

THE HEART OF THE DEAL

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BY GENE POCKET



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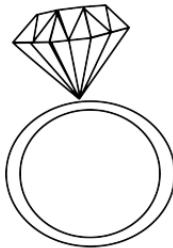
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For Sally



Holly Hitchens was seated in front of a smoky mirror staring at herself in the mirror. Paul Kirby paced behind her. The television was on in the corner.

“President Trump condemned threats of violence at the Cincinnati GOP convention,” said the perfectly tanned newscaster. “And called on Troopers to remain vigilant.”

“We should have gone to Canada in twenty-sixteen,” said Paul.

“And been killed by Muslims?”

“Muslim terrorists,” Paul corrected. “Now we’ll never get past the Canadian border wall.”

“True.” Holly blinked at her reflection and studied her lips.

“Members of the terrorist organization the Social Justice Warriors,” the newscaster droned, “have made continued to make threats online about the upcoming Republican convention but Attorney General Arpaio said tonight that he was taking a zero tolerance approach.”

“I really don’t want to go another Legislative District meeting,” said Paul. “I’m

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sick of listening to these Democrats talk about what they're going to do and all the lessons they've learned. They haven't learned anything. They're trying to make change in a system that doesn't exist anymore."

"Yeah." Holly used her fingertips to apply foundation.

"The only thing worse than a Republican is a Democrat," Paul continued.

"Really?"

"It's too sad. They're plotting a course to New York from the deck of the Titanic and they still haven't figured out its underwater."

Paul stopped to watch the TV and the TV spoke into the silence.

"And from California tonight, President Trump is holding a press conference to announce groundbreaking on what his supporters are calling 'White House West'."

"Ugh," said Paul.

"The new building is located just north of San Francisco and will act as a headquarters for the Trump administration when conducting business on the west coast."

"So what are you going to do tonight?" Holly wondered.

"I don't know." Paul sat on the end of the bed and chewed his thumbnail. "What are you doing?"

"Chelsea and I are going to dinner and then we're meeting up with the girls for drinks. I'm probably going to stay over so you don't have to wait up."

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Holly moved her face closer to the mirror. She picked up scissors and carefully cut the ends of three strands of hair.

“Okay,” Paul stared at the floor pensively.

“President Trump will be speaking to a gathering of tech titans in Seattle on Friday,” said the unnaturally tan newscaster.

“You have the place to yourself.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Have a drink,” Holly said. “You deserve it.”

“I can’t afford it.” Paul sighed and stood up. “I should probably get going. LD 33 meets at seven-thirty.”

He walked over and stood behind her. She smiled at him through the mirror and he kissed the top of her head.

“I love you,” he said. He looked worried.

She turned to give him a kiss but he was already halfway across the room.

“I love you too,” she said.

He stood in the doorway.

“Have fun with the girls,” he said over his shoulder.

“You too,” she said.

He turned and smiled.

“Bye,” he said glumly and was gone.

Holly turned back to her reflection and fluttered her eyelids. She picked up a tube of drugstore mascara.

“Secretary of State Ivanka Trump was greeted with cheers at Moscow Airport,” said the newscaster with a forced smile.

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Paul got off the bus and looked up and down the street. The sky was gray with twilight and the leaves in the trees whispered in the breeze. He rubbed his fingertips into his palms and crossed the street. He paused at the door of the Royal Castle Apartments and looked around. It was an unattractive building with ancient wood siding that was gray with age. He disappeared inside.

He followed the trash-strewn hallway to the stairwell.

“Trump would have this place demolished if he knew it was here,” he muttered.

He climbed two flights of stairs and knocked three times on the third door on the right. The door opened a crack. There was a chain stretched across at his eye line.

“Hey, Sally,” he said.

She pulled the chain away from the door and let him in. She looked up and down the hallway and closed the door behind him.

Chelsea Park exhaled a massive cloud of marijuana smoke and handed the joint to Holly.

“I’m sorry you can’t come out tonight,” Chelsea said.

Holly took a drag and exhaled.

“I promised Paul.”

“Whatever happened to hoes before bros?” said Chelsea.

Holly took another drag.

“He’s my fiancé,” she exhaled. “I think

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we're past that."

"You guys have been engaged for like five years."

Holly passed the joint.

"You sound like my mom," she said.

"I'm just fucking with you." Chelsea puffed on the joint. "I can get drinks without you."

She blinked her eyes coquettishly and handed the joint to Holly.

"I know," Holly took a long drag.

"I haven't paid for a drink since the 2017 Food Crisis. I have to dress like a hoe-bag but how else is a girl supposed to survive in this unbearable world?"

"Drinks are expensive."

"I'll go to second base for a cocktail."

"You sound like Paul." Holly snickered.

"Jesus. You should get back to him."

"Thanks, Chelsea," she took another long drag and handed Chelsea the joint. "Paul and I haven't had a night together in I don't know how long."

"Monogamy is so weird," said Chelsea through pot smoke.

Ben Dickerson was seated in the recliner. He was a thin man with thinning blond hair. His mouth was a straight line with frowning wrinkles on either end. Next to Ben, Wendy Starr sat on a barstool. She looked upset. Her round face was surrounded by a halo of perfectly crafted brown hair. She looked like a Stepford wife whose treadmill had broken

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but her fridge worked fine. To Ben's left, sitting on a folding chair was Sally Anulisch, a black haired twenty-something with olive skin that turned red when she was angry. Paul Kirby sat in the other folding chair facing Ben. There was a pile of cardboard, wooden sticks and markers between them. Paul looked nervous.

“Let’s get to work,” said Ben. “Friday is less than a week away and we have a lot to do.”

Holly was seated alone at a table in the middle of a crowded restaurant. She looked at her watch. She downed the last of her wine and looked around. She sighed and started to dig in her purse for her wallet.

“Sorry I’m late. The President’s press conference went a little long.”

Holly looked up at Eddie Preston. He had a smile on his square face and he was dressed in a spotless dark suit with a red tie. He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

“You look great,” he said.

“Are you serious?” said Holly indignantly. “You made me wait here so you could listen to President Stubby Fingers give another press conference?”

Eddie Preston sat across from her.

“He has normal-sized hands,” he said. He grabbed Holly’s hands across the table.

“Did one of his expert witch-doctors tell you that?” She stared into Eddie’s gray eyes. “What did he say this time?”

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“Everything is awesome.”

“Ugh,” said Holly. “And everything is twice the price.”

“Hey, baby,” said Eddie. “Don’t worry about it. You never have to worry about the price when you’re with me. I take care of you.”

In spite of herself, Holly smiled.

A waiter approached.

“Can I get you something to drink, sir?”

“I will have a Trump Ice,” said Eddie.

Holly rolled her eyes.

“Very good, sir,” the waiter replied. He moved away.

“How’s school?” asked Holly.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Eddie replied. “How are you? How’s Paul?”

“I’m fine.” Holly kissed Eddie’s hand. “I missed you.”

