

Justice for All

The buzzing of the alarm clock startled her from her restless sleep. She turned it off quickly. The room was silent, as she lay motionless in bed. She listened carefully, trying to hear any sound in her apartment. She tried to determine if he was standing in her hallway or her kitchen or her living room. Was he in her house? Did her alarm clock alert him? Is he just outside her bedroom door, waiting for her?

She wanted to cry, but she knew crying would not make her safe. She wanted to scream, she wanted to hit something, anything. She remained motionless. She would not move from her bed until she was sure her apartment was safe.

In the early morning twilight, she could see her bedroom clearly. Her clothes were on the chair in the corner of the room. The door to her bedroom was open. She did not want it closed. If the door were closed, it would muffle the sound of his breathing; he could hide on the other side. If he attacked her in her bedroom, a closed door would keep her from escaping.

She held her breath and listened for as long as she could. Not a sound; not a noise to suggest he was in her

apartment. She sat up and slowly moved her feet toward the floor. As her feet touched the carpet, she paused again to listen.

Her heart began to pound rapidly. She reached into the crevice between her bed and the nightstand. She pulled out an aluminum baseball bat. She held it firmly in her right hand.

For a few moments, she rehearsed swinging it. In slow motion, she imagined each swing of the club. She would hit him in the knees. As he stumbled, she would smash the bat down on his shoulder blade. When he looked up, she would swing the bat like a ball player hitting a home run, but her bat would be shattering his jaw.

Her fantasies had evolved. Two months ago, she only thought of knocking him out—one blow to the back of the head then dial 9-1-1. Knowing she would be safe was all she wanted then.

Now the fantasy had grown into a desire to hurt. It had become an obsession with exacting a punishment, making him feel pain and fear, and the loss of control. She wanted him to be terrified, as terrified as she was. She wanted justice.

Gripping the bat with both hands, she walked from her bedroom, down the hall, through the kitchen, around the living room, and back to the hallway. She walked to her front door and studied the locks. The deadbolt was still closed; the two chain locks were still in place. The piece of masking tape that spanned the top of the door was still there, exactly as she had placed it last night. No one could have entered through the door.

The light from sunrise glowed through her living room windows, casting her shadow across the entryway mat and up the front door.

She stared at her shadow. She was proud of this little trick. She had thought of it a few days ago and each morn-

ing she practiced it with a feeling of smugness. She would stand in front of the door with her back toward the living room. She would wait for a few seconds. She would watch for shadows. If he came from the living room, she would see his shadow; she would spin around and swing her bat like a Viking beheading a Saxon. Yes, she was the bait standing before her door, drawing out that vile, arrogant man who would be shocked by how clever she is.

The apartment was silent.

She walked back to her bedroom and returned the bat to its hiding place. She put on her slippers and robe, and walked to the kitchen. She brewed coffee, ate breakfast, dressed, and began her morning commute to the office. As she sat on the bus, watching people get on and get off, she wondered who had been victims and who had committed crimes.

She watched elderly people moving slowly to their seats and she felt a great sadness. At first, she thought her sadness was sympathy: growing old around hoodlums and thieves must be impossible. Then she looked down at her hands and realized that when she grows old, she will not be fast enough or strong enough to stop a burglar with a baseball bat.

Her fear began to grow as she thought that perhaps even now she isn't strong enough, and for the first time in two months, she felt weak. She had been foolish and she knew she needed a better plan.

The gushing sounds of the air brakes and the forward lurch of the bus startled her into the realization that she had missed her stop. She would get off at the next stop and walk back the five blocks to her office.

She looked out the bus window and watched storefronts, people, and newsstands sliding past. When the bus pulled into the stop, she exited and began the trek to her office. The bus pulled out leaving a billowing plume of black diesel fumes settling onto the sidewalk.

She walked into the cloud of dirty smoke and held her breath until she was clear of it. As she exhaled, she saw a pawnbroker's sign and glanced at the storefront. It was the standard pitch: *Cash for Gold, Silver, Jewelry, and Guns.*

Guns.

