

And Freedom for All

The first shot at Fort Sumter



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by

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Daphne closed the drawer and looked around the room. There was so much she wanted to take, but there was so little space. Two suitcases, her cat Sarah and her dog Maxie were all that were coming with her. Her sister had taken custody of her two mares, Star and Moon. They would be safe with her. Later during one of the horse show tours, she would return them. The rest of her belongings she had arranged for trusted friends and family to store; maybe later, they could be safely forwarded to her. But she wasn't counting on it. She wiped away the single tear. Backing toward the threshold, she emotionally let go of the little reminders of the past. She would still have the memories--most of them were sweet. Unfortunately, some were not--resting her open palm on her stomach, she knew that the only way to keep her life and freedom was to run and hide. Angrily, she slammed the door and turned her back on it.

"Daphne?" Melanie ran into the hallway from the kitchen. "You okay?"

Slowly she shook her head. "Just feeling stupid. "The trunk's all packed. There is a little more room if you have something small. Maybe some of your riding trophies?"

"No. Nothing else."

"You don't have to do this. We can find another way."

"I'm already seven weeks. A few more I'll start to show and they'll stop me at the border." Daphne sighed. *I can't believe I trusted him*, she thought. *He wasn't the person he pretended to be. I fell in love with a kind, intelligent progressive man. Only George wasn't that man; he was an illusion, who betrayed me.*

"You aren't married. He doesn't have any proof he's the father." Melanie persisted. "Besides, he can't prove you're even pregnant."

"It doesn't matter. Not anymore. With so many women escaping to free states, they are stopping every woman."

"Remind me again. What country is this?"

"I've heard of women being jailed for the full term of their pregnancy to prevent them from leaving the state."

Rolling her eyes, Melanie shook her head, the dark strands swished over her shoulders. "Let's go pick up Sarah and Maxie from the vet and get on the road. Do you want to say good-bye to your Mom on the way out of town?"

"Yes. But it wouldn't be a good idea." Through the window, she saw a tan van pull into the driveway and two strange men got out. She recognized the Confederate flag of the logo on their vehicle; they were from the PBP. One checked his clipboard and said something to the other. He replied and they both walked toward the front door. Daphne didn't recognize them nor hear their words but she knew who they were. "Don't ask any questions. Go into the bedroom."

"What for?" Melanie turned toward the window. "Who are they?"

"Pre-born Protectors."

"What the hell--"

"George must have filed a claim with them." Angrily, Daphne marched to the door, locking the screen door before they could turn the handle. "This is private property. You are trespassing!"

A knowing look passed between them. The older of the two stepped forward and pulled on the knob. "Daphne Miller?"

"Get off my property!" Daphne hissed back.

"I'm Agent Schub." He pointed to the other man. "This is Agent--"

"I don't care who you are!"

"Agent Robertson. George Hedge has filed and been granted custody of his unborn child that you are carrying. If you attempt to leave the state, you will be arrested for kidnapping and if you abort the child, you will be prosecuted for first-degree murder. Fetuses and children are the sole property of the men who created them."

The fury rising, Daphne slammed the interior door and returned to Melanie's side.

"He's kidding. This is just a scare tactic?" Melanie stepped closer. "I knew it was bad, but they couldn't do it?"

"They can and have." Whispering, Daphne shook her head. "Two women have already been convicted of kidnapping. They've been sentenced to twenty years."

"Ms. Miller, open this door." Agent Schub demanded through the screen of the window. "You are only making it worse on yourself."

"If you aren't cooperative, we'll come back with a warrant." The other man added.

"Gotta hell." Daphne snapped back. "You are just rent-a-cops! If you don't get off my property, I'll call the real ones!"

"The Pre-Born Protection Act already passed the House. It'll pass the Senate later today." The voice came from the other side of the door. The screen door rattled. "The President will sign it and there won't be any place in the United States where you'll be able to hide."

"She doesn't need to hide." Melanie snapped.

"Who's with you?" Agent Schub demanded.

"A woman with a legal gun who isn't afraid to use it."

Amazed, Daphne spun around to face her.

Melanie pointed a small silver pistol at the door. "You are trying to break in. I can and will kill you." She smiled and shrugged. "Mom said never go south without it."

"Your mother hates guns," Daphne whispered.

"Desperate times. She's now a marksman. So am I "

Schub backed away from the window. Their voices could be heard, but their words weren't distinct enough to be understood. After a moment, Schub returned to the window. "We'll be back with a deputy and a court order preventing you from leaving the state. If you attempt to leave, you will be stopped at the border. If you do leave the state, you will be hunted down and forced to return."

"Eat shit and die red neck!" Melanie barked back.

"You're only making it worse!" Schub snapped back. "For both of you. Ms. Miller won't be the only one arrested and brought back."

Melanie moved closer to the window so that only the glass and screen separated them. "Like you have any power outside Kansas!"

"The Act will make the PBP part of the Federal Justice system. It'll give us the power to cross state lines to apprehend, detain, and return any woman we deem necessary to protect the life of an unborn child." He leaned in closer to the screen; his facial features distorted by the shadows of the screen, he continued. "And anyone aiding you will face the same charges."

A smile crossed Melanie's lips. Quickly tucking the gun in her pocket and stepping forward, she swung, hitting him through the screen. His head snapped back, and his body followed, tumbling backward. His comrade caught him before he hit the ground.

"You'll regret that!" The semi-prone man growled. "We'll be back with a warrant for your arrest." Returning to the van, they slammed the doors and squealed out of the drive.

"In a little over an hour, we'll be out of the state and out of their reach." Melanie returned the gun to her purse. "Let's go."

"But—"

"But nothing. Let's hit the road! Time's a-wasting."

Daphne suddenly found it hard to breathe. Melanie was her oldest and dearest friend. She couldn't allow her foolishness to endanger her. Grabbing her hand, Daphne stepped in front of her, blocking her path to the door. "I can't let you do this. They'll catch us at the border."

Turning her hand around in Daphne's grasp, Melanie intertwined their fingers. "Sister. We will be all right. I will get you safely out of the state. Trust me. There is more going on than you know."

Confused, Daphne hesitated. *I can't stay. I need to leave, but not at the expense of Melanie's life.*

"Let's pick up your fur-babies and get out of Dodge. Trust me"

Slowly Daphne nodded. Ever since they were six years old, she had known Melanie would be her protector and best friend--the one person she could always trust to stand by her no matter what her folly.

