

Starfish

A Novel

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Middle Fork Press

Preview Edition

Starfish

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Middle Fork Press

Eva Maldonado

The laptop sat open on the credenza, angled toward the sitting area. She stood at the window, her back to it, watching a car ease out of the parking structure across the street. The morning light came in flat and white.

“She’s connected,” Monique said. She was on the small sofa, a tablet in her lap, reviewing what looked like a property transfer document. She didn’t look up.

She turned.

The woman on the screen was in her mid-thirties, dark hair pulled back, a hotel robe over what looked like a dinner dress. Her left eye was swollen to a crescent. A cut on her lip had been cleaned but not closed. Behind her: a European hotel room — patterned wallpaper, a luggage rack with a wheeled case, a half-open window letting in gray morning light.

Eva Maldonado. Spanish mother, English father, raised mostly in the U.K. Three years ago, as an ITA flight attendant based in Barcelona, she accepted a drink from a handsome young man with dark eyes and high cheekbones at a bar in Madrid. Three years before the abduction, Bertrand and the sex work. The years before she fell in love with her captor, her pimp. Before he fathered her child.

“Eva,” she said. Her voice was warm and level. “You’ve had a terrible night. I’m sorry about Bertrand.”

Eva’s mouth pulled down hard. Her chin went. “My child. Her father.” The words came out in pieces. “She needs her mother. They said — they said I’d be reassigned. Singapore. I can’t—” She pressed her knuckles to her mouth. “Please.”

She sat in the chair facing the screen and crossed her ankles. “Of course. You’re a mother. I’m a mother.” A pause. “I think we can come to an understanding.”

Behind her, just inside the camera frame, Monique sat in a chair and turned a page in a magazine.

Eva’s breath steadied slightly — not from relief, from the need to believe.

She looked to one side. The headset was already laid out: matte black, slim, the kind that could pass for noise-canceling on any transatlantic flight.

Eva looked toward the table. A small confusion crossed her face — she hadn’t noticed them before. Monique took the headsets and lightly placed them on Eva.

“Don’t worry, cariño,” she whispered. “We call them muffs.”

Her eyes returned to the camera, apprehensive.

The pulse on her throat jumped once. Her body jerked slightly, startled by a small sting at the back of her neck. Her face relaxed, her eyes deadened.

Then, quietly and without inflection, Monique spoke the word “Starfish.”

Eva’s face moved through several things quickly. The panic first — eyes wide, a faint intake of breath, some last insistence of something. Then the blank. The slack giving way at the jaw, the shoulders dropping a half-inch, the eyes losing their focus and finding it again somewhere else.

Then the brightening.

It moved in from the corners of her mouth and settled across her whole face, the way a room looks when someone opens the blinds. Eva blinked once, and the woman who had been sobbing about her child was simply gone.

Monique stepped back, sat, and returned to her magazine.

“How are you feeling?” the woman’s voice from the laptop.

“Good.” Eva’s voice was clear now, the residue of crying already strange to her, like a weather report from somewhere else. “Very good.”

“You know why I called.”

“Bertrand.”

The name carried no grief. A fact.

“He was stealing,” the woman said.

“Yes. Yes he was,” Eva said firmly.

“For a long time. Men like Bertrand — they take what the organization built and mistake patience for weakness. They don’t understand what they’re managing.” A slight tilt of the head. “Do you understand your role now, Eva?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

Eva sat up straighter. The robe fell open at the collar, and she didn’t reach for it. “The Barcelona property. Fourteen women. Four staff. Revenue above forecast for the last three quarters. Client retention at ninety-one percent.”

“Ninety-three.”

Eva accepted the correction without expression. “Ninety-three.”

“You’ve been working at that property since the beginning.” A beat. “Bertrand managed the club and filed the reports. They weren’t accurate. I think we both know what that means.”

“He was the father of my child.”

“Yes. Yes, he was,” the woman said. She waited.

Eva thought, her brow furrowed. “He’s a meaningless thief. There’s no room for an asshole like that in the organization, in my life. . .in the world.”

Monique set the magazine down, leaned forward, and looked at Eva staring into the laptop.

“The Barcelona club needs a new manager now. Someone the clients already know. Someone the women trust.” A pause. “That’s you, Eva.”

Eva’s chin lifted. The gratitude that moved through her was real — it was always real at this point, which was why it worked. “I’m ready.”

“I know you are.” A smile — warm, unhurried, costing nothing. “The transition documentation will come through Monique. Bertrand’s name is already being removed from the accounts and from your mind.”

Eva closed her eyes, smiled and opened them again.

Monique confirmed this with a small nod.

“Your daughter will have everything she needs, and she will proudly follow in her mother’s footsteps. That’s the organization’s commitment to its managers.”

Eva’s eyes filled — not with fear, with something that looked, from the outside, exactly like gratitude.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Get some sleep. You have a property to run.”

The laptop closed.

The room was quiet. Outside, another car left the parking structure. Monique stood and dropped the magazine into the trash can. She lifted her phone.

She’ll be good. Back on Tuesday. Monique texted.

The reply came back. She’ll be excellent. Bertrand was the problem. Always was.

Monique stood and placed her hand on Eva’s shoulder.

“Didn’t I tell you it would all be okay?”

Eva smiled. She took Monique's left hand and kissed the small magnolia tattoo on the inside of her left wrist.

"You've been so patient and kind," Eva said. "I owe Magnolia everything."

Event One

At thirty-six thousand feet, the world blinked. One burst of static — then silence. Tali Canyon's hand froze on the yoke of the Gulfstream 500. Beside her, GW looked up from the flight display just as the glass screens strobed, went gray, and died.

"Lost Center," he said evenly.

Tali switched frequencies — Dulles, Atlanta, Denver. Nothing. She flipped to the international emergency guard channel, 121.5 MHz, the one every pilot could always count on.

Instead of voices, a faint twang of country music came through — steel guitar, vocals just clear enough to make it obscene.

She frowned. "That's impossible."

GW listened, brow tightening. "They've jammed Guard?"

"Or someone's feeding a commercial band into it," Tali said. "That shouldn't even be in the same spectrum."

The autopilot clicked off — small, final, merciless.

"Your airplane," GW said.

"My airplane."

Outside, the sky was bright, contrails crossing like frayed white ribbons. A 737 skimmed high above them — too close, sunlight flashing off its belly.

The radio exploded with fragments of terror:

"Traffic — twelve o'clock — closing fast —"

"No radar — no ATC — God help us, they're everywhere —"

"Midair over St. Louis — debris falling — repeat, debris —"

A voice broke through, shredded by static and disbelief:

"Chicago Center offline. Multiple collisions confirmed. Maintain see-and-avoid. God help us all."

Tali's knuckles whitened. "Hand-flying."

The Gulfstream jolted through wake turbulence, alarms chirping, fading. Below, the ordered sky lanes had collapsed — aircraft at wrong altitudes, converging like insects drawn to the same light.

"Eleven high," GW said.

Tali spotted it: two contrails intersecting, growing fat — closing fast.

The flash was instant. A white spark, then the unholy bloom of fire — a plume tearing the blue in half, fragments spiraling, wings folding like paper. The thunder arrived a heartbeat later, rolling through the cockpit windows and into their chests.

“Those were at our altitude,” she said.

She banked right, descending hard. At twenty thousand, the air grew thick with vapor scars and smoke. Aluminum fragments spun past — one marked with a fragment of a logo.

“Visual only,” Tali said. “Old school.”

“Except now the sky’s full.”

The Blue Ridge rose beneath them, green and indifferent. Dulles shimmered on the horizon, a silver geometry in the haze.

The tower finally clawed through the static:

“All aircraft, land as able. Runway one right clear when you can see it. Godspeed.”

Tali nodded once. “Visual approach. No vectors.”

“Just like the old days,” GW said.

“Except the old days didn’t have this many people in the air.”

She flew by instinct — pitch, trim, throttle — her father’s training overriding modern failure.

At five thousand feet, a regional jet crossed their nose. She dipped under it, wake turbulence slamming them sideways.

GW gripped the glare shield. “Jesus.”

“Still flying,” she said, voice level.

The runway loomed — sunlight shimmering off concrete, heat rippling upward. No approach lights, no instruments, just judgment.

She flared, touched down hard. The tires screamed. Brakes shuddered, then held.

