understands, Jeff thought. He had investigated his options already. He could call the police and have Susan arrested, but she'd be out in no time. He could get a restraining order, which would have her put in jail *after* she came back and beat him up again. What if she killed him for doing something about her hurting him? Regardless, all of these options required that he confess this to someone, and how could he do that?

He couldn't go on, but he couldn't do anything about it. He couldn't do anything *normal* about it. There was something wrong with him, and something wrong with her. Their relationship was certainly *intense*, and some of that tension had to give, somewhere, or he was going to go crazy.

Then she'd said, you're taking me to Chimney Rock for our anniversary. I



want to go hiking, and you'll need to get a new camera before we go because I want some good pictures from this trip. She'd patted him on the cheek and smiled and thrown a weekly sale paper from an electronics store at him. Get a video camera. Make it *expensive*.

And at three in the afternoon, standing alone on top of Chimney Rock, when he was done getting video of the scenery and of Susan enjoying the scenery, she had turned to the camera and said, put that fucking camera down, Jeff. So he turned it off and put it in the bag and said, what's wrong, honey?

Don't you have something to ask me?

What do you mean?

C'mon, Einstein, do the math. It's our anniversary, we've been together three years, aren't you going to ask me to marry you?

Jeff had said nothing.

Don't tell me you don't have a fucking ring.

I don't have a ring. I...I forgot it.

You dumbass. Well, get the camera back out and ask me anyway. I want this on tape.

So he had taken the camera out, and turned it on, and walked closer. He let it focus, and she smiled winningly, like he'd just surprised her pleasantly, and then she said through gritted teeth, *ask me*, and turned her back to him so that it could look spontaneous. He hesitated a moment, and

then he had pushed. One hand in the middle of her back, the camera on, he had pushed with all his strength. His arm was still sore from where she'd broken it a few weeks earlier, just a hairline fracture but it hurt like the goddamn dickens nonetheless. He pushed, and she didn't even have time to turn her head before she simply disappeared over the side of the outcropping on which they stood.

A woman screamed from the trail below.

Oh my God! Henry! Henry, did you just see that woman? That woman just jumped off of Chimney Rock!

The park was a state park. The park police were state officers, and they had come running up the trail and huffed and wheezed to the aid of Jeff when they heard the screams from the trail and what had happened. An ambulance is coming, they told him. What happened?

I have video, he said. It's right here.

They had watched it through the little view screen as he played it back.

Oh dear God, they had said. Oh, sir. We'll get help as soon as possible.

Then they had run off back down the trail to try to find Susan.

Jeff dumbfoundedly turned the camera back around and watched Susan fall to her death in slow motion. His hand wasn't visible in the shot. She was there, the wind in her hair, her parka billowing in the breeze, birds flying by in the distance as they trekked northward again, and then she disappeared. It

was like she had been peeled away by centrifugal force, like the Earth itself had ejected her as it spun on its axis. He rewound. She reappeared. He hit play. She disappeared. He was having trouble seeing for the tears running down his face, and then the officer was back and he said, I'm very sorry sir, but she's dead.

He didn't remember the walk to the park's visitor center offices, but the trail was closed for the day, a sign put up in the parking lot, everyone shooed off home. Was there anything wrong that he had noticed, they asked?

No, he said.

They were about to get engaged, he said.

No, he couldn't think of any reason why she would kill herself. She didn't kill herself.

Shock, said one officer to another, and then the park had put him up in a hotel for the night and a county social worker had come over to talk to him about loss and grief and to make sure he wasn't by himself.

He went home the next day and called Susan's family. They were already notified, they said. They'd already started taking care of arrangements, but they wanted him to come stay with them. They wanted him to be a part of taking care of things.

He videotaped the funeral. A tripod in the back of the church captured emotional eulogies from Susan's siblings and friends. Her parents wept openly, loudly. Her mother had to be held up when the casket sank into the ground.

Jeff and Susan's father stood side by side, both dry-eyed and both absolutely unable to speak.

Shock, the friends and mourners said. Like they've been hit in the face with a frying pan. Just frozen there. Look at them. Oh, the poor things.

Bless her poor heart, Susan's father finally said to Jeff. I'm so sorry she did this to you. You seemed so happy together. She spoke so highly of you. She seemed so happy. But you can never tell with people. You can just never tell.

For a month, Jeff watched the video every morning and every night. He got his absences excused and his professors went easy on him. He was a stellar student, and medical school was expensive, and they knew he'd be okay. They had no reason to penalize him for his fiancée's suicide. Everyone at school was very nice, but a little distant. Jeff put off that aura of subtle wrongness that the grieving possess for a little while.

For spring break, he stayed home and watched talk shows and called them and said, Yes, I know grief. My girlfriend was...she died recently.

Jeff debated telling the police. He had been debating it since the social worker had walked into his hotel room in Bat Cave that night. Should he tell her? He had been justified - she was going to kill him eventually, she was the textbook definition of an imminent threat, always around and always threatening him. He was one hundred percent within the law and one hundred

percent within the precedents that had been set.

He had thought he was telling the park police when he showed them the video. But his hand wasn't there on screen. It was like he'd never done it. Now what was he going to do, walk into the police station in Charlotte and turn himself in for obeying the law? He went in circles in his mind. Over and over, he wondered how he'd managed to fail to capture his own justifiable homicide when he was the one holding the camera. The physics of it he understood perfectly, his camera hand had tilted up when he stepped forward, and that was it. Still, it felt wrong. Was it cheating to kill someone within the bounds of the law but not tell anyone? Did it count if you didn't have to prove they deserved it in the first place?

He saw Susan's parents over the summer. Her mother was still very sad about everything, but she was very sweet to him. He was the son-in-law she'd never had, she said. He'd always be welcome in their family. Susan's father had silently clapped Jeff on his skinny shoulder and said, How have you been, son? Are you holding up in school okay? You look like you've lost weight.

Jeff had said yes, he was fine, but behind the words he was screaming I KILLED YOUR DAUGHTER BUT SHE DESERVED IT, SHE HAD IT COMING BUT I KILLED HER AND I KILLED HER FOR WHAT SHE DID TO ME. Every possible phrasing of a confessional justification was fully formed, ordered like soldiers at attention, ready to fight the war of misunderstanding and grief that had of course accompanied every case so far. There had been angry accusations,

claims that the nonvictims were framed for their aggressions towards their killers. Everyone had a family that claimed their child didn't deserve death, it was just that simple. A killer's mother still loves her child, no matter what they do. Susan's mother still loved her, even after she'd beaten Jeff half to death every month for two and a half years.

That was the word that had been coined for those who were killed in the act of trying to rape, to rob, to murder, to abuse: nonvictims. They were victims, but they weren't *really* victims, everyone knew that.

The state still hadn't worked out a budget. There would probably be a shutdown of state government at the beginning of the new fiscal year in July. Gladys' support hadn't wavered, however, and she was busy busy busy negotiating with the state legislature on one day, driving her own car to some town in the state the next to make a speech to a church or a chapter of the John Birch Society or a chapter of the NRA or a chapter of NORML or a chamber of commerce. She was getting the state out of people's hair, and they were liking it.

The state was thoroughly out of Jeff's hair for having killed Susan, and everywhere he went, every conversation started and ended in his imagination with, Yes, I killed my girlfriend. But she deserved it.

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Seven

People of Faith Against the Death Penalty were here to talk to Gladys, and she had zero desire to see them.

The thing was, she agreed with them. There was absolutely no getting around that, she agreed one hundred percent with them. They'd been around for years, agitating for that death penalty moratorium, a study of how the death penalty was used, something to demonstrate their main point: that the death penalty was applied overwhelmingly unfairly. African-American men were like the center of a bull's eye on the walls of prosecutors everywhere. This was true in death penalty states nationwide, regardless of the overall demographic makeup of the state. Racism and classism, brewed together in the cauldron of a judicial system staffed with underpaid, overworked public defenders, attorneys that got paid whether their clients won or lost their cases, prosecutors eager to litigate the "easy" cases, resulted in a concoction that was killing men of color and poverty at a rate that was astonishing when compared to the overall mortality rates of any given state. Whereas crime was no more or less common among one ethnic group or another, punishment for crimes was wildly imbalanced. The state did a bad job of enforcing the law fairly and equally, and there was no disputing that. The numbers didn't lie, no matter how many statisticians registered as Republicans claimed the sample size was too small.

The problem was how to agree with People of Faith Against the Death Penalty without getting into getting into the sort of social engineering Gladys hated with such a passion. The state might be well-intentioned whenever it tried to step in and help someone at a disadvantage, but an impersonal bureaucracy was never as good an advocate or a helping hand as a neighbor. It was that simple for her. It takes a village, she was fond of saying, not a state. A store that had unfair labor practices could be run out of business pretty quickly by a walk-out or a local boycott drive. A child whose home life was a story of neglect could best be helped by a neighbor, by a church, by a relative. There were options other than having the state swoop in to lesser effect. A poor family who received the charity of a local group of activists and didn't have to pay the state for the help was surely better off in the long run. The bottom line was that people were great, as individuals, when it came to their morals and aiding one another. As a group, they stank at doing anything other than bickering. All she needed to do was call up a legislator who wouldn't get behind her on one thing or another to relearn that.

The banks and the textile mills and the cigarette plants had loved her, though, and they had some politicians in their pockets, and slowly but surely Gladys was managing to grind forward in cutting the red tape and shutting down the programs that had simply never worked. Her biggest victory had been in getting the Department of Labor trimmed down to a third its starting size. That one had been *easy*, it had been a *breeze*. The legislators beholden



to the plant owners had pushed that one through in hours. It wasn't that Gladys thought workers should get screwed by their bosses at every opportunity, it was that she thought the workers did a better job of deciding what they wanted than the state. What had caught the businessmen off guard was when she flipped around and required by state law that businesses pay the same salaries as before, in the absence of state income tax, so that everyone statewide effectively got an instant raise, and that the salaries and wages of new hires maintain the same average as the previous two years' new employee pay scales. If they didn't, the newly slimmed down Department of Labor could issue summary fines. Period. There were a lot fewer caseworkers in the Labor offices, but there were a lot fewer cases for them to work.

It was funny. People seemed to have gotten into the experimental spirit. Everywhere she went, she was greeted with support. It would have been a lie to say that she was universally supported - polls showed she floated between 40% and 60% approval, depending on where the polls happened, but it was hard for her opponents to paint her as a bad person. She had no messy divorces in her past, no drug-addicted children to embarrass her, no scandals in her past. Old boyfriends who had been approached by reporters and other scum had been very candid: they loved her, she was quite a woman, but she was too independent for a relationship to work out in the long run. Mostly, they had voted for her. Mostly, they approved of what she was doing, as long as it didn't get out of hand.

That was the great balancing act: nothing could get too out of hand. Of course, when could it? What had kept fringe Democrats and fringe Republicans, the fanatical wings of the two big parties, from getting much of anywhere in the state had been that everyone could sense a little of the crazies in their eyes, their manners, their speech. They were generally shot down way before the election. North Carolinians were overall a relaxed and reasonable people. Everyone had their hot-button issue, from students marching in the streets to their grandmothers shuffling down the retirement home hallways, but everyone was going to be okay - perhaps uneasy, but *okay* - as long as nothing got out of hand entirely. The state had faced debacles before, it would do so now. It had faced cutbacks, budget negotiations that would never end, redistricting battles that lasted longer than the decadal census that had sparked them, even shutdowns of government, and it would do so again no matter who was in power.

Gladys could handle all of these things. She was very good at building coalitions, and she was even better at greeting her enemies. No one could say she had been nasty or overly rigid. She'd talk to anyone about anything. She was just that sort of person, and everyone liked that. She listened.

Now she was going to have to listen to People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, and she really didn't want to.

A pretty young woman's head poked perky blond hair through the doors of the governor's office. "Madam Governor," she chirped, and Gladys smiled

patiently. “Sorry,” the woman stammered with a blush, then went on to whisper, “*Gladys*, your three o'clock is here.”

Gladys nodded her assent and then straightened up in her chair as the young woman disappeared again. Oh hell, Gladys thought, I can't greet someone from the other side of this massive desk. She stood, then looked around, then stepped forward to stand beside the desk, then looked around again. The damn chair looked too empty, and she looked like an aged flight attendant about to sit someone in first class, with that big chair sitting there and no one in it and someone about to walk in. She stepped around in front of the desk and leaned against it, half-sitting. Casual but confident? No, she didn't want him to think she didn't take him seriously - god damn it, she thought, why am I so nervous about meeting this one guy? I can talk to anybody - it's my specialty, it's like it's my job to be talkative and at ease, what is wrong with me right now?

She stood up again, straightened the hem of her coat and then strode towards the doors. Gladys Stone was not going to sit in wait in her office, like some oracle ready for the next supplicant. She would go out there and invite him in herself - and the doors opened before she could get to them, and there he was: the head of People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.

Damn, she thought. He beat me to it.

“Mr. Wilson,” she said, and she held out her hand to greet him like a long-lost cousin. “It's very nice to finally meet you.”

“Governor Stone,” the man said, and his voice was like gravel being scraped across a bass drum, deep and rough but not unkind. He was extraordinarily tall, fifty-ish, African-American, athletic, healthy-looking. Gladys would have bet a nickel he worked out three times a week. For a flush moment, she found him remarkably attractive, but she was the governor, and governors do not flirt with lobbyists.

Lobbyist, she told herself. Lobbyist. I hate lobbyists.

Still, it wasn't like he was here to sell her on some pork barrel program. She'd have to face the music eventually - not everyone liked her, not everyone liked her ideas, and this man was probably going to be the hardest of all of those to face down. His only vested interest, after all, was his soul.

“It's also a pleasure to meet you,” he went on after they'd sized one another up for a moment.

“Thank you, Mr. Wilson. Have a seat.”

Gladys gestured towards a chair after they'd finished shaking hands, and then she turned her back to him and walked around the desk to fill that enormous chair. It shouldn't be assumed that Gladys was afraid of her authority or intimidated by being Governor - oh, she knew the seriousness of it. She just hated the trappings.

They each settled in, and then Gladys released a breath. You have never lied to yourself for one minute, Gladys Stone - her internal monologue was very sharp with herself. You will not start now. This man will appeal to

your conscience, and you hate the idea he might be right.

“Mr. Wilson,” she said after they'd smiled at one another one more time, “What can I do for you?”

“Governor, I assume you are familiar with the work of my group.”

“Yes.” Gladys folded her hands together on the desk in front of her.

“And thus I assume you can guess what I'm here to talk about.”

“The death penalty, one would assume.”

“That, and one other thing. Ms. Stone, it should come to no surprise to you that I am a bleeding heart liberal. I am as left as it gets in these parts, to be frank. I believe in Affirmative Action, I believe in the right to die, I believe in the right a woman has to choose, and I believe in mercy and forgiveness for those who have done wrong. I believe that addicts should be taken in by the state and treated for their disease, neither locked away with murderers and rapists nor left to their own, diminished devices. I believe in many things which I take it you also support, and some which you almost certainly do not. But suffice to say, we have some common ground. Do you agree?”

Gladys smiled for a moment. He's smooth, she thought. He'll be a dangerous opponent, if it comes to that.

“I agree that we have a great deal of common ground, Mr. Wilson. You'll be happy to know that I am, of course, pro-choice, and in favor of one's right to die, and in favor of the decriminalization of the disease of drug addiction. I don't think heroin should be sold on street corners, but I also think it's a waste

of time, money and good people to stick a junkie in jail to let him sweat it out. I also believe in mercy and forgiveness for those who have done wrong, if they can make it right again. Mainly I believe that people can and should be trusted.”

“Yes,” Mr. Wilson said, and he nodded at her in agreement. “As do I. I believe that people are inherently good, and should always be given a second chance.”

“I’m glad we agree on so many things,” Gladys said, and her patience had worn thin just that quickly. She wasn’t usually short or irritable, but she didn’t like playing hopscotch when there was work to do. “So what’s the point?”

Mr. Wilson grinned more earnestly this time, and then he relaxed in his chair. “The death penalties must stop.”

“I gathered that from the name of your organization, Mr. Wilson. Do you have something more specific?”

“What could be more specific, Governor?” Wilson shifted his weight to lean forward, towards her - still several feet away, but focused on her as he spoke. “I believe the state has a moral duty to do away with the death penalty - in all its forms. I had been duped, along with half of the rest of this state, into believing that Mr. Watts, if elected governor, was going to listen to me on this point, that he would support a moratorium on the death penalty while our allegations against its fairness could be investigated and proved. Clearly, I was

wrong, so now I come to you. You have stated that you believe the state stinks at making moral choices, and so I'm hoping you'll lend a sympathetic ear.”

Gladys leaned back in her seat and rested her hands on the arms. “Mr. Wilson, I do believe the state stinks at making moral choices. That's why I've put the choices back in the hands of individuals.”

Wilson reached up to rub the bridge of his nose, under his wire-framed glasses. “You have doubled the death penalties in this state, Governor Stone. You have yet to establish a moratorium on the death penalty and you have increased the likelihood of revenge killings by making them legal. How can you tell me that the state is making a sound moral choice?”

“I didn't,” she said, very flatly. “I said I put the power back in the hands of individuals.”

“Governor Stone, you have told them to go forth and kill one another.”

“Hardly. Have you noticed an increase in crime?”

