

Foreward

SOCIALLY UNCONSCIOUS \_\_\_\_\_ ELECTION EVE

A Novel by John W. Flynt with Lauren Milovy

B4x01 "CRISIS COVERAGE"

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For my four girls, Allison, Brea, Lani and yes, even Minuete. I love each of you, you're the children I'll never need to have. Working to let other people meet you has lead to the best and worst parts of my life. Every hour writing this novel has been for you.

Author's Note

A word from the author,

My name is Lani Cameron, and this novel I've written is simply the beginning of a story, a story about the life I've lived and my friend's lives, and how it all really runs together into something that's the same thing.

I write this because it's a very important story to tell. It's funny to look back at it all, because my life has taken me places that, despite my wild ambitions as a child, I never would have dreamed. And once the entire story has been told, you're going to learn a secret. The secret is what it's all about, what all of the friends, stories, mishaps, and craziness all really all really add up to. I think that in telling you my story, you'll be able to appreciate the nuances of your own story and your own life that much better. In any case I made a promise over a coffee table that you'll get to read about, and I keep my promises. The period of my life where I've decided to start to tell you that story is where it all started, the two weeks leading up to the Election Eve of the Iowa Presidential Primary. It's the story of the beginning of our life in Washington D.C. It's very important for you to understand, the story of my life in D.C. didn't start when I moved there, it started when my friends did, six months later.

I want the reader to know up front, the title of this chapter of the story, the Election Eve, and the fact that it takes place in Washington are very misleading. This story is to politics what Charlie's Angels was to solving crime. It might accidentally happen, but it's not the story's about.

This novel ends on what, looking back, was undoubtedly the most important day of our lives, those twilight hours of the Iowa Presidential Primary. But that doesn't mean the days after that are the next part of the story. No, the next part of our story might be the days we first met, all those years ago in junior high at Charbonneau Academy. Or it might be our incredible adventures at Bishop University. I simply won't know until I'm done.

However, in this author's humble opinion, this is the best part of our story. Other participants in the matter disagree, it's all quite subjective. I write this story in third person, looking from the outside in, rather than my own experiences out. I do this because we all lived this together.

Have no doubt, this is an incredibly well researched book. I've spent countless hours with all my accomplices, and have recorded hundreds of hours of audiotape.

Every place, every address and name have been painstakingly researched. Be aware that if you learn a thing or two from this book along the way, it's all very real, not fiction. This is the way the world really works. Those of you that wish to review my research, it's all on file, available for you at C. K. Masters, the Bishop University library. If anything is anything less than factual and accurate, let me know and we'll fix it for the paperback.

Signed, Lani Cameron

Sub-Chapter 1 - The Complex

- The LV Complex, Bishop University

As always, it had all started in LV-426.

Things had a tendency to go wrong for Brea Anamata and Allison Holiday. But today was a day that was going to go particularly wrong. It was all just the first domino to fall in the worst crisis ever.

Although Allison and Brea had the most special dorm rooms in all of Bishop University, they could never talk about them, or risk exposing their scheme. Allison Holiday came to slowly. She badly needed coffee as she groggily stood up from the couch. The party last night had been spectacular, but considering Allison's epic social schedule it hardly deserved memory.

The TV was still blaring entertainment newscasts on the "E!" channel left on from the night before. LV-426, known as just "The Den," didn't just steal cable. It stole every channel that existed via their illegal satellite hookup. Coaxial cable was snaked through the building air ducts to the illegal satellite dish on the balcony. Allison didn't care to understand how any of it worked.

Allison Holiday was perhaps the best looking girl in any given room, but mostly because of her eclectic charisma. Her motions were exaggerated, because Allison lived life at a higher intensity level than the people around her.

Back home, people talked in hushed, reverent tones about her, as she'd achieved legendary status as Bishop University's number one boozy party girl. A former cheerleader, in her mind Allison was on permanent holiday. Nothing and everything slipped by Allison.

She had dangling strands of blonde hair that spiked out from her forehead in front of her excited green eyes. Her hair was gathered into a ponytail in the back, and somehow fell into the shape of a heart. She was tall, and curved just enough to generate more hushed tones.

Usually, Allison dressed in sorority girl formal uniform, Greek party tee shirt and tight shorts that showed off how leggy she was.

She favored the color purple, especially for the hair scrunchies she wore on her ponytail and wrist. Today wasn't any different.

Allison had trouble distinguishing her life from a movie.

Reality had all just kind of run together by now for Allison, but it was understandable. She regularly had car chases on the way to class, celebrities often popped by, and in general she had an endless series of wacky adventures. Life was just all one big fantasy by now to Allison, and she was the special guest star. There was something, some quality of Allison's life that led her to an epic existence. Things just seemed to go wrong, and so very right around her... but mostly wrong for all the victims caught in the wake of her bedlam. Allison was the kind of girl that would certainly be a

celebrity someday. Not because of any desire, but because it was the kind of life she had been destined to live.

Allison Holiday practiced hard for all potential movie moments. From her emergency driving classes she had learned how to flip a car 180 degrees. She took Krav Maga martial-arts classes. After all the hours of computer flight simulations, she believed she could almost fly a helicopter. Naturally, Allison had been a Drama major, and she constantly practiced her favorite movie lines. They were obscure and silly, but she couldn't get them out of her head. If the opportunity ever came up, she wanted to deliver them perfectly. "I'm on a mission, which I intend to accomplish." She would play with the rhythm and the timing.

The sound for the TV was muted, but the stereo was blaring bland alternative music from the college radio station. Passing it, Allison absently turned the volume up even more, breaking out in a dance/walk and exclaiming "Rock on, baby! Whoohooo!" She then crossed into the "kitchen," actually just a bathroom where the drywall had been knocked out.

Next to the coffeepot was a toilet. On top of that was a statue stolen from the Boy Scouts front lawn. Allison remembered how her former boyfriend Sydney had ordered his pledges to smash the cement bolts securing it, then loaded it into the van to steal it. The statue was giving a very sharp salute.

Allison looked, in the cupboard, actually the bathroom medicine cabinet, and there was no coffee. Panic gripped her. She searched the towel closet and again came up empty. Her mind raced with the possibilities of how to avert this imminent disaster. The nearest source of caffeine was the campus Starbucks, at best a five-minute walk. There was no doubt, Allison knew she was engulfed in a terrible crisis, better call in the troops.

Allison exited the Den and quickly marched down the hallway to Brea Anatamata's dorm room. Her doorway stood out from the rest of the floor because Brea had convinced boys to install a doorknocker. It was made of a metal that was probably expensive. But Allison was undeterred, and reached for the knob, knowing the door would not be locked.

Brea was deep in sleep, but her eyes snapped open as she smelled the smoke in Allison's hair from the night of bar hopping.

"Ahhhhh!" Brea jerked upright in her four-posted princess bed. Her hair was jostled from sleep and even spikier than usual. It wasn't an accident that her ornately lacy nightwear was the same shade as the high thread-count silk sheets. Knowing Brea, there were a thousand other details of her room that were too subtle for Allison to contemplate without coffee. Her car keys were neatly arranged. Her movie collection had all the sequels grouped together. Allison was anything but aware she'd just woken Brea up, "Brea, I'm freaking out here, it's an emergency!"

"This had better be a level ten emergency," Brea stated grumpily and very sleepily with her Kat Australian accent.

Brea Anatamata had the diminutive body of a teenager that had never quite grown up. Even now, fresh from college, she was shorter and thinner than any of the Freshman. She was also flatter, but would never discuss that.

Brea was a girl in a million with a very unusual ethnicity. Her father had been an Australian wild-child. Her mother was a quiet Japanese traditionalist, and the story of how they had met and fallen in love was ridiculous. Brea's personality had aspects of both opposed mindsets. Although Brea's

features were mostly Australian, when people heard her last name, they could almost see the half-Japanese ancestry. Mostly it was the eyes, which had a slight Asian slant to them. One of Brea's pet peeves was when people mispronounced her name on paper. It wasn't Bre-ah, the sound that made Brea wince, that was like a name straight out of a porno movie. No, her name was pronounced 'Bray,' a single strong, independent syllable, just like Brea herself.

Brea spent an inordinate amount of time on the way she dressed. She had recently changed her hairstyle into a kind of ultra-stylish cross between the feathered look, and a 60's bob. And, as always, there was the bright red streak of her bangs she always dyed for a very important reason only Allison knew about.

Growing up, Brea had been attractive the way all young girls are attractive, with no features that particularly stood out. But maturity had changed this, and had given Brea any number of features that would entice members of the opposite sex. Her faults were mostly in her head, silly things like the slight bump in her nose. Brea's parents had insisted on a very formal education for their favorite daughter. She had gone to an exclusive girl's finishing school.

When she had been presented to society at her debutant ball with the rest of the graduating class she still didn't appreciate how much her time there had affected her. There had been girls there that were prettier, girls that were more socially prominent, and Brea had never noticed.

That finishing school, Charbonneau academy, was where Brea had met her lifetime best friend Allison Holiday. Meeting each other, they suddenly realized they were incomparably fabulous, and christened themselves Gals, screw the Bitches that think they're so great. "Most of them put the Duh in Diva," noted Brea.

If they had known then on that rainy Thursday afternoon the years of adventure they would soon have together, they would have giggled and called the whole thing "totally stupid."

There was an identical finishing school for boys next door called Alecia Academy, which for some perverse reason had an incredibly evil view of the Charbonneau athletic field. A lot of the girls used the field to burning off the frustration of attending an all girl's school. They would pull the tee-shirts back in knots, showing off all the dimension they had. Brea and Allison and their third laughed at girls like that because as Brea's grandmother had told her "we're the ones with the pussies, let them do some of the work."

Brea had a unique voice, prissily enunciating every syllable in an accent that was so enticing, it tangibly attracted men. Brea could say "I spilled a taco on my pants," in a completely accidental way that guys would find totally alluring. It was the girl's finishing school that had drilled it into her, the American-British accent that had been in vogue at time. No matter where she went, her voice was the first clue that she was different than other girls. She talked at a faster clip, so everything she said came out as slightly melodramatic.

"This absolutely is a level ten emergency." Allison informed her. "There's no coffee."

"Emergency no coffee?" Brea repeated.

"It was a late night. Tequila came over. We went to this thing at the Blue Marlin... We were about to leave for the Gin when..."

"I don't need to know the details. Actually, I don't think I want to know at all." Brea said.

“There’s just one thing you need to know. We’re out of coffee!” Allison repeated, trying to communicate the desperate magnitude of the situation.

“Well, let me take a look,” Brea mumbled, putting on her bedroom slippers, and mincing down the hallway to LV-426 into the den.

Brea and Allison’s crazy college years, they had all happened in this room. The drywall to room 427 had been knocked out to make the large community room that they simply christened “the Den.”

The three buildings of the LV Complex towered in the sky over Bishop University. LV-426 was located in a floor of the original building, LV-Alpha. The LV-Project was part of the universities commitment to innovation and reinvention. Dilapidated dormitory conditions had gotten so infamous that Bishop University was finding it more and more difficult to get students to come to the school. The joke about the infamous Kincannon dormitory was that it was like Vietnam. All the guys had done a tour of duty there.

But that was all changing. With the help of a generous state grant, the LV complex was more than a construction project. It was a symbol of the new Bishop University, a school that wasn’t like the country club it had been in the past, but a progressive, modern school. LV-Beta was the same architecturally as LV-Alpha, a mirror copy brick by brick. But LV-Gamma was only a shadow of a dormitory. Raw girders, exposed frame and building cranes were only the most visible signs of the chaos. Construction had gone in fits and starts, the inevitable result of different plans from different administrations.

The final phase of the project would be completed with LV-Delta, now just an empty parking lot, and the sky-rise quartet would be complete. It was hoped the opulence of the most expensive building project in state history would reinvigorate Bishop University. Speculation was rampant over who had actually donated the money for the project, named in the Bishop Beacon as simply “Lede” and “Vetipane.” The secret life that had taken place in LV-426 had been extraordinary. Brea and Allison had moved into LV-Alpha just as it was finishing construction. Absolutely unbelievable stories, really.

Thanks to a bureaucratic snafu, Allison had managed to sneak into the woodwork as the Resident Advisor/Civil Defense Coordinator. Although the floor was originally meant for twenty-six students, Allison was able to manipulate the paperwork. This allowed Allison and her chosen friends to live in incredible luxury for student housing. To the administration, the records showed that LV-Alpha held its full compliment of students, where in reality it was merely four people. Single rooms, private bathrooms, life was good for the students on the top floor of LV-Alpha.

Allison, Brea, Lani, and the tragically named Ashley Allen, picked on shamelessly for his name. Thanks to their scheme, the floor was co-ed, something exclusively forbidden by Bishop University policy. The cast of LV-426 weren’t the most politically correct. They weren’t the most socially conscious. But damn if they hadn’t had some amazing adventures.

Lani had taken on the fraternity known as “The House.” Allison had hosted “All Things Considered” on NPR. Ashley tried to negotiate a breakup with his high school girlfriend Nikki. Brea had run the most corrupt Student Body President campaign ever. Lani had been blackmailed into baby-sitting her Faculty Advisor’s kids. Brea came up with “The Plan” to make a romantic leap with a friendboy. Ashley had won the Science Fair by cheating and received a full scholarship. Allison accidentally uncovered a mysterious scheme of fraternity hazing. Lani tried to outdo her overachieving sister with a job at Fox News. Ashley attempted to get his name changed legally because of endless teasing about his “girls” name.” Brea totaled Lani’s car on a bagel run. Allison continued her “relationship”

with the alcoholic and sex addicted Tequila. Ashley tried to negotiate a breakup with his high school girlfriend Nikki, this time more desperately. It just went on, and on, and on.

Brea opened up the “Kitchen” cupboards, and scanned them intensely. She checked the pantry (medicine cabinet). After a beat she reported to Allison in horror.

“There’s no coffee in here...”

“I know that part.” Allison muttered, very scared.

“I can’t start my day with no coffee. This is awful!” said Brea.

“It’s totally tragic,” noted Allison.

“That’s exactly what this is. A tragedy,” Brea agreed. “As of now, we’re on a mission. What are our options?”

“You had to get the fancy stuff! I can’t even sense fancy stuff in the morning. I could be drinking motor oil and not notice.”

“So, again, what are our options?” Brea repeated.

“We could walk to the store.”

“I can’t walk there with no coffee. Laws of physics and all.”

“Then we drive,” agreed Brea. “Now let’s see if I can find my keys in less than twenty minutes for once.”

## Sub-Chapter Two - Feeling Over

Brea never joked about style, and was very proud of the results from her expedition to find a new car. When she had started at Bishop University, she had been driving a classic BMW Z3, the exact same car from the old 1995 James Bond movie “Goldeneye”.

Even though she loved her car, Brea started to ache for something grander and more stylishly epic. She did an exhaustive search, carefully weighed her options, and suddenly realized. Her Sean Connery fantasies had begun to trump her long time relationship with Pierce Brosnan. And so she set her sights on the 1964 Aston Martin like the one from Goldfinger, less the machine gun headlights, rotating license plates, and ejector seat, of course.

Finding one was a rewardingly difficult challenge. Of course there were no dealerships that sold exotic cars like that in the city of Audrey. The town was little more than a few restaurants, a smattering of bars, and a pathetic strip mall meant to service the student body with an athletic shoe store and a Radio Shack. For all intents and purposes, Bishop University was the whole city of Audrey.

Realizing her limitations, Brea turned to her boys for their technical expertise. They pointed Brea to a website that specialized in matching buyers to sellers of classic cars. It didn’t take them long to find exactly what Brea wanted, down to the precise shade of paint. Brea was extremely pleased with her new car, and extremely displeased with the coffee situation.

“This is awful! This is the worst crisis ever!” Brea whined, not even looking to see where she was driving as she raced her car out of the parking lot.

“This is bad.” Allison absentmindedly agreed, flipping through Brea’s music collection.

"This is all your fault!" Brea exclaimed, very upset. "I was going to go shopping yesterday, and you wanted me to go with you down to jail to bail out Tequila."

"It really is, that's why we had to celebrate last night." Allison agreed absentmindedly. "Seriously Brea, you have the worst taste in music. I need something to wake me up, and they're nothing in here I can really get down and boogie too."

Allison realized she was stepping on something. Looking down she saw she was stepping on one of Brea's endless cell phones. Allison counted four that the floorboard was littered with. One was black, two were silver and one was turquoise blue. All were small.

"I have sophisticated taste," continued Brea.

"Abba's 'Dancing Queen' is sophisticated?"

"It's deceptively sophisticated."

Allison reached down to the passenger side floorboard and handed a phone to Brea.

"How many phones do you have, anyway?"

"I forget."

Even under normal circumstances, Brea was not the world's best driver. Except for a brief period during her sophomore year when her license had been suspended because of tickets she'd forgotten to pay. Then she'd had to be very careful, because being caught driving would have meant jail. Brea was particularly afraid of jail. After a couple of months, paying attention to driving got old, and she found an afternoon to wade through the bureaucracy to get her license reinstated. She wasn't even out of the police parking lot before she was changing a CD, talking on her cell phone, putting on lipstick, and driving with her knees. If possible, just now she was even more distracted.

"I was thinking, I need a look," Brea started "A special look."

"Your look is fine. I love the glam lipstick! But your hair's a little spiky though."

"No I mean a look, a glance. For enticement purposes with total hotties."

"Like I don't know what 'a look' is." Allison laughed. "I have a look,"

"I've never seen any you do a look," retorted Brea.

"This, this is my look," Allison leaned far back into the seats of the Aston Martin, and tilted her head to the side, pursing her lips. She pushed her hands dramatically into her lap. It was pure Playboy Playmate, something straight out of the first Marilyn Monroe spread.

Allison dated a lot, and was just Southern enough to keep the sultry details quite private. But she never seemed to take any of her boys seriously. She liked dangerous boys with muscles, bikes and black leather. Her current beau was Tequila, the worst guy of them all. He had changed his name because it was hard to menacing when your real name is Bob. Tequila drove the baddest, blackest motorcycle Allison had ever seen. His pastimes included gambling, smoking and stealing. His stories about prison, which he called "the pokey," were incredibly exciting.

Allison accidentally tormented him.

It was unclear when Tequila's ongoing problems with alcohol and sex addiction started, but they probably started with Allison. When Bob had originally met Allison, he was a Web site designer. But

a single kiss from Allison Holiday had driven countless men into a world of obsession and insanity at wanting the one thing they could not possess.

Now Tequila was giving court mandated drug rehab another shot. But Allison would taunt him. "Get out of that wussy rehab," and "Be a man!" And of course this just made him crazier and more in love with Allison.

"You call that a look? It's a little on the nose," said Brea skeptically.

"That's the ultimate look. I know what boys like," replied Allison.

"My look totally owns your look." Promised Brea.

"This I have to see," said Allison excitedly.

Brea scrunched up her nose, a furled her brow, angrily. And that was it.

"You look angry. And a little constipated," replied Allison, confused.

"It's pouty. This is me doing pouty."

"I think I'd work on that look," said Allison with a raised eyebrow. "I think it's a little scary."

Sub-Chapter Four - One-Winged Angel

Brea and Allison bickered all the way to the coffee shop. Standing in the eternally long line at Starbucks, things were looking up slightly for Allison. Brea's scary driving had woken her up. But Brea wasn't going to make it, and was even whiner than usual.

"These people, with their fancy drinks, they get me so mad!" Brea ranted and raved. "Anyone that doesn't order coffee, black, is on my list. Especially the boys! Be a man, drink it black, you wuss!"

"You actually have a list?" Allison asked.

"I should start a list of people that annoy me, like Nixon did." A freshman walked by, holding his 3 dollar Frappuccino. Brea chided after him, "You're totally on my list, loser!"

A high piecing soprano laugh pierced over the noise of the crowd in the coffee shop. Brea and Allison picked up on the familiar sound, turning their heads to see. It wasn't the screechy pitch that grabbed their attention, but the loony edge to it.

"I have a bad feeling about his one, girls," the short blond girl said without a trace of humor. "I have a feeling you're about to have a very bad day."

"Minuete." Brea's tone said "You freak."

Minuete was the worst villain of them all. In her own words, she was "mean and evil and nasty." When she closed her eyes, she could feel herself lusting for power. "I was just getting some coffee," Minuete said, playing with the two like a malicious cat.

Minuete was short, just shorter than Brea and perfectly confident. Even her hair was short. Her golden rod blonde hair was on the oranger side of yellow and impossibly wavy. It was the only thing in her life she couldn't quite manage. But it always looked perfect. She was dressed in a way that was deceptively effortless.

Minuete was a real live, swear to God, Bond villain in training. This was absolute fact since she'd gotten her "scar," the multicolored glitter from her whole right forearm and hand. An unfortunate

accident from the time Allison Holiday had brought the FBI to her family home to arrest her for extortion.

The glitter didn't take from her beauty one bit, and in fact, made her beauty even more unique. But Minuete hated being not perfect and had a score to settle with Allison. But all things in good time and good fun...

Brea's family was reasonably rich, rich enough that she would never have to concern herself with the cares of having a job where you had to show up on time and get fired. But Minuete's family was way richer. One thing that made Minuete truly awful was how conscious she was of her opulence. She thought nothing of using her leverage for her own personal purposes. So while Brea would never think to judge someone by their wealth, Minuete knew she could use that power to conquer this world.

That was Minuete's price for unlimited money and charisma, world domination, that same old dream. Minuete obsessed about world domination constantly. She fantasized about herself with her hands around the throat of all mankind. Minuete was a real-life Bond villain in training. She imagined how she would finally manage to take over the world. She excitedly read the schemes she discovered in the Washington Post and the New York times, and imagined how she would one day monopolize those pages when she managed to enslave mankind.

Minuete's first evil scheme had taken her into direct competition with the gang of LV-426. In an evil scheme to obtain a handicapped parking sticker for her car, she ended up in an epic duel for power with Lani Cameron. In a battle for the Lektor device, LV-426 had soundly trounced Minuete, ensuring Minuete would spend years contemplating their demise.

(Note from Editor Lani Cameron: In the original draft of this, I explained the lengthy story of our first encounter. However, my editors and I agree, it's too complex a story to tell here, and slows down the story of the historic Election Eve, which is the whole point of this novel. So I promise, we'll tell you the tales our first run-in with Minuete in *Socially Unconscious: The Heineken Diet*.)

"Allison Holiday. Brea Anatamata. Everyone left from LV Alpha." Minuete grimaced her face. She said with underplayed deadpan, "It looks like you're having some problems here, I'm guessing you ran out of coffee?"

"Yeah," Allison agreed. "But it's no big."

Brea chimed in. "That's a total lie. This is an emergency situation. I need caffeine in my system pronto. I stayed up late watching this infomercial because I love bad TV."

"That's too bad." Minute intoned singsong.

"It's tragic really," Allison said on cue. "A major caffeine crisis."

Minuete ran a delicate hand through her wavy hair. "I have connections to influence people, even at this coffee shop. But I'm sure you understand I'm pressed for time, and can't help you."

Allison noticed the insignia on Minuete's vest. She recognized it from one of her previous catastrophes with the madwoman. It was a tiny illuminati insignia, an open eye atop a pyramid. Apparently, Minuete had gone to quite a lot of trouble to get her family herald imprinted onto a custom bronze badge. The illuminati was the same symbol conspiracy theorists associated with the conspiracy of elites to rule the world, at least according to the TV show X-files.

"Only Minuete would pick a conspiracy theorist symbol as their family herald," thought Allison.

"What is it your family does again, Minuete?" she asked.

"My family? They help people with problems," said Minuete dismissively.

"Problem solving, eh?" responded Brea.

"My family is more engaged in... problem elimination," said Minuete, eyes darting to the corners at the inquiry.

Brea was finally at the counter. "Two large coffees...stat!"

"What flavor coffee would you like?" The Starbucks clerk perkily asked.

"Just give me whatever's blackest," Brea replies huffily.

"And I'll take the same, only decaf," Minuete interrupted. "I just stopped by Audrey for a few hours. I'm in the process of moving to DC."

Brea couldn't hide the sarcasm. "And we're very happy for you."

Minuete pretended to be very absorbed in her villainous monologue, ignoring Brea altogether.

"There's a ball to crash. New job, and a contest for best dressed and all." With this she smiled. Have your heard from Lani as of late?"

This caught Brea and Allison's attention, because neither had heard news from Lani Cameron since she had graduated and moved from the LV-426.

"No." Brea stated. "It was pretty sudden the way she just moved out the day she finished finals."

That was an understatement. It was true Lani had always been a bit detached from the action during her years in the LV, embarrassed by the spectacle of it all, but it has been shocking how quickly she had moved. One moment she was there, the next she simply vanished, without a word of exclamation.

"I have a small secret." Minuete promised. "Lani's in DC working for the Washington Post, the Opinion section. And if my sources are right, she should be the one covering the Washington Correspondent's Ball. Only she doesn't know it yet." At this Minuete giggled evilly, finding her own thoughts hilarious. "It's true. She always just wanted to get out of the LV. She didn't tell you about her graduation plans because she couldn't stand all the craziness you inflicted on her." Now that part sounded exactly like Lani, even though it was quite a bit rude. The entire time Lani had been part of LV-426, she had held her nose and tried to go along with all the bedlam of the last few years. It didn't matter what she did, she always seemed to end up a casualty. Lani just wanted to stop the insanity. "No more adventures!" she would angrily declare at the insanity Brea and Allison inflicted upon her.

Even still, Not having Lani around to inflict insanity upon was unthinkable. The very notion of Brea and Allison having adventures without Lani to drive mad was preposterous.

The Starbucks clerk finally had their coffee order ready to go. Even though it was just black coffee and had taken a long time to be served, Brea gave her a very generous tip. Brea was aware she had numerous faults, and downplayed them with a smile, a wink, and a lantern on the problem. But certainly, giving and generosity were not one of them. Brea gave whatever she could, whenever she

could. She didn't take any pride in it, and didn't think it made her superior to other people, giving was just a natural reflex.

Minuete stepped in and handed Allison her order.

"You sound like you really need this," Minuete handed Brea the cup of coffee.

Allison turned for the car. "We've got caffeine, let's get out of here." Brea already had the lid off her coffee and was blowing on it to cool it down so she could suck it into her system as rapidly as possible.

"Seriously. We are out," Brea responded. "See you next Tuesday, Minuete."

And they were gone. Minuete broke out in her evil cackle one more time. She simply couldn't believe these suckers had fallen for it! "Boy, do I enjoy being evil! There's no thrill like ruining someone's life!" thought Minuete.

Outside Brea and Allison were climbing back into Brea's classic Aston Martin. Brea spat back a hateful glance through the coffee shop plate glass window back at Minuete, a glance overwhelmed by someone so overwhelmed by someone so caught up in themselves.

Minuete raised an eyebrow, and the corners of her mouth curled into a smile. "Well then, what was that nasty look?"

Sub-Chapter Five - Surface of the Water

Brea was even more distracted than usual while driving back to the complex. The caffeine from Starbucks hadn't kicked in yet. "Allison?" she asked.

"Yeah," responded Allison.

"I've made a decision." Brea said with great finality.

"I have a good feeling about this one," Allison joked.

Brea paused for a beat. "It's time."

"Is it?" asked Allison.

"It's time. It's past time," agreed Brea.

Brea thought about Lani in the DC, and thought about how depressing it would be to spend another minute to spend at Bishop University without her. Truth be told, Brea really hadn't gone far enough away to college. It was time for her to experience the rest of the U.S, the crazy world outside the limited Bishop University worldview.

Graduation. What would Brea do after Graduation? She didn't know because she wanted to do everything. Brea's major hadn't pointed her down any set career path. In fact it hadn't been any career path whatsoever. For Brea Anatamata, the possibility of becoming a pop idol was just as easy as becoming a Fortune 500 CEO, which one to pursue?

Allison was feeling anything but serious at the moment. "This is a very good feeling that I'm having," Allison said enthusiastically.

"What can I say?" asked Brea, "It's well past time. We've got to get out of Bishop. It's time for a new life."

“Because it’s well past time?” asked Allison.

“Because it’s well past time,” replied Brea.

“So what’s the plan?”

Every day of Brea’s life was an incredible crisis. It was damage control, she was just trying to put out the fires. She knew she should have spent the last six months getting her plan ready for post-graduation, but time had just somehow slipped by.

“I’m not going to lie to you. I don’t have a plan,” said Brea.

“There’s usually a plan,” replied Allison. “When we stole the water heater from LV-Beta we had a plan.”

“It wasn’t for a lack of trying. But this look right here?” said Brea, pointing to her face.

“Yeah.”

“This is the look of sheer desperation,” said Brea. “College is over, it’s time for a new adventure.”

“You tried and didn’t come up with a plan.”

Allison Holiday and Brea Anatamata. They had gotten on from the start. Allison tall and curvy, Brea short and painfully thin. There was a rhythm to their dialogue, like lifelong buddies in a cop movie. But even those guys had nothing on the lifelong friendship between Brea and Allison. “Graduation, it’s just in a couple of days. We don’t even need to pack, we pay for the moving. Just get in a car and drive,” offered Brea.

Brea might have had money, but she wouldn’t just throw it away unnecessarily. So Allison knew she was serious. She said nothing, but Allison would never show any display she was thinking. She responded after a beat.

“Well, I have to say, this is a fabulous idea!” said Allison excitedly

“Very fabulous.” Brea realized she didn’t feel like herself. She felt sluggish and tired.

“It’s an absolutely fabulous idea. Except for one very small detail.”

Brea knew instantly. “I have no job.” She thought about that one for a moment. Where would they move to? Now that graduation was here, the cards were on the table. What would Brea do for a living?

Brea didn’t want to let onto Allison that she was silently panicking, so she picked the conversation back up. “No job and no apartment.”

“That’s two details.”

“Yeah.” After a beat, Allison realized. “Three, really three small details.”

But Brea seemed not to hear her. She was talking to herself again. “Okay A, so we don’t have a job or an apartment but we can get them, B, let’s not forget we’re both so fabulous.”

“Obviously.”

Brea’s eyes went all sparkly then sad. “And then, of course, there’s the matter of John.”

Brea was spinning emotionally, not awake enough to contemplate John. "And C, uh, what was the third small detail?" she asked distractedly.

Allison said with bored detachment. "Graduation is today."

"Graduation is today?!" exclaimed Brea in total horror.

"Today in like 20 minutes," replied Allison, oblivious to Brea's horror.

Brea lost all interest in the fact that she was driving. Her foot lightened off the accelerator. Her eyes glazed over as her mind raced with thoughts that the furniture in the room had just been rearranged. "Then this is the part where I freak out!" she exclaimed.

Just then, Brea's peripheral vision caught a little girl on a bicycle desperately scrambling out of her car's path. The girl leaped from her bike, dropping her bag of popcorn. The car only barely missed her, but she heard the Aston-Martin crashing into a bicycle. She could feel the smashed metal scrape across every part of her tiny car's underside.

The rear right tire of the car exploded, and bits of popcorn and what was left of the twisted metal bike shot out from behind the car like a slot machine jackpot. All Brea could think about was her generous insurance coverage and what suckers they were for taking her money.

Brea pulled the damaged car off the road onto the shoulder. Allison and Brea exited the car and stood behind it, surveying the damage the bicycle had done. As always, Allison was unconcerned. "Your car, it's hasn't always been like this, has it?" she asked.

Brea stared at her blankly for a beat. "No, Allison. It hasn't."

"Where are we? Oh yeah, you were freaking out about graduation." said Allison, trying to catch up with the situation.

"Of course I'm freaking out! Do you have any idea what's going on here?" Brea exploded.

"I have a general concept," Allison said evenly.

"I don't think you do."

"I really don't," agreed Allison.

Across the street, the little girl ran crying into the arms of her mother and father. Both parents gave Brea and Allison their most evil eye. Brea was too freaked out to notice and Allison didn't care.

"I specifically asked you if today was next Tuesday." Brea stormed on, not really listening to herself. "Today is next Tuesday!"

"Yet another example of my general concept of things," said Allison primly.

"We spend, I don't know how many years at this school, and you make me miss my graduation?" Brea was just blowing steam, and didn't expect an answer.

Allison was happy to give her one anyway. "Who cares about Graduation? It's walking across a stage."

"I don't care, so I wouldn't care," Brea was livid. "Except for two small details, my mother and my father. And my grandmother, which is tricky with her coming here with the oxygen tank and all."

Brea's parents lived in Australia, so Allison was a bit taken aback. "They're coming here?"

“They’re probably in the auditorium right now!”

“It’s a world gone mad, Brea.”

The Aston-Martin had been made long before the days of clock radios in the dashboard, and Brea needed to know what time it was. “I need to ask you something,” she said as she reached for a cell phone.

“Sure.”

“Do you think we’re going to make it?” asked Brea, looking for optimism.

“Honestly?” replied Allison.

“Yes.”

“No.”

“We’re going to make it.” In crisis mode Brea got very methodical. “We can do this, if we figure out what to prioritize.”

Allison’s mind was already elsewhere, looking for another distraction. She settled on a nearby bishounen, the Japanese word Brea had taught her for “pretty boy.” Allison spent a hell of a lot of time thinking about cute boys.

Brea didn’t notice the staring. “All right. We need to pick up our robes over in Arrowway Dormitory. No time for the hats.”

Allison’s eyes opened wide. “I’m not graduating without a hat!”

“I’m telling you, there’s no time!” The phone Brea was holding didn’t have a clock on the display, so she reached for another one.

“Well, this has been a big waste of 6 years.” Allison sulked and assessed the situation. “And there’s no choice. You’re going to have to change this tire.”

“Me? I’m not going to be seen changing a tire, my Grandmother would slap me!” Brea tone showed dismay. “You do it.”

“I would, except that I don’t know anything about technology.”

“Technology? This is changing a tire!” Brea could feel the eyes of people around her watching her.

“And I’d call someone to do it but none of my cell phones seem to be working.”

“This is shaping up to be a bad day,” observed Allison.

“Well, at least it can’t get any worse,” said Brea “With the no coffee, and the flat tire, and missing graduation. But we’re not going to miss it because we’re going to make it.”

“We are. We absolutely are,” agreed Allison.

“Really?” asked Brea with great enthusiasm.

“No. But I’ll tell you what.” Allison had the solution. “If you get the, uh, control scheme about this car...”

“The manual?”

“Yeah. Just tell me how to do it,” said Allison. “I’ll take care of the situation and save the day as usual.”

It was true that Allison didn’t know anything about technology. And it wasn’t just the newer Internet stuff; she was even confused by the technology of the 1950’s. To Allison, the concepts from science fiction were exactly as confusing as the exotic concept of operating a toaster.

And the techno-babble all seemed the same too. That was why Allison avoided technology at all costs. She felt safer when she took the stairs, she didn’t understand how to use a mouse, and she believed X-file conspiracies about cell phones.

Brea had tried to explain to Allison once about how to use an answering machine. And her eyes had just glazed over, as if Brea had a hypnotist pinwheel and started spinning it. In fact, the only things Allison understood about technology was what she learned from watching Star Trek. Frequently she used words like beam, switch, and sensor.

When there was a problem at the computer, Allison would watch in wide-eyed amazement as Ashley, LV-426’s resident technophile, would work. She would try to give him constant analysis. “You’re receiving an Internet transmission on the main view screen,” or “Increase power to the email!”

Brea loudly continued to complain, mostly to herself, as she fished out the manual for the car. She pressed the button on her key chain that popped open the trunk. Allison managed to pull the spare tire out of the trunk, and quickly located the jack behind a hidden panel.

“It’s a good thing I’m here.” Allison assured her. “There are exactly three parts of the plan, first part, second part, third part. First part starting. We jack up the car. Secondly take off the tire, then thirdly, uh, put the spare on.”

“That’s not quite right.” Brea said. “You have to loosen the bolts on the tire before you jack it up. The second part is the first part.”

“Who’s changing the tire here?” Allison asked.

“I’m just trying to avoid disaster,” replied Brea.

“It’s first part, third part, second part?” asked Allison, very confused.

“Second part, first part, third part. Unmitigated disaster,” said Brea.

“Tell you what.” Allison rolled her eyes. “We’ll pick up the spare tire debate after we make it to graduation.”

“Fine,” agreed Brea.

“Fine.”

Allison jacked up the car easily enough. But she had some trouble using the tire iron to loosen the bolts for the flat tire. She pulled with all her strength, but nothing happened.

Standing up, she tried to use the leverage with her foot on the tire iron to stomp the bolt a little loose.

“This one’s really stuck,” she commented absentmindedly.

With the fourth stomp, the car swayed backwards. The jack tilted back with the car a slight angle, before deciding to fall over completely. As the car began to roll down the slight incline of the hill they were on, Brea realized she might have forgotten to put on the emergency brake. She hadn't been thinking so clearly just now.

The Aston-Martin was gathering up speed as it rolled backwards. Now it was flying down the hill out of control. Other drivers on the road swerved out of its careening path to avoid it.

At the bottom of the hill was the dormitory complex still under construction, LV Gamma, the grandest campus property of them all. Absolutely no expense had been spared in the opulence of the new building, thanks to generous education funding by the state Senate. Wi-fi Internet access, power and natural gas lines ran exposed up the sides of the building, the natural gas lines less out of student demand than of political correctness. Raw construction had been nonstop for several years now, and conservatives and opinions column in the state screamed bloody murder over the insane expense of the building.

The construction crews had built equipment to make their job a little easier. This included a crane to position steel girders, which Brea's car was now barreling towards, along with a large tanker of gasoline to power in.

The explosion was spectacular, the best Allison had ever seen. Fragments sprayed out like graffiti from LV Gamma and what was left of Brea's car.

The fire blazed in the background, LV-Gamma was being consumed in the conflagration. As the flames of the burning wreck of LV Gamma flickered in the sky, Brea considered her insurance policy. At the time, one hundred thousand dollars of liability coverage had seemed perfectly reasonable, but that wasn't nearly enough to protect her just now. As a matter of fact, Brea wasn't even sure that liability coverage on the Aston-Martin would be honored, because of certain "act of God" provisions.

"Second part, first part, huh?" stated Allison deadpan.

"I told you we should have called someone to fix that tire!" Brea exploded, "We're into some pretty deep stuff now! I loved that car!"

"That was a pretty fabulous car," Allison commented. "Except for the fact that it was blue."

"You didn't like the blue?"

"Well, I mean it's not like it was red or black."

"Besides the blue, you know what I'm thinking?"

"What?"

"Dire consequences!"

"This is pretty bad, but at least we have coffee. That was a much bigger crisis." Allison was elsewhere, thinking back to the coffee shop. Something hadn't been right. She was thinking through the events of the day. "When Minuete was in the coffee shop, didn't she hand you your coffee?"

"Are you talking to me about Minuete?" exclaimed Brea. "We just blew up a building! Do you understand how much trouble we're in?"

"I think she switched your coffee with her decaf." Allison was piecing the clues together like a detective. "That's why you crashed your car. You weren't thinking straight without any caffeine."

Brea looked at the labeling checkbox on her paper coffee cup, and realized Allison was right. The coffee was clearly marked decaffeinated. Minuete had absolutely, completely gotten her, and she had done it just to be evil, mean and nasty. Brea paused as she considered what had become the worst day yet.

"I don't think we're going to make it," she said with a sigh.

#### Sub-Chapter Six - The One Thing

Brea and Allison bickered for a bit, arguing who would be the first on the scene, the police or the news media.

Of course Allison was nonchalant about the entire thing, but Brea knew better. This wasn't an adventure story, this was real life and they had just blown up a multimillion dormitory building. The media would be screaming for blood, and the police would be expected to hand the public someone's head on a platter. Brea's first instinct was to keep her mouth shut and report to her lawyer, but decided against it until she had more to report.

In the end, Brea had been the one to guess correctly. The local Channel 5 news station came screeching onto the scene, eager to out-scoop their rival Channel 9 affiliate. The mini-cam crew of three and perky reporter Cindy Camper leaped from the van. Brea and Allison glanced at each other knowingly. Their luck was steadily getting worse.

On the local broadcasts, Cindy was perfectly professional. She was even better than television good-looking, very tall and blond. She dressed well for a local person, and every time she covered local news events like movie openings about dogs and state referendums about nonsense with equally convincing enthusiasm. Brea thought to herself that Cindy had the crazy eyes, because she was insane the way a girl could sometimes be insane. She'd witnessed some crazy girl activity in her three sisters, overreacting to this or that. Yet, a bit reluctantly she knew it was true. There was the dark side of being female that was high pitched and hysteric.

Brea and Allison actually knew Cindy quite well, and it had been a surreal experience. She had been introduced into their family through Lani. The two had hit it off as friends at first, and she did quite a bit of time in LV-426. Allison was very excited to know someone that was on TV. Brea had the exact opposite reaction, and tried to give her a fair shot despite the fact her reporting was absolute bubble-gum.

But all things considered, Cindy wasn't so bad. Sure, it had been a little surprising the first time she had level 10 freaked out on them, but she wasn't even close being a maniacal super-villain like Minuete. Cindy was simple to understand, her only end was attention. And her means were all very self involved. But, Brea thought to herself, she didn't mind her so much. It was hard even for girls not to like attractive blond women.

Still, the destruction of a school dormitory was an excellent story for a local news reporter. Nothing like a little crisis coverage for the locals. The camera crew scrambled, the boom mike operator was plugging in cables, and the lighting grip setting up powerful assemblies.

Cindy hissed orders at the crew. "First crew up, online. Second team, move in. Flanking positions. What's that over there? Get it! Shoot it!" she said, pointing excitedly.

“Hello, Cindy,” said Brea.

Cindy noticed them, and it took a moment for her to recognize them. “Brea Anatamata and Allison Holiday...” It took half a second for her to launch into her predictable monologue about Lani.

“Have you heard anything from her since she left?” Cindy whined. “You know she never returns my phone calls. And I don’t have a clue how to get in touch with her!” she said, her psycho eyes wide.

Brea and Allison just nodded vigorously. “Well, uh, we just heard from Minuete...you know ‘Style Section’ Minuete.”

“Apparently she moved to Washington DC,” commented Allison.

But Cindy wasn’t quite listening, because she was in reporter mode, and she realized she might be talking to eyewitnesses. “Wait, did you see the explosion?”

Allison excitedly replied “Oh yeah, we saw the whole thing. It was soooo cool!”

“Great story, want to tell it on camera for Channel 5?” It was a standard reporter’s trick that could be interpreted any number of ways.

No one knew better than Brea that talking to the press was a bad move, even if it was just Cindy. But she also knew it was futile trying to hide the destruction of LV Gamma with the press, because she would tell this story twenty more times to the police before the day was over.

Allison and Brea glanced at each other. “Well, we would tell you except that there’s one small thing.”

“A very small, insignificant thing,” Allison chimed in.

“What is it?” Cindy intoned.

“See that blue burning thing down there?”

Sub-Chapter Seven - Dancing Mad

The Washington Post, Washington D.C.

As always, it had all started in LV-426.

Lani Cameron, the first survivor of the infamous dormitory. Lani had escaped. She was in Washington D.C. now, and was living her ultimate dream as a reporter for the Washington Post. She was happier than she’d ever been in her life.

Lani took a deep breath, drew it into her lungs. For the first time in her life she didn’t feel a tightness in her chest. She was relaxed now, elated with her new job and her new life. This, she knew, was as good as it could get.

And although the fiery destruction of LV-Gamma had already gotten major play on the national cable networks as a possible terrorist incident, Lani hadn’t seen that yet. And that was unusual, because Lani was addicted to cable news. But even if she had known, there was no way she could have guessed that her world was about to come crashing down around her, by a special delivery from Brea Anatamata and Allison Holiday.

Lani was medium height, with eyes that told a story. People could never help but comment on her eyes. There was nothing particularly unusual about their shape or size. Their color, a liquid blend of

blue and quicksilver alone would not have been enough to make them stand out. But Lani's eyes had an appearance of feral alertness that seized the attention of anyone that met her.

Lani Cameron had never felt that she was beautiful a day in her life, even though she knew that she was.

Her best feature was her blond hair, just below chin length. It was a fantastic natural shade, thick and always falling in front of her eyes. Her eyebrows were also the same light shade. She had been blessed with perfect skin, although it sunburned easily.

It had taken Lani a few years to grow into her looks. Lani had been awkward as a teenager, but now at 24, she was very beautiful, but not in the traditional model sense. There was an almost feline appearance to her features.

During her time at Bishop University she had started to acquire the stare. The thousand-yard stare, it was like she'd really seen beyond during her time in LV-426. But living in D.C. had done much to rejuvenate her. The result was a mishmash of brilliance inside the office, and something a little less than brilliance anywhere outside of it.

Much to her embarrassment, Lani had started to develop early, the very first girl in her class. It had continued slowly throughout high school and through the first few years of college, and as a result she was on the voluptuous side. This both helped and hurt her career as a serious journalist, her assets were the first thing men, and even women noticed.

She dressed like a reporter and favored her trademark blue turtleneck sweaters and khaki shorts. She always wore a tiny gold anklet on her right foot, a present from her only serious, and very bad relationship ever with Simon Burke. She wore it less out of nostalgia, and more as a reminder of how far she had come from that nervous, insecure college freshman.

But anyone that knew Lani even casually knew her in-your-face attitude what was made her truly stand out. There is a certain type of person that is attracted to journalism, and Lani felt in her bones.

Lani's first draw into journalism was in her high school Yearbook class. Many students took the class because it meant they could leave at the end of the day, supposedly to do "yearbook" production activities. In reality, this meant that there were only two or three people working on the massive project. Lani was one of those people.

She remembered the first time she had to stay up all night to finish the color-separated spreads of the prom and the football team finals before the deadline. They were at their final deadest deadline.

Still, she was the only one working this late, and the fate of the whole book was in her hands. It was an adrenaline rush, the feeling of being racing against the clock for publication. She made it with 15 minutes to spare.

Once in college, Lani parents refused to let her major in Journalism. So she picked the most useless major of them all, English so later they could "talk" her back into a journalism career.

Her first encounter with the staff of the Bishop Beacon had been truly intimidating. It was a college newspaper, but it was a professional newsroom. For the first time in her life, Lani felt she was at home. In a school that was 65 percent Greek, a sign hung above the Bishop Beacon editor's door. "The nightly meeting of the Beta Beta Fraternity meets here at 6 pm." Anyone with a passing knowledge of the Greek alphabet got the joke, knowing it was the paper's budget meeting.

Lani Cameron was the new girl, and as such she got stuck with much of the grunt work. Photographing and writing about local events no one wanted to attend, like the Police Bicycle Safety Fair. Lani's first story ran on the front page with the headline "Bicycle Rodeo is Safety Success!"

But she moved steadily up the paper's power ladder. Eventually she wasn't the one getting stuck with the worst writing assignments. Always on the story, always questioning everything she was told, Lani Cameron was born to be a journalist. She was damned good at her job, but at her age it didn't matter how good you are. You needed to move up the system.

Although she couldn't possibly have seen it coming, Things started to fall apart the moment she was promoted to Opinions Editor. That was when she received a free dorm room as part of her paper salary. The computer had randomly chosen a room on the top floor of Lede-Vetipane Dormitory Alpha.

As always, it had all started in LV-426. Lani had met Allison previously their freshman year on an expose she was writing for the paper about the boozy Bishop University cheerleaders. Allison liked Lani from the very start, and was happy to bring her along to photograph her sin-packed weekend. She winked and posed for Lani's camera as she and the other Cheerleaders shotguned cheap cans of Beast at "The House."

The House was the most popular fraternity on campus. Although membership was exclusive, it had an open door policy for all its parties. These parties were wild, and wildly popular. If you weren't at the House on a football game weekend, then you weren't anyone.

The image of Allison in her cheerleader uniform, liquored up, paddling a naked pledge lying in her lap while wearing his boxer shorts on her head remained one of the most memorable images from that year. It ran in full color, and was fronted on Monday morning issue of the Bishop Beacon. The public never noticed the photography credit that ran underneath the photo. But Lani did.

The expose had three main effects. First, Allison Holiday became one of the most famous people on campus. She was a party girl before, but now she was a valued person at any public event, and especially at The House. It instantly became a House tradition for years that Allison must paddle all the pledges with a ping pong paddle while they were naked. Secondly, Lani's reputation as an investigative journalist improved instantly, and she moved another notch up the ladder at the Beacon.

As fate, or at least Allison's fate, would have it, that very same week, the President of the United States announced his new administration program to stop alcohol abuse on college campuses. The photograph Lani had taken of Allison was picked up by the AP wire, and was even made the cover of Newsweek as part of the wider story. Allison proudly showed the Newsweek cover to everyone she knew, friends, neighbors, and even her professors.

The third effect of the photograph was a bit tragic. The Bishop University administration, particularly Chancellor Burke, became concerned with their image Allison was projecting. They felt they had no choice but to dismiss her from the cheerleading squad. Although almost everyone on campus rallied around her, it wasn't any use. The University was simply under too much pressure from the media.

Allison didn't seem to mind being dismissed. She was even more popular now than she had been before, and the cheerleading had gotten a bit mind-numbing, even for Allison. When the President of the United States mentioned her by name during a press conference, as the very kind of student that would benefit from his faith-based program on alcohol abuse, Allison excitedly yelled "Boogya!" and celebrated by taking a large swig of Jungle Juice. For Allison, it was a taste of the big time.

But for Lani, it was the first time she had encountered the dark side of journalism. A very real, tangible negative effect her published writing had on the lives of the people around her. The decision to write the article had been Lani and Lani's alone. She had hurt someone that had trusted her, and she felt awful about it.

And one year later, here Lani was, confronting Allison, her new resident assistant for her free dorm room in LV-Alpha.

Lani had expected the worst, but Allison seemed to have forgotten about the incident altogether. She acted as if it had never happened, and to Lani, she couldn't detect any kind of acting or deception on Allison's part. She guessed to Allison, it was just another side story in the big television show that was her life.

Her free dorm in LV-Alpha was a perk of being the opinions editor for the Bishop Beacon. Better still, she got one of the corner rooms, where she only had to share a bathroom with one other person in the adjacent room.

Lani had first met Brea in a car accident in front of LV-426. Brea had accidentally bumped her Aston Martin roadster into Lani's crappy used Saturn. The two had launched into a screaming match over it, a pattern that would be repeated endless times in the years to come. Realizing later they were floormates was an awkward dance to be sure.

Many years later, after the Election Eve, they would look back on their endless arguments and laugh. But even from the beginning, they were best friends, even if they didn't know it for a long time.

Even stranger was the fact that Lani was first cousins with Michael-Anne Petite, Brea and Allison's very best friend from high school. With Brea and Allison, things had always clicked well with Michael-Anne. But they had clicked so completely with Lani, whose real name was "Elina" Cameron. It was as if the Lani, Allison, Brea triangle was so meant to be, Michael-Anne was a just passable substitute for Lani for all those years in high school. But it was true, all the months Brea and Allison spent with no "Lani" to drive mad had been pretty boring.

Considering the scope of the scam Allison was pulling for LV-426, Lani was initially surprised Allison could pull off such an elaborate scheme. Allison had gotten Ashley, the techno-savvy freshman to fake out the University residential computer system. He made it seem as though the floor was filled to capacity by using the names of students he had pulled out of thin air. In several cases, she had even gotten fake student ids issued for the fictitious students like "Bud Anheiser."

By the standards of student dorm life, LV-426 was the Trump Towers. When Lani moved in, there were only 4 students living in the dorm floor designed for 31. Every resident of LV-426 had multiple rooms, some had exclusive bathrooms, and most importantly, the Den.

The Den had taken the three about a week to create with a couple of sledgehammers and some paint. They had knocked down the drywall between several dorm rooms and the bathroom, to create one giant room. Allison did most of the sledge-hammering, Ashley did most of the heavy lifting, despite the fact that Allison could easily kick his ass.

And for Brea? Brea made it to Bishop University the semester after the Den had finished completion. It was John that had worked to build the Den.

(Note from editor Lani Cameron: Again. I'm sorry to do this to you, but explaining John will take another book. I tried to do it justice, but it didn't work. Sorry, but you're going to have to wait.)

When the University drama department decided to remodel their stage, Allison convinced her on and off boy-tease Vince Prack to pick up the discarded lumber from the trash bin with his van. With Ashley's help they had used the lumber to construct a raised hardwood floor level around the TV and couches. Originally, they had a number of chairs for parties, having stolen them from a campus storeroom. Unfortunately, Tequila would use them as weapons against other guys whenever Allison made him upset, so they were gone through like spent ammunition. There were chair parts stuck in one part of the drywall where he'd thrown a fit, and Allison had decided she liked the look of the Den better that way.

It was a most generous compliment that Allison decided to let Lani move in after the request came to remove "for a corner room from University Housing. Allison remembered the Spacekat reporter that had made her a Bishop University superstar, and had agreed to let her be the fourth member in the Alpha building of the Lede-Vetipane dormitory.

As always, it had all started in LV-426. Disaster, elation, and complete chaos. Although Lani was complimented that Allison had invited her into her epic world, she never quite felt like she fit in. Lani was always embarrassed by the spectacle of it all.

And Brea. Again and again she got into it with Brea. Because of the layout of the complex, they were forced to share a bathroom. It wasn't that Lani didn't admire Brea in some respects. It was that when with her in person, Brea's hyper-girlish quirks just simply made Lani crazy.

By week one in LV-426, Brea and Lani were bickering, but with a friendly distance. By week two this had taken its toll, and they argued constantly, sometimes screaming at each other. By week three, they would just stick out their tongues and blow at one another. "Thhhhhbbbbbb!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" And things just grew progressively worse from there.

Although it wasn't exclusively because of LV-426, as her graduation date drew closer and closer, Lani wanted to make a clean break between college and the rest of her life.

In May of 20x7, before anyone else was awake, Lani quietly moved her pre-packed boxes down to the U-Haul she had rented for the weekend. And that was it, she was out.

Allison, Ashley and Brea were a bit clueless at first at what had happened to Lani, but they soon figured it out. Lani Cameron had moved on from LV-426 to a new life. It was a bit offensive the way she had just left without saying goodbye, but according to Brea it was "good riddance."

Now, Lani was in the ranks, the enlisted foot soldiers for the Washington Post. She loved her job. And if anyone asked her how she felt about her job, she would honestly answer, "I'm just happy to be here." She was constantly amazed by the splendor of living in Washington DC. She would take an extra 10-minute walk every day just to take the red Metro line home that would let her past Capitol Hill.

Some days she would be so overwhelmed by the beauty of the city, she would just do the hour and a half walk back to her apartment in Dupont Circle to admire the city she lived in. But not all of her colleagues working at the Post had Lani's boundless enthusiasm.

In the halls of the Washington Post, Walking through the halls, you crossed many older, jaded reporters that were not "just happy to be here." The office was always pure mayhem. People scrambling through the halls, always just a heart beat to missing a deadline. And always the sounds of phones. Phones ringing, reporters frantically digging for stories. Reporters always trying to seem

casual on the phone, despite the fact that their jobs depended on the information they were digging for.

Molly stuck her head through the door of Lani's cubicle. She was another face from the latest batch of interns that had finagled their way into a paid position.

"Hey, Lani didn't you graduate from Bishop University?"

"Yeah."

"There's been some kind of accident at one of the dormitories, it's on all the news networks right now."

Lani wasn't important enough to have a television in her cubicle, so she saved the article she was working on, habitually picked up her cell phone, and walked into the foyer of the office. The fiery destruction of LV-Gamma was playing on CNN. Lani listened to the audio where a bubbly anchor was describing the scene from the studio.

"...the third building of the Lede-Vetipane dormitory complex. There still is no official word from the Bishop University. We're going live to the feed from our local affiliate at Bishop University."

The story had happened so suddenly, that CNN didn't have any of their network people on the scene, and instead had to rely on the local reporters with the Fox Channel 5. Lani was shocked to see Cindy Camper, the woman that had spent a lot of time stalking her, on television behind the burning wreck of LV-Gamma. She came off as mostly sane.

"Thank you Lisa. We have an exclusive on the real story behind the firebombing of the LV-Gamma. Rather than a terrorist incident, this is the tragic result of a car accident, where two female students, Brea Anatamata and Allison Holiday were changing a flat tire and their car apparently slipped and rolled down this hill into LV-Gamma. There, it struck the natural gas lines, and caused the explosion. Apparently the girls were just trying to make it to their graduation ceremony. We're on the scene live with those two students. Allison, what can you tell us about the accident?"

The camera angle widened out, and Allison and Brea were in the shot. It was hard to read Brea, who almost looked uncomfortably nervous, but Allison was a natural for television, coming off as much better than Cindy.

"It was just awful Cindy. We were really lucky no one was hurt, and that's the important thing to remember," she said confidently.

"How did this happen. What is the story here?" asked Cindy.

"It was just freak accident, really one in a million, Cindy," replied Allison. "We had a flat tire, and were trying to change it. The jack, possibly defective, I don't want to say because we don't know for sure. It slipped and the car rolled down into the building."

"Brea Anatamata, what can you tell us about the accident?" asked Cindy.

"Well, I don't mind losing the car as much as I mind missing our graduation. Allison and I have worked very hard academically in the last several years, we really know how to hit the books. We really regret that we're missing our chance to walk across that stage."

“Cindy,” Allison interrupted “I think it’d be a great thing if Bishop University could pause the ceremony, just long enough for us to get there, as soon as the police get this mess straightened out. We deserve our chance to celebrate our passion for academy,” agreed Allison.

“This is Cindy Camper, for Fox Channel 5, back to you Lisa.”

The local feed cut back to the national Fox News feed, and back to the national anchorwoman.

“So, at this point it does seem that this was in fact, an accident and not another terrorism incident.” The fade out music started. “Next, another day of violence in Israel, we’ll tell you why after the break.”

Lani turned from the television, her mind was racing with manic possibilities. That Allison and Brea had accidentally destroyed LV-Gamma did not surprise her one bit. What surprised her was that she had caught the newscast. It was an incredibly impossible coincidence.

It was starting again.

Sub-Chapter Eight - Out of the Deep

LV-Gamma, Bishop University

As it turned out, Allison had only lost the bickering by a hair, as the police arrived on the scene very shortly afterward.

“We have been here for three hours. How many different ways do you want me to tell the same story?” Brea was getting upset now.

The police sergeant was pure cliché, with a dark police uniform overcoat. He absentmindedly and convincingly promised, “It’s just routine.”

Brea glanced over at Allison, as if to say, “I have a bad feeling about this.”

By now, the rival Channel 9 news was running their own interview with Brea and Allison, excitingly updating their mouth-breathing local viewers that the graduation ceremonies might indeed be halted for Brea and Allison’s arrival. It had been under their “Special Stories,” C block segment. Brea had gotten into the groove, and exploited the cameras brilliantly. Allison had even managed a tear on cue.

“We know it’s been a terrible accident, but we just want to make our Graduation,” Allison said, shamelessly pandering to the cameras.

By now, emergency crews were crawling on the scene. The fire from the explosion had heated the superstructure beams of the building, until they were unable to bear the weight of the outside walls. The result had been the subsequent collapse of LV-Gamma. The mayor of Audrey was already calling it the worst economic disaster in the state’s history. There were whispers that the State would ask the President to declare it a disaster site, and ask for special federal disaster funds.

Brea and Allison were leaning against one of the police cars, when they noticed a new cop car arriving. The police car had been converted from the standard police Crown Victoria.

Detective Monica Marlstone, 40ish, opened the door and stepped out, an impressive figure. She had aged gracefully, and had the swagger of a law enforcement type. She had been the agent that had helped Allison take down Minuete with the FBI.

Monica's whole family was a cop family. She approached the sergeant in charge, bringing him to the side for a private conversation. After about 30 seconds she approached Brea and Allison. It was clear that she was instantly in control. One of the perks of making Detective is that you're unquestionably in charge of any crime scene. She got straight to the business at hand.

"I don't have any time for pleasantries, if you wouldn't mind getting in the back of my car, we can get going." Brea was frantic. "Are you taking us to jail?"

"Oooh, Tequila's told me all about women's prison. You're not going to make it." Allison observed. "I wonder how many cigarettes you'll get traded for?"

"They use cigarettes for money?" Brea was intrigued.

"Oh yeah, there's a whole system," Allison promised, "It's very clever."

"Looks like all those Econ classes are going to pay off after all," Brea decided lips moving, although in her mind she was just racing about nightmare scenarios.

Lieutenant Marlstone was almost amused. And she liked these two girls. "Don't worry about it. We're just taking you to your graduation. Orders from the top."

"We're going to make it? How is that even possible?" Brea wondered.

"Chancellor Burke was pressured into putting the ceremony on hold."

Brea was ecstatic. She turned to Allison, stuck her tongue out and blew. "Thhhhhbbbb!!! Like there was ever any doubt we'd make it."

Marlstone might have been a detective, but she still had a sense of humor. In fact she saw so many of these cases she thrived on it. Allison and Brea were nothing if not amusing to watch. "Girls, if you'll just step into my car we'll get you to your graduation. Hell, the whole school is waiting on you."

#### Sub-Chapter Nine - Just Another Day

A total explosion of people. A wall of screaming and pushing and cameras and madness. The ceremonies had been halted for so long, the people were unsettled, waiting for the girls so they could finish the whole thing and go home.

Brea took point with Allison in a cordon as they crossed the stage. There, waiting patiently, was Chancellor Burke with diplomas in hand for the girls. For the local TV affiliates, this story was a dream come true. Danger, destruction, and a happy ending with perky photogenic girls.

Local cameras clicked and flashed in an explosion of noise and light. Boom mike operators poised their microphones to catch every word between the University head and the girls. Chancellor Burke, who was known for grandstanding, launched into a predictable monologue.

"Exaudio, comperio, conloquor. A Latin phrase that translates 'To listen, to learn, to speak.'" The very words that are carved in iron at the gates of Bishop University from the families of the soldiers that served in World War Two..."

Brea flicked her eyes, locking her gaze with Allison for a moment. It was just enough to communicate "Do you believe this guy?" Finally, the girls heard the words they were waiting for.

"... Brea Anatamata!"

It was Brea's moment on stage. She took a step or two then preformed her "wink and wave," with one eye gleaming and her hand on hip, she made a "V" with her fingers. For that moment she was the pop princess she often fantasized about being. People screamed wildly for her. She took the diploma in one hand and the microphone in the other.

"Was there ever any doubt that we would make it?" Brea paused, eating up the cheers from the crowd. "Caio bello! I am getting the hell outta here!" People cheered for her as hard as they could yell.

Then came Allison, prancing up to the stage. She had a glint in her eye and a gleeful smirk on her face. Because of her misadventures, she had been on the news many times and people knew her. The crowd responded, cheering even more wildly.

Faster.

The University Dean reached to shake her hand. And, as she'd planned, she'd fantasized for all the years, she instead handed him a can of the cheapest beer possible, the Beast. It had been a tough choice between beer and a prophylactic, both belonged to Tequila. But the Newsweek cover had cinched it, since Allison was the poster girl for alcohol abuse on college campuses. The Dean looked at the can, thrown off, confused. Then Allison wrapped her arm around him, pulled out a Beast of her own, and shaking it vigorously then shotgunning it in one gulp, just as she had for the Newsweek photo. The cameras literally ate the moment up, chewing up film.

Allison crushed the empty beer can on her head, one of very many tricks she had that made her the number one Bishop Party girl.

### **The Washington Post, Washington D.C.**

Lani Cameron was watching and blushing at the whole thing live on MSNBC, even though FOX News and CNN had made a mistake and passed on the live coverage. The image of Allison shotgunning Beast onstage in front of the Dean would become an even more popular image than the one that found its way onto the cover of Newsweek. It would find its way onto all the nightly news broadcast, and even on the Alyssa Riffe Effect as the "Most Ridiculous Item of the Day."

Lani had a very bad feeling about this. This would end badly for her, and there was nothing she could do about it. It had all happened there in LV-426. Lani had managed to escape the insanity for a while, but it was all coming back.

### **Sub-Chapter One - Remnants**

LV-426, Bishop University

Brea read over her resume for the millionth time. It was printed on very heavy, very special paper. Sure, everyone buys good paper for their resume, but Brea always wanted to stand out as someone that was especially special.

She has done exhaustive research, and was now quite the expert on printer paper. This paper had been chosen because of its brightness, as measured in Lumens. It had been specially shipped overnight from a distributor she had found on the Internet.

Although it had been very expensive paper, it would never occur to Brea to actually know what it costs. She had specifically not looked at that part of the invoice.

Studying her resume, she tried to see it for the first time. To put herself in the mind of someone that had never reveled over its every detail. Had she chosen the correct order of her skills list? Was her choice of the ITC Galliard font the right one? Should she mention that she was the one that had destroyed LV-Gamma?

The destruction of LV-Gamma had gotten national coverage because of the concern that it was a terrorist attack. It became a wider story when in the investigation uncovered that there were bribes and payoffs between University officials and the labor unions, and that basic safety protocols were why the building had been so easily destroyed. Brea and Allison's television stunt ended up captivating the nation, and Allison Holiday had spent some time on the Talk Show circuit.

Brea's lawyer strongly advised against that she participate, so she stayed home. That had been mumbles of Brea's possible liability in the incident, but nothing ever came. And fortunately, there were no injuries from the incident, just minor structural damage to LV-Alpha and Beta.