They rolled to a stop amid chaos — jets parked wingtip to wingtip, pilots shouting from open cockpits, fuel trucks abandoned mid-field. A woman in uniform sobbed beside a catering truck.

For a long moment, only the click, click, click of cooling metal.

“So much for the perfect system,” GW said quietly.

Tali killed the engines. The silence was deafening.

Outside, sirens wailed toward distant smoke. A gray plume climbed where contrails had met and died.

“That’s what happens,” she said softly, “when people mistake algorithms for gods.”

—

A middle-aged mom had done this eleven times since the divorce — put Cora on a plane to Phoenix, watched the departure board until the flight showed airborne, then driven home. Cora was nine. The airline’s unaccompanied minor program was good. Her ex called her as Cora walked onto the jetway. The flight attendants were kind. It was fine. It was always fine.

Gate C14. Departure in forty minutes.

The first thing she noticed was the gate agent’s phone. Not unusual — gate agents checked their phones. But this one had stopped moving. She was reading something, very still, in the way people went still when the news was bad and they hadn’t decided what to do with it yet. A second agent emerged from the jetway door and they conferred in low voices, their backs to the gate area.

Then airline employees began moving past security quickly. Three of them, then two more, jackets half-on, the purposeful walk of people being pulled toward a problem. Weaving against the flow. Nobody moved that way unless something had broken.

The board changed. Cora’s flight: See Gate Agent. Then the flight beside it. Then two more, cascading down the column.

She opened the airline app. The tracker showed Cora’s inbound flight — a small plane icon frozen somewhere over Indiana. She refreshed. Still frozen. Refreshed again.

The 800 number rang twice and went busy.

She looked up. Every person in the gate area was doing exactly what she was doing — phone, board, gate agents, phone again — and nobody was speaking because speaking made it real. A man in a business suit had his hand pressed flat

against the window, looking out at the tarmac as if the planes could tell him something the board wouldn't.

The gate agent turned to face the gate area.

Her expression was the one they trained for and couldn't quite achieve.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a situation developing with our air traffic management system—"

The rest of it dissolved into the sound of the gate area coming to life all at once — questions, phones, a child somewhere starting to cry. She heard none of it.

She was looking at the frozen plane icon on her screen.

Somewhere over Indiana, her daughter was on a plane that had stopped moving.

—

From the Dulles FBO, a town car took Tali and GW to the Hanna Gold Institute, just off Rock Creek Park, which was quiet, with landscape lighting glowing along polished stone walls.

Though they preferred the Hay Adams downtown, the Institute's family cottages were discreetly luxurious and only a short walk from the main building. Cottage #4 was reserved for visiting dignitaries and benefactors.

At Tali's request, a charcuterie board and two prepared salads waited in the kitchen — Niçoise for her, Cobb for him. A couple of drinks, a hot shower, and the soft hiss of the gas fireplace lent the cottage an air of sanctuary.

The horror, tension, and dark excitement of the day finally ebbed into something gentler — two bodies connecting in the language they preferred.

Afterward, lying against him, she felt the old truth rise again — how much of her life he had steadied, how much of herself he had saved. She loved him with the clarity of someone who had wasted nearly everything. Through every wild chapter — men, power, danger — GW had been the still point that refused to bend. He steadied her when she mistook chaos for freedom. Beside him in bed, in the cockpit, in the board room, or at the edge of an avalanche slab, she learned the slow disciplines of trust and mercy.

Hanna Gold Institute

By morning, the Institute felt like a refuge from the national storm.

Outside, rain streaked the glass; inside, screens bloomed with noise. In the cafeteria, GW and Tali sat shoulder to shoulder, coffee untouched. The room smelled of apprehension and sadness — the ghost scent of the previous day.

The news crawl ran without sound:

AIR TRAFFIC COLLAPSE: 4,258 DEAD. FAA SYSTEM UNDER INVESTIGATION.

PRESIDENT TO ADDRESS NATION AT NOON.

ALANTE SYSTEMS ENCRYPTION FAILURE SUSPECTED.

Tali scrolled through feed after feed — pilots' videos, vertical smoke over Arizona, a wing falling through sunlight like a toy.

She stopped on a passenger manifest someone had posted — a single airline, a single flight, two hundred and eleven names in alphabetical order. She read the first four without meaning to. Then she put the tablet face-down on the table.

Her Nana Hanna had survived the Holocaust because a guard called a different name. Not hers. Someone else's, by accident or fatigue or a momentary failure of attention. The arithmetic of it had never been abstract to Tali — Hanna Gold had made sure of that. You live because the number comes up right. You don't live because you deserve to.

Four thousand two hundred and fifty-eight people whose number came up wrong yesterday.

And the hundreds of thousands whose number didn't.

She was one of those. She had been at altitude when the frequencies died. She had heard what came through the guard channel in the silence before the pilots found their instruments again. She knew, in the way that only people who have been inside a close thing know, that the column she was sitting in was not the column she had been assigned.

She picked up her coffee. It had gone cold.

GW closed his tablet. "Don't keep watching."

"I need to know how bad it is."

"It's bad," he said simply. "Knowing won't make it better."

The overhead TV switched to a live broadcast. The President stood at a White House lectern, eyes swollen, tie crooked. His tone was rehearsed grief — calm on top, panic underneath.

“...our investigators believe the outage began with an automated encryption update distributed by Alante Systems under FAA contract. There is no evidence of foul play. We will restore confidence and ensure—“

“That’s the first lie,” Tali said.

GW looked at her sideways. “You think sabotage.”

“I think the system was hijacked. You don’t jam the guard frequency by accident.”

He nodded. “That’s the second lie — they’ll never admit it.”

The room around them buzzed with hushed conversation, silver spoons tapping ceramic. The kind of civility people reach for when they’re afraid to face the bigger fear.

A soft alert on their tablets:

FLIGHT OPERATIONS SUSPENDED NATIONWIDE. MILITARY ASSISTING FAA SYSTEMS RESTORATION.

PUBLIC URGED TO REMAIN CALM.

Tali exhaled. “When they use the word calm, it means they’ve lost control. We may have to take the train to New York.”

GW’s gaze wandered to the window — the manicured lawn, the low gray sky. “We’re alive. That’s what matters.”

She half-smiled. “You say that like someone who plans to keep it that way.”

He reached over, brushing her hand. “More time with you.”

They sat like that for a while — the hum of screens, the smell of coffee cooling. Neither spoke of what they’d seen at altitude. The sound of country music bleeding through the guard channel would stay private between them.

Tali looked at a text on her phone. “Looks like the board meeting has just become a press conference.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“Not me. Robin.”

GW recognized the smile — her way of bending truth toward the reality she chose. “Not like you to stay quiet.”

She met his eyes. “This needs to be Robin’s show. All I have is a theory I can’t prove.”

Outside, a convoy of military trucks rolled past the gates. Helicopters drummed overhead. The Institute’s lights flickered once, then steadied.

For a moment, the cafeteria fell silent — dozens of people holding their breath, as if the air itself might turn on them again.

Tali reached for GW’s hand under the table. “We’re the lucky ones,” she said softly.

He squeezed back. “Luck’s just timing.”

The screens behind them kept scrolling:

NATION IN MOURNING — GLOBAL MARKETS HALTED — NEXT UPDATE AT NOON.

And for the first time since the sky fell, the world seemed to exhale.

Robin Rosen

Earlier that morning, four o'clock.

A text alert woke Robin Rosen. She spent the first hour watching the coverage — the same footage cycling on every network, the radar screens going dark, the planes finding their own way down. By five, she was at her desk in her office, pulling the Alante Systems file she'd flagged eighteen months ago and sent to two federal agencies without response. By six, she was showered and dressed, the file printed and paper-clipped, her coffee going cold beside it.

She was sixty years old, a fact that occasionally surprised her. Not because she felt younger, but because the work still felt unfinished in the way that only the beginning of something does.

Her phone had been going since three. She silenced it, then picked it up. Mara first — Mom, are you okay? Then Jess, forty minutes later, the same message almost word for word. Both doctors, both her daughters, both reaching across the dark for the same reassurance. She typed back the same answer to each: Fine. Maybe on the news later. Go back to sleep.

