

The first anti-woke novel ever published - and it's hysterical.” Marcia Gaines

Jessica Harper Is Not Woke tells the story of an American mom living on Georgia's coast, whose life falls apart in the space of 48 hours after she outs herself as “not woke” at a dinner party.

A chain reaction of events - including a disastrous appearance on a shock jock’s radio show - causes Jess to lose her friends, her job and (nearly) her sanity.

But when a local newspaper owner offers her the chance to head up a new magazine, *The Truvian*, she thinks her problems are over... when in fact they’re only just beginning.

Can she get her life back or has she been canceled forever?

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www.avenueoftheamericas.media
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Jessica Harper Is Not Woke

(By Jessica Harper)

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Jessica Harper Mom, wife, anti-woke campaigner and editor of *The Truvian* magazine.

Brandon Harper Her husband. Ex marine. Salesman for Huckleberry Moon Beers and Spirits.

Jackson Harper Their son. Student at Truvy High School.

April Meadows Jess's best friend since childhood. Self-employed interior designer and decorator.

Tucker Sweet 'Shock jock' DJ. Presenter of *Drive Angry With Tucker Sweet*.

The Truvian magazine

Porter Montrose Owner of parent company Montrose Media. Semi-legendary journalist, back in the day. Patriarch.

Connie Gordon Self-appointed "news editor".

Birdie O'Brien Office manager.

Erwin Moses Black conservative, freelance journalist.

Denver Kelly Fashion blogger turned freelance journalist.

Rusty Rogers Freelance photographer.

Ellie Jones Woke intern.

Shaun Williamson Advertising sales rep.

"Bloody" Mary West CEO, Montrose Media.

The wokeys aka wookiees

Kayla Cobb aka **Strong Mom** Unofficial leader of Truvy High School's woke moms.

Tiffany Rideout, Stephanie Davis, Polly Parker and Ava Birch Woke moms from the school.

Local reptiles

Colin Hanks Alligator, Blackwater Swamp

PART ONE: THE WOKENING

“Wokeness preys upon a person’s desire to be a good person and the vulnerabilities associated with thinking they might not be.”
Anon

Chapter One

“I wouldn’t call myself ‘woke’,” I heard myself say. “I mean, would anyone here call themselves that?”

And in those few seconds, my life changed forever.

I had been looking down at the last of my hunter’s chicken and sautéed potatoes as I said this but was suddenly aware the dinner party had screeched to a halt like a stolen car over a spike strip.

“Well, ho ho ho, I don’t know about that,” guffawed Brig Daniels, our charming host, nervously dabbing his big white moustache with his napkin. “There’s some good stuff those folks are doing, too, Jess.”

I looked up from my meal to see six alarmed faces staring at me. Somewhere, through the French doors and beyond the veranda and maybe at the end of the very long lawn, I was sure I heard a leaf landing.

“Well, *I* feel woke,” said Angela, immaculate in a floral lace cocktail dress. Of course she did. She was the most “woke” person I knew so why had I chosen that occasion to give my controversial statement its test flight? And in Angela’s own home, too (a stunning mansion on the Georgia coast) at her own soirée? Three glasses of wine on an empty stomach was why.

Sitting opposite me, my husband Brandon was gazing at the ceiling and repeating the word “woke” as if he were a wine nut attempting to discern a subtle note in a pinot noir. Similarly my best friend April, next to him, was laughing nervously and twisting her fingers in her hair. Thanks for the back-up, guys. Well, not their fault, I guess. This was all my doing.

“What is it that ails you, exactly?” asked Brig. He was in his sixties and one of those old school Southern gentlemen who effortlessly charm you in a blur of blazers and luxuriant moustaches. What some modern people would call the patriarchy.

I don't mind a bit of patriarchy myself. I like the charm.

"The amount of it," I blurted. "It's everywhere and everything. I can barely open my inbox at work for all the emails about diversity courses and values and inclusivity and whatever new phrase it is this month. And don't get me started on that ridiculous bookshop in town. I should have learned my lesson but I keep going in and looking for, I don't know, any book that isn't about a grievance, a complaint, an injustice. I walked in there last week and tripped over a customer who was taking the knee."

"Chapter and Voice?" said Angela, all hushed tones and earnestness. "I've heard about that store. I keep meaning to go in there."

"I've been in there," said Brig. "I thought they had a little coffee shop."

"Every time I turn on Netflix I get this propaganda pushed down my throat. When did we start accepting that any drama we watch will have a social message? What happened to drama just being entertainment? And people being fired for giving the most anodyne opinions at work. For the love of God, who thought we'd have to live through another McCarthy era in our lifetime?"

"No coffee shop though," said Brig. "I must have been thinking of somewhere else."

"Woke, hmm," said Bran. "Woke woke woke." That man lops down trees with chainsaws any chance he gets, he walked away from a helicopter crash in Basra with no more than a broken arm and he breezes into fancy dan bars and sells them a ton of his beer without breaking a sweat but when it comes to the prospect of hurting someone's feelings he might as well be one of the snowflakes.

"Well, I'm sorry, Jess, but that just sounds like what they call white fragility," said Angela, her cutlery now back on the plate, the food getting cold (abandoned?). "And one thing I've tried to-"

“And that’s another thing!” I cut in. “All those ridiculous phrases they’ve got so you can’t move a muscle without them saying well that’s white fragility or that’s X or that’s Y. You can give anything a label if you fancy it.”

In my best Kate Spade dress and with a curved bob haircut lovingly styled by Kelly at Truvy Tresses that very afternoon, I’d arrived at Brig and Angela’s with every intention of being a charming dinner guest. It was going horribly wrong.

“I like non-fiction mainly,” said Brig. He too had sunk quite a few glasses of wine from his cellar and was in a world of his own.

“We had an unconscious bias course at work this week,” said Brandon. Finally, something!

“And how was that?” said April.

“It was okay. I didn’t like the look of the guy when he walked in but he did a good job.”

Everyone seemed to miss the irony of his remark, which was a shame as some laughter might have defused the situation. As it was, we were all still stuck in the sweaty World War Two submarine that was the dinner party. You know, one of those movies where they all have to be totally silent or the Germans will drop bombs on them (apologies to any German readers).

“We had one on sexual harassment, too,” said Bran. “That was done by Stephanie from reception. She’s in her sixties and forgot to remove her MAGA cap.”

We met Angela and Brig when our previous cat, Jones, got hit by a car and then went to hide, wounded, behind their garage in the street next to ours. It was a little odd that we were friends. I got on better with Brig than Angela: he was easy company. I did love Angela but she was a classic champagne socialist – always running down the cops and talking about “powerful white men” although she had done rather well from Brig’s carefully nurtured portfolio.

They'd moved from Brunswick, the district of Truvy City where Bran, our son Jackson and I lived, to the uber-affluent Riverside area a couple of years ago. Their house had gorgeous pinewood flooring and elegant arched fireplaces and tasteful hand-painted pictures of old-time paddle steamers on the Halfmoon River, which raced silently past just a few feet beyond their back garden.

The other couple were Sarah and David Brooks, both neat and accomplished. He was high up in something and so was she. I really should listen when I'm introduced to people (do you have that problem, too? Oh good). Sarah and David weren't going to get drunk and offer some rogue opinion on race relations. Was what I had done bad manners? It probably was. You were meant to avoid politics at dinner parties, weren't you?

"Why are they taking a knee at the football games?" asked Brig. "I'll tell you why: 'cos if they don't they get accused of being racist. And why is that the only cause that gets the knee? How about victims of crime, how about the elderly, veterans left without pensions?"

"It's certainly dividing people," said Sarah. "At our son's basketball games you've got some kids taking a knee, some standing, some parents shouting for their kids to stand up or get down, it's like a bad game of Simon Says."

Hurrah! Thank you, Brig! Thank you, Sarah! Maybe I wasn't mad after all. Maybe I could pull my status back from "troublesome guest" to "instigator of stimulating chat". Yes, it was all just a case of brand positioning.

"Yeah, our boy at his school, too," said Bran. "And then some of the crowd won't stand for the national anthem now and we sing that as a mark of respect to folk doing their duty overseas so that others can *have* the freedom to protest."

"I'm just sick of it," I said. "I don't feel I have anything to apologize for. And the people who are starting this, a lot of them

are activists, hard left, using the racist brush to bully people into doing what they want. I'm sick of hearing about them and their causes.”

“Well, we don't want a white woman being bored with hearing about racism, how awful,” said Angela.

“I know that bookstore,” said Brig. “You can sit down and read their books.”

“Yes,” I said, “a white woman. You've heard of them, Angela. They're thirty per cent of the population. White women like you and me and Sarah and your mom and my mom and all those nice women you grew up with, you must remember those?”

“Now you're being facetious,” said Angela. “I'm not running down those nice people and you know it. I'm talking about injustice. I would have thought that as someone who works for a healthcare provider you'd have some empathy with people who don't have much money.”

“I know how incredibly lucky I am that I was born into a stable, middle-class family,” I said. “And yes, I got to college and breezed into a job and live in a nice house in a nice part of town. I'm just saying I don't think having to hear about white racism every time I go to work, and reading about diversity every time I open an email, is helpful or necessary.

“And neither do I believe that every one of the people behind these campaigns has some noble motive. A lot of odd characters have wormed their way into positions of power these past few years and nobody's telling them to hit the road for fear of being called a bigot.”

“I think a *lot* of people are telling them to hit the road,” said David. Actually, he had a point.

“Black people have been treated with impunity by the police since this country was born and I think they're right to take it to this next level,” said Angela. “Change doesn't come to those who

sit and wait. Young blacks are more likely to get longer prison sentences for drug possession than whites.”

“Oh those poor drug users,” I said. Sucking up to drug users is always high on a liberal’s list of priorities.

“And police are more likely to pull over black teenagers for traffic offences.”

“Are all your examples about lawbreakers?”

April sniggered but it turned out she was showing Sarah pictures of cats that looked like Taylor Swift. Sarah seemed uncomfortable, I’m guessing at the conversation Angela and I were having rather than at the identikit kittycats.

I felt alcohol doing that thing in your head where you can hear the blood rushing around it. I hated myself and I pictured tomorrow when I would hate myself even more, when the hangover paranoia kicked in and I would no doubt be apologizing to everyone here, multiple times. Including with flowers.

“I stick to my Jack Reachers,” said Brig, swirling rosé round in the glass. “He has other people write them now but they’re still pretty good.”

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Chapter Two

“The Left used to be the party of the hippies and the free spirits. Now it's home to woke scolds and humorless ideologues. Not since the Puritans has a political movement wanted so much power over your thoughts, hobbies and preferences every minute of your day. In the process, they are sucking the joy out of life.”

The Rise of the New Puritans by Noah Rothman

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Bran and I got a Groovy Truvy Cab home, its slime-green color reflecting the self-hatred that oozed through my veins.

“What have I done?” I said as we whizzed away from the beautiful homes of Riverside. Would we ever be allowed to return here? Maybe Angela would recommend that the residents’ committee ban me for life. The security guy would have a photo of me in his little hut with “NOT WOKE” stamped across it.

“Well...” said Brandon.

“Did I screw up?”

“Depends on your point of view. You gave an honest opinion about an important subject. You don’t feel woke. That’s not a crime. You don’t like a lot of the social justice warriors; you’re hating the players, not the game. It just happens that this so-called wokey thing arouses passions big time, whichever side you’re on. But you knew that when you brought it up, so...”

“So I screwed up?”

“Not necessarily. I’m saying you just made a decision to raise that subject because it was something you felt strongly about and you wanted to see what your friends thought. That’s conversation and there’s no rule that says it has to be about how your job’s going or what show you’re watching.”

“Brandon, *did I screw up?*”

“Yeah, you screwed up a little, honey.”

“I knew it!”

“But only if...” His voice trailed off. It was what it was. It wasn’t up to him to exonerate or condemn me.

We sat in silence. The only consolation I could cling on to was that, after my initial outburst over dinner, I had managed to stop ranting, bringing the tenor of the debate down to a much quieter level, so that it ended up as a lively if far from rancorous conversation. Then we had dessert and changed the subject and I was nice about some new paintings Angela had bought. And then we left.

Now I had time to ponder. I had always been like this: I had always been a “blurter”. Even as a teenager I believed in being true to what I believed in, not just going with the herd. At high school when most kids were trying to fit in, I was reading about rebels like Dorothy Parker, John Lennon, the artist Georgia O’Keeffe and the novelist Annalee Calhoun. I understood that they didn’t always fit in and didn’t want to.

I didn’t believe people like Angela (sorry, Angela) and the white woke. They could have been calling for statues to come down ten years ago (they weren’t) and they could have been demanding streets be renamed (I never heard them). So forgive me for saying there is a distinct smell of horse dung about their anger.

But enough about them: who was *I*? Was I a bad person? The notion that people might think badly of me was terrifying. I found it very hard to go to bed on an argument, very hard to go to bed if anyone was thinking I had so much as let them down, however trivial the reason.

You see, I am a pleaser. And so I try to please people, always. Please please please please please. And it doesn’t always work out well for me.

For example, that time I dropped out of the interview process for a promotion at Silverstream Care because Marion Fielder had worked there longer and I didn't want her to be sad / angry. She got the job and bam, what a bitch of a boss she turned out to be (to me, specifically, for some reason).

And then there was that time I asked an old friend from Atlanta if she wanted to come and live with us after she broke up with her boyfriend but she ended up criticizing our life in Truvy and repeatedly saying how she couldn't stand to live here (while making it sound like she was bigging me up, eg "How do you live without proper sourdough? I'm not criticizing Truvy, Jess, I'm in awe of you for being able to soldier through out here.").

"Ma'am! Ma'am!"

The taxi driver's urgent tone snapped me back to reality. "Er, yes! Hello?"

"I heard you talking about wokeness or wokery, whatever the hell they call it. I tell you, lady, I am sick of hearing about it."

"Well, me too!" I said, barely able to get the words out fast enough. "I just said this at a dinner party and I might as well have peed in the soup."

"Peeing in the soup is worse, believe me," said the cabbie, a note of regret in his voice. The ID card swinging from the rearview informed me this was Luther Lutz. Mr Lutz was a very obese white man with a booming voice and a huge amount of dreadlocks. He wore a long, Jesus-type smock and huge wraparound sunglasses, even though it was nearly dark.

"You gotta think about who you're aiming at before you pull the pin," he shouted. "Not everyone can handle a truth grenade. You gotta take the high ground. You got room for prisoners? AKs, light weapons? Whose borders are you prepared to cross?"

A huge mop of tangled hair fell over his face and the cab swerved slightly while he flung it back into place. Luther didn't

just look like he lived off the grid, he looked like he lived off the *planet*.

A battered book languished on the passenger seat. The cover showed Kennedy's car in Dealey Plaza on that fatal day. There was a tiny speck in the sky, which had been ringed in red. The book was called *Did Aliens Kill JFK as Revenge for Roswell?*

“We’re not the only ones, lady,” he said. “Plenty of folks get in this cab, they’re like ‘Luther, Luther, the wokeys are driving me crazy.’ Black, white, you name it, they can’t say diddly at work and their kids can’t say diddly at school. I’m talking normal American conversation here. And if you object, they call you a racist.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about Luther,” I said.

“Don’t you worry, we are on to them. The only way you’re gonna get me to—. Whoa, whoa, listen up, it’s a trailer for Tucker Sweet. I love this guy. You ever listen to Tucker?”

“No,” I said. “I’ve heard the name.”

They were playing clips from the show, clearly some wild, shock jocky affair. “Join us for three hours of trigger warnings. He ain’t Sweet... he’s sour. *Drive Angry... with Tucker Sweet!* Every weekday, four ’til seven.”

There then followed soundbites of Tucker talking to guests.

TUCKER: George, tell the listeners why we asked you on the show today.

MALE GUEST: ’Cos I sell crack to the mayor of Truvy City.

TUCKER: BOOM! THAT JUST HAPPENED! And does the mayor like crack, George?

MALE GUEST: He has spent around twenty thousand dollars of civic money on that drug, Tucker.

TUCKER: BOOM! That is bigger than my Arby’s curly fries habit, woo-eee. But pray tell, why are you outing him if he’s a customer, George?

MALE GUEST: Because he owes me fifty large and I wanna

scare his white ass.

A series of fart sound effects separated this from the next dialogue.

TUCKER: And joining us right now are the girls choir of Truvy City, who have released an album of Beatles songs to raise money for Ronald McDonald Houses. Girls, I've gotta say: lovely idea, *dreadful album*. You murdered the Beatles! You killed Lennon, for the second time. Get out of my studio! (SOUNDS OF KIDS CRYING AND TUCKER'S STUDIO POSSE LAUGHING).

“Oh my word,” I said.

“What an a-hole,” said Brandon.

“I know, right?” said Luther, who nevertheless cackled before switching the radio off.

“So he’s an anti-woke DJ?” I said.

“He’s anti *everything*. He smells blood, he goes for the kill. He’s even had guests on who were fixin’ to pull down the statue of Charles Montrose and – wait for this – Tucker’s radio station is *owned* by Montrose’s great great grandson Porter Montrose. But Tucker don’t give a damn.”

It started to rain. Luther put the wipers on.

“They want to swap that statue for one of XplicitClean. Can you believe that? The liberals are always telling me his rap is like poetry. Have you heard this guy? My cat makes more poetry coughing up a furball.”

XplicitClean was a world-famous rapper who grew up in Truvy City and had made albums including *DUI (Dead Under the Influence)* and *Booty and The Beast*. He once came on stage at the Grammys riding a model of a woman’s gigantic backside, which he repeatedly slapped with huge rubber hands. He later said it was to “raise awareness of non-consensual butt slapping with giant rubber hands in the music industry”. It didn’t do his ticket sales any harm, I recalled.

“Maybe it’s okay to at least say where some of these people’s fortunes came from,” said Brandon. “I’m not saying an explanation should go next to Charles Montrose’s statue but maybe it could go inside the museum.”

Charles Montrose was one of those names you heard all the time if you lived in Truvy. He was another son of Truvy but most certainly not the sort who had ever ridden a giant woman’s bottom onstage, with or without rubber hands. He had made his fortune from his plantations, among other things, and that meant slaves.

“I just think...” I began but the truth was I didn’t know *what* I thought. I’d blundered into the Culture Wars armed with a peashooter instead of a rifle.

“I don’t know,” said Luther, as we cruised into the fringes of Brunswick, our neighborhood. “The whole world’s screwed up. But I’ll ask you this: did you ever see Barack Obama in the same room as Xi Jinping?”

Brandon shot me a nervous glance. “Er, the Chinese prime minister?” he said.

“That guy. Ever seen so much as a picture of them together?”

Brandon pretended to think. “No... No, I don’t believe I have.”

“Exactly. And do you know what that has to do with Hillary’s missing emails?”

“I really don’t.”

“Well, I’m going to pull over into the deserted parking lot of this dark, abandoned building and show you exactly what it is!”

“Yo! Stop the car, man!” shouted Brandon. I was scared, but mainly because I seemed to have married a man who said “yo”.

Luther slammed on the brakes and we screeched to a halt. “What’s up?” he said. “I’m going to show you the real cheesecake. Look, we can park behind this dumpster. That should block their satellite cameras. Put these special hats on, they block out the—.”

“*You just passed our house,*” said Brandon, his fingers clawing at the handle.

“What? You said 355 Monteith.”

“That was our *old* house,” I said. “He has blackouts.”

“I do?” said Brandon, irritated at having his fictional health problem outed.

“You see, he can’t remember them,” I said. “So, Luther, here’s a bunch of money. And thanks!” In my desire to get the hell out of the vehicle, I shoved sixty dollars through the hole at him, twice as much as was needed. “Could you let us out now, please?”

“Here?” said Luther. “This is the most dangerous place in Truvy.”

“Let us out!” I hollered. The taxi screeched to a halt and we piled out before Luther could produce the “special hats”.

A rat bolted between us and I screamed. It was carrying a syringe back to its nest. A scream came from an upstairs window. Three men with baseball bats were standing around a brazier, even though it was a warm night in mid-April. Some large object burned toxically in the flames. One of the men tipped his baseball cap at us.

“Good evening,” he said. “Do you have the package?”

“Yes,” said Brandon, without missing a beat, “but my wife spilled some ketchup on it in the taxi, we’re just gonna clean it up a bit.” I was about to deny the fictional ketchup accident but Bran had started escorting me back towards the road. When we were behind cover of the nearest flaming dumpster he hissed: “Run!”

The taxi drew level with us, Luther with the window down, shouting at us to get back in.

“I need to get my ten thousand steps in, Luther,” said Brandon.

“Oh you gon’ get your ten thousand steps in *real quick* in this neighbourhood,” said the cabbie, before he sped away, muttering: “Them folks is crazy.”

Chapter Three

We walked the two miles back to our house without incident, although Brandon did keep his hand inside his jacket the whole way, like we were in some pedestrian-based version of *The Bodyguard*. He didn't actually have a gun in there, just some stale Mentos, so I'm glad nobody called his bluff.

I was woozy, dehydrated, sweaty and under attack from gnats. It was not a pleasant evening stroll. Brandon was enjoying it more. We'd been sitting for most of the evening and he liked to stretch. He had a chronic back condition from the aforementioned helicopter incident and sitting in one place for a long time was agony for him.

As I panted up the wide steps cut into our steep lawn, it's fair to say that the cheery exterior of our Victorian house, with its sky-blue clapboards, was strikingly at odds with my filthy mood.

I apologized to Taylor, our babysitter, for our lateness, shoved some cash into her hand (expensive evening) and went to check on our twelve-year-old, Jackson, who was fast asleep with his mouth wide open, one gangly leg poking out from the duvet and his huge mop of bleach-blond surfer locks flopped over his face.

In the hallway mirror I saw that I had bleary eyes (had I been crying? I couldn't even remember). The only thing that had come out of this evening with any remaining credibility was the dress, and even that looked jaded now.

Was I evil? I looked pretty much my usual self: an average, smiley (usually), thirty-eight-year-old mom from Middle America. The closest things I might have to evil-looking characteristics were my caramel brown eyes that were a tad close together.

A Pandora's Box of self-doubts had opened its lid. What the hell

would that nice Brooks couple think about me? Was I evil and just couldn't see it? Was I a bitch? How many close friends did I have? Were the school moms real friends? Some of them had gone woke lately and I wasn't sure how much more mileage there was in those relationships.

I stared at myself to see if I *looked* evil.

All that stared back was the person I had started the evening believing myself to be: someone who was (mostly) positive, fun, a good mother and a reasonably supportive daughter (the sister angle is more complicated). I felt things deeply, in a way that sometimes baffled and frustrated my husband (whom I'd only seen cry three times: twice during *Saving Private Ryan* at the cinema and once when we went to see it again and it was sold out) and, as already mentioned, I was a Pleaser. Oh yes. My biggest virtue (?) and my biggest flaw.

A racist? I doubt even Angela thought I was a proper racist, but she clearly now had fears about my scores on the unconscious bias / white privilege etc scales.

I'd backed social causes before, and not just as a student. I'd been on marches for veterans, raised money for the homeless and campaigned for better public housing in Truvy. I'd even had sympathy after the death of George Floyd but boy, had that been short lived. It lasted for as long as it took the hard left to use that brief window of respect for Black Lives Matter to storm the castle.

Suddenly finding themselves in a position of influence, they went for broke, pulling down statues with impunity, scanning classic books for "racist" references and flooding school curricula with the so-called "critical race theory", not to mention some weird ideas about gender and sexuality while they were at it. And if you object, you're a bigot.

And now they seemed to have infiltrated every corporation, charity and public body in the US and many other western

countries. Well, a lot of us had got wise to their tricks and were sick of it. You can be a good person without being, if you'll excuse my French, a dick.

After this little pep talk, I decided I had been right to speak out at Angela's. But I needed to be armed with the facts next time. And not shout. Or use sarcasm to excess.

Brandon had showered and flopped on to our bed to watch some sport. I couldn't face bed yet, I was wired. I stuck the TV on and found myself watching a drama called *Woke Judge*, which was on every night. Or at least, it was until I could dive for the remote and turn it off.

But this night, I felt a masochistic urge to watch a bit. Why not? In for a penny, huh?

The woke judge was a big, formidable white woman called Cassie Groves. She was just summing up.

“Do you know the only thing I hate about taking the knee?” she was asking the court. “It’s that I only have two knees to take.” She wiped a tear away. “Mr Wendell, do you feel culturally appropriated by what the prosecuting attorney said to you yesterday?”

“No, your honor.”

“Well, you should. Mr Wendell, the jury has found you guilty, which is clearly correct, but you are a fabulous black man and have been victimized enough, so I am setting you free, mister. Court dismissed!”

Bedlam. Cheers rocked the court. The woke judge leapt over her bench to join a black gospel choir who had stood up in the public gallery to begin a rousing rendition of *I Will Survive*.

I threw the remote at the screen and it bounced off, leaving a mark on the screen.

This had not been a good day.

Chapter Four

“Coca-Cola employees were urged to be ‘less white’ as part of the company’s alleged diversity training – but the material was yanked offline following a viral whistleblower post. A slide suggests ‘try to be less white’, with tips including ‘be less oppressive’, ‘listen’, ‘believe’ and ‘break with white solidarity’.”

New York Post, February 23, 2021

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And it was not a good night.

I slept until 1am and then awoke, dehydrated and with the beer fear, or in this case, the wine wobbles.

The next morning I managed to get up at the usual time and schlepp downstairs, feeling a terrible sense of oppressiveness.

I padded silently across the living room’s hardwood floors to the kitchen and saw that the cafetiere was gone – Brandon was already up. I found him in the screened-in porch at the side of the house, our favorite spot to read and work. The gentle street bustle made you feel like you were part of the world and besides, it was a perfect place to see if the neighbors were up to anything interesting. Today was not a day to appreciate any of that. Today was in the cabinet labelled Paranoia and Damage Control.

Bran was staring intensely at his laptop. He never had a “just out of bed” look – even at that time of day he looked handsome with his dark looks and compact, athletic body, neatly packaged in one of his sharply cut suits. He was a born salesman and had managed to mix his greatest skill – selling stuff – with his favorite hobby – beer. He’d been a salesman since he left the Marines and had been Huckleberry Moon Beers and Spirits’ top guy since he joined five years ago.

“Morning,” he said.

“Morning. Is that work?”

He scowled. “Just looking at these remortgage offers again.”

“I thought we’d decided to try and make savings and stick with the current deal.”

We’d overstretched ourselves on the house purchase 18 months ago. We bought when the market had been inflated by people moving in from wealthier states, and by investors snapping up properties for vacation rentals.

Plus we’d really overdone what was meant to be just a lick of paint for our new home. Talk about “mission creep”. We ended up with a new kitchen, new bathroom, new side porch and a re-landscaped garden. Subsequent vacations to Disneyworld and Aruba hadn’t exactly helped the bank balance either.

I settled down on the sofa and continued obsessing about the night before. I hadn’t sent Angela a thank you text after we got home as it’s the sort of thing you send the next day... which meant I had to start thinking about it soon. How much of an apology (if any) should I make?

I called up Facebook. Maybe someone else was going through some kind of crisis that would make mine look better. Wasn’t that what social media was for?

The little notifications bell was lit up. It took me to some comments that mentioned my name. Lightning bolts of anxiety shot up and down my body. The first one was from Tiffany Rideout, a mom friend from the school. “Sorry to hear you’re not woke, Jess. Hold on to that privilege lol.”

Cold dread seized my stomach. Not woke?! What the hell?

I looked at the comment above hers. Stephanie Davis, another friend through the school. “@Jessica Harper is not woke lol.”

I felt awful; dizzy and weak. I’d had one panic attack in my life and it was like this.

“You okay?” said Brandon.

“I don’t know,” I said, sounding very distant.

I wanted to scroll to the post the women were referring to but at the same time I didn’t. My hand felt heavy and sweaty.

Jessica Harper is not woke, what the hell? Who had written the original post? It couldn’t be April or Brandon and it certainly wouldn’t be Brig, who once asked me if they did Facebook in paper form. One of the Perfect Harpers? Impossible. The cab driver? He didn’t know my name. One of the drugs guys standing around the brazier? Had I sickened the local drug dealers with my anti-woke sentiments?

No. It could only be Angela.

It was the only name that fitted. She was the one I’d had the altercation with and she did post on Facebook, although not often.

I scrolled past about a dozen or more comments (*a dozen!*), to the original post. Who was it? Who had been talking about me?

I reached the top of the thread and was almost too frightened to see who had started it. The shock was even worse than I had anticipated. The original post had been published the night before at 10.20pm, right about the time Bran and I were getting into our taxi to come home. It just said: “Jessica Harper is not woke!”

Very slowly I scrolled to reveal the name of the original poster and it was worse than I could have imagined. But at the same time, it made perfect sense.

It was me.

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Chapter Five

“A young friend has just started a teacher training course, and has been regaling me with some of the lectures she’s had over the past couple of weeks. She has been instructed to encourage pupils to develop the “praxis” of “scholar activism” and to show “radical empathy”. A lecturer told her class that “the elephant in the room” was that they were all racist. The national curriculum, she learnt, is government propaganda; decolonising the classroom should be a priority for teachers.”

Emma Duncan, The Times (UK), October 3 2022

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After the usual cajoling and threatening, I managed to get Jackson into my Accord because this was a school day. The radio blared out an advert for *Drive Angry With Tucker Sweet*. He was shouting about white privilege, to gales of laughter from the posse. I switched it off. I wasn’t in the mood for more anger.

“How’s school?” I said.

“School’s so woke, it’s horrible,” he said, his voice seesawing somewhat as he was going through that stage of puberty. “Anything that gets said about anyone who’s not white gets shouted down, unless it’s gushing praise.”

“Good Lord,” I said. “God help the young people.”

I dreaded to think of some of the things we used to say at school. Truvy High School had been hit badly by the wokeys. The school nativity had cut the word “crib” lest it be deemed to be culturally appropriating the concept of rappers’ apartments. Jesus was not referred to as the Son of God in case it was offensive to people who didn’t have a father. There was a “trigger warning” at the start about mention of the Holy Ghost, in case anyone in the

audience was scared of ghouls. And some earnest girl gave a speech about how Joseph and Mary's plight was mainly one of a shortage of affordable accommodation. Herod inevitably came in for some abuse as a "powerful white man". Tiffany Rideout, Stephanie Davis and pals all laughed loudly and sycophantically. At one point I cheered for Herod, just to annoy them. And because I'd smuggled in a mini bottle of wine.

"Do you know the weird thing about Minecraft?" said Jackson.

"Apart from why anyone would be interested in it?"

"No," he said. He was good at ignoring my sarcasm. "The weird thing is that you can survive lava, being attacked by a sword and hit by lightning but you can't survive a snowball."

"That is indeed weird."

"Why are we going this way?"

"Sometimes you have to mix things up. You see the world in a different way."

Jackson stared out disbelievingly at the abandoned industrial estate we were passing, with its pile of smoldering furniture and a homeless guy taking a leak against a dumpster.

"Oh yeah, mom," he said. "I feel like writing poetry."

The truth was that the usual route always entailed us crawling along the approach road to school, with other parents passing us on foot. That was useful for having shouted conversations through the window if I saw someone I knew, but today... Today I didn't *want* to talk to anyone I knew. I had left the Facebook post up, to make it look like it might be an ironic joke. Deleting it would have been an admission of guilt.

My only attempt at damage limitation had been to publish *another* post – a picture of our cat Wilbur sticking his head under a tap – in the hope it would bump the offending one out of the way, but somebody just wrote: "Is your cat not woke too now?"

So, Route B would take us round the back of the school to a less

busy dropoff point which wasn't used by anyone on that Facebook thread.

"Look, we're on Maple already," I said. "We're flying. This is such a good route."

I put my foot down just a little to make the drive seem quicker than it really was, not that it was possible to pull the wool over Jackson's eyes. We got about half a mile from the school... and then hit a tailback of other parents in cars. Jackson sighed and put his headphones on.

My eyes went to the rearview and lo and behold, who was coming out of a sidestreet but Facebook's Tiffany Rideout. And who else was this hoving into view? Ah, fellow social media jester Stephanie Davis. Why the hell were they and their brood coming this way? They always went the usual way.

I tried to make myself very low and very small.

"What are you doing?" said Jackson.

"Ssshhh," I said. "I don't want to talk to Tiffany and Stephanie."

"Why are you being weird?"

"I'll tell you later. Close your window."

But it was too late to do that without it seeming blatantly rude.

The two women were about to pass the Accord. Did they know what car we had? We'd only bought it a few months ago. Maybe I'd get lucky and they'd just breeze right--.

"Morning, Jess!" beamed Tiffany. She, Stephanie and oh joy, a bonus mom, Polly Parker, who was as annoying as her name suggested. They were all now peering in to the car, where I was hunched in my seat like someone whose spine had been stolen.

"Oh, morning, ladies," I said. "How are you?"

"Good. You don't normally come this way."

"No, neither do you," I said, a little too abruptly, perhaps. "We just thought we'd try something new."

"That's exactly what we thought," said Steph, all big white

smiles and wholesomeness. “So we went via Montrose Park and I’m glad we did, because I *think* we spotted a white fringeless orchid, which is *incredibly* rare. And Zoe here saw a salt-marsh sparrow, which must be pretty unusual too, this far from the river.”

“We saw a homeless guy peeing on a dumpster,” said Jackson.

“Oh,” said Tiffany. “Isn’t that a shame when they have nowhere else to go?”

Jackson shrugged. “He had a dumpster.”

Steph turned her attention back to me. “Are you okay, Jess? You’re sitting very low in your seat.”

“I hurt my neck this morning. I fell in the shower.”

“My Jerry,” said Polly, “he got a crick in his neck chasing a porch pirate and the doctor said you will never bowl again.” She lowered her voice so the kids wouldn’t hear. “Two weeks later he threw himself off the city hall car park.”

“Oh, how awful,” I said. “I didn’t know he *killed* himself.”

“What? No, he didn’t kill himself. He was trying to fix his neck. Worked a charm. Here he is.”

A grinning, bucktoothed man popped into view. “Beautiful day, ain’t it?” he said, raising his Braves cap to me.

“Wonderful,” I said, when I was actually thinking this was shaping up to be the worst day in history. Maybe he could recommend a good car park to throw myself off.

“Jess, is sitting that low in your seat helping your neck?” said Steph.

“Maybe you need one of those special mats,” said Polly. “My mom had one. She was always falling in the bathroom. It’s a *common* accident among alcoholics.”

“I’m not an alcoholic,” I said.

“That’s the spirit. One day at a time, huh?”

“What? Ah, I think the traffic is moving. Gotta go.”

“Nope, traffic’s deader than a Waco waffle,” said Polly’s death-defying spouse.

I wished they were *all* deader than a Waco waffle. *Christian thoughts, Jess, Christian thoughts.*

“Anyway, how does sitting down low help your neck?” Polly ploughed on, with the persistence of a particularly ambitious CIA interrogator. I don’t think she believed me. Great. Now I was an insurance fraudster as well as a racist. I really had to update my LinkedIn profile.

“It puts less pressure on the L4 and L5 discs,” said Jackson, who had been doing the spine in biology.

I grunted “shut up” at him through gritted teeth.

“You let him have his say,” said Steph. “Don’t listen to your mom.”

“What did she say?” asked Polly.

“She said ‘Shut up, Jackson’,” said Steph with a laugh. “Just like that.”

“Well, your mom *can* have a temper,” said Tiffany.

“Can I?” I said.

“Well, I mean, that Facebook post. Which was absolutely your business and your business alone.”

“Absolutely,” added Steph. “Although we did wonder what that was all about?”

I then heard the most beautiful sound I have ever heard: the car behind me beeping its horn.

“Ooh, gotta go,” I said.

“Don’t you beep her,” shouted Polly. “We have a disabled woman with anger issues here.”

Still looking out the passenger window as I waved goodbye, I put my foot down on the gas. All three women and their kids and Jackson screamed: “MOM! / JESS!”

I stamped on the brake and saw that the traffic had stopped

again and that I'd come to a halt about an inch from a Triumph motorbike.

On hearing the shouting, the rider and its child passenger, both clad in leathers, turned and stared at us. The rider dipped his or her head to look very pointedly at the minuscule distance between our vehicles. I pulled some stupid apologetic face. The child shook its head in disbelief. The little brat.

The bike made one of those hideous motorbike sounds and zipped off down the oncoming lane.

I restarted the car, overdid the gas and had to brake (again), causing us to stall.

“Are you okay?” asked Steph. Then quietly: “Is she okay?”

All of them were still standing there, jaws dropped.

I started the ignition, we leaped forward again and for the third time Jackson was thrown forward and his seatbelt kicked in.

We advanced two car lengths and stopped, as there was nowhere else to go. The moms were coming up behind us again.

“I've got to tell you, mom,” sighed Jackson, “I prefer the old route.”

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Chapter Six

“In 2020, fiction was dominated by identity politics more appealing to the academic sociologist than to the general reader. Publishers, agents and journalists called for more women, non-whites, foreigners and social antagonists (euphemized as ‘underrepresented voices’, even though they’re overrepresented in publishing).”

Bruce Oliver Newsome, American Greatness website, May 15 2021

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I managed to drop Jackson off without killing either of us (or any other road users) or engaging in any more sweaty conversation with the moms.

A short while later I was parking in Truvy’s Historic District. I never got tired of browsing its street market with its flowers, musty secondhand books, stylish but overpriced clothes, zingy condiments and of course its seafood: notably crab, shrimp and oysters plucked from the ocean less than a mile away. Occasionally I would buy a shirt for myself or a Charleston Chugger beer for Brandon – I was supporting the local economy, right?

Rows of oaks hung over this half-mile stretch of the city, their Spanish moss-draped branches providing a little shelter from the sun – or rain. The district’s aesthetic highlight was the smart green and gold horse-drawn carriages, transporting happy visitors around Truvy’s historic highlights for seventy-five bucks (plus all the upselling you could handle). Tourist Central but so what? The tourists came because it was beautiful.

If I wasn’t working I sometimes met April for lunch or took a

novel to sit in one of the area's 24 famed squares. Rather than lay them out in a predictable grid, the city's designer Sir Samuel Winterbourne had in the 1740s placed the squares in all kinds of unpredictable locations, as a kind of eternal puzzle to amuse and intrigue future generations. Shoving a town map at your kids and telling them to find every one of the squares had long been a popular way of wearing them out on a slow weekend.

