

The Mystic

A light rain fell as Senator and Mrs. Cleveland LeGrand left the Warner Theater. A man with a reputation for being prepared, the Senator had his umbrella and popped it open for protection from the rain. He was in his early sixties, graying slightly, but physically fit. He had been a competitive swimmer in his college days and he still swam three or four times each week.

His wife, fifteen years his junior, was the only daughter of the Anderson Steel family of Georgia. She had two brothers who ran the corporation and that left her free for charity work, social occasions, and minding her husband's rise in the Senate.

The major drawback to the Warner was the lack of valet parking. The Senator and Mrs. LeGrand were resigned to walking five blocks to get to the parking garage, and then up two flights of steps to get to their car.

Mrs. LeGrand was annoyed by this inconvenience: they should have had their driver deliver them to the front of the theatre. However, the Senator did not like to be conspicuous, especially with his re-election campaign getting underway. He had prevailed in their argument earlier that evening, they had driven the hybrid sport utility, and she

had left her prized chinchilla fur in the closet.

Mrs. LeGrand despised this hypocrisy; however, it was only necessary for about six to eight months, every six years. The rest of the time, the voters' attention span was much too short to know if their Senator cared about the environment or his position on endangered species.

As they approached the parking garage, the rain began to pelt down harder and the wind picked up. They hurried to the shelter of the garage and paused just inside to shake the rain from the umbrella.

"Spare change?"

The voice was female, an older woman, dressed shabbily.

"Come on," the Senator said as he pulled gently at this wife's arm. "Let's get up to the car."

"Spare change?" the woman asked again. "I do kindness for kindness and pain for pain."

"What did you say?" the Senator asked. "You don't mean that as a threat, do you?"

"Spare change?"

"Let's give her something and go," Mrs. LeGrand said, as she opened her coin purse.

She only had three twenty dollar bills; cab fare—flexible cab fare for an emergency. She peeled off one of the twenties and pressed it into the woman's outstretched hand.

"You are very kind," the woman said. "I'll be very kind to you."

"Thank you," the Senator said, "and a good evening to you."

The woman pocketed the money, closed her eyes, and held up her hands, as if praying. She announced:

*Driving home, from journeys afar,
You'll both be sad you drove this car.
The air inside, hisses away,
Call your chauffeur; he'll save your day.*

"Thank you," Senator LeGrand said. "That was a very nice poem. Thank you for your kindness. Now, we must be going."

The Senator and Mrs. LeGrand walked up to the third level of the parking garage. As they entered their car, the Senator said, "Do you think she was talking about a flat tire?"

"Perhaps," Mrs. LeGrand said. "She was probably just rummaging around in her brain for words that would rhyme."

"The tires all look fine to me," the Senator said. "Let's go home."

About two miles from their home, the front left tire went flat. It began with the car being a bit harder to steer, and ended with some people pulling up along side them at a stop light. When the Senator and Mrs. LeGrand heard the passengers in the other car shouting out that their car had a flat tire, they smiled at each other and Mrs. LeGrand called home to get their chauffeur, Parks, to come and get them.

When Parks arrived, they swapped vehicles with him and Parks stayed with the sport utility until the garage people arrived to repair the flat tire.

"That's a strange coincidence," the Senator said as they started home in the limousine.

"Coincidence?" Mrs. LeGrand asked. "I'm not sure."

"How would she know that?" the Senator asked. "She did say something about air getting out, didn't she?"

"I think so," Mrs. LeGrand said. "That's quite a coinci-

dence. If she can do that for twenty, imagine what she could do for a hundred. I'd give her five hundred to predict the price of steel over the next ten years."

"We'll run back and get her, and take her to the Kentucky Derby," the Senator said. "Or why not just cover the Triple Crown?"

"With a talent like that," Mrs. LeGrand said. "The Presidential Election would not be a major challenge, would it?"

"It was a fluke," the Senator said. "Let's not dwell on it too much."

The Senator and Mrs. LeGrand both slept fitfully that night. They were obsessing over possibilities. The next morning, breakfast conversation was animated.

"All right," the Senator said. "We need to test her again. If she has a gift, we need to be sure it's not wasted or misdirected."