“No, I have not noticed a statistical increase, but you cannot sit there and tell me that it's a good idea for people all over the state to be packing a gun and legally encouraged to use it.”

“Why not?” Gladys sat up again emphasizing by tapping on the surface of her desk with one index finger, her gray and black hair finally out of that stupid bun she'd worn for months and cut to something more civil, hanging just past her shoulders, her somewhat-worn and slightly wrinkled face momentarily hardened and smoothed by vehemence. “Statistics show that states with

strong concealed carry laws have lower crime rates overall. A heavily armed society is a polite society. I hate to put it that way, because I don't like the way it sounds myself, but it's fact. Indisputable fact.”

“Governor,” Wilson said, and now he sat back in his chair, hands out to either side to gesture as he spoke quietly, “There are also statistics which show that such states may suffer higher crime rates. Some do, some don't. Relying on those numbers to justify making revenge killings legal is gambling with the future of this state. It's rolling the dice with the lives of children, for God's sake. Or have you not stopped and looked at the numbers on accidental gunshot injuries and deaths in states with 'strong' concealed carry laws?”

Gladys fluttered her lips dismissively and waved Wilson off with one hand. “Oh, Mr. Wilson, I liked you right up to that point. Anyone who says something must be done *for the children* is simply out of ideas. It's the ultimate cop-out, whether you're on the Right or the Left.”

“Governor,” Mr. Wilson thundered, and he sat bolt upright to glare at her, “A child who dies playing with a parent's poorly protected gun is not just a cop-out!”

“You're right,” Gladys snapped, and she half-stood out of her chair to address him. “It's a tragedy. And guess who should take the blame? Guess whose responsibility that was? Was it the responsibility of the parent who did a shitty job of locking up their guns? Was it the mom or dad who managed to slap a Mr. Yuck Mouth on the side of the Drano but didn't think maybe a gun



should be locked away, kept out of reach, safeguarded as something other than a toy? It is not the state's job to be anyone's parent, neither is it the state's job to parent by proxy. If you want to keep children from being hurt, then educate their guardians about how to protect them. Yes, keep criminals from wandering the streets, their tongues dragging the ground behind them. Yes, keep food makers from putting poison in school lunches. Yes, protect the public. But we can't go into someone's home and tell them how to safeguard it for their own child, it's *not our job*.”

“And what is your job, Governor Stone?” Mr. Wilson thundered back, also half standing, half sitting. “Tell me that!”

“To enforce the laws and constitution of this state, Mr. Wilson! I am no one's preacher, I am no one's mother, I am no one's nanny. I am, ultimately, a cop - a cop who walks the line between protecting the people and protecting their rights *as people*. And guess what? People are stupid sometimes. People make mistakes, sometimes. And when that happens, it's a very sad thing, but I refuse to bubble-wrap every body in North Carolina and put them under lock and key and tell them to behave! Democracy and liberty, the two things our founding fathers wanted so very badly that they gave up land, they gave up inheritances, they gave up titles and they gave up their lives to have, were referred to by those same founding fathers as a great experiment. No, we do not know that if we allow the people of North Carolina or any other state or any other country a greater array of freedoms that they will use them wisely,

or well, or that no one will get hurt, but that's the *point*. Freedom is unpredictable, Mr. Wilson, and that is both its greatest danger, I will gladly admit and..." Here, she stopped and gasped for a breath, "And it's greatest beauty."

Mr. Wilson hovered, still six inches out of his chair but not standing, and looked at her. No one had ever seen a governor impassioned before. Generations of North Carolinians had seen governor's saddened, angered, righteously so sometimes, but few had seen one *impassioned*, certainly no one still alive. Activists are supposed to be impassioned, Mr. Wilson thought out of nowhere.

Gladys drew another breath and brought her voice back down several notches. She trembled very slightly, but certainly not from fear. "Mr. Wilson, I sympathize with you," she said finally. "I do. I am personally, and I tell you this right now against my better judgment, I am *personally* against the state having a death penalty. But if a man or woman in this state were under direct attack and their life threatened six months ago, they could have killed the person who sought to end their own lives, and it would have been okay, and I can't honestly look at what's in the eyes of someone else, someone who was raped or molested or threatened every day or beaten within an inch of their lives by someone they thought loved them, I can't look at that person and see whatever it is that lurks in those eyes and tell them they don't also have a right to defend themselves." Finally, Gladys sat - heavily and abruptly, the air from

the chair jerking from the suddenness of it, the wind gone from her lungs, the fire gone from her eyes. “I believe in mercy and forgiveness, yes. But not everyone does, and the state stinks at making moral decisions, and there you have it - we're back to square one.”

“Someone will go too far,” Mr. Wilson said, his voice very quiet. It was like his own energy had been drawn out to fuel Gladys' fury.

“No one has yet. There's no guarantee someone will.”

“Someone *will*, your own statement that freedom is unpredictable assumes as much, Governor Stone.”

“And when they do, a jury of their peers will agree, and they will go to prison for a very long time.”

“It doesn't have to happen like that. You could get a repeal of the justifiable homicide laws through the legislature in a day. You could commute the sentences of everyone on death row with a stroke of the pen.”

“No, Mr. Wilson, it does have to happen like that. Individuals and communities must make those moral decisions. I do not have the right.”

“Laws exist to protect people, Governor Stone. Your law is endangering them.”

“My law allows them to protect themselves.”

They both sat in silence - voices hoarse, quiet. The whole capitol building was quiet, Gladys realized. It wasn't generally hustle and bustle as far as the ears could hear, but there were always school groups, tourists,

lobbyists, someone or something going on. People have run off, she thought. They ran as soon as they heard yelling.

Finally, Mr. Wilson cleared his throat. "On the topic of more conventional death penalties," he said, and he had gathered himself back together in a moment's effort. "You said you are against them."

"Yes."

"Are you planning to commute the sentences of those currently awaiting execution?"

"I have yet to allow any executions during my term."

"I've noticed."

They gazed levelly at one another across the desk. Silence reigned again, and Gladys took her turn to break it.

"Mr. Wilson, I have examined the cases of each person currently on death row, personally, as their executions neared. I have taken into account your group's oft-quoted statistics, and I have tried to assess whether the men who were about to receive capital punishment were treated fairly by the system, whether justice would be served by their execution."

"And you've agreed that it would not?"

"I have agreed," Gladys said. Now their conversation was starkly devoid of emphasis. They spoke like strangers at a funeral.

"Will you consider enforcing a moratorium against the death penalty? Give us two years to have the whole system thoroughly audited and assessed by

someone outside of it. I want an objective assessment, Governor Stone.”

Gladys sat still, then picked up a pencil and tapped the eraser against the blotter on her desk, the point held between her thumb and fingertip. “I’m going to need some very good background research. Get me some figures. Get me figures on every state that has the death penalty. Include Texas, despite Bush’s itchy trigger-finger when he was governor there. Make the numbers solid - don’t spin it at all. The closer it is to a spreadsheet and the further it is from a position paper, the better. If you can get me numbers that anyone in this state can read and understand, then I’ll order a moratorium when the legislature is out of session. If that won’t work, I’ll commute every death sentence in the state, now and for the next two years, while a commission studies its history.” She had started out looking at the pencil’s eraser as it tapped, but she had lifted her eyes as she spoke until she met Mr. Wilson’s steady, focused face. Gladys’ own eyes were a piercing green, and she narrowed them at Wilson from her side of the desk.

“And in return?”

“I don’t want anything in return, Mr. Wilson.” Gladys looked away from him, up at the ceiling, and laughed a long, quiet chuckle. “I’m not cutting a deal with you. I’m doing what’s right.”

“So what if I make a lot of noise about the justifiable homicide law?”

Gladys shrugged easily and stood up. “Make all the noise you want. It’s your right. However, if you want some advice, I’d say you should save your

breath and quit making noise at me about it. If you want to keep people from using that law when it's appropriate, you'll have to convince them of that. Campaign to the public, not to the governor. Convince them, not me. I can promise you I'm the hardest sell in the state on that one.”

Mr. Wilson stood in turn. The appointment was over, and frankly he was amazed it had lasted this long. “You won't try to smear us, stop us or slow us down?”

“No. First Amendment, Mr. Wilson. You can talk all you want, just like anybody else.”

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Eight

Mary Schumacher was being followed by someone who was a rank amateur. She'd seen this sort of thing in enough detective movies and assorted thrillers to know when she was being followed, and now was it.

Well, she was pretty sure. It certainly seemed like that beige Oldsmobile had been back there the whole day as she'd run from one place to another, and she'd seen it in the parking lot of every store, the mall, the restaurant where she worked and the bank when she'd gone to drop off her paycheck. As a waitress, she got one day off a week, and she just didn't feel like fucking around with some stalker today. This was the last thing she needed, some regular from the Captain's Catch who had gotten obsessed with her. It happened sometimes, you get a customer who comes in every day, orders the same thing every day, sits at the same table every day, and eventually - usually sooner rather than later - you caught on that he was some nut case who'd been let out too early or not caught soon enough. He's ask you personal details, make nice like the good kind of regular, and then he'd start asking you out, asking more and more personal questions. Do you have a boyfriend? Do you have a *girlfriend*? The smile that accompanied the last one was always the worst. It was like he was rubbing his greasy mouth all over your body and giggling at the same time while everyone watched. It was just gross, the psychic tongue-bath someone can give you when they're good and psycho

and they think you're too dumb to notice.

At the mall, she parked near the door and went inside. Crowds are good, she reminded herself, and besides she was not going to spend her first day off in twenty just fucking around with some asshole who was trying to creep her out. She had things to do, places to go and people to see, and if someone wanted to watch her then more power to them. It's a free country.

When she left the mall, the beige Olds was still sitting where it had been - parked about ten spaces from her, on the other side, backed into a space, ready to jump out and follow if necessary. She didn't make them sweat for it - if they kept chasing her around all day, she'd just drive to the police station and point at that car and say, get 'im boys, he needs a new hobby and counting bricks in the wall of the county jail sounded like just the thing.

She could picture herself doing it, very easily. It made her laugh.

Off she went, through the mall's parking lot and down Four Seasons Boulevard and back up and into downtown. Now to the bank, the giant First Citizens building on Main, the one so inexplicable in a town of a few thousand people. She bet there was something funny that went on in there. Maybe they laundered money for some big mobster, who knew? She just wanted to cash her paycheck and get to the bookstore.

She went into the bank - the car stayed inconsolably parked outside, squatted in a space in the parking deck like it was pouting she wouldn't come out and play. She was forced to laugh when she walked outside and now they



were parked eight spaces away from here instead of ten.

How ominous do you think you're being? She called it out across the parking deck. You're in a fucking beige Oldsmobile, it is not exactly a goon car, and then she laughed again, waved at the car and got in her own little hatchback. It was very simple to drive right past the Olds and out of the parking deck. This time she waved again, but with only one finger. That entertained her even more, so that she was giggling by the time she saw the Olds tentatively come up the ramp to street level and stop on a dime when she was sitting there waiting for them to show.

She turned out onto Sixth Avenue, crossed over Main at a crawl, the Oldsmobile going even more slowly behind her, obviously unsure of what to do, and then she turned on her signal to park in a space in front of the Police Station. She coasted to a stop and the Olds did the same, only Mary was in a space and Oldsmobile was sitting in the middle of the street. Mary pulled out her cellphone and waved it in the air, through the sunroof, then with a dramatic flourish and a look of feigned surprise, she flipped it open and very dramatically dialed 9, then 1, then 1.

The Oldsmobile, still idling in the street a few feet away, stomped on the gas and tore away down the street, around a corner onto King and out of sight.

Mary closed the phone and laughed. Asshole.

Mary had been around the block before. She was pushing 45, though she referred to it as “turning 39 all over again.” She'd had bad boyfriends, boyfriends who couldn't let go, boyfriends who wouldn't let go until she bit them on the hand or the face, and she knew all the tricks of the trade. She got home and started to unpack the things she'd bought that day, a new blouse and a new skirt. Next week she had a job interview with a travel agency and she wanted to look good for it. She was sick of waiting tables. She'd been doing it since she'd lost her job as a ticket agent at the airport. Now she was going to put those skills to use - she knew how the ticketing worked and she knew how the airlines gouged people and she was going to know all about how to keep them from doing it to her customers at a travel agency. She knew the system, and she was good at it.

With her things put away, she settled into the kitchen and heated up some leftovers. The first thing being a waitress made you hate was cooking. She wanted to go out and make someone wait on her for a change, but that always made her feel guilty. Food stopped being fun when it was how you made your living. It always felt like she was taking her work home with her.

Mary carried nuked leftovers into the living room of her condo and sat at the couch, plate on the coffee table with a mug of instant coffee. No cable now, she had to save every penny, but she was going to unwind in front of the tube if it took PBS and a special on nose surgery. She just couldn't be made to care.

Two bites into her chicken, she got the urge to look out the window.

I am not becoming paranoid, she told herself. I am not going to look out the window.

She looked out the window anyway.

The beige Olds was parked across the street, in front of a drug store, pointed at her house.

That does it, she said out loud, and she walked over to her phone and picked up the handset and walked back to the window, her jeans swishing loudly and her pale blond hair fluffing as she puffed through her lower lip in annoyance. This is stupid, she said out loud. I will get this bastard arrested, she said out loud.

With another flourish, she yanked open the venetian blinds and held up the phone, waving it back and forth with her wrist like a metronome pacing her frustration. Then she dialed 911 and put the receiver to her ear.

911 Emergency, a voice said.

Yes, this is Mary Schumacher, unit 42, Four Leaf Condos, Spartanburg Highway. There's someone watching my house and I want him gone.

Someone is stalking you, ma'am?

Yes. He followed me around all day so I drove to the police department and then he ran. I thought he was gone but now he's back. He's parked in front of the Eckerds across the street. Beige Oldsmobile, tinted windows. I bet those windows aren't legal, they're too dark.

Are you in any immediate danger, ma'am?

No, but this guy's gonna be if he doesn't beat it, so send some cops over.

We'll dispatch officers to assist you, ma'am.

And Mary hung up.

She'd kept her eye on the beige Olds the whole time and it had sat there, staring back at her insolently. It continued to sit and she continued to watch it, hoping the cops showed up before Stalker Olds managed to get the picture, do the math and high tail it out of town.

The car's headlights came on and it pulled away.

I bet he's got a police scanner in there, she said out loud. That jerk.

The police came, but they didn't go to the parking lot of the drug store. They came straight to Mary's condo, and she answered the door and invited them in. He's gone, she said when she opened the door to them. But thanks for coming anyway, can I make a report even though he's gone?

She hadn't gotten the license plate on the car, but she was sure it was the same one. She'd had no breakups, no fights and no run-ins with strangers lately, so she had no idea who he was. She'd never seen the car before. The windows were really dark, she was sure they were illegal, she made a big point of telling them that: you see a beige Olds with windows that are too dark and you pull that son of a gun over, I'm telling you, that's your man.

They took notes, listened politely, gave her their cards and asked that she call 911 immediately if he came back. Then they left, and Mary stood at

the window and watched the parking lot of the Eckerds until it closed at eleven that night. She chain-smoked Misty's the entire time, hoping that he came back. She would love to call the cops, march over there and give that guy a piece of her mind and then watch him get hauled off to jail.

At midnight she closed the blinds, locked the doors, turned off the lights and went to bed.

The next day at work, Mary seemed a little distracted. She kept getting diet and regular sodas confused, she put in an order wrong. Her bosses were big jerks, so they gave her shit about it, but she survived. Everything smoothed out by the end of the lunch rush, and she had a pretty decent night. She cashed out at ten o'clock and folded her tips into a neat roll and put them in her pocket before leaving. She would never lie so grandiosely as to claim that she liked waiting tables, but she loved the immediate cash. She loved driving straight to the automated teller and depositing two hundred, two fifty maybe on a Friday, and the feeling of that money going right into the bank, right into her life. She'd had a good week for tips, and she was tempted to decide it was an omen that things were looking up. She was feeling good about this job interview, good about things in general. She'd been officially and vehemently single for six months this time, and the independence was working for her.

Oldsmobile was parked outside, in the next parking lot, watching the

back door when she left.

Fuck 'im, whoever he is, she thought, and she flipped off the car as she went to her own, got in, and drove resolutely to the ATM. Let him try to rob me, she told the steering wheel. Just let him try and rob me on top of this following shit, and we'll see how that one goes.

She deposited her tips unmolested, though the Oldsmobile stayed in the parking lot and watched her do it.

Some pervert, she finally decided. What, does he get off on watching bank transactions and reheated dinners?

Maybe he has a waitress fetish, she thought, and that made her laugh again.

While she sat at the ATM, she dialed 911 on her cell and hit SEND.

911 Emergency, someone said.

Yeah, this is Mary Schumacher, I called you yesterday about a beige Olds following me around, watching my house. Well, I'm at the ATM at First Citizens on Main and the guy is back and he's sitting about thirty yards away, watching me use the machine. Can you send a cop over?

The ATM at First Citizens - we'll send a car right away, ma'am, are you in any danger right now?

Fuck if I know, that's why I called you, and then she hung up.

She sat there and made busy with the machine, checking her bank balance over and over. It was a good way to kill time, and beige Olds didn't

look like he was going anywhere anytime soon. Eventually he turned his headlights off, and she heard his car cut off, and then she was left to sit there and busy herself with the buttons on the ATM and he sat and watched her.