Today I had just one thing to buy: a birthday gift for Taylor, our babysitter. She'd said her parents were getting her a record player (!) and I knew she liked old British mod bands so I thought I'd swing by Loaded 45, Truvy's hip record store.

Coming towards me – although thankfully looking at her phone – was Tiffany. What. The. Hell. How was this even possible? Back at the school I'd been in the car and she'd been on foot. Did she have a teleporter?

I swerved into the nearest shop, without even looking to see what it was. Once inside I recognized that cold, dead atmosphere where joy came to die.

“Oh, hello again,” said a shop assistant, who looked slightly female. Why do they all wear glasses?

Arrghhhhhhhhh!!!! I was in Chapter and Voice! The right-on bookstore that I'd bitched about at the dinner party. How did I keep ending up in here? (Just for the record, there were three reasons I kept going in there: 1) My preferred bookstore, Pageturner Books, was having a refurb. 2) I naively kept thinking that it must have some normal books and that I'd just not found them yet. 3) I kept seeing people in the street that I wanted to avoid (yes, incredibly this was the third time this had happened)).

“Oh, hello,” I said. “Again.”

I was surrounded by themed tables: Amazing Women (which was different from Strong Women). Sri Lankan History Month. Menstruation Matters. Unheard Voices. Thriving With

Neurodiversity. Celebrating Celery. Voices of Celery. Celebrating Paranoid Schizophrenia. Inspirational Dyslexics. A huge sign suspended from the ceiling said: “Well-behaved women seldom make history”, a saying I must see at least three times a week on people’s Facebook posts.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” asked the assistant.

“Do you have any light romance?”

“I’m sorry?” she said, in a tone of naked disbelief. It was like I’d walked into a funeral director’s and asked for a sex toy.

“You know, something about men and women falling in love?”

“Falling in love?” Her eyes were deader than a shark’s, and a shark that was dead.

“Uh huh, like a romance section. Or a Hot Sex table, do your little themed tables have one of those?”

She pointed to the table nearest me. I glimpsed a woman with her hand held up in a “no” gesture, plus wheelchairs.

“These look a bit worthy for my taste. Have you got anything with less wokery?”

“I think the word is ‘wokeness’.”

Game on. I haven’t told you this yet – although you probably guessed it from the dinner party incident – but a) I sometimes say things I shouldn’t and b) when I get the bit between my teeth you’d better not try to take it out unless you feel you’ve got a couple fingers too many.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I shot back. “Is it wokeness? I don’t want to get it wrong, it being such a real word and all.”

Another assistant appeared. She looked very similar to the first one. They both had a streak of pink in their hair, peeking out from under their little woollen bobble hats, and the aforementioned glasses that may or may not have had a corrective purpose.

“I tell you what,” I said, because I had the devil in me now, “why

don't you show me your specials? What's cooking?"

She stood back to proudly reveal a floor-to-ceiling shelf labelled "Through A Different Lens."

"Is a lens the same as a voice?" I asked.

The sales girls laughed, then pulled straight faces when they realized it wasn't meant as a joke. "Oh no, they're very different."

I picked up a book called *300 Poems by Refugees About Rain*. And then *Why I Am No Longer Talking To White People About The Best Way To Season Halibut*. The young black woman with short hair on the cover had a bit of tape over her mouth. There was a lot of tape over mouths on the books, which seemed ironic as they appeared to be the only people with book deals.

"Do you have an Amazing Men table?" I asked.

"No," she said. "But the Sexual Violence section is upstairs."

"Ouch," I said, "Good to know, I suppose. It's my dad's birthday next week and he does love a nice book. No, I was thinking of sex more as a pleasurable activity than a public health risk. Do you have anything about *hot* sex? You know: 'Oh my God, I'm so close,' 'Wait, are you thinking about my sister again?' 'Don't start that, it was just the one time.' That kind of thing?"

"And Sam over there is setting up the Everyday Sexism table," she said, ignoring me.

"Ah, I see. I don't mind a bit of everyday sexism myself. It's that 'special occasion' sexism that gets my goat. Wait, you have *three* members of staff? Well, I guess you never know when you might get a rush on."

"Sometimes there's only two of us on the floor, if the other person is in the safe space. Anyway, is there anything particular you're looking for?"

"Yes, I've got a sudden craving for a Nora Roberts."

She wrinkled her nose and its several rings chimed softly. "Oh, is she that queer economist I keep hearing about?"

Chapter Seven

“Refusing to submit to ideological pronoun politics is nothing more than the refusal to confess allegiance to a false new philosophy about what it actually means to be male and female. If anyone tries to control your speech by withholding friendship or accusing you of being unkind, that is adequate evidence the individual is not dealing with you in good faith. They are trying to bully you.”

Don’t Be Bullied in the Pronoun War, dailycitizen.com

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I told them I was going to browse and they left me alone. When they were occupied with some more self-absorbed conversation (“Kara’s not coming in. She’s changing pronouns”) I slipped out the shop and back into the sunlight and sanity. For about five seconds anyway.

“Jess!”

Startled, I yelped.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Ava Birch. “I didn’t mean to give you a fright.”

Ava was yet another mom from the school. I had no idea if she had seen the Facebook post.

“It’s fine, Ava, I was just in a world of my own.”

“I see you were coming out of Chapter and Voice. It’s fabulous in there, isn’t it? Anything you liked?”

“Yes,” I said. “The air conditioning.”

“I’m glad I saw you,” she said, oblivious to my sarcasm. People are always oblivious to my sarcasm; it means I get to drift through life in my own parallel world. “Are you going to the match later? It’s the final.”

“Basketball? Yes, Jackson’s playing. We’ll be there.”

“Would you be interested in joining a protest? Because you know that Montrose Media sponsors the team?”

“Yes, I did know.”

“Well, Porter Montrose is handing out the trophies and of course his great great grandfather made his–.”

“Yes, I know he did. About two hundred and fifteen years ago.” Did it never end? Life had become a zombie movie: *The Wokening*.

“Oh, right, well some of the boys have expressed a wish to turn their backs when–.”

“Have they really? Or did this come from their parents? Because I don’t think that would actually occur to a child.” Was I really saying this? Was I back on the rollercoaster?

“That’s fine. I just thought I’d ask. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You didn’t, Ava. I should get on. I’m going to look into some voluntary work for the elderly and the disabled. Maybe *they* could do with some attention.”

“Yes, those are good causes,” she said. She was saying something else, but I was hurrying away. I didn’t want anyone else pursuing me with their strange ideas.

I texted April: “Need to talk. You free after work?”

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Chapter Eight

“I do think there is an anti-Christian bias in Hollywood. As soon as the David character in *The Last of Us* started reading from the Bible I knew he was going to be a horrific villain. Could there be a Bible-reading preacher on a show who is actually loving and kind?”

Actor Rainn Wilson, Twitter, March 11 2023

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I grabbed two pricey records by The Who and The Jam for the babysitter and drove back to Brunswick, where we lived. Jackson was staying at school until the basketball game at 5pm, which meant I could get myself a little April time.

On the drive I thought about how out of sync I had become with so many people I knew and so much of the world. The media was always talking about Middle America but I didn’t feel that the sane, moderate values of Middle America were occupying as much of my mental real estate as they used to.

When I had studied for my journalism degree – and when I had started work at a newspaper – I quickly realized I wasn’t on the same wavelength as the majority of my fellow students and co-workers, who were mostly left wing and a little bit, how can I put this, sneery?

Top Five Occasions I Realized I Was Not in Sync with My Peers

- 1) That time I bought my woke sister’s son, ie my nephew, a massive AK47 toy gun. The next time we visited it was upside down in a flower pot with daffodils coming out of it. I cringe now to think about this. Mainly because the gun was expensive.
- 2) “The most pious man in America.” This was an incident that

took place just before my final journalism exams. I'd been sent away for three days to a residential course for a refresher. A bunch of people were in the TV room and Mark Wahlberg (a Catholic) was on a chat show. One of the students, a real little Trot I hadn't taken to, sneered: "The most pious man in America" which got a lot of laughs. I liked Mark Wahlberg. I didn't like the Trot.

3) During the same course, a bunch of us were watching America play Germany at women's soccer. In a rejection of the jingoism evident in the stadium, Trot said: "Does anyone know where I can buy a German flag?"

4) Friends telling me that XplicitClean's rap is "like poetry". Did the poetry include, I wondered, this verse: "Honeyz bring me honey, n****s bring me money, I'm wearin' shorts today, because it's lookin' sunny"? Because I can do better than that myself.

5) Angela's dinner party, obviously. Specifically Angela, as the Harpers seemed to agree with me.

Back home, I kicked off my shoes and padded across the hardwood floors to what had been sold to us as a "chef's kitchen".

When the salesman showed us those 3D images and virtual tours of other great chef's kitchens installed by his firm, I pictured a new me, a me who could effortlessly toss off a soufflé as easily as I tossed off devastating one-liners to my guests: "Oh Jessica, stop it, you're killing us (with the jokes, not the food)." In reality, and before we had even made a dent in the payments, our chef's kitchen was mainly just a posher space to carve up pizza.

I made a cappuccino with the steaming, huffing, coffee machine (made by Cast-Iron Coffee: "Over Stimulated and Lovin' It") that my sister had bought us the previous Christmas. I kind of hated it (I had been perfectly happy with our simple cafetiere but no, Ashley decided that this was going to be her Big Gesture Present that year. For the first month she would phone me at least twice

a week, requesting updates on my relationship with the caffeine-dispensing Transformer. If my enthusiasm ever dipped below “insanely ecstatic” she would make a mewling sound and suggest things I might be “doing wrong”. I’d even had daydreams about faking a burglary so I could get rid of the darned thing.

I perched myself at the breakfast bar and flipped open my laptop while I waited for whatever the hell went on inside that dark lord of the Froth to finish (Star Wars joke). Maybe this could be one occasion where social media offered me comfort, rather than anxiety (naive, I know, I know).

On Facebook I typed “moderate Republicans” into the search bar. There were quite a few groups and I started reading the latest activity from the one with the most followers.

Someone had added a photo of their cat hiding in the wardrobe. I clicked Like. I mean, why the hell not? Look at me, participating in a political Facebook group!

The next post was someone requesting recipe ideas for pork.

The first reply to this said: “WHATEVER CRAWLS ON ITS BELLY, AND WHATEVER WALKS ON ALL FOURS, AND WHATEVER HAS MANY FEET AMONG ALL THINGS THAT SWARM ON THE GROUND, YOU SHALL NOT EAT, FOR THEY ARE DETESTABLE.” Leviticus 11:42.

Whoa nelly, I was not expecting that. But it did get me picturing meal time at chez Leviticus.

“Dinner, honey!”

“Wait, this is lamb! I said nothing on four legs!”

“Well, YOU make dinner without using anything on four legs, Mr Old Testament Rulebook!” (throws dinner plate across room).

Anyway, what the hell has “many feet?” Somebody needs to take a Geiger counter reading in that neighborhood, I think they may have a radiation problem.

I scrolled to the next post, where someone asked for ideas on

where to go on a first date.

The first reply said: “Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.”

Sheesh, and there was me about to suggest Dino Golf. The people in this group might have been moderate on the Republicanism but they sure as hell weren’t holding back on the fire and brimstone. Not for me.

I was about to search for “Moderate agnostic republicans” but I decided life was too short and besides, the doorbell rang and saved me from any more hellfire.

April. Thank the Lord.

I opened the front door wide and pressed my back to the wall because you do not stand in the way of a tornado. She had been a tornado ever since we first met at high school in Atlanta. When I moved to Truvy with Brandon, I was blessed that she decided she was ready for a change, too, and followed me down to the coast. I don’t know what I would have done without her.

April Meadows is a pint-sized powerhouse, a ball of unstoppable energy, all rolled into a cute physical package complete with blonde bangs, big blue eyes and a face that was a constant riot of big expressions, like a cute animal in a Disney cartoon (before Disney got woke and annoying). It was a face that was perfectly designed for expressing her great enthusiasm, which is unflagging, a solution to the world’s energy problems, if ever it can be harnessed.

She was very modest but next to her I had always felt inadequate about my abilities in fashion, design, cooking and, well, you name it. She did *everything* effortlessly and with style.

April had infused her modern apartment with a fabulous bohemian style (interior design and decoration was what she did for a living). Everything seemed just thrown together, from the

vintage Moroccan-style rugs to the battered leather armchair to the low glass coffee table around which – I have always suspected – she and her more arty (ie less square) friends sat on the floor, drinking mint tea and discussing their top five methods for stripping floorboards. On the walls, photographs of exotic vacations mingled with abstract oils she had painted herself.

But now, in the more conventional surroundings of my side porch, I brought her up to speed with the Facebook incident (she hadn't seen the offending post) and the awful drive to school and trip into town.

“And on the way *out* of the bookstore my handbag clipped a stack of books on the Exiled Voices table and I only just caught them in time.”

“Wow, where are they exiled from?”

“I don’t know but it sure as hell ain’t that bookshop. I tell you, April, they’ve got more voices than the Vienna Boys Choir. And the lenses! It’s like a myopic’s optician.”

“What in God’s name is a lens?”

“It’s some weird thing the lefties have dreamt up. You can always rely on them to come up with some stupid new word.”

It’s fair to say April didn’t have a well-defined political viewpoint so I tended to just blurt out whatever I was thinking on any subject and we were usually in agreement. She had many passions but keeping up with current affairs wasn’t one of them. “I made a new year’s resolution to follow the news but darn it, it just kept changing every day,” she told me once.

“Why were you even in there?” she asked.

“I was hiding from another woke mom from the school. I don’t know, April, the past day has been beyond crazy. The world has been like a rabid dog for some time and now it’s come to bite *me*. Doesn’t it ever bother you?”

“I don’t see as much of it as you do. I mean, I had a client who

asked if I thought it would be racist to have a banana in her fruit bowl. That was about it.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. I ate it. Problem solved.”

“Ha, I wish my dilemma could be solved as easily. I don’t know *what* to think, Apes. I don’t know how to organize my thoughts. I’m new to this: defending what has always been to me a regular American way of life. I’m not used to arguing about it. I need all the facts, so that I’m ready. Because I’m going to fight. Don’t worry, I’m not going to drag you into it.”

“Hmm, well you came close last night.”

“I’m sorry. Even *I* didn’t know I was going to come out with that stuff at Angela and Brig’s. This is going to be my fight. Anyway, enough about me. Did you sign up for a new evening class?”

April did love her evening classes: Emoji Studies, The Illuminati: Is It Right For Me?, Self-Defense Against Marsupials, Stetson Awareness, Jigsaws 101, Learn to Moonwalk For Fun and Profit. She’d even joined what she thought was going to be a mixology class before discovering (on week three) that it was an AA meeting. “I did think them folks were kinda nosy,” she told me at the time. “Always asking about my drinking habits. ‘When was your last drink?’ and I was like: ‘Umm, about twenty-five minutes ago? When was *yours*?’ and they’d be like ‘Oh, ten years ago’, and I was like: ‘Damn girl, you should come out with me some time, we’ll rip the town *up*’.”

But now it was time for April to sign up for something on the newly introduced summer timetable.

“I plumped for Crazy Cupcakes,” she said.

“Ooh, you went for it. Personally I am glad. I look forward to tasting the results.”

“I’m already taking orders. Batesy’s ordered two dozen for his thirtieth birthday.”

Batesy.

Batesy was an uber trendy English decorator that April hired to work with her sometimes. His real name was Sebastian Bateman-Otterbourne and he had gone to a very expensive private school perched on some cliffs. When he moved to America (for reasons no one was quite sure of) he reinvented himself as a “diamond geezer” called Batesy, thereby expunging the memory of posh Sebastian. He had had a small role in the semi-successful Britflick *Not The Face, Ronnie, Not The Face* and had never stopped going on about it. He liked to pretend he was a bit of a name in the British underworld but I was not fooled.

On a more personal level, he once looked down at my new Sophia Webster shoes and said something so rude that I had never forgiven him. He didn’t even have the excuse of being gay. I couldn’t stand him and April knew as much but she skillfully kept us apart for roughly 364 days of the year.

I want to say that Batesy had a certain charm but I can’t because he didn’t.

“Good old Batesy,” I said, my tone so brimming with sarcasm that it should have carried an “unsafe load” warning. “How is he?”

“Oh, he’s given Plonker a mohawk, you should see it, so cute.”

Batesy’s bulldog, Plonker, had once urinated on the aforementioned pair of shoes. I suspect Batesy would have urinated on them himself if he could have got away with it.

“Sounds cruel. Hopefully no one reports Batesy and he gets deported.”

“Don’t even think about it, Jess. I need him to decorate that big Colonial house in Sycamore Heights. Anyway, he’s out of the picture right now because he’s preparing for Burning Man.”

“Obviously. Wait, isn’t that in, like, August?”

“Yes but he’s helping to make a two-hundred feet high sculpture of an oil rig that they’re going to set fire to in protest against

something or other.”

“Maybe it’s a protest against artwork that pollutes the atmosphere?”

“Oh hush. Hey, maybe you could go along this year?” said April, mischief in her eyes. “Take Brandon and Jackson, get back to nature.”

“Share a tent with Batesy? I definitely wouldn’t be cool enough. I’m picturing him snoring in time to some urban beats.”

“Oh leave him alone, he’s got some good points. And you wouldn’t know an urban beat if it dumped a trash can over your head in Times Square. You’re still buying CDs from Walmart.”

“That is low and untrue.”

“Shall we examine the sticker on that Adele album? I can see it from here.”

“It was \$6.99, what could I do?” I pleaded. “Her face looked so sad in the bargain bin. But anyway: the Bobby situation...”

“Oh, the Bobby situation. Not much going on in the Bobby situation.”

This was music to my ears. Bobby was April’s estranged husband. I had never really got to know Bobby in any depth (despite knowing him for six years). He was Mr “Aw shucks, all good,ahaha” always laughing, fun to be around but behind it all... Well, what *was* behind it all? He was either keeping his true thoughts and feelings very secret or he just didn’t have many. He was all surface. The surface wasn’t bad but it’s all there was. He never fully engaged with April, or listened to her.

In the end it drove April to think: what am I getting out of this? And so followed a hideous round of arguments, trial separations and finally a separation separation. And lately she hadn’t mentioned Bobby at all. I wanted her to do what was best for her but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t trying to edge her towards closing that chapter forever. Someone as full of life as April deserved

someone of greater substance.

“Well, I say there’s not much going on but I *am* thinking of getting a divorce now,” she said, just dropping that metaphorical shot glass of whiskey into the hypothetical beer.

“Whoa, okay. How did this come about?”

“Oh, you know, Just... summer...”

“Summer?”

“It’ll be three years since Bobby and I stopped living together and I think I feel ready to move on. Summer always makes me feel... I don’t know.” She looked at our front windows, with the Magnolia tree swaying in the breeze.

“Oh,” I said, suddenly getting it. “*Summer...*”

“Yeah,” she said, with a sheepish grin. “Summer.”

At that moment, Brandon entered the house with one of his big smiles.

“Oh, hi April.”

“Hi, Bran. How are you?”

“Good. It’s feeling very summery out there,” he said, undoing his top button of his work shirt. “I’m feeling really... summery.”

April raised both eyebrows at me. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“To what?” said Bran.

“April, we’re going to a *basketball* match,” I said.

“Not all night, you’re not. Have fun, guys.”

“Hey, you’re the one who invented all that summer malarkey!” I shouted as she dashed from the house.

My face must have fallen the instant she did because Brandon said: “You okay? You look worried.”

It had been fun bantering away with April but now she had gone I was left facing reality again. I wasn’t sure what was so worrying about that but it had something to do with the basketball match.

**

Chapter Nine

We thought we'd left plenty of time to make the twenty-minute drive to Truvy High but some mysterious traffic meltdown meant the game was in the last minute of the first quarter when we skulked into the sports hall. I was using my peripheral vision to find a space in the bleachers so that I could avoid eye contact with, well, anyone who might know about the Facebook exchange. But the bleachers were rammed.

I heard someone call my name and instinctively looked up, realizing too late what I'd done.

"Jess, space for two over here!" Stephanie yelled, waving her arms frantically at me. I played dumb and waved back like I thought we were just doing some waving practice.

She screeched at me again and I was just about to concede defeat and go and join her when Bran grabbed my arm.

"Look, *there*," he said, bounding up an aisle and pointing to a little gap someone had created for us, God bless them. Hey presto, we were seated.

My evening off from the culture wars lasted for all of I would say eight seconds. Eight seconds in which I got to check out the scoreboard – we were leading by five points – and admire the hundreds of balloons constrained in nets high above the court, just waiting to be freed.

"Can't believe we got here late," hissed Brandon to me. He was attempting to assuage his guilt by going nuts every time Truvy scored, shot, got the ball, looked at the ball or were within twenty feet of the ball.

"I know," I said. "I just hope Jackson didn't score."

"Heavens to Betsy, Jackson got two of the baskets," said the woman next to me. "He was happier'n a hound dog with two tails."

Fantastic. I could almost hear the therapy session now: “*So Jackson, you say you got into hard drugs after your mother missed the final of your basketball match, the one where you scored three amazing baskets, all of them over your head with your back turned and which Steph Curry described as the reason he quit the sport?*”

“*Yep, well, I don’t blame her, really. She was busy with her anti-Black Lives Matter stuff at the time. That and faking neck injuries.*”

I was wrenched from my indulgent fantasy by a loud chant off to my left and about ten rows back. Were they chanting what I thought they were chanting?

“MONTROSE MEDIA, WE DON’T NEED YA!”

Sickeningly, they were. And there I’d been, hoping for an evening where I didn’t have to think about all this nonsense.

The subject of their protest was Charles Montrose, the very man whose statue we’d been talking about with the insane cabbie.

Right in the thick of the action were Stephanie, Tiffany, Ava “Would you like to join our protest?” Birch and one other white woman, who was short but had big shoulders, big specs, dark, slicked back hair and combat trousers. I’d seen her around. She had a loud voice and was always staring intensely at stuff. I was sure I’d felt her laser gaze boring into me on more than one occasion, even when my back was turned. My private nickname for her was Strong Mom. Now she was standing on her bench, blocking the view of those behind her.

“That’s a hell of a noise for ten women,” said Bran, who was rarely irritated by anything. “Look at their poor kids.”

A gaggle of the moms’ kids were robotically clapping their hands to the chant.

“And what the hell has Charles Montrose got to do with anything?” I hissed to Bran. “Isn’t he dead?”

He pointed to a table on the other side of the court. “Montrose are sponsoring the tournament. And *that*, if I’m not much mistaken, is Charles Montrose’s great great grandson Porter.”

A distinguished silver fox type sat at a table courtside. He removed a shiny little object from his inside jacket pocket and swigged from it.

“Did you see that?” I said. “A hipflask at a school basketball game?”

“Can’t begrudge a final drink to a condemned man,” said Bran. “He probably thinks he’s going to be lynched.”

At half time I decided I had no choice but to dash for the exit. I didn’t want to talk to anyone about anything.

I was first down the aisle and managed to catch Jackson’s eye so I could give him a thumbs up.

Then I killed twenty minutes in the car, mindlessly browsing stuff on my phone, and only returned as the game was about to begin again. The Protest Moms were in full voice. Strong Mom was now beetroot and sweating, as was the guy next to her whom I’d seen her with before. Half length shorts, leg tattoo of a fire-breathing dragon and various ironic slogans and references to strange online things, at a guess. I believed his name was Rick.

Other people were moving away from them now. A man said something to Tiffany as he and his group passed her on the steps. She sort of shrugged, looked a bit apologetic and then carried on as before. Tiffany didn’t have the cast-iron certainty of purpose that I saw blazing in Strong Mom’s eyes. Heaven knows what the parents from Woodville High, the opposing team, thought of it all. I imagine they had their own Strong Moms though.

Our school’s principal, Mike “Meek” Weekes, as he was known by us and indeed everybody else, was sitting next to Porter Montrose. Weekes was pulling a pathetic smile. He didn’t want to have to deal with woke protesters and was just pretending he

considered it all a bit of loud fun.

“Is Meek Weekes just going to sit there like a great wet fool as usual?” said Brandon. His time in the military had made him intolerant of cowardice.

“Looks like it,” I said. Of course he would. Stopping them would be deemed racist. That’s how they got what they wanted these days. My simmering rage was now at boiling point and spilling over the pan. I realized I was mainly watching the angry moms much more than I was watching the match and that annoyed me.

The only bright spot was that our team were cruising to victory, 85 to 39, and that I was actually looking at the court when Jackson scored one more basket with three minutes to go. The final buzzer went and the place erupted, everyone on their feet. Even the protest moms deigned to swap their chanting for whooping.

“I’m watching those idiots closely,” said Brandon.

“Me, too. I think I’m going to have a heart attack.”

After some refreshments and back slapping the two teams lined up and Porter got to his feet, to the sound of some boos.

“Oh come on,” said Brandon. “Weekes should stop this.”

But the principal did nothing more than look back at the protesters with a raised eyebrow as he accompanied Porter to centre court.

“He is so wet,” said the woman next to us.

“He’s moisture on legs,” I said.

I’m sure in previous years Porter had given a speech but not today. He put on a brave face as he did a little glad-handing with the players and coaching teams, and then there was a giant cheer as the nets released the balloons, which fell to earth in a slow-motion beauty that proved an ironic counterpoint to what was about to happen.

Because bedlam broke out.

Porter gave an ironic wave with one hand to the protesters, and with his other made a small adjustment of his tie. Classy. And much classier than the booing that came back at him.

“Shut up!” I yelled at them, finally snapping. “Shut the hell up!”

They couldn’t hear me. I waved my arms to get Weekes’ attention. “Principal Meek, can’t you do something about this?” I realized my mistake too late, but what the hell, I’m sure he was aware of his nickname. And if he wasn’t, I was happy to spell it out for him.

Belatedly he stepped towards Strong Mom and Tiffany and I heard him say: “I understand where you’re coming from”. Never mind that “where they were coming from” was a place called Crapping All Over The Sponsor.

The woke wonders were edging on to the court and seemingly growing in confidence in the knowledge that Meek wasn’t going to police them. Below us, Brandon and I spotted a gap in the bleachers and threaded our way down.

The hall was now part celebration, part warzone: kids kicking the balloons around, popping them; Kayla’s guy Rick shouting something over and over into a really loud megaphone; Porter vanishing out a fire door, triggering a shrill alarm; a Coke cup getting knocked over, two kids running into the puddle and landing splat on the court; parents from Woodville disgusted, pulling their children towards the exits; Noah, our team’s captain, raising the trophy and shaking it to a big cheer, thank God, the ugly taste created by the few finally expunged by the celebrations of the many; an adult slipping over on the spillage; Stephanie and Tiffany and their associated teens wandering through the throng, silent and haunted now, clearly regretting what was going on.

What the hell had Strong Mom and her acolytes done tonight? These people were being allowed total carte blanche. I looked for

Jackson to check he was okay but I couldn't see him.

Brandon stormed up to Strong Mom, who was still chanting, like some unstoppable robot.

“Oh COME ON!” he yelled.

“You got a problem?” she bellowed back.

“You bet I do!”

“Kayla, over there,” said The Man I Believed To Be Called Rick. Kayla? Well, well, well, Strong Mom had a name and now I knew it.

She saw what he was talking about: a long, self-standing MONTROSE MEDIA hoarding.

“Gotcha,” she said before she (and she alone; Rick clearly didn’t think someone with *her* shoulders needed help) went over and lifted one end of it. She immediately discovered, however, that there was nowhere obvious to hide such a large object.

I picked my way through the crowd to Brandon. “Bran, go and find Jackson!”

“Yep,” he said. He took a last look at Kayla and stormed off.

Kayla had opted to drag the hoarding into the center of the court, to cause maximum disruption, no doubt, and was surprised when a hand pushed it back down on to the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” she demanded.

“That’s what I came to ask you,” I said. In that moment I intuitively knew that this person was the rider of the motorbike I had nearly bashed into.

“I’m exercising my right to protest,” she said, jerking the hoarding back up again. My hand had still been on it and I yelped as a flash of pain shot through my shoulder. She was, after all, Strong Mom.

“Mom.”

Jackson was standing there, fearful, crying. Brandon had a hand on his shoulder.

“You have not heard the last of me,” I told Kayla, as Brandon took my arm and began leading all of us to the exit.

“Bring it on,” she said.

**

Chapter Ten

I was too shaky and angry to drive so I handed the keys to Brandon, who wasn't any cooler than me but at least he'd fought in Iraq, which was something. We attempted to play down the protest by enthusing about the win and Jackson's part in it. We decided to be honest about missing the two baskets and he wasn't happy but he had every right not to be.

Eventually we could stall things no longer and the conversation turned to other things.

“Wasn’t that old guy drinking whiskey?” asked Jackson.

“Er, maybe?” I said.

“I can’t believe they were booing him. He seemed pretty chilled about it. I guess that was the whiskey.”

“We couldn’t believe it either,” said Bran. “That was completely out of order. The you-know-what is really going to hit the fan tomorrow, believe me.”

We drove in silence for a while. It felt like someone had died.

“The shit,” said Jackson.

“Yes,” said Bran.

I flinched as from out of nowhere a sleek black car overtook us and blazed past with a bone-rattling roar like a lion furiously defending its territory. It pulled in just in time to avoid oncoming traffic.

“That was the sponsor guy,” said Jackson. “Porter Montrose.”

Brandon whistled. “Holy Moses, a 1969 Ford Mustang Boss. A stone-cold classic.”

The three of us said nothing more for the rest of the journey. The events of the past 24 hours had drained me. Plus the hangover was still, well, hanging over. I had nothing left. Was this the worst day in my entire life?

Later I realized it wasn’t.

Because the next day was.

Chapter Eleven

“We could save millions in the public sector by scrapping every Equality, Diversity and Inclusion department today. The risk that all local government and NHS teams are run by homophobic racist neo-Nazis is one worth taking.”

Comedian Leo Kearse, Twitter

**

“GAME OF SHAME”.

That was the headline on a local news website. I’d read the story half a dozen times and it just got more depressing. I put my phone down on the table with a loud clunk.

Ten of us in a room on the fourth floor at Silverstream Care HQ in Truvy City’s famed Historic District. Spanish moss on the oak trees swayed majestically as the wind picked up. Rain spotted the windows.

I felt bruised, and not just from Strong Mom’s injury to my shoulder. I felt *emotionally* bruised. I felt like a wounded animal. I could even picture what my resting bitch face looked like as I sat there, both hands around my coffee cup for comfort. I felt like Ed Norton in *Fight Club* when he’s spitting out teeth at work.

“Jess?”

“Hmm?”

It was our head of training, Cathy Sheerman, who was addressing me. “I was asking for initial observations about what you saw in the video?”

There was a video? We were in the training room, yes, of course. Rain against the window. Oh yeah, I did kinda remember a video now.

“Well,” I said, “Jean had a wheelchair and her manager started whacking away at the door frames to make room for it and he

didn't seem very happy about it.”

“Yes,” said Cathy. “Jean is a wheelchair user and is perfectly entitled to expect reasonable workplace modifications to accommodate it. Her manager was annoyed by this and began destroying parts of the office to enlarge it. What did you think when you saw him doing this?”

“Finally, a guy who gets things done?”

This got a laugh. As much laughter as you can expect in the scared modern office anyway.

“You ain’t kidding,” said Martha from sales. “I’ve been waiting two months for my man to install that smoke alarm. ‘Oh baby, I don’t have the right drill.’ He had the right drill for that poker table, believe me.” I loved Martha. She was in her early fifties and didn’t pander to any BS.

“Can we stay on topic, ladies?” said Cathy. “Thank you. What else happened in the video?”

“Jean asked to read the company policy on adapting the workplace,” said someone else, someone who had been Paying Attention And Making Notes. What were they writing: ‘Don’t sledgehammer office walls’?

“That is right, Luisa,” said Cathy. “It’s her first day on the job and she is within her rights to ask about the policy on adapting the workplace. Of course, it should have already been shown to her before she started. Anything else?”

Luisa’s notes came up trumps again. “The woman in the video had a picture of a field as her desktop background. Jean asked if this could be changed as she suffers from hayfever.”

“Jean’s a pain in the ass,” I said, louder than intended. A couple of people sniggered. Cathy either didn’t hear it or chose to ignore it. What was I doing? I was acting like a naughty kid in school. I was the deputy head of comms for Truvy’s largest hospital group, for Heaven’s sake.

“Yes, Luisa, good,” said Cathy. “Jean suffers from hayfever psychosomatically triggered by pictures of flowers. She is within her rights to ask for that picture to be removed.”

“Is she within her rights to sit down and do some work?” I said. This didn’t even get a titter so either people were scared now or I was losing my touch. Of more immediate concern was that Cathy (not unreasonably) had had enough.

“I know the video can seem a little funny,” she said, although her unconvincing smile suggested she thought it was actually pretty brilliant. “And yes, it might not be easy accepting that someone would ask for all these things on their first day, but I’m sure we can all just accept that the video is exaggerated for the aid of training purposes. Okay, Jess?”

“Apologies.”

“Marvellous. Let’s restart the video.”

I was actually kind of excited to see the next step in Jean’s plan to make her workplace America’s least productive company.

It appeared to be lunchtime in the video. Some people were opening Tupperware.

“Don’t fall for it!” I shouted. “It’s a trap!” We were just seconds away from someone offering Jean peanuts.

Lots of people laughed at my latest joke – I was back!

“Jessica!” said Cathy. “Follow me, please. Right now.”

I began scooping up my things. I was in the mood for a fight. I’d been in the mood for a fight since the basketball game.

“Okay,” said Cathy to the others. “Someone *was* about to offer Jean peanuts. We shall skip that bit as I fear its impact has been diminished. Which is a shame as it was a useful lesson on allergies in the workplace, especially the part where Jean finds a pistachio shell in the trash and asks that the company pay for an air ambulance. I am restarting the video so we can see Jean’s *second* day in her new job. Take notes and I will be back in a minute.”

I stormed towards the door. Cathy pressed play on the video. I took one last look at the TV. Jean was entering the office in a turban.

**

Chapter Twelve

“Jess, what the hell just happened in there?”

I was looking down at my lap. My anger was now mingled with shame / embarrassment / regret. The familiar Big Three.

“I’m sorry for messing up your training session,” I said. “I’ve just kind of had enough with...”

There was no easy way to phrase whatever it was I was thinking. I wasn’t sure I could even express it myself.

“Go on,” she said. “Off the record.”

Now the rain was lashing the windows. A big fork of lightning speared down over the Historic District.

“Wokery,” I said.

And.

Then.

I.

Let.

Rip.

**

Chapter Thirteen

Driving home in the rain and crying. Thankfully the afternoon rush hour traffic was fouled up, meaning I wasn't able to drive at a speed that could have been dangerous.

I called Brandon, got his voicemail, blurted out some incomprehensible sentences through my sobbing and hung up.

As the Accord crawled along the Beltway I noticed a billboard looming down on me. "DRIVE ANGRY WITH TUCKER SWEET. EVERY WEEKDAY 4PM – 7PM."

That was the show the cabbie had told me about: "*He's anti everything. He smells blood, he goes for the kill...*"

I shouted at my phone to dial the number on the billboard.

"*Drive Angry with Tucker Sweet,*" said a chirpy little voice. "You're through to Xena. How can I help?"

"Xena, put me on the air right now," I said, my voice seesawing with emotion. "I have just been suspended for some major politically correct corporate BS and I am sad and I am angry and I want to share this because I am not the only one. Oh, I am far from the only one, Xena."

"You sound dynamite, darlin'," said Xena. "What's your name?"

"Jess."

"Jess, will you hold for me?"

"Yes."

"Wait, I need to ask you – are you driving angry? I know the show's called that but legally we have to warn people not to."

"Oh, I am driving angry, Xena. Angry, bitter and a danger to other road users."

Xena didn't know how to react to this. She was clearly used to callers assuring her they weren't angry.

"Umm, okay, please hold."

The traffic had stopped. I took a deep breath. Rain rat-a-tatted on the roof like furious machine-gun fire.

I only waited about thirty seconds.

“On the line right now we have Jess,” said a voice I recognized from the trailers. “Jess, you are angry, you are suspended from work and you are live on *Drive Angry With Tucker Sweet*.”

“Yes, er, hi Tucker.”

“You sound tearful, Jess. Tearful and vulnerable. Tell us what happened.”

“Well, Tucker, I was in this training session at work. I’m in health provision here in Truvy. And there was this woman, Jean, in the video–.”

“And she was a royal pain in the ass?” said Tucker. “She wanted the moon on a stick?”

“Yes!” I said.

“Oh, *I know, Jean*,” said Tucker. “Everyone in this studio knows Jean. We have those videos here, too. Who hates Jean?”

There was a muted cheer from what I was picturing was his production crew.

“Tell me, did you get to the bit where she buys someone a Secret Santa and they open it and it says ‘YOUR GIFT IS THE KNOWLEDGE THAT WE ARE ALL RACIST’? And the guy breaks down because he wanted dancing antlers”?

“No, I didn’t get that far,” I said. “I started heckling and got thrown out.”

“Yes!” he declared. “Yes! That is the way to handle the Jean video. Wait a minute, while we’re at it, if YOU have had to watch the Jean video, call us now. 900-900-9000.”

I was already smiling again. This was a fun way to spend a traffic jam.

“I want this whole story in all its gory details,” said Tucker. “But tell me, where are you now?”

“On the Beltway.” I leaned forward and there, proud on the horizon, was a tower with the TUCKER SWEET LIVE NOW

rotating in hundreds of little lights. And a big image of him in a black baseball cap, lots of curly beard and a super-sized grin.

“I can see you from here,” I said.

“Well, Lawdamerky, lady, come in and see us! We love a live guest because so many of them are stiffness, you know what I’m saying?”

I didn’t even think about it. “Sure! Expect me in fifteen.”

I hit the indicator and pulled across three lanes of traffic, just making the exit ramp in time.

**

Chapter Fourteen

Sick with nerves and high on adrenaline I made my way through the rush-hour traffic like I was in a video game. Before I'd even had time to think about what I was doing I was inside the radio tower, had been given a security pass and was being greeted by Xena. I was too terrified to enjoy the birdseye view of Truvy from the glass elevator; it felt like I was being led to my (voluntary) execution. Everything was being run by my adrenaline now. That and a deep sense that however dangerous this might be for me, I was at least doing what was right.

