

Praises for

A DESTINY OF FOOLS

FINALIST – 2006 Florida First Coast Writers' Festival

“Sometimes I send some suggested corrections to entrants so the final manuscript is as clean as possible, but your writing is so clean that I would only be quibbling about commas here and there.”

—**Howard Denson**, Judge, Florida First Coast Writer’s Festival

EDITOR’S PICK – June 2004 Online Writing Workshop for SF/F/H

“There is a lot to like in this short chapter [four], which goes down as smooth as pricy bourbon but still has a wonderful bite.”

—**James Patrick Kelly**, Hugo Award Winner, *Think Like a Dinosaur*

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A DESTINY OF FOOLS

a novel by

Ejner Fulsang

Århus Publishing

To Julie

*They name their lands after themselves,
but, despite their wealth, people do not last,
they are like animals that perish.
This is the destiny of fools...*

—PSALMS 49

Chapter One

12:30 PM, Friday, 29 June 2085

The Times Building, West 97th & Amsterdam, New York City

Everyone thought it could see the future, or perhaps they just hoped it could. No one could pass casually by without peeking at the instrument readout, hoping for some clue, some hint of the fate that awaited the old building.

Inclinometers had been mandated by the City twenty-three years before when the problem of rotting foundations had become acute enough that the major buildings of Manhattan began to topple into their neighbors. City architects had done much analysis of the Times Building using arcane mathematical formulae and sophisticated computer simulations, the net of which was that if its departure from the vertical should ever reach two degrees, twenty-six minutes, a contract would be let for its demolition. Given its present angle of one degree, forty-four minutes, the old building had, in a sense, forty-two minutes left to live, a fact that played significantly into its residents' already quirky behavior. They were, after all, New Yorkers. More than just New Yorkers, they were of Manhattan, the queen of the five boroughs... or so they thought.

Sophie had been studying them ever since arriving from the New Mexico Territory. In her opinion, New Yorkers were the most interesting people the world had ever produced. That didn't mean she liked them especially, although she had become

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fond of several, one of whom was taking his daily communion with the inclinometer this very moment.

Charlie stooped to peer into the instrument face. He'd lifted his spectacles off the bridge of his nose to see through the bifocals, and he was thumping the bezel-ring with his fingertips. Old Charlie was a bezel-thumper. There were also face-knockers, housing-slappers, and base-kickers, all of whom shared the conviction that the instrument was withholding the truth, but if they could whack it right, it would confess.

"You can't beat the truth out of it, Charlie. If it knew anything, it'd tell you."

He panned around the room with his glasses. "Oh, hi, Sophie. Where you off to this lousy day?"

"Press conference. Down at the DA's."

"Still chasin' that Nydegger circus?"

She assumed an Al Jolson tap-dance posture. "The serial-killer you love to hate!"

"Shoulda slow-roasted him ages ago. What's the hold-up?"

"Who knows? Mahoney played the trial like he was an avenging angel. Now it's time to do the deed and he's back to bein' a bureaucrat. The people are plenty pissed."

"Can't blame 'em. You takin' public transportation?"

'Public transportation' was an office euphemism, coined by some wag when the City retired the last of the buses. 'Sure, we got public transportation. Feet. Everybody's got a pair!'

"Yeah, Roger says I need the exercise—gettin' a little too big in the caboose." She teased him with a little bump and grind and a lascivious wink.

He laughed and reddened. "You're either gonna make me young again or put me in an early grave, doll."

"See you later, Charlie. Don't let the building fall down till I get back."

She sat on a stone bench in the lobby and exchanged the studio's mandatory heels for comfortable walking sandals, then stepped outside onto the marble landing and smoothed her skirt. Charlie had been right—it was a lousy day. She pulled her sunglasses down her nose to get a truer sense of the sky. The bright blue of her morning run had turned to old dishwater. Just looking at it made her skin feel clammy. It would probably thundershower later on. She remembered her umbrella lying on the dresser, nine flights up. Fuck it, I'll just get wet. She pushed her sunglasses back into place and headed south.

She checked her watch. 12:45 P.M. About a block a minute when she subtracted the conversation with Charlie. Pretty good time considering her pace was limited by the humidity. Ahead she spotted a missing manhole in the center of the intersection.

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As she stepped off the sidewalk, the roadbed shifted under her weight, reminding her of spring ice on the lake back home. She froze, knees bent and arms spread for balance. Should she make a run for it? Before she could decide, the street swallowed in on itself, throwing her back hard onto her rump.

She was on a boat-shaped raft of asphalt that rested on a rubble slope left by the undermined substrate. It tilted downward about twenty degrees to form a rounded rim, beyond which a large hole yawned where 87th Street had once joined Amsterdam Avenue. A breath of chilled air displaced by falling debris swirled over her skin. Her ears filled with the hail of crashing rocks and lesser objects cascading into the hole until the slope regained its stability. Then a new sound—a muffled, throaty roar that she recalled from exploring the caverns back home—a subterranean river. A tidal sewer created when the subway tunnel system yielded to decades of neglect.

Her asphalt raft slid on the scree bringing her another foot closer to the rim. Smaller chunks of asphalt were left in her wake. She recalled the same phenomenon from Poe's *Descent into the Maelstrom*, a story that had terrified her as a little girl. The trick that saved Poe's hero would not serve her in this predicament. Her raft was more a sled than a piece of flotsam being carried with the current. But she might be able to find a more secure hold if she could get off the asphalt and dig her feet into the rubble.

It slid again, this time not stopping. "Shit! I gotta get off this thing!" She scrambled to its edge and pumped her legs up the slope. The raft disappeared over the rim, a moment later returning a muted 'whump' as it hit bottom.

She looked up to the blue-black cut where the raft had separated from the street. The rim was about fifteen feet above her. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself, then began taking careful steps, thrusting her toes deep into the gravel.

At the top, the rim protruded out from the scree slope just above her waist. She would have to vault up to the surface. *No problem, just like hoppin' a three-rail fence back home.* As she was about to initiate her leap, a shadow blocked the sky above her. A man, maybe fifty years old and stoop-shouldered, stared down at her.

"You that reporter?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Can the introductions wait till I get out of this damn hole?" She extended her hand.

He stared at it, backing away a little. "Uh... got a bad back."

She glared at him, then placed her bag on the road surface in front of her and hoisted herself out. The man grinned at her as she dusted herself off. Dirt and grit from the scree slope stuck to her skin, glued on by sweat until she could rinse off.

"I saw youse comin'. I always watch for youse on Fridays. Thought you was a goner today."

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She gave him a lame half-smile. “Yeah, well, sometimes you just get lucky.” He smelled of home-brew and old sweat.

“I was gonna ask youse to sign your picture.” He held out an old publicity photo, creased and faded. She was wearing one of the comic-book super heroine getups from Wardrobe.

She toyed with extending him her middle finger and mocking his basso voice saying, ‘Uh... got writer’s cramp.’ She took the picture and dug a felt tip pen from her bag. “Turn around and lean over.”

“Huh?”

“Turn around and lean over,” she said louder. “If you couldn’t help me out of the hole, maybe you can be a desk.”

He turned his back to her, head twisted over his shoulder to watch. She signed it, ‘*To Joe Homebrew, XXOO, Sophie Zapata!*’ Her normal practice was to put a lipstick kiss-mark under the signature. She decided against that this time.

