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XI – Red Cross

The Castro was her home ... in fact, it had been her home for over two decades, and she hated the idea of moving away from it. But if it was going to be turned into just another regular, up-market area, then she wouldn't want to stay. It was like taking the soul out of the place, and frankly, she could think of other places she'd rather live then.

Maybe Yohni was right. Maybe leaving the United States altogether was the best idea then. They had friends all over the world, so starting anew in some other country wouldn't necessarily be all that difficult. She thought back to the holiday, all those years ago ... when she had first proposed to Yohni. They had "done Europe" then, but there were still a lot of European countries she had never visited. Spain for instance. Greece. Norway. Ireland.

London wouldn't be a bad place to move to. Especially if she wanted to start designing again. Copenhagen had appealed greatly to her even then and she and Yohni had visited their old friends there several times since, and the city had always been friendly and welcoming. Or maybe Paris?

Or maybe somewhere smaller. Somewhere less ... conspicuous. Where she and Yohni could just disappear together and grow old and grey together in peace.

Gabrielle sighed and sipped her coffee. It was early morning. Very early, and Yohni was still asleep.

The truth of the matter was ... she was ready to move.

No matter how much she loved the Castro, she was ready to move on to something new. When the ballots were all counted, it would be time to look to the future, and her future ... well ... there was still a lot to see and experience.

She hadn't told Yohni yet, but even in the extremely unlikely event that she won, this would be her final stint in politics. She wouldn't run again. Not for a seat on the city council ... not even for a lower office and *certainly* not for a higher one.

There was a limit to how long she would spend on politics. Originally, she had done it for two reasons, really. One was to prove to herself that she could do it, and the other was because the locals in the Castro had asked her to. To her own surprise, admittedly. But she had accepted their invitation to run for public office and she had done so and won by a landslide. That in itself was not surprising. The Castro was the most liberal area in San Francisco, and that *was* saying something.

Dawn was breaking over the rooftops, and Gabrielle wondered how that would look where she and Yohni decided to move to.

Sunrise didn't look the same everywhere in the world, after all.

She looked at the papers in her left paw and shook her head to herself. This was why she'd gotten up so early in the morning.

Was she ready to use these?

She had to make up her mind, whether she wanted to or not. The answer should be simple. The answer should be yes ... she did want to. Not only for her own sake, but for the Castro's sake as a whole. To prevent Jason Hartwood ... or more precisely, his wife ... from changing the area from the world's biggest haven for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered furs into standardized American suburbia.

But wasn't that what democracy was all about? Letting the voters decide what they wanted?

And more importantly, did she want to be a part of the political game anymore? She had been under no illusions when she ran the first time. Politics was dirty business, and she had expected to be blasted for her past in Blue Movies, but it hadn't happened. Not in the Castro. Here, it was more important to the voters to get someone who was "one of their own" representing them.

Or so she had thought.

Now she wasn't quite so sure. And over the years she had spent on the council, she had seen some political wheeling and dealing that didn't leave her father much to be desired. That was really what offended her the most. She refused to turn into a copy of her sire, regardless of the circumstances. Theodore was long dead and buried, and he'd stay that way!

Finishing her coffee, she looked at the papers again. She was too much of a fighter to simply throw in the towel like that. And besides, if she didn't use this, she was simply allowing Jason Hartwood to slander her, and he wasn't going to get away with it, as far as Gabrielle was concerned.

Or at least his wife wasn't going to get away with it.

It was unlikely to swing enough votes to change the outcome anyway, but at least she'd go down fighting. That in itself was something. But then ... when the election was lost ... she *would* move. Other important reason for that, too.

At first, she'd have to endure living amongst the very furs who had rejected her. And then, as they realized what they had voted in, instead of her ... they would regret it, and then she'd have to listen to them complaining about it. And she wouldn't be able to stomach it. Suddenly, no one would admit to having voted against her.

That kind of hypocrisy was nothing new. Particularly in politics.

Nodding to herself, she turned around and headed inside to get a fresh cup of coffee and wake up Yohni. Tomorrow was election-day. The day after, she and Yohni would have to sit down and start figuring out where to move to.

###

Things were going as well as anyone could expect, but Steve could still look forwards to months of rehab. There were already voices talking about how this would end his career, and he was determined not to let that happen. First, the fracture had to heal properly, of course. And then he could focus on getting back in peak physical shape.