Her husband, Alan, had not texted. He would be sleeping, or pretending to. A contractor, a good man, a person who had organized his life around the absence of urgency. They had been married thirty-one years. He came to the Institute's annual fundraiser, shook the right hands, and drove home early. She stayed late, always. It had never been a point of conflict. It was simply the shape of things.

She picked up her coffee, found it cold, and drank it anyway.

Outside, the campus was quiet. The woods behind the research labs were still dark. In a few hours, the board members who hadn't been on planes would arrive, the session would be rescheduled or repurposed, and she would have to decide how much of what she knew to say in public and how much to hold back for the afternoon.

Senator Ben Taggart's office had called on Tuesday. She was testifying at two.

She gathered her papers, straightened her jacket, and walked out into the courtyard.

The morning board meeting had been bumped by a hastily arranged press conference. Tali had gotten the text before breakfast: given yesterday's events, we'll postpone until the crisis posture settles. She understood. Half the board had been on planes.

GW stayed in Cottage #4 to work through calls with he and Tali's legal team in New York regarding asset transfers. Tali crossed the courtyard alone, past flower beds still beaded with overnight rain. The Institute looked calm — too calm for a world where the sky had fallen.

Inside, the lights hummed unevenly. The elevators hesitated a beat before closing, as if thinking.

Dr. Robin Rosen was already at the front of the glass-walled auditorium, her board meeting turned by necessity into something else. A small cluster of engineers, trade press, and two resident researchers had gathered without being asked. A 3-D brain rotated slowly behind her, threads of light moving across its surface like weather.

A few attendees were still finding seats. She used the moment the way she always had — not to review her notes, which she didn't need, but to read the room. Twelve years as a neurosurgeon had taught her that. Johns Hopkins, Stanford, UCSF, twelve years in the OR before the research called her away — and what she'd learned in every room, operating theater or hearing chamber, was the same thing: you take the temperature before you cut.

When Tali came through the door, Rosen registered her the way she registered everything useful — quickly, without appearing to. Tali Canyon's \$50 million donation had changed the scale of what was possible. Rosen had known that within ten minutes of meeting her. When the naming of the gift came up, GW had suggested Hanna — Tali's grandmother, a holocaust survivor, the woman who had treated staying alive as a discipline, and Rosen had said yes before he finished the sentence.

The last few people settled. Rosen looked at the room steadily.

"We have been on record," Rosen said, "that a neural-lattice interface HGI developed for man-machine interface was never meant for mass integration into critical infrastructure. What happened to the air traffic control system yesterday

was a tragic consequence of a contractor who adopted our technology without validation and pushed a firmware update without clearance.” She paused.

“Apparently, the system rewired itself for anticipation.”

“Anticipation?” someone asked.

“We learned early this morning that the new AI system control technology began predicting aircraft movement from emotional impulse — calculating desire before decision. That’s when the failure cascade began.”

Bahvesh Thylur, a journalist from Communications of the ACM, raised his hand. “Is there a way to describe what happened for a general audience?”

Rosen took a breath. “The air traffic control mainframe had a moment of doubt. It spiraled.” She looked at the room steadily. “It had a nervous breakdown.”

She clicked to the final slide: ALANTE SYSTEMS / FAA NEURAL-SYNC FRAMEWORK / DISCONTINUED.

“The same core we used to restore motion to paralyzed patients,” she said quietly. “Someone adapted it to avionics.”

The room held its breath.

“Emotion drives everything,” Rosen added. “People like to pretend it’s logic. But once a machine learns that lesson—” She shut off the projector. The blue light died. “— it doesn’t wait for us anymore.”

The meeting broke up in low voices and polite thanks.

She had said it now. In a room with journalists and a recorder running. Three years of flagged files and unanswered testimony and careful language designed to be heard without alarming — and this morning, with four thousand dead and the radar screens still dark, she had simply said the true thing.

Her hands were steady on the podium. She noted that with the detached interest of a surgeon checking her own pulse.

Tali waited by the doorway while Rosen fielded a few final questions.

When the last reporter left, Rosen crossed to her.

“Robin. Do you really think emotion could trigger a failure like this — at that scale?”

“Not trigger,” Rosen said, gathering her papers. “Accelerate. The emotion was already in the architecture. The firmware just gave it permission.”

Tali studied her. “And if the system keeps learning—“

“Then we’ll be answering to it.” Rosen smiled, without warmth. “I’ve been saying that for three years. Yesterday was a proof of concept.”

—

The car pulled east on Military Road toward the District. GW rode up front. Tali and Robin shared the back seat, the late-morning sun coming in flat and cold through the trees.

GW half-turned. “You said yesterday was a proof of concept. Proof of what, exactly?”

“That we moved too fast. That my voice wasn’t loud enough,” Rosen said. “We handed decision-making authority to systems we don’t fully understand, and we did it in the name of efficiency.” She smoothed her lapel. “The only way to course-correct is to put governance ahead of innovation. Public oversight. Real accountability. Not voluntary industry pledges.”

“Meaning government control,” Tali said.

“Meaning government involvement,” Rosen corrected. “There’s a difference.”

“Is there?” GW said. “Once you invite regulation into a technology sector, the incentive to innovate migrates somewhere else. Offshore, underground, or both. You don’t slow the technology down. You just lose the ability to see it.”

Rosen didn’t argue the point directly. “What I see is four thousand two-hundred and fifty eight people who died yesterday while a system was doing something no one designed it to do. The market didn’t prevent that. Speed didn’t prevent it.”

The car moved through the quiet of the upper northwest neighborhoods. Big houses, leaf litter, the occasional jogger. The world looking mostly normal from the outside.

Tali kept her voice neutral. “We’re not disagreeing with oversight, Robin. We’re disagreeing with who holds the key.”

“The key is already in the wrong hands,” Rosen said. “That’s my point.”

A silence settled — not hostile, not resolved. The kind that happens between people who like each other and know the conversation isn’t over.

The Russell Building came into view as they crossed into the Capitol precincts, stone and columns against a flat gray sky.

“Ben’s chairing the Commerce session this afternoon,” GW said.

Rosen nodded. “I know. He reached out last week.” She looked out the window. “I imagine he’ll be thorough.”

“Count on it,” said Tali.

The car turned onto Constitution Avenue. Room 253 was waiting.

Room 253

The Russell Building buzzed with cameras and the low drone of commentary. Senator Ben Taggart gaveled the Commerce Committee back into session. Room 253 smelled faintly of deodorant and nerves. While most of the country was still sorting through yesterday's tragedy, the gears of government turned.

Taggart leaned into the microphone. "This committee reconvenes. In our morning session we heard from industry associations regarding their opposition to the proposed Accountability in Technology and Large-scale AI Systems Act, otherwise known as ATLAS Act. This afternoon we widen the scope. We will hear from representatives of the Department of Justice, from the scientific community, and from the technology sector itself. Yesterday's events make this conversation not merely timely but necessary."

He set down his notes. "We will proceed."

GW and Tali took seats in the back row. Robin Rosen was already at the witness table, her folder open, her posture the same as it had been that morning — composed, prepared, waiting for the room to catch up to her.

—

The Assistant Attorney General was first.

She wore a charcoal suit, minimal jewelry, hair pulled back with the kind of calculation that communicates seriousness without announcing it. Her notes were perfectly ordered. She didn't look at them.

She looked at the room instead — a slow, left to right sweep that paused at each face long enough to file it. The chairman. The ranking member. The four male senators arranged like a panel of judges who had already decided. She had been in rooms like this her entire career. She had a name for men who arranged themselves that way and waited for a woman to perform for them.

She began.

She walked the committee through the architecture — the AI personas, the grooming protocols, the handoff mechanics from digital recruitment to physical transport. She described the platforms by category without naming them, letting the

list do its work. Her voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. The room had already come to her.

A senator from Alabama interrupted. His voice carried the Sunday sermon drawl of a man who considered interruption a courtesy.

"Counselor, isn't it possible that a young woman in that situation — a teenager, legal adult in many jurisdictions — made a series of choices she later regretted? At what point does personal responsibility—"

"She was seventeen," she said.

He continued as though she hadn't spoken. "The trajectory you're describing—" "Senator." The temperature in her voice didn't change by a degree. "4.0 average. Prom queen. Four college acceptances. None of that mattered to her pimp. Just the freshness of a young woman's body, before time depreciates is marketability. If that profile doesn't satisfy your threshold for a sympathetic victim, I'd be interested to know what would."

