

And Freedom or All

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And Freedom for All
by
Theresa Chaze

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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 forward 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 your riding trophies?"

"No. Nothing else."

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

"I'm already four weeks. A few more I'll start to show and they'll stop me at the border." *Getting involved with George Hedge was the biggest mistake. He wasn't the person he pretended to be. She fell in love with a kind, intelligent progressive man. Only George wasn't that man; he was an illusion.*

"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 up north, 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 SUV pull into the drive and two strange men got out. 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 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 murder."

The fury rising, Daphne slammed the interior door.

"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." Daphne shook her head.

"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 chimed in.

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

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

Amazed, Daphne snapped around.

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.

"That and a lot of things changed. She's now a marksman."

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," Daphne whispered, "you are only making it worse."

"Like you have any power outside Kansas!" Melanie snapped.

"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 SUV, 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 back 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 own 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 outside Kansas than you know."

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

"My car's outside. It's ready to go. 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 out. Locking the back door, Daphne dropped the keys in the tall vase beside it. The dried flowers would conceal them from all but the friend who would be coming tomorrow to retrieve her belongings. Melanie was already behind the wheel and the engine was 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.

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 down 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. It was valid, yet looked like it had been well used, instead of being freshly created. "Here put this on him. It belonged to Jax. Just in case. It'll be an added detail in case we are questioned.

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

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 her stomach, but it did little to calm the growing fear that Daphne felt. Forty-five miles before 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 sleep and replace the nightmare my life had become with a peaceful dream where all people were treated with respect. But she was awake and this was the reality of her life. 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. "Look, 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 of 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 does 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 which 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 in the air as she finished the sentence.

"I don't understand. Why wouldn't you want the rest of the country to know?" 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." The humor remained in Melanie's voice, but her tone became

more serious. "We don't want the religious crazies invading us. We have enough problems with the bounty hunters dragging women back on false warrants as it is. Last week, a new law was fast-tracked through invalidating 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."

"How do you know so many details?"

"A really good friend, Jamie, is one of the Governor's assistants. I get daily updates." A knowing smile crossed Melanie's lips. "You should know that Michigan had a statewide vote yesterday. The results are being double and triple-checked to make sure nothing could be questioned. But if it passes--and I'm sure it will--then the federal government and the Prez are in for a rude shock. Not only from Michigan but also from at least fifteen other states who voted on the same legislation." 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. 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 inside tried to back up, but Melanie's car prevented her escape. The man on the passenger side smashed the window and unlocked the door. He opened it and jumped inside. They struggled. The driver's door was unlocked in the process. The first man pulled it open. Between the two of them, they forced her from the car, kicking and screaming. They dragged her into the building and the man in front moved her car out of the way.

"All women are required to show ID before leaving Kansas." Ignoring the battle, he snapped back. "It's the law."

"What law?" Melanie matched his tone. "What are they doing to her!"

"The Pre-Born Protection Act." He looked over his shoulder. "They are arresting her for kidnapping an unborn child."

"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!"

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. "Lady, show me your ID or be arrested."

"Just do it." Daphne prompted. "Here." She pulled Daphne's purse from behind her seat. "I'm tired and hungry. Prove your point another time."

Reluctantly Melanie pulled her wallet out 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."

Gratefully, 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.

"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."

"Good."

"Don'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."

"Thank you for the cheer up." Inwardly, Daphne flinched. She wasn't sure of Melanie's tone. There was a bite to it that Daphne had never heard before.

"No problem." 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. Quietly she sang along. Sometimes Daphne found herself harmonizing with her. Halfway through the state, they stopped for lunch. Daphne felt like everyone was watching that they knew and had called in their location. No one seemed to take notice of them.

Getting back in the car, Sarah again complained about her confinement, but Daphne couldn't risk losing her. She had access to water and a small litter pan. Food would have to wait. About mid-afternoon, they crossed into Illinois without incident. Taking the most direct route, Melanie drove north; they should cross into safety sometime early evening.

