

Chapter 1

There's supposedly an ancient Chinese curse that goes, "May you live in interesting times." God knows – no, *the gods know* – my life had been pretty interesting in recent months.

I was convinced that our earth did indeed have more than one deity looking out for it. By that point, I had met quite a few of them: Jehovah, otherwise known as the Judeo-Christian God; Blood Clot Boy, the sacred child of the Utes' creation myth; Brigid, who was my best friend Shannon's matron goddess; Coyote, the Ute Trickster god who my husband Joseph channeled with glee, now and again; Tezcatlipoca, the Aztec jaguar god of chaos who held onto our acquaintance Jack Rivers by main force, and Quetzalcoatl, His brother and chief antagonist; Odin and Frigga and Thor, oh my; and last but not least, White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman, the Lakota Indian goddess who had recruited me in December to mediate a peace agreement amongst all these beings and countless others.

We had run into a few other not-exactly-human beings over the past few months, most notably Loki, the Norse Trickster demigod, with whom my ex-fiance Brock had an uneasy alliance.

Why am I listing this mismatched pantheon? Because in my first and last communication with Jehovah, I had set a date with Him for the mediation that White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman had chosen me to oversee, and that date was fast approaching.

As was my due date. Here we were, in early May, and while I was about two-and-a-half months pregnant in the real world, my body said I was eight months along, give or take a week. This frog-marched pregnancy was playing havoc with my innards and with my state of mind, too. I was sore from my pelvis stretching too fast and cranky from the hormonal surge that precedes birth. I moved at a waddle and felt like a beached whale. Why White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman had timed things so that I would have to broker this deal now, when the thing I wanted most in all the world was for this pregnancy to be over, was beyond me.

Interesting times, indeed.

Joseph, too, was in the midst of interesting times. Besides coming to terms with prospective parenthood, he was splitting his time between his construction job in the southeast part of Denver; my place in Denver's Lower Downtown neighborhood, known locally as LoDo; the double-wide near Denver International Airport where he still kept a bunch of his stuff; and Boulder Community Hospital, where his grandfather had been hospitalized for the past several days – first with a stroke, and then with a severe reaction to an injection prepared by none other than Loki. Shannon, using her extra-special healing powers, had managed to contain the toxin, thereby saving the old man's life. But he was now in a coma while his body worked to neutralize the stuff.

The doctor had called us out into the hallway, away from Looks Far's bedside, to recommend that the old man be transferred to a rehab center. "We can't do much more for him here," the doctor had said. "His condition is stable. A rehabilitation center would provide a less stressful atmosphere, which could speed his recovery. And if cost is a concern, rooms there are less expensive."

Joseph blew out a breath, puffing out his cheeks, and looked at me doubtfully. I knew what he was thinking. "The problem is," I told the doctor, "Looks Far is dead-set against going into a nursing home." *For a lot of reasons. Most of which I'm not going to share with you, Doc.*

The doctor's mouth twisted into a smile. "That's a fairly common concern among people of his generation. And it's understandable. There have been a number of horror stories in the

press. And too, most people your grandfather's age who move into some sort of assisted living facility don't ever leave again." He looked at Joseph. "It's very possible that he won't, either. I'm not going to sugar-coat it for you."

"I know," Joseph responded, looking at the floor. "I just need some time."

"Understood," the doctor said. "Social Services has a list of facilities in Boulder. I can ask them to drop it off here for you."

"That won't be necessary," I said hastily. We were still dealing with the fallout from the last time Social Services got involved in Looks Far's business. "We'd like to find a place for him in Denver – closer to where we live," I continued. "And there's the security issue, too."

The doctor had the grace to look uncomfortable. He'd been on duty the night Shannon had had to resuscitate Looks Far after Loki's unauthorized injection. "Of course, of course," he said quickly. "I'll leave it to you, then. But the sooner the better, for everyone's sake." He shook hands with us both and left.

"For everyone's sake?" Joseph asked me quietly.