Together they walked into the garage. Locking the back door, Daphne dropped the keys in the box at the back of the shelf. The dried flowers would conceal them from all but the friends who would be coming tomorrow to retrieve her belongings. Melanie had already opened the garage door and was already behind the wheel with the engine purring. Opening the passenger door, she closed the door and curled up on the floor. If they were watching the house, they would be looking for her either behind the wheel or in the passenger seat. Melanie was a stranger in a strange car with Michigan license plates. No one would or should connect them once they were away from the house.

Quickly stopping at the vet's, Melanie retrieved Sarah and Maxie. Safely in the carrier, Sarah was secured on the back seat. Maxie jumped on the passenger seat and looked at her. Discreetly, she reached up and scratched his chest. Melanie slid behind the wheel, producing a bent-up, well-worn Michigan driver's license with Daphne's picture on it from her purse and an old collar. The license looked like it had been well used, instead of being freshly created. She offered Daphne the collar. "Here put this on him. It belonged to Jax. It has my name and address on it. It'll be an added detail in case we are questioned.

"You were always better at the details." Daphne whispered, exchanging the collars.

"Let me." Melanie stepped out of the car and quickly put the collar in the trash can outside the vet's office. She returned and started the engine.

Pulling out into traffic, Melanie deliberately drove past the Sheriff's department. Tossing back her head, she settled into the seat and turned onto the freeway. Within twenty minutes, they were out of the county. Daphne had settled into the front seat and Maxie had curled up on the back seat next to the carrier. Sarah continued to loudly complain.

Sitting upright eased the queasiness in Daphne's stomach, but it did little to calm her growing fear. Forty-five miles until they crossed the state line. Anything could happen. She didn't have anything to say that wouldn't sound like whining. Silence filled the car, except for Sarah's lessening complaint from the carrier. *Eventually, she would curl up and nap. I wish I could too.* But she was awake and fully aware of the nightmare her life had become. To save her dignity and independence, she had to run. *But to what?* In Kansas, unlike so many, she had a secure job, a home, and a life she truly loved. George had taken it all away. Now she was left with an uncertain future. *No job. No home. And soon a warrant for my arrest.*

"Penny for your thoughts."

"I was thinking about the future." Daphne swiveled in her seat so she could see her friend's profile. The humor lines around her eyes and the sparkle within the deep brown eyes never changed. No matter what hardship or life challenge sadness never found a permanent home within her. When a drunk driver killed her husband and daughter, she started a local chapter of M.A.D.D. Three years ago when the doctor diagnosed her with breast cancer, she faced it head-on and did what was necessary. "I'm going to have to find a job so I can get my own home. With today's economy, that won't be easy."

Chuckling, Melanie briefly tilted her head and glanced at Daphne. "Don't worry. Things are different in Michigan. Our economy is strong. With your computer and research skills, you won't have a problem finding a job." She returned her attention to the road. "When our new Governor took office, she brought a fresh way of thinking and doing things. Instead of cutting budgets and adding taxes, she looked for new revenue sources. She focused on new technologies. Her goals were based on finding new energy sources and using the ones we had more wisely. Michigan uses the winds above and the currents below to create electricity. Most of our homes have been switched over to electric heat. The excess is sold to the surrounding states and Canada. The only fossil fuel most of us use is in our cars and soon even that will change. Detroit was the car capital of the country, so it will be that again. I work for one of the research facilities in the northern part of the state. We are within a whisker width of making the jump and leaving fossil fuels behind."

"Really? Why wasn't any of this in the news?" Daphne quickly added. "It's not that I don't believe you, but--"

"It doesn't sound incredible." Patting the air above the steering wheel, she smiled. "But it's all true. Our unemployment is just over one percent."

"The national average is over eight."

"Right. We have one of the highest standards of living. We also have the Personal Privacy Act, which prohibits the government and businesses from interfering in individual medical, religious, and lifestyle decisions. It also is the prosecuting tool to deal with those that do. All of these are in direct opposition to the President's policies, which is why none of this is in the national news. He doesn't want it known and we don't advertise. Since the legislation was changed about media ownership, it isn't that difficult to keep secrets. Most of the big networks and newspapers are

owned by big corporations, who really like the tax breaks they've been getting. So what the President doesn't want to be known is simply not reported except by a few independents. Even they are being harassed into silence by the patriotic citizens." One hand lifted off the wheel long enough for two fingers to mime quotation marks "patriotic" in the air as she finished the sentence.

"I don't understand. Why keep it a secret?" Anger began to rise in Daphne. *How dare they keep the advances to themselves, when the rest of the country was in such desperate need?*

"Don't get your panties in a bunch. That's about to change." The humor remained in Melanie's voice, but her tone became more serious. "At first, we didn't want the religious crazies invading us. We have enough problems with the bounty hunters sneaking across state lines and dragging women back as it is. We kept things on the Q-T until things could be permanently codified. Last week everything changed. Several new laws were fast-tracked. Including one that invalidates all out-of-state fugitive warrants. In order, to detain or take into custody a person, it has to be with a valid Michigan warrant—and will be impossible for the PBP or any other bounty hunter to get one. As a consolation prize, they will be given heavy finds and three-hots-and-cot in our prison system for ten years for kidnapping if they try to use out-of-state warrants. State charges can't be pardoned on the federal level."

"How do you know?"

"I helped write it." A knowing smile crossed Melanie's lips. She nodded toward the road in front. "There's the border. Ready?"

Forcing a deep breath into her lungs, Daphne nodded, but the fear again began to rise. "Ready."

Stopping behind the green sedan, Melanie rolled down her window as the tan uniformed man marched up. The logo on his arm patch read "PBP". "Ladies. ID please."

"Why are we being stopped?" Melanie demanded.

At the sedan in front, the uniformed man suddenly grabbed at the driver's door and tried to yank it open. The woman inside screamed. He shouted and two more men appeared; one stationed himself in front of the car; the other tried forcing his way in from the passenger side. The woman tried to back up her car, but Melanie's prevented her escape. The car jerked forward, but more to scare than to injure. The man jumped out of the way. The one beside the driver's door smashed the window. Glass fragments flew. He opened the door and tried to pull her out. She fought for her life.

Melanie tried to get out. "What are they doing to her!"

The uniform beside her threw his weight against the door, slamming it shut. His free hand reached for his pistol. "Stay inside! Mind your business!" The rage in his voice didn't sound human, but more like that of a rabid animal. Maxie started barking and growling. "Shut the animal up! Or I will!"

Stunned, Daphne turned in her seat and quieted him. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Melanie tensed, her hand sliding toward her purse. Melanie grabbed it first and pulled it out of her reach.

“What are you doing?” His gun was already drawn, another uniform approached her side of the car.

Daphne froze. “Quieting him. Getting her ID.”

In front of them, other uniforms appeared to help him rip the women from the car. Kicking and screaming, they forced her to the ground and handcuffed the hysterical woman. Smug and self-satisfied, they yanked her up and forced her into the building.

