

For Jamie Lynn

With love and gratitude

Marjorie Florestal is a former international trade lawyer for the Clinton Administration. She is currently a writer, law professor, and pet mom to four unruly dogs.

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CHAPTER ONE

Stop

The smell of urine pressed in her nose. It was a human thing, angry, acidic, and biting. It stung her nostrils as she fought to push him away.

"Stop! Stop!"

He bit her ear, as if that would stop the cries. The more she struggled, the more he pressed down, until she felt his teeth, like sharp razors, skimming across flesh and cartilage. She cried now for this new pain and for the feel of his hand ripping at her panties. He pushed into her with three hard thrusts, then it was over.

She rolled away, wincing as a spring poked through the mattress to dig into her flesh. "Why did you do this to me?" she cried, wrapping her body in a tight bud.

By now he was staring at her with confusion and a look of dawning horror. "Why are you crying?" He reached out to wipe her tears, but she shrank from his touch. "Please, don't cry."

She pushed him away, and that seemed to unleash something inside her. Hands balled into fists, she began punching and hitting him, trying to inflict even a fraction of her own pain. It was impossible. She climbed over his prone body and rearranged her crumpled skirt, her belly heaving with sobs.

"I'm sorry," he said as she rushed from the room. "I am so sorry."

CHAPTER TWO

Notice

Ten Years Later

The City of Boston groaned under the weight of its fifth consecutive blizzard. On the deserted streets of Braddock Park, Renee François made her way against a wind so fierce it turned the snow into stinging nano-missiles that attacked her with the force of a thousand mosquito bites. It was not a day to brave the outdoors on foot, but what choice did she have? There was no way that she was going to miss her conference call, not even for a blizzard.

Her law firm was only a few blocks away, and she usually enjoyed the walk. Even now, she couldn't help but cast an appreciative glance at the snow-laden, redbrick row houses that

lined both sides of the street. The mishmash of Greek and Renaissance revival architecture was part of the South End's charm. It was a community that poured immigrants, gays, artists, and misfits of every stripe into one huge cauldron and stirred the pot, producing one of the most vibrant neighborhoods in Boston. She felt more at home here than she ever had growing up in Brooklyn.

The storm intensified. By the time she made her way to the five story row house that served as her office, she was desperate to get out of the cold. She flung the door open and almost collided with a darkly-cloaked man who seemed to materialize from the shadow of the stairwell. Before she could utter an apology, he brushed silently past her to disappear in a veil of snow.

The wind nearly blew the door off its hinges, forcing her to push her full weight against the wood to get it closed. When she finally made her way up the stairs to her office, the blast of heat that greeted her was a welcome relief.

"Did you see him?" her secretary, Kelly, asked as she walked in the door.

"Who?" She pulled off her winter gear and hung it on a peg by the door.

"He wouldn't give a name." Kelly handed her an impressive

stack of phone messages. "I told him to wait, but he left a few minutes ago. He said he'd be back later."

"Was he a client or a reporter?" She scanned the messages: interview requests, clients calls, and two overtures from prominent law firms hoping to recruit her into their ranks. Her office was becoming very popular.

"Neither. He said it was personal."

"If he didn't leave a message, there's not much I can do." She glanced at her watch. "I'm going to be late."

"Wait." Kelly held up a hand as she turned to leave. "I've got a surprise for you."

"I don't like surprises."

The secretary pulled something from behind her back and waived it frantically in the air. "You're on the cover of *Time!*"

She took the magazine, barely glancing at it. "The cover? Must be a slow news day."

"Look at it," Kelly demanded. "What do you think?"

She glanced down and saw her own face staring back at her under a headline that read, "Lawyers Who Change The World." She hadn't changed the world—far from it.

"That should certainly help increase billings," she said.

"Is that all? I'm more excited than you are."

"It's exciting to be able to pay our bills," she said

dryly. "A few years ago, it was a different story."

Kelly dismissed the practicalities with a wave of her hand. "All I know is that my family would go crazy if I were on the cover of a magazine. My mother would buy up every last copy in Boston."

She tucked the magazine under her arm and changed the subject. "I'm expecting a call from President Aristide—"

"I know the protocol," Kelly replied, visibly disappointed by her boss's lack of enthusiasm.