Paul was sitting on the couch, a tufted plum velvet thrift store find with wear in the cushions. He sipped his tea and listened as Paul Simon crooned from the grooves of a vinyl record. He stared at the coffee table like he could see through it. He looked worried. He didn’t hear the sound of keys jangling in the hallway.

The front door swung open and Holly entered. Her brown hair was dull and her shirt was on inside out.

“Hey, baby,” she cooed.

“Hey. How are the girls?”

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She dropped her bag and started to kick off her shoes.

“Oh, you know. Becky broke up with Mario again.”

Holly was in the bathroom tying up her hair.

“They were back together? What’s wrong with her?”

She came back into the living room rubbing lotion on her hands.

“I know. I wouldn’t date a Mexican.”

Paul glowered at her.

“I’m not a racist. It’s a trigger. You date a Mexican and Trump’s Troopers come to the door to ‘check your safety’. You know this shit is real. Better to play it safe and stick with your own kind.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m not a racist. I’m just saying.”

“You would’ve been a great Nazi,” Paul said.

Holly sat on the opposite end of the couch.

“Thanks.” She folded her arms. “How was your night?”

“It was my last night with the Democrats.”

“That bad?”

“I’m tired of it. They are seriously talking about running Chelsea Clinton.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, baby.”

She reached for his hand.

“I’m glad to be home,” she said. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” he said automatically.

They listened to Paul Simon for a moment.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so distant lately,” said Paul.

“Have you been distant?” Holly wondered.

“I can’t stop thinking about President

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Trump. President Trump! I still can't even believe it's real."

"It's been three and a half years."

"Donald freaking Trump our president and he actually had the doors of houses and apartments kicked in and tore millions of people away from their families."

"Illegals."

Paul stared at Holly with a dead expression.

"They were," she said.

"They're still people," Paul replied.

"But they did come in illegally," said Holly. "What's the point of laws if we don't enforce them? What are they, guidelines?"

"Fat lot of good it did us. If I have to eat more ramen I don't know what I'll do."

"So, we should ignore the law just so we can have cheaper food?"

"They're stupid laws."

"So change them," said Holly.

"What do you think I've been trying to do? I spent years supporting those idiot Democrats. They couldn't win an argument with an online bot. They couldn't win midterms against Donald Trump even after his storm troopers tore apart millions of families. It's like he's running against a party of ghosts."

"That's true."

"Where's this coming from anyway? Did you get swept up by Troopers and brainwashed or something?"

"You love it when I play devil's advocate."

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“I guess,” said Paul.

There was a moment of silence between them as Paul Simon sang about an orange and blue rug.

“You know I love you, right?” said Paul.

“Of course, baby.”

“I do it for your love.”

“I know, baby,” she kissed his forehead.

“I’m going to find some work soon. I promise.” He squeezed her hand. “I’ll find something.”

“Starbucks is hiring.”

“I’m not working at Starbucks. I’m a writer.”

“A lot of writers work at Starbucks. I see them all the time with their laptops.”

Paul gave her a thin smile.

“Keeping busy,” she continued, “isn’t the worst thing in the world.”

“Working at Starbucks? I might as well become a Trooper.”

“Let’s not get dramatic. No one’s saying you have to volunteer to be one of Trump’s Troopers. I’m just saying a little mindless work might help you take your mind off things.”

“I’m not working at Starbucks. They are the corporate embodiment of everything that’s wrong with our neo-liberal society.”

“They pay okay.”

“For Trump’s America. At least our state still has a minimum wage, I guess.”

“For now,” Holly observed.

“I’m going to come up with something,”

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Paul said. “I still need to buy you an engagement ring.”

They stared at the record player and watched the record spin.

“I love you,” Paul said like he had just remembered something important.

“I love you too,” Holly sighed.



Paul sat in the backseat. He watched the city pass by his window and listened to Ben Dickerson explain what to expect. The other passengers seemed tense. Everyone was dressed in dark non-descript clothes.

“We only have a short window of time,” Ben was saying. “So be looking for your escape route while we’re out there. I nearly got nicked last year because I wasn’t paying attention and lost my bearings. Turn here.” He pointed.

Wendy Starr, looking as immaculate as ever as she drove the SUV, wordlessly followed his instruction and turned at the corner.

“Just remember that in these situations you have to think about yourself first. We all know the risks. We all know the rendezvous. We all know how important this is. You are the best keeper of your safety. I know it’s hard for do-gooders to be selfish but in this case, it’s necessary to your survival.”

“I’ve done this before,” said Sally. She was sitting next to Paul in the backseat. She scowled out the window.

“Me too,” said Wendy with a satisfied smile.

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“This is my first time,” Paul said soberly. “I have that same feeling I have right before I look at my bank balance.”

“Turn left at this light,” said Ben. “This is nothing like 2018. Do you know how many innocent people have been locked up since then because of this Sedition Act? The so-called ‘protester class’ has been rounded up and forced into virtual slavery all on the whim of that cheeto-faced follicly-failed goon.”

“You don’t have to tell us,” said Sally. “Why do you think we’re here?”

“I know,” said Ben. “Let’s just try to stay focused.”

“I’m trying to get into the right headspace back here and I need some quiet,” Sally snapped.

“Millenials,” Ben said softly to Wendy. Wendy shook her head.

“What’s that?” said Sally.

“It’s just a joke,” Ben replied.

“Label and dismiss,” Sally said. “It’s the classic Trump formula.”

“Alright, alright. Let’s not get into the weeds. We should get focused because we’re almost there. Pull in there.”

Wendy pulled the SUV into the underground parking garage at Pacific Place Mall.

“It’s not cool, Ben,” said Paul. “You should apologize.”

“I’m sorry I impugned the generation that elected Trump,” Ben said.

Wendy pulled the van into a parking space.

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“Bullshit!” cried Sally. “It was your Fox News watching parents.”

“It was a coalition of anarchists, religious fundamentalists, Pokémon hunters, race purists, idiots and NASCAR fans,” Paul said.

“Would you all please shut up?” said Wendy with instinctive maternal authority. “We need to get out there and protest and hold those signs up high, not bicker like children deciding whose fault it is. Let’s get it together.”

Sally folded her arms and stared straight ahead. Paul looked out the window.

“Now, Ben,” said Wendy cordially, “where are we going?”

Holly looked at her phone. She felt awkward having a 2d handheld in a place like this. She looked at the place setting across from her at the table. She was dreading the waiter stopping to check on her for a third time. She took a sip of her water. She checked her phone again. Almost thirty minutes late now. She looked up. Eddie Preston was standing over her smiling.

“I got you something,” he said.

“You’re almost a half hour late,” she said angrily.

“Don’t you want to know what I got you?”

“It had better be something really good. Where were you?”

Eddie leaned in and kissed her. He brushed her arm lightly with his fingertips. He sat down and stared at her from across

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the table with a contented expression.

“Well, what did you get me?”

He reached into the pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a small black velvet box. He handed it to her.

“Eddie,” admonished Holly.