From her vantage point, Daphne saw that several of the men, as well as the one on the other side of Melanie’s door, had full erections. The bile rose from her stomach, threatening to spew out. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. It was obvious this wasn’t the first time they’d done it and wouldn’t be the last.

The uniform slammed his fist on the roof above Melanie. “ID!” He demanded. “It’s the law.”

“What law?” Melanie matched his tone.

“The Pre-Born Protection Act.” He pointed toward the building. “She’s being arrested for kidnapping an unborn child. Until we confirm that neither of you is pregnant, you’re not moving.”

“We’re from Michigan. Your laws don’t apply to us.” Melanie countered. “We’re just going home after vacation.”

“Show me your driver’s license. I’ll confirm there isn’t a detain warrant on either of you and you can pass.”

“That isn’t constitutional!”

“Refuse show ID and get arrested.” He snipped. “Be grateful it’s just ID. When the PBP passes, it’ll be a pregnancy test. Pregnant women won’t leave the state until they have delivered.”

Her stomach twisting into a double knot, Daphne prayed her hand wouldn’t reveal her nervousness as she pulled the license from her purse and offered it to him. “Mel, just do it. It’s getting late and we have to be back to work tomorrow.” Inwardly the butterflies swarmed in her stomach, but she didn’t stutter the pre-rehearsed speech.

“No!” Melanie continued her role. “This is still the United States. We haven’t broken any laws. As far as I know, the Pre-born Protection Act is still being debated. Therefore, it isn’t valid. Therefore, this is an illegal stop! And it is the woman who is being kidnapped!”

He snatched the license and swiped the card through his computer notebook. "Daphne Harrison. No wants or warrants." He returned it. Leaning forward he faced off with Melanie. "Show me your ID ." He growled.

"Mel, just do it." Daphne prompted. "Here." She pulled Melanie's wallet from her purse. "I'm tired and hungry. Prove your point another time."

Reluctantly Melanie accepted it and flashed the license.

"I need to scan it."

Removing it from the plastic case, she held it out.

Nastily he snatched it, examining it closely before running it through the system.

"Melanie Harrison. Same address." A knowing look crossed his face.

"We're sisters." Melanie snapped. "Give me my license and get out of the way."

"No wants or warrant. This would have gone a lot faster if you had just co-operated." He tossed the license through the open window. "They're clear!" He shouted to the man at the booth. "Drive through and come back soon."

"When hell freezes over redneck!" Melanie pulled out and sped through the now open barricade. "Welcome to Missouri."

With a mixture of fear and guilt, Daphne breathed a sigh of relief. Their plan had worked. By focusing his attention on Melanie, he hadn't looked too closely at her ID. *That poor woman*, she thought. *I wish—I wish. What could we have done? If the stress and brutality cause her to miscarry, she'll be charged with murder on top of the kidnapping.*

Tears silently flowed down Melanie's cheeks. "Just two more states to go before we reach safe harbor."

"Three." Daphne corrected, seeing the look of disgust and anger on her friend for the first time. The light was gone from her eyes only to be replaced by a smoldering rage. "No. We're going up to Wisconsin from Illinois. Then we'll take the ferry over."

"Why?"

"Jamie told me it was the safest route. Everyone knows about Michigan, California, and New York. But they don't know about the others. Once we cross the border into Wisconsin, they can't touch either one of us."

"Are you sure?"

Melanie slowly nodded. "We can't relax yet. Missouri is going to be the tough one. And your buddy will know you've taken off. They'll be looking for you."

Inwardly, Daphne flinched. She wasn't sure of Melanie's tone. There was a bite to it that Daphne had never heard before.

Melanie hesitated. "I don't think the trick will work twice. Next time we'll both be good little girls."

"I understand." Settling back, Daphne watched the scenery. She couldn't think of anything to say. Small talk didn't seem appropriate and she couldn't face the big topics just now. The what ifs ran in a never-ending loop, punctuated by moments of self-doubt and disappointment. *If I had been more careful, I wouldn't have gotten pregnant. If I had been smarter, I wouldn't have gotten involved with George; I would have seen him for who he truly was.*

Part of her questioned if Melanie thought less of her. Not connected by blood, Daphne still thought of her as a true sister. Her opinion was important. She turned in her seat, allowing her hair to fall across her face to hide the tears. She wiped them away and forced herself to focus on the positive changes. *A new job. A new home. Regaining control over my life. I had always loved the energy of Michigan. It was so much more open than Kansas.*

Melanie popped in a CD of hits from the 70s. Sometimes, she quietly sang along. Normally, Daphne would have harmonized with her. They loved singing together. But no matter how much water she drank, her mouth continued to be dry. Every car, SUV, and pickup had the enemy. They were watching for them—tracking their movements. Every time they passed, she felt her whole body tense. She knew it was an irrational fear. She left her cell phone, computers, and all other devices they could be tracked behind. All her data, reports, and pictures had been carefully uploaded onto thumb drives that would be uploaded onto new devices later. If they knew the car's info, they could track it. But it belonged to Melanie's friend, Jamie. Without a direct link, even today, they couldn't get the tracking information. For as much as they thought through every angle and possibility, Daphne was still afraid they had overlooked some small detail.

A dark SUV followed behind them for miles. Several times, it pulled up along of side them as if it was going to pass only to slow down and drop back again. A Missouri State cruiser did a U-turn crossing the connection between the lanes. Daphne thought her heart would stop. It sped passed them, returning in the direction it had just come without the first consideration of them much less a second.

"Calm down We're safe." Melanie chided. "But if you keep jumping like that every time a car passes, we won't be."

"I'm sorry."

"We're safe. I promise you."

"I'll do better."

Slowly down, Melanie pointed at a sign, which stated that gas, food, and lodging, were five miles down the road. “We’re going to stop”

Daphne shook her head. “Keep going. We have plenty of gas.”

Maxie whined from the backseat; Sarah chimed in. Melanie reached back and scratched his chin. “Your furbaby needs a pee break and so do I. With all the water, you must have to go too.”

“Not until we’re out of Missouri.”

Melanie briefly sped the car up. “No. Now.”

A few moments later, the SUV also speed up and pulled up beside them. Melanie sweetly smiled. It passed them and kept going.

“Good. They’ve been behind us for a long time.” Now that it was gone, Daphne leaned back and shifted in the seat. She stretched he neck from side to side. It released some of the tension. Closing her eyes for a moment, she suddenly felt calmer. She didn’t know why.