"Good." She turned and headed down a narrow hallway to her office, closing the door firmly behind her. Only then did she allow herself a hint of a smile. She didn't usually care about this sort of thing, but it was *Time* magazine, after all.

She dropped the stack of phone messages on her desk and took her seat, transfixed by the magazine cover. She was just vain enough to appreciate the photograph. The lighting accentuated her flawless brown skin and softened her features, lending an almost hazy glow to her dark brown eyes and long, black hair. She stood with arms crossed, serious and unsmiling, ready to take on the world. The photo radiated strength and intelligence with just a hint of sexy. At nearly thirty-two, she would take sexy where she could get it.

She flipped through the magazine until she found the

interview. It was a flattering look at her role during the Haitian refugee crisis. The reporter was good, he got her to talk about things she usually never talked about—like how she got involved in the crisis in the first place.

Four years ago, she was glued to her television watching as the military ousted Haiti's first democratically-elected President from power. It took just under an hour for Jean-Bertrand Aristide's eight month presidency to collapse, and soon enough he was on a plane bound for exile in Venezuela.

Then the chaos began.

Military leaders rounded up Aristide's supporters and strapped rubber tires around their necks before dousing them in gasoline and setting them ablaze. The screams were chilling, but even worse were the thousands of smiling faces dancing in the streets, chanting "down with Aristide" as the horror unfolded just a few feet away.

Shortly after that, thousands of refugees poured out of the island, taking to the open sea in boats so small they looked like glorified tuna cans. She had to do something. What right did she have to sit in her comfortable home and watch the crisis unfold as if it were no more than a made for tv movie?

Within a week, she quit her job and was on a plane to Guantanamo Bay to interview some of the thousands of Haitian

refugees now trapped on Cuban soil. The U.S. Coast Guard had intercepted them at sea and herded them into detention camps. Women and men—even children—were piled like cattle behind steel and barbed wire with little water and no protection against the brutal Cuban sun. Flies circled them, waiting to feast on their pain and misery.

She fought the Federal Government in court seeking political asylum for the detainees. The media quickly became involved. As one reporter said, her story had a certain “Cinderella” quality that made it impossible to ignore. A first generation Haitian-American—the daughter of a maid and a former bus driver—she had gone to Harvard Law School and worked at a prestigious “white shoe” Boston law firm. But she gave all of that up to fight Goliath. And just like David, she won.

Her clients were allowed to resettle in the United States, and she thought her work was done. But then Aristide called, and she soon found herself embroiled in an even bigger battle—this time with the White House.

She closed the magazine and let it fall to her desk. The article read like her personal version of The American Dream, but only because it left out the nightmarish parts. Her eyes darted to a framed picture of her parents she kept on her desk. Would her mother have been proud of her? She doubted it—Haiti

had been a forbidden topic in their home.

The blinking light on the console snapped her out of her dark thoughts. She reached for the phone with a sigh of relief.

"You got a minute?" Kelly's voice rang over the intercom.

"What's up?"

"The guy I was telling you about is back."

She glanced at her watch. "My call is in ten minutes."

"He says it'll take less than five."

"Send him in." She had a hard time turning away someone who needed help.

A few minutes later, Kelly ushered a man into her office.

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked him.

"No," he said. His voice was curt, bordering on impolite.

Kelly raised an eyebrow but left the office without a word, closing the door behind her.

Renee discretely observed her visitor. Nothing about the man stood out. He was medium height, medium build, with brown hair and dark brown eyes. He looked to be anywhere between mid-thirties to mid-forties. He was a man who would easily blend into a crowd. *Probably a private investigator*, she thought. In that line of work, it paid *not* to stand out.

But there was a current of energy swirling around him that left her cold. She suddenly wished Kelly had kept her office

door open.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

"Renee François?"

He reached in his coat pocket, and she immediately stiffened. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

He pulled out a thin, business-sized envelope and handed it to her. "I'm delivering a message."

She took the envelope from him, noting the postmark with some surprise. "I no longer have any dealings in New York, Mr . . . ?"

"Dan Brown," he said, his tone clipped and impatient.