Even an old person can pull the trigger of a gun. A gun could be useful, very useful; perhaps two guns? No—for now—only one gun. Something she could hide, but get quickly. If she needed to use it, it would bring people promptly or at least when they heard the shots, someone would call the police. A gun is an excellent idea.

She walked to the office wondering how much a gun would cost. She knew they came in many sizes and some guns are more powerful than other guns. She had watched enough television to know that in the right hands, guns brought justice. No villain was the equal of a righteous person with a pistol. The drama always ended in seconds with the bad-guy sprawled across the floor with a vacant stare in his eyes, and blood seeping into the carpet.

She passed up the elevator and took the stairs up the two flights to the office where she worked. Despite missing her bus stop, she was still early. She greeted the receptionist, settled into her chair, and began planning her day's work.

At ten o'clock, she allowed herself a fifteen-minute break to surf the internet and find prices on guns. Guns are expensive, yet cheap when you consider that for five hundred dollars you can buy piece of mind—an *equalizer* that placed her level with the biggest man or the vilest burglar. Her credit card would deliver this comforting aid into her life—she would donate the baseball bat to the local YWCA.

As she resolved to buy a gun, she realized she had been naive about a baseball bat. What if two burglars broke in? She would swing at one while the other knifed her in the back or strangled her. Yes, a gun is the best possible choice. She would stand in her bedroom doorway and shoot

him from there. A bat is a ridiculous weapon! Who wants to get that close to a dangerous man? She would get a gun, today!

She returned to work feeling relieved no one had broken into her home while she only had a bat to defend herself. Burglars must gather in shadowy alleys and laugh at the people who try to defend themselves with such a silly toy; it's just a stick when they have knives... and guns.

At lunchtime, she left her office and walked down the street to the pawnshop. It looked like a fortress. The windows were barred and the heavy door swung open slowly. A bell sounded as she entered the shop.

As she looked around, she understood why pawnshops were so heavily fortified. Thieves everywhere wanted to get what was on display here. There were knives, swords, brass knuckles, marshal-arts throwing stars... and guns.

She walked around the shop for a few minutes, taking in the sites, not wanting to appear too anxious to buy a gun. She crossed the store to the counter that had pistols on display. With her hands grasped behind her back, she bent over the counter and looked at the pistols.

"Can I help you with something? Would you like to look at something behind the counter?"

"Yes," she said confidently, as she walked toward the woman who had asked the question. "I'll look at this one."

"This one, right here?" the sales clerk asked.

"Yes," she said, "the grey one."

"Here," the clerk said as she placed the pistol on the counter. "Is this a gift?"

"Excuse me?"

"Usually this is something our younger customers buy."

She looked at the pistol, then at the sales clerk.

“Younger customers?” she asked. “How young?”

“We don’t sell to kids under sixteen,” the clerk said. “But we know even twelve year olds can get these things and raise havoc with them.”

“Twelve?”

“Yesterday, a kid’s mother brought this one back because he shot his sister with it.”

“Is she going to be all right?”

“Well, they’re dangerous. That’s why you should wear goggles anytime you’re shooting at someone.”

As the clerk told her she should wear goggles, she saw more pistols hanging on the wall behind the counter. A sign declared “Paint Ball Guns.”

“I don’t think I’ll get one,” the woman said as she pushed the paint ball pistol along the countertop toward the sales clerk, then asked, “What do you have in terms of real guns, the kind the police carry?”

“Sporting or self-defense?”

“Self-defense.”

“Have you owned a weapon before?”

“I have a weapon at home, but I’m thinking about getting something more powerful.”

“Are you thinking .38 caliber—something in that range—or something larger?”

She did not know what she wanted.

“Let’s take a look at what we have,” the sales clerk said, “and I can always order something for you if we don’t have it.”

“Yes,” she said. “Let’s take a look.”