Brea worried the most that the resume was a bit long, but what facts could she possibly cut about herself? After all, she was marketing Brea Anamata, the phenomenon. She wanted to make things as simple as possible for the people reading it, but not one bit simpler.

In her kitchen next to her coffee pot was her fax machine. Brea had literally every communications gadget that existed. When a new version of Windows or Macintosh, or whatever was released, she researched things, and bought a new box. Then she got one of her technical boys to install everything. She had no idea what that cost either.

In her second bedroom of LV-426 was a maze of computers and cable so elaborate, she knew if it was ever taken apart it would be quite impossible to put back together. And although the fax machine was brand new, it never quite worked right. It always seemed jammed, and the paper never quite fed right. But nothing ever worked in Brea's dorm room.

But there were many things in Brea's dorm room more interesting than her tech stuff. Random bookshelves sprawled through her dorm room, filled with paperbacks, hard covers, DVD's and VHS tapes. If you took any single book into your hand and looked at the spine, it was very worn, read many times over. Brea had a deep passion for books and movies.

Then there was the matter of Brea's katanas, Brea happened to possess a very cool skill, she had chosen kendo as her required sport in high school. At the time, she had figured it was the one thing she liked about her half-Japanese heritage. The sword hilt was bright yellow, and although the sword was an antique and had a great story behind it, Brea would not tell Allison about it, no matter how much Allison pestered her to.

Yet if you asked Brea if she had seen any particular popular movie, you would probably get a no. It was a famous in-joke with people that knew Brea that she had never seen anything. The truth was that Brea was more interested in watching a movie or reading a book for the third time than the first.

Brea's book and movie collection tracked pretty closely with pop culture, and she had no problem admitting it. All Die Hard and Michael Crichton. Some people tried to simulate class by pretending to like boring things.

Brea knew she had class, and didn't need to fake it. Let the posers pretend to like classical music or Shakespeare. No one cherished candor and informality more than she and her family did. And more to the point, you can't bullshit a bullshitter.

She looked at the “D” Ashley had written in permanent ink on the fax tray, and placed the document in, face down. She picked up a sheet of paper by the phone, scribbled with endless random numbers, none of them with names. Brea found the one she had written with a sharpie, and entered it into the fax machine. And then, Brea realized it didn’t matter what kind of paper her resume was printed on, because she was faxing it.

Small details. Waiting for something to go wrong, she watched the pages run through the fax machine. She held her breath for something to go wrong as the fax ran through its cycle. The green light went off on the fax. And that was it.

The door rammmed with a slamming “Knock, Knock, Knock”! Brea raced to the door and peered through the eyehole. There was Allison, proudly holding a copy of the Bishop Beacon. Brea opened the door.

“Boogya!” Allison shouted, reading the Bishop Beacon headline “Infamous Sorority Girl crashes Graduation Ceremonies.” The paper had gone full color for the front page, and your eye was immediately drawn to the image of Allison chugging beer.

Brea picked up the paper, studying it for a moment. “Well, I have to tell you, this is fantastic news!”

“Tell me about it! Hello, dream come true!” Allison was as thrilled as Brea had ever seen her. She plopped down a stack of various newspapers. “I’m in every one of these.”

“Thrillsville. Ask me how my job search is going.”

“How’s the job search going?” asked Allison.

“Close to God-awful. It’s semi God-awful,” replied Brea with a sigh.

“Semi God-awful, huh? At least you’re better than the English majors”

“Do you have any idea how pointless it is sending out resumes from this town? It’s a waste of paper! And it’s a fax!” said Brea huffily.

“You know,” Allison chided. “You listen, you move. You shake. It’d be simplest to just go ahead and move to where we’re going. Then we can get a job.”

“And where would that be?” Brea wondered.

“We’ve got to move to where our story is,” Allison answered.

“We move to where our story is?” asked Brea, puzzled.

“Is there any doubt we’ve got a story?”

“No. I’ve been living a story with you since high-school..”

“These are the words that I’m saying. Our story is big, it’s bigger than big. What’s the thing that’s bigger than big?”

“Epic?” replied Brea.

“Bigger than epic! We move to Washington DC, baby!” said Allison with great enthusiasm.

“There’s nothing bigger than epic,”

“NTP, not the point. Can we stick to the story here? DC. That’s our story. Lani’s already there, it’s a signal.”

“I think it’s possible that’s a signal,” agreed Brea, catching on to the idea.

“It’s an in your face signal,” said Allison.

“DC. I could live there. I mean it’s the power center of the world and all.”

“Power is good.”

“Power, I mean is there any other point?”

“I have a dream. And I’m not sure it’s traffic and crime and more traffic.”

“You’ll get over the traffic. And so you get mugged a couple of times.”

“Yeah, it’s probably not that bad once you get used to it.”

“So are we saying D.C.? Because I think we should say it.”

“It’s said. I’m already saying it. I’m saying DC.”

“Ohhh. I have a good feeling about this one.”

“That part gives me a bad feeling.”

“Just one question.”

“Shoot.”

“What about John?”

The world just suddenly stopped for Brea.

Sub-Chapter Two - Brightest Night

As always, it had all started in LV-426.

Minuete’s eyes were closed, but her smile was wide. The night before she had made the phone call to the movers back in Audrey to pack up her stuff at the mansion, and also at the dorm she kept at Bishop University to load everything up and move it to her place here. She was very deep in sleep, and having a particularly delightful dream of world domination. Even better, it was a lucid dream, one where she was aware she was dreaming, and was hoping she would be able to remember the lurid details later, surreal images of people cheering and worshipping her. Somehow even over the roar of unending people worshipping her, her evil maniacal cackle was quite audible.

In the seemingly infinite biomass, Minuete’s eyes slanted curiously, zeroing on a boy, young and all too blond. There was something curiously rebellious about him, a complete absence of fear in his eyes. The edges of his lips were suggesting as much a smile as would be allowed by someone so utterly dominated by Minuete’s boundless power. And then, in the liquid ways dreams change, Minuete’s was there, with him in every way. And then he kissed her.

No permission, no sense of warning, just complete violation. It was like electricity jolting from his lips. Unable to take the burning pleasure, she took two little steps back from him, utterly stunned. Out of reflex, she slapped him hard, so hard the outline of each of her delicate fingers were painted along his cheek. The dream was so real in every way, that the speckles throughout her hand from

her accident had left hundreds of tiny slashes on his face. The same way it would have if she had slapped someone in real life.

“You belong to me in every possible,” Minuete said, more that a little scared. “Did that slap teach you anything?”

“To be absolutely obedient,” the Blonde said. It was a proper response, but it sounded sarcastic as hell. And that drew Minuete into him, another kiss. It still felt the way a first kiss was supposed to feel, with a tangible high. And in that moment, the part of Minuete’s mind that knew she was dreaming, wondered if it was possible for a girl to have a wet dream.

Now he was holding Minuete’s delicate head in his hands, and it was clear from his eyes, he was deciding on a plan of attack to bring Minuete to total pleasure. He might be a proud slave, but he was utterly intent on pleasing her. Minuete felt his fingers at her belly button, and she was wondering which direction they would roam when it happened.

The phone went off.

Minuete’s eyes opened in complete rage, she took an angry gasp, drawing the breath in her lungs to yell. There was no one there so she just screamed at the phone, not even with words. You didn’t call Minuete, you called one of her secretaries, and even then there was a good chance you would be sent to one of Minuete’s minions. There was no doubt, the person that had let this call go through was going to have their life screwed like they had never been screwed before. Minuete decided she was going to screw the lives of they’re friends, family, and pets for good measure.

Minuete reached for the phone, ready to let the expletives fly.

“Listen! You little...” But there was only a lonely dial tone, the caller had just rung the phone once. To wake her? Several things proceeded to be smashed in Minute’s bedroom. Amazingly, the cellular phone had survived being hurled across the room at a wall. A few minutes later, it gave another ring. Minuete grabbed it violently and brought the phone to her ear.

Two days later Minuete had been doing nothing but watching CNN. Could she dare the offer was legitimate? Was it possible someone was going to help her in her desires to grab political power?

Minuete’s main resource was her near unlimited wealth. And yes, to a certain extent, she had political connections. You don’t acquire Kiley-level wealth through traditional means. Some of Minuete’s childhood friends were the families of politicians her family was bribing. But what she had been offered was frighteningly powerful. The voice had asked her to name anyone, any public official she would like destroyed. They even asked her which network she would like to see break the story. And the voice promised that person would be drowned in scandal in three days.

Minuete had selected Congressman Garbran Blond. She didn’t know much about him, but her thoughts were still on the boy from the fantasy, and wasn’t taking the thing particularly seriously. At first Minuete had decided the whole thing was an elaborate prank. The phone records showed that her secretary had in fact not put the call through to her, and that somehow someone had acquired Minuete’s cell number.

That was before she had seen the article. She had instructed a secretary to alert her to any press about the Congressman. Yet, the very next day a story had made its way in a far right wing publication. It had broken a story of massive securities fraud the Congressman had appeared to have committed. The story had broken on CNN, just as she had asked it to just minutes earlier, and there was already endless speculation on the case. A secretary knocked on the door, Minuete looked up.

"This just arrived by FedEx overnight," the shy woman said, visibly intimidated in talking to her boss. It's was why Minuete had hired her. "It's was strange, the delivery guy said it was for your eyes only, and said you'd understand.

"Bring it to me," Minuete extended a hand. There embedded all throughout her palm and forearm were thousands of jewel fragments glittering through violently scarred skin. They caught the light, glistening and catching her eye. Every time Minuete remembered she had the scar, an ugly mark on an otherwise flawless beauty, she remembered just how much she hated Allison Holiday. The jewels were purple amethyst shards, ironically the same shade purple that Allison always wore.

She excitedly tore into the envelope, wondering what exactly she was getting herself into.

### Sub-Chapter Three - Liberation

After the chaotic events of their graduation day, Brea was being recognized pretty often as the girl that had destroyed LV-Gamma. Some people cheered for her. Others denounced her. After a night of thought, Brea was more excited than ever at the decision to move to DC. And more nervous then ever about what that meant for her relationship with "John". She was at "John's" apartment door, trying to get up the courage to knock. She was reliving their entire relationship in her mind, appreciating the subtlety.

Brea was cursed the way all unique women were cursed in having guys being too nervous to approach her. Maybe they didn't think they had a shot, or figured she already had a boyfriend. And although Brea certainly was attractive, she wasn't a typical beauty. Instead of being blond and busty, she was a stylish, petite knockout with a unique sense of fashion. All the same, guys were attracted to her from the incredible energy of her personality. But she was seldom actually asked out.

Despite all the progress women had made in this century, the simple truth is that guys weren't quite comfortable with driven, intelligent women. There were simply too many sweet-natured blue eyed, blond haired clones that were easy to impress at Bishop. Why complicate matters by meeting someone as unique as Brea?

Brea had dated only a handful of boys in her life. And it was all due to junior high at Charboneau Academy. Of all the evils in the world, the cruelty of children is the most malicious. And the most harmful. Wilcox was a very small town, with only thirty people in her class. Brea was so unique that those thirty people couldn't quite place her in the typical junior high social hierarchy. Brea didn't fit in, and the kids around her picked on her mercilessly for it. There were more girls than boys, and Brea felt totally inadequate because she was neither sought by guys, or respected by the girls.

For years and years, Brea didn't think enough of herself to assert herself as someone sexually good enough to date. But all the while she knew she was superior to her classmates both creatively and intellectually. Brea simply operated at a level other people didn't understand. Certainly not her family, except a bit from her mother. The other Anatamata girls were traditional beauties and had the same typical intellect and personality of traditionally beautiful girls.

Brea's mother had insisted that her final daughter would turn out differently from the rest of the Anatamata sisters. So the day when Brea finally broke down one day and told her mother about the incredible torture the other children in the school were inflicting upon her, she pulled her out of the school within a matter of hours. For the next week, she did nothing but feverishly research what would be the right school for her final, secretly favorite daughter.

It ended up being an exclusive all girls' school, the Charboneau Academy, with a twist. There was an identical boy's institution next door, Alecia Academy. Social activities between the two were both encouraged and required. For the girls, many classes were taught on proper manners, and sex education was taught with the values of a catholic nun. But Brea never bought into any of it.

At Charboneau Academy Brea found girls she fit in with. She easily rose through the ranks, becoming one of the most popular girls in her class.

Brea ended up discovering she had quite a talent when it came to the sport she chose to study, kendo. Kendo took sword fighting and turned it into a sport with rules. Brea had picked the sport because of she possessed an antique katana, and liked the idea of being able to wield it, just in case a boy tried to get too fresh with her or something.

She quickly understood why an all-girls school is such a needed institution. It kept everyone focused. Charboneau was also a finishing school, teaching girls proper manners and how to behave around boys. This was primarily done by formal parties arranged between the two schools.

While other girls found serious boyfriends at Alecia, Brea fell into Friend-Zone pattern again and again with boys. At least until in the 10th grade, where she met the most destructive relationship of her life: Her first kiss and subsequent four-year relationship hell-ride with Trace.

Because he was her first, she loved him, not understanding she could do better. She paid a terrible price with that. Trace consistently abused her goodwill and commitment to the relationship. He enjoyed nothing more than twisting her passion for the pride of being the best girlfriend she could be and turned it into shame. Sure she tried, but she never measured up to the other girls Trace supposedly could be with if he wanted. And Trace loved nothing more than staging public screaming matches, and flirting with other girls to bait her. Brea's friends all disliked him, but kept their mouth closed out of respect for Brea.

On a rainy Thursday just before graduation she was hanging up the phone from a regular screaming match. It had been over what movie they were going to see. Trace had agreed to go see Brea's movie because he loved to make Brea feel bad for getting what she wanted. In her mind, it was if a switch had been hit. Brea asked herself, "What if I just didn't show up? What if I never answer his calls again? Why put up with another second of this bullshit?" And so it went. Trace called again and again, but Brea never answered. She loved that his mind was reeling in the doubt of where the relationship was. She didn't want to hear the sound of his voice, or the sounds he would make trying to make her feel guilty for ending the relationship.

Four years later, Brea accidentally ran into Trace while she was driving back to Charboneau to give a speech to the new class. Trace was a bitter, bitter man. He had aged terribly, and weighed close to 300 pounds. He had married a girl that had dropped out of Charboneau Academy. Trace himself had picked on her in high school.

Brea was cordial, but brief. He asked her rudely if they had broken up yet, and the only response Brea gave him was a laugh, because he had been a bully and deserved the petty cruelty. She asked around again later, and discovered he laid sewer pipe for a living, and she worked at a bank. Brea honestly felt sorry for Trace. His driving ambition was a lot of what made her attracted to him, and she felt bad that his life hadn't turned out the way she knew it could have. Brea was accepted to an Ivy league school for college. She never mentioned which one to people because she thought that dropping names was silly. School was the same, highly structured environment she'd experienced at Charboneau. When she encountered people outside of the school, she was unsure of how to deal

with them, as they were unsure what to think of her. Life was boring, Brea wanted some time to play.

After talking with her mom, Brea transferred to Bishop University. It was well respected academically, and also ranked as the 7th party school in the nation by Playboy. The Bishop had intense school loyalty, and powerful alumni support.

While parking to move in, Brea Anatamata and Lani Cameron met while hitting each other in a minor car crash. They had yelled and insulted each other, then Lani stormed out. She met Allison Holiday while moving in, who was her next door neighbor. They got along from the start, almost like it was fated to be. Then it turned out that Lani was living across from Allison. She and Brea initially didn't like each other, but over the years became friends. Friends that bickered, but friends nonetheless.

Allison set Brea up with a series of ex-boyfriends. Endless ex-boyfriends. None of the relationships worked out, but taught Brea how disposable boys could be. She finally was beginning to understand how fabulous she was.

By their junior year, Brea's feelings had gone the opposite direction. Meeting guys and dating was simple. Put yourself out there and the worse anyone can do is say no. But the challenge remained, how do you meet someone interesting enough and unique enough to have a long-term relationship with? It was hard to meet someone interesting enough for Brea to date.

Statistically speaking, it is a one in a thousand shot of meeting someone at a bar you can have a relationship with. But it happened to Brea when she met her "John."

Lani had just broken up her long term boyfriend Simon Burke, the Chancellor's son. The relationship between Lani and Simon was remarkably similar to Brea's with Trace. It was as though Lani was learning the lesson a few years too late. The ironic thing was as much as Brea and Lani bickered, they really were quite similar. Physically, they could not be more different, Lani very abundant, and Brea fantastically lacking, Lani blonde and blue, Brea's hair matching the exact shade of her fabulous brown eyes.

So there Brea was, fabulous and trying to get up the courage to knock on "Darien's" door. Brea thought of him as "Darien" because he reminded her so much of a character from her childhood favorite animated series, the man the modern day princess was destined to be with. Ergo, in her mind Brea had equated "Darien" with this fantasy of the perfect relationship she had.

Brea and "Darien" were not together. It was as if God himself was sitting there arranging circumstances to keep them apart. Brea and "Darien" flirted like crazy with each other, but John was older, and had had a long-time girlfriend for the entire time she had known him. Kate was so incredibly stupid, she was oblivious to the whole thing. Brea, honest to God, could not detect any personality at all in her. Brea didn't understand their relationship at all. How could someone so beautiful be so completely empty?

Darien looked exactly like Brea had always imagined his literary doppelganger, and in her mind he was just her future prince. This traditionalist love story did not work well at odds with Brea's very modern views on love and dating. From her very soul Brea was someone to be admired for her utterly unique charm, and that charm was not meant to be captured by just one person.

Even from elementary school, Brea had never closed her eyes and fantasized about married life with a live-in husband. Looking back, she understood it so clearly now! She remembered her childhood

drawings of her fantasy home. There was no husband there in the rooms of endless flowers and fantasy.

So here Brea was, an utterly unique American woman. The thing that sucked about it was that she was a drafted explorer into the frontiers of a modern relationship. Now, in 20x7, women had only gotten the right to vote within a few decades eyesight. Brea thought about her endless history textbooks in her wall-sprawling library. Huge, thick books with endless stats and dull repetition. For like ninety-nine percent of those books women were possessed, oppressed, and other words that end with the letters "essed."

So America decides women can be individuals, and she gets to be the crash dummy to figure out how to reconcile that with the insolvable female mind? That mind with so many impulses, paradoxes, and things so completely logical, yet impossible to explain, much less justify? Brea had decided from the dull, drunken faces of the boys she had seen walking around in college that the majority of guys just didn't think, in as far as the way girls had no choice. Brea's mind raced endlessly with questions, revelations, and realizing things that proved or questioned her worldviews. She just didn't see that process happening in the guys she met.

Except for Darien. You could almost watch him charm you looking into his eyes. It was remarkable how much of their relationship had nothing to do with Darien, but with the way he uniquely fit into her life. And even though she had trouble saying the words, in her heart she felt more than she was comfortable feeling. Gathering her resolve, she knocked on the door, needing to tell John she had to go. After a few moments he came to the door and said something completely charming. "Wow, that dress, every time I see you I'm wondering how you've gotten even more amazing."

Brea was wearing a Mod Dress from designer Anna Sui in an off shade of red, striped up top, circles down below. Girls always commented on her sense of style, but few guys did, for obvious reasons. That was except Darien. Darien always noticed. Whenever he saw Brea he would look her up and down, as if he was trying to figure her out.

Plainly speaking? Darien was so good looking, it was just stupid.. His hair was fashionably short and spikey. Right now he had a red cut on his cheek, probably from shaving.

"Kate's not here," he said, making Brea's eyes light up.

He leaned in to kiss her because they sometimes kissed. He was a good kisser. It was always funny when Darien because he has six foot one, and Brea was barely five feet tall. She stood on her tiptoes, and their lips touched. And in that moment Brea decided to tell him about her decision to move to Washington, only after they had spent the day together.

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Brea held the gun in her hand, had her back to the wall, listening intently for any motion. She peeked around the corner. It was clear. She circled into the hallway. She had the gun out with both hands finger on the trigger, ready to fire as soon as she could.

Into the den now. There was no way to cross the room without risking that he was hiding behind one of the couches. Brea was just about to peek behind the couch when a closet door burst open.

"That's it!" She heard a voice say. She was spinning around to a kneeling position when she felt something whoosh past her ear. He had fired and missed. Now facing him, Brea aimed straight at Darien's chest and fired.

The Nerf bullet hit him in the left arm and he leaped behind a couch. Brea took cover behind the kitchen table. Going fully aggressive, Darien now had a much larger Nerf Ballzooza, machine gunning Brea with foam balls, each firing with a cute pop.

Brea saw the plastic toy Lightsaber and extended it and turning it on. The red plastic shaft lit up, and it made sound effects. Darien saw he was in trouble and scrambled to the floor to pick up the balls and reload. But Brea had him now, she was clubbing him playfully with the Lightsaber, making a sound effect with every impact. Both her and Darien were laughing hard, completely enjoying themselves.

“Help! For the love of God, someone save me from this madwoman!” he joked. “She blew up LV-gamma, now she’s after me!”

“This is for making me watch you flirt with girls all the time,” Brea told him, both knowing Brea actually quite enjoyed watching him flirt, it was a shameless spectacle.

At first he was just defending himself, then he decided to wrestle the Lightsaber from her. Soon the two were tumbling all over the carpeted floor playing and giggling. Darien pinned her arms to the floor, and the two looked into each other’s eyes, and silence came. In the tumbling Brea’s skirt had come up, designer dresses are not designed for this kind of thing, and her red lace panties were quite exposed. Darien leaned in and kissed her softly.

A lot of boys would have gone sexual from there, but instead he pulled back and looked into her eyes and said the exact right thing “This, right now is my favorite moment I’ve ever had with you.” Brea reached up, touched her finger to the tip of his nose and said “poink!” in a cute voice. Darien smiled, backing off from her. Brea pulled her skirt down, and readjusted herself in her bra, but the two stayed on the floor talking.

“I know you so well,” said Darien.

“Oh do you now?”

“Yeah, I do. I really do.”

“What do you know?”

“I knew there you’d make a joke, or do something else there. You can never say you feel anything.” The way he said it, it wasn’t a bad thing or even a problem. It was something he found interesting in someone he could not figure out.

It was a perfect moment. To most guys, all Brea’s millions of quirks made her less desirable. To Darien, it was cute. So Brea asked Darien the question she and Allison had spend countless lunches deciding she should never, ever ask.

“Darien, why are you with Kate?” He seemed genuinely confused by the question.

“Kate’s, she’s,” He was searching for the right words. “I mean, why is anybody with anyone? Why are you asking?”

“Well,” Brea said, “frankly she’s a little dumb.”

Darien furled his brow. Brea honestly believed this was the first time he had ever considered his possibility. “What makes you say that?” He asked.

“Well remember when I told her the story about blowing up LV Gamma? And told her that a girder had totally flattened the Aston Martin? Into a pancake? She asked how long it was going to take them to fix it?” Darien tried to defend her, but it was clear than in his talking, he was reasoning and new wheels were spinning in his mind.

Brea had already made a risky gambit, so she decided to go for broke. “Why did we never get together? I’m going to hate myself tomorrow for saying this, but you’ve always been a kind of person that could just wisk a girl away and make everything perfect.”

Darien’s reaction was honest, a reflexive laugh at the absurd while figuring out something unexpected. The laugh didn’t deter Brea. “And I’ve always kind of hoped I would be that girl.” There was a bit of silence, then he broke it. “The idea of me wisking anyone off their feet is just so crazy. I can’t get my life together, I can’t even do my laundry.” And then John stopped the conversation without meaning to. “It’s Kate, it’s always been Kate.”

Brea, an expert at changing the topic when something bad happens did so, pretending that her heart had not been broken, and that she hadn’t noticed the rejection. Later, the conversation started to dwindle, and she made up a plausible excuse why she needed to go. He was genuinely sorry, they made plans to keep in touch. After all, his graduation was only 6 months away. And Brea’s heart hardened again, and she shut herself off from feeling and needing, because that’s what Brea had to do to operate. And she was off to DC.

#### Sub-Chapter Four - Invisible Sunrise

The Annex Skyrise was Minuete’s third attempt at creating a base for her evil operations. Her first lair had been a converted cold war missile silo, hidden by the Kiley family mansion. It had been seized by the FBI before she had been able to settle on an intimidating name. The second had been a success beyond Minuete’s wildest expectations. The only problem is that its success required it to remain completely secret.

Now that Minuete had decided controlling DC was the quickest way to the world domination she so desperately needed, it was obvious that something more social was required. Something designed to be as intimidating as possible to people she needed things from. Something for dinner parties, and secret alliances and blackmail. Now that was more important than ever, this wasn’t just a new project, succeed or fail it was destined to change the country.

The Annex Skyrise had been the first attempt at skyscraper building in Washington DC, the hope being that a central commercial building would become a magnet for powerful firms and lobbies, who had previously stuck to overpriced buildings on K street. It had not caught on as well as the original owners had hoped, and was up for sale when it came to the Kiley family’s attention.

Now, everything had changed. With the pressure from the Kiley family, the building was the new hotspot in town. Minuete’s domain was the top floor and roof. Minuete had immediately sequestered bids from aspiring architects to renovate the top floor, and she had chosen the most expensive contractors. The bottom floors had remained dedicated to offices and businesses, but the new top floors that had been added made the building even taller, new angles and mirrors. Each corner room of the skyscraper was built with pure glass, leading to amazing sunlight, and an incredible view of the city.

Minuete paid far more attention to the interior of the building. She wasn’t building an office, she was building a set. A set where her insane dreams of world domination would be realized. She hired the most talented people in Hollywood to plan the areas of the building, the entrance, the

conference room, the holding cells. The architecture featured things like globes on the wall, spinning, with monitors that constantly updated hundreds of numbers and statistics that didn't mean anything to Minuete. She took particular pleasure in the planning of the overly elaborate traps.

She was just entering the bedrooms when she spotted Carmet Criser sitting in the glass tower waiting room looking out over the city. She was awestruck by the majesty of the building. Apparently she had destroyed something in her last mission, because Minuete heard her talking on the phone.

"Aw man. This sucks. I see pretty things and I just have to have them, and now I'm poor cause of some stupid egg."

Carmet was constantly buried in debt from credit cards, student loans, and a complete inability to not overspend. She was also a little bit of ditz and a little bit of a klutz.

Later, Minuete got to hear the story she was complaining about, and it was highly amusing. Carmet had been unbelievably lucky and had found out an antique ring she had inherited for her grandmother was in fact a priceless artifact after appearing on an antiques television show. Carmet didn't even care what it was, and eventually she was driving to the Smithsonian, arriving at the delivery zone, the backstage of the museum where the next generation of exhibits were being prepared to be displayed publicly.

She had the dumb ring in her pocket, mind focusing on nothing but the 4.7 million dollars the Smithsonian was paying for her to display. She was on her way to sign the papers when she saw a pretty glass Faberge egg lying in a cage of stele and glass lying on a cleaning table. Now that she was filthy rich, she wanted to see if she could buy it. She marched into the office and set it on the desk.

The lawyer's eyes opened wide when she set it on the table. He was speechless. Carmet's didn't notice, and reached for the papers, and then for a pen when she hit the glass case with her elbow hit the glass, knocked it off the table and the whole thing just shattered into a million pieces, egg, case and all. It turned out the egg was priceless as well. Months later on the advice of her lawyer, she had to turn over the ring as property of the Smithsonian Museum to make up for it.

She'd had 4.7 million dollars of crap happen to her. But the hilarious part?

She'd had to pay an extra 35 dollars for the glass case.

Carmet was medium height, with bright red hair, and amber eyes. She was as voluptuous as you can without being automatically assumed to be a porn star.

She favored the color ice blue, and dressed in a manner that was more sexual than usual protocol allowed in DC.

Carmet Criser had never met Minuete before she'd gotten the call. The call that had taken her from a hot bar stool and an even hotter blond boytoy. Now she was here. Carmet had gone through police academy training, but had been fired months into job. It wasn't for incompetence, because Carmet could freaking kick some ass.

It was because she had been caught using a fake id to sell used panties to a sexshop for perverts that liked school girls, because she was totally broke.

Her police salary had been \$33,902 dollars after taxes. And once again \$33,902 dollars of crap had happened to her. Carmet was a human cartoon.

Minuete was a girl that liked to make an entrance, and she did so with a noticeably confident stride and sharp audible taps as her high heels hit the floor. Carmet didn't seem to notice.

"What's shaking, shake and bake?" Carmet offered her, not extending a hand to shake. Minuete was taken aback. She was used to total fear from her employees, and here this disgraced policeman bimbo was talking to her like she was one of the girls. Minuete paused for a second, figuring out what to say next while simultaneously realizing she had no choice but to work with this freaking incorrigible blonde.

"That's a nice cell phone," Minuete started. "Can I take a look at it?" Carmet was actually giddy, removing the pink phone from her belt clip. "It's the new Motorola, I can swap the faceplates to match what I'm wearing!" she said handing Minuete the tiny phone. Minuete looked at the phone for a moment with disembodied interest.

Then she threw it out the skyscraper window.

Carmet was absolutely speechless. She looked out the window in confusion then back at Minuete for explanation about what had just happened. Minuete just responded with a cold stare. "Do I have your attention?" she asked. Carmet stumbled a few times in her speech before she could say "Uh, yeah."

"You're not a real cop, you're some badonkadonk who thinks I can be referred to as 'shake and bake.' That's not quite right," her voice had a sharply menacing edge.

Carmet couldn't help but roll her eyes. Minuete noticed it and jabbed a finger in her direction. "Listen, I'm going to hire you and you'll get your badge back because I get things I desire, but this is the absolute law of the land. You work for my organization from now on. You do what I say."

Under normal circumstances Carmet would have told Minuete exactly what she could have done with her job, but her overwhelming credit card debt had necessitated that she would have to be to be more patient. "Yeah okay, whatever," was her response as she stared at the floor. In that moment, Minuete realized this was going to be a mother-daughter relationship, Minuete trying desperately with praise and admonishment to control this person that had the power to help her with her aims.

"What's the organization?" Carmet asked, noting that question set Minuete a bit up on edge.

"It's strange," Minuete started. "The return address was the 'Coterie' and that's not listed in any search my team can find. And that's why you're coming along."

Carmet started, "Me? I don't know anything about it, how can I help?" Minuete was back with a response quickly, and a bit grudgingly. "You have the police badge, something I cannot readily get my hands on. I'm guessing someone that can bring down members of congress just to impress me, is probably operating above the law."

"You should get David Hasslehoff then," Carmet joked. "Remember that intro announcer? 'Knight Rider, a shadowy flight into a dangerous world of a man that does not exist.'"

Minuete just stared, following her logic train just to see where it was going. Carmet's voice was in a pitch perfect parody of the ridiculous introduction.

"Michael Knight, a young loner on a crusade to champion the cause of the innocent, the helpless, the powerless, in a world of criminals that operate above the law."

A beat. Minuete shook her head "Give me something expensive to throw out the window. She demanded. The following conversation sounded much like trying to train a spastic puppy. "Carmet.....Those earrings...give them to me..." After some whimpering they were back on subject.

"In any case, if we're going to be skirting the law, which by the way I have no problem with, I'd like you there as insurance. But that's not even the strangest part." Carmet just gave her a knowing nod to continue. "The address for the Coterie on the envelope. It's in a DC night club downtown. A very large club. We're scheduled to meet tonight. I have to stop by the Washington Post first to say hello to an old friend."

Carmet inquired "What's the club called?"

"Wonderland," answered Minuete.

#### Sub-Chapter Five - Event Horizon

And that was it. The years at Bishop had been good, but it was time for a new story. An even more epic story, and this time it was all going to happen in Washington DC. Brea did not tell Allison the story about Darien because that would have taken away from the sheer joy of what she was experiencing. Packing was going to be a nightmare. For instance, the Boy Scout statue they had stolen from the front lawn, the centerpiece of the den in LV-426. How could they bring it? And how could they leave it?

In the end, Brea followed through on her promise to pay for movers. But just on principal, she boxed everything personally, and Allison agreed to drive the truck. Especially since her car had been destroyed and she had nothing else to drive. And boxing up all of Brea's huge three bedrooms in LV-Alpha was a tougher task than she'd initially planned for.

The Bishop University liquor stores were an excellent place to find boxes to move with. And more fortunately, Allison knew where each and every one of them were. But since Brea now had no car, they would have been out of luck. Even Allison's boyfriend Tequila only drove a motorcycle, useless for gathering empty boxes, and he was in rehab again anyway.

In the end, Allison and Brea were horrified to be seen with "The guy with the van" Vince Prack, and another of Allison's past love interests. Allison stayed out of sight in the back, and Brea pulled a Jacqueline Kennedy with sunglasses and a shawl, and rode shotgun. But in one swift stroke, they had a van-full of empty liquor boxes.

Out of everything, the books were the worst to pack. They were heavy, and worse yet, they ate through the finite supply of boxes very quickly. In the end it took one and a half more box hunting excursions to pack Brea's stuff. But Allison packed easily enough, just several duffle bags, and that was mostly clothes and definitely not books.

It had all happened in LV-426. But what was its fate now that Allison and Brea, the last custodians of the floor were leaving? It would have broken Allison's heart to let their dream just die. So the next generation of LV-426 residents were selected, incredibly carefully.

And so it started. Another group of students, the same secret. The 14th level of LV-Alpha completely to themselves, paradise in dormitory living terms. LV-426, the most special dormitory ever. So, yes, their successors were selected incredibly carefully. Another Sorority girl. The same guy as before for the technical work. A finance major, a music major, a journalism major and a manic pet.

One by one they were let in on the secret of the dorm, then instructed on how to make sure it stayed a secret indefinitely. They would have their own adventures; the new crew of LV-426 would have their own story. But now Brea and Allison's story was taking them to Washington DC.

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The truck was heading across the State lines of the Bishop University campus. Brea and Allison were hooting and hollering. Four miles. Montel Jordan's "This is how we do it" was blaring over the loudspeakers of the rented truck. It had an ancient tape deck, with was rigged in to Allison's workout CD Walkman. Since Allison was the driver Brea was automatically DJ.

Three miles.

"You know what I'm thinking?" Brea asked

"I could take a guess. I have a general concept." Allison returned.

"Again with the general concept! That worked out real well last time."

"My general concept is we robbed the bank."

"We did rob the bank. And do you know why?"

"Because they gave us degrees." Allison stated blandly.

"Because they gave us degrees!" Brea was getting worked up.

"All the things I learned? They had nothing to do with school."

"Really, school was just getting in the way."

"It's a good thing I switched my major every week."

Allison's eyes went wide. "Do you think I should have told Tequila I was leaving?"

"So he gets transferred to a rehab center near DC."

"I guess he'd be upset about the fact that we didn't pack any of the chairs."

"Which would make him want to smash something with a chair."

"It's a vicious circle."

For Brea it had been her dream for a long time to leave the state. And it was finally happening. Brea had spent way too much time here. For Allison though, she was very much an out-of-state student. Occasionally you would catch a hint of an accent in her speech, but it was very minor, the result of too much time talking to Brea had driven it out of her.

Two miles. When you asked her about what state she was from, Allison would deflect the question with a clever comment or a joke, Sinatra-style. Brea assumed the worst, that she was from one of the really bad states, Mississippi or Alabama, rather than a slightly better one like South Carolina.

One mile. To Allison, leaving Bishop University was just another in a very long list of adventures. The anticipation was building for that final mile to the state boarder. The sign was getting closer and closer. Allison laid on the horn hard as they passed, with Brea screaming "Boogya!" And they were out and free.

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The trip to Washington D.C. was very many miles, but also was over all too soon. Because neither Allison nor Brea had any idea how to follow a map, it was a trial by fire. Luckily following the highway signs to the general D.C. area wasn't too tough, except one small fact. They were driving the Death-mobile.

Brea was barely skilled enough to drive the Aston Martin that she had wrecked before blowing-up LV-Gamma and that was a highly nimble sports car. She knew she would have no chance driving an unwieldy rented U-Haul.

At first, Brea had believed Allison's very assuring claims that she could drive the truck, and that had been a truly terrifying couple of hours. Despite the obvious way she had no control over the vehicle, Allison insisted on driving way too fast. The truck skidded all over the road, and Brea's heart stopped beating every time Allison would attempt to pass someone. Everyone was honking and screaming at them, and when Brea noticed that even included the Grandmothers, she threw up her hands, screaming "All right, that's enough!"

And so Brea was stuck trying to drive this horrible truck. She could mostly keep it in a steady lane, except that it meant she had to drive very slowly. The well-worn steering wheel was slick with the sweat from Brea's nervous death grip. She hated it, but she was happy to be escaping Bishop University, so she was still very excited.

The trip also took several days of overnight hotel stays. Parking the truck in the tiny parking lots was incredibly stressful and difficult. Once checking into the front desk, Brea was awkwardly insistent that each room have two beds.

As they drove further and further from the familiar territory of Bishop University, the dilemma of how to follow the map became worse and worse. This was discussed heavily during the "There's no Charleston, West Virginia" debate.

Brea did know enough about Washington D.C. to have heard of "The Beltway", which they eventually figured was the loop of roads surrounding the District of Columbia, made up of Highways 95 and 495. So that was the plan. Find the Beltway, then find a hotel, and try to figure out another map, one of the city. They arrived in the outskirts of DC, barely managing to park the truck yet again, using 8 parking places horizontally. The trucks barely-running engine made a terrible whining sound as it came to a stop.

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Brea and Allison were in the hotel room that night. Allison was flipping through the phone book looking for Lani's phone number.

"I'm telling you, there's not going to be a Lani Cameron." Brea complained.

"I have a good feeling about this." Allison counteracted, not even thinking.

"She's not going to be there."

"Cabber, Caffman, Calerdon. Calowitzski. You know what I'm thinking?"

"There's no Lani Cameron?"

"It's almost as if there's no Lani Cameron."

"It's almost as though she's not there!"

“And do you know why?”

“Oh, please don’t tell me government conspiracy.”

“Do you know how easy it is for, poof! Government conspiracy to happen?”

“You’re a lunatic woman.”

“Just another one that goes all the way to the top.”

“There’s no Lani Cameron in the phone book.”

“Or is it just possible your buttercup world is crumbling around you?”

“There’s no Lani Cameron listed and you’re a crazy lunatic woman.” Brea picked up the hotel phone and dialed 411. “Unless you think the phones are part of the conspiracy.”

“Don’t get me started on the phones.”

A recording a James Earl Jones’s voice came onto the line. “Welcome to Verizon 411.” Then, a pre-recorded operator’s voice. “City and state please.”

“Washington, DC” Brea answered.

“What listing?”

“Lani Lirtzman-Cameron.”

“One moment while we look up that listing.” The operator soothed her.

“This is a good feeling,” Brea chided Allison.

“That number is...2-0-2-4-0-1-3-0-5-0.” Brea hung up immediately, while the numbers were still fresh in her mind. “202 401, uh, 3050,” Brea mumbled the numbers as she remembered them, hanging up and re-inputting them into the phone, not wanting to be charged the 35 cents.

“Cameron-Lirtzman?” Allison asked.

“It’s Lirtzman-Cameron.” Brea reminded her.

“So it’s her divorced family name.”

“Her family is very divorced, she usually drops the Lirtzman.”

“I’d drop the Lirtzman too. And do you know why?”

“You don’t want to be Lani Lirtzman.”

“It’s very possible Lani Lirtzman’s an awfully bad name.”

Brea was concentrated on the phone. “Almost there... that’s it.” Brea waited for Lani on the line.”

It was a brief pause.

“Hi there, this Lani Cameron. I’m not home right now.” A bright cheerful voice announced, before turning sarcastic. “You could try reaching me on my cell phone, but if you don’t know the number there’s a reason. Caio Bello.”

Brea hung up the phone. “She’s not home.”

"She's not home. And you don't think there's a government conspiracy." "You know what I just realized?" Brea was incensed. "She stole my 'Caio Bello'! That's my phrase!"

"I thought it was very common."

"It's common to hear me say it."

Allison was deadpan. "Yet, somehow, life goes on."

"There was a time where it was just mine. God, I was so cool."

"To tell you the truth, I never really got it."

"It means goodbye."

"I could always tell by the way you were always leaving. So what language is that it?"

"It's general language. I picked it up."

"Lani picked it up."

"You know what I'm thinking? We just show up at the Washington Post."

"Just show up?"

"What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"We freak Lani out."

"Is that possible even more? She's up, she's down. I'm telling you she's a little kooky."

"Those are words that wouldn't be entirely out of place describing you."

"So now you're saying I'm the same as Lani?"

"No. You're very different. In ways that are entirely the same."

"Excuse me, have you even met Lani Cameron?"

"I think the way you guys are always fighting is cute."

"I'm ignoring that, and here's the plan. A. We show up at the Post.

"And B?"

"We see what happens."

"Show up and see what happens. You are a great planner. I think you majored in planning."

"I was too dedicated to my real major."

"What was that again?"

"I forget."

Sub-Chapter Six - Something to Awaken

The Washington Post, Washington D.C.

Lani was frantic, working wildly. She was manning the phones, typing a story, and talking to coworkers at the same time.

“Hey Lani, is ‘State Party’ capitalized?” Molly asked from her adjacent cubicle. She bothered Lani all day with questions. “Yes. Absolutely.”

Lani considered carefully the sentence she had just typed. Did it have the rhythm? Was it perfect as a part of her paragraph? Lani didn’t have the editor’s eye, as much as she had tried to develop it. By the twelfth time she’d read her own work, she missed essential errors.

Lani leaned back in her desk chair, trying to mentally take a quick break from her work to look at it with a new eye. She was stressed. Her job was making her stressed. And she loved every second of it. All around her the noise of the phones, the shouting and the chaos soothed her. It was the environment she thrived in.

She heard footsteps at her door. Lani was instantly at attention, cursing herself for having been caught leaning back in the chair. She spun around to see who her visitor was.

“Boy, have I got a story for you.”

It was Minuete. She was dressed in the trademark light yellow overcoat that matched the orange shade of her hair. She was tiny and diminutive, even next to Lani. Instead of her usual pearl bead tiara, she wore a pair of stylish, huge round glasses, even though Lani could not recall Minuete ever needing them before. The purple shards of jewel fragments glistened purple in the light.

“Minuete? What are you doing here?”

“What, you mean no one told you the Post hired me? Don’t you just pine for the good old days at the Bishop Beacon together?”

Lani remembered the “good old days.” They mostly consisted of Minuete making her work as editor of the Beacon ten times harder. Because she was better connected with the faculty, she got the first pick of interns. She took entire batches of them for the Style section. All dedicated to making that part of the paper a giant advertisement for Minuete and her glamorous brie-tasting party world.

“Are you doing the Metro section here too? That’s the closest thing to the Style section back at the Beacon.” Lani asked.

“Yes, but it gets even better than that.” Minuete held up a piece of paper. “Directive dates six-twelve-seventy-nine. Signed Cameron, Lani E. Temporary duty assignment to the Metro Section. And by the way, people in my department don’t call it the Metro section, we call it the Style section. That’s our way of reminding ourselves the fabulousness we require of ourselves.”

Lani was thrown back. “You’re joking,” her voice betraying how stunned she was. “You’re still upset about the Parking back at Bishop, aren’t you?”

Minuete laughed evilly “I have no intention of harming you. If you obey my orders for just a bit.”

“What do you mean?”

“Now, you’re going to be working directly underneath me. Still remember how to work a camera? You’re my new photographer.”

“I’m a writer! I stopped doing photography years ago. I’ve spent my time at the bottom.”

“This assignment is straight from Gorman himself. You’re in the Metro Section. I’ll pay you maybe half of what you’re making now. Unless of course, you’d rather drop out.”

Lani paused. "No, of course not."

"Fabulous! Your first assignment is tomorrow night. The New Year's Washington Correspondent's Ball. There's a special contest. The best-dressed woman will be crowned, and will generally be the envy of the entire town. She'll also have a full color photograph and article featured in the style section. Obviously, there's no way for you to win, but being on the Style Staff means you show up in style. I want you to get the most glamorous dress you can find. I mean high heels, diamond earrings, the whole works. Got it?"

"I get you."

"The great thing about the Style Section is all the cute boys to ogle. Oh, and one more thing," Minuete motioned towards her chest. "For you, I'd have to remind you that too much cleavage is definitely out of style." Minute winked. "Cheerio!"

Silence. Lani leaned far back in her chair. "Style Section..." she muttered to herself.

#### Sub-Chapter Seven - Influence of the Deep

As Allison and Brea walked through the doors of the Washington Post, Brea was still complaining about the Taxi ride.

"Thirty dollars for a ride from Eisenhower Avenue? That sucks!" Brea's hair seemed to get even spikier when she was upset, almost a defense mechanism.

"It was twenty five dollars," Allison reminded her.

"You know the people that don't tip? I'm not ever gonna be that person."

"I don't even know where Eisenhower Avenue is."

"I'd say it's about thirty dollars away from where we're standing now."

Allison noticed a group of guys standing in the lobby. "Boy there sure are a lot of cute boys in this city to ogle."

"Forget the guys for once, Holiday," Brea stated, not wanting to be distracted from their mission. "We need to find Lani."

The two strode through the lobby and to the elevators. Nearby, a security guard leapt to his feet, stepping between the girls and the elevators.

"Excuse me!" Most security guards weren't the savviest, motivated people in the world, but this one was different. He had a large, muscular heft to him.

Brea and Allison spoke in tandem. "Yes?"

"I need to see your passes before I can let you up."

"Oh, uh. We don't work here." Brea stuttered.

"We're here to see Lani Cameron, in the Opinions department," Allison finished her thought.

"Well let's just look in the building directory." They all stepped over towards the guard's desk. The guard typed quickly into a terminal, drawing up a list of all employees.

"Be sure to look up Lirtzman-Cameron while you're in there," Brea said while eyeballing Allison.

“There’s no ‘Lani’ anyone in the directory,” he stated plainly. “It’s possible she’s not listed.”

“Of course she’s not listed!” Allison exclaimed. “Let me tell you, we are neck deep in a government conspiracy, the likes of which...”

Brea cut her off. “What my friend here is trying to say is that of course she’s not important enough to be listed.”

“That sometimes happens,” the security guard agreed.

“So if you’ll just let us into the Opinions Section, we’ll find her and be on our way,” Brea said as the two girls started towards the elevator again.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that. Absolutely no one can be let into this building without prior authorization.” Brea started to protest, but the guard cut her off. “No exceptions.”

Allison knew a movie moment when she saw one. She jutted a finger sharply in the security guard’s direction, and tried the Schwarzenegger line boldly. “I insist.” There was just an awkward pause as everyone stared at her, the guard deciding whether to throw them out, Brea wondering why he hadn’t done so already.

The guard was about to stand up from his chair when the elevator bell dinged, the doors opening. Minuete stepped out, her yellow-orange hair wildly untamed yet perfect. And again, the tiny bronze family insignia pin on her overcoat.

Minuete turned her head, locking wide eyes with Allison Holiday, the last thing she was expecting. As Allison looked curiously into Minuete’s eyes, they seemed to be spinning, what was going on inside her head? The Minuete launched into her usual grandiosity.

“Well hello, hello. What brings you two to the neighborhood?” Minuete’s voice was chipper and condescending.

“Minuete,” Brea was completely shocked.

“We decided to take over the neighborhood. We’re getting jobs and apartments here,” Allison continued.

“You should see my new high-rise apartment,” Minuete said grandly. “It has a beautiful view of well, everything. But you’re here to see Lani. You there, guard! Let them in.”

“Yes, Miss Kiley,” the guard quickly responded.

“Gotta go girls! Ta-ta!” And she was gone.

The guard handed Brea and Allison a clipboard with form, and started digging for security passes.

“Opinions Section is the 10th floor, office 1004. You need to sign in, and sign out when you leave.”

Brea’s signature was just a messy scribble. Allison dotted both “l”s in her name with a bold movie star, and gave a grand, underlining loop with the “Y” in Holiday. They exchanged a smile.

Sub-Chapter Eight - It's Going To Be Closer

Lani thudded her head against her desk three times, each with an audible bonk. Her mind was racing with options. What was she going to do? How could the day possibly get any worse?

Allison and Brea raced into the cubicle, making Lani jump.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!” They screamed.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!” Lani screamed back, more terrified. “This! You two! This whole mess is your fault!”

“What, no ‘Hello, I missed you badly’?” Brea asked.

“We just saw Minuete in the lobby. It’s like Bishop University happening all over again!” Allison said excitedly.

“That’s why I’m screaming! This isn’t happening, oh dear Jesus this isn’t happening,” Lani wailed.

“Seriously, though there are some really cute boys in this office,” Brea said, ogling an intern across the hallway.

“I remember something vaguely about forgetting boys,” Allison was craning her neck to see.

“That was before I met the future Mr. Anatamata.”

“That’s not quite right.”

“Well I don’t know his name.”

“He looks like a ‘Timothy’.”

“He does look like a Timothy! Ooooooh, Timothy.”

“You might consider the possibility that he’s out of your league.”

“You should know lots of guys like the petite look, and my legs have been called sexy.”

“But in your case? I’d go with his last name. Any last name.”

“What’s wrong with Anatamata?”

“It kind of sounds like Ana-tomato. We’ve been over this”

“We went over that I told you, I don’t think that’s funny.”

“Who’s been calling your legs sexy? John?”

“No, my mom.”

“Okay, don’t talk to me for long time.”

Lani was miles out of the conversation. She was just staring to remember, the all-to-familiar rhythm coming back to her.

Allison continued, “While we’re on the subject, will you just tell us your first name already? I mean P. Brea Anatamata? What can be the story there?”

“There is no story. Now let’s never speak of it again.”

“Your Grandmother wouldn’t tell me either. But I’ll find out.”

“Oooh. Look at that! He’s typing, it’s so cute! I’m going to try my special look.”

“Your enticement look?”

“It’s me doing pouty. Check this out.”

Brea caught the intern's eye across the office, and furled her brow, pursing her lips together. This startled "Timothy", who jumped back in his chair, which he was already tilting back in. This caused the wheels to slip on from under him, his head smashing against the desk behind him. He fell to the ground, unconscious. Around him the coworkers raced, one woman screaming, "Medic! Get him a medic!"

Allison looked at Brea matter-of-factly. "I told you to work on that look." Behind them, Lani bonked her head against her desk again, this time leaving it there, defeated.

"Gee Lani, you don't look so hot," Allison commented. She pulled a hip flask from her pocket. "Have a little jungle juice. Six times stronger than beer, about eight other things in there to keep you up and rocking."

Lani spoke to them directly for the first time. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Allison laughed. "Because we're a team."

"It's our story, see? All of us here in DC, just like Bishop," observed Brea.

"Yeah! Go team, go!" The decibel was too loud for an office, and the words were an involuntary reflex from her days as a cheerleader. Allison realized this a beat too late. "Sorry about that. We always used to do that on the team bus. Made us fierce!"

Lani was speaking more freely now. "We're not on the team bus now. And I'm not your teammate, I'm your roommate. Formerly. We talked about the difference, remember?"

"I should tell Tequila to change his name to 'Bus.' No one can stop 'The Bus'."

"I have to tell you, that is a fabulous idea!" Brea said excitedly. "'The Bus' doesn't stop for anyone."

"Better look out for 'The Bus'," Lani added.

"I'm going to call him right now," Allison exclaimed. "Somebody give me a phone."

"None of my phones are working here," said Brea.

"I left my phone is at home," said Lani.

"See, you're sparking up," observed Brea. "You're getting into the feeling here. We've a rapport."

"Rapport? All I know is every time Brea Anatamata and Allison Holiday show up, my life starts to spin out of control. Rapidly. I don't want any more adventures, no more impossible stories! You two are like a walking sitcom plot," Lani was frantic.

"And I called you the lunatic woman," said Brea to Allison.

Allison didn't even hear her. "Bishop was pretty cool, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bishop was tragedy. Over and over again." Lani wanted to set the record straight. "Can you even name the number of times we caused epic disaster? The NPR thing."

"Getting Ashley to break up with Nikki."

"My run for student body president."

"Trashing Finnes house with the party when we babysat."

"The whole 'Plan' thing to go out with Ashley."

“Posing as a judge and rigging the science fair.”

“Getting the House thrown off campus.”

“Ruining my shot at Fox News.”

“Wrecking your car twice.”

“Trying to get Ashley’s name to something more manly, like Julian.”

“The time Tequila trashed Lani’s dorm room when he was all high.”

“Getting Ashley to break up with Nikki again.”

“Do you see a trend here? Do we need to continue?” Lani finished the story reminiscing. “Plus, and I’m out of my mind for not mentioning this earlier, but you blew up a multi-million dollar building!”

Molly, the intern stuck her head through the door. “Lani, your apartment manager’s on line six. Something about a kitchen fire.”

Lani sat frozen. “I’m only 24 and I’m lost my mind.” She picked up the line, giving Brea and Allison her coldest stare. They could only hear Lani’s part of the conversation.

“Yes, this is Lani Cameron. I don’t know, I might have left the coffee pot on, but I never used the stove. How bad was it? Three apartments? So you’re telling me there’s nothing left. No, I didn’t have any insurance. Well how long will it take to redo the place? Can’t I move into another part of the building? What do you mean, you’re kicking me out? Of course those tenants are insisting! No! Fine, just call me back tomorrow and we’ll figure out what we’ll do about the lease.”

Lani was shell-shocked. “I just hung up the phone. What’s the best possible thing that could have just happened to me?”

“Nothing possible but the worst.” Brea said quietly.

“But it’s the best! You know what this means? We’re all going apartment shop-ping!” Allison was thrilled, her voice sing-song.

“No, no, no. We are not going apartment shopping.” Lani cut her off. “We are not doing this over again.”

“You’re pretty freaked out. More than usual,” said Brea, stating the very obvious. “What all is going wrong?”

“Where do you want me to start? Minuete got me transferred to the Style section, I’m just a photographer now, my pay got cut in half, my apartment burned down, I lost everything I owned but my car, which I’ll have to sell when they sue me over the rent.”

Brea and Allison looked at each other. A beat.

“Mm...b-oy...” muttered Brea.

“This, this is nothing. It’s a cakewalk,” Allison was oblivious.

“It’s a signal. A subtle signal,” Brea agreed.

“You move in with us, we’ll cut you a break on the rent for a couple of months while you get back on your feet.”

“What could possibly go wrong?” Brea soothed her in her most assuring voice.

#### Sub-Chapter Nine - Omission of the World

Club Wonderland, Washington D.C.

Later that night, Minuete was driving way too fast for the city, all but ignoring the red lights. Her car was a bright red 1987 Porsche 956, originally part of the F3 project designed to make the ultimate Porsche 911. It was reduced in weight, and designed without safety features so it could be driven at the maximum handling limit. Its driver could computer-select the suspension for one of four modes. Dry road, wet road, ice, and maximum traction. Right now Minuete was on wet, icy road and driving all too fast.

She circled the block twice until she could find a spot right next to her destination. The snow was coming down hard as Minute skidded into a parking spot. New Year’s Eve was so close to arriving. She bundled her untamed hair into a bright red shawl, and put on her clear glasses she didn’t need. Stepping out of her car, she smoothed down her yellow overcoat.

“Taxi!” She raised her arm. One came to a stop immediately. Climbing in she waved offhandedly, “Just around the block. Take me to Wonderland.”

Even outside, the loud techno music could be heard blaring from Wonderland, the greatest club of them all. An epic experience of lights, dancing, and pushing as people lined to get in. Minuete threw money in the direction of the driver. The crowds of people lined outside in the snow could only feel envy as Minuete confidently walked past the bouncers who recognized her, and into the insanity. Carmet was there waiting for her, and gave Minuete a sharp salute. “What’s the story?” Minuete asked.

“They already knew who I was when I got here. Way weird. Anyway there’s someone waiting for you in the VIP room. The door is hidden on the junction between rooms on this floor.” Minuet just nodded, barely hearing her. “Stay near the door and wait for me. I’m not sure exactly what we’re dealing with here.” “Not a problem boss,” responded Carmet perkily.

A mass of people, writhing drinking and dancing, and enjoying all the easily available pleasures of Wonderland. The music was a tense, chaotic beat, all minor apocalyptic chords, compelling people to dance at a frenzied pace. It was past 1:00am, which meant the second ballroom was open. Annoyed, she pushed her way through people who did not part for her. Minuete was not used to people missing exactly what she instructed.

It was easy for most people to miss the entrance to the VIP room between the first and second ballroom where the biggest bouncers of them all guarded. Again, they recognized Minuete, and easily allowed her access to the Coterie. And that was it, the hallway was eerily devoid of the chaotic music.

The muffled roar of the music allowed for conversation. In the corners with the chairs there were no lights.

Seven people were in the room, but no one important enough to Minuete to care to remember. One man, thinner than the rest, stepped to the side, revealing a laptop screen and some equipment. Minuete recognized the equipment from her families military dealings. It was a secure videophone, top encryption of signal. This was not something easy to come by. Minuete felt a little impressed and a little scared.

The one light of the room spotlighted Minuete. She casually removed her shawl, glasses and overcoat, discarding them in a nearby chair. She looked as beautiful as she ever had. Her blouse was the blackest black, stylishly cut out in all the right places. Her skirt flared out as wildly as her hair, picked carefully to match the orange-yellow shade of her hair. Her high heels had elaborate straps, laced up around her ankles. Minuete moved towards the equipment.

On the phone was a matriarchal female sitting quite deliberately in shadows. No matter where she moved, her face was masked in the darkness, making it all but impossible to see anything but the outline of her hair and lips as they moved. The voice was electronically filtered.

You could barely see them as she spoke. "Ah, Minuete. It's so good to see you. We've all been looking forward to working with you."

"Hello, I...I don't know what to call you." Minuete said with far more respect than she ever showed anyone else.

"Sadly, this is a world where real names can come back to haunt you. You may refer to me as the Mistress Nine. My organization is the Coterie."

"The Coterie?"

"Like witches, the Coterie is an umbrella group for all my various interests. You should come up with your ownonyms, and a name for your cell. All cells end with the numbers Ninety."

"A name, then Ninety. I Understand. Actually naming my own organization has been a dream of mine for a very long time."

"That doesn't surprise us. I have to say, we were all pleased you went ahead and hired Carmet. She will be an excellent addition to your management team," Mistress Nine remarked, overly enunciating every syllable of the sentence, her voice overly proper and villainously pitched.

Minuete was placing her delicate tiara on her forehead, the delicate beads running through her hair. "She's up and on deck... She's a little ditzy but she does as she's told." This was an ironic comment because later when she was leaving she would find that Carmet had forgotten about the whole guarding her thing, and was dancing like crazy on the stage, drinking very heavily.

Mistress Nine offered "Did you know you had a predecessor? Her name is unimportant and her intentions were in the right place, but lately her failures have necessitated a more... direct solution. To put it simply, you're up, Minuete. And your formerly nameless predecessor, poor Melpomene, I'm afraid... she's out!" Minuete understood the underpinnings of this comment. Do not mess up or else. "What is it that you wish for me to do, Mistress?" The words were quite direct. "I am not your Mistress." Apparently Minuete had inadvertently pissed her off. "I am the 'Mistress Nine', or in a pinch 'Nine.' That's important to remember. But yes, let's get to the fun part. Why you're here. Can you please show me your right hand, palm face?"

Excitedly, Minuete pulled back the black spandex sleeve enough to show her right hand and forearm for the video camera, badly scarred with embedded multicolored amethyst shards. They coldly glistened in the reflected light from the laptop. She was excited because this meant Mistress Nine apparently knew about the incident. The rare incident where Minuete Kiley had not gotten what she had exactly wanted. And in fact, it was something that she didn't want.

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Before the incident Minuete had been familiar with Lani Cameron, but only in the loosest sense. She had been editor of the style section and had taken substantial delight in watching her editor freak out as she consumed all the resources of Lani's beloved Bishop Beacon newspaper. But the Lani had done the worst thing possible. She had accidentally bested Minuete.

As always, it had all started in LV-426. Ashley Allen, the group's resident male tech expert, had been playing with his new cell phone channel scanner. On Allison's insistence he had pointed the thing at LV-Beta, the sister dorm to their building LV-Alpha. As he shifted through the frequencies, there had been very many conversations. But Lani's journalist ears picked up a 5 second clip. It was Minuete's evil cackle, then her voice.

"Everything's in the pipe five by five. Let Rook know to pick up his train station destination, P216." A random voice responded "He's in accord."

From this, Lani's nose for a story turned out to be dead. Onboard a train, Minuete's trained good squad, Taro, Tselinoyarask and Rook had been sent to retrieve the "Lektor" device Lani was able to steal, which would have generated Minuete parking permits in handicapped zones.

Minuete's punishment for Rook, Tselinoyarask and Taro losing the Lektor device had been quite harsh, and was also illegal. It was a shame she had no one else to blame for the accident/incident that had left her right palm and forearm permanently scarred, worse yet by the same jeweled purple color of her attacker.

Here's how it had gone down. Minuete, quite unaware that LV-426 and its crew existed, needed a computer expert for some work, and Ashley Allen fit the bill. Ashley was, in fact doing computer work for Minuete's first attempt at world domination, offering free porn on the internet, but keeping detailed files on who had downloaded what. In fact, she had even caught Ashley downloading several naked pictures of the Little Mermaid.

But Allison had been onto Minuete from the start. One day, she needed Ashley back in the LV because she couldn't figure out how to load her optical disk viewing device, known to many Americans as a DVD player. She called a friend in the FBI, who went to investigate Minuete's family home for FCC violations. Allison came along for the ride.

Minuete had run through her bedroom, grabbing things to take with her as she escaped, throwing her bag. Her passport, a tazer, ceramic throwing knives (sharper than any steel), a remote controlled door clearing charge, and a collection of amethyst gems she had kept in case she needed to barter the black market to help her escape from a bad situation. One small problem. She dropped the remote control for the small bomb.

Allison was just prancing around Minuete's complex, singing Barry Manilowe's "Copacabana" in her head. She saw the transmitter Minuete had dropped, and wondered out loud "What does this button do?" Allison loved pushing buttons, and did so. She heard a small explosion, then Minuete's inhuman shrieking.

Recovering at a private European hospital (her lawyers had made short work of the FBI's case against her), the doctors told Minuete she had been incredibly lucky. She had been trying to move stealthily to escape in her Lexus SC, and had unlocked the trunk with the keys to quietly drop the bag inside. Crouching behind the car, she slid open the trunk just enough to slide the bag in, her palm and forearm exposed. She had just released it to drop, then boom!

She had been lucky it was just her hand that had been burned and scarred. The months of skin grafting procedures were absolutely excruciating, and the drugs barely numbed the pain. For starters, fragments of hundreds of bright purple amethyst shards had embedded and burned themselves within her skin.

The burn damage was so serious that removing the jewel shards, causing more trauma to the skin, would have seriously risked her losing the whole hand. First the team of surgeons grafted skin from a cadaver onto her arm. Then after months of progressive grafts, Minuete had a piece of skin taken from each buttock, and placed over the hand scarring in the final graft. The amethyst shards had, as with each previous graft, poked their way through the skin.

Today, the burns were reasonably unnoticeable but the bright glints of purple light certainly were. She also had a large vertical scar on each of her buttocks. She pledged in her mind to repay Allison with all the pain she had suffered for the experience, with interest for the buttock scars.

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Back to the Reality, back to the Coterie. Mistress Nine was observing Minuete's jeweled hand through the video device. Her gaze was coldly detached. "Your dream is world domination, it looks as though you've gotten your first scar," she laughed. Inside Minuete was fuming, but she knew better than to go against her new boss and said nothing instead.

"I'd expect you'd like the opportunity to strike back at this insurgent, Allison Holiday."

"Why on earth would someone as powerful as you care about Allison Holiday?" Minuete actually had to know. "She's just some girl from Bishop University, a ditzzy boozed up cheerleader. She doesn't even know how to work a microwave!"

Mistress Nine's gaze was cool. "All too true. But have you bested her yet? Here's a bit of advice from your new boss. Why I'm interested in her is my own business. All you need to concern yourself with is the sheer joy and insolent pleasure you'll get in taking her down."

Without a beat Minuete knew what side her bread was buttered on. "Then I guess we're after the same thing." On the video phone, she saw the first hint of Mistress Nine's eyes, an excited glint from them. Mistress Nine spoke "I will give you whatever resources you need in eliminating Allison Holiday."

"Eliminate her, not a problem. But how far are you wanting to go?"

"I think an excellent place to start would be to get me her ponytail, cut it off, chop chop!" spoke Mistress Nine, "Then we can consider giving her a few scars of her own."

Minuete remembered seeing Allison and Brea earlier that day in the Washington Post lobby. If they had met up with Lani, Brea would most certainly have freaked out at the chance to go to the dinner in a fancy dress, and Allison would most certainly come in tow.

Minuete spoke "Allison Holiday and Brea Anatamata have met up with an old friend of theirs, Lani Cameron. I assigned her to go to an event on New Years Eve. They will probably be there as well. I have some 'friends' that could stop by."

Although you couldn't see it, you could feel from the coldness of the room that Wiseman was frowning disappointedly.

“It’s possible that could complicate our plans. In any instance, we’re going to have to push up our schedule a bit. I want you to take an old friend of yours with you on this first assignment, the New Year’s Eve Ball. I’m sure she’ll prove to be most useful.” stated Mistress Nine.