She returned the picture, trying not to think about its fate. “Here ya go, fella. Gotta run now.” She turned in search of a detour.

Missing manholes often heralded new sinkholes. She chided her inattention. Still, it was unusual to see one this far north on the West Side. Feeding on rotten substrate, Manhattan Island’s flooded subways were undermining the streets above with the twice-daily ebb and flow of the tides. Years before, Park Avenue had collapsed from Gramercy Park all the way to Harlem, causing a mass migration from the East Side. Today, crews from City Maintenance fought to keep the West Side afloat, stoppering the remaining subway tunnels with injections of wet cement.

At West 81st Street Sophie paused in front of the old storefront for her weekly chat with Mona. She’d been making this trek for three years now. She did the math—a hundred fifty visits. That made Mona her closest friend since leaving the ranch in Capulin.

They had nothing in common, but Mona was honest in a way no human could approach, the honesty that comes of having no agenda, no thoughts, no brain.

Everything about Sophie was too something. Breasts too big. Waist too small. Ass too round. Her legs were the worst.

“They start on Monday and don’t stop till Sunday,” as the pundits were fond of saying.

“Nine heads tall, a perfect comic book super heroine,” they’d told her. “Six and a half is average.”

Mona was the marque every woman used to crave. No ‘too something’s.’ Everything about Mona was just right. Granted, she wasn’t much to look at anymore. The mice had chewed off her right foot, causing her to list back into the corner of the storefront. Her head was streaked with dried glue that once kept a wig in place. Her

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painted-on face had oxidized, leaving her with a pair of vacant dents for eyes, a bump for a nose, and a gash for a mouth.

Mona never said much... unless you knew how to listen. Then she said plenty. A mirror could show you your image, but Mona could tell you what you looked like. Sophie leaned her body, morphing her reflection onto Mona. Her eyes became Mona's eyes, her mouth Mona's mouth. The trick only worked on her face though. Mona's body was a stick and Sophie's lush contours a trespass. Sophie laughed at the thought of Mona in her old work clothes—steel-toed boots, chaps, a leather vest, and ten-gallon hat. “Sweetie, we'd have to paint your skinny butt with tar to keep you in the saddle.”

Could she still set a proper horse? It had been eight years since she'd traded Capulin's dormant cinder cones for the City's dormant skyscrapers. She missed the austere beauty of the New Mexico territory. The infrequent visitors to the area were awed by its vastness, especially easterners. They always took a lot of pictures that never came out. The land was too wild to be captured on film. It was something you had to feel, something the wind blew in your face.

Local legend claimed that Capulin volcano was the home of the Earth Mother. Local kids claimed that it was the logical place to give the Earth Mother an enema. They always dreamed of running away but never did.

Sophie had considered the idea when she was twelve. The ranch's board of governors had converted the schoolhouse into a warehouse, reasoning that since the community had no more kids under twelve, it was time the twelve year-olds started earning their keep. Besides, eighth grade was intellectual overkill for the two jobs the ranch had to offer: the cannery and the herd. Sophie wanted to write and knew she would find no inspiration among the chopped up vegetables, meat cubes, and corn starch. But the buffalo might have something to tell her, something worth putting on paper.

Long before Sophie was born, the Oklahoma-Texas panhandle region had been immensely proud of its Black Angus beef. A lot of Capulinos worked the ranches, herding cattle in the tradition of the vaqueros of the old west. It was in their blood, they said, from the old Spanish conquistadors who stayed behind after Coronado departed.

Then the water level in the Oglala Aquifer sank, leaving the windmills choking on dirt. Too impatient to wait for the next ice age to fill it up again, the Capulinos started harvesting the wild buffalo. That too was in their blood, they said, from the nomadic Apaches who roamed the territory with pack dogs and lived in tents made of buffalo hide.

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Buffalo got by on surface water and prairie shortgrass. The prairie took good care of its residents... so long as the Capulinos avoided the temptation to 'improve' it. Of course, that didn't stop a number of them from trying. Especially in the early days. Eventually, they realized that restoring the prairie was the best way to improve it. Fence was ripped out, wellheads sealed up, and pasture and crops left to grow over with prairie shortgrass. The buffalo thrived and then thrived some more. Folks said you could walk for miles on the lumpy brown carpet of buffalo. The Capulinos were happy.

Then they worried that the runaway buffalo population might bring famine and disease. The board of governors held meetings long into the night to discuss what to do. Their voices were stilled by a mournful howl far in the distance. Another howl answered, as far away but of different timbre.

"That ain't no coyote."

"Ain't had no wolves round these parts for nigh on a centry!"

"More like a pair a centries, I'd say."

"Gone home, folks," said the mayor. "Ain't gone be no famine."

Every spring the vaqueros would castrate and brand enough calves to provide a year's worth of meat for the cannery. The brands were not for ownership but to indicate the animal's birth year and ultimate destiny. Branding could get pretty exciting since the mama buffalos didn't appreciate being parted from their calves, even if it was just temporary. The calves generally agreed it was a pretty bad day also, but being buffalo, they forgot about it within a day or two.

The rest of the year consisted of periodically separating the mature steers and herding them back to the pasture to await slaughter. Capulin maintained fence around a two thousand-acre pasture convenient to the cannery. It was nicknamed the 'icehouse' because the cannery only had a small refrigeration plant, and pasturing was the easiest way to keep a large quantity of fresh meat on hand.

They never let the icehouse herd exceed a couple of dozen head of market weight steers. The forage stayed lush that way and the community only needed to put up enough hay for winter use for the dairy herd and the horses. Usually, they only slaughtered one or two steers at a time. But if they were getting ready for a shipment, they might slaughter the whole herd, sending the vaqueros out scrambling for replacements.

The vaqueros divided themselves into 'smokies' and drovers. The smokies were a morose, solitary lot, living off the land, only coming in from the range when they ran low on ammunition or salt. Their job was to trail the herd, publishing their locations with their campfires made smoky by the addition of a little fresh buffalo dung.

The drovers worked in teams of five or six, rounding up a few steers at a time and driving them back to the icehouse. Sophie decided being a drover was more

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suiting to her literary needs. Being out for only a month at a time allowed her to swap out her portable library and at least keep up with her reading.

By the time Sophie turned seventeen, all but three of the girls from her eighth grade class had decided that the reality of the range outweighed its romance. The winter of 2075-76 was severe. Sophie and Rita rode out one January day at sunup to relieve Pilar for breakfast. They found her rigid in the saddle, gray skin showing through a dusting of frost, eyes glazed open in a lonely stare.

Rita'd had enough by then. She abandoned her kit and pointed her horse at the cannery. Sophie stuck it out awhile longer, then in October of 2077, left the New Mexico territory headed east. Her goal was uncertain so long as she ended up on land that was still controlled by the Consolidated State of America—a city perhaps, a big one with lots of people.

Sophie had been in New York eight years since then—a little over four at Columbia's School of Journalism, a bit less than that at the Times.

She felt a cool spot on her backside. Checking it out in a storefront, she discovered a triangular flap torn in the seat of her dress. "Oh, shit!"

It was the last dress Irving had created for her—a howling white Rayolast number. Rayolast was weird stuff. It had an enamel finish although technically, it was a fabric. It stuck to your body, stretched like skin, and breathed. He'd put silly little straps on it that wouldn't stay up.