I can't remember anything Xena said to me, except: "We're here."

We stepped out into an untidy office where three members of staff sat at desks overflowing with newspapers and magazines. Taking up the rest of the limited space were a pool table, beer fridge, darts board, multiple objects of ironic value such as a monkey suit and zombie prop ("that's actually from a George Romero movie") and a ladder leading on to a balcony, from which came laughter and a strong waft of weed.

"Certainly more fun than where I work," I said.

Off to our left was the soundproofed studio.

"There's Tucker," said Xena, almost reverentially. "But I guess you knew that."

"Uh huh," I said noncommittally.

"Take a seat and listen to the show. I'm not sure what his plans are for you but don't worry, he'll let us know. Do you want a coffee, soda, water?"

"Water, please," I said. I sat on a light-colored sofa that had seen better days. What even *was* this show? How many people were listening?

From my position, I could only see Tucker, who was facing me,

but it was clear that he had a female guest. A small speaker resting on a table next to the sofa relayed the show to me.

“Jeffrey, listen to me, buddy, and listen real good,” said Tucker, dropping his voice to low and intense. “First, don’t set fire to the house, capiche?”

There was a silence in which I realized I was holding my breath. The clack of keyboards had stopped, too, as the production crew paused to hear how the situation unfolded.

“Jeffrey,” said Tucker. “Do you know what capiche means?”

A little voice said: “No.”

“It is Italian for ‘do not burn down the house’. Do we have a deal that you will not?”

Again, a long pause. “Yes.”

A couple of the radio team exhaled and clapped their hands in celebration.

“But why? Why would I not just set fire to this place that has such bad memories?” whined Jeffrey.

“I’ll tell you why. You will walk away, you will still have a house, you won’t have to spend the next three years in jail and your neighbors won’t have to put up with that terrible house fire smell that never goes away. How does that sound?”

More dead air followed, which is meant to be death for radio, but this had to be the first ever *good* dead air. There was a clank as I’m guessing Jeffrey put the can of gas down.

“I want you to just get in your car, put the radio on and chill the hell out, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Then I want you to go and get a bite to eat and check in to a motel and text your wife and say you want to meet her tomorrow for a coffee to talk things over.”

“Sure, Tucker.”

A police siren could be heard in the background of the call.

“Damn, why did they have to go in loud?” said Tucker.

“You called the cops?” said Jeffrey. “Why would you do that?”

“Because you’ve got a can of gas and you’re threatening to burn down your house, genius,” yelled Tucker. “I hope they make you drink the lot and then smoke a cigar to celebrate.”

Now cops could be heard yelling for Jeffrey to get down on the ground. There was a clatter as his phone landed on something hard. More sirens. Sounds of struggle.

Then a cop voice: “Tucker Sweet, that you? This is Officer Eugene Batson.”

“Officer, this is Tucker Sweet. You are live on *Drive Angry With Tucker Sweet*. Three hours of toxic masculinity.”

“Oh golly, I ain’t never been live on the US media before,” said some goofy-sounding law enforcer. “I love the show. And can I just say, I think the mystery voice this afternoon was Reese Witherspoon.”

“Sorry, Officer Batson, it was not the lovely Miss Witherspoon. But good luck with the arrest and thanks for protecting and serving out there.”

Just before Tucker cut them off, Jeffrey could be heard saying something and Officer Batson screamed: “SHUT UP! YOU RUINED MY MOMENT!”

The show then cut to yet another trailer. Tucker was saying: “If you guys listening don’t raise five grand for the dogs home by ten o’clock tonight the puppy goes in the blender.” And then a serious guy said: “A ruling on this trailer is available on the FCC’s website.”

Back to the here and now. “So, these smoky Southern baked beans,” said Tucker to his studio guest, like nothing had happened. “I want that recipe right now.”

“Well,” said the woman, sounding a little taken aback but what she’d just heard, “the secret is the cooked ground beef. And you

gotta swap navy beans for pinto beans.”

“Swap ‘em out,” said Tucker. “They’re gone. History.”

“That’s right, Tucker,” laughed the woman. Her voice was familiar but from where I was sitting I still couldn’t see her.

“Well, guessy ye WHAT. I want you to make a batch of that next week, then me and the studio team will eat it for lunch and we will come on air and Georgia will HEAR just how flatulent we have become. And that will be the ultimate judge of your recipe.” A fart sound effect and canned laughter blasted out of the speakers next to me.

“Ha ha,” said the guest. “It’s a deal.”

It was already clear to me that Tucker had a certain something. I wasn’t sure if I could call it charisma but I could see why he was on the radio. He put a finger behind a red sweatband that said BJÖRN BORG 1980 (ironic fashion but I don’t know what was ironic about the achievements of Mr Borg) and pinged it back against his brow.

“Talking of flatulence of the verbal variety, we have a very special guest joining us and I can see her through the glass right now.”

Xena darted to the door into the studio and whisked it open. I stood up on Jell-O legs and floated into the studio.

“Here she is,” said Tucker. “Jessica Harper, not so much a woke warrior as a warrior of the woke. Stick those cans on and meet my fellow guest, Jess. She arrived just before you did – I believe you are acquainted.”

My mouth fell open and stayed there. In fact, I don’t think my mouth has ever worked quite the same again.

It was Kayla.

Fixing me with her horrible black little eyes. Holy Moses, what had I got into here?

“I was listening to the show and I heard you phone in and I was

on the bike and I thought I could add to the debate,” she said, in her trademark monotone.

“Ain’t that great?” said Tucker. I had no idea what she had told him but he could clearly sense trouble. He could sense *ratings*. “Wokeness in the workplace, Jess. You had enough. You told them to stick it. Tell us what happened.”

“Well, what happened was – I mean, I’m not sure I should be talking about this, really, because I haven’t been sacked. At least, I don’t think so. I’ve just been suspended.”

“Tell us about Jean from the training video. She had disabilities, she was neurodiverse, she had needs. But. You. Did. Not. Like. Her. Why, Jess? Why?”

“Because she was a pain in the ass! She wanted a new office, cat pictures GONE, flower pictures GONE, she was allergic to everything from pollen to peanuts–.”

“Oh, that’s her fault?” sneered Kayla.

“I know, right,” said Tucker. “Jean was the victim in this, Jess, surely?”

“Jean’s a troublemaker,” I said. “It’s companies pandering to the Jeans of the world that have made America lag behind Japan and, er, Germany, maybe, and, well, India probably and–.” I had no idea where I was heading. “This isn’t about Jean,” I said. “This is about the takeover of our corporations and charities by odd characters with some very strange hard-left ideas about expunging western civilization.”

“Wow, that’s what you got that from the video?” said Tucker. “I just got ‘swap peanuts for chips’.”

“It must be frustrating for an able-bodied person such as yourself to have to hear about someone wanting to actually, you know, get into the office,” said Kayla.

“You’re getting your clock cleaned, Jess,” said Tucker. “Whoo boy.”

“I-I-I disagree, Tucker,” I stammered. “My clock was not dirty and no one has cleaned it.”

Tucker and Kayla roared with laughter. I could see bodies cavorting around behind the glass as the characters in the backroom did likewise.

“That is the most ridiculous answer anyone has ever given on this show,” said Tucker. “And we have had some idiots.”

“While we’re talking about ridiculous,” I said, “this woman was hectoring throughout a school basketball match last night, and all about a man, Charles Montrose, who has been dead for two centuries. Even being dead is not good enough for these people.”

“Well, it’s a start,” said Kayla.

“Zzzzing!” said Tucker. “It’s just falling off the bone.” Another button produced a sound effect of what I presume was an electric meat carver.

I was like a soldier being pinned down by a couple of snipers. Every time I made a move, there was a bullet waiting.

Someone rapped loudly on the glass partition.

“Oh yes,” said Tucker. “I should say that we do not condone anyone disrupting a kids’ basketball game, especially one sponsored by our parent company, Montrose Media.” He pressed a button and triggered a sarcastically fast rendering of *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

“And women’s weight lifting!” I blurted out, surprising even myself.

There was half a second of silence and I thought I finally had their attention. But then Tucker and Kayla began screaming, and I mean screaming, with laughter. Tucker was slapping his console with one hand and wiping away tears with the other. I saw someone throw a pile of papers up in the air in the office as they lost grip, too.

“Children being read stories by drag queens?” I said, acting on

the basis that the hardest target to hit is a moving one.

Tucker was grabbing his stomach. “Jess, stop, I’m having an appendicitis! I think I’m having a baby!”

“No, I wanna hear about the drag queens,” begged Kayla.

“My point,” I said, but I couldn’t think at all. “My point is that I just want to live in the America I grew up in.” I had no control over the stream of consciousness nonsense falling from my mouth.

Tucker was laughing so hard that he fell off his chair, bashing his head (the only good moment of the day) on the console. A voice said: *“Drive Angry With Tucker Sweet.* He hates being on the radio when he could be on TV. Tune in and feel the resentment.”

“What happened to the great American role models?” I said. “Doris Day? Mr Rogers? Jimmy Hoffa?”

“Jimmy Hoffa!” screeched Kayla.

“What’s wrong with Jimmy Hoffa? He’s an American hero!”

“The dead union guy?” said Tucker.

“Oh,” I said. “Jimmy, umm...”

“She means Jimmy Stewart,” said Kayla. “He was a straight white guy so it’s probably him.”

“Okay, take control, Tucker,” said Tucker, clambering back on to his chair and rubbing his forehead. “Jess, what happened after the video? You got suspended? Can you name your employer? Go on, name and shame these peanut fiddlers!”

Somebody knocked on the glass again.

“Nope, apparently we can’t do that,” he said. “A grown-up is telling me no namey, no shamey.”

“Well, I wish I *could* name them,” I said. “They preach to us like we’re racists, they make us sign up to these ridiculous statements and the facilities went to hell a long time ago – they can’t even – they don’t even – the fridge is so warm the milk goes off in like,

ten seconds.”

“Holy crap, the milk was off?” said Tucker. He lunged for a button and a cow mooed.

I wished I was somewhere else, like a coffin.

I was until very recently a respected comms professional who had never put her head above the parapet. Now I was turning into Truvy’s public enemy number one. In the past 24 hours:

- I had nearly fought a musclebound woman at a basketball match;
- HR and around ten of my co-workers thought I was a racist and
- now I was being mocked with bovine noises on a radio show.

The modern world moved quickly, it was cruel and I hated it.

“Oh dear, oh man,” said Tucker, as he rode the latest wave of hysteria. “Jess, I’ve got to thank you for coming in because you are possibly the best guest we have ever had.”

I ripped off the headphones and headed for the door, where I paused to deliver what I hoped would be a face-saving statement.

“I shall leave with my dignity intact, unlike some,” I said. But then Tucker blasted the airwaves with a very long fart effect.

I’ve no recollection of getting in the elevator but I will never forget that as I crossed the ground-floor lobby the show was being broadcast through speakers and Tucker had already turned the “My clock was not dirty” line into a jingle. Although it was hard to hear above the sound of the receptionists’ laughter.

Chapter Fifteen

Rain hammered furiously on the car as I dialed Bran's number.

"Hi babe," he said.

"Bran, I-I-I juzt gart fye-yuhd," I sobbed. "They lemme go *sob sob sob*."

"What? Honey, slow down. *What* happened?"

"Work jussht canned me. I said somefing bad *sob sob sob* in training and and *sob* they 'spended me and then I wen on tha radio show wid the shark jark and and and he and the woman from the match last night mocked me with cow noises. It was horrible."

"Okay, okay, don't worry," he said. "Where are you now?"

"In the car outside the radio station."

"Don't drive in that state. Go for a coffee somewhere to calm down, okay?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get into trouble. I've got to go. There's a man outside knocking on the window. Maybe I'm blocking him in."

"Does he look dangerous?"

"No, he looks old." This was ageist of me, I admit. I'm sure many old people do an excellent job of being dangerous.

"Okay, but then park and take time out before you drive."

"Will do, Love you."

"Love you. Bye."

My phone was slick with tears. I reached across the passenger seat to open the door.

"Sorry," I said. "I'll move my car."

Somewhat unexpectedly, the man in the rain eased himself into the Accord. It took him a few moments as he had some kind of hitch in his getalong. He was maybe in his early seventies and relying on a cane that was as elegant as his brown tweed suit with

red polka dot pocket square was dapper. I didn't feel threatened by his unorthodox move; he looked more likely to point a mint julep at me than a gun.

He twinkled his blue eyes at me in a way he'd clearly done to women down the decades, and fair play to him for trying it now.

"Mark Twain said that everybody complains about the weather, but nobody does anything about it," he said.

I smiled. "Nice. I'll use that."

"Didn't mean to startle you," he said. "I just heard the show and thought I'd catch you if I could. We don't like guests being upset. Well, I don't anyway. Tucker is clearly a different matter."

"You work for the radio station?"

"You could say that. Behind the scenes." He looked very familiar.

"Did I say something bad? Are you going to be taken off the air?"

"No, we've had much worse than that. That was just free speech. In my books anyway."

"Was I terrible?"

"Well, you weren't doing so good to start with and then you made the milk comment..."

"I had so much to say and I thought the people listening would relate to it."

"I'm sure a lot of them did," he said. "But that wasn't a debate on NPR. It was a gunfight and you took a knife."

"And she had an AK-47."

"Yep," he said, wearily. "Those people are good at that sort of thing because it's all they think about all day. Don't feel bad about it. She was better prepared, that was all. When that circus was going on just now I googled you. You used to be a reporter. *Atlanta Journal*. Some good investigations."

"Feels like a different lifetime."

“Wait until you get to seventy-two. I feel like I’ve lived *four* lifetimes... Covering the wars in Vietnam and Cambodia... Bumming on a beach in Mexico for a year... Hitting the campaign trail with Hunter S Thompson in ’72.”

“You knew Hunter Thompson?”

“Oh sure. We were good pals for a time. He gave me a shotgun and it’s in my study at home. Don’t break in.”

“Noted.”

“They were exciting times. Listen, Jess, can you spare me half an hour? I’d like to get your opinion on something.”

“Why would anyone want my opinion on anything after *that*?” I nodded towards the Montrose tower.

“It’s because of *that* that you came to my attention. My PA burst in and said I should tune in to Tucker’s show. I looked at your LinkedIn profile while I was listening; your résumé is a lot stronger than your debating skills. Why did you move to comms? Money?”

“Money, security... Print had been on life support for a long time. Then the 2008 crash happened and it suddenly looked even worse. I got a 40 per cent pay rise and twice the perks at Silverstream.”

“Anything you miss about journalism?”

“There’s not a week goes by without me thinking did I do the right thing? I know I did, but that doesn’t make it easier. I miss the thrill of getting a big story, the camaraderie, the sense of humor. And just being able to say you’re a journalist, a reporter and people understanding what it is that you do.”

“It did used to be a great job,” said Porter. “When you could do what the hell you liked. Anyway, you got half an hour? You probably shouldn’t be driving while you’re upset either.”

I dabbed my eyes with a tissue and nodded. “Let’s go.” When I opened my door he was already round my side with an umbrella.

I was in the company of a gentleman. I told you I didn't mind a bit of patriarchy.

I nodded. Stop crying, Jessica! You can't cry in front of men, it just confirms what they think about women in the workplace.

"It's just round the corner on West 27th," he said.

We made chit chat as best we could above the popping of rain on the umbrella. The walk could not have taken longer than three minutes but my feet were soaked by the time we stopped at some doors next to JB's Diner. Johnny Bouillabaisse and his eaterie were legendary in Truvy, and April and I would occasionally meet here for smashed avocado on toast on a Saturday morning – and a good old-fashioned girlie catch-up.

"You'd better text someone your location," said the guy. "Fifth floor, Jupiter House. I'm Porter Montrose, by the way."

Porter Montrose! Of course! The man from the basketball match (and indeed the reckless driver in the Ford Mustang).

"Oh yes," I said. "Of course you are." Relax, Jess, he's not Elvis.

I texted April. She didn't even know about my suspension so I kept it simple: "Business meeting, fifth floor, Jupiter House, W 27th. Safety text."

Porter led me into an old-fashioned lobby with parquet flooring and clouds of dust visible in the air. With a grunt, he yanked open the cage doors on an old service elevator and stepped in.

"Try to avoid letting your clothes touch anything," he said. "It might be a little oily in here."

I got in and the two of us pulled the doors shut. Porter pressed a button and there was a strange delay of about five seconds before the elevator jerked to life, nearly knocking us off our feet.

"The luxury glass elevator with commanding views of the city is being ordered," he said, twinkling again. "Our main headquarters are in the radio tower, but this place I'm taking you... this is something different. A side project, you might say. Project X."

“I’m intrigued.”

The doors opened and a slightly cheesy gold “5” confirmed we had arrived at our destination. Porter led me along darkened corridors, occasionally flicking on a light, until we reached a lobby, whose main attributes were plastic sofas, a Formica reception desk and lots of vinyl and wood paneling. Oh yes, and the smell of decades’ worth of more dust.

Dead silence up here. I stepped up to a large, mysterious machine, from which hung a single sheet of A4. I flipped it up. “PORTS AUTHORITY UNDER FIRE AGAIN OVER HARBOUR FACILITIES.” It was dated December 10 1990.

I scooped up a magazine from a pile on the coffee table in the waiting area. The *South Georgia Gleaner*. November 1988. I tried to open it but the mouse-nibbled pages had long since been stuck together by time and damp.

Porter was vanishing through a fire door. I scampered after him. Just when I thought the day couldn’t get more intriguing, it had, er, got more intriguing. This Porter episode was already helping to quieten memories of the radio fiasco.

At the end of a short corridor we entered a large room that was painted a murky turquoise color and veered off in all sorts of interesting directions into nooks, crannies, side offices, and even what appeared to be a long-deserted photographic darkroom.

Resting on the wooden desks that had been pushed together into a central reporters’ hub were a couple of electric typewriters (!), one manual typewriter (!!), stacks of discarded press releases impaled on large spikes, a very large 1988 diary in which all the events that had to be covered were recorded, and heaps and heaps of old newspapers and full notepads. There certainly was a lot of paper in the pre-digital age. On the floor was a metal pail that made a satisfying “tink” every time a drop of water landed in it. And a bird chirped, evidently somewhere in the room.

I liked this place. It had character and was a world apart from the sterile open-plan offices I had always known.

“This was the newsroom of our daily newspaper, the *Gleaner*,” said Porter, easing himself into a leather swivel chair at a desk on its own that had probably been used by the editor, news editor and their top team back in the day. He gestured for me to pick a seat.

“Truvy was big enough for a daily newspaper?” I said. “What on earth did you report on?”

“Anything that moved,” he said. “And a lot of stuff that didn’t. The *Gleaner* covered all the surrounding areas, too, of course. But it all came to an end on December the tenth, 1990, the day our final issue was printed. Daddy just pulled the plug. ‘Good work on the paper this week,’ he said. ‘Sadly, I have to fire you all. Happy Christmas.’ It was a total over-reaction to what turned out to be a brief recession. But the printing presses never turned out another *Gleaner* again. Not even in the boom of the nineties.”

“Why not? Weren’t you leaving money on the table?”

“In hindsight, yes. But while Dad was thinking about whether to revive it, the internet boom started and he was afraid to invest new cash in old media.”

“Why has this floor been left like Miss Havisham’s mansion? Didn’t you want to sell it?”

He unscrewed a gold hip flask that had miraculously appeared in his hands. “I’m not sure. Maybe I’ve always hoped we could get a daily newspaper up and running again. And then there’s my Plan B. Besides, this room is still the center of a thriving business.”

“It is?”

He pointed to some far corner and there were two middle-aged women, ironing, folding and putting clothes into laundry bags.

“Mary-Lou and Pat. Morning, ladies.”

“Good morning, Porter.”

“Good morning, Porter.”

“Friends of mine,” Porter explained. “Why waste the space? Plus I’ve not had to iron my shirt since 2005. A daily newspaper must remain in my dreams but I do have a little seed money put aside for another idea.”

“The Plan B?”

“Indeed.”

He passed me a stack of A3 color page proofs from the desk. An attractive, swirly-fonted masthead announced that this was *The Truvian*. Below it was a skillful montage of photos taken around the city: the nature reserve, a whizzy-blurry shot of the Historic District’s bars and restaurants at night, film-makers shooting a scene at the Montrose Museum, exotic offerings at the fish market, spinnakers in the annual Truvy regatta riding some gnarly waves, and an alligator at what I am guessing was Blackwater Swamp Park.

“Have a look,” he said. Then he dialed a number on his cell phone. “Maev, Porter. And good afternoon to you, too. You got any pastries left today? Uh huh. Could you bring me a couple? I’m on the fifth floor with a special guest. Love ya.” He hung up.

The Truvian (a Truvian is anyone born in Truvy City, meaning I wasn’t one) celebrated the city and its outlying towns with high-quality photography, beautiful design and writing that had real personality.

“Who wrote these articles?” I said.

“Erwin Moses, a local freelance journalist. He’ll be on the team.”

“Will be? So this is more than just a plan?”

“Oops, rumbled. You’re more Jessica Fletcher than Jessica Harper.”

“I’m only just starting with the questions. Next one: why a print

mag? Higher rates?”

“Exactly. We can charge more for advertising than if it’s purely online. A little more prestige. And besides, an old dog like me can’t get excited about seeing stories on digital.”

“This looks different. Fresh.” I skimmed through some articles. “And funny. It’s got personality.”

“Glad you think so. Erwin’s a good writer and I will expect the same standards from all contributors. *The Truvy Times* went down the pan last year and that *Go Truvy!* is a shoddy franchise thing put together by some idiots in Idaho. I took this idea to our sales guys in the radio tower and they said there was definitely space in the market for a quality monthly print mag. Et voila, the prototype is in your hands.”

“Distribution?”

“Twenty-five thousand free copies available in fifty bars, restaurants, stations and malls. Every business in Truvy would get a copy of *The Truvian* delivered to them, and we door drop to an additional ten thousand homes. Plus at least thirty thousand people looking at the digital version.”

“What’s Southern Magnolia Publishing?”

“Just a name I came up with to give the magazine a fighting chance. The Montrose name being persona non grata with certain folks.”

It was then that I noticed a poster on the wall behind Porter. A painting of a young woman sitting at a typewriter, done in a kind of agit prop style, like she was in the Russian Revolution.

“Annalee Calhoun,” I said. “Is someone a fan?”

“We held an art competition many years ago to celebrate Truvy’s most famous author. She declined our invitation to judge it, unsurprisingly.”

“Did any of your papers ever interview her?”

“Nope. We tried every now and then but she doesn’t talk to

anyone. Never has.”

“She gave one interview in the early seventies,” I said. “I’ve still got the cutting somewhere.”

“Yes, you’re right, there *was* one.”

“I was obsessed with *How My Friends Dance* when I was twelve. And I mean *obsessed*. And I became an expert on Annalee herself.”

How My Friends Dance was about an exclusive girls school where reading, writing and arithmetic take a backseat to madness, mayhem and murder. The narrator, Judith Winters, galvanizes the other pupils into organizing peaceful protests against their oppressive teachers. When the demonstrations have no effect, the protests become increasingly violent.

How My Friends Dance was written at the age of 17 by the legendary Annalee, who achieved instant fame and then vanished from public life. She was believed to still live somewhere in or around Truvy.

“I should read it again,” said Porter. “It is a great book.”

“That poor boy she takes against...” I said.

“Indeed. I’ve not sliced a salami since. Well, lookie who it is.”

A woman in an apron and carrying a large paper bag had appeared in the doorway.

“Why you keep asking an old woman to deliver to this haunted house I will never know,” she said. “Can’t you clean up in here if this is going to be your new HQ?”

“Not collecting in person *is* a trifle lazy, Maev. I apologize. As for cleaning up, that is on the to-do list. Jess, this is Maev from JB’s Diner downstairs.”

She gave me a nod, said: “Get him to dust,” and was gone.

We opened the bag and slid out a cardboard tray, which held four delicious options. I took a cupcake and continued reading. Porter’s eyes were closed and the hipflask clasped to his chest.

This whole excursion was unusual, interesting, entertaining and came with bakery goods but I still had no idea what it had to do with me.

“Did you grow up in Truvy?” he said.

“No, Atlanta. I did my journalism degree at Georgia State and then I took a year out travelling around Europe and southeast Asia. When I came back I got my first job at *The Prosperity Perspective*.”

“One of our weekly titles. I haven’t heard that name in a while. Happening place, Prosperity.”

“It sure was. Our biggest story in two years was that somebody’s cat went missing. Somebody phoned us just as we were going to press to say it had turned up.”

“Oh hell. What did you do?”

“Pretended we never got the call,” I said. There was something I wanted to say but I was a little nervous. He was just someone you automatically respected and I didn’t want to seem overly familiar. “You didn’t visit us very often but it was a big deal when you did. ‘Oh my God, when’s Mr Montrose coming?’ One day you asked me to print out the story I’d just filed. Then you stood over me. I was terrified.”

“I had a reputation?”

“Just the reputation of being the former news editor of the *New York Globe*. That was enough.”

He gave a tight smile and took a swig from the hip flask.

“So what did I say to you?”

“It was a story about a veteran who came into the office in a wheelchair and told me he’d lost the use of his legs in Afghanistan. He’d set up a charity for local vets in the same situation. I’d written a nice little story with his photo and bank details and a plea to the public. You said speak to the state charity regulator. I called them and they said oh him, hold off with that

story. Turned out he'd been going from one town to the next, fleecing people for small amounts of cash. The next time you came in to the office I said how did you know he wasn't paralyzed? And you said he delivers my pizzas. On a bicycle."

Porter smiled. "That was you? I remember that. A piece of luck. But I was also trying to teach you to cover all the angles. And not to fall for a hard-luck story." Another pull on the hipflask. "You got kids?"

"A twelve-year-old. Jackson."

"Good kid?"

"The best."

"Fill in the rest of the résumé for me."

"I started dating Brandon when I was at the *Atlanta Journal*. But he's a homebody and wanted to move back to his folks in Truvy. He'd been on two tours of Iraq before I met him and he was done being away anywhere, but mostly Iraq."

"Which branch?"

"He was a scout sniper in the Marines. On his second tour his Humvee got blown up. He kept going back in and pulling guys out from the fire. He came home with a Silver Star and crippling back pain."

"Brave guy."

"I knew I wanted a family with him and I didn't want to jeopardize that, so we both came here and got hitched. Newspaper jobs were few and far between by then so I bit the bullet and made the decision to sell out to comms. And that's when I joined Silverstream. I presume you've heard of them."

"They replaced my knee."

"Uh uh."

"Anything else about yourself I should know?"

"Hmm, well, I go to boxercise twice a week, I have a recurring dream about missing a flight and I have a cat called Wilbur who

steals the lime from my gin and tonic.”

“He does?”

“Yeah, weird, isn’t it?”

“What does he do with it?”

“Hides it under our car.”

“Hmm, cats are strange.”

Another quiet moment broken only by the hissing of the steam irons.

“Why did the world go so mad?” I asked. He seemed pretty wise, maybe he would have an opinion on it. I was expecting something slightly grand and philosophical but his answer was surprisingly specific.

“The internet,” he said, wearily. Wearily but with depth and character. “The damned internet.”

The internet... of course! He was so wise. What other mysteries did he know the secrets to? I was just about to ask him who shot JFK when he spoke again.

“You know, not much happened in the eighties. Or the nineties. We didn’t realize at the time how lucky we were. I wish somebody had come back from the future and slapped us, told us how good we had it.”

My phone was buzzing. When I saw who it was, I felt sick.

“It’s work,” I said.

“Take it,” he said, a bit Clint Eastwoody.

I didn’t care if he listened in. Things were moving in a different direction suddenly. I got to my feet and swiped the screen.

“Hello?” I said.

“Jessica, this is Janice Carullo from Silverstream HR. Can you talk?”

“Yes, Janice.” I looked down at the street corner and the statue of Charles Montrose that nobly watched over the intersection. The statue that our taxi driver had told us was so annoying the

wokeys. The rain was bouncing off his bronze head.

“Jessica, your behaviour in the training course this afternoon was completely inappropriate and violated the rules and values of our corporation. You also signed an NDA stipulating you would never discuss company business outside of work and you have just done so on the radio. Jessica, you are being terminated from Silverstream Care.”

**

PART TWO: YOUR HUDDLED MASSES

Chapter Sixteen

Two months later

My tiny office was crowded with bodies for the Monday morning conference. There was some good banter going on and I let it continue in the name of team building. But mostly because I loved it, I bathed in it: the gossip, the buzz, it filled me with life. It was like being in newspapers back in the old days. I was so into this job that I'd even bought myself a couple of Hugo Boss suits and some oversized pink specs. A little OTT maybe but now I looked and felt the part.

Our photographer Rusty Rogers was playing a few chords on the electric guitar he always brought to meetings. He was in his standard uniform of denim, snakeskin cowboy boots and a faded Grateful Dead bandana. You couldn't really get to know Rusty but I had seen some of his photos and they were good. Plus he was an old mate of Porter's so I was stuck with him.

"Ah, Rusty," I said. "All okay? You were out of radio contact yesterday."

"Been on the road," he said. Rusty seemed to think he was Jack Kerouac. Frankly, Kerouac probably had more respect for a nine to five schedule.

"Rusty, are those boots real snakeskin?" asked Ellie Jones, our token young person, who was on the floor in a yoga pose. I marveled (maybe recoiled is a better word) at her generation's relaxed attitude to impressing their elders at work; specifically, that they didn't feel the need to. I spent the first two years of *my* career cowering behind my monitor and hoping the news editor didn't so much as think about me. And when I did file a story I would re-read it a dozen times first. For Generation Z, going to work was just an extension of chilling out at home. We should be

thankful they even change out of their nightwear, I guess.

But Ellie was the grand-daughter of a friend of Porter's so we were stuck with her, too. She was willowy, gorgeous and eager to help, although if she asked me one more time if we'd be running an 'unconscious bias' training course I was going to *beat* her unconscious.

"Oh yeah, real snake," said Rusty. "Caught it myself out by Doober's Creek. It was me or him."

"Maybe it was a her," said Ellie. The new generation cared more about misgendering than killing animals for fashion.

"No, it was definitely a 'she'. I could hear her chewing someone's ear off a mile away."

Rusty laughed at his own sexist joke and broke into a smoker's cough. Bob Dylan had got him into smoking grass, he had told me. On a different occasion he told me it was Neil Young. In any case, he liked to wind up Ellie. Humor wasn't a strong point of the woke and you had to remind them what it was.

Our no-nonsense office manager Birdie O'Brien brought in a tray of goodies from JB's Diner. She was in her seventies and had been Porter's secretary in the 1980s when secretaries were still called secretaries and getting your ass slapped was part of the job and you'd better well like it. For some reason she still sported the tight, curly hairstyle and shoulder pad jackets from that decade.

The only team member missing was Katie Ocando, a graphic designer who came in two days a week to lay out pages, tell us how many words we needed to write or cut, and find any additional photos we needed. She always came in Mondays and attended the conference but so far there had been no word of her.

"Does anyone want a free meal at that new Thai restaurant: The Golden Waterfall?" said Erwin Moses, the freelance journalist who had written the mock-up copy of *The Truvian* that Porter had shown me. Erwin was a black conservative in his mid thirties,

had a sharp sense of humor and his own (political) podcast.

“Golden Waterfall?” said Rusty. “Sounds like a urinary complaint.”

“Do they sell gluten-free beer?” asked Denver Kelly, who was around Erwin’s age and always showed up in some amazing outfit (today it was a 70s shirt and slacks with her maple brown hair in flipped-out curtain bangs). I’d followed Denver’s fashion blog for several years and we’d become online friends. I was thrilled when I asked her to write for us and she jumped at the chance.

“Denver, smuggle your own gluten-free beer in if you have to,” said Erwin in mock exasperation. “This place is getting rave reviews. Oh, while I remember, Jess, shall I write something on the new arts cinema? I might go along. They’re opening with *The Third Man*. Never seen it.”

“Great, go for it,” I said. “Rusty, get pics.” I began reading page proofs and let the chatter wash over me like white noise.

“I love that movie. Orson Welles is *magnetic*.”

“That’s *Citizen Kane*.”

“They didn’t even have gluten in my day, for God’s sake. Gluten!”

“Excuse me, Orson Welles is in *The Third Man*. He’s Harry Lime.”

“Is Harry Lime the third man?”

“Yes. No. I’m not sure. He’s certainly *one* of the men.”

“Right, from the internet: ‘People with celiac disease are genetically predisposed to gluten intolerance, and even ingesting a very small amount can lead to severe damage of the small intestine.’”

“Oh. Do you have celiac disease?”

“Well, no.”

“Are there any women in *The Third Man*?”

“None whatsoever.”

“That is so sexist.”

“Can I show you this thing on my elbow? What do you think it is?”

“Ebola.”

“Really?”

“Can I just ask: *The Truvian?* Is that the final title?”

“Yes. Don’t you like it?”

“I was kidding, it’s *eczema*. Get some Vanicream.”

“Right, the Over Fifty Men’s Support Group feature, is that happening?”

“I can’t get hold of the guy.”

“Maybe he died of erectile dysfunction.”

“Are you sure this is decaff? I’m flying.”

“I’m getting nothing off this latte. I think I’ve got your decaff.”

“Does anybody want this pain au chocolat? I haven’t touched it.”

Okay, time to get the show on the road. I clapped my hands loudly. “Right, folks, I hereby call this meeting to order. I shall take minutes. *Ellie*: have you done the circular river walk yet?”

“Yes.”

“How was it?”

“It was completely sexist and ableist. For a start–.”

Rusty groaned. He was holding on to a guitar string and nervously tugging it back and forth between two fingers. He frequently did this when Ellie was talking.

“*Rusty*,” I hissed. “*Ellie*, continue.”

“For a start there was an approximately two-mile stretch of the route with no trash can. Nowhere for women who are having their period to dispose of their tampons. Women who will have to disguise the smell with improvised items such as tea bags or crumbled aspirin if they don’t want to be pursued by bears.”

The guitar string twanged off and Rusty exploded. “Pursued by

bears? You are not in *The Winter's Tale*, young lady. And why does everything have to be some feminist grievance with your generation of women? I cannot work with this girl any more! I'll be in JB's if any *grown-up* wants me. Damn!"

"Rusty!" I protested, half-heartedly because I knew the meeting would be easier for everyone without him.

He stormed out but had forgotten to remove his guitar and both ends of it whacked the doorframe, sending bits of wood and paint flying upwards in an impressive cloud.

Everyone released their breath. Rusty and Ellie's relationship was, to use one of the liberals' favorite words, toxic.

"Well," said Erwin, looking at the clock, "he lasted approximately fourteen seconds longer than last week."

"Ellie, did you take plenty of notes?" I said, calmly.

"Yes," she said, looking a little shocked.

"Ellie, listen to me. I want you to write this up *as per the brief*. The access issues can have a mention but that will be all. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. And how about your interview with The Barefoot Gardener?"

"It's up in the air. He got tetanus."

"Keep me posted. *Erwin*," I said, holding up some page proofs for him. "Good work on Food and Drink. The only gap I have is that review of The Golden Waterfall you just mentioned."

"I am through with Truvy nightlife, Jess," he said. "If I see one more chopstick I am going to stab myself in the throat with it."

"Come on, how many free drinks have you got out of this feature so far?"

"They're not helping me write it any faster; they're slowing me down, if anything. I've had a permanent hangover since Memorial Day."

“I can review the Thai place,” said Ellie. “I heard they pay their staff dirt poor wages though. Maybe *that* can be the story.”

“As they’re paying us for a sponsored feature, probably not,” I said. Another thing about the young woke is their total lack of regard for turning a profit. “I will review The Golden Waterfall, Erwin. Give me the details.”

“And I’ve been getting a lot of questions from that lady in accounts,” said Erwin. “About my receipts. She says double tequilas aren’t expensable.”

“I never had trouble claiming for double tequilas in my day,” said Porter, wafting in. “Maybe because they were usually triples. Nobody queried a triple; it was seen as heroic. Morning, team, and pretend I’m not here.”

Porter always arrived late to conference, made some useful, salient remarks, charmed everyone, sidestepped any difficult questions and then vanished. Today there was a slight variation in his routine: he was carrying a shotgun, a hammer and some kind of bracket.

“And that’s for... what?” I said.

“Just pretend I’m not here,” he repeated, as he began hammering a nail into a wall.

“Whoa, whoa, time out,” I said. “Porter, what on earth are you doing?”

“This is the shotgun Hunter S Thompson gave me. It’ll look fantastic in here. Manly, iconic.”

“This is my office and I am neither manly nor iconic and we are in the middle of a meeting. Can this wait?”

He held his hands up in surrender and clanked firearms and tools down loudly. “My bad.”

“Thank you. Right, *Erwin*, anything else?”

“The Career Makeover feature, you’ll have it today. And, er, Rusty took some pics so if you can find him, you can have them...”

“Good. Thank you. Denver: local fashion icon Zita Zodiac. Have you had any luck talking to her?”

“She canceled. Said something about... Well, you, Jess.”

I felt sick. This was the third interviewee who had pulled out because they’d got wind that I was involved in the magazine. Me, the racist radio mom, scourge of the woke, or so I had been painted by a small but vocal band of social media idiots. Of course, it was too much to ask for any of these advertisers or interviewees to challenge the claims or ignore them or, God forbid, oppose them. And so they just quietly withdrew their time and money, casting a shadow over issue one of *The Truvian*, and surely over my longevity as its editor.

“Fine,” I said, glancing at Ellie. It had been my understanding that Erwin, Rusty and Denver (and possibly Birdie) had been hired because Porter knew them and that they were fun people, good folks to run a magazine with. It was clear that Ellie was not on the same page as us, politically speaking, and so far a silent agreement had existed to avoid woke chat when she was around. She seemed unaware of the radio incident and the mud that had been slung around online, probably because she didn’t use those platforms, which she found “toxic”. She found most things toxic.

“Okay, Denver, what else?” I said.

“You should have the sailing feature today and the vacation fashion ten-pager by the end of tomorrow.”

“Terrific.”

“I’ve got an idea for a feature,” said Ellie, whose feet were now tucked around her neck (*Readers note: please assume Ellie is on the floor at all times unless I specify otherwise*). “Truvy’s most offensive statues.”