A figure stood from the shadows directly behind Minuete. In the dim light, it flickered brightly off her the blue silver tint of her angular sunglasses, then out like a candle. They were on the edge of fashion, almost like a visor, obscuring her eyes. She held an extended cane, with a strap around her delicate wrist. Everything about her was pale, her lips, and her dark hair that shone the same muted blue color as her glasses in this particular light. Around her forehead the hair was not quite as long, but flared out sharply, with several stay strands floating upwards and neatly falling back into her thick mane.

For her top she wore a very high collared suit coat, coming all the way, nearly to her chin. They were just a shade darker than her visor sunglasses. When her cleavage was as low as possible, and was held together by two buttons along her stomach. Her pants were very tight leather that eventually made it up her legs to her belt buckle. There the shirt matched the pants, leaving a seamless illusion. Everything about the way she was dressed was on the edge of fashion, designed by the top style intellects of that world. Ironic because of her condition.

When Minuete realized she was blind, she realized who she was.

“Britney? Britney Candrell?”

“Hello Mimi.” That comment set Minuete off. “Don’t you call me Mimi!”

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Three years earlier at Bishop University, Minuete had a passing knowledge of who Britney Candrell was. Brea hadn’t arrived at Bishop University yet. The cast of LV-426 consisted of Allison, Brea, Ashley, and John. Many males are clueless at dating, but John was someone particularly clueless. And the woman that got to wait patiently was Britney Candrell.

Britney sat back, waiting for John to figure out she didn’t play games, there were no signals, she said exactly what she was thinking. Her exact words were “I don’t play games, there are no signals, I say exactly what I’m thinking.” To John, the fact that there were no apparent signals was a signal in and of itself. The secret of what she was really saying was something he was getting by subtle clues.

Although not officially part of LV-426, she did live in the LV-Alpha building. Britney would pop up from time to time in the calamity, less and less frequently after John had moved, and Brea had moved into his room in the dorm.

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Britney tapped her cane along the floor, feeling her way beside Minuete. Minuete had to get one thing out of the way immediately. “Why are you here? I thought you were friends with Allison and Lani?”

Britney just smiled. “Passing friends at best. It was really just me and John. After he moved, quite frankly I thought that chick Brea was absolutely crazy after about 5 minutes.”

“So why go after them now?” Minuete had to know. Could she trust her? “It’s simple. Mistress Nine wants to pay me a lot of money. And I don’t give enough of a damn about them enough to care. Everyone from LV-426 remembers me quite fondly. Brea, Lani and Allison. I’ll have no trouble manipulating them, for your own personal purposes of course.”

“Of course,” Minuete agreed.

Despite being a former love interest of one of the earliest members of LV-426, after he had early on transferred schools to be near his latest crush Britney was pissed. Seriously pissed. But she had still done her time in LV-426. Before, she was as sweet as possible, something had changed her dramatically. Now she was darker. More Machiavellian.

Minuete wondered what could have happened to her to make her turn?

Minuete, Britney turned, ready to leave. They were quite the pair. A boy crazed blond, and a lethal brunette.

Mistress spoke commandingly “Minuete, Britney, I don’t foresee you having any problems with Carmet, but I do know you two are very different people. I don’t want any cat fighting wasting our time. You make it work.” The girls looked at each other, then to Mistress Nine and nodded.

The video screen went blank. The girls took it as a message it was time to leave. Minuete gathered her coat, and Britney picked up a large laptop bag. This meeting of The Coterie was over.

#### Sub-Chapter Ten - Liberi Fatali

Brea and Allison were thrilled having their first adventure with Lani back in tow. The whole LV-426 back together again. Blowing up LV-Gamma hadn’t quite felt right without Lani in there watching with appall. Neither had the daily lunch sessions they’d held in the cafeteria commons. Sure they’d brought in an old friend from junior high to be their third. In fact, it was strange. Years later they were amazed to find she was a distant cousin of Lani’s. So for their part, Brea and Allison were pretty psyched. For her part, Lani was freaked out and paranoid.

After reporting to her old boss about the transfer to the Metro/Style section, and telling him about her apartment being burnt down and all her other troubles, he had quite generously given Lani her two-weeks of vacation with pay. It wouldn’t even show up as vacation time once she transferred to the new session. Reporters understand the value of taking the occasional day off.

Lani had visited her burned down apartment, it was pretty much all consumed in the conflagration. Lani hadn’t had renter’s insurance, and her complex had announced their intention to sue over the damages. It was a total of \$15,482. Her only asset was her car, a gold Saturn, it was worth maybe \$11,500 if she was lucky. Lani had a bank account balance of \$546.34 with no savings. To add insurance to injury, there wasn’t much of a car market in DC, because there was no need for one with the bus and the metro.

The girls were in the lobby of Lani’s apartment complex, where she had just gotten the news, negotiating with her apartment manager. Lani had her face in her hands. “I am so screwed. I am so screwed. Oh my god am I screwed.” Allison was sitting next to her listening. Brea was on the phone, angrily arguing with someone. “Don’t worry,” comforted Allison who didn’t really understand the situation. “We’re here now, you’ve got your posse, your girls.”

“Yeah,” said Lani in a heavy voice. “At least I still have my job. I mean working for Minuete will be awful. I can sell the car and make payments. I don’t know. Allison was just staring with her head cocked, Lani added “You know, the thing is, I love DC. The last six months have been by far the happiest of my life.”

“Not for me,” said Allison. “The LV just hasn’t been the same without you. Ashley and I really have missed you. And Brea will never admit it, but she was always bringing up stories ‘Remember when Lani did this’ and ‘Wonder what Lani would think about that.’”

“Really?” said Lani, watching Brea across the lobby, intently jabbering on her cell phone.

“We would be in the shopping and she’d want to buy you something she thought you’d like, and I’d have to remind her we didn’t have your address.”

Allison didn’t notice the shift in Lani’s demeanor. “I guess it was pretty bitchy of me to leave without telling you guys where I was going. It was just...Allison, there is something about you and Brea. Disaster follows you guys. It’s just draining.”

“Yeah,” said Allison. “But things always work out, don’t they? I mean in the end we always make it.” Allison remembered the race to graduation with Brea, where she had asked her every three seconds if they were going to make it, and they had.

Brea folded her cell phone and walked over to the girls. “I’m about to say something, but first you guys have to promise no arguing over it. Actually check that. Lani, I don’t want to hear any complaining from you.”

“Sure, Brea.” said Lani, curious what she was talking about.

“You know how I’m a geek when it comes to money and numbers?” The girls both nodded. “Lani, I checked with my accountant and your car’s worth less than 11k because of all the accidents you’ve had in it, and even less in the city.”

By now Lani well into the acceptance stage and was numb to bad news. “Okay.” she said. “Well, Allison and I caused most of them,” Brea said with a smile, “so I thought I’d help you out. I’ve got a cousin in Tennessee that just turned 15 and got his learner’s permit. He could use a 4 year old Saturn to beat around in. He’s already wired the \$11,500 into my account.”

Lani’s eyes opened wide, her mind racing with relief. She stammered “Brea, Brea, I...” Brea cut her off, “And had my lawyer your apartment manager. He couldn’t get anywhere with the guy, so I got on the phone with the actual owner of the building, who said the apartment manager was out of his mind, he was sure he could get the fire damage fixed for \$13,000. And you’ve got 500 dollars in you bank account.”

Lani was started to protest but Brea completely cut her off. “No, no, no, no. Let’s just skip the part where you tell me you can’t accept it. It’s already a done deal. By the way, you’re the one that gets to drive it to Tennessee. Allison and I will get set up in a hotel room big enough for the three of us, and we’ll start searching for an apartment.”

Lani took a moment to process everything. “Alright,” she agreed. Lani was overwhelmed with gratitude for Brea. She might be a spiky haired crybaby sometimes, but she could also be a good friend. “Brea, that leaves a thousand dollars that I owe.”

Her response was simple. “I’ll pay you a thousand dollars not to hug me right now.”

#### Sub-Chapter 11 - Roses and Wine

It took Lani four days to get back from Tennessee. Between the traveling, the security, and the long time spent alone in the car driving, she was exhausted. She wanted nothing more than a shower and a change of clothes. Of course because her apartment had burned down, she didn’t have any. At her

gym she had several sets of workout clothes though. Lani looked absolutely ridiculous as she got out of the heated Saturn wearing a thick black DC overcoat shivering in the December air wearing a sports bra and workout clothes. At least she got to get away with wearing a comfy sports bra for a few days. Being busty definitely had its advantages, but the girls could be a pain.

For that exact reason Lani was at the mall with Brea and Allison. She had gotten her paycheck and was out at the mall buying a whole new wardrobe from scratch. She was buying shoes when she mentioned "You know, I really should go ahead and get a dress for the ball."

Both Brea and Allison's heads turned simultaneously. "What ball?" Lani had no choice but to spill the beans.

"Da-da-da, DA!" A fancy dress ball?" Allison was thrilled beyond belief.

"A contest for best dressed, on New Years Eve?" Brea's mind was racing with possibilities.

Lani was unimpressed, driving them up to the mall in her four year old Saturn coupe. "I can sneak you in, but Minuete said we had to look fabulous. Diamond earrings, high heels. The whole works. I'm talking to the moon."

Allison was dreamy eyed. "I wish Tequila would fly me to the moon in a spaceship! It would be so romantic!"

Lani quipped instantly. "You don't need the spaceship Allison, you're spacey enough. Although, between you and Brea is a tough call."

"What do you mean by that?" Brea demanded! "I'll have you know if there's anyone around here that's a space case it's you, fashion flop."

"Fashion flop? If you'd spent a little more time studying, maybe I wouldn't have graduated a semester before you did."

"The bleeding side of fashion. I'd say that's at least as important as GPA."

"I suppose you do," Lani continued. "And besides, when you weren't screwing up school you were going after boys. That's all you did is chase after boys, boys, boys, boys..."

"They were chasing after me!" Brea batted her eyelids. "Some might say proof of superior taste."

"Sure. But how many serious boyfriends did you have at Bishop? And don't count Sydney because he was only using you to get to Allison."

Brea was starting to tear up. "I know, it's true. All of it. But I just can't help it." She was wailing now. "I'll never get married!"

Lani was steamed. "Honestly Brea! Seriously you can be such a whiny headed crybaby sometimes!"

"Crybaby! At least I'm not a traitor to the LV. Traitor!"

"I'll bail whenever I want. For instance I'm bailing out of this conversation now."

"Fruit face!"

"Banana Brain!"

"Boobs for brains!"

“You blew up a building!”

It had come to its inevitable conclusion. Brea’s tears shut off instantly.

“Thhhhhhhbbbt!!!” Brea sputtered at Brea, tongue sticking out.

“Thhhhhhhbbbt!!!” Lani sputtered right back, blowing her tongue even harder.

“Thhhhhhhbbbt!!!” Brea sputtered as hard as she could.

Allison had had enough about the insanity. “All right already! That’s enough!” Allison declared. “Now let’s talk about this ball.”

The annual White House Correspondents Dinner Ball was a very famous event. For most of the year the press and the politicians were in a all out war. For this one night, the best and brightest of the nations media had a chance to get together and celebrate with the very people they were covering. The event had been rescheduled, they were experimenting with moving the event to New Years Eve this year in an attempt to make the ball less predictable. The most prominent attendees were the staff of the White House and, yes, a visit from the President himself, as Lani explained to Brea and Allison.

Brea and Allison instantly went back into their own little worlds, miles away from Lani, planning on what they were going to wear. Something to match Allison’s green eyes, the highest heels possible. Something elegantly simple and satin for Brea, with a shorter skirt. What kind of jewelry were they going to get? What about lingerie? And it was then that Lani realized she was going to have to “do pretty” and go along with the game.

Lani surprised them all by saying “I don’t know much about this fashion stuff. Is it possible you could do me up, you two?”

Brea didn’t know how to respond. “Well, I have to say, I’m a bit honored.”

Allison interjected. “All those years of Vogue and Cosmo are finally going to pay off. We’ll make you look fabulous!”

“There will never another night where you look more fantastic than you will on New Years Eve. Lani?”

“I’m not much up for the girly-girl stuff.”

“One night. One night to look as fabulous as possible.”

Lani stuttered for a moment. “All right. I’m in.”

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“Shopping...” Allison intoned almost zombie like.

Brea and Allison found the formal dress department almost instinctively. Six hours later Lani was coming out of her mind. They were talking about details entirely beyond her scheme of comprehension.

For Allison, she decided on a dress that she could also wear clubbing, should the need arise at the party. An opaque purple with an equally transparent bow in the back, the dress was sleeveless and mischievously short. Allison had never really mastered the art of walking in heels, so she purchased a pair of translucent flats.

Strapless? Red? Pink? Blond Orange? Brea couldn't decide, and needed much more time than Lani was willing to give her, so she bought three very similar gowns. All of them stuck to her original vision of something elegantly simple. Besides, she knew it was the accessories that made an outfit, so she bought everything she imagined would possibly work.

As for Lani, it was amazing the transformation Brea and Allison were able to accomplish for someone that dressed in reporter's clothes virtually all the time. She was arguably the most beautiful, although Brea was cuter and Allison had far more sexual charisma than she was aware of. Her gown was a beautifully opaque blue, showing her flawless skin, but not quite so opaque in other places. Her thick mane of short blond hair was to be brushed back, exposing her tiny ears. The earrings she bought were dangling crystal jewels, hexagonally cut so that they almost reached below her chin. But it was the cut of the dress that made it so enticing. The back of the dress fell all the way down to her waist. The dress was slit on only the right side, daringly high, ending just a little above her upper thigh. In the front, the dress was just as revealing, and was not quite designed for someone with the kind of chest Lani had. It would have to be altered.

They spent the rest of the day buying special makeup, getting new haircuts, and boring Lani out of her mind. But at the end of the day, she had to admit the girls were right. She did look more beautiful than she had ever looked in her life.

But no, they weren't quite finished yet. Allison and Brea insisted on helping her get her new clothes, with the apartment fire and all. Lani was tough on them and bitterly stuck to variations on her standard reporters outfit, all of them based around the turtleneck sweaters she favored. She was especially psyched about getting the leather knee boots she had always wanted.

Brea did not believe in credit cards. She just didn't believe in borrowing money at all, except of course for a mortgage. She wanted to be in her own mortgage as soon as possible, but needed the flexibility of a lease, because it was impossible to say where she would be in three to five years.

When her parents had gotten a mortgage, they had literally been up to their forehead in to the tune of \$100,000 dollars. But they had worked their way through the debt and now they were just two years from paying it off. The house was now worth \$450,000 dollars.

When it came to buying a car, she was a hypocrite somewhat. For most people she felt spending more than \$25,000 on a car was crazy. And you did not want to get into a discussion with her on interest rate game that most car dealers paid. And she had bought her very first car, a decade old Honda Accord sedan. But after that, she had gotten fancier and fancier. But now that she understood finance, she ended up not getting sucker punched.

Brea could not imagine a situation where you should borrow money at a credit card statistical average of fourteen percent. But Lani's situation came close. But because she had been building heavily into her emergency fund, Brea was more than happy to help Lani out with her shopping crisis.

Lani was truly touched by the gesture, but knew Brea wouldn't want sappy hugs and kisses, as would she be uncomfortable giving them. So the two made the traditional "But, I couldn't possibly accept," and "No, I insist." Then they made each other's eye contact and nodded. A gesture of true respect. Brea and Lani's relationship was like a carnival high wire act. Sometimes things go crash.

Since Lani's ball gown would need to be altered, Allison and Brea took the extra step of getting everything measured so all their outfits would fit like Armani suits. For Brea's waif-like body, it was more difficult.

The gowns would be available by New Year's Eve.

## Sub-Chapter 1 - Rhythm Shift

Capitol Hill, Washington D.C.

It was the dawn of 20x8, and Election Eve was just under a year away. The news about town of course was centering on the upcoming Presidential primaries. It was the end of a successful two-year term for the Democrats. But not all was well. The economy had been mediocre from day one, and had only improved marginally in the interim. In addition, the office had been among the most scandal plagued in history.

Very early on in the administration the Vice President had declared that he would not seek the Presidency. Under no circumstances whatsoever. This was partially due to health concerns, partially because it left him to be a more effective tool for the President. But this left the Republicans with a terrible power vacuum. But the past eight years were another story for another time. Here and now, Charlie Westcott was the rising star in the Republican Party. Despite the fact that the biggest mistake of his life had been his spectacular flame-out Presidential campaign in 20x0.

Looking back at what he was thinking at the time, it was hard for Charlie Westcott to figure out what was going on in his life and in his mind for him to have made so huge a mistake. And it had cost him terribly with the party. Charlie Westcott had been elected out of the Senate in 20x4 after a death duel with the Democratic candidate.

In order to "come back" to the political scene after his resounding defeat, Westcott had gone the other way with it. He had immediately started his campaign for Governor of his state. It had been his wife, Staci Westcott's idea in the first place.

One of the biggest surprises of his campaign had been how much his wife, Staci Westcott grew into her role. At first, she was disgusted by the spectacle of politics. Before she and Charlie had gotten married, they were dating during his doomed campaign for reelection in the Senate. The election very nearly destroyed their relationship. But soon Staci came to accept the "always on" way of life.

The leading candidate for the Democratic opposition was a woman by the name of Maryam d'Abo, a member of a lesser state with few electoral votes. It seemed America had finally gotten past its stereotype that only white males were eligible for the Presidential office. Maryam knew she had to be twice as hard and smart to just be seen as equal. But the age of the female President just might have come for the Republican Party.

Maryam d'Abo had gotten involved in politics from the very beginning. She remembered the first time she had been 6 and a kind poll worker had allowed her to "vote" in the election, although her ballot had been cast aside. From then on, she was hooked.

She had worked very hard at her High School Republican's club, even years before it was fashionable for women to be part of the Republican Party. She carried it to the next step in college, being the Vice-President of the college Republicans.

Tragically, her husband, Congressman Sterling d'Abo had died earlier in 20x7 in a tragic private plane accident. The ceremony was tearful, yet left the Republicans in quite a quandary. With the election so close there was no way to position another Republican into position in time to have them win. So fell the brilliant strategy of using his wife. Maryam soon found herself from playing dutiful widow to doing standard stump speeches. Moreover, she had seen them enough to be good at them. The crowds literally ate her up as she hit the same talking points of her dearly departed husband.

It was an exciting time to be a Republican. Moving on from the uncompassionate roots their past, this new generation of Republicans realized that Government did have a place in making lives better and more fair. Under the worst of circumstances, of course. Quickly moving up the ranks of the Republican Party, her brand of politics was compromise, working together with Democrats to work somewhere in the middle. Compromise was her mantra.

Better yet, the Republican National Committee was eager to give all their support, both logistically and behind the scenes for the newly elected Congressman d'Abo. The Republican party wanted to move beyond its roots as being seen as the party of every America, not just the majority.

Would Maryam d'Abo be the first elected woman to the Presidency? She certainly had a good shot at it. The polls had Americans split nearly down the middle, with far more undecidedes as usual. She looked fantastic for a woman her age. She ignored the heavily shoulder padded, linebacker look that most women in politics went for, instead going for simple skirted suits. Although the murmurs persisted about a face-lift and if she had cleverly changed her hair at the same time to distract from it.

The two candidates had much in common. Both came from military families. Both believed government had a mandate to help people that couldn't help themselves. And both supported middle of the road politics. Charlie Westcott and Maryam d'Abo believed in compromise being the way to govern. Although this was an excellent strategy for the actual election, it was no way to win the primary. Usually the best strategy was to play to the extremes of the party, then move back to the center after the primaries were over. Although they would most certainly run, neither candidate had made it official yet. Maryam d'Abo had a large exploratory committee set up, and Charlie Westcott was waiting until later, so he could spend as much time as possible concentrating on the affairs of his State.

And then there was Bill Dalton.

He rounded the field of nuts, flakes and fruits in this, the silly season before the real race for President could occur. Bill Dalton spent an hour every single day of the week on Fox News making sure than America knew exactly what his opinion was on any given subject.

Why did people tune in? Because on the air Bill Dalton was a straight up, no nonsense, look-you-in-the-eye, no BS kind of guy. In a town where looking after your own butt was the highest priority, Dalton was the king of no spin. He called them exactly as he saw it. And he didn't try to hide the fact that he was an ego-maniac. He called that the way he saw it too.

His show, The Dalton Influence, was the number one show on Cable News. If you had told Bill Dalton five years ago what a phenomenal success his show was going to be, he would not have believed you.

On television Dalton was deliriously happy, playing up all the town gossip that he would run for President. He delighted in the mystery, the grandiosity of it all. He did things like run a poll on his website on the topic of whether he should run or not run. The way he spoke, he could say one thing, when viewers familiar with him knew what he really meant. That's why there was no question with fans whether or not Dalton intended to run for President.

Dalton went to extreme measures to make sure his private life remained private. In all his years in the media, he had never once mentioned his wife, Lisa. He drove himself to work, wanting the location of his house to remain a secret. It was assumed that since he was quick to instantly judge

others, there were people checking him out. In fact it was that assumption that worked in Dalton's favor.

As Dalton himself pointed out many times on his show, the nominations of Charlie Westcott and Maryam d'Abo were far from certain. In fact, it almost seemed foolish to try to predict the winner with an entire eleven months to go. Before Election Eve was over, there would be absolute hell to pay.

Sub-Chapter 2 - Open Hand, Closed Fist

"Here's the story," started Minuete, "The three of us are now managing an official evil organization seeking world domination, and Mistress Nine says we need to decide on a name."

The girls were back in Minuete's Annex Skyrise apartment, an entire floor at the top the only skyscraper in DC, recently sold to the Kiley family after initial financial mediocrity. The girls were sitting around the kitchen table having a meeting.

Carmet was impressed "World domination? That's pretty cool!" in her mind she was reasoning that if she dominated the world, she could get those cool Co'Toure designer boots she had her eye on. "Finally, a Minuete I can get of board with!" she exclaimed.

Even blind people like Britney roll their eyes reflexively. The only difference was Britney could get away with it, her eyes hidden by the darkened sunglasses she wore. She was in this thing because Mistress Nine had given her a six figure check. Roll over, play dead, go fetch. Britney had no problem following orders. She could do that until the cows came home. She hadn't quite made up her mind on Minuete yet.

Her first assessment was that Minuete couldn't find her ass with a flashlight, but didn't want to dismiss her entirely because she was impressed by the fact that Minuete could work all day, seven days a week towards world domination. Maybe she'd eventually hit the jackpot and figure it out, even broken clocks were correct twice a day.

Back to the meeting, Minuete was speaking "This is a 'family' meeting to decide what our name is. We're not moving forward until we have a consensus." This was Minuete's attempt at team spirit building.

"Give me a break Min," said Britney. "You're just pulling this out of your ass. You've already decided what we're going to do. Just say it already."

"I kill you!" screamed Minuete, who then paused, calming herself down wanting to be more managerial. "I mean, please don't call me Min, Britney."

Carmet chimed in "I was thinking like 'BitchSlap 90' or something." Minuete was quick to dismiss her. "First I'd like to show you our new team logo. Then we can discuss the name." She pulled a few color printouts from her Kenneth Cole leather briefcase.

"This is our old one," Minuete passed out a picture of the Kiley family herald, the illuminati symbol. All the Kiley family and their employees wore them in the form of silver and bronze lapel pins. The Illuminati, a secret upper class of people that privately ruled the world, had chosen a pyramid with a single glowing eye atop as their symbol of power.

"I hired a marketing agency to develop a new corporate logo, something that speaks to the values of our new evil organization. What are our core values, Carmet?"

Carmet thought for a moment. "Destroying people that get in our way?" Minuete liked that answer, "Yeah, and with a sense of wicked style." She continued "So here it is, after extensive market testing and focus groups, this is our new team logo."

With great fanfare, Minuete slapped the printout on the table. There it was, a cartoonish skull with a bright red heart on the forehead.

"Wicked pissa!" exclaimed Carmet.

"What do you think Britany?" Britney turned her darkened visor towards Minuete in disbelief, then delivered deadpan. "Well, I have to say, this is quite simply the greatest logo I've even seen. I think it's a testament to just how brilliant you are. I'm sure our organization has the leader it deserves."

Minuete was oblivious to the sarcasm and quite pleased at the compliment. "Thank you." She handed each of the girls jewelry boxes, and then one for herself. Curious, Carmet opened hers. Inside was a pin, a cartoonist great skull, with a cute red heart on the forehead. "What's this made off?" Carmet asked. "Platinum." Minuete replied. "It's far more precious than gold."

"I like!" Carmet decided. "It's cute. He's cute. I've decided to name that cutey SkullHeart." Britney was fastening her SkullHeart pin to her lapel. "So what's did you decide our group is?"

Minuete was quite excited to explain her train of logic. "Well, the reason for the pin is this. This organization has an official policy of serving death for breakfast to anyone that gets in our way. But it's important to remember. We are girls, but we're not just ordinary girls. We are incomparably fabulous." Minuete was really worked up by now. "And we will pursue our goals in an equally fabulous way. That presents something of a contradiction. A paradox, if you will. From this moment on, we are....Paradox 90!"

At this Minuete started laughing insanely. Carmet turned to Britney and whispered "This part here, this is pretty messed up."

"Ya." Britney responded.

### Sub-Chapter 3 - Penthouses and Pavement

The days of apartment shopping had not been pleasant for Allison, Brea, and Lani. Although Lani knew the city quite well, the girls had competing ideas about what they were shopping for.

Lani insisted that the apartment be in a safe neighborhood and close to the Metro. Allison insisted it be near a liquor store. For Brea, it was pure system shock to Brea to learn that no matter where they lived, the apartment was going to be tiny.

But it didn't particularly matter where they wanted to live, because it had no relevance whatsoever on what was available. Day after day they heard over and over "No vacancies." They decided to put the apartment shopping until after the New Year of 20x8 when everyone was back from holidays.

Brea bought yet another cell phone, the smallest on the market, and called everyone that needed to know her new number. She tossed the old one to Lani, and made a mental note to tease her that her phone was too big. She deliberately did not call certain people about her new whereabouts.

Brea got especially jazzed about the Metro, the D.C. subway system. Lani calmly explained how the Red, Blue, Green, and Orange lines worked, where you needed to switch stations, and the very

important fact that you “Stand on your right, walk to the left. Allison picked it up immediately, but while on rides, Brea would just stare at the map, trying to figure out how it related to different parts of the city.

Both of them bought Metro “Smart Cards,” which had a circuit in the shape of a credit card. In theory, you waved them over the sensor, and it deducted the right amount of money from your account. It never quite worked right, but it was what separated the Washington people from the tourists.

In the meantime, Lani had managed to look and sift through the charred remains of her apartment, and it was true that nothing was salvageable. All she had in the world was the stuff she had in her shoulder bag, the clothes she was wearing when she had driven to Tennessee to sell her car.

#### Sub-Chapter 4 - The Fourth Survivor

There was another that made it out of the world of LV-426. Ashley Allen.

Every group of guys needs a girl to do “girl stuff,” and every group of girls needs a guy to do “guy stuff”. Ashley was LV-426’s resident expert on guy stuff.

Ashley was male, a bit on the geeky side, and not bad looking. He was a bit short, and had a baby face that barely grew. He casually gelled his short hair straight up. Ashley dressed casually, usually in Jeans and a T-shirt. Recently, he had stopped wearing the necklace with a beryl shard Nikki had given him.

“Ashley” was a tragic first name, one that he hated. His parents had placed their bets with their baby being a girl or a boy, and instead made a deal where it was a name that could be taken one way or another. He had this, at least, in common with Sydney, a former bishounen of Allison.

Ashley was arguing with his “girlfriend” for the second time today, although he was pretty sure that they had been broken up for nearly a year now. In fact he was remembered exact instances where had said to her. “It’s over!” It was not over. Because Nikki Prelate knew exactly how to manipulate him, so they kept going around and around for years in a vicious circle.

LV-426 was a completely different place, but somehow the same. Brea and Allison had left and their absence had been a severe blow for the family. But the girls had carefully selected a group, then carefully instructed each of them about how to make sure LV-426 remained a secret. This made Ashley Allen, still the youngest, into the most senior member of the LV.

Ashley had come a long way from being the nervous freshman Allison had discovered. He was much more confident. He enjoyed the success of being one of the more popular people on campus, mostly because people associated him with Allison Holiday. On most days he wore contacts. He knew how to go out on weekends and when he did, he partied with the best of them. And although he knew Nikki was holding him back, there was something about their relationship that wouldn’t let him go.

The problem was that Brea didn’t have one cell phone, she had five. He found the scribbled down phone number that Brea had given him, and dialed the number (202)-762-0630.

The phone rang and rang and rang. He hung up the instant before the answering machine would click in, so he wouldn’t have to pay for the long distance. The fact that she didn’t answer didn’t surprise Ashley one bit. Right now he chuckled as he imagined Brea scrambling to find her cell phone her from her purse and trying to figure out the “Missed Calls” feature.

Seconds later his phone was ringing. The Caller ID said P. Anatamata. Brea didn't even give him enough time to say "Hello."

"Ashley! Boogya!!!"

"So I guess you've gotten out of Bishop."

"We are sooooo out of Bishop."

"Are people still talking about LV-Gamma?"

"Talking about it yes. The investigation turned up mob ties, so it's front page every day. Talking about you and Allison, not so much any more."

"How's the job search going?"

"Yeah. Zilch. And we've run into Minuete quite a bit."

Ashley remembered with a bit of fear. During all those years at Bishop University, Minuete had had many a run in with the residents of LV-426. In the most spectacular, Minuete had seduced their resident gadget guru, Ashley, and tried to get him to install the computer system for her home.

The Kiley Family had the world's most unusual home.

As part of the START 2 Accords, the United States had dismantled many of their missile silos, leaving them with plots of land to sell with incredible empty infrastructure beneath the ground. The Kiley family had purchased the land, and had their home built atop a hollowed out silo. The computer system Ashley was installing was part of Minuete's first clumsy bid for world domination.

Ashley was stunned, but tried to concentrate on the conversation. "So you've been concentrating on the apartment instead."

"Let's just say that I am... Lani! What the..."

And all Ashley could hear was scuffing in the background. "Just give me the damn phone, Brea!" "Excuse me!" I was in the middle of a conversation!"

"You turnip-brain!"

"Party pooper!"

The rest was garbled, but Brea sure did make some weird noises when she got upset. Which was often. Now, Lani was on the phone with Ashley.

Lani was trying to stave off Brea. "Two seconds, then back to you. Hey Ashley."

"Sounds like things haven't changed much."

"No, Brea's still a spiky headed little cry-baby."

Ashley heard Brea's muffled protests in the background. By now he knew by now not to get in the middle of a match between Brea and Lani. "That's about right." Lani continued. "I have a gadget job for you. I need a very, very small digital camera, one that won't make me look like I'm there as a photographer, even though I am. Something I can hide in a small handbag, get it overnighted."

Ashley thought about that last sentence. "They've got you doing photography? I thought you were working in the Opinions section."

Lani warned him. "That particular subject gets me Grrr. Like this." Ashley knew to back off.

"Well, I'm sure I can come up with something for you."

"I'm seriously going crazy here without you here to occupy these two."

"Yeah, that brings me to my point," Ashley continued. "Bishop University has a program. One semester at George Washington University for a ton of credits. I was thinking about taking it."

"Like you even have to think about that one," Lani yelled out to Allison and Brea. "Ashley's coming up here for the semester!"

Ashley heard more of a struggle as Brea snatched the phone from Lani. "You're coming up here?"

Ashley stammered. "Well, I guess I am."

"I have a very good feeling about this. Leave your stuff in the LV. Just pack a duffle-bag and get on a plane."

"Yeah. I'm going. I'm on my way."

"You're going?"

"I'm already gone."

"Boogya! Now, Mr. Technical, I'll need you to bring me a few things."

#### Sub-Chapter 5 - White Rabbit

It was a snowing hard on Christmas Eve. Allison had never seen snow before and had her palms on the glass and was just looking at it, head jerking excitedly from side to side, up and down. The way she was moving she looked like a puppy, wanting to go outside and play, unfortunately she didn't have winter clothes. She was making cute whining noises.

The girls were in a double suite at the Radisson closest to the DC convention center Brea had paid ahead already by a month. No rush in finding a good place to live, the right apartment was an important thing for a DC politico.

All three of them had been so caught up with the apartment search, the thought of Christmas had never crossed their minds. Each of the girls had a story. Lani's stepmother that had adopted her and had let Lani take her name, Lirtzman-Cameron. It was undoubtedly Jewish, and so was her stepmother. Christmas was a cursory ritual without much feeling. Allison's story was that she wasn't even aware of the day of the month it was. For Brea, her father was randomly away on business trips from year to year, so Christmas had become more of a small event with the sisters. Plus in DC, Christmas isn't thrown in your face as much because of sensibility and respect for the many minorities that don't celebrate it.

Allison had two days before decided on what career to dedicate herself to. The other girls had known for a long time. Brea had decided to work as a politico and Lani had her journalism career, a passion boiled in her blood since birth. But Allison had never thought a second in her life about getting a job.

The whole thing happened when Brea and Lani were negotiating the details of the financial details of three girls living together at the café Peppers near 13th Street and R. Allison had been singing Abba

songs in her head, it was all random blather to her. When she heard the words “So it’s settled, we all buy our own alcohol, it’s not in the food budget.”

“Hold it right there Chica.” Allison exclaimed, “No budget for stocking alcohol? That’s crazy talk. We had it in the budget in the LV.”

“That’s because we were stocking it for the parties. And we never had any for the parties because you would drink it all.” Brea said with one eye closed, eyebrow raised.

Lani looked at the printed out spreadsheet for their expenses running LV-426. “We spent one thousand two hundred sixteen dollars and sixty-seven cents a month on alcohol. That’s around forty dollars a day. There’s just no room in the budget.”

Allison just kind of sat there for a second then spoke. “Let me tell you a story. Once there was a little boy named Rudy. He wasn’t the biggest guy or the strongest guy, but let me tell you something the kid had heart. And he had a dream: To play football for Notre Dame. Everyone and everything tried to stop him from getting in, but he just wouldn’t quit. He worked his butt off in junior college, and worked as a janitor and slept in the janitor’s closet to afford the tuition.”

By this point Allison was tearing up, on the verge of crying. “Finally, Rudy made the B team, and on the very last game of his senior year, he begged the coach to let him play. The coach didn’t want to let him, but the players on the team admired Rudy for his heart. So they cheered ‘Rudy! Rudy! Rudy!’ Eventually the crowd caught on, cheering his name as well. The coach was forced to put him in, and in a surprise to all, Rudy was able to make the touchdown pass that won that game,” Allison was glaring at Lani and Brea and continued. “Are you going to tell little Rudy there’s no room in the budget for alcohol? In Reagan’s America?”

Brea and Lani just looked at each other for a few seconds, Allison made a mental note that they did that pretty often, and proceeded to quickly forget it.

Brea offered “Tell you what, if you get a job and chip in, we’ll put alcohol in the budget.” Allison didn’t even blink “That’s cool.”

“What do you want to do for a living?” Lani asked.

“I don’t know.” It was obvious Allison had no clue.

“Well, I like to blow stuff up,” Allison said excitedly. “That whole LV Gamma thing was really cool.”

Lani was a little taken aback “So like an, uh, demolitionist?”

“I never saw that movie. What’s that?” Allison perkily asked.

Another long silence and glance between Brea and Allison. Brea helpfully offered. “You majored in Drama, why not be an actress?”

“Cool,” Allison decided. “It’s on like Donkey Kong!”

That had been 2 days ago.

Back to Christmas Eve at the Radisson. Brea brought out the package. It had been sent FedEx overnight by Ashley to the hotel.

“Hey there doom and gloom, in case you didn’t notice its Christmas Eve! And...” Brea announced.

Both Allison and Lani, who was intently watching coverage of the deathmatch Republican primary on CNN perked up.

“And... I have presents!” Brea announced.

Allison exclaimed “Presents!” Allison really like getting presents, especially if they were shiny or involved a button. She skipped over excitedly. Lani kind of rolled her eyes, because quite frankly she thought the whole Christmas thing was kind of dumb, but she crossed the room anyway.

“I was one of four sisters growing up, and we always had a tradition.” Brea was acting a little melodramatic like she could be. And although Allison didn’t notice, but Lani did, she knew it was from Brea’s heart and was a bit moved. “We always couldn’t wait and gave our gifts on Christmas Eve. Sooooo....Guess what it is? You’ll never guess!”

Allison made an attempt to guess with the first thing that popped into her head. The thing that popped into her head was very dirty. Brea assured her it was not that thing.

“Is it a toaster?” Allison asked.

“Nope. Guess again!”

“Rhyming dictionary?” Allison tried again.

“Nope. Guess again!”

“Is it like a boat?”

“Nope guess ag...” Brea suddenly got something “How would a boat fit into this box?”

“I meant like a remote controlled...”

“Just open the damn box!” Lani exclaimed, losing her patience.

Brea just gave her a glance like “Wow..... Mm, Boy.” And then offered Lani the package. Lani was a little excited, and whipped out a wicked Swiss army knife, the best available on the market. Ashley had been using it, and gave it to Lani on a whim, and she found out it was an indispensable tool. Particularly as a reporter, and particularly as someone that hung with Allison and Brea, things like a fish scaler actually came in handy from time to time.

Lani tore back the cardboard and responded with absolute glee! “Holy Crap!” she exclaimed. Digging through the Styrofoam, she found a laptop Macintosh with every possible accessory. Leather carrying case, a docking station, surround sound speakers, a top of the line integrated PDA that was at the bleeding edge of technology, a printer, a photo printer for digital camera picks, the best digital camera on the market, heavy yes, but capable of getting ultra high resolution images. Lani was speechless at receiving a reporter’s wet dream for a present.

“Brea, I can’t believe you splurged on all this!” Lani exclaimed. Her pathetic personal computer had burned up in the fire, leaving her no way to report. With this gift she had given Lani the best tools possible to report the truth.

Brea didn’t seem to particularly notice Lani’s emotional gratitude. “No big,” she stated.

Allison dug through the Styrofoam looking for her present. “I don’t see anything for me....” Allison said.

Brea was incredibly excited about the whole thing. "Do you know how you have always dreamed of being a movie star since 2 days ago? And you want to work as an actress?" This was true, and Allison had been a drama major at Bishop University. "Yeah, it's on like Donkey Kong!" Allison exclaimed.

"You've got to stop saying that!" Lani begged.

"Anyway," Brea continued. "The best idea occurred to me. You're an actress, and Lani's a writer. So why not do the whole Good Will Hunting thing, and write your own script?"

Allison's eyes opened wide with excitement and her mouth dropped. Lani's eyes opened wide in terror and her mouth dropped as well. She was thinking of an excuse when something caught Allison's eye.

"There's another present in here!" she exclaimed. "Yes those are for Lani, a little something I picked up." Allison handed the rather heavy wrapped rectangular presents to Lani.

"Wow, I don't know what to say, what is it?" she asked, too overwhelmed to immediately tear into them.

"Oh, just a few books I picked up for you on anger management."

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The next day, Allison and Lani were having lunch at Sakana, the best sushi place that no one knew about. It was near Dupont Circle, the girls had ridden the red line to it. Lani quite liked mass transit, Allison pined for boys with big trucks.

Lani was enjoying exotic brands of sushi, but Allison was eying it suspiciously the same was she did with the cell phones for which she believed government conspiracies about. But damn, did Allison love the sake. She was ordering it by the pot because it was too weak for her tastes.

Lani was wearing eyeglasses that were quite stylish. The lenses thin and rectangular, and they had a nice flare at the rims.

"I didn't know you wore glasses," said Allison.

"I don't." Lani absentmindedly said. "But with this laptop, the keyboard pushes me so far from the screen, they help a bit."

"Daddy always told me that guys don't make passes at girls that wear glasses," Allison smirked.

"I say that guys that don't make passes at girls that wear glasses are asses," Lani said retorting her. "So where do we start?"

"Get off the babysitter because daddy's home!" Allison exclaimed. "I had this like, uh inspiration!"

"You're inspired?" Lani asked.

"I'm a bit inspired. I have the concept for this movie."

"What's the inspiration?" asked Lani.

"This is the best inspiration." Allison explained. "All the rest is the writing. It's all in the title."

"So what's the title?" asked Lani.

"Can you handle this? It's an incredible title... Imagine it in lights."

"I have a good feeling," Lani lied.

"Blow'd. Up!" Allison beamed, her bright green eyes more excitable than usual.

"Blow'd Up?" Lani repeated, her eyes wide in terror again.

"Perfect title, here's the story," Allison started. "There's this guy running around that likes to blow stuff up. I'm a secret government demolitions expert, and it's up to me to blow him up and stop him." Allison furthered. "And the cool part is I wear tight outfits, and I show lots of cleavage in new and exciting ways. We'll use CGI. Can you write that?"

Lani was near speechless. "I was thinking we could do a serious character piece, maybe something based on World War One." Allison dismissed it nearly instantly.

"That sounds pretty boring. Not enough explosions."

"It was World War One!" protested Lani.

"That was before they invented bombs," responded Allison curtly.

It took Lani a good week to understand what the hell Allison was talking about in the pitch meetings. But she soon realized, this was going to be a very, very bad movie. Pure sex, explosions, and extreme violence. But the worst part was that she knew her name was going to be on this travesty. And that because Allison Holiday was involved therefore something very bad was going to happen.

Lani was exhausted. Very exhausted. At first she had tried to work with Allison, to use her ideas but make the script work at a higher level. But eventually fatigue got to her. And she decided the best way to end this was to just acquiesce and write the worst movie possible, the bad movie Allison wanted.

After an especially sleepless weekend, she met with Allison again at Sakana, and handed Allison the printed script.

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**BLOWED UP!**

(v1.1 Purple Cover)

Written by Lani E. Cameron and Allison Holiday

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**OPEN ON:**

Ext. NUNNERY -- DAY

It **BLOWS UP.**

Follow with many slow-motion "Matrix" shots of nuns, crosses and hymnals being blasted into the air. One nun **HITS** the ground hard. Her habit is blown off in strategic places, **REVEALING** a sexy body, and trashy lingerie.

**SWISH TO --**

The back of a leather thigh-high boot STEPS into the shot, and the camera slowly travels up the leg to her butt, she's wearing a matt purple leather Catsuit, as tight as possible. She has a wedgie, and each cheek is brightly lit, just J'Lo in Gigli. We HEAR her voice.

Catsuit Woman: The person that did this drives a white car. I hope the jive turkey wasn't part of your nunnery.

Injured Nun: (awed, confused) Why, why is that?

Close in on the Cautsuit Woman's face and torso. One arm is out of the shot. She's wearing bright red lipstick, and a glittery purple streak of color at the corner of her bright green eyes. Her outfit is stunning. It's cleavage, cleavage, and more cleavage.

Catsuit Woman: Because they're gonna take it like a little bitch.

PAN TO --

Her gloved HAND, which is holding a detonator. She PRESSES the button. A BEEP.

Slow motion shots of white cars blowing up, hundreds of them. Fast shots and more slow motion matrix shots. Occasionally, a blue, green or other colored car explodes too.

She TOUCHES a metal insignia just above her very erect nipple. It BEEPS at her. It's obviously a communication device. She speaks to it.

Catsuit Woman: I've cut off PHARAOH's escape. Flame on, Fashion Force Five!

CUT TO --

Shots of girls also wearing cat suits in variants of bright colors like pink and yellow. They grab high tech weapons, working computer keyboards, and using binoculars to scan from a rooftop overlooking the nunnery.

CUT BACK TO --

The frightened nun. She's looking at Allison in a state of shock. Allison is LOADING a very large six-barreled grenade launcher with large explosive shells.

Injured Nun:

Who... who are you?

Catsuit Woman: Justice... Allison Justice. FBI agent, specialist in demolitions.

Justice turn to the camera and puts on an ultra fashionable pair of Fendi sunglasses. She closes the grenade launcher's breach with a loud metallic KLACK!

Allison Justice (CON'T): It's time to kick some ass and take some.

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The girls had fallen into a daily rhythm of working at Sakana. When Allison read that line, she closed one eye tight and opened the other wide, and furled her brow. Lani noted in shock, it was the same face she made while figuring out basic technology. Lani believed strongly in the power of editing. By cutting away what is unimportant, you reveal what is. Wheels were turning in Allison's mind, editing things. After a bit her eyes focused and she spoke. "That's not the right line for that part of the story," Allison concluded. She was thinking of the right line. She hummed a little song as she thought

and then spoke, "How about she closes the breach of the grenade launcher and I say 'We'll see who explodes now.'" Allison's eyes were shimmering a particularly glittery shade of green.

According to her 20x6 tax return, Lani was a "Professional Writer." In fact, she had been such a noteworthy writer and investigator she had been hired by the Washington Post, the same paper that had busted Nixon! But she had to admit, when it came to writing an awful movie, Allison had the better line. Allison had an instinct that she just didn't have.

"Blow'd Up!" would be a bad movie. But Lani hadn't expected it to be so entertainingly bad. And she was terrified the movie would work the same way everything always worked for Allison Holiday, "Blow'd Up!" would take Lani on another crazy adventure.

"We haven't talked much about a romantic angle for the movie, all these action movie clones manage to barely work it in," said Lani.

"You know, the great thing about action movies is how Republican they are." Allison was yet again being affected by her Republican sexual fetish. "I can't wait to hear this one," thought Lani to herself.

"See, in every action movie there's the hero. He and he alone decides right from wrong and is the sole judge, jury and executioner. And he usually has to act because the government bureaucracy isn't effective. Plus they prove that these insane liberal gun laws are stupid. To get the job done, ordinary American's need grenades and rocket launchers." Allison's speech got slower.

"These....damn...dirty liberals....they're nothing but scum..."

Lani knew where this was going, "Allison?" She tried. But it was too late, Allison's mind was elsewhere "They're evil. And I will make them pay! They're drunks, they..."

"Allison!" Lani said sharply, causing most of the people in Sakana to turn their heads and stare.

It was as if Allison was waking up from a daze, "Where am I?" What was I talking about?"

"We were talking about how to introduce your romantic lead," Lani said, bringing her iced tea to her lips to drink.

"Yeah, okay, it's like this. He's a CGI character, a young Ronald Reagan. So he walks up to me and says 'Damn bitch, you stupid hot. Let me pull up on that bumper and smack that monkey.' Ya like?"

Lani was just kind of stunned. In drinking the iced tea, the cup missed her lips, and she just poured the whole glass down the front of her blue turtleneck. The ice woke her up, to the pleasure of the men in the restaurant.

Allison handed her stack of napkins. "Just pat dry it up. We've got work to do and I'm on a roll!" Men were hoping.

"I'll do it in the bathroom," said an ever over-the-edge Lani.

#### Sub-Chapter 6 - Festival of Servants

Christmas had come and gone with especially little fanfare for Minuete and the Kiley family. That left the final sprint to New Year's Eve the last leg of the nightmarish holiday season.

The TV was blaring in the background. Minuete was alone, and loved looking at herself in the mirror. She judged the reflection with total disembodied scrutiny, and from every possible angle. She had

started to panic when the saleswoman had said she had just sold out of the blond orange dress moments earlier. It wouldn't work if she didn't have that dress that matched her hair.

Drastic measures had to be taken to find the perfect dress. Some people read the fashion magazines, Minuete skipped most of the American ones and had the ones from Paris overnighted to her.

Now, she had almost decided that fashion Plan B was the superior solution. The dress was black spandex like material all the way up top, cutting away to show cleavage that was barely there. It was cut away on the sides, the back coming together in a single clasp between her shoulder blades. Filling in the gaps in her outfit along her waist, necklace, and in a long dangling strand just below her back. The whole outfit showed off how amazing Minuete's body was.

From the waist down, her skirt was naughtily short. It puffed out because of the second skirt underneath it, dyed exactly to the blond orange shade that Minuete had desperately wanted. Her stockings were the identical color.

And as always with Minuete, she wore her pearl tiara. For tonight, she decided to add an extra layer of beads. Her earrings were the same pearl color, in long ovals.

She saw the latest batch of her smattering of teen scream magazines had arrived, including her favorite, Tiger Beat. And next to it, she saw that her dossier had arrived as well on the former months "Cute Boy of the Week," impeccably researched by one of Minuete's newspaper faye boys.

Minuete ogled the images, she had about three thoughts a day that weren't about cute boys or world domination. The rest were about cute guys like this. Suddenly she heard footsteps, and reached for a nearby finance textbook and hid the photos inside.

It was Britney. "You don't think you'll feel a little stage fright in that dress?" she said, the light flashing over her visor-hidden eyes.

Britney Candrell had gone the other way in her thinking. Just now, she was wearing her usual outfit, which was probably enticing enough for a dress ball. Still, she would change into her dress later. She didn't care to wear her formal wear for longer than necessary.

But that was fine, because Britney's everyday outfit was very sexually intimidating. Unlike Minuete, Britney was quite experimental in her look, very non-traditional. Her pants were leather and tight. She wore knee high boots, with her pants, boots and top a pale shade of purple. Her top was the same lifeless color and hid none of her body. However, it was the half-jacket that made you notice her. Purple and white, it was derivative of a navy uniform. The collar was high, around her throat.

"I don't get stage fright, I give it," Minuete responded confidently. Then, as if on cue, she dropped the finance textbook, the bishounen images spilling everywhere.

It was enough to knock Britney out of her medium cool charisma. "We're on a vital mission for the Coterie, and you're ogling pictures of the latest teen scream?" Britney picked up a remote control and put in on channel 63, Fox News.

The channel was Brit Hume's Special Report. It was an election roundup of the leading candidates. Maryam d'Abo and Charlie Westcott were leading on both sides of the tickets. The Westcott Campaign was ready to continue the Democratic legacy. The d'Abo campaign was prepared to right the sins of the past administration. "This is reality. This is what we're after." The same right-to-left light reflection flickered across Britney's sunglasses as she spoke. "I've always found your tactics to be needlessly complex, Minuete. But you were put in charge of logistics."

“Just because I like to enjoy the occasional indulgence doesn’t mean I’m not perfectly aware of our situation.”

“I’m just making sure you know it. Things tend to go wrong when Allison Holiday’s around.”

Minuete was still fuming about Lani, Brea and Allison. “I shouldn’t have told those LV losers where Lani was living. How come those chicks always crash my party?” Minuete’s spin on her Ls was absurd.

“They thought it was a signal.”

Minuete didn’t want to concede the point. “A subtle signal at best.”

“Secondly, I think you should hire your own goons to grab Allison Holiday and give her ponytail a Lorena Bobbit.”

“Why? Mistress Nine gave us access to her boys.”

“If Allison Holiday and Brea Anatamata figure out there’s an organization called the Coterie intent on causing them trouble, how long do you think it will take things to spin out of control? You know what is like with Allison. Just look at your hand.”

Minuete didn’t like that last comment, but let it slide. “So I’ll logistisize things.” Minuete was scribbling on a notepad. “The plan is straightforward, offer Brea this to keep her busy, Allison will follow I tow, then deal with Lani anyway that you wish.” She handed the sheet to Britney.

“I can’t read this.” Britney stated blandly.

“Oh, just expect Britney Candrell to get caught up in the details, the whole blind thing. Blah, blah, blah.” Minuete then proceeded to explain what was on the paper to Britney.

“Well, I have to say, this is a fabulous idea.”

“Very fabulous,” Minuete agreed.

“It’s an absolutely fabulous idea. Except for one very small detail.”

“What’s that?”

“What are we doing about Allison Holiday?”

Minuete smiled. “I haven’t been hunting in a long time, I’m getting out of practice.” Her tone was cinematic as her fingers blurred across the phone, dialing the digits at inhuman speed. “What are you doing?” Britney asked. “Calling some friends,” Minuete answered sarcastically as hell. “Rook, Tselinoyarask and Taro.”

Carmet popped in through the door with bags of takeout food. This particular cop on her beat was bored. “Okay, for Princess Minuete I’ve got your carryout from Sakana’s on Dupont and for Britney I’ve got your stuff from Bricksellar’s Grill. Can’t I get dressed for the ball already? I’m freaking beat.” Minuete chided after her “Have you cleaned your room? You’ve got my Annex Skyrise looking like a teenage slumber party!” Carmet rolled her eyes. “Fine, if I clean my room then can I go change” Carmet looked to Britney for patriarchal help. She couldn’t see thought the visor to her eyes for signs of any emotion. Then Britney turned to her and said “Yes.” It was simple, a judgment of the mother daughter dispute from an outsider and the final word.

“You always do that, you make me out to be the bad guy!” Minuete fumed.

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Carmet Criser had been living in the Annex Skyrise with Minuete and Britney for nearly 2 weeks now. It hadn't exactly gone well. Britney spent most of her time in her room, reading Braille books and using her notebook computer running, honest to God this was true, Blinux, a Linux OS meant for the blind. That left Minuete out and about to deal with Carmet.

For starters, Carmet was in massive debt. Creditors would call the apartment night and day. Ordinarily Minuete would have just said "Call my accountant," and had her take care of the whole thing. But she had thought it would be a good lesson for Carmet, earning the money and paying off her debts.

In the meantime, Minuete had finally finished construction and installation of her "Situation Room," taking up the largest room in the Annex Skyrise. She had called Hollywood's Ken Adams to construct the room. In the Bond films, by far no man had been more responsible for the series' incredibly imaginative sets. At first, Adams believed he had been hired to do the set construction to a film titled "Paradox 90" with a director he had not heard of, M. Kiley. With the veiled threat of Minuete's Bishounen, her "pretty boy" thugs, Adams thought it best to do his work as quickly as possible, and get the hell out.

Construction had been completed two days before the ball. She stepped into the unlit room and hit the power switch, not knowing what to expect. She had been thrilled with the results. In the middle of the floor, a large PEOC type table with video-conferencing models and access to transmissions from the military. PEOC was the Presidential Emergency Operations Center. In addition, video terminals along the wall tuned into the Presidential and military Emergency Broadcast System, CSG transmissions, the Counter-terrorism Security group, and last but not least, local and national news channels from across the Globe. Ken Adams had been smart enough not to ask how the Kiley family was able to tap into these transmissions.

The main chair from the PEOC, moved by command via rail from the Emergency Operations Center back into a more concentrated phalanx of monitors, keyboards, access to search tools such as Lexis-nexus, and large whiteboards to scrawl notes and diagrams on. In short, the perfect place for Minuete to research and plan world domination. In asking her janitor, he was able to confirm "Yes! This is the exact same setup from the White House, I've seen it with my own eyes."

Then, as Minuete was being totally thrilled to own the perfect room to plan of her lifelong dream, that was when the music from Carmet's room started. Carmet was a fan of modern punk music, and enjoyed playing it loud. Unfortunately Carmet's room was adjacent to the Situation Room.

What followed was an unimaginable scene of screaming, implied violence, and thinly veiled death threats between the two girls. If Minuete listened to music it was mostly orchestral soundtracks from movies, all minor apocalyptic chords and tense beats.

Carmet liked to sleep in late, order pizza in the middle of the night, bring boys over and play videogames. Worst of all, she owned a game called "Karaoke Revolution," a game where a microphone judges your singing, and would play the game singing drunk out of her mind at 3 in the morning.

Basically, when Carmet started acting up, Minuete would proceed to go scream at her to stop. Britany couldn't see the two, but Minuete's Bishounen had to fight hard to hold back their laughter. Only a fool would laugh at Minuete.

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Back to the Annex Skyrise, where the girls were getting ready for the White House Correspondents Dinner. "Why can't you help me more in controlling her?" Minuete said, completely exasperated. "I'm telling you, she makes me crazy!"

Britany had the slightest smirk on her face. She said the following deadpan, but it sounded sarcastic as hell. "I think you've got the situation under control."

"You always make me be the bad guy. Can't you talk to do some of the disciplining?" Again the deadpan response "Sure, I'll get right on that." Minuete then started ranting and raving and talking mostly to herself. To Britany, it sure seemed that Minuete was having the time of her life.

#### Sub-Chapter 7 - Crazy Kings

In the meantime the girls spent most of their time preparing for the New Year's Eve ball. Even though Lani had her Saturn, Brea insisted on showing up in style by renting a car for the special occasion. A 4-door 390 horsepower Jaguar S Type. Allison spent her days fending off the charms of endless boys that wanted to be her date for New Year's Eve. Lani spent most of her time trying to get her dress properly altered since she didn't have a normal body type, and to pick up the easily tailored gowns for Brea and Allison.

And the day was suddenly upon them. Since they were all living in Brea's hotel room, things were cramped. Lani was putting on her basics when Allison barged in. "Just need a little bit of spritzer."

Lani scrambled to cover herself. "Hello, have you ever heard of knocking?"

Allison just laughed. "We're all girls here. This is what girls do."

Lani was insistent. "Other girls, not me. If I'm in here you'd better damn well knock."

Allison was ready with her quip. "Well, aren't we Mrs. Modesty."

Allison closed the door and Lani was left to start putting on the wonderful gown. Exiting the hotel room, she saw Allison carefully arranging Brea's elaborate ponytails on the back.

Lani spoke. "I'm ready with the dress, but I think I might need a little bit of help with my hair and makeup."

Brea and Allison exchanged a quick glance. "Don't worry," Brea said reassuringly. "You're in very experienced hands."

As she waited for Allison to finish with Brea's hair, Lani took on the monumental task of putting on her high heels. They were strappy, with two delicate strands running back and over her ankles, and had elaborate strips that wrapped over and over the ankles. They were incredibly uncomfortable, but she had to admit they looked good. The heels were just two inches high, wide bottomed and not too difficult to walk in. When starting, Allison and Brea had realized Lani was not up to walking in very high heels.

"Ready!" she chimed. "Take your seat here on the bed." Lani complied, and there was a flurry of hairspray and gel and more hairspray. Then came the makeup. A bit of blue eye shadow and light mascara. Next, she finished with the concealer, base, and powder. Lani waited, incredibly bored. But she had to admit, she looked incredibly beautiful. Her hair was laid delicately back. It lost none of its volume as it exposed her ears. The thin straps of the dress barely touched Lani's graceful shoulders,

and the fabric of the dress was daringly backless. She put on her angular earrings, completing the dress.

In the front, Lani's generous bust strained the daringly low top of the fabric. You could see the upper contours of her breasts on the side cut for her arms. The dress had also been altered for Lani's narrow waist. Her bottom pressed against the dress, exposing perhaps too much with the opaque fabric.

Allison spoke "Tonight you're on a mission. It's straightforward. You are going to meet a man tonight. Can you cook?"

"Yes," said Lani.

"Doesn't matter. You are totally cute. Go frustrate boys." Lani just laughed but inside thought that wasn't something someone that worked at the Washington Post would do. She realized something else, she didn't quite care. She had a nice body, why not flaunt it for just one night?

Brea had decided on the brilliant red dress, with all black accessories. It was strapped with a very modest neckline, appropriate for her, and arched sharply encircling her narrow shoulders. The dress was lace and simple. Her high heels were perfectly black, on the left side strapping over and over until above the knee. On the right side the high heel straps ended at the ankle, but a garter with a delicate ribbon tied around it floating free in the breeze. Just as black were her onyx earrings, bracelet and lace throat necklace, with a dangling pitch-black star. The star could be seen with hints of gentle white interlacing through the shadowy onyx. The skirt was daringly short in the front but gently fell in waves bending behind her thighs and down to her ankles. Her hair was more elaborate than usual, enticingly arranged with several of them spiking out weightlessly above her head. Long curved stands flopped in front of her face and over her ears in sharp angles. In the back, rather than the usual two beads, they were coupled by long ribbons that were tied in two short ponytails into the shape of teardrops. Brea Anatamata couldn't be cuter and was simply ravishing in her red dress.

"Do you think you're prettier than me?" Brea asked Lani pointedly, hoping to rile her up. That took Lani off guard, she was sputtering, "No, I don't know, no..." Then Lani noticed Brea's slight smirk.

"Let's get the hell out of here," she said.

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The girls pulled up, just twenty blocks from the Washington Ballroom at the Four Seasons Hotel in complete in style in their brand new Jaguar S coup. After a huge fight between her and Lani, it had been decided that Brea would have to sit in the back of her rented car because she was barely over 5 feet tall, where as Lani and Allison both had much longer legs.

The girls were at a red light. Allison spoke, "Hey, check out that cute boy in the black tuxedo in the car beside us." Everyone looked, and the cute boy were looking right back. He was in a brand new Acura CL, probably a gift from his parents. He was looking at Allison, and not at all Brea or Lani. But both girls were used to that happening by now.

"I'm going to try my 'look' declared Allison."

"Oh yeah. That worked out real well last time, didn't it?" Lani said dripping sarcasm.

"My look is much better Brea's." She rolled down her windows and motioned for the guy to do the same. "Hello, hello!" The she gave him "The look," leaning far back into the seat of the Jaguar, and

tilted her head to the side, pursing her lips. She pushed her hands dramatically into her lap. Once again Allison was pure Playmate. The poor guy never even had a chance.

“Are you coming with us to the Washington New Year’s Ever Dress Ball?” Allison asked.

“Sure am,” He responded.

“Mind if I catch a ride with you?”

“I’d be honored, gorgeous. I’ll even open the door for you.” The guy smiled at her, exposing all his beautiful teeth.

Allison climbed out of the Jaguar, and into the Acura. “Caio bello girls!” And she was off. “I blew up a building one time,” she told the man, and she was off.

Now it was just Brea and Lani left.

Brea was already upset. “Dammit, she stole my ‘Caio Bello’ too. You’re all definitely on my list. Now climb out so I can drive.”

“What? No way! We’re already running late. And you’ll have to change all the mirrors.”

Brea launched into her favorite analogy style, point A and point B. “A. Have you ever heard of being fashionably late? And B. We’ve already established the fact that you are a lunatic woman.”

“Fine, go ahead and drive. Have a party.” Lani opened her door, slamming it.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Brea said, opening her own door and moving to the other side of the car.

“I’m, just saying you can have a big party for you and your stupid car.”

“Yeah, you better believe I’ll have a party.” Brea muttered underneath her breath, stepping into her car.

“What was that?” Lani shot back.

“I said, you better believe I will,” Brea said, getting seriously upset now.

“Okay,” Lani said with finality. “We’re not doing anymore.”

“We’re not doing what?”

“This. This! We’ve been doing this since college and we’re not going to do it any more.”

“I seriously doubt we’re not doing to be doing it anymore. Since we’ll be roommates and all.”

“Every time you guys get near me, my life starts to spin out of control. You did it the summer before freshman year, you did it during college, and you’re doing it now. I don’t think it’s cute, I don’t think it’s funny.”

“You don’t think I’m funny? Because I’m one of the funniest people on earth.”

“Are you trying to be funny just now?”

“Yeah, a little.”

"It's really not working. But you know what I do whenever I feel my life spinning a little bit out of control? I go buy a new DVD. Every time I know things are slipping, I get a new movie."

"Well, you must have a very impressive collection by now, because like I said before, you are a lunatic woman!

"I'm driving this car to the party now," Brea said, hoping to finish the argument.

"Seriously Brea, I don't know why you're being such a whiny crybaby about this whole thing." Lani spoke loudly, taunting her.

Brea stuck out her tongue and blew. "TTTTThhhhhbbbbbbbbbb!!!"

"Oh, yeah, that's like real mature Brea. Very well put. It's no wonder you flunked English."

"I didn't flunk English, I flunked... never mind. So TTThhhhhbbbbbbbbbb!!!"

Lani returned "TTTTThhhhhbbbbbbbbbb!!!"

And so and so they argued during entire drive to the party.

#### Sub-Chapter 8 - Under the Stars

The line to enter the ball reminded Brea very much of watching the red carpet coverage live on the E! network, except the Hollywood crowd was much, much better looking. Decked out in eveningwear, Brea and Lani were learning a lesson that all Washington women learn very quickly. The Capitol crowd has a very high population of dirty old men, and they are not subtle in their lechery.

Getting through security for the event was even worse than it was at the airports. Every item in the girls' handbags was sifted through without the trace of the sense that girls deserved a certain air of modesty. Even Brea's tampons were eyed with suspicious scrutiny.

Arriving at the building, the girls were at the coat check and ticket confirmation. At first they were worried when the tickets wasn't in Lani's name, not even Lani Lirtzman-Cameron. Then she tried Minuete Kiley. That was an immediate match and in they went.

All the action was happening in the main ballroom. Brea and Lani were on the periphery of the action, sort of like being at the concession stand at a baseball game. There were waiters passing out food, alcohol, and Brea could not help but admire the gorgeous gowns and dapper guys in their tuxedos.

In the midst of all the glitz and glamour, Brea was in a good mood." The very first thing we need to find is the bar. What are you having?"

"You've offering me a drink?"

"I'm hoping it will improve your personality. And besides, I'm starting a tab."

"It's an open bar!" Lani chided.

"They never have enough alcohol at these political things, and run out early. But most bartenders will keep some on the side for you if you're nice."

The girls got a round of drinks and food into their system. Since the line to the bar was so long, Brea insisted she and Lani carry a drink in each hand. Lani was worried that this would make them seem like alcoholics, but was too worn out from bickering during the drive over to protest.