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 in the carrier 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 the 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, Melanie 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 about how I could help more of the others." Pointing to the rest sign, she pulled onto the off-ramp. "I rather suspect that soon this trip will seem like a walk in the park."

Daphne waited for her to continue.

Pulling next to an open gas pump, she turned off the engine and turned to face Daphne. "What you don't know is that the vote determined two things. The first was if we want to accept the Pre-born Act. The polls were running about eighty-five percent against. The second would determine what we were going to do if it passed."

"What do you mean do?"

"The number of states against is way short of preventing its passage. The President will have his way. It will become a federal law." The anger rose in her voice. "Women in this country will no longer have control over their own bodies. Meaning we will lose our financial freedom and our equality. Men will again be making all the decisions and have all the rights."

"I never thought of it like that."

"It was only after we could control our reproduction through prevention and termination did we actually achieve economic freedom. Before pregnancy interrupted schooling, job training, and work. It controlled every aspect of our lives and made us dependent. But once we gained control over our reproduction, we could decide when or if to have a child, and we achieved financial independence. We no longer needed a man to survive. We could do very well, sometimes better on our own."

"I have." Daphne pointed to herself. "I had a good job, in spite of the economic times. My own home. My own car. My own money."

"And you had to give it all up." Melanie finished her thought. "Why? Because you no longer had the right to choose your own destiny."

In the distance, many police sirens rapidly raced closer.

"They're from the north." Melanie opened her car door and slid out. Stretching, she looked up the road. "I wonder what's going on. It sounds like a lot of them."

Opening the door and getting out, Daphne opened the back door and attached Maxie's leash.

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. 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 T-shirt underneath. His keys jingled in his hand.

Lifting up the pump handle, Melanie inserted it and pulled the trigger. "Damn, I wonder what that's all about?"

"They have a scanner inside." He volunteered. "They are chasing down some of those PBP Retrievers. 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. "Do you know how Michigan decided?"

Daphne stared at them as if they had suddenly transformed into space aliens. She didn't know what to think. *Were they for real? This couldn't be happening.*

"It passed there and in the rest of the states."

"Have the announcements been made yet?"

"Not yet." He shook his head. "But the Feds have already tried to circumvent. They tried taking the Alaskan oil fields. But they had a rude surprise. The Alaskan Militia was already dug in. The troops were arrested and their weapons confiscated. Thanks to the Patriot Act, we are all well prepared."

Daphne heard their words. *They not making any sense. At the very least, they were talking treason. A house divided--civil war--the nation would be vulnerable.* Clamping her eyes shut and turning away, she tried to block them out. But their words followed. *It had to be stories. Just stories. None of this was in the papers or on TV.* Her anger flared. *How could they keep it a secret?* She snapped around to stare at them. They had forgotten about her. *How could they? It was all about women like her...no, her*

own mind contradicted, *it was about more than just reproductive rights; it was about a government representing all its people, not just a select few.*

"They tried taking our wind turbines last month. Claimed they were national property according to National Resource Act."

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."

"It's amazing what we can do when we work together." Melanie wickedly smiled. "Too bad the rigs kept sinking."

Shaking his head, he lifted a single finger then pointed to the road, then covered his ears with his palms as the sirens rose to a deafening level. Melanie nodded and followed suit.

The van passed the rest stop, closely followed by the state police cars

At her feet, Maxie whimpered and tried to pull free. Instead of covering her own, she tried shielding his. In the car, Sarah bounced against the walls of the carrier nearly knocking it off the seat. Daphne saw her cries. She couldn't help.

A patrol car sped up from the opposite direction. The volume of the others had concealed its approach. Kicking up dirt, it 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 the patrol car in front. 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 continued straight, trying to avoid the flying pieces of burning metal. The sixth crashed into the van. The roof 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. Unable to keep her eyes off the road, Daphne knelt to quiet him. Time stopped. Flames ate. The vehicles creaked. Black smoke billowed. The officers ran toward the wreck. A few from the station ran in the same direction. Several carried car-size fire extinguishers. From the van, a woman screamed. 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 back into the station 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!" The man whispered, crossing his chest.