She walked along the counter trying to read the small tags attached to each pistol. Some had ‘9 mm’ which she

assumed meant nine millimeter and others had any variety of numbers on them: .22, .32, .38, .40, and .45. At first, she thought the size of the pistol would tell her the number on the tag. However, three 45-caliber pistols sat side-by-side and they were three different sizes.

“Let me look at this one,” she said, pointing at a large pistol.

“That will give you a lot of firepower,” the clerk said as she ejected the magazine, cocked back the pistol’s slide, and handed it to her. “It holds eight rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber for a total of nine rounds. It has fixed sites and it is double action and single action. It has a manual safety, but it doesn’t have a de-cocker.”

She held the pistol in her right hand. It was very heavy. At that moment, she realized she had never touched a weapon before and she knew she needed this thing; she needed the great equalizer that would make him tremble. Never again would she wake in the morning, worried that he was in her apartment—never again!

She pointed the pistol toward the back of the store and felt the price tag brush against her fingers. She turned away from the woman so she could glance at the price: \$1,500.

She turned and put the pistol back on the counter, with the barrel pointing at the clerk. The clerk quickly picked it up, replaced the magazine, released the slide, and returned it to its place beneath the counter.

“When you said you want a pistol for self-defense,” the clerk said gazing down at the countertop, “did you mean self-defense in general terms or self-defense from a specific person?”

She looked at the clerk. Where is this going? Perhaps they have *one-use* pistols that don’t cost so much.

“Just one person: a man.”

“A man is causing you problems?” the clerk asked, still looking at the counter. “If you need a pistol, they must be serious problems.”

“Yes, they are.”

“I assume the authorities have not been helpful?”

“No, they have not been helpful and they are not going to be helpful.”

“If someone took care of this man, would you still need a pistol?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said and then added, “I’d be okay if I knew he would never bother me again.”

“Look up at that camera, right there,” the clerk said, pointing toward the ceiling in the corner of the store. “Keeping looking at that camera and answer me while you look at it.”

“All right.”

“Are you a police officer?”

“No.”

“Are you an agent of any law enforcement agency, for example, the F. B. I., the state Bureau of Investigation, or any state or federal organization with the power to arrest a citizen?”

“No.”

“Please keep looking at the camera.”

“Sorry, OK.”

“Are you a representative of any person or organization affiliated with the law, in any capacity?”

“No.”

“Do you swear that the nature of services provided to you and the identities of any people you may meet will be held in strictest confidence and will not be revealed to any-

one?”

“Yes, I swear.”

“Please state your full name and address.”

“Patricia Gale DeVries, 1426 Lexington Avenue, Apartment 226.”

“Do you have a nickname or a shortened form of Patricia? Please keep looking at the camera.”

“Yes. OK. My friends call me Pat.”

“Thank you, Pat, that is all for now. You do not need to look at the camera anymore.”

Pat looked at the woman and asked, “Now what?”

“Tomorrow night, between six and seven o’clock, call the toll-free number on this card and give them your name and do what they tell you to do.”

“What does this cost?”

“They will give you a price when they have had a chance to review your case.”

“I guess I don’t need to buy a pistol.”

“You could buy one; but this will take care of your problem.”

Pat left the pawnshop and walked back to work. After she sat down at her desk, she took the business card from her pocket; it had three words and a toll-free number.

That evening, Pat sat in her apartment and wondered what solutions these people had for her. Then she felt overcome by a terrible fear: Was this a swindle? It was probably a security system company and she had just fallen for the best sales job ever. It had to be a swindle, that’s why the clerk asked all the questions about cops and law enforcement. That’s how they keep ahead of the law and they have her answers on video if they ever went to court.

She began to feel foolish. She felt her hopes fade as she realized they must think she's good for a big swindle, they must be expecting even more than they could make on selling that \$1,500 pistol. She had played into their hands and she was a fool. She had been too anxious for help from someone who could even the score.

Well, forewarned is forearmed. She would not give them any money and she already had fraud alerts on her credit reports. They won't get anything from her.