"Yes," Mrs. LeGrand said. "What can we ask her?"

"I don't know if it works that way," the Senator said. "We need to find her and just take it from there."

"I'll ask her about my brothers," Mrs. LeGrand said. "I'll ask her if I should be concerned."

"No," the Senator said. "Nothing personal; nothing business; nothing political; we should be very careful choosing what we ask. We have no idea who she is or who she might be working with."

"You're sounding paranoid," Mrs. LeGrand said, almost chiding.

"We need to find her and just take it from there," the Senator repeated his earlier comment.

"If she is the real thing, then what?"

"We hire her."

"As what?"

“Assistant housekeeper or whatever,” the Senator said. “We’ll put her on the household payroll and keep this out of the public eye.”

“How do we find her?”

“She looked homeless and dressed like she collects her clothes from dumpsters,” the Senator said. “We can start with that.”

A knock at the dining room door ended their conversation.

“Come in,” the Senator announced.

The door opened and Parks entered the room.

“Excuse me, Senator,” Parks said. “The car is fine and parked in the usual place. Will you need it this morning?”

“Yes,” the Senator said, “Mrs. LeGrand and I have some errands to run and we’ll both be out most of the morning.”

“On another point, sir,” Parks said, sounding a little tentative. “There is a lady at the main gate requesting permission to enter and meet with you and Mrs. LeGrand. She asked me to tell you: tires need air.”

“Did she give you her name?” Mrs. LeGrand asked.

“No, ma’am,” Parks said. “She said you would understand the comment about the tire.”

“Get her,” the Senator said. “We’ll meet with her on the veranda. Tell Mrs. Halverson we will have three for coffee in about ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Parks?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Don’t be too concerned about her appearance. She’s not one of our typical guests; we’re interested in her perspective on homelessness in the District.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ten minutes later, the Senator and Mrs. LeGrand sat on their veranda. A disheveled old woman entered from the south yard. Parks escorted her to the table, stepped back, and awaited the Senator’s instructions.

“Thank you, Parks,” the Senator said. “Come back in a half-hour.”

Parks returned to the golf-cart and drove away.

“How did you know who we are?” the Senator asked, sounding a little defensive.

“Your picture in the paper,” the woman said. “Know a name; find an address, not hard to do.”

“And your name?” Mrs. LeGrand asked.

“Shelly,” the woman said. “Just think of sea shells or mermaids with shells covering their—”

“I think we can remember that,” the Senator interrupted her. “And what is your last name?”

“Oh, it’s Dungeness: like the crab.”

“Shelly Dungeness?” Mrs. LeGrand asked. “Is that your maiden name? Did your parents name you Shelly Dungeness?”

“Yes,” Shelly said. “My parents had a sense of humor. You also need to know I am not an undocumented worker: I have a social security card.”

“Why would we need to know that?” the Senator asked.

“It isn’t a good idea to hire undocumented workers,” Shelly said. “Gossip, bad press, that sort of stuff.”

“What do you mean, hire?” the Senator asked.

“The Assistant Housekeeper position.”

The Senator’s face turned ashen and Mrs. LeGrand made an involuntary noise as she felt a shiver run through

her body.

“The Assistant Housekeeper position?” the Senator managed to ask, trying to conceal his surprise.

“I am rushing you, right?” Shelly asked. “Sometimes I can’t tell when I scare people. I don’t mean to do that; it’s just that I don’t do a very good job of separating what I know from what you know from what we know.”

“I don’t understand what you just said,” Mrs. LeGrand said.

“Think of it this way,” Shelly said. “You know things. I know things. Some of those thoughts are private; the thoughts that only you know—your secrets.”

“All right,” Mrs. LeGrand said, “I understand that.”

“If you tell someone a secret, then you both know it, and you both know that both of you know it.”

“I am still following you,” Mrs. LeGrand said, “If I tell someone a secret then we both know it.”

“I have trouble sorting through what I should know and what I should not know. So, people sometimes get uncomfortable around me.”

“You know other people’s secrets?” the Senator asked.

“Yes. That’s one way to think of it; but usually they think I know their future.”

“Can you pick winners in horse races?” Mrs. LeGrand asked. “If you attended the Kentucky Derby, could you pick the winner?”