"They're not supposed to stay up—they're drop sleeves," Irving had said. "See?" He arranged them for her in the mirror. "Now, don't that look nice?"

The hem stopped at mid-thigh. "Doesn't leave much to the imagination," Sophie had said.

"We like to say it takes the imagination where it's not supposed to go." Then he'd winked. "Don't forget—legs together when ya sit!"

He'd told her to call him 'Oiv.' He pronounced it with a soft 'r' hidden inside where she couldn't find it—she just said 'Irv.' He had been a sweet old Jew. Used to commute all the way from Queens. "Them other bridges gonna fall—every one, I tell ya. They all got cables, but not the 59th Street! Cantilever! I'm a designer—I know! That bridge ain't ever gonna fall." So far he'd been right. The 59th Street Bridge was the only bridge over the East River that was still standing.

After his wife died, he moved into the Times apartments. "It's lonesome by yourself," he'd said. "I got nobody left." He joined her last fall—huge turnout for his funeral.

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One block east, Columbus Avenue ran adjacent to Central Park. The Children's Nursery, built in 2052 to service the greater New York City Region, was located there in Teddy Roosevelt Park where the Museum of Natural History used to be. An eight-foot fence of wrought iron spears marked the perimeter, and armed Department of Reproduction cops, 'DoRCs' in the popular parlance, patrolled the grounds, although 'patrolled' was too strong a word in this heat. Probably hanging out under a tree where they could keep an eye on the children.

Giant tree branches arched over the fence, providing welcome shade on sunny days. Though the sidewalk was broad, the park benches had been removed, replaced by 'NO LOITERING' signs. She took her time, peeking through the occasional gap in the privet hedge that grew inside the fence. Her patience was often rewarded by the distant view of children playing on the swings and slides. Maybe if she just stooped to adjust her sandal...

"Are you the reporter?" a voice asked.

She jerked herself erect and scanned the weed grass growing under the arches between the privet stems.

"Are you the reporter?" the voice said louder.

A small hand waved at her through the fence. She drew near the hand for a closer look.

"Better stay back," the voice said. "They'll see us."

Her head bobbed and weaved, trying to coax an image from the grassy veil. The voice had a blue eye and a forehead rusted with freckles. The grass parted, revealing a boy.

"You're in the viddies. We're not sposed to watch that channel, but I do. I seen you a bunch a times."

She extended her hand, palm down and fingers relaxed, as though she were offering a strange dog a salutational sniff. The boy stared at her hand, curious but not enough to extend his own. She pulled her hand back, covering her mouth.

"Can't you talk? Does somebody say your lines for you?"

"Yes... no, I say my own lines." She kept her voice as faint as possible without whispering. "How old are you?"

"Eight. How old are you?"

Her mind stalled under the question, unwilling to accept the burden of a child in the flesh. "Twenty-six," she said at last. "Uh... what's your name?"

"We're not supposed to tell anybody our names."

"Oh, sorry." She paused a moment. "I'm Sophie Zapata."

"I know."

A voice in the distance called, "Sean!"

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The little boy turned his head toward the call. “I have to go now.” He extracted himself from his hide and scampered off.

She watched him a moment, then called after him in a voice more meant for herself than him. “Goodbye, Sean.”

She’d almost touched his hand. What would it have felt like? She had big hands for a woman—one of hers would have cradled both of Sean’s hands. The park benches and a cloudburst started in unison at 78th Street. She picked out one that was under a tree and sat hugging herself in the rain.

Mama called it the ‘yarnin’s.’ “Gone get worse ever year till yer ‘bout fifty,” she’d told her before she left for New York. “Maybe let up some after that.” Mama’d spent thirty minutes in a desperate attempt to complete Sophie’s ‘fetchin’ up.’ It was the longest conversation they’d ever had.

“Sean.” Sounded Irish. He certainly looked it. How long would she be able to hold his image? She wished she could draw.

A half-hour later, the shower still hadn’t let up, so she sprinted the last block to the DA’s office. It felt good to rinse the grime off. She was going to be late—Millie would make sure that cost her.

At twenty-five stories, the DA’s building was one of the bigger ones still standing. The demolition industry had been thriving since the ‘70s, based on the popular view that knocking a building down was cheaper than having it fall down. It had an inclinometer in its lobby also.

She changed into her heels in the anteroom. A wet spot on the bench outlined her butt where she’d sat down. She wrung some of the wet out of the end of her hair, then smoothed her outfit before taking a few steps to settle into the studio’s ridiculous runway walk.

“Just put each foot directly in front of the other,” they’d said. “It’ll emphasize your hips.”

My hips need emphasizin’ like a sow needs a pecker.

Inside the lobby the air conditioner chilled her damp skin, raising goose-flesh. Eddie had attached the new tassels she’d given him last week to the epaulets of his maroon doorman’s jacket. The rest of the garment was shiny and threadbare, but he was proud of it. His father had worn it at the Plaza. He smiled and his face darkened as she admired his new look.

“Elevator working today, Ernie?”

“It is for you, Sophie!” He never asked for the press pass the Times had issued her.

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She pressed '24,' one floor below Mahoney's Penthouse. The auditorium used for press conferences took up most of the floor. Folks said the press corps used to fill it to capacity. These days, a few rows of folding chairs up in the front were all that was needed.

At the 24th Floor, the elevator doors strained for a partial breach against aging, arthritic sliders swollen in the City's humid summertime air. *Well, almost the 24th Floor.* She grabbed the small stepladder that was lashed to the wall and climbed to the floor level. She watched it disappear behind the closing doors. Ernie would see to it—she'd have to remember to thank him on the way out.

Across from the elevator, a set of double doors were barricaded by an oversized desk, behind which sat Millie, part-time receptionist, full-time bitch. Sophie always imagined her in a doughboy's helmet, waving a bayoneted Springfield with a banner labeled, 'That none shall pass!'

Millie had two pictures on her desk—a boy and a girl. Trophies, testifying that she had fulfilled her duty twice.

Sophie had asked about them when she first got the Nydegger assignment. Millie had snorted, scooping the pictures into her desk drawer. "You should be home, trying to conceive your own children instead of envying mine." She'd spat her words like cobra venom, glowering at Sophie's breasts as she spoke.

"Hi, Millie," Sophie said. "Sorry I'm late."

"They've already started."

"Yeah, I figured as much." Sophie started walking around the big desk. "Don't worry—I'll be real quiet."

"You'll wait till they're through!" Millie got up and barred the door with her body, shaking her finger in Sophie's face as she spoke. "You can't come barging in here fifteen minutes late and expect to just wander in as you please."

They made for a comical confrontation. Bulldog Millie yomping at Great Dane Sophie, well over six-feet tall in heels. But Sophie was in no mood for comedy. She leaned into Millie's pug face, gritted teeth showing through her faux smile.

"Millie, I'm havin' a real bad day. I suggest you park your overstuffed butt back in your overstuffed chair, or I'm gone fol' you in a paper airplane an' fly you up Mahoney's ass." Older New Yorkers found her southwest drawl intimidating.

The shock of the threat anchored Millie in place, allowing Sophie to step through the doors. She leaned her body against them a moment, listening for Millie to recover and give chase. When she didn't, Sophie continued inside.

True to form, Mahoney was late. Half a dozen other reporters were draped on the chairs. Some had old-fashioned digital imagers, others had exotic 3D holocorders. She set up her own recorder next to a reporter she knew, Methuselah Wong.