The feeling of being conned into revealing her name and address to a stranger began to spread into her overall paranoia. That night when she checked the locks, she pushed her couch up against her door. She turned on the kitchen light and left it on for the night.

When her alarm clock buzzed the next morning, she once again listened and then patrolled her apartment with baseball bat in hand, searching for him.

During the day, she did her work as usual. Occasionally, she thought about forgetting the whole thing. She would not call them. Then a half-hour later, her curiosity would overcome her embarrassment about the swindle and she would scheme how to beat them at their own game.

As she rode home on the bus, she decided she needed to play along for a while and then get out. If she did that, they would give up on her and move on to someone else. She would be very careful.

She had a sandwich with a glass of milk for supper. She paced the apartment for almost twenty minutes, waiting for the proper time to make her phone call.

Six o'clock. She picked up her phone and dialed the toll-free number. It rang once.

"Good evening. Thank you for calling *Justice for All*. How may I help you?"

"I was told to call this number and give you my name,"

Pat said.

“Thank you for calling and may I have your name?”

“Yes. It’s Patricia DeVries.”

“Your full name, ma’am.”

“Patricia Gale DeVries.”

“Thank you Ms. DeVries. Your address?”

“I live at 1426 Lexington Avenue, Apartment 226,” Pat said, as she tried to hear any other noises in the background on the other end of the line—it was silent.

“Yes, I have your file right here in the computer. I am pleased to tell you we will take your case. To get started we need to set up a meeting between you and our representative.”

“What kind of meeting?” Pat asked.

“Just to confirm details and finalize the paperwork.”

“When?”

“I have an opening tomorrow evening at eight o’clock, or next Thursday at noon. After that, I don’t have anything for three weeks.”

“I don’t know.”

“I can put you on a waiting list for cancellations.”

“What is this going to cost?”

“We can’t tell you that until we have a few additional details.”

“I don’t think I want this any more.”

“If you change your mind and would like our service at a later time, just tell the person you spoke to yesterday and she’ll arrange a meeting for you.”

“Where would the meeting be held?”

“Anywhere you would like to meet. Many of our clients

want to meet in their homes; others like public places, like libraries, bars, or restaurants. The choice is yours.”

“A coffee shop,” Pat said. “I would like to meet at the coffee shop on the corner of Lexington Avenue and Twelfth Street. Would that be all right?”

“Yes, that would be fine—at eight?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“If anything changes and you can’t make the appointment, please call this number and leave a message.”

“OK.”

“Anything else?”

“No.”

“Have a pleasant evening and we look forward to helping you, Ms. DeVries.”

“Thank you. Good night.”

Pat put down her phone and tried to figure out how these people were going to swindle her. She would be certain to listen very carefully and keep notes when she met with their representative tomorrow night. That would be important. She could study those notes and look for a pattern, something to let her know what to expect next. She was accustomed to dealing with people who were trying to get away with something. She had dealt with deadbeats for years. She knew all the tricks and gimmicks they use to manipulate honest people who are just trying to make a living. You can’t trust any of them; they’re all liars; they’re all only looking out for number one.

The next day was business as usual and supper was equally unexceptional.

At eight o’clock, Pat entered the coffee shop at Lexington and Twelfth. She joined the back of the line and looked around the little shop. Every table was occupied. She ordered a decaf latté and turned to face the tables. The

woman from the pawnshop was at a corner table, reading a newspaper.

Three people stood and began gathering up their trash. “Hey, Steve!” one of them called out. “You can have this table.”

Steve moved to the table and sat down as Pat tried to decide if that was fair. Steve had not been waiting as long as she had; she was sure of that.

She heard someone call her name and she picked up her latté. She walked toward the middle of the room thinking this was the wrong place to meet; it was too crowded and noisy.

Again, someone called her name. It was the woman from the pawnshop. She motioned for Pat to come to her table.

Pat tried to think of a good reason to decline an offer of sharing the table. Her mind went blank. Perhaps this woman was leaving and offering her table to Pat.