“Open it.”

She stared at the box like there was a bomb inside.

“What is it?” said Holly. Her voice cracked.

“I want to marry you,” said Eddie.

“I don’t know what to say,” said Holly. She put her hand over her mouth. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Open it,” Eddie with a careless wave.

“Don’t open it. We’re still celebrating!”

He flagged the waiter over.

“But I don’t know,” Holly said.

“Nonsense. They have the best steaks here.”

The waiter arrived and Eddie ordered two steaks and a bottle of wine. He didn’t even ask for the price. Holly studied the velvet box, but wouldn’t touch it. When the waiter left, Holly spoke.

“What is going on?”

“I told you. We’re celebrating!”

“Celebrating what?”

“I got a huge bonus today.”

“Huge bonus?”

“I quit school.”

“What are you talking about?”

The sommelier came to pour the wine. Holly studied Eddie’s face the while the sommelier explained the vintage and year.

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When he was gone Eddie grabbed Holly's hand.

"I want a future together. In our future we both get what we deserve. I'll have the love of a beautiful woman and you'll have whatever your heart desires: make-up or clothes or jewelry, anything."

"And if my heart desires Paul?"

"Has he found a job?"

"You just told me you quit school—You quit school and got a huge bonus? Tell me you didn't, Eddie. I don't know if I can handle that."

Holly drank her wine in one gulp.

"He pays the best people the best wages."

Eddie poured her another glass

"To become his fucking foot soldier," said Holly.
She drank another glass.

"There's a five thousand dollar signing bonus, Holly. And a ten thousand dollar bonus for every year of service."

"You have literally become a tool of oppression."

"This is the world we live in. You're either with him or you're against him."

"It's one thing when you're just voting for him and watching his channel but when you start doing his bidding, that's something else. Never mind the fact that whole Trump's Troopers concept isn't even legal."

"The Supreme Court says it is."

"He's the Chief Justice! That's not even supposed to happen."

"But it's not illegal. You have to break a

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few eggs to make America great again.”

“I thought it was ‘Keep America Great’ now.”

Holly poured herself another glass of wine and took a sad sip.

“What happens now?” she wondered.

Eddie nodded toward the black velvet box.

“I’m engaged to Paul.”

“You’ve been engaged to Paul for two years and he still hasn’t bought you a ring.”

“I love him.”

“He’s been unemployed for almost a year. What is it again? A graphic designer?”

“He’s not one of those asshole Trump’s Troopers. Do you know how much chaos those people have caused?”

“Your cuck boyfriend is keeping you from enjoying the most prosperous time in our nation’s history.”

“If you’re lucky enough to be one of the Bright Young Things.”

“We’re going to be.”

The waiter arrived with the steaks and potatoes. Holly’s stomach growled so fiercely she wanted to cry. Paul wasn’t wrong about ramen. Eddie seemed pleased to watch her wolfing down the slab of meat.

“I don’t need a weather app to tell me which way the wind is blowing,” said Eddie. “I’m tired of being a passenger on the Trump Train. I’m ready to join the crew.”

Holly was halfway through her potato.

“If you are a Trooper, I’m afraid this—” She pointed at the velvet box with her fork.

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“—is impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible in Trump’s America and I want you to be with me,” Eddie said. He nudged the opened black velvet box toward her. She took another bite of potato.

“Let’s wait till after dessert,” she replied.

Eddie laughed.

“Perfect,” he said.

There was a crowd gathering across the street from the Washington State Convention Center. Most of them had their faces covered. Some of them held signs. Some stood silently. Others shouted across the street to the entrance of the building. Ben Dickerson directed Sally, Wendy and Paul to cover their faces. Sally pulled a pink balaclava over her face and charged into the crowd. She held a sign that said “Love Trumps Hate.” There was a picture of two hands clasped next to “Love” and picture of Donald Trump’s face next to “Hate”.

“Love trumps hate,” she shouted as she disappeared into the throng.

Paul pulled a mask over his face and looked at Ben. Ben was wearing dark glasses and a purple handkerchief tied around his mouth and nose. He tugged the hood of his sweatshirt over his face.

“Cheers, mate,” said Ben.

He lifted his sign. “Fascism = Trumpism” it read. Under that was a doctored photo

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showing Donald Trump as Joseph Stalin. A chant broke out from the crowd near the police barriers.

“Hey hey! Ho ho! Donald Trump has got to go!”

Paul looked at Wendy and then plunged into the crowd.

“Hey Hey! Ho ho! Donald Trump has got to go!” he shouted. He raised his sign. It said “Dump Trump!” There was picture of Uncle Sam bent slightly at the waist. A cartoon Donald Trump emerged from the crack of his butt.

Wendy raised her sign into the air and plunged into the crowd.

“Freedom!” it read.

Holly snuggled closer to Eddie and he pulled her close, savoring the heat of her skin touching his. The TV was on but neither of them were paying attention.

“That was nice,” said Eddie.

They were on the bed in his one-room apartment. The high ceilings made up for the lack of floor space. Eddie’s dog Reagan was curled up at the foot of the bed next to a video game controller.

“Are you really going to be a Trooper?”

Eddie laughed.

“You think I was lying?”

“I don’t know,” Holly replied, looking up at his face. “I just always thought you were joking. I mean, I knew you supported Trump but I always thought it wasn’t real.”

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“What?”

“You used to say you wanted to see him blow up the world.”

“Have you been thinking about this since lunch?”

“It changes things, Eddie.”

“I hope so. I want you, Holly.”

She didn’t say anything.

“The driver of the Duck will be charged with vehicular homicide,” said the woman on the TV. “In other Seattle news, President Trump visited with tech industry leaders at the Washington State Convention Center.”

Eddie turned up the TV with the remote.

“Did you know he was in town?” Holly wondered.

“It’s just for this meeting,” Eddie said quickly.

“He was met by almost a hundred protesters,” read the newscaster flawlessly. The picture showed the gathered crowd in front of the convention center. “Be aware that some images may inappropriate for sensitive viewers.”

“Fuckin’ SJWs,” sneered Eddie.

“They have a right to protest,” Holly said.

“Not anymore.”

Eddie sat up and put his back against the padded headboard. Holly did the same and pulled the sheet over her breasts.

“After President Trump’s arrival, a group of Trump’s Troopers clashed with the protesters while police looked on.”

“Good,” said Eddie. Holly gave him a sideways glance.

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The TV showed them shaky video from professional cameras and camera phones for several minutes. The black-clad Troopers pushed the protesters and the protesters pushed back.

“With the aid of President Trump’s Troopers, federal authorities arrested over forty of the protesters. Many of them are believed to be involved with the SJWs, the BOBs, the ACLU and other homegrown terrorist organizations.”

The TV showed several of the protesters being carted away, their hands zip-tied behind their backs.

“And you want to be part of this?” said Holly.

“They’re keeping America great.”

“Are you joking?”

“Are *you* joking?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do *you* mean?”

“I’m serious, Eddie.”