The thought made him chuckle ... since he was currently lifting paw-weights. Fifty five pounds on each ... and he had no difficulty with them. Not too shabby for someone who had spent weeks in the hospital.

He had already gone through a stomach and back routine, and a couple of his team-mates were gawking at him. He was sitting in the Fargo Greys' gym. He had been sent home from the hospital only that same morning, and he had pretty much just waited for the nurses to leave before calling the front office, telling them he needed someone to come pick him up and take him to the gym.

Once he was done here, he'd go visit Nadia. Just because he was out of the hospital himself, it didn't mean he wouldn't go and visit her ... every day, in fact ... without fail. She was coming along very well as well. There were no complications with the amputations, and no necrosis in the tissue. That had been the main concern. It would only be another week before the doctors could start taking measurements for her new, prosthetic legs. The wonders of modern medicine never ceased to astound Steve, but in this particular case, it was almost mind-boggling. The healing even of stumps where a limb had been amputated could be accelerated, and Nadia would be able to stand on her new legs months earlier than it would have been possible just ten or fifteen years earlier.

At first, she'd be walking with crutches, but he knew his girlfriend, and he knew how tough she was, and she'd be walking without them before anyone expected. He was absolutely sure of that.

One of his team-mates came over and nodded to him. "Hey Steve. Are you sure you should be working *that* hard? I mean ... you've still got your leg in a cast!"

"Only for another week. The doctors have cleared me for this, don't worry," Steve said, pumping the paw-weights without losing a beat. "Ready for tonight's game?"

The fur in front of him nodded. He was a hulking tiger, playing middle linebacker, and Steve knew how hard that particular fur hit. He almost felt sorry for Kalen, knowing what was coming his way. The Greys were a better team than the Jaguars, and he felt confident that his team-mates would notch up a W. Kalen might be the hottest young quarterback in the NFL at the moment, but as long as his team's defence couldn't stop the furs of a geriatric-ward on their way to the pastry-table, they'd still be in big trouble.

And the Greys played lights-out defence. It was part of the team philosophy.

"You know I'm still going to do my best to put your friend under the turf, right?" the tiger asked, smiling crookedly and hooking his thumbs in his belt.

Steve chuckled. "He'd probably be pissed enough to tell you off himself if you didn't give it your absolute best. Still, I appreciate his gesture."

"We all do. And I'll make sure to tell him that," the tiger said. "Want me to spot you?" he asked and gesture towards a weight lifting bench.

"Can't. I need to be able to support myself with both legs to do that," Steve said, "But thanks for the offer."

He put down the weights and got up, grabbing his crutch on the way to support himself. The tiger took the paw-weights and put them on the rack.

"Damned I can't wait for this cast to come off and my rehab to begin for real. And I can't wait to get back on the field with the rest of you guys," Steve muttered.

"Not until the off-season, Steve ... not until the off-season," the tiger chuckled and patted the wolf's shoulder.

Steve nodded. He'd go take a shower ... which took twice as long as normal since he had to be careful about the cast ... and then he'd head to the hospital.

###

Vishalya hadn't seen her father for several days. He was out of town on business, and she was getting anxious for him to come home. With Yashvir in charge of the household, things were rapidly becoming unbearable, and she was certain her brother was up to something. Her mother seemed to agree, but she seemed dreadfully torn. On one side, she was loyal to her husband and consequently to his decisions, which included giving Yashvir increased influence ... but on the other, she was clearly uncomfortable with how he was treating his sister.

By now, Vishalya was practically ready to move out, except she knew her father would disapprove greatly, and Yashvir would simply forbid it.

And while she was perfectly willing to disregard her brother's ban, he could ... and no doubt would ... make life almost impossible for her if she chose to defy him.

And she didn't even know who she could trust around the household anymore. Who were on her side and who were on Yashvir's ... it was impossible to tell.

She had tried calling Kalen several times, but to her distress, Yashvir had blocked her from making international calls. Her only way of staying in contact with Kalen for the moment, would be to either use someone else's phone-profile, or to use the antiquated and slow method of sending letters.

Since she had no access to other phone-profiles than her own, she had no choice and she had sent off a letter the day before, explaining to Kalen why she couldn't call and how desperately she needed his help.