"He's afraid we'll sue the hospital for malpractice," I said, just as quietly.

"Should we?"

I showed him a tiny, wicked smile. "I haven't decided yet."

He gave me a quick Coyote grin. Then he asked, "Is Shannon coming up tonight?"

Shannon, too, had been practically living at the hospital since the incident with Loki. "I think so," I said. "I know she was planning to wrap up a few things today, before she takes a break from her practice for the mediation. Maybe she got stuck at work – no, there she is." I waved at my auburn-haired friend as she double-timed it down the hall toward us.

"Everything okay?" she asked, breathless.

"Fine," I told her. "Catch your breath. The doc just hauled us out here to talk to us about finding a nursing home..."

"Rehab center," Joseph cut in.

"Rehab center, sorry," I went on, "for Looks Far."

Shannon searched our faces. "It'll kill him," she said. "You know that."

We nodded. "But he can't stay here in the hospital forever," I argued. "The doc's right. There's nothing more they can do for him here. He'll be better off in a less hectic environment."

"He'd be better off going home," Joseph muttered, "if the wickiup hadn't been destroyed." He was kicking himself, I knew; he'd promised his roommate George that he'd help him rebuild the old man's home, but he hadn't had time to get up to Looks Far's place yet.

"And who would take care of him there?" Shannon countered. "He needs round-the-clock care right now, Joseph. You know that."

Joseph scrubbed at his eyes and sighed. "Being a grownup really sucks sometimes," he said.

I wrapped my arms around him. "Come on in," I said to Shannon.

Joseph and I took adjoining guest chairs while Shannon gave the old man a once-over. Her hands still gave off a residual glow as she turned to us. "He's making progress," she said. "I'd say the toxin capsule is thirty to thirty-five percent smaller than it was right after the incident."

"So a few days and he'll be okay," Joseph said.

"I don't know, Joseph," Shannon said, not unkindly. "The process could slow down. Or stop. Looks Far could run out of oomph. And even if he succeeds in clearing the poison, he might not come out of the coma." She glanced at the old man. "Even if he does, coma recovery doesn't work in the real world like it does on TV. Consciousness comes back in fits and starts."

"How do you know all that?" I asked her.

She gave me a crooked grin. “I did a web search.” She held Looks Far’s unresponsive hand for a minute. Then she looked at us. “I’ve got some good news, though.”

“Let’s hear it,” Joseph said.

“I spoke with the goddess today,” Shannon said as she slid into a chair across from us. Every now and then, I would stop to marvel at how references to deities just rolled off our tongues these days, as if we ran into them at the dry cleaner’s. “She says we won’t need to rent any special facilities for the mediation – the sweat lodge will be fine. And only one delegate is coming in from out of town, and he’s already got a room – and coincidentally, Naomi, it’s at the hotel where your mom is staying.”

“Poor Mom,” I said with a guilty start. “I’ve really neglected her.” My mother had arrived unexpectedly about a week earlier. Things had been kind of hectic since then. Luckily, I come from resilient stock; instead of moping around, waiting for me to have time for her, Mom had been finding her way around Denver, playing tourist, and generally setting up a life for herself. Her plan to move from Indiana to Colorado had solidified as soon as she saw her pregnant daughter with her own eyes. Her house in West Lafayette – the place I’d considered home since I’d been in the eighth grade – was already on the market.

“Ginny’s pretty independent,” Shannon reassured me, echoing my thoughts. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

I gave her a grateful smile.

“Anyway, getting back on track,” Shannon said. “We’re still going to have to explain ourselves to the media at some point. Would it make sense to have a press conference?”

“Probably,” I said, grimacing.

“Before or after?” she asked.

“Probably both.”

“So we’ll need a venue for that.”

“Probably.”

Shannon was beginning to grin. “I take it you’re not looking forward to it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not exactly, no. I guess we could ask Antonia to help us arrange everything.” Antonia Greco was a reporter for Channel 12. She was sort of an auxiliary member of our woo-woo team, and the person who would have been our pick for Investigator if we’d met her first.