A police cruiser cut a sharp right into the bank parking deck and its sirens came on.

Thank you *GOD*, Mary thought, but the Oldsmobile cranked its engine and hit the pedal and zipped out the other entrance while the cop was coming towards it, so that the cop had to hit his brakes and squeal to a halt and the Olds was gone. The cop sat for a moment, then jumped out of his car and ran towards Mary, barking something into the radio mouthpiece clipped to his shirt.

Are you alright, ma'am?

It was one of the cops from last night.

Yeah, but you let him get away, she replied, and then she had to give another statement and no, she hadn't seen the license plate this time, and neither had the cop, and they followed her home and stayed around for about twenty minutes to see if Oldsmobile showed back up. He didn't.

Mary was so pissed she couldn't see straight, she told her sister on the phone.

Two days went by without a sign of Oldsmobile. She went to work, and everything was normal. She went to the bank every night, and it was as

deserted as ever at ten thirty at night. The only person she'd see anywhere that wasn't driving somewhere else was the guy emptying the trash in the bins in the parking deck, and he didn't drive a beige Olds, he drove a big, white van with sparkingly clear windows and KLEENUPRIGHT(tm) on the side of the van. I wish you'd been here two nights ago, she said to him when she pulled around to leave, and she told him the story and he shook his head sadly and said something in Spanish. She couldn't understand a word, but she thanked him for his kindness and went home.

She'd been inside five minutes when there was a knock at the door. She looked out the peephole and didn't see anyone there, so she undid the locks and opened the door.

Yeah? She called out, but there was no answer. Jerks! It echoed around the parking lot, bounced off the faux brick of the condo place she called home, and she turned around to reach for the phone.

It felt like a truck hit her at the base of the neck. The last thing she saw was the face of the man standing over her. She didn't know him, had never seen him before, but he looked at her very...she didn't know what to call it. Intently? Purposefully? No, she realized, he's just looking at me. Like he's memorizing every detail.

She turned her head and looked out the door and saw the Oldsmobile sitting in her parking lot and she opened her mouth to scream. He kicked her in the face, and she went to sleep.



Three hours later, she woke up. She was still on the floor of her living room, in her condo, the door closed now, and everything was quiet.

Help, she said. Her voice was very soft, her throat dry.

She pushed herself up to lean on her arms, then sat, then stopped and listened again. Still nothing. She looked down, and she was still dressed, like nothing had ever happened.

He knocked you out, she thought. That was it?

Coming back to the here and now, she leapt forward from the floor and grabbed the phone and was sobbing by the time she heard the voice say, 911 Emergency.

The police came. It was those same two officers first. There was no sign of the beige Olds. They'd put out an APB, but it would depend on whether anyone saw him. They checked the house thoroughly, and there was nothing missing. Her wallet hadn't been taken from her purse, a little cash was still in it, her credit card was still in it, her television and her DVD player were still there, her stereo still in her bedroom, nothing touched.

A woman officer came over to her house while the two that had taken her third statement stood out front like sentries at a castle gate. The neighbors were all looking out their front windows at her house, at the cop cars, but none of them would come outside.

The lady cop helped her go through her things more thoroughly. It turned out only one thing had been messed with: her dresser. Every pair of underwear she owned was gone, except for the pair on her body right at the moment. Every single pair.

What kind of fucking freak is this guy, she asked the lady cop, and then she'd needed to cry again. She'd never felt like this before, never in her entire life. She'd seen people do some low down things, seen them do some weird things, but she'd never felt like this, never been so angry and so hurt before. He came in my home, she said, he knocked me down and knocked me out cold and he stole my underwear and left again, and what if he comes back? Huh?

We'll talk to you about your options there, ma'am, the lady cop had said, and there was a look in her eye, a look that said, *that fucker can't start pushing up the daisies fast enough*, and that had sobered Mary up a little. The cop was young, not very pretty, kind of big and stocky, and she looked like she could put her boot through someone's brain pan if that's what it took to stop them, and that made Mary feel strangely better. She held Mary's hand while she talked and said, Don't worry ma'am, we'll get this guy.

She had called her sister first - her sister was speechless. Actually, her sister was speechful, Mary thought, but that's why I called her. She talked and talked and talked about what Mary should do, what Mary should have done, and then her sister said, get a gun and get a lawyer and track this guy down.

The cops are no good for you, they're nice and all but they'll never find this guy, they couldn't find him when he was sitting across the damn street, Mary, what makes you think they'd catch him now that he's hiding somewhere?

What makes you think I'll catch him, that's stupid, Mary said.

Well, get a gun in case he comes back, Mary. I worry about you.

So Mary went and got a gun.

It was a big gun. The guy at the gun shop and book exchange - she'd traded in some old paperbacks for partial credit - the guy at the gun shop told her attackers often think a woman who's got a gun doesn't know how to use it, so the key is to get a really *big* gun so it won't matter so much whether you know how to use it. The gun alone will be enough to scare the guy. He was very sympathetic, and he listened to her whole story and he blushed when she blushed as she told him what the attacker was really after. Well, get this gun here, he'd said, and he handed her an enormous piece with a box of ammo. Twenty rounds, he said, though you'll only need one if he comes back, guaranteed. He laughed then, but she didn't, and then he'd leaned forward and said conspiratorially across the counter in his empty shop, Just kidding ma'am, of course I can't make any sorts of guarantees. But it's a very powerful weapon, I'd highly recommend it.

So Mary bought the gun - there went some serious money down the tube, she thought, or should I said there it goes down the barrel? And the man gave her a couple of booklets on the house. They explained how to clean the gun

and how to use a trigger lock if she opted to buy one with it. She didn't.

Mary went home that night and practiced cleaning the gun. It was a lot of work, more than she had expected, but it wasn't that complicated. She did it a couple of times and promised herself she'd do it right on schedule, as the manual described, and never forget. Then she had to debate whether to load it and leave it loaded or just tuck it away in her closet or put it up on the wall somewhere, empty. She decided to load it and leave it on her dresser, across the room but still there and available.

She did debate taking it with her to work, tucking it into her waitress apron and dropping her tips on top of it all night long. What a fantasy, she thought, grinning and sort of scared of the thought at the same time she rolled it around the gums of her mind. I bet every waitress ever has wanted to take a gun to work and when she gets stiffed by a table yank it out and face them in the parking lot and say - 20% or your life, punk! It'd get you canned, she thought, but it might be worth it just to see the looks on their faces.

Two days passed like this:

The police would call her in the morning to make sure she was okay. If she missed the phone, they said, they would come by and check on her at her condo. If she did answer, they'd ask her if she wanted an escort to work. She turned this down, both days, but while she was at work then she knew that the lady cop would cruise by once or twice and just check out the parking lot, make sure no beige Oldsmobile would be parked outside waiting for Mary to

finish her shift or take her break or something - anything that would expose her again. Then when she got off work there would be a cruiser sitting in the parking lot and they would follow her to the ATM and then follow her home and wait in her parking lot until she gave the thumbs-up through the window. If that went fine - and it did - then they would pull around and out and across the street to cruise the drug store parking lot one more time before leaving.

It made Mary feel a lot safer, but there didn't seem to be anything to be afraid of.

The third morning was the morning of her job interview.

She got up. The cops called ten minutes later, like clockwork, and she answered and kind of laughed and said there hadn't been any trouble so far, but thanks for checking. She showered. She dressed. She did up her hair for her job interview, her way rather than the Health Department's required waitress way, she loved her hair when it fell down onto her shoulders. Then she put on her ball cap that the Health Department required the restaurant to require her to wear and she went to her door and unlocked it and looked out the peephole just to give the parking lot a quick check.

The beige Olds was sitting outside, in the parking lot, right in front of her house.

Mary stepped back, and turned, and started to go to the phone.

Someone knocked at her door.

Mary knew the sound of that knock.

Everything seemed to hang in the air for the moment, and then the knock sounded again.

I'm calling the police, she said out loud.

The doorknob jangled as someone tried to turn the knob.

I'VE GOT A GUN, she said more loudly, and then she picked it up and suddenly it was a lot lighter than it had been at the gun shop and book exchange, a lot smaller than it had seemed sitting there on the counter. It was still heavy, but it was a weapon, and what she wanted was a shield.

The front door opened, and there he stood, and his eyes were on her for a moment but then they were on the gun in her right hand.

Oh shit, he said.

They stood there for long, slow seconds - Mary could hear the tick of her grandfather's clock on the wall, and she counted fourteen ticks as she stared at the man and he stared at the gun, and neither of them moved.

Her other hand reached out and hit SPEAKER on her answering machine, and she dialed 9 and then 1 and then 1.

Please don't shoot, he whispered.

I told you I had a gun, she said.

He took a step forward. He was sweating.

She raised the gun at him, and he stopped before taking his second step.

I don't want to hurt you, he said.

911 Emergency, please state the nature of your emergency.

Please don't shoot, and then he took the second step.

911 Emergency, is this an emergency call?

Walk backwards, Mary said. Take two steps back to where you were.

His left foot lifted, hovered, and he stood there uncertainly.

911 Emergency, please state the nature of your emergency, hello? Is anyone there?

They continued to stand there looking at one another.

He took a step backwards.

I don't want to hurt you, he said again, whispered.

I'll kill you, she said out loud, and he took another step backwards to stand on the front porch of her condo and then Mary heard the lady cop's voice say, Sir, put both hands in the air and turn around slowly, this is the police.

Thirty minutes later, the only person with Mary in her home was the lady cop.

You had a gun, the lady cop said.

Yeah. Yeah, I did. Mary stared at her grandfather's clock as she said it.

Most people would have used it, the lady cop said.

I have a job interview this morning.

Mary turned to look at the lady cop.

The rest of my life is starting in two hours.

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Nine

“Well, *Newsweek* can suck my dick,” Gladys said, and she slammed the magazine in her hands face-down on the desk, her palms flat against the back of it as though she needed to put her weight on it to keep it from animating and flapping, cackling, around her office.

Darryl smiled very patiently, then slowly put up both hands to slow her down. “I know, I know, they're not from North Carolina, they don't know the people of this state, they don't know you and they obviously haven't read your policy proposals. I know.”

Gladys had been frozen, mouth half open, air in her lungs to fuel a litany to which Darryl had become accustomed. Now she closed her mouth, paused and smiled back. “You know, I know.”

Darryl sighed. Rant averted.

“So what are you going to do about it,” Gladys asked as she sat back down at her chair, lifted the magazine and then threw it aside like last week's trash.

Darryl lifted both eyebrows at her and stayed very still. “Me?” he asked.

“Yes,” Gladys purred, and she was grinning wickedly. “You're my chief of staff, a trusted adviser, a confidante. So advise me. We have a nationally read, widely respected media outlet - print media, no less, and although their slice of the pie is nothing compared to cable, the people who bother to read



them take them *seriously*, this is where they go for analysis - we have them printing national's platform from last year and extrapolating what it will mean for North Carolina down the road. They're talking about what sort of state we'll have in three years, and they're flat wrong. What do you do about it?"

Darryl reached up to rub his chin with his right hand, then ran it up the rest of his face and across his close-cropped hair. Air fluttered out between his lips as he sighed and then he looked away, out a window, at the street outside. A bus load of school children from four counties away were piling off to take a tour of the mansion.

"We call *Time*. We offer them an exclusive interview. A two-hour sit-down where they can ask any question they want - as long as it's about policy. We ask the editor of their political desk to handle it personally. He may be rusty but he's probably got the chops for a good article. We don't pressure him, we let him know he can print anything from the interview that he likes. We fax him a copy of your platform from last campaign, and we tell him we'll hand him an updated copy with precise details about what we've done so far, what effects we've had and our plans for what else we're going to do."

Gladys listened, nodded her head from time to time, and then smiled at him again. "Exactly. We use the market that's already there. We don't need a PR blitz response - there's already a mechanism for getting competing information in front of the public. Good job. Now hop to it."

Darryl stood up and stretched his arms up and then out to the sides,

then shook his head at her. “What is this? You get attacked on all sides and you love it.”

“I’ve never liked the idea of being prom queen. I’d much rather be remembered for something more annoying.” She winked at him and then stood from her own chair. “Now, there’s a bunch of fourth graders here that I think I’m going to escort around the mansion personally. At least, for ten minutes or so.”

“Right,” Darryl said and whipped off a lazy and sarcastic salute. “Oh, and People of Faith sent us a fax this morning. Landed on my desk twenty minutes ago.” Darryl reached into the stack of papers he was carrying and produced a few sheets. “You said you wanted anything that came in from them.”

“Yes,” Gladys nodded, hand already out to take the sheaf from him, her glasses in her other hand. She glanced over the papers for a moment and then set them on her desk. “Thank you.”

“Word is, they’re planning a protest action.”

“Uh-huh?” Gladys looked over the top of her glasses at Darryl. “When?”

“Two weeks, Sunday AM.”

“They’re skipping church for it?” Gladys smirked very slightly.

“Yes,” Darryl said, clearing his throat. “Um.”

“Um?”

“Um,” Darryl repeated. “They’re planning to point out that you, also,

are skipping church that morning given that you, um, skip church every Sunday.”

“After three decades it hardly qualifies as mere 'skipping,' Darryl.”

Darryl rolled his eyes just a little, perhaps annoyed, perhaps seeking guidance from above. “Yeah, that's their point.”

“That's some dirty fighting,” Gladys sighed, and then she laughed.

Darryl looked down at the floor for a minute and then back up, waiting to hear what was so funny. “What a bunch of bastards,” Gladys went on. “I think I'll join them for their protest.”

Darryl put up a hand and said, “Hey, now, no getting all jackbooted at this point. You know they have a right to assembly.”

“I know,” and Gladys' tone scolded Darryl for having scolded her. “But if they want to talk to me, if they want it so bad they'll skip church to show up at my door, I at least ought to hear what they have to say.”

Two weeks and two days later, Gladys was up at six in the morning. She had her usual coffee, her usual bowl of grits and her usual one egg, over easy, side of bacon. The governor's mansion came with a chef. Gladys had cut him to half-hours immediately. Twice a week - every Saturday and every Sunday - the line cook from a diner in Durham came in and cooked her breakfast and she paid him out of her own pocket, in cash, on the spot. The other five days of the week it was a cup of coffee and a Pop-Tart in her suite while she did the

crossword. She was easy to please, she'd told a reporter from the *News & Observer* when she'd been asked about it, and she didn't need to spend taxpayer money to do it.

People liked little things like that.

By seven o'clock she'd settled into her office for a quick look at some paperwork and a couple of bills she needed to look over. They were in committee in the legislature - gods, but those bastards could flood her with paperwork when they had a mind to - and she wasn't going to be caught off-guard when someone rang her up the next day to moan about how something was or wasn't going in the House.

Speaking of, she needed to put the spurs in some people about the budget. Damn it all, she thought, they want to hang me up in that so bad they can taste it. They'll get tired of being called in for special sessions eventually.

At eight o'clock, she was standing out in the foyer of the governor's mansion, in a business suit, her hair up in that bun she hated. She'd debated a little pillbox hat with a veil, just to completely freak them out, but Darryl had talked her down from that one. Instead she looked like she was dressed for church, or like it was any other day as governor.

The buses started pulling up at quarter past eight. Gladys was out on the veranda of the governor's mansion waiting for them. Mr. Wilson was there, of course, bedecked in a somber, black suit and a black fedora. Very nice, thought Gladys. Then she saw the rest of the people getting off the

buses, and they were all in black - all bedecked in black dresses, black suits, black jeans, black t-shirts, black oxfords, black shoes, black hats, black veils. They were a funerary procession.

Those bastards, Gladys muttered under her breath.

“I hope you're not here to try to talk us out of meeting, Governor Stone.” Wilson was unbelievably tall, the suit was even further slimming, his hair was oiled and perfect, his glasses were black horn rims. “We have the proper permits, issued by your offices.”

“Nope,” Gladys said, and she smiled prettily. “Not here to stop anybody. Right to assembly, yes. I just figured if you wanted to talk to me it would be rude not to come out and say hello.”

About seventy people piled off of buses and gathered in a group behind Wilson. So these are People of Faith, Gladys thought. They were young and old, and many of them carried signs: END MURDER, read one. IF THE WAGES OF SIN ARE DEATH, read another, and carried next to it the sentiment was continued: THEN TAXES MUST BE THE WAGES OF DEATH. Gladys wasn't even sure what that was supposed to mean - she knew, of course, tax money shouldn't be used to pay for killings, obviously, but that was a damn long way to go for a sign that could have been a lot shorter.

“You look like you're dressed for a funeral,” Gladys said to Wilson. She hadn't come down off the porch yet, and he had put one foot on the bottom step without going further. The crowd was arrayed in a rough half-moon

behind them, and there were four state troopers Gladys had ordered to wait across the street rather than try any sort of “crowd control” in her own yard and make her look like some guarded despot.

“We are mourners,” Wilson said. “Some of us are dressed as the past, some of us dressed as the now. We come to make our case to you, Governor Stone. You're the future.”

“Uh-huh,” she grunted, and then she folded her hands behind her back. “Well, you know your rights. Use 'em, I've got a letter to deliver in two hours.”