They scanned the crowds, trying to see someone they recognized. At every party there are flowers and bees. The bees are attracted to the flowers, and the flowers suffer the bees. At Bishop University, Brea, Lani and definitely Allison would have been the flowers. After all, they were the residents of the infamous party spot LV-426! Allison was a worshiped cheerleader, Brea was infamously popular with the fawning Freshman and Sophomores. And with her work at the paper, Lani was well known by the people that noticed those things. But it was clear that in Washington they were going to have a brief stint as bees.

Brea's eyes were drawn to a woman stepping out of the closed ballroom. Her mouth was wide open. "Oh my God, do you see who I see over there?"

"Where?"

"The girl to your right." Lani turned to look. "I see her. Wow. You don't think that's Britney, do you?"

"It's definitely Britney!"

"Wow. She looks so different from what she looked like at Bishop!" Brea remarked.

"Is it the light? Her hair looks so pale."

"Freaky. But it looks like everyone from Bishop is coming here, same as us. Come on, let's go say hi." Brea hoped Lani would follow her.

"I have a bad feeling about this." Lani said, cautiously.

The girls crossed the room to Britney. She sensed them coming, but couldn't immediately figure out who they were.

"Is someone there?" Britney asked.

"AHHHH! Britney Candrel! I would have never guessed you'd be here!" Brea enthusiastically exclaimed.

"Hello, hello Britney," Lani continued.

If Britney was shocked to see them she didn't show it. "Ah. The entire gang from LV-426. I heard you were in town." Brea was a bit taken aback. "Really?" "Oh yes," Britney explained. "It's a very famous fact. When it comes to rumor, DC is even smaller than Bishop."

"We might be incredibly lucky running into you like this. We're here for jobs and an apartment. Do you know the neighborhood?" Brea said, taking a sip of her wine, and Lani handed her a spare drink. "Except of course for Lani. She's just looking for an apartment, because she's a photographer for the Post."

"Shhhh! Don't say that so loud," Lani protested. "I'm not a photographer. I'm on a temporary duty assignment from Minuete. The key word being temporary."

"It's pretty odd running into someone else from Bishop. Minuete's here too, do you remember her?"

Britney was playing dumb. "The name seems familiar." Lani stepped in to help. "Style section Minuete. Short girl, blond orange hair. Do you remember her?"

“Just the name. It’s vaguely familiar,” Britney explained. “I didn’t pay too much time reading the Style Section. Or noticing blond orange hair.”

Lani reached inside her handbag, dangling off her shoulder, pulling out the Ashley’s digital camera. “Mind if I get a picture for the paper? We’re here for the contest.”

Britney almost chuckled. “Ahhh. Best dressed woman and all. I just assumed that was fixed.”

“It’s probably fixed,” Lani agreed. “That’s why I want to get photos of the girls that should have won.” Britney raised an eyebrow “I’m not sure that being photographed with someone that blew up a multi-million dollar building is a good idea.”

Brea wrapped her left arm around Britney, and with the fingers on her right, formed a V. “Why do people keep mentioning that to me? Am I going to be known that the girl that took out LV-Gamma for my whole life?” Britney smiled. “Only till you destroy something bigger.” She fell perfectly into her picture face. In her mind, Brea looked Cosmo cover cool. And yet somehow Brea managed to look awful anytime there was a camera. Either she’d blink, or grimace, or try to give her “look” that was wildly enticing. In her own mind. Lani kneeled in to frame them for the photo.

“What are you doing nowadays, Britney?” Brea asked.

“Oh a little of everything. I work for a PAC, but my real work gets done at nightfall.”

“All that in just under a year, that’s amazing. Where do you live?”

Britney lied again, “I’ve got a little house in Georgetown, it’s small but it suits my needs.” Britney stated proudly. “So, tell me a little bit about your job search Brea.” Lani snapped the photo, the flash causing Brea to blink.

“The job search. Well, I’m doing better than the English majors.”

“Do you need some help? Because I could offer you something.”

Brea was taken aback. “Really!”

“Of course I do. It’s only a volunteer position, but it’s enough to get you started.”

“That would be great!”

Britney handed her a piece of paper, scribbled in neat handwriting. “How did you write this?” Brea asked without thinking. “I mean, uh, no offense.”

“I don’t mind. It’s not like it’s a big deal,” Britney assured her, not answering the question.

On the piece of paper was written an address for the Dalton campaign, the young and a single sentence job description. “Intern wanted to facilitate concerns via phone bank from constituents.”

“Dalton. Is that the Fox News Dalton?” Lani was too busy snapping pictures to hear the conversation. Brea and Britney moved into another pose for the camera. “The one and same.” Britney continued. “Now, the fact that Dalton is hiring for a Presidential run is the biggest secret in Washington, because he wants to do everything he can while he’s unannounced. If this ends up in Roll Call, there will be hell to pay. Do you get me?”

Out of earshot, Lani snapped another picture. Brea didn’t even notice it. “I get you. Dalton’s a bit of a blowhard, wouldn’t you say?”

“He’s a little unpredictable, sure. But in a good way.”

“Hey, you’ve got me sold. Because I’d love to work for a dark horse Presidential candidate. I’m all about going on a suicide run.”

Lani came over, with her pictures finished. Suddenly Brea and Britney were very aware they were talking to the press. Lani was already curious. “Suicide run? What?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Brea assured her. “Old stuff. Pay it no mind.” Lani arched an eyebrow. She smelled a story.

“Is Allison around too?” asked Britney innocently.

#### Sub-Chapter 9 - The Allison Holiday Solution

Allison was trying carefully not to fall off the side of the Four Season’s Hotel, but the high heels made stepping along the ridges difficult. Closer. Closer, she was inching to the window that would give her access to the party.

Allison recalled the evening’s events that had not gone as planned. Although she had arrived at the party with her beautiful boy toy, things had gone wrong at the gate. She had not been on the list for the party. Unfortunately, she hadn’t known like Lani and Brea to give Minuete’s name at the gate to gain access to the party. She motioned her boy on ahead, and winked at him saying “See you in the party, pal.”

Of course, it would take a lot more than a paunchy security guard to keep Allison Holiday out of the most fabulous party of the year. She stood face to face with a security fence. Allison stood up on the air conditioner box beside it, and climbed onto the fence. Then she got a foothold on the circuit breaker box above the air conditioner, and pulled herself onto the second floor ridge.

Allison was inching towards the second floor balcony window when she heard an evil laugh. All of a sudden, Allison lost her balance. The entire floor seemed slippery, and Allison started to lose her footing.

She desperately tried to grab a handhold, but failed. Her high heel slipped, and Allison went tumbling to the ground. She fell a story to the floor with a dull thud. Allison was still dazed from the fall. She instinctively knew. Who else could it be but Minuete?

“Well, well, well,” taunted Minuete, “look who came back to dance with death.”

Allison stood, casually wiping the dust from her evening gown and getting herself settled again in the dress. If she was hurt from the fall she didn’t show it. She almost noticed she was surrounded by three of Minuete’s bishounen thugs, who for some reason were not wearing Minuete’s tiny Illuminati insignia pin on their lapel. Instead it was a skull with heart on the forehead. “Totally cute!” thought Allison.

Before she could react Minuete’s goons shoved her against the building, forcing her into a pair of handcuffs. There she stood, restrained with her hands cuffed together behind her back. All three were muscle-jocks with perfect abs which made Allison suspect they were fans of showtunes. But Allison wasn’t nervous. The corners of her mouth curled into a smile. “So what’s this about Minuete? Are you still mad about your goldfish?” “Goldfish? What are you talking...wait, you killed Mr. Blooper?” “I accidentally spilled a tequila shot in his bowl,” explained Allison. “It’s a long story.”

"That..." Minuete said jabbing a finger in Allison's direction, "is just another reason to let my goon squad do a vicious job on you. Today I'm cutting off your ponytail. Tomorrow it might be your head. Say cheese!" Minuete held up her picture phone, and by instinct Allison made a little pose. Click. And with that Minuete walked off, leaving Allison alone with the thugs. There was a beat. Then Allison asked "So do you guys have names?"

They stared at each other dumbly. They answered right to left. "Rook," "Tselinoyarask," "Taro." The heftiest one, Rook asked, "Why do you want to know our names?"

"Because I want to know whose asses I'm about to kick." Allison raised her eyebrows.

Rook was huge, a bodybuilder. He seemed to have muscles on top of muscles, a physical tank. Contrastingly Tselinoyarask was thin and angular, but had a quiet air around him that told him that he was not the man with whom to mess with. Taro was short and strong, distinctively Asian. Rook opened his mouth, trying to think of something clever.

Allison moved on them in an instant, leaping over her handcuffs so her hands were in front of her. Clasp her hands together she jackhammered Taro between the eyes, who tumbled backwards. Tselinoyarask went low, trying to tackle her, Rook went high grabbing for her throat. Allison easily sidestepped Tselinoyarask, whose momentum carried him past her. Allison pivoted on one foot, spiraling around and kicking him hard in the back. He collapsed on all fours. "That's a little something I call the Allison Holiday Solution," taunted Allison.

This left Allison easily open for Rook's attack, who grasped her by the throat. His eyes went wide as platters as Allison easily smacked his hands away with a forward upper thrust of her cuffed hands.

Tselinoyarask was recovering. Allison shoved Rook backwards forcefully, causing him to fall on his bottom. Then, standing on her left leg, she caught Tselinoyarask in a sleeper hold with her right, cutting off the blood supply to his brain with the powerful grip of her thigh. Taro was on his feet now, about to attack Allison. She held a single index finger in front of her face, daring him. Taro eased down, as Tselinoyarask collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

It was down to Allison, Rook and Taro, who was edging in on Allison slowly from her sides, cautiously but gaining confidence. Allison pivoted again and kicked behind hard, catching Taro right in the face. Blood poured freely from his nose, and he stumbled backwards, very disoriented. Rook managed to land a right hook on Allison. She answered him with a two-fisted sideways sledgehammer blow. It barely fazed him, merely making him madder.

Rook lunged insanely at Allison. She easily dodged him, spinning around him using her patented spin kick, causing him to fall down on top of Taro. Allison spotted the handcuff key on Tselinoyarask's belt. In a quick motion she grabbed the key and unlocked her left handcuff. The pair dangled free on her right wrist. Then, deciding she liked the look of it she clasped the other cuff into a bracelet.

"If you leave now quietly, I won't have to beat you up anymore," Allison stated matter-of-factly. Taro stayed on the ground, knowing when to quit. Rook put his fists up into a boxing stance, ready for another round with Allison.

Allison stood on one foot, her arms outstretched beside her in a crane position.

"Miyagi Crane Kick!" she yelled. Then exactly like from Karate Kid, she leaped onto her other foot, and kicked Rook squarely in the jaw. The high heel cut deep, blood flowed.

Rook was lurched over on all fours beside the fence. Allison stood on his back, using him as a stepping-stone to climb to the second floor. Allison crossed the balcony to the window, which opened easily enough. And she was in the party.

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Allison crawled through the window and, feeling the draft, closed the window behind her. She noticed a urinal on the wall and realized she was in the men's restroom. She heard a flush, and didn't flinch a bit as the stall door opened.

The guy was gorgeous, with great Icelandic features and in a perfectly fitted black tuxedo. He looked Allison up and down, intrigued by what she saw. "I have to say, this is quite a way to say hello," he quipped. Allison was instantly attracted to him. She raised an eyebrow. "Actually my specialty is my willingness to say goodbye."

Allison's hormones were raging. Hand to hand combat did that to her. The very thing she wanted more than anything else was to get this delicious guy and kiss for a bit.

"So charming. So suave." She paused for a beat, getting closer. The man looked at her with hungry eyes and Allison continued. "Don't insult me by thinking I'm not one of your little Scandinavian girls." This again one of her movie lines she had practiced.

He was leaning in to kiss her when Allison grabbed his tie to give him what could only be described as a full on smooch. "Is there somewhere we can go that's more private?" she asked. Another domino was about to fall in what would later be referred to as the "Washington Ballroom Catastrophe."

#### Sub-Chapter 10 - Chinese Burn

The view from the ballroom was spectacular, at least for the boy-ogling Brea. Seriously, these DC boys were just simply delicious.

"When I decided to move to DC, I had no idea I was moving to a place with such delicious guys," said Brea. Lani just smirked "It's the biggest secret in the world. All of us politicos in DC are just the kids that were jaded from not being popular in high school and make meeting people and have them like them a skill." Brea raised an eyebrow. "Did he decide to make being deliciously cute a skill too?"

She was eying a boy daring to wear his hair long and without product. This was especially noteworthy because it was a black tie event. Brea had a private name for boys with this look, "Pretty boys."

"I love that Pretty boy over there," stated a listless Brea.

Lani looked in Brea's direction. "I know that guy from an interview I did at the Russell. His name's Michael. You think he's cute?"

"I think I'd like to kiss him and make out with him in a private place enough to do the things I would not tell my mother I do," answered Brea. "I could make that happen," offered Lani, "But I have to tell you, he's a little clueless the way all guys can be a bit clueless."

"Sometimes I like them dumb," admitted a crushing Brea. "Actually, I'll admit it. You want to know if I'm man hungry? Yes. I'm man-Hungry. I want a big juicy boyfriend to dress up all cute for and to buy me things."

"Aren't we all," replied Lani.

Brea grimaced her face. "So I'm suddenly relying on Lani freaking Cameron for romantic advice? You're even more clueless than I am when it comes to boys!" Lani was absolutely indignant, "Yeah. As if. Begin eye rolling now."

Brea's only retaliation was a stare and a beat to decide how to put many years of events she had witnessed. "Okay, as far as I've seen it your whole romantic history goes like this. You intimidate boys, by among other things those huge knockers, so much so they're too scared to ask you out. Conclusion? The guys that aren't intimidated enough to chase a hormone goddess like you are jerks and perverts. All of which can be proven."

"All right, thrill me. Prove it."

"It will take two words," smirked Brea. "Simon Burke." Lani paused then was at a loss for words. "Okay, yeah. He was a perverted jerk, and a bad kisser to boot."

"Too much tongue?" asked Brea.

"It was like he was trying to lick off my tonsils."

"Don't take the following as some lesbian vibe or whatever," said the perky brunette "but guys don't talk to you but because you are totally hot and you don't know it. And they don't know you don't know you don't know you're hot and therefore have low standards," said an eye rolling Brea.

She continued "See, so boys out there think you're only looking for a Pierce Brosnan when you'll settle for a George Lazenby."

"We were talking about Michael, can we talk about Michael?" asked Lani. "Absolutely."

Then all of a sudden Lani was seriously panicking, noticing that Minuete Kiley was across the ballroom and she was doing things. "Do you have any mace?" She asked Brea. "What?" responded Brea. "Minuete's here at the party. Do you have any mace? I left mine at the hotel," Lani finished her sentence, her voice trembling.

"Has anyone ever suggested that you're a paranoid psychotic?" Brea said off handedly.

"All I know is every time Minuete Kiley shows up, my life starts to spin out of control. Rapidly. I don't want any more adventures, no more impossible stories!"

"I seem to recall you saying the exact same thing about Allison and just recently."

"Probably because it's all true! I'm going to end up in the Darwin awards."

"Take a Valium, Xanax, Something. Just relax. Really, what are the odds Minuete Kiley is a... deranged supervillain

"On her first clumsy bid for world domination," Lani finished. "Better than even I'd say."

"Oh with this." Brea flagged down Minuete across the room, waving her over. Lani responded to it with a whimper "Oh my God," and hid her face behind her drink.

Minuete approached them. "How can I help you girls?" Brea was casual with her conversation. "Lani here. Lani and not me seems to think you're after world domination. And we were wondering how you felt about that."

“We’ll, of course I’m after world domination!” The room seemed to swoon around Minute, and she launched into a familiar monologue. “When I close my eyes I can actually feel myself lusting for power. Very soon this world will end. And there’s nothing you can do to stop me!” She paused for a beat. “But that shouldn’t get in the way of our... relationship. I have no intention of harming you, if you obey my orders for just a bit.”

“Those are the same words you used to me at the Post...” noted Lani.

“I have a team of writers that work on material for me. I practice with my acting coach. That’s the line of the week,” responded Minuete. “This week it’s ‘I want you to seize all the Mayan artifacts in this museum and bring them back to our secret base.’ Do you have a problem with that?”

Brea didn’t even blink. “I don’t think we’ll have a problem with that.” Lani followed “I, uh, don’t think you’ll have a problem here either.”

“Good.” Minuete was positively giddy with herself. “It would be unfortunate if something happened to you like what happened to Allison tonight.”

And with that she turned on her heel and left. There was a silent beat between the girls. Brea broke the silence. “Come on. Just forget about it for now. We’ve got our alcohol, let’s go into that ballroom. We’ve got a party to crash.” It was an evening they had been preparing for a solid week now, but the fun had just begun.

#### Sub-Chapter 11 - Headlines

January 2, 20x8 The Washington Post Washington Correspondence Dinner Total Catastrophe, Questions over Contest Winner \_\_\_\_\_ By MINUETE KILEY

WASHINGTON, D.C., Security problems ended up preventing the President’s appearance at the Washington Correspondence Dinner over the Weekend. The once a year dinner, in which the President, his staff and several important members of Congress get a chance to address the Press Corps that report on them was interrupted by what was described by the Secret Service as a “security event.”

According to official police reports of the event, a police officer not in uniform officer accidentally fired rounds from a pistol in a security check with one of the women being considered in the “Best Dressed” contest being run by the Metro section of this paper, a wholly owned subsidiary of Kiley Universal, the owner of this publication.

The shots were enough to concern the Secret Service that until essential security protocols had been reestablished for the premises, allowing the President to appear in a public speech was unacceptable. The event will not be rescheduled, instead there will be an informal dinner in the White House for the members of the press.

White House Press Secretary Kerry Green was quoted “The President takes the White House Correspondent’s Ball as an important opportunity to communicate with the Fourth Estate, who have a constitutionally established role to play in the patchwork which is our American democracy. Yet, in the current security climate this administration must take the advice of those that know the field best. I find it regrettable that their advice and recommendations occasionally hinder unfettered access to America’s leaders.”

Since the resurgence of fashion and glamour being reintroduced into the media coverage of events such as the Academy Awards, even our public figures and their main events have reentered public

scrutiny as far as fashion is concerned. All the excitement over security nearly overshadowed the "Best Dressed" contest that this publication had intended to introduce to the yearly event.

The winner of this year's Washington Post Best Dressed contest was Allison Holiday, (Seen in headline photo) a recent graduate of Bishop University, who stunned the crowd in a purple Couture gown. Twenty-something Allison Holiday could only comment "Winning the contest for best dressed has been a longtime dream of mine since I heard about it last week. I can't decide what the dress shows off better, my boobs, or my bootie, what do you think? God, I'm so drunk!"

Interesting enough, Americans seem intent on not remembering Holiday's many appearances into national news, as this is not Allison's first nationally newsworthy incident. Just last year Allison Holiday appeared in a photo that ran in periodicals nationwide. In the photo, Holiday was very intoxicated, and seen paddling a naked pledge in her. Allison Holiday was also involved in the accidental destruction of a dormitory building at Bishop University earlier this year. Investigations into the event have led into one of the largest mob investigations in the state's history. When asked to comment Holiday said "Really? Like the Soprano's? Isn't it weird how James Gandalfini is so overweight, but kind of hot at the same time? That explosion was cool though." Holiday will attend the rescheduled White House Dinner.

#### Sub-Chapter 12 - The Night Before

Allison Holiday's tolerance for alcohol was legendary to the Bishop University student body. Because she partied and drank every night, she was used to waking up with at least low level hangover every morning as she partied and drank every night. But her banging, aching, liquefied head was only her first clue that the previous night had been a big one. Allison was gaining consciousness painfully, in the sense that Allison was ever actually conscious of what was going on around her and not in a daze. Slowly her mind started to piece what had gone on the night before.

It had all started to go terribly, terribly wrong with that kiss, right up there in the bathroom, where Allison had found someone that could satisfy her warrior libido after beating the crap out of Minuete's minions. Allison, of course, was a Southerner and a lady, and if a boy ever tried too far with her, Allison would calmly solve the problem. Actually Allison could solve any problem by hitting someone. Then she would explain to them that she was the one that made the rules, and that she was the one that was going to have her way and not the other way around. Allison just wanted to kiss for a bit and maybe run her fingers over his delicious chest. Yum.

In between kisses the man was gasping for air. "Oh my God, I think you're amazing!" feeling the current break from his liplock with the blond was painful. "Who are you anyway" Alison pulled his shirt over his head, her delicately painted fingernails ticking his well developed chest.

"Holiday..." she said in her kat voice she used to excite men. "Allison Holiday."

"I think you're the most phenomenal woman I've ever met!" he exclaimed. "And I don't really know anything about you!"

"Yeah, thanks. I know." She said absentmindedly. The man looked at her longingly, ready for more. "Well, that was fun," she said. "I've got a ball to attend. See you later!" The man was stammering, trying to figure out what to say. He was stammering "...but...but...."

Allison walked out of the bathroom to find herself in the bowels of the huge conference building, and not in the ball at all. She was in the operational rooms for event planning. The lights were mostly

out, unused. This part of the building was mostly empty. Seeing the lights on in a single room, probably an office, she opened the door the way she always did. Without knocking.

Allison Holiday had seen a lot of things in her life but this was the first time she had ever run into a live domination session between a man and a woman. The dominatrix was clearly stunned, well interrupted during a session with her client. The woman was Scandinavian as well, tall, blonde with the eyes a person gets when they are used to having their exact way in this world. She held a paddle in her hand, arm raised, ready to strike. Allison surmised that the man she had been kissing in the back was her manager, and she was serving someone very rich and important in secret.

It was as if the man, who seemed vaguely familiar, had been caught like a deer in the headlights, but much, much worse. He was on all fours, just wearing boxers, his ass extended behind him ready to receive the paddling it so very much probably deserved. These white guys, they just pissed Allison off. He was just another old white guy to Allison. Finally she was able to break the silence.

“Don’t worry about me, I’m cool if you guys want to party, I don’t judge. I mean it’s not my thing and all. But I’ve got a lot of experience paddling pledges, and I guess I could try anything once and....”

The man-slave screamed, “Security!” and faster than Allison could hardly believe, men wearing sunglasses, earpieces and sporting Uzis stormed the room. There really wasn’t much of a scene, seeing as Allison just stood there letting them secure her. The men were giving updates through their earpieces “Situation normal, Trout is safe. We have a civilian that accidentally got through security.

Allison looked at the agent next to her. “Hey, that’s a pretty cool Uzi.” She got nothing from the guy, but tried again. “I prefer the MP5 better myself because of the grouping.” The man didn’t respond, but Allison knew he had been trained that way. Soon she was being escorted out and before she knew it she was sitting in front of a forty-something balding man with tiny rimmed glasses. He had the demeanor of someone with the weight of the world on his shoulders. The agents had taken her purse that had her ID in it which he was holding.

“Allison Holiday.....How are you doing Allison?”

“Eeehh. Pretty good. I’m ready to get to the ball downstairs, what’s the holdup?”

“My name is Kerry Green, Allison, I am Chief of Staff to the President of the United States. Can you tell me what is going on?” “Oh, sure. I had a bunch of guys jump me outside, so I had to crawl up the wall into the building. I was just trying to find my way to the party when I ran into that dude, and then he called security and I was here.”

“Allison...do you have any idea who...that dude is?”

“Oh, I always forget...What’s his name? He’s that President guy....Oh yeah, President Lambert.”

“That’s right Allison. I don’t know how to say this but...well. You’ve seen some things today that might have seeming a little, well, shocking.”

“Are you talking about that whole dominatrix thing? Not really. I guess that’s just his ‘thang.’ Guys all end up being huge perverts some way once you get to know them. It’s no big.”

“Allison, I’m very glad to hear you say that. Can you wait here one second?”

“Sure, Kerry.”

Allison just shook her head and laughed. "That wacky old President Lambert!" she thought. Then she glanced at the clock on the wall. The party had been underway for a solid hour now, and she was still relatively sober! What was the big deal anyway? So some old white guy liked to get spanked. That was better than some of the things she been asked to do when she was a cheerleader. She was bored. She glanced at her nails, the clock. Then there was a knock at the door. "Come in!" she offered. And before she knew it she was in the room with the President of the United States. Allison stood and gave him a very sharp salute, which seemed to confuse him, but he gave her one back.

"Hello there, Miss Holiday. I take it you're having an interesting evening."

"Eh...not really. I was hoping you guys could let me down there to the party. I've got serious drinking to do, and I bet you'd like to get back to your own party, hehehe, am I right?"

"Oh, I am so relieved. Allison, I was hoping you could do me a little favor."

Allison stared him in the eyes the way she'd seen that Secret Service agent do on television when the President was asking him to use his special forces torture a man for information that was necessary to stop a national disaster. She responded with the same line. "What is it you would like for me to do Mr. President?" "Miss Holiday, I need for you to not let anything you're seen tonight fall into the hands of our enemies. In this case the press. Can I count on you to keep this whole thing to yourself?"

"Sure thing, Mr. President."

"On behalf of a grateful nation, I thank you. We owe you a great debt."

"That's cool and all, can I get back to the party now?"

"Of course. Unless you've got anything I can do for you in return? I don't like owing favors."

"Well, there was this one thing..."

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Meanwhile down below Brea and Lani had made it to the interior of the party, after getting a decent amount of alcohol into their system. Apparently Lani's job at the Washington Post had gotten her out of practice as far as partying was concerned, because she was substantially more intoxicated than Brea.

"There he is...." Lani slightly slurred. "Michael. The boy you had thought was cute earlier." Brea looked over and giggled.

"Oh my god, he is too cute. But Lani...he's so cute he's probably chasing girls a lot prettier than me...Oh, it's just not fair!"

Brea and Lani had spent quite a bit of time slightly intoxicated and chasing boys in LV-426. Basically their team broke down like this. Sober, Lani had learned it was best not to be so opinionated and bossy, but the slightest bit of alcohol removed these roadblocks. As for Brea? A little bit of alcohol in her system turned her into the girliest girl on earth, all giggles and insecurity. The girls would wake up in the morning and regret having shown their undefended selves, but for the meantime Brea was on the hunt, and Lani was going to help her.

"So come on, tell me what Michael's like!" expressed Brea. "What is he into?"

Lani was reflective. "Oh my God, actually, when I think about it he is totally the perfect guy for you. I had always thought about him in the terms of a guy that wasn't my type. But he's perfect for you!" Brea was intrigued. "Why? What's he like?" Lani answered "Well, he's a romantic, and I'm weird that I don't like guys like that. He's got a band, and he's into Linux, and is just a nice guy in general."

"Well how can I meet him? Much less know what to talk to him about?" said a nervous Brea. "You'll figure it out," replied Lani. Then she yelled "Hey Michael!" He turned, approaching the pair. He made a motion that somehow communicated to Lani "I'm in an important conversation right now and I'll be over in a bit." To Brea it only looked like he was waving back, but reporters are a breed in and to themselves with their own language. Nervous, Brea was turning all shades of red. Lani reassured her, "Just relax, and be yourself."

"You know Ashley's mother gave him the same advice, and Allison had an interesting comment for him."

"What was it?" Lani asked.

"Oh you should be yourself, absolutely. But only if you were a different person."

"That was probably good advice," Lani reflected. "That was back when he was dating Nikki, right?"

"Yep. Totally whipped. I can't believe I'm meeting Michael when I'm surrounded by these totally gorgeous girls."

"God, I'll regret saying this when I'm sober tomorrow morning, but there are certain ways of perceiving you as being a catch." Brea pulled out her day planner which was leather and Kenneth Cole and jotted down a quick note. "What's that?" asked Lani. "Oh, just a reminder to rub that in your face for the next several days." The wheels in Lani's mind were spinning trying to come up with a really pithy comeback, but by now she noticed Michael approaching them, and would be within earshot soon. He made his introduction.

"Lani, hey, what's up?" Michael said. Every girl has her own tastes in looks, as far as who Mr. Right would be, and Michael was definitely Brea's. "You spend so much time at the paper, I've never seen you with friends before, who is this?"

Summing up all her strength Brea nervously stepped forward shaking his hand. She had butterflies in her stomach the way she had gotten them in Junior High around whoever her latest football crush happened to be on. "I'm Brea, well my real name is Breana but it's just too absurd, so to my friends it's Brea. And I know we just met and all but you can call me Brea." Even as the words were passing through her lips she knew she was crashing and babbling incoherently.

Lani shot her a glance that said "What the hell could you possibly be thinking?!?" Brea's return glance said "I know! I'm nervous, do something to help me out here!" All this took place in a fraction of a second, but like reporters, girls have their own ways of communicating silently.

Brea's glance went back to Michael's. Her brown eyes met his delicious blue ones and she felt her heart melt. She could not believe her luck, she could tell from his face he thought Brea's nervousness was cute. "I'm Michael. I have to say I like Breana better. It's very pretty."

That was when Lani said the following. "Michael, I have a bit of alcohol in my system which has resulted in me saying the following. I am going to get alcohol because I want to leave you alone with my friend Brea. She is so fabulous and available that you would be well advised to spend every effort

to go out with her at a future date because she's new in town and will undoubtedly have guys better than you chasing after her before long." And with that, Lani walked off.

Both Brea and Michael were pretty speechless, both not knowing what to say in the situation. Brea broke the silence, "Lani's a little drunk tonight," she said with a smirk. "This isn't the first time she's done this to me." He smiled back at her "How did you guys meet?"

"According to Lani, we've been ruining her life since back in junior high, something about how we accidentally stopped her from being accepted to the school, but myself and my friend Allison don't remember. We actually were roommates at Bishop University." This peaked Michael's attention.

"Bishop University? Huh, what did you think about that dormitory that blew up over there?" Brea's savvy little mind lit up, knowing she was about to impress him. "Actually, it's a funny story..." she paused for effect. "I actually had a little something to do with that." And from there she went on to tell Michael a highly amusing story involving a flat tire, a forgotten handbrake and a cup of decaffeinated coffee.

Brea could tell Michael was impressed because he kept asking lots of questions about the story. And not because he was a reporter running on auto-pilot, but because he found Brea to be inherently and utterly interesting.

"So what do you do for the Times, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Oh have the most boring job on earth, so I'm telling you ahead of time it will not impress you." Brea chuckled, "I don't think that will be a problem." "I'm a design editor," said Michael. "I lay out the stories in Quark, and insert photos and copies. Very repetitive, I don't use my brain most weeks."

"That's cool," Brea smirked "Having a job? What's that like, how's that working out for you?" "Total suckville," confessed Michael.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a man, thirty something was watching Brea and Michael intently. The man noticed Brea noticing him, and tried to act all casual.

"I don't think I'm the only person interested in you tonight," Brea said, pointing to the man with a nod of her head. Michael looked up at the man, seeing who Brea was talking about.

"Him?" said Michael jovially. "He's harmless, just a friend of my family."

By this time Lani had made it back to the couple after having suffered through an awful line to get alcohol at the open bar. "You were right about them running out of alcohol Brea. It's a good thing we had tipped the bartender in advance." "Oooh, that's a good idea," said Michael. Brea was about to tell him she was full of helpful advice when the band stopped playing, the event was starting.

### Sub-Chapter 13 - The Night Before (Part Two)

Minuete's hands were shaking she was so visibly upset at the phone call she had just gotten. It had been from one of her father's assistants. Someone big was calling in a favor that Minuete had no choice but to cash. She was being forced to rig the Best Dressed Contest for Allison Holiday to win.

Not that the contest hadn't already been rigged anyway. Minuete had worked it so that the wife of a certain Senator, a Senator susceptible to flattery, would win. That she was scandalously young and blonde only helped the illusion. She was doing a favor to be owed a favor. Things in Washington just worked that way. She didn't know who was calling in the favor, or why they wanted it, but you don't say no to the Kiley family.

In a way, Minuete was admittedly enjoying all the ironies of the event. Starting the contest in the first place had been her idea. The story announcing the new contest had been picked up in the monologues for all the late night talk shows, meaning that the whole nation was paying attention to who actually won. Her managing editor had taken her out for drinks he was so pleased with the publicity. And now Allison Holiday was going to be the won that won? The whole thing just further proved there wasn't any justice in the world. An independently wealthy, attractive, white woman just couldn't get an even shake in life, she mused.

"This just sucks!" exclaimed Minuete to Britney but more to herself because Britney never more than half-listened. "How am I supposed to get out of this one!?"

Britney was leaning against a column, both with her shoulders and left temple. "I thought you said it was a rule to do exactly as the Kiley family said to do," mused a sarcastic Britney. "And now you want to interfere? What about the rule."

"Britney, you should know by now that my rules apply to other people and not me. It's a bit of a policy I have called 'I'll do whatever the hell I want.'"

"That's cool," said an unimpressed Britney. "So get Carmet to go arrest her for something, anything. She never makes it onto the stage, we act like we were freaking clueless. There's even a good chance we could pay someone in the prison lockup to give her ponytail a little chop-chop once she's in lock-up."

"That's! That's...." sputtered Minuete, "That's actually not a bad idea. In fact it's kind of the opposite of a bad idea."

"You don't keep me around for my good eyesight." she said, again with the heavy sarcasm. She held her tapping can up for effect.

Minuete switched her cell phone over to short-range radio, sort of a walkie-talkie for anyone in a two mile radius. It made group communication more simple. "This is Pimp Daddy to Crack Ho, come in Crack Ho."

Carmet's voice was filtered over the radio "This is Crack Ho, man, why did you get to pick the code names? It's not fair." Minuete responded with an authoritative

"Coming up with the code names is one of the best parts of the super-villain job." Carmet just responded with some noises that were part language, part wailing.

"We have a new objective for you, Crack Ho. We need you to arrest Allison Holiday. I don't care what for, don't let her get on stage with the finalists for best dressed."

"I read you Pimp Daddy. Over and out."

Minuete turned to Britney. "What do you think? I've got a good feeling."

"Oh, I think that things will definitely work out," Britney returned with a thin smile. "Probably."

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Security for political events in D.C. was always tight, but with an event such as this, with so many leaders in both the government and the media, tight was not good enough. Imagine the American people's panic if both their leaders and the people they relied on to tell them about their leaders were killed or kidnapped.

For event such as this, COG rules were in effect, or Continuity of Government. A leftover program from the Cold War with the Soviet Union, it was a plan designed to reroute official to alternate sites with very strict rules of who would be in charge under what circumstances.

Which is to say Carmet was feeling more than a little nervous for exactly two reasons being a policeman backstage during this event. The first fear was that even to Carmet, the fact that she was a policeman always came with quotation marks. Sure, she'd passed the exam after three tries, but her employment with the police was nothing more than a paycheck and a badge their overburdened accounting system software was not aware of. And besides, she'd always expected the Kiley family had somehow rigged the test.

Secondly, in the event of an emergency, someone might expect Carmet to actually do something Policemen-like. She had a badge and her Glock 9 x 19, but to be totally honest? Carmet had been more interested in making out with her live-in boyfriend at the time than studying the rules for some dumb arrest procedures.

As for firing the weapon Carmet had never really liked loud noises or explosions taking place near her body. She had a light gun for her Playstation, and could usually get to level 6 with the cheat on for unlimited ammo. She figured that was close enough, because to tell you the truth? If it ever went down on the streets, Carmet would be running. She had no shame in running her ass off, and would later ask any innocent bystanders what they had meant by shame.

Unlike Minuete and Britney, Carmet had never far less interaction with Allison Holiday. In fact she had no interaction with her whatsoever. 'The Orange Queen' and 'Sarcasmo', her personal nicknames for the two that brought her severe scolding when they slipped, of them had known her at Bishop University. Scanning the room, she saw a lot of tall blond girls with ponytails, but she had to admit her attention was being drawn to one in particular wearing a stunning purple Co'ture gown.

This blonde had caught her attention because Carmet was noticing all the guys in the room noticing the blonde...and not Carmet. Not Carmet! It was because she was stuck in some dumb cop uniform. She should be the one up there wearing the purple Co'ture gown with those too cute diamond earrings, except she thought that purple would have clashed horribly with her red hair and that her favorite color was jet black.

She had reluctantly called Minuete to admit she couldn't remember what Allison Holiday looked like. As Minuete scolded her Carmet was just going "Blah, blah, blah blah blah, blah," in her mind so she didn't have to listen to her ranting. When the noise stopped she hung up the phone.

In a few minutes, Minuete sent her the photo of Allison she had taken via her cell phone. Carmet considered the universal fact that no matter how much technology changed, cell phones would always be quirky and slow. But when the image did come up, there was no mistake. This particular girl was Allison Holiday and that girl was also her target. Carmet moved closer.

When she was about to pull her gun Allison spun around, looked her up and down and said "Oh my God, where did you get those boots because they are totally cute!" This threw Carmet off because she was excessively proud of her Versace black pumps because A, they had cost her a small fortune and B, they were so much cuter than the standard cop uniform boots.

"Oh these little things?" Carmet bragged "It was in this little boutique over across from M street and Wisconsin over near Georgetown. They're Versace."

“Well, I don’t know what they cost but they were totally worth it.” Allison eyes Carmet’s service pistol “Is that a Glock 34?” Carmet noted that talking to Allison Holiday was way more cool than talking to ‘Orange Queen’ or ‘Sarcasmo.’ On instinct she pulled the pistol out to present to Allison saying “Yeah!” who picked it up, gripping it expertly.

“Back home I’ve got two of these. Laser scope, extended magazines, 3 round burst, very cool stuff. I tried to teach Ashley how to use one but he’s a total blork.” Allison said as she expertly disassembled the barrel from the grip of the pistol to Carmet’s wide-eyed amazement. Allison closed one eye, flipping the disassembled barrel upside down, looking intently at it. “This thing is totally too oiled, you’d better cycle some ammo through it, or it could jam,” Allison commented. She then piecing the frame, barrel and magazine back into a completed gun, which was pretty much the extent of Carmet’s knowledge of the stupid thing.

Carmet gripped it, confidently putting it back in her holster when her finger grazed the trigger while forcing it down. Allison’s reassembly of the weapon had cycled a round into the chamber, causing the normally recessed trigger to be cocked with a live bullet. As Carmet pushed the gun into the holster she accidentally pulled the trigger, firing the pistol into the floor, barely grazing her boot leaving a small scratch in the leather near her big toe.

This had two immediate effects. First people started screaming and running away, trying to exit the backstage area’s two exits. The second effect was police, Secret Service, and even hired security were trying to get into the room, causing a rather humorous road jam. As for Carmet she was paralyzed with fear she’d be busted as a “cop”. And then Allison’s cell phone rang.

“Hello?” she said answering it. “Oh, hey Tequila! What’s up?.....No, I’m at this dress ball thing..... Yeah, it’s pretty boring.” By this point the girls were surrounded by police. “Hey listen, I can’t talk now but I forgot to tell you, I moved to DC. Later!”

All of them were looking at Carmet and Allison like “Since you’re standing here you must know what happened.” It took her a beat for Allison to realize this and Carmet was just frozen with fear. Allison pointed towards the stairs leading to the second floor of the backstage area, “He went that way! If you hurry you can still catch him!”

Part of the swarm immediately rushed off and part stayed to ask Allison a million questions at once, mostly “What did he look like?” and “What happened?” The relief brought Carmet out of the shock long enough to move her foot over the bullet hole in the floor, a good thing since she noticed the Secret Service agents were surveying the scene more carefully.

After Allison had said enough to get enough police away from earshot, Carmet leaned into her to whisper “Thanks, I owe you one. I think you just kept me out of jail.”

To which Allison replied, “There’s no time for jail, those boots are Versace! I think if you’ll rub some moisturizer into that bullet scratch, you can still save them.”

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This was the story Allison was recounting to an impressed Brea and a horrified Lani over coffee at a small table in the lobby of the Radison Inn they were staying at, sans her rendezvous with the silly thing with President. Nope, she was going to do her American duty and keep that to herself, although Allison was the last person on earth able to keep a secret. All the girls were sucking down vast amounts of coffee fighting their hangovers, especially Lani. As for the rest of the story, Allison winning the contest and being paraded around on stage and being crowned, Lani and Brea had seen

all of that. Allison was wearing the tiara she had won in the contest even though she had just woken up and hadn't done her hair yet.

"You lied to the police over a scratch in a boot?" asked an incredulous Lani, "Do you understand you could have gone to jail?"

"Were you able to save them?" asked a concerned Brea. "A little moisturizer and it buffed right out," Allison said proudly. "By the way, Lani I got a phone number from someone I thought you'd be into. This picked up Lani's attention, "Really?" Lani hadn't seen any romantic action since moving to DC, but that wasn't too much of a switch.

"Oh yeah, she's got everything! She's into politics, and book stuff. The hair's a little short though."

Brea tried to choke back a reflex chortle, causing her to nearly spew her coffee all over the table. Lani waited for a beat, then pausing after each word for effect. "I'M...NOT...GAY." This made no impression however on Allison. "Yeah, I couldn't remember, so I got this guy's number for you too."

Then the shock hit Brea, realizing she had not broken the most important news in the world to Allison. Michael. Her Michael! She and Allison went into to what Lani referred to as screechy "Oh my God Girl Mode."

"What were his hands like, did he have good hands?" Allison asked. "Great hands, Like I'd ever date a guy with bad hands!" "How heavy a beard do you think he'd grow? He didn't have a baby face did he?" "Bleah, No way, it wasn't like 5 o'clock shadow, but you could totally tell he could grow one if he wanted. You know if he grew his hair out a bit more it would be perfect!"

"Butt, please," said Allison primly.

"Allison! I didn't notice. I don't notice things like that."

"Lies. That was a certifiable falsehood. Butt, please," said Allison, folding her arms.

Brea realized resistance was futile. "He had a really smoking tushie, okay?"

"What's his last name?" Allison wanted to know. This one threw Brea for a loop. "I don't know...Lani?" She responded with a "Don't ask me, I barely know the guy."

"Be sure to find out on your first date or it'll be awkward," said Allison. "And by the way when is your first date?" "I don't know yet. He said he'd call.

Brea's cell phone rang. She looked at the caller ID. It was Ashley Allen! Brea, Allison, Lani and Ashley, the fourth and final part of the gang from LV-426. Ashley was their slightly geeky younger boy they kept around partially for guy stuff, partially for amusement.

"Ashley! What's happening babe?" said Brea, genuinely happy to be hearing from him. "I just wanted to let you guys know," he replied "I got a ticket to Baltimore, Maryland, because it was the cheapest flight. I'll be getting there on the 9th. Have you gotten a new car yet?"

"I'll get a new car once I have a place to park it. We're still apartment shopping."

"That's not a problem. If you guys take the yellow line all the way down to Franconia-Springfield, you can take a 30 minute bus to meet me at in Baltimore. I'm bringing your techno stuff, I'll need some help carrying it. "

"Yeah, that's gonna happen," said Brea sarcastically. "How much more just to fly into Reagan?"

“35 dollars.”

“It’s worth 35 dollars to me not to sit on some smelly bus. I’ll pay you back.”

“Alright. I’ll be flying in on the eighth, that’s exactly a week from now.”

“All right, we’ll see you shortly. Listen, you’ve got to hear this story!” said Brea, passing the phone to Allison who was adjusting her tiara from the reflection in the hotel brass railing.

#### Sub-Chapter 1 - A Present for Pandora

The Annex Skyrise, Washington D.C.

Minuete wasn’t quite happy. In fact, she was pretty much the opposite of happy. She was filled with bloodlust rage at the failure of her new evil organization, Paradox 90, to accomplish its first mission. She had just gotten the phone call she had dreading, the one from Mistress Nine.

Minuete was at her secret lair in the Annex Skyrise. She had been sitting in her office at her desk when the phone had rung. She knew in her gut it was Mistress Nine without even looking at the lights on the phone to verify that the line being called was the private line that only her boss knew existed.

“Yes, Mistress Nine? Or Boss, what would you like me to call you by the way?”

“I let the people I put in charge call me Boss, but then again they’re the only ones I communicate directly with. But again, Nine will also work in a pinch.”

“I’ll still refer to you as Mistress Nine when I talk with them.”

“Excellent. I was just reading the Washington Post today, there was a rather interesting article in the Metro section about the ball last night. Did you see it?” Minuete felt her anger rise, she herself had been the one to write it, and her boss certainly knew it. She decided to play dumb.

“I kind of wrote it, Boss.”

“It was a poor attempt at humor, I take it from the newspaper photo your mission wasn’t successful.”

“Boss, maybe this is the same reason you’re sending us after her, but dealing with Allison Holiday is a crap shoot. If there’s a way for it to go wrong, she will find a way. She beat up three of my operatives, and when I sent Carmet after her personally, she cocked the pistol without Carmet knowing, causing it to go off and cause a huge scene.”

“I know, I have other ways of getting information other than yourself and the Post. I’d appreciate it if you would not waste your time trying to figure out why I wanted Allison Holiday’s ponytail.”

“Yes boss.”

“Minuete, I’ve been in this business for a long time, and one thing I’ve learned is that even if you put the best people on the job, it takes a while for things to get rolling. For instance, did you know that for both the FBI and the CIA took about a decade until things were actually working the way they should? So my message to you is this, you can chalk up all of last night as a do-over.”

“That’s very generous boss.”

"I want you to go over what happened, look at the organization, change what needs changing. Question the fundamentals."

"We're already in the process, boss. Carmet is bringing in an outside consultant even as we speak."

"Then I'll let you get to work, Minuete."

"Thank you boss. Thank you Nine."

"Minuete, one last thing."

"Yes?"

"The American government might be willing to put up with a decade of incompetence, but I will not. You get things working, do you hear me?"

"I'm on it," she replied.

That had been the conversation earlier in the day. Overall Minuete had been surprised, because she had been expecting to be chewed out, only worse because it would be someone as powerful as the Mistress Nine doing the chewing.

And in a way, it was also comforting, because it filled in some gaps in the puzzle over who Mistress Nine is, and why someone that can take down a Senator would be wasting their attention on something as trivial as Allison Holiday's ponytail. Obviously this first mission was meant to just be a shakedown. But Minuete had no idea what to think about the part where Mistress Nine had jumped on her for wondering what her overall agenda was.

The speaker on Minuete's intercom buzzed, interrupting Minuete's thoughts. It was the phone line she had put in exclusively for Carmet to call her on. She had installed it to make the task of ignoring Carmet more efficient. She answered with a harsh "What the hell do you want, Carmet?"

"I've got the delivery you had asked for, Minnie...I mean Minuete."

"I've told you nine million times not to call me Minnie. You're lucky I let you call me by my first name at all and not Miss Kiley."

Carmet was murmuring something under her breath, enraging Minuete even further. "Have you finished your chores today?"

"I'm just about done," Carmet promised. "Dirty Dancing is playing on cable."

"What's 'just about done?' Did you make your bed?"

"Uh, no."

"Have you taken out the garbage?"

"Uh..Yes. (i have not,)" she whispered the last part hoping Minuete wouldn't catch it."

"I heard that. Can you tell me one chore you've done today."

"Uhm. No," said Carmet in a guilty voice.

"I swear, I wish I had some sense of the day you turned me into a lunatic woman!" Minuete said very angrily, then yelled "You make me crazy!" she could almost sense Carmet giggling on the other end of the phone. "Have Rook, Taro and Tselinoyarask deliver the package to my office. You are

grounded from TV until you do your chores. No Dirty Dancing for you.” Carmet whined, then very sarcastically said. “I’ll get right on them then ‘Minnie’, then hung up before Minuete could yell at her some more.

Minuete was still pacing the office talking to herself complaining out loud about how much Carmet was making her crazy when she heard a knock at the door. It was Rook, Tselinoyarask, Taro and Britney. Rook was holding a large gunny sack, filled with what was obviously a human being from the way it was thrashing. Rook threw the sack in front of Minuete’s desk, where she moved to sit behind. Britney closed the door to the office, crossed her arms, and leaned against it. She was watching the events amusedly, or at least watching it to the extent that her blindness let her watch anything.

The man thrashed his way out of the sack, scarred out of his mind. Looking around the room in a panic, seeing who was there. As soon as he turned to see Minuete he could tell she was in charge.

“Where am I? Why did you kidnap me?” he demanded.

“I’ll stick to the questions, you can concentrate on the answers. You are Professor Laurens, are you not?”

“Yes, that’s me, do I know you?”

“Indirectly, I was a student of yours at Bishop University. My name is Minuete Kiley.”

“I remember her,” he said, reminiscently, “She took my senior Business Management class, but you’re not the Minuete Kiley I taught at Bishop.”

“Oh, why is that?” Minuete said coyly.

“Well, for starters she was black!” said the panicked professor.

Minuete chuckled. “Well, I went to your class twice, and I swear you are the most boring professor I’d ever had. Even watching you breathe in and out made me want to beat you and everyone else in the room up, so I hired an honors student to go to class and take the class for me. She briefed me carefully though. Business management is, of course, a very important part of taking over the world!”

By now the man had sat down in a chair in front of Minuete’s desk. Rook, Tselinoyarask and Taro stood behind him menacingly. “What does any of that have to do with me?”

“Well Professor, you are honored to be at the headquarters of my evil organization to take over the world, we are....Paradox Ninety!” Minuete said, pressing a button on her desk. The wall behind her lit up, revealing the SkullHeart logo, along with hundreds of broadcasts from every part of the world.

As Minuete said the words “Paradox Ninety,” Rook, Tselinoyarask and Taro all give sharp salutes, as they had been instructed. Britney rolled her blind eyes, giving a long sigh that blew into her hair. At this point Professor Laurens was absolutely scared out of his mind. Minuete stood imperially with a loud command “Bring in the TortureMaster 2000!” This sent Rook scurrying off to Minuete’s office closet.

Professor Laurens was in an absolute frenzy “What...What is that? A torture rack or something? Is this a joke?” “It’s no joke at all, Professor, I got it on eBay!” said Minuete cheerily. She had circled behind him by now, putting a hand on his shoulder. She then swiveled the man’s chair suddenly around so he was facing her again.

She pointed an imperious finger at the man, declaring “When I’m through with you, I shall have all the secrets of Business Management you possess. Then there will be nothing to stop Paradox Ninety from taking over the world.” The burn scars and shattered jewel fragments glittered in Minuete’s pointing hand positively glistened in the cold light of the large flatscreen monitor covering the wall across the room.

His eyes were opened wide “Possess?” said the Professor “I’ll tell you anything you want! I’m a teacher for God’s sake! You don’t need to torture me!”

This caused Minuete to laugh out loud. “This was the only way I could think of to make it interesting. Boy, you are boring.” Rook was wheeling out the TortureMaster 2000. It was twelve feet tall, the metal restraint cuffs dangling against each other, making heavy clacking sounds.

The professor was reeling, mind racing crazily. Can I at least go to the bathroom first?” He asked, not knowing what else to say. Minuete thought about the matter for a second, then declared “Taro! Seize him and take him to the bathroom! Not my office bathroom though, let him use Carmet’s.”

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Minuete was standing behind a podium in the Formal Address Room inside the Annex Skyrise. The seats were filled with over a hundred of Minuete’s minions, everyone from her accountants to building security. Britney, Rook, Taro and Tselinoyarask had gotten seats in the special V.I.P. section. Carmet had gotten a seat behind a pillar way in the back. This was not a lucky accident. After the “Ball Fiasco” as Minuete was referring to it now, she had ordered Carmet to leave her gun in her apartment in the Annex Skyrise, to make catastrophic gunplay events less probable.

Minuete had ordered all of her staff to come to a meeting, a meeting she had carefully prepared. She had even had her tech boys prepare elaborate PowerPoint slides for the Address Room projector. It was game time.

Minuete began her speech. “My name is Minuete. I’m about kicking ass. I’m gonna give you this presentation, and Paradox Ninety is gonna conquer this nation.” Minuete had spent about 15 minutes writing that line, with the help of a rhyming dictionary, hoping to grab everyone’s attention from the start.

“A lot of you have been working for me for years now from the Kiley Foundation. Some of you have only been hired recently, as we’ve had a merger from a fragmented to a single organization, Paradox Ninety! In any case, we’re going to talk a bit about where we’ve been and where we’re going. From the suggestion box located in the Operations section of the Annex Skyrise, the most common question I get is ‘I hear rumors that Paradox Ninety is an evil organization, is that true?’ or also ‘I’m just an accountant trying to feed my family, I’m not breaking the law am I?’ Well, the good news is that no. We are not an evil organization. Our focus group studies showed that the word ‘evil’ gave people a negative impression of the Paradox Ninety. In any case, we are not evil. When I enslave the population of the world it will be a good thing, because a retarded third grader could run things better than the guys in charge now, much less a super-genius like myself. So the word evil is not appropriate in describing this organization. However, make no mistake. I will lie, cheat, and even strangle a dear friend like Carmet Criser if it gets me any closer to my lifelong dream of world domination. I would take money from tobacco companies if I ever ran for office. I’ll launder money, bribe people, kick puppies, whatever it takes. But that doesn’t make us an evil organization. No, Paradox Ninety is an ‘ethically-challenged’ organization.”

“There’s a world of difference between evil and ethically challenged. And don’t worry, all the ethically-challenged activity will be done by my executive staff and myself. The rest of you are not liable legally for our own highly unethical activities, at least according to my lawyer.”

Minuete brought up a slide with an elaborate graphic depicting a paradigm shift. “Although it is true that the overall goal of Paradox Ninety is world domination, that’s only a very long term goal. Short term, the goal of Paradox Ninety, the goal each and every member of the team is one word. Quality.”

A new graphic came up on screen, a new image of the Paradox Ninety logo, A skull with a heart on the forehead, only this time with the word ‘Quality!’ below it in a jazzy font. “We are going to reengineer this corporation! We are going to reengineer this corporation so that when people hear the name ‘Paradox Ninety’ the first thing that pops into their head is the impression of quality. To that end, we need to look at the three C’s, a staple principal in the world of business reengineering.”

The next cycled graphic was the word “Customer” with a heavy emphasis on the C. “In every aspect of the work Paradox Ninety engages in, the focus needs to be on the customer. In this case, the customer is me!” Minuete was pointing at various members of the audience. “You, you, and you. By God, you’d better be thinking every minute of every day, am I pleasing Minuete? Would she beat me up and fire me if she saw the job I was doing? Because we will be instituting a rewards program for coworkers that have the goods to rat out coworkers. We have some lovely prizes! For coworkers that rat out a total of eleven coworkers, you can win a lovely vacation in Maui!”

The projector clicked, and the next slide appeared, “Competition.” Minuete moved from behind the stage. This one is pretty simple. There are people out there that would stop me in my plan for world domination. Our official company policy for these people is very clear. ‘Anyone who opposes Minuete Kiley shall be destroyed.’ Enough said.”

The third and final slide popped up, “Change.” Minuete declared “This one is simple too. We must not fear change. We must embrace change! In this case change means that if I figure out a way to ship your job overseas to a fifteen year old Bangladeshi kid, I don’t want to hear any girlscout whining like ‘I’ve got a family!’ That kind of whining belongs on Oprah.”

Minuete looked down at her notes, there was nothing left. She was disappointed, having enjoyed all the ranting and threatening her employees. “All right, that’s it! In the meantime all workers are to report to Carmet Criser’s room tomorrow morning at Eight AM to receive their free “Quality” HeartSkull tee-shirt and coffee mug.”

Taro dropped a cardboard box in Carmet’s lap. “Aw man!! This sucks!” she cried, not wanting to be awake at such an ungodly hour, much less hand out some crappy coffee mugs.

## Sub-Chapter 2 - The Little Things

It was the second day of the New Year, 20x8. The first day of the year had been on a Sunday. The week before, when Lani had gone to her former editor to tell her Minuete had transferred her to the style section, and that her apartment had burned down, he had quite generously given her two weeks of paid vacation. This gave Lani nine days to shop for an apartment with Brea and Allison before she had to face her new job with Minuete.

The girls had moved to the DoubleTree Guess Suites, because Brea had spent hours online negotiating a cheaper hotel room. She did not like to waste money, and if she could save a dollar, she would. It was located near M street and 25th street, and Brea was in love with the

neighborhood. Allison was in love with the number of liquor stores, having taken the afternoon before to stock up the intricate cacophony of ingredients needed to make her “jungle juice” she always carried in her hip flask.

As for Lani? She was in love with such impressive access to the Metro. Losing a car wouldn't be so bad. Even better, it was access to both the red and blue Metro lines, debatably the most important ones. The red led easily to Union Station, near the Capitol. The blue led right to take one directly to the heart of the U.S. Government, or south to the very large mall at the Pentagon. One could even make a quick jump to the yellow line at L'Enfant Plaza and you were at the Ronald Regan Airport.

Brea had kind of unofficially taken charge of the apartment search. Lani didn't mind, even though she knew DC better. Brea was admittedly much better with meeting people than Lani was. There are laws that try to stop it, but getting an apartment came down to the manager liking you. Brea had this talent for meeting people and making friends.

“Can we all agree...” proposed Brea, “that this is neighborhood we want to live in?”

“I think this is it,” said Allison, pouring some jungle juice into her coffee cup.

“No argument from me,” said Lani. “But this is a pretty expensive part of town, Brea.” It was a bitterly cold DC morning.

“I know. But sometimes I like to go by my instincts. I have a very good feeling about this place. This is the apartment building that said they had a 3 bedroom vacancy. If it's not too expensive, I say we take it.” Brea was holding the classifieds in one hand, and her coffee cup in the other.

The apartment hunting situation was far more difficult than anything the girls had anticipated. In every building remotely acceptable, there didn't seem to be any vacancies. Lani had proposed independent apartments for the girls, but with a tripled utility cost, they needed a large apartment. Besides, Brea and Allison wanted somewhere they could throw parties.

They were looking for a three bedroom apartment. It was true that Allison usually just passed out on the couch, and didn't really need a bedroom. But Brea and Lani both shared an unusual quirk. They absolutely could not sleep in the same room as their home office. This had been part of the reason Lani had gone along with the LV-426 scheme. They planned to share the third room as an office, and put a bed in there for Allison to crash on, or make out with boys in.

The name of the elaborate brass placard was Westbrooke Place. They entered the doors only to find themselves in a small lobby, the doors ahead of them tightly shut, as Brea discovered as she tried to open them. There was a slot for a keycard and a speakerbox. Brea turned it on.

“Hello?” Brea asked, testing the box.

“Yes, this is Dawn, how may I help you?” she asked in a chipper, very professional voice.

“This is Brea Anatamata, I had a 9:30 appointment with the apartment manager.”

“One moment please,” said the receptionist. Brea could see her through the glass, she was tall and had a regal air about her. Within moments, the doors clicked, unlocking. The girls pushed forward.

“Oh my God,” Lani said involuntarily. The lobby was amazing! It was done in old world antiquing, yet in accordance to DC architecture, it was very compact, not a single square foot of space wasted. Beautiful flowers decorated the hall, with an elegant set of stairs to the second floor in the shape of

a heart. Brea's face showed excitement, but she had spent more time in luxury than Lani, so was able to hide her excitement better. Allison just looked bored and took another swig of her coffee.

A charismatic woman came marching through the lobby, shaking Brea's hand.

"Hello, I'm Miss. Vetipane, it's nice to meet you. You must be Miss Anamata. How do you do, and your friends are..."

"This is Lani Cameron, she's a writer for the Washington Post." Lani moved forward saying "It's very nice to meet you."

Brea continued "And this is Allison..." but she turned and Allison wasn't there. She was near the elevators, being chatted up by cute guy that had just finished in the workout room. "Allison Holiday, who is...making friends with one of your residents. She's, uh, very neighborly."

"Perhaps you'd like to step into my office." said Miss Vetipane.

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Twenty minutes later, Brea was back downstairs in the apartment manager's building. The apartment had been absolutely spectacular, beyond anything she had expected. Quite frankly, it was perfect.

On the sitcom Friends, the joke had been how they afforded the incredibly large apartment. This was one of those apartments. You entered through the kitchen, the appliances looked as if they were from the future, from there you could go to the residential area in the back, or down two feet of stairs into the den area. That meant the den had that much more space and, oh the light! It was on the top floor, and the room had a large skylight. The porch was huge, and had stairs to the roof of the building. Brea was salivating thinking the parties she could throw.

Each of the three bedrooms in the back had its own bathroom, and walk in closets. The master bedroom even had a spa!

So downstairs, Brea was looking at the numbers in the apartment manager's office. The place was too much even for her. Brea was rich the way someone is rich enough that their money is making enough money for Brea to live off of. Basically speaking, her money was the one with the job. If she paid for this place, she would go over her carefully calculated budget and would have nothing to retire on. She was alone in the office with Miss Vetipane because Brea had tasked Lani on locating Allison Holiday who seemed to have disappeared altogether. Both Lani and Brea had begged her a million times to carry a cell phone, but Allison didn't trust them, believing they could make your brain short circuit. Or was it that alien's used them to control your mind? Honestly, sometimes it was hard to keep up with Allison's delusional fantasies.

In any Miss Vetipane offered "We have to keep records of who we show apartments to, rules for Equal Opportunity Housing and all. I can fill out the paperwork for you while I'm crunching numbers if you'd like."

"Sure," said Brea. "Is everything you need on my driver's license?" Miss Vetipane assured her that it was, and Brea dug into her purse and handed it to her, noting she was out of Tampax and that her friend was arriving soon.

Brea was still way off in accounting land punching numbers with Lani's Palm Pilot she had borrowed when her stately host exclaimed "Oh! Small world after all and all! You're from Bishop University! LV-426, which building is that in, LV Alpha or Beta."

“Oh, It’s in LV-Alpha. Did you go to school at Bishop?” asked Brea.

“Oh, no. But my father did. A long time ago. He and his roommate from there donated the money to build the this building LV-Gamma, even using their own construction thing.

Brea froze so hard she dropped Lani’s Palm Pilot. She put it all together in her head very quickly. The LV complex was apparently short for the Lede-Vetipane complex. And she and Allison had been the ones to destroy LV-Gamma! Brea looked at Miss Vetipane, who was oblivious to her shocked expression, punching data into the computer. Then she looked at the numbers, and decided it wasn’t going to work out, there was no way she was getting this apartment. Why not tell an interesting story?

“Actually, I’ve got kind of a funny story to tell you then. You had heard about the accident with LV-Gamma, right?”

“Heard about it, good lord, it practically saved my family and my job here. It was the best thing that ever happened to us.” Brea was taken back. “How so?” she asked.

“Well, my father is no one’s fool. And for years he’s been crunching the numbers on his construction projects and things just are not adding up. A million here, a million there. Sooner or later we’re talking about real money. He’d been screaming at the government for years, because he knew the mob was involved, but he couldn’t get them interested. I’m sure you’ve heard about the heavy mob involvement that law enforcement discovered investigating the thing.” Brea responded by saying she hadn’t been following the story.”

She took a long yawn, and then asked if Brea was interested in some coffee. She said yes, and Miss Vetipane continued. “So not only is the mob embezzling money, stealing money by listing fictional construction costs, they’re trying to scrape by with shoddy construction. And it all backfired against them when a car rolls into a faultily wired gas line and I’m sure you know the rest. It’s been on the front page for weeks, the police keep uncovering more of the mob’s organized crime.”

“Does the name Anatamata ring a bell?” Brea said. Miss Vetipane stopped making the coffee dead in her tracks, making the connection from Brea’s drivers license,

“Is P. Anatamata a relative of yours? because my father had been trying to locate her.”

“Why, is she liable for something?”

“Good lord no, he wanted to pay her for her car! It was his defective building that had blown it up.” This shocked Brea, because Mr. Vetipane was right, she had been so scared of her own liability in the incident, she hadn’t considered anyone else’s. Ms. Vetipane continued “And he nearly died when he found out it was a classic Aston Martin. Dad’s always begged my mother to let him collect cars, but you know us Italian women.”

“Miss Vetipane, I’m P. Anatamata. I go by my middle name Breana, which is just Brea for short, but that was my car.”

“Oh my lord, you have got to let me try to get a hold of your dad, he will go crazy to have an opportunity to thank you!”

“How is that? The complex was destroyed? I don’t know what something like that costs, but it has to be tens of millions of dollars!”

“Sweetie, it was all insured! You have to with multi-million dollar projects like this. And now that the police rooted the mob out, his construction costs are much, much lower. And not only that, since he can offer lower bids for government contracts, my family is doing a huge project for the government that makes the LV Complex look like a low-rent condo.”

Brea smiled, “Great!” she thought. “I’m going to get a new car! Now I don’t have to file on my insurance for the claim, so it won’t go up this year.”

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Three hours later, Brea was signing a lease to the apartment in Westbrooke Place. It had taken three hours because once Edda, Miss Vetipane’s first name which she insisted to be called by, reached her father he firmly insisted on taking the girls out to lunch. He also insisted Allison must come along. That meant Allison had to be located (she was in the sauna room with her new neighbor, Lani and Brea wondered where she had she gotten the bikini) which took the better part of an hour. The restaurant was one of the fancy ones where the menus for the ladies had no prices listed. Mr. Vetipane seemed to be a little enthralled by Allison’s charm, and listened in amazement to the entire story about graduation. He even had a taste for her Jungle Juice, which both drank from liberally throughout the meal. Mr. Vetipane mentioned that she should keep the recipe a secret to, because for something so easy to drink it was quite potent. Allison said it was a Prohibition bootleg recipe.

Mr. Vetipane laughed, thinking it was a joke, but Brea and Lani both knew that would be the only way Allison would know what the Prohibition was.