“Only if people were involved in the outcome,” Shelly said.

“What do you mean?” the Senator asked.

“If someone bet a lot of money on a horse because he knew that horse was on a drug that made him run faster and it was undetectable, then I might bet money on that

horse, too," Shelly said. "If no one knows anything, then I don't know it, either."

"How did you know about our car?" Mrs. LeGrand asked. "Whose secret did you hear?"

"Your husband knew it," Shelly said. "But, he didn't know he knew it. That tire had been going down just a bit for a while; the car didn't steer right. He was on the verge of knowing it when he walked by me. He just hadn't made all the connections."

"We'll take your word on that," the Senator said, as he tried to recall any thoughts he may have had about a low tire or an odd feel to the steering wheel.

"You can know someone's thoughts even when he doesn't know what they mean, yet?" Mrs. LeGrand asked.

"Yes."

"You are a mind reader?" the Senator asked. "What am I thinking right now?"

"That's the funny thing about this," Shelly said. "People don't think in words on a page. They think in pictures; they think in words floating in space; sometimes they think in feelings; other times sensations. Right now, you have images, words, songs, feelings, and punctuation marks racing around your brain. You know what they are; do you really want me to talk about them?"

"Tell me one thing," the Senator said. "Tell me something that only I would know. Prove to me you can do this."

"Mrs. LeGrand's diamond earring is under your bureau," Shelly said. "It's toward the back on the right side."

"That's good," the Senator said. "We'll look for it there; perhaps you will come back tomorrow morning to discuss employment with us."

"How is that a secret?" Mrs. LeGrand asked. "I thought you could only discover secrets."

“The Senator left it there,” Shelly said. “He dropped it and rather than pick it up, he kicked it under the bureau.”

“Why would he—”

“Mrs. LeGrand,” Shelly said. “You know why, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“The earrings were a gift. A gift from long ago,” Shelly said, as she moved closer. She stared into Mrs. LeGrand’s eyes and continued, “They were from your boyfriend—no a lover; he was your fiancé. His name was Jeffery. He was a steel worker. You were secretly engaged and your family found out. They didn’t like him. He wasn’t good enough for you.”

The Senator had been sitting in silence watching his wife. When Shelly finished he said, “So it is true. Those earrings are special to you for a reason I never knew. You had been wearing them almost everyday, but when one was missing, you didn’t say anything. Must it be a secret?”

“He died,” Shelly said as she sat back in her chair. “He fell to his death in an industrial accident the day after your father found out about your engagement.”

“Yes,” Mrs. LeGrand said as her eyes welled up in tears. “I was eighteen years old; it’s been a long time.”

“We only think we have secrets,” Shelly said. “The trouble is we all keep our secrets in the same place.”

“If you were in a room full of people,” the Senator said, “would you know everyone’s secrets?”

“Perhaps.”

“Do you need to touch someone to know his secrets?” Mrs. LeGrand asked.

“That’s usually best,” Shelly said. “If I touch them or something they have recently touched I can get a clear image or impression. If I need to touch the person to be sure, a handshake will do.”

“If you touched a chair someone had sat in or perhaps a pillow they had slept on, would you know their secrets?” the Senator asked.

“Probably.”

“Can you start work tomorrow?” the Senator asked.

Shelly nodded yes to his question, then he continued, “Be here at nine o’clock and Parks will meet you at the front gate. We do not want you to tell anyone about the skill you have. If you do, we will not need your services anymore.”

“You may stay in one of the employee rooms,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “Mrs. Halverson will help you settle in.”

“Thank you,” Shelly said.

“We need you to fit in,” the Senator said. “To do that, always address Mrs. LeGrand as either ‘ma’am,’ ‘Madame,’ or ‘Mrs. LeGrand.’ You should address me as ‘Senator’ or as ‘sir.’ When we have guests, you do not start conversation with them and when answering their questions, ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am’ will usually suffice.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do not make eye contact with anyone visiting the estate,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “Look at the area immediately beneath their chin.”

“Why wouldn’t I look them in the eyes?”

“That’s too assertive,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “We need people to believe that you have been in service to fine families your entire life and eye contact was not appropriate fifty years ago.”

“Yes, ma’am, I will not be too assertive.”