“Hello again,” the woman said. “You are right on-time.”

“Excuse me?” Pat said. “What do you mean?”

“Eight o’clock and you’re here. Good. Are you ready to start?”

“Yes, I guess so,” Pat said. “I’m meeting with you?”

“Yes, you are. They explained to you that we want to confirm details and finalize paperwork?” the woman asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Let’s get started.”

“You have me at an advantage,” Pat said. “I don’t know your name.”

“What is your mother’s name?” the woman asked, apparently ignoring Pat’s request to know her name.

“My mother’s name is Claire; she passed away four years ago.”

“Now that’s a coincidence,” the woman said, “my name is Claire.”

“Oh?” Pat asked. “That is a coincidence.”

“Let me confirm some information and this meeting will not take more than a half-hour,” Claire said, as she pulled a small folder from her purse. “I have another appointment tonight, on the other side of town. That case involves four orphaned children.”

“Orphans?”

“Yes, apparently their mother lost her job, forcing the family to live in a public housing slum. Drug dealers killed their mother. It’s a tragedy. The youngest is only four years old.”

“People are so heartless,” Pat said. “I hope you get those guys.”

“Let’s see,” Claire said, as she positioned her reading glasses. “According to our files, about two months ago you were mugged. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“The mugger threatened you with a knife and took your purse and briefcase.”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“The mugger pushed you to the ground and kicked you several times, then fled the scene.”

“Yes.”

“You asked the building superintendent to call the police; they arrived, filled out their reports, and you have heard nothing from them since that night.”

“Yes, that’s also correct.”

“Pat,” Claire said, “people get mugged everyday. Why do you want a gun? Are you going to carry a concealed weapon?”

“No. I need to be safe at home.”

“You are not safe?”

“No.”

“The lobby is monitored and you don’t need to admit anyone you don’t know.”

“There was a key.”

“A key?”

“Yes, I had a duplicate key in my purse. It unlocks the lobby door and it unlocks my apartment,” Pat said.

“Tell your superintendent.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Duplicate keys violate the lease and I’ll be evicted.”

“Just say you lost it.”

“That would not make them change the locks; he would just give me a new key. Don’t you understand? This thief knows where I live and he has a key to my home!”

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” Claire asked.

“Yes, he told me if I reported him to the cops he would kill me.”

“So, you live in fear of being killed in your apartment?”

“Yes.”

“We know who mugged you.”

The words sent a shiver down Pat’s spine.

“How do you know?”

“I will tell you what you need to know,” Claire said. “I will ask the questions and you will answer them. You may ask one question—any question—and I will answer it. However, that is the only question you may ask and after I an-

swer it, our relationship is over. You will not see me again. Understood?”

“Yes,” Pat said.

“Do you really want to know how we know, or shall we continue our interview?”

“Let’s continue,” Pat said.

“We know who mugged you. He is a gangbanger looser who’s been in this area about four months. You were his fifth victim.”

“How—” Pat stopped before finishing her question. “Sorry, ignore me; I don’t need to know anything. Please go on.”

“Sometimes he works with an accomplice and at other times he arranges to have an audience for his muggings. There is a gang of about five other punks who hang out with him. When he pushed you to the ground and kicked you, it probably meant other gang members were nearby. He was putting on a show.”

“Go on.”

“We know where he lives; we know where he hides. Compared to our other jobs, he would be quick and easy. We just need to know what you would like us to do.”

“Anything you can do—stop him.”

“What do you need us to do so you can sleep better at night? What is justice for you?”

“Oh, yeah,” Pat said. “Your card: Justice for All. That’s what it means, right? No! No! Forget I asked that question, I don’t want you to answer it.”

“Fine, then what do you want?” Claire asked. “If you don’t know right now, think about it for a while, though not for too long—these kinds of people move on frequently. Take a few days at the most.”

“The key—get the key back.”

“We can try, but it’s probably gone: it is evidence.”