The crowd was not hostile. Quite the opposite - they knew they were being watched, and not by an authority eager to swoop down on them for having dared to disagree over something but by the person to whom they hadn't really thought they'd be speaking. We're not going there to convince just the governor, Wilson had told them when they boarded the buses at a church an hour away, we're going there to talk to the people of North Carolina, including the governor. Maybe we won't convince her, but we can convince other regular citizens, just like us.

Gladys refused a State Bureau of Investigation agent - one of her small retinue of drivers and guards - when he offered to get a chair for her. She stood the entire time, hands behind her back, watching and listening.

Eventually a local channel or two had set up camera crews to see if anything interesting happened.

The crowd sang songs. They sang funerary marches, they sang elegies, most in English but one two in Spanish and one in Cherokee. There were families of inmates there to speak. Four different ministers delivered short sermons on forgiveness, mercy, the lessons of Cain's murder of Abel. A rabbi delivered a speech on how murder begets murder, hate begets hate. A mullah spoke at length, in Arabic. No one understood him, but he was passionate, and the crowd applauded when he finished with a few sentences in English exhorting Allah to kindle the hearts of those who seek retribution when education and understanding remain viable options. There were some tears, and there was some righteous indignation.

Gladys kept standing there through the whole thing.

Damn, but I want a cigarette, she kept thinking.

An hour and fifty minutes later, Darryl walked out the front door of the governor's mansion with a clipboard and a manila envelope.

Everyone stopped briefly to look at him, then went back to what they were doing - a choir flipped open their songbooks and sang a verse from a hymn.

"Governor Stone," he said to her under the sound of the choir. "You want me to get your driver to pull around."

"Tell him to be here in five minutes," Gladys said, and then she took the clipboard and read over the top sheet, pulled a pen from her pocket and signed the document. Darryl returned from the foyer and took the clipboard

from her as Gladys took the piece of paper to which she'd put her signature and produced an embosser from one of her coat pockets.

Pressing the seal of the governor into the document, she tucked it neatly into the manila envelope and wrote something on the outside of the package.

“Going somewhere, Governor Stone?” Mr. Wilson turned to address her as the choir finished and all eyes turned to watch their exchange.

“Yes,” Gladys replied evenly. She was careful not to sniff at him, suggest anything in particular by her tone. “I told you I have a letter to deliver.”

“I thought you were going to stay to hear everything we had to say, and we're not done yet.” He smiled very faintly.

I do not want him as an enemy, Gladys reminded herself.

“You said you're here to represent the past as well as the now, that you're here to address the future? Well, everybody,” and here she turned her voice out and onto the crowd, “Look down for a second. See the bricks?”

Seventy heads bowed to examine the walkways on which they stood.

“Those are names,” Gladys said, looking back at Wilson. “In the bricks, those writings are names. They're the names of the prisoners who built this mansion. Did you know that was the case? Prisoners in the state's prisons built this mansion. It was the 1880's. They had to write their names in each brick as they shaped them by hand so that they could keep track of how many they



made. They were punished if they didn't work hard enough.”

Seventy heads kept looking at the bricks. Some knelt to touch a name, some looked back up at Gladys.

“No society, ever, has perfected a way to punish or a way to rehabilitate, much less do both at the same time. 'Deterrent' is a fancy word for scaring the bejesus out of people. No offense, of course.” Gladys paused for a breath, and then pointed at the bricks in the front yard. “The treatment of prisoners is ugly. The crimes they committed were ugly. The past is ugly, sometimes. The now is ugly, sometimes. The future will certainly be ugly, sometimes. Nothing is perfect. No person is perfect. No punishment is perfect. I respect your work, I've told you that, but as long as people commit crimes, someone, somewhere, will have to take responsibility and decide what to do with those people after the fact.”

“Killing them doesn't make the problem go away, Governor Stone.”

“I know,” Gladys said to Wilson, and she held up the envelope. “It's a letter to the State Warden of Prisons. I'm commuting every death sentence in the state, except for the cases where someone's already been remanded for a new trial. These people have been found guilty by juries of their peers, but it's possible for that system to make an error and I won't kill people for making a mistake. Everyone gets a second chance.”

The crowd held its breath.

“I'm glad we have swayed your opinion, Governor Stone,” Wilson said,

and his eyes positively sparkled.

“I wrote the letter yesterday. The Warden of Prisons was on vacation until today. I'm on my way to give it to him in person, or he won't believe it came from me.” Gladys shrugged. “But I'm glad you came to talk to me.”

Wilson's eyes quit sparkling. He frowned very slightly, the corners of his mouth just twitching downwards for a second.

“And what of the justifiable homicide laws, Governor Stone? I've told you before that this state has two death penalties. What of the other one? What of your laws that legalize revenge killings?” Wilson's voice was hard - he wasn't threatening, he was passionate in the purest sense, on fire in the face of what seemed like a big gimmick on the part of the governor.

“Have you ever been attacked, threatened, beaten, Mr. Wilson?” Gladys met his gaze and shook her head. “I'm not budging on it. I'm not taking away a citizen's right to defend himself.”

The crowd, as one, stiffened. Their gazes were all on her or on Wilson, on the person who had organized them to come this morning, the person who was currently their voice. There were ripples in the crowd, though - the families of some of the inmates had started crying. The camera crews had realized something was finally happening.

“We'll see, Governor Stone. Someone in this state will make a serious error and then we will all have even more blood on our hands.”

“You want a moratorium? I'm willing to give you a moratorium. Your

data shows pretty unequivocally that the numbers don't add up, the demographics of the state's death penalty are all out of whack. If the state legislature won't agree then I'll simply keep commuting death sentences while an independent commission from outside of North Carolina comes in and completes an objective assessment of capital punishment in this state.”

Gladys spoke loudly enough to be heard by the crowd. Some of them clapped, others of them remained suspicious.

“Are you trying to turn this from a protest into a rally?” Wilson's voice was very quiet, for her alone.

“We both enjoy the rights afforded us by the First Amendment, Mr. Wilson. I told you to talk all you want. I can do the same thing.”

Gladys took the steps down to the walkway and the crowd parted ahead of her.

“Thank you for coming,” she said to them in general as she walked through. “I'm sorry I can't stay for the whole thing.”

“Thank you,” a woman said to her from the crowd. She was holding a placard with a picture of a young man with BROTHER underneath it.

Gladys nodded at her just once, and then her car was there waiting for her.

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Ten

Police Lieutenant H'Diane Bing was sitting in her cruiser, in the parking lot of the Wake County Courthouse, waiting to walk inside. It was seven o'clock in the morning, and she was coming off her patrol shift to check in and then head upstairs for traffic court. There were three of her tickets being challenged today, and she was always there for them. A part of her found it very difficult to believe that this was an important thing for her to do - speeding tickets were not crime, a part of her cried out. There are bigger things that happen than speeding down Glenwood Avenue at four in the morning.

But they were still speeding, the rest of her said, and that's her job - stop crime, large or small. It's just the way it is that sometimes the crimes are small. Sometimes they were big - she'd worked murder scenes, responded to domestic abuse calls, responded to robberies. She loved to pull over a drunk driver. Those were the cases where she'd show up for their court date even if the charge wasn't being challenged, just to watch the sentencing.

Officer Bing really liked being a cop.

What was important to her wasn't the satisfaction derived from being handed the badge, putting it on every day and then going out into the world lavished in fear or respect or annoyance or apathy; it was doing her job.

Officer Bing was one of the not so rare police who honestly saw it as her job to

safeguard the public, to make life more secure from day to day, and that was something it was easy to get out of bed for. She had been sharp as a whip in school, pushed by her father to go into accounting - he wanted her to cut herself a big slice of the American pie - but she'd gone to college in Criminal Justice instead and wound up a night shift beat cop in Raleigh. She hoped to get upgraded to detective eventually, but for now she had to pay her dues.

H'Diane snapped back to alertness in the driver's seat of her cruiser. The end of the shift was always tough, and her mind would always wander if she didn't go to bed right away. It's probably not even safe for me to be out here, she thought, safe for me to be on the road. Some job I'm doing this morning.

A rap on her window woke her from her reverie again - two minutes had passed unnoticed, and she jumped in the driver's seat of her car.

"Morning, sleepyhead," and the voice was that of her captain. He grinned from behind his salt-and-pepper beard at her. He was growing it out for the department's Christmas party, and he still had six months to go. What a freak, she thought, and then she nodded and cranked down her window.

"Morning, Cap."

"You need some good, hot coffee, Lieutenant."

H'Diane shrugged and rubbed her eyes at him. "I need for court to happen earlier."

"Well, you want some company?"

"Sure thing."

The captain climbed in on her passenger's side, and settled in. She didn't mention the way the car shifted slightly at his weight - it wasn't just the beard he was growing to be Santa this year.

“Long night?”

“Nah,” she sighed, and took a pull from a mug of cold joe, made a sour face and dumped the rest out the window. “Just catching a catnap before traffic court.”

“You're gonna work yourself to death, Lieutenant,” he grinned. “But, that's what makes you a good cop, I guess.”

“Then give me a raise. Ha ha.”

“Ha ha.”

They sat in silence for a while and then the Captain cleared his throat. “Tough day in court, 's gonna be, that's for sure.”

“How so?” H'Diane was tired of the Captain, tired of being awake, tired of everything at a quarter before court opened. She was just tired.

“Big murder case this morning.”

“The Jones thing?”

“Yeah.” The captain reached up to scratch his beard around his mouth and whewfed and shook his head. “Horrible, what that man did.”

“Assuming he did it,” H'Diane said.

“Oh, he did it, that's for sure.” The captain shook his head again.

“Don't tell anyone I said this, but he's going to plea bargain.”

“A plea bargain for four counts of homicide and a count of vehicular manslaughter?”

“Ayup.” The captain shook his head a third time. “It's enough to make a cop want to turn in his badge, when something like that happens. You know?” H'Diane settled in to ride out fifteen minutes of lecture. She could see lights come on in the courthouse, and she wasn't ready for a morality lecture. “I mean, it's such a tragedy.” The captain was talking to the windshield. “The guy kills three kids and their mom, shoots the dad and injures him, and then steals their car, and when dad runs out in the street to stop him he runs the guy over. And he'll plea bargain to avoid the big needle at Central Prison.”

H'Diane shrugged and tried to sound unconcerned. “That's why we have lawyers, Captain. We don't have to live with those sorts of decisions.”

“Oh yes we do,” the captain countered, and there was a weird edge in his voice. “Everyone does. The poor guy's parents were his only family. His mother's senile and his father's paralyzed. The mom's parents are already dead, and her sisters and brother are here hoping they'll get a little retribution, and instead they'll get a twenty minute floor show, a little song and dance about mercy and regret, and then their kids and siblings and nieces and nephews and grandkids will still be dead and buried and they'll have to go home and pretend they got some sort of...” The captain trailed off, a hand waving in the air like he could brush aside the fog from the feelings he was trying to describe.

“Satisfaction?”

“Yeah.” The captain nodded his head. “Satisfaction.”

H'Diane looked away and glanced down at her watch. Five more minutes.

“I just wish there were more we could do.” He turned and looked at her from her side, H'Diane's own eyes focused on the doors of the courthouse. “Do you ever feel that way, Lieutenant?”

H'Diane said nothing in response.

“I sure do,” the captain answered himself. “I sure do.”

The plea bargain was big in the news. The case had been followed by the media, Court TV was there to cover it, the newspapers were all running sketches by various artists. The guy who had killed the Joneses was a John Doe. He refused to supply a name, refused to supply a history. His fingerprints didn't show up in any databases, and his DNA hadn't matched any profiles already collected. The outcome was pretty much a forgone conclusion: even if he'd had a jury trial and they'd found him guilty and recommended the death penalty, odds were the governor would just commute it to five life sentences with no parole.

Same difference, H'Diane figured, but a lot of people wanted a whiff of blood on the air, a sense of revenge. Satisfaction, like the captain had called it.



A week after he'd been shipped to Central Prison, the John Doe in question, prisoner number 867129, had granted the *Citizen-Times* an interview. The murders had happened in Murphy, an hour or so away from Asheville, and their paper got the first crack at the nut, so to speak.

He did it, he'd told them. He'd do it again.

Was the death penalty a deterrent to him, the woman who conducted the interview had asked.

No, he said. The death penalty doesn't work, he told her, because it's so far in the future. It's such a remote possibility. You get the chair, he said, and you get trial after trial after appeal after appeal. Besides, the governor didn't like killing people.

He'd committed the crimes before the election, the reporter reminded him.

Yeah, he said, but it didn't matter who was governor, the state took so damn long to gas or fry or shoot up anybody on death row that no con ever stops to think about those things. It like it happens in some far away land, he'd said.

He was alternatively frighteningly rough with his language and frighteningly eloquent. Sometimes he looked at the wall behind the reporter when he spoke.

Someone has prepped this guy, *Citizen-Times* told her editor when she

turned in the tapes and transcripts and her write-up. Someone's planted some lines on him.

Yeah, that's called a lawyer, her editor said.

Hmph, *Citizen-Times* had said.

What's that mean?

Nothing, she said to her editor. Lawyers. I hate 'em.

A paralyzed woman was robbed and beaten into a coma by unknown assailants in Charlotte. The captain couldn't stop talking about it whenever he saw H'Diane around the department.

“If she'd just had a roommate, a kid, somebody there who could have done something. She had a caretaker, you know, a nurse who spent the days with her and another who checked on her every two hours all night, but they weren't there.”

“That's some damn good insurance,” H'Diane said to him.

“Yeah,” the captain had snorted. “Insurance against getting beat senseless? The lady's still in a coma. I just wish someone would do something about people like that, like that Jones guy.”

“Yeah,” H'Diane said. “Me too.”

The captain looked up at her, and here her memory became distant and sort of third-person about that day, whenever she thought of it later.

Do you really mean that, Lieutenant?

What do you mean, captain?

Do you really wish someone would do something about it?

About guys like that? Diane was suddenly uncomfortable, and she blushed hard through her almond complexion and pushed back her straight, black hair. Yeah, I do. It's why I wear the badge, captain. Same as anyone else here.

No, Lieutenant, you're better than almost everyone else here. Close the door, Lieutenant. I want to have a talk with you.

About what?

About doing something about guys like that.

*TIME* sent the editor of their political desk, just as Gladys had hoped. He flew in a week after Gladys had commuted every death sentence in the state, and there were a lot of people who were plenty pissed about that. He was a tall, power tie and chunky glasses and pressed shirt sort, and Gladys wanted very badly to throw a t-shirt at him and say, Undo that thing, Mister, you're cutting off all the air to your brain. She was on her best behavior, however, and worn down from a week of answering a lot of phone calls and a lot of mail and generally doing her level best to enforce some sort of spin control. The spin was simple: the state stinks at making moral decisions. The state should not be saddled with taking responsibility for whether a human being found guilty by a jury of their theoretical peers should live or die.

Gladys had thought this was an argument no one would take on, that no one would come out swinging for continuing to kill people, but she'd been wrong. The Attorney General, for one, was very hot under the collar this week. An abrogation of justice, he called it, and Gladys had sighed. Then the legislature had a hernia over it, saying she'd bypassed both the legislative and judicial systems to have her own way with things, and wasn't that the exact opposite of her party's declared ideology? That hadn't gone very well, and Gladys had ended up doing some yelling at some members of the Legislature in her weekly radio address. She'd thought that would get her some traction with the folks at home, anyway, but it turned out no one was listening except for political junkies, and they were feeling mighty sympathetic towards the legislature on this one. The old adage had begun to apply to the attitude most people had towards the state legislature: me against my brother, my brother and me against our cousin. The people who were paying attention might not like the *idea* of the state legislature, but they also didn't like the idea of being nice to murderers. It seemed a little two-faced, as though Gladys were talking out both sides of her mouth, to urge them to take matters into their own hands in their own defense and then let off everyone who'd been found guilty of murder and sentenced to die for it. There were people who were starting to say, when asked about it in a poll or on the street or around the water cooler, "Funny, I thought she said it was everybody else who was soft on crime," even though Gladys had never even begun down that slippery slope herself.

It had been a long week.

On top of all of this, *TIME* wanted to talk to her about her other platform planks, the ones the legislature hadn't gotten around to approving in a budget package, the ones that were stalled while they tried to sink Gladys on her maiden voyage. Governor Titanic, she'd seen written on a campaign poster some wise-ass in the state Senate had turned into a dart board in the legislature's cafeteria.

"You've faced a lot of opposition over the death penalties," *TIME* said. He was sitting in one of the high-backed chairs by the office's fireplace. Gladys had wanted to sit and talk with him and not have the desk between them. Darryl had encouraged her to seem "down-home," which she found patently offensive but she didn't mind seeming relaxed. She met his gaze and smiled a little and then nodded.

"Yes, I have. I've taken a moral stand, Mr. Jenkins, and when one takes a strong moral stand, one usually faces a lot of opposition."

"There are calls for your resignation coming from the state legislature. This is more than a policy disagreement, Governor. There are those who say that your platform is illegal and that your most recent actions are dangerous."

Gladys smiled again and allowed herself a small chuckle, took a sip of coffee and then straightened up a bit in her chair.

"Jenkins," she said, and when she dropped the 'Mister' then he seemed surprised, "There's no such thing as an illegal platform. My platform includes

changes to current law, yes, some of which have been passed and some of which haven't, but it's mighty hard to characterize a belief, an ideal, a proposal, as being illegal.”