“We look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

“We have not discussed pay,” Shelly said.

“What do you believe would be fair?” the Senator asked.

“One hundred and fifty thousand per year,” Shelly said.

“For a housekeeper?” Mrs. LeGrand asked, incredulous that Shelly could be so naïve.

“Oh,” Shelly said. “I got confused again. You haven’t told me yet that I’m here to get the Senator elected to the Presidency.”

The Senator and Mrs. LeGrand exchanged glances, then the Senator said, “We will pay thirty-six thousand plus room and board, and when your services warrant an increase, we can discuss bonuses that will be paid in cash.”

“If we are finished here,” Shelly said. “I’ll get some of my things packed up and I’ll be back in the morning.”

“We look forward to you joining our staff,” the Senator said.

“Sir, ma’am, see you tomorrow.”

Shelly walked away from the table, toward the golf cart that was just pulling up in the backyard.

“Cleveland, this is destiny,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “Fate has dropped this gift in our lap.”

“Let’s hope she is a gift,” the Senator said. “Everything she can do for us she could also do against us. We will not have any secrets from her.”

“We need to keep an eye on her,” Mrs. LeGrand said.

“I’ll arrange for that,” the Senator said.

“How will you keep that information from her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she already knows.”

The next morning, just minutes after nine o’clock, Shelly entered the LeGrand estate through the servant’s entrance.

The Senator and Mrs. LeGrand had spent most of the previous night discussing how to use Shelly’s talents. They needed to get potential detractors into their home so Shelly could assess their motives when the Senator confided his presidential ambitions. His announcement would not sur-

prise anyone; but if his competitors planned to sabotage his campaign, he would know in advance and he could stop them.

The Senator and Mrs. LeGrand were in their day room, finishing coffee.

“Let’s start with Senator Stanek,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “I don’t think any other Senator would be serious competition. We’ll see what he has planned and what his problems might be.”

“Drinks tomorrow night?” the Senator asked.

“Yes,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “I’ll call Dorothy and see if she and her good husband would be available on such short notice.”

“Make it 6 o’clock and let them know we would appreciate an hour of their time,” the Senator said.

“Why so coy?” Mrs. LeGrand asked. “Let’s hint at your decision; why shouldn’t we? Perhaps both of them will be thinking of nothing else when they arrive.”

“All right,” the Senator said. “Confide in Dorothy and ask her to keep the information in strictest confidence.”

Senator and Mrs. Stanek arrived at 6:20 that evening, being fashionably late and offering no explanation. They stayed for 30 minutes and listened intently to Senator LeGrand’s plans to form an exploratory committee as a first step in announcing his plans to enter the party primary. They were both very encouraging and wished him the best of luck.

Within a minute of their departure, Shelly was in the room, listening to Mrs. LeGrand’s description of the places in the room where the Senator and Mrs. Stanek had spent the most time.

Shelly walked around the chair where Senator Stanek had sat and placed her hands on the back of the chair.

“He is a busy man,” Shelly said. “Lot’s of ideas in his

life. He was... well, I don't know, perhaps I shouldn't."

"You work for us," Mrs. LeGrand said. "Remember that: we pay you for the information and we want to know what you know."

"Anything I know?"

"Yes, anything. We want to know what he is not saying to us," the Senator said.

"Just remember these are secrets; they're ideas, not actions; and wishes are not crimes."

"You don't need to sight the law to me," the Senator said. "I have a Harvard Law degree."

"Very well," Shelly said. "Senator Stanek is very attracted to Mrs. LeGrand and he thinks she is interested in him."

"What else?" the Senator asked, unaffected by Shelly's revelation. "Anything related to politics?"

"Yes," Shelly said. "He has six million pledged; but he's waiting until he has fifteen million before announcing his candidacy."

"He already has six million pledged?" Mrs. LeGrand asked. "How did he get that without us finding out about it?"

"I can't tell you that," Shelly said. "I don't think he knows the details; they are only telling him the results."

"How much does Mrs. Stanek know?" Mrs. LeGrand asked. "Does she know about the money?"

"Where was she sitting?" Shelly asked.

"Here, on the loveseat," the Senator said.