Lede-Vetipane Properties was willing to negotiate with Brea over the rent over the apartment. In fact, she paid less than half of the original rent. Way less than half. In the end, Her monthly lease was a mere \$749, and only that token amount was only to be paid so her accountant and the IRS wouldn’t give anybody any grief over something too suspicious. Mr. Vetipane had also decided that LV Properties really should rent the apartment furnished, and wouldn’t it be great to hire Miss Anatamata to decorate it with a budget of say...10, no \$20,000 dollars?

Lani couldn’t sleep that night, wondering when the other shoe would drop. On top of her.

### Sub-Chapter 3 - The Little Things

The next day the girls were sitting in their favorite sushi café, Sakana. And best news? And it was a mere block and a half from their new home. Actually that wasn’t the best news, the best news was their dreamy new apartment at Westbrooke Place! Then, as if life couldn’t get any better, Brea’s cell phone rang.

“Hello, hello!” said Brea playfully, “This is Miss Anatamata.”

“Hey there, Miss Anatamata,” said a deep voice on the other end of the line, “I was hoping I could have the pleasure of your aquatinted tomorrow night around 8:00.” Brea’s heart started to flutter! It was Michael! Cute Michael from the Ball! He had said he would call and he did. Brea went straight into “play-it-cool” autopilot.

“I guess that might be okay,” she said “I’ll just have to check with my calendar, one moment.”

“Just in case ‘checking your calendar’ means checking with the girls about the rule against accepting a date on such short notice, tomorrow is my only day off. And by my rules I was forced to wait the three days.”

Clever, funny, true. Brea was getting pretty charmed, and the truth was she was about to consult the girls. "You know about that rule huh?" "I saw it on Oprah. I was looking for the show where she talks about the family that lost their jobs in this economy to see if I knew any of my fraternity brothers."

"I guess that will fine but it's actually been four days!"

"But three days after the night we met."

"Is that the real reason you waited to call?" asked Brea?

"No, the real reason is I left your number in the rented tux, and it took me a while to get it back. But it is true tomorrow night is my only day off for a long time."

"I tell you what," offered Brea. "Right now I'm both at a restaurant table and with my girls which means I'm being doubly rude. I'll call you once we leave and we can set a place and a time."

"Alright. Goodbye, 'Miss Anatamata.'"

Brea couldn't help but giggle madly and then clicked her phone shut. Allison and Lani were watching, mouths agape.

"Hot damn were you cool!" said an impressed Lani.

"You were like Batman!" offered Allison.

"Have you like been taking classes?" asked Lani pointedly, "Because every time I've ever seen you with a guy you get nervous and giggly and weird."

"I think it's DC and wearing all the black," offered Brea. "I don't know what it is, it's not like he's trying to date me, he's just being real. Bishop boys always seemed like they were trying to "play a trick to try you," if you know what I mean." Allison did not, and people were staring, so Brea drew a helpful diagram on her napkin. "Oh, okay," she said.

The next fifteen minutes were spent analyzing and over analyzing everything said on the phone in high pitched girlspeak. Lani even got in on the action. Then the dreadful subject came up of who got which bedroom. Lani had no problem taking the smallest one in the back, since it was the furthest from the den and would be the quietest, in case she wanted to sleep during one of Allison's infamous parties. But there was quite a debate about who got the master bedroom, because to their great surprise Allison wanted the master bedroom.

"Why on earth do you want a room Allison? You always just pass out on the couch."

"Yeah, but this place is pretty nice. I thought you guys would mind the couch smelling like vomit and jungle juice! But if you don't mind..."

Lani and Brea could not say "Oh, no, no, no, no, no!" Quickly enough. LV-426 had been incredibly luxurious...by the standards of a college dorm room. This was an actual apartment, why not try to keep it not smelling like vomit.

"Allison, I'm the one paying the rent! I'm the one with the most clothes, and all the books and DVD's!" Brea said. "I deserve the master bedroom, you can take the one in the middle."

"But I want the spa!" whined Allison.

"There's a spa in the workout room. Where did you get the bikini anyway, yesterday?"

"I forget, but let's be honest. Who is going to make the best use of a spa in regards to the boys?"

"I will have you know," said a prissy Brea. "That I am the one with a date with a dreamy boy tomorrow night, and that if he keeps being so dreamy I plan to spend lots of time in a bikini with Mr. Michael....uh...."

"You still didn't get his last name?" asked Lani. "Better get it tomorrow, or it'll be humiliation nation."

"Good idea," agreed Brea.

"Still, let's not forget who's responsible for getting us the apartment in the first place," said a resolute Allison.

Brea just stared at her like she was crazy. "What are you saying! That's was me!" she exploded.

"Uhm, I think not!" said Allison. "Who was the one to destroy LV-Gamma in the first place?"

"I was the one that forgot the handbrake."

"Yeah, but I was the one that knocked over the jack, much less my thing with my second part, first part, third part?"

"Just for the record, you went first part, third part, second part," said Brea.

"So I am the one that blew up the building then," said Allison as if she had solved the case. "Ha! Logic pays off for once!"

Lani had the answer. "How about a coin toss then Allison? It's fair for everyone." she said soothingly. "Heads, Brea gets the room. Tails, you lose the room. Doesn't that sound fair?" Brea shot Lani a glance that said 'Thank you.'

Allison closed one eye, scrunching her lips to one side of her face as she did when she tried to figure out something complicated. Wheels were turning. "Yeah..... yeah that sounds fair."

Lani flipped the coin and showed it to the girls. Allison, ever the gambler said "Damn." And that was the end of the matter.

"Okay, on to issue three," announced Brea. "Allison, Lani and I have discussed the matter, and you are going to keep a cell phone on you if we have to hold you down and superglue it to your ass. We're in a big city now, and you got lost we won't know how to find you."

"We'll just head to the nearest bar," muttered Lani under her breath, but Brea heard and made a face gesture to shut up.

"Oh no. You know how I feel about techno-whatyamahoosey. Do you have any idea what cell phones do to you?"

Brea rolled her eyes "Go ahead, amuse me." Allison had to think for a second. "They allow aliens to short-circuit your brain. You pick up the phone to log-up or boot on or whatever and snap!" here she snapped her fingers for effect. "You're a mindless zombie! Doing their evil bidding."

"And where did you hear about this?" Lani asked, waiting for the punch-line? "I think it was on Star Trek," said Allison. "We are neck deep of a world of conspiracy. How many times have we been here Brea?"

“Been where?” asked Brea.

“Pounding down some dirt road in the middle of the night,” Allison said, launching into script straight from the X-files. “Chasing some elusive truth on a dim hope, only to find myself standing right where I am right now!” Allison was really getting worked up.

“Allison!” scolded Lani, trying to quiet her down.

Allison physically twitched, coming out of the rant, “Where am I...Oh yeah. I’m not carrying a cell phone.”

“Allison, trust us, there is no conspiracy going on, the phone won’t hurt you.”

“No conspiracy? What about the fact that we’re being spied on right now.”

“No we’re not.”

“Yes we are.”

“No we’re not.”

“Then what about this guy?” With this Allison spun around, giving a spin kick to a 15 year old boy who was standing near the bar.

“Allison!!!” both Brea and Lani screamed at the same time. The whole bar turned to look at the commotion.

The boy was trying to get up, scratching against the wall scared out of his mind. “Who are you and why are spying on us?” Allison demanded. The boy responded incomprehensibly, he was foreign, maybe Bangladeshi Brea guessed, barely on his way to being a man.

Lani held Allison’s shoulder hard. “He’s not spying on you, Allison!” It was the perfect moment for the tape recorder to fall out of his jacket pocket. It played Allison’s recorded voice. “Pounding down some dirt road in the middle of the night...” He quickly reached down to hit the off switch, dropping dozens of Polaroid’s of the days events.

Now all three girls were confronting the boy, arms crossed. “Who are you and why are you spying on me?” asked Lani this time far more threateningly than Allison. The kid had no choice but to spill the beans.

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“Ding-dong!” Minuete’s buzzer rang loudly, causing Minuete to exit her office and answer the door. She looked through the peephole and was stunned. It was Allison Holiday and what was his name? Seeratsho, Swerapo?

Not knowing what else to do she swung open the door. “Yes?” she asked coyly.

“Hey there Min! Long time no see!” said Allison cheerily. “I see you made it to DC. This building is way cool!”

It was Allison Holiday, right there in the Annex Skyrise, Minuete’s home turf! The scars in Minuete’s hand began to ache. “Yes! Thank you.” she said, caught off guard. “It’s nice to see you as well. We should have lunch sometime.”

“We should, we absolutely should,” agreed Allison. “I was just wondering one little thing.”

“What’s that, Allison?”

“I was just wondering why you had flown over a boy from Bangladesh and paid him 37 cents an hour to spy on me,” said Allison, as if it were the most casual thing in the world. To Allison it probably was. Minuete thought for a moment saw no reason to lie to her.

“Well, there’s a mysterious person that I’ve never met but is calling me on the phone named Mistress Nine. She’s paying me an ungodly amount of money to do missions that attack you, I’m guessing to seek revenge against you, starting by cutting off your ponytail. So that’s why we’ve started this evil-- I mean, ethically-challenged organization. We’re called Paradox Ninety.”

“Oh okay. That makes sense. I just knew there had to be some reason that explained everything.” said Allison. “Brea and Lani wanted to know if it involved them too. You kind of freaked Lani out.”

“Is that possible even more?” joked Minuete. Both girls enjoyed a laugh. “No, actually Mistress Nine hasn’t really mentioned them. I think she’s just after you. Allison.”

“They’ll be glad to hear that.” Allison pulled out a form, “Lani was hoping you could sign this? It’s the paperwork for Lani’s formal transfer, she’s too scared to talk to you right now.”

“No problem,” said Minuete “Do you have a pen on you?” Allison searched her pockets, “No, I don’t think so.”

“There’s a pen in my checkbook,” said Minuete who dug into her purse, pulling out the pen, then signed the form and handed it back to Allison. The girls looked at each other. What to say?

“Okay,” said Allison leaving. “I’ll see you the next time you try to destroy me.”

“It’s supposed to be a good Leno tonight!” called Minuete after her.

Allison walked off, leaving Minuete alone with the kid. “You’re fired,” she said jabbing a menacing jewel-scared finger in the kids direction.

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The girls were downstairs waiting for Allison as she skipped down the steps of the Annex Skyrise. Brea would have gone upstairs with Allison, but she wanted make sure Lani didn’t run off to another state again.

Lani was more mad than scared Minuete had been spying on her. As Allison arrived within earshot she was all business, cutting Allison off from telling what had happened.

“No, no, no. I just want to know one thing. Is there any part about whatever she’s got planned that endanger my immediate life and or job?”

“Uh, that would be no.”

“Fine, I don’t want to hear about it. I’ve got more than enough to worry about in between the fire, and getting transferred to work for that Orange Darth Vader, to be worried about whatever psycho scheme she’s got going this time. I wish she’d just take over the world all ready and get it over with.”

Just then Brea got a call on her cell phone, she looked at the caller ID, it was important enough that she needed to take it in private. She stepped away from the group.

“Listen, I was just thinking about Brea’s date with Michael. Who was that guy you had gotten his phone number for me at the party?”

“Oh, yeah. I can’t remember his name off the top of my head, sorry,” Allison said distractedly. Lani knew this look, it meant Allison’s mind was elsewhere.

“Who was he, someone you knew? Someone you just met? Was he cute?” Lani said with a little too much interested.

“Yeah, pretty cute. I don’t think I’ve ever set you up before?”

“Do you want me to say it?” admitted Lani. “I am hungry, I am totally man-hungry. My dating life at Bishop, remember? Vanilla at best. And it’s been zip since moving to the city. I haven’t had you guys forcing me go to parties. I want a boyfriend.”

That got Allison’s attention. “Wow, uh. Okay. I’d never pictured you as that type before!”

“What are you talking about?” asked Lani.

“No! I promise. Whatever you’ve got to do to get ahead. I’m not judging,” Allison said, hands raised to make the point.

Lani felt a raw ache at the bottom of her stomach. She knew this sensation. This was when Allison had said something she’d taken the wrong way and misunderstood. It usually led to something bad. Very bad.

“Let’s go back to square one,” she said. “You told me you had gotten a boys number for me, and you wanted to set me up.” “Yes,” agreed Allison. “What exactly did you mean by that?” asked Lani.

“I met this guy at the White House Correspondent’s Dinner,” started Allison. “We were talking about Bishop University. He asked me about your newspaper there, the Beacon and mentioned all the journalism awards you guys had won. I told him I knew the editor, and that you were a friend. It turns out he’s a news editor for MSNBC, and asked me to give you his number to call about so he could get your resume. He’d read your stuff and thought you’d make a good copy editor. I was going to set you up on a job interview with him, not on a date.”

Lani couldn’t even speak in between the panic of having missed getting this job by not calling, and the thrill of the possibility of working for MSNBC!

“Do you have the number on you?” asked Lani, near panic.

“No, it’s back at the hotel,” said Allison, not really picking up on Lani’s excitement. “It’s to the right of the bottle of Everclear I have in the bathroom on a receipt for malt liquor. Brea’s facial exfoliating cream is sitting on top of it.”

“Taxi!” screamed Lani, with such force one immediately stopped for her. “I’ve got to go,” she said, entering the cab. “I’ll meet you guys....whenever.”

And she was off. At that exact moment the Bangladeshi kid had just exited the building looking dazed. His eyes met Allison’s and she motioned it was okay for him to come over.

His mood was downbeat. “I’m sorry to have spied on you.” He said apologetically, in broken English. “I am from a good family. I am here in America trying to make money to send home to my family.”

“What’s your name?” Allison asked compassionately. The boy pronounced it, but Allison couldn’t quite get it. Seeratsho, Swerapo?

“I’ll just call you Sweatshop,” decided Allison. “So did Minuete fire you?”

“Yes,” said the nervous Bengalese boy. “I am the first person in my entire village to make it to America. It is hoped that I will be able to make enough money for my village to afford plumbing.”

“What was Minuete paying you, Sweatshop?” asked a sympathetic Allison.

“37 cents a day,” said the nervous child.

“Yeah. It’s a tough economy kid. But you could work for me for say, 35 cents a day,” she offered. “You could help me with carrying the stuff I need to make jungle juice to the hotel.” The kid ran up and hugged her leg, which caught Brea’s attention as she had just recently gotten off the phone.

“Me and my entire village thank you,” said the grateful boy.

“What’s going on?” asked Brea, who then proceeded to freak out on Allison as she began to explain the situation, gross violations of child labor laws and all. “Oh, come on Brea. Can’t I keep him, please? I promise I’ll feed him and everything! It’s just 35 cents a day!” Brea decided to try using reason on Allison for once. “How many days is it until Ashley gets here?”

“Uhm, that will be on the 9th,” said Allison.

“And is there anything a 15 year old Bangladeshi boy will be able to do for you that Ashley will not if you tell him to?” After a pause, Allison offered “Well, no.”

When once Allison had gotten distracted, Brea gave the Bangladeshi boy her personal accountant’s phone number and promised her she would instruct her to make arrangements for the boy to get a plane ticket home, and phoned ahead to get him a nice clean room at the Radisson, hailed him a cab and gave him a twenty. No reason for this boy to be further afflicted by Minuete’s insanity, all the worse Allison’s brand of it would be.

She also promised to talk to a charity she often contributed heavily to that worked in the boy’s country to make sure her donations were going to the boy’s village so they would get the plumbing they needed. She was hoping all this would be good karma for her date with Michael.

### Sub-Chapter 3 - Finer Feelings

Brea was feeling quite good and quite incredible. She had been worried that she had been spending too much time thinking about Michael, her dear sweet Michael with his delicious eyes and hands. But right now it was okay for Brea to be thinking about Michael because she was on a date with him! Michael! Delicious Michael with his dirty blond hair, and his scruffy look, and the eyes that looked mischievous even though they also looked quiet and calm and very strong!

They were sitting in the basement of the Bricksellar restaurant, which was very much a steak bar designed by a man for men that ate their big manly steak. They had hundreds and hundreds different brands of beer, but not so much in the wine department. Michael had suggested it when he had called Brea to arrange the date and asked her where to pick her up. Her hotel being so close to Dupont Circle? That meant Bricksellar was right around the corner! At the time she had agreed to go there, Brea had not known it was a steak bar.

Although Brea wasn’t a hardcore vegetarian like their friend Catherine Masters had been back at Bishop University, she tried to avoid eating meat when she could. She had no problem with eating fish, crawfish gumbo was one of her very favorite dishes. But eat a big chunk out of a cow? Yeah right, that was going to happen. She was enjoying her grilled salmon, but the sight of the blood from the steak, Michael liked it rare, was turning her stomach.

That was the only notable problem in what otherwise had been a fantastic and flawless date. Michael had been funny and hadn't said anything too stupid so far, the ways guys inevitably do eventually. Most importantly he had the one trait that was crucial in having a relationship with Brea. He didn't mind listening her talk endlessly.

At the moment, they were having an in depth conversation about the black hole of vapidness known as Britney Spears, as Michael put it. "I swear her whole career is 'Look at me! I'm young and I'm naked!'" denounced Michael, then continued "I met her once at a party for the Post. You are totally overwhelmed by this sense of emptiness because she really is beautiful, and it's a tragedy."

"I totally know what you mean," agreed Brea. "There's a poster of her in the local library back in Audrey. She's holding a book with a big sign that says read. I find this highly ironic for two reasons."

"How so?" asked Michael.

"Well, first of off, there's never been a celebrity that's never had a higher ratio of nakedness to speech."

"Every interview I've ever seen with her basically boils down to..." at this point Michael spoke in a very amusing southern drawl, 'Yall don't know me, and all I really want to do is dance.' which is pretty much the extent of her personality. What's the second reason?"

"Well in the poster Britney Spears is encouraging children to read. I feel this implies Britney herself actually knows how to read, a fact I am as to this date, not entirely convinced of," said Brea, getting a huge laugh from Michael.

Inside, she was beaming, because an excellent tactic, she had been told by her sisters, to get guys to fall in love with you is to make them laugh. And even better still, laugh at their jokes. Most boys think they're funny, even when they're not.

"You know, I can't think of another celebrity that has done more to encourage children not to read," noted Michael. "I mean, she basically telling girls to dress and be slutty. As for boys, our judgment and attention at that age are in a state of 24/7 intoxication anyway, thanks to our hormones. But she's certainly not contributing to the situation."

"There's this song she sung with Madonna," offered Brea. "I absolutely love the lyrics to this song. Okay, it goes like this. Britney is alone in a dance club, and she's upset because she's always been too nervous about people judging her to 'lose control' and really dance the way she wants. And I'm thinking to myself, I remember when she turned eighteen and was doing her first event on MTV. So she walks out on stage dressed in a fedora and a man's suit. Then she rips off all her clothes, to this gold outfit that covers only the barest amount one could wear and not owe money to the FCC. And she's shaking what her momma gave her like an epileptic having a heart attack in the middle of a seizure. And I'm thinking 'Wow, it's good to know she didn't lose control, and dance like she really wanted to dance.'" Michael was laughing heartily the entire way, to which Brea offered "If you want I can keep going. I've got tons more Britney Spears material."

He returned with a good natured "I think I've wasted enough of the precious time I have on this date discussing Britney Spears. "Yeah, agreed Brea. "She's a blork." At this she froze, having definitely said the wrong thing. Michael didn't notice, laughing and asked "What's a blork?"

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“What’s a bork?” Brea had asked Allison earlier that evening. The girls were both digging through their closets, trying to decide what Brea. “What do you mean?” she asked. “Just now, you had called Britney Spears a bork, although it had nothing whatsoever to do with our conversation.” said Brea. “It’s not the first time you used it, what does it mean?”

“I dunno. It’s bad.”

“So you don’t want to be a bork.”

“Bork is bad. It’s like being a badonkadonk.”

“Okay,” said Brea sarcastically, “That’s much clearer.”

Allison held up a very sheer black top in her right hands. It had lacy shoulders that were completely see through, making the top look similar to a sleeveless dress. In her left hand she up a pair of Brea’s skinny blue jeans. “I think you should wear this with some black pumps.”

“I like it. It’s a good look for a first date. What should I do with my hair?” Allison handed the top to Brea, who unlike Lani did not mind changing in front of Allison and proceeded to do so.

“Just a bit of curl at the tips, I think. What are you going to do for a bra?” asked Allison. “That one’s going to show.”

“It’s already built into the top. Not that I’ve got much to fill it with.”

“Yeah, you really don’t.” Allison said absentmindedly. She was still digging through the closet looking through Brea’s clothes. It wasn’t so much she was looking for something to wear as she enjoyed looking at random objects.

“Can you get me my black BEBE sling backs while you’re in there?” said Brea, zipping the ultra tight jeans and scrutinizing herself in the mirror. She was wearing black, meaning she definitely could not do both eyes and lips as far as makeup went, only one of the two. “What do you think Allison, eyes or lips?”

“Definitely eyes. A little blue eye shadow. I think you could get away with a little lip gloss”

Sitting down at her dressing mirror, Brea proceeded to apply her makeup. When she got to the blue eye shadow, she applied it with a cat-like slant at the upper edges of her eyes. “What do you think?” she said, spinning around where Allison was waiting to hand her the heels. “Put those on and take a spin so I can see.

Brea had the kind of feet women envied, built for high heels. Delicately arched, Brea had applied clear gloss to each toenail. She put them on, turned around twice, and waited for Allison’s verdict.

“I like it,” Allison decided. “Now let’s talk strategy for tonight.”

“I was thinking about that. Here’s what I think. We can both agree that I’m a little kooky.”

“You can be a little kooky.”

“My strategy is to hide this fact from him as long as possible. I’m not going to do something weird like call someone a bork or a badonkadonk in front of him.”

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“Brea?” Michael said, bringing Brea back into the world of the living. The entire bit about the blork had hit Brea like a ton of bricks. Her savvy political mind was spinning, she had thought of something clever, was it worth the risk of ruing a great first date?

“Michael...” she offered, suggesting with a mischievous smile. “...I’m a blork.”

“You are?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m a total blork. I’m a little kooky. I like Abba and try to tell people it’s deceptively sophisticated. I do weird things. I was planning to hide that from you, but it’s inevitable that you’re going to find out. So, I’m just letting you know so we can get it over with.

“I’m a blork too,” he said warmly. “I eat my hot dogs with a fork in the middle because it seems vaguely gay.”

Brea liked this game. “I like to sing disco music in the shower.”

Michael shot back “I faked my FreeCell win record in PhotoShop and emailed it my friends.”

“I sometimes use eyeshadow right here,” she said, pointing to her chest, “to make shadows to create the illusion of cleavage.”

“I have a complete set of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles I’ve put together from Ebay.”

Brea said “I have at least 5 cell phones.” At this one, Michael kind of paused, his expression a little stunned and weirded out. Brea gave a panicked gasp. Then he broke into laughter, having gotten her. Brea couldn’t help but throw her napkin at him, “Shut up!” she giggled.

Then, their eyes met. There was a brief moment, Brea knew something was about to happen but didn’t know what to expect. And then Michael did the sweetest thing. He leaned in and kissed Brea, full on the lips. It was as if Michael’s lips shot electricity directly into her system, she felt her insides fluttering, and then after what seemed like an eternity, he drew back.

“What was that?” Brea asked in a the same small voice she’d used after her first kiss in ninth grade.

“Just getting our good night kiss out of the way,” said Michael. Then, mirroring Brea’s earlier words said. “It was inevitable, so I thought we’d get it over with.”

Sub-Chapter 4 - Deadlines and Datelines

“No, seriously, I’m a fan of the Bishop Beacon,” said the kindly man, “College journalism is where I got my start. It’s a purer time, because back then there’s no bottom line to worry about.”

Lani was sitting in Mr. Carol’s office at the DC office of MSNBC network. Carol was a handsome man, with hair that was going pepper grey around his temples, quite aesthetically she admitted. He wasn’t particularly tall or muscular, but had a sense of compassionate authority. His eyes were dark, and he was just starting to age around the eyes.

“In a way,” he continued “It’s what I love about the job here at MSNBC. CNN and Fox News have to spend their time and energy slugging it out with each and every day to be number one. It’s a battle that’s never going to end.”

Mr. Carol turned and looked out his window reflectively. “For CNN, they have to expend a lot of their effort in appearing to be the most epic, it comes off as a little pretentious in my opinion. Fox News is popular in part because the debate over ‘fair and balanced’ is inherently entertaining. Each of the

news anchor talks freely of their own careers along with the news. Bill O'Reilly spends a lot of his show talking about Bill O'Reilly, for example. We're not about that at MSNBC. I think all that self-attention comes at the expense of actual news reporting."

"Miss Cameron," he said, looking her straight in the eye "The simple fact is at the end of the day, the only thing I have to worry about is producing the best possible news coverage I can. The other networks are about process, we may be third but we are about accurate reporting."

"The way I've always seen it," said Lani, daring to try a little humor. "Is that you consistently come in third. Each and every time. That's a solid record."

The man appreciated the joke, and rewarded Lani with a chuckle. "Miss Cameron, let me tell you why I'm interested in hiring you to work for this network. The truth is, I pay attention to all the college journalism awards, and I am aware that the Bishop Beacon has won numerous awards in investigative journalism, which you were editor of."

"Not to brag, but I did the majority of them myself," said Lani, proud to be with someone that would appreciate her hard work. "That two page resume you're holding in your hand is the result of hundreds and hundreds of hours of shoeleather journalism."

Carol nodded. "In my opinion, investigative journalism is a total joke in this country. The networks shy against aggressively researching the people we report on because it might make them seem to have a bias. I'm doing whatever I can to change that. It's not about ratings, but it's my feeling that if MSNBC breaks enough big stories, sooner or later people will take notice."

"Do you mind if I ask you something, Mr. Carol?" asked Lani.

"Not at all, go ahead."

"If this is some reality show plot to trick me into thinking I've found the perfect job, would you please go ahead and tell me now?"

He laughed again. "You're funny. It's a rarity to find a journalist that has kept their sense of humor, how soon can you start? Do you need to put in a two-weeks notice or something?"

"No, I had something else in mind," remarked a bemused Lani.

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Minuete was sitting at her desk at the Washington Post. With Paradox Ninety in such full swing, she hadn't been able to spend as much time as she would like at the Washington Post writing misleading news coverage. She had requested a new job title, she was now the "Assistant executive managing editor of the Metro/Style section." Basically her new job position would let her sneak in a story whenever it would come in handy.

That wasn't to say her employees still didn't fear her. Many of the writers and fact checkers for the section had attended Minuete's meeting of the new "ethically-challenged" re-engineering meeting of Paradox Ninety.

That is to say she was stunned, utterly stunned, when Lani opened the door without knocking, marched straight up to Minuete's desk, and laughed defiantly in her face.

"Ha! You thought you could move me to your crappy little style section? You thought you'd gotten the last laugh, you big orange haired psycho bitch? Well, I quit! I quit and there's nothing all your

power and all your money can do about it! Do you think the people here are impressed with you? Minuete Kiley wants to take over the world, does she? Well, it sure looks like she's writing news copy about traffic reports to me. You're a joke! These people are laughing at you." With that, Minuete noticed that Brea, Allison, a lot of the staff, and Minuete's bosses that were forced to work with her and secretly hated her, were crowded around the doorway watching and laughing so hard that some of them were struggling to breathe.

Then Lani turned around, sticking out her butt and started slapping it while she yelled. "You can just pucker up kiss my ass, Orangie!" The entire office cheered Lani as she started to turn around and leave the office.

Minuete just sat there for a second, too stunned to react. No one had disrespected her authority like this ever in her life. Then she screamed, "I kill you!!!" And then, like a released bloodhound onto a foxtook a single step onto her desk and leapt at Lani, her fingers out like claws to ready to tear out Lani's eyeballs.

Lani was startled, her right arm in stride behind her in her deliberate march out of the office. Minuete had grabbed her by the upper arm with frightening strength. Lani could feel the jewel shards in Minuete's hand puncture her skin with a grip so tight that meant they were fighting to the death.

As Lani spun around to counter her, Minuete's animal momentum knocked her down onto her back. The strange noises Minuete was making were equally animalistic. Minuete's fingers were racing towards her face. Lani barely managed to grab Minuete's wrist, holding it tight, trying desperately to keep Minuete from clawing her face. The two struggled on the floor.

"Miyagi Crane Kick!!!!" yelled Allison as she preformed her patented multipurpose kick from the 1984 thriller. This move called for her to stand on the ball of one foot, raising her arms like a crane, then jumping down and shifting weight onto the other foot in a powerful kick.

It was the same kick that had been hard enough to hit Rook pretty hard back at the Ball. For a waif like Minuete, it sent her flying back across the room, leaving many dozens of deep scratched lines into Lani's forearm as she tried to hold on from being knocked back. Lani yelled in pain.

Then the back of Minuete's head finally made contact with something to stop her backwards momentum; her desk. She passed out hard, crumpled on the floor. There was a beat of silence.

"Do you wish to press charges against her?" asked a security guard, terrified he'd have to defy his real boss, Minuete. "Do you, Miss?"

Lani looked at her damaged arm, most were just scratches, but a few were bleeding enough to dribble a few drops of blood down her arm. "Do you have a family?" she asked. He nodded, they both got the message. "No, I think it was worth getting jumped to watch her fly across the room like that."

Brea handed Lani a few paper towels she had gotten from the break room to clean up the blood. "Here is what I propose," she said stately "We go celebrate by renting all seven 'DeathBorg' movies, order a couple of pizzas, ignore the calories, and see how many sequels we can sit through while we drink heavily from the bar Allison has so heavily stocked in our fabulous new apartment." "Hear, hear!" cheered Allison.

"Sounds good to me," said Lani, standing up from the floor. The Deathborg movie series had always been her favorite.

Before heading out, Lani had an idea. She walked over to Minuete's desk. "Minuete's passed out right now, so you can be honest. By a show of hands, how many of you here don't like Minuete Kiley?" The people looked around nervous at first, but after a bit, they raised their hands, nearly unanimously. There were some janitorial staff in the crowd that didn't know her. "How many people," she continued, "think Minuete Kiley a lying bitch?" Even bigger cheers came from the crowd.

Lani reached onto Minuete's desk, picking up Minuete's purse. It was pink and plump and Prada. "Okay, and since Minuete's passed out dead on the floor and no one has to 'see' the following, how many people here would like to see me stomp everything in Minuete's precious little Prada purse into tiny, tiny bits?" She raised the purse high in the air.

Wild cheers from absolutely everyone, there was absolutely universal applause. Lani realized she was working the crowd! It wasn't in Lani's nature to showboat, but she had them all in the palm her hand.

Allison "I love to Showboat" Holiday realized it as well, and going on autopilot, decided to go into one of the routines she'd learned as a Bishop University cheerleader.

"Ready, O-kay!" she started, then launched into her raunchiest cheerleading bump and grind. "Bang, bang, choo choo train! C'mon Lani, do your thang! Get it, get it, get it, get it! Got it, got it, got it, got it, BOOM! And let it roll!"

And with that, Lani dropped Minuete's purse onto the floor, and then proceeded to merrily stomp the purse ten, twenty times, over and over until the bag was completely flat, everything in it stomped to tiny bits. The cheering was so loud, later different departments of the paper would call their colleagues to find out what all the fuss had been about.

After her applauded stomping, Lani held the bag high in the air and unzipped it, the fragments of Minuete's cell phone, PDA, makeup, and everything else in the bag fell out in small, flattened pieces. Even Minuete's Driver's License was a bent hopeless mess.

As Lani, Brea, and Allison left the building they were cheered as heroes, daring Minuete's ethically-challenged regime. Lani was absolutely beaming. "This," decided Lani "was the best moment yet since moving to DC." She turned to Brea to see what she thought. Brea smirked. "It's not even close."

#### Sub-Chapter 5 - Angels in Repose

A bit of celebrating was in order. For Brea, she was completely infatuated by what could turn out to be a very, very nice relationship with Michael. Or, as she referred to him, "her Michael." For Lani, escape from an ethically-challenged editor, and a new dream job at a network that don't have to worry about sensationalism or ratings deserved a good cheer. For her new job she would worry about producing good journalism, not angering Minuete. Allison...well, Allison never really needed a reason to celebrate. Her hair looked shiny today, whatever.

Sometimes, "the girls" just need to get out and dance. Allison introduced Lani and Brea to the temptations of the epic club known as Wonderland she was always telling the girls about. Brea had spent quite a bit of time clubbing in Europe during her Senior Trip, but Lani had no such experience clubbing. Bishop University and the city of Audrey had nothing that came even close to rivaling the three floors of dancing.

Not that Brea was one of those girls that thought that “Oh, I am just so hot,” but damn if she didn’t look particularly fine tonight. Allison was wearing a mini-dress with a halter neckline and a scooped back. Lani was wearing a silver lame’ miniskirt and a scoop-neck sweater that showed off her chest to great display. As for Brea? She rarely played up her ethnic heritage, but even though she was half Japanese, wore a Chinese Cheongsam dress made of Brocade silk in pink with a lacy mandarin collar around her throat.

This wasn’t MTV Party to Go music mix playing, this was the über-hip geniuses dropping beats that simply forced your body to do things and gyrate in ways that were uncontrollable.

On the Metro-ride to the club, Brea’s cell phone had rung.

“Hello?”

“Brea, hey.” It was Michael! Brea put her hand over the receiver, and gave a girlish squeal! Lani and Allison asked her what it was and she told them and they all made motions to pick up the receiver.

“Michael, hey, sorry about that. You cut out for a second. What’s up?”

“I know it’s late to be calling, but it took all night laying out tomorrow’s section for the Post and I’m on my way home now, and it’s late, so I’m sorry for calling.”

“It’s okay, Michael,” said Brea. Michael cared that he was calling late! He was rightfully concerned that he might bother her delicate sleep time, seeing as Brea was the kind of girl that did not need beauty sleep. “What’s up?” she asked, convincingly faking casualness.

“I just wanted to say I had a great time last night, and...Well, I know I’m supposed to wait a few days to call you....At least according to the movie Swingers.”

“Michael, again with the rules?” said Brea. “I’m a bloke, remember? And you are too. Why don’t we just forget all the rules. I’ll call you when I feel like it and you can do the same?”

Then Michael said the sweetest thing! “Brea, it’s impossible you’re this incredible. Could I break the rules and have a cup of decaf with you tonight?” Brea barley repressed another squeal.

“I can do you one better.” she explained after a beat. “The girly-girls and I are at Club Wonderland.” Then Brea proceeded to explain the whole promotion, and scene with Minuete’s purse.

“That’s at the Green line, right?” he asked. “Navy Yard stop, right?” Brea confirmed it with Allison, to which Michael responded, “Okay, I’ll see you soon. Try to only dance with gay guys until I get there, okay?” It was a joke, but it kind of wasn’t, in a good way.

Brea responded in her same small, 15 year old, just been kissed voice. “Okay,” she promised. Then hung up the phone, closing it in one hand.

By the time she had recounted the story to Lani and Allison, the Metro train had arrived at the club. Even outside the club, the music was too loud for in-depth analysis about the phone call.

Everyone had to be patted down and searched, everyone but Allison, that was. The guards let her pass through with no search, Brea and Lani had to undergo the indignity of a pat-down.

Once inside, it was as if someone had decreed “Let there be chaos!” It was a veritable Disneyland of light and sound. The good news was that there were lots of golden hotties boys dancing with their shirts off. The bad news was that the girls were just a single chromosome away from having the goods to entice them. Obviously Wonderland was a gay club, because Wonderland was fabulous and

epic. The laws of physics prohibit the same being said of any straight club. It didn't take Allison long to be lured into the inner depths of the dance floor by a crowd of gay men.

Allison, ever the cheerleader both in college and high school, had more than her fair share of dance moves, so no surprise there.

As for Lani and Brea, they spent the first twenty minutes on the dancing sidelines, drinking their six dollar mixed drinks and getting suitably liquored up enough to get into the groove. This had not been a problem for Allison, who was already blitzed on her jungle juice. But all of a sudden, Allison suddenly appeared from the crowd, grabbing the girls by their wrists, and pulled them into gay man heaven.

To Brea's amazement, Lani knew how to dance. Or at least move to the music without looking awkward. She seemed to switch between three basic dances, the cabbage patch, raise the roof, and smack that ass. A blond resembling Thor had taken an interest in moving with her, and Lani had enough whiskey shots in her system to enjoy it without any of it making her feel self conscious.

Brea had been given formal dance lessons back at Charbonneau, and these included modern dance. So she was satisfied to stir up a scene with Allison's gay groupies while waiting for Michael to arrive.

For Allison herself, she had moved to the center stage in the raised platforms resembling a stage where everyone in the dance pits had no choice but to look up into above them. It was impossible to deny that Allison was causing a commotion. In between the erotic movements dancing and the fact that she was a blond-haired green-eyed total sexpot, Allison had captured the attention of both variants of the male and female persuasion.

This was about the moment that Brea spotted a boy at the periphery of the club, carrying a dozen pastel color flowers, and with a single flower for her. Brea's finishing school eye identified the soft pink flower as an alstroemeria. What boy would understand flowers well enough to get her an alstromeria? Only her Michael, Brea thought, her heart fluttering.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but Michael looked totally hot. In fact, now that she thought about it, Michael had looked hot every time they met. If she was going to get all fluttered every time she saw him, it was going to eventually interfere with her concentration.

She slowly pushed her way through the crowd, the way one must do at events like these to meet him. Michael was dead sober, but Brea was a little sloshed. So she greeted him, ignoring the flower and wrapped her arm around his waist and gave him a passionate kiss. He had a little bit scruff on his face, so the kiss was a bit ticklish and scratchy, which gave Brea a little thrill.

She took the flower, along with a twenty she pulled from her wallet and handed it to the bartender, yelling over the noise "Can you keep this in eyeshot till I leave?" The arrangement was made.

The club was entirely too loud for any kind of conversation, so all that was left to do was dance. It turned out that Michael was a pretty good dancer, too! In between the drinking and the dancing, Brea had allowed Michael's hands quick skims over areas of her body that she would normally not responded without a face slap. There was no question she was completely infatuated by him.

Later in the night, Allison ran into Brea in the bathroom, where the deafening music was muffled enough by the thick wall for conversation.

"Looks like you're having fun with Michael over there!" said Allison, reasonably hammered. "You two are totally cute together."

“Aren’t we?” said Brea giddily. “He got me an alstroemeria.”

“Wow!” said Allison, very impressed. “I love those!”

“I do too, I mean, who knows to get a girl that?”

“I guess it’s cool that we have a spaceship now. Warp Factor 9, here I come!”

Brea was crushing too hard to let that one slide, “Do you mind if I take him back to the loft with us?”

“You’re not going to let him sleep over, are you?” said Allison, taken aback.

“Oh my lord, no. I just want to let him see the place.” Said Brea, horrified. “It is pretty fabulous now that we’ve decorated it. And by we I mean mostly me.”

“Oh, did you ever get Michael’s last name?” asked Allison. Brea went white, “Eeeeeek!” she cried.

“You’d better, this is the second thing you’ve been to with him.”

“The third thing,” noted Brea “If you also count the party where we met.”

“You’d better get his last name or he might think you’re the kind of girl that kisses boys and doesn’t know their last name.” said Allison.

“I’m a girl kissing a boy, and I don’t know his last name?!” cried Brea “I don’t want to be that girl.”

“Relax, we’ll figure it out. Listen, I think it’s time to call it a night. We should go ahead and get a cab, Michael and Lani have to work in the morning.” “That’s cool,” agreed Allison.

“Do you want to split up and look for her?” asked Brea primping in front of the mirror.

“Last I saw of her,” offered Allison “she was dancing on the center stage.”

“Lani dancing on the center stage!!??” squealed a delighted Brea. “This I simply must see.”

—————

Back in the chaos of the club, Allison went to hail a cab, and Michael and Brea pushed through the crowd to retrieve Lani, who was in the dance hall furthest from the entrance. Michael took charge, grabbing Brea by the hand and pulling her through. Ordinarily Brea didn’t like being bossed around, but this was Michael, so it gave her a bit of a thrill.

As they got closer and closer to the back of the club, Brea could see Lani on stage. Holy crap was she hammered! Lani was grinding with a guy on stage that was the only one without his shirt off. He was pretty small for a guy, and had a flat top. There he was, getting to second base with Lani on stage, causing a spectacle, seeing as Lani had a lot of second base.

Inside, Brea was totally cracking up! We weren’t talking days, we were taking months of making fun of Lani! And then as if it couldn’t get any better, Brea realized! Lani wasn’t dancing with a guy, she was dancing with a particularly butch lesbian, and she didn’t know it! Probably.

As if on cue, Michael read her mind, holding up for Brea a very small digital camera. The blind luck that he had it on him made sense seeing as he was a journalist, Lani always kept hers on her as well. Brea gave him the motion to snap away.

They were just below the stage now, giving him a great view with the zoom lens. Brea moved in next to his face, her cheek getting tickled again by his scruff, then yelled something in his ear loud enough for him to hear. He nodded in acknowledgement.

Brea made her way through the crowd up the stage, Placing a hand on Lani's shoulder. Lani turned around, recognizing her, which was a little impressive considering how far she was gone from the whiskey shots. She yelled/slurred "Who's got a Michael now?!" at Brea.

Brea got in close enough to yell in her ear. "Lani, you're gonna want to stop. That's a girl!!!"

Lani's eyes went wide and she spun around like lightning, eyes forcing themselves to go into focus. The understanding hit her, sobering her instantly, and causing her to drop her glass of whiskey all the same moment.

"Click."

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Despite Lani's death threats, Brea, Michael and Allison laughed and laughed the whole ride home. Brea wished she could have had a snapshot of Allison's face too when Brea handed the camera to Allison wordlessly to show the picture. After about 20 blocks of being loudly mocked, Lani just allowed herself to give up on it all and pass out. In her blasted mind, she somehow sensed things would be better in the morning. Thanks to Brea and Allison, they wouldn't be. Seeing she had passed out, Brea, Michael and Allison took the opportunity to laugh at her some more.

Allison was totally convinced Lani was secretly in the closet, and Brea didn't feel particularly bad in allowing her to believe the notion. Michael, who knew Lani and her friends at her old job, promised he wouldn't tell anyone at the Post about the incident, Brea and Allison wanted exclusive rights to picking on her. When they arrived at their new apartment on "N" Street, Michael had fully intended to carry the unconscious Lani upstairs into their apartment. But Allison, who had years of experience caring for passed out drunks, simply hoisted Lani up over her shoulder as if she were weightless, and marched towards the door.

"You sure I can't help you with her?" offered Michael.

"With Lani?" said a bemused Alison. "I've put Hell's Angel's to bed, I think I can handle little Anne Heche here."

Brea remembered something important and yelled "Allison! Remember that when Lani gets drunk enough to pass out, she sleep-barfs!"

"Oh, yeah. What do we do about that again?" asked Allison.

"Give her a pillow and a comforter, and let her sleep it off in the tub." Allison entered the building, and this finally left Brea outside with Michael and the cabbie.

"We finally finished furnishing the place. Do you want to come up and see it?" offered Brea.

"It's really late, Brea," said Michael simply. "I've got to be up in a few hours, and I'd have to wait to hail another cab."

"Oh, okay," said Brea, thinly hiding her disappointment. "Another time then?"

"Hey," he said, putting his arm on her waist to get her attention. "I had a good time tonight." Then he handed her the single flower she had placed in his lap and moved in to kiss her.

He leaned down, and Brea stood on her tiptoes, and the two shared a kiss. As Brea opened her eyes, she saw that Michael had closed his as well. And before Brea could get her thoughts straight, saying something like "Thanks for the flower," or whatever, he was in the cab and off.

#### Sub-Chapter 6 - Still Standing

What little bit of Lani's mind that was sentient as she somehow managed to come to the next day wished her brain, which felt like the texture of Jell-O, would just go ahead and melt and run out through her ears so it would stop jack-hammering against her skull.

When Lani was able to comprehend that she needed Advil, much less Excedrin Special Migraine Formula in her system, stat. She also realized her cheek felt cold.

Then she realized it felt cold because she was sleeping in the tub. Then she realized that was because she tended to sleep-barf, and she had passed out and Allison must have taken care of her...

Then it all hit her. She remembered what had happened the night before. She felt horror, then fear at the ribbing Brea would give her, Then the one good point occurred to her. That the little bit Brea had actually witnessed was the extent to what had gone on. A horrible thought occurred to Lani. A girl had touched her boobs! Eeew!!! That was just gross. She would definitely have to throw away the bra and top she had been wearing, and probably burn them for good measure. Lani was, by lucky accident, already in the bathroom. So she managed to stand and make it to the medicine cabinet. There she saw Brea had already unpacked generic naproxen sodium, the main ingredient in Aleve. The uncoated generic tablets burned their way down Lani's throat as she swallowed the pills with the help of the water Allison had helpfully left, knowing Lani would wake up dehydrated. "Leave it to Brea," thought Lani, "to save a few cents on uncoated generic Aleve and have it make me suffer at the worst possible moment."

She was conscious enough now, so took a quick shower to wash off the aforementioned sleep-barf, and changed into pajamas. Her next priority was getting coffee into her system, so she went into the kitchen, where Allison was sitting drinking coffee. She had just gotten up herself, and had already brewed a pot. Allison's goofy smile showed every one of her teeth.

"Allison," started Lani "Before you say one word to me, you should know I have one hundred sixty three dollars in my bank account, and if you can talk Brea into nobody talking about a particular subject with me today, you are welcome to every cent of it."

"I'm going to need a check," decided Allison after she thought it over.

"I'll do you one better," said Lani, reaching for her purse on the counter. She dug threw it and tossed her ATM card in Allison's direction. "The code is 0426. Go convince Brea, and have a party."

Which Allison then attempted to do, with visions in her head of using the cash for better-quality vodka in her jungle juice. "Are you out of your mind??!!" demanded Brea. "I've been waiting years for something like this! This will totally get her back for that time I couldn't beat her at Tetris and made she fun of me."

"Yeah, but how about this," offered Allison. "We take the cash, and use it to go to Kinko's and print out hundreds of copies of the photo where she realizes she's with a girl. Then we sneak into her room tonight once she's asleep, and we tape them up everywhere!"

Brea considered this for a moment. "We'll print them in color," she agreed. "And we'll have the camcorder running when she marches into the kitchen to yell at us."

Allison went to the kitchen, and Brea was out for coffee shortly. When she met her gaze with Lani's, she turned to Allison and said "I have a feeling someone, I'm not saying who, is going to be pretty sorry they called someone a 'Total Tetris Loser' tomorrow morning."

"That was like, Freshman year!" exclaimed Lani, after taking a moment to figure out what Brea could possibly be talking about.

"Yeah, but you did this like, dance of joy in my face."

"That's true," said Lani, remembering the moment with a very satisfied smile. Then she returned to her morning paper. "Do you want the financial section Brea?" she offered.

"Sure, and I bet Allison wants the comics." This got Allison's attention "Oooh!" she said excitedly, eagerly accepting the section from Lani.

There was a quiet for a bit. When Allison got to Garfield she exclaimed "Hey check this out! Garfield wakes up and goes "I hate Mondays! Ha! What a cat!" Then there was more silence.

When Allison finished the funnies, Lani was still buried in the opinion section of the Post, and Brea was deep into an article on the balance of trade. She wanted to get up and watch TV, but something was happening just now. Something important. She made her "thinking face," which meant she closed one eye and scrunched up that side of her face. Then it occurred to her.

"This," she announced "is the next part of our story!"

Brea and Lani both put their newspapers down. "What do you mean?" asked Brea.

"Well, when you think about it, last night was the first night we're slept here and not the hotel, because the beds finally arrived. Brea even put up her katanas in her room. We did it, we made it to Washington D.C. and last night we celebrated it. Lani's got a great new job, you've got a great new boyfriend, for me the script to Blow'd Up! is practically writing itself. These are new adventures in a new place. Our adventures at Charbonneau Academy were crazy, but they're over. Bishop University and LV-426 was a new crisis every week. Someday somebody should do a sitcom about what happened to us there. But that part of our lives is over too. This is the start of a new story for us."

Brea and Lani were silent, contemplating everything that had happened to them over the last few years. It was a lot to take in.

"You know, she's got a point, Lani," said Brea.

"Yeah," agreed Lani. "I'll make you a promise, Allison, and I mean this. Someday after you've become wildly famous from your movie, and Minuete finally takes over the world, and Brea finally succeeds in her lifelong quest to drive me crazy, after that happens, I'll sit down and write our story. Because other people should know about the things you've put me through."

"Ha!" laughed Brea. "The real reason you should write it is so other people can know how uniquely fabulous we are, particularly me. Young girls would not want to miss a single sentence of my story."

"Young boys would get captivated," surmised Allison. "by the irresistible feminine wiles of 'Allison Holiday, the phenomena' as I will be referred to." Lani remembered to remember this moment, the moment she decided her story was one worth telling. "I wonder who will play me in the TV movie?" she wondered.

————— Later, Brea and Lani were in their new den, trying to figure out their new entertainment center. Brea had blown a lot of her redecorating budget on the setup in the room. A plasma wide-screen TV, state of the art surround sound, couches with leather soft as a baby's bottom, there was no way to describe it other than straight up bling.

However, Brea and Lani just wanted to plug in their old Nintendo to play Brea's copy of Tetris, the Tengen version that had two player when the Nintendo version did not. There was so much trash talking going on about who was going to get 'murked', as Brea put it, that even Allison was interested in who would win the competition.

"Ashley usually does this kind of stuff for us," stated Brea "but this is an all out war. Whoever can get this game plugged in for me to murk Lani I'll give my free Blockbuster rental to."

"Cool." mused Allison. "You are aware you're just making up words," noted Lani with a loud sigh.

Brea had the home theatre manual out. "It says here we need to convert the cable from the Nintendo into S-video. Does anyone know what S-video is?" Brea looked at Lani.

"Don't look at me," she said. This got Allison very excited!

"Oooh! Oooh!" exclaimed Allison.

"Yes?" asked Brea.

"I don't know the answer either," said Allison with great self-satisfaction, "Ha!! Now we're tied, Lani. Oh yeah."

Eventually the girls just ended up calling Ashley who walked them through it. When they finally got the Nintendo plugged in and the game turned on, the screen welcomed her with "Tengen Presents, The Soviet mind game Tetris" Allison squealed "It's on like Donkey Kong!"

There they were face to face, two fierce women. One a perky, energetic waif, the other a vixen with a bad hangover. Time seemed to stand still.

Either Brea had gotten better at Tetris, or the hangover was severely affecting Lani's reflexes because Brea was wiping the floor with her. Lani was using so much profanity, she was turning variants of a single word into complete sentences. She proposed the two switch to Dr. Mario, which Lani was confident she would beat her in. And she did, meaning Brea was the one using unladylike language.

"Who's getting 'murked' now, huh?" taunted Lani.

"Listen up good, sweet cheeks. Here's how we're going to play it," said Brea. "I am going to march into the back and I'm going to unpack the Super Nintendo. And you and I are going to have a little dance of death I like to call Super Mario Kart."

That worked for Lani. "Fine with me. Would you care to make it interesting?" she offered. "What did you have in mind?" shot back Brea.

"Well," started Lani "Money doesn't seem appropriate, since it doesn't really mean anything to you."

Allison got very excited. "Oooh! Ooooooh! I've got it! If you win she has to tell you what the P. in her real first name stands for!"

Lani's eyes lit up, "This I like, Mrs. P. Brea Anatamata." Brea was in a gambling mood, but was very hesitant, "You'd have to put something absolutely huge on the table for something like that."

"What do you want?" asked Lani.

"What can you give me?" offered Brea.

"I'll let you start picking on me today about last night," tried Lani.

"I'm a very patient girl," returned Brea. "What else do you have?"

"I'll cook an entire dinner for you and Michael, and will be your waiter," tried Lani again."

"Ha! I could pay you enough money if I wanted to see that. We both know you have no shame," Brea stated, matter-o-factly.

"Okay, how about this?" she said. "If I lose, then I'll promise to never ask you what the P. stands for ever again."

Brea pondered that one for a minute. It meant Lani would never be able to bother her again. "Never again, huh?" That wouldn't stop Allison for snooping, but she'd been able to hold Allison off since junior high school.

"Bring it on, bitch!" Brea decided.

After a bit of digging around, Brea found her old Super Nintendo, and came back into the den. Lani and Allison gave each other conspiratorial looks, But Brea couldn't prove anything. This time, wiring it into the system was no problem.

Brea explained Super Mario Kart to Allison, who only played flight and light gun sims. "You drive around in your kart, and you have three balloons. You collect stuff to shoot at each other, like shells, and they pop the balloons. First one out of balloons wins."

Brea picked up the controller. "Hey, that's not fair! That's the lucky controller!" complained Lani, to which Brea dismissed her with a stern "You snooze, you loose, Cameron." The girls played a few rounds to warm up and were ready for the real thing.

Brea had all guns blazing directly out of the gate, and managed to pop two of Lani's balloons with a lucky hit from her invincibility star. Things looked dim for Lani, when Brea got a red homing shell, the best weapon in the game! But Lani stole it with a ghost, which also made her invisible.

Brea was trying to figure out where she was by watching Lani's screen, when she managed to make her slip on a banana she had thrown at Lani. That was the moment Lani nailed her with the red shell! The tide had turned, both girls were down to one balloon!

Then the worst thing possible happened, Lani got a green dumbfire shell and Brea only had a banana. "Oh my God," thought Brea, I'm going to have to tell them my real first name! That was when something hit Allison hard!

"Lani, what time do you have to be at work?" she asked. Lani put the game on pause by hitting start as soon as the words left Allison's lips and went white. "Holy crap! What time is it?" she demanded.

"Eleven thirty-three," answered Allison

"Late for the first day of work! They're gonna kill me!" Lani whined. "Brea, I've got to go. Now. We'll redo this race later," said Lani frantically.

Brea, who was the underdog in this fight, was only too happy for a do-over. "I guess that will be alright," she mused. And put down the controller. Lani was kind of just sitting there in a state of shock, "What on earth was I thinking, they're gonna kill me!" Brea exited the room, amused at Lani's distress. That was when Lani unpaused the game, and started racing for Brea's kart. Brea heard the music of the game start playing again through the speakers, and started to run back to her controller. "Oh no, no, no! This doesn't count!" she protested. But it was too late, Lani had popped Brea's last balloon and won the match!

"Ha!" Lani yelled, pointing, dropping the controller to the ground. "Out with it! What does the P stand for?"

"You cheated, cheater!" Brea yelled. "That doesn't count."

"All that matters is I won the match," countered Lani. "You snooze, you lose, remember?"

"I think she's right, Brea" agreed Allison. "You snooze you lose. Tell us what your first name is."

Brea was actually considering telling them for about a second, but Lani blew it. She shot a glance from the corner of her eye at Allison, and had a look on her face as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

Brea physically gasped! "You two planned that! You tricked me!" she thought aloud. "That's what you two were whispering about when I went and got the Super Nintendo!" And with that, Brea turned around, and marched into her bedroom in a huge huff, slamming the door behind her locking it. "Just you wait until I finish Operation: Kinko's! Just you wait!" Brea said, racing for her bedroom.

Allison and Lani ran after her, Lani banging against the door. "You lost, now tell us your first name!" she demanded. But Brea was already in the shower with her stereo blaring to drown out the noise.

"Go apply for your Actor's Equity Guild Card, you cheaters!" yelled back Brea.

#### Sub-Chapter 7 - Step Back in Time

Lani had let Allison accompany her down to the MSNBC offices, despite her better judgment. She figured after last night, disaster would be on vacation for a few weeks, after working so hard to ruin her night. The real reason Lani was bringing her along was that, even though she would never admit it, she was a little freaked out after last night, and wanted a friend around.

Getting ready to go, she saw that in her intoxicated state, she had neglected to charge her cellular phone the night before. She would have to be unreachable until she got back. Actually, the thought of not being able to be bothered by anyone seemed like it would be nice, actually.

Today would be a day of informal work for the job, fill out some paperwork, get her entered into the employee database. She planned to drop Allison off on the MSNBC tour, which lasted about an hour and a half, when you included the waiting. That would be long enough for Lani to finish up, get her press credentials printed up then the two could go get dinner, and argue with Brea.

The girls had already gone through one security checkpoint, and Lani was going through the second one for employees. This was no joke either, the guard was eying Lani suspiciously, because he didn't know her.

"Just go on the tour, I'll be down in about ninety minutes," said Lani.

"No problem," said Allison, bored already, glancing around for buttons.

"It's straight down the hall to the right," she explained. "You can't miss it."

"See you later," said Allison, turning and headed down the rightward hallway. "Whew!" thought Lani, turning back around to the security guard. "Once she's on the tour they'll be someone to keep and eye on her."

What Lani did not notice was that totally cute guy with blond hair that was turning down the hallway to the left. She also didn't notice Allison turning around to follow him down the leftward hallway to talk to him, since he seemed more interesting than the door.

The man punched some numbers into the keypad, and opened the door, walking through it, and closed it in Allison's face, not noticing her. Allison reached for the doorknob, which didn't turn for some reason! This really confused Allison, who couldn't figure out what was going on. There was no keyhole for a key, she surmised...

A forty-something man saw Allison's confusion, and tried to help, saying "You've got to push the numbers on the keypad, to which Allison looked puzzled for a moment said, "Oh, I get it. Thanks!"

So Allison punched the numbers in the keypad. Every one of them! One, two, three," till she finished pushing in them all. Just for good measure, she pushed the star and pound buttons too. But it didn't work, the door still wouldn't open! She tried pushing in the numbers again, but it just wouldn't work! In a supreme effort, she braced one foot on the wall and pulled with all her might, trying to force the door open, still to no success.

Allison was growling under her breath, then gave the keypad her worst glare, and then said in her most threatening voice, "You'll get yours, Keypad, just you wait!"

She was on her way to find something that could be used in a manner described by the words "force" and "blunt," when she spun around to see a working mother very distracted by three spastic children.

"Oh, thank God, you're with the nursery, right?" she asked.

"I don't know, probably," answered Allison, who was being presented with an infant child. "Can you hold him for a second?" she asked distractedly. "I can never remember my code." Then the woman dug through her purse with one arm, and held a six year old child trying to get away by the wrist.

Allison glanced back at the door, which had words on it. Allison knew exactly what to do in situations like this, use her ability to read. The words said, "Day Care."

She punched in the number, and Allison followed her through to the other side. Blondie was nowhere to be seen, so Allison just followed the mother through the hallway, still carrying the infant.

"They've got the twins," the woman said, "Could you take little Ashley to the Infant Care Center?"

"You can leave it all to me," promised Allison confidently, not knowing what she was talking about, but it made the woman leave, which was what was important.

Allison looked down at what she was holding, she knew what this was! It was one of those babies she always heard people talking about on daytime TV. She held it up and examined it, the way someone might hold up a hammer to look at it. Frankly, she didn't know what the big deal was. Little "Ashley" just looked like some kind of midget midget or something.

A woman walked by, and noticed Allison “Can I take him to the Infant Care Center for you?” she asked. “Yeah, cool,” said Allison, handing the kid over. And then Allison was all alone. Why had she come this way again? Where was she?

She felt a tug at her left hand, Allison looked down and saw that a little seven year old boy was tugging on her hand.

“What’s shaking sweetie?” asked Allison.

“My name is Lindsey, what’s your name?” asked the wide eyed boy.

“I’m Allison Holiday, but you can call me ‘Allison the Phenomenon’ if you’d like,” she said making a sweeping motion with her hand. The kid did not understand, however, mouthing the words phenomi-what?”

“You’re a girl,” noted the child.

“As if any boys don’t notice! If you know what I mean, Lindsey. I’ve seen a little action, heh, heh, heh.” laughed Allison. This conversation was getting boring, noted Allison, how to get out of it without seeming rude?

“I don’t like girls,” this got Allison’s attention.

“Really, why is that, Lindsey?” asked Allison taking notice.

“Girls are weird. And they have cooties,” said Lindsey, scrunching his face. “Thhhppppbbbbb!!!” went Lindsey.

“Lindsey, can I tell you a secret?” asked Allison.

“I love sharing secrets!” exclaimed Lindsey. “Sharing secrets makes friends!”

“Well, little Lindsey, do you like candy?” asked Allison. This excited Lindsey very much, “I love candy!” he exclaimed.

“What’s your favorite kind of candy?” asked Allison. Lindsey thought for a second, “I like Skittles the best! No, Starbursts! Yes, I like Starbursts the best,” he decided.

“Well Lindsey, let me pass along a little information.” started Allison, getting right in Lindsey’s face, lowering her voice into a menacing growl. “You might be all high and mighty right now with your male chauvinist ‘girls have cooties’ propaganda. You might try to subjugate us and spread your lies! But one day, about five years from now? I promise you. Girls are going to have a kind of candy you will want a million times more than Skittles and Starbursts. And we are going to deny you that candy. And you are going to spend more time thinking about getting our candy that you can possibly imagine! And there is nothing you can do about it! Hah! Boys suck, girls rule! You have no chance to survive, make your time!”

Lindsey just looked all wide-eyed at this revelation, for a moment. Time seemed to stand still. A more noted observer than Allison might have noticed the dream dying in young Lindsey’s eyes as he screamed “Ahhhhhhhhhhahahahaaaaaaah!” and ran off for his stuffed animal and his cubbyhole.

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Lani was sitting back in Mr. Carol's office, she was thrilled. Sitting inside her purse were her brand new MSNBC Press Credentials! As if they were tangible keys, the new ID's would allow Lani special access at public events, but even more so they carried sentimental value. Back at the Washington Post it had been her job to write about political events, but certainly she'd never had the opportunity to go back stage, and interview the people she was writing about. "Here's the way I see it," offered Mr. Carol. "Network policy requires for you to have a title and a job on one of our shows. But the main reason I'm hiring you is I want you out there doing investigative journalism."

"Yes sir," said Lani, she'd go along with anything at this point.

"Ratings have been great for the Alyssa Rifte Effect, I know we're adding people to that staff, how would you like to work as a copy editor there part time?"

"Alyssa Rifte?" thought Lani. "Oh my God, just kill me now." Lani's immediate reaction was to reflect back on a Doonesbury cartoon where Mike Doonesbury was telling his daughter Alex he envied her generation because they were able to grow up in a more Geraldo and Howard Stern-free era. Alex had pointed out she was sure there were people perfectly willing to leap in and take their place as self-aggrandizing, smarmy blowhards. Alyssa Rifte was one such smarmy blowhard.

Her show had only been on the air for a few months, but was getting excellent ratings, going up against the eight and eleven o'clock O'Reilly Factor on Fox News. Perhaps the reason it was pulling so many viewers from O'Reilly was that their message was extremely similar, except Alyssa Rifte was a former model.

There are two species of blond girls, the ones with bright eyes, and the ones with dark eyes. Alyssa was the latter, with eyes so black they were one of the first things you noticed about her when you first saw her. Contrasting the darkness of her eyes was the paleness of her very fine, straight blond hair. She had high, angular cheekbones, and thin lips. Alyssa Rifte was very attractive in the classical sense.

Since she had been a model, there was no surprise then that she had the crazy eyes. When Lani saw Anna Kournikova on television there was something just wrong with her that she couldn't quite put her finger on. She got this same feeling whenever she saw Alyssa Rifte's talking head. She had given Lani the willies so bad the first time Lani had seen her on television, she had physically shuddered at how psycho she seemed to be.

If you took the self-wanking ego of Bill O'Reilly and combined it with Bill Maher's complete inability to sense ordinary standards of human decency, you'd get a pretty clear picture of Alyssa Rifte. If you added Rush Limbaugh's shameless lies and Sean Hannity's shameless hypocrisy you'd get closer. Toss in a bitchy girlfriend looking to pick a fight, bake for twenty minutes and you'd be done. Lani truly loathed Alyssa Rifte, and all the smarmy talk show hosts like her.

If you listened to Alyssa Rifte's side of the story, she was a no-spin, strand-up gal that knew how to voice the opinion of real, ordinary American's whose views weren't being heard by the liberal media. Alyssa was good at make-believe, thought Lani.

Her show format basically boiled down to the following. Raise whatever talking head issue is in the paper that day, then criticize the people involved, too busy with bigger media venues, as being too scared to appear on her show. Then she would bring in some professor from whatever cow college and label them an expert on the issue. Finally, she would have a "debate" that closer resembled a monologue. If someone was bold enough to disagree with her in any way, the bully came out and she would shout them down.

Perhaps Mr. Carol read what Lani thought of Alyssa Rifte and her show because he said “Listen. I trust you enough to be honest about this, I can’t stand the show either. I think it’s a total embarrassment to the network. But Alyssa’s ego is being fueled by all the ratings and she wants to expand her little empire of worker bees here at the network. You can spend your days working on investigation research and interviews, then spend a few hours at night working on the show.”

“What would I be doing for her?” asked Lani?

“What would you like to do for her?” replied Carol. “The show’s producer is a friend of mine, I’m sure I can talk her into putting you where you’d like. I assumed you’d want to do copy editing.”

“I am telling you right now,” said Lani “that doing copy editing will be impossible because her kind of logic is like Disneyland to me, and I can’t copy her speaking style.”

“That follows,” noted Mr. Carol.