“Ellie, we are not running any woke nonsense in *The Truvian*,” said Porter. “This is a lifestyle magazine for the average citizen of Truvy, not a student magazine.”

“Woke nonsense?” said Ellie.

Rusty edged back sheepishly in the room, guitar still around his neck.

“I think what Porter meant,” I said, “was that we should see *The Truvian* as a beacon of free speech.”

“Free speech?” she said, like someone had shouted “Incoming!”

“Yes, free speech,” said Porter, gruffly. “The first amendment and all that.”

“Isn’t that the right to remain silent?”

“That’s a MIRANDA right,” said Erwin, rolling his eyes.

“Hmmm,” said Ellie, as tension built in the room like a fog that would have kept even Sherlock Holmes indoors. “So what amendment is the right to a free delivery of a replacement if you’re not happy with the food?”

“*That’s Papa John’s Quality Guarantee*,” shouted Rusty and he stormed out, once again accidentally whacking his guitar against the door frame. More splinters, more dust.

Ellie went red and looked down at her pad. I expected tears and I wasn’t in the mood to assure her that her dumb questions had been okay and that Rusty was in the wrong. My first news editor had been a bastard and it never hurt me. Much. But you learned your craft quickly. You also learned that the workplace is not a playground.

“And that brings us to me,” I said. “Women’s business breakfast group write-up, done. Weddings venues feature, *done*. Fourth of July celebrations preview, *done*. Truvy in Bloom feature, *done*. God, Jess, you are amazing.”

“Leading from the front,” said Erwin. “And how’s that Annalee Calhoun interview coming on? Let us guess – you’ve tracked her down and she gave you a short story she wrote after *How My Friends Dance* and she says we can run it in the launch issue?”

“Yes, okay, okay, guys,” I said. “It was always going to be a long

shot that I would track down Annalee Calhoun but a woman's reach should exceed her grasp and all that. There's nothing wrong with a little ambition. I will keep trying." I looked at my watch. "Whoa, we're over-running. I have to leave. Because coincidentally I have a tipoff that Annalee Calhoun goes to Blackwater Swamp every weekday at noon to walk her dog. Watch this space."

"Don't forget your banjo out there," said Rusty. "I love those articles the *Journal* still runs once every five years: 'We couldn't find Annalee Calhoun but we found something better – the dark hole at the soul of her community.' Haha, sure you did. Face it: you found butkus."

"You've got more of a chance of finding out what happened to the Titanic," said Ellie.

"We *know* what happened to the Titanic," said Rusty. "It hit a frickin' great iceberg."

"She meant the *Marie Celeste*," said Erwin.

"Please don't speak for me," said Ellie, who was wearing a T-shirt that said '#handsoffwomensmouths'. "But yes, I might have meant the *Marie Celeste*."

"Well, thanks for the support, guys," I said. "Gotta fly. Meeting terminated." And with a wave to all gathered, I bolted.

The newsroom hadn't exactly been *transformed* since that day Porter had invited me up there but it was now at least somewhere that didn't make you want to throw on a hazmat suit. The dust had gone, the stacks of musty newspapers had gone, the Cindy Crawford calendar had gone (to Rusty's dismay) and I'd managed to squeeze some new chairs out of our minuscule budget. We even had a pretty good system for catching mice, and the one we couldn't catch (DB Cooper, we called him) we'd taken a shine to and were leaving him cheese *without* a trap attached.

Otherwise the newsroom was pretty much as it had been when

it was abandoned in 1990: the same wooden desks, same stained polystyrene ceiling tiles, same cracked windows and the same uneven flooring.

Crossing the newsroom this morning, I was stopped in my tracks by two burly men in overalls.

“Morning, Brad,” I said. “Let me guess – more good news?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, Jess. There’s something in the men’s toilet that is causing the blockage.”

“What is it? Or do I not want to know?”

“All we know is it’s not of human derivation.”

Brad had a beautiful vocabulary for a man who spent much of his life knee-deep in sewage.

“I’m just saying that your male members of staff will have to continue using, ah, alternative facilities,” he added.

“Well, I’m sure that in these smartphone-obsessed times, the library will be glad of the footfall. Anything else?”

“All the window frames are rotten. And as for the bats...”

“Ah, the bats. What have they bitten through now?”

Brad unfolded a piece of paper. “Okay, in alphabetical order...”

I took it off him. “Let’s cut to the chase: can you just fix this stuff?”

“Kind of. I just want to know *what* you want us to fix.”

“But you work for Montrose Media, the same as we do. Don’t you just have to fix whatever’s wrong?”

“The head of facilities, Danny O’Sullivan? He said to check with him on any spending over two hundred dollars.”

“Two hundred dollars? Porter!” I cried, shoving the paper back at Brad. Porter could deal with this; I was only on a six-month contract, which didn’t exactly invest in me a passionate commitment to resolving the crumbling estate.

I looked around in the hope of spotting the old goat and caught a flash of his jacket as he darted from the newsroom. This was a

recurring situation. Porter breezed in with smiles and pastries for everyone and some wise little maxims and then poof, he was gone. Usually just moments before some problem arose to which there was no obvious solution.

“Brad,” I said. “What’s the sum at the bottom of that list?”

“It’s around four thousand dollars,” he said.

“Okay. Tape up the windows, leave the bats alone and hire a plunger for the john. Good day to you, Brad.”

I gave what I hoped was a sincere smile and then pointed to the door as if to say: “That is where I am going, do not attempt to obstruct”.

**

Chapter Seventeen

I took the rickety elevator to the underground car park and was soon cruising out of the city towards an area that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources called Blackwater Swamp Park but the locals just called The Wilds. A two hundred and sixty thousand acre wildlife refuge, its name derived from the river vegetation that rots and leaks tannins into the water, making it look like black tea.

Treats for visitors include the chance of encountering lyme disease, black bears and snakes such as the Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake, Timber Rattlesnake, Coral, Cottonmouth and Copperhead. Then there was the poison sumac, poison ivy, razor-sharp sawgrass, potential heat exhaustion and of course *Alligator mississippiensis*, better known as the American Alligator. About six thousand of 'em.

And then there are the people...

Yep, it wasn't just the wildlife that earned The Wilds its sobriquet: the people could be a little... uninhibited, too. Not all of them but definitely some. And one of them might just have been Annalee Calhoun, legendary author of *How My Friends Dance*, which *The New York Times Book Review*'s most recent list of the greatest novels ever written ranked at number nineteen.

Driving time is time for reflection and I found myself taking stock of all that had happened since that day of two halves (Tucker's show = awful, Porter's job offer = brilliant).

I now knew a little about Porter. He had grown up in Truvy City as the only child of national media magnate Henry Montrose and the great great grandson of Charles Montrose, whose statue (or the planned removal of) had got our cabbie so riled up. At the tender age of 17, Porter had joined the family trade as a lowly

copy runner in the *New York Globe* newsroom before covering low-profile boxing matches and ball games that the proper hacks couldn't be bothered with.

After two years as a full-time sports reporter he demanded that he join the general news team because he “refused to be covering baseball when the Apollo 11 landed. I wanted to be in on history”. His first assignment was to carry out a “vox pop”, mini interviews with random people on the street, about their thoughts on the moon landing.

Aged just 26, Porter became news editor (well, it did help that his dad owned the company), then editor and then chairman of the board of Montrose Media after his father died in a plane crash. He was a better journalist than businessman and never felt at home at the top of such an important organization.

During the dotcom bubble, the firm got cold feet about old media and sold most of its empire, including the once mighty *Globe*, leaving Porter alone to run his more modest concerns (43 weekly newspapers, three radio stations and a bunch of non-media investments) back down south. He married (but he was, as I joined *The Truvian*, widowed) and had two children, a son and a daughter, who both lived in New York. He had liked the idea of being an ‘editor at large’, zipping between the different titles, coaching staff of all levels “and being a real newspaperman again instead of a pretend suit”.

“We’ve had some good years, some bad,” he told me. “But we’ve worked out the internet thing now, as well as anyone anyway.”

That meant editorial departments were sometimes no more than a couple of interns writing the bare minimum of copy to justify some advertising to hang off it. It was sad but it was the same the world over.

Enter *The Truvian*, Porter’s brainchild, his labor of love. Now that he had little to do with the day-to-day running of the weekly

newspapers, the magazine would be his baby, his last hurrah.

And so here we were, everyone on a day rate apart from me. Everything was going nicely to plan, although I did have my suspicions about Porter's relationship with the board. Porter had hinted that they were far from enthusiastic about him reviving old media ie magazines, and wanted to remove "Montrose" from the corporation's name, tarnished as it was with transgressions of the past, as the wokeys like to call it. This conflict with the board would also explain why Porter had chosen to base *The Truvian* in a dilapidated old building on the other side of town from Montrose Media's HQ in the tower. We were free to do as we liked. It was like *Home Alone* for adults.

I made a turn on to the state highway that would lead to one of the swamp's car parks, where (or so my contact had told me) I could find Annalee Calhoun walking her dog every weekday at around midday.

Why did I feel so nervous? Maybe it was the anonymity of my source. Why would someone be tipping me off about Annalee? Anyway, no one knew I was here. It wasn't like I had agreed I would be here at a certain time.

The GPS said take a right but I couldn't see any road *on* the right. Oh, there it was. A dirt track. Was this a private road? There were no signs.

I proceeded at a cautious 20mph, fearful of getting stuck in mud. There was plenty of it. I cringed as I recalled that Bran had taken the car for a wash the previous weekend.

There was nothing to see on either side of me except a dense forest of bald cypress and swamp tupelo trees. Why would anyone choose to live out here? Was this the best place to walk your dog? Maybe I would round the next bend and be confronted by Georgia's best kept secret, a verdant paradise of exotic flowers and rare creatures.

I rounded the next bend. There was no verdant paradise. Just the end of the road. I drove as far as I could and then stopped.

Ding. “Keep going,” said the satnav, in a slightly irritated tone.

Keep going? When had she ever said that before? How rude. I don’t expect my robot servants to insult me. And keep going where? The track ended right in front of me. There was nothing but flora and... the other one. Foliage? No. Fauna. Whatever that was. I could never remember. Anyway, I realized I was just avoiding the real question which was what the hell did I do next? *Get out the car, dummy. You didn’t come to write a review of obscure car parks in east Georgia.*

I got out of the car and stood there, listening for the sound of approaching gators, whatever that sound might be. Approaching Gators, sounded like one of those indie bands Jackson listened to. “Approaching Gators are the new Imagine Dragons.” *For heaven’s sake concentrate, Jessica Harper.*

Fauna meant *animals*, I suddenly remembered. Funny word for animals though. Surely “faunas”. *Jess, pay attention!!!*

“Go into those woods and look for Annalee Calhoun,” I said aloud, disgusted by my own inaction.

But then I saw something just off to my right that meant I owed the satnav an apology: another track, cutting right into that impenetrable thicket. The sort of track on which even bicycles would have to ride single file.

“Go on”, said the satnav. *Go on?* The cheek of the thing. And how was she even working with the ignition turned off?

“Traffic should be light,” she added.

“No Shinola, Sherlock.”

Well, if the GPS was endorsing this place, it had to be accessible to vehicles, right?

Right?

I got back in the car and took a deep breath. I was going in.

**

I hadn't driven very far before I realized I had made a massive mistake. I was driving down the equivalent of the Appalachian Trail. I could get out of this though; all I had to do was find a slightly wider part of the "road" and make a three-point turn. Then I would return to the only-slightly-less-muddy-and-wider-track and sip some coffee from my cup and think about what to do. I was beginning to think I'd been bamboozled. But to what end? No one had robbed me, I'd just wasted some time.

Absolutely nowhere to turn the car around. Now the wheels were starting to spin. Time to see if those all-season tires that Brandon was so keen on upgrading to actually work. I had my doubts that-.

Some terrifying, man-eating beast burst out of the undergrowth and ran across my path.

A raccoon. For heaven's sake, Jess, get a grip.

The wheels spun again and the car just froze for a heartstopping moment before jerking forward unexpectedly.

An imaginary conversation ran through my head: "Mr Harper, the bad news is your wife's been raped and eaten by some meth-crazed rednecks, which is kinda weird because normally meth kills your appetite. But anyway, that's a digression, Mr Harper. The good news is those all-weather tires you bought worked really well. Dammit if she didn't nearly get away."

Panic was setting in but then, thank you Jesus, I saw something ahead, some dark form, maybe a building, visible through the spindly trees. Maybe in a few minutes' time I would be laughing over bobcat pie in Annalee Calhoun's living room as she spilled her life story to me, happy for it to be printed as a world exclusive in *The Truvian*.

And maybe not.

The car skidded and squelched and complained but it brought me to the mystery building: a cinder block bungalow (okay, shack) that looked like it had been dragged backwards through the swamp and then patched up with the contents of the nearest recycling center: bakery trays, car tires and even a wooden dinghy had been used to fill gaps in the walls. This wasn't a fixer-upper, more a blow-it-upper.

From what I could see of the porch through the mosquito screen, it was piled with oily junk, car parts, mason jars and a couple of armchairs that had been torn to shreds by what I hoped was the elements and not wild dogs. And instead of a screen door, the porch had some of those plastic flaps that you get in abattoirs.

This really was the end of the road. Even the satnav had nothing to say, like she was thinking: *You realize I was only kidding, right?*

I got out of the car into the sticky atmosphere of Blackwater Swamp in June. Not pleasant.

“Hello?” I called. Nada. “Hello? Anybody home?”

Immediately I was assailed by gnats and flies, which no amount of flapping at them with my hands would deter. I took a few pictures of the shack just in case this did indeed turn out to be the home of Annalee Calhoun. As I did so, I noticed that in the darkness of the porch, an old woman with Coke bottle specs and a huge Sixties beehive was sitting in a rocking chair. Watching me.

“Hello,” I said. “I’m looking for Annalee Calhoun. I don’t suppose you know her?”

The woman mumbled something.

“I’m sorry?” I said. “Could you speak up?”

And now, somewhat unhelpfully I thought, she began chuckling. Specifically, *cackling*.

I was not in the mood for this. “Annalee Calhoun,” I shouted. “Do you know her? Ma’am? I would sure appreciate some help right now.”

Now she started laughing, like a witch, and rocking in her wooden throne.

“What the hell is your problem, lady?” I yelled, and just as I was about to completely go ape, I heard something much larger than a raccoon moving through the carnivorous plants and mushroom-like fungi behind me. I spun round and this time my scream was justified: a 10-foot-long creature with a nightmarish armored body, stubby little legs and a mouthful of sharpened white teeth (which it was currently showing off as it licked its chops) was casually waddling out from behind a fallen oak tree.

“Help!” I shouted. “Help me! Alligator!”

I needed to get back in the car. What if I got in there and it didn’t budge and I couldn’t reverse? Reverse? Who was I kidding? I could barely reverse into a parking space at Walmart when there were six empty spaces either side. There was no way I could reverse two miles down a squelchy track. I could attempt a fifty-point turn but the alligator would have to co-operate by getting out of the way, and I would have to perform the maneuver perfectly so that I didn’t get the wheels stuck in the ditches.

The alligator and its horrible eyes and mocking toothy mouth started slap slap slapping its little feet over the mud towards me on the driver’s side of the Accord. I somehow had the presence of mind to snap a few pics of him with my shaky hand before getting in and locking the door (just in case the monster was particularly dexterous). Now I considered my options:

- 1) Phone 911. Nope, you guessed it, I had no reception on my phone. Might explain why the GPS was quiet, too.
- 2) Google what to do if being chased by an alligator. Nope, see number 1.

3) Sit here and wait. The alligator would surely wander off at some point when it was hungry / had a social engagement.

4) Turn car on, rev engine and honk horn and hope to scare it away.

I decided on number 3 as it was only midday and nightfall wasn't something I had to worry about. Just yet. Maybe some relatives of the witch would appear from whatever low-level criminal activity they'd been indulging in and would help me out of my predi-.

BOMP

The car shuddered and the little troll on my car keyring swung back and forth. I swore. I swore a lot. I also might have whimpered. Who the hell had sent me out here? They could only be forgiven if that abode in front of me was the secret hiding place of Annalee Calhoun. And if it was, I would be sad that royalties from the nineteenth greatest novel of all time had been so pathetic that she was living out here like an extra from *Deliverance*.

BOMP BOMP

Sugar Honey Iced Tea, the alligator is attacking the back of my car!!!!

The vehicle was all so sleek and streamlined that I couldn't picture any part the Gator could get its jaws around, which meant the bumping was probably the darned reptile just headbutting it in frustration. If it took a shine to the tires, well, they were all-season tires, not all-species tyres so I didn't much fancy their chances.

I started the engine and honk honk honked until my hand was raw. It didn't seem to bother the gator at all as I heard a loud popping sound. In my side mirror I watched it waving a hubcap back and forth in its mouth like it was some hilarious game.

“Leave it alone! You can’t eat that!”

Boy, did I get that wrong. It bit that thing in half and was using it as a light starter. I could see it eyeing me, like: “No mustard?” But all I needed was for that thing to move to the side of the car and then I could slowly back up. Even if I had to make that fifty-point turn, I could escape Blackwater Swamp with my life. And then track down whichever son of a gun emailed me that “tip-off”, truss ’em up, drive them here, cover them in bloody porterhouse steaks and leave them tied to a tree for old Gary Gatorade here to devour at his leisure.

The only flaw in the plan was that Gary wasn’t going anywhere. He was, in fact, quite happy dentally removing another hubcamp. Believe me, I would have reversed and killed the sumbitch if I thought I could have got away with it, but his immense size meant I would surely have got him wedged under the vehicle, and I’m pretty sure Triple A don’t remove alligators.

“COLIN! COLIN! GIT!”

What the hell? That was a man’s voice. In the rearview I could see a lanky guy in dungarees, with a greasy mop of black hair hanging out of a trucker cap. Oh, and he had a shotgun, too, and right now it looked pretty useful.

The alligator – whom I now knew to be called Colin – made a hissing sound. I opened my window just a few inches.

“Hello? I said. “Thank you, he’s been, er, attacking my car. I’m sure he’s totally harmless, it’s just that I just need to reverse.”

“Colin ain’t harmless, he’d bite your nuts off if he could. Nuts, ovaries, whatever you got – he’d eat ’em.”

Lanky was pointing the shotgun down at Colin, and Colin was now playfully rubbing its snout around the muzzle.

“He’s a soppy old thing, he is,” said Lanky.

The old woman cackled.

“Joony dab dog takey smakey digger Colin Hanks,” she said. Or that’s what it sounded like.

“Yep,” agreed Lanky. The shotgun standoff continued. I was mesmerized. And also terrified that any moment now there would be an almighty bang and Colin’s brains would be blown out over what the Honda salesman had called our sophisticated and aspirational sedan.

“Scaggy wander burn Colin Hanks, sessy cater marchin’ dangle stroon haw,” said the woman. I really was starting to believe she was saying “Colin Hanks”. Wasn’t that the actor son of Tom Hanks?

“Yep,” concurred Lanky, with a slight weariness. “Colin Hanks gon doonburger.”

“Excuse me,” I said. “Are you saying ‘Colin Hanks’?”

“Yup. This gon gator’s Colin Hanksdun gon scaggy mantin. Scoot!”

This last word was directed at Colin Hanks (?), who had got the muzzle in its mouth and was tugging on it.

“As in the actor Colin Hanks?” I said.

“Yup. Actor. Producer. Wunna dem Hollywood hyphenates doon daggly dog. Bin dang gon gator tator.”

“Director!” snapped the old lady.

“Yeah mama, director, too, dong daggit daggit,” said Lanky.

“But why Colin Hanks?” I persisted. I had to know; this was literally worth losing my life over.

The aforementioned Colin released the shotgun barrel from its jaws and lunged at Lanky, who yelped and flung himself to one side, landing in a gulley. I leaned on the horn and that seemed to startle the gator, just for the couple of seconds needed for Lanky to get up and flee. Well, he got up but he didn’t flee.

“Run!” I shouted.

“Go!” he ordered. “Back back back!”

I needed no further urging. I started the car, slammed it into reverse and put my foot down and mud and alligators be damned. It was do or die.

There was a wet thud and I flicked my head round to see that a large uncooked beef patty had landed on the windshield. I kind of mentally shrugged as nothing surprised me any more. The old woman was tossing meat from a bucket at the car. Or rather, she was trying to throw it *over* the car but had missed with the first shot. The second burger landed in a bush, sending Colin Hanks into a frenzy. He bolted for that midday snack so fast that Lanky had to dive out of the way again.

I gave the thumbs up and mouthed thank you to him and kept going. I did make that fifty-point turn but achieved it in a more socially acceptable five. Now I was driving forward, at least, but I was still a mess, my back clammy with sweat, my mind spinning with conspiracy theories. Had I gone the wrong way earlier, been set up by someone who wanted to see me recycled as alligator feed, or was the old woman actually Annalee Calhoun and I'd missed the scoop of the decade?

It was a good five minutes before I realized I was driving with a raw burger on my windshield. I wasn't leaving the car again so I turned on the wipers and it sailed off into the weeds.

**

Chapter Eighteen

Twenty minutes later I was trying to stop my hands shaking as I sat in Little Moe's Diner and licked my wounds. I don't know why Moe was or had been little but it sure as hell wasn't from eating his own food. If it wasn't fried, smothered in cream or supersized, Mo hadn't heard of it.

All I wanted, however, was something to calm me down so I ordered a vanilla milkshake and a piece of cake. Caffeine was the last thing I needed.

I did some deep breathing as I was still in a panic. But this did seem a good time to recap: I'd been sent down a single track road to a house that had a pet alligator. A house that could not easily be driven away from once you had reached it. A house that was probably guarded 24/7 by a reptile.

It stank to high Heaven. I looked at the email that had tipped me off. "Annalee Calhoun takes her dog for a walk here every weekday, around midday." And then a link to the Google Maps location.

The email address it came from was "anonymous_account", which sounded to me like it belonged to a trouble maker. It sure wasn't the email you gave to your mom.

So who would set me up? Kayla and Co were the obvious suspects, although the basketball match / radio disaster had been two months ago and I had only glimpsed her on school runs since. They (I presume it was them but it was impossible to tell as everyone uses pseudonyms) had been making trouble on social media, tweeting about how *The Truvian* was going to be run by an anti-woke racist (me) and funded by a man who had got rich on the blood of slaves (Porter).

My phone pinged. A text from Katie, our freelance designer. "Apologies for not making it to the meeting this morning. Some

personal issue came up. Will be in this afternoon.”

And then a second text from an unrecognized number. “Annalee, 230 Misty Lake Drive.” And a zip code.

I felt like I was being watched.

I looked around the diner.

There was only one other patron, an old guy who didn’t exactly look like Mr Subterfuge. He’d tucked his pants into his briefs and his tie was dangling on his pie.

Hmmm. It was hard to believe someone would be so ballsy as to try to set me up twice in the space of an hour. But what if I did go and it was a hoax? I tried to picture the humiliation.

I keyed the zipcode into Google Maps and it showed that Misty Lake Drive was about eight miles away in Corinth, an unincorporated community about which I knew zilch.

I texted back. “Who are you?”

In a movie, the reply would say: “A friend.”

Ping. “A friend.” Right, okay.

I replied: “Dangerous times for a woman to be running around on her own to strange places. Don’t want to end up as a Netflix show.”

Ping. “She won’t answer the door. Post her a note and leave.”

“A note saying what?”

I waited a minute but no reply came. I sent another one: “Why do you care about this anyway?”

And no reply to that either. Today was all about mystery and frustration.

I ummed and ahhed and decided I’d give it a go. I texted Brandon my destination and set off. 230 Misty Lake Drive was a modest stick-built house painted a muted gray-green. On the tiny front lawn, a leaf turned slowly in the water of a crumbling cherub birdbath and that was about all there was to see. I’d half hoped to hear a manual typewriter being hammered and the ringing bell of

the carriage return but I was to be disappointed. So disappointed, in fact, that it was only professional ethics that stopped me rooting around in the trash looking for clues.

I had written a note at the diner, saying what a fan I was and would she do an interview for *The Truvian*? I included our website's address so she could check it out if she wanted. Now I held the piece of paper in trembling fingers as I walked up to the front door. I pressed the bell. The chime was the theme from *The Addams Family*. I was sure I heard a creak in there, like someone was moving around, but it had been a long time since I'd had to doorstep anyone as a journalist and felt very self-conscious. I was kinda keen to just leave my little note and skedaddle.

No one opened up. I skedaddled.

**

Chapter Nineteen

The next morning, I walked into the office to find Rusty perched on a desk, strumming a different guitar and doing not much else, as far as I could tell. Still, softly softly catchee monkey.

“Sounding good, Rusty,” I said.

“Got a gig tonight down at that micro brewery on Jameson.”

“Which of your bands is this? Unexpected Item in Bagging Area or Rumsfeld?”

“Neither. This is our brand new Pink Floyd tribute band.”

“And what are *they* called?”

“Pink Floyd.”

“Oh, don’t tribute bands usually have a funny name?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Funnier than Pink Floyd?”

“I take your point. Rusty, have you saved the pics for the nightlife feature on the server yet?”

He nodded towards his photographic bag. “All will be revealed shortly. Rusty Rogers must compose when the muse strikes. I got the blues baby...”

“And could you lighten those photos the chamber of commerce emailed us for the Truvy in Bloom preview?” I said, acting like he hadn’t just said the thing about composing and “the muse”.

“Not great on Photoshop, sorry.” He went back to his bad singing. “I got the blueeee baby...”

Only Porter could have found me a photographer who couldn’t use Photoshop. I would have to ask Ellie, who was at that moment sitting cross-legged on the floor, slowly designing more page layouts on which we could place the stories that were piling up. She only knew the basics of software but she was all we had, unless the near-mythical Katie showed up.

I wondered what my blood pressure was.

Ping. A text from April. Damn, I hadn’t had time to text her

yesterday or the day before. I'd been neglecting her. It was this new job: it was so absorbing, it occupied every moment of my waking hours.

"Oh, Jess," said Denver, breezing past. "I got the *Truvian* Facebook page up and running."

"Thanks," I said. Then quietly, so Ellie wouldn't hear: "Send an email to everyone in Montrose Media, asking them to follow it. God knows I could do with some new activity on Facebook. Since I started on this anti-woke thing I've unfollowed so many people that all I've got left is Uncle Barry and adverts for thrush cream."

"Plain Greek yoghurt," said an unfamiliar voice.

I was confronted with a slight woman, probably somewhere in her late sixties, her almost elfin-like appearance enhanced by a pixie haircut, who was staring at me challengingly with a sparkle in the eyes, not to mention an undoubted intelligence that I found a bit intimidating.

Great. Who had sent me a mad grandmother? Let me guess. *Porter*.

"I'm sorry?" I said.

"For thrush. Make sure it doesn't contain any added sugar, flavoring or fruit. You can eat it or apply it straight on to the-."

"Whoa, Nelly," I said, my hands up in surrender. "That is quite an introduction, ma'am. And you are?"

"Connie Gordon. I hear you're looking for writers. That's me. I will be your news editor anyway. Where shall I sit?"

Great, another refugee from Porterland. Thankfully I had a reply ready that a) established I was the boss; b) made it clear she was not a shoe-in, and c) was satisfactorily sarcastic. Unfortunately, by the time I had thought of it she had sat down and was singing.

"Do you need a laptop?" I said.

"Nope," she said. "You can't write poetry on a computer."

“Thankfully we’re not writing any poetry,” I said, but my *bon mot* was wasted amid the clatter of her removing a mug, thermos flask, yoga mat and various large reference books from her bag. I had known this woman less than a minute and I hated her. I wasn’t too keen on Porter either.

My phone was ringing. My sister. Sheesh. Maybe this was the time to tell her I’d lost my job. I was fired from Silverstream a couple of months ago but I still hadn’t broken it to her or mom. My parents idolized Ashley and her husband and I didn’t want to give either of them more evidence of their superiority. I went into my office and closed the door.

“Hi, Ashley.”

“Hey, sis. How are you?”

“I’m good.”

“Bran?”

“He’s fine. A little back pain but just the usual.”

“Uh huh. Good. My nephew?”

“He’s fine. Got a big basketball match tonight. *The final.*”

“How’s the C-50?” she said. I had kind of been expecting her to say something on the lines of: “Tell Jackson good luck from his auntie” but no. *How’s the precious coffee machine we bought you?*

“It’s fine,” I said through teeth that were so gritted they could have kept pedestrians vertical all winter.

“Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“No. I am not just saying it.”

“Have you descaled it yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Jess! You’re meant to descale every three months or three hundred capsules, whichever comes first.”

“I will buy some descalers from the supermarket tomorrow, okay, Ashley?” My teeth were now so gritted that I feared I might

never open my jaw again.

“*Buy them at the supermarket?*” she said, all in italics. “Vinegar or store-bought descalers may cause damage to your Cast-Iron Coffee machine. You have to buy it direct from *them*.”

“Okay, I will buy it from them, Ashley. Is everything else okay with you, apart from your concern about the coffee machine?”

“And you need to empty the drip tray. Give it a wipe down first.”

“That’s still the coffee machine. How is John?” John was / is her husband.

“He’s okay. Well, he had a collapsed lung.”

“What? Oh my God, is he okay?”

“He’s all right, they got it working again. He was cleaning out our Cast-Iron Coffee Machine – we’ve got the C100 – and he spilled some water on the floor and slipped over on it.”

I heard John say, in a weak voice, “Honey, my oxygen canister is low.”

“Coming!” she said.

“And check the temperature of the coffee beans,” John was wheezing. “Make sure they’re between 20 and 25 degrees.”

“Will do. Gotta go, Jess.”

“Clearly. Bye.” I hung up. I didn’t even have a chance to ask about my niece and nephew but I didn’t feel this was entirely my fault.

My call history shows that it was one minute and eight seconds later that my phone rang again. *Mom.*

“Hi, mom.”

“Ashley says you got fired.”

“What?!”

“Well, did you?”

“Er...”

“Jessica, what are you going to live on?”

“How did Ashley know? All she asked about was the damned

coffee machine.”

“It’s a great coffee machine, Jess. Don’t you like your Cast-Iron Coffee Machine? Whatever Ashley and John buy is amazing.”

“How did she know?!”

“She said you hadn’t descaled your coffee machine, which she was understandably annoyed about because it was very expensive. She said it proved you had something on your mind and as you said everything was okay with Brandon and Jackson it could only be that you’d lost your job.”

“That’s how she knew?”

“Well, that and the fact Jackson told her.”

“Jackson told her?”

“Yes, she said she phoned on your landline yesterday and you were out and she spoke to Jackson.” Oh well, it wasn’t Jackson’s fault. But who phones on a landline? Did she think she was in *The Brady Bunch*? It was probably a deliberate ploy to bypass me and get any gossip about the coffee machine from her nephew. See if it was being mistreated.

“If she knew I’d lost my job when she called just now, why didn’t she mention it?”

“I think she was going to but then you–.”

“Then I told her I hadn’t cleaned the coffee machine, yes, okay, got it. For the love of God...”

“So why did you get canned?” said Mom. “Was it the usual?”

“What’s ‘the usual’?”

“You know. Incompetence.”

“What?” I said. “Why would it be incompetence? Do I have a reputation for incompetence?”

“Well, you know what you can be like.”

“No. What *can* I be like?” Was I having this call? Was it real?

“When your concentration goes. Anyway, what was it?”

“Maybe I just resigned, did you think about that?”

“That’s not what Ashley thinks.”

“Ashley doesn’t know anything!”

“She knows you need to descale the C-50 every three months or three hundred capsules.”

I hung up on my mother. This happens sometimes. It always ends in me calling her back and apologizing. But I was through with that. I really *was* changing. Getting tougher.

I came out of my office to see that the new woman, Connie, was unrolling the yoga mat while chatting to Erwin and Denver. Then she got down on the floor and began doing some elaborate pelvic exercises. I went back into my office, closed the door and silently screamed.

**

Chapter Twenty

“A BBC presenter was criticized on Saturday for claiming British gardening is ‘racist’ because of its ‘fetishisation’ of terms such as ‘heritage’ and ‘native’.

“Botanist James Wong, 39, who has presented *Countryfile* and appeared on BBC Radio 4’s *Gardeners’ Question Time* as a panelist, made the controversial remarks on Twitter.”

Daily Mail, December 13 2020

**

I was out of the office the next morning, interviewing a man who had discovered a secret tunnel below his house in the Historic District. When I entered the newsroom mid-afternoon I nearly tripped over Connie, who was doing her floor exercises again. Had she been there all night? Talk about “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses.” Porter was a walking Statue of Liberty. Or rather, I was. I was the one who had to deal with his workforce refugees.

“Connie,” I said sharply. I was damned if I was going to come off verbally second best again. “A quick word in my office?”

“Uh oh, the new girl’s in trouble with the principal,” I heard Connie say. I didn’t hear anyone laugh (it was a bit of a lame line anyway) so I was at least thankful for the semblance of loyalty from the other staff.

Ting. A text from April. Darnit. I hadn’t managed to reply to any of her banter texts today or yesterday. This job was taking up every molecule of my brain power. I couldn’t neglect Apes. I *mustn’t*.

In my office, I sat on my desk like I was in *Cagney and Lacey*

or something and nervously awaited Connie. I already felt a little intimidated by her. She had got as far as my doorway but was now reading some obscure notice from the 1980s on the wall outside.

“Connie!” I snapped. “In here, please.”

She entered. I was just about to say please give me a reason to keep you on (I didn’t care if Porter had sent her, frankly) when Denver popped her head in.

“Ooh, excuse me, Jess. Just wanted to say thanks again, Connie. Still can’t believe you turned her around. Speak later.” And with a smile, Denver was gone.

“Turned who around?” I said.

“Zita Zodiac,” said Connie. “I zipped over to her workshop and, would you know it, there she was, holding a beautiful summer dress she’d designed in one hand and a watersnake in the other.” She shoved her smartphone at me. It showed an amazing photo you could have put on the cover of *Life* (back in the day): internationally renowned fashion designer / local nutcase Zita Zodiac snarling at a snake, which was baring its fangs at her. Zita’s alcoholic drink tipped precariously at an angle, about to spill. Various fashion people visible in a blurry background.

“Wow,” I said. “Hell of a picture. So what happened?”

“I used that good old-fashioned trick they call charm. They don’t teach it to the young people these days. Making people feel good about themselves, you know?” She had a point. I couldn’t picture Ellie using people skills to loosen an interviewee’s tongue. “She and her assistant couldn’t agree on whether fuchsia pink’s moment was finally over, so they got out a dagger and played that game where you jab it between your fingers. First one to draw blood loses. The assistant lost. And then Zita challenged me. And I lost.” She held up two heavily bandaged fingers. “Zita was drinking bourbon cocktails so I was never going to win. Alcohol’s a great relaxant, don’t you find?”

“Frequently. But that looks terrible. Are you okay?”

“Fret ye not. I once took an uppercut from Hemingway and barely even flinched.”

“Wow. I wouldn’t have thought you were old enough to have known Ernest Hemingway.”

“Not *that* Hemingway,” she said. “*Bill* Hemingway, used to be my accountant. Anyway, I asked Zita if I could write the whole thing up as a story and she said be my guest, darlin’. I think that’s what she said anyway; she was pretty sloshed by then. Anyway, I could do with a word count from this Katie I keep hearing about. When’s she in next?”

That was a good question. Katie still hadn’t shown up. She *had* designed a couple more page layouts and emailed them to me but none of us could use PageMonkey, although we had a copy on my laptop and Ellie’s. Neither of us was very good with it. My gut feeling was that Katie was getting cold feet about the Montrose name. Urk.

Before I could give Connie an answer, Ellie appeared. “Excuse me, Jess,” she said. “Connie, is the Barefoot Gardener meant to be climbing out on to the roof?”

“Oh sure,” said Connie. “He’s going to show us how a flat roof can be turned into a veritable tropical paradise with a little know-how. Rusty’s taking pics.”

Ellie gave a double thumbs up and dashed away excitedly. I’d never seen her so enthused about a subject not related to social justice.

I could see a limping (tetanus, remember), long-haired Barefoot Gardener, in tattered, Robinson Crusoe-style shirt, on the other side of a newsroom window. Rusty – who was standing amid a clutter of flower pots, tall plants, bird feeders and tubs of grass – was passing him out a section of decking. What the hell was going on? Was Connie friend or foe? I was beginning to think

the latter because everything she did made me feel, well, redundant.

“Who is paying for all that stuff?” I said.

“Oh, I said we’d pick up the bill,” said Connie.

“We? We can barely afford toilet roll. Please don’t sign off any more expenditure without my–.”

“Oh it’s fine, it’s mainly recycled stuff he’s giving us free. So did you track down Annalee Calhoun yesterday?”

“Er, well, not exactly. That mysterious contact gave me duff directions, my car got stuck in mud and an alligator started sizing me up for a late lunch.”

“Well, glad to see you made it back in one piece. Hope you didn’t mind me taking charge of a few stories while you were out. Was there anything else you wanted me for?”

It took me a moment to realize what she meant. I’d asked her in here to deliver a dressing down. But that now seemed inappropriate, given that she had effortlessly cracked two stories that had seemed dead in the water twenty-four hours ago.

“I just wanted to say...” I began, not sure where I was heading. “Thanks for the support.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said. “We’re all on the same team, right?” Without another word she left my office. “Don’t forget that yoghurt,” she called back, and I heard her chuckle.

**

Chapter Twenty-One

Two weeks later

I got home at 9.30pm and went straight to the fridge. It had been another hectic but fulfilling day at *The Truvian*. I was loving it but I had nothing left in the tank of late.

“Well, hello there,” the Decoy Sauvignon Blanc seemed to say to me, in the accent of a very naughty English aristocrat.

I poured myself a glass, slipped my lovely old musty copy of *How My Friends Dance* off the bookshelf and retreated to the porch. Inside the book I’d written: “Jessica Shelton, 9th grade.” There was another piece of paper in there, too, folded and biding its time to be opened. Hopefully something cringey I had written when I was a teen.

This book had changed my life. It was a portal into the pleasures and pains of the adult world and it made me want to write for a living.