“Beat him up—can you do that? No! I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to ask a question.”

“What do you want us to do about your mugger?”

“I wish he was dead!”

“We can do that, it would be justice,” Claire said, quietly. “He killed a boy a year ago. It was a drug deal double-cross.”

“He killed someone?” Pat said, as her stomach grew tight and she felt her hands begin to tremble. “It could have been me. He could have killed me and for what? Twenty dollars and a cheap briefcase? Is that all my life is worth to him?”

“You must witness everything we do to him,” Claire said. “Victims must see their attackers punished.”

“All right,” Pat said. “I want to see it.”

“It’s good for the soul to seek justice; you will rest easier when all is right in the world,” Claire said. “This contract details everything we have talked about. If you would, please sign above your name and date it. You understand you cannot have a copy of this agreement?”

“Yes, I understand. How much?”

“Two hundred dollars and I will not count that as a question, I was getting to our fee.”

“That’s reasonable,” Pat said, as she signed and dated the agreement.

“It’s fair,” Claire said. “We know justice will be served and you are a champion of justice.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Please have the money—cash—as soon as possible. I will call you when we have everything arranged. You will need to pay us just prior to the act.”

“Thank you.”

“Have a good evening,” Claire said as she folded the contract and put it into her purse.

“Yes, I will—you, too.”

“I’ll do my best. Now I’m off to see what we can do for those poor children.”

“I can’t believe the cruelty in this world,” Pat said. “I hope you get them.”

More than a week had passed when Pat’s phone rang with the call she had been waiting to receive.

“Ms. DeVries?”

“Yes.”

“This is Claire.”

“Hello, Claire.”

“We need you to attend a performance this evening. I’ll pick you up at eleven-thirty, outside your apartment.”

“Fine. Yes. I’ll be there.”

“Ms. DeVries?”

“Yes.”

“We have that missing article. I’ll give it to you tonight.”

“Thank you, thank you *very* much.” Pat put down her phone and felt a great burden lift from her shoulders. In a few hours, the nightmare of the past two months would be over. It was ending. Justice! Finally, she would have her key back—the fear was over. In only hours, they would silence her assailant. Peace at last!

She was in the building’s lobby at eleven that evening. She did not want to risk being late. At eleven-thirty, a white van pulled up and she walked out to greet it. Claire was driving. She motioned for her to get in on the passenger’s side. Pat hesitated a moment. Was the mugger in this van?

As she fastened her seatbelt, she looked back over her shoulder.

“We’re the only ones here,” Claire said. “My colleagues have your mugger and we are prepared to fulfill our part of the agreement.”

“I have the money,” Pat said.

“Good,” Claire said. “Give it to me after we arrive and you have seen the mugger and you are certain that justice is being served. If you change your mind, just walk away.”

“Oh? OK,” Pat said. “I don’t think I could walk away from justice; he’ll mug again and he will kill again.”

A light rain began to fall and Claire turned on the windshield wipers.

“Do you have children?” Claire asked.

“No,” Pat said. “Never married; no significant others—just me.”

“I don’t have any children, either,” Claire said. “So, I guess all children are my children.”

“Yeah,” Pat said. “You could look at it that way.”

“I do,” Claire said. “When we champion justice we are making the world better; better for the children. I will not live forever, but the human race needs people to fight for justice and protect the children.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“You are doing a brave thing,” Claire said. “You are a hero.”

“Yeah,” Pat said, sounding distracted, “a hero who can’t protect herself or anyone else.”

“You decided to right a wrong and you gave us permission to be part of your cause,” Claire said. “You give us your cause and we give you our methods. We are a team: together we *are* justice.”

“Yeah, right, I see what you mean.”

“We’re here.”

Claire and Pat exited the van and entered an abandoned warehouse. It was cold and wet. On the far side of the building, a single light bulb lit up a small area. Pat counted five people standing under the light.

They crossed the building and joined the group. A man sat beneath the light, his feet and hands were tied, and he had a hood over his head. He appeared unconscious.