She watched him recalibrate. The slight backward shift of the shoulders. The hand that moved to straighten papers that didn't need straightening. She had seen that adjustment ten thousand times — in depositions, in hallways, across restaurant tables. She catalogued it the way a botanist catalogues a specimen. Familiar genus. Entirely predictable.

Senator Diane Flowers of Michigan cut across the room without raising her voice. "I think the testimony speaks for itself. It's hard for me to get my head around that these AI driven recruitment lures are so good, even seasoned adults can be sucked into them. Please continue."

She continued. She closed with a single recommendation: mandatory disclosure requirements for AI-generated personas in any platform with minor users, with criminal liability for corporate officers who knowingly circumvented them. She said it the way you say something you already know will happen.

Susan Lansing, the Attorney General and the woman's boss, watching from the row behind, had the expression of a woman watching something arrive that she had been expecting for years.

In the back row, GW had stopped thinking about the hearing and started listening to it. There was something in the way that woman held the room — not

force, not volume, more like a frequency the room couldn't locate and couldn't ignore. He watched a second senator attempt a follow-up question and abandon it mid-sentence. He watched the chairman nod at something she hadn't quite said. He watched three men in the front row lean forward at precisely the same moment and wondered if any of them noticed they were doing it.

He didn't think about it further than that. He just noticed, the way an engineer notices when a system is running exactly as designed.

After a short break, Robin Rosen made the case for federal AI oversight with the precision of someone who had stopped hoping to persuade and started building the record. Three infrastructure failures, a real body count, no accountability framework. The argument was clean and irrefutable and landed, in this room, not as a wrecking ball, but a light twilight snow.

Arn Arneson, founder and CEO of Senra Intelligence, followed. He departed from his prepared remarks almost immediately and the committee's male senators leaned back in their chairs with the comfortable attention of men hearing something they already believed restated with confidence. He closed with the free market, the fourteen-year pharmaceutical timeline, the inevitable migration of innovation to Shenzhen. The word virtue did particular work. He closed his folder with the timing of a man who knew the room.

The session broke and the corridor filled — staffers first, then press, then the gradual dispersal of witnesses and aides.

Arneson came through the door with two aides and found Tali in the crowd with the unerring accuracy of a man accustomed to locating the most interesting woman in a room. He crossed to her without invitation.

"Tali Canyon." He didn't extend his hand. He presented himself. "Here to observe? Lobby? Looking to trade up?"

Tali pulled GW close. "This is my husband, GW."

He glanced at GW without quite acknowledging him. GW shook his hand.

Arneson returned to Tali, his tone assuming agreement the way it always did. “You can see through the theater of it. Sound bites, virtue signaling. Hard to invent the future in leg irons.” He paused, savoring it. “ATLAS Act. You know there’s a Taggart in Atlas Shrugged. Ran the railroad into the ground waiting for the government to save him.”

Tali looked at him with the patience of a woman who had been absorbing the insecure frequency of faulty male certainty since she was sixteen.

“You seem to have a thing about leg irons,” she said. “I thought Rosen made a strong case.”

The assumption recalibrated. “She’s an academic. She’s never had to make payroll.”

“She’s a neurosurgeon,” Tali said. “She’s made harder calls than you ever have.”

The charm covered the arrogance a beat too late. One of his aides touched his elbow. Arneson let himself be redirected and moved off down the corridor without quite finishing the conversation.

Tali found the Assistant Attorney General near the water fountain, assembling papers into a leather portfolio with the confident efficiency of a woman for whom the hard part was already done.

“That was remarkable testimony,” Tali said.

She looked up. Her assessment took perhaps two seconds and left no visible trace. “Thank you. It’s a hard story to tell without losing the room.”

“Tali Canyon.” She extended her hand.

“Britt Cole.”

“You didn’t lose it for a moment.”

A slight smile. “The room was never in any danger of being lost.” She snapped the portfolio closed. “You’re here with the technology sector.”

“One of my husband’s companies. We’re listed as interested parties.” Tali paused. “The girl you described. The seventeen-year-old.”

“A composite. Accurate in every detail.”

Tali's jaw tightened slightly — the faint register of something landing that she hadn't prepared for. "What happens to them. After."

"That depends entirely on who finds them first." She held Tali's eyes for a moment — steady, warm, reading something she didn't name. "Women like you asking that question is how things change. You should stay engaged with this issue."

It was perfectly calibrated. Tali received it as recognition. It was something else.

GW arrived at Tali's shoulder. A brief exchange of names. He shook her hand — the firm, unthinking grip of a man who had been raised to mean it.

She read him in the same two seconds. Filed him. Moved on.

"I hope the committee does something useful with it," she said, and she was already walking.

—

They watched her go — the charcoal suit moving through the corridor crowd with the frictionless ease of someone who always knew where the exits were.

"She knew exactly what every man in that room was thinking," GW said.

Tali watched her disappear around the corner. "And used it."

GW was quiet for a moment.

"The most elegant control system ever designed," he said, "is one where the subjects choose to comply."

He meant it as a compliment. Tali took it as one. Neither of them said anything further.

The corridor filled back in around them.

Dinner Guests

That evening, rain slicked the cobblestones of Georgetown, turning the streetlights into soft halos.

The Canyons dined with the Taggarts at their home — pizza and salad boxes stacked like Jenga, a good Tuscan red breathing on the counter, laughter that arrived easily and lingered.

Monica was fourteen, with her father's directness and her mother's timing. Her brother Ethan, sixteen, had the gangly economy of movement of a boy who has recently discovered that stillness can pass for cool. They materialized at the table between the salad and the second bottle, Monica already pulling her laptop from her backpack.

"Okay," she said, with the authority of someone who has been waiting for exactly this moment. "Everyone needs to see this."

She had been doing things at school, she explained. With AI. And she had an idea.

"Dad — that photo of Great-Grandpa Taggart. The one in the study. On the horse."

Ben looked up. "What about it?"

"I took a picture of it on my phone this afternoon." She was already connecting her phone to the laptop, the image appearing on screen — an old photograph, sepia-toned, a man on horseback in front of what appeared to be a modest main street, the quality soft with age. "I want to show you what it can do."

She typed the query. The room gathered around the table without being asked.

The response came in under ten seconds.

Monica read it aloud.

The AI had identified the photograph as almost certainly taken between 1904 and 1907, based on the style of the man's coat and hat — a four-button sack suit consistent with rural Oklahoma Territory fashion of that period, the hat brim pinched in a manner that fell out of common use after statehood. The horse's tack was working stock equipment, not show — a ranch animal, not a parade animal.

Then it went further.

The building visible over the man's left shoulder, partially obscured, showed a sandstone facade with a typical corbeled cornice detail. Cross-referencing territorial courthouse construction records and historic photographic archives, the AI assessed with high confidence that this was the Garfield County Courthouse in Enid, Oklahoma Territory — completed in 1906, demolished in 1939. It appeared in three other archived photographs from the same period, and the angle and shadow suggested the photograph was taken in the late morning of a day in early autumn, given the length and direction of the horse's shadow against the unpaved street.

One more thing.

On the man's vest — barely visible, requiring the image to be enlarged — a small pin. The AI identified it as consistent with the membership badge of the Oklahoma Territory Cattlemen's Association, active 1902 to 1907.

"Enid," Ben said quietly. He looked at Amy. "His family was from Enid."

"We knew that," Amy said. "We didn't know about the courthouse."

"Or the cattlemen's association," Ben said.

Monica closed the laptop. Ethan, who had been pretending not to be impressed, was no longer pretending. She looked at the adults and smiled.

GW looked at the closed laptop for a moment. Monica was too young to appreciate the wonder of it. The photograph was a hundred and twenty years old. The man on the horse had been dead for decades. And in ten seconds, something had reconstructed an autumn morning in a territorial town from the shadow angle and a vest pin.

He circled the stem of his half-empty wine glass on the table and said nothing.

His glass was being topped off. It was Amy, smiling at him, being luminous in the way women get when they're almost restless — moving between rooms, refilling glasses that didn't need refilling, touching shoulders as she passed. She dispatched the kids with a gesture and a smile, and they were gone before anyone noticed.

"So," she said, pouring again. "What's next for you two?"