I read half a chapter and was about to slide that other piece of paper out to see if it held any amusing traces of my young self but I remembered I’d promised to follow Rusty’s band on Facebook and I went to find my phone. I have a pea brain and knew I would forget otherwise. I put the copy of the book in my handbag and then found my phone and liked the band’s page and chuckled at photos of him rocking out.

Then, unable to help myself, I searched for “Kayla Cobb”. She didn’t have any privacy restrictions on her account, meaning anyone could see what she’d been up to. Reading her posts made me see red but I couldn’t help myself ploughing on.

And there it was: “There will be protests up until and beyond launch day.”

No mention of me by name. That’s probably because she had

tried that before and I had sent her a message saying libel laws do exist so be careful.

I scrolled down to her next post. She was sharing a plug for the Truvy New Country Music Festival. Something made me hover over the “likes” because I wanted to see who her buddies were. There was always someone I knew and it was useful to know who to avoid at the school gates.

A second later, I wish I hadn’t been so darned nosy.

April Meadows likes this.

April Meadows?

April!?

How the hell did April know Kayla Cobb? It couldn’t be through the school as April had no kids. I was suddenly furious, confused and shocked all at once. I was used to experiencing three emotions simultaneously – usually sad, despondent and tired, or anxious, nervous and suspicious – but I’d never been furious, confused and shocked before. And I didn’t like it.

Maybe there was some innocent explanation – there had to be, didn’t there? There was no way that April would choose to be friends with someone she knew was my sworn enemy.

I took a few calming deep breaths. I could ask her the next day because we were going to the Thai place for the last-minute review I had to write.

Innocent explanation. Defo.

“It’s her! The sister did it, you idiots!” Brandon was shouting at the TV, bless him. I went into the living room and settled next to him while I looked at the emails I hadn’t had time to read in the day.

For the second month running, payments had been late to my staff, ie Erwin, Denver, Birdie and Rusty, plus expenses for Ellie. This made my blood boil, not least because I suspected it was deliberate (yes, I know I have a tendency to be a little doubting /

paranoid). But there was a reason: I had discovered that the board of Montrose Media had it in for Porter. Yes, *the man who solely owned the corporation*. They were against Porter, they were against *The Truvian* and they were against holding on to the Montrose name, due to what board members apparently called its “toxic legacy”. I knew all this because Porter told me. He was an outsider in his own company and they wanted him gone. Apparently you can do that; the board can sack the owner.

But worse than that, they wanted me gone, too. Because even the small amount of localized social media crap-slinging about my anti-wokery (sorry, *wokeness*) was enough to scare them. It didn’t have to be true (although, to be fair, it was), it just had to be *out there*.

So, in the wee hours of the morning, I lay awake and wondered if the board were sabotaging (through methods such as annoying the freelancers over pay) *The Truvian*. It made a change from lying there pondering the usual subjects such as how clean are you meant to get the peanut butter jar before you put it in the recycling? Could Jim Morrison really sing? Why do cats get credit for having whiskers but never dogs? And if Wilford Brimley played a retiree in *Cocoon* in 1985, how could he play a working police officer in *Did You Hear About the Morgans* in 2009?

Anyway, *sabotage*. Would the board really try to sink its own product? Maybe they would, because publication would surely stir up the hornet’s nest, angering Kayla, her woke moms and all her other affiliates to a degree that wouldn’t be good for Montrose Media (kinda ironic that a media company was so scared of a bit of free speech but these days if some minority group cried racism, then it was surely so, case closed).

A key exhibit in my prosecution case was an encounter I had with the company chairwoman, Mary West, aka Bloody Mary, aka The Wicked Witch of the West, aka Contrary Mary. She was

colder than a hangman's hello.

I'd been working late in the office one evening when I looked up and bam, there she was. I half screamed. She said she'd just been passing (yeah, like OJ was just passing) and thought she'd see on the off-chance if I was around ("We haven't been introduced" etc).

It felt a bit like an interview and I struggled to maintain my manners as I felt that *Porter* was my boss, not her, and Porter had been good to me and he said Mary was the devil incarnate. And besides, I was only on a six-month contract – if anyone wanted to grill me they could give me a pension, benefits and an office that didn't have mice first. I wasn't being paid enough to be given a hard time.

Wow, sometimes I loved the new me. I was tougher, alligator encounters notwithstanding.

For ten sweaty minutes I gave straight answers to her questions until she said she had to go to her bare knuckle boxing class.

She began striding out in a haze of some delicious perfume that was so expensive I didn't recognize it.

Then she halted.

"We cannot enter into alliances until we are acquainted with the designs of our neighbors," she said. "Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*."

And she left. And it made me think. It made me think: I have no idea what she is talking about.

There was also Exhibit B to consider. This was the fact that someone had taken screenshots of a couple of articles we were running: the little contents panel, with my and Porter's names on it, the deadly duo, and some random article I'd written about a guy who turned old rust buckets into beautiful, shiny vehicles again.

This had no pro or anti-woke angle whatsoever but it did have my name on it and was tweeted from some BS anonymous

account as further evidence that I was being allowed to earn a living and should therefore be “canceled” (although how you can cancel someone you weren’t supporting in the first place is one of the many nonsenses of the woke scene). My point being: would Mary and the board have leaked those screenshots *to hurt their own magazine?*

Why did I choose this life for myself? Less pay, more pain and a certain infamy (among a small group of people). I missed some of my co-workers from Silverstream, too, especially Martha (of “He had the right drill for making that poker table, believe me” fame). She’d called me a couple of times after I got canned, to check that I was okay, and had sent me some juicy texts about what was going on at work (the company had upped the diversity etc training, making me glad I got out when I did).

Ting. A text from April. Or rather, *another* text from April. She’d been maintaining our usual level of text banter but my replies of late had been infrequent and not my wittiest. In fact, I was mainly replying when I wanted to vent about some problem at work. And there were plenty of those.

“Wazzup lady?? Everything ok? Tell me the wookiees ain’t kidnapped you?”

Wookiees were what we called the wokeys.

This time, I did reply. “All good babes, work crazee. So soz. No kidnap attempt yet but you’re right to check in! What’s new?”

Ping. “Cool! No probs. Free for a catch-up tonight? You won’t believe the evening class I signed up to hahaha.”

“You got a place at Crazy Cupcakes?? Can’t really talk tonight, been neglecting J and B. Family time owed. But you still on for the Thai tomorrow?”

Ting. “You betcha. I’ll come round at 7.30?”

“Perfect!”

Chapter Twenty-Two

The next morning I was determined to make the school run quality time, rather than just twenty minutes of Jackson and I being sarcastic about radio ads. As with April and Brandon, my son had suffered from my recent overwork.

As soon as he'd done up his seatbelt he opened a pretty hefty A4 document and began muttering to himself.

“What’s that?” I said.

“*My play*,” he said, all in italics.

“Oh yeah,” I said, but panicking inside. *He was in a play?* Obviously, yes. And the way he said it implied *he knew I hadn’t remembered* he was in a play. “How’s it going? Learned your lines yet?”

“Half of them.”

“Like every other word?”

“Haha. Did you even know I was in the summer play?”

“Well, you haven’t mentioned it much,” I said. Nice. A politician’s answer. Not a politician you could trust but a politician all the same.

“I mentioned it yesterday on the school run and I think, oh yes, most school runs for the past month.”

“Oh come on, Jackson, you’re exaggerating,” I said. “I’ll shut up and you can learn your lines.”

He made a skeptical sound and went back to his play. I had no recollection of the play whatsoever. What a bad, bad mother. I would do better.

Jackson closed the document and sighed.

“What’s up?” I said.

“I kinda had a falling out with Connor.”

Connor was Jackson’s best friend and I was pretty sure they had never had a falling out before.

“Oh... That’s not like you guys. What happened?”

“It was... It was over the whole radio thing.”

I felt sick to my stomach. I was feeling sick to my stomach a lot since that night at Angela’s. It couldn’t be good. My stomach probably had the biological age of a centenarian.

“Oh no, I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s not your fault. Well, I guess it is a bit. There’s a bunch of super woke kids who shout everyone down and are always pressuring people to sign stuff. They started giving Connor a hard time because he didn’t want to sign the petition about making it compulsory for the football team to take a knee at every game. Connor just caved in and signed it.”

“He signed it? Oh no!” What the hell was happening to our country? My hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles turned white.

“Then he said he’d changed his mind but they wouldn’t let him cross it out. It sucks.”

“Good Lord, Jackson. What times we live in.”

“I know. I wish I’d been at school when you were. When there was no social media and none of this crap.”

I thought of Meek Weekes. There wasn’t going to be any pushing back on the woke bullies while he was in charge at that school. Not for the first time I wondered if Brandon and I should think about moving our son to another school. But there’d be similar stuff there, I was sure.

“So you’re not talking to Connor?”

“Nope.”

“Well, I hope you two make up. Sounds like they forced him to make a difficult decision. That can be hard when you’re young. If they’d asked me or dad, well, they’d have got both barrels.”

“If they asked dad, he’d tell them some story about the army. And if they asked you, you’d go on the radio and do something

embarrassing.”

I laughed. “I can’t argue with that.”

I dropped him off and then, upon reaching Truvian Towers, as I called our building, I chose the stairs over the elevator and bounded all the way to the fifth floor. Today called for guts, for decisive action, for showing the world who was boss.

“I’ve rewritten the intro of your Truvy in Bloom feature, I hope ya don’t mind,” said Connie, the second I’d sat my backside down in my office. “It had no angle. It was so vanilla it needed a cone.”

“Ouch,” I said. “Good morning.” *Showing the world who was boss? Come on, Jess, grow a pair of ovaries.* “Actually, Connie, could I take a look at that page proof?”

“Sure.” She handed me two A3 sheets, which were covered with her indecipherable shorthand. I still had no idea of her journalistic background and I didn’t want to ask, given that it would probably lead to a long conversation I didn’t want to have.

“I’d rather not be making extensive changes the day before press day unless there are some glaring problems,” I said. “I hope there aren’t any glaring problems? At least, not quite *this* many?”

“Well, you see, Jess, I was thinking that...” Her sentence petered out as she felt my laser stare burning into her forehead. “Those marks were just, well, thoughts. To myself.”

“I see. And how is the barbecue review you’re writing?”

“Well, I did manage to test six barbecues last night and that wasn’t no mean feat, Jess.”

“I’m sure, Connie, and I thank you for taking on a task that no one else volunteered for. And have you written it up?”

“Well, that’s the thing. I had to go to ER and by the time I got home I was too damned tired to switch on the old Olivetti and feed that hungry bitch some words.”

I had no idea how she got stories on to our server. I suspected she handed Birdie or Ellie her pages of typing and they turned

them into Word documents. In any case, she was a very good writer.

What she'd just told me hit home.

"You went to ER? Why? Are you okay?"

She held out her arm and showed me a long burn mark, intensely red. "Check *that* out."

"Oh my God," I said. "You burnt yourself on a grill?"

"Nope. I couldn't get the second barbecue to light for love nor money so I threw a load of lighting fluid over it and WHOOSH."

"That's horrific. Was it agony?"

"No, didn't hurt at all. I was safely out the way."

"Oh, so what caused the burn?"

"Well, my neighbor had called out for pizza and when the boy arrived he got back on his motorbike and it wouldn't start. So they called on me and I had a look at it 'cos I used to be in a motorcycle chapter called The Wild Bitches of Atlanta. I saw at once that the radiator grill was leaking fluid."

"And so you burnt yourself on the radiator grill?"

"What? No, I wouldn't touch a radiator grill. I ain't stupid."

"*So what caused the burn on your arm?*"

Connie looked at her injury and sniffed. "Damned if I know."

"Well, didn't they tell you at the ER?"

"Huh? No! I didn't go to ER about the *burn*. I went to pick up my friend Stuey. He's a brain surgeon and he can't drive 'cos of a DUI." She stroked her chin. "I guess I could have asked them about the burn as I was there. But anyway, they've got needier people to treat than an old woman with a borderline septic injury."

I sighed inwardly. Then I sighed outwardly. "Connie, can I ask how many barbecues you got round to testing?"

"All six. I was out in the garden until 3am."

Connie. Connie Connie Connie. Quite the enigma. You could

have written all the things I knew for sure about Connie on the back of a tube of burns cream. She never stopped talking but it was trivial stuff, nothing juicy like who she was shacking up with (actually I did know that: she lived alone). Other facts I had gleaned were that she made her own clothes, (vintage style, nicely done), she didn't own a TV but did have the internet, which she mainly used to listen to the radio, and had never been married (she seemed to like men as she was always talking about fancying Burt Reynolds).

“Well, if you are fit enough to work, can I suggest you write up those barbecue reviews rápidamente and get them on the server and tell me and I will email Katie to ask her to flow them on to the layout.”

“Uh huh,” said Connie. “This Katie person is actually coming in today?”

“Lord knows. I don’t know what the Katie person is playing at, frankly. If she *doesn’t* come in, we are in deep doo-doo.”

Connie was drifting out of my office when she bumped into Porter, who was coming in.

“Ah, good Lord, excuse me,” he said, all southern charm and gallantry. “I, erm...” I had never seen Porter lost for words before!

“Excuse *me*, sir,” said Connie. “After you.”

“Thank you. These doorways are only built for, ah, one person, really.” What??

“Yes, yes,” she said. “That tends to be the nature... of doorways.” *The nature of doorways????!* What was happening? In the space of approximately six seconds their capable minds had turned to jello!

Porter nodded and made a play of thinking over this piece of wisdom re the limited dimensions of doorways. Meanwhile, Connie was busy turning as red as a beetroot and staring at her shoes, or the area where her shoes should have been (she walked

around barefoot most of the day). As for me, I wanted to crawl under my desk and stay there for a year or until I died, whichever came first.

“Porter, this is Connie Gordon,” I said.

“Yes, Connie, of course, I’ve been reading some of your stories. We’re lucky to have you on board.” *Oh Porter, stop it.*

They shook hands. “Porter Montrose,” he said and took a tiny step backwards (to put a little distance between her and his eau de Jack Daniel’s?).

“Oh yes, your reputation precedes you. It’s not often a lady finds herself in the company of a famous newspaperman.”

Porter laughed. Connie laughed. I raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not sure famous is quite the right word,” he said.

“Oh, *I* would say. Famous is the word *I* would use, and *I* am.”

“Fame is fleeting, a foolish thing, and we should treat it thus. Thusly.” Why were they talking like drunk Shakespeares?? This was a car crash. “All *I* will concede is that *I* had a certain reputation in my day.”

“Like a fine wine. That’s biding its time until somebody uncorks it.”

“Anyone with a corkscrew can uncork a fine wine,” said Porter. “The talent lies in recognizing the taste.” Your guess is as good as mine at what they were talking about at this point.

“As long as it’s not destined to gather dust forever,” said Connie. Coming to her senses, she said: “Well, Mr Montrose, I’d better get moving. It’s press day next week.”

“It’s press day *tomorrow*,” I growled.

“I hope to see you around,” said Porter.

“Likewise do I hope for this shared proximity.”

Porter shifted to let her pass but at the same moment she went the same way and there followed a brief ballet of awkwardness, made worse by the fact that neither of them made a joke about it

or indeed passed any comment whatsoever.

Finally Connie left and Porter closed the door on the inadequate doorway.

“That was interesting,” I said.

“She seems nice,” he said. “How’s it going?” He was clearly changing the subject to avoid me quizzing him on that weird interaction.

“Volatile,” I said. “But we’re getting there.”

“Any more advertisers drop out?” Three companies who had taken out ads with us had cancelled their contracts. Two of them had told us outright it was because of the heat the wokeys were applying to the Montrose name.

“Looks like we’re holding steady but I haven’t spoken to Shaun. Fingers crossed.” Shaun was the sales guy who had drawn the short straw at Montrose HQ: it was his job to occasionally drive over and see what the hell the idiots who were restarting the print side of the business were up to. Porter and I suspected he was really being sent by the board (the grown-ups, as Porter called them) to spy on us. To make sure we weren’t producing some secret magazine called *The Anti-Woke Times* or *Trump: A Pictorial Celebration*. I’d been very careful about what I’d let Shaun see, only waving partially completed pages under his nose.

Shaun didn’t really “get” editorial independence and had suggested changes to some of the copy. When he glimpsed the feature I’d written about my fruitless hunt for Annalee Calhoun in the Boonies he said: “My alligator terror? Jess, we’re hoping to get some advertising from Blackwater Swamp Visitor Centre. Could you tone the headline down a bit? How about: ‘My alligator concern?’”

“No, Shaun, I couldn’t,” I had said. “We are not running ‘My alligator concern’. And who wants to go to a park where there’s not at least a 30 per cent chance the alligators will attack you?”

Where's the fun in that?"

"It looks like issue one will make enough of a profit to keep the grown-ups happy for a while," Porter said to me now. "Well, at least until issue two."

"And how happy *are* the grown-ups?"

He pulled out the chair on the other side of my desk and eased his aching bones into it.

"They're not really people who are happy being happy. To be honest, they've been busting my sweet ones about *The Truvian*."

"Because it's a return to print media?"

"That's one of the reasons. The other is that I'm still around and they don't like the Montrose name one little bit. They think it's napalm."

"Which is unfortunate as it was your father who started the corporation and it's you who owns it."

"It does seem a little unfair, doesn't it?"

"Would they rather you stand down?"

"Oh yes..." He closed his eyes like he'd suddenly fallen asleep. This happened quite a bit.

"It's been hell getting the staff paid," I said. "Payroll won't even talk to me. Is that the board playing games, trying to get my people to quit?"

"That is a distinct possibility."

"And how do the grown-ups feel about me and my run-in with the Truvy wokerati? Do they know who I am?"

"Your name might have come up." In his hand was the hip flask which as far as I knew had never been near his hip and should more accurately have been called a mouthflask.

"So let me get this right," I said. "They want us both gone? I sometimes wish you'd been a little more candid about the situation with the board when you took me on." *And your drinking and absenteeism*, I nearly added.

“I thought I did.”

“Hmmm, nope.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I am. I thought they’d see the advertising rolling in and would leave us alone. I didn’t realize the social media thing would snowball.”

“You mean the social media thing concerning me and the radio appearance?”

“Well, yes, that’s been the worst of it.”

“So it’s my fault?”

“I’m not saying that, Jess. Listen, we are where we are. Tomorrow is press day. I’ve not been around as much as I should have been and I’m sorry for that, too. Now tell me how I can help. I’m a journalist – a famous one, apparently – so give me some journalism to do.”

I wasn’t ready to let him off the hook. “What’s the plan, Porter? What’s the vision? Why are you doing this?”

“Oh by the way, I put the shotgun up. In the newsroom. Not here in your office.”

“Marvelous. But please don’t avoid my question. Why have you been so hellbent on launching *The Truvian*?”

“Because it matters. It’s words, pictures, stories.”

“So are all the stories on the Montrose news sites that you own.”

“Give me a break, Jess. We’re talking about paper here. Blood, ink, passion.” He was on his feet. He yanked open the venetian blinds and stared out at Truvy. “Time was when I’d leave work at 5am, catch a bus down Seventh Avenue, hop off to get a cream cheese bagel from French’s Deli and, by the time I got to Jack Dempsey’s bar to give Jack bets to phone to his guy, Truman Capote was inside at a table, my Friday column all marked up in red pen and ready to hand to me.”

“What? Truman Capote? Why was he marking up your column?”

“Because I asked him to. He made me a better writer.”

“Wow, that was quite a mentor to have. Porter, those are fabulous stories and I implore you to write your memoirs. But you can’t re-live the golden era of newspapers. This isn’t your second crack at the Big Apple, 1969. You won’t be handing bets to Jack Dempsey this time. You’ll be lucky if you get to pose for a photo with the council’s head of waste disposal.”

“So what do you want from me, Jess? I gave you a job, didn’t I? At your lowest point?”

“You gave me a six-month contract at a *lowish* point, for which I am grateful. But it still doesn’t shake the feeling that I’m a pawn in your nostalgia game.”

He put his hands in his pockets and jingled some change. I wondered what he spent the coins on. Maybe they were left over from his bagel at French’s.

“Okay, okay,” he said. “It can’t be easy for you. Did I mislead you? I sure as hell didn’t mean to. I’m just desperate not to be dealing in online nonsense all the time. It means diddly.” He gestured to (I think) the sky, the wide circling arc of his hands suggesting the sheer nebulousness of the modern world.

“Where’s the soul? Give me the the furious clatter of a typewriter with minutes til the deadline, news men shouting, angry poets of men, ink on the fingers, the roar of the presses, fleets of trucks speeding a newspaper to millions of eyes, and not just once a week but every day, a world for ten cents, that’s what it was, as welcome as your morning coffee, as a beer after work.

“And I know it’s just a humble little magazine which won’t add up to a hill of beans in this crazy world (wasn’t he quoting *Casablanca* now?) but as God is my witness (*Gone With The Wind*??) this can be the start of something new, something big, a spark that will start a fire, a fire that will become an inferno and out of the flames will come a new generation who say screw the

internet, we've had enough, we built this city on rock 'n' roll (wtf?!?) and tomorrow is another day!" (*Gone With The Wind* again).

"Yes!" I yelled and I punched the air, because he had me, he had me at Jack Dempsey's illegal betting routine. I was half expecting him to pull out some poisoned Kool Aid for me to drink. Thankfully I came to my senses. "I mean yes, Porter, those are very wise points and I fully concur with the sentiments within them."

He leaned over the desk and placed his hands on my shoulders. "Jess, what I want you to do is get out of this office and put together a first issue of *The Truvian* that will dazzle the board, wow the advertisers and make this great city pick it up and then not be able to take another sip of coffee, another bite of their sandwich – hell, they wouldn't be able to *make love* until they've read every darned word!"

"Yes! Yes! Stop them making love!" I shouted, unable to help myself again.

"So go! Go now, Jess! Lead from the front and shine!"

"I'm going! I'm going" Issue one! Issue one!"

I yanked open the door and found myself staring at the faces of my team, who had witnessed the whole thing.

**

Chapter Twenty-Three

I left work at just after 8pm, my thoughts flying around in a dozen directions as I took the elevator to the underground car park. Was Porter mad for having this idea of a new era of journalism in print, a medium which had suffered a spectacular demise since the start of the millennium? Would we live to see issue number two? Would the board ever pay the freelancers? Did Annalee Calhoun read my note? And who had sent me the text tipping me off to her supposedly real address? Another woke troublemaker? And where exactly had I parked my car down here this morn–.

“Evening, Jess.”

I spun round, half expecting it to be Kayla with an AK47. It was just as bad: *Bloody Mary*. In a fabulous emerald green pant suit that lit up this dingy space.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” she said.

“Lady, you’ve got a funny way of not meaning to startle someone.”

“Is this your car?” She extended her arm to point to a white Accord I’d just walked past.

“Yes,” I said, before remembering I needed to be better at playing corporate politics. “Maybe.”

“I think it is.”

I paused, to show that I couldn’t be pushed around. “Yes, it is,” I said. “That is my car. Anyway, is it a coincidence that you’re down here or did you just come to locate my car for me?”

“Jess, Jess, Jess, I like you,” she said in her Texan twang, that southern accent with a twist. “And I like those words you put together with those bigger words at the top that kinda tell you what it’s all about.”

“Yes, they’re called headlines.”

“Headlines, that’s the word. I like those.”

Was she really an idiot or was this a mind game aimed at undermining my faith in *The Truvian*'s value in the digital age? Like: *What's that you're working on again, Jess? Oh yes, old media.*

“Well,” I said, “I’ve had a long day and tomorrow is press day so—.”

“Dress day? That sounds fun.”

“Press day. It’s when we finish putting all the small words and the bigger words above them together.” *Sheesh, get me out of here. And by “here” I mean Georgia.*

“Tell me, Jess, is *The Truvian* the extent of your ambitions? Do you like being a big fish in a small pond?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have time to ponder your enquiry about aquatic relativism right now, Mary.”

“Then let’s fix something up. Lunch. I belong to Chanteuse, a private members’ club in the Historic District. The scallops are to die for.”

“I accept. You know how to find me.”

“Porter’s a talented man. And he is no pushover. He knows what he wants. And he’s still a healthy man in body and mind, thank God. But even he will be the first to say he can’t lead Montrose for much longer.”

“I don’t think he’d be the *first* to say it – I can think of some others who might beat him to it – but I take your point.”

“He wouldn’t choose to step down but there’s other reasons it might happen.”

“Like the board removing him?”

“These are sensitive times. The Montrose name is toxic in this city. Some of us feel that name should go. I mean, even your magazine has to hide behind some bogus moniker, doesn’t it? Southern Magnolia Publishing? A fresh start is required and we need talented people to make that happen.”

“There are some big jobs in digital journalism in the corporation. At the tower. Heads of features, heads of news, editorships... Full-time, proper contracts, company car, benefits. We’ve tried to run our news operations with kids out of college. Doesn’t work. We need grown-ups. But of course they would have to be grown-ups who didn’t create a stink if older members of the Montrose team were replaced.”

I let her words hang in the slightly nauseating gasoline-tinged atmosphere. “Let’s have that lunch,” I said. “I need to go.”

“Enjoy your meal. And I can’t wait to see *The Truvian* on the nightstands.”

“Newsstands.”

She stepped aside as I approached the Accord. I got in and did some deep breathing. I wasn’t cut out for this *Godfather* crap.

I reversed out of the space and instantly saw some kind of very expensive orange sports car behind me.

When we got to the street, she peeled off with a roar in the opposite direction. I’d never really had to play office politics before but back in the car park I’d made a start by accepting lunch with Mary.

I wouldn’t betray Porter but when it came to knowing what Mary and her cronies were up to, it was better to be on the inside than out in the cold.

**

Chapter Twenty-Four

When I got home, Bran was staring angrily at some Netflix series.

“Everything on TV these days is strong women shaming ridiculous men,” he said. “This is why men watch sport.”

“Men have always watched sport.”

“But they haven’t always had to switch off TV drama because it’s – it’s – it’s –.”

“Insufferable propaganda?”

“Exactly! Thank you.”

Honestly, I haven’t seen Brandon so angry since Charlie Sheen got fired from *Two And A Half Men*.

“This is meant to be set in England in the 1900s,” he said. “She’s talking *back* to that guy. She’d have been arrested and put in jail!”

He switched it off and stood up.

“Mike called me in,” he said. “About you.”

I felt the latest in a long series of horrible freezing sensations grip my stomach.

“Me how?”

“The magazine. Your association with the Montrose name. The radio show. You name it.”

“The radio show was months ago.”

“It’s just one part of the picture. He asked how long you were thinking of staying at the magazine.”

“What? That’s outrageous. He can’t ask that. That has to be against some kind of employment law.”

“He said I’ve been hearing some ugly things on social media about Jess and people are saying boycott Huckleberry Moon Beers and Spirits because that’s where her husband works.”

“Oh my God.”

“I said do I need to consult a lawyer about this line of questioning, Mike? And he started slapping me on the back and

saying: ‘Ah, I just hoped this could be a friendly chat, Bran. You’re my top guy etc etc.’ But anyway, I *am* seeing an employment lawyer tomorrow, 9am.”

“He’s got a nerve.”

“Yeah, maybe... Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I can see it from his point of view, too, babe. Everybody’s so sensitive about this stuff. The rules have changed.”

“Tell me about it.”

“We lost one job, we can’t lose another.”

I let that ride. It was true. I had lost the Silverstream job fair and square and Brandon had taken my foolish behavior at the “Jean” training session in typically good grace. I’m not sure I’d have been so understanding if the roles had been reversed.

“No, we can’t,” I agreed. “But I’m doing nothing wrong. We can’t back down every time one of these people starts flinging mud.”

“I guess what I’m thinking is: is it worth it? This heat from Mike and all the stuff on Twitter. For the few months’ pay they’re giving you at Montrose?”

“Montrose saved our bacon, Bran. We needed that money.”

“*Porter* Montrose saved you. I’m pretty sure Montrose *Media* wouldn’t have hired you.”

“That might have changed. Scary Mary was waiting for me when I left work. Loitering in the car park like a bargain basement Hannibal Lecter. Made some not-so-veiled suggestions that there might be big jobs in the tower as long as I played ball if they oust Porter.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I wouldn’t trust her as far as I could throw her, so no. And I wouldn’t be happy working for a bunch of bed-wetting appeasers. It would be like Silverstream all again. But we’ll need money if

this magazine hits the skids.”

Bran came to me and held me.

“I’ll back you up, whatever you decide.”

“Thanks, babe.”

“Just promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You won’t make any more career decisions live on radio?”

“Deal. Oh, shoot, I’m going to be late for my dinner date.”

**

Chapter Twenty-Five

“So Batesy’s writing the soundtrack to a British gangster movie,” said April, taking a sip of pinot grigio.

We were in The Golden Waterfall and the place was buzzing. It was jazzy and modern, its walls hung with modern art. Best of all, the food we were about to eat was free. All I had to do was write a little “puff piece” to go next to the advert that would be appearing in *The Truvian*, which was due to be coming off the presses in about twenty-four hours’ time.

“Oh, how did that come about?” I said. I already didn’t believe Batesy’s story.

“Well, Batesy says that one day he was spray painting the side of an apartment block in London because it was a poor area and he wanted someone to be able to chip it off and sell it, what with Batesy being famous and all.

“Batesy had just finished the job and was getting on his moped when suddenly there’s gunshots and screaming and a man starts running towards him, covered in blood. And he says start the bloody motor and Batesy says where to, guv’nor, and the guy says anywhere but here, you nonce—.”

“What’s a nonce?”

“I don’t know, it’s one of their Cockney words. So they whizzed away as the bullets were pinging off the numberplate. They’ve stayed in touch and now the gangster is a celebrity and is making a movie of his life and he wants Batesy to write some hectic electronic tunes with heavy guitars and classical bits, all mixed in together.”

“He’ll be good at that,” I said. By “that” I meant being a pretentious idiot. “So what else is new?”

“Well, I’ve been looking at the schedule for some new evening

classes. They're doing them in the summer now, too."

"You *love* night school. So what's taken your fancy?"

"I tried to sign up to Crazy Cupcakes but they were full. And then I tried to join Impersonating Minor Politicians and that was full, too. And so was Kung Fu Pottery, How to Direct A Blockbuster, Exorcisms Your Way and Make Money With Legitimate Insurance Claims. But guess what I did get into-."

The manager, Niran, and two young waiters had appeared beside us, along with a trolley laden with a vast range of succulent Thai dishes.

"Ladies, your starters," said Niran.

"First we have saku sai kai, which is chicken and shrimp tapioca pearl dumplings, sweetened radish, peanuts, crispy garlic and Thai chillis. Next, golden pouches: these are shrimp and shiitake mushroom dumplings. Then, here, Octopus lemongrass salad, which is kaffir lime, roasted chilli paste, shallot, mint and Thai dressing."

I looked at April and she looked at me. There were six more of these dishes. Was he going to list what was in *all* of them, and more to the point, was he expecting us to *eat* all of them? And as starters?? But I'd been shocked by a lot of things recently and I was determined not to be shocked by excess food. So I smiled, pulled my notepad and pen from my bag and pretended to scribble some notes.

"Can you remind me what's in the dumplings again?" said April.

Niran smiled. I threw April a horrible look: *don't you dare start asking questions.*

"Oh, wait, I just totally remembered what is in them," April said, before the manager could reply. "In fact, I am very familiar with them. In quite some detail."

But Niran had waited years for someone to ask about the tapioca dumpling and he wasn't going to be denied now.

“Pop a tapioca dumpling in your mouth and you have begun a culinary journey you will never forget,” he said. “The first bite starts to release the flavors: the coarsely ground peanuts and well-seasoned filling contrasts strikingly with the sticky, bland tapioca wrap. Meanwhile, the spiciness of the chilli pepper keeps you alert should you need to, for example, operate machinery.”

No, no, no, this couldn’t be happening. I could see this meal stretching on into my late fifties, with me only ever seeing Brandon and Jackson when they came to visit, handing me the grandkids before they had to be taken away again. Christmases and Thanksgivings would pass by outside the windows, happening to other people, as the manager continued to explain the origins and ingredients of each starter, with the serving of the main dishes being possibly still decades distant. And every time I thought I was about to escape, April would ask another question.

“I’m sorry,” said April, her voice snapping me out of it. “Did you say this dish originated in the eighth century or the ninth century?”

“April,” I snapped.

“What? I’m just trying to get all the details for your little article.”

“I do not need any help with my little article.”

We both turned to Niran and smiled.

“Apologies,” I said. “My assistant and I are passionate about ensuring we get all the details.”

“I understand,” said Niran. “Most professional. I shall leave you lovely ladies to enjoy your starters.”

We did some more smiling and thanking him and he left us alone.

“So, the evening class I did manage to sign up to–,” began April but she was again interrupted. This time by me.

“Oh my God,” I said.

“What?”

“Something just popped into my head.”

She sighed. “Okay, what was it?”

“Connie was in my office today and Porter walked in and they introduced themselves and it was really cringey and awkward.”

“So?”

“So... Why on earth would—. Oh hell!”

April turned round to look at whatever had just stunned me.

“Who is it?” she said, as a party of about a dozen women entered The Golden Waterfall amid a noisy babble of chatter.

“It’s Tiffany Rideout, Stephanie Davis and Polly Parker,” I hissed. “They’re friends of Kayla. Well, *kinda* friends. They’re always the first to click something woke on Kayla’s Facebook page.”

I grabbed my menu and covered my face with it. Thankfully Niran was leading the group away to a distant part of the restaurant. Phew. I didn’t want to have to try to remember whatever story I’d made up on the last occasion I’d spoken to Tiffany, Stephanie and Polly on that day Jackson and I had been stuck in traffic. Had it been a broken neck? Spinal injury? This is why you shouldn’t lie. This, and the fact that it’s wrong, obviously.

“So anyway, do you want to hear about my evening class or not, lady?” asked April.

“Yes! Of course I do. We just keep getting interrupt—.”

My phone began vibrating on the table. I grabbed it. In hindsight, this was rude and a mistake.

“It’s Porter,” I said. He never called me on my cell so it put me in a panic. Maybe the board pulled the plug on *The Truvian*. I didn’t think about April at all. I just answered it.

“Porter,” I said as I headed for the exit. This was a conversation for the street.

“I’m in an emergency board meeting,” he said. Suddenly it

became clear why Mary had been in the car park. “They’ve allowed me a ten-minute break to think things over.”

“Think what over?”

“They say they are *reviewing their values*. ‘This corporation can no longer operate under the Montrose name.’ They want me to agree to the new name – East Georgia Insights or some bull like that – and sign all the relevant documents. Or they will cancel *The Truvian* here and now.”

“Hell, Porter.” I pushed open the doors and was cocooned in the heat of the humid Truvy evening.

“I’m thinking of going along with it.”

Now *this* I wasn’t expecting. “Go along with it?”

“Montrose is just a name. Then we live to fight another day. And they’ve got a point: if the Montrose name is bad for business, what’s the point of holding on to it?”

“There’s something I need to tell you,” I said. “Bloody Mary was waiting for me in the car park after work. Making overtures, promising me nice fat jobs in the tower if I acted like a good little girl when they fired you.”

“What did you say?”

“Not much. But I didn’t freeze her out. Better to be on the inside. So what are you going to do?” My pacing had taken me to the nearest intersection. I turned round and began doubling back.

“I don’t know. Oh wait, they’re calling me in.”

“Good luck. Do the right thing.”

“And what do you think that is?”

“I have no idea. I just write the words.”

When I got back to the table, April wasn’t there. I then saw the most unexpected thing: she was at the other side of the room, talking to the woke moms and their pals. I tried to pick up what they were saying but they were too far away. All I could hear were

their gales of laughter. What awful twist was this? I couldn't take any more.

April waved them goodbye and returned to our table.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey. Just saying hi to the girls.”

“Oh, yeah... The girls. How do you even *know them*?”

“Whoa, okay, Jess, easy.”

“I’m just surprised.”

“I only know Steph and Polly; they went to one of my evening classes.”

“You didn’t say that when they walked in.”

“You didn’t give me a chance! I haven’t managed to say anything about myself all night. And I didn’t know they were your enemies.”

“Well, they kind of are. They’re friends of Kayla and that makes them enemies of mine.”

“Well, forgive me if I can’t keep track of all your enemies.”

“You know Kayla is my enemy and you gave a thumbs up to something she said on Facebook about the country music festival.”

“What? I never look at people’s names when they comment on Facebook, just what they say. I would never have given Kayla a thumbs up if I’d seen it was her. Honestly, Jess, there are more things going on in the world than your battle against the wookiees. It’s all you’ve talked about for months. You’ve barely dropped me a text, and if I try to tell you about my new evening class again I’m gonna scream. Heaven forbid I should say anything about me!”

And with that, April – whom I had never seen so angry – stood up and hurried from the restaurant. I called her name a couple of times but decided she had earned this. I deserved a telling off and she deserved this moment of anger.

I looked across at the woke moms and of course, they were watching it all, mouths wide open.

Tiffany held up a hand in an awkward wave. I completely blanked her.

Niran was beside me. “The lady has left?”

“Yes... The lady has left. An emergency, I’m afraid.”

“Most regrettable. You will be staying?”

I was an emotional wreck but I still had to write the review. Plus I was starving and needed to shovel some food into me pronto. I have never been too upset to eat.

“Yes, Niran, I will be staying. Thank you.”

I thought he had gone away and I was in the process of raising a forkful of delicious-looking green chicken curry towards my mouth when a hand took the utensil off me.

“Before you take another bite,” said Niran, “I must tell you the history of Thailand in great detail. So, prehistoric Thailand can be traced back as far as one million years ago if we look at certain fossils and tools...”

**

Chapter Twenty-Six

I'd eaten my bodyweight in Thai food but I stopped at Beltway Burgers on the way home because I needed one of their great shakes to soothe my mouth after all that chilli.

Beltway Burgers is actually nicer than it sounds because the beltway is hidden from sight behind a billboard for haemorrhoid cream, and the burgers are to die for.

I got my Coke and was lost in thought about Porter's phone call and whether we still had a mag and jobs. I was nearly out the door when I spotted someone sitting alone in a booth. Someone who sent a chill through my heart.

Black motorcycle leathers, mouth wrapped around some burger that was much more awesome than mine.

Something compelled me to walk over.

"How's the class struggle going?" I said.

Kayla gestured to the seat opposite her. I slid in.

"You want to join us, Jess? Lots of pretty white women do, you know."

"You do realize you're one of them?" I said. "White, that is."