"Mr. Brown, are you sure you have the right person?"

"I think you'll find your answer in that envelope." Before she could respond, he turned and walked out of her office.

She stared at the envelope as if it were a particularly venomous snake. New York brought back bad memories. But she had been a lawyer for too long not to recognize the document in front of her—it was a legal filing, she couldn't just ignore it.

Reaching for her letter opener, she stabbed its pointed tip at the base of the envelope and slid it open. A single sheet slipped out.

It was a Notice of Hearing.

Her eyes scanned the document, even as her brain tried to

process what was in front of her. He was being released. No, she quickly assured herself. He was being *considered* for release—there was a big difference. The hearing would determine whether Cristobal Colón emerged from the Flatbush Psychiatric Institute a free man.

At least he got a hearing. She had been imprisoned for the last ten years with no possibility of parole.

The notice fluttered in her hand like a captured butterfly. A phantom odor of urine invaded her office, and she felt once more the sting of teeth on her soft flesh. Her chest tightened. The room began spinning on its axis. She put her head between her legs and struggled to breathe, forcing the air in and out of her lungs.

"Renee, your ex-husband is on the line." Kelly stood at her office door, looking concerned. "I tried your intercom three times, but you didn't answer."

She sat up and tried to focus on her secretary. Her mouth felt scratchy and bone dry, almost as if she had ingested sandpaper. "What does he want?"

Kelly shrugged. "You know he doesn't talk to The Help."

She offered her secretary the semblance of an apologetic smile. Her ex-husband was the only child of rich parents and often found it challenging to relate to ordinary people. "I

can't handle him," she croaked. In fact, Paul was the last person she wanted to talk to right now.

"Are you alright?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not."

#

Five stories below, the man calling himself Dan Brown stood impervious to the wind and snow. "It's done," he said, speaking into his cell phone. He listened silently for a moment, brows furrowed. "I've got it under control. It's time to do your part."

He hung up and disappeared into the storm.

An ocean away, the Old Man stared thoughtfully at his now-dead receiver. His granddaughter had urged this change, but he was skeptical. The plan was too complex with too many moving parts. Could it succeed? He doubted it. But if it did, his family's five hundred year old problem would finally be resolved. It was at least worth the effort to find out.

He dropped the phone in its cradle and went off in search of his granddaughter. They had work to do.

CHAPTER THREE

The Call

Renee cried all the way home. There was no one on the streets to care. The notice lay in her coat pocket, and each brush of the envelope against her skin was like plunging her hand in a vat of hot oil. It was the pain that helped her keep a grip on reality. Without it, she would have drowned in a pool of ten year old memories.

She could barely remember what she said to President Aristide during their call. He thanked her for persuading the Clinton Administration to send in the Marines to restore peace in Haiti—and to reinstate his presidency. But her work was hardly a success. In the end, Haiti's first democratically elected president would serve a total of just ten months of his five year term. It was a concession President Clinton had wrung

from them when he agreed to intervene.

So much for saving the world.

She raised her face skyward and let the hard pebbles of snow sting at her eyelids. After the call, she had practically run from the office. The last thing she wanted to do was sit there and pretend to help people when she didn't even know how to help herself. What was she going to do? The question rang in her head even as her fingers reached for the envelope, like a moth singeing its wings on an irrationally seductive flame.

By the time she let herself in her house, she had managed to wrestle the tears under control. She sat on a small bench inside the entryway and kicked off her snow boots, laying them on a rubber mat underneath the bench. Next came the scarf and hat. Each item she removed made her feel lighter, less constricted. She stood up and took off her coat, hanging it on a rack next to the bench. A sliver of white peeked out from her pocket, wet and curled over. She pulled out the envelope and stared at it with blurred eyes. From the kitchen, a tinkle of laughter emerged, light and innocent, full of joy. It was the best sound she had heard all day.

The past was dead, she told herself. Let the dead bury their own dead. Crushing the soggy envelope in her hand, she threw it unceremoniously into a small waste basket by the door.

She wouldn't allow her old life to contaminate the new.

"Anybody home?" she called out as she made her way to the kitchen.

"Mommy!"