“Which reminds me,” I went on. “Anybody heard from Jack?” Jack Rivers, a.k.a. Juan Riberas, was our designated Investigator. He had been treated for an arrow wound to the torso, inflicted by Antonia, earlier in the week, and sent home. We assumed that he was also suffering complications from having two Aztec gods fight it out in his head, for which he had received no treatment that we knew of.

“He’ll turn up sooner or later,” Joseph said, glowering. “He always does.”

“Let me call Antonia,” I said quickly, and pushed myself up off the chair.

Out in the hallway again, I sagged against the wall and sighed. I wondered whether Joseph would ever get past his mistrust of Jack. Granted, it was Jack’s fault, if indirectly. Tezcatlipoca had given him the ability to mess with human emotions, and when Jack first met us, he’d had a field day with that ability against our little team: Shannon and I had briefly vied for his attentions while Joseph acted like a spurned, jealous lover. Eventually, Tezcatlipoca decided the only way Jack was going to get me for Him was for Jack to rape me – and it nearly worked. After that, White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman devised an early-warning system for us: when Jack started working on us to feel something we didn’t really feel, we heard a rattlesnake’s rattle. But by

then, the damage was done. None of us trusted Jack. And even though Joseph and I had seen Tezcatlipoca's and Quetzalcoatl's otherworldly battle for Jack – well, the outer manifestation of it, anyway – I wasn't convinced Jack had a handle on either one of Them. So I figured Joseph didn't believe it for a minute.

There was nothing I could do about that right now, though. I pulled my phone out of the pocket of my maternity slacks and called Antonia.

"Greco," said the businesslike voice on the other end of the line. Then she must have caught sight of her caller ID. "Oh! Hi, Naomi!"

"Hi, Antonia," I said. "I've got a favor to ask you."

"Shoot."

"Any chance you could talk your manager into letting us use your station's equipment for the big news conference before the big mediation?"

"You have good timing," she said. "He just walked past my desk. Hey, John!" She put me on hold, and left me there for a considerable period of time – so long, in fact, that my back started aching. I began to count silently; I figured if she didn't pick up again by the time I got to one hundred, I'd hang up.

I'd gotten to seventy-nine when the line clicked. "Naomi, are you still there?"

"Still here," I said.

"I'm sorry it took so long," she said, and I could tell by the chagrin in her voice that the answer was no. "My news director is afraid it would be a conflict of interest if we loaned you any equipment. But he's sending me a list of reputable production companies, which I can forward to you."

"That's great, thanks," I said. I was suddenly very tired.

"And the good news is that he said I can help you get the word out," she went on, sounding excited. "As long as I don't mention my connection to the station, I can be your publicist! So when you set the time and place for your news conference, let me know. In the meantime, I'll write up a release."

I blinked. "Release?"

"Yeah. You know, a news release. We'll want to notify all the networks, and all the big newspapers...CNN, MSNBC, Fox News...oh, and the AP, of course..."

My head was beginning a slow spin. "Can't we just put it up on YouTube?"

Instead of answering my question – which, by the way, had been genuine – she laughed at me. Then she said, "I need your e-mail address so I can forward you the list from John."

I rattled it off in a daze, then ended the call and shoved the phone back in my pocket. Then I shut my eyes and sagged back against the wall again. I felt as if it were the only solid thing in this brave, new world of notoriety that I was hurtling toward.

"You okay?" a friendly voice at my elbow asked.

I blinked. Then I pushed myself upright and stuck out my hand. "Dr. Johnson," I said.

"This is unexpected. You don't work here in Boulder, too, do you?"

He shook my hand. "No. This is purely a social call. Although if my patient is around, I'd be happy to see him." Dr. Johnson had been on call in the Swedish Hospital emergency room on the night I brought in a half-dead Joseph.

"He's right in here," I said, opening the door for him.