“Come now, Governor Stone, there are many instances of an illegal proposal. Conspiracy to murder, for example.” His mouth twitched and he smiled politely. Sharing her amusement, no doubt, Gladys thought sourly.

“By which you mean the justifiable homicide laws.”

Jenkins shrugged a bit, spread his hands in innocence and did a good job of looking surprised. “Not at all, it was just an example.”

“Right. Okay, take your example: conspiracy to murder. The illegal act is planning a murder with the intent to execute it. That's a far cry from proposing changes to state law to make life easier for everyone. I want to lift the burdens of taxation and over-government from the people of this state. I want to get the state out of everyone's business and everyone's wallet, and of course that's an unpopular platform over in the legislature. They love money, and I want to take a lot of it away and put it back in the hands of those who earned it. The only thing I'm conspiring to murder is tyranny.”

“tyranny? That's a strong word, Governor.”

“Yes.” Gladys smiled again, this time without an ounce of sweetness. “It's a harsh word, an offensive word. But I hate playing games, I like to cut right to the point.”

Jenkins nodded, glanced at the tape recorder and then looked at his

notes for a moment. “Governor, it’s my understanding from your party’s published platform that the Libertarian Party wants to legalize drug use. Is that an accurate statement?”

Gladys waited a heartbeat and then nodded at him. “Yes. The federal platform includes decriminalization of victimless crimes, such as drug abuse. Now, does that mean we’re all junkies? No, it just means we know that prison is not the best treatment option. It shouldn’t be an option at all. Someone who is wasting away in a shooting range with a dozen needles in his arm is not a public menace. He’s a menace to himself, and he needs help. He also needs the opportunity not only to make his own mistakes but to make his own recoveries from mistakes. There are a lot of people in the world who don’t get a dime in taxes who would reach out and help that junkie, the hypothetical poster child for what is a disease and should be treated as such, Mr. Jenkins, and the state is not helping those people connected with the junkie if we put the junkie in prison and surround him with genuinely violent, disturbed people who may harm him further, may maintain his dependency on the drug or may kill him by removing his access to it in an uncontrolled, amateur fashion.”

“What about drug-related crimes? Doesn’t that make him a potential menace to others in his community?”

“Not once the drug is legal and the price drops through the floor and keeps going. We don’t want people on the drugs, because they may do something unpredictable and dangerous, so we make the drug illegal, so the

price goes up because of the risk associated with the so-called business of production and distribution, so the addict needs more money for the drug, so the addict robs and steals in order to get it. We'd have to look a long time to find a finer example than Prohibition.” Gladys took another sip of coffee and shrugged at Jenkins. “It's just that simple. We made alcohol illegal and it became so profitable we funded the mafia for another century on the profits from a single decade. Now we've done the same with every controlled substance. We've made the problem far worse than it might have been. I'm not saying these drugs are a good thing, I'm saying the government will never be what steps into someone's life and convinces them not to become a victim of the disease of addiction. The government has only made life better for producers and dealers and spent a ton of money shoring up their prices.”

“It's an argument that's often made, if unpopular,” Jenkins acknowledged, and then he rested his chin on one fist. “But what can you do about it? These are federal laws.”

“I can make sure that the police of North Carolina, the highway patrol and the State Bureau of Investigation don't waste a lot of time and money chasing the college kid who sells a little grass out of his dorm room. If we defund drug enforcement in North Carolina, we can save a hell of a lot of money, and devote more of our resources to going after the real problem: violent crime. Murderers walk away from their crimes without a scratch, without a moment's thought about the consequence if their victim is unable to



defend themselves, remaining a menace to society, while good cops are stuck busting someone with a dime bag in his backpack. That's some backwards government, if you ask me.”

Jenkins laughed sort of oddly and smiled at her. “Governor Stone, surely you're suggesting the state of North Carolina isn't going to just ignore the federal laws regarding drug enforcement. Surely you don't believe every officer of the law in this state is just going to stop *caring* about illegal drugs, that the federal government won't just look the other way on the topic.”

Gladys nodded her head in agreement. “You're right, I can't expect that. But I can try to get people talking about it and thinking about it. We, as a society are flexible over the long term. I'm not trying to push this on people right out of the gate, but I do want them to roll it around in their heads for a while and see what they think. What I'd like to see happen short-term is the legalization of medical marijuana. There's a lot of good science and a ton of anecdotal evidence that it can play a critical role in the treatment of some illnesses - we all know about glaucoma, cancer, side effects of other cancer treatments, the usual. The West Coast led the way on this a decade and more ago. Given that they have yet to descend into utter chaos, the Schwarzenegger governancy aside, I think we're pretty safe starting to talk about the possibilities of respecting our own citizens and their rights in the same way.”

Jenkins nodded as Gladys spoke, took notes, and double-checked the

tape recorder. “So are you saying your platform isn't serious? That it's hyperbole for the sake of making an argument?”

Gladys rolled her eyes at him. He looked surprised, and she wasn't even trying to hide it anymore - she rolled her eyes again. “What I'm saying is that change takes time, and I respect that. The people of North Carolina have to back these ideas before they'll happen, and they don't back all of them right now, and they may never back all of them, but that's okay. That's their prerogative. In the meantime, I can do my damndest to keep the state out of their wallets and get them talking about these ideas. That's the only way meaningful change will ever happen. Every election, in every town and county and state and country, every candidate pounds their pulpit and makes a lot of noise about how they're going to change things, they're going to get things done, they're going to make everything right for everyone. They've got the key, they said, and they know what to do, they have a plan, just wait and see. And you know what? We get nothing. Jack. Zip. We get a big, fat nada out of these yahoos because they don't want change - they would saw off their own right hand before they'd change the society that saw fit to elect them in the first place. But I am different - genuinely different. I don't plan to push a lot of stuff down the throats of anyone in the state. I am the governor of this state, however, and I have some ideas about how I'd like the state to look in the future. Not the just in time for reelection future, I'm talking ten years, twenty years from now. It's up to the people of this state whether they'll get

behind those ideas, demand that their representatives get behind those ideas and enact them, and experiment to find the right balances to reshape things in a better way.” Gladys pointed out the window, through the curtains, at the street outside the mansion. “I maintain no illusions that I can walk outside and start barking orders and things will just *change*. But if I can get people talking about these ideas with their families, their co-workers, their mechanic, the guy who cuts the meat down at the grocery store, the kid who comes around to ask them questions for a poll about the next city council election, then I've done something. Then I *have* changed things. I've made people care enough to make a collective choice, take responsibility for their future as a society.”

Jenkins looked out the window, following the line she drew in the air from her fingertip to the streets of Raleigh, the state outside the governor's mansion and then looked back at her.

“Then what about the justifiable homicide laws you've enacted. An expanded definition of 'justifiable homicide' to allow the killing of someone who poses an imminent threat not just to life in the right here and now but in the potential future - some say it was rushed through the legislature, that it was a mistake to act so quickly while something was so fresh and turbulent in the minds of the people given the embarrassment of your opponents the week before the election. And regardless, that's certainly more than just getting people to talk about change. That's getting people to kill, right now. There have been several cases already.”

Gladys nodded at him. Damn.

“Yes. That was important enough to enact now. I have to get the state out of the business of making a decision that should be in the hands of the victim, the victim's community.”

“Polls showed very high support for the law initially, but that support has fallen. Do you think people are having second thoughts, that maybe people believe it is the government's job to be an objective enforcer of the law, an objective agent of justice?”

“Yes. Some people do believe that, and that's why almost every murder case in North Carolina this year has still gone before a judge and jury, still been resolved by an arrest by law enforcement and followed by the due process guaranteed every citizen when they're in the hands of the law.”

“And what about due process for those in the hands of a lynch mob?”

Gladys looked at him for long seconds and then said, “The state can't be held responsible for the decision of a community or a victim. If someone abuses the law, then a jury of their peers, the agents of their community, will find so and not let them get away with it.”

“No one who's used the justifiable homicide laws to their advantage has failed yet, governor. Can you really say the law is working?”

“Yes,” Gladys said, but her voice wasn't entirely steady. “That's the natural result.”

“You sound uncertain.”

“I don't like to speculate,” Gladys said, straightening her jacket. “I prefer to think North Carolinians are rational and fair.”

Jenkins smiled and nodded once at her. “There are those who say that the state legislature is trying to bog you down with the budget negotiations. Are they doing this to try to get you to give ground on justifiable homicide?”

Gladys wrinkled her brow slightly, but kept her tone pleasant. “The legislature approved the law. It was the second piece of legislation they passed this session.”

“Some say that it was a trap.”

Gladys laughed, her voice louder than she'd expected, so that they both sat back just a little at the first, uncontrolled noise of it. “That would be pretty dumb, don't you think? They could bog any governor down with anything - they've done it for decades. It's practically their job.”

Jenkins looked over his notes for a moment and then asked, almost off-handedly, “So why would it be dumb for them to vote for the justifiable homicide law and then bog you down over the budget?”

“Well,” and Gladys could hear what she was about to say: because the justifiable homicide law is dangerous. Better to pass a budget, any budget, and then bog me down on something they can really sink their teeth in.

Time froze for a moment, and Gladys thought of the eyes of the victims she'd met, the people who had wanted revenge so badly.

“Yes?” Jenkins' tape recorder had picked up, Well, and then stopped in

the wafting silence.

“Well,” Gladys said, and she cleared her throat. “Because the budget's so important to them. The budget's got all the pork for their barrels. Better to pass it and then try to create some clamor over something else, something that the people feel strongly about. That way they can play both sides without taking a...” She paused. “A moral stand.”

Gladys had no idea where the interview was going, and clearly Jenkins was somehow off his sea-legs as well. A vibe of general uncertainty resonated around the room, and Gladys said, “Mr. Jenkins, have you seen the bricks out front?”

Jenkins had not.

“Let me show them to you. It'll be a good chance for a break, if you don't mind.”

Later that day, she had called Darryl into her office, and she had been furious with herself. She'd fucked the whole interview, she said. He'd gotten her off-balance with the justifiable homicide laws, and now she wasn't sure what to do.

“What do you mean?” Darryl sat across the desk from her, his own notepad on his lap, his glasses sliding down so that he had to keep pushing them up with one bony finger.

“I mean...” Gladys lifted both hands to the heavens in supplication. “I

mean, I realized today that I may not be one hundred percent in favor of the justifiable homicide law.”

Darryl wrinkled his own brow, and Gladys wondered if that was how she'd looked when she did it to Jenkins.

“Gladys, I still don't get it. This is...this is ground-breaking legislation on the part of the state. This is recognizing the rights of a citizen to defend herself or himself in a way no one ever has. It's...it's just good sense.”

“Is it? Is it good sense to remind everyone that they can have all the guns they want and they can use them all they want if they can justify it to the jury?”

“Gladys, it's the second amendment to the United States Constitution. It's the Bill of Rights!”

Gladys sagged in her chair somewhat. “I got my foot in the door of this office on that one, and now I'm having second thoughts. I'm already months into my term and it's flying by. We rushed the bill through the state house, I had a popular swell of support, I could do anything, and what if I did the wrong thing?”

“No one's abused it yet. You keep saying that to everyone else, are you telling me you don't believe it all of a sudden?”

“No.” Gladys sat straight again and then, after a moment's consideration, stood and started pacing behind her chair. “But someone will. I half as said as much myself not long ago. Someone will, and then what?”

“Then they go to jail. Just like you also said, repeatedly, ever since the bill was passed.”

Gladys wrestled with something for a few seconds, and then she nodded. “Well, I've said it, and I think I do believe it. But I hope I'm right.”

“I know you're right,” Darryl said, “And besides, we can hardly back down now.”

“We could...tweak it, though. We could refine the language in the statutes, tighten it down a bit. I,” and she turned to look at Darryl again, head-on, eye to eye. It was the Gladys he was used to, and very comforting. “I do believe what I said. I would kill the bastard who laid a hand on me. I would never turn away someone who asked for the right to defend himself. But if we're going to break ground, we've got to do it *right*. I don't mean correctly, though I do mean correctly - I mean more than correctly. I mean morally.”

Darryl nodded, and started writing as she dictated.



## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Eleven

H'Diane had gone to the website the captain had given her, four days after he'd given it to her: the invitation. He'd sat there looking like Sheriff Santa and written down the address of the site and slid it across his desk at her.

We're not alone, he said.

In what?

In wanting to stop the criminals, even the ones who get away, the ones we can't always catch. Go to this site and read what's being said and then make up your own mind.

I don't get it, she said, looking at the site's address. It wasn't a name, like they usually were - nothing like [ilovecats.com](http://ilovecats.com) or [www.vigilantes.org](http://www.vigilantes.org) or something obvious like that. It was just numbers, and H'Diane was no networking expert but she knew that was a way to sort of hide. It wasn't much of a way to hide, it kept someone from just stumbling across you website when they'd meant to type in some other one. It was a bit like meeting in a warehouse down on the docks in some noir film - it was still possible for someone to end up there by accident, but a lot less likely than if they'd hung a sign out front that said SECRET MEETING HERE.

H'Diane still hadn't been sure what the captain was trying to tell her by giving her the site, hadn't been sure what he'd been getting at. The signs were

all there, but she preferred not to contemplate the captain trying to draft her into some vigilante justice ring. Eventually, however, the curiosity had gotten to her and she'd fired up her computer and dialed in to her ISP - archaic, but the need for cheap Internet access would never go away, it was that simple - and typed the address into her web browser's navigation bar, and there it was: THIRD-PARTY AVENGERS. It sounded like a band name, H'Diane thought, or a subcontracted superhero team. She felt ridiculous, but she read.

We are not Revenge, Inc., the site said. But we do care about justice - we know just how many perps walk away without ever facing the music or repaying their debt to society or, more importantly, to their victims. We know first-hand how a rape victim or a mugging victim or a home invasion victim feels for days, weeks, years after their crime. Even if the criminal who stole their sense of security moves on and never thinks of them again, their victim has to live with the knowledge that someone out there did this to them and the fear that they could one day come back. The intimacy of the relationship between criminal and victim is invasive and oppressive, and we are lucky to live in a society where the rights of a victim to ensure their own future security are respected.

H'Diane got a cup of coffee and kept reading.

**Who are we?**

We are those who best know the fear felt by victims. We are those who have devoted our lives to defending those victims, keeping them from becoming victims in the first place. We are those who best understand the behavior patterns of the criminal in our society, how they hide, how they flaunt the law and how they get away with it.

### **What is our purpose?**

There are those victims who want justice and want it more quickly and effectively than the courts can provide, but are for one reason or another unable or unwilling to seek it on their own behalf. That's where we come in, to provide them with the means and abilities and most importantly the will that they lack. We act on behalf of a client victim to track and neutralize their nonvictim attackers.

### **Are we vigilantes?**

Yes and no. We operate outside our official capacities within the law, on our own time, in our own way. However, we do so on behalf of legal victims.

### **Is this legal?**

It's not illegal, under the law as we understand it. However, we do operate in secrecy. We do so because there are those who would not grasp the understanding we have of what damage is done to the lives of these victims.

We also operate in secrecy because the enemy operates in secrecy. We must sometimes use their tactics against them.

**Are we affiliated with any known organizations?**

No. We are not affiliated with any other organization, for better or worse. To answer your concerns in advance, we are not the KKK, we are not the Dixie Mafia, we are not criminals and we are not indiscriminate. We are not in business for ourselves. We do this as volunteers working to better the world around us.

**Do we take payment from clients?**

If clients wish to compensate the agent who works on their behalf, and are able to do so, then it is accepted at the discretion of the agent. It's not our business why justice is done, as long as it is in fact done.

**If we operate in secret, how do we get clients?**

Word of mouth, mostly. Also, an agent may approach a potential client who matches their particular area of preference and offer them our services as long as they do not identify that they are an agent of anything other than justice.

An agent who approaches a client rather than is approached by a client does so on their own, knowing they cannot claim protection or shelter from the organization should something go wrong.

**How do we get started?**

Join the forum. Discuss the issues. Let others in the group get to know you, what you think, and we'll contact you from there. Use a real email address when you register, but feel free to make it as anonymous as you wish. If you sound like you've got the right stuff for our program, we'll let you know.

H'Diane was somewhat horrified and somewhat excited. Vigilantes - and they made little attempt to hide that they were cops as their day job - were getting into it. Did this mean the Captain was one? Did this mean the Captain was testing her? Was she being set up by the Captain?

She registered for the forum and started browsing the topics.

In June, the corpse of a respected school teacher was found on the steps of the city police department where she lived. She had been stabbed repeatedly and, in the coroner's report, knowledgeably. She'd died from the second wound, but the attacker had worked hard to make sure the job was completed. Her face and hands were unmarred, to aid in identification. Her wallet was in her purse. Clasped in her stiffening hands was a manila folder filled with printouts and Polaroids of children engaging in various sex acts.

The police chief had the body put in the city morgue, her family contacted and the press summoned to answer questions. The press, such as it

was, consisted of two reporters - one from out of town - and the high school kid who ran a local website.

The press conference, such as it was, did not take long.

Did the police intend to investigate the slaying?

No. They would initiate proceedings against the deceased on charges related to child pornography.

Did the police have an opinion as to the nature of the attack or identity of the attacker?

No, although it would make sense to assume it was a victim. The wounds, the chief said, were clumsy and brutal. This was probably the work of a child, as horrifying as that sounded.

There were rumors that the deceased had been delivered along with evidence of the crimes. Did these include photographs that identified local children as victims?