"Marie-Thérèse." A small dynamo came charging at her. She lifted the little girl in her arms, pressing soft kisses on her cheek. "What are you doing?"

"Tantine Rose is teaching me to cook. We are making ak . . . ak—"

"Akasan," a softly-accented voice behind her offered.

Marie-Thérèse nodded. "What Tantine Rose said."

She laughed, putting the little girl down as she greeted Rose Fleurie, the housekeeper who had become her daughter's "Aunty Rose."

At six feet tall, Tantine Rose made an imposing figure. She looked like a ballerina—rail thin and full of grace—but she had the strength that came with a thirty-year career as a professional chef.

"You are home early," Tantine Rose said, her English fading into a mix of French and Haitian Creole. Her piercing brown eyes roamed her employer's face, missing nothing.

"I thought I'd spend some time with my two favorite people." She forced a smile, hoping it would be enough to

distract the perceptive housekeeper.

Luckily, the phone rang in the other room. "You stay with your daughter," Tantine Rose instructed. "I will go."

The housekeeper left the kitchen. She leaned against the counter watching Marie-Thérèse lay out the ingredients for Haitian porridge with military precision: cinnamon, star anise, cornmeal, vanilla extract, milk and sugar.

"Very good *choupitre*," she said.

"It's called *mise en place*. Tantine Rose taught me. She says the best chefs are always prepared."

She smiled at the hint of hero worship in her daughter's voice. Tantine Rose had a knack for gaining adoration. In Haiti, she had been chef to President Aristide, and world leaders lined up for a taste of her *pate*, black rice, conch, and fried pork. But after the coup, she became one more Guantanamo refugee.

"Is Tantine Rose teaching you to speak French?"

Marie-Thérèse grabbed the sugar canister. "She says I'm Haitian, so I have to learn Creole first. I can count to five in Creole: *Youn-de-twa-kat-and-senk*," she sang as she added five lumps of sugar to her mixing bowl.

"Excellent. Can you teach me?"

Marie-Thérèse giggled, and her insides melted at the sound. This little girl, with her gap-toothed smile, honey-brown skin,

and eyes that reflected a kaleidoscope of color, had taught her so much about love. She would do anything to protect her child.

"Tantine Rose says *akasan* is very special 'cuz the Tainos invented it, and that makes it part of my heritage." Marie-Thérèse wrinkled her nose and added, "What's a Taino?"

"They were the first people of the Caribbean." It amazed her how much Tantine Rose continued to love a country that had nearly destroyed her. On the night of the coup, a mob threatened to "necklace" her with an old tire and a gallon of gasoline. She fled the country in a boat that sprung a leak the minute it reached the high seas. Nineteen passengers stranded in six hundred miles of shark-infested water. Tantine Rose was the lone survivor.

"What happened to them?" Marie-Thérèse asked.

"They died, *choupitre*."

"But why?"

Her daughter's insatiable curiosity could sometimes prove awkward. How do you explain genocide to a nine year old? "Well—"

Thankfully, Tantine Rose chose that moment to re-enter the kitchen. "You are wanted on the telephone."

"Who is it?" Renee asked.

"You will want to take it in private."

She knew what that meant. "I'll be right back, *choupitre*,"

she said to her daughter before heading to her home office. She was careful to close the door behind her before picking up the phone. "Hello?"

"Renee, I need to cancel dinner tonight."

Her ex-husband still had the power to inflict so much pain. "Paul, you canceled last week. Marie-Thérèse is really looking forward to this. Please don't disappoint her."

"Can't be helped," he replied in crisp tones. "I've got a client in crisis—he needs me."

"You're a corporate litigator—what kind of 'crisis' can't wait a single night? Maybe it's your paralegal who needs you?" She immediately regretted her words. Five years of brooding over Paul's mistresses was enough, she had given that up when she walked out on the marriage.

"Are you jealous?" He did not bother to mask his pleasure.

"Hardly."

"You always did give up too easily."

She closed her eyes and silently counted to ten. "Could you come for an hour? She's having a tough time and could use your support." She hated the note of pleading in her voice, but what else could she do? Her daughter would be devastated. Again.