The good doctor preceded me into Looks Far's room and greeted both Shannon and Joseph. "You've made a remarkable recovery, Mr. Curtis," he said.

"That's what they tell me," Joseph said with a grin. "Nice to see you again, sir."

Dr. Johnson waved one hand. "Call me Garrick."

"And I'm Joseph," my husband replied. "You know my wife, Naomi."

Garrick turned and shot me a surprised smile. "Congratulations! I didn't even know you had set a date."

"It was kind of sudden," I told him, the corners of my mouth quirking up. "You know our friend Shannon, of course."

"Of course," he said, turning back to her. "I'm very pleased to see you again."

"Nice to see you, too, Garrick," she smiled, blushing a little.

I cleared my throat. "Shannon? Maybe Garrick could give us some advice about Looks Far."

"Oh! Right. Great idea, Naomi." She motioned to Garrick to join her at the old man's bedside.

I watched Joseph as he turned to observe them, his forehead creasing in a way that had become habitual lately. I slipped my arms around his waist and whispered to him, "You're not as cute as usual with those worry lines, but I think I'll keep you anyway." I reached up and smoothed the two vertical grooves on either side of his nose.

He caught my hand and kissed the palm. Then he confessed in a whisper, "I'm scared. For Grandfather."

"So am I," I told him honestly. He dropped his chin on top of my head.

I realized the room had gotten quiet, and gently pulled away from Joseph. Sure enough, Shannon and Garrick were looking anywhere but at either each other or us.

I decided the best course would be to get back to business. I cleared my throat and said, "The hospital is strongly suggesting that we move Looks Far elsewhere." I congratulated myself briefly on avoiding the loaded term *nursing home* before plowing on. "Obviously, not just any facility will do. We have his safety to think of, among other things. And we'd like to have him closer to us."

"That drive up U.S. 36 is getting to you, huh?" Garrick said with a knowing grin.

Shannon shook her head, a disgusted look on her face. "How do people do it every day?"

"You get used to it," he said.

"People can get used to anything," she retorted. "That doesn't make it healthy."

"In any case," I broke in, "Garrick, I was hoping maybe you had some suggestions for places we could call."

He glanced back at the old man on the bed before replying. "I can ask around. But even if you find a suitable place, there's no guarantee it will have a bed available for him. Have you explored the possibility of hiring someone to care for him at home?"

"At whose home?" Joseph asked. "He lives in a wickiup. Naomi's got a one-bedroom condo, and the trailer's not secure."

Shannon opened her mouth, closed it, and finally came out with it. "What about my place?"

Joseph and I stared at her for a moment. "Oh, Shannon," I said. "We wouldn't dream of..."

"No, no, no," she said, waving me off. "I've been mulling this over for a while. I've got that second bedroom..."

"It's your office," I broke in.

"It's a junk room with a computer desk in it," she shot back. "I've been meaning to clean it out anyway. This will give me a good reason to do it. I'll move the computer into my bedroom"

and get rid of all the junk. That will leave plenty of space for a hospital bed and whatever else the aide will need.”

I looked doubtfully at Joseph.

“Please,” Shannon said. “I want to do this for Looks Far. I’m still mad at myself for not being here when Loki walked in with the needle.” She cut another look at the old man.

Joseph walked to the bed. He straightened the blanket covering his grandfather and smoothed his long, gray hair spread out on the pillow. His hand came to rest on the old man’s shoulder. Then he turned to Shannon. “If he’s got to be under a white man’s roof, I’d like for that roof to belong to a friend. Thank you, Shannon.”

Shannon beamed. “It’s the least I could do. And I think I know the perfect aide, too.”

“Oh, really?” I said. “Who?”

“Your mother.”

I opened my eyes wide. But then I started to grin. Mom was, after all, a registered nurse. She kept saying she was moving to Colorado to retire, but I had never thought of her as the type of person who would thrive with nothing to do but play pinochle and tat lace. “I think you might be right. Have you talked to her yet?”