“And I can’t do fact-checking for her because my work would actually be accurate, and she might mess up and accidentally say something that was true.”

“I’ve got it,” said Carol. “What if we put you on the pre-interview staff?”

“I’m sorry,” said Lani, drawing a blank. “This is my first foray into television journalism, what’s that?”

“It’s really not complicated,” he promised. “You interview the guests before the show, and take notes on their position on the issues. Those go to Alyssa and her writers so she can have talking points and witty comments ready to act out on television.”

“That sounds great to me,” said Lani. “And on the investigative front, I hate to ask for an office, but I’m going to need a place to access Lexis-Nexis.” Lani was referring to the huge database that provided authoritative legal, news, public records and business information, far beyond what she could simply find on the Internet.

“As for an office, no can do,” he answered simply. “But I might be able to wrangle up a spare cubicle for you.”

“I just have one more question for you,” said Lani. “Why on earth are you taking the time to be so nice to me?”

“Well,” started Carol. “Part of it is it’s nice to have a pet project. The second reason is I’m a guy that likes to listen to my instincts, and my instinct is that you’re going to uncover something big for the network.”

“Oh gee great, boss. No sky high expectations or anything,” she joked.

Then, noting the clock, Lani noted that Allison would be finishing up her tour soon. “Do you need me for anything else boss?” she asked. He didn’t so Lani left to go meet up with Allison in the building lobby, she thought she’d stop by the set for the Alyssa Rifte Effect on her way down.

—————

The office for the Rifte Effect consumed the 4th floor of the MSNBC News building. Mr. Carol had phoned ahead to his producer friend to let her know Lani was coming. A veteran journalist, Lani had a simple but quite effective technique for finding out who was in charge of a newsroom. Just look for the person that looks the most stressed.

As she walked through the fourth floor, looking at everyone, she was struck by a realization; there were no men on the floor! Each and every one of the employees on the set were women, except for the security personnel. How strange!

Lani knew the woman was in charge the moment she laid eyes on her. "You wouldn't be Mrs. Drake? By any chance would you?" The woman looked up from the desk. "Yes, yes I am." Lani extended a hand. "My name is Lani Cameron, Mrs. Drake. Mr. Carol had sent me down."

"It's Miss Drake, which actually doesn't matter because I keep all staff on a first name basis. It's just Dana, and what was your name one more time?"

Lani could tell Dana had used to be very pretty, but the stress of the years had gotten to her. With a name like Dana Drake, perhaps she had been a newscaster? Not to say she wasn't still attractive, she just looked very tired. And also distracted. "It's Lani."

"Listen, Lani, we are very close to gametime, there's an interview we're pre-taping that I need to direct. I just don't have any time to give you right now."

"That's perfectly fine," said Lani. "Why don't I come to your budget meeting tomorrow and I can meet everyone." For a news organization, a budget meeting had nothing to do with money, it was where time was divided out for different sections and stories out of the total available time.

"Make it the day after tomorrow, and that would be great, it's at 4:00," said the woman as she scuttled off.

Lani glanced down at a shot sheet Dana had left on the desk in front of her. Lani could not help but roll her eyes when she read the topics Alyssa would be frothing off about.

"Just exactly what kind of idiot?" Lani wanted to know, "thinks listening to Alyssa Rife is a good idea?"

That was the moment the door to Alyssa's dressing room opened up, and Lani got her first glimpse of the show's star in person. And there standing there laughing with her was, who else, Allison Holiday.

Lani was thinking of working up the energy to look shocked, but what was the point, really?

"Wow, Miss Rife!" exclaimed a starstruck Allison "I've never heard it put that way before! You're the smartest, most provocative commentator I've ever heard!" Alyssa's ear loved nothing more than the sounds of people fawning over her. "Thanks kid. Listen, I've got a little case the pre-tape jitters so can I have a little more..."

"Oh, yes of course Miss Rife!" Allison exclaimed, digging into her pocket and pulling out her hip flask of Jungle Juice. Alyssa took a long pull off the bottle, and handed it back, saying "Damn, that's some strong stuff. Just the kind of medicine I need right now. Think you can get some of that for my dressing room?"

"Absolutely! You'll have it tomorrow."

"You're a good kid, Holiday. I like your can-do rugged individualist attitude. Have Dana get you a permanent set pass so you can watch us taping whenever you like," and with that she turned and left.

“Boogya!!” yelled Allison. Then she noticed Lani standing there, rolling her eyes. “I swear, she’s got it dead right when it comes to politics. I honestly had no idea Jesse Jackson wasn’t a SNL skit character!”

“That woman,” said Lani matter-o-fatly “is my new boss, so please try not to get me into any trouble around here.”

“No problem!” said Allison. “Are we leaving?”

“Yep!” responded Lani. “Ready to go argue with Brea over the Mario Kart thing?”

“That’s cool. Can we stop at the bookstore on the way home?” asked Allison.

Boy did that one took Lani from left field. As far as she knew, the last time Allison was around any books was the time she was so drunk, she thought that C.K. Masters, the Bishop University library was the Sigma Alpha Epsilon House and had passed out there looking for cute boys. Boy had that librarian had a pleasant surprise! Then she realized why Allison wanted to stop at a bookstore.

“Alyssa Rifte told you she had a book out, right?” said a bemused Lani.

“She also told me she wrote a suspense novel too! ‘Valley of Evil!’”

Allison was hopelessly gone. “Lani, I’ve made a decision. From now on the only thoughts you’re gonna be hearing from my mouth are Alyssa Rifte’s.”

#### Sub-Chapter 8 - Better The Devil You Know

Brea decided to take a long morning, spending a few hours enjoying the hedonistic luxury of her fabulous new apartment. After Lani and Allison had stopped trying to bang down her door, and had left to go down to MSNBC, Brea had carte-blanc over the apartment.

It had been a long time since she’d had any time to herself. Wearing nothing but a smile, Brea went to brew another pot of coffee, but not just the regular Folgers, but grinding the good stuff she kept in the freezer. Then she poured what she could into a large thermos, and headed back to the bathroom. She picked up the latest Candice Bushnell novel, and got through the first hundred and twenty pages while relaxing in the idling spa and sipping gourmet coffee.

When she decided to finally get up, it was well after one o’clock. She dried herself off, put on her silk bathrobe, and sat down at her computer to check her email. She had decided to wait until Ashley arrived in Washington to hook up all of her good computer stuff, so was just using her laptop.

Nothing noteworthy was in her email inbox, unless you considered the threats Lani had sent her with her cell phone over the Mario Kart debacle while riding the Metro noteworthy. She was about to check out the new Dilbert cartoon of the day, always the very first thing she did in her daily surfing, when she was startled by the loud audio chime that she had gotten an instant message.

**REDFIVE34:** Hey, is that you Brea?

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Who is this?

**REDFIVE34:** This is Michael, I’m at work.

Brea’s heart leapt up into her throat! It was Michael! Except for the whole Mario Kart thing, this was shaping out to be quite an excellent morning.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Oh, how did you get my IM number?

**REDFIVE34:** I did a search with your email account, how are you?

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Good, I had fun last night. Did you get much sleep?

**REDFIVE34:** Not much. Fortunately most of the layout work I do does not require the use of my brain.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Lani paid Allison and I over a hundred dollars to not mention her little make-out session today.

**REDFIVE34:** Try not to be too hard on her. We've all done stupid things when we've been drunk. Lani seems to be pretty nice person.

Look at Michael, looking out for Lani like a big brother. That's just the kind of guy he is, always thinking of others. Brea felt a twinge of guilt over the whole Tetris thing for about a second. And then she remembered the Mario Kart conspiracy, and that was the end of that.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** lol, She gives as good as she gets, but I'll keep that in mind.

**REDFIVE34:** We're getting hard into the election cycle, I'm going to be too busy to do anything for the next few days, so sorry.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Maybe a quick lunch?

**REDFIVE34:** Maybe. I don't know. I had to work through lunch today.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Why is that?

**REDFIVE34:** I came in late, and I'm on deadline.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** I could bring you takeout. I was trying to think of an excuse to leave the apartment anyway.

**REDFIVE34:** Wow. I'd do the whole polite decline at first thing, except that I'm really hungry. :) But only if you needed an excuse to get out and about.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** lol. It's no problem. What kind of food do you want?

**REDFIVE34:** You're right there by Brickskellar's, it must be my lucky day. :) I'll phone ahead, I owe you one.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** That's cool... What's Red Five mean, btw?

**REDFIVE34:** It's Luke Skywalker's X-Wing in ANH. Yes, you are instant messaging with a minor Star Wars geek.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Somehow, life goes on. See you shortly?

**REDFIVE34:** Later. Thanks again.

Brea had no idea what "ANH" had meant, but didn't mention it, because Michael might make the mistake of thinking she was interested in Star Wars. She had dated a guy once that just would not get the message that she did not give a crap about the anime nonsense he would not shut up about. Of course Michael would never do that, because he thinks about people, the way he thought about Lani.

To be perfectly honest, Brea would have rather gotten take-out from any other place in the universe more than Brickskellar's, which had a sickly smell of cigarette smoke and cooked meat, not to mention it was located in a basement. But at least this time she didn't have to eat anything.

She quickly went through her hair and makeup routine, deciding to wear her hair with a little feathered curl, and she freshly dyed the red streak of hair on her forehead. For an outfit she chose a thin white tight tank top that showed her midriff, and a pink mini that was "ruched", meaning it had been sewn to make the fabric scrunch together in stylish layers. Overall, the outfit looked casual, but it definitely showed off Brea's best features, as she was sure Michael would notice.

When she got to Brickskellar's it sucked because the order wasn't ready yet and Brea had to wait at the smoky bar and endure the smell. She had been looking forward to paying for the meal, because it was as close as Brea could ever get to cooking one for him, and it would mean he owed her one. But, sadly, Michael had already paid with a credit card, even down to the tip.

Michael was a mere four stops down on the Metro red line. Brea remembered back when she had first arrived in the city, and had visited the Washington Post building. She had been complaining loudly to Allison about the thirty dollar cab ride. But Brea was getting used to DC and all the walking, and this time it had cost her a mere \$1.42 on her Metro Smartcard.

Brea had been to the building enough times now that the security guard knew her, and she was quickly waved through security. It took her a few wrong turns to find Michael's department, but when she finally did find him, she could tell he was genuinely happy to see her. He flashed Brea a smile that made her heart flutter. That, Brea decided, was a smile you didn't give just anyone. "Or maybe it was just the food," thought Brea. She really could tell he was hungry.

After Michael took the Styrofoam container from Brea he waited until no one was looking, then leaned in and gave her a quick peck on the lips, which made Brea giggle, a little intoxicated by the rush. Michael was getting away with PDA at work!

"It's good to see you. Was the Metro very crowded?" Asked Michael.

"I'm still too new here to know what's considered crowded," admitted Brea. I brought you something else for you too," she said, going through her bag, and producing two pills in a sandwich bag. "I discovered these things back at Bishop," she said. "They do wonders when you're a little hung over and sleep deprived." "Thanks, that's sweet," said Michael, not accepting the bag. "But I have this thing about not taking medicine unless I really need it."

"Oh," said Brea, a little disappointed, wanting to play the role of Michael's nurse. What she really wanted to do was play doctor, but that was beside the point.

Then Brea noticed something. The same man she had caught staring at her and Michael back at the New Year's Eve ball was here at Michael's office also?

"Michael!" said Brea in a hushed whisper. "There's that man again! He was at the ball when we met. Is he spying on you?"

Michael stopped eating his lunch and looked to who Brea was talking about. "Oh, Brea. Please, it's no big deal, you really don't want to know."

"You had told me he was 'a friend of the family,' so I had assumed you meant he was gay or something." Michael laughed so hard at that he nearly choked on his burger. "You have to know him for that to be funny."

Michael considered the matter for a second, then said “Brea, I’ve got to tell you something. I’m not exactly who you think I am. There’s something important about me that you don’t know. I’ve never told you my last name.”

“Oh thank God,” said Brea relieved, forgetting about the secret part. “I had been going nuts, thinking you would think I was the kind of girl that kisses guys when she doesn’t know their last name.”

“Oh! I’d never thought of that.” said Michael, slightly confused at Brea’s logic train. “Brea, my last name is Cabbot. As in Speaker of the House Cabbot. He’s my father.”

Brea was more shocked than impressed. “Why does that matter at all? I’ve never talked to you about my father’s career, but I grew up around people like you. Did you think I’d mind?”

“No, it’s just. With the news and all.” said Michael, looking to Brea guiltily. Brea’s stare gave him nothing. The Michael realized, and slapped himself in the head. “Oh Brea, I’m sorry. In between this job and being raised as a Congressman’s son, I forget people don’t follow the news.”

“Michael,” said Brea. “Don’t get the wrong idea and take me for an idiot, I follow politics. I’m here because I want to work in politics. I am perfectly aware your father has been Speaker of the House for, what is it three years now? It’s just with the move and all. I mean, what story did I miss?”

“Oh Brea, no no no, I didn’t mean it like that,” Michael felt bad for saying something Brea could possibly take as he didn’t think she was anything other than brilliant. “I just mean it’s hard to know what other people know that are on the outside.”

“Will you please just tell me what is going on Michael?” Brea asked, getting to the point.

“My father is running for President, Brea. He’s neck deep in the whole debacle.”

“Oh, well then of course I didn’t know about it. All the news about who’s doing what before the first Primary has always seemed like a huge wank-a-thon to me. It’s just rampant speculation by talking heads. I deliberately block it out until after the New Hampshire election eve.”

“Well, you know Westcott and Dalton are fighting for the nomination,” said Michael.

“Of course,” said Brea.

“Well, about two months ago, on the last day you could file to be on the New Hampshire ballot, my father announced he was getting in the race.”

Michael then went to explain the story to Brea, much of which Brea already knew in bits and gaps. Simply put, Congressman Cabbot had decided to enter the race, but had not broken into double digits as of yet, mostly because his opponents had a massive advantage of money and time.

“So the guy watching us down there, he’s a Secret Service agent assigned to protect you.”

“Exactly,” said Michael. “I convinced him to take the night off for our first date. He was at the club with us last night, but of course you didn’t notice with all the chaos.”

“I didn’t want to tell you, because I’m my own man. Who my father is and what he’s doing shouldn’t define who I am and who we are. And if you could just forget the fact that he’s running for President, and we could just see where this whole thing takes us. You have no idea what it’s like, growing up with a father that’s a public figure. There are girls that would date me just because of him”

With that, Brea bit her tongue, deciding now was not the moment to tell Michael the secret she intended to take to her grave. The secret of her half-Japanese heritage, and the reason Brea didn't talk much about her family history. She knew all right.

Brea knew she shouldn't ask the following but couldn't help herself. "Why aren't you helping him on his campaign? Do you guys get along?" Michael seemed a little shocked.

"We get along fine, I love and respect him very much. But I want my future to be in journalism, and journalists don't participate in political campaigns. Besides, between you and me, he doesn't have a snowball's chance."

A new chime went off on Michael's computer behind him. He had received an instant message. "Oh God, not her again. Why won't she just leave me alone?" Brea looked at the screen as Michael typed.

**HOTLIPS283:** Hey Michael, I was wondering what was up.

**REDFIVE34:** I am both on deadline and in the middle of a conversation, can this wait?

**HOTLIPS283:** I only need a minute. I was wondering, are you coming to the party on Friday?

**REDFIVE34:** I'm planning on putting in an appearance.

Brea's senses took note of that and went up. When Michael had IM'ed with her, she had gotten the impression he was going to be too busy to do things like go to a party. And if he was going to a party, why had he not invited her? But Brea bit her tongue, this wasn't the time in a relationship where she could ask things like that.

**HOTLIPS283:** He's your best friend Michael, in my opinion you take your work entirely too seriously. You need to relax, and not be so uptight.

To this Michael gave an audible growl, and said the words as he typed them in a sarcastically angry voice. Brea had no earthly idea who this HOTLIPS283 was, but she sure knew how to push Michael's buttons.

**REDFIVE34:** How's the job search going, Kate?? **HOTLIPS283:** I'm expecting a call any day now. **REDFIVE34:** Was that it, just the party then? Because I have work to do. **HOTLIPS34:** Oh, yeah. I'm sure what you're working on is soooooo important. See you Friday. Brea would remember what happened next to her dying day. The precise moment everything fell apart was about to happen. HOTLIPS283 sent one final IM.

**HOTLIPS283:** I love you.

Brea couldn't muffle a shocked gasp! Just who exactly was this Kate, and who did she think she was? Michael's girlfriend, that's who, realized Brea. And then a million scenarios went through her mind, as she analyzed and reanalyzed everything that Michael had even said and done with her, because apparently he was not single and was playing games with Brea.

Michael turned around and met eyes with Brea. He had a very guilty look on his face.

"Michael," said Brea, trying to hide both the panic and rage, "Just what the hell is going on here?"

Sub-Chapter 9 - Word Is Out

Allison's nose was buried deeply into Alyssa Riffe's book, "Treachery" She was sitting on the couch in the girls new apartment, which they she and Lani had decided to name "The Loft." Lani was there with her, reading through all the weekly newszines such as Newsweek and Time.

"Boy is Alyssa right about this one," decided Allison. "The Democrats can't take credit for the progress in our balance of trade, because even with the Senate evenly divided 50 Republicans and 50 Democrats, they got the deficit reduction bill through."

Allison had been doing a lot of this, spouting out Alyssa Riffe's rhetoric from the book.

"Allison," said Lani. "What are you talking about, that sentence makes no sense whatsoever. Is that a direct quote?"

"Yep. I guess you have to have a whole 'nother level of book-smarts to understand political theory at Alyssa Riffe's level," said Allison.

That pissed Lani off. "What then," she demanded "does the fact that Congress is evenly divided have to do with balance of trade or deficit reduction?"

Allison made her thinking face. Then after a while said primly, "Some people don't question the Bible, I don't question Alyssa Riffe."

"Do you even know what 'balance of trade' means?" asked Lani.

"Oh, yes," said Allison, very sure of herself.

"Then enlighten me."

"It's about trade, you know and balancing," Allison said slowly thinking through it. "And whether or not we should use some foreign metric system with our scale."

"Give me that," said Lani, snatching the book from Allison. Going to a random page, she skimmed through it. "Okay, how about this. On page 46 she says 'More and more of our imports are coming from overseas.'"

Allison nodded grimly, "And it's happening. In Reagan's America."

"You are simultaneously beyond help and are hopeless," decreed Lani. This was the moment Brea burst into the Loft, it was clear she'd been crying. A lot.

"It's all over!" she screeched, starting to cry again. "Michael's got a girlfriend and it's not me!" Then the sobs turned into a kind of wail that made Lani grit her teeth.

Allison ran over to Brea, "Oh Brea! What happened? Don't worry sweetie, I'm here for you." Lani looked up from the couch to see that Allison had the situation under control, so she didn't have to worry about this one. She'd get the details later, sans Brea's irritating sobbing.

"Allison, it's just awful! How am I supposed to compete with some girl named 'Kate.' Another girl named Kate is ruining my life and stealing my boyfriend!! Kates are smart, and they've got substantial breasts, something I am terribly lacking, and they're always...."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down," said Allison, taking charge of the situation. "You're going too fast for me, Brea. You're not making any sense here." Then Allison grabbed Brea by the shoulders and forced her to look her in the eyes, saying "This is what we're going to do. You are going take a minute to calm down, and we are going to go to my room and close the door. Then we are going to

go over the situation in fine detail until we figure out what to do to make Michael yours, even if it takes staying all night.”

“Okay,” said Brea, starting to feel better.

“The Rifte Effect’s on!” yelled Lani from the Den.

“I’ve-got-to-go,-bye,” said Allison, running off into the other room, leaving Brea standing there like a zombie. She could see Allison in the other room, sitting not on the couch, but inches in front of the television on the floor. Even from the kitchen, Brea could hear the smarmy, self satisfied voice.

“Hi, I’m Alyssa Rifte. Thank you for watching us tonight. The decline of morality in America, that is the subject of this evening’s ‘Talking Points Memo.’ Last night, we demonstrated how the Black Entertainment Television Network has degenerated into a rap video flesh fest.”

Lani could not believe what she was hearing. Did the woman honestly believe that a pasty-faced white woman closing in on forty had any business judging what black people watched on TV?!! Surely, it had to be a sick bit of play-acting.

Rifte continued her screed. “The belief that America is degenerating on a moral level is shared by both Republicans and Democrats. So what’s happened? First, secular forces have destroyed any rendering of Judeo-Christian philosophy in the public school system. Many teachers are now ordered not to make value judgments on behavior and not to push any specific moral standards. Thus children receive little if any moral guidance in class. Am I the only one that sees the problem? In a moment your humble correspondent will tell you just what needs to be done about it.”

Lani’s stomach was turning, especially with the thinly veiled sarcasm in Rifte’s voice as she said “your humble correspondent.” The she looked at what was standing behind her. It was Brea, looking down at Lani with her most pathetic puppy dog eyes. Her lips were pushed together, very thin. It was as if Brea would burst into racked sobs if she allowed her lips to part a milimeter.

Lani sighed and looked back at the TV, then back at Brea, trying to decide which person would bother her less. She settled on Brea. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s go out on the balcony and talk.” The night air would do her good.

The air was chilly, but that was good as it seemed to freeze up Brea’s waterworks as well. After a bit of hysterics, Brea related the story to Lani, up until the “I love you” in the instant message Michael had recieved, and Brea asking exactly what was going on.

Michael told Brea everything, explaining to Brea the situation in a straightforward way that put it into a perspective that would show Brea that any concern over Kate was just silly. Or at least in his own delusional fantasy world, Brea knew Kate was now her number one enemy, she had feminine instincts that could sense it! Screw Minuete, thought Brea, the deranged supervillian that concerned her was Kate. It was as if Kate’s from around the world had started a conspiracy to ruin her love like, just as the other Kate had done with John.

It seemed Kate was Michael’s very long time girlfriend, they had been together for over five years. According to Michael, Kate had one skill honed to such a fine point, it deserved recognition. It was Kate’s ability to make him crazy. After five years it was enough already.

Michael had been unable to get Kate to break-up with him, but after a long time he had been able to convince her that should be allowed to date other people. “That way,” said Michael. “We can make

sure we're right for each other." If there was one thing Michael said he was dead certain of, it was that he and Kate were not right for each other.

"The night I met you was the day I got her to agree to see other people, the first night after five years Brea! I know a sign from above when I see it, save me from this woman. Kate's just a big psycho lunatic, Brea, if you'll just ignore her, you'll save yourself a world of headache. I'll deal with breaking up with Kate, it's going to take some time. You have no concept of how crazy she is."

Brea, princess-like said "That's a fine enough explanation for now, but if you intend to get serious with me, I will not be someone's additional girlfriend. Kate simply has to go." "I agree," replied Michael with enthusiasm.

Leaving the Washington Times building, Brea was choking back tears. Michael had a girlfriend! And even worse, Brea had put down an ultimatum that before Michael could consider Brea his girlfriend, Kate had to be one hundred percent gone. "How long will that take!?!?" cried Brea. "I don't know anything about this girl," she reflected "but I sure don't like the sound of that name Kate." Still, if Michael was faking his dislike of Kate, he had fooled Brea like no one had ever fooled her before.

So Brea was very worried, but convinced ultimately believed Michael was sincere that he was in the process of breaking up with her, and all she had to do was wait and she and Michael would be together. That was until she had gotten back to the Loft and again checked her email. A new instant message popped up.

**HOTLIPS283:** I know who you are...

Brea felt a wave of dread wash over her, this Kate had gotten her IM address! She was so taken aback, she was trying to decide if she should just log off and stay out of the mayhem, that was until Kate thought she was ignoring her, and sent a second message.

**HOTLIPS283:** Brea Anatamata, recent graduate of Bishop University living at 2201 "N" Street, Washington DC, with a journalist named Lani Cameron and Allison Holiday who recently won Best Dressed at the White House Correspondents Ball under questionable circumstances.

Holy crap, thought Brea. This girl was serious! No way to ignore her now.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Michael told me you were a big psycho, but I never dreamed you were this crazy.

**HOTLIPS283:** Lies. You should know in advance, you have absolutely no chance with Michael.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Oh, why exactly is that Kate? The exact words he used were "big psycho headache."

**HOTLIPS283:** Because he and I belong together, and I will do anything in my power to keep him. I'm going to destroy you if you don't stay away from him.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** ;p

**HOTLIPS283:** You won't know when it's coming, you don't know when, you don't know where. You'll be walking down some alley, wondering "Is that Kate?" You'll never know until it happens.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS:** Oh, you're getting murked, bitch.

**HOTLIPS283:** One more thing...I have a secret about Michael....

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Oh, do you now, as if I'd believe anything you said to me.

**HOTLIPS283:** I am very sure of this information, having obtained the information personally.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** (bored) What's your big secret?

**HOTLIPS283:** When they're big they really drive him wild.

With that, Brea lost her temper and decided she had experienced quite enough of this insanity, and logged off of IM. She cut and pasted this text, or at least everything leading to Brea's "Oh, you're getting murked," threat, into an email addressed to Michael. The subject line went "You put up five years of this????!!!!!!?"

But as Brea clicked the icon to send and receive, her email box cycled and was refreshed, and to Brea's dismay she had received an email from HOTLIPS283. The subject line read "What you're up against." Despite her better judgment, Brea opened the email. It was a simple .jpg, a picture of Kate and Michael together, hugging. They looked deeply in love. Michael gave a big huge smile, the same smile that he had flashed at Brea today as she had delivered him his lunch! Kate was way gorgeous, but pretty in a very different way than Brea was. Kate looked like the kind of girl who would appear in the Victoria's Secret Catalog, brunette and very tall and thin. She had this kind of sultry, mischievous look in her eyes as if she was thinking, "If I wanted to? I could devour you sexually, make you fall in love with me, and then break your heart. And I'd do it just to see you squirm."

Back to the balcony where Brea was explaining all this to Lani. "So after that, I couldn't get you on your cell-phone and I kind of lost it, so I went to try to see if you guys were still at the MSNBC building. It took forever to get through because security was going nuts, apparently someone had broken into the Day Care Center, I don't know. The guard said you had checked out, so I came back here.

"She can't be that pretty," tried Lani. So they left the chilly night air to go inside, where Brea could turn on her computer and show her. After booting up, Brea had turned the computer physically off because she wanted no chance of more crazy IM's or emails. Brea showed her the picture, and Lani had no idea what to say.

"Blue's not her best color," she said after a pause.

Just that moment Brea's cell phone rang. "Brea. I just got your email." It was Michael. Brea felt more like she was being rescued than being romanced.

"Michael, I swear she really sent all that to me, and I'm not making it up," said Brea.

"Oh, Brea," Michael said melting. "Of course she sent that to you, I'm just worried about you. I can tell you've been crying. Are you all right?"

"Yes," said Brea, then looking at Lani added "I'm with my friends now."

He seemed relieved. "That's great Brea. I'd...I'd just die if she managed to chase you off. Do you know how to block her on both accounts?" Brea said that she did. Then Michael asked her again if she really knew how to block them, and Brea admitted she didn't.

"I'll come by on my lunch hour tomorrow, and set it up for you. Kate knows zilch about tech. She won't be able to figure out how to make a new account without my help. I have to go but let me know if she bothers you again, alright?"

This made Brea feel much better, so she said that she would and hung up the phone. Then she recounted the other side of the call to Lani.

“Brea, I know this whole thing has got to be upsetting,” said Lani. “But I really think if you just ignore her, and are patient this whole thing will go away.”

“Really?” said Brea, sounding much better. She knew Lani, with her excellent journalism skills could get a good grasp of a situation.

“Really. I think you need a drink. Let’s go to the kitchen, I’m thinking a couple of Jack Daniels shots.”

Brea certainly needed no convincing, so they left Brea’s room and headed down the hallway. But when they reached the kitchen, Allison was in full production of her Jungle Juice. Alcohol distillers, half-gallons of alcohol, grapes, wine bottles and other mixes were everywhere.

“The kitchen is closed,” announced Allison. “I’ve got to finish a few batches of Jungle Juice to thank Miss Rife for her great show tonight, it taught me so much!”

“Just pass us a fifth of anything brown, and a couple of glasses, we’ll improvise,” said Lani. The liquor ended up being Bacardi Gold. Then the girls turned on television to the delight that HBO was having a Sex and the City marathon! Lani poured the drinks, and the girls laid back on the couch, ready to forget their troubles.

Brea raised her tumbler, offering Lani a toast. “Boys,” she mused “Screw ‘em.”

“Amen to that,” agreed Lani.

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The next day Michael arrived well after noon at the loft. Brea was perfectly happy to see that there was none of the exhaustion in his face she’d seen the day before.

He seemed to be in his normal mood, which kind of pissed Brea off. I mean, after all, when he had met Brea in the lobby he should have said something like “Oh my God Brea. I am so exhausted. I stayed up all night fighting with Kate, but we’re broken up now. We’re broken up and I’m not going to let anyone or anything else get in the way of our destiny together!”

No. Instead he just said “Hey.” But then he stooped down to give Brea a quick hello peck which made her giggle accidentally. He didn’t really notice the giggle because he was in kind of daze looking around. “This looks like a really nice place. Do you mind if I ask what your rent is?”

“Seven hundred and forty nine a month,” Brea said smiling. She almost wanted to call Allison to get out the camera and get a picture of his face when he saw the Loft.

“That’s cool, it’s a little more than what I’m paying now. I’m moving out and looking for a new place. Do you know if you have any vacancies?” Brea just smirked and said she didn’t know.

On the ride up the elevator, Michael looked down at Brea and said “You look really nice today,” which made Brea beam with a “Thank you, that’s very sweet of you to say.” Brea was wearing a pair of black yoga pants with slightly flared legs, and a stretchy pink top. She had scrambled to get ready for him, because Michael had woken her up when he had called her to ask if it was okay for him to come over. “That comment,” thought Brea “totally gets him off the hook for not staying up all night trying to thwart Kate.”

Brea opened the door to the loft with a grand swing. Michael's expression was priceless, she really should have phoned ahead to Allison to be ready with the camera. Michael entered into the apartment cautiously, as if the place was so fancy, he did not belong there.

"When you said this place was seven hundred and forty nine a month," asked Michael, "was that in American dollars?" Brea told him that it was.

"How on earth is that possible?" he wanted to know.

"I'll tell you what," said Brea "It's a long story, so I promise I'll tell you on our next date. Just in case you needed any extra incentive."

"I don't need any extra incentive," he said unromantically, just stating a fact so Brea would know she didn't need to play any games like this one. But Brea was having fun, and realized she liked being coy with Michael. Don't boys like to play? "Gaisobo would approve," decided Brea, Gaisobo being the Japanese word for Grandmother she called her by. She had drilled all kinds of rules and advice about boys, virtually all of it long outdated.

The Brea was reminded of what Gaisobo would certainly not approve of. And that was the fact that the wallpaper for Brea's laptop was a picture of Pierce Brosnan with his shirt off looking quite fine. "Eeeek! What's Michael going to think?" Brea certainly hoped she didn't have anything embarrassing running on her computer, like the Cosmo online article she had read last night about what to do about boyfriends with psycho ex-girlfriends.

Then another thought occurred to her, "I bet Michael would look very nice with his shirt off. Maybe I can ask him if he wants to sit in the spa?" But then she realized he was on his lunch hour, so he probably wouldn't have time.

"Let me show you to my bedroom," offered Brea, grabbing his wrist and pulling it as a bit of humor, as if pulling him from the daze he was in.

Brea's bedroom was nice and neat, but this was purely by accident. Brea had just finished stuffing all her dirty clothes that had been laying around, like the bra hanging on her bedpost when Michael had buzzed her from the apartment lobby.

Had she more time, she would have liked to have straightened her bathroom too, hiding things like the Tampax scattered on her counter, just in case Michael needed to use the bathroom. "But," thought Brea. "I am a girl after all, and there's no shame in having Tampax scattered all over my counter. He'll have to get used to things like that eventually, right?"

"Wow!!" exclaimed Michael, eyes first going to the katana prominently displayed on Brea's wall and it's cousin, the shorter killing sword, the wakizashi. "That's an amazing pair of swords you have there! Are they antiques?"

"You might say that," she said Brea, closing and locking the door so they could have privacy. "I have my reasons for not telling Allison and Brea this, but there's no problem telling you, because it's actually very cool."

She and Michael stood walked up to the swords, so Michael could appreciate the nuances of their beauty. "They're both priceless antiques. One of the most famous samurais that ever lived was named Miyamoto Musashi, and this is his sword, the Kamifusanosuke Kaneshige." Brea's Japanese was so perfect, she didn't trip over the words one little bit. Michael reminded himself to ask Brea later how well she knew the language.

"It's all quite impossible to prove but legend has it Miyamoto served at Osaka Castle around 1614 or 1615 on the defending side, and another that he helped quell the Shimabara Rebellion of 1638. A lot of his legend is because he appears in many of the novels of the time."

"Wow," said Michael. If he hadn't been stunned before when Brea had told him about LV-Gamma, he sure was now. "How is it you have a priceless sword in your apartment and not in a museum?"

"Just got lucky, I guess," Brea said, not answering his question. "Any other questions I can answer for you, hotshot?"

"I have one," announced Allison "What's the name of that sword again?" She had a pen and a piece of paper in hand to write the name on.

"Allison!" Brea yelled. "What the hell were you doing in my bathroom? I was trying to have a little privacy with Michael here!"

"I can't remember," she said absently. "But that's really cool about the swords. But why didn't you let us know what they were?"

Brea was indignant. "I have my reasons, one of which is you might take them out and play with them." She had her eyes closed, and her arms crossed, making a prissy face.

"I would never do that" said Allison, genuinely shocked and appalled that Brea would think such a thing. "They might get lost, and I wouldn't be able to use them to stir the Jungle Juice while it's in the vat boiling."

Brea was taken aback "You use my priceless swords to stir Jungle Juice!" yelled Brea, more shocked than pissed.

"I don't have a spoon that long," then, changing the subject said "Show him the thing you can do with the sword." Allison picked up a pair of bamboo swords Brea had told her were called shinai, the weapons used in a kendo tournament. She tossed the second one to Brea.

"Allison," Brea said dismissively, "I am seriously not in the mood. Now let's get back to the Jungle Juice. If I get you a...."

"BANZAI!!!!" yelled Allison, charging at Brea, weapon high in the air, ready to strike. She meant business.

Brea knew both Kendo, the formal art and Kenjutsu, the practical one. She decided to use the latter. In several quick, bored motions, she used one swing to deflect Allison's attack, a second to knock the weapon from her hands, then swung around behind her to strike behind the knees, causing Allison to fall over.

"Holy crap!" exclaimed Michael.

Allison got up and dusted herself off. "See how cool that was? I could kick her butt if I really wanted to though."

"I'll take your word for it," said Brea, picking up the bamboo practice weapons and putting them away.

"How did you learn?" asked Michael.

“Back in high school we had to pick a sport. I had these swords and thought it would be cool to know how to use them,” answered Brea, unlocking the door and pushing Allison through it. Michael made several amazed comments on how cool a skill that was.

“I was just leaving anyway,” said Allison in a huff. Brea closed the door and locked it, just in case Allison remembered why she had been in the bathroom and decided to barge back in.

“How much time do you have before you have to get back?” asked Brea, secretly hoping that he would tell Brea that he had time to share the spa with her.

“Just enough to arrive five minutes late,” announced Michael. He sat down in Brea’s computer chair and wiggled the mouse to wake the computer up.

If the desktop wallpaper image of a shirtless Pierce Brosnan made any impression on Michael, he didn’t show it. He was just going along, clicking and changing things very familiar to him.

“If she finds a way to bother you again, it will really surprise me,” Michael said, finally bringing up the taboo subject of Kate.

“I hope she doesn’t. Was she always this crazy, or did she just snap one day.”

“There’s no specific day I can point to that she turned into a lunatic woman,” offered Michael. “It was more of a downward slide.”

Brea laughed at that one. “When will your next night off be?” she wondered, half aloud to herself.

“Unknown,” said Michael, a little lost in the computer menus. Then he told the machine to reboot, and stood up from the chair. “We’re upgrading to the newest version of Quark, so I’ll be down at the paper nights until we can verify everything is working fine. I think we’re done here.”

“Okay, she said taking him by the arm. “I’ll escort you out,” she said grandly, playfully then walking him to the front door. “Thanks for coming over and fixing the computer. I hope it wasn’t a bother.”

They were at the door now. “Hey,” said Michael, “It’s never any bother to do something with you Brea.” He leaned down and give Brea a full on kiss that she felt in her toes. “I’ll call you when I know when my next night off is.” And with that, Brea bade him farewell.

Allison was right there, taking a swig of her freshly brewed Jungle Juice. “He seemed like a nice guy, who was that? Is he single?”

Brea just blinked for a moment. “That’s Michael! The Michael I’ve been talking to you about for, I don’t know how long for now! Don’t you pay attention to anything?”

Allison looked puzzled. “Really? I remember him as being taller. And I can’t say for sure, but I think I remember Michael being black.”

“Aaaaaarrghhh!!!!” exclaimed Brea, supremely frustrated. “Stop using my swords to make Jungle Juice!” and with that she stomped off to her room and slammed the door.

#### Sub-Chapter 10 - Limbo

While Allison was having fun at the expense of Brea and Michael, Lani was seriously in the zone, her intense shoelather reporting zone. She was in her new office in the MSNBC building, a cubicle on the floor that did the fact checking for the network, Lani was surrounded by pale boys that pointed and talked in whispers about Lani as though they’d never seen a girl before.

Although the office had a computer, Lani decided she would use it along with her laptop, preferring to take her notes on it so she could have it with her at home as well.

Mr. Carol had given her free reign as an investigative reporter subject wise, and her instincts were picking up something suspicious about a small article she'd read in the Wall Street Journal, one of the seven papers she read daily.

Minuete's family business, Kiley Enterprises, had spun off Minuete's organization into a spin-off enterprise named Paradox Ninety. Its public face would be the legitimate investment sections of Minuete's domain. What interested Lani in the article was that it announced that Paradox Ninety intended to research and invest in better ways to protect electronics from electromagnetic interference.

This reminded Lani of a second article she had read in the Bishop University student newspaper, the Bishop Beacon, way back in the city of Audrey. It turns out a tenured professor left the University all of a sudden, to pursue a job that was then unspecified, leaving the University in a jam having someone to teach the Physics 211, Physics for Science and Engineering. The person to leave was one Professor Brooke, and Lani knew him well.

She knew him because she had taken his class. With Minuete of all people! And her mind conjured up one particular moment when they were studying nuclear explosions, and the professor had explained that after a nuclear explosion there is so much electromagnetic chaos that it stops electronic devices from functioning. Minuete, who had been kicking back reading Cosmo suddenly took an interest in the class, motioning for her assistant to take careful notes, and asking the Professor all kinds of snarky questions.

After a couple of trips around the barn, Minuete pestered the Professor to explain more on the subject of EMP and EMI interference devices, devices that mimicked the electronics-shorting out effects of a nuclear explosion, but without the nuclear explosion. Professor Brooke told Minuete to see him after class and she could schedule office hours and he'd explain to Minuete anything she wished to know.

That really honked Minuete off, who then told the Professor something to the effect of "Do you have any idea who I am??!! If you know what's good for you, you will see me after class, and you will schedule a time to come to my office and see me, and maybe we can figure out a way for you to keep both your tenure and kneecaps." And do you know what? He did just that.

To be honest Lani had no earthly idea if Minuete had anything to do with Professor Brooke's decision to leave the University, but there had been a number of odd stories in the Beacon lately. Like Professor Lauren's seeming abduction, where he simply vanished from thin air terrifying his wife and family. The business professor was found four days later, looking like he'd just been released from a prison camp. He claimed he had simply needed a trip out of town, and had gone on a spontaneous vacation for a few days. "That one just didn't pass the smell test," thought Lani. And in any case, Minuete researching ways to disable electronics could simply not be a good thing.

Lani had mixed feelings about going after Minuete. On one hand, some of her best investigative reports had come from investigating Minuete, like the time she proved Minuete had a Lektor device and was using it to print fake handicapped parking stickers. And she was certainly riding on a high after stomping on Minuete's purse in front of the Washington Post staff. "I haven't heard anything from Minuete since then," realized Lani with a chill. Minuete would definitely want revenge over that one. The fact that Minuete was off planning revenge gave Lani a cold shudder.

Hence the mixed feelings. Minuete had admitted to Lani personally that she was, in fact, a supervillain seeking world domination just days earlier. Minuete definitely knew how to give as good as she got when it came to getting revenge. And in any situation involving Brea, Allison, and herself, Lani would most definitely be the one that got burnt the most.

Still, neither rain, nor sleet, nor snow. "Sure," thought Lani "that was the alleged motto of the Postal Service, but it applied to investigative journalism as well."

Where to start? First Lani tried typing in her web browser "www.paradox90.com." And this pulled up a dull drab web site that really told Lani nothing. The information and goals were so general the information was useless, like the company's mission statement, "to invest in and provide research and investment in technologies that will revolutionize tomorrow's marketplace."

"Show me a technology firm where that wasn't their goal," thought Lani. Then she realized, the website was just window dressing. Minuete was putting up a public front for Paradox 90. Someone might have seen the story and wanted to read about her company. What was going on behind the scenes probably had nothing to do with the part of Paradox 90 that served Minuete's financial interests.

Lani opened her web browser, and used the alias email address she used when she wanted to be anonymous. The name she used, Hildegard 'Hildy' Johnson, was from the uber-classic 40's dialogue comedy "His Girl Friday," a film about a divorced couple with a love-hate relationship. They worked at a fictional paper called The Front Page, in a time where journalism was a much purer form of art.

The 1940 remake had Rosalind Russell playing the character of Hildy, and despite the fact that her co-star was Cary Grant she positively stole every scene. Grant gave a one liner, and she'd top it.

Walter Burns: I still wish you hadn't done that, Hildy.

Hildy Johnson: Done what?

Walter Burns: Divorced me. It makes a man feel he's not wanted.

Hildy Johnson: Oh, now look junior . . . that's what divorces are FOR!

That was who Lani saw herself as, a classic old-school reporter that was both skilled and witty. "Brea doesn't give me enough credit for being funny," mused Lani.

"I can be very funny when I want."

Lani sent the following email to questions@paradox90.com.

From the Office of Regulation Authority,

My name is Hildegard Johnson and as a newly spun off company, rules require my office to physically verify that your office and operations physically exist. This is to aid in preventing fraud and investment companies being set up that are merely on paper. The inspection is quite cursory and should not take up much of your time. The reason I'm asking so informally is that frankly, following the official procedures is a quagmire of lawyers and legal bills, and I always attempt to see if I can visit the company informally first. The goal is the same, getting me on site to verify your office actually exists. If I haven't received a reply back in 42 hours, I will go ahead and assume you wish to go through the process formally. I appreciate your time.

Sincerely, Hildegard Johnson

Of course there was no Office of Regulation Authority or any such rules, as was blatantly obvious to Lani. Frankly she had been surprised anyone had ever fallen for this trick, but they always did. And according to Lani's lawyer back at the Beacon it was probably legal, you never knew if the matter ever fell before a judge.

Then Lani spent the next three hours surfing through Lexis-Nexis reading everything she could find on Minuete Kiley. A lot of it was all the articles Minuete had written for the Washington Post. They were absolutely infuriating to read because Minuete was so obviously spinning things for her own thinly veiled agenda. Not much was useful information to be found there, but a Lexis-Nexis search of "EMI+Expert +Leaving" with a date range of within the last two weeks found thirty-one hits, nine of which were stories just like the one at Bishop University, an expert in electro-magnetism up and leaving somewhere, usually a university for an unspecified job on short notice.

After reading that, Lani decided on a separate tactic. Creating a false resume for Hildegard Johnson, pulling wild qualifications out of thin air that made her out to be an expert in Electro-magnetism. She then FedExed this to the Paradox 90 headquarters attached with a note.

Attention Human Resources,

My name is Hildegard Johnson, and I am an expert in semi-conductor devices and advances studying electromagnetic pulses. I am currently looking for employment, and read the story about your company in the Wall Street Journal today. Included is a current copy of my resume. I appreciate your time.

Sincerely, Hildegard Johnson

Lani also posted the resume to all the Internet job sites, including Monster and HotJobs. By that time she glanced at the clock, she realized she had lost all track of time. She had started at nine in the morning and taken a lunch break around three. It was getting close to seven, she needed to get downstairs to the Alyssa Riffe set. Lani wouldn't formally be on staff until tomorrow, but she figured she had put in a good day on the investigative side, and she could start getting able to know the faces.

As Lani logged off the Lexis-Nexis connection, she saw she had gotten an email. It was a response from someone in Paradox 90 concerning Hildegard Johnson's desire to informally inspect the office. They had taken the bait. The person that had read the email gave Lani a number to call and set up an appointment. It was after five o'clock, so Lani would have to set up the meeting tomorrow. She put the number in the Palm Pilot and shut down her laptop.

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As the doors to the elevator opened to the Alyssa Riffe set, Lani found herself eye to eye with the queen bitch herself, Alyssa Riffe. The moment she saw Lani she looked her up and down, deciding she didn't trust her.

"Who are you?" she asked, narrowing her eyes coldly. "And why are you on my set?"

Lani tried to fake it. Sticking out a hand she tried "Hello Miss Riffe, my name is Lani Cameron, and I'm one of your new staffers. It's an honor to meet you in person." Alyssa just wasn't buying it.

"Are you a fan of the show?" she asked pointedly.

“Oh, yes,” lied Lani. Then she parroted back the official line Alyssa used to spin herself. “I think you’re a no-nonsense, bare-knuckled, working-class straight shooter who sticks it to the phonies and stands up for the little guy.”

“That’s a very interesting way to put it,” said Alyssa. “Do you know who else used those exact same words? Al Franken in his last book attacking me, I think the next sentence was ‘I ain’t buying it.’”

It was over. Alyssa had caught Lani dead to rights. Lani loved listening to Al Franken’s books via audiobooks over and over, the most recent having torn Alyssa Rife into several small pieces. “What an interesting coincidence, Miss Rife!”

Alyssa was about to call out for her producer to find out what the story was on Lani and also to fire her, when thank God, the elevator doors opened and another person got off of the elevator.

“Hey there spacekatz! What’s shaking?” It was Allison. She had a large duffle bag with her.

“Not much Kid, do you have that medicine I needed?” asked Alyssa. Allison told her she did. “Can you put it in my dressing room, I’ll be there in a minute, I just have to take care of a small problem first.”

“No problem, chief. Lani, if you go down to the lobby there’s a second duffle bag, I couldn’t carry them both. It’s my red one.” “You two know each other?” asked Alyssa.

Lani’s mind was spinning like a cat trying to land on his feet. “We’ve been roommates since college, Miss Rife. Actually, the reason Allison came down here yesterday and met you is because I asked Allison to come with me.” Alyssa’s raised an eyebrow.

“Lani’s a little high-strung, but she’s cool. I would have missed your show last night, which was incredibly visionary, if it hadn’t been for Lani.” Allison was already walking off to the dressing room.

Alyssa looked Lani up and down one more time, deciding what to do with her. “I’m going to keep my eye on you,” she informed Lani. “I’ll let you keep your job until I’ve made up my mind on you. But you’d just better watch yourself.” And then she stomped off to her Dressing Room to get medicated with Allison.

By the time Lani had retrieved the duffle bag, and returned to the floor, her heart was still racing from the adrenaline. The moment she stepped onto the floor Dana Drake, the show’s producer, grabbed her and whisked her away to an empty office, and closed the door. She didn’t turn on the lights.

“Ssshhh!!!” she said in a hushed whisper. “You have no idea how incredibly lucky you were just now. If you know what’s best for you, keep as far away from T.B.D. as you can. And for God’s sake, if you see her in the hallways don’t make eye contact with her!”

Lani caught on quickly “Okay, I get it. What does T.B.D. stand for Miss Drake?”

“Tyrannical Broadcast Despot” she said. “We told her it’s a television technical term, and it’s what everyone on staff calls her.”

“You seem like a sane person, how can you possibly produce this show? All she does is lie and mislead people!” asked Lani, surprised that Dana wasn’t one of legions of brainless zombies following Alyssa.

“Do you think I’m a moron?” said Dana. “When I get home at night, I wonder how I made it through the day without clubbing her to death with my clipboard. My advice to you is to get good at make-believe real fast.”

“How do I do that? I can’t stomach this kind of stuff,” cried Lani. “I don’t want to mislead people for a living!”

“I’ve got two kids and a deadbeat ex. I do this job for them. Go read Alyssa’s god-awful book, and take notes. Then for the hour this show tapes, that reality is your reality. Get it? Fake this job like a hooker being paid by the moan.”

Another staffer stuck her head in the door. “T.B.D. is coming your way, Dana. Better get going.” Lani remembered Dana had told her everyone on staff was on a first name basis. Probably out of a sense of survival comrade.

“Got it,” said Dana. “You hide in this office with the lights until she leaves the studio. Read her books, and go take an acting class. I won’t be able to save you twice.” Dana then hurried out of the room.

Lani tried to decide how to spend an hour in the dark, so she sat down and leaned on the wall right next to the door, playing solitaire on her PalmPilot where the light couldn’t be seen. But soon, the show was taping, and Lani had to listen to the broadcast audio being piped into the room. The crappy speaker and the darkness made it only that much worse.

“We’re live in 15!” shouted a technician.

“T.B.D. in frame!” yelled another. “Roll graphics!” Then there was a long pause.

“Hi, I’m Alyssa Rife. Thank you for watching us tonight. The unpatriotic cowardice of the Democrats, that is the subject of this evening’s ‘Talking Points Memo.’ I’m looking on TV today, and I just can’t believe what I’m hearing from the lefties. There he is on TV, Speaker of the House, Michael Cabbot, is on the Senate floor saying we should examine our President’s approach to foreign policy. Speaker of the House Michael Cabbot wants to work with the U.N. He actually has the audacity to suggest we listen to what they have to say? Your humble correspondent is the only one that’s going to give it to you straight. Working with the U.N. would be like deciding our foreign policy based on a focus group. And a focus group of people that aren’t even Americans! ”

On the floor Lani was squirming like she had to go to the bathroom, hands over her ears. “I hope it doesn’t take me long to get used to this,” she prayed. Because actually processing the words coming out of T.B.D.’s mouth was infuriating!

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The next day Lani was a woman on a mission, she was a woman on fire, determined to break a story large enough to get her away from Alyssa Rife. She had just left a working lunch, working further on the Blow’d Up! script with Allison, and was undercover as Hildegard Johnson down high in the upper floors of Minuete’s Annex Skyrise evil (not so secret) base of operations. Basically, Lani’s strategy of remaining undercover involved two components, her right middle and index fingers crossing.

She usually wore her short blond hair down, but had it pinned up into a bun. She was also wearing her trusty fake pair of glasses she used when she wanted to seem more official. She was holding a clipboard and had even gone to the trouble of creating fake documents for her to fill out. The forms were even filled with logical questions and checkboxes, should someone decide to look.

Lani had already gone through security, easily the most intense she had ever gone through before in her life. So here she was in Paradox Ninety's Human resources wing, filled with Minuete's SkullHeart Logo with the word QUALITY printed in bold letters. Other posters proclaimed "The NEW Paradox Ninety! Not Evil, just Ethically-Challenged."

Lani was someone in possession of enough facts to have a very expert opinion on the matter, and there was no doubt in her mind. Minuete was both evil AND ethically-challenged. "The words psychotic belonged in there somewhere as well," thought Lani.

A woman came out of her office extending her hand. "Hi there Miss Johnson, my name is Sue Whitman. It's a pleasure to..." Only there was someone running across the floor yelling "Lani! Lani Cameron!" across the floor. Lani turned to see it was Allison.

"You left your purse behind at Sakana," said Allison, a little winded. "I knew you'd need it for your inspection today."

"I don't own a purse," replied Lani, mind racing to save the situation. Allison had blown her cover. What to do??!!

Allison looked at the purse. "Oh. Well, someone's screwed then. And then she just casually tossed the purse into a trash can.

"I'm sorry, what's going on here?" said the woman confusedly. She looked to her assistant for answers but she was on the phone. "My assistant said there was a Miss Whitman here to see me?"

Finally, Lani thought of a plausible lie, mouthing to Allison "PLAY ALONG."

"Sorry about the misunderstanding, Miss Whitman. My name is Lani Cameron, this is my colleague Miss Hildegard Johnson..." Lani turned to face Allison, where Miss Whitman couldn't see. "who is here to inspect and tour your facilities as a building inspector." Lani winked to her.

"Ah!" said Miss Whitman, shaking both girls hands vigorously. "We appreciate you taking the time to do this informally. We like to avoid anyone looking into business that doesn't concern them whenever we can. How long have you been in the inspection business, Miss Johnson?"

"You just give up counting the years after you've been in this business as long as I have," said recent college graduate Allison Holiday. She was sounding very somber, continuing "Building inspecting is serious business, Miss Whitman. You'll see things being a building inspector. Horrible things. Things that change a man. That's when you stop counting the years, when you realize that you used to think you'd never been one of them, someone that succumbed to the fast-lane, free-loving lifestyle of a building inspection, but you did. And it's stolen your very soul from you..."

And with this Allison just looked into the distance, overcome by the (make-believe) memories. Miss Whitman honestly had no idea what to say. "Well, I guess we could start the tour then."

"That would be fine," said Allison, letting Miss Whitman see her take Lani's clipboard, and then her glasses, which she also put on.

"Everything's looking up to code here," said Allison. "Let's start with the most important room here, and that's the boy's locker room. There are a lot of important items I need to inspect in there."

Miss Whitman stammered "We, uh, we don't have one here in this complex. Our henchman, I mean security teams, train in a gym off near Union Station." Allison was very disappointed by this, but allowed Miss Whitman to show Allison and Lani through the complex.

Lani was so intent on taking notes and looking for dirt on Minuete that she was very conspicuous. This was noted by Miss Whitman.

“What is it your colleague does again, Miss Johnson?” she asked very pointedly.

“She’s an investigative reporter, you know. Going around snooping everywhere, looking to dig up dirt on people,” said Allison, loud enough for Lani to hear and be terrified by.

“...In college! She meant back in college. I was editor of my campus newspaper. Now I’m just her assistant for inspecting buildings.”

Miss Whitman had an eyebrow raised. “Miss Johnson, would you be so kind as to stay here one moment? I need to check on something that just came up.”

“No problem, and please call me Hildegard,” said Allison, unconcerned. And with that Miss Whitman scurried off.

“Hildegard Johnson?” said a nearby man, terribly excited. “Did you get my call about a job interview. We got your resume, and tried to get in touch with you immediately. Your expertise really was quite amazing, beyond anything anyone on staff has.”

Allison blinked dumbly, then said “Can you give me one second, sweetie?” And she turned to Lani who leaned in and whispered “Okay, you’re also a world renowned scientist that’s an expert in electro-magnetic interference.” Allison nodded.

“Your research” continued the man “studying the electrons that are accelerated by those collisions in the Compton Effect was incredibly visionary.”

“It was nothing,” said Allison. “Total piece of cake. I did the whole thing while I was on the can, to be honest.”

Another man was nearby, obviously a scientist, and asked “What do you think of the recent advances in the aperture size correlation electromagnetic field penetration?”

“What’s your name kid?” asked Allison.

“Kelly,” the man replied, very intimidated by Allison.

“Well Kelly, frankly I think it stinks.” She jabbed a finger at him. “It’s bad science and it’s a waste of my time! I’m not about wasting anymore of our limited scientific resources with any more of this apertures and correlations nonsense. We need to be looking to the future.”

“And...and what is that?” he managed to stammer.

“Tetrion Beams. Coherent Tetrion Beams,” said Allison confidently. To Allison, the mystery of how a microwave worked was equally as confusing as the transporter from Star Trek. She assumed it was all quite real and scientifically accurate. “Do you know that you can use a Coherent Tetrion Beam from this side in the Alpha Quadrant, and send a ship 700 million miles away from earth in the Delta Quadrant. Can you imagine what that could do for, uh, aperture correlations?”

Kelly, not a native English speaker only looked confused. “I’m sorry, what is a Tetrion?” Allison looked absolutely shocked, and turned back to the original woman that had liked her resume.

“You don’t know what a tetrion beam is?” asked Allison incredulously. The kid could only shake his head no.

“Who is this kid? It’s almost as if you have no formal training in science at all!!” exclaimed Allison, turning to the woman. “Is he working on your team? Are you in charge here?” The woman just acknowledged “yes” to both questions. “You’re trying to run a first rate, uh, science shop, and you’ve got some joker here that’s asking me what a Tetrion beam is? Why even have him around wasting everyone’s air?” Allison wanted to know.

“I like your point, Miss Johnson. Kelly. You’re fired! Pack up your things, I want you out of here by the end of today. Miss Johnson, are you interested in a job? We’ve recently had an opening.”

“I’m not sure,” said Allison. “It depends on the team, if they’re in the dark as much as this guy.”

“You’d be in complete charge of course. Total authority on who’s hired and who’s fired.”

“That’s a start,” Allison decided. “I tell you what, you can start salary negotiations today with my assistant here, Lani?”

“Not so fast!” yelled a voice. “What’s going on here is a complete sham!” Everyone turned to see it was Miss Whitman, who was there with a large attachment of henchmen...security teams, and boy did they look pissed.

“That woman is not who she claims to be, we checked up on her,” said Miss Whitman imperially. “It’s all just a big scam! Guards, seize her and throw her out of the building.”

“Allison’s overacting finally did her in,” thought Lani. “And before I’d gotten any good dirt, Damn.” That was why she was completely stunned when the guards grabbed hold of, not Allison, but herself! “Hey, not so rough!” she yelled.

“I’m afraid she’s been fooling you all along Miss Johnson. She’s no assistant to a building inspection. She’s a staffer for MSNBC.

“You lied to me?” asked Allison incredulously. “After all these years? You traitor!” she yelled, then giving Lani a hard slap in the face. “Get her out of my sight.” Then Allison spit on the ground.

Miss Whitman gave the guards a twenty. “Please be careful that she doesn’t get any bruises or scratches on her way out of here,” she could not have said more sarcastically. “Seeing as how I will be so busy filing a formal complaint against Miss Cameron to MSNBC, I would be unable to file any accident incident reports that might come up today.”

“I’ve never understood people that feel the need to lie,” Allison said reflectively. “Things are so much different today that when I grew up,” she noted shaking her head in disgust. Miss Whitman could only agree.

#### Sub-Chapter 11 - Living the Dream

Later, Brea, Allison and Lani were sitting in Sakana again. The girls spent so much time there that they knew all the staff on a first name basis, which was tricky for Allison and Lani to pronounce because everyone was Asian. Everyone had their own reasons for liking the place so much. Although Brea had never been a pound too heavy a day before in her life, she was obsessed with her diet, sushi wasn’t very fattening. For Lani, Sakana was right next to a bookstore with wireless internet, and she could do research from her laptop.

Allison just liked to drink Sake bombs, a drink you make by putting a shot of sake into a glass of beer, then slamming it back. The waiters didn’t even ask her anymore, they just brought her more alcohol

when she ran out. Allison's tolerance to alcohol never failed to get the staff chattering excitedly in Japanese, filled with amazement at her super-ability.

Lani had just told the stories about how the security guard had tried to beat her up, but she just kicked him you-know-where and walked off. So now, Allison was excitedly explaining what had happened after security had hauled Lani off.

"They wanted me to work full time," explained Allison. "But I was all like, science has taken me some really interesting places and all, but acting's always been my real love, and I'm working on Blow'd Up with Lani. So they said they'd still pay me a full-time salary if I would just look over their progress from time to time and give them notes."

"Just what interesting places exactly," asked Lani "has science taken you?"

Allison put on her thinking face, and then replied "Remember that time I saw Weird Science on cable, and they were putting all that stuff in the computer, and I tried it, only with guy stuff instead? So I got like a Ken doll and all Lani's Playgirls, and like totally got it to catch on fire and fry, but nothing exploded like in the movie.

This got Lani very angry. "That's what happened to my Playgirl collection!?!? How dare you break into my room and steal those without asking me! Ashley's going to freak when I tell him what happened to his computer!"

This caused Allison to look confused, "I could have sworn I told you. What did you think happened to them?"

Lani blushed. "I thought Ashley was young and a little confused. He had just broken up with Nikki that week and..."

Brea put up a disgusted hand, "The last thing I need to know is you have a subscription to Playgirl which is read mostly by fabulous men and not by proper ladies. You're totally making me feel sklunklish."

"Oh here was go again," said Lani "It's 'Brea makes up the new word of the day' time. I swear, I don't even know what you're talking about half the time."

Brea was indignant "Sklunklish is totally a word, it's from a classic Shirley Temple movie!" That just made Lani roll her eyes.

"Yeah, I call bullshit. You make up words all the time. The other day you told me you were going incomunacado, and I had to ask Allison what it meant."

"Listen," said Brea, going into princess mode. "I'm going to let that slide because I feel sorry for you. I mean, you lost big time in the genetic lottery and got a couple of beach balls to haul around all the time. What do you feed those things anyway?"

"You're just jealous, because I've got guys staring at them all day, and for you guys are as interested in seeing your chest as their ironing board," shot back Lani.

"Oh my God!" said Brea. "I realize why I'm so small! You, you're draining them from me somehow! You've been doing it for years!"

Lani had had enough and put up her hand. "Oh just stop, all ready. You're going to make me to throw up my 6 dollar salmon rolls."

Brea was only too happy to change the subject. "Speaking of money, how much does the job pay? You can start paying for the alcohol yourself."

Allison told the girls the number. Their mouths literally fell open in astonishment. Lani was the first to speak, "For giving a few notes on a subject you know absolutely nothing about! That's ludicrous!"

"Hey," said an offended Allison. "I know all about this whole 'science' thing. I've seen every one of the Star Wars movies, even those four crappy ones."

Lani was put another disgusted hand, "I am so broke, just don't even tell me about it. And, by the way, don't need to waste your time watching other people's space adventures because you have enough of them on your own."

"You realize if you're getting a paycheck you're going to have to finally give in and get a bank account," said Brea.

"Oh, no no no no no no. That's how they get you. They wrote about that in the bible, your bank account number is the mark of the beast! That's how they track you."

"You're going to have to get one anyway," retorted Brea. "The bank's not going to give you that much in cash. You'd have to haul it around in a suitcase."

Lani had a sudden thought. "Feel free to use my bank account!" said Lani very excited. "It's really no problem, I don't mind one bit."

"That's cool," said Allison. Then both girls had the same thought simultaneously. "Heh, heh. Sucker."

"You do realize," said Brea, "that the second Minuete spots you down there, the whole thing will be over except for the police and the shouting."

"They said I don't have to come in, they'd contact me on this rectangular plastic thing," said Allison, holding the object up. It was a laptop computer. Lani promised to help her use it, and asked when the first paycheck would be coming in.

Lani took out her own laptop and started going over notes with Allison over Blow'd Up! Brea hadn't heard much about the script before, and was laughing her butt off over the hilarity of it all.

Ext. RETIREMENT HOME -- DAY

It BLOWS UP.

Follow with many slow-motion "Matrix" shots of wheelchairs, hospital beds, and television sets being blasted into the air.

CUT TO --

Allison's face. Shock! Horror! She's gripped with panic, what to do?

Allison Justice: (All the rage in the world) No. (gasp) Noooooooooooooooooooo!!!!

She gets over her initial shock, she runs towards the flames.

TIME PASSES --

OPEN ON -- SMOLDERING REMAINS

Smoke is everywhere. A lone police woman is standing with Allison, taking a report on the incident. She has no idea of what Allison has just lost.

Less-pretty Policewoman: How long have you been in the demolitions business, Miss Justice?

Allison Justice: (getting slow) You just give up counting the years after you've been in this business as long as I have.

At this moment Justice is overcome with emotion, remembering the fate of Clover and her pimp Robo. She LOOKS to her grenade launcher laying against the wall, still SMOKING from being fired.

Allison Justice (CON'T): Blowing things up is serious business, officer. You'll see things doing demolitions. Horrible things. Things that change a man. That's when you stop counting the years, when you realize that you used to think you'd never been one of them, someone that succumbed to the fast-lane, free-loving lifestyle of a demolition agent, but you did. And it's stolen your very soul from you...

Less-pretty Policewoman: You know it's not your fault, you're a demolitionist. You don't know anything about defusing a bomb. You build enough retirement homes, eventually one's going to explode. It's math, it's inevitable.

Allison's only response is to look of into the distance. A long beat.

Allison Justice: You try telling that to my sister. She had a family, for God's sakes. Who's going to take care of Mister Whiskers now?

Brea just would not stop laughing. "This is great, that's hilarious! I would totally go see this movie!" she said. Lani didn't know what to think of the compliment. On one hand, Lani was thrilled Brea had liked her work. If anyone ever wanted to get a writer to do their bidding, all they would have to do would be to read a few paragraphs and compliment them on it. One the other, this movie was just bad! Maybe she could pull an Alan Smithee and put a fake name on it. Alan Smithee was the fake name Hollywood directors put their name on when a project was so bad it would hurt their career.

"Do you like spend a lot of time thinking about who you'd cast for what part?" asked Brea.

"Oh, no way," said Allison. "This movie is all about me, me, me. We're going to use unknowns for the whole rest of the cast, so no one detracts from me and my cleavage."