Shelly walked to the loveseat and circled it slowly, lightly touching it as she walked.

"She sat on this side, didn't she?"

“Yes,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “What can you tell us?”

“She doesn’t know much about Senator Stanek’s plans,” Shelly said as she sat down where Mrs. Stanek had been sitting. “There is something though... I’m not sure about this; it’s a little fuzzy.”

“Tell us what you can,” the Senator said. “Tell us impressions or feelings, or whatever it is that seems fuzzy.”

“I don’t think I should,” Shelly said.

“You work for us,” Mrs. LeGrand said, sounding impatient. “Tell us what it is.”

“If I tell you something that’s illegal, am I an accomplice?” Shelly asked.

“No,” the Senator said. “Don’t worry about legal issues. We will handle anything that’s a problem.”

“Mrs. Stanek thinks the money is a bribe,” Shelly said. “This campaign money has been buying the Senator’s votes on issues.”

“Which issues?” Senator LeGrand asked, knowing this information would be Stanek’s weakness if he could prove it.

“Trade agreements,” Shelly said. “Also there is something about restricting the government’s authority with terrorists.”

“Terrorists?” the Senator asked. “What do you mean?”

“Mrs. Stanek is worried,” Shelly said. “She knows her husband is dealing with deadly people. He has accepted their money and he is going to be drafting the legislation they want passed.”

“Terrorists?” Mrs. LeGrand asked. “How could terrorists approach a Senator? Homeland security would know, wouldn’t they?”

Senator LeGrand quickly shot a disapproving glance at

Mrs. LeGrand. They should not be saying anything that would distract Shelly or make her nervous about divulging more information.

“What else can you tell us?” the Senator asked.

“That’s it,” Shelly said. “That’s what’s left in the room right now. Some of it is fading a bit. Mrs. Stanek thought her drink was too strong and Senator Stanek thought his drink was too weak. That’s all, I guess.”

“Thank you,” the Senator said. “You are doing a fine job of helping us. Take the rest of the week off, on us.”

“Really?”

“Yes, feel free to use your quarters,” the Senator said. “If you need Parks to take you anywhere—shopping or anything like that—don’t hesitate to use him. I’ll have an advance check for you in the morning. I suspect you would like to add to your wardrobe. We’ll advance you a month’s pay; please keep that to yourself.”

“Yes, Senator,” Shelly said. “Thank you sir, ma’am; I’ll be going now if you don’t need anything more.”

“I don’t think we need anything just now,” the Senator said.

The Senator had sat in silence for almost five minutes after Shelly left the room. Mrs. LeGrand knew better than to break the silence, so she also sat quietly, waiting for Cleveland to speak.

“Can we trust her?” the Senator asked, rhetorically. “If she is right, we have Stanek over a barrel. If she is wrong, we would be chasing our tails.”

“Why did you give her the rest of the week off?” Mrs. LeGrand asked in a manner that did not hide her disapproval. “All the staff will notice she is gone and she’ll return with new clothes and—”

“Do you want her around during the next few days?” the

Senator asked, interrupting her. "Do you want her to know your every secret?"

"No."

"Did you see how she started out certain about her information and then she said it began to fade? Like perfume in a room; we'll strategize, then wait a few days before we allow her to be around us again."

"How do we explain her absence?"

"We don't."

"You don't think Mrs. Halverson will want to know what's going on."

"Tell Halverson that Shelly is an 'as needed' employee and that you will supervise her."

"Still sounds a little strange."

"We will live with it," the Senator said.

For the next few days, the Senator and Mrs. LeGrand huddled in hushed conversation several hours each day. They were creating plans to eliminate challengers, confirm supporters, and minimize surprises. Their plan bordered on genius and they had finally reached the point of congratulating themselves.

"Tomorrow morning we start with calling everyone on the 'problems' list," the Senator said. "We'll take the leading contenders first, and then work down the list."

"Will blackmail work?" Mrs. LeGrand asked. "If we send letters, will it scare them out of the running?"

"If you were the high and mighty Senator William Stanek would you ignore a letter accusing you of bribery and pandering to terrorists?"

"I don't know."

"Would you call in the F.B.I.?"

“No.”

“If the letter threatened full disclosure if you started a presidential bid would you pull the plug on your campaign?”