"Perhaps we could help each other." He spoke amiably enough, but she wasn't fooled. "I know you're getting more legal

work than you can handle right now. How about sharing some of your better off clients? The less time I spend rainmaking, the more I can spend with Marie."

"Her name is Marie-Thérèse," she snapped.

He ignored her objection, as he always did. "Come on. The partners are on me to bring in some new cases. This isn't such a bad idea, is it?"

"For you to coerce me?"

"That's not what I—" He cleared his throat and tried to again. "Why don't you come to dinner with the client tonight? You could see how I operate. It would put your mind at ease."

"Thanks, but I'll be eating with my disappointed daughter." She hung up and started massaging the pain at her temples. What had she ever seen in Paul? He was a lousy husband and an even worse father, but when they met at Harvard Law School, she thought he was the answer to her prayers. Paul came from a prominent Haitian family—his father was once Haiti's Consul General to Boston, and his mother was the current Haitian ambassador to the United Nations. More than that, his parents loved and protected him since the day he was born. She had wanted a little bit of that for herself, which explained why she was dumb enough to marry him just six weeks after they met.

Now, she was paying for her mistake. Worse yet, so was her

daughter.

The phone rang once more, and she picked it up with a snap of her wrist. "Paul, if you think—"

"Ms. François?" a woman interrupted. "I'm Nadine Jeffries, a prosecutor with the Brooklyn DA's Office. I'm calling in regard to Chris Colón."

She could feel the blood drain from her face. "How did you get this number?"

If the prosecutor was surprised by the chilly reception, she did not let on. "A private investigator—"

"I can't help you."

She could hear Nadine Jeffries pause and take a long breath before responding. "I realize this is a delicate situation, but we need you to testify at Mr. Colón's hearing next week. Without your help, he could be released. This is your chance for justice."

"Justice?" She nearly spat out the word.

"Colón is a predator," the prosecutor replied. "He attacked you, and he will do it to someone else if he is not stopped. Is that what you want?"

"What I want is for you to leave me alone."

"Ms. François—"

"Please don't call here again," she said, before slamming

the phone in its cradle.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Pocahontas Lady

"No." The word echoed silently in Renee's mind as she tossed and turned, struggling to find her way out of the dreamworld. "No." The darkness was overwhelming. She was drowning in a pool of shadows. "No!" The piercing wail finally penetrated her sleep. This was no dream.

She leapt from the bed and raced down a narrow hallway in the chilly house. Bare feet hit cold tile in an urgent rhythm. Moments later, she reached a closed door and flung it open. A night-light illuminated the small figure writhing on the bed.

"Marie-Thérèse!" She rushed forward to grasp her daughter's thrashing shoulders. "Open your eyes."

"No! No!" the little girl shouted.

"Wake up, *choupitre*. Everything is fine. Wake up." She sat

on the edge of the bed and repeated the words over and over, running a soft hand across the child's brow until two small, light-colored eyes opened to stare up at her.

"Mommy? Why are you in my room?"

With a sigh of relief, she gathered her daughter in her arms. "You were having a nightmare again," she explained. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Marie-Thérèse laid her head on her mother's shoulder. "No."

"It might help if you do." Her daughter had suffered nightmares every night for the last month, but she refused to talk about them—not to her mother, or to the child psychologist she was now seeing.

"But you have nightmares too, Mommy, and you never talk about them."

Her heart seized at her daughter's words. It was true. She had battled nightmares for most of the last ten years, but talking about them was the last thing she wanted to do.

"It's different for mummies, *choupitre*. We are here to listen."

Her daughter considered that for a moment, then tentatively offered a small entrée into her world. "There's a lady in my dreams. She looks like Pocahontas."

"Yeah? Tell me about her." The little girl had been through

so much in her nine short years, how could she not have nightmares? It was her fault that her daughter was suffering. She tried not to let the guilt overwhelm her.

"It's the same dream all the time. The Pocahontas Lady is lying in the ocean all by herself." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "She's *naked*, Mommy."

She smiled despite herself at the horror in her daughter's voice. "She is?"

"Umm-hmm." The little girl nodded. "Then, a man jumps in the ocean to go after her. She doesn't see him. I try to tell her, but she can't hear me!"