No comment.

*Citizen-Times* got in her car and drove back to Asheville considering what would make a child be bullied into performing a sexual act on camera then pick up a knife and use it on the photographer, and what would make a child molester keep weapons just lying around.

It was of course more contemplated than that, she thought to herself. But it smelled of being a *lot* more complicated than that, and she'd bet her bottom dollar that she'd never be able to get a copy of the coroner's report.

H'Diane read the forums for three hours solid. She sat at her cheap Wal-Mart desk in her low-rent apartment on the outskirts of Asheville and she read and read until her eyes were blood-shot and her entire skull throbbed from the slight flicker that ran across her cheap computer monitor every few minutes. She read “case” files, and they tended to be very, very detailed. There were scans of composite drawings, scans of victim photographs, of wounds inflicted, of coroners' reports, of psychologists' profiles, of anything and everything. There were days' worth of material on this site, she realized, and she had just barely cracked the lid on it and taken a peek inside after three hours of solid, continuous reading. There were witness statements, endless reams of speculation on motivations and methods and worry that one criminal or another might be a repeat offender. Some of the cases were cross-referenced, hyperlinked to one another to easily and quickly construct a potential profile of a potential mass murderer or serial rapist.

H'Diane had a hard time considering that this was a small-scale operation. She'd bet her last nickel that a significant percentage of the open assault, murder and rape cases in the state were right here, at her fingertips.

This was more illegal than anything she had ever witnessed, more than anything she had ever considered. She had seen terrible things in a few short years on the force, and she had never witnessed something as stomach-churning as this.

The idea that there were dirty cops was nothing new. It was omnipresent in society, in culture, in film and book and movie. The idea that cops were dirty was more than just an open secret in Asheville, it was a fairly well documented fact. Hell, that officers of the law could be bad anywhere was ground into the very foundations of how her people had ended up in America in the first place. She would never, however, have entertained the possibility that police across the state would break this many laws to do something they thought *good*.

She sat on her balcony and thought this over for a very, very long time. That all police officers were bad was a false statement. That all were good was a false statement. That all people of a particular race, class, gender or profession were anything was 99.99% untrue, no matter the value of the variable *anything*. The only exception would be the one thing which put them into that group in the first place: all cops are cops, for example, or all women are women, or all Montagnards are Montagnards, for example. Outside of that one, given generalization, nothing would be true.

Thus, not all cops in the state would be part of this.

Not all cops who were part of this would be scanning and posting confidential, legally protected case files on a publicly available Internet site, either.

Not all cops involved in this would be for reasons other than a genuine belief that criminals, assailants, rapists, murderers - the prey for the cop who



prowls the perimeter of society, guarding the flocks in their midnight hour of deepest vulnerability - should be caught and that justice of some form should be done. H'Diane did not kid herself into believing that justice was always done, or that all suspects were guilty, or that all suspects deserved to be hunted down outside the confines of a formal investigation and pursuit.

She also did not kid herself into believing that all criminals deserved to be treated kindly. Kindness, however, was not the same as *fairness*.

She could also safely assume that not all police or sheriff deputies or SBI agents or *whoever* was running this site, posted to this site and used this site would be interested in justice or in fairness.

So was the site a bad thing, or a good thing?

Either - it depended on who used it.

But if people used it, was it *fair*.

If someone got away with very literal murder and they could have been tracked and trapped and put down via this site, but they were not, was that *fair*.

H'Diane spent the whole afternoon sitting on her balcony, her mind going in circles and circles and circles. She couldn't tell whether she was simply circling the question, or spiraling towards its answer.

*Citizen-Times* drove back to Asheville in utter silence. She had the radio off. She had her tape recorder off. She turned off her mobile phone,

she turned off her pager and she turned off the CB radio she kept under the dash like some Dukes of Hazzards guest star.

She drove, and thought, and the foothills scooted their feet under the blanket of the land and gently lifted her ever higher, until the mountains loomed and the foothills bled away beneath her and she abruptly found herself chugging along in third gear, pedal to the floor, trying to climb Old Fort Mountain and somehow maintain interstate speed. She had no idea where two hours had gone, but she had done some serious thinking.

Someone knew who had prepped that guy on death row, she told herself. That someone was not his two-bit public defender, a drunk who reeked of cheap whiskey, no matter what her editor mumbled about lawyers and those who train them.

*Citizen-Times* drummed her fingers on the steering wheel as she topped Old Fort, at last, and then rocketed down the other side in virtual free-fall, zooming past Christian conference centers, bite-sized towns, chain restaurants. As she glided smoothly back into the mountain fortress of Asheville, she nodded to herself.

Someone knows, and I'm just going to have to ask everyone I can until I get some answers.

Melinda Blumfeld was dead, and everyone except her mother and the machines that kept her breathing knew it.

Her husband had watched her waste away after the car accident that caved in her skull. He had collected the disability insurance and had used every penny to have her hooked to machines that fed her, machines that pumped her heart, machines that made her breathe, and machines that watched for the day her brain would wake up and so would she.

That had been six years ago.

Melinda's husband had plenty more insurance. He could pay for another few decades of this, given her coverage and his. They were lucky. They were extremely lucky, the doctors had told him. They had options, and that was a lot more than most people could afford, very literally afford.

Had Melinda made a living will, arrangements for the occasion of her permanent disability, the doctors asked.

Permanent?

Her doctors had called Melinda's husband to meet with them three months after the accident and had been gentle but honest, as they knew they must be. They were doctors, and they had to care, and they had to be truthful. It was their obligation, they told him, to discuss his options given that Melinda was, obviously, brain dead.

Melinda made some arrangements, yes, her husband had choked out, and then he had told them that he did not know what the arrangements were, that they were in the papers she kept in a safe deposit box and it might take some time to get access to that through the bank where she kept her private

finances.

Of course, the doctors had said. Once you know, we'll be glad to do whatever we can to help meet your and Melinda's wishes.

Four nearly six years, Melinda's husband had told no one of the living will in her safe deposit box and what it stated: do not let me lay dead and on display for months or years. If I am gone, I am *gone*. Give me release.

It was hand-written, and notarized. There would never be any disputing it in court, it was as verifiable as anything could ever be. It was literally the next best thing to Melinda waking up and telling them herself, and that would simply never happen.

The doctors never mentioned it again. They kept a polite distance. They assumed that she had requested every effort be made to give her a chance to recover, even if the recovery were simply impossible. It would take the hand of God to reach in there and turn her back on, one doctor said to a nurse very late one night. It's just never going to happen.

Melinda's husband visited her every day for six years. He brought her new clothes on Christmas, he brought his dinner on Thanksgiving, he brought candy on Halloween and gave it to the kids in the Pediatric Ward when the nurses were pretending they couldn't see. He was a fixture at the hospital, and everyone pitied him, and it didn't bother him - his wife was in there, and one day she would wake up, and that would be that.

Two weeks ago, he had awakened, taken a shower, gotten dressed,

checked his calendar at work and taken care of everything ahead of schedule so that he could cut out at three o'clock and had to go to the hospital. He asked to see her doctors.

I found her living will, he said, and he handed it to the neurologist who was handling her monitoring.

I'm ready to respect her wishes.

After a waiting period the doctors had advised Melinda's husband to take, to make sure there were no regrets, no second thoughts, to give him a chance to say goodbye, the doctors had notified Melinda's parents, at her husband's request, of his decision regarding Melinda's wishes.

Her mother said that she would be in attendance.

Finally, after two weeks of debating and considering and counseling and pacing and sleepless nights and taking all his vacation and sick leave from work, Melinda's husband was ready. The day had come, and he was going to the hospital, and at noon today they would withdraw her feeding tubes and leave her to die. It would not be pretty, but Melinda's doctors were very certain: she would feel nothing. There was nothing left for her to feel it with.

At eleven thirty, the doctors left Melinda's husband alone to say goodbye to his wife, and then at quarter of noon Melinda's mother had arrived to do the same.

She asked to be alone with her daughter, and Melinda's husband had of

course agreed.

At noon, the doctors and a nurse and Melinda's husband had filed slowly into the room, her husband staring at the woman he'd married, a delicate woman, her high cheekbones and the lovely, long, red hair he'd savored smelling every morning when they awoke. The doctors all looked at the floor, the nurse at the ceiling. He looked at her and said goodbye, aloud, and then nodded to the doctor.

Don't, Melinda's mother said. Everyone turned and looked at Melinda's mother, first, and then at the gun in her hand.

Don't kill my daughter.

Your daughter is already dead, Melinda's husband said, but his face was entirely blank, whereas Melinda's mother held her jaw clenched, the words bitten out too tightly, the veins on her neck standing out, her dull gray bob stringy with sweat, her face damp, her eyes rimmed with red.

Don't kill my daughter, she said again.

Ma'am, one of the doctor's said, his hands held out, open, up a little, Put the gun away and we can talk about this.

Shut up, Melinda's mother told him. Just shut up. Some doctor you are, you're here to kill my baby girl.

She doesn't want to be like this, Melinda's husband said. His voice was still flat, his face still blank. The shock had set in already, the weeping was over. I have it right here, she wrote it herself, I...I hid it. I didn't tell anyone

because I wanted to give her a chance.

And now you're tired of giving her a chance? Melinda's mother's face trembled as she spoke, her eyes dark behind squinted lids, angry, betrayed. I will not let my daughter die from your exhaustion.

Do it, Melinda's husband said, but the doctor's stood stock still.

Do it, he repeated.

Do it and I kill every last one of you. Melinda's mother did not speak it, she screamed it, her voice shrill, her pace too fast.

Do it or I will, Melinda's husband said, and he moved one hand. No one knew how he moved it, what his goal was, but it moved a few inches towards Melinda - to point, to grab the feeding tube, to go across her for the gun in her mother's hand, to stroke her face, no one knew, there was never enough time to tell before the gun started firing.

Melinda's mother's attorneys announced they planned a justifiable homicide defense.

A judge ruled in a separate case brought by Melinda's husband's mother that the living will be respected. Melinda was laid to rest twelve days later, beside her husband.

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Twelve

Wilson was in Gladys' office with a copy of the *Greensboro News & Record* the day after Melinda's mother had become a murderess. He wore a plain brown suit and a plain scowl and a look of being plain exhausted.

"I thought I might see you today," Gladys said, when her assistant showed Wilson in, and she had stood to greet him. Wilson had declined to shake her hand, simply sitting down and then setting the newspaper on the desk, turned to face Gladys.

"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty," Wilson said. His voice was heavy and thick. He looked like he hadn't slept. His eyes were slightly unfocused. "People of Faith," he repeated, his hands folding in his lap, fidgeting, his eyes on his hands as he rubbed them together a little and then balled them into fists. "Faith in what, I wonder, sometimes?" He laughed darkly and then lifted his eyes to look at Gladys, who had no reaction yet. "In God? Why did God let this woman be brain-damaged in the first place? Was she trapped in her body for six years before she was taken into the bosom of the Lord, or did she go as soon as her forehead hit that steering wheel? And what of her wish to die? Does God approve of that? Do any of the Gods? What of her husband ordering the doctors to let her go, finally? What of her mother killing him for doing what Melinda had asked, despite obviously disagreeing with it himself. Do you know he went to her bank and got the living will six



years ago? He's had it all this time. He's kept it out of sight. He's not told anyone, and then, one day, he wakes up and he can't do it anymore. He can't lie to the doctors, because his wife is right there in that bed. She doesn't look at him, but she's there, and he's afraid that she knows, somehow, that he's lying to them about what she said. He tells them to let her body die because he knows, deep down, that her soul is gone, that her consciousness is forever lost, but he still fears her conscious resentment of him for not doing so sooner.” Wilson smiled and tears welled in his eyes. “He must have been going crazy by the end. I don't mean insane, I mean he must have been right on the edge, emotionally, spiritually. So many questions, questions I wish I could answer, and that's my own failure: that I question. Faith isn't about questioning, it's about trusting, but I still have so many questions about Melinda, about her husband, about what my God thinks of them, about every murderer who was on death row until this year.”

Gladys sat and listened, and new far better than to start talking now. Wilson wasn't finished, just tired, just pausing for breath, pausing to wipe his face with one open palm, rub his eyes, lift his glasses and release a long sigh.

“There is one thing I know, however,” Wilson went on. His voice hardened, his lips stiffened. Gladys knew she would never want to see him angry. His entire body tensed. “I know that your law did this. I know that regardless of the situation, no one should have been shot to death yesterday in a hospital room in Greensboro.” He cleared his throat and looked away, and

sagged again. “You did this.”

“I’ve commuted dozens of death sentences, and juries aren’t bothering to recommend them anymore, haven’t for weeks since I vowed I’d commute all of them, regardless of the circumstance.” Gladys spoke very quietly, and sat very still, but it was out of respect for Wilson, not fear.

“And with the other hand you condemn countless, unknown people to die in hospitals and back alleys and their own beds, at the hands of someone who believes they have been wronged or, better yet, that someone else entirely has been wronged but that they have the right to avenge it for them. That’s what the woman’s mother is saying, you know. That she’s going to use your law to convince a jury that she did not, in fact, commit a murder yesterday in a hospital room. *A hospital!*” Wilson trembled for a moment, his voice caught, gasping to hold in some air before he screamed in anger or frustration or terror.

“No. I give people the ability to defend themselves.”

“So you keep saying, but you keep having to say it, don’t you? No one buys it, Gladys, and that’s why they keep asking you about it. Everyone knows that this law will spell the end of something, and they aren’t even sure what. They’re all afraid, whether consciously or otherwise, that you’ve let down the gate on something terrible, that it will all spin out of control and that you won’t be able to stop it.”

“One crazy lady is not an epidemic, is not a wave of killings.” Gladys

still spoke softly, very controlled, trying to help balance Wilson by contrast.

“The flood started with a single raindrop, the crucifixion with a single kiss, the First World War with a single bullet. Things have to start somewhere, Gladys, good things and bad. You have done something and no one knows what yet. But I'm afraid of what history will say of us, what our children will think of their parents and their madness for setting aside judge and jury in favor of one another's individual standards of 'justice.'”

“You're being melodramatic,” Gladys said.

“I'm being the voice of conscience in a world without one,” Wilson whispered. He stood and turned his back to her and walked to the door. He lifted one foot, very slowly, and tapped the side of his sole with one finger. Then he lifted the other and did the same. “May God forsake this place,” he said, then slipped through the doors and out.

H'Diane sat at her computer, in her pajamas, reading Third Party Avengers. The governor was actively working to restrict the applicability of the justifiable homicide laws, it was in the paper, and she had confirmed it herself at a press conference the day before.

Third Party Avengers were going crazy.

H'Diane had wondered if the site would even be up when she went to it, but it was there and, in fact, the running total of available cases had jumped. Whoever was compiling the site had been burning the midnight oil to get cases

out there.

*We must act while we have time, one poster said on the forum. The Governor is being bullied over one case, this woman in Greensboro whose only crime was to protect her own child, and we have to help balance the numbers. It is imperative that we get out there and do justice in time to save this law. WE MUST ACT NOW.*

H'Diane had sat and trembled in front of the computer. There had already been a quiet rise in the number of suspects who had turned up in their homes, in their cars or in front of police departments and sheriffs' stations and anywhere else they might be found, with a big pile of evidence clutched in their dead hands and a note that said, one way or another, that the deceased had been a criminal and a danger and the community had stopped it because the authorities could not.

H'Diane had been offered a case. A woman had been scarred and permanently disabled in an arson attempt on her home. There was a profile of a very likely suspect. It had been emailed to her with a straightforward offer:

*You've been quiet on the forum, but we know you watch closely. Take this and act if you believe in what we're doing.*

She hadn't gone back for three days. When she did, the message was gone from her inbox of personal messages, and the case was listed as "closed." The suspect in question had died in a fire at his home. The authorities ruled it a particularly gruesome suicide.

*Citizen-Times* had been watching the numbers, and thought she had a pretty good case to make to her editor: there was an organization out there killing people under the justifiable homicide laws, and she wanted to prove it. She believed she could prove it, if she could just find a chink in their armor. If she could just find someone who would *talk*.

Her editor had listened politely, and then cleared his throat.

We do not print conspiracy theories, he said.

This isn't just a theory.

Yes, he said, It is. It is until you have *proof, evidence* of some sort. We are not going to go out there and tell the world that there's some shadow network of apparent assassins who are killing rapists and murderers, within the bounds of the law, or at least that one of our reporters is pretty sure that it's happening but of course she doesn't have any proof and hey, we just thought we'd bring it up. He had frowned at her, scowled deeply, and then shaken his head. It's crazy talk.

I will get proof, *Citizen-Times* had growled at him, if I have to sit out front of a murderer's house for a week and wait for someone to walk up and shoot them and then ask *them* what the fuck is going on, I will break this wide open and when I do, you will thank me for the ten gazillion papers that you fucking sell!

Then she'd stormed out. Her answering machine at home let her know

that she was being put on temporary leave for a much-needed vacation, and if she could turn over her notes on any current stories - *printable* stories, her editor had added - to another reporter on staff then they'd look forward to seeing her in a few weeks.

Just what I need, she thought. Time.

H'Diane drove to the scene of the crime, very slowly, dressed in street clothes. She had her badge in her pocket, but she just didn't feel like wearing it at the moment.

In years of being a cop, she had never thought it would shame her.