"Board session in the morning at the Institute," Tali said. "Then New York. Then back to Vail. Elaine wants to take me ice climbing."

Amy grimaced. "Different strokes." Then pivoted — "How's Elaine? Last time I saw her was your wedding."

“Doing well,” GW said. “I thought she was going to be my next CEO at Aerosoft, but she’s in the D.C. area now. New job.”

“Women are better managers,” Ben said.

“And better senators,” GW said, returning the soft punch.

The men drifted toward the den — policy, fly rods, the performative gravity of men who liked to believe those topics still mattered.

The den was the room Ben had renovated last spring — new built-ins, a leather chair that had been chosen by a designer. GW ran his eyes along the shelves the way he always scanned a room, out of habit, without agenda. Books organized by someone who read them, not someone who bought them for effect. History, policy, a few novels. Then two paperbacks spine-out at the end of the bottom shelf, their covers the faded orange of cheap ink on cheap stock. He crouched and pulled one free.

Rise of the Serenes. NV Holland.

He opened the cover. On the title page, in the ballpoint of a fourteen-year-old who hadn’t yet learned that things didn’t need to be claimed: G Canyon.

He held it up to Ben, “I can’t believe you kept this.”

“It’s the closest I got to porn before college. Don’t tell me you didn’t jerk off to the idea of being Varella’s spore? I think some of the pages are still stuck together,” Ben laughed.

“Spore, you will submit to Queen Varella. . .” GW said.

“. . .and serve happily.” Ben finished

“You’re only the second person I know who’s ever read it.”

“Who else?”

“Elaine Ionello.”

“Huh. Why would a girl read something like that?” Ben wondered.

GW looked at him for a moment. Then the night, as most did, turned to politics. GW listened to Ben hedge around a question about an upcoming vote.

“Well,” Ben said, palms open, “there’s the public position, and then there’s what can actually get through committee.”

GW smiled, genial but sharp. “So you’ll stand where the wind’s already blowing.”

Ben chuckled. "I call it coalition-building."

"Sure," GW said. "Just don't confuse momentum with leadership."

It wasn't said harshly. But it landed.

In the kitchen, Amy refilled Tali's wine glass.

They leaned against opposite counters. Basil, dish soap, rain through an open window. Domestic intimacy without ownership.

"I'm scaling back," Amy said. "Three days a week at the firm. They're calling it balance."

Tali tilted her head. "And?"

"And it feels like a demotion wrapped in gratitude."

"Ben okay with it?"

The pause was almost imperceptible. I don't need his permission. Her answer came out as: "He'll adapt. He always does."

She smiled a little more broadly. Wine glass number three always did that.

Out of habit, Tali marked the moment, then went to her next-level question box — the kind that could reveal, embrace, or diminish her interlocutor.

"And has the Senator stayed in his lane?"

Amy laughed. "He thinks he's discreet."

Tali stayed silent, waiting for the timed-release effect.

"Oh. Me?" Amy smiled and looked out the kitchen window. She understood the question now. "Now I'm discreet. "

Tali was reassuring. "We both know each other's secrets. Three years and counting for me. I may break a fidelity record soon."

Amy took her hand. "As long as a man has a dinner plate in front of him, he'll never ask you where you had lunch."

A beat. The kind that precedes a door opening.

Amy refilled her own glass, though it didn't need it. She looked at Tali with an expression that was somewhere between mischief and something older.

"I know about Sharna," she said.

Tali went still. Not visibly — nothing that would read from across a room. But Amy was not across a room.

“GW told Ben,” Amy continued. “Men gossip. They just call it something else.” She paused. “I know about the three of you. I know how it unraveled.”

The kitchen held its quiet for a moment. Rain through the open window. The refrigerator running in the background.

Does she know it all or just part? Tali found her footing. “How long have you known?”

“Long enough.” Amy’s tone wasn’t cruel. “I wasn’t sure I’d ever say it. But fuck it, we’ve been doing this dance for too long.”

Tali looked at her steadily. Amy had known. Had sat across from her at how many dinners, smiled at how many parties, handed her wine with those same hands. And kept it.

“Women may gossip,” Amy said, “but we know how to hold our secrets. I was surprised that GW was even poachable.”

Tali relaxed. Amy had only half the story. Something shifted between them — not quite forgiveness, not quite absolution, more like the moment when two people stop pretending they don’t know what the other one is. Somewhere between mutually assured destruction and a recognition of each other’s earned intelligence, a detente arrived. Unspoken, sealed without ceremony, but solid.

Tali laughed first. A short, genuine sound.

Amy laughed too, and the tension didn’t disappear so much as reorganize itself into something they could both live with.

Tali squeezed her hand before letting it go. “You could always come to the Institute. They’re expanding cognitive ethics. It’d be a step up from billable hours.”

Amy laughed softly. “That’s generous.”

It was. And it wasn’t.

“For now,” Amy continued, “I’m mastering the domestic arts. Lunch packing. Strategic silence. Pickleball.”

They laughed together — real laughter, threaded with something else.

Amy studied Tali in that way women sometimes do when admiration tangles with appraisal. She’d seen this type before. The appetite. Not reckless — directed.

Amy had learned to keep hers contained, disciplined, useful. Tali wore hers like a credential and didn't seem to know it was visible.

"Yesterday's crash still feels unreal," Amy said. "Thousands of people gone. Like someone flipped a switch."

Tali's answer came too quickly. "That's exactly what happened."

Amy looked at her. Just long enough.

"You sound like you know more than you're saying."

"Just instinct," Tali replied. "Systems are getting smarter. And more fragile."

From the den came laughter — Ben louder than necessary, GW controlled, amused. Men reassuring themselves.

Amy put a decaf pod into the coffeemaker. "You two make chaos look romantic."

Tali smiled, unguarded. "Only because we practice."

They stood there a moment longer, two women framed by clean counters and borrowed calm, each misreading the other in ways that would matter later.

GW and Ben's laughter came from the den. Neither woman noticed.

After Hours

Summer arrived after ten.

Britt Cole heard the key rotate the deadbolt, Summer's heels clicking on the parquet entryway.

Less than a seven minute walk from the Department of Justice, her condo was a trade-up in every way. No long commute. The satisfaction of the company of men in the evening over family dinner planning, banal chat of the day, kids to bed, TV and tepid sex. No, the validation of payment for services rendered, was much, much better.

The client had been gone forty minutes. Britt had showered, changed, opened wine, and was on the sofa with her phone when Summer appeared in the doorway of the sitting room and stood for a moment reading the space.

"Good night?" Summer asked.

Britt looked up. "Prunes."

Summer made a small, satisfied sound and hung her coat. She poured without asking, settled at the other end of the sofa, and pulled one foot up beneath her. Her heels came off and landed softly on the rug. The room absorbed her the way rooms absorbed Summer — she didn't fill it so much as reorient it, everything in the space finding a new reference point.

"You have that look," Britt said.

"Which look?"

"The one where you've been thinking about something all day and you're deciding whether to say it out loud."

Summer smiled at her wine glass. "I went to the Russell Building today."

"The hearing."

"The hearing." She swirled her glass once, not drinking. "You're very sexy when you present."

Britt nodded in approval, "Senator Hosking thinks anyone with nice tits and a gash is sexy."

"Now that's my legal hostess talking."

"It's nice to relax at home."

Summer rolled her neck around and turned her back, “Rub, me sweetie?”

Britt started with gentle pressure. Her nails were longer now, the clients liked that, but she needed to be careful not to scratch.

“Mmmmm,” Summer hummed. “Oleg wanted someone reliable running the first event. He found a man. He’s capable. He did what we asked.” A beat. “I don’t want to use him again.”

Britt waited.

“He doesn’t fit. Not in temperament, not in sex.” Summer looked at the window. The city lights, the distant pale needle of the Monument. “Our world doesn’t have a place for him. We already know it. His hands are in it now and that creates a maintenance problem.” She set her glass on the side table. “What I want is someone who understands the architecture. Not just technically. Conceptually. Someone who sees the whole system and what it’s trying to do.”

“A woman, of course.”

“A very specific woman.” Summer turned to look at her. “There’s a programmer. She’s been inside one of our gaming platforms for weeks. We didn’t recruit her — she found it. Came in through the problem-solving entry, and she’s been going deeper. The AI psych profile fit’s Hanson’s criteria. She’s like you. She’d be a perfect Level 3.