“Yes,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “I would.”

“We just need to develop files on each of the major contenders and we will be the front runners,” the Senator said. “How does ‘First Lady’ sound to you? Like it?”

“Yes, Mr. President, it sounds perfect.”

The weather was clear and inspiring. A breeze wafted gently from the south, bringing a clean fresh quality to the veranda on the following Sunday afternoon, when Senator LeGrand’s chief rivals gathered at his home for a luncheon and social chitchat.

The food was excellent, wine flowed free, and conversation was animated. Everyone was on his or her best behavior. Curiously, very curiously, they did not discuss politics in any form. Everyone was cautious and everyone kept his or her most pressing question a secret. No one would ask why this group of movers and shakers had gathered at one table with no mention of who might support whom in a bid for the Whitehouse. The three-hour luncheon concluded with jokes, laughter, and the promise to ‘do it again, very soon.’

Shelly had spent most of her time pouring wine, pouring water, pouring coffee, and pouring brandy. Her only task was to ‘pour’ and she did so in a way that was unusual; however, no one in the room thought anything out of the ordinary. Shelly handled everyone’s glasses. When a congressional representative set down his coffee cup, Shelly lifted it from the table and refilled it while she held it. When the governor’s spouse emptied his wine glass, Shelly lifted it from the table and re-filled it. No one noticed anything too unusual; no one suspected a thing.

After the Senator and Mrs. LeGrand finished the good-byes, they hurried out to the veranda where Shelly was waiting for them.

"I don't know how you call these people 'friends,'" Shelly said as she stared at the wrought-iron tabletop. "They have... I mean, I don't know how they live with what they have done."

"I want to record this," the Senator said.

"No!" Shelly snapped at him, rudely. "No recording. My life is at risk here: no recording and nothing written down. I don't want anyone to know about what I have done."

"Very well," the Senator said. "No evidence of any kind. Now tell us what you know about these people."

"They are all very ambitious," Shelly said. "They're all very dangerous. I don't think it's a good idea to make enemies in this crowd."

"Go on," Mrs. LeGrand said. "Tell us about what they do to their enemies."

"The governor had an assistant who was going to become a whistle-blower," Shelly said. "The assistant was in a car accident and she's in the hospital now. They don't know if she will live."

"Did the governor do that?" the Senator asked. "Did you get a clear impression that the governor was directly responsible for that?"

"It was strong," Shelly said. "But, not clear; maybe or maybe not. The governor suspects the accident may not have been accidental and feels relieved that it happened."

"What about money?" the Senator asked. "Do any of these people have sources that will help them get to the Whitehouse?"

"Yes," Shelly said. "Two of them think they have it covered."

“How?” Mrs. LeGrand asked. “How do they have it covered?”

“The congressman is planning an art theft.”

“What?” the Senator asked. “A theft?”

“Yes,” Shelly said. “He has art work—paintings—appraised in the millions and his insurance company is working with him on this. There will be a robbery and they will pay him for the loss. Millions, he is planning on millions for this. Then in a few years, he pulls them out of hiding and no one is any wiser for it.”

“That’s creative,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “What else?”

“That man with the mustache, the one who talked about hunting in Canada,” Shelly said, sounding as if she was having trouble recalling his name. “He has been working with a communist group in Russia. I think they’re mobsters or something like it. They deal in weapons and drugs and they’ll funnel money to him if he gets tough on communist.”

“What?” Mrs. LeGrand said. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Unless they’re trying to stir up anti-American sentiment,” the Senator said as he wondered if his wife was going to interrupt Shelly all evening. “It would be to their advantage to support a strong anti-communist candidate.”

“What other details do you have?” the Senator asked. “What thoughts did you pick up on regarding attitudes towards me?”

“Not much,” Shelly said. “The Congressman doesn’t think you are a viable candidate because your wife is too young and Stanek has told him about an ethics investigation that will start on you next month.”

“What?” the Senator asked sounding angry and embarrassed. His face flushed as he tried to regain control. “What investigation?”

“I don’t know,” Shelly said. “It could be anything. The Senator told the Congressman there will be an investigation; I don’t have any other details.”

“Get them,” the Senator said. “How can you get more information? What can we do?”