When they arrived at the rest stop, the SUV was just pulling away from the pumps to park outside the restaurant. Seeing it, Daphne involuntarily slumped down in her seat. Again, Daphne’s stress level rose. She felt like everyone was watching-- that they knew and had called in their location. No one seemed to take notice of them.

“It’s okay.” Melanie reassured her, pulling up to one of the pumps. “I really have to go. You put in the gas while I go in. I’ll take care of business and pay for it. When I come back out, you can take Maxie for his walk and you go in. That way Sarah won’t be left alone.”

Daphne lamely nodded.

“We’ll pick up food to go and hit the road. Work for you?”

“Sounds good.”

“Are you going to feed them?”

Daphne shook her head. “Bad idea. They both have water. They will be fine for a few hours.”

Melanie parked and got out. Daphne also got out. Walking around the car, she took the nozzle from the pump and started filling the tank. She watched Melanie walk toward the building. For a moment, she slowed her pace as she approached and walked past the small group of people standing around the SUV. The group didn’t seem to notice her. Whimpering, Maxie hopped from the back seat to the front. She reached in and scratched his ears. “Just a few minutes more.” Sarah let out a long plaintive yowl. “Sorry girl. You’re in the carrier for the duration. It’s the only way to keep you safe.”

Looking around, Daphne surveyed her surroundings. The station and restaurant were in constant motion. So many people raised her anxiety level. Two guys in a huge pickup slowly drove past her. The pump clicked off, signaling the tank was full. Startled, Daphne jumped. The pickup continued. When it had passed, she realized the group around the SUV had moved from the front to the back of the vehicle. Before she had time to speculate, Melanie walked out, carrying a small sack. This time she fluently walked past them, returning to the car.

“Paid for the gas and ordered us food to go.” Melanie held up the bag. “Munchies. You go and pick up the order. Here’s the receipt. It’s under my name. I’ll park over there,” she pointed to an empty spot just down from the SUV, “and give Maxie his walk. We won’t go far. Sarah will be perfectly safe.”

‘I don’t like that SUV.’

“Then avoid it. Just go. Be quick about it. We’re burning daylight.”

There was a hint of urgency in her voice that had not been there before she had gone inside. Before Daphne could ask, Melanie pointed at the building and got inside the car. Holding her hands up in front of her, Daphne surrendered. She grabbed her purse and went inside.

Several TVs were airing the news channel. Daphne wasn’t interested enough to notice whether it was the state-run one or one of the few independents left. Looking around, she quickly found the bathroom. It was in the back corner. Walking back, she decided to pick up more water for the kids and her favorite munchies. Melanie wasn’t the only one who like to snack on the road. The place to pick up the food was on the opposite side of the room. She’d gather what she need on the way there and pay for it when she picked up their lunch.

The stalls were full when she walked in, but she was first in line. She saw herself in the mirror; she looked better than she expected. Her image was the very definition of a weary, worn traveler. In a way, it gave credence to their story of traveling for days, instead of just a few hundred miles.

A woman walked out of a stall and went to the sink. Daphne nodded and smiled at her as they passed each other. The woman refused to make eye contact. Unsettled, Daphne went in and closed the door. For a moment, she just stood there. Other doors opened and closed. Water ran. Women briefly made pleasantries. It was just a couple of seconds. But like in the movies time slowed to a stop. Laughing loudly, two women’s voices came in together, breaking the spell of the moment. She took care of business and went out to gather what she needed.

Quickly filling her basket with what she needed, she walked to the counter. One of the men from the SUV stood in one of the aisles pretending to shop. He pretended not to notice her. Daphne nearly dropped everything and ran out. She stopped herself. That would be a dead giveaway. She waited in line. Picked up the order. Paid for her purchases. And forced herself to slowly walk out.

Melanie and Maxie waited for her outside the car. He was happy to be outside it. Even at the distance, she could hear Sarah’s displeasure. She quickly joined the. “Let’s go.”

Melanie nodded. Guiding Maxie to her side of the car, they both got in. Daphne looked back and got in on the passenger side. Once they were on the road, they ate in silence. Neither had much to say. The music helped fill the dead air between them. So many years of endless chatter seemed to suddenly stop. For the first time since kindergarten, she didn't know what Melanie thought or felt and she felt totally alone.

For the next few hours, she watched the scene go by intermixed with dozing. Once or twice, she swiveled in her seat to check on Sarah and Maxie. He wagged his tail. Sarah had finally curled up and slept. All three of them would need a home of their own soon.

How much damage was done to their friendship? Daphne didn't know at this point, but if the discomfort level in the car was any indication there were major issues now between them. After the procedure, I'll need a couple of days to recuperate. I'll use my time wisely. While Melanie was at work, I'll look for a job and a place to live. Hopefully, the bright future Melanie talked about wasn't an exaggeration. My savings will last for a couple of months. Transferring the title to the house and car to her mother prevented them from being seized. Selling them would be enough to make a sizable down payment on a new home with enough land for the horses. For now, they would just need a safe place, nothing too big just enough for the three of them.

Somewhere along the way she drifted into sleep and only woke up when the car stopped. She snapped awake. Her neck suddenly hurt. Blinking rapidly, she tried to bring herself back into focus.

"We're at the Illinois border."

"Sorry." Rubbing her neck, Daphne swiveled in the seat. "I didn't mean to check out on you."

"It's just as well. I needed to think a few things through."

A PBP officer walked up to their car. "ID please."

Without complaint, Melanie offered hers while Daphne dug her out of her purse. Melanie was cleared. He returned her ID and accepted Daphne's. For a moment, he looked at it then at Daphne. He swiped it through. For a moment, Daphne thought they were caught. Still, with a questioning look, he handed it back and waved them through. Slowly, he walked to the car behind them.

Melanie drove through and they were safely in Wisconsin. "Welcome to freedom, sister!"

"I thought for sure..."

"He was just trying to see if he could spook one of us." Melanie shifted in her seat. "I need a break and the car needs gas."

Nodding, Daphne continued to look at her. "What did you need to think through?"

"The other women." She slowly continued. "Some of them don't have the options. They don't have the education, the resources--"

"Or good friends." Daphne cut in. "I am grateful. You've risked everything to save me from my own stupidity."

"Stop!" Melanie shouted. "You made a mistake. That's all. Who hasn't?"

"You. You always seem to be able to turn a negative into a positive."

"Get real. It is all a matter of attitude." Melanie sighed. "I'm not perfect. You aren't. No one is. We just do the best we can."

"So you're not angry with me?"

"For what?"

"Getting involved with George and getting pregnant."

"I was just happy you let your guard down long enough to get involved. Do I wish he was a better man? Yes. Do I have an opinion about the pregnancy? No. If you want to have it--fine. If you don't that's fine too."