In a vain rescue attempt, the officers surround the vehicles looking for a way in. The woman screamed. The fire extinguishers had no effect. Other orders were given. The officers ran to safety. The sides of the van seem to suck inward. It exploded. The sides disintegrated. Black smoke rose in a pillar, creating a dome above the van. Pieces of burning metal shot in every direction. Flames licked the bare frames. The screams stopped, replaced by the crackle and hiss of the flames.

Shaking, the man leaned against the trunk of his car. "It didn't need to be."

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

"I know," Melanie whispered.

"To answer your question." He coughed and wiped the tears away. "The networks have been covering the debate and the vote over the PBP Act. If it passes, the senators will officially announce to the Congress that as states we are withdrawing from the Union."

"Including Michigan?"

He nodded.

Stunned, Daphne straightened. "You can't mean that?"

"Yes, he does." Melanie started slowly, "The United States will no longer be fifty states. There have been so many right-wingers who kept saying if you don't like it, leave. We are and we're taking our talents and resources with us." She paused for an instant. "We've had enough of being lied to and manipulated. Of having our resources and rights stripped from us for our own good. Of having their brand of religion and morality forced on us."

"I'm a Christian." He cut in. "I love God and I follow the Bible. But it's not my right or responsibility to dictate what consenting adults do. I married my wife. We hold hands and kiss in public. All couples should have the same right. Just because some are so insecure in their sexuality--"

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

He turned toward her and nodded. "Be right there!" He returned his attention to Melanie. "Interested in watching history in the making?"

"Definitely." Melanie fell into step with him but stopped when she realized Daphne hadn't followed. "Coming?"

She licked her lips. Her mouth was dry. "I'll be there in a few. I need to calm down Sarah and walk Maxie."

Tilting her head to one side, Melanie stared at her, questioning but not verbally asking. Slowly she shook her head and continued into the store.

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." She leaned against the frame and reached down to scratch Maxie. His tail wagged and he set his head on her lap. *It was never easy to start over, but now it wasn't just her. It was the country and everything that had given me security. How could it all end? But it was ending? Or was it's just changing?* 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. The Vice President had just banged the gavel and announced the PBP Act had passed. Obviously, the President and his pro-life group were not taking any chances. To have the Vice President residing at the podium was not the norm. Usually, a freshman Senator was appointed to lead the proceedings.

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 room grew hot as the Vice President talked about the benefits of the Act.

A moment later, the Senators from Alaska stood in unison. "Mr. President." Their voices carried across the room even without the microphone.

"Out of order!" He slammed the gavel and continued with his prepared speech.

Undaunted, the Senators continued. "The citizens of Alaska can no longer accept the unconstitutional behavior of this regime. Therefore, we are leaving the union of the United States of America and taking with us all the resources and benefits within our borders."

Immediately the Senators from Arizona stood. "Mr. President. The citizens of Arizona can no longer accept the unconstitutional behavior of this regime. Therefore, we are leaving the Union of the United States and taking with us all the resources and benefits within our borders."

The California representatives quickly followed.

"Out of order!" He screamed trying to drown them out.

Alphabetically, the state Senators stood, ignoring 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 tried grabbing the female Senator from Michigan as she stood. With a single punch, she sent him sprawling backward. Wisconsin Senators finished. In mass, the departing Senators marched toward the door.

"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 and lock down the border."

The woman behind the counter reached up and turned the TV off. Many of the men pulled blue shirts with the Wisconsin emblem on the shoulders out of various kinds of bags and changed where they stood. Several of the women disappeared into the ladies' room only to return wearing the same. 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.

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

Daphne shook her head. "I can't believe it."

"Believe it." She nodded toward the road. "We just witness the first casualties of civil war."