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He was one of the few people in this town, outside the Nursery, who was younger than she. Tall, African-Chinese, and Jewish, he was an interesting combination of contrasts, if not handsome. He'd accepted her invitation to go out with her two weeks before. Kept hiding a snicker the whole evening. They were both a little tipsy when she'd gotten him home. He sat on the sofa while she took off her dress.

"What's so goddamn funny?"

"I'm queer as a steer," he'd said through his mirth.

She couldn't decide if she should punch him or rape him. She settled for sitting on the sofa beside him and giggling.

He still wore the smirk from their 'date.' "H'lo, Soph." He did a double-take. "How'd you tear your dress?"

"Street repairs."

He touched the material. "God, woman, you're soaking!"

She threw her hands up in mock impatience. "What! You practicin' for Ma-honey?"

"Wouldn't do me any good. With that wet dress, he won't be able to take his eyes off them nipples."

She looked down. The room was freezing. "Oh, shit!"

"That's okay, that's okay! We can work with that. You make better video copy than the rest of us anyway. Here, since you're gonna get all the questions, ask him some of these."

She took the list he handed her. "Another appeal? Where'd you get this?"

"My snitch. He's never 'wong'."

"Ugh!" She rolled her eyes. "Why you givin' it to me?"

"I owe you from last week."

She sat down and put her foot on the chair seat in front of her. "It was two weeks." Her voice dropped. "I got written up 'cause of you."

"What? But I wanded your card!"

"Yeah, well it seems your sexual preference is a known quantity at the DoR. They were gonna lay fifty goddamn points on me for fertility card fraud."

"What'd you do?"

"I told them I cured you."

He clapped his hands. "An' they bought that shit?"

She squished her breasts together for maximum cleavage. "But officer," she said, her voice whiney and dumb, "I told him he should try it, just this once." She finished her mockery, batting her eyes at him and pulling her lower lip down with her index fingertip.

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Murray, an old fellow who'd been leaning on the back of a chair in the row ahead, looked up from reading his notes. "Hell, if that's the cure, how do I get the disease?"

"Shh, here he comes!" Sophie faced forward, trying to look cherubic. Murray sat down; Methuselah took his foot off the chair seat in front and straightened a little.

The press secretary approached the podium and thumped the mic with his finger to see if it was working. Several members of the audience winced. The secretary asked, "Is this on? Can everyone hear me?" No one answered. The secretary continued with his salutation, "Ladies and gentlemen, District Attorney for the Greater New York Region, Michael Mahoney."

Mahoney walked to the podium, unfolding a piece of paper. He cleared his throat and took several sips of water.

Was he going to gargle next? "Mr. Mahoney, Mr. Mahoney!"

Mahoney canvassed the audience. "Ah, Miss Zapata. I gather we're going straight to questions."

"It's been twenty-six months since the jury rendered a guilty verdict on John Nydegger. Twenty-three months since he was sentenced to the electric chair. When will we see justice?"

"Miss Zapata! Are you forgetting which office prosecuted him, fought for the death penalty? We're on your side."

"It's not about what side you're on, Mr. Mahoney. It's about justice. When?"

"We're doing the best we can, Miss Zapata. Next question."

"Is it true the defense submitted another appeal?"

Mahoney glared. "Where did you hear that, Miss Zapata?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Can we have a new topic, please?"

"Is there another appeal?"

The District Attorney started to answer, then stood silent.

"Yes or no, Mr. Mahoney."

Mahoney backed away from the podium, the sounds of his shuffling feet amplified by the microphone.

"Mr. Mahoney..." she called as he left the room.

A spokesperson leaned into the microphone. "Mr. Mahoney's written statement will be available at the door."

While the rest of the room began gathering equipment, Sophie dashed for the stage exit. She found Mahoney in back, dressing down an aide.

"Dammit all, Higgins! You were supposed to..."

Sophie interrupted, "I didn't hear your answer."

He turned to face her, hands akimbo, then turned his back to her and started walking toward the door.

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Sophie started to follow but was restrained by Higgins. “Justice, Mr. Mahoney!” She struggled with Higgins. He was neither large nor strong, and she could have pushed him aside easily, but he would have made a scene. She backed him toward Mahoney. “The public has a right to know, Mr. Mahoney!”

Mahoney’s hand was on the door ready to twist the knob. He released it and turned to face her. “Does the Times Building have a helipad?”

“Yes.”

“Be there. 10 PM.”

“Okay. But why?”

“Justice, Miss Zapata.”

Chapter Two

4:00 PM, Friday, 29 June 2085

Sing Sing Federal Consolidated Prison, Ossining, New York

John Wesley Nydegger winced as the razor scored the top of his head. His eyes followed the trusty's quivering hand as he wiped the excess shaving cream on a rag. The old coot had the shakes again. Bad this time.

Nydegger looked at the guard leaning against the wall outside the cell. His eyes were nearly shut, and he had a soggy toothpick parked in the corner of his mouth. Apart from the fact that he did not fall over, the only evidence he was awake was the occasional tensing of his jaw muscles as he chewed on the toothpick.

Nydegger sat on the end of his bunk facing the cell bars. Prison regulations required his hands to be cuffed together outside the bars only during entry or exit from the cell. But with the trusty inside the cell wielding a straight razor, the guard had decided to leave him cuffed.

"Warden shut down your still?" Nydegger asked the trusty.

"Nope."

The guard's toothpick tilted up to forty-five degrees. A single weary eyelid parted enough to aim a disinterested pupil at the trusty.

"Can't have no booze in prison," the trusty said, voice too loud. "You should know that, John."

The guard's eyelid drooped down again, shuttering him from the dullness that glowed from the cell. Nydegger watched him roll the sodden toothpick to the opposite corner of his mouth, then lift his shoulder blade up and down a couple of times,

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scratching it against the wall. The itch satisfied, the guard's brain appeared to go back to standby.

The trusty prattled on, planing the last of the follicles from Nydegger's head, taking a layer of scalp with each stroke. Nydegger twisted his wrists hard inside the cuffs, hoping the pain would tune out the trusty's white chorus of babble. But every time his mind found a saner station, the trusty would razor-nick him back to the lumpy mattress, the cold cell bars, and the stout wooden chair that was waiting for him at the end of the hall.

"Well, that's about as much as I can get," the trusty said. "This one's a freebie; I don't usually do heads."

The trusty wiped off Nydegger's head with the rag, the same rag he had probably used to wipe tables in the mess hall that morning. It stank of mildew and old dishwater, its smell lingering after the trusty and guard had departed. Nydegger hated their presence and their absence equally. Present, they tortured him with their inanity. Absent, he tortured himself with his imagination. He looked at the clock hanging outside his cell. Eight hours.

What did he look like now? No mirrors allowed. His raw scalp itched fiercely as it dried and tightened to a size too small for his head. Not thinking, he dressed it with a sweaty palm, the salt stinging his myriad micro-wounds.

"Shit!" he said under his breath.

Lunch was supposed to have been the famous 'last meal.' The warden had come to take his order personally, but Nydegger hadn't been up for anything fancy.

"But you can have—" the warden had said.

"I know, I know—duck in apricot sauce," he said. "Just gimme a sandwich. Swiss cheese and ham on rye."

"You want some beer to go with it? You can have beer now."