She nodded, as if conceding a point. She had the manners to chew most of the large mouthful of burger and swallow it before she spoke. "If the woke had a sense of humor I guess I'd be laughing right now."

"I've seen what you and your anonymous buddies put on social media. So what's your problem with me?"

"Not you so much. The magazine. It's owned by Montrose."

"It's owned by Montrose...? That's it? We're doomed to be harangued forever because of *that*, no chance of parole?"

"You could try to make amends by printing some stories about how Charles Montrose made his money. As things stand, it

sounds like your magazine's nothing but powder puff about weddings and how rich people can get richer."

Now she did smile. She did it with her eyes because her mouth was busy extracting Diet Coke from the cup like a pumpjack sucking oil from a San Antonio well. "Charles Montrose got rich on the blood of slaves," she said, before finishing the soda with a slurp that made my ears ring.

"Are you done?" she said. "I've got to go home and worm my dog."

"People used to be reasonable," I said, my voice quivering. I was better than I used to be at confrontation but still not great. "They would protest, they would lobby Congress, they would write letters to the newspaper-."

"Screw writing letters to the newspaper," she said, angry for the first time. "We're not talking about protesting against some new apartment block. This is systemic racism we're fighting against, letting people know about the evil at the heart of American life."

Her eyes never left mine, not for a moment, and I'm pretty sure they didn't blink either.

"So you're just going to go round bullying people, harassing folk who are just going about their lawful business?"

"I'll be going about my lawful *protesting*."

"How about I come and harass you, send letters to your boss, protest outside your house? Would you like that? Would your family?"

"Why don't you stop by, come on to our property," she said, getting to her feet. "Then you can find out."

She crushed the cup, threw it over my head, spattering drops of cold liquid on to my face. The missile must have landed in the trash can because I heard the counter guy whoop.

"Bring it on," I said, as she pushed the doors open.

"Sure. See you tomorrow."

See you tomorrow? *What the hell did that mean?* My phone was ringing. Porter again.

“Porter, what happened?”

“They fired me.”

“What?”

“I signed all the documents to agree to the name change and then they fired me. Classic corporate sucker punch.”

“Those snakes! How could they pull such a lowdown trick?”

“I got more news, Jess. They’re about to fire you, too.”

“What?”

“I overheard them through the walls as I was going back in to the meeting. You’re next. I’m sorry.”

My phone was beeping. Incoming call from an unrecognized number.

“So that’s it, then,” I said. “It’s over.”

“Not even close.”

“What?”

“I saw a way out of this. It was a long shot but I went for it. I offered to make some calls tomorrow to cancel the printers and the distribution firm. The board said that would be a great help.”

“I don’t follow.”

“What if I *don’t* cancel them? We’re on our own in *The Truvian* offices. Shaun probably won’t stop by. Nobody knows what we’re up to in there. So I say screw ‘em: let the presses roll.”

I laughed. “That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard. Who’s going to cover the costs?”

“All the advertising money we’ve already *got*. You can’t just cancel a magazine thirty-six hours before it’s due to hit the streets. The people in the tower are idiots. It would harm them more than they can imagine. Our name would be dirt. Are you in or out?”

“You have to ask? Now excuse me, I have an incoming call.”

“Take it. Let them fire you and remember to sound sad.”

I hung up, wiped some remaining spots of Coke from my forehead with a shaking hand and answered the call.

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PART THREE: THE STAND

Chapter Twenty-Seven

7am. Considering I was a woman without a job I got up very early the next day to go to work. It was press day, crunch day, the day we had to finish the magazine and whizz it down the phone lines to the printers. And to kick it off I had to write my puffy “review” of The Golden Waterfall.

Press day. It was meant to be the climax of our exciting little adventure, our two fingers to the suits in the tower and the mob on social media. But now we would have to scurry around in Jupiter House like criminals. Well, Porter and I would. The plan was to not tell the rest of the team that technically we didn’t have a magazine any more. Porter had promised to me that he would pay them, so there was no real point in creating an unnecessary distraction.

Just as worrying, of course, was the whole April affair. It was all my fault. I’d acted poorly in recent weeks, not been a good friend at all. I’d texted her an apology this morning and she said she accepted it but didn’t say much more. Fair enough. Once this launch (final?) issue was out of the way I would do all I could to build bridges with her.

In the car I switched on the radio for some light relief and found my eardrums being assaulted by a trailer for my old friend Tucker Sweet’s show. He was saying: “So Joanna, you identify as a French bulldog?”

There were two barks.

“I think that was oui oui,” said Tucker, to an explosion of laughter from his posse. “And tell me, Madame French Bulldog, do you oui oui on the couch?” More laughter from the sycophants in the booth. Then the voice of the growly growly voiceover man: “Drivetime with Tucker Sweet, every weekday, four ’til seven. He hates you and everything you stand for.”

Then it returned to Tucker's live show. "I miss the bulldog lady, don't you, guys? I mean, of all the crazy-as-all-get-out guests we've had, she took the cake. Or did she? That's right, I've got another lady on my mind." The posse whooped.

No, please.

"Oh yeah, who doesn't miss the anti-woke warrior, *Jessica Harper*?" We were then treated to a quick medley of all my cringiest quotes from the infamous radio appearance. "I've been trying to get her on the show," said Tucker, when it was over. "I've been phoning her every day, but she is obviously too busy producing that exciting new magazine of hers: *The Truvian*. Which, as it's published by our owners Montrose Media, I will simply wish well." Jess, I will pay you, hmm, let's see, five hundred dollars out of my own pocket for you to come on the show and shoot the breeze with Tucker and Co. Call me, Jess, call me!"

The trailer, thankfully, ended.

I was not going to call him.

**

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Racism is not dead, but it is on life support — kept alive by politicians, race hustlers and people who get a sense of superiority by denouncing others as ‘racists.’”

Thomas Sowell, black conservative

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“I just heard a trailer for that idiot Tucker Sweet’s show,” said Birdie, as I walked in to the newsroom. “He must be desperate to humiliate you again.”

“Good morning, Birdie.”

“Because I’ve heard that interview you did on his show and a humiliation is what it was. He calls me every day, wanting to speak to you. He’s desperate to get you back on the show to give you another hu–.”

“Yes, thank you, Birdie.”

“So don’t accept his invitation unless you want to be humiliated all over–.”

“BIRDIE! That is not helpful. It was a painful and embarrassing incident and I don’t need reminding of it. Now sit down and read some page proofs.”

She scurried away, muttering apologies. She wouldn’t bring a bullying suit. Her generation didn’t have bullying and they respected the boss.

I settled in my office, fired up my laptop (why do people say they “fired up” a laptop as if it’s a heroic act like blasting off into space?) and rattled off a passable review of the Thai meal, which was quite an achievement considering most of my notes were smeared with the tears I’d shed after April stormed out.

Next I emailed the Word document to Katie so she could turn it

into a page layout as soon as she arrived (?) in the office. I prayed she'd turn up: she had been booked to come in the previous day and hadn't shown up, eventually making some excuse about having a cold.

I looked at my phone. One text message received. I stabbed a finger on the messages icon.

Katie Ocando.

I was guessing she wasn't going to say she was excited about coming in today and did I want a flat white from JB's? Katie was okay but I got the sense she'd never met a social justice issue she didn't like. A few unguarded jokes that Rusty and I had cracked had earned a raised eyebrow from her.

I opened the message. "Hi Jess, apologies but won't be coming in again. Perhaps naively I had been unaware of the Montrose family's transgressions of the past. I cannot align myself with those toxic values. Sorry for the inconvenience, Katie."

Fantastic. I wanted to align my fist with Katie's face. Now we had no designer and no one in the office had any clue how to use the software. We were screwed.

I rested my face on my keyboard for a few seconds' rest and contemplation.

There was a gentle knock on my door. I sat up.

"Depression so early in the day?" said Porter, especially dapper in a white linen suit and orange bow tie. "What can possibly be worse than being fired?"

"Katie just got an attack of the wokes and she's not coming in. She was the only person who could use PageMonkey."

"Hell. Do you know any other designers?"

"No, but Denver and Erwin and Ellie might."

The only bit of good news was that all the artwork for the ads had been submitted by the advertisers and were on our server – and our server was not accessible by the rest of Montrose Media.

The reason this was good news was because our ad department sure as hell wasn't going to share the ads with us if the board ordered them not to. Which would happen very soon.

But still, we didn't know how to use our page design software.

"Tell me what you need me to do," said Porter. "I'm here for you."

"It might be good for morale if you went down to JB's and brought some tasty things back."

"That's your answer to everything."

"Uh huh."

"You got it."

As he turned to leave he nearly bumped into Connie (again).

"Oh my, I am sorry, Connie."

"Entirely my fault, Mr Montrose. Porter."

"Doorways again," he said. "Doorways..."

"Yes, they always seem to be there, don't they?" she said, blushing (!?). "Doorways..." Sensing what a conversational black hole they were being sucked into, she changed tack. "I hope your evening was well. The evening that has just passed, that is, the most recent evening to where we are now. In time. So to speak."

"My evening passed well and without incident," he said. "I trust that yours was similarlylahlee – similee – similarlar – also pleasant."

"It was, and I thank you for your asking that question at this time."

"Porter, *coffee and pastries, por favor*," I said, to put us all out of our misery, like a vet for humans.

They muttered some more nonsense to each other and went their separate ways. I took my laptop into the newsroom and sat at the big four desks we'd pushed together to create one central place for the writers. Today was not the day to be hiding in my office. I had to lead from the front.

However, I didn't feel so bold when I remembered the Beltway Burgers incident. What was it Kayla had said? *See you tomorrow.*

I darted to the windows and peered down nervously at the street. Just a steady stream of people going to work. Hmm, but it was still a little early for the wokeys. They were probably sleeping off a particularly exhausting statue removal. Maybe Rocky in Philadelphia had got their goat for some reason, or an effigy of Alvin and the Chipmunks.

Erwin, Denver and Ellie entered the newsroom at the same time. Before I could greet my team, there came the sound of somebody running in the corridor from the elevator lobby and Porter burst in, without pastries or coffees. I didn't think he had it in him to "burst in" anywhere these days but there it was, before my eyes.

"It's Shaun," he panted. "He's in JB's. He must be coming up here."

"What?!" I said. "Why would he be coming here if he knows the mag has been pulled?"

"The mag's been pulled?" said Denver.

"The board won't have got round to telling everyone yet," said Porter. "It's not even nine o'clock. So what the hell is Shaun doing here so early? Oh, wait, it's press day..."

Of course. Shaun thought the mag was still going ahead and was here to check his adverts looked okay on the PDFs. Damn him, this was no time for professionalism, we were trying to cover up a minor-level fraud.

"The mag? Anyone?" Denver tried again.

"What's the problem with Shaun coming over?" asked Erwin.

There was the distinctive clank of the elevator.

"Everybody into my office!" I yelled. "Connie, Birdie, Denver, Ellie, Erwin, Porter!"

They did as they were told. I followed them in and with

difficulty shut the door on our little tin of sardines.

“What is going on?” hissed Denver.

“The board have pulled the plug on *The Truvian*,” said Porter. “In the overused modern parlance, we’re too toxic for them.”

A loud, collective gasp filled my office.

“Seriously?” said Connie.

“And they’ve fired me and Jess. But it’s okay, there will be a magazine and this is still press day.”

“So who’s paying for it all?” said Connie.

“It’s already paid for itself with the adverts. If the board refuse to pay the printers and distributors I’ll cover it from my own pocket.”

“And then what?”

“Then what’ doesn’t exist yet.”

“Everyone is free to walk out of here now, with full payment for all they’ve done so far,” I said. “You didn’t sign up to this. I don’t know what today might hold. There could be protests. Just go, no hard feelings.”

There were lots of “no’s” and shaking heads. They didn’t like being pushed around either.

“Wait, here comes Shaun,” I said. “Act normal.”

Everyone’s idea of acting normal was saying nothing but casting sidelong glances towards the corridor that led to the elevator lobby.

“When he comes in, act as if you’ve all been let go,” I said through my teeth like a ventriloquist.

A tense few moments followed. And then Rusty walked in, with a sky blue electric guitar slung around his neck.

Everyone released their breath. I rapped on the glass and beckoned him in.

“We need to convince Shaun that we’ve accepted the board’s decision and are winding down,” I said.

“You’re right,” said Porter. “Else he’ll go back to the tower and *they’ll* tell him and he’ll say well they sure as hell weren’t acting like they’d been axed just now. And then the board will send the heavy mob round to make *sure* we close.”

“They have a heavy mob?” said Denver, who was wearing a rather fetching tunic shirt with a geometric design. You have to give sartorial credit where it’s due, even in an emergency.

“Oh yes. Tom Christie, head of security. He’s nasty.”

Now Rusty appeared, being very careful about his guitar and the doorframe. “Rusty, bad news. The board have canned us but everyone will still get paid.”

“Oh those cowards,” he said, and strummed an angry chord. “I got the blues, baby.” It was clear he didn’t really have the blues: he was a Baby Boomer who’d paid off his debts and was grazing on a nice pension. *The Truvian* had just been a way for Rusty’s wife to get him and his endless guitar abuse out the house.

Now Shaun really did appear, drinking from a JB’s branded cup. When his gaze turned to my glassed-in office he found all six of us staring back. I gestured for him to join us.

“Morning, Shaun,” I said.

“Good morning, everybody,” he said. “Beautiful weather for your big day.”

He clearly hadn’t got the memo. Either that or he was a good actor.

“Shaun,” began Porter. “It’s early still, so you won’t have heard, but the board has closed *The Truvian*.”

“What? Really?”

“I’m afraid so. All money will be refunded to your advertisers, I’m sure, but you will need to talk to HQ. Jessica and myself have been let go.”

I dabbed an eye with my sleeve. Denver put an arm around me.

“Well, that’s a shock. I’m very sorry to hear that,” said Shaun.

“Maybe it’s for the best,” said Porter, turning to look out the window. “There’s no place for hideously straight white men in the business world, they say. Do *I* believe that? Yes, yes I do. Some days I wake up and I am sick with my own whiteness. I can feel the DNA of my slavery-owning ancestors goading me into, um, buying some slaves. And I’ve thought about it, believe me. What a monster I am. I need to be saved from myself, and others need to be saved from *me* and my hideous straight whiteness.”

Erwin looked at me with wide eyes, like *what the actual *&!%?* This is a good time to remind ourselves that Erwin is black.

“Yes,” I said. “Very noble, very brave, of you to do that, Porter. Best you just walk away now. Go, go and try not to be that terrible racist man that you have just described.”

“I’m not sure I can, Jess.”

“*Well, give it a go,*” I said, staring daggers at him. He was going to make Shaun suspicious if he overdid it.

“Nothing would make me happier than to wake up tomorrow and discover I had turned into a gay Ugandan with–.”

“Get out, Porter!” I demanded. “I won’t have your wishful thinking about an alternative racial and sexual identity in my office!”

Porter left, doing a very good impression of a broken man.

“Right, so where was I when Shaun walked in?” I said. “Oh yes, you’re all fired. Sorry about that. You need to leave now. Shaun, it was nice working with you. Good luck and all that.”

Shaun mumbled similar things in reply and then skedaddled. Now he’d go back to the tower and report that everyone had been dismissed and was packing up. That might at least assure the grown-ups that Porter was keeping to his word.

It was hot and sticky in my office, which didn’t have its own AC, so we all filed out into the newsroom.

“I don’t understand,” said Ellie, “was Porter really thinking

about owning some slaves?”

“I damned well hope not,” said Erwin. I was too scared to ask him what he’d thought about Porter’s speech. I mean, he was a black conservative but surely even he had limits.

“It was just a ruse,” I told Ellie. “We need them to think we’re going home. Then we’ll print the mag anyway.”

“Isn’t that like, bad?” she said.

“From a corporate point of view, probably,” I said. “But we’re journalists, right? Your degree was in journalism, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And did you ever study Martha Gellhorn, Katharine Graham, Veronica Guerin, Dorothy Thompson, Bethany McLean, Marie Colvin?

“Kinda. Some.”

“They often risked their lives to get the truth out there. Now, our truth in Truvy in 2023 might be a lot less dangerous than reporting on the rise of the Nazis in Germany or the Dublin underworld but we do have one thing to stand up for and it’s called free speech.” I knew this would rattle her. Well, it was time for her to be rattled, then. Her lot had started it, frankly.

She ran her hand nervously through her hair. Her eyes had gone wide. “Yeah, right, I understand. So...”

“So let’s not worry about what corporate thinks. As journalists we should be committed to standing up to bullies and that means getting this magazine out without caving *in* to bullies. Journalists are meant to be rebels, rule breakers, iconoclasts.” I pointed to that great portrait of Annalee Calhoun on the poster. “*All* writers. It’s a spirit, not a career. Ever read *How My Friends Dance*? ”

“No. I mean, I started to-.”

“Read it.”

She didn’t hear me. She was looking at her phone. “A friend’s just sent me some tweets,” she said. “People are celebrating the

fact that we're closing. This makes no sense. Why us?"

Damn, for a journalism graduate she was unobservant.

"Look, Ellie," I said. I'd suddenly come over feeling guilty. No one (and by no one I mean Porter) had explained to her that the editorial staff of *The Truvian* would be an enclave of traditionalists, anti-woke enthusiasts and, quite possibly, Republicans.

"I think it's a good thing that you don't look at social media," I said. "It's awful. But you might have missed some stuff... I said some things that certain people have objected to and so now they are targeting the magazine because of me and because it's owned by Montrose."

How could she not know that Porter's family had links to slavery?

"We're owned by Montrose?" she said. God give me strength.

Rusty strummed his guitar like he was trying to start a fire.

"And what was it you said that annoyed them?" she said, betrayal in her eyes. It was like I'd just told her I wasn't her mother. I mean, it's true, I *wasn't* her mother. You know what I mean.

"Well," I said. "Ellie, I said some stuff... on the radio. A while back."

"What sort of stuff?"

"I might have said that I found the woman – Jean – in a health and safety training video at work a pain in the ass."

"Oh. What was she doing?"

"She wanted an air ambulance to take her to hospital."

"What's wrong with that?"

"She had conjunctivitis."

"Pink eye? That can be serious."

"Not 'helicopter' serious. And I might have called Jimmy Hoffa an American hero."

“Who’s Jimmy Hoffa?”

“He was head of the Teamsters.” For Heaven’s sake, why has no one heard of Jimmy Hoffa any more? Why were Teamsters called Teamsters anyway? What did a bunch of truck drivers have to do with a team? Why were they more of a “team” than any other profession (and was “Teamster” even a profession)? *Jess! FOCUS! Engage the snowflake and fix her broken mind.*

“And peanuts and drag queens, I mentioned them, too.” I was feeling a need to confess everything to Ellie. That way she could decide if she wanted to stick around.

“You don’t think drag queens should be allowed to eat peanuts?”

“No. I mean yes. I mean no I wasn’t objecting to them eating peanuts. Peanuts and drag queens were separate subjects. Jean was allergic to them.”

“Drag queens?”

“Peanuts!” yelled Rusty.

Ellie whimpered and ran from the newsroom.

“Thanks, Rusty,” I said. “There goes a 200k bullying lawsuit.”

“Sorry,” he said.

“No, I mean 200k seems cheap to get rid of her. Thank you.”

“Yep, and you won’t have to pick up the bill; you’re no longer an employee, right?”

From outside came the sound of car horns, people cheering – and a motorbike revving. Motorbike? My heart sank again. It had sunk so many times recently that I half expected to see it running around the floor like in *Alien*.

Connie and I looked down on West 27th Street. Around a dozen people were setting up with placards that said “BOYCOTT MONTROSE!” Some of them were eyeing up the statue of Charles Montrose like a lion licking its chops at an all-you-can-eat gazelle buffet.

“They’re right in front of the door,” I said. “We’re not the only people in this building. They can’t do that. Can they do that?”

“All they need is a Right to Assembly permit,” said Connie. “I’m going to take a wild guess they’ve got one. These people tend to know what they’re doing.”

“But nobody from the council warned us.”

“They didn’t need to. And besides, these guys down here have probably given their protest some fake BS name like Citizens Concerned About Injustice to keep it on the downlow. The council probably doesn’t even *know* we’re the target.”

“Ooh, injustice?” said Ellie. “Shall I go down and take some notes? Maybe it could be a story.”

The look that Connie gave her was so intense that I feared it might burn through her skull and fry her brains. Ellie didn’t notice it, of course. She was indestructible, impermeable to sarcasm, censure and hostility. After Doomsday there will be two forms of life left: bugs and Ellie. And Ellie will be looking at her phone and saying: “My friend says there’s been a nuclear attack.”

“Actually, Ellie, that’s a great idea,” I said. “See what’s going on and report back.” That would get rid of her for a while and might elicit some valuable info about the wookiees’ intentions.

She scurried away to find her pad. I’d never seen her so happy.

“They’ve got their eyes on that hunk of bronze,” I said. “If they touch that, it could give Porter a coronary.”

“Yeah but he’ll probably take a few of them out with him,” said Connie. *Take them out with him?* I don’t know where she’d got the impression that Porter was the new Bruce Willis. Maybe they really did have a soft spot for each other.

“Okay people, we making a magazine or what?” said Porter, who had returned with the delayed trays of goodies from JB’s. He set them down and we helped ourselves to Truvy’s finest muffins, croissants, donuts and coffee.

“What’s it like out there?” said Denver.

“Quiet. There’s only a dozen of them so far and they didn’t notice me.”

“We need a designer,” I announced. “Katie quit. Who knows someone who can use PageMonkey?”

“I know a couple people,” said Denver. “Not sure they’re free though.”

“I know it’s short notice. Offer them five hundred bucks if they stay until it’s done.”

“Do the rest of us get five hundred bucks?” asked Erwin.

“The rest of you get what you signed up to,” I said. “Nice try.”

“I had to ask.”

“Hit the phones, people,” I said. “We need a designer who is fast, competent and doesn’t mind a light protest that suggests they are a racist.”

This got a laugh and acknowledged the fact that I didn’t hold out much hope of finding such a person. I felt the beginnings of a panic attack and pushed it away. We were in hot water. Damn. When did it get easy?

I photocopied my flatplan, which showed all the pages and what features and ads were appearing on them, and handed them out to everyone. Porter and I stared down at mine, which I’d marked up in colored pens. There was a lot of white, meaning pages I hadn’t sent.

“If it’s late on the newsstands, advertisers could ask for discounts on their ads,” said Porter. “Plus they might not bother advertising with us again. Our reputation’s on the line, especially as it’s issue one. Plus it gives Montrose Media one more reason to badmouth us, which they would love to do because we will be in competition with them.”

“Won’t they still own us?”

“Not if I pay for all the costs and buy us out.”

“Would the board agree to that?”

“I would imagine they’d jump at the chance to offload *The Truvian*, the black sheep of the family.”

“So it either gets finished, printed and distributed in the early hours of tomorrow, as planned, or we’re done for,” I said.

“Something like that.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s see how complicated this PageMonkey thing is.”

I fired up – I mean started – my laptop and launched the software. Fingers crossed that IT hadn’t revoked the license. But it started just fine. With great reverence, I clicked on a document and there was our nightlife feature.

“Looks good,” said Porter quietly, as if talking too loudly could trigger a fatal tech avalanche.

“Yes,” I said. “I have no idea what to do now.”

I clicked on a photo and my laptop went bong bong bong.

“What’s that?” said Porter, alarmed.

“Nothing. I just selected the wrong tool.”

“Don’t use a tool on a Montrose laptop, you’ll invalidate the warranty!”

“It’s not a real tool, Porter,” I said. “Read some proofs.” I shoved a bundle of pages at him and he sat down and produced some elaborate fountain pen.

I tried some clicking again and got the bong bong bong. There was only one thing for it: YouTube. One video was called: “PageMonkey: absolute basics in 10 minutes.” I put my headphones on and pressed play.

“Hi,” said the guy in the video.

“Oh get on with it,” I snapped, somewhat unreasonably. It wasn’t his fault that I’d got drunk at a dinner party and alienated half of Georgia. And he was only saying “hi”, not even “hello”, which takes longer.

“So you want to learn how to use PageM–.”

“YES, OF COURSE I DO, YOU FOOL, WHAT DO YOU THINK I’M LOOKING FOR: HOW TO MAKE THE PERFECT MAI TAI?” (this was all in my head, my team didn’t need to see me stressed).

I skipped ahead 30 seconds. “This is what we’re going to cover in this video–.”

ARRGHHHH. Surely you will be covering “the basics of PageMonkey”. Why do modern people have to spell things out in such unnecessary detail? Just give me the skinny on why I can’t go clicky clicky on the picture and why it’s going bong bong bong.

“To give you some brief background about myself,” the guy was saying. Background on him? Who did he think he was: the Dalai Lama? CHECK YOUR EGO, PAL, WE LITERALLY DON’T CARE.

I jumped as somebody tapped me on the shoulder. Denver.

“I’ve found someone,” she said. “She’s coming in to the office in twenty minutes.”

I leapt up to hug Denver and, forgetting the earbuds were still in, nearly severed both lugholes.

“Thank you, Denver, thank you thank you thank you. Hey, Porter, did you hear, Denver found us a designer?”

But Porter was on his cell phone and scowling.

“I don’t know who you heard that from but let me tell you it is not true,” he was saying. “We wish to keep that print run open and for your guys to deliver *The Truvian* to all the dropoff spots we agreed in the contract.”

Oh heck, sounded like the printers had got wind of our predicament.

“Uh huh,” he said. “And who told you we’d been cancelled? ... Mary West? Well, Mary is a fine lady but I have no idea why she said that. We are finalising our pages and we will be done and dusted in about twelve hours... You want me to pay upfront? Me personally? Come on, Steve, this is me you’re dealing with... Jeez,

Steve, I've never been treated like this before. And remind me what that amount is?" There was a pause and then he swore. "Wait a darned minute, Steve, that is not the amount we agreed. That is nearly twice as much! ... Well, whose decision was it? Can I speak to him? After all the business we've put your way over the years, I'm disappointed. Uh huh, damn straight."

He hung up and for the first time there was a beaten look in his eyes.

"The board has been speaking to the printers," he said. "Bloody Mary and the grown-ups didn't trust me to cancel them. That's about the first wise thing they've ever done. The price of printing and delivery just went up 70 per cent. Well, screw them. Printers are begging for business these days, we can find another one. But it has to be done fast."

There was another cheer from outside. Louder than the earlier one and that meant the mob was growing.

I saw that someone – a rake-thin young man in some thrift-shop knitwear and sporting what I would call a Spin Doctors goatee – was shinning up the statue of Charles Montrose (why are these people always so good at climbing? Do they learn it at a secret training camp in the Sierras?).

At the top he held on by putting an arm round Charles' neck in a kind of death grip, and with his free hand placed a fancy dress pink mohican on the crown of Charles' top hat, earning more cheers. The protester dropped down and upon landing on the sidewalk performed a graceful forward roll.

It was then that I noticed Ellie emerging from the crowd, looking radiant and excited. She went to Statue Guy and said hi and he gave her one of those modern hugs. Whatever happened to the handshake? And don't say "covid" because nobody worries about getting covid from a handshake any more. Now they were laughing and she was touching her hair. These were her people.

It was clear she couldn't work for us for a second longer; it was just wrong, like making a pig eat pork.

Statue Guy was pointing at Charles Montrose passionately and Ellie's pen couldn't move fast enough to record his words.

"You can't blame her for wanting things to be better," said Connie, standing by my side. "I just wish they went about it differently."

"They've got a license to just break the law, that's the problem," I said. "The 'wrong type' of statue today... and then what? What do they want tomorrow?"

Three protesters were bashing away at some bongos while a very large woman with exposed midriff was doing a belly dance that I would never be able to unsee, however much I spent on therapy.

"I could just go down there and tell them we've been canceled," I said. "That would send them away."

"No," said Porter. "This thing is hitting the streets, one way or the other. We're not putting word out in the community that it ain't happening."

"So what happens when the heavy mob come calling? This Tom Christie guy?"

"We lock the doors and tell them to go to hell. Ha!"

But something else had my attention now. "Is Ellie really doing what I think she's doing?" I said.

"It does look like she's accepted some kind of poncho and is dancing to the drums."

And then Ellie tossed her notepad into the road, where it was instantly run over by a Kenworth semi, which honked angrily as its wheels spat out the pages in an impressive shower of paper snowflakes.

"I think she just quit," said Connie.

"Brilliant," I said, as little white pages danced all around the

junction. "One less job for me."

"We still need a printer, by the way," said Porter. "And something for them to print. Let's get on it, people."

I pulled myself away from the window. That lot down there got enough attention as it was.

"Let me try Brandon, this is the kind of guy stuff he loves." I called up his number and he answered immediately. "Hey, what's up?" I said.

"Little bit tense here again but I'm just trying to get on with work. I closed that deal with Big Rodge's Restaurants."

"Well done you. That's because you're their top salesman."

"I know it. How's press day?"

"Little bit tense here, too. Our printers just pulled out. You know anyone who can print thirty-five thousand magazines and deliver them to fifty retail businesses and twenty vending machines tomorrow morning? And doesn't mind that it's by Montrose?" Brandon had been a print buyer many years ago and still had a few buddies in that line of work.

"I got people I can try. Good boys. I doubt the Montrose name will scare them."

"You're the best. Speak later." I hung up. "Right, now all I need is Denver's designer to show up and actually produce the darned thing."

"I'm here," said a very familiar voice behind me.

April.

"I didn't know Denver was on your team," she said.

Of course, I should have known: Denver was primarily a fashion blogger and knew every designer, artist and fashionista in Truvy. Of course she'd have known April. April, who just happened to use PageMonkey all the time.

And there she stood.

I didn't know what my reaction should be and I stood there

frozen. Did I smile, cry, apologize?

Thankfully she knew what to do. She hugged me. “Forgive me?”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” I said. “I’ve been a terrible friend. I’m so sorry.”

“I over-reacted. I feel terrible.”

“Don’t. All I’ve gone on about for the past three months is *The Truvian* and you have every right to... Hey, everyone back to work!”

The thumping of fingers on keyboards resumed.

“That was just getting interesting,” said Erwin.

April wiped some tears away as she removed her laptop from her bag. “Are you working off a server?”

“Yes. I can hook you up.”

“Is this our savior?” said Porter, twinkling at April.

“This is April, my best friend.”

“Oh, I’ve heard a lot about you, April,” he said, shaking her hand. “Jess showed me some of your interior design work. Next time we decorate *chez Montrose* I will be on the phone to you, young lady. I bet I couldn’t hire you for love or money.”

April giggled and I swear she fluttered her eyelashes. I shoved a flatplan at April. She’d worked for magazines and knew what to do.

“What’s our deadline?” she said.

“We don’t have one. Due to the small problem of us not having anyone to print it yet. Just get it done as fast as you can in case someone offers us a slot at short notice.”

“Then let’s party,” she said. I loved April. “Oh by the way, I was listening to some radio ads on the way over and that idiot Tucker Sweet is still baiting you.”

“I heard that one, too,” I said. “Doesn’t he have anything better to do?” I couldn’t blame him really – he knew the listener figures would be through the roof if he could lure me back.

“He’s been phoning me all morning and I can’t work out how to block the damn number,” added Birdie.

Something in me snapped. “Tell him I’ll be there at 5pm!”

A collective gasp filled the newsroom like a circus crowd watching the trapeze act. And then I got a round of applause. I was expecting Birdie to remind me of my previous humiliation at the hands of Mr Sweet but she just smiled and said: “Great, Jess, you gon’ kick his ass.”

My phone rang. Unknown number. Did I want to take this? It had to be bad news but like I say, I’m a curious sort.

“Hello?”

“Good morning, is that Jessica Harper?” An older guy.

“Yes, it is.”

“Miss Harper, I’m sorry to bother you but my name is Clyde Kinnard and I am as of this moment advertising with your magazine, which I believe is called *The Truvian*, which, might I add, is a fine name for a magazine. But there again I am perhaps guilty of a little bias in favor of our great seaport city on Georgia’s coast, nestled as it is between–.”

“Mr Kinnard, please forgive me but it’s press day and I have many things to do. How can I help?”

“Yes, Miss Harper, I apologize for that. My family have always joshed me that I tend to be on the longwinded side; loquacious, if you will. The crux of my malady concerns my family business, Tickle My Pickle, which is trademarked, although feel free to use it in conversation yourself. My son said he’s worried that by advertising with Montrose Media we leave ourselves open to certain accusations by the, ah, Awake People? Is that what they’re called?”

“Woke?”

“That’s it. Now, I am worried that all of this might reflect badly on Tickle My Pickle, which has been run by our family since 1912.

The commercial viability of the pickle has its roots in the—.”

“Mr Kinnard, please.”

“My bad. The role of the pickle is not entirely relevant to my query, I admit. ‘Not everyone is as interested in pickles as you are’, my nephew said to me last week. Hmm, it might have been the week before that. I could phone him to check.”

“*Mr Kinnard.*”

“What I’m asking, Miss Harper, is what do you make of these Wacky People and do I need to be worried about them or indeed you?”

“Mr Kinnard—.”

“Clyde, if you will.”

“Clyde, I do have my opinions on the Wacky People. Did your father fight in WW2?”

“You bet he did, ma’am. Anzio, Normandy, the South Pacific, Africa, the Antarctic, everywhere. Then he got drafted to fight in Vietnam when he was fifty-three; that was some bad luck, I tell ya. But he came through it all with nothing worse than the loss of a leg, his hearing and his entire memory, praise the Lord. Do you believe in the Lord, Miss Harper?”

“Less and less as this call progresses, Mr Kinnard.”

“Haha, I do go on some, don’t I?

“My point was, Mr Kinnard, that would your father have given in to the Nazis or indeed the Vietcong just because they were shouting loudly, even *if* he had still been in possession of his hearing?”

“He’d have fought it on principle.”

“He sure would, Mr Kinnard, Now, you sound like good people. I would leave your advert just where it is. Get out there, pick those pickles, sell them and enjoy the sun.”

“I will! You have put my mind at rest, Miss Harper. I didn’t want to have to worry about this stuff. I said to my nephew I just want

to have some quality time with my pickles.”

I finally ended the call. I liked Mr Kinnard but I kinda hoped he never called back.

“Good work,” said Porter. “But Truvy Furniture Depot just pulled their ad.”

“Great. One step forward, one step back. Aren’t all these people locked in with contracts?”

“Yes but most of the amounts are so small that they know we wouldn’t bother taking them to small claims court. Plus getting into legal disputes with your advertisers isn’t a good look, especially when you haven’t even launched the darned thing yet.”

“So the sooner we print this thing, the better,” I said. “Hey guys, anyone want to buy some ad space? Staff discount available.”

My phone. Brandon.

“Hiya.”

“Jess, you must have some Rockefeller in your blood, baby, because you struck oil when you married me, baby.”

“Honey, I know that. But why, specifically?”

“I tried five printers and they all said it’s too short notice, which isn’t a surprise. But then I tried Ben Myers. He says he’s printing stuff round the clock but seeing as I saved his ass in Fallujah he can fit us in. You gotta love Ben.”

“Fantastic,” I said. A couple of Bran’s old Army buddies happened to live in Truvy and by luck he happened to have saved both their lives.

“What’s the deadline?” I asked.

“Seven thirty.”

“And he can deliver them, too?”

“Well, no.”

“Oh.”

“He’s two men down as it is. But he said I can use their truck to do it myself.”

“What? Brandon Harper, you cannot do that.”

“Are you kidding? I drove half a Humvee through a firestorm in Nasiriyah. This will be like, well, delivering some magazines in Truvy. Besides, the highway from Charleston to Truvy will be sweet and empty at that time of the morning.”

“Ben’s printworks is in *Charleston*? That’s two hours away.”

“You got any other ideas?”

I didn’t have time to argue. He was a grown-up, fearless and he loved a challenge. Plus he was right: we didn’t have any other options. “Okay, I shall think of a plan for the dropoffs before you arrive. And Bran, don’t even think of lifting those magazines yourself.”

“Deal.”

I hung up. Some music started outside. Quite loud music. Oh great, were we going to be Waco’d out of here with bad rock? This was all we needed on press day.

April was flanked by Erwin and Denver, the three of them molding the design, making suggestions, spotting typos and writing headlines on the hoof. The magazine was finally marching forwards again.

“We got a printer, kids,” I said. “Seven thirty deadline. That gives us exactly seven hours. Burn rubber.”

Cheers all round. They needed some good news. I couldn’t resist going to look down at the mob again. Somebody spotted me and waved and then everyone started booing. I was like one of those faces in the windows when Lehman Brothers went bust, the TV cameras zooming in to some schlub with their arms crossed. Oh well, better than being filmed leaving the building with my stuff in a box, although the day was not over yet...

Two cops on bicycles whizzed up to the crowd. Cops on bicycles, was that dignified? You never saw Dirty Harry groaning up a San Francisco hill on one before removing his crash helmet and

fumbling in the little old lady basket for his .44 Magnum, all while the perp waited patiently.

Something in me didn't like the way this was going. The narrative was being written without me.

“I'm going down there,” I announced. “Back in five.”

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Shriver dismisses the campaign to remove statues of slave traders as ‘theatre’, expensive and with no practical benefit, but also thinks the idea of reparations to enslaved peoples is ‘a can of worms’. She detests identity politics but adds: “There is nothing malign, initially at least, in the impulse to pursue a fairer society. The biggest problem with the ‘woke’ is their methods – too often involving name calling, silencing, vengefulness, and predation.”

Interview with Lionel Shriver, author of We Need To Talk About Kevin, Evening Standard, June 16 2021

**

When I got down there it was louder than I expected and I got phones shoved in my face the moment they realized who I was. Why are modern people always filming everything? What misdemeanor did they expect me to commit? I was hugely outnumbered.

There were a lot of masks: two Trumps, a DeSantis, even a Miss Piggy mask with spectacles like mine! Did I look like Miss Piggy?? If so, I would have preferred to hear it from a friend.

My eyes started watering from the vegan burger stand’s onions as I navigated between dogs on string, people with tape over their mouths (why are they always pretending they’re being silenced?), androgynous types with lank blue hair (lots of them), a mariachi band, its noise tearing effortlessly through one ear, all the way through my head, destroying everything in between, and the constant blowing of whistles. What is it with these people and whistles? Maybe I’d become an “activist” if the music wasn’t so awful.