“He’s coming out of it,” one man said. “A few more minutes and he’ll be awake.”

“Sir? Excuse me, sir?” Claire asked the man in the chair. “Can you hear me?”

“Who are you?” the bound man asked, sounding groggy.

“No questions,” Claire said. “I will ask questions and you answer them. No other conversation.”

“Go to—”

“I didn’t ask a question,” Claire said, cutting the man off in the middle of his sentence. “Now, once more, can you hear me? It’s important; you deserve to know everything that happens here. Tonight is more important than any other time in your life.”

“Do I know you?”

“That’s a question. I don’t answer questions,” Claire said. “I have a woman with me. You mugged her two months ago. Do you remember her? You took her purse and briefcase and you knocked her down and kicked her. Do you remember doing that?”

“What? Is that why I’m here? That no count piece of crap has connections? Are you her girlfriend? What’re you going to do? Beat me up?”

“Those are questions,” Claire said, quietly and calmly.

“Are you saying you remember this woman? You mugged her on Lexington and you told her you would kill her if she went to the police.”

“I tell everyone that! Lexington? Maybe.”

“Just ‘yes’ or ‘no’ will help move us along,” Claire said. “You had her business cards and you had the key to her apartment building in your pocket.”

“That was the key to her apartment?” the bound man asked. “I thought it was for her office. No wonder it didn’t work.”

“Let’s continue,” Claire said.

“That key wasn’t any use to me,” the man said. “It was just a collection agency; a stupid collection agency!”

“We also know you killed a boy—a seventeen year old boy—a year ago,” Claire said. “Is that true?”

“Yeah, who’s crying about it? I had orders. That kid tried to burn us on a meth deal. He was a double-crossing gang-banger and a snitch.”

“You confirm that death?”

“Who are you? Did they hire you?”

“Just a moment,” Claire said, as she touched Pat’s elbow and looked expectantly into her eyes. “Yes?” she whispered.

“Yes,” Pat said quietly, as she pressed the money into Claire’s palm.

Claire gave Pat the key to her apartment.

“You can walk over there if you want to,” Claire said, as she motioned toward a small cabinet. “Or stay here; but you’ll want to be at least twenty feet away—we try our best to be neat, but sometimes there’s splatter and it’s a mess.”

“I’ll be over there,” Pat said as she pushed the key into her pocket, turned, and started to walk away.

“No wait! I can’t do this,” Pat said. “I can’t. Let him go. Can you make him promise not to kill me?”

“Yes,” Claire said. “We can do that. Will it be enough? Will you feel safe again?”

“I don’t know,” Pat said. “I might never feel safe again; but I know that killing him will not make me feel better.”

Pat felt a little strange, almost a sense of loss. Her fear and hatred of this man was dissolving from her thoughts. She had lived for two months imagining her revenge, her justice. Her mouth was dry. Two men helped the mugger stand and they began escorting him from the warehouse. Claire followed them to the far end where there was a loading dock. She talked with the man for a few minutes. He nodded and nodded, and then they removed the hood from his head and the shackles from his wrists. He glanced quickly toward Pat and left the warehouse.

Claire crossed the floor and joined Pat.

“Follow me,” she said. “Over here.”

They walked to the small cabinet and Claire opened the door.

“One shot, maybe two,” Claire said. “This is expensive scotch. The best money can buy. We always toast justice.”

She poured the scotch into two small glasses and lifted her glass as she announced, “Justice for All.”

“Justice for All,” Pat rejoined, sounding a little confused. “Was it justice?”

“Justice is fulfilling the will of the victim,” Claire said.

“But I—”

“Here,” Claire said, cutting off Pat’s explanation as she handed her some money. “We talked about your choice and we’re giving you a discount—\$100 off.”

“Why?”

“It seems like the proper thing to do.”

“Thank you.”

“I just need a couple of minutes to collect myself,” Claire said. “Want another?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“How about a double? You can have mine—I’m the designated driver.”