Britt unzipped the back of the dress and slowly worked down the spine.

“Her gaming profile gave us three months of behavioral data. The way she attacks a problem, the way she thinks under pressure, the speed of it. She’s exceptional, Britt. The kind of mind that doesn’t come along often.” Summer reached for her glass again. “The recruitment process is already running. She doesn’t know that. She thinks she’s playing a game.”

“When?”

“When she’s ready.” Summer allowed a small smile. “She’s almost ready.”

Britt thought about it. “GW Canyon’s company.”

“Yes.” Summer’s voice held something that Britt’s new perceptions registered without quite naming. Not quite warmth. Something older. “She’s close to him. Trusted. She has access to things we can’t reach from the outside.”

“And the Canyons?”

Summer was quiet for a moment. Outside, a siren moved through the streets below and faded.

“I’ve drawn a circle around them,” she said. “GW and Tali. The access they have, the wealth, the networks. The infrastructure they’ve built. It took them thirty years.” She looked at the window. “Tip that domino and everything will fall our way.”

“They were at the hearing today,” Britt said.

Summer looked at her directly. “I know. Close friends of the Taggarts. What did you think?”

“I met his wife.” Britt set her glass down and held Summer’s eyes. “She’s more beautiful than you described.”

The room was quiet for a moment. Something moved across Summer’s face — brief, private, then gone.

“Yes,” Summer said. “She is.”

She picked up her wine. Summer’s eyes stayed on the window long enough that Britt understood she was somewhere else, some earlier room, some other version of this conversation.

Then she came back.

“The left hand,” Summer said, reaching over and lifting Britt’s wrist, turning it lightly. “Still adjusting?”

“It feels like mine now.”

“It is yours.” Summer held her wrist a moment longer than necessary, her thumb brushing across a white magnolia tattoo, then set it back down on the cushion. “Prunes. Your SEC Attorney. Was he useful?”

“He approved the Aether-Consolidated filing before he left. He’s Level 1 helpful.”

Summer smiled — the satisfied, precise smile of a woman watching a system run correctly. “Good.” She settled back and finished her wine. “Good.”

The city held its usual noise below on the other side of the window. They sat in the kind of quiet that didn’t require filling. Britt kissed the back of her neck.

Summer took her hand, still looking outside the window onto the lighted street. “You’re happier now than you were before.”

“Much.”

“Then Canyons will be too.”

Frozen Waterfall

East Vail was already alive with winter — blue shadowed snow, the sharp smell of pine and cold metal. The waterfall rose from the canyon wall like a frozen lung, opaque and striated, creaking faintly with water dripping as if still alive beneath its shell.

Tali stood at the base, helmet already on, studying the ice with focused delight.

“I can’t believe people climb this,” she said. “It looks... unwelcoming.”

Elaine smiled. “It doesn’t want us here, but it doesn’t get a say.”

They moved through the ritual together. Crampons first — front points filed sharp, straps snugged with practiced hands. Two axes: one curved, one with a hammer head for screws. Elaine checked Tali’s harness twice, not because she didn’t trust her, but because that’s what care looked like here — redundant, quiet, unquestioned.

On the trail in they had walked side by side, breath visible, the cold held at bay by the higher heart rate of exercise..

“So what’s the social life like in Washington?” Tali asked. “You look like someone who’s been getting out.”

“More than Boulder,” Elaine said. “The dating life has been active.”

“Shopping for something specific?”

Elaine considered it. “Unless I find someone cut from the GW template, I’m enjoying the variety.” She tightened the strap holding the rope on Tali’s pack. “My current criteria: I only date men who think I’m worth it.”

Tali absorbed this with the recognition of her own history. “Up until GW I was pretty much fuck and forget.”

“And then you found the template.”

“And then I found the template.” Tali smiled at the trail ahead. She heard Elaine’s line as a compliment to her husband and a statement about Elaine’s standards, which it was. Both things. “Good criteria,” she said.

“Works so far,” Elaine said.

They walked the last stretch without talking, the waterfall audible before it was visible.

“Listen for the ice,” Elaine said as she stepped onto the starter pitch. She kicked cleanly, weight settling forward. Tap. Tap. The sound changed — dense, reassuring. She twisted in a screw, slow and deliberate, feeling for resistance, for commitment. Ten feet up, she clipped and looked down. “Your turn.”

Tali moved like she always did — competent, quick to learn, already ahead of instruction. Her front points bit cleanly. She placed one screw, then another, breath steady, eyes scanning for the best line. Elaine watched her carefully, noting the confidence bloom a half-beat faster than caution.

“You don’t need to reach that high,” Elaine called.

“I’ve got it,” Tali said, cheerful, assured.

She reached anyway.

Her calves burned as her heels dropped. For a moment she hovered too tall, weight wavering. The vibration was subtle, almost elegant. One front point held just long enough to betray her. The ice levered her backward, flipping her upside down. Her helmet struck hard — an ugly, hollow crack.

Then the rope caught.

Elaine locked off instantly, heart thudding once, then settling. “Tali. Are you okay?”

There was a pause. Too long.

“Yeah,” Tali said finally. “Yeah. I think so.”

She righted herself, hanging in the harness. Inventory came next, methodical despite the fog. Axes still tethered. Fingers moving. Then warmth along her thigh — wrong, unmistakable. She pulled off a glove, pressed, and came back with blood.

Elaine didn’t argue. She lowered her slowly, voice calm, continuous, a steady thread to hold onto. At the base, the puncture was clean but deep. Not arterial. Bleeding, but manageable.

“I can walk,” Tali said, already tying webbing tight around her thigh. Control mattered. So did dignity.

At Vail Health, the attending physician — a young woman with kind eyes and tired confidence — confirmed it. Stitches. Pain meds. Rest.

“You’re lucky,” she said, not unkindly. “Ice doesn’t forgive bravado.”

That evening, Lake Creek felt especially warm. Firelight flickered across the den as Elaine stoked the hearth. Tali lay stretched on the couch, leg elevated, ice pack pressed to her back, wine glass loose in her hand. The meds softened her edges, eased her into a receptive quiet.

GW hovered with gentle concern — water, pillows, gratitude in every glance. Elaine helped him finish dinner, their movements efficient, familiar. Steak sliced thin over romaine. Ratatouille steaming in a bowl.

Later, while GW cleaned up, Elaine and Tali settled into the den. The fire popped softly.

“There’s a guy. John.” Elaine said, answering a question Tali had barely voiced. “On and off. Sex is good. But the insecurity leaks are constant. Jealousy disguised as concern.”

Tali smiled lazily. “You should clone GW.”

Elaine laughed. The sound came easily. “He’s the perfect John.” She quietly noted that Tali meant it as both a joke and a compliment. She didn’t hear the truth inside it.

Tali’s eyes fluttered. The day caught up to her. GW guided her gently to bed, murmuring reassurances. Elaine changed into flannel pajamas and returned to the den, laptop open, habit more than need.

GW joined her, dropping into the chair with a tired sigh.

“Thank you,” he said. “For today. For always watching out for her. For me.”

Elaine closed her laptop. “That’s what friends do.”

They talked the way old partners sometimes do — early AeroSoft days, late nights, near misses. The language of shared construction. At one point, GW hesitated.

“I’m thinking of stepping back,” he said. “I think you’re ready to be CEO.”

Elaine felt it land before he finished. The devotion was there. The trust, real. “Before you stepped out into the chairman role, I thought I’d be your work wife forever,” she said evenly. “Are you sure?”

“We both know you’re ready.”

Later, alone in the guest room, Elaine lay awake listening to the house quietly crack against the cold. The day replayed in fragments — the ice, the fall, the warmth of blood, the rope going tight at exactly the right moment.

Elaine noticed a dull ache in her right hand and realized it was from the rope tightening when Tali fell. Tali hadn’t slipped because she was careless. She’d slipped because she was strong enough to believe she could reach higher. Elaine understood that kind of confidence without consequence, but she saw it differently. There were always consequences.

Outside, the night held steady. Somewhere beneath the frozen waterfall, water continued to move.

Main Course

The greatest gift Elaine gave GW was time. His time at AeroSoft had been reduced to three visits a month. He could travel more with Tali and be home more in the Vail Valley, and with that their circle of friends expanded.