A car beeped as it passed by. It was the only one I'd heard beep so far. Maybe they didn't have as much backing as they imagined.

To his credit, the black cop I now know to be Clarence Bradley rushed over to me and told the wokeys to keep their distance.

"I'm Jessica Harper," I told him. "I am what these people are here about."

"We are against ALL of Montrose Media," shouted a young woman.

"Give the lady room here," said Clarence.

"Can you get rid of these people, officer?"

Boos and klaxons from the people who'd heard me say that.

"They have a permit and so far it's been a peaceful protest," said another officer, puffing up at the rear. His badge identified him as one Eugene Batson and he was in his fifties and overweight. I'd never seen a fat bicycle cop before. Either he was new to bike patrol or he ate so many donuts that all those calories burnt on the road were canceled out.

"As long as they keep five feet from the building they are in full compliance," said Clarence.

"Five feet? How does that help? It's not the *building* that's in threat."

"Five feet back, people!" said Clarence, and the two people who were standing next to the building shuffled back slightly, prompting more hoots and cheers. "Okay, ma'am, you need to move away from here because you are agitating the lawful protesters."

"I just came down to..." I said. I didn't know what I'd "just come down to". As on that fateful day when I appeared on the radio show, I'd gone off half cocked.

"What do you want?" I shouted to the crowd.

"Reparations!" they shouted back at me. This was obviously one of their stock chants and I'd walked straight into it. Much

laughter but not from me, obviously.

“Come on, guys, let me make you an offer,” I tried.

Their leader was elbowing her way through the throng to reply. Looking hot and sweaty in motorcycle leathers: *Kayla*.

“What kind of offer can you make us, Jessica Harper,” she said, “when we demand nothing less than the blood of the oppressed wiped clean on the blade of justice.”

“I hear you,” I said. “But I was thinking more on the lines of some vouchers for local businesses?”

“Defund the police!” shouted someone, randomly.

“I paid for this bicycle,” said Clarence, grabbing his crossbar protectively. “Except for the bell, that was on expenses.”

“We won’t rest until Montrose Media closes down or makes some serious reparations for transgressions of the past,” said *Kayla*.

“Well, why don’t you put your demands in writing?” Maybe that would appease them for the moment and they would go away and we could finish the mag.

“Here are our demands: sell Montrose Media and donate every cent to Black Lives Matter.”

“Can’t you do anything about them?” I appealed to Eugene.

“They’re not breaking the law, ma’am. In fact, if they get really agitated, I might have to close *you* down.”

This earned a massive whoop and for the first time I felt physically threatened. A new chant started: “Jenna’s law! Jenna’s law!”

“Who is Jenna?” I practically screamed at him. I couldn’t hear his reply and so I stormed back into our lobby, to more cheers. As I slammed the door behind me I happened to glimpse someone out there who was of much greater concern than *Kayla*. It was Andy Westerfield, a reporter for Montrose’s digital news sites. I only recognized him because he wore the same dapper trilby in

his LinkedIn profile that he was wearing now. He was holding out his dictaphone to the large lady who'd kicked off proceedings with her revealing dance. Fantastic. So that meant the grown-ups in the tower knew or were about to know that we'd refused to shut down. I was too shaky to even think about what that meant and if it even mattered – if Porter was bankrolling this, didn't we just have to remove "Montrose Media" from the mag and keep rolling?

In the elevator, my hands shaking, I googled Jenna's Law.

"Jenna's Law (*informal*) is an ordinance in the state of Georgia which empowers Truvy Police Department to temporarily shut down any enterprise whose business is aggravating a gathering of at least eight people. It is named after Jenna Richardson, who was referred to as "Miss" by a staff member of Dillan's Donuts, when her preferred form of address is in fact "Jedi Master". The resulting volatile protest by her friends and family outside the premises led to the drafting of the ordinance, in the hope of preventing future disturbances. The ordinance was approved by Truvy City Council on April 20 2023."

Great, so any snowflake or wokey could have a business shut down at any time. No wonder I hadn't heard of it; it had only just come into force.

I walked back into the newsroom to receive my own applause and cheers.

"It wasn't exactly my moment of glory," I said. "But at least I looked them in the eyes. Right, how's our mag doing?"

"Looking good," said Denver. "April's cleared twelve pages. Twelve more to go." She handed me a page proof with my Thai restaurant review on it and I sat down to read it. Of course, my phone went again.

"Hi, Bran. What's going on?"

"I just quit."

“WHAT?”

“I told Mike I might be late tomorrow because of some important thing and he said if you’re not coming in for the 8am meeting tomorrow, don’t *bother* coming in tomorrow. And if you don’t come in *tomorrow*, have a long think on *Saturday* and *Sunday* about what you’re going to do on *Monday*.”

“Holy cow, that’s complicated.”

“Yeah, he lost me around ‘Saturday’ but the takeaway is I quit. If I haven’t built up enough goodwill at that company they don’t deserve me. I’ve been their top salesman every year since I started. Anyway, I am a free agent and you know what? It feels good. And I am ready to drive that truck.”

“Honey, we can’t pay the bills with you as an unpaid truck driver!”

“I can take a sales job at any corporation in Truvy. Fresh start, baby!”

I tried not to dampen his enthusiasm and told him I loved him and said goodbye.

What followed was an unexpectedly productive period in which we all worked seamlessly to finish the magazine. I was braced for the sound of the buzzer as Eugene and Clarence called to say they were shutting us down but it never came, and the next thing I knew it was ten past four. Ten past four! That meant I had to leave for Tucker’s show in about ten minutes. No way. It wasn’t going to happen.

“There’s no design work to do at the minute, everyone’s reading proofs,” said April. “What do you want me to do?”

“Hmm, do you fancy phoning Tucker’s studio and asking them to accept my humblest apologies but saying I can’t make it? Pressures of press day and all that.”

“Sure. No problem.”

“Thanks, Apes. I’m running out of courage and need to conserve

what I have left.”

I dialed the radio station’s number on my phone and handed it to her.

“Hi, is that Tucker’s show?” she said. “My name is April Meadows, I’m the best friend of Jessica Harper. Oh well, that’s why I’m calling. She sends her utmost apologies but says she is unable to make her appearance this afternoon. You’ve heard about the commotion at our offices? Yes, it’s a little, um, lively here. So as you can imagine she has rather a lot to deal with. But I wondered if you’d be happy if I stood in for her?”

“APRIL!” I screeched. I actually saw Erwin duck down at that moment.

“You wouldn’t mind at all?” said April. “Fantabulous, I’ll see you soon.”

“April, what the hell are you thinking? You can’t go on Tucker’s show! Are you mad?”

“And why can’t I go on Tucker’s show, Jessica?” she said, and she never calls me Jessica. “I too am sick and tired of the loudest shouters like our friends out there getting all the attention and being given all they ask for. And besides, I think we could do with the publicity.”

“But... but... The pages! We need you to finish the mag.”

“Denver knows how to use PageMonkey well enough to take in any text corrections. The final nips and tucks and PDFing and sending can be done by me when I come back. What’s our deadline?”

“Half seven.”

“Pah, easy.” She slung on her denim jacket. “Wish me luck, and tune in to Tucker.”

**

Chapter Thirty

I was so wired on caffeine and adrenaline that I decided to sneak out the back entrance to Jupiter House and go for a walk around the block. Inevitably I ended up in JB's for a takeout coffee. I was just grabbing a stirrer when a familiar voice froze me.

“You’re a tough lady.”

“Mary,” I said. “You have a habit of just showing up and refusing to go away.”

“I like you, Jessica.”

“So you keep saying. Why are you spying on me, Mary? Or are there six clones of you walking around Truvy, if you can imagine such a nightmare.”

“Let’s take a booth. It’s time to give me a decision on that little deal I mentioned.”

“There’s nothing little about betraying Porter.”

“You wouldn’t be betraying him. We’ve already fired him. A shining future awaits you in the Montrose tower. Come on over.”

“It sounds like you read that off a corporate brochure. Get out of my way.”

She held up her phone. “I’ll cut to the chase. There’s a text message here. One click will send it to a friend of mine: the chief of Truvy Police. Urging him to enforce that Jenna’s Law down here at one of our buildings. You can guess how fast they’d act on that. They’d close your little magazine down faster than a knife fight in a phone booth.”

“Do it.”

“Last chance.”

“Do it.”

She smiled and pressed a button on her phone. “Your decision.”

I walked out of the diner not too quickly, not too slowly.

The mob was now so big – I estimated around two hundred

people – that it was spread down the street and around the corner and I had to push past someone who was blocking JB's doors.

Eugene was on his walkie talkie and judging by how straight he was standing and how white in the face he looked, I guessed that he was in conversation with none other than his boss. Wow, Mary really did have some muscle in this town.

I was about to nip back into our building when there was one of those deafening acceleration noises that motorbikes make and I saw Kayla herself pull an impressively long wheelie and zoom away. Where was she going? Wherever it was, I doubted I had seen the last of her for the day.

Eugene waved me down like I was some errant motorist.

“Mrs Harper, we’re gonna have to close you down. Not just you but every business in Jupiter House. Your trade is causing upset to a number of these people here in a clear breach of Jenna’s Law. Please escort me to your office and we will–.”

“These people are not upset!” I shouted. “*They’re* the ones who are causing the upset. *I’m* upset! I am trying to run a business. I have a load of pages to send.”

“I have no idea what that means, ma’am.”

“What’s up?” asked Clarence, his hand moving to his baton.

“This lady is saying she’s got to send some pages,” said Eugene.
“Send? Like by FedEx?”

“No, on the internet,” I said.

“Oh,” said Eugene, turning serious. “If it involves a phone line it could be wire fraud.”

“Wire fraud, that’s federal,” said Clarence.

“What?” I said. “I’m just telling you what work I still have to do. *I’m* not being accused of any crime here.”

“With respect, ma’am,” said Clarence, “we’ll judge that.”

“We’re cops,” said Eugene. “You ever heard the expression: ‘If it turns federal, it turns ugly’?”

“No,” I said.

“Well, it’s one of mine. And it’s true. They’ve cleared out most of those terror guys from Guantanamo and that means there’s a lot of room for everyone else. You don’t want this going federal. Federal is as federal does.”

“Is that one of yours, too?”

“Yes, that is also one of mine.”

People were pushing into me and chanting stuff I didn’t even understand and generally being idiots now.

“Lead me into the building, please,” said Eugene.

I felt my phone vibrate. *Connie*. I looked up to our office and saw her in the window. She threw open a window and shouted “PICK UP!” I answered.

“Hi,” I boomed. “I’m coming back in.”

“Ma’am, lead the way, please” said Eugene, holding open the door to Jupiter House.

“Tell the boys in blue that Jenna’s Law *cannot* be enforced if the enterprise in question is engaged in a product of benefit to all citizens of Truvy City,” said Connie.

Before I forgot what she had told me, I blurted it out to Eugene. “Jenna’s Law cannot be enforced in this case. We are producing a product of benefit to all citizens of Truvy. The magazine will be free; anyone can pick one up. It’s a community service.”

Eugene went: “Whoa.”

Clarence looked skeptical. “Wait a minute, lady. It’s a magazine, right? That is not a community service. Somebody is making money from it. They sure as eggs is eggs ain’t doing it for the love of it.”

This earned him a cheer.

“Actually, we are,” said a calm voice, rich with gravitas.

Porter.

“What was that, Mr Montrose, sir?”

“All the adverts are free,” said Porter, beside me. “No charge. I am covering all costs. And that means Jenna’s Law cannot be used to close us down.”

I was expecting an egg to come flying at Porter’s white suit but the crowd had been momentarily silenced by this development.

Eugene had turned a funny colour. “I better speak to the boss,” he said. “He gave me his personal cell.” He stepped away to make a very short call before returning, opening his arms out wide to get everyone’s attention.

“All ye who are gathered, pay heed,” he began, like a town crier in mediaeval England. “I, Eugene Batson, as an officer of the law – a cop, I’m a cop, let it be noted – do declare that on this day, Jenna’s Law will not be enforced. *The Groovy* magazine may continue its lawful, not-for-profit activities.”

Every single person in the crowd started booing. I went to grab Porter and lead him back into the building but in typical Porter style he’d vanished. I was halfway through the doors when an egg splatted right next to my face, showering me in a horrible mess. I didn’t much care – the chief of police was understandably more scared of violating Jenna’s Law than upsetting his pal Mary, and I was taking that as a victory.

**

Chapter Thirty-One

“All the adverts are free?” I said, when we were both back in the haven of the newsroom. “Porter, I never knew you could be such a hero. A humanitarian, even. Giving something back to local businesses and saving our bacon. That is a masterstroke, Mr Montrose. I commend you.”

“Jess, I’m not giving away diddly,” he said, a bottle of Wild Turkey in one hand and a whiskey tumbler in the other. “I just wanted those cops off our back. I’ve been around the block a few hundred times, I know how to play dirty.”

“Porter!”

“Journalists are meant to be rebels, rule breakers, iconoclasts,” he said, reminding me of what I had said to Ellie.

“Yes, er, thank you, Porter,” I said. “Did I say that?”

“Yes,” said everyone. Everyone apart from Connie, who always acted a little nervous when Porter was around. They were still doing that weird ballet of avoidance every time they got within twenty feet of one another.

Outside a chant broke out. “WE DON’T WANT THEM IN OUR TOWN, MONTROSE MEDIA’S GOING DOWN!”

Porter poured his glass half full of bourbon, necked it in one and slammed it down on his desk. “What now? I thought I’d just knocked all that crap on the head.”

“The cops can’t shut us down,” said Connie. “But those fools can still protest. And it sounds like they’ve just turned up the volume.”

**

Chapter Thirty-Two

“The racist legacy many birds carry. Birders grapple with complicated past linked to slavery, white supremacy.”

Headline, Washington Post, National Weekly, June 2021

“It won’t be easy teaching birds about critical race theory but we must try.”

Comedian Leo Kearse’s response, Twitter.

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“We are very, very pleased – nay, honored – to welcome April Meadows to the show,” said Tucker Sweet. “She is the best friend of Jessica Harper, who had to cancel at the last minute. That’s right, Jessica has pulled a wheezy replacement off the bench – no offence, April – to stand in for her. And let’s face it, her BFF cannot do worse than Jess did when she was on our show a few months ago. Let’s remind ourselves of that particular car crash.”

The usual highlights package of my debacle was played. Again.

“April, welcome,” he said, when it was over. “Are you up to speed on the culture wars debate that your friend Jessica has put her foot in?”

“Well, I have been reading up on it lately, Tucker, yes. But I’m certainly no expert.”

“And what is your job, if I may ask?”

“I’m an interior designer.”

“Okay, but you are here as Jessica’s advocate. Can you tell us what happened to her magazine? We heard it’s been pulled before launch day and that right now there are protesters threatening to remove the statue of Charles Montrose.”

“That is correct, Tucker, yes.”

“And what do you think about that old statue? Do you think we should just leave the old guy there, let bygones be bygones? It was a long time ago, wasn’t it?”

“It *was* a long time ago—.”

“So you’re saying: ‘For goodness sake, get over it, people!’”

“I didn’t say that, no. What I was going to say is removing statues is to whitewash the part of history they represent.”

“But you’re whitewashing the Montrose family’s past by saying hey look at Charlie Boy up there on his plinth, he must be one of the good guys!”

You could almost hear the spit flying from his mouth. Either Tucker really believed in his point of view or he was as deft a presenter as that cabbie had told us he was.

April said: “Without the Montrose family we wouldn’t have had our beautiful museum since 1892, and we—.”

“Do you know how many homeless people we could rehouse in that dusty warehouse of Indiana Jones’ rejected artefacts? That could be a start of the reparations. And how about Jess’s pal Porter Montrose opens up that creaky old wallet and lets some of the bats out, huh? He could spare a few mill for the black people of Truvy City, couldn’t he? Come on April, open up. Truvy is listening. Over to you.”

**

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Woke Walmart has trained more than 1,000 employees in critical race theory, denouncing the US as a ‘white supremacy system’ and telling staffers to accept their ‘guilt and shame’ and stop thinking ‘white is right’, according to leaked documents.

“Staff members are reportedly separated into racially segregated ‘affinity groups’ for the course, because ‘people of color and white people have their own work to do in understanding and addressing racism’.

“Racial minority employees are told they suffer from ‘constructed racist oppression’ and ‘internalized racial inferiority’, creating ‘self-hate’, ‘anger’, ‘rage’ and ‘lowered self-esteem’.”

New York Post, October 21 2021:

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“Let’s not antagonize them,” I said.

“No, *let’s* antagonize them!” Porter raged. He was now drinking and doing not much else.

“Porter, why don’t you, er, get a taxi home? It’s last knockings on the issue. It’s all over bar the shouting. Or the shooting. Whichever comes first.”

“I’m having the time of my life,” he said. “I’ve never felt so alive. Who wants a drink?”

“It’s only 4.50pm.”

“So what? I brought something special that’s been in my cellar for ten years. I was going to save it until we were done but to hell with that, let’s open it now!”

Nobody argued and minutes later we were drinking champagne

from some posh flutes he'd also brought in, some of us in that token way people do in offices, but others (Porter, Erwin and Birdie) like they were serious about it. I sorely wanted to tune in to Tucker's show but I didn't want to hear April being destroyed. Whatever was happening to her right now, there was nothing I could do about it. Poor, brave April. Luckily no one else in the office had overheard that she was going to stand in for me, and so they weren't listening in either. I tried to put it out of my mind.

"I can get a taxi," said Erwin. "Wow, this is good stuff. I should have had some lunch."

Porter gave a quick toast and there was some back slapping and cheering, which felt premature but we'd already been through a lot together.

"What's left?" asked Porter.

"Just the front cover," I said. I had a spare printout and passed him one.

"Looks fantastic," he said. "Can we make the main headline 'Truvy by night' and the sub-head 'Your ultimate guide to hitting the city'?"

"Yep, that's good," I said, marking the page with his change.

"On the smaller headlines, how about: 'Up close and personal with the Barefoot Gardener'? It's a bit stronger. And try: 'Gators, Guns and Getaways: My Dangerous Quest for Annalee Calhoun'."

"Hmmm maybe."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't want to overegg it," I said. "I have my doubts about running that story at all. Let's face it, I didn't get any closer to finding her than any of the other losers who've attempted it over the years."

"Anyone nearly getting savaged by an alligator is *always* a good story. Plus any *Annalee* story is a good story."

"Okay," I said. I wasn't really sure what I thought about it. That

it was a non-story, I suppose, albeit an amusing one.

“Rusty takes a mean photo,” he said. Katie had turned those pictures into a striking montage of blurry city lights, busy restaurants, crazy angles, food and fun.

A text message popped in from Bran. “On the way to Ben’s printworks. We got this.”

“Superstar,” I texted back.

Then I had a dreadful thought. *Jackson*.

I texted Brandon: “JACKSON!!! I completely forgot about him. I’ll call him.”

He was twelve and could fend for himself but it wasn’t my greatest moment of parenting. I just had to pray the issue went to plan and I could get out of here in the next hour or so.

Text from Brandon: a picture of him and Jackson in Bran’s Grand Cherokee.

Good. One less thing to worry about. Now I was fed up with firefighting all–.

A hideous drilling noise blasted up at us from the street.

“WHAT NOW?” I said.

Connie was first over to the windows. If I’d known how much time we would spend looking down at the street that day, I would have bought a nice chaise longue and stuck it over there for us to recline on.

“Uh oh,” she said.

“What is it? Connie?”

“Some idiot’s got a jackhammer and my guess is they’re trying to black out the whole damn building. Save any work on your laptops, people. We could lose the server.”

“Huh?” said Denver. “I thought we’d nixed Jenna’s Law.”

“We did,” said Connie. “So the cops can’t shut us down. But the protesters can still try.”

“Isn’t that then just criminal damage?”

“Maybe but I’m going to take a wild guess they’ve thought of a way round that, too. They probably know that the cops will need an injunction and that it will take longer to get than it will take to saw through our wires. Or they just don’t care about being arrested. These people love nothing more than being arrested.”

Lose power? That was unthinkable. My mind raced with possible solutions.

“If we lose the internet we can just take my computer to JB’s and use their wifi to send the pages,” I said.

“How many pages you got to send?” said Denver.

“Erm, all of them.”

“What??”

“All a hundred and ninety-two of them,” I confessed. It *did* sound bad.

“Why have you got all the pages to send?” barked Porter. “You said it was just the cover left!”

I picked up a stapler and threw it at him. “Ow! That hurt!” he protested. I noticed he didn’t spill a drop of bubbly.

“Good!”

“And I deserved it!”

“You did! Now give me some more champagne and shut up.”

There was only a dribble left in the bottle – Porter had really been getting through it. Moments later there was a pop and he was refilling my glass. Mmm, champagne. *Concentrate, Jess.* You are nearly there, lady. You got this.

“When I said only the cover was left, I meant to *proof read*. I haven’t sent any pages yet because Katie said it was a quick process these days.”

Wisely, Porter bit his tongue.

“If the power goes, we’re gonna lose access to the *server*,” said Erwin. “And then we can’t send anything...”

The server! The server. The server that Katie had set up, that

she had insisted we needed if we were going to have a proper magazine. The server! For months I had been evading one vital question, a question that was now coming back to bite me... Namely...

WHAT THE HELL WAS THE SERVER?

Before I had the nerve to ask this aloud, Erwin was by my side, whispering: "It's that box over there, with all the blinking lights. It's where all the pages live."

"Thank you," I whispered back. "Can't I drag the pages from the server on to my laptop?"

"No. You'd need to drag every picture file along with them, and there are hundreds of pictures. And they are very large files."

As I let this sink in – and wished I hadn't touched the champagne – Connie said: "Well, y'all've been brave and some. Now it's Connie's turn." She began to literally roll up her sleeves. "And Jess, for the love of God start transmitting those pages."

Then, with a mean look on her face, she stormed off towards the elevator lobby.

**

Chapter Thirty-Four

“And how about this cultural appropriation deal?” said Tucker. “I was on your website just before you showed up. Did you source the Native American artefacts, the rugs, the baskets that I saw, the art?”

“Yes, I did.”

“So you’re fine with cherry-picking objects from their culture and profiting from it?”

“Firstly, your home is a private space that should not be seen as an authoritative statement about the authenticity of anything. And secondly, with the state of race relations in this country, I think there are more important things to worry about.”

“Oh, you do? Why not jump *around* in your home, then, firing arrows at whoever comes in?”

“That’s just a silly–.”

Tucker began doing that wooo wooo war cry thing.

“In the privacy of your home, do you black up and pretend to be Louis Armstrong, April?”

“I am not going to dignify that with a reply.”

“And how about our local basketball team, do you think we should go back to calling them the Truvy Redmen?”

“Of course I don’t, that would be–.”

“Or do we have bigger things to worry about?”

“If you’ll just give me a chance to reply, Tucker.” Was her voice cracking?

“I am a white woman and I must be heard!” said Tucker in a stupid high voice. “I demand to speak to the manager!” He patched in his studio crew so that the listeners could hear their laughter. “And I will oppose cultural appropriation as long as I have it in writing that I will get a twenty per cent discount next time I shop here!”

“I am just... I am not replying.” She sounded shaken.

“Well, perhaps you can reply to our next guest, who is walking into the studio as we speak. We called her up just as soon as we knew you were coming in, April, and she has broken off from her protesting outside *The Truvian*’s offices to come and see if she can dice you up just like she did your friend Jess. Take a seat, Kayla.”

“Thanks, Tucker,” said the woman formerly known as Strong Mom. “It’s good to be back.”

**

Chapter Thirty-Five

“Ma’am,” said Eugene, “we cannot go near wires. ‘No officer of the law shall prevent the destruction of electrical works if said destruction is caused in the act of protest’.”

Connie just nodded, taking the news in her stride. “Truvy Ordinance 404?” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Clarence.

“Uh huh.”

The three of them were standing near – but not too near, as it was deafening – a hole that was being drilled straight into the sidewalk by the same protester who’d shinned up the statue. No one could say he wasn’t versatile. Another man stood by, ready to take over when his friend tired.

“So they can just get out a big old jackhammer and destroy one of our streets?” asked Connie.

“Pretty much, ma’am, yes.”

“Out of interest, are any other cops coming along to this protest or is it just you two? I wouldn’t mind a second opinion on some of this stuff.”

Eugene looked around him sheepishly. “It looks like it’s just gonna be us, to be truthful. Between you and me, the police are kinda touchy about interfering in woke protests.”

“Uh huh.”

It was a regular party now: fresh placards were being constructed and painted on, there was a hotdog and popcorn stall, two TV vans, milling reporters and sound guys and cameramen, BLM stalls, petitions thrust into passers-by’s faces, and the mariachi band – which had thankfully disappeared for a few hours, perhaps to do a paid gig – were back, and there were many, many selfies being requested of Cool Drill Guy (formerly Statue Guy), who had clearly been left with no option on such a

sticky day than to remove his shirt and do his drilling topless. If there was an ordinance outlawing protesters from blocking the sidewalks, neither Clarence nor Eugene were enforcing it. Jenna's Law took precedence, no doubt. And you didn't mess with Jenna's Law.

"Would you mind following me, please?" said Connie. But she wasn't talking to the cops; she was addressing the three-person TV news crew who had just finished talking to a henna tattoo artist.

The way she told it to me later, Connie pushed herself to the front of the circus gathered around Drill Guy, put two fingers in her mouth and gave a whistle that cut through the jackhammer's din. He immediately killed the tool.

"Yo!" he said.

"Yo. How you doing? I'm Connie Gordon, from the magazine you're irked about. Just wondered if you knew whose power you were trying to bring down."

"That fascist rag you're working for," he said.

When the cheers had died down, Connie said: "Uh huh. And you're not bothered about the homelessness advice center and day nursery – which has at least three hours to run today, if I'm not mistaken – which also share this building?"

"It's just *your* power we're cutting, lady. Now excuse me."

"You sure about that, pal?" said Connie.

"Is this true?" Eugene asked Drill Guy.

"Ooh," said Clarence, grimacing. "That could be bad."

"I know what I'm doing," said DG. "I can see the names on these lines and we are cutting yours and yours alone."

"Peaceful protest, lady, let him get on with it," said a slip of a girl, one of his groupies.

More cheers, although less enthusiastic than before.

Connie was playing for time and that was smart. She looked up

at us. Denver flashed up both of her palms, ten times. *We've sent a hundred pages.* Connie wiped her brow. She still needed to buy a whole lot of time so we could do the rest.

She got down and positioned her petite frame over the narrow trench, spreadeagled to cover as much of it as possible. Now that the entire hole was covered, and along with it the lengths of visible cable, Connie just lay there awkwardly, looking up at the sky.

“What the hell are you doing, lady?” said DG.

“Get off that, we’re trying to destroy it in a legal manner,” said the groupie.

Drill Guy’s buddy came over and took hold of one of Connie’s arms but was stopped in his tracks by the appearance of Eugene, and more to the point by the klaxon Eugene had acquired and was using for the first time.

“No peaceful protester engaged in the business of covering electrical cables with their bodies shall be touched by any other person!”

The buddy yelped and threw his hands over his ears, along with everyone else within about fifty feet of that sound.

“You just deafened me! I’m suing! And I’m suing you, lady!”

Still lying over the narrow slit, Connie lifted her head and managed a smile. “Peaceful protest,” she said.

BOOM!

A wave of people ducked, screamed and hit the deck, some of them landing on each other. Connie told me her first thought was that some part of the cable had exploded from someone’s meddling but then she realized it was a gunshot. As the protesters braced themselves for more of the same, a voice rose above the commotion: grand, furious and slurring.

“I am Porter Montrose. Get your cowardly asses off my property before I use this the way Hunter Thompson intended.” He

pointed his shotgun at the statue. “That man, Charles Montrose, did more for Truvy than any of you idiots, and you can remove that statue over my dead body. Go ahead, somebody try it!”

He shook the firearm up and down like a warrior with a spear and that was when three people charged him from the side and, spotting them in his peripheral vision, he lost his footing and sailed helplessly into space. For about a second, anyway. After that he made a hard landing and there was a sickening sound as his head struck stone.

Connie had been dashing – as fast as she could dash anyway – to the statue in the hope of disarming Porter, or at least reasoning with him. She had her arms held out like a receiver hoping to catch a Hail Mary but she couldn’t make it in time and Porter splatted in front of her. She kneeled, cradling his unconscious form and was soon covered in blood from the wound in his scalp. “Porter! Porter! Speak to me, what have they done?”

Eugene was already calling an ambulance and, belatedly, police backup.

“That’s it, folks,” he announced through the loud hailer. “Person interfered with while engaged in lawful protest. Game over.” It clearly *hadn’t* been a lawful protest, given the blasting of the shotgun, but the sight of blood had made everyone nervy. Who knew who might be held accountable when the dust settled? Dozens and dozens of protesters were scurrying away from the scene, like rats from a sinking ship. The party had been a good one, but they knew it was over. Only a couple of them had come to see how Porter was. One said she was a doctor and was administering first aid from a kit she’d spread out.

“Shame on you, shame on you all!” shouted Connie, emotional, her tough exterior peeled away at last.

**

Chapter Thirty-Six

I watched the whole thing in horror but as soon as I had seen that Porter was being cared for, I nipped back to my laptop and pressed send on the final batch of PDFs. I *knew* it wouldn't take long. What were they so stressed about? Sheesh. (Note to self: NEVER send all the pages at the last minute again).

I was down to just the cover.

I clicked send.

PAGE SENT. A little green tick appeared.

I wanted to punch the air and shout we've done it but the way things were going some other mad incident would strike, like a typhoon totaling the printers.

Erwin, Denver, Rusty and Birdie were still excitedly watching the pandemonium from the window. So they didn't hear when I said: "Thank you, guys. We've done it. Issue one has been put to bed."

It was just as well they didn't hear, really, because as usual I was completely and utterly wrong.

**

Back down on 27th, I put my arm round Connie as she watched the ambulance pull away. Porter had been conscious but in pain, his dapper white jacket daubed a shocking red.

"I hope he's all right," I said. "Do you think he'll be all right?"

"I don't know. The next couple hours will be crucial with a head injury. He sure did bump his noggin' hard. But he was talking a lot of the usual Porter talk when they took him away. And he refused to let me go with him, which sounded normal, too."

"Yep," I said. "Fingers crossed. And thank you for saving the day with those heroics. You could have fried yourself on that cable."

“Did you get the magazine away?”

“Sure did. But we couldn’t have done it if it hadn’t been for you.”

“Truth be told, I wasn’t laying over that hole for long, thank God. It was Porter who stopped the protest.”

“That he did,” I said. “So what now?”

“We’re going for a drink,” said Connie. “His last words before they shut the ambulance doors was there’s a five hundred dollar tab down at Luigi’s Bar. Go and drink it all.”

I just wanted to stand there. Adrenaline was still rushing through me.

“I felt like a bystander at my own launch day,” I said.

“Baloney,” said Connie. “I just lay over an itty bitty trench for a couple minutes. And Porter got drunk and fired a gun, mainly. You’ve had more balls than any of us. This magazine only got off the ground because of you. It sounds like Porter had been thinking about it for years without getting anywhere.”

“Maybe,” I said. “In any case, we all faced them down and won. For now.”

“Well, I need to grab my coat and then I’m going down to that bar, as long as you don’t need me for anything?”

“Nope, I sent the cover. We’re done. Now it’s over to Brandon to deliver it to the dropoff points.”

“Your hubbie’s doing what?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you at Luigi’s. I’m just going to stand here for another minute.”

“You should. This is a special moment. You don’t get many of them.”

There was a fair amount of mess – food and drink containers, mainly – where people had dropped to the ground during the event’s unscheduled finale. I remembered I had a litter picker in the car so I went and got it. I didn’t have a refuse bag so I had to carry each item individually to the trash can. Thunder was

rumbling around east of Truvy and I smelled rain. It just added to the atmosphere. This was certainly the most excitement I'd experienced in... in when? Maybe my life?

I returned to the newsroom and ordered everyone down to the bar to start celebrating. Ben had loaded all our pages as PDFs on to his system and I was going through each spread, approving them after a thorough check.

After a while I got the sense that I wasn't alone. There was some kind of shuffling sound coming from around a corner, just out of sight. For a moment I was terrified it was a giant rodent that I would now have to battle. Let's face it, a mutant rat enlarged by a radiation blast like in a 50s B-movie was about the only situation we hadn't faced today so I was half resigned to attacking it with my ruler.

It turned out to just be Connie, fiddling around in the wooden storage shelves where staff put their stuff.

"Connie, hi," I said. "I thought you'd be three Manhattans to the wind by now."

"More of a beer girl," she said.

"So, er, what are you doing? I mean, not that you're not free to do whatever you like."

"Just taking a few things home for the wash," she said. "You know what it's like. You bring in the 'old emergency office jumper' and then it never gets a freshen up. Don't you worry about me, you skedaddle down to Luigi's before Rusty drinks the whole tab himself." She had that guilty look on her face that decent people just can't hide if they've done something wrong.

She was holding a straw shopping bag by one handle and it tilted in my direction, revealing its contents. Very rude of me to look inside but I *am* a journalist so...

"And are you taking the picture of your cat home to wash, too?" I asked.

“Hmm? Oh, no. I don’t know why I brought it in. Thought I’d take him home before he smashes.”

“And your mini cafetiere and the little transistor radio you carry around with you all day?”

“Well, forgive me if I fancied a clearout, Jessica,” she said, a little irked, or at least acting it.

“A clearout of belongings? A freshen up of jumpers? You’ve only been with us two weeks.”

“Is this an interrogation, Jess?”

“No, Connie, it’s not an interrogation. The last piece of the jigsaw is what it is.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“I would really like to hear what’s been going on. I think it’s time to come clean.”

Her shoulders dropped and it was like a weight had been lifted from her. She gave a broken little smile and put the bag down.

“Okay, Jess,” she said. “You got me.”

**

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“A Colorado Springs school district banned critical race theory after a black father claimed racism in America would ‘by and large be dead’ if not for institutions and schools ‘keeping it on life support.’ ‘I’m not oppressed and I’m not a victim,’ added Derrick Wilburn, founder of the Rocky Mountain Black Conservatives.”

Daily Mail, August 20 2021

**

“So was your friend Jessica too busy to come and get a second beating?” said Kayla.

“She has better things to do,” said April, in that prim little voice she uses when she’s at her most lethal. April isn’t scared of anything, apart from Komodo dragons but that’s another story.

“It is a *shame* she’s not here,” said Tucker. “But if you are her ambassador, tell us, April, where do *you* stand on drag queens in schools?”

“I think the parents should decide. And if this artist in question wants to keep returning to the school, I would question that person’s motivation and the necessity for them to do so. But if there’s any suggestion of sexual innuendo going on, which I know has happened in some cases, absolutely not. There’s no reason for kids to see that.”

“Reasonable answer,” said the presenter. “Kayla, you’re a mom. Drag queen wants to come in – or maybe the school board invites them in – and then they want to come back? Why should they?”

“They give young people queer role models and show them they can be whoever they want to be,” said Kayla. “Drag is a way of getting kids to think outside the boring boxes that adults have

made for them. Drag queens *should* be invited into schools to help challenge the stifling heteronormative culture. And you know what? They're just fun. The best ones are so funny I could watch 'em all day."

"Well, pretty soon you *will* be able to make that happen at schools around Truvy, won't you?" said April.

"What you getting at, April?" said Tucker.

"Well, Tucker, Kayla's agenda is spelt out very clearly in the document I picked up from home on the way over. I am holding a very interesting report with all your plans for Truvy High School and some other schools that your friends have infiltrated, Kayla. Oops, I might have just taken photos of them in advance and now I'm oops posting them on twitter, hashtag Truvy."

"That is private property," said Kayla, in a deep scary voice like the girl in *The Exorcist*.

"Whoa, we are out of time," said Tucker. "But you two *must* come back as that was getting spicier than a Cajun corndog."

Tucker went to press a button but April grabbed his hand. "We are not going *anywhere*," she said. "This document is a masterplan of how Kayla and her chums intend to drive home their agenda on the five local school boards they sit on. Ideas include renaming two of the schools, Lincoln High and Montrose High; a proposed teacher code of conduct, which would discipline teachers for speaking out against the direction of the school system, and covert monitoring of teachers' social media accounts, with the intention of identifying sentiments that are less than fully woke."

"Incendiary stuff," said Tucker. "Let's give Kayla a chance to res-."

April, however, was in no *mood* to give Kayla a chance to respond. She continued passionately: "Kayla and The Gang have also drawn up a very detailed and angry flowchart showing how

to combat any criticism of their plans, all the way down to ‘crushing all dissent’.”

“I am shutting you down,” said Tucker. “Your mic is muted, lady.”

“I’ll use yours, then,” said April, and there was a horrible sound as she yanked it off him.

Even louder and faster than before, she powered on: “But best of all, the masterplan of Kayla and her Marxist buddies is a three-day Critical Race Theory exercise that has already been tried in other states and countries, in which children are split up by race and made to see countless examples of white privilege in action. Kayla implemented this controversial program when she was on a school board in Raleigh a couple years ago. A quick Google of news stories shows you some of the parents’ comments when it was over.”

“Wait a minute,” said Kayla. “You can’t trust what people say on social media.”

“Does that include the ninety-six tweets you’ve posted, slandering my friend Jessica Harper? You should really use a range of screen names, Kayla, or it makes it so easy to follow the trail back to your real identity.”

Two things of interest happened at this point. The first was that Tucker said nothing. This is because a senior exec at the radio station had come down and was standing in the control room, where he was telling Tucker via his headphones that ratings were dynamite and to keep April on as long as possible.

The second thing that happened was that Kayla tried to wrest the mic off April, who simply moved (with her mic) to the far side of the desks. Every time Kayla tried to edge towards her, April moved the other way, keeping perfect distance between them.

April said: “Comments from these parents include: ‘What I saw was kids who used to get along and not care about race, have now

been divided and started to resent each other. Great job, teachers!' And: The kids were just all happily playing together as equals, not even noticing each other's ethnicity or gender. Now half of them feel resentment and bitterness while half feels shame and guilt.'

"Last comment. 'Brilliant exercise. These kids learned a valuable lesson – adults will use them as pawns in their game of political chess, with no consideration for repercussions. Bravo!'"