It made her feel strange. She was practically playing the part of the princess, waiting for the knight on the white stallion to ride in and rescue her.

It was not a role she liked. She was much too pro-active for that kind of thing, but Yashvir was cutting off her options one by one. Short of simply running away, into the streets ... she didn't know what to do.

There was a knock on her door. She sighed and called out for whoever it was to enter, and Yashvir appeared in the doorway.

"I have good news," he said, managing to actually sound like he meant it.

"Oh?" Vishalya asked. "You have terminal cancer? There's a fur standing next to you just beyond the doorway, holding a gun to your temple? You insulted an Apsara and ended up with Arjuna's curse? Please let it be the latter! At least you'd be in a position to understand just why I detest the air you breathe and hate the ground you've walked on!"

She didn't even try to contain her loathing and hatred anymore, and for the briefest of moments, Yashvir looked shaken. Like he hadn't expected her to be *that* vitriolic.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, regaining his composure and dismissing her anger casually. "I have arranged for you to meet your future husband. I do, naturally, expect you to be on your best behaviour."

Laughing, Vishalya half-turned in her chair. "You *expect* me to be on my best behaviour?" she snapped. "I always knew you were conceited, brother ... but I had no idea you were simply *stupid*."

Yashvir's eyes narrowed. "Father has approved this wedding. Would you go against *his* wishes and bankrupt your own parents?"

"Watch me!"

"Vishalya ... contrary to what you believe, I am *not* stupid. Trust me, if you do not do as I say, I will make your life difficult in ways you can't even begin to imagine. Starting, of course, with moving you somewhere else under guard. I don't personally care how much you protest. You will do as you are told, one way or the other. The easiest thing for yourself would be to simply accept this and make the best of it. Your future husband

comes from a good family. He is heir to a fortune several times the size of anything our family ever possessed, and he can lavish you with all the luxuries of life ... in fact, I am disappointed in your absolute lack of gratitude! I am setting you up with a life most femmes can only dream about or watch in movies!"

"I didn't know you were a fan of the prison-genre, brother. Now unless you've got anything to add, I'd be grateful if you'd vacate my rooms," Vishalya sneered, narrowing her eyes.

Yashvir smiled the vilest little smile she could remember ever seeing even on his face. "Your rooms? Sister ... since when have you owned anything? This is father's house, and he has left *me* in charge."

Then he turned around and left.

Just in time ... as a potted plant shattered against the wall where his head had been moments before.

###

Esteban shuffled down the hallway to where Nadia's room was. He had packed his bags and he was ready to go stay at Steve's apartment when the wolf turned up later. His son would no doubt need a paw with a few things. Running errands and suchlike, and Esteban was just happy to be able to help.

He was starting to feel a little better at last. He didn't feel dazed. He could think straight again.

He also knew this had affected him permanently. Zig Zag had called almost daily. She clearly felt terribly guilty, but Esteban wasn't quite sure what for. Still, he appreciated her calls to make sure he was okay.

Charles called every morning, too, and Frances called every evening. Gabrielle had called several times, despite being caught up in the election campaign of her life. Kalen had called twice daily ... and come to the hospital as often as he possibly could, too.

Everyone seemed to worry about him.

About *him*.

But he hadn't lost his legs. He didn't have any broken ribs, and he hadn't been involved in a car crash where a fur had been killed.

He turned a corner and bumped into Leo Leon and a nurse.

And immediately, he began apologizing. His knees trembled. His paws shook. He hadn't been involved ... he hadn't ...

He hadn't even been at home! His son could've been killed. His future daughter-in-law had been maimed ... and he hadn't even been at *home*! And everyone was worrying about *him*.

It didn't make any sense.

Leo grabbed a hold of his friend and immediately guided the maned wolf into a chair.

Esteban barely seemed to notice. Nor did he seem to register it when Leo looked sidelong at the nurse and asked her to bring something for Esteban to relax on.

It wasn't until then that the maned wolf saw his feet and noticed he'd forgotten to put his shoes on before crossing the street from the hotel.

And socks.

He sighed and hid his face in his paws, his shoulders shaking as he lost control again.

Why did everyone worry about *him*?

###

Gabrielle opened the door from her dressing room. Guy and Chris were waiting for her and the equine couldn't help but feel it was all just *slightly* ridiculous. She was due for her last debate with Jason Hartwood, and the whole thing had been blown completely out of proportion by now. This was a debate over a single seat on a city council. And sure ... she realized that San Francisco was a major city, and that more furs lived there than in some small countries around the world, but this had been blown up until it was almost akin to a national event. Most of the state of California had read about this by now, and all because of those stupid eight million dollars.

No ... not stupid.

She'd been able to see two truly great furs make their dreams come true because of it. That money had done a world of good. But it sure had come back to haunt her.

And that was something she intended to address out there. This was not about eight million dollars. This was about bringing back her past to haunt her. Things she had no

control over at the time. And as she sat there in her dressing room, musing over the fact that there even *was* a dressing room for someone taking part in something as simple as a political debate over a simple council-seat in San Francisco, she had realized that if it hadn't been the money, it would simply have been *something else*.

The money in question had merely been eight million convenient excuses for her opponents, but if there had been no eight million, they'd still have attacked her on her father's criminal record ...

Her past in blue movies was a non-issue in the Castro, and the Hartwood-campaign had wisely stayed off that. Many furs were ill disposed towards pornography for one reason or another, and that was true in the Castro as well, but attacking anyone for their sexuality in the largest LGBT-district in the world was the political equivalent of ramming one's head down the barrel of one of the main batteries of the USS Ohio and shouting "clear your guns".

Chris nodded to her. She could see on his face that he too knew this was merely something that had to be done. Guy looked a bit more optimistic, but she knew ... as did everyone working for her ... that the game was lost. Even with the information she would disclose tonight, she stood almost no chance of catching the six point lead that Jason Hartwood had on her.

By now, however, she was at peace with it.

"Ready?" Chris asked.

Gabrielle nodded. "As ready as I'm ever going to be."

Guy smiled and held her papers out for her to take. "I'd like to say ..." he began, then faltered.

Taking the offered paperwork, Gabrielle briefly skimmed them to let Guy gather up his thoughts, before looking at him and nodding. "Yes?"

"Everyone at the office ... we'd all like to say we think you've been amazing, Mrs. Ryder. Most other politicians would've gotten nasty if they had to take what you've taken. But not you. You haven't let them bait you. You've kept your dignity, and regardless of the outcome of all this ... we all think more politicians need to be like you."

Gabrielle smiled and reached out, giving Guy a light hug. "Thank you. But I doubt we'll ever see a president or even a governor again, who wins by being decent and upstanding," she said.

Guy hugged her back. "Doesn't mean I can't hope for it," he mumbled.

He looked down and let go, and Gabrielle reached out and gave Chris a hug as well, thanking him for his help.

Then she headed down the hallway towards the stage.

###

It was evening. The floodlights had just come on, and the second quarter was underway. And Jacksonville was getting a thrashing.

Kalen had thrown a touchdown to Joe early in the game, but that didn't help much when the opponents had since scored four, and a field goal ... and there was still five minutes left on the clock before halftime. And the Fargo Greys were playing like demons. The Jacksonville offensive line looked like they were made of rice-paper and Kalen had been sacked twice already. The only reason he hadn't been sacked many more times, was because he'd scrambled for a few yards several times and thrown the ball away at least four more.

One of those times, he pulled an intentional grounding penalty, which annoyed him no ends. It was second and seven, and Kalen took the snap. It was a passing play. He was supposed to dump it off to a wide receiver running a short slant across the back of the opponent's line, but that sort of thing only worked if there *was* a line holding in front of him in the first place.

He realized almost immediately that it wasn't going to work, and suddenly, he had a face full of linebacker.

There was no time to react. All he could do was go limp like he was supposed to, to avoid injury, and take the third sack of the game.

He hadn't been this badly mauled since a certain game back in Canton, years ago.

The very game that had set him on his course to stardom.

Just before he got shot ...

He was laying on his back, still holding the football despite the opponent's attempt to strip it from him, and he was trying to catch his breath. This was going to be one loooong night. Jacksonville wasn't a playoff calibre team ... the Greys definitely were ... and he was paying the price for that qualitative difference on every single play.

The linebacker reached down to offer him a paw up and Kalen took it, letting go of the football so the referee could spot it where it where the next play was supposed to start. When he got up, the linebacker brushed his shoulders off and nodded respectfully.

"We all appreciate this. And we all hope you'll go to a great ball club next year," he said and tugged on an armband Kalen was wearing around his left upper arm. His throwing arm.

It was white with a red cross on it. The kind of thing a rescue worker might wear in a disaster area.

Kalen nodded to the tiger and smiled crookedly. "Thanks," he responded and hurried back to his team-mates in the huddle that was forming. He had been informed of the next play already through the small receiver in his helmet.

He'd already been informed he had received a forty thousand dollar fine for wearing a non-regulation item onto the field.

He didn't care. He couldn't afford such a fine. He didn't exactly receive a star-player's salary, but his team-mates had said they'd help him pay it. Joe had arranged it.

Said it was a matter of team spirit and that fining anyone for honouring an injured friend was absolute crap anyway.

Those had been his exact words, in fact. And he had said it before the game ... before anyone knew what the fine would be.

Kalen would miss his team-mates when the season ended.

"Alright ... listen to me. I'm going to call an audio on the line. They want another slant and it hasn't worked so far," Kalen said to the players in the huddle. "They're calling for a four thirty-two, but forget that. I don't care how the Greys line up. Listen for my signal!"

Then he clapped his paws and stood upright. His team might lose this game because of poor defence. But he'd be damned if they lost because of bad offence.

###

Gabrielle sighed and looked down at the papers on the table. She felt strange about this. On one paw, she should be happy that she had the necessary information in front of her to finally answer Jason Hartwood's accusations, but on the other paw, she couldn't help but respect the fur, despite their political differences.

He honestly believed that he would be helping the Castro if he got elected. He clearly did feel that property values could and should increase, and that this would benefit those living in the district, and it was impossible to argue against that purely based on financial thinking. But Gabrielle also knew that the soul of the Castro was the fact that it was a colony for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered furs from all over America, and that in order for the property values to increase, Jason Hartwood would have to attract investors who would be willing to set up businesses in the district, and who would build new housing and new buildings for businesses to set up offices in. And while these two things were not mutually exclusive ... Gabrielle also knew that there was still a deeply ingrained homophobia to struggle with in the corporate sector. It wasn't as bad as it had been twenty years before ... it was bad for business to be seen as openly homophobic these days ... but behind closed doors, she knew that many higher level executives entertained the exact same prejudices that had plagued the world for centuries.

She also knew that a good number of them would happily frequent gay bars themselves, in hiding, or that some of them had secret same-sex lovers. But hypocrisy was hardly a modern invention either. It still made her stomach turn though.

But Jason Hartwood's plan was to make the properties that the furs in the Castro lived in worth more, and speaking to an individual's wallet had always been sound tactics in any election. And when it came to her, he had been fair and forthright as well. All he had done was ask what even she had to admit was a legitimate question about eight million dollars that, for all he knew, had come from criminal activities. She couldn't deny that he had a right to ask.

She didn't even want to.

The trouble was that if she didn't use the information in front of her, her opponent would win the election. If she did use it, she had one last chance to undo the damage done to her campaign. Just one, and it required more than simply presenting the facts. She would have to draw on her acting experience to do this right. Not because she had to act as such, but because she had to remember how to deliver a line in a far more convincing way than what most politicians did most of the time.

Jason Hartwood entered. He approached her and she got up and shook paws with him. A few cameras went off. The local news network was here, as well as most major Internet-papers in San Francisco. The Castro election had become interesting material the moment Hartwood had presented the AVC-story at the first debate, and it had only grown since.

There had practically been daily calls for her to step down from the running since then, but she had refused to give up. She knew what had happened all those years ago in Denver. She knew what the truth was, but she had needed to find the right way of presenting it. She had needed to know where Jason Hartwood got his information from.

And now she knew.

What was more important ... he didn't know that she knew.

And she knew exactly how to go about this. The media expected her to concede defeat. It was not uncommon to withdraw late in the race, and they obviously expected a statement from her.

They'd get one.

Just not the one they expected.

"Ladies and Gentlefurs," the debate-leader said and tapped the microphone. "I ... "

Gabrielle approached him and tapped his shoulder. "Excuse me. Before we get started, I've got something I'd like to say to the press."