"Sure. A beer would be nice."

And it had been nice. They brought it to him in a mop bucket filled with ice. He wasn't permitted to have a glass bottle inside the cell, so they opened it and served it to him in a large plastic cup. He relished that first long pull, savoring the sting of the bubbles on his soft palate. The cup sweated with condensation squeegeed from the Hudson Valley's humid summertime air. He had rubbed it across his sweltering forehead. *A parallel pleasure, beer—tasted good and felt good.*

He wished he had another one of those beers now. The mid-afternoon heat was unbearable. There was a big oscillating floor fan at the end of the hall next to the duty guard's desk. Nydegger sat crosswise on his bunk, waiting for the fan to rotate around and tease him with its dank breath. He got up to stare at the clock.

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His hands started shaking again. He balled them into tight fists, unable to quell the tell-tale trembling of his deep-seated fear. Fear. The most contemptible of all the human emotions. He'd been doing fine until they made him go through the procedure rehearsal yesterday.

"You need to go too," they had said. "Warden wants this to go smooth as a pat of butter on a hot knife!"

Pat of butter, my ass. The only part I need to know is how to fry when they throw the switch. They didn't need me. They're just trying to get to me. They can't stand not gettin' to me.

Now his jaw was shaking. He clenched his teeth, but that only made his hands shake harder. He raised his fists to eye level. He needed to hit something. His half-eaten sandwich grinned up at him from the tin plate.

"Fuck!" he yelled and kicked the little table, scattering plate, cup, and sandwich in three different directions. The plate clattered against the back of the cell, slow-rolling back to him after it hit the floor, finally spinning like a top in front of his feet. He stomped on it, killing it before it could finish its metal-on-concrete scream.

"Something the matter, Mr. Nydegger?"

"Oh, Chaplain! It's you."

"Would you like me to pray with you, John?" The chaplain always lowered his voice an octave when he used Nydegger's first name, his way of signaling that he was ready to be your buddy for the next few minutes.

"No thanks, Chaplain. I'm about all prayed out."

"Very well, John," he said, turning to go.

Nydegger ran to the cell door, pressing the corner of his face through the bars to see down the hall.

"Chaplain!"

"Yes?"

"Maybe... maybe if you could just sit and talk a bit. Huh? Could you do that for me? Just sit and talk?" He tried to keep the shakiness of his jaw from coloring the timbre of his voice.

The chaplain studied him for a moment. "Certainly, John. What would you like to talk about?"

"Could you come inside? Like we done before. You know, so I don't have to talk through these bars?"

The Chaplain signaled the guard to approach the cell. "Can you let me into Mr. Nydegger's cell, please?"

When he spoke to the guard, the Chaplain exchanged his 'buddy' voice for his broom-up-the-ass, prison bureaucrat's voice. Nydegger wanted him to go back to his

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buddy voice, a raspy, smoker's baritone. The kind of voice that could make his hands stop shaking.

The guard approached the cell door and removed the handcuffs from his belt. "Stick out your paws."

Nydegger sat on the end of the bunk and protruded his hands for the guard to shackle outside the bars. He closed his eyes in anticipation of the cell door's irritating clang. All moving parts within the prison had an embedded clang, carefully tuned to reverberate off the cement floors and walls, ultimately ending up in your fillings. Maybe that was how the place had earned the moniker, 'Sing Sing.'

The chaplain walked into Nydegger's cell and dragged the wooden chair over to the bunk, his calm betrayed by his too-quick movements. The guard slammed the cell door and locked it with the key that hung from his belt. Satisfied no one could get out, he freed Nydegger's right wrist so he could turn and face the chaplain.

"Thank you, Albert," the chaplain said, dismissing the guard.

You had to like the chaplain. A class act all the way—even classier than the warden. Nydegger watched the guard walk away; then turned back to the chaplain, giving him a conspiratorial grin.

"Thanks, Chaplain. This means a lot to me."

"How are you holding up, John?"

"I'm okay. Just got the shakes a little."

"That's understandable. Do you want me to have the doctor bring the tranquilizer? You're not supposed to get it for another four hours, but I'll bet he'd bend the rules a bit if we asked him."

"No, no! No tranquilizers. I need to be able to think."

"What about, John? You should be trying to prepare your soul to meet God—"

"That's just it, Chaplain. I can't meet God yet."

"John, I don't wish to sound harsh, but you're running out of time."

Nydegger rubbed his palm across his itchy scalp, forgetting again the sting of his sweat on his razor nicks. Too late he jerked his hand away, barely swallowing the curse that rose in his throat. "Just... just hear me out, Chaplain. You're a man of God, so more than anybody, you should be able to understand what I'm about to say."

The chaplain wrinkled his brow and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Go ahead, John. Why can't you meet God yet?"

"Because... I haven't finished what I'm supposed to do. God's going to want to know... want me to tell Him that I did it. Only I haven't yet. I need more time." He tried to turn more toward the chaplain, forgetting his left hand was still shackled to

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the cell bars. He jerked his hand against the chain several times in frustration. “Dammit!”

“Easy, John! Here I’ll move closer.” He pulled the wooden chair closer to the bed. “Now what is it you’re supposed to have done for God?”

Nydegger took several deep breaths. “I haven’t found her.”

“Found whom, John? Who were you looking for?”

“Eve.”

“You mean Adam’s Eve... from Genesis?”

“Not exactly. But yeah! Like that Eve.”

The chaplain paused. “Is that what you were doing with all those... fifty was it?”

“That’s right, fifty. Every one of them gorgeous. And every one flawed.”

“Flawed?”

“You’d think out of fifty beautiful women, one of them would have been perfect.”

“Perfect.”

“Yeah, my Eve has to be perfect for this to work.”

“And none of those women were perfect enough to suit your plan?” the chaplain continued.

“Not my plan—the Man’s! God’s plan. The one He told me I had to do.”

“Very well, God’s plan. What was the point of this... God’s plan?”

“The sterility, Chaplain.” Nydegger leaned close and pulled on the chaplain’s sleeve with his free hand. He looked left and right before he whispered, “I’m the only one that can fix it!”

The chaplain raised his eyebrows, “Now really, John!”

“It’s true, Chaplain! I checked.”

“John, you’re confusing me. Checked what, exactly?”

“I made them pregnant,” he whispered.

“Pregnant? John, no one can—”

“Shh!” Nydegger held up a gritty index finger. “No one can know about this.”

The chaplain lowered his voice. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anybody. But John, are you trying to tell me that you can get women pregnant?”

“Yes!”

“But no one can do that anymore, John.”

“I know! That’s why God picked me.”

“Okay, okay. But how do you know? You said you checked?”

“Yeah. But I really didn’t need to. I mean God told me I was the one, so I should’ve had faith. But after the first few were dead... I had to see for myself.”

The chaplain swallowed hard. “What did you see for yourself?”

Nydegger beamed, his eyes eager. “Babies!” he whispered.

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The chaplain's face grew pallid. He leaned back in the chair, shaken, as though he had suddenly imagined that the grinning shade sitting in front of him was neither a man nor of man's world.

"They looked like little cocker spaniel puppies the way their eyes was shut—from bein' dead an all." Nydegger tilted his head to regain eye contact with the chaplain. "Didn't matter; they wouldn't have been perfect anyway 'cause of their moms. But I had the proof right in front of me. I can make women pregnant!"