"You were so quiet, I thought--"

"I was thinking."

"Care to share?"

She pointed at the rest stop sign. "Pitstop." The tone of her voice in that single word said no she wasn't ready to talk.

They continued down the road in silence. The SUV, which had been following them, suddenly raced passed them. Its back bumper had been dented, not enough to impede it, but it had been involved in an accident. The brake lights flashed once, paused, and flashed three times.

"Shit!" Melanie scream and rapidly accelerated.

"What?" Daphne looked back then forward, The SUV looked like it was going to take the off-ramp when it suddenly swerved and kept going straight. Two SUVs and a pickup mimicked its maneuver and followed. Less than a quarter of a mile down the road, one SUV slammed on its brakes, screeching its tires and skidding partly off the road. It did a quick U-turn, illegally racing back toward them.

"Hang on." Melanie floored it. Fishing tailing, she took the offramp at full speed.

“What’s—”

Briefly holding up her hand, Melanie cut her off. She quickly returned it to the wheel and focused on the road. She pulled into the rest stop parking lot, The SUV followed, quickly gaining ground on them. Keeping her attention both in front of and behind them, Melanie scanned the parking lot. She quickly found what she was looking for and parked between several vehicles that were close to the gas station door. The people in the vehicles quickly got out and stood around them. The SUV slowed down but did not stop. It drove passed them and parked just before the onramp leading back to the freeway.

For a moment Melanie just sat and angrily stared at the SUV. “You need to know it’s going about to get worse.”

“You’re scaring me.”

Obviously debating with herself, Melanie nervously licked her lips and pointed at the SUV. “Bounty hunters.” Taking a deep breath, she calmed herself.

“Ohmygod! What do we do?”

“We’re safe. Wisconsin is a sanctuary state. Let’s go.” Melanie opened the door.

Confused, Daphne stopped her. “Tell me.”

Melanie again tried to leave. “We’re going to miss it.”

More confused than ever, Daphne stared at her.

Slowly Melanie continued. “The announcement.” She pointed at the parked SUV. “They are bullies. If you back down to them, they only get worse. That’s what happened. But we learned from our mistakes. We’re fixing them now.”

“Impossible.” Tears welling up, Daphne felt like giving up. “Everything we did—all the precautions...they still found us. We can’t stay here forever. Eventually, we have to leave.”

Sadly smiling, Melanie touched her cheek. “We are safe because we are NOT alone. They will try to stop us. In fact, I hope they do.”

Daphne pulled away. “Why would you say that?”

“It’s true.” Melanie again pointed at the SUV. “They are emboldened by the vote today. They followed us across state lines cause they think that the PBP will pass. They wanted to be the first to use it.”

“I don’t understand. What vote?” Even to her own ears, Daphne thought she sounded silly and stupid.

“Don’t do that to yourself.” Melanie chided. “You didn’t cause this.” She pointed to the SUV. “They-and others like them did.”

“What vote!” Daphne demanded, her guilt becoming fury.

“It would allow bounty hunters to legally go into any state at any time to hunt and drag women to any state. No exceptions. No limitations. No recourse for the women or the state. A hundred grand for every woman they bring in. They just have to believe she is pregnant and considering abortion. The woman becomes a ward,” Melanie mimed quotation marks as she said ward, “until she reimburses the state for all expenses. Until she does, she relinquishes her right to vote and is forced to work for the state.”

The world darkened around Daphne. *This isn’t real. It’s not possible.* She felt herself sinking, falling away.

Not seemly to notice, Melanie continued. “Whether it does or doesn’t pass, it won’t matter. The tricks you use against others, the others can use against you. They kicked reproductive rights back to the states. We’ve made...Daphne?”

Daphne only half comprehended what she was saying. Her thoughts scrambled. Panicking, Maxie frantically licked her face. He brought her back. "I had a good job, despite the economic times." Daphne mumbled. "My own home. My own car. My own money."

"And you had to give it all up." Melanie finished her thought. "But only for a moment. You will have it all back and more. Trust me."

In the distance, many police sirens rapidly raced closer.

"They’re from the north." Melanie slid out. Stretching, she looked up the road. "It sounds like a lot of them."

Maxie tried to follow her, Daphne quickly grabbed him and attached his leash. For a moment, she sat there trying to make sense of it. Maxie whined. Sarah cried. Daphne reached into the carrier and scratched her ears. It didn’t calm Sarah, but it helped her focus. Taking a deep breath, she opened her door and got out. Maxie suddenly changed his mind and didn’t want to leave the car. Between the shade of the building and the cross-breeze coming through the windows, they would be safe for a few minutes. *I need to know what’s going on.* Taking the keys from the ignition, she locked the doors and followed Melanie.

In the distance, a black van followed by a half-dozen police cars raced down the freeway. All around the rest stop, people stopped and watched. A man walked out of the station. Dark-haired and lanky, he marched between his car and Melanie’s with an air of military efficiency, yet his appearance didn’t match his demeanor. His hair was pulled back in a ponytail, he was dressed in jeans and a checked short-sleeved shirt with a blue shirt underneath. His keys jingled in his hand.

Like the others, Melanie moved to get a better view. "Damn, I wonder what that’s all about?"

"They have a scanner inside." He volunteered. "They are chasing bounty hunters. The city cops wouldn't honor the Mississippi PBP warrant, so they grabbed the woman off the street. In Wisconsin, we call it kidnapping." Bitterness and anger dripped from his voice. "They'll catch the bastards before they reach the border."

"They are running out of road." Melanie flipped back her hair. "I'm from Michigan. I've been down south. Helping a friend."

Knowingly, he looked from Melanie to Daphne and back again. He held out his hand.

"Captain Michael Walgreen. Wisconsin Militia."

Melanie shook his hand. "Officer Melanie Harrison, Michigan State Home Guard." She continued raising the volume of her voice to be heard over the approaching sirens. She nodded toward the door. "Have they started yet?"

"Just starting."

Daphne stared at them as if they had suddenly transformed into space aliens. *Ate they for real? Was it a weird role-playing game?*

He raised the volume of his voice to compensate for the approaching sirens. "The announcements haven't been made yet."

"The administration doesn't have a clue what's coming."

Daphne was having trouble hearing them. The sirens intermittently drowned them out. They seemed to be reading each other lips more than hearing their words. She stepped closer and changed the angle of her stance. At least she would get half the conversation. "What's coming?"

Michael cocked his head to one side and looked at Daphne.

"Kansas." Melanie said as if it was explanation enough.

"Oh." He silently mouthed and turned away.

"What do you mean by that!" Daphne yelled more to be heard than in anger.