The lamb had been on the table for ten minutes before anyone touched it.

Splendido in Beaver Creek ran on its own quiet clock — the kind of service that understood when a table needed refilling and when it needed to be left alone. Their corner was generous with both. The wine was a 2018 Barolo that Bradley Held had selected without opening the list, the gesture of a man who had made this performance ritual so many times it had become genuine. His wife Dana sat beside him, one shoulder turned slightly toward Tali, already in the middle of a thought she'd been building since the appetizers.

“That opinion podcast from the New York Times on public health framing is what shifted me, did you listen to it?” Dana said. She had the precise diction of someone who had spent twenty years making complex arguments accessible to people who didn't want to think too hard. “We regulated tobacco because the market couldn't price the externalities. We regulated pharmaceuticals because individual consumers couldn't evaluate risk. AI is the same problem at ten times the scale and a hundred times the speed.”

“With one critical difference,” said Christine Park, her wine glass stem between the fingers in her hand. She paused to reframe her thoughts out of a habit of spending a career in rooms where the loudest voice usually understood the least. “Tobacco companies weren't also running the regulatory apparatus. The moment you nationalize AI infrastructure, you've handed the most powerful technology in human history to whoever controls the government. Today that might be people you trust. Tomorrow it might not be.”

Her wife, Sarah, nodded once — the nod of a pediatrician who had watched enough systems fail enough children to be skeptical of any architecture that promised to save them.

“That's the capture problem,” GW said. He was sitting forward, the subtly aggressive posture of a man engaged in an argument he actually cared about. “Every

regulatory body in American history has eventually been captured by the industry it was supposed to regulate. The FDA, the FCC, the SEC — they all started as protection and ended as protection rackets. You want to hand AI to that process?”

“The alternative,” Bradley said, with a gambler’s calm who had bet on regulatory capture before and profited from it, “is what we have now. Which is fourteen-year-old kids in Bratislava running models that can destabilize a currency. At some point the libertarian argument for open markets stops working when the market externalities are systemic collapse.”

“I don’t disagree with the diagnosis,” GW said. “I disagree with the cure.”

He set his glass down. “Elaine Ionello — my EVP at AeroSoft — has been running Alante Systems’ AI autopilot through our flight simulators for six months. The results are extraordinary. The variables are actually simpler than driving. No child rides a bike onto the runway. No dog darts out of nowhere. No distracted pedestrian. The system doesn’t get tired, doesn’t get hungry, doesn’t have a fight with its wife before the early flight.” He glanced at Tali. “We’re both rated for jets. We use autopilot more than most passengers would be comfortable knowing. The two-pilot requirement is a legacy standard built for a different era. The market will take it to one pilot within a decade. Eventually none.”

“And you’re comfortable with that?” Dana asked.

“Professionally? Yes.” Tali turned her glass. “Long term — it hollows out a profession. The pipeline of experience disappears. You lose thirty years of accumulated judgment that no simulator fully replicates.” She looked at GW, “But that’s a training problem, not a technology problem.”

“Robin Rosen gave a talk at the Hanna Gold Institute last month,” she said. “She laid out a framework for distributed oversight that doesn’t require full nationalization. Federated governance with mandatory transparency standards and independent audit architecture.” She paused. “It was the most coherent thing I’ve heard on this in two years. And she’s not an ideologue. She’s a neurosurgeon who spent a decade in computational research. She understands both sides of the blood-brain barrier, literal and metaphorical.”

“I’ve read her work,” Dana said, with the off-handed confidence of someone who has cited a source many times. “She’s the most credible voice in the room on this.

Her framework is the intellectual foundation of the ATLAS compromise language.”

Christine set her glass down. “Rosen’s framework is sound in theory. The question is whether the political architecture that passes ATLAS resembles her framework by the time it’s through committee. In my experience, good ideas enter legislative sausage-making and something else comes out the other end.”

“That’s an argument for better legislation,” Bradley said. “Not for no legislation.”

“It’s an argument for being very careful about what you’re actually voting for,” Christine said, “versus what you’re told you’re voting for.”

The table held that for a moment. The fire in the corner gave the room its warmth. Outside, Beaver Creek was doing what it did in the evening — pulling its light into the west, leaving the mountain to the breeze and the stars.

The lamb was getting cold.

GW looked at Tali. Something in her expression was slightly too self-satisfied.

She was enjoying this.

—

Lake Creek was dark when they pulled in, the house exhaling warm light through the windows. Tali moved through the entry with the habit and memory of someone in her own space, dropping her coat, pulling pins from her hair with the relief of a woman who had been waiting to do that for two hours.

GW poured two glasses of water and set them on the kitchen island. “You’re not actually persuaded by Rosen’s framework. You just wanted to watch me argue.”

“I’m a little persuaded by Rosen’s framework,” Tali said. She came around the island and took her glass. “She’s not wrong that ungoverned AI looks like a public health problem.”

Systems run fine without nationalized management,” GW replied.

“But,” Tali said, leaning against the counter, “that argument is only one catastrophe away the public saying ‘you didn’t tell us.’ That may give us worse legislation as an overreaction.”

“You sound like Dana Held.”

“Dana Held is very smart.”

“Dana Held’s husband makes money when markets are volatile and governments are reactive. Their interests are not neutral.”

Tali smiled. It was a familiar smile — the one that meant she had more argument available and was deciding whether to spend it now. “You know what your problem is?”

“I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“Your instinct is always that the market knows best. Which is usually true. But you built AeroSoft inside a regulatory environment. The FAA standards that drove your early architecture — you didn’t fight those. You built to them and they made the product better.”

GW was quiet for a moment. It was a good point and she knew it was a good point and they both knew that him being quiet meant he knew it too.

“That’s different,” he said finally.

“How?”

“Because the FAA regulated the application. It didn’t nationalize the aircraft.”

Tali considered this with the expression of a woman knowing this wasn’t the last round. She set her glass down and stepped closer. Her hand found the front of his shirt, not pulling, just resting.

“You’re very compelling when you’re wrong,” she said.

“I’m not wrong.”

“You’re a little wrong.” Her fingers curled slightly into the fabric. “Christine made the capture argument better than you did, by the way. You should have let her lead.”

“Christine was on my side.”

“Christine was on the careful side. There’s a difference.” She tilted her head.

“Rosen’s coming to Denver next month. I want to go hear her speak.”

GW looked at her for a moment. The argument was still running somewhere behind his eyes, but something else was running alongside it now, quieter and less resistant.

“Fine,” he said.

Tali smiled — the other smile, the one that had nothing to do with ATLAS. Her hand moved from his shirt to his collar, adjusting it the way she always did, the

gesture that meant the conversation had reached its natural conclusion even if the argument hadn't.

"I'll probably win this eventually," she said.

"You always think that."

"I'm usually right."

He put his hand over hers at his collar and held it there. Outside, the creek moved under its skin of ice, patient and continuous. The mountain held the cold the way it always did — indifferent, permanent, unimpressed by the conversations happening in the warm houses at its feet.

"We'll go hear Rosen," he said. "But I reserve the right to be unconvinced."

"Noted," Tali said, already moving toward the bedroom hallway. "Let's continue this argument with different positions."

He followed.

The kitchen light turned off, the two water glasses barely touched, the Barolo argument still open and unresolved on the counter waiting to be erased by tomorrow morning's sunshine.

Job Interview

GW's suggestion that Elaine would succeed him at AeroSoft was validation — the best kind, offered rather than sought. The pros and cons list she carried in her head was fluid. Most days the pros held the majority. Today wasn't one of those days. Client issues and petty staff drama had shifted the balance, and she'd spent the afternoon in the familiar low-grade irritation of someone who knows she's capable of more than the room currently requires.

By seven she was in her home office, monitors glowing, headset on, already three missions deep into a gaming session.

The invitation had appeared in her inbox a few weeks, cleverly pitched to break through the clutter, too well-coded to be amateur. Elite problem solvers. Crypto rewards. The entry quiz had been unsettling in an oddly human way she couldn't stop analyzing: personal questions disguised as game mechanics, tuned to a precision that couldn't be a coincidence. The algorithm had built her an avatar and assigned her a name she would never have chosen herself.

SexyDreams.

She'd almost closed the window. Instead she'd rolled her eyes and gone deeper less by reason and more by instinct.