She had thought of calling someone in the media, but what good would that do? They would know it was her, would know somehow. They knew everything, didn't they? They had everything on tap, somehow, and someone with access to it and a willingness to exploit it. They had become the law, not its enforcers, and that was going to drive her crazy if she didn't do something. Before she could do anything, though, she needed to see the house, see the place where the man who was her assigned "case" had been burned to death in his sleep.

The man had lived outside of Asheville. He'd been a loner who made crystal meth in a lab in his basement. It was a delicate process, but one could learn to do it without poisoning one's self to death on the gases that were a byproduct of the reactions. It was a rare skill, as well, something few people

knew how to do, but once someone learned then they could produce it in vast quantities.

The woman whose home he'd tried to burn down had found out, at last, where her son had gotten his supply, had faced that he was a drug addict, had faced that everything she had hoped for had gone wrong, and had told her son that she would, in fact, make it right again. She was going to turn in the weird guy down the road, the guy who sold her son that awful shit, she'd screamed, would pay very fucking dearly.

Her son had feigned a coherent apology, promised his mother he would never use illegal drugs again, listened to her lecture and then slunk to his room, picked up the phone and called his friend.

Don't be there tonight, his friend had said. No, scratch that, don't be there ten minutes from now. And take your phone off the hook.

H'Diane knew that the man who had made tons of crystal meth in his basement had not been a good man. He was not one of the well-meaning, retro hippies with a bag of weed or a hit of acid wrapped in tin foil in their pocket. This had been someone whose living had been to destroy septums, cause unnatural weight loss, permanent heart damage, cost his clients thousands in reconstructive surgery, cause cardiac arrests, cause rages of anger, cause desperation, cause secondary crimes like robbery, mugging, burglary. He had thrived on the worst side of human suffering, an addiction almost as bad as heroin, and he had done so remorselessly. Rather than give

up and move on, like most people when they realize the heat is suddenly on them, he had turned around and tried to murder the person who planned to turn him in, and once the flames were started then he'd stood in the front yard with the woman's own son, his own client, and watched the fire grow and known that she could not call for help because the phone in the son's room was, as ordered, left off the hook.

Then he'd walked back to his home with his client, where they had shared a couple of lines and he had said, Go on back home and see if it's done burning yet, I've got to get back to the lab.

H'Diane felt a pit in the bottom of her stomach when she thought of it. It was unbelievable, what people were capable of doing, what they could be driven to do given enough desperation and enough lack of forethought.

She pulled up in front of the dealer's own burnt husk of a home, and got out of her car. There were no police left now, two days later.

Third Party Avengers had expected her to act quickly.

She stood in the quiet, her nose still struck by the stench of burnt plastic - a smell so strong she wondered if the whole place had been made of plastic, some weird, inflatable mobile home tucked into the side of a hollow behind a mountain in a place that wasn't even enough of a town to have a name, just a road with a number and a stop sign.

Another car pulled up, and H'Diane thought about hiding, but her car was right there, they would know someone was here.



She figured it must be Third Party Avengers. The criminal always returns to the scene of the crime, she thought, and then she'd laughed.

"It's not very funny, if you ask me."

H'Diane turned at the sound of the woman's voice as she walked from her own car up the driveway, past H'Diane's car - she's parked me in, H'Diane thought, I am a dead woman - and then the figure had stepped out of the shadows and the blunt object in her hand was a videophone.

"*Citizen-Times*," the woman said by way of explanation.

H'Diane stared at her dumbly.

"I'm here to cover this murder."

H'Diane stood stock still, and couldn't believe the sound of the blood in her ears. The press were in on it too, she realized, of course they are. She still didn't move, didn't speak, just stood there holding her breath.

"You know, the newspaper?" *Citizen-Times* looked at H'Diane more closely and then took a step back, her own eyes growing wider. "Holy shit," she said.

H'Diane still didn't say anything.

"Holy shit," *Citizen-Times* said, "You're the one who did this, aren't you? Aw, *shit!*" She looked around quickly and then pointed at H'Diane. "I know what's going on, I know that someone's going around killing people, I know it, and I'm not the only one, so you can't lay a fucking *finger* on me, you hear what I'm saying?" Then she yanked the videophone up into the air and the

flash went off and *Citizen-Times* turned and ran for her car.

“WAIT,” H'Diane had yelled, and begun running after her.

It had taken H'Diane all her officer driving training to stop *Citizen-Times* from beating her back to the main road, and it had taken another set of police skills to tackle *Citizen-Times* to the ground to keep her from running into the woods at top speed. It had taken another ten minutes to convince her that H'Diane was on her side.

H'Diane told her the whole story over an untouched plate of fried eggs and toast at the Denny's on Patton Avenue. They had spoken quietly, their voices low, and when a waitress came to refill their coffees, *Citizen-Times* had smiled so sweetly she showed every tooth and said, “Fuck off, lady, we're having a lovers' spat so leave us a-*fuckin*-lone.”

H'Diane had left a big tip to make up for that one.

“I need to see this website,” *Citizen-Times* said to her, so H'Diane took her to her own apartment and fired up her computer and prayed that the hard drive wouldn't be dead, the modem wouldn't be on the fritz, Third Party Avengers wouldn't have somehow psychically known that she was most definitely not on their side, that they wouldn't have killed her dial-up access or taken down the site.

*Citizen-Times* had patiently pointed out that Third Party Avengers probably did not fear what one officer could do to them. It's how arrogance

works, she'd said, shaking her head and pushing her hair back behind her ears as she flipped through page after page, verifying everything H'Diane had said to her, verifying the case files, verifying the forum, reading the Message of the Day:

*Justice may be blind, but lucky for her, we're good shots.*

"We need everything," *Citizen-Times* said. "Everything. There's software on my computer that can do it, can pull down everything from a website and store it locally, create a backup. It's nothing that would hold up in court, but it's information, and that's what we need."

*Citizen-Times* pulled out her own mini and went to the site from her own machine and then started the software that would create a local duplicate of the Third Party Avengers website.

"Will they notice this?" H'Diane asked.

"Don't know," *Citizen-Times* shrugged at her. "But I suggest we make sure they don't notice."

"Um."

"Don't worry. Cops do this all the time. If professional hackers never realize they're being watched, why will these yahoos?"

"They know who I am," H'Diane whispered, all the color gone from her face so that she looked like a strange apparition of an Asian woman, a ghost in a black turtleneck and aging cargo pants her father had worn in a war across the ocean, before the Americans had moved him and three thousand of his

people to America.

“So we'll do it from my computer, from a public place, where we can't be traced.” *Citizen-Times* grinned at H'Diane and felt more alive than she had all week. “Don't worry, girlfriend. I know what I'm doing, and I have a plan.”

H'Diane was still unconvinced, and still unenthusiastic. It had felt so good to have someone to tell, initially, but now she was starting to come out of the rush of adrenaline. “We still won't be able to arrest them on anything worse than illegally collecting and distributing information. Corruption charges aren't what we should get them for - they're killing people. We might not even be able to prove that they're guilty of corruption, I don't know who any of the people on this site are except for my own captain.”

*Citizen-Times* nodded and blushed so that her dark brown skin turned a little darker. “I know. But you take your victories where you can.” She looked back at her computer, continued watching the website collate on her local drive, and was silent while H'Diane watched her work.

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Thirteen

Gladys hated Charlotte, to be honest. Almost everyone in the state who didn't live there hated the place, and half the people who did live there hated it, too. It was filled with big buildings in its very center and counties of sprawl around the edges. Its football team sucked, its streets were unsafe, its pollution was unbearable and its bankers were greedy. Few people thought of anything other than banking when they thought of Charlotte, and although Gladys owed them a pretty clear debt for their financing of her campaign, she hated them - they were ready for her to start talking about less regulation of banking, and she wasn't quite sure she agreed with them despite her party affiliation.

Wilson - that damn People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, those damned eyes of his, that damned sanctimonious God talk - Wilson came from Charlotte. He's like a banker for the soul, she thought to herself when he called, and then she hated herself for being so damned angry at him. She knew she was angry because she agreed with him, had told him as much herself, but she was doing something now to take care of restricting the law, and that hadn't made him happy.

She hated people who wouldn't negotiate.

Wilson had said, someone recently contacted me who would like to speak to you, and I think it's important that you hear him. I also think it's

important to him that he talk to you. I hate to sound cryptic or overbearing, but this is important.

He'd called her Gladys, and she'd known he was serious then. She'd said yes.

It was nine o'clock at night when Wilson pulled into the driveway of the governor's mansion, drove around its winding front lane and then pulled into a reserved visitor space after being cleared by an SBI man. Wilson drove his big, old sedan, one that marked him as a man of modest means, and there were few preachers who weren't. No, Gladys thought, I am not going to get misty over the idea of the country preacher and his ungenerous flock.

Wilson brought a man up the walk with him, someone Gladys didn't know. He was young, late twenties, and he smiled politely when he saw her. Wilson took off his hat and said, "Governor Stone, I'd like you to meet a member of my congregation." He turned and put a hand on the man's shoulder. "Jeff Franklin, meet Governor Gladys Stone."

"Nice to meet you, Jeff." Gladys was eaten up inside wanting to know what the hell all this was about, and she had ashamedly ordered a couple of extra SBI men to keep an eye on the mansion while they talked.

"It's an honor, Governor Stone." Jeff's voice was quiet in a way that Gladys recognized immediately as being not quite right. Now she didn't regret asking for the agents all of a sudden. There was a hollow sound in that voice, as though he were very, very far away.

“Governor Stone, Jeff would like to tell you a story.”

Gladys rolled her eyes, and could see it coming now - how he'd been hurt, but he'd forgiven, and his life was better.

“Go ahead, Jeff,” Gladys said, and she checked her watch just to piss Wilson off.

“I...” Jeff started, but then he shook his head and blushed. “I'm sorry, can we sit down, Governor?”

Gladys ungracefully plopped herself down on the front step of the mansion and said, “Have a seat, there's stairs enough for everybody.”

Wilson was patient, didn't show a single sign of annoyance. That got Gladys' attention. He gestured for Jeff to sit and, very subtly, put some pressure on Jeff's shoulder to encourage him.

The kid sat down on the step, looked at his shoes for a few seconds, and then turned his face to look Gladys in the eye.

“I killed my girlfriend this March,” he whispered.

Gladys knew those eyes. They were the same deeply disturbed and disturbing eyes of the victims she'd seen, the people who had nearly been murdered, the people whose families had been killed, kidnapped, the people whose child had been hit by a drunk driver and whose father had been smothered by a nurse in a rest home. They were the eyes of soullessness. They weren't empty, and that was a big part of what was wrong with them. They were the eyes of someone full of something so terrible that they *wanted*

to be empty. They were eyes that cried out for the pain to go away.

Jeff told Gladys his story. He showed her the video from Chimney Rock. Gladys had zero doubts that this was the most surreal experience she had ever had, this was more surreal than watching the old governor vomit on his podium, more surreal than watching her opponents remove themselves from a race they didn't even know they were running with her, more surreal than being sworn in as governor, more surreal than the first day she'd set a soapbox in front of the Vance Memorial in the middle of Asheville and held up a poster-board sign that said GOT CORRUPTION?, and started shouting out loud that the Sheriff and the chief of the Asheville Police Department were the local equivalent to mafia dons, and people had stopped to listen.

Jeff told Gladys about the abuse, the beatings, how he had no ability to tell anyone that he was a man whose beautiful girlfriend tried to kill him every few weeks. He told her about the threats, about the attempt to blackmail him into marrying her, about how she tried to get pregnant.

When he was done, he looked at her and said, with those big, brown eyes, the ones Susan had called puppy-dog, "I need someone to tell me it was okay or that it wasn't. That's why I called this man," with a finger lifting to point at Wilson. "I need someone to tell me if what I did was okay."

Gladys sat in terror. She had started sweating. Wilson was standing there with some dumb-ass half-smirk on his face, like the kid had just come out with the world's deepest wisdom, and Gladys wondered if they were



watching the same channel here.

“Jeff,” she said, after a long pause and a thorough licking of her lips and a swallow to try to get over her throat that had suddenly gone dry, “That’s not my job.”

“Someone must hold me responsible.” Jeff was still whispering. “You’re the chief executive of the state, Governor Stone.”

Gladys heard her own words about to be said to her, could see them about to come out of Jeff’s mouth: *You are, ultimately, a cop*, the words she’d said of herself to Wilson a few months before.

“You must take responsibility for yourself,” Gladys said to him, her voice very quiet, very calm. “I can’t do that for you.”

“I can’t.” Jeff’s face was still very still.

“I can’t take responsibility. I can’t be held responsible. But someone has to pay. I killed my girlfriend, but she deserved it, but someone has to pay.”

Jeff reached into his pocket.

Gladys opened her eyes wide. Her whole life unrolled before her, and she opened her mouth as Jeff fidgeted with whatever was in her pocket, and Gladys screamed at the top of her lungs.

Three agents of the State Bureau of Investigation appeared out of nowhere, though it took long seconds while Jeff’s hand stayed in his pocket, still fidgeting, still trying to get *it* - Gladys imagined that even if it were a very

small gun, it could still kill her quite easily - out of his coat, out from that damned pocket *where the fuck are my bodyguards, don't they hear me screaming* and no sooner had she had time to start screaming and have that thought, the three agents had landed on top of Jeff and pressed his face against a step and his hands out of his pockets and up in the air behind him.

Are you okay, Governor?

Gladys sat there and stared at Jeff's utter failure to writhe or struggle. There was a folded piece of paper in his right hand. There was no gun.

Are you alright, Governor?

Yes, she mumbled. Yes.

Wilson was still watching them, unmoving, unsurprised.

Gladys stood up, walked over to him and said, You knew he was crazy.

I knew he was in need of guidance.

You knew he was going to try to take something out and show it to me.

Now you know what those people feel, and interestingly, you didn't go for your own gun despite carrying one in your own purse. Don't worry, *I* knew what was in his pocket.

You son of a bitch, Gladys said. She punched him as hard as she could, and he went down cold.

*You crazy fucking son of a bitch*, she yelled at him as he lay sprawled on the ground.

He's clean, Governor, an agent said, but they still had Jeff face-down on

the step. He wasn't fighting.

Everyone stood still for several very long seconds before time seemed to sort of rush back in around them. They could hear the sounds of the street again, and the sounds of the city, and the sounds of the yard and of breathing.

“Give me that piece of paper,” Gladys barked, her voice hoarse. An agent obeyed, yanking it from Jeff's hand and then presenting it to her.

It was a petition to repeal the justifiable homicide law.

## Life, Liberty And - Chapter Fourteen

It took three days to get the law repealed.

Gladys did very little sleeping during those days. The legislature wouldn't move on anything until their budget was signed, and so she'd talked and yelled and threatened and cajoled and finally she'd caved in and signed their budget.

They'd repealed the law with minimal debate - a few angry fists shaken in the air for the look of the thing, a few sincere complaints - and Gladys had stood on the front porch of the governor's mansion to wait for a special courier to bring the bill to her. She signed it while the media stood by, getting footage.

Do you consider your platform a failure, a reporter had asked with a smirk on her face. Rumor has it that there was an attempt on your life because of this law. Is that why you're signing the repeal?

Gladys had smiled at her sweetly.

I am grateful that we have had both the opportunity to experiment as a society and that we, as a society, can recognize when laws should be changed to fit our changing culture and changing needs. I do not believe that this has been a failure, I simply believe that the business of government must go forward. I do not plan to turn this state into some sort of Free State Utopia overnight. If the legislature wants to go more slowly in enacting my plans to

better our government and its relationship with our people, then that is their prerogative. They write the laws, I approve and enforce them. I am willing to work with them to do whatever it takes to get the business of the state conducted, and right now we need an approved budget. We can try again on other issues next time they're in session. In the meantime, they did their job - they wrote and passed a bill overwhelmingly, and I did mine: signing it because I feel that ultimately it will be in the best interests of the people of North Carolina.

After answering the question, Gladys discreetly sent that reporter a hand-written, unsigned note, passed to her from over a shoulder before she could know who had dropped it into her lap.

*Fuck you*, it read.

The *Citizen-Times* ran a headline that got a lot of people talking.

DIRTY COPS GO ONLINE TO RECRUIT VIGILANTES

Halfway through the story, a sidebar read, *Excerpts: Murder*

*Justifications in their Own Words, Page 3.*

The Captain called in sick that day. By chance, H'Diane was the day officer. She was still badged, but she'd been taken off her night shift rounds for a few weeks of handgun training and recertification.

I'm going to be out of town for a while, he told her. My mother's very ill,

I'm sorry it's so abrupt, but the Chief knows all about it. Simmons will be handling things in my absence.

Could you come in to sign my time sheet, H'Diane asked sweetly.

No time, the captain said, my flight leaves in three hours.

I'll bring it by, H'Diane said, and when she knocked on the Captain's front door, his bags piled up in the front yard, half loaded into his mini-van, and the door opened, she pointed her gun at the middle of his face.

Henry Manx, H'Diane said before he could do anything other than pop his eyes wide, You're under arrest for criminal breach of confidentiality, conspiracy to murder and as an accessory to murder.

There were four other officers with her.

Cops never like a snitch, the Captain said to her. You're finished in this force.

That makes two of us, H'Diane said.