"He means," Melanie leaned closer, "that in some states the governors had more control over what information was made available than others. Kansas is the worse of the bunch. You don't know what you don't know because of it."

He looked in the direction of the siren. "The Feds have already tried sending in their assets to circumvent us on our side of the lake."

“Yeppers,” Melanie agreed. “It’s amazing how a good guy with a wrench can stop a bad guy with a gun, who is intent on destroying state resources.”

They were speaking a code that Daphne didn’t understand. “What are you talking about?” She screamed.

Michael found her confusion amusing, but it was Melanie that clarified. "They tried confiscating our wind turbines last month. Claimed they were national property according to National Resource Act and all the electricity they produced was under President's control. They were going to lease them to their buddies so they could make a profit."

He snorted. "I remember when they tried forcing us to accept drilling in Lake Michigan. Both our states said no. Therefore, they were going to do it anyway."

Melanie wickedly smiled. "Too bad the rigs kept sinking."

The sirens rose to deafening levels as a van closely followed by a dozen Wisconsin State Police vehicles raced on the freeway in front of them. Maxie howled. Sarah cried. The sirens were worse for them. Daphne knew that taking them instead of the building would do little good.

The van quickly passed the rest stop. Two patrol cars appeared from the opposite direction. The volume of the others had concealed their approach. Kicking up dirt, one crossed the median between the north and southbound lanes in front of the van. The van swerved and lost control. Flipping it bounced down the freeway, clipping a patrol car. Metal screamed. On the third bounce, flames appeared. In midair, it burst into flames. The following cars screeched in various directions. Two landed in opposite ditches. A third fishtailed across the median. Two skidded forward, trying to avoid the flying pieces of burning metal. The sixth crashed into the van. The hood caved in. The sound of metal scraping on metal replaced the sirens. The van folded around the front bumper nearly to the windshield. Bits of asphalt shot up as the pair skidded to a stop. For an instant there was silence.

Maxie howled. Sarah growled and hissed. Horrified, people cried and questioned what they should do. Time slowed. Flames ate. The vehicles creaked. Black smoke billowed. The wind blew it toward the rest stop. The officers ran toward the wreck. A few people from the station ran in the same direction. Several carried car-size fire extinguishers. From the van, a woman screamed. Her terror motivated everyone to move quicker. One of the officers barked orders.

Fanned by the breeze, the flames reached for the sky. Smoke and the smell of burning rubber crossed the distance. An elderly woman retreated into the station violently coughing. Several others followed with their children

Melanie turned to look at Daphne. Her eyes asked if she was okay. Nodding, Daphne slowly stood. The smoke was already making both their eyes water.

"Oh my God!" Behind them, a stocky middle-aged woman whispered, and made the sign of the cross.

In a vain rescue attempt, the officers surround the vehicles looking for a way in. The woman continued to scream. The fire extinguishers had no effect. Other orders were given. The officers ran to safety. The sides of the van sucked inward. It exploded. The sides disintegrated. Black smoke rose in a pillar, creating a dome above the van before the wind blew it in their direction. Pieces of burning metal shot in every direction. Flames licked the bare frames. The women's screams were replaced by those wounded by the shrapnel and the hiss of the flames. Civilians and officers alike ran to help the injured.

"They're all dead." Daphne cried, knowing as she spoke them, her words were unnecessary.

"I know," Melanie whispered.

Enraged, a stocky man marched from the SUV that was parked near the exit. He wildly pointed at the burning wreck. "It didn't need to be! We're just trying to save the babies!"

Rage flared in Michael's eyes. The fury within him suddenly made him seem twice his original size. "How pro-life of you!"

The man shrank away from him only to quickly recover when he saw Daphne. He skirted around Michael and shoved Melanie out of the way to reach Daphne. "Daphne Miller, I have a warrant for your-"

Daphne tried to step out of his reach. The person behind her blocked her retreat. He grabbed her arm and yanked her forward, throwing her toward the ground. Twisting her arm behind her back, he used his full weight to force her face down on the asphalt. The pain in her shoulder was quickly overshadowed by that in her face as she hit. Blood dripped from her nose and oozed from the cuts on her lip. Planting his knee in the middle of her back, he reached into this back pocket and produced a pair of handcuffs.

Michael yanked him off her and put his full weight behind the punch. Instead of the chin, it landed on the man's chest. With a screech, he went down, clutching his chest.

Crouching beside her, Melanie used her sleeve to wipe away the blood.

The assault woke Daphne's survival instinct. Using Melanie's shoulder for support, Daphne stood. Adrenaline charge, she kicked the prone man. The ball of her foot hit him on the side of his head, sending him sprawling against Michael's legs. She followed it by stomping on his arm. The cracking sound and his scream spurred her on. Shifting her weight, she aimed her foot at his ribs. Melanie pulled her away. Her foot hit the pavement.

A shot ran out. It hit the car between Daphne and Michael. Screaming, people dove for cover behind vehicles and into the building. Melanie yanked Daphne down with her between the two parked cars. Michael dove for cover to the opposite side.

Law enforcement's attention shifted from the wreck to the SUV. The engine started and it drove toward the freeway. One of the patrol cars blocked its escape. Another spun around, sending dirt

and grass flying, to block it from backing up. Trapped between the cruisers, they quickly tossed out their weapons and surrendered. The officers quickly took them into custody. In the distance, more sirens approached from both directions.

“You have no right. No right!” Gasping, the prone man rolled over onto his stomach. “We have a warrant.”

“Not valid in Wisconsin.” Michael looked as if he would hit him again.

The man used his arm to shield himself the best that he could. “It will be!” He screamed. “The vote—the vote--

“Shut up!” Taking a deep breath and patting the air in front of him, Michael stepped back. “You’re not worth it.”

"Michael!" A woman yelled from the station door. "It's starting."

“Be right there!” He shouted back.

“We’re doing the Lord’s work!”

“Like hell!” Grabbing the man by the back of his shirt, Michael yanked him to his feet. “I’m a Christian. I love God. I follow the Bible. You and the others have perverted its teachings.”

Elbowing Michael in the ribs he freed himself and wildly punched, knocking Michael off balance. “I’m not a pervert!”

“Sounds like a close-to-home truth time.” Melanie snipped.

Spinning around, he focused on her. “Shut up bitch! You’re going to jail for the rest of your life.”

Rapidly curling and uncurling her fingertips, she dared him. “Go for it.”

Two deputies reach them and grabbed him from behind, preventing her from making good on whatever she planned.

“Dark-skinned with the aura of a Marine drill sergeant dressing down a raw recruit, the deputy got into his face. You’re under arrest!”

“You have no authority!” He snapped, struggling to free himself. “I’m immune!”

“No here, you’re not!” Confidently, the female deputy handcuffed him.