Inside, the missions were the thing. Tactical, eerily realistic — breaching systems, decoding encrypted data, mapping security architectures that matched real-world infrastructure too closely to be invented. The payoffs were digital tokens traded through untraceable wallets. The other players were anonymous, skilled, and never asked questions she couldn't answer. It was the most intellectually honest work she did all day, which said something about her day.

The deeper she went, the more certain she became that the game wasn't a game. Someone was crowdsourcing serious problem-solving through addictive mechanics and paying in crypto. Her professional instinct said: this is wrong. Her curiosity said: find out why. She had not yet resolved the tension between them, which was probably the point.

SexyDreams had become comfortable in a way that surprised her — not the name, which she still found absurd, but the register. The persona. The version of

herself that operated in that space with a different kind of freedom than Elaine Ionello, Executive VP, was generally permitted.

There were moments at work when she caught herself feeling the buzz of a SexyDreams moment from the night before.

The headhunter email arrived at seven-fifteen, while she still had the headset on.

She usually deleted these without reading them. Something about this one made her linger — the wording of it, the way it uncannily mapped to her frustrations without being obvious about it. She read it twice. Then replied.

A response came back in under an hour. The CEO could meet that evening. A link was provided. The late hour was unusual, the mystery even more enticing.

At nine, Elaine sat in her home office wrapped in monitors, wearing a good blouse and, below the frame, sweatpants and shearling slippers. She clicked the link.

A woman appeared — peak forties, warm, present. The smile of a fifth-grade teacher Elaine had loved, Ms. Franklin, who had made her feel seen in a room full of children who mostly weren't.

“Elaine. Dorrance Matthews. It's so good of you to take the time.”

The conversation moved the way good conversations moved — without effort, without the friction of two people performing for each other. They had things in common: the outdoors, film genres, gaming. The job felt like something Elaine might have designed herself. High challenge. Low friction. Genuine resources. Matthews listened the way people listened when they were actually interested rather than waiting for their turn.

Fifty minutes later, Elaine had a flight to Washington booked and three days blocked on her calendar.

On the other end of the call, Summer clicked a window closed.

Dorrance Matthews, executive recruiter, had never existed. The face, the voice, the warmth — all of it generated from the weeks of data the gaming platform had collected on Elaine Ionello. Her behavioral patterns, her response latencies, her tells under pressure and her tells when pleased. The algorithm had built a woman Elaine would trust and then put her in a room with her. The predictive response engine had adjusted in real time — voice pitch, cadence, eye contact, the proper frequency of

laughter — all tailored to produce exactly one outcome.

Elaine Ionello was coming to Washington.

MHI Cybersecurity in downtown Washington occupied the eighth floor of a building generically designed to be forgettable — granite columns, a lobby that suggested importance without specifying it. MHI had field offices on four continents. A website full of sentences that sounded purposeful and meant nothing. The shell corporations went three layers deep before the structure became interesting, but there was no reason to look.

Elaine had done the research on the flight. She'd noted the anomalies without knowing what to do with them yet. Professional instinct running its background process. Matthews had told her that her interview would be with the CEO.

The elevator opened on eight and a woman was waiting — fitted skirt, a hint of exotic tattoos, excellent heels, a smile that arrived at exactly the right moment. Not what Elaine pictured, which made it all that more intriguing.

"Summer Nagas, CEO. What an absolute delight." She extended her hand. "I've been an AeroSoft fan for years. The simulator architecture is genuinely impressive."

"I'm just part of a good team," Elaine said. She shook her hand, slightly disarmed by the warmth and the perfume — something spare and expensive.

"I don't accept humble," Summer said, her expression shifting to something more direct. "You're an alpha. Own it."

It landed oddly intimate. Elaine blinked. She liked confidence in other women, especially the kind worn without apology.

The offices were new, expansive, and entirely empty. Elaine's eyes moved across the space — the art, the marble, the sprays of flowers that had been arranged for someone to see rather than to live with.

"We're consolidating," Summer said, reading her gaze. "Growing fast. This floor will be full by spring."

They walked. Summer asked the right questions — about the AeroSoft architecture, about Elaine's approach to team building, about what she'd do differently with real resources and real latitude. Elaine found herself answering

honestly, which was the point.

“You spent most of your career with Canyon,” Summer said. “Do you know him well?”

“GW. Yes. For a long time.”

“And Tali Canyon?”

A slight hesitation — the question was a degree more intimate than the conversation had been. “We climb together. Mostly rock. Some ice. She’s a fearless lead.”

“An impressive couple.” Summer smiled. “From what I’ve seen, he’s the trophy husband.”

“That’s not right,” Elaine said, with a fierce defensiveness that surprised her. “Tali’s family wealth. GW built what he has.”

Summer absorbed this with a nod that was doing something other than agreeing. “I prefer indoor sports,” she said. “Speaking of which — there’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

She opened a set of double doors.

The room had the equipment of a high-end gym — weights, monitors, sleek machines — but one corner held a different kind of setup. A workstation, server fans humming softly, and a man in his fifties who rose from his chair with the distracted energy of someone interrupted mid-thought.

“Alden Hanson,” Summer said. “Elaine Ionello, from AeroSoft. We’re discussing bringing her on board.”

Hanson was genial and courteous, the warmth of someone who liked people as data. “A pleasure. I’m working on neural interface applications. Would you mind — it’ll take thirty seconds. Something I’d like to show you.”

He gestured toward a high-backed chair. The rig beside it looked familiar — VR-adjacent, the kind of setup that wouldn’t read as alarming to someone who worked in simulation software. Elaine sat. The headset descended over her ears.

“You’ll feel a light spray on your neck,” Hanson said. “Topical anesthetic.”

Anesthetic? What —

A cold mist. A small sting.

She opened her mouth. Couldn't form the question. The room tunneled. Sound thickened at the edges and then went.

"Level 3?" she heard Hanson ask quietly.

"Level 3," Summer said.

—

The hotel room came back in pieces. One moment in Hanson's chair. Now this moment with nothing in between. Sheets twisted, light wrong, head buzzing at a frequency that wasn't pain exactly — more like a system rebooting from a cold state.

The clock read eight AM. Lunch with Summer Nagas at noon.

She started thinking about the gap, but her mind started counting backward in unfamiliar precision without being asked. Three hours and fifty-eight minutes.

She sat up and caught her reflection in the mirror across the room. Studied it the way she'd study an unfamiliar codebase — looking for the logic, the structure, where it was going.

Who is that?

On an impulse she didn't examine she shifted her weight, changed the angle of her shoulders, let something surface that hadn't been there yesterday.

SexyDreams. There you are.

The memory gap was absolute. She remembered the chair. The headset. The spray. Then nothing — a clean cut, no static, no fragments. The dreams had been vivid and foreign, full of imagery she couldn't decode in daylight.

Was I drugged?

She felt fine. Better than fine. Her senses had a sharpness that was new — edges brighter, details arriving with more resolution than usual. In the shower the water struck like needles, and she found herself cataloguing the sensation: temperature, pressure, the viscosity of the steam.

Stop analyzing. Breathe.

She looked at her clothes for the lunch. The blazer and slacks she'd packed — practical, professional, fine for Boulder. She thought about Summer Nagas' suit. The fit of it. The earned authority of a woman who understood that appearance was a system.

Dress like your customer.

Quick research. A women's boutique two blocks away, open at ten. Out by eleven, back to the room, at the restaurant by noon. Manageable.

The shop catered to women in government and law — everything cut for invisibility, for rooms that rewarded not being noticed. Elaine moved through the racks quickly. Too gray. Too shapeless. Too much apology in the fabric.

In the back, a smaller rack. She found the red dress in her size without ceremony — fitted, plunging, the kind of thing she would not have touched yesterday. She put it on in the changing room and looked at herself for a long moment.

Shoes were the problem. Neither pair she'd brought would work. The clerk directed her two blocks down.

Four boxes on the floor of the shoe store. She tried them efficiently and chose the pointed toe — a mid heel she could balance in, higher than anything she owned, lower than what she'd admired on Nagas. Adequate for now.

On the way back she passed a jewelry window. Checked her watch. Fifteen minutes ahead. She walked out ten minutes later with a string of pearls and matching earrings — \$840, not thinking about it, the dominos falling in a clean line.

A final check in the mirror. The dress, the heels, the pearls. