



COVID SEASONS

A NOVEL
RICK GOELD



Also by Rick Goeld

Fiction

Searching for Steely Dan

Sex, Lies, and Soybeans

Non-Fiction

People of Windsor Mountain

COVID SEASONS

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ISBN: 978-0-9829453-8-4 paperback

First Printing: August 2021

Printed in the United States of America

PROLOGUE

WEDNESDAY JANUARY 29, 10:00 PM

He'd had an upset stomach and headache the entire day. After dinner, as they watched TV, he started coughing and couldn't stop. He drank some hot tea. Didn't help. Then cough drops. Nothing helped. It got so bad he was having trouble catching his breath.

She asked him if she should call 9-1-1. He said no, he just needed a good night's sleep. He took a sleeping pill, but before they went to bed, he had another coughing fit. He was gasping for air, and she insisted on calling 9-1-1. He wouldn't have it. They argued, and he finally agreed to go to the emergency room. Then, in the car, he insisted on driving.

They got on the freeway, heading toward the hospital. His coughing got worse. She begged him to pull over, but he wouldn't do it. "Just one more mile," he said, and then, suddenly, they were off the road. All she remembered was screaming and the car going into a ditch.

Minutes later, she woke up. It was pitch black, and the car was on its side. She was hanging from her seat belt and shoulder harness, looking down at him. He was unconscious.

She had a broken wrist, was badly bruised, and had a concussion. The doctors later told her it was a grade three. Severe. She was in and out of consciousness, but when she was awake, she'd reach down with her good hand and shake him. He never woke up.

They were in that ditch the entire night. No one came until the next morning. By then, it was too late. He died. Loss of blood from a head injury.

She woke up in the hospital. A policeman was there to explain what happened.

“On that part of the freeway,” he told her, “there’s a deep drainage area running along the side of the road. It’s not right next to the road, it’s a few yards away. So when your car went off the road—it was late at night, not much traffic, hardly any light—no one saw it go into the ditch. A maintenance crew spotted it just before sunrise.”

They do blood tests in situations like these. Cause of death was pretty clear, but they want to know if there was an underlying cause: alcohol, drugs, whatever. A few weeks later she was notified. Her husband had Covid-19.

PART 1: A WINTER OF BLISSFUL IGNORANCE

CHAPTER 1

THURSDAY JANUARY 30, 9:30 AM

MARK

Mark Taylor, balancing a tray of pastries in one hand and a cupholder with two paper cups in the other, backed out of Mimi's Place, a coffee shop situated in a strip mall near the corner of Hayden and Mountain View. Once clear of the swinging glass door, he moved slowly across the sidewalk, stopped, bent slightly at the waist, and carefully placed the tray and cupholder on the wrought iron table top. There were a half-dozen tables with matching chairs arranged randomly along the sidewalk, ostensibly reserved for Mimi's patrons. On this cool January morning in a Scottsdale jammed with winter visitors, every table, and almost every chair, was occupied.

Winter in Arizona, he thought as he removed the cups from their holder and sat. *Send me your tired, your poor, your senior citizens freezing their wrinkled butts off.*

Seated at the table were his wife Julie and friends John and Sherri McKee. The temperature was in the low fifties, and they were all dressed warmly. Julie, a former model who still turned heads at forty-seven, wore a forest green DKNY outfit. Sherri, a handsome woman of sixty-five who was fighting a losing battle against wrinkles and gray hair, had her usual Chamomile tea, and wore a blue sweater-slacks combo from Banana Republic. John, drinking unsweetened black coffee, wore a navy hoodie, jeans, a very nasty pair of cowboy boots, and his ever-present Ford Trucks

baseball cap. Mark, who tended to dress casually, wore a medium-weight black pullover, jeans, and sneakers.

Julie reached for the cup marked with the letter H. “Hazelnut, right?”

“Absolutely,” Mark said. “Hazelnut latte for you, ordinary run-of-the-mill latte for me.”

Sherri glanced at the tray, which was overflowing with a large almond croissant, a dark, chunky morning glory muffin, an oversized chocolate chip cookie, and a scattering of paper plates, napkins, and plastic utensils. “That’s a lot of calories,” she said, perhaps a bit too loudly, drawing glances from people sitting at adjacent tables. In a near whisper, she continued, “What’s the occasion?”

“The occasion, my dear woman,” Mark said, grinning, “is that I am flat out hungry. On this winter morning, I was not able to avail myself of my usual cold weather breakfast of hot oatmeal with dried cranberries. So, I must settle for coffee and however many of these goodies I can scarf before the rest of you vultures get your paws on them.”

“Well put, oh great one,” Julie said as she arranged paper plates in front of each person. Sherri, wielding plastic, did the cutting: the croissant in cleanly cut quarters, the muffin in crumbly quarters, and the soft-baked cookie cut into sixths, like a small pizza. Yes, it was a cliché—women’s work—but Mark was unlikely to do it, and John was useless in the kitchen. The women, who’d been friends for a long time, didn’t mind.

“And Mark,” Julie continued, “regarding your comment about oatmeal, you forgot to mention that it was you who shopped yesterday and failed to replenish your cereal supply.”

“Guilty as charged,” Mark said.

John leaned forward, gazed at the pastries, then looked up, first at Julie, then at Mark. “Should we wait? I assume Scott and Emjay are coming?”

“They said they’d be here,” Mark said, “and that’s another reason for having pastries. Today, we celebrate the reconstitution of the Scottsdale Six, after operating as a foursome for what, a month?”

“They left just before Christmas,” Sherri said, “and got back Tuesday.”

“So, more like five weeks.” Mark pushed his chair back and stood. “In any case, today, we are again Six. Six souls in need of conversation, companionship, coffee ... and, occasionally, pastries. So, as organizer—”

“Self-appointed,” John mumbled.

“Organizer, discussion leader—”

“Whatever.”

“Yes, John, whatever ... I say ‘cheers everyone.’” He lifted his cup and drank. Foam clung to his upper lip. He smiled, then sat back down.

Mark was, in fact, the self-appointed organizer, discussion leader, and overall majordomo. The others played along.

“John,” Julie said, “to answer your question: No use waiting. Eat. If we run out of food, we’ll get more. And guys, as Sher said, they got back Tuesday. They’re probably wiped out, not to mention busy as hell. Cut ‘em some slack.”

The Core Four, as they often called themselves when Scott and Emjay weren’t around, had known each other for going on eleven years. Mark and Julie Taylor had moved into Monterey Vista, a small gated community in central Scottsdale, in 2004. John and Sherri had purchased

their Monterey Vista home in 2009, just after the market crash. John liked to brag about the deal he got. “Pennies on the dollar,” he liked to say.

The regular Thursday morning meetings had begun, just after John and Sherri had moved in, with what they now referred to as “that serendipitous encounter.” John, backing out of Mimi’s front door carrying his and his wife’s drinks, turned and barreled into Mark, who was just approaching the entrance. As John dipped and swayed, trying mightily to keep the drinks from toppling, Mark mumbled an apology, did a double-take, and said, “Hey, I know you. You’re our new neighbor.”

Both families lived in the same quiet cul de sac, albeit on opposite sides. Minutes after their encounter, the couples were seated at the same table, getting to know one another; thus, the Core Four was born.

Over the years, they had added other couples and begun calling themselves the Scottsdale Six. None of the newbies had lasted more than two or three years. One couple had moved away, another took offense when John characterized them as “too argumentative,” and another had just lost interest. Scott and Emjay had moved to Monterey 18 months ago. After meeting the Taylors and McKees at a neighborhood gathering, they’d been invited to join. So far, so good.

Sherri served everyone their choice of pastry. A moment later, John said, “So, Mark, you went to the grocery store and failed to buy oatmeal. Can I assume you avoided the cereal aisle so you wouldn’t have to see Aunt Jemima’s smiling face?”

That tired routine again? Mark smiled. He was mixed-race, and his legal name was Marcus, but he preferred Mark. John would occasionally needle him about avoiding use of the so-called black-sounding name. “I also detour around the aisle where the Uncle Ben’s Rice is displayed.”

“I feel your pain,” John said, grinning.

“I doubt it,” Mark said, returning the grin, then adding, “Mr. Pasty Face.”

“Ouch!” John said, stricken.

“Mark?” Julie said.

“Jules,” John said, grinning, “he knows I’m just messing with him. Anyway, so what if I’m light-complexioned?”

“Whiter than a Klan bed sheet,” Mark said.

“Guys?” Julie said, tapping her fingers on the table. “We’ve all heard this routine before. Let’s move on.”

“Yes, Julie, let’s,” Sherri said. “First, we very much appreciate the goodies, but I’m getting a little concerned about Scott and Emjay.” She tapped her cell phone. “Fifteen minutes late, and no call or text. Emjay’s not like that.”

“Sherri, my good woman,” Mark said, “yes, they’re late. A little late. Things happen, people get delayed. It happens to all of us. Right?” Sherri nodded. “They said they’d be here, so be patient—”

“And, speak of the devil, here they come,” Julie said, turning toward the parking lot.

A black Dodge Charger slowed to a rolling stop on the pavement adjacent to their table. The driver tapped his horn, then continued on.

“That’s Scott’s ride,” Mark said, watching the car move away.

CHAPTER 2**THURSDAY JANUARY 30, 9:50 AM****MARK**

A few minutes later, Scott, holding a Starbucks cup, wedged himself between tightly parked cars. Emjay was close behind. As they approached the table, Mark again stood. "The world travelers return," he said.

"After all this time away," Scott said. He held out his fist, and Mark bumped it with his. "And a good morning to all of you, my friends." He grinned as he leaned over and snagged a piece of cookie. "Goodies. What's the occasion?"

"The reconstitution of the Scottsdale Six," Mark said.

Having just celebrated his forty-eighth birthday, Scott was the youngest of the men. He was tall, lean, and fair, in sharp contrast to his wife, Emjay, who was an attractive Latina. Wearing a Lululemon combo, she approached. Julie, Sherri and John all stood.

"Hola, amigos," Emjay said, hugging Julie, Sherri, John, and, finally, Mark.

"Amigos, indeed," Julie said. She sat, Sherri sat, and the three men sat.

"I'm going inside," Emjay said. "Anyone need anything?" She glanced at the tray. "Should I get another muffin? More cookies?"

"I think we're okay," Julie said.

Emjay went inside, returning two minutes later with her own latte. Once she was settled, Sherri said, "We want to hear all about your travels."

Emjay: "You guys got our emails and pictures?"

Sherri: "Yes, but we want more. Details?"

Scott: "It was a great trip. A few days in Florida—"

Julie: "With your family? Orlando, right?"

Scott: "Yeah. Spent Christmas with them. Then we drove down to Miami. Did some swimming, water skiing, soaked up some vertical rays, hit a few hot spots.

Emjay: "Then over to Europe for a couple of weeks."

Julie: "Those were wonderful pictures of the French wine country."

Scott: "Yes. Did some serious drinking over there. We came back through D.C. Stayed with Emjay's sister and her kids for a few days."

"Alena, right?" Sherri glanced at Emjay, who nodded. "How's she doing?"

"As well as can be expected," Emjay said, "considering." After an awkward moment of silence, she continued, "Next week, I promise to bring a bunch of pictures, and provide you all with details and answers to all your questions."

Back to business. "Okay," Mark said, leaning forward. "Now that that's decided, without further ado, discussion, distractions, or detours, I call this meeting of the Scottsdale Six to order! Cell phones off or on vibrate, please." He watched as everyone silenced their phones. "So, the first order of business: discussion of global and national news. I've got three subjects: Trump's impeachment, Kobe's death, and that new virus, the one from China. Anybody got anything else?"

"Super Bowl this Sunday," Scott said. "The Chiefs will roll."

"Jared's Middle East Peace Plan," Sherri said. "Another example of Trump making good on a campaign promise."

"Oh boy," Mark said, chuckling. "Where do I begin?"

“And we’re into politics,” Julie said. “Mark, let’s not get into a big brouhaha about that.”

“Okay, but I just want to make one point. That plan is totally ridiculous. Dead on arrival. The Palestinians didn’t even come to the announcement. Didn’t participate in the negotiations, of which there were none, as far as anyone can tell.”

“Mark,” Sherri said, “I didn’t expect you to acknowledge another achievement.”

“What achievement? Nothing’s been achieved.”

“Guys,” Julie said, “enough.”

“Okay,” Mark said. “I won’t mention the rigged impeachment, his absurd Davos comment about that virus: ‘We have it totally under control. It’s one person coming from China.’ And then he thanks President Xi for whatever it is he’s doing—”

“Hates Mexicans,” Emjay added.

This prompted glances from people sitting at an adjacent table. Mark nodded at one grey-haired senior citizen—wearing a MAGA hat, no less—who was giving Emjay the evil eye. Mark coughed, caught his eye, and met his gaze. After a few seconds, MAGA man turned away.

“I’m gonna change the subject,” Julie said. “Kobe’s passing. What a horrible thing. All those children.”

“His daughter,” Sherri said, crossing herself. “Just thirteen.”

“One of those random accidents,” John said. “Could happen to any of us. Underlines the fact that we’re only here, on this earth, for a very short while.”

“Cherish our time here,” Sherri said.

“Still,” John said, “It could happen to any of us. Today. Tomorrow.”

Next week. Next year. “Not to minimize it,” Mark said, “but apparently he—they—rode helicopters frequently. Increased the probability.”

“I agree, and I need a refill,”—John picked up his empty cup —“and I’ve gotta go. Back in a minute.”

As John headed into Mimi’s, Julie said, “Any other global issues before we move on?”

“Let me think,” Mark sighed. “Okay ... Unrest in Iran ... Brexit.”

“Yawn,” Sherri said.

Mark shot her a look, then, “Well, I can’t think of anything else.”

“That virus you mentioned,” Julie said. “Didn’t we get our first case this week? Arizona, I mean?”

“One more thing to worry about.” Scott said, groaning.

“On that unhappy note,” Sherri said, “Mark?”

“Agenda item two.” He paused as he spied John coming out of Mimi’s. “John, we’re moving on to item two: closer to home.”

“I’ve got nothing,” John said, sitting.

“I’ve also got nothing,” Scott said, then, “wait. One thing. Played golf on Tuesday.”

“Hardly news,” John said, grinning.

“Ha ha. But newsworthy. Broke eighty for the first time in forever.”

“In the cold,” Mark said. “Impressive. Where’d you go?”

“Desert Mountain. Expensive. Winter rates.”

“I miss playing,” Mark said, sighing.

“I’ve never played,” John said. “Never could understand the game.”

Golf defies understanding. “I haven’t been out in a dog’s age,” Mark said.

Scott smiled. “How many times have I asked you to come out with me?”

“You’re out of my league,” Mark said, shaking his head. “I’m lucky if I break a hundred.”

“I’ll take a look at your swing. How about next Tuesday?”

“Let me check my calendar.”

“Mark, you’re not working,” Julie said. “Remember?” Her phone began to vibrate. She picked it up. “It’s Marsha Solomon.”

“Marsha?” Mark said. “From next door?”

“Yeah,” Julie said, standing. “I’m gonna take this.” She moved away from the table.

“Not working?” Scott asked, catching Mark’s eye. “Since when?”

“I’m on hiatus.”

“What’s the matter? Too many lawyers?”

“Not enough work. The firm has me on indefinite hiatus.”

“Indefinite?” Scott said. “Sounds like retired to me.”

Mark: “For Christ’s sake. I’m fifty. I’m not retired.”

John: “Indefinite hiatus for how long now?”

Mark: “Two months.”

Scott: “And counting.”

Give me a break. “Scott,” Mark said, “regarding golf on Tuesday, I’ll let you know tomorrow.” He glanced around the table. Paper plates with scattered crumbs, empty coffee cups, wadded napkins. “Anyone got anything else?”

“We saw the movie *1917*,” Sherri said. “I thought it was good.”

“Disappointing,” John said. “Don’t know ... Just didn’t strike me as realistic. All those foxholes. A little too staged for me.”

“I was impressed with the way it was filmed,” Sherri said.

“Two stars out of five,” John said.

Julie, pale, returned to the table. “Guys,”—she scanned their faces—“Marsha and her husband ... They were in a car accident.”

“Oh my God,” Sherri said.

“Her husband, Gerry,”—she slowly lowered herself onto her chair—“he’s dead.”

Dead? Mark leaned forward. “What?”

“He’s dead.” She took a deep breath. “Died in the accident.”

“Madre de Dios.” Emjay, stunned, crossed herself.

Sherri, blinking away tears, also crossed herself, then began whispering a prayer. John, shaking his head, put his arm around her, comforting her. A few seconds later, Scott asked, “How did it happen?”

“Marsha was calling from the hospital,” Julie said. “She didn’t say much. She just wanted me—Mark and me—to watch their house.”

“How is she?” Emjay asked. “Physically, I mean.”

“She said she wasn’t hurt badly. Said she’d be there a couple of days.”

“Gerry is,”—Mark sighed—“Gerry was a good friend. Scott, Emjay, remember we told you about the them? They were part of this group before you guys.”

Scott thought for a moment. “I remember you telling us there’d been a few couples before us, but I don’t remember the name.”

“Solomon,” Julie said. “Gerry and Marsha.”

“They were friends of ours, too,” John said, looking up. “Not just from this group. I mean, we all live in the same cul de sac. We saw each other, not all the time, but occasionally.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever met them,” Scott said, “but we’re a couple of blocks over. Honey?”

“I met Marsha,” Emjay said. “Just walking around the neighborhood. In fact,”—she glanced at Julie—“you were with her. You introduced us. Remember we talked for a few minutes?”

“Yes, over by the tennis court,” Julie said. “I told Marsha I’d visit her tomorrow.”

“Good,” Mark said.

“I’m just so shocked,” Sherri said. “So close to home.”

“Horrible,” Julie said.

John glanced at his watch. “On that sad note ...”

“Yes,” Mark said. “It’s a little early, but I think we should adjourn.”

As they stood, Julie said, “I’ll let you guys know about Marsha.”

“Please do,” Emjay said.

CHAPTER 3**FRIDAY JANUARY 31, 10:45 AM****JULIE**

Julie Taylor was tired. As a Scottsdale police lieutenant, she didn't see much real action, but a graveyard shift was never any fun. She'd had one callout, just after 3:00 AM. One of her response teams had gotten into a shouting match with a lawyer who was "asserting his First Amendment rights" by playing basketball on his driveway and chugging Miller Light while an old-school boombox blasted out hard rock.

After arriving, and upon further discussion, she'd discovered that he was a wannabe lawyer who'd failed to pass the bar exam once, or maybe twice, or maybe three times. He'd lost count.

Asshole.

After her shift, she'd gone to see Marsha Solomon, and then headed home. After parking her Chevy Malibu in the garage, she moved quickly through the laundry room into the main hallway, tossed her coat on the sofa, and continued into the kitchen.

"Mark?"

No response.

Where the hell is he? "Mark?" she half-shouted. "I'm back."

"Be there in a minute."

"I'm in the kitchen." Two minutes later, he strolled in, still wearing his warm pajamas and slippers. Already seated at the counter with a cup of coffee, she gave him the once-over.

"The slob appears."

"Dressed for comfort," he said, smiling. "Any coffee left?"

"Yeah. Help yourself. What were you doing?"

“Reading emails,” he said as he poured himself a cup, added a dollop of milk, and sat down next to her. “Cleaning up my desktop. Nothing special.” Sipping his coffee, he picked up the newspaper. “Here’s the headline: As Virus Spreads, So Does Anti-Chinese Sentiment.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Me neither. So tell me how Marsha’s doing.”

“I did get to see her, but just for a minute. She was pretty much out of it. Drugs. She thanked me for visiting. She was drifting in and out. Know what I mean?” He nodded. “But I did talk to one of the nurses. Said it was a day-to-day thing, and that I should check back tomorrow.”

“Hmm,” he said.

She sipped her coffee, grimacing as she swallowed. “Did you call our illustrious property manager? What’s his name?”

“Yeah. Didn’t get Roger; got his assistant—”

“Shirley?”

“Yeah, Shirley. She’s pretty much worthless.”

Brain dead. “Did they have an emergency contact?”

“Marsha’s sister in San Diego. The police had already notified her. She’ll be here this afternoon.”

“Okay then.” Another sip, another grimace. “You made the coffee too strong.”

He smiled. “Guilty as charged.”

She added milk, stirred, took another sip. “Better.”

“I’m happy for you.”

Where’d that come from? “Sarcasm this early in the day?”

“Never too early.”

“So, Mr. Lawyer on Indefinite Hiatus,”—they exchanged smiles —“what are you gonna do today?”

“Got some reading, some things about new regulations on family-owned businesses. Then I’m gonna have a late lunch with Don. He wants me to think about coming back.”

“When? You going back, I mean.”

“He hasn’t said, but he implied there was some turnover coming.”

“Hmm.”

“I might hit some golf balls after that.” He stood, moved to the coffee maker, and poured more coffee and milk. “And what about you?”

“Sleep. Then I’ve got a meeting at five. They’re rolling out some new policies. Criminals to catch, citizens to protect, just do it by the book. After that, I’m gonna meet up with Lauren. Maybe have dinner if she wants to. You’ll be okay by yourself?”

“I’ll get some Chinese take out. I’ll be fine. Suns are playing the Thunder. I’ll watch that.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“Now who’s being sarcastic?”

Marcus Taylor—Mark—was from Philadelphia. His father, William, was a somewhat militant black man who’d worked on an assembly line his entire life. His white mother, Sarah, was from a faux liberal Main Line family who had shown their true colors by immediately disowning her when they married.

Without her family’s support, they struggled to make ends meet. Mark and his brother, Dennis, always had enough food and clean clothes, but not much else.

After high school, wanting to be a lawyer, Mark worked his way through Penn State, where he met Julie Roth, a criminal justice major, at a party. She was from Easton, a small town in Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Valley, a

gritty region that never fully recovered from the collapse of Bethlehem Steel.

It was a cliché: he was working class black; she was white, blonde, and Jewish. In 1992, after graduating from Penn State—she in criminal justice, he in pre-law—they married and moved to Philly, where he got his law degree at Drexel. They were broke, ambitious, and happy as clams. He found work as a public defender; she became a rookie cop. They saved some money, but it wasn't enough, so they decided to move to a faster-growing region. After a few month of searching, he landed a job with a Phoenix-based firm specializing in family and small business law. After establishing their household, she joined the Scottsdale police force. Mark's career progressed well, and he eventually made partner. When Lauren was born, Julie, not wanting to be an absentee mother, resigned. When Lauren turned four, Julie rejoined the force. A few years later, she became a sergeant, and last year was promoted to lieutenant. She had aspirations of becoming a commander.

Lauren was now a sophomore at Arizona State, and her love life had become a concern. "Mark?" Julie said, standing and moving to the sink, where she rinsed her cup and placed it on the drying rack. "When I'm with Lauren, I'm gonna talk to her about Matt."

Matt Donaldson, a junior at Arizona State, lived with his mother, Stacey, in the same cul de sac as the Taylors and McKees. Like Lauren and many college students at ASU, he split time between his near campus apartment and home. There were two aspects to the problem: the obvious one, Matt's negative influence on Lauren; and the on-again-off-again feud between the Taylors and Stacey Donaldson.

"All I can say is: be careful. You know how sensitive she gets."

“I’m gonna focus on their relationship. I’ll keep you-know-who out of it, unless she brings her in.”

Mark stood and moved to the sink. “I doubt that she will.” He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “Reading between the lines, I think she feels the same way about Stacey as we do.”

I hope so, but ... Julie checked her cell phone, then moved quickly into the living room. Mark followed. “Jules? One more thing?”

She grabbed her coat. “What?”

“Not to get you upset, but ... If you guys have dinner, take it easy on the wine.”

She turned to face him, and they locked eyes. “I don’t need you to tell me—”

“All I meant was—”

“I know what you meant.” She turned and moved quickly away. Seconds later, the door between the laundry room and garage squealed open, then slammed shut.

CHAPTER 4**THURSDAY FEBRUARY 6, 9:30 AM****JULIE**

They had all arrived on time, nine-thirty sharp, which hadn't happened in, as John put it, "a blue tit's age." Julie had laughed out loud. Over the years, John had used the term many times, and it always cracked her up. Years ago, on a whim, she'd googled "blue tit" and learned that it's a common bird, found throughout Europe and thereabouts, with an average life span of 2.7 years. John knew the average life span of many species of birds, fish, and mammals, and often used that phrase, aptly modified, to estimate the passage of time. But blue tit was his favorite.

Nice that John had lightened the mood, Julie thought, but she knew—they all knew—that this morning's discussion of Gerry Solomon's death would be no lark.

On this cool February morning, the Six occupied a booth in the far reaches of Mimi's back room. Once a dingy storage area, the room had been painted in blue and white, and decorated with murals depicting scenes from various cities. Overhead fans kept the air moving.

On one side of the booth, Julie was flanked by her husband Mark and Emjay. Opposite them were John, Sherri, and Scott. Once settled, each with their respective hot drinks, Julie began. "What happened was so awful, I hope I can get all the way through it without breaking down." Mark put his hand on hers, leaned toward her, and whispered in her ear. She nodded, then took a deep breath.

"It was after dinner. They—Gerry and Marsha—were watching TV. Gerry hadn't been feeling well. Marsha said he'd had an upset stomach and headache for most of the day. Anyway, Gerry started

coughing, and couldn't stop. He sipped some hot tea, and Marsha gave him some cough drops, but nothing helped. Then it got worse. He couldn't catch his breath.

"Marsha asked him if she should call 9-1-1. He said no, that he'd be okay and just needed some sleep. So he took a sleeping pill—I think she said it was a Benadryl—but then, a couple of minutes later, he had another coughing fit. A bad one. He was gasping for air. She insisted on calling 9-1-1. They argued, and he finally agreed to go to the emergency room. So they went out to the car, and he insisted on driving."

"Stubborn," John said. "I remember that about him."

"Shush," Sherri said.

"So," Julie continued, "they got on the 101 freeway, heading north, toward the hospital. He was still coughing. It got so bad, she begged him to pull over, but he wouldn't do it. 'Just one more mile,' he said, and then, just a few seconds later, he lost control of the car. She remembers screaming and the car going into a ditch."

"My God," Sherri said.

"It gets worse," Julie said. "She wakes up in total darkness. The car is on its side, on the driver's side. I mean, they're still in their seat belts, so he, Gerry, is below her."

"I know what you mean," Emjay said.

Julie felt her hands shaking. She took a sip of latte, then a deep breath. *I'm not gonna get through this.* "Guys, I'm sorry." She reached into her handbag and took out a pack of Marlboro Lights. "I know our policy is to not smoke at the table during our meetings—"

"Not to mention it's against the law," Emjay said, frowning.

"Jules?" Mark said. "Really?"

“Sorry, but I’ve gotta have one, and there’s what,”—she scanned the room—“two other couples back here. Four people.” Using a Bic disposable, she lit up, took a deep drag, savored it, and then exhaled toward the floor. “Call me a hypocrite. I’ll smoke it fast. So where was I?”

“After the accident, she woke up, and it’s pitch black,” John said.

“Right. So she’s hanging from her seat belt, looking down at Gerry. And he’s unconscious.”

“Was she ... I mean, how was she?” Sherri asked. “Was she hurt? Injured?”

“Let her tell it,” John said.

“No, it’s okay.” A long drag from her cigarette, again exhaled toward the floor, followed by a sip of coffee. She scanned the room, looking for nasty glances, seeing none. “So, she had a broken wrist, and she was bruised, badly bruised in a few places, but the main thing was that she had a concussion. The doctors told her it was a grade three. Severe.”

“My goodness,” Sherri said.

A final drag, and another exhale toward the floor. *Better*. Sighing, she dropped the butt and squished it with her shoe. “Remember I said she was looking down at her husband? Well, she was close enough to touch him. With her good hand. She touched him, tried to shake him a little, but he wouldn’t wake up.” A tear fell, and then another. She reached for a napkin.

“Should we stop for a while?” Mark said.

“No,” she said, patting her face. “I’m okay. It’s just ... This part is just so awful.” Emjay leaned closer and put her arm around her. “What happened was, they were there, in the ditch, the whole night. No one came until the next morning.”

“My God,” Sherri said. “How—”

“She explained it to me. Actually, the police explained it to her. On that part of the 101, there’s a deep drainage ditch running along the side of the road. Well, not right next to the road. It’s a few yards away. So when the car went into it ...”

“No one saw them,” Scott said, finishing her sentence.

“That’s right,” Julie said, taking another deep breath. “It was a very dark night, and not much traffic ...”

“What’s so scary about this,” Mark said, catching John’s eye, “is that it could have happened to anyone. Any of us.”

“I think I know the spot you’re talking about,” John said. “I kind of remember the drainage area by the side of the road. But those are everywhere.”

“You’re right,” Mark said, “but that spot is particularly bad. After Julie talked to Marsha—”

“This morning,” Julie said.

“I drove over there, just to get a better idea of what happened. I parked on the shoulder, and actually paced off the distance from the roadway to the edge of the drainage area. Twenty steps. That’s about twenty yards.”

“A long way,” John said.

“It’s a bad accident waiting to happen,” Mark said. “Late at night, extremely dark, almost no traffic, no barrier, no trees or bushes. A car goes into that drainage area and disappears. No one sees it happen.”

Julie continued, “The police told Marsha that a maintenance crew just happened by and spotted the car. It was just after seven. Just before sunrise.”

“January,” John said. “Late sunrise, early sunset.” He began tapping on his cell phone.

“So they were in the car the entire night,” Emjay said.

“Yes,” Julie answered. “From about ten-thirty to seven the next morning.”

“Just checked,” John said. “There was a new moon on January twenty-sixth, so the accident—”

“On the twenty-ninth,” Julie said.

“There would have been damn little moonlight three days after a new moon.”

Mark nodded.

“In the car for that long,” Emjay said, “they could have frozen to death.”

“Actually,” Julie said, “Marsha said she was cold, but never felt like she was freezing. They both had winter coats on. And gloves.”

“Excuse me for asking,” Scott said, “but did Gerry ever regain consciousness? In the car, I mean.”

“Marsha wasn’t sure. The doctors told her that she was probably in and out of consciousness, and, with a concussion, wouldn’t remember much. She did remember Gerry coughing a few times. She talked to him, but he never answered.”

“So when they found them ...”

“The police came, ambulances came. They took both of them to the hospital, but Gerry died en route. He’d lost a lot of blood. Head injury.”

“My God,” Sherri said, crossing herself as she whispered a prayer. Emjay also crossed herself.

“Guys,” Julie said. “This is so difficult,”—she scanned their faces—“I need a few minutes—”

“Me, too,” Emjay said.

“We all do,” Mark said. “Ten minutes?”

Nods all around, and the booth emptied, some to get refills, others to just go outside and clear their heads.

Mark had gotten a refill and immediately returned to reclaim the booth. Winter in Scottsdale, and a vacant booth didn’t stay vacant for long. But fifteen minutes passed before the Six were all re-seated.

Sensing the mood, Mark began. “Look, everyone, I know that was very hard to listen to. Your faces ... I feel the same way. So, my suggestion is that we dispense with our formal agenda. I mean—”

“Mark,” John said, “we agree.” Julie, Sherri, and Emjay all nodded. Scott was silent. “Whatever news there is ... Trump’s acquittal, and the nasty repercussions that are sure to follow ...”

“That virus thing. He closed the border,” Sherri said.

“Kind of,” Mark said, catching her eye.

“Guys,” Julie said, “a terrible thing has happened, a friend of ours is gone, and another friend is hurt ... physically and emotionally. Marsha,”—tears rolled down her cheeks—“what she went through.”

Mark handed her a napkin. “We should go,” he said, catching John’s eye.

John nodded, the others nodded, and, seconds later, the table was vacant.

CHAPTER 5**THURSDAY FEBRUARY 13, 9:35 AM****MARK**

A difficult week, Mark thought as he searched in vain for a parking place. Politics, that new virus, Gerry's passing, and now I'm gonna have to park in The North Forty.

The North Forty was, as the Six often referred to it, a section of parking in, not surprisingly, the northernmost part of the lot: just about as far from Mimi's as one could get. *A hike.* He parked, locked the car, and headed south.

It was a large, sprawling strip mall covering 15 acres. Mimi's, located in the section which ran along the South perimeter, was flanked by a do-it-yourself pizza joint, a dog grooming salon, a vape shop, a yoga studio, and a Walgreen's drug store. The East section featured a Chinese restaurant, a shoe repair shop, a Subway, a very busy dry cleaners, and a couple of empty storefronts. The North perimeter had a stand-alone Circle K convenience store and gas station. The West perimeter had a short strip featuring a stand-alone Wells Fargo branch office. The parking lot was dotted with concrete islands planted with small trees and shrubs, and open areas around the perimeter sported large trees and well-manicured grass.

The morning was sunny and unusually warm, with a temperature in the low sixties, and Julie, who'd arrived early in her own car, had secured an outdoor table. She and the McKees and Sanders were already seated, all with their usual hot drinks. And, for the second straight week: no pastries. Feeling that she had gained a few pounds over the holidays and subsequent weeks, Julie had emailed the group suggesting that they forego any extra calories for a while. No one objected, although John

noted, as the group's resident libertarian, that no one should have a problem if anyone bought, or brought, their own snacks.

As Mark approached the table, Scott caught his eye. "You're late."

"Guilty as charged," he replied, thinking: *I use that phrase way too often.*

He disappeared inside, and emerged three minutes later with his latte. He sat, apologized again for being late, and called the meeting to order. "Guys, last week ... that was such a horrible thing."

"Julie," Emjay said, "do you have an update on Marsha?"

"She's out of the hospital," Julie said, "and her sister is staying with her for a few more days. Sherri and I went over there yesterday. Her sister, Dorrie, drove over from ... San Diego?" She caught Sherri's eye.

"Yes," Sherri said. "She seems very nice. Caring."

"I'll stay in touch with them," Julie said. "See if they need anything."

Mark said, "I'd like to bring up one more thing about the accident. Some legal stuff. It was in an article in yesterday's paper. Did any of you see it?"

"We don't get the paper," John said. "Just a bunch of gibberish."

"We get it," Emjay said, "but I don't remember seeing anything about the accident."

"It was in the supplement," Mark said, "and it made some interesting points. Remember no lighting? No trees? No guardrail? No barrier of any kind?"

"Yeah?" John said.

"The article made an argument that the city was negligent in creating a hazard like that. Said that the survivor had a strong case. That she should sue."

“Good point,” John said, “and I agree, but think about it. Who would she sue?”

“Everybody,” Scott said, smiling. “Isn’t that what lawyers always say?”

Is that a shot at lawyers in general? Or me? Mark considered responding, but let the comment slide.

“Hold on,” John said. “That freeway is on Indian land. So she could sue that tribe.”

“Indian nation,” Emjay said, correcting him.

“Okay, Indian nation. However you want to call it.”

“But,” Mark said, “having been a lawyer ...” He shot a glance at Scott.

“You’re still a lawyer,” Julie said.

Thank you, dear. “As a lawyer, I’ll bet that when that particular Indian nation leased the right-of-way, they made sure that any liability issues would be the state’s responsibility.”

“Yeah,” Scott said. “Makes sense. So it would be the State of Arizona.”

“Yes,” Mark said, nodding. “Look, guys, Jules and Sherri are going to stay in touch with Marsha. Okay?” The others nodded. “Then I suggest we get back to a semblance of order, and go through our normal unabridged agenda.”

“Semblance. Unabridged. Them are five dollar words,” John said, smiling.

John and Sherri were the only native Arizonans in the group. Both had experienced tragedy, and tragedy had influenced them in vastly different ways.

John was born in Phoenix, the oldest of three brothers. His father was a car mechanic; his mother a traditional homemaker; and the family lived modestly. In 1976, at age twenty-one, he joined the army, working in the motor pool. His plan was to learn vehicle maintenance. Then, after his military service was completed, he'd start an auto repair business with his father.

Both of his brothers had followed him into the army, and tragedy struck both. Just as Operation Desert Storm was about to launch, one was killed in a training accident. Six months later, the other was killed in Kuwait. John was devastated, and, in 1991, he left the army. He'd served fifteen years, and had never set foot outside the United States.

He did start an auto repair business with his father, which grew into a successful four-bay shop. A few years later, his father's health began to fail, and he could no longer work. John took on a partner, and things began to unravel. He and his partner didn't get along, and John was uncomfortable working on the advanced electronics in newer cars. Frustrated, he allowed his partner to buy him out.

At loose ends, he took a job at a large company that did collision repair work. He was happy, but an incident involving his best friend soured him. He lasted three years. Now semi-retired, he still worked part time when shop owners he knew needed help with "old-fashioned wrench and hammer work."

He'd met Sherri while both attended Phoenix Central High School. She'd been a bit of a wild thing in school, developing a reputation as a fast mover. Tragedy had also struck her: after just one year of marriage, her first husband died in a motorcycle accident. While mourning, she had reconnected with John, who was home on leave. After a short courtship, they married. A few years later, her older brother, Riley, who had struggled

with mental issues all his life, committed suicide. Sherri retreated into a life filled with religion, charity work, Yorkshire Terriers, and their daughter, Jennifer.

“So,” Mark said, taking control of the meeting, “item one on the agenda: All things great, global, and national.”

“We obviously didn’t talk about it last week,” Scott said, grinning, “but my Chiefs rolled, just as I predicted.”

“Hear, hear,” Mark said. “What a fantastic game.”

“One of the best Super Bowls I’ve every seen,” John said. “Patrick Mahomes—”

“Mahomey,” Scott said. “He’s gonna break some records.”

“Long way to go,” Julie said.

“Julie, my beautiful friend, if you don’t know what you’re talking about ...”

Julie didn’t immediately react, but Scott’s comment had caught his wife’s attention. Emjay turned toward him, the expression on her face barely masking her displeasure. “Honey,” she said, forcing a smile, “isn’t that a bit rude? Not to mention chauvinistic?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, flashing an “aw shucks” grin. “Didn’t mean anything by it. If I offended anyone ...” He glanced toward Julie, who looked away.

Sorry, not sorry. Mark thought, suppressing a smile.

“Next subject?” John said.

“One more thing,” Scott said, “the Chiefs made me a nice piece of change.”

“Two hundred bucks,” Emjay said, shaking her head. “Not exactly mucho dinero.”

Chump change. Mark held up his hand. “Guys, let’s get back to global and national.”

“That was national,” Scott said.

“Agreed, but moving on to more substantial items,”—Mark made a show of placing both index fingers on his temples—“starting with the bad news: Trump’s acquitted. Last week, of course.”

“Yawn,” Sherri said.

“Given the make-up of the Senate,” John said, “a predictable outcome.”

“Duh,” Scott said.

“And now,” Mark said, “we shall see that movie, *There Will Be Blood*, played out in real life.”

“Great movie,” John said.

Mark nodded. “And the blood spilled will be that of those brave individuals who have deigned to cross our glorious leader.”

“Mitt Romney comes to mind,” Emjay said.

“Mitt Romney,” John said, smacking his lips as if savoring the name. “I think y’all know ... I guess you guys,”—he nodded at Emjay and Scott—“being relatively new to the group, you don’t know this, but I’ve got a relatively low opinion of politicians in general—”

“I’ve noticed,” Emjay said.

“Ditto,” Scott said.

John smiled. “But I’ve always admired one politico: John McCain.”

“May he rest in peace,” Sherri said, crossing herself.

“Not a perfect politician,” John continued, “and I haven’t always agreed with him, but the man had integrity ... for the most part.”

“Hear, hear,” Mark said. “I’m a moderate who leans slightly left —”

“Leans slightly?” Sherri said, smiling.

“Okay, I’m left of center, a Democrat, I admit it, but I agree with John. I always liked McCain. Respected him.”

“My point was,” John said, regaining the floor, “that I’m beginning to like Romney. Not as much as McCain, but at least the man had enough balls to vote for impeachment.”

“One article.”

“Granted,” John said, “but still, one better than none.”

“Back to ‘blood,’” Mark said, “I think he, Romney, may spill some blood in the very near future.”

“I don’t think so,” Sherri said. “As I recall, he was elected in 2018. Six year term. He’s okay until 2024.”

“True,” John said, “but he’ll have a hard time getting anything done. Trump and McConnell will shut him down. I think there will be blood, but it will be other people’s.”

“Stay tuned.” Mark checked his phone. “We’ve been going for a while. Let’s take a break.”

Upon reconvening, Scott said, “I’d like to go back to that Chinese virus. Let me tell you ... that thing is no accident. I’ve been reading about it. The Chinese government is behind it.”

“Evidence?” Julie said.

“There’s no hard evidence yet. Too early, but it’s obvious. I read about a secret biological lab in that city where it started—”

“Wuhan.”

“Yeah, Wuhan. That’s where it was developed.”

“Evidence?”

“Like I said, too early.”

“So,” John said, “the Chinese developed this virus, and it got out and killed a bunch of Chinese people. How does that help them?”

“Yeah, some Chinese have died,” Scott said. “They accept that. They’re tough-minded. A lot tougher than we are. But watch how it’s spreading to other countries. That’s their long-term strategy.”

Sherri said, “And that’s why the president closed the border. To protect us.”

“Yeah,” Mark said, “he closed the border, with a bunch of exceptions.”

“But he did close it.”

“Sherri, I love you like a sister, but do your homework. Haven’t you seen the reports about all these planes landing and people coming in with no screening?”

“Guys,” Julie said, “let’s move on.”

“The screening is being set up,” Sherri said.

“Won’t matter,” Scott said. “Too little, too late. The Chinese are way ahead—”

“Scott, enough,” Emjay said, interrupting her husband while giving him a nasty look. “Julie is right. Let’s move on.” Scott stared back at her, scowled, then looked away.

Trouble in paradise? Mark’s gaze drifted from Emjay to Scott and then back to Emjay. “Okay,” he finally said, “next on the agenda: closer to home.”

“Kirk Douglas died,” Sherri said. “He was one-hundred-and-three.”

“I’m Spartacus.” John said, smiling. “Great movie.”

“What a great actor,” Sherri said. “Some of his early movies, when he was young, were really excellent.”

“Speaking of movies,” Mark said, “Jules and I saw *Bombshell* a couple of days ago. Excellent. Lays bare the toxic environment at Fox News.”

“Definitely lays it bare,” Julie said, grinning. “Lots of female flesh.”

“Sherri,” Mark said, “you’re a Fox News watcher. You should go see it.”

“Oh, Mark,” Sherri said in her best sing-song voice, “You’re a glutton for punishment. Haven’t you eaten enough crow today?”

Eaten enough crow? He opened his mouth, started to speak, but then stopped, shaking his head.

Emjay said, “A friend told me that *Parasite* is very good.”

“Korean, right?” John asked.

“Yeah. Subtitled. But she said it was easy to follow.” She caught Sherri’s eye. “Want to go see it?”

“I’m not big on subtitles,” Sherri said.

“Me neither,” John said.

“I’d go with you,” Julie said, then turning to her husband, “Mark?”

“Yeah, I’ll go.”

“I’ll check out the showtimes,” Emjay said. “Maybe I can get this one,”—she nodded at her husband—“to go with us. Make it a foursome.”

“Like Sherri and John,” Scott said, “I’m not a fan of subtitles, but for you, my dear, anything.” The sarcasm in his voice belied the forced smile on his face.

“What else?” Mark said.

"I've got an idea," Julie said. "The weather's so nice, let's go hiking this weekend."

"What? You mean mountains?" John said. "Like Camelback? Or Squaw Peak?"

"Ding ding ding!" Emjay said, shaking her head. "The use of the word 'squaw' is no longer politically correct."

"Oh, Jesus," John said. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, dear," Scott said. "Are you serious?"

"Half serious," Emjay said, ignoring the jibes. "The correct name is Piestewa. Piestewa Peak. Changed a few years ago. We should be using that name."

"In any case," Julie said, "anyone interested? How about Sunday morning?"

"I'd do Sunday," John said, "but, in that I'm old and decrepit—"

"Really, John?"

"Let me finish. What I was about to suggest was to take a long walk along the bike path. The one that parallels Hayden Road. We can walk a mile or two, stop to get coffee, and then walk back. Somewhat easier than climbing mountains."

"I'd go for that," Emjay said.

Sounds reasonable. "Second," Mark said.