“I will be soon! The vote happening. Our warrants will be authorized in every state. “

“Not ever!” The female deputy grabbed the loop of his arm and pulled him toward the squad cars

“You can’t stop us!” He looked over his shoulder at Daphne, he screamed. “You’re going back! They can’t protect you! No one can!”

“I’m never going back!” Daphne matched his tone. “Try it! I’ll finish what I started!”

Tipping his hat to them, the drill sergeant followed. Catching up to them, he helped drag the struggling bounty hunter the rest of the way.

Michael looked at Daphne with new respect. His arm unfurled toward the door. “Ready to watch history be made?”

“More than ready!” Melanie enthusiastically fell into step with him but stopped when she realized Daphne hadn’t followed. “Coming?”

The reality of what she just threatened, suddenly overwhelmed her. Trembling, Daphne stepped toward the car. “I can’t leave Maxie and Sarah.”

“Bring them in.”

She licked her lips. Her mouth was dry. “We’ll be there in a few.”

Tilting her head to one side, Melanie stared at her, questioning but not verbally asking. Slowly she nodded and continued inside.

Daphne needed to think. Looking around, she couldn’t process the chaos. Nothing made sense. It felt like her whole world was burning down around her and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She had never hit anyone before—at least not seriously. *I wanted to hurt him—him and all the others like him. I wished them dead. It makes me no better than them. If Melanie hadn’t pulled me away—*Daphne wouldn’t allow herself to finish the thought. The hatred in her heart at that moment made her feel ashamed.

The smoke was getting thicker as the car continued to burn. In the distance, a fire siren approached. The officers stood around watching; there was little else they could do. Reaching into the back seat, she straightened the carrier. Sarah hissed and growled. “I know baby. It’s very hard on you. I’m sorry. I know it’s scary. But we can do it. We’ll have a new house. You’ll get all new toys.” She leaned against the frame and reached down to scratch Maxie. His tail wagged and he set his head on her lap. “Darling, you too. New toys. New smells. It won’t be long. Star and Moon will be back with us.” She looked toward the building. “What’s going on? I need to know. But I don’t want to at the same time.”

Maxie whined and licked her hand. “Okay. We’ll go tree.” Standing, she closed the door and took him to the field next to the station. A few minutes later, they were back in the car. She grabbed the carrier and took them both inside the gas station.

No one noticed when they walked in. Everyone's attention was absorbed by the activity on the TV screen. Daphne looked for Melanie. She stood in the center of the room next to Michael and the woman, who had come out to get him. Like the others, she stared up at the screen. The room was silent, except for the sounds of the various coolers and equipment behind the restaurant counter. Shifting the carrier, she led Maxie to Daphne.

Without taking her eyes from the screen Melanie reached down and scratched his ears. "It's procedure discussion. So far the vote has gone down along party lines."

"Does this have to do with the PBP?"

Melanie nodded. "If it passes, their warrants will be valid in every state. It expands their jurisdiction and over rules state law. Even minor interference would result in huge fines and prison sentences of up to thirty years. Miscarriages would be investigated and prosecuted as murder. Abortion would make it first degree."

"It can't pass. They need sixty votes."

Melanie shook her head. "They forced through the change. All they need is a simple majority."

The gavel banged. The voting continued.

"But they have that!" Daphne shrieked.

"Quiet!" A woman demanded from the back of the room.

Melanie shushed her. "Just listen."

On the screen, the clerk picked up where he left off. "The senior senator from New York--

Before she could finish his name, both New York Senators stood and voted No.

The Vice President banged the gavel and pointed it at the junior senator. "Lady, sit down and shut up. You are out of order."

Ignoring him, she continued. "I vote no!"

Applauding, the Democratic Senators stood. The Republicans grumbled and sneered,

"Order! Order! Sergeant at Arms, remove them!"

"Wait!" The majority leader demanded. "That's what they want. Remove them, we don't have a quorum and the vote stops."

Angrily, the Vice President slammed the gavel. "Silence! Sit down or you'll be forced."

Laughing, the Democrats ignored him and continue to stand.

‘If that was your plan,’ Daphne sniped, “it just failed.”

“Naw, here comes the plan,” Melanie replied, practically giggling. “The turtle is going to stroke out.”

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy.” The woman next to him gleefully commented.

Both senators from North Carolina stood, but only the middle-aged man spoke. “We represent the people of North Carolina.”

The gavel banged, but the Vice President didn’t stop them from speaking.

Pointed to himself then to the balding man next to him, he continued. “I speak for both of us.” He took a deep breath and rapidly continued. “The party no longer represents the Constitution, the people of North Caroline, or ourselves. We change our party affiliation to Independent. We vote no!”

The balding man continued. “We will be caucusing with the Democrats.”

Chaos erupted among the Republicans. Security tried to control them. It was impossible. The Democrats silently stood.

As the pair walked across the aisle, they were shoved and spat upon. For a moment the balding man stopped; he looked as if he would strike the man who spit in his face. The elder one shook his head and they joined the Democrats.

“You’re out of order! Your votes are rejected! The Vice President banged the gavel.

The handle broke, sending the head flying into the well, sending a shockwave throughout the room. No one moved. No one spoke.

The junior senator from Florida stood. “Protocol make me next to vote.” He slowly continued. “For the good of the nation and Florida, I,” smiling, he paused, “vote no and change my party affiliation to Independent and will caucus with the Democrats. I give the Democrats the Senate majority!” His fellow senator from Florida tackled him but the younger and more physically fit man easily freed himself and crossed the aisle.

Standing, seven more Republicans voted against the bill and changed their party. Senators ignored all attempts to silence them. Their voices could no longer be heard over the angry profanity and accusations of treason, but their intent was clear. A burly Senator lunged at the female Senator from Michigan. With a single punch, the much older woman sent him sprawling backward.

“I reject your vote!” The Vice President screeched. “Stop the vote! Stop the vote!”

At the bottom of the screen, the votes continued to be quickly tabulated. The only outstanding votes belong to ten Republicans. The official voting time lapsed.

“Ohmygod,” Daphne whispered.

“Wait for it.” Melanie purred.

Daphne pointed to the door. “They’re trying to break quorum.”

“Doesn’t matter. There was a quorum when the computer registered the votes. That’s all that counts.”

The clerk announced the results. “Fifty-eight against. Thirty-two votes for. Ten not voting. The bill does not pass.

“I reject the votes! I reject the votes!” Ignored by the others, the Vice President continued to scream.

The crowd in front of the TV grumbled. Derogatory comments and snide remarks snapped around the room. One woman held her toddler closer, silently crying in the corner of the room. The clerk turned down the volume but didn’t turn it off. Several quickly left.