“I’m going to be one of Trump’s Troopers. I signed the papers this morning. I report to Fort Lewis on Monday.”

“Because you want make America great again.”

“Keep America great,” Eddie corrected.

“People aren’t even allowed to protest anymore.”

“That’s not true and you know it.”

“You can’t criticize Trump at all.”

“I agree. He’s doing a great job. He brought back jobs. He fixed immigration. He defeated ISIS.”

“He cut a deal with them! He’s like Neville

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freaking Chamberlain!”

“Is he Hitler or Chamberlain?”

“I never said he was Hitler.”

“Your unbased SJW boyfriend probably did. They either call him Hitler or Stalin.”

“Paul is not an SJW. You’ll get him disappeared with that kind of talk.”

“Did he vote for Hillary Clinton?”

“I voted for Hillary Clinton!”

“You did?” Eddie looked disgusted.

“Don’t tell Paul. He voted for Bernie Sanders.”

“Nice. I like a Trump voter,” he smirked. “I didn’t know you voted for Hillary Clinton.”

She nodded.

“That changes things,” Eddie said with a straight face.

Reagan whined at the foot of the bed. Eddie got up and put on his boxers. Reagan followed him to the door. Holly picked up her phone from the nightstand and looked at the time.

“Oh shit,” she said. “I gotta get going. I should be coming home from work right now.”

Paul Kirby came into the apartment and closed the door quickly behind him. It was dark. He locked both locks and then put his eye to the peephole. There was no one there. He wore a purple t-shirt and his dark jeans. He’d thrown his dark jacket and mask away in a trashcan along the sidewalk. Paul ran to the window and looked down at the street for

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a moment before closing the curtains. He sat on the edge of the couch and stared into the darkness with a hollow expression.

A sound at the front door startled him. He tiptoed across the room and peered out the peephole. It was Holly. He unlocked both locks and opened the door.

“Paul?” said Holly.

“Get in,” he said. He looked up and down the hall.

Holly came in and stared at him. He closed the door and locked the locks.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m in trouble.”

“What?”

“Did you see anything weird when you were coming in?”

“What is going on, Paul? Are you drunk?”

“With what money?” he snarled.

“Can I at least turn the lights on? I can’t even see you.”

Paul turned the lights on. He was pale.

“What happened?” said Holly.

“Did you see the news today?”

“A little bit in the break room. Why?”

“Did you see the protest at the convention center?”

“Yeah. It looked like they caused a lot of traffic.”

“I have to tell you something and I hope you’re not mad but I don’t care if you are.”

“Were you there?” Holly felt like she was going to be sick.

Paul took a deep breath.

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“I’ve been lying to you. I’ve been lying to you for months. I haven’t been going to Legislative District meetings with the Democrats. I’m an SJW.”

“What?” Holly was furious. “You might as well join Al Qaeda!”

“That’s not the same and you know it.”

“They’re both terrorist organizations.”

“The Social Justice Warriors are a collectivist action group dedicated to fighting fascism. Al Qaeda were religious fundamentalists.”

“The government has classified the SJWs as a terrorist organization, Paul. It doesn’t really matter what you think at this point.”

“I’m not going to do nothing, Holly. I can’t. I was asleep for too long. I’ve spent too much time waiting for someone else to fix things. I can’t live with the guilt.”

“You always find some way to blame yourself. I don’t know what your parents did to you, but the world is not your fault.”

“I want to help. Is that so bad? I want to make this world a better place for our future. For our children’s future.” He took Holly’s hand.

“By what? Holding up some dumb sign till Trump’s Troopers come and beat your ass down?”

“Protest is painful. That’s why no one wants to do it.” Paul let go of her hand. “What is wrong with you? I thought we were on the same page.”

“You’re going to get arrested, Paul. I’ll

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never see you again.”

“You’re right. But what am I supposed to do? It’s so bad that I almost got arrested today. For protesting. I almost got killed today. They beat Ben till he was unrecognizable.”

“Jesus, Paul.”

“I didn’t know what to do.” Shame reddened Paul’s face. “I ran away. I felt like I was being followed the whole way home.”

“Why couldn’t you have just stayed with the Democrats?”

“I’ll never forgive them for what they did to Bernie Sanders.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in conspiracy theories.”

“They may not have started the fire that killed him but we all know they rigged the nominating process. If I was followed, we could both be in trouble.”

“I don’t know what to say. This is a lot to process.”

Holly sat down on the couch.



Paul Kirby sat at the bus stop across the street from the Royal Castle Apartments. He looked at his watch but didn't register the time because his mind was going too fast. He had been holed up for six days. He was afraid to leave the apartment he shared with Holly. He rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch again.

As is the custom of busses, the bus appeared unexpectedly. The door opened and several passengers got off. Paul kept his place on the bench. He could feel the bus driver glaring at him. He looked at his watch again. The door closed with a sigh and the bus harrumphed away.

Paul spotted Sally Anulisch climbing the stairs to the Royal Castle Apartments. He rushed across the street. An oncoming car honked its horn. Sally paused to turn and look. She seemed surprised to see Paul. He hurried up the steps.

“What are you doing here?” said Sally.
“We thought they got you.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Well, where the hell have you been?”

“Let’s get off the street.”

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Sally pushed open the graffiti-covered door and Paul followed her inside. A light bulb flickered.

“Nice of you to come to my home unannounced,” Sally said insincerely.

“I didn’t know where else to go.”

“Just like a man,” Sally said.

“Label and dismiss, right?”

They were quiet for the rest of the walk up two flights and the hall to the third door on the left. Paul looked up and down the hallway as Sally dug out her keys.

“Would you chill out, man?” said Sally. “Acting suspicious makes you look suspicious.”

She pushed open the door and turned on the lights. It looked pretty much the same as the last time Paul had seen it what seemed like a lifetime ago. The same pizza box was in the same place. The pile of rejected protest signs they had labored over weeks before still covered the kitchen table. She closed the door and locked the two locks. Paul sat on the folding chair and Sally perched on the barstool.

“I can’t chill out,” Paul said like he was finally exhaling. “I haven’t slept right in days. They nearly got me. I saw them beating the shit out of Ben, just smashing him again and again with those sticks. They got him, Sally. God knows what happened to Wendy.”

“She was at the rendezvous spot.”

There was a long uncomfortable silence.

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“I just couldn’t get there,” said Paul. “They were following me. I would’ve been putting you and the others at risk.”

“Not following the plan puts us all at risk. These things aren’t arbitrary.”

“Lay off, will you? I’ve never done this before. I’ve never stood up to tyranny before. Give me a little time to get the hang of it.”

“It’s not riding a bike, Paul. You’re in a war. Every decision you make is literally life or death.”

“We’re not soldiers, Sally. We’re an activist group.”

“What is wrong with you?” Her cheeks were getting red. “You aren’t living in sunny 2003 anymore. This is 2020 in Trump’s America. Your nightmares are real. It’s either kill or be killed. This is a war.”