"Give me a break," said Kayla. "America was built on slavery and a whole range of other injustices and everyone – from kids to adults – need to examine and learn from that history."

"Maybe so but you know what the conclusion to that is: that our country was founded on and defined by racism and that our founding principles, our constitution, our very way of life should be overthrown?"

"Yeah, why the hell not?" Kayla bellowed.

"BOOM! That just happened!" Tucker was able to declare, having just been given back his mic by April. "'Overthrow America', says Kayla Cobb. And just as I was about to ask you to draw our Fourth of July raffle. Screw the commercial break, kids, this is too hot. We've been reading your emails and tweets. A lot of them are saying that if there's a second issue of *The Truvian* they not only want to get hold of a copy, they want to *advertise* in it. 'I've always respected Porter's editorial columns in his weekly newspapers; he's a man of sense and moderation,' says Margaret in Hickory City. While Linda in Tyneburg says: 'Anyone with a brain and a basic interest in their community knows the many great things the Montrose family have done for Truvy. Let's get behind this magazine.' And Ted in Groverville says: 'Why did they cancel *Dallas*, it was brilliant.' I don't know, Ted, but thanks for the many handwritten letters you've sent us on this.

"So, Kayla: bit of a love-in for the Montrose family there. And

people pledging their advertising dollars for *The Truvian*. It looks like your campaign might have misjudged the mood somewhat, huh?”

“Oh shut up, Tucker,” she said.

“And I didn’t even play the military card that Jess’s lovely husband Brandon is a veteran,” said April.

“Her husband was in the military?” said Tucker.

“Oops.”

“How is that relevant?” said Kayla.

“Two duties of Iraq,” said April. “Silver Star and everything. But I didn’t want to mention that. I believe he got fired from Huckleberry Moon Beers and Spirits this afternoon because he told them he might be an itsy bit late for work while he delivered *The Truvian*. Those little men down at that corporation didn’t like the fact that Jess or Montrose Media were associated with the magazine. Maybe they should stop drinking all that beer and see the world as it is. But I shouldn’t have mentioned that either. Oops.”

“Ouch,” said Tucker. “Let’s run a new poll. How about: are you proud or ashamed to live in America? It’s yes or no; this question identifies as binary. Hideously straight, as you wokeys might call it. Vote now!”

“Drop dead, Tucker,” said Kayla. “Why don’t you take a stand for once instead of backing whichever guest you think the listeners like?”

“Didn’t notice you complaining when I was laying into Jess a few months back,” he said. “Maybe you didn’t hear but eighty per cent of our listeners said they backed Jess over you in that showdown.”

“What are they, idiots? In fact, you’re all idiots. You’re all idiots and everything is racist. Privileged, white media idiots perpetuating Montrose Media, which has to be one of the most racist corporations in the state. You can all go to hell, and I will

not rest until you are closed down!"

She stormed out of the studio, the omnipresent crash helmet she was clutching bashing into various surfaces as she did so. The listeners were treated to the sound of the door slamming.

"I think she prefers it when things are going her way," said April.

"Kayla Cobb has left the building," said Tucker. "Wow, April, what have you done?"

"One down, one to go," she said. "Enough about politics, Tucker, let's talk about you..."

**

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“I’m Black. I was born in the 80s. My world was filled with black artists, athletes, musicians, singers, actors, writers, directors, political figures, on and on. I NEVER once thought I was limited in life because of the color of my skin. Fast forward to today and they are teaching young black kids that their race, gender, and sexuality is a curse.”

YouTube comment

**

Connie and I were sitting in my office and finishing some warm champagne. We’d been talking for about twenty minutes.

“And now you know it all,” she said.

“I thank you for trusting me,” I said.

“There’s no secrets in that little tale, not really. You’ve saved me, having me in here. I’ve loved every day. And I know I can be a pain in the ass but... Well, there is no ‘but’, I can just be a pain in the ass.”

“Everyone here loves you.” I looked at my phone: the presses were due to roll in an hour. “Shoot. It’s do or die time. What do you say to my idea?”

She puffed out her cheeks. “It’s a big step, Jess. A big, big step.”

“I know. But like you said, it’s going to happen one way or another.”

My whole body was tensed. *Please please please say yes.*

“Well, if I’m going to give it to anyone, I’d like it to be you, Porter and *The Truvian*,” she said.

“Yes! I love you.” I was already dialing a number on my phone.

“Hello?” said a slightly tipsy voice over a background of bar noise.

“Rusty, come back to the office, and bring your camera. And make sure there’s some film in that thing.”

“It’s digital.”

“Well, make sure there’s some digital in it.”

“Do I have to come back? I’m playing beer pong.”

“If you don’t you will regret it for the rest of your life. And that’s not a threat, it’s just a fact. You’ll see what I mean. Trust me.”

“All right,” he said. “I’m intrigued. I’ll be there in ten.”

Next I called Brandon. He answered mid-war anecdote. “And then Stevie said I don’t give a rat’s ass about the hole in my leg, who’s got my sandwich?”

“Hey, sounds like you’re having fun,” I said. “So who *did* have his sandwich?”

“The camel! Hi hun, you still in the office?”

“Yes... It’s been an interesting afternoon. I’ll tell you later. Right now I have a question.”

“Oh?”

“That final deadline... how final is it exactly?”

**

Chapter Thirty-Nine

So, Ben had granted me an extra 90 minutes. If I missed it, there would be no *Truvian*. We'd default on all the advertisers' cash and our name would be mud to anyone else who might have considered spending money with us in future (?) issues.

The plan had been for April to come back and finish the mag but April was still AWOL. Now that the mayhem in the street had faded away I found myself worrying about her. She hadn't even sent a text.

Some instinct made me tune in to Truvy FM on my phone in the hope of clues, even though Tucker's Show was due to have finished.

I was instantly greeted with April's voice.

"I think summer is such a lovely season, don't you, listeners? Even though Georgia can be very uncomfortable in the heat. Do you know a funny little trick my grandmother taught me? On hot nights, she would fill a bowl with ice and place it in front of a fan and as it blew it made things lovely and cool. Here's another song..."

I had no idea what was going on at the tower but April was alive and seemingly in charge of Georgia's fifth most popular radio show.

Back to business. First I had to write a new cover *story*. The biggest story of my career. And I had an hour and a half to do it.

I opened a new Word doc, took a deep breath, and began.

**

Fifty-five minutes later I printed off my story, stood over it with a red pen and edited the hell out of it. Then I took in the changes, duplicated a layout of one of the other four-page features and

somehow imported the new photos Rusty had just taken. I had no idea what I was doing and the imported pics came in tiny, and then massively big, and then I couldn't crop them. When I pasted the text into a text box it didn't appear, and then it appeared but was superimposed *over* the pictures. And then I clicked something and all the pictures disappeared. Arrghhhhhh. This was something out of a nightmare. What a time to be in the middle of a champagne comedown.

My phone was ringing. Urk. There were so many people this could be and none of them was good news. Out of curiosity, I answered.

“Hello?”

“Jessica, this is Mary West.”

“Mary, how lovely to hear from you. Can we talk some other time because I am rather tied up.”

“Jessica, I am pulling up to Jupiter House with Tom Christie from security and several board members and I have reason to believe you are inside. Please let us in to our property, we need to escort you off the premises.”

Oh darn.

“Can’t do that, Mary,” I said. “By the way, you’re gonna love issue one.”

I hung up.

I made my approximately eighty-seventh trip of the day to the window and saw some serious-looking black SUV parked on the yellow lines. Some very solid guy in a dark suit and with one of those ridiculous twirly twirly wires behind his ear that looks like a long bit of fusilli was getting out of the driver’s seat. Haven’t they heard of bluetooth? Was he wearing a Walkman from the 80s? *Concentrate, Jessica, this is serious.*

Serious Guy – obviously this Tom Christie character everyone pooped their pants about – opened one of the back doors and out

stepped Bloody Mary, who was on her cell.

Back at my laptop I saw something so glorious that I actually laughed, and not in madness like usually, but from happiness. I saw that the story was suddenly appearing on the page, and running beautifully around the new pictures, and that it fitted perfectly. I decided not to fiddle around with it any more. I did a spellcheck, turned the layout into a PDF and sent it to Brandon and the boys

Just the cover left now.

I could hear buzzers sound in distant parts of the building as Mary's heavy mob started trying to get other tenants to let them in. One was a day nursery, who didn't let anyone in unless they were on their list. Another was a charity for the homeless but they didn't open on Thursdays. And the other was us.

I still needed to buy myself time so I hurried to the flimsy door and locked it. My brief bit of good luck seemed to have deserted me though because I could hear the elevator grinding around in its shaft out there. They were in.

Surely they wouldn't kick the door down once they got up here. Well, maybe Tom Christie would. I'd never met him but I'd seen his profile on LinkedIn and his job title was given as "Lifesaver". His photo was a blurry image of him throwing himself between some African president and a gunman. I'm guessing Tom wouldn't care about Jenna's Law or any other local ordinances. He would be more of an "ask forgiveness, not permission" kinda guy.

Back to the cover, the most important page, the shopfront. It would mean removing that beautiful montage but *c'est la guerre* and all that. And talking of wars and the French, it sounded like Napoleon's Great Army were storming their way down the corridor. On horses. I was braced for some loud knocking and that is just what I got. The wood actually shook.

“Jessica, this is Tom Christie from Montrose Media. Let us in.” I imported the cover picture and it was tiny. Oh hell, what if I imported it wrongly and this was as big as it was going to get? I needed to blow it up. I needed to keep my head. I needed to pee.

“JESS,” said Tom. “On the count of three. ONE!”

That was not a strong door. Tom would only have to lean on it for it to bust open.

“You are forbidden from transmitting any pages from these premises,” he called. “TWO!”

Why did he give me only three? That was so mean. Ten would have been fairer. Five minimum.

“Your misguided mission is over, Jessica,” Mary said. “Don’t make this worse for yourself.”

Worse for myself? It could only get worse for myself if I had turned the cover into a porn shot, added a speech bubble saying “I love Montrose Media” and then set fire to the building on my way out.

Please, God, this whole journey has not been easy so please just give me the tiniest of breaks right now.

After the cover photo had got bigger, smaller and totally vanished half a dozen more times I smacked my keyboard in anger.

And that made it fit. Perfectly.

I bashed out a headline and standfirst and thought Jess you really have to go back to church because you surely owe the big man. I turned the cover into a PDF and hit the send button.

Trying to connect... Trying to connect...

“JESSICA! OPEN UP NOW OR I AM COMING IN!” hollered Tom.

Trying to connect...

Trying to connect...

“THREE!”

Chapter Forty

“Sandia National Laboratories sent white male executives to a three-day reeducation camp, where they were told that “white male culture” was analogous to the KKK, white supremacists, and mass killings. The executives were forced to renounce their “white male privilege” and to write letters of apology to fictitious women and people of color.”

Christopher F Rufo, City Journal, August 22 2021

**

I drove to the hospital to collect Porter. On the way I listened to the April/Kayla showdown on demand on my phone. I think my jaw was open for the full fifteen minutes of their argument.

Porter was ready to leave just as I arrived. His lawyer had already been in and he'd been released on bail.

“Nice bandage,” I said. It covered one side of his head.

“Glad you think it’s funny,” he said. “It hurts like hell.”

“Exactly what favorable outcome did you imagine when you started waving a shotgun at several hundred peaceful protesters? I’d say you got off lightly. You could have been picked off by a SWAT team.”

“Well, one fewer straight white man, no big loss. By the way, thank you and well done today. But today I am mostly thanking myself for hiring you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You put the mag to bed?”

“It was close – I had Mary and her little helpers banging on the door – but yep.”

“Tell me that story tomorrow. Where to?”

“I’ll drop you home. And then I have to go and collect my friend

April, who says she is still at the radio station.”

“What? I thought she was just dropping in as a guest.”

“Yeah, well, there’s been a slight development down there.”

“On Tucker’s show?” he said, sounding alarmed.

“Yes, April took him apart. He was in tears. It was beautiful.”

“Oh my God. Get us down to the studio. I have to find out what’s going on. He’s a sensitive boy.”

“Tucker? Sensitive? Porter, what are you talking about?”

**

Chapter Forty-One

When we got to the tower, we found the production crew staring dumbfounded through the glass as April sat there, playing a song from her phone into a mic. The presenter who was meant to be doing the slot after Tucker just watched with everyone else.

“What’s going on?” I said.

“She’s broken the ratings,” said the presenter. “They’re off the scale.”

“They’re levelling off now,” said Xena, the young woman I’d met on that first, fateful trip to the tower. “I think people are getting bored with her just playing *In The Air Tonight* over and over.”

“How many times has she played it?” I said.

“This is number nine.”

“Okay... And why are you letting her?”

The other guy just lifted an arm and pointed feebly at April. “Your friend... she’s crazy. First she destroyed Kayla Cobb and then she destroyed Tucker. She told the listeners that he’s really called Melvin Spurtle and he lives with his mom, who she knows; she redesigned her home, apparently. April called his mom live on air and she told Tucker slash Melvin that he needed to tidy up his bedroom before his Dungeons and Dragons pals come over tomorrow night. And that was just the start of it. Tucker tried to cut to someone else but he was in a kind of trance. We all were. And then we saw the ratings were going up and up as people told their friends and more and more people tuned in and we, er, left well alone until Tucker fainted...”

“Uh huh,” I said. Of all the mad things I’d seen April do, this might not have even been in the top five. “And where is Tucker now?”

The guy gestured to a sofa, where Tucker was lying down. Porter had sat next to him and they were comparing injuries and

grievances. Wow, Porter really did care about his staff. Or *former* staff, given that he had been fired from Montrose Media.

“And then she started playing *In The Air Tonight* over and over... and doing the drumming.”

“She always does the drumming,” I said. “Trust me, she is totally harmless. As long as you don’t get on the wrong side of her.”

April spotted me and gave me a big cheery wave.

“Go in and take back your show,” I told the presenter. “Go on, you can do it.”

He was frozen to the spot for a while, but then found the courage and entered the studio with the trepidation of a cop approaching a hostage situation.

April was doing the drum solo.

“Hey!” she said. “I’m sorry to cut into your show by, oh dear, how much?”

“About an hour and forty five minutes but it’s all good,” he said, palms up in surrender.

“We’re not still on air, are we?”

“Yes.”

“Oops. My bad. I’m having such a good time. Well, I don’t wish to outstay my welcome.” She leaned into her mic and said: “Well, I’d like to thank y’all for being so kind and calling in with your opinions and what-not. And for letting me play my favorite song. Why don’t you practice that drum solo at home, taking care no pets or elderly relatives are within striking distance. This is me, April Meadows, signing out.”

April and I hugged as she came through to the back room.

“You saved me,” I said.

“I loved every minute.” She threw her hands up to her cheeks in horror. “Oh my gosh, I completely forgot to come back and finish the mag!”

“It’s all good; the mag is complete. You did the harder job.”

“Phew, I’m glad it worked out.” She looked at Tucker, who was conscious but lying on his side of the floor. “And Tucker is a pussycat. You all right there, Tucker?”

“Fine.”

“So April,” I said, steering her away to a private corner. “How did you know all that political stuff? That was some advanced debating, girl.”

“Well, missy, I’ve been trying to tell you about my new evening class but every time I start you go off on one about work.”

“I’m sorry. So please, what is the new evening class?”

“It’s called Advanced Counter Arguments to The Doctrines of Post-Progressive Social Movements.”

“Right...” I said, because that’s all I was capable of saying. “What happened to Crazy Cupcakes?”

“I couldn’t do Tuesdays.”

And that is perhaps how many a political revolutionary is born: they couldn’t do Tuesdays.

“And how did you know about all that school board stuff?”

“Let’s just say one of your school moms – the ones you were so irked I was friends with – might have leaked me the skinny. I’ve been collecting all this stuff to show you but again, you won’t even reply to my texts.”

“I’m sorry. Sorry sorry sorry sorry!”

I asked Porter if I could have a private word. April slunk off to leave the seating area to us. We found a sofa that didn’t have Tucker slumped on it and began to talk in hushed tones.

“Unfinished business,” I said.

“Whatever it is, can it wait? I have nothing left.”

He did look spent but I heard myself say: “I have waited long enough for these answers. Firstly, I’m guessing it was you who sent me the anonymous text the day I nearly got eaten by an

alligator? Giving me Annalee's supposedly real address?"

"Jess, I know nothing of any text message."

"I just wish you'd sent it to me an hour earlier. You could have spared me a near death experience with a bunch of hillbillies and their pet alligator."

He managed a chuckle. "Life's rich pageant." But then he remembered to look serious. "Not that I sent you any message." He was having trouble keeping his eyes open and I thought he might fall asleep in front of me. I had so many questions I needed to ask him but now was not the time.

"Are we going, Uncle Porter?" asked Tucker, who had got to his feet.

"Uncle?" I said.

"Yes, he's my nephew," said Porter, raising an eyebrow to me.

"It was nice to meet you, Mr Montrose," said April.

"Porter, please. Likewise." He started to lead Tucker away. It was hard to know who was the most fragile. "Come on, Melvin, let's go see your mother. And maybe we'll get a slice of caramel pecan pie on the way, how's that sound?"

"That's my favorite, Uncle Porter."

"I know, son, I know..." He looked over his shoulder at me. "I'll see you around, Jess. You did good, kid."

"See me around? What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, the whole 'us being fired' thing? You do remember that, I take it? I doubt that my firing a gun at woke protesters will have improved my chances of reinstatement."

"I have a feeling they *will* reinstate us, when they see our cover story."

This threw Porter. "Cover story...? 'Your Guide to Truvy at Night'?"

I laughed. "Porter, pick up a copy at the first newsstand you see tomorrow."

“Are you saying there’s a cover story I didn’t approve?”

“Hmmm, you did kinda remove yourself from the editorial process this afternoon.”

“I did have a drink, didn’t I?”

“Yes. And a shotgun.”

“I apologize. That was unprofessional. I may need to address my drinking.”

“Go home. But find a newsstand first thing.”

“I will. Oh, I will.” He and Tucker ambled away. “Newsstand... Unapproved cover story... She’s got me intrigued now, Tucker...”

**

Chapter Forty-Two

I went home to try to snatch a few hours' sleep before my rendezvous with Brandon and Jackson. *Woke Judge* was on. I poured a large glass of red wine.

"Mr Baines," judge Cassie was saying, "you are clearly as guilty as hell of murdering that powerful white man, but it's mardi gras outside and you are a gay man so get out of my court room and party, mister!"

The court burst into applause and a mariachi band appeared from nowhere. Mr Baines was protesting that he wasn't a gay man but nobody heard him.

"Silence in court!" ordered Cassie. "And you, Mister Kobrovsky, you might be the plaintiff, rather than the defendant, but I find you guilty of transgressions of the past. Not just transgressions but what I call *mansgressions*. That's right, mister, for the sins committed by your great great grandaddy I order you to pay a million dollars to a charity of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's choice. And take a knee, sir, right now!"

Mr Kobrovsky began throttling his lawyer and had to be held back by a couple of cops, who forced him to kneel.

Bedtime.

**

Chapter Forty-Three

At 6am I was sitting on the kerb outside a diner called The Truvy Hotpot, a cappuccino in my hand, watching the day begin. Traffic was light and lazy, drivers just giving each other space and a little time to wake up.

A couple of bums drifted around on the other side of the street, shouting at each other, but they didn't bother me. I felt fearless but a little chilly: I put the hood up on my trackie top and dug my hands into the pockets.

I had too much nervous energy buzzing around in me and so I got up to pace. I was worried that after all those months of planning and producing *The Truvian*, the most important part – the cover – had been knocked together by me and me alone in two minutes. I just hoped there weren't any spelling mistakes. Please please please no spelling mistakes.

I stood up and peered through the diner windows. Its big clock with plastic muffins instead of numbers showed it was 6.01am. When I looked back at the road, there was a white box truck pulling into the lay-by. I even got a little honk. Brandon at the wheel, as happy as if he were driving a tank. And Jackson with his feet up on the dashboard and wearing some newly acquired baseball cap.

“Hey lady,” said Bran, as we hugged.

“Breakfast treats for the newsboys,” I said, handing them a bag of goodies and a tray of coffee.

“I can have coffee?” said Jackson.

“Today you are a man, my son,” said Brandon. “Fill your boots. You might find sugar helps.”

“Whoa,” said Jackson, like he'd been handed the keys to Disney World.

“How was the journey?” I said.

“Easy,” said Brandon. “Kiddo here stayed awake the whole way. How was your day? Yesterday, I mean.”

“Well...” I began. “I will pick up the story just after Porter had been taken to hospital, the protesters had dispersed and all my crew were drinking away a five hundred dollar bar tab at Luigi’s.”

“Porter went to hospital?” said Jackson.

I realized they didn’t know any of this. So I gave them a rundown of the whole day, up until I returned to the newsroom to send the final pages.

“And as I was up there, I heard some rustling sound, like someone doing something and trying to be quiet about it. It was Connie, clearing out her cubbyhole.”

“Eww,” said Brandon.

“Oh grow up, Bran you know what I mean: her *storage space*.”

“Eww,” said Jackson. What are men like, really?

I punched my son on the arm. “Listen, will you?”

“I’m listening,” said Jackson, manically stirring a third sachet of sugar into his coffee.

“She tried to talk her way out of it but it was obvious she was leaving us. I said why don’t you tell me what’s really been going on?”

“And what *had* been going on?” said Brandon.

“Honey, did you even look at the front cover of the thirty-five thousand magazines you’ve been driving across Georgia?”

“No, they’re all sealed up and I didn’t want to cut ‘em open.”

We all looked at each other and then as one we marched quickly to the rear of the truck. Brandon threw open the doors and climbed inside. He found a tool and cut open a stack of the magazines, which filled the interior.

He hopped down and handed me the mag. My whopping great, 192-page mag.

I closed my eyes then slowly started opening them through a widening squint.

“Wow, great cover,” said Jackson.

I took a deep breath and just opened my peepers and faced the music. Rusty’s characterful, soulful portrait of Connie stared back at me. There was wisdom, wit and vulnerability in that face. He’d even made her pose so that one of the abandoned typewriters was visible in the reflection of her glasses.

Brandon read out the main coverline: “ANNALEE CALHOUN. First interview in 53 years. World exclusive.’ What the hell, Jess? Annalee Calhoun, as in the lady who wrote that famous book?”

“Wow,” said Jackson. He read the rest of it: “The legendary writer on her wilderness years, her regrets and her first novel since *How My Friends Dance*. ”

“I don’t get it,” said Brandon. “I thought you couldn’t find her?”

“I couldn’t,” I said. “But she found *me*. This...” I put my finger on the cover. “...is Connie Gordon.”

“Your annoying news editor?”

“My annoying but indispensable news editor.”

“Now I’m really lost.”

“You remember that day I drove out to find Annalee and one of the woke mob gave me a bogus address and I nearly got eaten by an alligator?”

“If I’d forgotten *that* you could *really* put me down as one of those husbands that don’t listen.”

“Okay, and then I was steadying my nerves at a diner when I got a text that gave me another address for Annalee? And I went there and posted a desperate begging note through the door, saying I know you’ve been a recluse for the past five decades but would you mind doing an interview for our itty bitty non-existent magazine?”

“Yep, remember.”

“I feel amazing,” said Jackson, froth around his upper lip. “But your story is, too, mom. Go on.”

“No more sugar, please, mister. So, the next day, Connie Gordon arrives unannounced in the office and I assume she’s another of Porter’s old pals. But when Connie and Porter bumped *into* each other they acted like they’d never met before. Acted *weird*, too.”

“Oh yes, the day of the two drunk Shakespeares,” said Jackson.

“How I wish I had that on film,” I said. “Porter had known I was heading out to search for Annalee that day because I mentioned it in the news conference. That’s why he texted me from some burner phone he must have.”

“Porter with a burner phone?”

“He acts ancient but he’s a sly old fox, believe me.”

“How did he know where Annalee lived?”

“I’ll get to that. You see, when I was waiting for Porter at the hospital, I pulled out my copy of *How My Friends Dance*. And what fell out of that beloved book but a musty old newspaper cutting. I have a nasty feeling I might have poached it from our library at the height of my teenage Annalee obsession. If so, I ask forgiveness of the Truvy Library Service.”

“Get on with it, mom.”

“It was a very interesting article in which the interviewer from the *New York Globe* followed Truvy girl Annalee Calhoun, author of the sensational new novel *How My Friends Dance*, around New York to get the smalltown ingénue’s thoughts on the Big Apple.”

“And Porter was the interviewer?” said Brandon.

“You got it. Annalee was in New York for a week to promote the book and Porter, the old devil, offered to be her guide for forty-eight hours. By coincidence they were both from Truvy and so he played the Truvy card – a good old Georgia boy and girl looking

askance at city life. She took the bait.

“Printed on the same page as Porter’s article was one by Annalee herself, giving *her* take on the bright lights. She says he took her to the so-called Hard Hat Riot involving construction workers and students and had to shield her when things turned nasty. Ah, knight in shining armor.”

“And?” said Bran.

“And romance blossomed over a long weekend. But she was young and not ready to move to New York and so at the end of the book tour she returned to Truvy. They rekindled the flames when he came back south to run the papers here and they were an item for some years. But it was volatile and she was always on at him about his drinking and they split up and he got married and divorced and had kids and that was that.

“But he’d always had a thing for her and sent me that text in the hope I could locate her, interview her and find out what she was up to. Maybe even if she was single, who knows? Crafty, huh? This is all Annalee’s theory anyway: Porter didn’t want to tell me much when I saw him last night. But you can bet Porter and Annalee have been meeting in secret ever since that brief encounter in the office.”

“Porter must have nearly had a heart attack when he saw her that day,” said Brandon.

“I know, right? No wonder neither of them could string a sentence together. He sure as hell hadn’t been expecting her to do something crazy like walk into the office and demand that we employ her. The craziness of their reactions didn’t fully occur to me until I was having that disastrous meal with April, when it just popped into my head. You see, I’d assumed that Connie was an old pal of Porter and that he had sent her in to work for us. But that obviously wasn’t true. So where the hell had she come from? I hadn’t put out any pleas on social media for freelance staff.

“It was another piece that helped me complete the jigsaw. Another one was when Connie lay over the cables in the street. Just like the girl in *How My Friends Dance* lay over the foundations of the gym that she didn’t want built.”

“Why didn’t she want the gym built?”

“It’s complicated,” I said. “Read the book. Oh, and Connie made reference yesterday to Porter being a ‘man of action’, which also sounded alarm bells. What evidence did she have that Porter was a man of action, unless by action she meant unscrewing the cap of his hipflask? She was obviously thinking back to 1970, when she came to New York and he kept her safe during that riot.

“Oh and another thing, Connie Gordon is a minor character in *How My Friends Dance*. She reminded me of that when I was interviewing her yesterday. I’d forgotten. She was like, ‘Call yourself a superfan, Jess?’”

“You need to read it again,” said Jackson. “Wow, I’m flying.”

“No more coffee, young man.”

“So why did she come in to the office if she’s such a recluse?” said Jackson.

“She’d grown *tired* of being a recluse,” I said. “She said: ‘Jess, when I got your note asking for an interview it just made me think that life is passing me by and that I had maybe done enough staring at trees and talking to my cat. It made me think hey, I could bluff my way as a journalist, no disrespect intended. Writing articles must be easier than writing a novel. It takes a long time to write a *novel*.’ I said: ‘Yeah, fifty-three years in your case’. So she worked for us for a couple of weeks and then decided that was enough, that she was happy being a recluse. And that’s when I caught her clearing out her things.’”

“Wasn’t she worried that she’d bump into Porter? She must have known he owned half the newspapers in Georgia.”

“In the note I pushed through her door I included *The Truvian’s*

website address, just a bit of puff ahead of its launch, really. She went on to the site to check it *wasn't* one of Porter's titles and saw it was owned by Southern Magnolia Publishing, which is just some bogus name Porter came up with so our new venture wasn't tainted with the Montrose name."

"Ouch," said Brandon. "So she thought it was safe to come in?"

"Exactly. She had no idea the mag she was freelancing for was owned by her old flame."

"What's an old flame?" asked Jackson.

"Boy, when you get home that XBox is going out the window and we're buying you a set of dictionaries," I said.

"What's a dictionary?"

"Hilarious. So now you know everything. I confronted Annalee yesterday with all my little pieces of the jigsaw and she filled in the rest. *And I* talked her into giving us the interview. She's got a new book in the works and she's got to publicize it some time. Plus she likes Porter and maybe feels bad about ending their relationship because of his drinking. Maybe she thinks that giving his magazine a world exclusive is a way of saying sorry."

"Are they going to get back together?" said Jackson.

"I've no idea but she kept smiling when she spoke of the old dog," I said.

"He's still on the bottle though."

"True. But after the events of yesterday afternoon I think he might finally seek help. And talking of help: my big, strong men, your time has come..."

"Are you about to say *The Truvian* isn't going to deliver itself?"

I reached into my pocket and produced two keys. "These are two copies of a masterkey that can open every Montrose vending machine. Birdie found them in a drawer months ago and I have personally tested them on newsracks around Truvy. Do not lose yours. Do not leave either of them in a lock somewhere. Capiche?"

“Capiche,” said Jackson, taking his. “Whatever that means.”

“And here are two copies of a map with twenty Montrose vending machines marked on it. Go forth and deliver.”

“Only twenty machines?” said Brandon. “And how about the ten thousand household deliveries?”

“I’m hoping that word of my Annalee exclusive will spread like wildfire and Mary and her goons come *begging* us to use their pickup points. I doubt they’ll be so hostile when they realize they own one of the biggest culture stories of the twenty-first century. Don’t forget, Montrose Media still own us; Porter didn’t buy us out. All we need is their thumbs up and we can turn everything in that delivery truck over to Montrose’s usual distributors.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then we’re in big trouble. Even if we were capable of delivering them ourselves – which might even be possible – Montrose Media would be calling up every bar and restaurant in the city, warning them against stocking our magazine, freezing us out.”

“So we’re still not out the woods?”

“Oh no. Things did get pretty hostile yesterday when Mary and her goombahs tried to break into the newsroom.”

“Break in?” said Jackson.

“Yeah, I might have sort of locked them out. And then the head of security broke the door down. But I’d sent the last page and had climbed out the window on to the flat roof. Thankfully Rusty had crowbarred the window open to give the Barefoot Gardener access the other day.”

“Then what?” said Bran. “You hid among the shrubbery?”

“Nope, I quietly closed the window and walked across the roofs to JB’s, which happens to have a very nicely maintained fire escape down to the street. And voila, a great escape.”

“Mom, you’re such a badass,” said Jackson.

Brandon had finished his second danish and clapped his hands

together to get rid of the crumbs.

“Well,” he said, “you always say we don’t do enough things together. This is a real family project.”

“Thank you, guys,” I said. “How can I ever repay you?”

“Well, you could drive me to Charleston some time so I can pick up the Cherokee,” said Bran.

“Oh shoot, I hadn’t thought about your car.”

“Forget about it, lady. Go home and get some sleep.”

Bran was right. My Duracell bunny was running low (under 40s, look on YouTube). I waved them goodbye as they pulled out into traffic and it was only then that the enormity of it all started to sink in: the exclusive interview with Annalee; the media storm that was about to break; Porter’s bloody stand and the fact we had used Montrose newsstands and premises to produce a magazine they had forbidden us to make. I had to hope that the ends justified the means and that Montrose Media saw what they had on their hands and welcomed us back. Knowing my luck, Mary would never have heard of Annalee Calhoun or *How My Friends Dance* and would merely shrug as she laid eyes on the magazine.

“Why the hell is their cover story about their own news editor?”

Mary didn’t strike me as a reader.

**

Chapter Forty-Four

Three months later

I'd like to tell you that Porter bought us out from Montrose Media and we were free from its evil clutches forever. Sadly, that would not be true. But we couldn't have it both ways: we'd wanted to use their newsstands and premises and we'd have been in *big* trouble if we then tried to claim the product was ours. Fraud-sized trouble.

You see, my plan had worked: Brandon and Jackson made their dropoffs to twenty vending machines and the story spread quickly: we had an exclusive interview with Annalee Calhoun, and she was writing a new book.

By midday I was fielding calls from local media, then national media, then international media. And for once, *social* media was our ally.

Even Mary called me up to congratulate me. It turned out that even she recognized a world exclusive when she saw one, even if she didn't know what "world exclusive" meant ("Only *we* have got the story? Is that a good thing? I mean, if it was any good, wouldn't everyone else be running it, too?").

I bit my tongue. And of course, when she asked where the rest of the magazines were, I had no choice but to admit they were sitting on an industrial estate with nowhere to go. When she demanded to pick them up and distribute them, I had to concede defeat and reveal the truck's location. It was a relief, frankly.

And I'd like to tell you that I never saw Mary again, but I was seeing more and more of her, and yes, still in unlikely places (in the next chair at the hairdressers!?? And it sure as hell looked like her serving me vanilla sticks at Auntie Fanny's Pretzel Palace).

I'd like to have told you about April's friend Batesy, and my perfect sister, and my parents and what happened the next time

I went to Angela and Brig's for dinner (it turns out beer is nearly as tongue loosening for you as wine).

I'd like to tell you Annalee and I were close friends but she hadn't replied to my emails and I let it go. The media went round to Annalee's house but they finally got bored with watching what was or seemed to be an empty house. You couldn't just rock up to the home of a recluse and demand a chat. And I'd like to tell you that I'd seen her new book in the shops but, well, she's a bit of a slouch when it comes to publishing novels, isn't she?

I'd like to tell you that Annalee and Porter rekindled their long dormant romance and were bantering away in that weird way of theirs. But I can't. Because that's their private business and you couldn't prise gossip out of Porter with a car jack in his mouth. But I have my suspicions.

And I'd like to tell you the wokery died down at Jackson's school, and that I was best buddies with the woke moms again. But that didn't happen either. Life has its rough edges.

One thing I *can* tell you is that Porter didn't go to jail over the gun incident. He was put on probation, like some teenage hoodlum. Ah, I had a lot of fun ribbing him about that. For his birthday I bought him a bandana and a toy switchblade.

They say that to tell a good story you should start it as late as possible and finish as early as possible (unless you are Clyde Kinnard, owner of Tickle My Pickle, who subscribes to a different philosophy altogether) so I kinda think this is the right place to end. Our final scene sees me taking the elevator up the radio tower one afternoon in September and hurrying into the production office, a little sweaty and a little stressed.

I said hi to the crew and tried to enter the studio silently but was unaware that for some reason a crash helmet had been placed on the floor, just inside the door, and it made an almighty whack.

"Please excuse the sound effects," said Kayla into her

microphone. “That’s my co-presenter kicking the bucket.”

“Sorry everyone,” I announced to our listeners. “I couldn’t find a parking space anywhere. Tried using my white privilege – nothing.”

“Even white privilege cannot find you a parking space in downtown Truvy City in rush hour, Jess, you know that.”

“But to make up for it, Kayla, I did buy you a culturally non-appropriated caramel latte.”

“I will be reading up on how fair trade that coffee is later, Jess, but I shall attempt to enjoy it in the meantime.”

Yep, Kayla and I had our own show on Montrose Radio. Tucker’s old drivetime slot, in fact. I wouldn’t say we were pals (what she had done on the school boards precluded that, although she had resigned from Truvy High’s) but the format kinda worked and we did have an odd chemistry. So when Mary suggested it, I’d gone along with it. And like they say, keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

“What did I miss?” I said, sitting down and putting my headphones on.

“Tucker’s Agony Uncle spot was a total doozy and he was very upset you weren’t here. It was emotional.”

I saw that Tucker was in the adjoining studio. I waved through the glass at him.

“Did you fix any broken hearts, Tucker?” I asked.

Tucker hit a switch to patch himself into our show. “You missed a good one, Jess. We had a Madison and Mike phone in. They were on the verge of splitting up because he was training to become a vet, his lifelong ambition, but she suffers from pet allergies. Mike said on air that he didn’t want to lose her and that he would drop out of his degree course and do something else.”

“That is so romantic,” I said. “What’s he going to do now?”

“Sewage treatment.”

“Oh that’s lovely,” I said. “Well, the idea is lovely anyway.”

“I was in tears, Jess. Those two just seemed so close.”

“Yes, let’s hope they’re able to stay close, what with the sewage and all,” I said.

“It’s true love,” said Tucker, a little gooey eyed.

On that afternoon when April had hung him out to dry, Tucker had experienced a true epiphany. He was now the sweetest, kindest man you ever met and he was a brilliant studio engineer and part-time contributor to our show.

He didn’t even seem to mind the loss of status, and responded patiently every time a listener called up and asked him why he didn’t have his own show any more. He’d even been round to watch football at our place with Brandon and Jackson.

“Coming up later, we have a very special guest dialing in,” I said. “Oh yes, fans of the hit TV show *Woke Judge* – and that includes me and Kayla, although we watch it through what she might call a different lens – make sure you are listening at around six o’clock when the judge herself, actress –”

“Actor,” corrected Kayla.

“–actor slash actress Babs Dixon herself will be on the line. And tomorrow we will be speaking to a woman called Jean, who lost her job with a health and video training firm after getting her hand trapped in her wheelchair.

“She has become a passionate advocate for able-bodied people who have suffered injuries while impersonating the disabled. I know that Kayla is really excited to hear what she has to say.”

“I sure am.”

“Okay, right now the mercury is taking a beating, people, so take it slow, drink some water and don’t overdo it out there. Commiz to all of you on the beltway, Truvy’s hottest spot: ninety degrees and rising. Stay cool right here with Kayla Cobb and me, Jess Harper, aka Strong Mom and The Privilege. Oh, and don’t

forget we have that storm heading our way tomorrow so get ready to batten down the hatches. If we watch each others' backs, we can ride this one out together, just like always..."

Hello!

Thank you so much for reading *Jessica Harper Is Not Woke*. I hope you enjoyed it.

You might be interested to know that all the quotes from the radio listeners who called in to attack Kayla's critical race theory exercise were taken from *real comments* left on a Youtube video about a similar experiment. <https://tinyurl.com/2d3t4zbh>

I read those comments for ten minutes and didn't find one that spoke positively of it.

If you enjoyed *Jessica Harper Is Not Woke* why not follow my blog at www.jessicaharper.me.

And above all, leaving a review on Amazon is a massive help to me.

Until next time,

Stay well,

Jess x