"That’s it!" Unbuttoning the checked shirt and stripping it off to reveal the blue shirt of his militia uniform, Michael’s voice rose to silence the group. "Time to saddle up. It’s about to get ugly."

Many pulled blue shirts with the Wisconsin emblem on the shoulders out of various kinds of bags. The men changed where they stood. The women disappeared into the ladies’ room only to return wearing the same uniform. Sidearms tucked into their holsters hung from their belts. Radio microphones were attached to the loop on the left shoulder. They gathered at the door and departed in mass.

Michael walked to Melanie and Daphne. “You should have never started without an escort.”

“We had three.” Melanie matched his matter-of-fact tone. “We were gold until we crossed into Wisconsin. The bounty hunters picked up the pace and passed us.” She nodded toward the SUV. “They must have recognized us when they passed. They did a U. The rest you know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Daphne asked, already knowing the answer.

“Daph, you were freaked enough as it was. If you had known you would have tried to sacrifice yourself to save me. It wasn’t necessary. We were safe.”

“The two of you taking the ferry over?”

Melanie nodded.

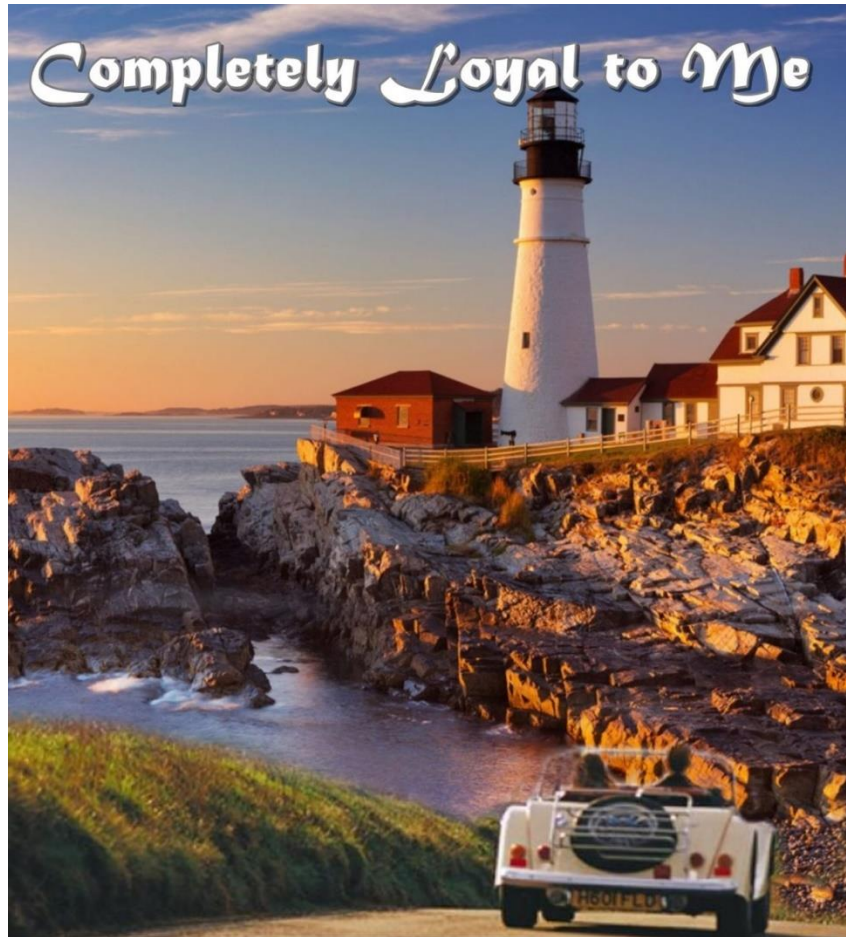
“I’ve arranged an escort to the other side. They expected it to pass. The bounty hunters are already positioned to take their targets. Until we clean’em up you’ll still be at risk.”

Trembling, Daphne took her furkids to a booth. She couldn’t bear to hear anymore—at least right now. Putting the carrier on the table, she helped Maxie on the seat and sat down. Overwhelmed, she looked at the parking lot but she didn’t really see any of it.

Melanie crossed the now nearly empty room. "You, okay?"

Daphne jumped when she touched her shoulder. "I can’t believe it."

"Believe it." She nodded toward the road. "That was Fort Sumter.”



When it is impossible to be who you are, you become someone you are not. This is the core element of *Completely Loyal to Me*. The 1950s was a time of McCarthyism, segregation, and discrimination. People spied on each other, making it nearly impossible for a person to be their true selves even in private. When a person is forced to pretend to be someone they are not, they become vulnerable to others and their own dark impulses. However, the era was especially hazardous for women and the LGBTQ community. Women were considered property with little to no rights. To have any power in their lives, women had no choice but to lie and manipulate. Thought of as deviants, who were threats to society, gays were brutalized and murdered. To save themselves, both needed to hide their true selves or risk becoming social outcasts or victims of violence.

Completely Loyal to Me is a dark comedy feature film with the suspense of Hitchcock and the slapstick of the *Keystone Cops*. It is comparable to *Family Plot*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Deathtrap*, and *Honey Pot*. Its primary goal is to entertain. However, it will also serve as a reminder of what life was really like in the 1950s.

Samuel and William James were twin flames who loved each other and were very happy until the rumors and grumblings started about their relationship. Margaret was the mastermind behind her and George's cons. They traveled the world romancing others out of fortunes. Samuel married Margaret to shield his relationship with William James. She accepted, believing that he, like the others, would be an easy mark. When Margaret's business acumen started the rumors that she wore the pants in the family, Samuel looked for a way to put her back in her place. He couldn't let her go without exposing his secret. Instead, he tried to force George to leave. It was the mistake that cost him his life. Yet, even in death, Samuel continued to control Margaret. The terms of his will bound her to the estate and William James. Heartbroken, Williams James was forced to stay silent. He couldn't expose the murder without their relationship being revealed. Stuck with each other, they agree to work together. When William James meets Lennette and Gary, he sees a way to free himself and get revenge.

Completely Loyal to Me reminds the audiences of the rampant discrimination that was the norm in the 1950s. A women's right to personal and physical autonomy has been once attacked by those who have already stated that the LBGTQ community is next in line as they work toward turning the nation into a Christian Theocracy. If you believe that women have equal rights, support the LBGTQ community, or if you just think that many people need to learn how to mind their own business, please support our efforts to bring Completely Loyal to Me to the screens of the country and the world. Please visit our website to learn more about our project and how you can become an important member of our team.

<https://www.kaleidoscopefilmmandtelevision.com/completely-loyal-to-me>