“Do you mind if I ask what happened to you?”

“What?”

“Why you are like this?”

Sally’s anger faded instantly. The red-hot fury was replaced by cold resolve.

“With Ben gone, I am the leader of this chapter of the Social Justice Warriors. If you want to leave, leave.”

“I’m not leaving. I’m scared.”

“Channel that. It’s the only way we can overcome and we will overcome.”

“You don’t understand. I’m engaged to be married. I want to provide for my family. I want security.”

“You have to fight for it.”

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“I’m tired and scared,” said Paul.

Sally stared at him. Her eyes narrowed.

“Where were you anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t seen you in a week and you appear at my door out of nowhere. How’d you get away?”

“I ran like hell. What are you asking me?”

“It’s just a little weird is all. The other chapter leaders think we have a rat.”

Paul stood up.

“I sure hope you’re fucking joking because I have been freaking out over here. I can’t sleep and everything tastes like ashes. Every time I close my eyes I can see those goons standing over Ben beating the shit out of him.”

“Alright. Just calm down.”

“I’m telling you I can’t. I’m going crazy. I need to do something, anything. We need to do something.”

Sally smiled.

“What do you think?” Eddie Preston opened his arms and spun around. He was wearing the black military garb of the Trump’s Troopers.

“You look like a Nazi,” said Holly Hitchens.

“My grandpa was Jewish.”

“My grandpa was a drunk. So what? You still look like a Nazi. Why did they go with black?”

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“John Galliano wanted the uniforms to be intimidating.”

“They’re downright sinister.”

Eddie sighed.

“Are you serious?”

“I’m sorry, Eddie but I’ve seen too much footage of people wearing that kind of uniform doing fucked-up things. I haven’t forgotten the Black Lives Matter protest in Chicago in 2018. Most people haven’t.”

“Those men were disciplined for their actions. Where do you want to eat? Sushi?”

“I’m not going anywhere with you if you are wearing that.”

“I have to wear the uniform if I leave the house. I’m on duty till Friday.”

Holly scowled at him.

“Have you even had any training?”

“Of course I have. Every Trump’s Trooper has to take a six hour course over two weekends.”

“So you have had a total of three hours training and you are already on duty?”

“We could order sushi in.”

“Will you change into something else?”

“After the delivery guy leaves.”

Holly rubbed her forehead.

“Okay.”

Eddie was already typing the order into his handheld device.

“How’s Paul?”

“He’s fine. Why?”

“Just wondering. Has he found any work

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yet? It's got be tough for web designers right now.”

“He's a passionate man. And he's a writer.”

“Wow,” said Eddie slowly. “It's that bad?

“Seriously though, you have only had three hours of training and you are already on duty?”

“I'm still in my probationary period. I'll get my Flag Pin to show I am a full-fledged Trooper after ninety days.”

“What's probationary about it?”

“Trump won't have any of his lawyers defend me until after my probationary period. Every five years of service, he adds another lawyer to your team.”

“At least he says he will,” chimed Holly.

“You're going to see one day,” said Eddie. “We're going to have the best life ever because of that man. You'll see. Do you want California rolls?”

“Of course.”

Holly leaned forward and picked up the TV remote. She turned the TV on and was greeted by the grotesquely handsome face of the nightly newscaster.

“Raids were carried out concurrently in twenty-five cities across the country,” said the newscaster. “In all over two hundred members of the terrorist organization known as the Social Justice Warriors were taken into custody.”

“Turn it up,” said Eddie.

Holly looked like she might throw up as

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she raised the volume.

“President Trump called the operation a rousing success and had this to say earlier today.”

The picture changed to President Donald J. Trump in the White House pressroom standing behind a podium bearing the presidential seal. Eddie sat down beside Holly on the couch still dressed in his Trooper regalia.

“It was a rousing success,” Trump said, stabbing the air with a stubby digit. “Sheriff Joe really let these dirtbags have it. Cause we gotta get dirty. These guys fight dirty so we’re gonna fight dirty. We’re going to get so dirty you won’t believe it. Believe you me, these sick bastards—I can’t always be politically correct—these bastards haven’t seen anything yet.”

“What are they being charged with?” Holly asked the screen.

“They’re terrorists.”

“Yeah.” Holly looked at her phone. No messages. She remembered Paul had thrown his phone into Angle Lake to avoid surveillance.

“While some have criticized the Trump administration’s crusade against the Social Justice Warriors as infringing on free speech rights, most people we spoke to said they were happy to hear the news.”

It cut to an old man standing on the sidewalk wearing a t-shirt with an eagle on it.

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“Bout damn time,” he said through yellow teeth. “After what those animals did to Vice President Pence.”

“I don’t know what’s worse, polling or this man on the street shit,” said Holly.

“Polls are for entertainment purposes only,” explained Eddie. “The Supreme Court ruled on it.”

“And this isn’t? Who is this guy? Who’s this lady?”

A woman in her late thirties came on the screen. She had blue hair and a tattoo on her neck.

“They ruined our Christmas two years ago. They ruined a lot of people’s Christmas’s. Trump should lock them up and throw away the key. See how happy their holidays are.”

“I’m changing the channel,” said Holly. She looked at Eddie and looked him up and down. “I’ve had enough politics for one day.”

“Coming up next, Kim K clashes with protesters,” said an announcer.

Holly turned off the TV.

“When’s the food going to get here?”

Paul Kirby’s stomach was growling. He took a long drink of water and tried to focus on what Sally Anulisch was telling him. Wendy Starr was watching his face.

“Degrade and destroy,” said Sally. “America did it before against all odds, throwing off the yoke of King George’s tyranny. We can do it again. King Donald

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won't know what hit him."

"I don't want to get arrested," Paul said. "I promised Holly."

"You have to be willing to sacrifice everything, even Holly. If you bet nothing, you get nothing."

"You're not going to get arrested," Wendy said. "This is a great opportunity. The White House West dedication is just a week away."

"What are we going to do?"

"It's need to know," said Sally. "No one's going to get hurt."

"I'm sure that's what they said about Mike Pence," Paul replied quickly.

"The SJWs don't claim responsibility for that and they never have." Sally's cheeks were getting red. "You should know that. If you knew anything, you'd know that that was a false flag operation carried out by Trump's Troopers to label the Social Justice Warriors as terrorists."

"We're an activist movement," said Wendy.

"I'm sick of this wishy-washy shit. You need to make up your mind," said Sally gravely. "Are you with us? Or are you with him?"

"I'm with Holly."

"If you want to be a warrior for Justice, you are going to have to pick a side."

Wendy nodded.

"What are you talking about? I've been an SJW for almost two months."

"I don't trust you," said Sally.

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“It’s standard procedure,” said Wendy said. “If you break protocol—and you have to admit you broke protocol when you didn’t show up to the rendezvous—then you have to do something to prove your allegiance.”

“This is bullshit,” said Paul.

“We need to know we can trust you,” Sally said.

“If you don’t trust me by this point, I don’t think you ever will. Like, what do you want me to do? Write a snarky tweet?”