The chaplain looked not at Nydegger but through him, as if he were a stranger that had suddenly stepped into his path.

"You okay, Chaplain?"

"Excuse me," he said, getting up and walking to the commode. There was a bowl built into the top. The chaplain turned the spigot and rinsed his face with the tepid water. He snapped open a clean towel from the shelf, holding it against his face for several moments before returning to his seat.

"What's the matter, Chaplain? I thought you of all people would be able to understand."

"I'm alright now. Please continue."

"Look, I know this is a lot for you to handle. You've spent your whole life believing everybody's sinful, flawed."

"That's right, but with faith in God—"

"No, that's wrong! God told me I'm perfect," he said, thumbing his chest. "Me and that Eve I told you about. She's out there; I just haven't found her yet."

The chaplain did not respond.

"You gotta help me, Chaplain. I can't go yet because I haven't found her. You know how God chooses some men for special tasks. Well, God chose me. I'm supposed to find my Eve, and together, she and I will people the earth. Only this time, we'll get it right. Our children will be perfect. And their children will be perfect. And everything will be as God intended. But I have to get out of here. If I don't—"

"If you don't, what?"

"The human race is finished."

The chaplain nodded his head. "Albert," he called.

"You done, Chaplain?" the guard asked.

"Quite."

"Chaplain!" Nydegger yelled. "Come back! You can't let them do this to me. You're the only one that understands!"

"No, John. God is the only one who understands. You're in His hands now."

Chapter Three

5:00 PM, Friday, 29 June 2085

The Times Building, Amsterdam & W. 97th, New York City

Up on the 12th floor, Roger's face was lit by his computer's holographic display. His eyes darted about the open file, blinking edits into reality. He held up a finger, stopping Sophie while he disengaged his temporal pickups and laid them on the desk.

He wrinkled his brow when he turned to her. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Sinkhole. Down on 87th," she said.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Dress didn't make out so good though." She slumped on Roger's sofa and kicked off her sandals to massage her feet. "Get to go for a helicopter ride tonight."

"Oh, yeah? Where?"

"Dunno. I was beatin' Mahoney up about some rumor I got—another appeal—when he ups and tromps off the stage like he had a cactus in his drawers. I smelled blood, so I took after him, beat on him some more. He's headin' out the back when he stops all of a sudden, turns and asks me if we have a helipad."

"Wait a minute—what's this about an appeal?"

She shrugged. "Probably bullshit. Seemed like a good way to needle him, so I went with it."

"Sounds like you hit a nerve. When ya leavin'?"

“Ten.”

“And you don’t know where?”

“Nope. He just said something about ‘justice’ and left.”

Roger puzzled a moment in silence. “Go clean up; I’ll make a few calls.”

She decided to clean up later—her dress and hair had dried during the walk back to the Times. Back in her cubicle she opened a jar of stew and inserted a pair of microwave prongs. While it was heating, she pulled up the draft of a story she had begun the year before.

The population of the Consolidated State of America, recently estimated at 27 million, was decreased by one early this morning with the execution of serial rapist and murderer, John Wesley Nydegger, carried out at xx:xx AM, xx XXX 2084.

She updated the year to ‘2085.’ Would the people ever see justice? What had Mahoney meant this afternoon? John Wesley Nydegger. One solitary human being out of how many? How could the death of one man atone for all those women? She inserted ‘The population of the world, recently estimated at 540 million,’ then undid the change. *Stick with CSA—it’s better known.* Not that it mattered. Roger would hate it either way. ‘Journalism students tell the news, journalism professionals sell the news,’ went his daily mantra.

“Zapata!” Roger yelled.

She looked at her watch. “That was quick.” She grabbed her stew and headed for Roger’s office. “What’s up?”

“Nydegger’s gonna fry tonight. It’s all hush-hush—victim’s families and one reporter. You!”

“Just me?” she asked through a mouthful of stew.

“Ten o’clock tonight, Santa’s personal chopper a-whop, whop, whoppin’ on our very own rooftop.”

She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. “This sounds really fishy, Roger. You sure it’s safe?”

“Sweetie, if it was safe, I’d be goin’.”

She smiled at his joke, dubious that it was the helicopter that was keeping him here. Office legend held that Roger had agoraphobia, the victim of a horrible assault many years before in which he’d been forced to watch the rape-mutilation of his wife and unborn child. Badly beaten himself, the attackers had

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left him for dead. He now depended on his string of reporters to keep him in touch with a world that terrified him.

9:55 PM. Gordon Neumann, Chief of Video, was talking to Sophie at the roof access stairway. He was waving his arms like his hair was on fire except that he looked happy. Roger walked up to see what the commotion was all about. He should have guessed.

“This is going to be sensational!” Neumann said. “A live execution and we’ll have the exclusive footage! Roger, there you are! Don’t you worry! I’m going to make certain Printed gets full credit for this scoop.”

“Not so fast, Gordon. I’m afraid I’m the bearer of bad news. ‘No computers, no cameras, and no recording devices.’”

“Says who?” Gordon asked.

“Says Justice. Sophie shows up with one, they’ll turn her right around and send her to bed with no supper.”

“This is an outrage! The public has a right to know! I can’t believe you muffed this one, Roger. The scoop of the century and no footage. Heads are going to roll, Roger. I always said Printed couldn’t handle the big stuff.” Neumann stalked off, muttering about dumping the whole Printed division.

Roger grinned. “He’s such a kidder!”

“Computer ban for real?” Sophie asked.

“What? You think I’d make up a story like that to get him off our backs?”

“Oh no!” Her voice mocked, then turned serious. “But how’m I gonna—”

“Here; take this.” His hand trembled a little as he handed her the notepad. He jerked his hand away, first hiding it under his arm, then jamming it into his pocket.

She made a face and dangled the notepad out in front of her, pinched between thumb and forefinger like something from the refrigerator that had spoiled. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“A notebook. You know, paper? Pencil? You just draw little pictures of the letters—use any font you want.”

She put the notebook in her bag and started up the stairs.

“And get your fanny back here as soon as it’s over! *We* still got a hopper deadline even if Video doesn’t.”

She continued up the stairs, waving at him over her shoulder without looking back.

The rotor wash slammed the access door out of her hand into its stop, spraying her with puddled rain and hot, dry turbine exhaust. A crewman, wearing a one-piece flight suit and visored helmet, beckoned her toward an open passenger door. She instinctively ducked low under the rotor blade. The crewman—well over six feet tall—stood upright. She grabbed the doorframe and was about to pull herself up when she noticed the red and black DoR logo painted on the side of the aircraft. Why would the DoR be providing the transportation to a Justice party? Were these the ‘friends in high places’ Mahoney referred to? She took her place in the austere, nylon-webbed passenger seat, fumbling with the seatbelt.

“C’mon; lemme help you with that. We ain’t got all night.”

“I can manage, thank you,” she mouthed, her voice carried away in the din.

“Okay, just pull on this little strap for a quick release.” He slammed the door and disappeared, leaving her wondering where the little strap was.

Through the front window, she saw the helicopter roller-coaster over the building edge and dip into the ink of the night. Lights from the city flickered in through her window, her apprehension dimming with them as they receded below. Overhead, a jet of burnt air vented into her face. It smelled of oil and hydraulic fluid.

She looked at the crewman but couldn’t see his eyes, his visor ablaze with red panel lights. She waved for his attention. “How long will it take to get there?” she asked in a voice she could feel but not hear.