The old canid nodded. He looked slightly sad. He clearly expected her to withdraw too, and from the look in his eyes, Gabrielle figured he at least was one of her voters.

"Mrs. Ryder has a statement she'd like to make," he said into the microphone and stepped aside.

Gabrielle took off her jacket and placed it over the back of her chair before heading back to the microphone. In her paws, she held the information she needed. The same pieces of paper she had debated with herself if she even wanted to use.

If only briefly, before coming to the conclusion that she couldn't just throw in the towel.

"Ladies and Gentlefurs," she began. "I know what you all expect me to do. I know I am trailing Mr. Hartwood by six or seven points depending on what poll you look at, and I know everyone expects me to concede defeat."

There was a general murmur of agreement and out of the corner of her eyes, Gabrielle could see Mrs. Hartwood. She was hidden from the press just behind the edge of the scene but the look on her face was one of absolutely unrestricted glee.

For a moment, Gabrielle found it hard to restrain her loathing for the other femme, but she got a grip on herself and cleared her throat.

"Well ... I'm sorry to disappoint so many furs," she began, only to see the smile grow wider on Mrs. Hartwood's face.

The old canid looked down, next to her.

Gabrielle, on the other paw, looked straight ahead now. "But I have no intention of giving up. And while that may seem foolish to some of you, I have to explain why. You see, here in my paw, I hold some information that I am prepared to share with all of you. And then I have a story to tell you. Because as I am standing here, I am finally coming to an understanding of something vital in this whole mess. I finally understand where a gross misunderstanding began. A misunderstanding that has been allowed to go on for much, much too long. Not just for the length of this campaign, but for decades."

"I really don't think ... " Mrs. Hartwood began and stepped onto the scene but her husband simply shook his head towards her. He looked interested, and once again, Gabrielle couldn't help but think he was a decent fur. Instead of shouting her down, he was prepared to let her make her statement.

She held aloft the papers in her left paw and sighed. "These documents explain to me how Mr. Hartwood came into possession of the information he used in his attack against my morals. And as I stand here, I finally understand why he did so. Because he only has part of the information. A significant part, yes ... but not all of it."

A few more blitzes went off and Gabrielle lowered her arm. She hated doing this. Ripping open old wounds like this hurt terribly and it was giving her father more attention than she felt he deserved. But there was no way around it.

"My father was a criminal scumbag. He was a degenerate, evil fur who made a living on the backs of others. Who watched his bank account grow fatter and fatter on the suffering of ordinary furs. And yes, I knew what was going on from a fairly early age. But how would you ... as a teenager ... break free? Trust me, I tried. I tried so hard I nearly killed myself, and if it hadn't been for my dearest friend who recently passed away, I would have succeeded. Why? Because I hated my life. I hated that I had no freedom. That I couldn't see the furs I wanted to see. Date the furs I wanted to date. Do the things I wanted to do. Most of all, I hated what my father stood for. How he made it plainly obvious that the only thing I was useful for was *breeding*, and how he expected me to get married to some fur of his choosing who would then become the heir apparent to his

criminal empire. From that moment on, my value lay not in who I was ... but in the number of sons I could produce."

There was a surprised murmur from the crowd. Gabrielle couldn't contain the bitterness in her voice and she didn't even try to. This was deeply private stuff but she had little choice but to bare her soul. Then the voters would have a clear picture of who to vote for at least.

"Is there a point to this?" Mrs. Hartwood said. Her tone of voice was so snooty Gabrielle nearly turned around and snapped a retort. But she restrained herself and instead she kept looking at the furs in front of her.

"When I moved away from home, my father believed I would start an education, so that I would be a more useful trophy wife for my future husband. When he learned that I had dropped out of college after three days, and then kept it hidden for him for a whole year, he nearly had an apoplectic seizure. He began demanding that I return home immediately. I refused. I had a job at something as un-glamorous as a condom factory at the time, and while I detested the work, it brought me a paycheck every month. And I had some measure of freedom, while I tried to help a friend who was undergoing the early stages of pre-SRS counseling. As many furs here in the Castro know ... that is a desperate time for *any* fur. She had no one to lean on but me, and if I had left her, she'd probably not have survived. So I stayed, against my father's wishes. And I got a new job at ZZ Studios as you all know. I don't hide it, nor am I in the least bit ashamed of it. I worked for a wonderful boss with great colleagues and frankly, I got to do something we all like to do, and I got to do it for a living, and legally too. Most importantly of all, I met my wife at ZZ Studios. But before I got married, my father tried to abduct me ... "

That whole sordid story was something she felt awful bringing up again but it hadn't been mentioned by Jason Hartwood, and she finally understood why.