“This isn’t the Brothers of Bernie,” Sally sneered. “We are warriors. This is life and death. The fate of the fucking world hangs in the balance.”

“How are you with explosives?” asked Wendy.

It was dark by the time Holly Hitchens came home. She climbed the stairs to the second floor apartment she shared with Paul. She had put it out of her mind all night. She pushed the door open to darkness. She turned on the lights.

“Paul?”

There was no reply. She stepped inside and closed the door. It looked like Paul hadn’t been there since the morning. His bowl of oatmeal was still on the coffee table. Holly sat on the couch and cried. She tried to stop herself. She shuddered and shook and took a deep breath. The tears poured down her cheeks.

“What am I going to do?” she said out loud.

Nobody answered her.

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Paul looked up at the Space Needle looming over him in the darkness. The backpack on his back felt like it weighed a million pounds. He turned his attention to the glass building next to him and read the stylish lettering over the entrance: Chihuly Garden and Glass. He took a deep breath and started toward the shadows between the shrubs and the building. He held the straps of his backpack tightly.

Chelsea Park handed Holly a joint and a lighter and leaned back into the couch.

“Spark that shit,” said Chelsea.

Holly took a few puffs and handed it to Chelsea.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Holly said. Her voice cracked on the last word.

“I can’t believe Paul got arrested,” Chelsea said with a creaky voice. She exhaled a massive cloud of marijuana smoke.

“I probably shouldn’t have told you that.” Holly took a drag.

“What are you talking about? I’m your best friend. Who else are you going to tell?”

“I know. I just don’t want you to get into any trouble.”

“I can find my own trouble. You know that.”

Holly smiled.

“He’s really an SJW?”

Holly nodded.

“I didn’t think he had it in him.”

Holly exhaled.

“That’s why I love him so much. I didn’t

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think he was a rash idiot like the rest of these overgrown boys." She was quiet for a moment. "What the hell am I going to do?"

"Oh no," said Chelsea. "You're not crying on my couch. Stay right here."

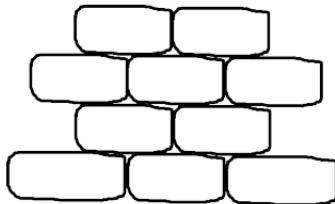
She came back with a bottle of whiskey.

"That guy Jason I was seeing left this here and I've been saving it for a special occasion."

Holly took the bottle and held it in front of her apprehensively. She took a breath and then a large swallow.

"Whew," she gasped. "Whoa."

"We're going to get drunk tonight." Chelsea took the bottle, threw back her head and poured like she was watering the plants.



Holly came home the next morning to find Paul asleep on the couch. He had a black eye and a bandage on the other cheek. She sat on the edge of the couch and caressed his face.

“Where were you?” he said.

“I was with Chelsea. Where were you? What happened? I was so worried.”

“They took me in.”

“Who?”

Paul sat up and rubbed his face.

“Troopers. I wasn’t arrested; I was ‘taken into custody’. The can’t legally arrest me.”

“Oh, my god. Paul!” Holly wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder.

Paul’s eyes rested on the bowl of leftover oats and milk from the morning before. He didn’t even see it.

“They beat the crap out of me,” he said. “I was begging for them to stop but that just made them laugh.”

“What was the charge?”

Holly unwrapped her arms and looked into his sad face.

“I didn’t do anything. I was just walking around. I was just going to plant

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a small explosive for the SJWs.”

“You went back with the SJWs? What the hell? Explosives?” She put her hands on her forehead.

“I never said I was quitting. We talked about it but I can’t quit, Holly. I’ve failed at everything else in my life. Hell, I even failed at finding a job. And when I had a job I couldn’t keep it. I never finished college. I’m broke. I’m 32 years old. I should be sitting on savings at this age but I’ve failed at that. I’m a loser. But I’m not going to lose anymore. It’s too important.”

Holly looked at him with sad eyes.

“It’s too late, Paul. The damage is done. What is blowing things up going to do?”

“We have a chance this year. We have another chance. A do-over to make up for the horrible mistake of 2016.”

“I guess we could close the barn door but the bull is already in the china shop. And what is blowing things up going to help? What were you going to do?”

Paul stared at the floor.

“They wanted me to blow up the Chihuly museum by the Space Needle.”

“What? Why?”

“You know he designed all the glass fixtures for White House West, right? He’s the Leni freaking Riefenstahl of glass-blowing.”

“I don’t know even know what to say. I’m stunned. I didn’t know you were so

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unhappy..." She trailed off.

"You're kidding, right? We can barely afford to eat. I don't remember the last time I had red meat. I can't live like this anymore. I need a burger. I would literally stab someone for a steak. And, it's not just us. Do you know how many people have been forced into the shadows of poverty because of that puffed up baboon?"

"Chihuly?"

"Trump!"

Holly stared at the bowl of leftover oatmeal.

"I don't even know what I'm going to do," said Paul.

"What do you mean?"

"They want me to snitch. That's the reason I'm sitting here. Because I agreed to snitch on the SJWs. I did it for you."

"What? What do you mean you 'did it for me'? What've you gotten yourself into?"

"I'm not going to do it. Of course, I'm not going to do it. I'm pretty sure. But I might have to. They implied that they have lots of Troopers undercover."

"This is a bad dream," said Holly holding her head.

"We should have gone to Canada," said Paul mournfully.

"What are we going to do?" Holly wondered aloud.

"I bet Sally's a Trooper. That girl has cop rage."

"Who's Sally?"

"She's in charge of our chapter since Ben

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was taken. She's what Trump would call a 'nasty person'. She's got a whole bag of chips on her shoulder. I would bet a million dollars she's undercover. It was her idea to plant the explosives."

"Why?"

"We weren't going to hurt anybody."

"Jesus, Paul." Holly looked disgusted.

"Degrade and destroy". That's what Sally said," said Paul.

"Why are you doing this? How is that making the world better?"

"I don't know." Paul hung his head. "I don't know."

"There are no degrees of evil," said Holly.

"I'm doing it for us, damn it," Paul said suddenly. Tears welled in his eyes. "I'm doing it for you because I never want to lose you and I'm afraid that in Trump's America I'll never be allowed to be anything more than a loser because I don't want to play the stupid money game because I don't like the game. I don't want to live in a world that is built on profits and money but I still just want to eat a burger. I want to eat a gallon of ice cream. I want to buy you all the makeup you've been wanting and the clothes I see you looking at online. I don't know what to do. I don't see any way out of this."

Tears were streaming down Paul's cheeks. Holly looked at him and gently wiped the tears from his cheeks.

"I just want you to be happy," Paul croaked.

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“I am happy, dear,” said Holly. “I love you more than anything and I want to be with you.”

They embraced. Paul clung to Holly like he was afraid to let go.

“We could go to McDonald’s,” Holly said. “We can still afford that.”

“Thanks but that’s not really a burger. That’s a burger like McDonald Trump is a president.”