"It's alright, *choupitre*." She slid a hand gently down her daughter's back hoping to soothe her.

"The man pulls her under the water. The Pocahontas Lady is fighting and fighting. She can't breathe. Then, she is very still, almost like she's dead but she's not. The man takes her to a ship. There are lots of other men there. They laugh at the Pocahontas Lady and start pulling at her hair. Then . . ."

"Then what happens?" she asked when Marie-Thérèse remained silent.

"They try to touch her private parts."

Where was her daughter getting these terrible images? She tried so hard to keep Marie-Thérèse away from adult television

shows or movies. Could someone have hurt her little girl?

"Marie-Thérèse, has anyone tried to touch your private parts?"

"No, Mommy."

She looked into her daughter's eyes and believed her. Marie-Thérèse was not a very good liar. "You remember what I told you to do if a bad man tries to hurt you?"

"Yes, Mommy. I should kick him were it hurts and run. Then, I should tell an adult I trust."

"Very good, *choupitre*. So, what happened to the Pocahontas Lady?"

"She punched one of the men on the nose, and they stopped laughing at her."

"Good for her." She tried not to cheer, it was just a dream after all. But if her daughter was going to have nightly visitation with a "Pocahontas Lady," better that she be a strong woman capable of protecting herself. "Is that the end of your dream?"

Marie-Thérèse shook her head. "Then another man came. He was tall with red hair, and all the other men were scared of him. He helped the Pocahontas Lady stand up 'cuz she wasn't feeling so good. Then, he gave her something."

"What did he give her?"

"Pennies, I think. Lots of pennies." She shook her head, as if to clear the image. "Why does she keep coming to me, Mommy? I can't help her. I wish I could, but I can't!" She began sobbing. "I want her to leave me alone."

Her heart broke at her child's distress. "Have you told her that?"

"What do you mean?"

The child psychologist they were seeing often spoke of "confronting the dream image." Perhaps Marie-Thérèse needed to do just that.

"Well, the Pocahontas Lady sounds like a friend you don't want to play with anymore. Maybe the next time you see her, you could tell her she has to leave. She no longer has permission to be in your life. Once you stand up to her, you won't be so scared anymore."

Her daughter stared up at her with tear-soaked eyes. "Is that what you do when you have a nightmare, Mommy?"

"Well, I . . ." Out of the mouths of babes. How could she ask her daughter to do something she wasn't willing to do herself? "You know what, *choupitre*? That's exactly what I'm going to do."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Beautiful City

The train barreled from the station like a wild horse bucking its rider. Renee stumbled against the passenger beside her—an old woman, who instantly shot her a murderous glare. “Sorry,” she mumbled, tightening her grip on the handrail. There was no breathing room. Every inch of the subway car was filled with hands groping for something to hold.

She could have taken a cab, but New York City taxis only crawled through the streets in morning rush hour traffic. At least the Number 2 train reached a maximum speed of fifty-five miles as it screeched through the underworld. It had the added benefit of being familiar. She had been taking this train to its terminus since she was five years old.

The train stopped, and like a finely-tuned swarm of

honeybees, the crowd made its exit in a single wave—leaving just a handful of stragglers behind. She breathed a sigh of relief at the sudden expansion of air and space. There was only one stop left, but she couldn't resist taking a seat. As the train moved from tunnel to open sky, she pressed against the window to feel the play of light and warmth on her face.

"Flatbush Avenue. Last stop." The conductor's announcement was unnecessary. Everyone on the train knew this was a dead end.

The doors opened, and she followed the small crowd outside, pulling her scarf close to ward off the chill of the wind. She headed south, moving briskly down the street. It was hard to believe that just a few blocks away, Flatbush Avenue teemed with life. The north end of The Avenue was full of high-rises and brownstones, Bodegas, and the little mom-and-pop shops that kept Brooklyn gritty and real, even as Manhattan transformed itself into a Disney theme park. But that was the north end. On this side of The Avenue, there was nothing but an electric fence surrounding thirty-six acres littered with a handful of worn-out old buildings.