The crewman motioned toward a headset hanging from a ceiling hook. “Push this button when you want to talk on the intercom. Don’t talk if you hear the pilot talking—she hates that.”

She looked forward to see the pilot’s gloved hand giving him the finger. The crewman had a southern accent—unusual in New York City. She pressed the intercom button, “I’m supposed to witness an execution at midnight.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Bout twenty minutes by air.”

“It takes me six hours in a 4WD!”

“Not so many potholes up here.”

She made a thin smile. “Will I need a car?”

“Nah, there’s a helipad up top of the Admin Building. Someone will escort you after that.”

She looked out her window. A thickening overcast veiled the night sky, blurring the moon’s yellow reflection on the surface of the Hudson. A few minutes later, the helicopter slowed and descended, heavy air pressing on her eardrums. The air from the overhead vent abruptly stopped, prefacing a violent shuddering

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throughout the airframe. The crewman was sitting calmly, his chin and forearm resting on his knee.

“Comin’ out of translational lift,” the crewman said.

Like she knew what that meant. Fuck it. Just smile; look calm like he does.

The engine noise became louder with more airframe buffeting as the craft stopped, floating in mid-air. She felt herself sinking, downward progress halted with gentle bumps as the landing gear certified its grip on the roof.

The crewmen disappeared around the nose of the helicopter, black pigtail of his intercom cord dancing after him. Where did he say that fucking strap was?

Her door slammed open. The crewman’s arm snaked in, striking the quick release. The entire belt assembly fell away limp, leaving her feeling suddenly undressed. He walk-shoved her toward the waiting escort. His hand was warm on the small of her back.

“We’ll be back to fetch you in a couple hours,” the crewman said, his steel voice sawing through the swirling din. He did not wait for her reply.

The helicopter released its grip on the rooftop, pivoting around the end of its tail. A short run, a shallow jack-knife over the building edge, and it dove out of sight to surface in the distance.

“Whew! ‘Em choppers sure do make a racket!” the escort said. “You that reporter here for the execution?”

She nodded, her eyes held by the spirals of mist dancing in the helicopter’s wake. At five feet ten—six one in heels—it wasn’t often that she had to look up at a man, not since coming to New York anyway. Nice smile. Too bad he had kept the visor down.

The escort cleared his throat. “Gotta see some ID.”

“Sorry.” She showed him her press pass.

“Okay, we gotta hurry. You’re the last one.”

The escort led her under a covered doorway and rang a buzzer. The door latch released with a loud, irritating grate; the escort jerked to catch it before the grating ended. He ushered her into an anteroom, walls painted bureaucrat green. The room was lit by a single bulb with a heavy wire cage that drew a shadowy grid on the surroundings. The heavy door slammed behind her. Its cast iron thunk had a pitiless finality belying the fact that she was a visitor and could leave when she chose. The far end of the room was blocked by another heavy door, this one equipped with a sliding steel view port.

The escort rapped shave-and-a-haircut. “Secret code,” he whispered behind his hand.

A pair of squinty eyes appeared in the view port, ignored the escort, inventoried her. Satisfied, Squinty Eyes slammed the view port and opened the main door, its ancient hinges straining under the ponderous weight. From previous visits, she had noticed a behavioral discriminator between Sing Sing's residents: guards did everything deliberately, noisily; inmates, furtively, quietly.

Inside was the top of a stair landing. The escort and Squinty Eyes exchanged nods. She chanced a smile in passing; no response. Felt his eyes tickling her back as she followed her escort down the stairs. Eight landings later, another door. The escort had a key for this one.

The hallway behind the door had a musty smell, mildewed carpet the likely culprit. The walls were covered with faux wood paneling that was peeling away near the floor. Overhead was a labyrinth of galvanized pipes and ventilation conduits, their patina obscured by coarse spider webs blackened from two centuries of grime.

Photo-portraits of previous wardens followed her passing form with glossy stares. Each one was placarded in brass—full name and years in office—hard to read in the dim light. The last of the pictures also marked the last of the paneling. The hallway beyond quickly faded to black. She snorted a puff of hot air wafting past her face from the dark end of the hall. Prime execution site; convenient access to hell, she thought.

The escort stopped at another steel door, this one unlocked. Muffled voices came from the other side. He held the door open for her.

“Find a seat. They’ll be starting soon.”

The viewing room had two sections of theater seats separated by a middle aisle, about thirty to a side. The only light came from the noise pattern of an antiquated plasma monitor hanging over the stage. She blocked the glare with her hand to search for an empty seat. The seats were packed with hulking silhouettes. Muted conversations reminded her of a church congregation awaiting the preacher.

“Press sits in the back, miss.”

The voice came from an old man standing behind her. His blue uniform coat swam over his spare frame. He wore an unpressed white shirt, buttoned to the top with the collar gapping widely under his Adam's apple. No tie.

“Thank you,” she said.

A pair of folding chairs was set up against the back wall, offering a clear view of the monitor. She sat down. The metal back was cold against her skin.

Three years, she thought. Three years to apprehend, try, and finally eliminate this monster. The CSA judicial process had always struck her as terribly

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convoluted. Out in the territories, there were no codified laws, no due process. Right and wrong were determined ad hoc, a communal intuition that varied from town to town and was a significant contributor to their growing provincialism.

When Sophie was in the fifth grade, Miss Lopez had marched the whole class down to the community center to watch a ‘trial.’

“You don’t see this every day,” she’d said.

In the community center the board of governors was seated at the front. Lupe and Juanito were standing in the open area shouting back and forth at each other. Lupe had a swollen lip and a bruise under her eye. The gallery had divided itself into two factions: Lupe’s and Juanito’s.

“That bitch gives it up for everybody but me!” Juanito had wailed. “What’d she expect?”

Lupe stood sobbing. “He didn’t have to beat me up!”

Juanito’s cousin jumped up from the gallery screaming that Lupe was a snobby whore and deserved what she got. These diatribes went back and forth between the two factions with the board sitting placidly. Finally, the mayor announced that the board had formed a decision. Sophie had thought that was odd since there had been no discussion among the board members. The room stilled more out of curiosity than respect.

“You both gonna to do two weeks community service. Juanito, we understand how you felt, but you shouldn’t have beat her up so bad. And Lupe, you shouldn’t be so fickle.”

Community service was the usual punishment handed out. The other was banishment. It was necessarily reserved for extreme offenses. Young people were the community’s most precious resource, not to be discarded lightly.

At this the room broke out in shouting and cursing, mostly between the two factions but some of it directed at the board. The mayor slammed his gavel down on the table, “Enough! Everybody get back to work.” Sophie had hoped that was the end of it. She was anxious to get back to Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. She found 19th century French sexual mores as fascinating as they were ridiculous.

Two days later Lupe’s little cousin blew Juanito’s guts out with both barrels of a shotgun. There was a trial the same day and by sundown the cousin was on his horse, banished for life. He rode out of town proudly, head high, looking neither left nor right. He was only fourteen, but if they were going to punish him like a man, then he’d take it like a man. Later the mayor was heard to have remarked, “It’s my fault. Lupe should have only got a week.”

As she looked around the auditorium, Sophie reasoned that banishment wouldn't work with a career criminal like Nydegger. He'd just go back to Utah and start on number fifty-one.