"Who do you think they'd cast in a movie about us?" mused Lani. The girls all stopped eating their meal, and considered the situation.

"Are we talking looks, or actor," asked Brea.

"Actor, and we'll pretend that they would magically be our age." said Lani, putting up the rules.

"Well, there's no question," said Brea. "The woman to play me would be Kylie Minogue. And not just because of the accent, either. Kylie Minogue is the most fabulous person on the planet besides myself."

"Kylie Minogue??!! There's no way Kylie Minogue could play you," said an incredulous Lani. "If it were a cartoon and she was doing the voice acting, no argument whatsoever. But she's like epic sex-kitten slash gay-icon. When it comes to boys you're always shy and awkward."

Brea turned to Allison, expecting her to tell Lani how screwball wrong she was. But Allison just looked at Brea for a second, then silently nodded.

"You know on that show *Alias*?" offered Allison. "When it's like, Jennifer Garner has finally had enough, so she snaps and is about to kick everyone's ass, and she gets this pissed-off look in her eyes? Well, that look always reminds me of Lani."

"Thank you," said Lani, taking the whole crazed eyes thing as a compliment.

"Way too brunette!" Brea totally disagreed. "Someone playing Lani would have to be a natural blonde."

"What about Rebecca Romijn-Stamos?" said Allison.

"She does kick ass in those *X-Men* movies. And blue is definitely Lani's color," agreed Brea. "Let's do me some more. What about Kristin Davis from *Sex in the City*?"

"Oh please," said Lani laughing. "more like Kristin Dunst from *Bring it On* playing an airhead."

"Oh yeah?" Brea was getting riled up now. "We'll you're more Britney Spears, with your giant boobs all out there and all!"

Lani was already set to pounce. "Well then you are Christina Aguilera then. And not pop-princess genie-in-a-bottle Christina Aguilera, but whore Christina Aguilera from *Stripped*."

Brea was taken aback, "I have never done anything Christina Aguilera whorish-like before in my life!"

"Not yet," said Lani. "But you should know that I can hear you in your bathroom perfectly from the air vent, and I heard you and Allison's discussion the other day over whether or not over the shirt counts as getting to second base." That pretty much won the argument for Lani, seeing as Brea started blushing several shades of red.

"Who would play Allison?" she wondered aloud, after several minutes of pretending to be very interested in her sushi.

That one brought dead silence to the table, as all three girls realized, there was no one on earth that could possibly play Allison Holiday, and it wasn't just in the looks department. What actor could possibly get into Allison's mindset enough to portray the character? If they could, then they definitely deserved the Oscar for that year. "No," the girls decided. "Only Allison could play Allison Holiday for the movie." Also voted unanimously was that Clay Aiken was perfect to play the part of Ashley.

"Okay screw personalities, what about when it comes to the looks department?" said Allison.

Brea was ready for that one immediately, "Well, obviously ordinary actors wouldn't suffice. We'd need to use Playboy Playmates."

"Obviously," agreed Lani.

Both turned to Allison knowing that she'd probably know, having spent that time at the Playboy Mansion, and being offered that chance to become a Playmate.

"Brea would be Angel Boris. Lani would be Shannon Stewart," she said, ending the matter.

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When the girls got in later that night, Brea went straight for her computer to look up who Angel Boris was. After wading through some really grotesque porn, she finally managed to find pictures of her from Angel Boris's Playmate spread. When she saw the images, she gritted her teeth and marched right back into the Den, where Allison was watching The Rife Effect. Brea waited for the commercial to pounce with her point.

"I do not have unusually long nipples," she wanted Allison to know. "And no one with unusually long nipples will play me in my movie."

Sub-Chapter 1 - Light Years

The next morning, Brea was checking her email and thinking about the situation with Michael. By now Brea had cooled off about the whole Kate thing, in part because of the fact that she and Michael felt comfortable calling each other whenever they wanted too.

It also helped that Michael's work on her computer had stopped Kate from stalking her, although according to Brea she had tried to force her way into the complex. Kate didn't get far, however, because Brea had taken the precaution of getting Kate listed as persona-non-grata with the building security, barring her from the premise.

Brea was about to call Michael to ask him if he wanted to come over tonight and watch a DVD when he saved her the trouble by sending her an instant message.

**REDFIVE34:** Hey.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Michael! I was about to call you.

**REDFIVE34:** Are you just now checking your email, stayed up a little late did we. :)

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Guilty as charged.

**REDFIVE34:** Lucky. Some of us have to cruelly work jobs, you know.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** I was just talking to the girls last night. I'm settled into the city well enough now. I was going to go down to Sakana with my laptop and work on my resume.

**REDFIVE34:** Hey, just type out the information you want on it and email it to me. I layout text for a living, I'd be happy to make it look really great for you.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** That would be great!! I'd love to have a second pair of eyeballs looking over it in any case.

**REDFIVE34:** What kind of job are you going to look for?

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Politics. You can go ahead and laugh at me if you want, but I really think I can make a difference.

**REDFIVE34:** lol No, I think that's really sweet. I'm having lunch with my dad tonight, he might have good advice on where to start.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Gee, ya think? He's the freaking Speaker of the House. :)

**REDFIVE34:** It's in the Senate cafeteria. Do you know how to get to Rayburn?

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** That's Capitol South, right?

**REDFIVE34:** Yes, we're meeting at 6:45. I'll phone ahead security for you.

**IMPOSSIBLEPRINCESS11:** Cool, see you tonight. (kiss, kiss)

**REDFIVE34:** (kiss) See you shortly.

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Although it was only 6:45, DC was very dark and snow was raining down softly, it being January and all. It was very cold outside, and Brea was savoring the warmth on the Metro before having to put back on her gloves and scarf, or as she thought of it “her cold weather protective gear.”

Brea had visited the public areas of the Congress both as a child, and on a Saturday where Lani had played DC tour guide. On the tour the security had been so tight, it kind of made Brea sad, remembering the kindly security guard on her childhood visit that had been nice enough to show her around personally and answer all her snarky questions. Times were very different now, with the war on terror and all.

Remembering how tight security had been for the tour, Brea had been dreading getting into Rayburn, the building that held offices for many members of the house. But Michael was already there, so Brea got in with a pretty cursory search.

Brea greeted Michael with a kiss that made many of the staffers and security give out catcalls.

“Whoooooooo! Look who thinks he’s mister hot lips all of a sudden,” one blonde staffer called out, playfully. Brea blushed.

“Brea, this is my extended family, my father’s office staff. I grew up with all these people. Somehow I’m still sane,” he joked. Then Michael introduced Brea so each and every one of them. All of them shook Brea’s hand in a way she’d never experienced before, it somehow communicated energy and confidence. It really was quite strange.

“It’s way after five,” noted Brea. “Does he always keep you here so late?”

“Not before, but with the Speaker in the Presidential race, we don’t even look at the time anymore,” noted a staffer. “Except in the sense that there’s increasingly less of it.”

“Another reason we’re hanging around is that Congressman Cabbot won’t shut up about getting to meet this Australian enchantress his son told him about.” Michael could not have said it faster, “Shut up...” he warned with a growl.

Michael waved the staff members off, and Brea was following Michael through Rayburn. “It sure looks,” thought Brea “a whole lot more like an airport than what the White House looks on West Wing.” You could even see into this one room where they had the heavy machinery for mass dry-cleaning.

Brea knew she was very fortunate that Michael had come to get her, because she absolutely would have gotten lost in all of the twists and corridors. When they got to the Cafeteria room, Brea was equally shocked. The Senate cafeteria was equally drab and functional, her high-school cafeteria had been nicer! Since it was so late in the day, it was pretty empty. And then Brea saw him, Congressman Cabbot.

Brea had run into a fair number of celebrities over the years, particularly in LV-426, and always attempted to play it as if she wasn’t impressed. On television, Cabbot just seemed to be another pudgy white guy in a suit. But up close? He didn’t seem pudgy at all. He actually looked totally cute. Maybe it was because he’d lost weight before running starting his Presidential run.

“Hello, Miss Anatamata, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’d say I’ve heard so about you from my son, but he will not even give his own father the juicy details he wants.”

Light, funny. Brea found herself getting giggly. The way she got when she was around Michael. I guess maybe because they’re related, and maybe they put out the same pheromones that her Anatamata DNA was attracted to. I wonder if his wife is anything like me.

“Two different worlds, dad,” said Michael, sounding as if he’d explained this many times. “You’re in total campaign mode. When I see you in family mode I will be happy to explain more about Brea to you.”

The Congressman looked at his tray with disgust. “And of course the only place I can get a quick bite without being hounded by reporters is to eat is here in Congress. But the food can’t be described without using the words ‘god’ and ‘awful.’”

He held up a French fry “Do you know they renamed these things ‘Freedom Fries’ in the cafeteria, just because we had a bit of a diplomatic run-in with the French? That’s how six year olds argue. Every time I go on television, I just want to tell the American people about the alternate reality Congress is living in. It’s their world, we just live and die in it.”

Brea laughed at that one hard. A little too hard, she decided.

After a little bit of light banter, Cabbot motioned for a Secret Service member to bring him something, it was a bottle of wine.

“It’s unheard of not to have wine to offer a lady you’re entertaining. It’s just not done,” said the Congressman. Cabbot poured three Styrofoam coffee glasses halfway full and passed them around the table.

At Charboneau Academy, Brea had been given formal lessons on how to taste wines, and even learned all kinds of facts about wines, the regions they came from, and other facts they would have at their disposal, given the chance to appear snotty.

That was the reason Brea skipped the sniffing the cork step. “This is really great wine, what kind is it?” said Brea, despite the fact she knew it was a red Australian shiraz.

“Jacob’s Creek,” said the proud congressman. “Only eleven dollars, and it always makes the top ten wine lists.” Brea remembered to give this information to Allison, because it might further aid her in her quest to improve her Jungle Juice.

“And do you know, you have to go a few blocks out of your way, the Liquor store next to the Republican National Committee sells it for ten dollars and thirty five cents!” said the Speaker, as if passing along an important secret.

“That is sooooo you dad. You’ll go blocks out of your way to save sixty-five cents on a bottle of wine, but you can stand the millions of dollars in pork you have to stuff in every these bills to get it passed,” said Michael in disdain.

“Congressman Cabbot, I’m very worried about the liquor store owner,” said Brea.

“How so?” asked the congressman.

“Isn’t he worried with the Republican Headquarters next door they’re going to scare off all customers with the kind of shady riff-raff that walk in and out of the place? What about his property

values?” Brea was rewarded with a hearty laugh from the Congressman, and Michael nearly choked on a Freedom fry.

“I think we’d all rather have a liquor store next door than the freaking RNC,” agreed the Congressman. “Where do you fall politically, Brea?”

“Dad.....” said Michael. He was in no mood to watch his dad try to wrestle a vote out of the girl he was seeing.

“Oh, come on Michael, how many times do you get to tell the Speaker of the House your opinions on what you care about?” she pressed him. Michael gave his approval by keeping his mouth shut.

“Well, Congressman, for starters it is nothing but a damn shame how you completely ignore my generation. I know we don’t vote and all, but to us, you’re just overweight rich white guys in suits. If you’d make the slightest effort to get to know us we might take an interest in what’s going on, it would get us involved in the process.”

“Go on,” encouraged the Congressman.

“The main thing that makes me sick is all the partisan bickering. When I was a little girl growing up I really believed that underneath it all it, at the end of the day it was about the people. I don’t believe that anymore. The religious right is insane and out of control. Until recently, a friend of mine thought that Jesse Jackson was a character in a skit for Saturday Night Live.”

“Brea that’s exactly the issue that I’m running on, fighting all this childish partisan bickering,” started the Senator. “When I became Speaker of the House, the very first thing I did was invite everyone from the Democrat Leadership Council, the guys that decide on strategy. I told them, listen. This is going to be a new kind of Congress, we’re going to work with the Republicans. Make fresh overtures, show signs of trust, do what it takes. And what happened boils down to give them an inch, they’ll take a mile. Now our troops in the House are so pissed off for being screwed over, the situation is worse than before. I’ve never seen the country more divided that it is right now. And that’s the sole reason I’m running for President is someone has got to stand up and stop the insanity.”

Michael had heard this speech hundreds of times. He could almost say in his head the same words that his father did. But as for Brea? Congressman Cabbot had her at “Hello.”

“What do you have planned to change all that?” asked Brea.

“When I announced this campaign, I also announced that I would pick a Republican as a running mate. And not just a token Republican, someone high up in their leadership. I’d even let the RNC pick the candidate, within reason of course.”

Brea really was quite impressed and a little star struck, “Wow, I could totally vote for something like that. I lean a little to the left on women’s issues, but the right has a lot of legitimate issues also. But I love the idea of a bi-partisan Presidency.”

“Yes, but that’s why my poll numbers are so low. The big D is pissed at the Republicans and in no mood to be giving them second chances, much less a seat in the White House.”

The dinner went for much longer than it took to eat the food. Michael sat back while Brea and his father talked animatedly. But he didn’t look bored, he’d experienced this many, many times growing up. But eventually the conversation came to a lull. There are some times in life where your brain is telling you one thing, and your fear is telling you it’s a bad idea. Brea pushed through it, and said the following.

“Congressman Cabbot, I’ve learned that you’ve got to take the occasional risk in life. I would simply die if your son factored into what I’m about to ask you, but the idea of you as President is very inspiring. I’d love a chance to work for you and your campaign.”

The Senator leaned back in his chair, thinking. “Hhhmmmm. Another staff member. We had just added a new one this morning. I’d need to see a copy of your resume to even consider it. As it so happened, Brea had one in her purse. This was not a “lucky accident.”

He looked it up and down very carefully, putting two and two together about Brea’s experiences and who her family could only be. “That would be an impossible coincidence, Michael must just not know, who she is.” he decided. “It might be worth hiring her for her family connections. Maybe they could write him a huge donation? Or does campaign finance law prohibit that?” But in the end, the Congressman decided to hire her because years of experience had taught him sometimes to go with his gut instinct, which was telling him he’d be a fool to miss this opportunity.

“Wait till you hear how shamefully low the pay is,” he said. “There are sweatshops that are considering outsourcing jobs into my campaign.” Brea just smiled and asked, “When can I start?”

## Sub-Chapter 2 - Never Send Flowers

Minuete was in a particularly good mood today, Paradox Ninety was finally getting its act together. “I’m quite a manager,” thought Minuete to herself very satisfied with herself. Soon, she’d place that phone call she couldn’t stop thinking about. The one to Mistress Nine telling her she was ready to come out from “dark” status, meaning she was ready to emerge from no communications to accepting new instructions.

The weekend team building workshop had gone well, except that her ethically-challenged scientists were missing their new assistant manager, this Hildegard Johnson. According to her underlings, the woman had ideas and theories that were so advanced, the rest of the team spent all of their time trying to comprehend them.

“Probably because she’s a woman, and we communicate on a level a bunch of middle aged men could not,” thought Minuete.

A light lit up on her direct line to her secretary. “Yes?” asked Minuete. “Miss Carmet Criser is here to see you,” said the secretary. Minuete wasn’t even in the mood. “Tell her to make an appointment,”

“This is her appointment,” the secretary said, voice wavering in fear. Minuete just gave a big sigh, which the secretary took as an affirmative.

Minuete could tell that Carmet had a whole show ready to put on for her based solely on the puppy-dog look in her eyes. “Spare me the speech you’ve got planned, Carmet. Out with it! What do you want? If you’re asking for another raise, you’re lucky I don’t fire you.”

“But boss!” she wined “There were these pretty little Christian Dior high heels, and I was only going to go in to try them on but I couldn’t help it, and now I’m all out of money!”

Minuete got all matronly. “Then it’s your own fault. You’re never going to learn your lesson if Britany and I keep bailing you out. You can’t stay stupid forever, you know.”

“Okay, fine, but aren’t there any jobs around here I can do to add to my allowance?” Minuete pondered that one for a bit.

“I’ll give you twenty dollars to grovel on the floor in front of me and plead for it, and I mean with absolutely no shame whatsoever,” she offered.

Carmet took a second to decide if she had any shame, and decided that she didn’t, and proceeded to grovel before Minuete, who laughed cruelly. “Put a little more ‘Padow’ into it!” she barked. Carmet wasn’t quite sure what “Padow” was, but started groveling even harder.

“Hehehe,” said Minuete, quite pleased with herself. “That was the best twenty dollars I’ve ever spent. Now get the hell out of my sight.” Then Minuete threw a few bills in Carmet’s direction, who proceeded to grab the fluttering bills like a cat pouncing on a mouse.

“Cha-ching!!!” she cried, exiting the room. “Taco Supremes tonight!”

Minuete shook her head sadly, then had a thought, she buzzed her secretary and instructed, “Put a guard to garrison the doughnuts in the snack room. Tell him under no circumstances is he to allow Carmet to use them as a primary food source. They are for snacking purposes only.” Minuete considered the possibility that Carmet might starve to death, and then she would be rid of her.

Minuete was sitting at her computer, reading the Washington Post online and taking notes on possible ways she could take over the world, when she got an e-mail.

From Mistress Nine!

The message made no sense whatsoever. Her instructions were perfectly clear. Paradox Ninety was running “dark,” meaning it was accepting no new orders until Minuete sent her a transmission letting her know the current assignment was carried out. Minuete had not sent that transmission. But there Minuete was, staring at the message.

“All work and no play? Go have some fun. Your men too. That’s an order.”

Minuete grabbed the device she used to make sure sent codes were authentic from Mistress Nine. In the beginnings of her employment, her shadowy boss had sent her a package transported via an Armored Car Service. To her surprise it had simply been a Palm Pilot. The device was hardly one of the newer models, it was a Palm Vx with a black and white screen, considered totally ancient in this day and age. But when Minuete turned the device on, she was shocked to see it booted to the Secret Service logo! This was military hardware, meaning it might be old, but by God did it work come hell or high water.

Minuete looked at the seams of the device, it had obviously been taken apart from its original configuration, and resealed shut. Minuete could see the re-glued seams. The device felt like it was made of lead.

The Palm then gave her a screen asking her to pick a color from a list of 17, and then gave her a six digit number to memorize. It also warned her if she forgot this number, there was no way to ever use the Palm again. Minuete did so. Later she would do the math on the chances of guessing the code, they were 1 in seventeen million!

So Minuete fished the Palm from her pocket and entered the thirty four digit alpha-numeric code that was included in Mistress Nine’s email. Then she entered the color she had chosen (a color from the jewels scarred into her forehead) and the numeric code.

It all checked out, “Have some fun,” the message ordered. So Minuete then proceeded to do. Time to do something totally evil...uh ethically challenged. So with that, Minuete started to scan the local paper for sims to dupe.

“National Finals on Interdenominational Bible Trivia in Conference Center on Saturday.” The article went on to describe how youth ministers from all over the country were competing in the trivia competition in order to win one million dollars for programs for the children in their congregations.

Minuete reflected she hadn’t done anything ethically-challenged in a while. Oh let’s not lie, she wanted to something terribly mean evil and nasty. I mean, sure she’d kicked that puppy on her way in to work this morning, but that was nothing new. Minuete always kicked puppies, and always did it with relish. It was time for a change, and stealing money from children that went to church, and crushing the dreams of youth ministers seemed like just the right thing to do.

“But how to cheat in a bible trivia competition?” she wondered. Minuete had a passing familiarity with the bible. She’d read Revelations several times, taking careful notes of just how the world managed to end, just in case she turned out to be the one to do it. She also liked the parts where epic disaster occurred, like the story of Noah’s Arc where the whole earth was flooded, and everyone in the world was killed. But that was something anyone that read “The Complete Idiot’s Guide to the Bible,” (like she just had) would know, this was competition with Youth Ministers. Youth Ministers! Those guys were way intense into that whole “Bible Thing.”

Minuete spent the next few hours drawing up her elaborate scheme. She would get Rook, Tselinoyarask and Taro to “invite” biblical experts from Georgetown and George Washington University to a seminar, right there in DC. She also instructed them to grab a few actual youth ministers from Mississippi and Arkansas, just in case someone asked Minuete, who would be posing as a southern youth minister, and she could take notes on the way they acted. Britney would be commanding the entire affair, and would get the trivia answers out of the college professors. to Minuete via her earpiece she was wearing for her “hearing disability.” Cheating, faking a disability, stealing from children? This baby had it all!

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Minuete ad just called the meeting, the one to announce her evil...ethically-challenged intentions towards the sucker nice-Christian youth minister competing for money. Carmet had been utterly appalled by the idea, her family being Catholic and all.

“But Minuete! You hate nice people!” Carmet protested. “How will you stand being around a bunch of them for that long?”

“You leave that to me,” she said, jabbing a finger. “You’re going to pretend to be a youth in my congregation.”

“That’s cool,” answered Carmet. “What do I wear? Like a pantsuit or something?”

Minuete just laughed at that one. “Slutty Catholic school girl. I want that skirt so short those boys are getting excited in ways they don’t understand.” Carmet actually didn’t seem to mind this particular slight.

“Do you think you can handle the whole kidnapping and torture thing, Britney?” asked Minuete.

“The kidnapping is no problem, we can hold them in the holding cell section.”

“Oh no, no, no, no, no,” she stammered. “I don’t want them anywhere near this building. We’re going to have to release them alive. Probably. I don’t want them to have anything they can tie them to me. See if you can find a warehouse or something we can use.” Britney nodded her head in the affirmative. Then Minuete leaned in and added with a low whisper “Something in a really bad

neighborhood so we can send Carmet and maybe she'll get stabbed." Britany just sighed and shook her head.

"Lastly," said Minuete "the earpiece. That's gonna take like a satellite uplink or something. Who do we have that can do tech work? What happened to Gygax?"

"You told us it was dangerous to ask us about Gygax," said a nearby henchman.

"Oh yeah," remembered Minuete. "Who then... There was this kid I knew from Bishop University. He did some server work for me at my MX Missile Facility? What was his name? Ashley..."

"Are you talking about Ashley Allen?" said Britney, a bit taken aback.

"That's him, do you know him?"

"You could say that. You know he was tied in with the entire crowd from LV-426," Britney, sounding as if she was giving a warning.

That just pissed Minuete off. "And your point is?" Her tone was sarcastic as hell.

"The subject's never come up, but I've spent a lot of hours you don't know about in LV-426. I know the kind of insanity that goes on with those people. Especially Allison Holiday."

"All I have to say about Allison Holiday is 'That bitch is through!' The way Minuete pronounced it was "thhrrr-eeeewww!!" It was very ethnic. She continued, "Send a special team to find him and bring him here, right here to the Annex Skyrise. I'm sure we can find technical projects for him to do."

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Allison walked into the den of her Westbrooke Place apartment. It was quiet, Brea and Allison were both in their bedrooms in the back, so she had the space to herself. A blinking light caught her attention, shiny things usually did. It was a black plastic box.

Allison stared at the strange alien piece of technology with decided suspicion. Brea had explained to her before what the device was, this... "answering machine."

Allison remembered the monologue she had gotten from Brea over the device. "I know you don't like technology, Allison. But if we're going to be roommates, you've got to understand this. If I need you to rescue me from, I don't know, a bad political situation with the Cabbots, or Lani needs you to bail her out of hooker jail or something, you need to know how to get our messages. That's why if you see this light blinking, just press this button here. I drew a star on it with a silver sharpie. Just press that button."

When Allison remembered this she got very excited. She totally loved pushing buttons! Especially ones with big shiny stars on them. The message played back with a lot of static. "Hey guys, it's Ashley. They just announced boarding call for my plane, so no delays, I'm getting on, and will be there at 9:45, just like we planned. So I'll see you and..."

What followed was a bunch of commotion and yelling to hang up the phone. Then Ashley's voice, "This isn't for real, you can't kidnap me! I'm on my way to DC to see my friends! They're expecting me! I have powerful friends, friends like Allison Holiday. When she finds out about this, there is no measure to how fast and how hard she will bring this fight to your doorstep. Hey! Don't touch

that..." and with that, the machine went dead. Allison tilted her head to the side, and stared at the black box with confusion.

Brea was coming into the Kitchen freshly out of the shower, putting in an earring. "We're leaving in fifteen minutes," she notified Allison. "We're going to catch the Red Line to Reagan to meet Ashley at the airport. I've really missed him, let's boogie."

"Oh," started Allison, "That was him on the, uh, answering machine just now. I don't think he's going to make this flight."

Brea just leveled a series of curses at the airline industry, and asked Allison if she had any idea when Ashley would be coming. Allison told her the message didn't say. Brea stormed out, but Allison's eyebrow was raised.

### Sub-Chapter 3 - Showdown

Since she didn't have to go meet Ashley at the airport, Brea was excited. She could go ahead down to McPherson Square where the Cabbot Campaign Headquarters in DC was located, about a block from the White House. She'd take the walk to the Blue Line Foggy Bottom- GWU stop and ride it down to the headquarters.

Brea was dressed for business, but also a bit flirty. She wore a black Chanel skirt-suit with white trim, and had a pearl jewelry belt that wrapped around her tiny waist several times. She decided she could get away with two buttons undone on her blouse, just for the random chance she would see Michael down at the headquarters.

When she arrived at McPherson Square Brea decided to stop in and grab a newspaper from the CVS Pharmacy. It would be a good idea to read up on the days news before showing up, just in case there had been some story that she would need to know about. She did so, and went into a nearby sandwich shop to settle down and read it while she ate lunch.

Brea's attention immediately went to a story about the Democratic Primary, and who was winning. Cabbot had broken into double digits, but was still trailing the other two candidates, by about twenty points. "It always goes like this," thought Brea in exasperation. "For the nomination, the process always leans towards the leftmost candidate. You've got to factor in who can actually win in November!"

The story went on to say, in a poll among likely voters in the middle and on the right, they absolutely loved Speaker Cabbot's promise to have a moderate Republican running mate for Vice President. In this time of such incredible division in the country, the country was sick of partisan bickering.

Brea was thinking of ideas to get this message across to the left when someone shouted "Brea Anatamata! How are you?" When she looked up, she had absolutely no idea who she was talking to. It was a woman in her early thirties wearing stylish glasses, but she did look vaguely familiar. "You might not remember me," the woman continued "but I was in the Senate the other day when you met Michael in the lobby."

That made things click for Brea who lit up. "Oh! That's where I know you from! Thanks for cheering when Michael kissed me. That wasn't awkward for me at all," she joked.

"If Michael Cabbot kissed me, I'd be the one doing the cheering," said the woman. "He's a certifiable Golden Hottie."

"No argument from me. What are you doing here? We're quite a way away from the Senate."

"I was just in the Senate that day because the Congressman wanted all his senior staff to meet you. I'm actually your new boss, I work at the campaign headquarters. I'm Catherine Disher," she said, offering Brea a handshake, which she took.

"Oh, Ms. Disher. It's a pleasure to meet you," said Brea.

"Please. Ms. Disher is my mother, who I do not need to be reminded of. They call me "The Dish" in the office. Don't ask me why, it's a long story. Mind if I have a seat?" she asked motioning towards her sandwich.

"Oh no, of course not!" replied Brea.

Catherine Disher was living proof that being thirty didn't mean anything anymore. She had large, expressive brown eyes and very curly brunette hair that hung down just below her shoulders. Brea looked at her left hand to see that she wasn't married, and then her right to see that she wasn't engaged. That was good news, as far as Brea was concerned. Instead of working for a potential harpy that was married and miserable, Brea would have a single boss who you could get drinks after work with and talk about boys. And boy did she want to talk about boys.

Disher moved in close, and propped her head up with her hands. "So... Is Michael a good kisser?" she demanded to know. "How far have you two gotten? Have you seen the goods yet? Huh? Huh?"

Brea was taken a back, she physically gasped an "Oh my God!" This wasn't something she was going to discuss with someone she just met! Much less her new boss! So Brea explained that to her.

"Oh, that's a bunch of crap. I should change my last name to Dish, because that's what I do. God knows nothing's happening in my own miserable love life. Dating divorced men is like being a vulture and getting excited that there's some meat left on a carcass. I'd rather be dating some hot guy in his twenties..." and the woman just went on and on, babbling nonstop, Brea couldn't get a word in edgewise.

Eventually Disher had to eat her sandwich, and Brea took the opportunity to tell her the story of how she and Michael had met. Eventually, she got into the story of the crazy IM's from Michael's ex-girlfriend Kate, and how frustrated she was over the fact that Michael and Kate were technically still together.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Disher said, in between bites of her sandwich. "I've seen Kate and Michael together, and that relationship is sooooo over. The only fireworks that go off are in Kate's head."

Brea was a bit taken aback, "So you know Kate?" she asked. "Yeah," answered Disher. "She's really not so bad once you get to know her. The girl's just too stubborn for her own good. I've been looking for a new boy for her, once that happens she'll forget all about Michael." Disher's words made Brea feel much better, so much better in fact she loosened up and gave a few juicy details of her last date with Michael.

Eventually the girls finished their lunch and Disher led Brea back to the campaign headquarters. Brea spent the next hour filling out her employment paperwork in Disher's office, and then got on file with security. She was feeling so good about the Kate situation, that when she took the photo for her security pass, she didn't even need to fake the smile.

All done, she went back to Disher's office for the formal employment training she had told her about. Brea figured it was probably a cheesy little video telling her the obvious about what she could

an could not say. Little did she know she was in for the shock of her life as she turned the doorknob and opened the door.

It was Kate.

Kate! Standing there in the office with her stupid model body and that smile, and the eyes! Brea knew right away from those eyes that Kate considered herself not the woman to mess with. Her tiger smile was wide and obviously fake. Brea noticed Kate wore a security pass on her lapel as well. That meant she worked here in this office! That made total sense it was probably where she met Michael. The initial stab of fear in Brea's gut spread throughout her body in cold waves.

Disher seemed unaware that the girls were locked in a stare, "Oh Brea, you're back. I've got to run, but I talked to Kate and she said would take you through the rest of your training."

"That's fine," lied Brea trying to hide her shock and horror. It must have worked because Disher left the room and closed the door behind her. Brea's instincts were telling her to go on the offensive, so she met Kate's cold gaze with equal fury. Time seemed to stand still, and the room could not have been more silent.

Kate was the one to break the silence, mumbling in a low growl that was almost inaudible "I'm going to kill you."

Brea's eyes went wide, and she immediately gasped "You're going to kill me??!!!"

"No, no!" Kate replied quickly, "I was just kidding!" She was very embarrassed, trying to hide her outburst.

"Holy crap!" thought Brea. "This girl really is just batshit crazy! What am I going to do?" Brea's savvy political mind was searching for a diplomatic response that would defuse the situation, because if Kate worked in the office they were going to have to work together. Maybe they could even become friends, because the girl couldn't be all bad. I mean she had been good enough to get Michael at some point. Brea was proud of herself for being so mature, she really was wise for her years.

Then Brea decided "screw that" and said "Bitch, you are going down!" and helpfully suggested an activity she could go do with herself.

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The door to Disher's office burst open to a shocked office as Brea and Kate tumbled backwards in a deathmatch. Kate was wielding a pair of scissors like a dagger trying to stab Brea in the throat with them. Crowd panic seized everyone, and they just stood there too shocked to help.

Brea slammed backwards into a wall, using all the strength in both arms to keep the dagger away from cutting her. Brea had really never been in a fight and Kate was trying to "murk" her, as she had put it to Lani! She was losing strength in her arms, so jerked her head to the left as hard as she could and stopped resisting. Caught off balance, Kate tumbled forward and embedded the scissors in the wall up to the hilt. Brea scrambled to get away, but Kate didn't miss a beat. Kate smashed the emergency glass for a firebox, and reached back past the coiled hose for a large fireman's axe. A woman on fire, she ran towards Brea who managed to get around a very large poster printing machine. If Kate hadn't been trying to kill her, the scene would have been funny. Brea was running like a chicken from Kate who circled and circled around the machine. Brea was yelling "Ahaaaaaaaaaa!!!" in a panicked voice.

Then Brea spotted it, the janitor's broom. Grabbing it, she wielded it like a katana. Kicking off her heels, she chose a kendo stance, the heel of her left foot slightly off the floor, her right foot flat. She just stayed in that position waiting for Kate to strike so she could counter.

First Kate did her a favor and hacked the broom end off the pole with a wild vertical slash. This was great because now Brea was wielding just the broom stick, which was very similar to the wooden Kendo poles she practiced with all those years as a little girl. So when Kate charged at her, it wasn't even close, Brea had practiced the moves a thousand times before. She swung the pole down hard on the back of Kate's hand, causing her to drop the axe by reflex. A little stunned, the pain forced a little sanity into Kate's system, slowing her down. That made it easy for Brea to sidestep around her and land a home run swing into the back of Kate's head, that end of the broom splintering into a thousand pieces.

Kate was just standing there now, very wobbly, she was about to pass out. Brea could have just waited for that to happen, but decided Kate really deserved a beating. Sidestepping again Brea delivered a hard horizontal blow into the pit of Kate's stomach. The force of the blow caused Kate to stumble backwards, tripping head over heels over a desk with enough force she rolled all the way over it and fell to the floor in a slump.

"Thank you for flying Anatamata Air," said Brea as she towered over Kate's unconscious body, and spat. "I hope you enjoyed the flight." The entire office erupted in cheer for their new hero. "What a way to meet the new office," thought Brea. "I'm totally gonna rule these sims."

#### Sub-Chapter 4 - On the Loop

Allison had just spent the last four hours trying to get the address for Minuete's Annex Skyrise from Lani's Palm Pilot, her instincts were telling her that Minuete had been the one behind Ashley's kidnapping, and also the psychic hotline had told her lucky color today was orange.

"Main screen turn on!" she commanded the device. But it didn't work, the device was dead. So she started mashing random buttons.

She figured she'd go there and beat people up until she got some answers. Allison had accidentally deleted half the information in the Palm Pilot, and broken off a few keys, (Allison had a philosophy that you've got to bang a computer around a bit to get it to work.) Eventually she gave up and decided to ask Lani later.

Rescuing Ashley would have to wait.

Allison looked at the clock, it was nearly noon! She had been so engrossed in Lani's Palm Pilot, she was actually a little sober! "That's gotta change," she thought, whisking out her hip flask of Jungle Juice and taking a swig. That reminded her of Alyssa Rife, who had asked Allison to read her book and give her notes. She called "Trash Can," a member of her daytime party posse to tell him she wouldn't be able to make it in "work" today. Allison Holiday had a mission which she intended to accomplish.

As an unusually sober Allison Holiday started reading the book, she noticed she wasn't agreeing with Alyssa Rife as much as she usually did. So she took a break and went and got Lani the present she had been meaning to get her for so long. By the time she got back, no worries. Everything in the book was totally clicking.

Brea beat Lani getting home that day, which was strange considering she's gone to get a manicure. She was probably caught up in her research and had forgotten the time. They had all agreed to have dinner at Sakana's as soon as they got off work. She saw Allison totally engrossed in Alyssa Riffe's book, little pieces of Lani's Palm Pilot broken off on the floor around her. Brea knew Lani was going to go nuclear, and decided it was better to not even ask.

"How was work?" asked Allison from the couch.

"Pretty good," responded Brea. "Turns out Kate works there, or at least used to. She jumped me and I kicked her ass."

"I've always found that any day where you get to kick someone's ass is a good day," said an unusually philosophic Allison.

"I was just thinking on the way over here how glad I am Miss Wednesday made me pick a sport to take all those years ago back at Charbonneau. It probably saved my life today. Do you remember Miss Wednesday?" asked Brea.

"Oh yeah," said Allison. "Especially that time she got suspended when the Principal found out she was gossiping with us about the boys in the class she thought were losers."

(Note from author Lani Cameron: It is impossible to tell our story without letting you nyo that Miss Wednesday will play a huge part in the next part of the story "Socially Unconscious: The Princess Complex." And nyo, the nyo was not a typo. Stay tuned for the story of how Brea and Allison screwed me over before they even knew me.)

Kathryn "Kat" Wednesday had been Allison and Brea's homeroom teacher from 8th through 12th grade, and had been an instrumental part of an entirely different chapter of their lives. Her best friend from college, who would eventually become Brea and Allison's P.E. teacher, could have predicted Brea and Allison's fate from the Freshman year of college she'd spent with Kat.

Back then Ms. Wednesday was just Kat, a spacey education major that spent a lot more time chasing boys than chasing academia. She had figured being a teacher would be a good profession for someone married to Mr. Right. She could talk all day, and fail people that didn't listen closely enough to her. All day long, she would be the star of the show, what could be more fun? How could she have known Mr. Right would never come along? It was ironic because Ms. Wednesday was a total babe.

"You nyo, we should call back and check on her, see if she ever got married," said Brea, bringing up a childhood joke she hadn't told in years. "Hell, we should have invited her to our graduation back at Bishop."

This failed to get much of Allison's limited attention "Yeah, probably. But I'm telling you now she's not married. That would be like letting Charlie Brown kick the football. So what happened with Kate?"

Brea told her the story, right down to the "Thank you for flying Anatamata air line," which made Allison excitedly scribble it down for use in a future dialog meeting with Lani for Blowd' Up. "That bitch had it coming, so what happened after you knocked her out?"

"So then the police came and it was all over," said Brea dismissively, then furthering "Remind me to call my lawyer tomorrow to figure out how to do this thing. This girl is so crazy I don't know what kind of crap she'll pull. And in any case I figure if she's in jail, she's away from Michael so he's mine."

Allison then told Brea all about how happy she was that she finally had a decent boyfriend, and also all about the gift she'd gotten for Lani. Brea found the whole gift thing hilarious, and gave Allison her highest approval.

"How are things with Tequila?" asked Brea. "I mean do you have a boyfriend at the moment?"

Allison just laughed at her. "What am I stupid? Why settle on one boy when I have twenty chasing me? I like to tease them. Everyone wants to have a little Holiday, if ya know what I'm saying, and I think you do."

"Spare me the details," dismissed Brea. She didn't know much about Allison's alternate night life with her party friends, and didn't care to.

Basically the routine went that Lani and Brea went to bed around midnight, and Allison went out drinking with her segment of the population with no other function than to party and drink all the time. Allison mentioned names from time to time; Trash Can, Little Biggie, and Neil Patrick Harris. And according to Allison, Alyssa Rife had even gotten in on the party act. Brea could think of nothing less appealing than listening to Alyssa Rife with a few drinks in her system loudmouthedly spouting off about politics.

"Listen," started Allison "I was reading Alyssa Rife's book. I was having a little trouble understanding it. Can you help me out?"

"Yeah no problem," said Brea.

"Okay, well it's got all these fancy college girl words in it, and I don't know what they mean. What the hell does "prescient" mean?"

"Prescient, that's like you have knowledge of future events."

"You mean like Miss Cleo?" asked a perplexed Allison.

"No, it's like making a wise decision," said Brea. "For example, it would be prescient to park your car in a garage if it were about to hail."

"Oh okay, I get it," said Allison.

"You don't actually get it, do you?" stated Brea.

"No, but to be honest, I know you and Lani regard me as this super-genius," started Allison, "but I don't know what I'm talking about half the time. Remember how I had that three hour argument with Lani a few days ago about how America needs to get out of the U.N.?"

"Yes."

"I don't have any idea what the U.N. is. I was just quoting stuff I read in Alyssa Rife's book. That's all gonna change though, now that I've got my new lingo. From now on, the Allison Holiday you see will be totally prescient."

"Using prescient there doesn't make any sense," said Brea. "That's not what the word means."

"Yeah, well do me a favor and don't tell anyone, college girl." responded Allison, who turned towards the front door, seeing that Lani was home.

"You're working late," said Brea "I stopped off to get a manicure, and I still beat you home."

“Yeah, yeah. I’m telling you, I’m totally on to something with Minuete and this EMP weapon thing. She’s up to something. Let me ask you something Brea.”

“What’s up?”

“So this manicure thing. Do you think any guy in history has even looked at a girl’s fingernails and thought ‘Wow, I’ve got to get me some of that!’?”

Brea just eyed a nearby broom, and responded “I think Allison has a present for you.”

“Oooh! Oooh!” Allison said as she jumped up and scurried off to her bedroom, running back with a wrapped present which she presented to Lani.

“You got me a present!” exclaimed Lani “That’s so sweet!”

“It’s the solution to all your problems,” promised Allison.

Lani tore into the wrapping paper and opened the box. She looked at what was inside, a deep pile of copies of Playgirl.

“To replace the ones I destroyed in my Weird Science experiment. I know you don’t have a boyfriend or anything, and don’t worry, Brea and I totally don’t think you’re sad or pathetic or anything. But just in case you ever need to make a weekend of it, here ya go.”

Lani was about to go off on a wild ranting tangent, but was actually eager to see boys with their shirts off. She picked up a copy and flipped inside.

“Holy crap!” she exclaimed. “I wouldn’t want that poking me in the back in the morning.”

“Let me see!” said Brea. Lani handed her the magazine, Brea looked inside and soon had a strange look on her face. She handed it back to Lani. “I’m going to go call Michael,” she said, running off to her bedroom, very distracted.

Allison was looking at the magazine now, “Hey! I know this guy! I saw him in Wonderland the other night.” This peaked Lani’s interest “Really? Can you get me his phone number??”

“He’s in the book but I honestly don’t think he’d be interested. Totally gay.”

Lani let out a long sigh. “The Lani Cameron Axiom of Dating: Anyone I’d actually consider is either already in a relationship, or gay.”

“That’s very prescient,” noted Allison.

Allison was thinking about going and rescuing Ashley when she saw the article in the folded Washington Post Lani had folded under her arm. “May I see that?” She asked?

The headline read “Youth Ministers Across Country to Hold Bible Trivia Contest in Convention Center Tomorrow.” Rescuing Ashley would have to wait, this was a top priority.

“Boogya,” she explained “Wimbledon Tournament here we come! Ten million in prizes!” She handed the article back to Lani and asked her what she thought of the idea of entering it.

Lani seemed positively perplexed, “Allison, if I remember correctly, you were the sole reason your sorority instituted that formal policy of requiring members to show up sober to Sorority church.”

Allison made a few curses at the policy, then said “Yeah, but I love children so much, I’d make a great youth minister! I spoke at that school to those children the other day, remember?”

“Yeah, but that’s only cause you wandered in by accident, and were too drunk to know it was a school till the police came. Do you even know anything about the bible?”

“Nah, but I did see the Passion of the Christ, and that’s just as good.”

“Was it any good?” asked Lani. “I had wanted to see it.”

“I kept wondering when this Jesus guy would just decide he’d had enough and murder everyone. I mean that happens in every other Mel Gibson movie. He took it like a total wuss.”

“It’s probably be an alternate ending on the special edition DVD,” said Lani. “All right, I’m in. We’ll go down there tomorrow.”

Brea was in her bedroom typing an email to Michael because she hadn’t been able to get him on the phone, which was very unusual, when she heard Lani freak out about the Palm Pilot. “Oh yes,” she thought to herself with a goofy smile “Lani’s pissed off, and Kate’s in jail. This has been a really productive day.”

## Sub-Chapter 5 - Secrets

It was the day of the youth minister Bible Trivia contest, and Minuete was sitting in a confessional of a Catholic Church she had stopped off at on her way to the Convention Center.

“Father, I have something to tell you, and it’s truly awful,” said Minuete with great seriousness.

“Relax, my child,” said the kindly priest. “There is nothing that the lord cannot forgive.”

“Okay Father,” continued Minuete. “I’m about to commit a very great sin, and I wanted to let God know about it in advance. I’m about to go cheat...in a bible trivia contest for youth ministers. And I’m doing it because it’ll give me great pleasure to steal money from children.”

“Oh my God!” exclaimed the priest, “That’s really horrible! Why the hell would you do something like that?”

“Hold on, there’s more, a lot more,” promised Minuete. “To cheat, I kidnapped a bunch of priests and am holding them in a warehouse. I’m pretending to have a hearing disability so I can wear an earpiece that’s really a radio. And I’m dressing the girl that has to hold the transmitter in a slutty catholic school girl outfit just to mess with the minds of honest God-fearing men.”

The priest was really pissed “That’s worst goddamned thing I’ve ever heard. You are definitely going to burn in hell.”

“This Satan guy?” laughed Minuete “Bring him on. He’s had his shot, let me take mine.”

“That’s it, you’re out of here. Get out of my confessional and out of my church before I walk into that booth and tear you into little pieces,” threatened the priest.

Boy was that the wrong thing to say. “What did you just say to me? No one talks to me like that! Do you have any idea who I am?”

The priest responded with another helpful suggestion remarkably similar to the one Brea had given Kate. Minuete had already been planning to have Rook take the guy taken in the alley and beaten up for what he had said to her, but that last remark really crossed the line, so Minuete ordered Taro

and Tselinoyarask to trash the church as well. Minuete even participated in the fun herself for a while, and drew a funny moustache on the statue of Jesus.

“Take a few pictures of him before you do,” ordered Minuete. “If he crosses me again we’ll Photoshop up some pictures even Michael Jackson would be ashamed of.”

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The convention center was filled to overflowing with the most straight-laced religious people Minuete had ever seen in her life. She was absolutely amazed at the display. “These guys are perfect patsies,” she thought. “That money is mine.” On the way back from the church, Minuete was trying to figure out what would be the opposite of spending money on a church youth group, and the answer occurred to her as she was looking at Carmet in her Catholic Schoolgirl outfit. She would fly her goons to Nevada and let them go to town at the bunny ranches. After all they were warriors, and had warrior libidos. Letting them have their fun would be good for morale and team spirit building.

Minuete was able to skip out on most of the security because Carmet had gotten there in advance to secure their “church’s” credentials and to enroll them in the contest. She giggled hard when she read her nametag, “Reverend M. Kiley” from the “Church of the Ninth Disciple,” an obvious reference to her boss, Mistress Nine. Carmet must have been the one to come up with it, since she filled out all the forms. “Wow!” thought Minuete, “It’s almost as though she’s not stupid!”

The rules of the contest were remarkably similar to Family Feud, in as far as every single church was allowed to put together a team of five people to participate with the youth minister being team leader. For Minuete, her team was comprised of Herself, Carmet, Rook, Taro, and a chick from accounting (Tselinoyarask had gotten the flu). What was her name again? Laura, Lauren?

All members of the team were outfitted with transmitters, and Britney was running the show down at the warehouse where the religious experts they’d kidnapped were being held. Minuete had chosen Britney because in all the time she’d been working with her, she didn’t make mistakes. By now the sarcasm wasn’t even thinly veiled, but Minuete would never dream of firing her. Britney always got results.

At some point, Minuete would ask her about her ties to LV-426 and her love interest there, and what had gone so wrong to make her turn on her former friends. I mean, Minuete had known the guy that had broken her heart, and quite frankly if he was special enough to make you jaded, she didn’t see it. It shocked her that Britney had gone from someone that spent all of her time hanging out with Allison Holiday and Lani Cameron, to someone that had no problem destroying them. There was a story there she didn’t know about. She had read a story of Britney getting arrested for stealing a police car in the Bishop Beacon in some scheme involving

“The House.”

Minuete was looking at the people around her, and one person stood out. It took Minuete a minute to figure out what was so familiar with the woman, but when she realized it the familiarity seemed so apparent. The woman’s eyes had the same burning to them that Minuete saw every time she looked in the mirror. The woman, though attractive enough, looked as though she had just time traveled from the eighties. She had gigantic brunette hair, and a look on her face as though she was constipated. As Minuete watched her she saw that the woman’s eyes were flicking from person to person, as if suspicious of something. Minuete decided to introduce herself.

“How are you doing, I’m Reverend Kiley. It’s nice to meet you,” she said, extending a hand.

"I am Diana," said the woman returning the handshake. Her accent was strange, it was not British, but something very close to it. It carried all the melodrama and importance of the British accent with none of the wankish qualities.

"Diana...." said Minuete, thrown off by her distance. "Do you have a last name?"

"No, it's just Diana," said the woman, obviously spinning. Then she noticed Minuete's earpiece. "You're wearing an earpiece for a hearing disability?"

"Yes," said Minuete. "I have a hearing disability. I was injured in a... fireworks show for Jesus," she lied.

"I have the same disability, I think we're running the same scheme here." said Diana, pointing to her earpiece. "What was your name again?"

"Reverend Kiley," stated Minuete.

"Minuete Kiley, right?"

That one took Minuete aback. She had deliberately not mentioned her first name on purpose, better not to leave a trail. That meant that this person had heard of her, which was dangerous since she was posing to be someone she wasn't. "Yes, she admitted," why not go with it.

Diana extended a hand to her "Diana, you don't know me but we have the same employer." That one shocked Minuete, she wasn't sure whether or not to speak the name aloud, but did so, albeit in a whispered voice. "Mistress Nine?" she hissed. Then she pointed down at Minuete's jewel scarred hand, and said that's a nice villain scar you have there."

Minuete held up her forearm and let the fragments glisten in the light. "Oh, thank you. Do you have one yet?" Diana said she did and removed an ornate earring to reveal that her left earlobe was horribly scarred. "Stray gunshot in an accident" she explained.

Minuete returned "Jewels too near some C4."

"I've heard of you new guys, Paradox Ninety, heavy on the science side of Mistress Nine's agenda. My organization is called Accord 90. My guys just aren't good at academia, but we are good at training guys to kick ass. Under Mistress Nine's orders, I'm shipping out tonight and proceeding on my next assignment, we're infiltrating Rupert Murdoch's security personnel. I have no idea why we're doing it but I don't question orders from the Mistress anymore."

"Rupert Murdoch, that's the guy that owns Fox, right?" asked Minuete.

"Fox and a million other things," scoffed Diana. "His media reaches 3/4th of the world's population, no surprise Mistress Nine is interested in him. Listen, Minuete. Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure!" agreed Minute.

"This is just being totally honest, but when did you understand you wanted to take over the world?" she asked.

"Gosh, it's hard to point to a specific moment," said Minuete. "But I remember as a little girl knowing if it were me running the school and not my dumbass principal? I'd kick his ass over who would be the better leader," she responded.

“And you’re like me?” asked Diana “And ever since you’ve been a little girl, you’ve been driven by these fantasies of controlling people and running their lives?” “Oh yeah,” admitted Minuete. “Big time.”

“A word of warning then, friend. I’ve spent my whole life dealing with slippery people. And I can tell you, our employer, Mistress Nine is as slippery and clever as they come. If you’re like me, you spend all your time thinking up brilliant schemes to take over the world, but Mistress Nine is using you for those dreams, and is exploiting that. I don’t even trust her enough to wonder if you’re not Minuete Kiley, but one of her operatives sent here to manipulate me for some reason. You’d be smart to keep that mindset yourself.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” said Minuete coolly, and extended a hand. “How many other Mistress Nine cells have you run into?”

“Run into? Not many,” responded Diana. “Run over, more than I can count. The Shagohad, The Patriots, we took down LaLeLuLeLo just last week.”

## Sub-Chapter 7 - Advent

Brea walked into the Congressman Cabbot’s DC office at 9:00 on the dot, and was a bit surprised, there was a sense of melodrama and urgency in the air. She had experienced this yesterday as well, but had assumed it was due to the situation with Kate.

CNN was playing in the background, Brea looked at the monitor. As she had told Michael, she deliberately had not watched the coverage of the Presidential race until closer to the election because it was all just a bunch of talking heads doing a lot of wanking. And she’d spent the majority of her recent time reading Senator Cabbot’s books on both his biography and his experiences. She hadn’t watched CNN for months. That’s why she was utterly stunned by what she saw on the news.

It was a mere 3 days to the Election Eve .

The first race in deciding a presidential nominee is the Iowa primary held on January 11th. Winning the race was a huge deal, not so much in determining mathematically who was going to win, but winning the Iowa primary gave you a huge advantage in being perceived as the frontrunner.

Catherine Disher was working at a nearby lithograph machine making autographed photos of the Congressman to send out to constituents. Brea asked her “Jesus, the Iowa Primary is in three days and you’re not freaking out?” Catherine shot back at her with a gaze that could have melted ice.

“I’ve been working in DC long enough to know a thing or two about how to stay sane during an election year.” Brea could tell she’d given this lecture before. “We have one goal in this office, and that is to serve the constituents that elected us here. If you want to talk about the election, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ship you off to Iowa.”

“Alright, alright!” said Brea. “I get it.”

“Good.”

Brea noticed that the door to the Congressman’s office was closed, which made no sense. If the primary was in three days, he was undoubtedly off in Iowa giving speeches. “Who’s in Cabbot’s office?” she asked.

Disher's voice was sing-song. "Mi-chael!! He was asking about you earlier."

"I haven't talked to him since the Kate thing. Mind if I go in?" Disher just motioned go ahead with a dismissive hand.

So Brea half walked, half skipped over to the door and slipped inside. There was Michael, sitting in his father's chair, looking all cute and authoritative. Brea would have rust run right over and planted one on him, but he was on the phone and had a very distracted look on his face.

"Okay, well tell her not to worry about the fees for the lawyer, they're on the house. Kay Harmond is the best lawyer in the business." Then he hung up the phone.

"Brea it's so good to see you, thank God you're okay," he said, kissing her. "I didn't hear about what happened until this morning, I knew the fastest way to meet you and make sure you were okay would be to meet you here."

"I'm fine," said Brea quite chirpily. "I got to put on quite a show for the office."

"So I heard," he chuckled. "I'll have to remind myself to watch my manners whenever there's a broomstick around. So...are you planning on pressing charges?" Brea could tell this was the real reason for his visit, and all the "are you okay" stuff had been niceties. Sincere niceties, but this was the foremost issue on her mind.

"Unknown," she replied. "The D.A. said he'd contact me once they'd filed the report. I can't decide if I want to, Lani says to press charges just in case she comes after me again, Allison says I kicked her ass, and to forget about the whole thing."

"Well," Michael said, trying to be diplomatic. "I would kind of consider it a personal favor if you didn't."

All kind of warning alarms were going off in Brea's mind. The main thing she liked about, Michael because he was straightforward and honest, and here he was with an agenda he wasn't being honest about. And besides, if he was serious about wanting to be with Brea, she expected Michael to be cheering for her, and telling him

'Thank you for putting Kate in jail, now she won't bother us anymore.'

"Why is that, Michael? And don't play games with me, if you have something to say please say it."

Michael sighed, partly in relief. "Brea, Kate's not a bad person, she just lost her temper and did something really stupid. The thought of her in jail is making me crazy, it's all I can think about. I saw her down there last night, she's freaking out. She's been having problems with her medication, I had to bring her medication from the apartment for her in jail."

Brea gasped because Michael had just revealed a lie to her. "I thought you said you only found out about it this morning. Is that why I couldn't reach you last night? You were visiting her in jail?"

Michael looked away from her "Brea, I'm sorry, I was her only phone call."

"You don't even call me to ask if I'm all right, last night?" Brea was starting to get really pissed and it was showing in her voice. "Your first thought is to go make sure she's okay, and then you show up at my office first thing in the morning to influence me into bailing her out?"

"Brea..." he said weakly, knowing he had made a big mistake.

“You’re even paying for her lawyer, and lying to me about when you’re finding things out? Well, make up your mind, Michael. Which relationship do you want to be in, here?” By now Brea was seriously worked up, her voice on the edge of a shout.

“Brea, you’re making something out of nothing here, I was at home, she called me, didn’t mention why she was in jail, so that’s why I didn’t call you right away to ask if you were okay. I went straight down there, visiting someone in a DC jail is not like visiting your aunt. It was way after midnight before I finally got out, and I thought it was too late to call you.”

Brea’s parents always begged her to become a policeman like the rest of her family, but Brea had declined. It was too bad, because she had a great ability to listen to a story and get down to the bottom of things. “You went straight down there? I thought you said you stopped off at Kate’s apartment to get her medicine.” Michael’s face froze. And it all fell apart in that very instant. Brea had seen this look before. It’s the moment when someone’s been caught red handed, and they are trying out how to spin it.

Brea seemed to slow down as she asked the following “Michael, just tell me one thing. Are you currently sharing an apartment with Kate?”

Michael took a beat to answer, so Brea knew the answer. “Brea, it’s not sexual or romantic. It was my name on the lease and she’d been trying to find an apartment. I’ve been sleeping on the couch for months now, you know how hard it is to find an apartment in this...”

Brea slapped Michael across the face hard.

“Then tell me that!” she yelled, not caring who heard. “I’m not a child, for God’s sake Michael. And I’m not so insecure about myself that I can’t understand you’ve got a roommate problem. But the one thing I will not tolerate in a relationship is being lied to, Michael! You’ve been deliberately hiding that from me! And being in a relationship with someone that would do that to me does not fall within the standards to which I hold myself.”

“Brea...” he tried weakly. Brea just cut him off, ending the conversation.

“You can tell Kate, I’m not pressing any charges. The two of you deserve each other.” And with that, Brea left the room slamming the door behind her.

It was her second day and her second time to leave an office with the entire office staring. Brea marched right up to Catherine Disher and folded her arms.

“I need to get out of the city for a few days. Can you tell the election team in Iowa that I’m on my way? I’m renting a car and driving out now.”

—————

Lani and Allison were standing in line to register for the competition, surrounded by straight-laced people of faith.

“Oh man,” complained Allison. “I hate standing in lines. Good thing Dr. Holiday has the right prescription for boredom, heh, heh, heh.” Pulling out her hip flask, she took a long swig of Jungle Juice.

“Is that alcohol??!!” asked a shocked nun in full habit.

“Oh, my god, what was I thinking, I am so sorry for being rude,” said Allison, genuinely embarrassed. She then offered the flask to the nun. “I always forget to share.”

The nun just shook her head “No, no, no...” so Allison encouraged her. “Oh, just try some! This shit’s like a party in your panties!”

“I’ll take some please,” asked a nearby Catholic priest.

“Jungle Juice ain’t for white boys,” said Allison, ending the matter. The priest just frowned and turned away.

Lani’s cell phone rang, it was Brea on the other end of the phone, and she was pissed. She was taking a cab back to the apartment instead of the Metro, because she wanted to get out of town as quickly as possible. Brea explained the situation without any crying, the tears would come later.

“Would you like to go ahead to Iowa with me?” asked Brea. “It’s about a 16 hour drive, and I can’t do that by myself. I’d like to have some company, if you know what I mean.”

“I can’t, I have work on the Alyssa Rife show tonight, but I’ll ask them in the budget meeting tonight if I can travel out there to do an exclusive. Can you get me an interview with Cabbot? That would be HUGE for my career!”

“That will not be a problem. When I tell him what an asshole his son was to me, I’m sure he won’t mind doing me a favor. Can I talk to Allison?”

“Sure,” replied Lani.

Lani handed the phone to Allison and repeated the story about Michael. When she explained where she was going and what she would be doing there, she had to really dumb things down because Allison didn’t know anything about politics, other than watching the Manchurian Candidate.

“Basically we’re going to be going to giant parties for the next few weeks. Whole day parties, with lots of parties at night too, most of them with open bars.

“Open bars?” exclaimed Allison. Rescuing Ashley would have to wait, because this girl was Iowa bound. “This sounds totally prescient. I’m ditching this thing and getting home. I’m at Mt Vernon now, so it’ll be about...say 30 minutes?”

“See you shortly.”

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Minuete was having a great time that day in the Bible Trivia competition. She spent the day lying to Christians of all different types. It was just too much fun to tell them how filled with God’s love she was all sarcastically, and they wouldn’t get it. Carmet was having fun too, because all these guys were walking around with obvious erections around her. Youth ministers weren’t the smoothest guys in the world at flirting. One particularly zealous woman called Carmet’s enormous breasts “an abomination against the Lord!”

Minuete’s cell phone rang, looking at the caller id she saw it was Miss Whitman from the Annex Skyrise. The hairs on the back of Minuete’s neck stood up because Miss Whitman was supposed to report directly to Britney because Minuete couldn’t micromanage every little detail of Paradox 90. She couldn’t imagine what possible reason there would be for Miss Whitman to contact her directly.

“What is it? I’m very busy at the moment,” she barked.

"I hate to call you during an operation. And I'm very sorry if this sounds rude but you're going to want to drop whatever you're doing and get down here immediately."

"This is a secure line, or so my tech people tell me. What's the situation?"

"Boss, if you were in my shoes you'd tell me not to take the chance. Please get here as soon as humanly possible."

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When Minuete arrived at the Annex Skyrise, she was shocked. There was damage everywhere, doors kicked in, desks trashed. Her pace quickened as she ran to the science wing of her lair. It was disaster, even the computers were smashed. Apparently there had been a fire because the sprinklers had gone off, if anything was here it ruined. The place was empty, and Miss Whitman was standing there, looking scared out of her mind.

"What the hell happened??!!" Minuete demanded. "Where are my people, tell me what's going on!"

"A para-military team broke in, Miss Kiley. Maybe 30 men. They were armed with MP5 machine guns, they ordered everyone out of the building. Then they stole the xEMP, destroyed all the research data that let us create it and set off a fire, just to destroy as much paperwork as possible as well."

"Just how does a Paramilitary Group break into my building with only 30 men?" Then it hit Minuete like a brick in the face. Most of Paradox 90 was deployed in operation for the bible trivia operation.

Minuete recalled the message from Mistress Nine in horror, "All work and no play? Go have some fun. Your men too. That's an order." Mistress Nine was behind this. She had wanted to get me tied up with something so she could come in here and steal the next generation EMP weapon from her. Then Minuete remembered Diana's words. Mistress Nine is using you for those dreams, and is exploiting that. Mistress Nine had tricked her into developing the weapon so she wouldn't have any fingerprints! That couldn't be good news for Minuete.

"This EMP2, you guys completed it?" asked Minuete.

"Yes, we were actually just finishing up work on the device, putting the polish on the apple so to speak, making our tweaks here and there but we had about a dozen functioning devices. They got them all except for this one, one of the scientists had it on his person," said Miss Whitman, producing a rather strange looking PDA device. It was large, and had an extension that ran along the side of it that looked like a cannon. Minuete inspected it.

"How exactly does it work?" asked Minuete. "And I'm not a scientist, so no techno-babble. Give it to me straight."

"All right, we were assigned the task of developing a next-generation EMP weapon that would shut down an electronic system that was shielded from it. EMP weapons work by causing too much static for electrons to flow correctly. The trick is, there's a device similar to an avalanche diode called a THYZORB. If you put that diode on an electrical circuit it absorbs the static and an EMP weapon is useless. So our research team was essentially trying to stop this THYZORB. We weren't getting anywhere until we met Miss Hildegard Johnson. At first the research team didn't understand a single thing she was saying, until one of them noted the words she was using sounded a lot like Star Trek. So she went out and bought this book 'The Science of Star Trek' and suddenly everything fell into place. Once we began to understand Miss Johnson's basic language, it took us in directions we never

would have been imaginative enough to think of! I don't pretend to know how it works, it's mostly math, but clearly this Hildegard Johnson is one of the most brilliant scientific minds in the world."

"So basically what you're saying, is that Mistress Nine tricked me into building a weapon that can knock out Civilian and Military hardware that's specifically built not to be knocked out?" Minuete asked, her face drained of all color. All she got from Miss Whitman was a pensive nod.

Minuete was definitely someone that could keep her cool in a crisis. Her instincts were telling her what to do, it was unpleasant, but it was the only thing to do.

## Sub-Chapter 8 - Alliance

Lani's cell phone was buzzing. At first she expected it was Brea calling to say she'd managed to rent a car and was clear of the city, but it wasn't Brea. It was Minuete Kiley.

"Hello?" she asked.

"Lani, I need you to come down here to the Annex Skyrise. I need those sharp investigative reporter skills of yours," said Minuete.

"Ha, yeah right," laughed Lani. "You just want me to come down there so one of your goons can beat me up. I'm on to you, you know."

"No tricks, no games. I'm some serious stuff here," said Minuete. "You and I need each other." Lani was pretty shocked by the total honesty coming from Minuete. It was a side of her she'd certainly never seen before.

So then Minuete did it, she told her everything. Absolutely everything, all about Mistress Nine, and Paradox 90, and the EMP2 weapon. For an investigative reporter, it was a particularly satisfying experience because Lani had been spending 9 hours a day digging into her, and she was finding out the rest of the mystery.

"Here is what I propose," stated Minuete. "You come on down here, I'll give you total access to everything. We find out who this Mistress Nine is so when this EMP2 thing goes off, we'll be able to point the finger at the real culprit."

"I'm on my way," said Lani, hanging up her phone. Then she pressed a few keys and dialed another number, her Boss at MSNBC Mr. Carol.

He answered his own phone with a distracted "This is Carol."

"Mr. Carol? Lani Cameron here. Remember how you hired me to dig up investigative reports that were proprietary to the network? Well, I'm about to deliver big enough that I'll get that office I've been wanting," she joked.

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Lani arrived at the Annex Skyrise not long after. Her paranoid instincts were keeping her on her toes, as she checked in through the now incredibly tight security procedures, her eyes darting around frantically looking for danger. But once the concierge got word of her arrival, she was assigned a private security detail and escorted into the research and development wing of the building. There a perky redhead was waiting for her.

“Hey there spacekat,” she said extending a hand. “I’m Carmet Criser, I’ve been assigned by Minuete to be your permanent bodyguard from now on. I’ll take her from here, boys.”

The guards nodded and left, and Lani was suddenly aware of one thing, the pistol holstered by the woman’s hip. Carmet kind of reminded her of Allison, and she sure wouldn’t be in the same room containing both Allison Holiday and a firearm.