Shannon shook her head, her auburn curls bobbing. “I thought I should run it by you two first. I’ll call her tonight. If she agrees, and I think she will, we can start clearing out the room and setting everything up tomorrow.” She looked at Garrick. “So I guess we don’t need your advice, after all, Garrick. Sorry about that.”

He nodded toward the bed. “He still needs a doctor. Has he got one? Or are you it?”

“Well...” Shannon shrugged helplessly.

“That’s what I thought,” Garrick said. “I’ll be happy to consult.”

Joseph smiled and bowed his head. “That would set my mind at ease. Thanks, Garrick.”

Chapter 2

White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman preceded me down a dank stone passageway. Her glow was the only thing lighting the grim tunnel. Water dripped from the ceiling onto my head as I rushed after her, trying to stay within the protection of her argence.

The passage debouched suddenly onto a vast cavern. The goddess's radiance lit the space, although the ceiling disappeared in the murk above our heads. Around us, I counted seven archways, each hewn from the living rock and adorned with depictions of fantastic figures in what I recognized as ancient Aztec, or Mexica, style. What lay past the arches, I couldn't tell; all beyond lay in darkness, and all was silent but for the irregular drips of water and, now and again, a muffled sob.

"Why have You brought me here?" I asked Her as She turned toward me.

"To show you what you must face," she said, in a guttural voice unlike her normal tones.

"What I must face?" I was baffled. "I face the mediation You would have me conduct among You, Jehovah, and the other gods."

"No," She said in the same odd voice. "I am not who you believe Me to be. Come closer, so you may get a better look at Me."

My unwilling feet carried me nearer the goddess. As I did so, Her face contorted into a grimace. When I was only a few feet away, She shrieked. "Behold, Naomi Witherspoon! You, who would be the mother of Our deliverance! Behold who I really am!" The skin of her head split like an overripe melon and sloughed away, to reveal the heads of two serpents writhing against one another. She ripped her beautiful white buckskin dress from neckline to hem; underneath, she was naked to the waist, her breasts hanging slack, and her underskirt was woven of more snakes. Their heads snapped toward me, forked tongues tasting the air inches from my belly.

I couldn't move and I couldn't make a sound. But my reaction must have shown on my face, for She threw back Her heads and laughed. "Behold, Naomi! You will not succeed, for I am Your doom!"

I awoke trembling, with the baby battering me on all sides as if trying to find a way out.

"Shh," I said softly, trying not to wake Joseph while I rolled onto my back and placed both hands on my belly. "Shh, little one. It was just a dream. She's gone now."

"Who was here?" he mumbled as my belly slowly ceased roiling.

Shit. "No one, honey. I just had a dream and it upset the bean. Go back to sleep."

He reached a hand toward my belly, brushing my arm with his. Then he propped himself up on one elbow and rucked his long, black hair back from his face to look at me. "You're soaking wet. That must have been some dream." The city lights leaking in through the closed window blinds illuminated the concern on his face.

I let out a shuddering breath. "Actually," I admitted, "it was pretty awful." And I told him about it.

He slid one arm under my shoulders and pulled me against him. "She can't have you," he said with quiet ferocity.

"Who is She?"

He sighed and kissed my forehead. "I'm not sure."

"Bullshit," I said. "You sounded pretty sure a second ago."

He sighed again. "Coatlicue."

“Gesundheit,” I said, grinning into his shoulder.

He snorted softly. “She’s the Aztec mother goddess. Their Earth goddess. Like Shiva in the Hindu pantheon, Coatlicue is both creator and destroyer.”

“What’s She got against our bean?” I wondered.

“I don’t know.”

We were both silent for a few moments. Then I said, “First all those goddesses shushing Odin, and now this. Why do I get the feeling there’s something White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman hasn’t told us?”

He laughed aloud. “I’m sure there’s plenty She hasn’t told us. Humans are the playthings of the gods, after all.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not gonna be anyone’s plaything without a fight,” I said.