She paused to stare at the sprawling, redbrick monstrosity dominating the neighborhood. The Flatbush Psychiatric Hospital was built in 1856 to house the city's "lunatics." Almost from day one, people called it Belleville—the Beautiful City. The

name allegedly came from one of its earliest inhabitants, a Frenchman who entered the asylum after killing his wife. "*Quelle belle ville!*" he mocked as they removed his chains and the asylum's doctor pumped him full of morphine.

"First day on the job?"

Renee turned to find a young woman in blue scrubs huddled in the doorway of a side entrance. She was smoking a cigarette, blowing smoke and fog at the same time.

"Excuse me?" Renee said.

"I been here two years, and it's as bad as they say. Don't nobody tell you different. These people are animals. I'm just making time til I—"

"I don't work here."

The woman looked stunned, then embarrassed. "Sorry," she mumbled. "You don't look nothing like the kinda people who got folks up in here." She dropped her cigarette, crushing it beneath her heel.

Renee left the young woman without a word and headed toward the main entrance. Each step was more difficult than the last, until she was almost dragging herself to the security gate. The guard at the gate glanced at her identification, then waived her past him with a flick of his hand. She walked through the entrance and stepped inside.

It was worse than her memories.

The main room sported peeling paint, dirty floors, and old furniture full of suspicious-looking stains. The French residents of Belleville had long since departed, leaving behind a clientele of Caribbean and Latin American immigrants who walked around in various stages of psychological distress. One woman beat her head like a drum, while another held a long and complicated conversation with her imaginary lover. Several people sat on a dirty couch in the middle of the room staring into nothing.

The smell of urine was everywhere.

She took a few short, shallow breaths hoping to slow the passage of rancid air into her lungs. She was going to be sick.

"Can I help you?" The receptionist, a young woman sporting a Brooklyn College sweatshirt, pulled absently at one of her long, cornrowed braids.

"The Colón hearing?" She was surprised to hear her own voice. It sounded like the young, frightened girl she had once been. Belleville had a way of doing that to her.

"The Director's Office. Room thirty-nine," the receptionist said, pointing vaguely to the left while her tone made clear she had no intention of showing the way.

Unfortunately, Renee didn't need directions. She turned and

walked down a narrow corridor toward the administrative wing of the building. An old woman with wild hair shuffled past, her eyes vague, her gait slow and labored—victim of the Thorazine shuffle.

Room thirty-nine was at the end of the hall. Renee made her way to the door, then stood there for what felt like hours. Her sweaty palm rested on the doorknob while her heart sounded a wild, syncopated beat. She forced herself to breathe deeply once, then again. Finally, she turned the knob and stepped inside.

"Ms. François?" A young woman in a navy blue pinstriped suit approached, her shock of red hair an exclamation point in an otherwise drab room. "I'm Nadine Jeffries. We spoke on the phone?"

"Where—" Her voice emerged as a hoarse croak, so she cleared her throat and tried again. "Where would you like me to sit?"

The Director's office had been transformed into a makeshift courtroom, with plastic tables and folding chairs standing in for the judge's bench and counsel tables. The prosecutor gave her a strange look, but pointed to a lone chair several feet away.

She took her seat before her legs gave out.

"Are you alright?" Nadine asked, undoubtedly noticing the beads of sweat that lined her brow, and the slight quiver to her lips. "Would you like some water?"

She nodded.

Nadine gestured to the guard standing a few feet away. Moments later, the young man approached, handing her a small bottle of water.

She took a few sips while the guard hovered over her. "Thank you," she said. He nodded and walked back to his post.

"Better?" the prosecutor asked.

"Yes. I have an upset stomach."

"This place has a way of doing that to you," Nadine wryly responded.

"How long will this take?" It felt strange to be in a courtroom—even one this rudimentary—as a participant rather than a lawyer.

"One day. Maybe two. We're calling several medical personnel, but you're the only civilian. We're lucky to have you. You'll be great for our case."

She nodded even as she winced inside. *Lucky? Nothing about this situation is lucky*, she wanted to scream at this fresh-faced, young woman. "I'll do my best," she said.

Nadine gave her an earnest smile before heading back to her

own seat.

Only then did she allow herself to meet the eyes that had been staring at her from the moment she walked in the room.

She expected to find a monster, but instead she found herself staring into the eyes of a man she had once loved.