“You don’t know, do you?” Shelly asked the Senator as she studied his face.

“What do you mean?” the Senator asked.

“There isn’t anything in your political life that you are trying to hide, is there?”

“I have nothing to hide.”

“I believe you,” Shelly said. “And that’s unusual in this crowd. Everyone has been up to something. Some things are scary, too.”

“Do you have anything else for us?” the Senator asked. “Anything helpful?”

“No.”

“Take the rest of the day off,” the Senator said. “If you think of anything related to that ethics probe, let me know: even if you need to call at an odd hour. We need that information. They must be planning to make up something.”

“I’ll do that,” Shelly said as she stood and left the room.

“Cleveland?” Mrs. LeGrand asked. “I’m getting worried about this. Something’s not right; but I can’t tell you what it is. I’m not sure who to trust right now.”

“Why?”

“Shelly said she believed you do not have any political secrets.”

“I don’t.”

“What about Collins?”

“That’s history—ancient history; don’t think about it.”

“But Collins could be a problem, right? Maybe Stanek knows about Collins and why didn’t Shelly know? She said she believed you have nothing to hide.”

“Let it go,” the Senator said. “I haven’t thought about Collins in years and you shouldn’t be thinking about him now. Shelly will find out too if the thoughts are fresh in your mind. That’s probably why she didn’t know about it.”

“Do we have enough?”

“Yes,” the Senator said. “Let’s get started.”

“Let’s work in the office,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “Do you think Shelly will know what we’re up to?”

“Only if we think about it too much; but then, she does work for us, doesn’t she?”

The Senator began fantasizing about his election campaign. He could not contain his grin as he thought about Shelly attending meetings with potential contributors and telling him who else had been courting their money. “I’ll give her a bonus tomorrow,” the Senator continued as he began to get more practical about their situation. “Twenty-thousand would be a good starting point. We need to get her accustomed to how comfortable life becomes with enough money to satisfy her whims.”

“Cash?”

“Yes, I’ve been withdrawing for two weeks,” the Senator said. “All hundred-dollar bills and most of those from the Senate’s courtesy teller.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “I have some notes I made the other evening and I need to get some ideas down on paper before I forget them.”

The Senator and Mrs. LeGrand spent most of the evening in the Senator’s office composing letters; letters with accusations of very bad deeds, questionable associations, and illegal activities. Each letter ended with the same dire warning.

“If you run for the Whitehouse, copies of this letter will appear in the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, and the New York Times.”

Each letter was a masterpiece in accusation without revealing the accuser. The Senator saved the letters to a flash drive that he could drop into a garbage disposal without a trace of the greed and extortion that was behind them. When all of the letters had been composed, proofed, and formatted, the Senator and Mrs. LeGrand put on latex gloves.

The Senator opened a box containing a new printer that he had purchased for cash three days earlier from a major office supplies retailer. He installed it on his laptop. Tomorrow, he would return the printer to the store he had bought it from and request credit toward a better quality model. He would pay the difference in cash; no paper trail or fingerprints on the first printer and no paper trail or fingerprints on subsequent models.

While the Senator connected the printer, Mrs. LeGrand opened a sealed ream of cotton-bond paper, and together they printed each letter without making any personal contact with the printer or the paper. They handled the envelopes the same way. After they folded each letter, inserted it into its respective envelope, and carefully placed the stamp into position, they put it in a large food storage bag.

When the last letter entered the bag, the Senator sealed it and put the bag into his briefcase.

They had fifteen letters going out to intimidate the Senator’s major rivals and the spouses of the major rivals. They had included every sordid detail they could recall from their conversations with Shelly.

No evidence would remain, anywhere.

It was almost midnight.

“I’m going to put the briefcase in the safe overnight,” the Senator said. “Tomorrow I’ll return the printer and mail the

letters from a public drop box.”

“Where?”

“I’ll drive in to Alexandria to that bagel place and drop the letters off at one of the drop boxes there,” the Senator said. “What difference does it make? There’s nothing unusual about dropping a few letters into a public drop box.”

“No, there isn’t. You’re right,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “I just feel nervous about all of this.”