Joseph patted my belly and said with a grin, “Too late.”

“From here on out, then,” I amended. A few moments later, I said, “You know, I do have a lot of dreams that aren’t prophetic. Maybe this one was just a regular old pregnancy-hormone-infused nightmare.”

“You think so?” Joseph kind of mumbled. He must have been on the verge of falling asleep again.

“No,” I said quietly.

“Me, neither. Go back to sleep, Naomi.”

I snuggled against my husband and closed my eyes. But it seemed as if I listened to his even breathing for a long time before I drifted off again myself.

Weird dream-threats or no, we had to be up and at ‘em early the next morning, even though it was a Saturday. Joseph was working six days a week on his current construction project in the Tech Center while the weather held, and I was headed out to a video supply house to rent cameras and a crew for our press conference.

I dropped Joseph off at work and drove west on Belleview Avenue. The video place was way out South Santa Fe Drive, almost to Chatfield Reservoir. I could have gotten back on I-25, but I was early, and I thought I’d have a better chance of finding a coffee shop on the way if I stuck to city streets. It worked; I found one in a shopping center about a mile from my destination.

I parked the Cube and brought my laptop bag in with me. I was off caffeine until the baby came, but I hoped the smell would help me wake up vicariously, and in the meantime I hoped to get some work done.

But as I turned away from the counter with my decaf latte and scone, I heard someone call, “Naomi?”

“Just like a bad penny,” I muttered, and plastered a smile on my face as I made my way to the table where Jack Rivers had his hands wrapped around a cup of joe. “Jack, imagine running into you.”

“It’s fate,” he said, pulling out a chair for me.

“Or something,” I sort of agreed, plopping down, and managing to drop my stuff on the table without overturning anything. “What are you doing way out here, anyway?”

“There’s a video equipment rental place not far away,” he said. “I’m waiting for them to open. I want to see how much it would cost me to rent a rig so I can finish my thesis.” Jack had been kicked out of the University of New Mexico just short of a bachelor’s degree in film. He had intended to finish his film about the search for Aztlán, the fabled Mexica homeland, with the

grant he received from an unknown benefactor. But his benefactor had turned out to be a Mexican drug lord. And then things proceeded to get messy for all of us.

“What a coincidence,” I said. “I must be headed to the same place. I need to rent equipment and a crew for the press conference we’re going to have before the mediation starts.”

“It’s fate,” he said again, his teeth gleaming as he smiled. He was letting his moustache grow back, I noticed; it looked bristly.

“Or something,” I repeated. “I suppose you could use a ride over?”

“I wouldn’t turn one down.”

We had at least an hour and a half before the rental place opened. Jack nursed his coffee in silence, mostly, while I looked at stuff online and tried to pretend to work. I couldn’t help remembering that the last time I’d been working while Jack was in the same room with me, he’d attacked me. He was a perfect gentleman today, but still I couldn’t shake my trepidation. Especially when I remembered that I’d just offered him a ride, in my car, with nobody else in the vehicle with us. What the hell had I been thinking? Briefly, I considered offering to call him a cab, but that seemed like a coward’s way out. No, brave Naomi wouldn’t dream of renegeing on her offer. Brave Naomi would tough it out.

Brave, stupid Naomi.

Brave, stupid, and very pregnant Naomi. I could almost read the lurid headlines from here.

I shook myself mentally and went back to pretending to work.

Finally, it was time to go. I shut down the laptop and loaded it into my bag while Jack tossed our empty cups and my scone wrapper. *Eyewitnesses attested to the assailant’s attentiveness.* “*He even cleared the table before they left,*” one said. “*He seemed like a perfect gentleman.*”

Jack came back to the table. “Ready? Need a hand with your bag?”

“Nope, I’ve got it, thanks,” I blathered, struggling to my feet. He caught my elbow to steady me, and I flinched. My eyes, of their own accord, flew to his face.

“I’ll walk,” he said.