“So, do you, uh know how to use that thing?” asked Lani, motioning to the pistol.

“This big guy?” replied Carmet, pulling out the weapon playfully. “I’m actually a trained police officer. I’m not so good a marksman, but the way I figure I’ve got 17 shots, so something will probably hit something. Anyway, I’ve been ordered to bring you to Minuete.”

Minuete wasn’t in her throne room, she was in Miss Whitman’s office, on the phone barking out orders to rebuild the Research and Development wing as soon as possible. When she saw Lani in the room, her reaction was instantaneous. “I’ve got to go, something’s come up, I’ll call you later,” then she flip-closed the phone.

“Have a seat,” Minuete said, motioning to an empty chair. “Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?”

“Why don’t we just get down to business, Minuete,” replied Lani. “I don’t like you and you don’t like me. But if we find out who this Mistress Nine is, we both win. So let’s get started.”

“Fine with me,” agreed Minuete leaning far back in her chair. “So how do we do that?”

“Good old shoe leather journalism. Can you assign some of your team to me as research assistants?” Minuete nodded in the affirmative, and Lani continued “And please not that Carmet girl, because frankly she seems like a total ditz.”

That last comment got Minuete very excited. “Oh my God, she’s the biggest airhead on earth. She makes me so crazy. I’m going to shoot her with a BB gun when she’s not looking.”

“I saw that the computer stuff was destroyed. There must be a good reason to cause all that damage. I think it would be a good idea to see if we can retrieve any of that data. There’s a computer expert I’d like to bring in.”

“Who’s that?” asked Minuete.

“Ashley Allen. Do you remember him from Bishop?”

“Oh, uh, I’ll see if we can locate him. I’ll assign a team,” lied Minuete. She was nervous that when Lani found out she had kidnapped him and was keeping him in prison she would be enraged and would refuse to help. Fortunately, Lani seemed unconcerned about Ashley.

“We’ll give him that military Palm Vx that Mistress Nine contacted you on, see if he can find anything else about Mistress Nine,” ordered Lani. “Can you get me a computer with a Nexus connection? I’ll just use this office as my own.”

“I’ll have that and your research assistants for you in about 20 minutes. What do you need me to do?”

“I need you to play dumb, just keep doing business as usual. If Mistress Nine contacts you tell her you believe it was this Diana woman you met earlier. There’s a possibility she’ll buy it and we’ll have more information to use.”

“All right. We’re in this together.”

“What do you want me to do?” asked Carmet, who had snuck into the room to guard Lani.

“I want you to not ask me dumb questions and waste my time,” she hissed. “Now go get me some coffee.”

When Lani looked back at Minuete, she saw that she now had this goofy smile on her face. “I think you and I will work well together,” decided Minuete.

### Sub-Chapter 9 - Drive

The next day, Brea and Allison had made a lot of progress in the process of getting to Iowa. It had taken Brea until about noon to secure a car to rent, and it was close to 3 until she was actually out of the city and on her way to Iowa. The girls agreed to drive until midnight, and find a hotel.

Despite Brea’s best attempts to persuade her otherwise, Allison had gone out drinking the night before, and the girls didn’t even get close to making their noon checkout time. By now it was close to four and they were about two hours out from the Cabbot headquarters in Des Moines, Iowa.

For all the 15 ½ hours it took to drive to Iowa, Brea and Allison bitched about boys, and Michael in particular for about half of it. “I swear,” started Brea “they are a gender that goes to monster truck rallies. The only time they’re clever is when they’re coming up with euphemisms for masturbation. I really have no sympathy whatsoever for their species. I mean he lied to me, Allison! I’m not going to be in a relationship with someone that’s not honest with me.”

“I’ll lend you my ‘Boys Lie’ Tee-shirt,” promised Allison. “It should be the national motto.”

“I mean, but at the same time, I kind of feel bad for him, you know” said Brea. “Part of what got me so upset is that I know how a girl thinks. The first thing that popped into my head when he explained the Kate roommate situation thing is the ‘How can you be so stupid to not to see she’s lying about not being able to find an apartment, she’s just stalling for time while she finds a way into tricking you into staying with her!?!?’ But then again he’s a boy, and not really smart enough to figure out something like that.”

Allison just shook her head no, “Listen, boys are like dogs. You have to train them. I’d actually say this whole thing hasn’t really been a bad thing. Worst case scenario with this? He doesn’t make things right with you, and you’ve learned he’s a jerk before things got more serious and he broke your heart. Best case scenario, he learns his lesson and you have a boyfriend that’s honest to you.”

Brea was a bit taken aback by such clever insight from Allison of all people. “Wow,” she said “I never would have thought of it that way. That’s really great advice, Allison.”

“Hey, I read the sex advice column in Maxim,” she replied. “I know exactly what makes a healthy relationship work. Have you considered going back with John?”

John...her on and off boyfriend from back at Bishop. There had been a lot of times Brea had thought that he would be the one. But that was a long, long time ago.

“John’s really someone that I think needs to stay in the past,” reflected Brea “But, I think you’re right, give Michael a chance to make it right, and we’ll take it from there.”

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Cell phone coverage had been spotty in Iowa, but as they neared Cedar Rapids on I-80 West, Brea was able to get a decent signal enough to call the campaign headquarters to let them know she would be there soon. When she mentioned her name was Brea Anatamata, she was immediately put on hold and within seconds someone that was obviously a high level staffer was on the line.

“Miss Anatamata, I’ve been instructed by the Senator directly to put you through to his cell phone once we could reach you. He’s doing a speech right now, but could you do me a favor and stay in range of your cell phone until he contacts you?”

Brea just sighed. Brea guessed an inside source had tipped off the congressman of what had happened in the office yesterday...Michael himself. But the guy was her boss, and she loved him, so she just agreed. Brea offered that she and Allison stop and get lunch while they waited. Allison was trying to explain to the Applebee’s bartender how to make a “Fat Hooker” when Brea’s cell phone started buzzing. She excused herself and stepped outside for better signal.

“Brea, I heard all about what happened. Are you all right, how are you feeling?” he asked. Despite the fact that she knew the guy was a politician, he really did seem terribly concerned, so Brea was honest with him. “I’m actually not sure, Congressman. I mean 48 hours ago I was trying to resist my instinct to yell from the rooftops that I’d found my Mister Right. Right now, I kind of think he’s a lying jerk.”

“What he did definitely falls into that category Brea. And I’m not going to defend it, but do you mind if I tell you a story?”

“Yes, Mr. Speaker,” she agreed.

“Brea, I grew up in a very different era. When I was in my twenties like Michael, it was the beginning of movie divas and glam gals, and I got very caught up into the whole craze. Suddenly we went from an era that valued a wife for her strength and convictions and instead went into chasing this movie poster imaginary ideal. And when I say I was caught up in it, I mean I was neck deep in it. It cost me 20 years and two marriages before I got it that really great women get over themselves. When Michael told me ‘I’m dating someone that isn’t a Kate,’ I think it was the best news I’d ever heard, because he got it way sooner than I did. Michael has Cabbot DNA in his system, so I’d ask you to consider granting him a little leeway in doing things that are incredibly stupid, alright?” “Great women get over themselves,” thought Brea. If truer words were ever spoken about what the dark side of feminism had been, she’d never heard them. So that’s why she agreed to the following.

“Tell Michael to get his butt over here to Iowa and we’ll sit down and have a conversation about everything. And please. Tell him I don’t want him to grovel, that would be unbecoming. I just want him to be honest.”

“He’s on his way,” promised the Congressman. “Now, you get your ass over here, I need you to help me win this thing!”

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When Brea and Allison arrived in Des Moines, they were immediately sent to work for the campaign because it was an incredibly close Primary, and mere minutes mattered. For Brea, she was sent out along with the 72 hour teams to go door to door and ask people to vote for her candidate. For Allison, she was very insightful in finding cheap kegs of beer for the Cabbot Election Eve campaign party. The day was mostly a blur for both girls.

When they arrived at their hotel room that night that the campaign had rented out for staff members, they were both satisfied and exhausted. Congressman Cabbot had gone out of his way to make sure Brea got the room with the hot tub. As Brea's eyes closed that night, she felt completely spent. It would be a good, rewarding sleep that only comes from a day of hard work. How could she know, it would be a long, long time before she experienced that kind of sleep again.

#### Final Sub-Chapter - The Election Eve

It all started that morning in room 426.

Allison Holiday came to slowly. She badly needed coffee as she groggily got up from the couch. The party last night had been spectacular, but considering Allison's social schedule it hardly deserved memory.

She walked to the coffee machine in the hotel she shared with Brea, but something was wrong. There were no coffee packs next to the machine the way there were in most hotels. Panic gripped her. After thinking for several minutes she picked up the phone to the hotel lobby and phoned down to the lobby.

"Hello there, this is room 426. Allison Holiday here. There's no coffee in my room, could you please have the maid send some up? Jesus, do I have a hangover."

"I'm very sorry Miss Holiday, the hotel is out of coffee. We're out of a lot of things, actually. Laundry detergent, soap, towels. Apparently one of our delivery trucks missed a shipment, which is very embarrassing considering the esteem we have for our guests staying with us."

Allison thanked her and hung up the phone, then ran over to Brea who was still very deeply asleep. Allison started shaking her to get her attention. "Brea? Brea? I'm freaking out here."

Brea was deep in sleep, but her eyes snapped open as she sensed Allison. "Ahhhhh!" Brea jerked upright in the bed. Allison was anything but aware she'd just woken Brea up, "We have an emergency!"

"This had better be a level ten emergency," Brea stated grumpily and very sleepily.

"It absolutely is." Allison informed her. "There's no coffee."

"Emergency no coffee?" Brea repeated.

"It was a late night. I went out with a bunch of the boys from the campaign. You were asleep and we were about to fire up the old hot tub when..."

"I don't need to know the details. Actually, I don't think I want to know at all." Brea said.

"There's just one thing you need to know. We're out of coffee!" Allison repeated, trying to communicate the gravity of the situation.

"Well, let me take a look," Brea mumbled, slipping on her bedroom slippers, and minced over to the hotel counter.

"There's no coffee in here."

"I know that part." Allison muttered deadpan.

"I can't start my day with no coffee. This is awful!" ranted Brea.

"This is tragedy," said Allison.

"That's exactly what this is. A tragedy," Brea agreed. "What are our options?"

It was the one time Allison had noticed a building that wasn't a bar. "There's a Starbucks about half a mile from here," she offered.

"Help me find my keys then, we've got one of the longest days of our lives ahead of us," said Brea, "and we can't start it without coffee."

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Brea had complained loudly out loud the whole way down to the rented car as Allison explained why there was no coffee available.

"We're up way before anyone else," noted Brea. "The first meeting is at 10:00 so everyone can be fresh and ready to cheer for the rallies on TV tonight, win or lose we've got to have a lot of energy."

"You know what we should do?" offered Allison, "Why don't we buy a bunch of coffee at Starbucks and bring it back here."

"Great idea," agreed Brea.

Fully caffeinated and now with a huge trunk full of over-priced Starbucks raw coffee grounds, the girls parked in the back, which had better access to the lobby. That was when Brea's detective instincts kicked in and she noticed that a delivery van was parked illegally, and had received several tickets, meaning it had been for quite a while. Lani had told her all about Minuete and the Mistress Nine thing, so Brea had been keeping her eyes peeled.

"Allison," started Brea, "didn't you say that the lobby said the reason there was no coffee was because there had been no deliveries?"

"That's right," said Allison.

"Well, why is there a delivery truck sitting here in their parking lot?" she asked. "You go to make a delivery and ditch the truck? That makes no sense."

"It could just be broken down," noted Allison.

"Yeah, could be. But let's call Lani anyway."

Almost exactly 1000 miles away, Lani was hard at work doing research work. She had brought in Minuete's accounting personnel to audit all of Paradox 90's financial records, and meanwhile she was going through Nexus, looking for hints of who this shadowy Mistress Nine could be. In the meantime, Minuete was interrogating her staff one by one, she was going to find out how Mistress Nine had been spying on her. Her phone rang and she answered it distractedly.

"Yeah, what's up?" she said monotone.

"Hey Lani, this is Brea. Are you in front of a computer?" Lani told her she was, so Brea told her all about the van. "The name of the company is Cyprine Enterprises, I thought you could look it up for me."

"To be honest, I think you're being a bit paranoid. But sure, I'll look into it," the name sounded very familiar to Lani for some reason. "I'm really swamped today, but I'll get around to it. I'll call you back

if I find anything.” Brea thanked her and hung up the phone. Lani was probably right, and she was being a bit paranoid.

Coming back into the lobby, the security was very, very intense. The number of Secret Service personnel had tripled. As Brea and Allison were being frisked, and their coffee grounds being run through a bomb detection machine, Brea asked a nearby staffer “What’s going on here?”

“It was a surprise for you Cabbot people,” said the woman “but the President likes the idea of an administration that’s half-Republican, because it means whoever wins in November, their party is still in the White House.”

“A Republican endorsing a Democratic candidate would be suicide in November,” remarked Brea.

“Sure, but this is just the President stopping by today and having a talk with the Speaker about upcoming issues on the House calendar. We’ll let the talking heads do the rest. It’ll dominate the news networks all day long, and will hopefully push things over the top for your guy.”

Boy, were they right about it dominating the news. That day, Brea and Allison were dispatched to a polling station to cheer and wave signs for the Speaker. The polling place was a Ramada Inn, and inside there was a bar with a television, and all anyone was talking about was the Cabbot campaign and the meeting that had taken place with the President.

Because it was the age of 24 hour news coverage, there was all kinds of rampant speculation over the details. There was a lot of talk over the fact the President was staying in the same hotel complex as Cabbot. “It’s simply a matter of security, and being mindful of saving the taxpayers money in as far as the Secret Service has limited resources,” promised the President’s spokesperson. That didn’t stop the talking heads from going to town, coming up with wild theories about what it would mean for the 20x8 election.

It was an extremely busy day for Brea, seeing as voter turnout was so wildly high. Since the President was an incumbent, most of the voters in the primary were Democrats. But many of the Republicans that did come to vote came over to the Cabbot camp to give their approval. “He’s one of the good ones,” said one excited Republican voter, “Now if you can just get the far left to get behind the idea of a bi-partisan Presidency.”

Eventually 5:00 rolled around, and the polls were closing. It was all over but the shouting now, nothing more could be done, so the group disbanded. For the volunteers, they would head home to watch the news as the results poured in. For the Cabbot campaign members like Brea, there was a campaign rally scheduled for 7:00 at their headquarters as they waited for the results to come in for the race.

It was pretty much pure chaos as far as the campaign went, different people going in different directions. For the election team, tonight was the final result since March of last year when the Speaker had first announced he was running, nearly 10 months of work all came down to this night. The Iowa primary was so unpredictable, so no one really had any idea what to expect.

Brea talked Allison into heading back to the hotel so she could change clothes and retouch her makeup, which was fine with Allison. She needed to refill her Jungle Juice hip flask, the day had been so much fun she’d drunk the whole thing. So when they finally got back to her hotel room, Brea was completely shocked with what she found laying on her doorstep.

It was Michael.

There was no nice way to put it, he looked awful. He hadn't shaved for days, and it looked like he was suffering from a combination of a bad hangover and jet lag. He looked up at Brea with eyes filled with all the sadness in the world.

"Heh, heh. This is gonna be good," said Allison, wringing her hands in anticipation. Brea just glared at her, then threw her the room card key.

"Go ahead on in the room, we need some privacy, please."

Allison pouted and did so.

"Brea," he started slowly, "I am so sorry for not being honest about the Kate situation...I feel so awful. How can I make it up to you?"

"Michael, this is not about me needing to wring you over the rock and make you feel bad about the something you did. This is that I don't know if I can trust you again, and I mean fundamentally."

Then Michael did something she'd never seen before in a fight with a boyfriend. He sat there silent for a moment thinking about what she'd just said. Was there actually a boy that didn't spit out excuses and spin in a spat?

After a long pause he spoke "See this whole thing comes down to what you said about 'not caring' about the Kate situation. I've never met anyone before that would understand a situation like that and not get jealous. I've never seen you do anything remotely jealous. And I've been thinking about that a lot, and you're really the only girl I've ever dated that seems to like herself, with or without a man. This whole thing comes down to I knew you were different from other girls, I just didn't understand I had to communicate with you differently too. And different I mean very honestly."

He was on the verge of tears and so was Brea, he was just too sincere with his emotions. "So here's what I propose. We throw out everything we've done so far and we start over with an entirely new relationship and I'll tell you everything, and I mean absolutely everything. No more trying to hide Kate, or who my father is, or anything else. I promise you I will never lie to you again. Can't we just start over Brea?"

Brea didn't have an answer, just a big goofy smile and eyes watering at the edges. She didn't say anything right away, leaving Michael genuinely terrified. "Go ahead and kiss me, you idiot," she managed to blurb out. And he did.

They say you never get your first kiss feeling with someone again, but that's a big lie. This one was even better, because with it, Brea felt all the hurt and resentment melt away, and instead just raw emotion being conducted through Michael's lips. At long last he broke the connection, and Brea looked into those deep sweet eyes of his.

What she wanted to say was "Hey, our room has a hot tub," but what came out instead was "You're all scratchy. You need to shave. Come on in."

"No argument from me," he said, all the happiness in the world, "but I have a feeling you didn't remember to pack your Mach 3."

"It'll serve you right, using a pink razor," kidded Brea.

Allison was in the bathroom, so as Michael waited, Brea walked over to the television and turned it on, hoping there would be promising early numbers on the election results.

“Exit polling has shown a noticeable bounce for the Cabbot campaign,” said the reporter, “bringing the race nearly neck and neck with Senator Charlie Martin. This Election Eve is up in the air as far as this reporter can tell. We now go to CNN reporter Lauren Swartz who is aboard Air Force one to get reaction from the Vice President about the Speakers sudden turnaround in this Democratic Primary.”

The screen went into the dual window format CNN used when showing two correspondents. But the second window only displayed static, which Brea found odd. I mean, this was 20x8, satellite communication had gotten quite advanced. Brea hadn't seen a snow crash like this one since she was a little girl. “But then again,” she reflected “six years ago the idea of broadcasting from Air Force One was laughable.” The program apologized and moved on to the next talking head.

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Lani was at the MSNBC studio doing the pre-interview with a guest for the Alyssa Rife show when her cell phone rang. Seeing it was Minuete, she apologized to the guest and asked “Do you mind if I take this? It's pretty important.” The guest, a professor from an obscure school on an obscure subject motioned for her to go ahead.

“I've been trying to reach you all day!” complained Lani as she stepped outside. “Where have you been?”

“Just really getting a workout with my TortureMaster 2000. What's up?”

First Lani related the story about Brea and Allison seeing the delivery van, then continued, “The name of the delivery service sounded familiar to me, and it wasn't until one of the accountants was giving me reports on the financial audits that I remembered why. Cyprene Enterprises is a subsidiary of Kiley Enterprises.” “That's right,” confirmed Minuete. “My family has a home in Aspen, Colorado. I've got a very, very small operation there with, it think three guys? I've got no idea what they would be doing all the way down there in Iowa.”

Lani was trying to hide the panic in her voice, “Minuete, this doesn't pass the smell test. Find out and call me right back, and I mean hurry.” Minuete's voice carried the same panic as she promised she would.

Lani didn't walk back into the room to complete the interview. She just sat there, thoughts racing, trying to get the big picture. It wasn't long before she got the call back from Minuete, who by now was hysterical “My contact there says I gave him an order, with code confirmation to sneak eight female agents dressed as band members into this hotel in a van! I never did that, he says he hasn't heard from his two agents. Lani, Mistress Nine's trying to frame me for something big here.”

“Oh my God,” realized Lani “Mistress Nine's going to assassinate the President! The EMP2 weapons would knock out all the lights and communication equipment for the Secret Service, not to mention every other security measure. There were old fashioned night vision devices that didn't require electricity as they worked by filtering light with lenses, you could ambush the Secret Service easily!”

Lani was still trying to understand the magnitude of what was happening when she looked up at the MSNBC broadcast running. And anchorwoman was announcing that they still hadn't been able to get in touch with the Vice President. “Minuete?” asked Lani “What would happen if someone set off an EMP2 aboard Air Force two?”

"I... don't know..." she stammered "It could lose guidance control, surface to air chaff defense from missiles wouldn't work...a lot of things. All of them very bad." "I've got to go," said Lani. As she closed the phone she heard Minuete screaming "No, tell me what's going on!!"

Lani's hands were shaking so hard at this point she had trouble dialing the small keys on the phone. Brea answered on the very first ring.

"Oh my God, Brea," she stammered. "You weren't being paranoid, things are about to get very, very bad." Then she explained everything to Brea, the assassination teams, Air Force Two going down because of the EMP2 pulse.

"I...I don't know what I can do to stop this thing..." said Brea. Lani had known her for years, and could tell, what was happening was overwhelming Brea.

"I'll tell you what you do," scolded Lani, "You've got to get pissed. You've got to get mad as hell and go stop her. Go tell their Secret Service agents an attack is coming. You guys split up, they're probably going after Cabbot too. I got the goods from Minuete, Mistress Nine is using a terrorist cell named "Ninth Accomplice." They're female ex-special forces soldiers. They're posing as a band for the party tonight."

"All right," agreed Brea. "I'll call you when I can." Then closed the phone. Michael and Allison were staring at her, because she was white as a sheet. "I'm going to need to find a broom," she announced.

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"I had let my Secret Service agent go say hello to a friend that's assigned to the President's detail," said Michael. "I'll go find him, and tell him to get the President out of here."

"All right. Allison and I will go find your dad, Michael, we'll get him out of here, I promise."

Suddenly water started bursting from the bathroom, and seconds later Allison stepped out holding a three foot long metal pipe. She tossed it in the air to Brea. "A little bit better than a broom pole, right?" asked Allison.

Brea went through a few quick exercises to felt the weight of the pipe and decided it was acceptable to wield as a fencing weapon. "Let's roll," she declared.

Senator Cabbot wasn't answering his hotel phone, meaning he was probably in the bar getting ready for the press conference he was scheduled to hold there. Brea and Michael raced in the opposite directions trying to reach their goals.

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Senator Cabbot was sitting in the hotel Restaurant working on his laptop. A hands-on kind of manager, he always wrote his own speeches, in fact he really enjoyed the art. And to practice it he needed solitude, or at least the weird version of it someone running for President could get. So right now, he was writing variations of a speech, preparing for all the various possibilities of what could happen once the votes were counted. The room was relatively empty, save for a lone member of his Secret Service detail, and the band that was setting up their equipment running sound checks for their show that night.

“Mr. Speaker! Get down!” screamed a voice. He looked up to see Brea and Allison running at the band members with a metal pipe in her hand. The Secret Service agent went into overdrive, drawing his Uzi and standing in front of the Congressman.

The four members of the all-female band were clearly the Ninth Accomplice cell members. Dressed in outrageous dominatrix lingerie and green goggles, probably the night vision goggles Lani had told Brea about. The moment they saw Brea enter the room, they reacted, knowing they had been discovered. The assassins produced throwing knives.

“Squad B, reporting,” one member, obviously the leader spoke into her headset. “Situation compromised, proceeding on alternate plan 216.” As she was saying this, she was pulling out a device that looked remarkably similar to a Palm Pilot. Just as Brea and Allison were about to close in, she mashed a button.

In the blink of an eye, the world re-entered the stone age.

The lights went dead, the chatter on the agent’s radio suddenly vanished. Brea couldn’t see a thing, all she could do was blindly swing the pipe towards where the Ninth Accomplice leader had been moments earlier, she couldn’t help but think how alien the world sounded with no electronic background noise.

Brea could hear the screams of the Secret Service agent as she felt her weapon swing and miss. The scream was a truly horrible sound, as the lungs weren’t really there to expel the air through his vocal cords. Her eyes were adjusting to the darkness now, and she saw Allison Holiday doing what she had been training for a lifetime for; saving the day by kicking everyone’s ass.

Apparently all of the classes in the Israeli martial art of Krav Maga were paying off, because as a Ninth Accomplice cell member turned her knife to stab Allison, she pounced like a cobra. Pushing the dagger to one side with her left hand, she stiffened the fingers in her right to strike like a cobra as the throat and chest of the woman. This knocked the breath out of the assassin long enough for Allison to make a third swinging motion, grabbing the dagger, and spinning around to cold cock her in the head with the hilt of it. The assassin’s knees went limp as she slumped to the ground.

The other members of Ninth Accomplice realized Allison and Brea to a lesser extent were their primary targets. Two of them attacked Allison, using their own martial arts they had learned in their special forces training. One woman attempted to spin kick Allison in the head, but Allison, ducking under it just responded with a spin kick of her own, aiming for the back of the thigh of the leg the assassin was standing on, causing her to suddenly to be falling to the floor.

The other woman was rushing at her, hands posed to strike, so Allison pulled out her flask of Jungle Juice and took a large swig into her mouth. The woman was certain she had the kill but just as the woman got close Allison grabbed the goggles and spat the high-proof Jungle Juice into the assassin’s eyes, stunning her. Ninth Accomplice cell members seemed immune to pain, but the strength of the Jungle Juice seemed to get her attention throwing her off.

She then grabbed her arm at the wrist of the woman, using her momentum against her and threw the woman into the other assassin she had just downed. As the women were trying to recover, Allison rushed in for the kill.

All of this was happening in an instant. When Brea had screamed “Get down,” the agent had pushed the Speaker down to the floor of the room hard, catching him off guard. He had been told by the

agents that in a situation to simply stay still until an “All Clear!” was called. But when he saw the Ninth Accomplice leader rushing at him with a knife, he knew he had to fight.

The assassin’s first slash drew a spray of blood from Cabbot, but fortunately it had slashed from his right temple down to his cheek, and not across his throat as she had intended. He responded with a quick one-two punch that would have knocked out any normal person, but the woman was like a robot, not reacting in any way at all from the pain. Her eyes were insanelly wide, you could almost feel the tunnel-vision emanating from her.

“Stop right there!” screamed Brea hysterically. The assassin turned to see Brea holding the dead agents Uzi in both hands to try to keep it aimed at the woman, her hands were shaking so badly. “Put down the knife, and no one else has to get hurt today. Please, I don’t want to shoot you,” said Brea, the fear causing tears to start to run down her cheek.

The assassin looked at Brea trying to decide if she could do it. “Go ahead and shoot, Brea!” ordered Cabbot, knowing it was the only thing that would save his life. “That’s an order, pull the trigger, soldier!”

The lights were starting to flicker back on again, the EMP2 electromagnetic interference finally starting to fade. Brea was just racking with sobs now, the pressure had gotten to her and she was freaking out. “Please...” she begged the woman, “Don’t make me do this. I can’t do this, just put down the knife and this will all be over and I can go home.”

“What are you waiting for? Shoot! Shoot her, Goddammit!” screamed Cabbot. Brea didn’t seem to hear him, and continued to tremble with fear. Brea saw the moment in the assassin’s eyes when she decided Brea wouldn’t be able to do it. She lunged at Cabbot, dagger high in the air for the death strike. “SHOOT!!!!” screamed Cabbot, knowing he was about to die.

Brea somehow managed to pull the trigger, firing four rounds. Three of them hit the woman, causing her body to immediately shake and fit as if she was having a seizure, it was a truly horrific sight. The assassin had been aiming for Cabbot’s throat, but even as she was dying in midair, she managed to slash deeply in his upper thigh. The dagger was embedded in his flesh all the way to the hilt.

Brea didn’t hear the cry of pain from Cabbot, the whole world was tuned out, she just dropped the gun and started screaming. For the rest of her life Brea’s life would have horrible nightmares about what she witnessed. In the movies, you shoot someone and there might be some blood. In real life seeing parts of anatomy torn out of a body by the Teflon-coated hollow point UZI rounds would definitely earn an NC-17 rating.

“Brea! Brea! Calm down!” said Allison, trying snap Brea back into the real world. “She’s really freaked out,” thought Allison.

Cabbot didn’t pull the knife out of his leg, but was now fully back in soldier mode. He was now in the same mindset he’d had in Vietnam when his armored personnel carrier had come under fire, and he’d had to fight to save his squad’s life. Picking up the Uzi, he coldly walked to where Allison had knocked out the other Ninth Accomplices, leaving a large trail of blood in his wake. Putting the weapon in semi-automatic mode for more control, he double-tapped two shots into each of the terrorists foreheads, he couldn’t risk them waking up and killing him.

“What happened to my son, where’s Michael?!!” he demanded to know. Allison was still trying to calm Brea down, and just gave him a cursory “He went to go warn the President,” she told him.

The EMP2 wave had completely dissipated at this point, and the Secret Service headset was spewing chaotic chatter. Cabbot picked up the headset. "This is Speaker of the House Michael Cabbot to any Secret Service agent. What's the situation, talk to me!"

"We were ambushed, sir! Everything electronic went dead and a group of female assassins jumped us. The President...he's dead, along with half the Secret Service agents in the building. And it happened on live television is the worst part. We've got mass panic on our hands here, sir, all four assassins got away. There's no way we can get a team to your location."

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine, I'm just going to find a place to hide until things get under control. I'm sure the Vice-President can handle things for a while."

The agent seemed not to know what to say, "Sir... I don't know how to tell you this, but the Vice President is dead. Air Force Two crashed in Maryland about 17 minutes ago, it's what the President was going on live television to tell people." Here the agent took a long pause, and then asked with all the intensity in the world, "What is it you'd like for me to do Mr. President?" The man was scared, he needed structure and orders.

It was the moment House Speaker Michael Cabbot had thought about a thousand times in asking himself if he had what it takes to be President. "How would I respond in a crisis?" He wasn't just going to sit around undecided as America was under attack, it was time for action! He looked down at the knife in his leg, he was losing a lot of blood. He couldn't make the decisions he needed to make as President if he was unconscious.

"We never did a scenario like this when we were rehearsing FEMA procedures," noted Cabbot, FEMA standing for Federal Emergency Management Agency. "How do I put COG into effect?"

COG stood for Continuity of Government, an emergency plan that originated during the cold war. In it, members of government were diverted to alternate secure emergency bunkers to ensure that the American Government survived during a crisis like this one.

"I...I don't know Mr. President. The man that would ordinarily do it, your Counterterrorism coordinator, went down with Air Force Two," stammered the agent.

"What's your name, son?" asked the President.

"Agent Clark, sir. Agent Cassidy Clark," stammered the young agent.

"Mr. Clark, speaking under Article II of the Constitution of the United States, I am appointing you my National Security Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counterterrorism of the United States. Get in touch with whoever's left alive in the White House PEOC (Note from Editor Lani Cameron: PEOC stands for Presidential Emergency Operations Center, a hardened bunker located in the White House for making decisions in crisis.) and let them know you are in charge here coordinating things. Tell them you are instituting COG, and tell them if they think you are joking, my authority code to do this is Zeta Tau Alpha 1898." "Yes, Mr. President," replied the agent.

"Cassidy..." said the President, "I don't have to tell you we've got one hell of a day ahead of us... I need you to be at your best, America needs your best as well."

"I won't let you down, Mr. President," promised the young agent.

"My son is named Michael," said the President. "He went after you guys to try to warn you guys about the attack. I need you to find out if he's okay, and get back to me as soon as humanly possible."

I'm a father, and I need to know my son is all right to be thinking clearly." The agent promised he would.

At this point, Brea was marginally more calmed down, somewhat more herself again, taking deep breaths and trying to forget the horrors she had just seen. The President took off his suit jacket. "I need your help," he told Allison while taking off his suit jacket.

"I've got to stop this bleeding if I want to stay conscious," he said, motioning to the knife skewered in his leg. He tore the fabric in half, the adrenaline in his system making it easy. "I need you to pull this knife out of my leg and when you do, there's going to be a lot of blood. I need you to wrap this cloth around it like a tourniquet, and apply pressure to it until the bleeding stops. I'll try not to scream too much."

Allison ran over to him, taking the strips of cloth and promising it was no problem. "Did I hear you say you're the President now?" she asked, not with a lot of interest. "That's right," he affirmed. "That's totally prescient!" exclaimed Allison. "I hope you'll get rid of all these stupid taxes on alcohol, they really cramp my style. And also the laws prohibiting my bootleg production of Jungle Juice."

Brea was too distracted, staring into space to see the scene that followed, removing the knife from the President's thigh. But Allison Holiday showed more cool headedness than a nurse on ER. The President had removed his leather watch band to bite on for the pain, but fortunately all the adrenaline in his system helped. He couldn't help but cry out when Allison poured high-proof Jungle Juice on the wound to Once he was sufficiently coagulated, he radioed Clark again.

"Where can...Where can I go to get an open line to the rest of the administration in the PEOC?" asked the President, starting to get woozy from the loss of blood," he asked Clark over the radio.

"I'd ordinarily tell you to head to your Campaign Headquarters but that's not a secure location at the moment with the terrorists. You need to get to a secure facility. This is a crazy idea, but do you know how to fly a helicopter?"

"No," said the President. "In Vietnam, I was assigned to armored personnel carriers because I don't like to fly."

"I can," offered Allison. "What kind is he talking about?" Cabbot reiterated the question to his cabinet member who soon came back with an answer.

"Apparently there's a news media Bell Ranger parked on the helipad, two floors up. Historically, Presidents spend so much time in Iowa we built an emergency bunker to uplink with the PEOC, it's about twenty miles northwest of Des Moines."

"I usually fly the Bell 300C," remarked Allison, "but they're close enough. I'm sure can get you there. Probably."

"I've got a pilot...a pilot ready to go. I'll put her on, give her the coordinates," ordered the President, handing the headset to Allison. He felt woozy, and leaned on a nearby pillar for balance.

Brea's cell phone started ringing, startling her and snapping her back into reality. "Brea! It's Lani! The President was just assassinated on live television, how are you? What happened?" Brea took the opportunity as a chance for catharsis, and explained what had happened. "Look," she offered "I'll send you pictures of everything with my camera phone."

Brea snapped a quick picture of the dead assassins, and then one of Allison, jotting down flight coordinates she was being fed onto her palm. But when she turned to take a picture of the President, Brea saw he had collapsed from loss of blood. "Oh my God, I've got to go, Lani."

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Back in Washington DC, Lani was looking at the pictures Brea had sent her when she saw that Alyssa Rifte was standing behind her. How long had she been there? What did she know?

"Let me see that," Alyssa barked, snatching the phone away from Lani before she could react. She studied the pictures, then noted, "So the Vice-President is dead too, huh? We've got the scoop on this one, none of the other networks know about this! This is going to get me that second Peabody Award I've always dreamed about!" "It was a Polk Award, Miss Rifte," noted a nearby staffer, "You never won a Peabody."

"Hey, shut up," bellowed the arrogant blowhard, "Just shut up, okay! How long to airtime?"

"25 minutes," replied the staffer.

"I'll be in my dressing room rewriting tonight's talking points," she then threw the phone in the staffers direction. "Tell the chumps in graphics to get these pictures put up in queue to go on my mark.

Lani was appalled, "Miss Rifte, you can't go live with this! You've got to wait for the Speaker, I mean the President to get to safety and get a basic government put together. You're not in possession of all the facts, there's this woman out there named Mistress Nine..."

But Alyssa Rifte just cut her off, "I know all about this Mistress Nine because I've never trusted you and had this office bugged. I've heard everything you've been chatting about." Lani tried to protest further but Alyssa Rifte wouldn't let her say a word, "Listen, number one, I don't care what you think. And number two, get out of my studio before I tear you to (expletive deleted) pieces."

The next thing Lani knew security had thrown her out of the building, the door literally hitting her ass on the way out. "Oh my God, I've got to stop this!" she realized. There was already civil unrest and panic in Des Moines. If Alyssa Rifte went on the air and announced the Vice President was dead as well, and the Speaker of the House had also had an attempt on his life, and could not be located a lot of people were going to get killed.

Out of her own ideas, Lani could only think to call Minuete. Alyssa Rifte had stolen her cell phone, so she looked to see a 14 year old teenybopper girl yakking away. Lani just walked over and snatched it, dialing Minuete's number even as the girl ranted and demanded her phone back.

Wanting to stop the noise Lani jabbed a menacing finger in the girl face. "Seriously, I will kick your ass if you don't shut up and get out of here." That scared the girl enough that she ran off, leaving Lani listening to the phone ring.

"Thank God you're back," said Minuete, "What's happening? Give me an update." Lani explained what had just happened with Rifte, and why she had to stop her.

"I'll be down there in 10 minutes with my security force," said Minuete, rising to the moment. Now it was her chance to do what she had been training a lifetime for, "aggressive negotiations" as she liked to put it. "Don't worry Lani, if there's anything I know how to do, it's kick ass and take names."

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Brea and Allison were carrying President Cabbot up the stairs and out of the building each of them hoisting an arm. Because there was such a large difference in height with the girls, Brea was having to carry most of the weight. If the situation hadn't been so dire, it might have been comical, because Brea in her own words believed "Ladies do not lift heavy objects, we let boys do it because it gives them a thrill to help us and we like to give them that thrill." They were at the stairwell exit to the heliport on top of the building. Cabbot was becoming more and more lucid, making the task of carrying him a bit easier. Allison peeked out the door to the helipad, to see two of the four remaining Ninth Accomplice terrorist cell members guarding the helicopter. One was wearing a Secret Service headset, that's how they knew that this was where they were heading, the other two were probably sweeping the hotel floor by floor to find the President.

"We're outnumbered!" exclaimed Allison.

"What are we going to do?" asked Brea. "

"Well, fortunately my extensive knowledge of American military tactics will get us out the situation. Just follow me to the helicopter."

Brea just nodded, in the affirmative, and looked to Cabbot, "Mr. President, please try to move with me as quickly as possible, can you hear me."

"Yes," he replied weakly, "I'm with you,"

"Allison," said Brea, "Are you sure this is a good idea? Those guys are trained killers, they're terrorists."

"Bring 'em On." she said quite boldly, "We go on 3...2...1...GO!!!" and with that, Allison kicked open the stairwell door drawing the reloaded Uzi, and fired wildly, running at them as fast as she possibly could with no regard for either her own safety or what she was aiming at.

"Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!" she screamed crazily as she charged and fired.

The unexpected Blitzkrieg took the assassins so off guard they realized that they had two options, either 1. get out of the way or 2. die and maybe take out Allison out in the process. Scrambling, they leapt off the roof and splashed down into the hotel pool below, leaving Allison Holiday with a smoking gun, and a wicked smirk on her face.

"Now that's the 'Merican way," she said proudly, taking another potshot burst at the assassins and missing. "Heh, heh, heh. They can't be terrorists if they're dead."

By now Brea had secured the President in the small helicopter, and was taking a seat herself. Allison turned and entered the chopper herself, seating herself at the controls.

"When did you have time to take flying lessons, Allison?" asked Brea.

"Oh," she replied reflexively, "I never had formal lessons, but I did play Microsoft Flight Simulator on Ashley's computer a lot one weekend." That really got the Speaker's attention, but Brea just put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry," she said soothing voice, "Allison is living proof that it's better to be lucky than smart."

"A lot of people underestimate me," Allison agreed.

As Allison was flicking switches (her favorite pastime) and firing up the helicopter, she started to talk "You know, I was thinking about starting my own rock band, and so I was going to grow my hair out

real long..." babbling out loud to herself, not aware that no one was listening. The President turned to Brea and said

"She's really off in her own world, isn't she."

"You have no idea whatsoever," answered Brea.

The President asked Brea to hand him the Secret Service Headset, and once they were in the air, he radioed in. "Clark, are you there? Talk to me."

"Yes Mr. President I'm here."

"Any word on my son, Michael yet?" he demanded.

"No sir, I will personally go down to the site and find out. Medical personnel are finally arriving on the scene, we'll have a list available of the casualties..." he realized that was the wrong thing to say, "And also, the people that have been treated,"

The President stopped him, "Just stop right there, we're not going to get through today worrying about handholding, but make finding him a priority. I need for you to have the Putter ready for me when I arrive at my PEOC site."

"I'm sorry, Mr. President, I don't know all the lingo yet, but I pick things up quickly. What's the Putter?"

"I understand," replied the President, "It's the PDTB, it stands for Presidential Daily Threat Briefing, only three people in the government have access to it, and now you're one of them. It'll get up to speed quickly on just who's behind this attack on America."

"Mr. President. I think I have the answer to that," offered Brea, ready to tell him the long lurid tale of the Mistress Nine.

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Lani was standing outside the MSNBC building when fleets of orange SUV's started to pull up at the curb of the building. Minuete's squadrons of goons, the doors opened, and legions of Minuete's goon squads started to pour out of the cars. They were being trailed by a police car squealing through the streets, siren and lights blazing.

The police car parked right there in the handicapped space in front of the building. Who else could have perkily popped out, but Carmet, Minuete had been riding shotgun.

Carmet then overacted the following exchange over her police bullhorn for the bystanders to see, just in case Minuete ended up having legal liability for the "crime" she was about to commit. "Hello there, helpful citizens," she called out to the Jack-booted goons. "I'm policeman in a bind and I need some help from some Americans that love freedom. Do you guys have time to do me a favor?"

"All will fall before Paradox Ninety!!" they cried in unison. It was the only response Minuete ever let them give to a question.

"Uh, I'll take that as a yes. Under code uh, twelve, of the law, I am appointing all of you temporary deputies of the Washington DC police department. You have full legal authority and are acting as officers of the constitution or whatever the "controlling legal authority" is."

With that, Minuete just shoved the woman she loathed out of the way, and snatched the bullhorn from her. "Listen up, men! Alyssa Riffe's ass is ours for the taking, she's on the fourth floor, go find her and destroy her!"

A nearby minion couldn't help but look up at her with glowering admiration, "That was a really great line reading, boss!" That made Minuete chuckle in delight, "Ah well, thank you. I really am a traditional villain."

As her villains rushed into the building, they weren't carrying guns, because that would be illegal. No, they were just ordinary citizens that happened to have brass knuckles and baseball bats on them when they were deputized by Officer Carmet Criser.

"You're storming the building?" demanded Lani. "I think you've lost your mind."

"No, you've lost your balls," Minuete said, getting right up into Lani's face. "Even I'm not dumb enough to walk into a national network and assault a television personality. I expect a full Presidential pardon for this. If you've got any other ideas how to stop Alyssa Riffe, I would enjoy hearing them, because if I don't get my Presidential orders I will lie and tell people I had them and he's denying it."

Lani thought about that one for a second then replied, "No, you're right. You're the one taking a very dangerous risk here, I'll back up your story that the President said it was okay. Where's Britney, by the way?"

Minuete just looked around and said, "You know, now that I think about it, I haven't seen her around lately. She had mentioned something about being out of town for a few days."

"Minuete! The lobby is secure!" shouted Taro from the doorway. "You can proceed inside now."

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As they entered the elevator, Lani mashed the button to the 4th floor. Nothing happened.

"I expected as much," reflected Minuete. "There's an emergency lockdown on her floor. I have the same thing installed in the Annex Skyrise for the floors my office is on. We won't have any luck with the stairs, either. Just take us to the 5th floor instead."

"Why," asked Lani, "What's on the 5th floor?" But Minuete was just way too involved in looking at her PalmPilot. It seemed to be a diagram of the building. "It's really just simpler if I show you," sneered Minute. "How much time to Riffe's broadcast?" Lani glanced down at her watch. "About 2 minutes."

"Why is it always so easy?" smirked Minuete.

As the elevator doors opened, and out exited Lani and Minuete with a legion of Minuete's goons surrounding her. They were met with nothing but angry question of "Who they were?" and "What were they doing here!?!?" But Minuete just marched confidently through the office, it being obvious she didn't hear any of it at all. All Lani and the goons could do was to follow her.

The floor was where the executive offices were held, and Minuete went through the newsroom, through a Secretary office, and straight into the President of MSNBC's office. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded to know.

Minuete ignored him as well, and pulled an object out of her pocket, aimed at the floor and mashed a button.

It was the prototype EMP2 her lone scientist had recovered. The world went dead around them, all electronic activity entirely ceasing. "Her studio's right below us," said Minuete. "We've got to get to those doors before the EMP2 pulse wears off and we can't get to the stairwell doors. Lani nodded at her, and raced behind her to the emergency stairwell.

Going down one floor, it was now Lani in the lead, because she knew this floor better than Minuete did. The electronic security door were swinging wide open, the lock completely dead.

The next thing she knew Lani heard Alyssa Rifte screaming at her from her studio chair, "Are you responsible for this!?!? This is a complete setup!! I'm going to tear you to..."

She didn't get the opportunity to finish the sentence because Lani had her fist cocked back, and she put all of it, and I mean all of it into the punch. All the tension and frustration of everything that had happened to her since Brea and Allison had gotten back into her life, her fear and outrage over the events of today, the Election Eve, all of it went into this single punch. She could hear the cartridge snap in Alyssa Rifte's obvious nose job, and Alyssa's phony ass went flying back hard in her chair through her phony set for her phony show.

Lani was feeling better than she'd ever felt before in her life. All the stress and anxiety was completely out of her system. That was the moment when she felt the eyes of the entire staff of the Rifte Effect was staring at her in disbelief.

So she could only answer to them, "Everyone here on the Rifte Effect, I know it will come to no one's surprise here when I tell you that this woman has a gigantic ego. But tonight, her ego was so out of control, she would have rather gotten a lot of innocent people killed than give up a chance to win a Peabody award. So to you, I have just one question. Did anyone in here just see that?"

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Allison's landing in the Bell Ranger was a good one, in the "any landing you can walk away from" sense of it. As they landed at the site, the President was relieved to see that Clarke had been successful at contacting his campaign headquarters, because there waiting for him was his campaign manager, Lauren Klabosc, surrounded by the Secret Service detail that had been stationed at the campaign headquarters, preparing security for the campaign. Now they were the only thing that was stopping America losing a third President on one day.

As the President stumbled out of the helicopter the agents were shouting "POTUS! Confirm, we have POTUS!" POTUS was short for President of the United States.

"How's my team?" asked the President. "Did my advisory team make it here?"

"Yes, Mr. President," answered Kabosk.

When he had decided to run for President, he had consulted with the best of the best to help him decide what his economic, foreign policy, and Homeland Security policies would be. He had been very painstaking in who he had chosen, his critics saying it showed Cabbot was unable to make strong decisions. He would fight the urge to call them and say "They're my cabinet members now, glad I paid it some thought, and didn't use my magic 8 ball?"

As they were entering the complex, the President told Kabosk "I'm going to need to get an uplink with SIOC," he was referring to the Strategic Information and Operations Center, the FBI's command

center for emergencies much like the President's PEOC. "I've got information about who is behind these attacks, a terrorist operating under the name 'Mistress Nine.'"

Brea and Allison were following Cabbot, they were stopped by the Secret Service. "We appreciate your help, but only Government officials are allowed inside this facility. We'll arrange for an escort to take you to the city." This clearly seemed to piss off the President, because he just responded sharply, "You listen to me very carefully, son. Without these girls, there'd be something a little different about me, namely I'd be a whole lot deader than I am right now. Drop the bullshit and let them in."

"Wow," thought Allison, as she got a sight of the interior of one of the most advanced communication rooms in the world. "Today didn't turn out to be boring at all, like I thought it was going to be. I guess you telling Lani about that van turned out to be prescient after all."

Brea turned and stared at Allison, "You actually got it right that time! That's what the word actually means, Allison."

"What can I say?" said Allison with a great sense of pride. "I'm Allison (expletive deleted)ing Holiday. My adventures are crazy, but eventually they work out."

"That they do," agreed Brea, taking a seat at the crisis table. In her mind she was wondering if Michael was alright. She was glad she had a shoulder to cry on, because she would be in some serious therapy after today.

The President was at the head of the table orchestrating the meeting. "All right people," he started. "We are operating in Crisis Mode, meaning you leave your microphone off unless you are speaking to me. If there's something you wish to tell me, but do not wish for others to hear, contact me on the red phone. JCS, I need CAP over all major cities, how long till we can do that?" CAP stood for Combat Air Patrols.

"About 20 minutes, Mr. President," said the man from the Pentagon over the video display.

"Make it 15, someone tell me, what the state of the American people. Do we have mass panic on our hands?"

"Quite frankly, yes, Mr. President. The television people are swarming all over what happened at the hotel in Des Moines. I mean, they have a live video of the President having a dagger thrown into his throat. They don't know about Vice President dying in Air Force Two yet, but all they're talking about on the news is why they haven't gotten any response from him yet."

On the President's desk, the red phone started to ring. "Mr. President, this is Clark here. I have news about your son, Michael. You said you didn't want any handholding, so I'm just going to give it to you straight."

"Go ahead," ordered the President.

"According to the Secret Service agents that survived, your son tried to be a hero, sir. He stood up to try to stop the assassins when everyone else was running scared. He's got multiple stab wounds, and a collapsed lung. Sir...the doctor's are telling me that there's not a very good he's going to make it. If...if he ever walks again, it's not going to be very well."

Cabbot's eyes immediately turned to Brea, who had the look of someone that was trying to deal with a great tragedy. He didn't want to add to it, now was not the time to add to it. "If my son is

strong enough to stand up to a bunch of terrorists, he's strong enough to make it through this thing. Thank you for telling me privately."

"Mr. President," said an official on the main screen at the SION. "I'm sorry to interrupt you, but this cannot wait. The networks are reporting that this Mistress Nine has hijacked oil tankers all around the country and is crashing them into Federal buildings. There was just a synchronized attack in New York City, Los Angeles, and eleven other major cities. There's also a report from local police that oil tankers were seen driving erratically and were driving in this direction. We've got to evacuate this site, sir. It's not safe."

"No," disagreed the President. "I've got to get on the air this very instant, and reassure the American people that we have things under control, even if we don't. Brea Anatamata?"

"Yes, Mr. President?" replied Brea.

"Get your friend Lani on the air over there at MSNBC, tell her she's going to have one of the biggest exclusives in history. We're not going to do any prerecorded speech on this crisis, that's not the way this administration is going to operate. Tell her she's going to have a live interview with me, and can ask me any question she wishes. We're going to explain this to the American people in a way that's very open, honest and direct." Brea agreed and picked up the phone to dial. "Let me add one small thing to what I just said," stated the President. "When I first decided to run for President, it was because I am truly disgusted by partisan politics in Washington. You've got the Neocons hijacking the Republican party the politics of personal destruction, and the only agenda the Democrats can seem to agree on is 'We Hate Republicans.' I refuse to let this administration play that game. According to the Constitution, I am President until November 2nd, and then the American people decide if I deserve to keep the job. This administration will be half Democrat and half Republican. We're going to decide what we can do improve the lives of the American people, and not play any more games."

In the meantime, Brea had finally gotten Lani on the phone. "Lani! We're safe, we made it to the PEOC."

"Oh, thank God," said Lani, letting out a deep sigh of relief. "Guess what? I just punched Alyssa Rife so hard I broke her nose. Today's been the best day of my life."

"Well, then," replied Brea "I've got more good news for you. First, on the helicopter ride over here, the President told us we were all getting the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award the nation can give a civilian."

"Are you kidding me? Even Minuete?" said Lani, taken aback. That certainly would look nice hanging in her office, considering Rife didn't get her fired. "No," laughed Brea, "The President said her reward for her help today will be he'll do his best to keep her out of Federal Prison."

"That's great. I bet Allison's freaking out, she loves shiny objects."

"Oh yeah," agreed Brea. "It was a very Allison moment. She was all like 'But, I want a Congressional Medal of Honor, like in that videogame!' And he was trying to explain that you have to be in the Military to win that, and there was no Congressional Medal of Honor, just Medal of Honor, it's a common mistake people make. And that just confused her more, and she wouldn't shut up about it."

"How'd you end up solving that one?" said Lani, chuckling.

"I whispered to the President that he could give her the Medal of Freedom, and we'd tell her it was a Congressional Medal of Honor."

An aid tapped Brea on the shoulder, "Excuse me, but if you're staying here I need for you to sign your name to this sheet."

"I'm busy right now following orders from the President," said Brea very sarcastically. "What's important enough that you're interrupting me?"

"I'm going to email out a list of who's here, so the recovery teams will know how many bodies to look for," said the aid. "We don't have any idea how long it will be before those hijacked gas tankers get here." Brea took a moment to consider the seriousness of what was happening, then signed the list and continued with her business.

"I have some news you might find interesting, Lani."

"Not much could be as interesting as what we've seen here today," observed Lani.

So Brea told her about the interview the President was about to give her live on MSNBC. To say she freaked out would be an understatement.

"I can do it right here in Alyssa Rifte's studio. Once word gets out what she tried to do, she'll probably get fired, maybe I can take the job permanently."

"After uncovering a story that saved the President's life? That's got to count for something on a resume. And Allison probably won't have any trouble getting Blow'd Up produced, what with her Congressional Medal of Honor and all."

"How long do I have until the President wants to go live?"

"Let me find out," replied Brea, turning on her microphone. "Mr. President? How long till you want to go live?"

"No time like the present," replied the President. "Let me know when MSNBC has an uplink and is ready to do the broadcast."

"Mr. President," protested one aide, "We're going to need at least half an hour to get you through hair and makeup. That cut on your cheek isn't going to play well on television, with the right makeup..."

"What part of 'this administration will not play games' did you not understand?" snapped the President. "We're on the verge of mass panic, and you're talking about delaying that because something isn't going to play well with a focus group?"

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Minuete was standing in Alyssa Rifte's studio watching a technical team trying to reconstruct the hole Lani had punched a hole through with Alyssa Rifte. A team of makeup people were buzzing around her, working on short notice. They had insisted Lani change into one of Alyssa Rifte's pantsuits, but Lani refused, insisting "This is my interview, and I'm not going to play dress-up as just another talking head."

Minuete was admiring Lani's moxie on the issue, when she felt her cell phone buzzing. The caller ID was unable to identify who was calling, which was strange. Anyone that would have this phone

number was already programmed into the phone. Maybe Brea was calling her from a secure line at the PEOC site. She answered the phone, it was Britney.

"Hello there boss," she said, colder and more detached than ever.

"Britney, where are you?" asked Minuete. "Get down to the MSNBC building, I need you to help me coordinate these teams."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," reflected Britney. "But, I have a friend that can explain why." There was a pause as the phones were exchanged.

"Minuete... Kiley?" asked the creepy voice.

"Yes?" replied Minuete, feeling her nerves on edge.

"Minuete Le'Monde Kiley...you've had quite a day. I bet you're feeling quite proud of yourself...I thought I'd stolen all the Emp2's from your facility. For once you actually showed something resembling cleverness."

It was the Mistress Nine! And she wasn't using anything to filter her voice. Minuete immediately mashed the voice memo key, she'd had the phone modified to record conversations that she thought would come in handy later in case she needed to exploit someone.

"Who are you? Why did you do this? You planted Britney in my organization to spy on me?" demanded Minuete. "This is a really stupid way to try to control the world."

"Why did I do this?" replied an amused Mistress Nine. "I did this because I could. I can't take credit for the idea, I got it from the Lincoln assassination. Did you know the plan for his assassination was to kill the Vice President and Speaker of the House as well, to destabilize the Nation enough that Confederate Separatists could retake the North? But don't worry. I'll get what I want in good time. I always do."

"But why me?" cried Minuete, "Why did you pick me to frame for this? Why did you do this to me?"

"Minuete...always so self-involved, just like the psychological profile I had made on you said," laughed the woman cruelly. "This isn't about you at all...this, these attacks, everything that has happened today is all about Allison Holiday. I'd think you, of all people would understand that, Minuete, she's ruined your life so many times too. Why don't you ask Allison if she remembers the name...Wendy." And with that, the line went dead.

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Back at the alternative PEOC site, an aide had told Brea the President wished to see her privately. He was sitting alone in a private room, and just as before in the bar, he had managed to scrounge up a laptop, and was working on talking points for the interview with Lani.

"Brea," he said, standing for her. "I appreciate you coming."

"Yes, Mr. President," she said, very formally.

"Brea, I owe you and Allison more than another human being can owe another someone. I've got to tell you, I was in Vietnam, and you two showed as much bravery as I've even. And I don't know how to tell you how much I appreciate you saving my life other than to say what I've just said."

He offered Brea his hand, and Brea accepted it. They exchanged a tight, intense handshake, and their shared a glance that expressed feelings words could not. There they were, Brea and the leader of the free world, and for this moment they were equals.

"I wanted to ask you an important question before I went on the air. And that would be, do you want me to mention you and Allison's involvement in what happened today? I know it could propel you on to great things, but let me tell you, life in the public eye is not easy. I'm not sure it's a burden you wish to carry."

"Gee," said Brea, "I hadn't thought about it that way. When I was a little girl, I always dreamed of being a celebrity. But now that I actually have the opportunity, I...I don't know. Can I take some time to think about it?"

"Absolutely," promised the President. "Now Brea, I'm afraid I have to ask one more favor from you."

"What is it?" she replied.

He told her what had happened to Michael. He had expected her to freak out, but Brea just listened quietly and nodded. "The strongest people," thought the President, "are the ones that survive difficult events. After today, nothing is going to stop this girl at getting what she sets her mind to."

Brea asked what it was she wanted her to do. "I need you to fly to the hospital, and stay there with Michael. There is no doubt in my mind that with you there in that hospital room, he'll make a full recovery. All of this, surviving today, leading America out of this mess, none of that matters to me as much as knowing my son is alright. "

Brea smiled and agreed, adding "Mind if I take Allison along for company?" to which the President agreed. "Marine One has landed outside to fly the two of you to the hospital. Just do me a favor, and keep Allison away from any life support equipment, okay?" Brea laughed and said she would.

An aid stuck his head into the room, "Mr. President, they're ready for you."

"Alright," I'm on my way," he agreed, standing up.

"So," asked Brea, "You're about to give one of the most important addresses in history. Feeling nervous?"

"I'm too numb to the magnitude of it all to feel nervous," he replied. "But since this will be such a historic moment, why don't you come with me to witness it personally."

Brea followed the President as he walked down the hallway to the broadcasting room. As he took to the podium with the Seal of the President of the United States of America, Brea realized that he had the aura of a President around him. His eyes conveyed calm, measured reason. As a country, we'd need that go get through the day history would refer to as "The Election Eve."

"Mr. President," called a techie behind the camera, "We're live in ten seconds, 7...6...5...4...3...2..."

AFTERWORD

The gals of Soccon will return in...

### ***Socially Unconscious: The Princely Complex***

Melrose Place doesn't do psycho-drama half as well as the teenage girls of Charbonneau Academy, an exclusive all girls high-school. Brea and her best friend Michael-Anne Petite are in for quite a

shock when Charbonneau gets a new foreign exchange student, Allison Holiday, who arrives with her battle cry “Viva la glam lipstick, nyo!”

Also on a mission to make the most of every moment is their spacey homeroom teacher, Kat Wednesday. Way back in college when she decided to major in Education, she never would have dreamed she wouldn't get her Mrs. degree and she'd actually be forced to teach! That's okay, though, because she's more than happy to gossip with the gals about which boys in the rival class she secretly hates.

As if putting up with the spoiled “B!tches” of Charbonneau wasn't bad enough for Brea and the gang, Brea has started to receive anonymous love letters in the mail. Could it be that someone had finally wised up and realized how totally fab she is? Or is this just another psycho love-plot from the B!tches that put the duh in Diva? Look out, dear reader. If you hear something sneaking up behind you in a dark alley in the middle of the night, it's probably just this next thrilling chapter of the Soccon Universe, nyo!

Among the mysteries to be revealed in the Soccon saga...

- How did Brea and Allison meet?
- Will Michael Survive? And who's this John guy?
- What is Allison's past connection to the mysterious Mistress Nine?
- Why does Brea have a red streak in her hair?
- What happened to Britney to make her betray LV-426?
- What is Brea's real first name?
- Will Ashley ever get out of Minuete's prison?
- What's the secret behind Brea's swords?
- Why is Brea so secretive about her past?
- Will Allison persuade the President to remove federal taxes on alcohol?

#### Acknowledgments

Okay, right off the back, this isn't a normal boring Acknowledgements page. I care enough about the people I want to acknowledge for helping me write it to put a little effort into it and not just spout off a bunch of strangers you don't care about. I've spent my whole life dreaming about the day this novel gets published, so these thanks could not be more sincere.

#### **People not to thank**

S. and S. You know who you are, you assholes. I spent two years attempting to produce an animated version of this series based off the girls in college called “The Cracker.” I funded it with my own money. It was a really good script (I hope I'll get a chance to present it to you in a future animated series) and these two assholes ruined my film. One S. is a weasel tried to take financial advantage of the fact that I'm a nice guy that does not want to cheat people, and the other S. is just a lazy bitch that wouldn't do any work, despite the fact we were paying her. Both of you are human filth.

#### **People to thank**

My parents [Joel and Laura Flynt](#): Did you enjoy my artwork throughout this novel? Well. You have these two guys to thank. During the years when I was learning professional art, Dad is only too happy to give me the money for ridiculously expensive Adobe programs like Photoshop and Illustrator, and also the ridiculously expensive computer hardware to run them. The only hobby dad spends money on is his jogging shoes, so believe me, I am grateful. I am adopted, and thank God every day of my life I won the million dollar lottery to have such great parents. If you've found this novel to be creative, again you have them to thank. These guys bought me giant piles of Lego's growing up to build cities with and encouraged me to make stop motion films with them. As for my mom, she's so cool, I'll bet twenty dollars she knows more about computers than you do. How many moms will get on the phone and bitch at you about how shoddy the programming is on a CMOS upgrade in your bios? Plus she puts up with a son that constantly needs her advice, which is cool.

President George W. Bush: Okay, I'm making no qualms about this at all, the novel you have just read would not have been possible without the help of President George W. Bush. When I voted for him in 2000 I had no idea whatsoever that he would help me achieve my lifelong dream of finishing my first novel, by keeping the economy so shitty that I couldn't find a job and was forcibly unemployed. That meant I had a lot of free time to really refine this novel for you. So in part, you really have President George W. Bush to thank for the hilarious novel you have just enjoyed, and Bushie, I know you yourself have a lot of free time nowadays, so if you'd like, feel free to come on down with me to do some book tours with me. I think we'd get along famously, we have so much in common! Both of share July 6th as our birthday, and we also share the middle name Walker. Also both of us have vivid imaginations, and enjoy coming up with stories about mad evildoers determined to do harm to the American people. Bushie, you the man!

Pop Princess Kylie Minogue: Kylie, I'm your biggest straight fan in America, hands down. From the moment I first saw you on your 80's Locomotion cover with your poodle perm and gigantic hat, I knew you were the hottest woman on earth. You may have noticed that many of the sub-chapter names are titles of your songs. That's because I know your lyrics so well, and that's the track I put on repeat on my Ipod to listen to as I wrote it to keep me in the mindset of the chapter. Kylie, if I ever get my dream of finally producing this thing as an animated series the way it deserves to be done, let me say in advance that you are the only woman on earth that can play Brea Anatumata. You might have noticed all of the characters have a particular way of speaking and every word she's spoken in this book your voice has been in my head in that sexy Australian kat voice of yours. And yes, the "Thank you for flying Anatumata Air" line, I totally got that from your Album Light Years. Please don't sue. Plus, the way I figure, maybe if you're a voice on a TV show over here, this country will finally get it that you totally kick the American pop princesses asses all over the place. And one last thing, I told a small lie, there is one other woman that could play you for the series, and that's your Pop Princess sister Dannii, not so well known in the states. (Kylie's a sweetheart, so will not mind me saying the following) Dannii, if I could only have one album for the rest of my life to listen to, it would be Neon Nights, it's not even a close contest. Every song on there is perfect, except for "Push," what the hell were you thinking!?!? You lean a bit more on the dance side, so as far as my favorite songs, you win the battle by a hair. Brea is both a pussycat and a tiger, (the way I've heard the difference between you guys explained) which is why I have no preference of who would play her. In any case please take my agents call.

The Ole Miss Zeta Sorority: The hard drinking, hard partying Allison Holiday isn't fiction, she's based off the girls of Zeta Tau Alpha, where I had the privilege of being their houseboy. Here is what I loved about being a houseboy for the Zetas. A lot of these girls straight up, had gigantic badonkadonk asses. But what makes me love them so, is it never made them miss a beat with their drinking and

partying. I salute the women of Zeta Tau Alpha, because the size of a girl's badonkadonk should NEVER interfere with her partying.

Naoko Takeuchi, creator of Japanese Anime series Sailor Moon: The first time I saw the art of Sailor Moon, I knew right off the bat I would be spending years learning the nuances of drawing it. It took me about 6 years to get the hang of it, and I still learn things every day. Those of you reading this have Naoko Takeuchi to thank for the awesome villain name Mistress Nine.

The Employees of Uptown Coffee: I wrote 90 percent of this novel at this one particular coffee shop, and these guys are my Peeps that kept me sufficiently caffeinated. In no particular order, Ashley Thomas, Mandy Joyner, Amanda White, Sarah Taylor, Vera Parshikova, Brad Noel, Kristy Jacoby.

Harry McNally, who helped me edit an early draft of this book. He asked in return that I include his email address for the ladies. Q\_tip84@hotmail.com. I totally do not endorse this idea.

Lani had a very bad feeling about this. This would end badly for her, and there was nothing she could do about it. It had all happened there in LV-426. Lani had managed to escape the insanity for a while, but it was all coming back