"Less of a workout, but still, a nice walk. Show of hands?" John raised his, and a few seconds later, it was unanimous. "Start at around eight?" Nods all around.

"Then, without further ado," Mark said, grinning, "let's adjourn."

"Mark?" Emjay said. "One more thing?" He nodded, she continued, "I've been carrying these pictures around in my handbag."

"From our extensive travels," Scott mumbled.

“Rather than drag this meeting out any longer, how about I bring them on Sunday? We,”—she nodded at her husband, then turned back to the group—“can tell you all about our travels when we stop.”

“In excruciating detail,” Scott added, this time loud enough for Emjay to hear.

“What a great idea,” John said as he shook his head back and forth. “No, really,”—he stopped shaking his head—“I’m kidding. That’s a fine idea.”

“John,” Emjay said, “I can’t always tell when you’re being sarcastic.”

“Emjay,” Sherri said, “I’ve known him for what seems like forever. Just assume he’s always being sarcastic. And,”—she glanced at her husband—“I’ll make sure he doesn’t complain one iota during your presentation.” John made a face and started to say something, then thought better of it.

“And with that,” Mark said, “we are adjourned.”

CHAPTER 6**THURSDAY FEBRUARY 13, 10:40 AM****EMJAY**

They were both steaming. Scott shoved through the door, not bothering to hold it for his wife. *What a jerk*, Emjay thought as she put her hands up to keep it from slamming into her. *And what ever happened to ordinary common courtesy?*

The silence was deafening as they approached Scott's black Dodge Charger. He used the remote to open the doors, they got in, both doors slammed shut, and a minute later they were rolling.

"You're a real asshole," Scott said, firing the opening salvo.

"I'm an asshole?" Emjay said, incredulous.

"You're a fucking asshole."

"Oh, that's nice, coming from someone who calls himself Mr. Nice Guy. Mr. Nut Case would be more accurate." She controlled her temper, keeping her voice low and even. "Your conspiracy theory: 'The Chinese have unleashed this virus on us,' is pure garbage."

"You've got no idea," he said. They exited the parking lot, the car lurching over the curb as he turned east onto Mountain View Road. "You don't read as much as I do. I study that stuff."

Study? "Reading crazy theories on so-called news sites is not studying. That's wasting time."

He pushed the accelerator to the floor, and the car shot forward. "You know what's wasting time? Going to spin class three times a week. And those books you read."

"At least I'm trying to stay in shape. Not like riding around in a golf cart with my drinking buddies." The car accelerated, narrowly

missing two bike riders. “And your driving! We’re gonna have an accident!”

He hit the brakes, slowed down, made a right turn into the entrance of an apartment complex, and parked.

Scott Sanders had grown up in Chicago. His father, Charles, was a restless soul, and had moved the family from the inner city to one suburb, and then another, and then another—a half-dozen moves that Scott could remember. His two younger sisters had adapted well, but he hadn’t, and as a teenager he’d had a number of scrapes with school principals and the law. He’d managed to graduate from high school, but after two boring years of community college, he’d dropped out and talked his way into a part-time job with a real estate company. One week into the job, working the phone, he’d identified two sellers who wanted to list their properties, and he was hooked. He thrived, opening his own company three years later. Not feeling particularly connected to Chicago, cold winters, or his family, he’d moved to Scottsdale, where, in 2000, he’d re-established his business and hired ...

Maria Juanita Rodriguez as his first employee. Scott was a huge Michael Jordan fan, ‘Maria Juanita’ was just too much of a mouthful, and she had no objection; thus the nickname ‘Emjay’ was born.

Emjay had grown up in a poor neighborhood in the suburbs of Hermosillo, Mexico. Her family also owned a real estate company, with her father, Jose, as chief salesperson; her mother, Veronica, as bookkeeper and cleaning lady; and her lawyer uncle, Julio, handling contracts. Growing up, she’d studied hard, got passing grades, became fluent in English, did her best to be a good Catholic, and cleaned houses alongside her mother. After dinner, she often sat with her father, watching him

smoke his evening cigar as he spoke about the difficulties of running a small business, and about operating in an already corrupt Mexico just beginning to suffer the effects of drug wars. She learned the value of hard work, and of being tough-minded when necessary.

Her parents, with great foresight, had applied for a work visa for her while she was a teenager. When it finally came through, she moved to Phoenix, where an aunt had a spare bedroom. She went to real estate school, and got her first job as number two employee in Scott's new business. Eighteen months later, they were married.

The marriage had started well. In the first few years, Emjay went from being secretary, bookkeeper, and cleaning lady, to Scott's best salesperson. The business expanded and was fabulously profitable. Then came 2008: the housing bubble burst, the economy collapsed, and the marriage began taking on water. Lots of things contributed to the decline: Scott liked to smoke, drink, play golf, and peruse questionable internet sites; Emjay got into physical fitness and reading romance novels. And their mutual decision to not have children ... They were still together, but for how long?

They sat silently in the car, ignoring one another. The only sounds were those of cars passing by. Finally, Scott turned and caught his wife's eye. "Hey. I'm sorry."

Easy to say. "Sorry for what?"

He thought for a long moment. "I guess ... bottom line ... for being an asshole. Like you said."

"Hmm."

"Forgive me?"

"Scott, it's not just about the conspiracy thing. After that—"

"After you disrespected me: 'Julie is right. Let's move on, children.'"

"I didn't call you a child."

"But we all got the idea."

"You're the one who went into a deep sulk. Mumbling. Grumbling." *Acting like a child.*

He took a deep breath. "And then that thing about Squaw Peak." She opened her mouth, then thought better of it and stayed silent. "Political correctness gone wild." Remaining silent, she turned her head and gazed out the passenger side window. "Okay," he continued, "I acknowledge the fact that I acted badly." He smiled at the back of her head. "Forgive me?"

"Too many times, Scott."

"Come on." He reached over and placed his hand on hers. "Please?" She remained silent. "Do I have to beg?"

She turned to face him. "Okay." She smiled. "I admit the Piestewa Peak thing was a bit much. But I was right."

"Granted." He leaned toward her. "Friends?" She leaned in, nodded, and they kissed. "Let's try to do better? Please?"

"Okay."

"Such enthusiasm," he said as he started the car. Soon they were again heading east on Mountain View. He glanced at his watch. "Just past eleven. Want to stop and get something? Sandwiches? We can bring them home."

"I'm not that hungry, and I've gotta get home and change. Yoga lesson. Why don't you drop me off, and then get something for yourself?"

"Okay," he sighed.