Gladys had promised this guy from *TIME* another question and answer session over dinner, as the anniversary of her election night neared, and she was dreading it even more this time than her first, terribly abortive interview. She hadn't been able to come up with a believable way to steer everything away from the justifiable homicide laws, to talk about privatizing state functions, trimming the budget, eliminating state income taxes, eliminating sales taxes, especially the food tax, *nothing* but the legal recognition of

proactive self-defense, as one of the lawyers had called it. Lawyers sort of mysteriously materialized as if out of the ether around her administration, she had found. Repealing the justifiable homicide statute hadn't gotten rid of them, either.

Jenkins had appeared freshly showered and shaved, crisp at all the corners, looking very professional. Gladys had worn old blue jeans and a sweatshirt.

“You like sushi?”

Jenkins looked at her as though she'd started to show the first signs of madness, his eyebrows a little higher than they might have been normally, a thoughtful, considering nod of his head as he looked away for a moment.

“Sushi? You don't want to inundate me with more pork barbecue?”

“Sushi,” Gladys said again, and she was already wishing she'd left Jenkins stewing in New York to write whatever the hell he wanted to.

Gladys paused and thought for just a split second. She never used to mind talking to the press. They were the first thing the Bill of Rights mentioned, weren't they?

She took a deep breath and smoothed out her sweatshirt and then laughed quietly. Jenkins was still waiting politely for an answer; that was his job.

“Fuck it,” Gladys said, and Jenkins flushed crimson for a moment.

“Fuck the barbecue, fuck whatever you think I'm going to do for a song and a

dance. I didn't handle myself well earlier the last time you were in my state, and I tried to stay 'on-message,' whatever the fuck that means, and I fucked it up." Gladys hadn't cussed this much in front of someone other than Darryl or that damn Wilson in years. She dug around in her pocketbook and produced her pack of cigarettes and a lighter and walked over to open the door of the foyer of the governor's mansion. An SBI agent posted out front on guard duty turned to respond to her, expecting that she needed something, and she leaned against the door jam to light her cigarette and then waved the agent off. "Nothing, kid, don't sweat it."

Gladys turned to look at Jenkins, still standing in the foyer of the mansion, still staring at her and now he wasn't looking at her like she'd only started to go mad.

"What, nobody talks to reporters like this anymore?" She watched him flush crimson again and then she laughed harder. "Oh, c'mon. Let's cut the bullshit and go talk. Ask me anything. I've got straight answers for you this time, and yes, I want to inundate you with *sushi*, because I'm fucking dying for sushi here, and if you want an interview then it's going to be over a Dragon Roll or not at all. There's a great little joint in a strip mall on Lake Boone Trail."

Gladys took another long, loving drag and then dutifully stubbed out her cigarette only half-smoked in a giant ashtray on the front porch.

Jenkins was still standing inside. Gladys sighed dramatically, gave the stoic SBI agent a roll of the eyes as though to say, *Reporters these days*, and



then she ducked her head back into the foyer.

“I said, let's go. Bring your notebook and your recorder and whatever else you'd like. We'll call ahead and get a private room at the Sushi-Thai.”

Jenkins finally unfroze, checked his bag for everything he needed only half-heartedly and then strode towards Gladys as though in shock.

“Taxi!” Gladys yelled from the front steps, and as if on cue her limo pulled around and into view.

“I feel so good right now,” she said as she turned to Jenkins and grinned broadly. “I hate trying to lie to people. I hope you're ready for this interview, because I know I am.” With light steps she pranced down the walk and slid into the back of the car, Jenkins strolling as though tugged along on invisible thread.

The interview went fantastically. At least, it did from Gladys' side of the table. She ate heartily and messily, a pile of used napkins building up on her side of the table. She had three different kinds of sushi and two desserts. She ate like a woman who'd crossed a desert with nothing to support her but cactus water and a roll of breath mints. Jenkins sat and watched her as she ate and talked and sometimes did both at the same time, then apologized without apparent sarcasm for spraying half-chewed rice on him. It was orgiastic, Jenkins thought, it was hedonism in its purest form. She tucked a napkin into the collar of her sweatshirt, she paid the waitstaff extravagant

compliments, she stood and returned the chef's bow with a flourish and a grin when he came to the table, she had her picture taken with a family who'd recognized her on her way into the restaurant, she'd ordered funny, foreign beers - as she called them - and drank them as she ate. She acted like someone who'd just come out of a coma.

Jenkins had asked her questions, and impassioned responses had come pouring out. Gladys turned off her cell the first time it rang, because she recognized the number and it was Darryl. Nervous little kid, she thought to herself. He means well, but it's my interview.

Gladys spoke at length about the Libertarian Party's history, its point of view, its odd cross-sectional membership, the stew of hippies and gun freaks and, sometimes, hippie gun freaks. She loved both of them, she said, and did Jenkins know why?

He did not.

She loved them because they lived the lives they wanted to live, the way they wanted to live. Whether joining NORML or joining the NRA, they did what they wanted, why they wanted. They didn't do things *to* anyone or *for* anyone, they did things because they wanted to do them. They worked at food banks because they believed in charities, not welfare, or they taught self-defense classes or they stayed home and sat on the couch and smoked pot and ate Twinkies like they were going out of style, but regardless, these were the lives *they* chose, and that was what made them beautiful.

Gladys talked to Jenkins about cutting taxes, getting rid of taxes, about how she'd convinced her opponents on one bill or another to flip and support her on a watchdog proposal that was meant to ease the shock of one thing or another - a prime example being the average wage standards to shore up the cutbacks in the Department of Labor, or the summary fines meant to replace lengthy investigations. She talked about funding sources the state could use - tariffs on interstate trade, she said, were what they amounted to, but they were the only fair way to go about it. Well, they weren't entirely fair, small business owners who had to pay a special tax to have anything trucked in from Virginia or Tennessee or any other state were going to be harder hit than, say, a mega-chain, a Wal-Mart or its various derivatives, a McDonald's owned by the corporation. These entities could swallow a few extra fees a lot easier than mom and pop down at the store on Main Street, but Gladys figured that if everything came to pass as she envisioned it then the state wouldn't really be able to afford to investigate where Mom & Pop got their toilet seat covers for their hardware store, and that money would be better spent making sure Wal-Mart paid all its right fees anyway. That money was better invested in keeping an eye on the people who don't have a stake in the local community, the ones most likely to take a legal risk for the sake of the bottom line.

Jenkins was aghast. Was Gladys saying the state would turn a blind eye if a single proprietorship were to break the law just to give undue favor to local businesses?

Undue? Gladys laughed again at Jenkins. Write this down, son, it's important: the most likely criminal in any community is the one who can most easily remain anonymous, safely distanced from being held accountable, the one with nothing very likely to lose. Mom and Pop have a lot to lose, and frankly, if their community doesn't mind a few midnight deliveries to keep that store open then it's not my business to march in there and throw Mom & Pop in jail. But a joint like Wal-Mart doesn't need community support to stay afloat, they waltz into a community and flatten the local competition and stay alive by sheer momentum, so they'll do whatever they damn well please and give the finger to anyone who questions them, and that's the people I'd want to keep my eye on as governor.

Gladys had talked about defunding drug enforcement. If the federalis want to keep some high school kids from toking up behind the band room before a game, then fine, let 'em come down here and do it themselves. We've blown plenty of money trying to educate these kids that it might not be the best idea, and if they're bound and determined then I'm not going to throw good money after bad and round them up when they ignore us. That feels funny, it feels *fascist*. I still think there should be some age limits to deter kids from doing it, but the bottom line is that if I can sit here and have another one of these funny foreign beers if I feel like it, and don't worry, four's my limit, I promise I won't be slurring by the end of this interview, then by God they ought to be able to smoke a joint when they get off from their shitty job

and they need to goddamn unwind.

Gladys paused a moment and then nodded. Write that one down, too, kid.

“It all boils down,” Gladys had said, as she was winding down a bit after the meal, after the chef's visit to the table, after the pictures with the family from the main dining room, “To communities. The state doesn't exist to make life harder for communities. Go back to the days when this country was founded, stop and consider the lifestyle that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Betsy Ross, Benjamin Franklin - look at the lifestyles they admired, the lifestyles they chose to live. They got land, they got a house, they got a farm, they got a building, whatever, they got a *domain of their own* and they did the best with it that they could and damn the man who tried to tell them what to do on it. That was the point of the Revolutionary War, that we could not be told what to do with what was ours, and we fought a war to make that point. I want this state to function to protect that principle, on the scale of the man who owns a home, the woman who prefers to live undisturbed on her two hundred acres in a log cabin, the family that spends their weekends volunteering at a soup kitchen, the doctor who wants to donate half his work hours to a homeless clinic, the people who want to sit on their couch and be left alone. The state should protect that, not meddle in it.”

Gladys had sat back, then, and belched the belch of a mighty warrior after a long hunt and a glorious feast.

Jenkins sat in dumb amazement. He'd interviewed some crackpots before, he'd been there for off-the-cuff and off-the-record remarks from popularly elected officials, he'd been entirely unsurprised by the true opinions of the two men who'd thought they were running for governor a year ago, but he'd never had a subject sound like this in public, on paper, in an interview.

“Governor Stone,” Jenkins said, his meal only half-eaten, his eyes a little wide, his tone uncertain, “You talk about communities, and community standards for living, and I keep coming back to thoughts of the justifiable homicide law. You talk a good talk, but the only proposal you've mentioned that's been gotten through the legislature is the supposed right for people to kill other people if they feel like they can justify it, and you signed the repeal of that law before you were a full year into your term. You undid your own proposal. Do you think that anyone's going to forget that you originally included revenge killings in this Utopia of stoners living peacefully between community volunteers and concealed-carry gun nuts?”

Gladys smiled at Jenkins, finished her beer and set the bottle down on the table lightly.

“No.”

Jenkins reached up and rubbed the ridge of his nose with his whole left hand.

“I don't understand. I know you've reversed your opinion to get a budget through the legislature, but you said yourself that people have the right to

defend themselves violently if they felt it was necessary. Your state has recognized the legality of those killings. The law is gone, but you're on record saying that they were okay.”

“They're not.” Gladys shrugged and belched again. “I was wrong. I hate to admit it, Jenkins, but I was *scared*.”

“Of what?”

“Of being wrong.” Gladys grinned at him, toothily, and her eyes twinkled. “I was scared shitless that you were right, that everyone who's talked to me was right, that Wilson with the People of Faith gang were right. I was afraid I'd created a monster with that law and wouldn't own up to it. But the fact of the matter is, I'm the only person who's ever been governor in the last thirty years who's got the balls to own up to it when I *am* wrong, and that's what you're going to get right now. I was *wrong*. The law was too permissive, the way it was written, and I was going to push for legislation to make sure that it got tightened down to be what I intended when I stood on my back porch last October and told three reporters and a cameraman that I'd take care of the question of the death penalty without imposing my morality on the state of North Carolina and its residents.” Gladys shrugged and held out her hands, ready for the cross. “I passed a bad law, and some crazy people ended up on both sides of the question, and some people abused it. Were some of those killings legitimate? You bet - at least, that's what some juries thought. A couple of juries didn't. I've said and said that the state sucks at making moral

decisions, and I still think that, and so I've done what I promised: I've gotten us out of the whole question of the death penalty, no matter who administers it or how.”

Jenkins shook his head and held out both hands. “So what, you're going to pretend it's all okay now?”

“No,” Gladys said. A scowl and a deadly seriousness crossed her face for a moment. “I'm going to hope like hell that no one holds it against me in the long run, that a governor is allowed to experiment and to make mistakes.”

Gladys fished around in her purse and came up with her pack of cigarettes and lighter. The waitress very casually deposited an ashtray on her table and then closed the door to the room they were in.

“Smoking isn't allowed in this restaurant,” Jenkins said.

“Says who?”

“Says city ordinance.”

“Fuck that,” Gladys said, her lips fluttering and her eyes rolling like marbles. “They don't own this place.”

Jenkins waved it off and shook his head again. “So why didn't you realize the danger of this law in the beginning? Why didn't you just cop out early on and say, 'Sorry, it was an off-the-cuff remark and we should take time to consider this?’”

Gladys took a long drag and then shot the smoke out her nose, her face sour. “I felt rushed. I felt overwhelmed. I screwed it up, botched it



thoroughly. Now I need to learn my lesson and do better. I need to remember to focus on the core issues of my Party and, more importantly, of my beliefs. The state can do a lot of things if the legislature will get off its ass and listen and think and ask their voters if they back things as simple as not having a sales tax.”

“What makes you think the legislature will cooperate? Why won't they use this as proof that you're a bad governor, that you don't know how to run the state effectively, or that your philosophies don't apply well to practical governance?” Jenkins watched her coolly as he asked, his tone flat.

“You don't take me seriously,” Gladys said, and she smiled again, and then went all the way and winked at him as though they'd shared an in-joke. “You don't like me because I'm a human being and I won't claim otherwise - I mean, that's the whole thing with the legislature, right? This is the same shit that happens to pop stars all the time, has for decades, generations: they get put on the pedestal because it'll be so fun to tear them down. People expect politicians to be superhuman and then lick their lips at the first sign of vulnerability. Well, I'm not playing that game. I screwed up. I'd been governor for one week when I signed that law and now I know better. I've had time to think it over, I've had time to reflect, and I am too proud to sit here and act like everything I've done was perfect. I made an error and I intend to fix it.”

“People will say you're backing down from your convictions.”

“No,” Gladys said. “I mean, you're right, they will, but they're wrong. I'll argue it out for anybody. Anybody deserves a second chance, an opportunity to make things right if they mess them up, and that's all I want.”

“Your law fails to do the same for criminals, you know.” Jenkins finally took in the elephant in the room, finally laid his cards on the table. “Your law led to a woman's mother killing that woman's husband because he was about to honor her living will.”

“The right-to-live lady.” Gladys sucked smoke and then blew it out again and shook her head. “That lady's bat shit.”

Jenkins hiccuped in surprise. “Excuse me?”

Gladys looked at him coolly and stared right into his eyes. “That lady is bat shit. Guano. She is wrong, she is crazy, and she was trying to twist the law to her own defense when she didn't have the right. She was trying to take advantage of my law, Mr. Jenkins, and I am not going to give anyone else a second opportunity.” She chewed on her lip for a second and then shrugged. “I promised you straight talk, and that's what you're getting. Not long ago I thought I was going to refine the law to make it better, I thought no one would take advantage of it, that no one would be that crazy, that even if they were it was not my fault, and that lady proved me wrong.”

“So are you saying that if your own law had never been passed, that woman wouldn't have killed her son-in-law?”

Gladys thought for a moment and then shook her head. “I can't say that

one way or another. But I know that the law is being used in her defense, according to her lawyers, and finally I had to listen to everyone, including my own conscience. This law, as it was written and passed and enforced, was dangerous.” Gladys chewed on her thumbnail for a moment and then shook her head. “Don’t even get me started on those dirty cops, the ones with the website. Have you read the *Citizen-Times* story on that one?”

“I’ve heard a little about it, yes.” Jenkins sat back and relaxed. He had no idea where the interview had gone, but he’d clearly hit the exit ramp on the whole affair.

“I’d bet anything I could tell you who was the ringleader.” She grunted and sniffed and took another drag. “Dumb bastard used to be the Sheriff of my county, when I was on the city council in my hometown.” She pointed a finger at Jenkins. “That you can *not* print. You’d be endangering an active investigation.”

“You seem so strangely...” Jenkins waved his hands in the air, fighting the urge to twirl a finger beside his temple, seeking instead to indicate his search for words.

“Energized.” Gladys nodded at him. “You bet.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve got a fight I believe in again.”

“But you created the problem yourself!” Jenkins was thoroughly exasperated.

“Doesn't change a thing,” Gladys replied with another curl of smoke from each nostril and from her mouth as she spoke.

Jenkins scratched at his scalp with both hands and shook his head at her. “You know I'm not going to have anything good to say about you, don't you? I mean, you tried - and failed miserably - to spin things a certain way the first time we met and now you're doubling back, reversing yourself completely a few weeks later. I'm going to have to tell people what I've observed, that you're unpredictable and unprofessional, that you admit yourself you introduced legislation - important legislation, legislation that was designed to get people *killed*, Governor, legislation that *has* gotten people killed - without thinking it through and that you're now going to go back on your word on that issue. You've undone your own most successful proposal, the *only* thing of significance you've managed to get through a legislature that is only too eager to set a stumbling block in your path at every step, people desperate to get one of their own party back into your office, people who are considering legislation to allow *recalls*. People don't like unpredictable politicians. It suggests that they aren't principled. Someone who appears to have a solid and stable set of principles seems like they have a plan, that they're predictable, like they just know what they're doing, and people like feeling there's someone at the wheel who has a map and knows how to read it. This is going to make you look awful. You've used profanity, you've smoked, you've drunk alcohol, you've broken a city ordinance and you're dressed like you're going to a NASCAR

race, not dinner with an editor from a nationally read magazine. I have to reflect that if I have any scruples, I can't dress up this interview, what you've said, at all."

Gladys nodded at him and then finished her cigarette as they both sat in silence. Finally, eventually, she took out her wallet and laid a few bills on the table, over the check.

"So be it," she said. "We all pay for our mistakes, eventually, one way or another. I just want to make sure no one pays unduly. I'm willing to take responsibility for my choices, and face their consequences. If you roast me, I must deserve it, mustn't I?"