The Senator and Mrs. LeGrand both slept fitfully. When the alarm sounded, Mrs. LeGrand pushed the snooze button three times. They did not get down for breakfast until 9:15.

The Senator sat at the head of the table. A shoebox sat just to the right of his plate; taped closed with strapping tape and wrapped with a cord. He did not want it to open accidentally. His briefcase, containing the fifteen letters that would change the next presidential election, sat on the floor at the left side of his chair. Every minute or two, he compulsively reached down to touch the briefcase and reassure himself that all was well in the world. The printer was next to the briefcase, repacked in its original box and ready to be returned.

Shelly knocked at the dining room door and entered the room at 9:45.

“Am I working today?” Shelly asked.

“Here, this is for you,” the Senator said as he handed Shelly a shoebox that had been taped closed. “Open it in private.”

“I will,” Shelly said. “Do I have the day off, again?”

“Yes,” Mrs. LeGrand said. “But, plan to be here on Saturday and Sunday.”

“Can I drop you off someplace?” the Senator asked. “I’m driving in to the city in about ten minutes.”

“Yes,” Shelly said. “That would be nice of you, sir. I could use a ride to the metro after I put this in a safe place.”

“You wouldn’t want to be walking around the metro with that,” Mrs. LeGrand said, motioning toward the box.

Shelly was waiting by the front door when the Senator approached her, carrying his briefcase and the printer. Shelly was dressed in her homeless clothes; the same look she had when they met the first time. She had a large knapsack slung over one shoulder.

“Where are you going?” the Senator asked.

“Visiting some friends,” Shelly said. “I have a lot to do today and I don’t want to stand out, too much.”

The Senator opened the door and they both stepped out on the front porch and began walking toward the hybrid sport utility parked in the circular driveway.

“Senator LeGrand?”

The man’s voice startled the Senator and as he turned, he saw four men walking toward him.

“Who are you?” the Senator asked. “Why are you on my property? By whose authority are you here?”

“Sir,” the lead man said. “I am Special Agent Lassen with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and we are here to investigate charges of extortion and threatening elected officials.”

“This is ridiculous!” Senator LeGrand said. “Who made those accusations? Who is behind this?”

“Sir,” the Special Agent said. “This is part of an investigation being conducted by the Senate Ethics Committee and the charges have been made by Senator Stanek, of that committee.”

“Stanek has gone too far this time,” Senator LeGrand announced, sounding officious. “I was planning to report

him to Homeland Security for fraternizing with terrorists and known enemies of the state. I have the evidence here.”

“Where?”

“In this briefcase,” LeGrand said. “My briefcase has confidential reports on Stanek and I want an escort to Homeland Security, now.”

“We need to make this official,” the Special Agent said. “Then everyone can sort it out, later.”

“Make what official?”

“Senator,” the Special Agent said. “You have been charged with extortion and threatening elected federal and state officials. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney, and to have an attorney present during any questioning. If you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be provided for you at government expense. Do you understand these rights?”

“Of course I do,” Senator LeGrand said. “Let’s find Stanek.”

“Please come with us,” the Special Agent said.

The Senator looked around for Shelly. He did not see her, anywhere.

“Where did my housekeeper go?”

“Who?” the Special Agent asked.

“My housekeeper!”

“She drove off several minutes ago,” the Special Agent said. “She is not involved in this, is she?”

“No,” the Senator said. “There’s nothing anyone is involved with; let’s go.”

Mrs. LeGrand watched apprehensively from an upstairs window. The Senator turned over his briefcase and the printer. They helped him get safely seated in the back of the

large black car. Then they all drove away.

She walked to Shelly's room. It was empty. No clothes in the closet or bureau, nothing personal remained, except a folded piece of paper on the bed. She opened it slowly and read:

Mrs. LeGrand,

You do not understand the strength of a mother's love or the anguish of losing a child. My son fell to his death because he was an inconvenience to a wealthy family.

I do kindness for kindness and pain for pain.

The 5th Street Mission thanks you for your contribution, anonymous that it is.

Shelly

PS: I also know about Collins and a few other dreadful activities you and the Senator would not want revealed to the press. The details are on file with my will and they will be published if I do not die of old age.

PSS: Try to live a kinder life; it will be much less stressful for you and the Senator.