Holly smiled.

“We’re going to figure something out,” she said soothingly.

“I wish I had your confidence,” Paul replied dolefully. “If I don’t rat on the SJWs I could never see you again. No one comes back from the camps. They don’t give up free labor and every prisoner is a boost to their ‘jobs’ numbers.”

“I’m going to figure something out,” Holly declared.

“Baby, please. I don’t want you getting involved. Please. This is my problem; I have to fix it.”

“You still don’t get it? Your problems are my problems. We’re a team. You never ask me for help.”

“I’ve been sponging off you for a year.”

“That’s different. You’re out of work. You’d do the same thing if the roles were reversed. You probably would’ve charged into the police station to save me.”

“It was a Trooper tent.”

“I’m going to do something. Nothing is

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impossible in Trump's America."

Paul gave her a sideways glance.

"I guess that's true, sadly. What are you going to do?"

"I just need to think. What are the terms of this thing?"

"I just have to act natural and go along with whatever but when they ask me about later I have to tell the truth. If I go along, I get probationary release. If they find out I'm lying, right into the camp. I can't go to a camp. I can't do manual labor. I'm a writer. My neck is too delicate for a blue collar."

He rubbed his neck as though he could feel the rough cloth.

"You're not going to a camp. We just need to work within that structure."

"I know but it's not right."

"Jesus, Paul."

"I have to believe the good guys will overcome in the end. I don't know if I could get out of bed in the morning if I didn't believe that."

Holly stood up.

"I need some time to think," she said.

She went to the bedroom and closed the door. Paul chewed the end of his fingernail and stared blankly at the bowl of mush that used to be oats and milk on the coffee table.

Holly walked up the stairs with trepidation. She always felt out of place in this building. She noticed the frayed edge of

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the cuff of her sweatshirt as she knocked on the door. She waited. She knocked again. The door swung open. There was Eddie Preston, smiling and wearing a t-shirt that said “Feel The Bern” under a silhouette of a half circle of hair with cheap glasses.

“That is so wrong,” said Holly, smiling in spite of herself. “Where did you get that?”

“The internet is a magical place. Paul doesn’t have one of these?”

“Everyone got rid of their ‘Feel The Bern’ stuff after what happened. Can I come in?”

Eddie stepped aside with a sweeping gesture to indicate she should enter.

“What’s mine is yours.”

Holly didn’t say anything. She walked to the couch in the living room and sat down.

“Is everything okay?” Eddie wondered. “The shirt is just a joke. I can take it off.” He pulled the shirt off and sat bare-chested beside her. “Even I was saddened by the news of Bernie’s death. He was a thorn in the lion’s paw.”

Holly rolled her eyes.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“Can you put something on?”

“I can see how it could be distracting.” He flexed his arms. Holly didn’t notice. He turned the t-shirt inside out and pulled it back on.

“What’s up?”

Holly sighed. She stared at her hands in her lap and fidgeted.

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“I don’t know how to say this.”

“Wow.”

“I just want you to know that I love you and that I will always love you. There will always be a place in my heart for you.”

“What is this?”

“I need to give you back the ring, Eddie. I can’t marry you. I love Paul.”

“Paul can’t provide for you.”

“I’m not a crippled deer, Eddie. I don’t need someone to provide for me. I can feed and clothe myself. I need love. I need laughter. I need someone who believes the things I believe.”

“Is this cause I’m a Trooper?”

“It’s just not going to work out like that. I thought we were having fun.”

“Me too,” said Eddie. “So why stop now?”

“It’s just the way it is,” Holly said sadly.

She handed him the black velvet box that contained the engagement ring he had given her.

“So this is it?” said Eddie. “We’ll still see each other?”

“Paul’s in trouble,” Holly said quickly. “I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Eddie took her hand.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

“He got picked up by Troopers.”

“For what?”

“I have to go,” Holly said abruptly. She stood up to go but Eddie held her hand tightly.

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“I won’t stop loving you,” Eddie said.

“I know,” Holly whispered. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I can just look it up on the Trooper app, you know? So you might as well tell me.”

“He’s a Social Justice Warrior.”

Eddie laughed involuntarily.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I really didn’t think he was that stupid.”

“Says the storm trooper.”

“And you’re staying with him?”

“I love him,” Holly said. Her voice was taut with desperation. She sat back down.

“He’s going to a camp. It’s standard procedure.”

“But he hasn’t done anything.”

“He joined a known terrorist organization.”

“Trump calls anyone with an opinion he doesn’t like a terrorist. Remember what happened to Clay Aiken?”

“Who?” Eddie smirked.

“He can’t go to a camp. It’s not an option.”

“Why?”

“Because I love him and if he goes into a camp I’ll never see him again.”

“I don’t know what you’re going to do.”

“I have to go.” Holly stood up.

“Please don’t do anything stupid,” said Eddie.

Holly burst into tears and ran out of the apartment. Eddie stared at the black velvet box.

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“What?” Sally stared at Paul through the crack in the door. She did not unlatch the chain.

“Let me in,” he said.

“No.”

The door closed and Paul heard the deadbolt clunk in to place. He pounded the door with his fist.

“Come on, Sally! Open up!”

He knocked again. The door flew open and Sally pulled him out of the hallway. She slammed the door and bolted it behind them.

“The Glass Museum is still standing,” she said.

“Give me something else,” he said. “I can’t do it. Anything but blowing up art.”

Sally looked disgusted.

“The world is literally crumbling around you and you’re worried about a bunch of glorified bongs. You’re pathetic.”

“I’m trying, okay? I’m doing my damned best.”

“Well, do it somewhere else. The Warriors don’t have any room for cowards.”

She unlocked the door and pulled it open with one hand and shoved him out with the other.

“Please,” Paul cried. “I’m begging you! Give me something else to do! Anything!”

“When the Glass Garden is gone, we’ll talk.”

The door slammed and Paul stared with a dumbfounded expression.

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“I can’t go to my handler empty-handed,” Paul said. He was sitting next to Holly on their used velvet couch. “If I’m not an SJW I have no value to the Troopers. What am I going to do?”

“What will happen?”

“Camp.”

“So your choices are blow up Chihuly Garden and Glass or live the rest of your life in a forced labor camp? Why can’t you just tell the Troopers what they want you to do?”

“It only incriminates me. They want high-value targets like Susan Sarandon.”

“Why did you join the Social Justice Warriors in the first place? What did you think you would be doing?”

She felt her phone vibrate in her pocket.

“I thought we would be engaging in collective activism—making signs and petitions and stuff—not blowing up glass houses and getting the crap beat of us by Troopers. I didn’t know it would be like this.”

“But the SJWs? Might as well stand with Her.”

“It’s not the same and you know it.”

“They’ve accomplished the same amount.”

“I’m sorry I joined, okay? Are you happy? It was a mistake.”

Holly pulled out her phone. There was a message from Eddie.

I need to see you.

“I’m not happy,” she said.

“That makes two of us,” said Paul grumpily.