“Sure.”

Pat had bolted down the first shot and she was trying to drink the second two a bit slower; she failed. Two swallows and they were gone.

“Let’s go,” Claire said. “I need to take care of the next client.”

They walked out to the van and the light sprinkle of rain had become a downpour. Claire started the engine.

“I guess you will rest tonight,” Claire said. “I don’t think he will bother you any more.”

“Yeah,” Pat said, “I guess so.”

“Pat?” Claire said. “Did you know he was crying when we took the hood off?”

“Crying?”

“Yeah,” Claire said. “I don’t try to figure this stuff out. Sometimes, I think we’re all just here wondering around and whatever happens, well, it just happens.”

Pat looked out the passenger window. Rivulets of raindrops and the fogging on the glass blurred her vision. She wiped the glass and her vision continued to blur. Sounds echoed strangely in her ears, her tongue felt thick, and her fingers began to feel numb.

“I don’t think...” were the last words she spoke as the world went black.

She was seated on a hard steel chair. Her hands and feet were bound. She felt a rope or something holding her back against the chair. Moment by moment, as sensation returned to her body she could feel the rope burns and the cramping of muscles that had been bound for hours. She had a hood over her head.

“Ma’am? Excuse me, ma’am?” Claire asked. “Can you hear me?”

“Is that you, Claire?” Pat asked. “Something’s wrong here. What is happening? Are you okay?”

“No questions,” Claire said, firmly. “I ask the questions and you answer them. No other conversation.”

“Claire, it’s me,” Pat said. “Someone’s got this wrong.”

“Is your name Patricia DeVries?”

“Yes.”

“Do you work for the Burns & Upshaw collection agency?”

“Yes. You know I do.”

“You confirm your employment?”

“Yes! What’s this all about?”

“You handled the Jeanine Barber collection case?”

“Yes. I think so. The name sounds familiar. What about it?”

“No questions,” Claire said.

She could hear voices, the voices of children.

“What about it? What happened? Why am I here?”

“No questions,” Claire said. “I thought you understood that rule by now. Your harassments and collection activities destroyed Ms. Barber’s reputation. She was a struggling single mother of four and she lost her job. She lost her apartment on the west side and was forced to move her

family to a slum dwelling on the east side of town.”

“Oh no! Oh, dear God! Please, please!”

“You’ll have time for prayer, later,” Claire continued, softly. “Ms. Barber worked two jobs and when she was returning home late one night, she stumbled onto a meth deal going down in the stairwell leading to her apartment.”

“It wasn’t me, it wasn’t me; I didn’t hurt her!”

“Ms. Barber was shot three times and bled to death because the ambulance service would not enter that neighborhood at night.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Pat said. “It wasn’t me! I’m not guilty!”

“Just a moment,” Claire said.

Pat heard Claire walk away, talk with someone in hushed tones for a few minutes, and then she heard her return. Claire was standing next to her.

“One question!” Pat shouted. “We had an agreement. You must answer one question.”

“Very well,” Claire said. “Ask your question.”

“Do the children want me to die? I can’t believe the children want me to die! Are they here, now?”

“They were here,” Claire said. “They left a few minutes ago.”

“You’re lying!” Pat screamed. “Children can’t judge me. Children would not agree to this—not children. How could you let children decide? How could you ask them to live with a decision like that?”

“They were hesitant,” Claire said. “They were sad and confused; they miss their mom and she was not there to help them decide, so they voted and even that was a tie.”

“A tie?” Pat asked, quietly, mournfully. “I am going to die because of a tie vote?”

“No,” Claire said. “They decided they would do whatever the last person did. Strange, isn’t it? Do you want a ride home?”

“Home?”

“Yes,” Claire said. “I’ll take you home.”

“Yes, I would...” Pat’s voice trailed off.

“The children have a request of you,” Claire said.

“Yes?”

“They asked that you not be mean to anyone, again.”

Patricia couldn’t answer, she was crying too hard.