“No, Jack, it’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is.” His look held mine. “I make you uncomfortable and I understand why. I’m truly sorry about what happened in your office, Naomi. I know that you may never believe me. And I know for sure that you will never fully trust me again.”

“No, Jack, I...”

“No, you don’t. You’ve reasoned your way into a semblance of trust, but your lizard brain still runs and hides every time it sees me. And it makes it very hard for me to deal with you.” He snorted softly and looked away. “At least with Joseph, I know where I stand. He’ll always hate me.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” I said.

“You think so?” he said with a sidelong look at me. “You’re not a man.”

We regarded each other warily for a minute. Finally, I broke the silence. “What happened to you?” I asked. “At Looks Far’s place. Is Tezcatlipoca still...?” I gestured inanely with one hand.

“Yes.”

“And Quetzalcoatl...?”

He sat down, deflated. “Yes. They’re both inside my head. Every minute of every day, They give me Their advice. Right now, I’m listening to a running argument – the same one They’ve had for the past several thousand years. It’s exhausting.”

“Who’s in charge?” I blurted.

He regarded me seriously. “I am.”

I had heard that tune before. I looked into his eyes; so deeply did I search, it felt like I was boring all the way into his soul. But I found not a hint of red.

But I’d been down that road before, too. “Always?” I challenged. “Neither one ever breaks through your iron will. Neither one ever takes the wheel. Is that what you’re telling me? Is that what you want me to believe?”

“Believe what you want, Naomi. You will anyway, no matter what I say.” He stood. “I’ll see you at the rental place.” Then he turned on his heel and walked rapidly out the door.

He was absolutely right. No matter what he told me, I would believe his actions before I would believe his words.

I realized I’d been standing there for several minutes, just staring at the door, when a woman with two toddlers and a tray of drinks touched my elbow and asked me if I was still using the table. I mumbled an apology as I picked up my things again and went out to the Cube.

In my somewhat befuddled state, I got lost on the way to the rental place. Still, I beat Jack there. I sat in the car until I saw him. He looked every inch the college student, coming up the sidewalk in his gray hoodie and jeans. He glanced at the car as he approached, and then averted his gaze. He kept walking as I got out of my car. But he held the door to the shop open for me.

The storefront we entered was ill-lit, with worn green carpet and a formica-topped counter near the back. The same tired paneling covered the walls and the front of the counter that faced us. Faded posters of electronic equipment, its purpose inscrutable to me, adorned the walls. A couple of utilitarian chairs sat near the front window, separated by an end table covered in stacks of brochures for mysterious black boxes that bristled with meters and knobs.

Jack busied himself with a catalog at the end of the counter while I approached the sole customer service rep and explained to him what I was trying to do. The rep began making a list of all the gear I would need, talking me through each item as he put it on the list. The price tag was getting pretty high.

Then Jack broke in. “She doesn’t need a satellite truck.”

“What?” I turned toward him.

“You don’t need one, Naomi,” he said. “The networks will bring their own. All you need to provide is a platform for their cameras and a mult box for the audio feed. And mics for the panelists, and a mixer for the mics. Unless you’re going to do a closed-circuit feed. Were you going to do that?”

“Uh,” I said.

“Do you know this guy?” the rep asked me.

“I do,” I said. “He’s a colleague. And I think I’ve just promoted him to producer.”

“Director,” Jack said, with the beginning of a grin. “And I accept. Go have a seat, Naomi.”

Gratefully, I stepped back and allowed Jack to handle the technical details. The price estimate dropped substantially. When it was clear they were just about finished, I asked him, “What was it you needed, anyway?”

He gave me a suspicious glance. “Why?”

“Because we’re going to add it to my bill.”

Jack’s mouth dropped open. Then he shut it firmly. “No. I won’t let you do that.”

“Too late. Put Jack’s stuff on there, too,” I told the rep.

“Naomi,” Jack said, his teeth gritted, “stop trying to save me.”