He hadn't known that particular piece of the tale.

It was ancient history by now, and Gabrielle didn't bring it up unless she had to. Remembering how close her father had come to succeeding made her sick to her stomach. And because she hadn't brought it up, the reporters had been all over the information he had given them, and they had simply gone with it.

The abduction-case had, after all, gone before. It was over with by the time she went home to confront her parents all those years ago. Unless the reporters either knew about it or deliberately looked for it, they wouldn't have found it.

She hadn't wanted it publicized. She had simply wanted to go back to living. All the newspapers had said was that there had been a kidnapping attempt against her, but ...

Hanging her head, Gabrielle closed her eyes. How could she have been so *stupid*?

Miranda Spermophilus had proved her father's connection to ArseNick, a Senegalese poisoner, but her methods had been such that there was no way of taking that evidence to court. Consequently, it hadn't made it into the newspapers. Her father had never been *publicly* tied to the abduction attempt against her. She had simply grown so used to everyone she knew, knowing the truth that she had forgotten that others might not know.

"He tried to abduct me, to bring me home for an arranged marriage to a fur named Jonathan Smythe-Rogers. If the distinguished members of the press go to their sources, they will find that I was indeed the victim of an attempted abduction not long before all this happened. And they'll also learn that Jonathan Smythe-Rogers was one of the furs who now serve sentences of eighty years or more in prison for their role in my father's drug-related crimes. He was the intended heir to my father's crime syndicate. That said ... I understand why Mr. Hartwood failed to bring this to light. Because the information he had ... he had from his wife. And what good husband doesn't trust his wife? Naturally, someone as upstanding as Mr. Hartwood would do so. After all, his wife had never given him reason not to," Gabrielle explained, without giving more than a cursory glance to the paper. She knew everything it said by heart, and she held it mainly because it was an important prop. If she simply said these things, it wouldn't have the same impact as if she had it in black and white.

The furs from the press were taking down notes, but clearly expected her to get to some kind of point about it all, and Gabrielle wasn't going to keep them waiting much longer. Drawing herself up to her full height, she cleared her throat and continued.

"So here's the gist of this story: the most important of my father's accountants, the fur who literally knew how to tie together all the different subdivisions of my father's empire, serves a sentence of fifty years in the same prison as the aforementioned Mr. Smythe-Rogers ... and according to these papers, that accountant just happens to be the brother of Mrs. Hartwood's mother. Mrs. Hartwood's mother took her husband's last name when they married, and Mrs. Hartwood in turn, obviously, took *her* husband's name when *they* married. But there it is. Mrs. Hartwood had the information from one of my father's accountants, a fur who has every possible reason to hate me for helping bring his days in crime to an end, and consequently, she only had a fraction of the story."

The gasp that went through the crowd was enough to make Gabrielle stop talking. She had to wait for everyone to calm down, including Mrs. Hartwood who was protesting in a loud, shrill voice until her husband managed to get her to stay quiet. It wasn't easy, but he seemed to be listening to what she had to say and Gabrielle was grateful for his tact. Not many politicians showed enough common courtesy towards their political opponents to let them finish talking if what that opponent had to say was this damaging.

"I am not accusing Mr. and Mrs. Hartwood of anything untoward," Gabrielle finally said. "In fact, I sincerely believe they both used the information they had with the most honest of intentions. However, what struck me moments before I began explaining this whole thing, was that my father's accountant, a fur named Frank Joseph Derby, had no idea why my father gave me a large sum of money. All he knew was that it had happened and that shortly thereafter, my father's crime syndicate began to unravel dramatically, and that I played a part in that happening. To him, it must have looked as if my father gave me the money to safe-keep it ... in which case, my using it to fund a pornographic movie would be very strange ... or simply to avoid it being lost if the FBI should come down on him like it appeared they might at the time, or even worse, to buy my silence. That would have been the logical conclusion and since Mr. Derby was never privy to private details about my father's family life, he would honestly have had no way of knowing differently unless my father told him. And I can guarantee you all ... my father *didn't* tell him the truth," Gabrielle went on. She took a while to let the impact of what she said sink in. The crowd was clearly agitated by what she was telling them, and she was quite happy to let them discuss between themselves what this all meant.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Jason Hartwood gently restraining his wife. The femme looked like she could've torn Gabrielle to pieces if her husband hadn't kept an arm around her.