“I mean, I’m not happy living with you like

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this. Let's just go. Let's spend all our savings and just go somewhere. We could go see Peter in Chicago."

"Savings?" Paul was angry. "I literally have two dollars to my name!" He pulled them out of his pocket and threw them on the floor. Their slow descent seemed to deflate his anger. "I should just go to camp. They'll feed me."

Holly sighed and read the message from Eddie again.

I need to see you.

Another message popped up.

It's about Paul.

"You're not going to a camp," she said. "I'm going to figure something out."

She stood up and started for the door. She grabbed the two dollars off the floor and put them in her second-hand purse.

"I'll be back. Stay here."

"What? Where are you going?"

"Just stay here, okay? Try not to think about Sally."

She closed the door with a bang.

"What the hell?" Paul said.

"What the hell?" said Paul.

Eddie Preston was dressed in his Trooper uniform. He held out his hand. Paul stared at it.

"This is my friend Eddie," said Holly.

"This Nazi is your friend?"

"I knew it would be Nazi," said Eddie. "It wouldn't be Stalin because deep down you

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progressives admire communism.”

“I hardly think henchman for the star of TVs ‘The Apprentice’ rises to the level of Stalin,” Paul replied.

Eddie laughed.

“What’s this all about?” Paul asked Holly. “Are you helping me by turning me in?”

“I’m not turning you in, Paul. You still don’t trust me?”

“I don’t trust him.” He pointed at Eddie.

“We’re old friends.”

“How do you know him?”

“We went to school together,” she said.

“I thought Troopers were encouraged to avoid schooling.”

“I dropped out.” Eddie touched the brim of his cap obligingly.

“You’re being an asshole, Paul,” said Holly.

“I’m the asshole? I’m not the one dressed like a thug carrying a bloody nightstick.”

“Eddie is going to help us.”

“If you’ll let me,” said Eddie. He took off his cap. “Holly is a very good friend.”

“I can’t believe this is happening,” said Paul.

“Eddie can help us get through the Canadian Border Wall.”

“It’s really your only option at this point. Your file has been flagged and if you are apprehended by the Troopers, you will spend the rest of your life in a labor camp. Look. I can show you here on my app.”

He pulled out his phone and held it up. There was a 3-D picture of Paul staring back

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at him with the word "Combatant" underneath.

"I didn't even do anything!" Paul whined.

"You can judge a man by the company he keeps," Eddie replied. "That's from the Trooper handbook."

"Jesus."

"You have not made contact with your handler in over 24 hours. I would suggest you begin gathering the essentials. We need to leave as soon as possible."

The car ride to the border was filled with a terse silence. Eddie was driving and Holly was beside him in the passenger seat. Paul slumped down in the back. He didn't notice the cautious glances between Holly and Eddie. There was too much else to worry about. It was probably an hour before someone spoke.

"Do you know what happened to Sally and Wendy?" Paul wanted to know.

"I don't have that kind of clearance."

"Oh."

"But a buddy of mine told me that Salomé Anulisch was apprehended by our undercover and charged with intent to commit a terrorist act."

"What?"

"I don't know all the details but apparently our undercover had gathered enough information to finally arrest her. I guess it was some of the intel that she got from Sally

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that led to that crackdown last week.”

“Wendy?”

“If that’s what she was calling herself.”

The tense silence returned. Paul stared out the window while Eddie and Holly stole glances at each other. After another hour, Paul spoke up again.

“I need to pee,” he said.

They pulled off at a rest stop. Holly and Eddie stayed in the car.

“This may be my last chance, so I’ve got to talk quickly,” said Eddie. “I love you, Holly Hitchens and I always will. I love you more than I love America. All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy.”

“Wow.”

“I want you to have this.”

He handed her a wad of money.

“There’s a thousand dollars there.”

“I have money, Eddie.”

“I want you to take this and buy something with it and put whatever you buy in a place you can see it. And every time you do, you can think of me and it will be like I am right there with you.”

“Come on, Eddie. You’re going to make me cry.”

“It may have been just fun for you but I had the time of my life. If you ever need anything, I am always here.”

“I love you too but I don’t deserve this. Keep the money.”

“It’s the closest I can get to going with you.”

The door opened and Paul climbed into

GENE POCKET

the backseat. Holly slipped the money into her second-hand bag. The silent sojourn resumed.

When they started to near the border, Eddie got off the freeway. As the buildings began to dwindle, Paul started to look around nervously, thinking back to tales of Trooper Towers in remote locations.

“Some of the Troopers use this crack to smuggle stuff: drugs, booze, guns, pornography.”

“Seriously?” said Holly.

“It’s what Donald Trump would do,” Eddie reasoned.

“True.”

They were barreling down a dirt road when they reached their destination. The sky was clear and full of stars that were blotted out by the gigantic trees.

“We’re on foot from here,” Eddie said.

They got out of the car. Paul was getting nervous. Something didn’t feel right. They walked down a trail and arrived at the imposing concrete wall. Even in the darkness they could see the immense crack in the wall.

“I can’t believe this,” said Paul.

“Holly, you go first and then Paul.”

She looked at her two men.

“I’ll miss you, girl,” Eddie said playfully. He gave her a hug.

“I wish you weren’t wearing that,” she said.

He looked at her.

“What do you think is paying for your trip?

THE HEART OF THE DEAL

You ready?”

She nodded and then smiled hopefully at Paul. She disappeared into the crack. Paul looked at Eddie.

“Thanks,” he said and started to follow Holly.

“Hang on,” said Eddie. Paul turned to see him reaching for his belt and started to panic. Eddie grabbed his arm.

“Give this to Holly.”

He put a small padded envelope in Paul’s hand. Paul looked at it for a moment and then put it in his pocket.

“Don’t open it till you’re settled, then open it and give it to Holly. Don’t tell her about it, okay?”

“Okay.”

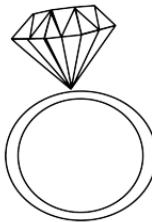
“That’s how you can thank me.”

“Okay.”

“You’re a lucky man, Paul Kirby. I would have killed you if I didn’t love her so much.”

Paul narrowed his eyes and turned away. He wriggled into the dark crack in the concrete wall.

THE HEART OF THE DEAL



Paul and Holly sat in the dining room at McDonald's. They were bedraggled from their trip through the crack and their long hike into town. They both chewed tiredly and listened to the TV.

“And we have breaking news this hour,” the crushingly handsome anchor paused dramatically. “White House West is no more. It was destroyed in a fiery explosion today that claimed the lives of more than forty people. Many of them were laborers employed under the controversial Sedition Act.”

“I’m going to get more Coke,” said Holly. “You want anything?”

“I’m good.”

“Police are saying it is likely the result of domestic terrorism and an FBI spokesperson has said it almost certainly the work of the Social Justice Warriors, enemy number one in the War on Terror.”

Paul remembered the envelope in his pocket. He pulled it out and ripped it open. Inside was a small black velvet box.