A tall, middle-aged man took the seat next to her. He had on a tweed jacket and tie. How could everyone stand the humidity down here? She was wearing the studio's mandated hip-hugger skirt and sleeveless midriff top and she was still hot. She hunted through her bag for the notebook, then gave up, realizing it would be too dark to write.

"Percival Hendricks," he whispered, extending his hand.

"Sophie Zapata." She shook his hand, keeping her eyes on the monitor.

"You with the Times?" he asked.

"Don't we get to see this in the flesh?"

"Apparently not. Perhaps they're trying to dignify the event by doing it over closed circuit TV." His accent sounded faintly British.

An image appeared on the monitor and stilled the room. The image showed a stout wooden chair on a raised platform. The chair had heavy leather straps on the front legs and arms. Chest straps and a lap belt hung limp across the back and seat. A metal cap was suspended from the headrest by a heavy, coiled electrical cable.

"The guards call it Ol' Sparky," Hendricks whispered. "It's the original one from 1890. They had to barge it up here from some museum down in Washington."

"Does it still work?"

"We'll see in a moment."

Suddenly the blurry image of a man clad in orange occluded the view of the chair. A pair of guards led him up to the platform. Raw, wounded scalp was all that remained of the wild mane of hair that had made Nydegger so frighteningly large during the trial. Looking at him now reminded her of a childhood experience when a shadow that had scared her in the night turned out to be a harmless shrub the next morning.

He used a slow, wide-legged shuffle caused by heavy leg shackles that were connected by a steel rod jointed at the middle. The center joint dragged noisily on the cement with each step. He looked exhausted.

The procession paused at the base of the platform. One guard stepped up, levering Nydegger around to face the front. Each guard maintained a firm grip on Nydegger's arm.

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She could see his handcuffs now, secured to his waist chain. Slowly, they eased him up and back until his legs met the front of the chair. In unison, they each grabbed a handful of Nydegger's shirt and lowered him into the chair.

Nydegger sat back in the chair, exhaling deeply, his eyes closed. Gone was his trademark smirk. In its place, the demeanor of a patient being moved to an operating table, nervous but still trying to be helpful. Should she pity this man? Was he really as vile as he seemed during the trial? She yearned for a fresh sign that he deserved this.

The guards buckled him into the chair. When he was completely secure, they removed the waist chain and the hand and leg cuffs. No metal would be left behind to shunt the grim work of the massive electrical current.

There was a clock on the wall over the chair, its second hand lockstep with the one over the TV monitor.

"Do they have to pull the switch at exactly midnight?" she asked.

"No, just as soon as practical after midnight."

A blurry image of a uniformed official took a position at the side of Nydegger's chair.

"Warden Steele," Hendricks said. "Gold epaulets."

The warden pulled a piece of paper from his jacket, squinting briefly before putting on his glasses. He looked again at the paper. His hand trembled slightly.

"Is he nervous?"

"Old."

"John Wesley Nydegger," the warden began, "you have been tried by a jury of your peers and found guilty of multiple counts of murder, rape, torture, mayhem, and kidnapping. For these crimes, the Consolidated State of America has sentenced you to die in the electric chair. It is now my responsibility to execute that sentence. Do you wish to make a final statement before I carry out that sentence?"

Nydegger hesitated, eyes closed as though he were trying to sleep. "Just get on with it," he said, voice cracked and fading.

She grabbed Hendricks' hand.

The warden instructed the guards to make the final preparations. A guard climbed the platform beside the chair, carrying a small plastic bucket from which he withdrew a dripping sponge. Nydegger winced when the sponge slopped onto his head.

"Is that thing hot or something?" she asked.

"No," Hendricks said, "they recently shaved his scalp. The brine solution probably stings."

The guard set the metal cap on Nydegger's head and buckled the chin strap. He placed a rubber bite pad between his jaws, securing it with a strap that went across his face and connected to the headrest. Finally, he lowered a canvas curtain over Nydegger's face to obscure his death grimace from the audience's view.

Sophie watched the second hand of the clock on the wall above the chair. 20 seconds before midnight, 19... 18... 17...

Nydegger gripped the ends of the chair arms, knuckles ready to rupture.

"10... 9... 8..." the audience mumbling through the last seconds of Nydegger's life.

At two seconds, Nydegger relaxed his grip on the chair arms, turned up both wrists, middle fingers extended.

At precisely midnight, the warden ordered, "First switch on!"

Nydegger's chest bucked forward in a violent convulsion, wrists bending back, middle fingers curling into angry hooks. His bitten off yelp made her jump, digging her nails into Hendricks' hand. Feeling it tense under her grip, she released him, embarrassed.

The monitor image blinked. When the image was clear again, she noticed the clock in the execution room seemed fast. She compared it with the clock in the viewing room. The two clocks were 3 seconds out of synch.

The warden commanded more switches to be thrown. Nydegger's body slumped against the straps that held him in the chair, the violent jerking done with the first jolt.

At midnight plus 30 or 33 seconds, a wisp of steam wafted upward from under the metal cap. She thought she heard a sizzle. Perhaps it was just speaker noise.

"All switches off!" the warden commanded.

"All switches off!" one of the guards echoed.

A middle-aged man approached Nydegger's limp body. He pressed the end of a stethoscope to Nydegger's chest. "No heart beat," he said. "Time of death—12:01 AM."

Nydegger's image lingered on the screen for a few more seconds then blinked out, his only remains a white noise pattern. A moment later, bright overhead lights flicked on, hurting her eyes. Slowly, the people looked around the room and murmured to one another.

She remained in her seat staring at the screen for a moment. When she looked around, Hendricks was gone. She scanned the room, but could see no sign of him.

Ejner Fulsang

The usher standing in the back of the room opened the double doors, inviting the viewers to leave. A few of the viewers stood up and formed small groups. Others were too overcome with emotion to stand up immediately. A heavy old woman remained in her seat, sobbing bitterly. She held her face in her hands, oblivious of the dark rivers of makeup smearing her fingers. A middle-aged woman sat beside her, trying to comfort her.

Sophie thought the warden might appear to make a statement. When he didn't, she went into the hallway to look for Hendricks. It was empty. She wondered if the usher might know where he had gone or who he was. If he was with the prison, it would be nice to get a quote from him.

"Excuse, me. Did you happen to see where the fellow sitting beside me went?"

"What'd he look like?"

"Tallish, tweed jacket. I thought he might have been with the prison."

The usher shook his head thoughtfully. "Sounds like a civilian. If he was with the prison, he'd a had a uniform."

She headed for the rooftop, pausing at the third landing to look out into the dimly lit courtyard. A door opened at ground level with several uniformed guards trying to push a gurney through the doorway. The lumpy form of a body bulged under a white sheet. Nydegger? She leaned her face closer to the window, blocking the glare with her hands.

The guards were forcing the gurney through the narrow doorway when one of them stepped on a corner of the sheet, exposing a pair of orange-clad legs. A pair of heavy shackles was attached to the ankles.

The guards became agitated, grappling with the stubborn gurney in the narrow doorway. Then another man took charge, replacing the sheet when they got the gurney outside. He was not in uniform and his face was illuminated briefly in the light from the doorway. Hendricks? Her view became obscured by the fog of her breath on the glass. She rubbed it away with her fingers and watched the strange procession disappear into the night until only the white sheet cast back enough light to penetrate the darkness.