Still, the bronco wasn't done and she took a deep breath, and waited for a moment of silence before she went on. "And here is why he didn't! He didn't, because he was too embarrassed by what had happened to admit it to anyone. But I have literally a dozen witnesses to what happened that day. Including furs of indisputable moral integrity, like a former air force colonel, and my then-employer Zig Zag, now a highly respected, award winning movie producer," she said, matter-of-factly.

"What did happen?" Jason Hartwood asked. His voice did not betray his emotions, if he felt anything in particular. But his interest was mirrored by almost everyone in the room.

"I blackmailed my own father," Gabrielle said and looked towards him. "I told him that unless he gave me a large sum of money, I would make sure that his whole rotten regime

came crashing down. I'd send a video-tape Zig Zag had produced to his business associates, to his contacts on Wall Street, to the cops ... to everyone who could benefit from knowing. It was a movie Zig Zag made at ZZ Studios which was never released to the public. It was made solely with the purpose of making him back off of me."

"That's easy for you to say. A movie that was never made publicly available ... *please!*" Mrs. Hartwood sneered. "Such a thing surely doesn't exist. Nor did it ever!"

"On the contrary," Gabrielle said, sighing again. "I have a copy at home, and I am prepared to let the members of the press see it for themselves if they are interested. It should be very, very easy to ascertain when it was made. As I recall, the raw footage still exists, and the recording date can be seen down in the left-paw side corner when it plays, should anyone wish to indulge."

Jason Hartwood nodded slowly, while the audience laughed, before gesturing for Gabrielle to continue. She smiled politely and looked back to the crowd.

"I didn't use the money for myself," she said. "I didn't want a cent of it. I knew where that money had come from. But with it, I allowed two furs to achieve their dreams. Two very good, decent furs who deserved every bit of it. I enabled Zig Zag to make the movie that finally allowed her to stick it to the Hollywood producers who had originally turned her away because of her stripes, and I enabled my friend, Jean LeBrun ... later Jean Lopez ... to undergo SRS. The money was clean. I have the FBI's word for that right here, on *this* piece of paper. That was why they did not confiscate it. But the money used to set up the businesses where it came from may not have been. That I don't know, nor can I ever. But what should I have done with it? Stood on the street-corners of Denver and offered it to passerby junkies in the vain hope that somehow I was giving them back *their* money and that they wouldn't go out and spend it on more dope? Instead, I tried to help two friends who deserved it, and I did it by hurting my father. He lost nearly eight million dollars because of me that day. This is the truth. The whole, rotten truth. I will gladly supply the press with the names of the witnesses I mentioned, so that they may contact those who are still alive today to ascertain that I've just told you the truth. I will also gladly help anyone dig up the files on my attempted abduction and I can refer you to the excellent police-officer who worked on that case, Captain Miranda Spermophilus, whom I am fortunate to still call my friend to this day. Thank you for your attention. And thank you to Mr. Hartwood for allowing me to shed the necessary light on this sordid affair. Now all we can do is let the voters decide who they wish to represent them at City Hall. Thank you."

She stepped back. Jason Hartwood approached her and nodded to her. There was a measure of real sympathy in his eyes, she noted, as he took the microphone.

"Thank you, Mrs. Ryder, for that excellent and comprehensive explanation. It appears that the information I had available to me was, indeed, incomplete. Our political differences notwithstanding, I wish to extend my thanks to you for this remarkably clean and decent campaign so far. I still obviously believe that I have something significant to offer the constituents of this district and I believe that in the end, politics will decide who wins this election. But I do believe that once the decision has been made and the ballots counted, we can both look each other in the eyes without shame or regret. Thank you."

Gabrielle took a deep breath and took Jason Hartwood's paw as he offered it.

There was nothing more she could do now. It was all up to the voters from this point on.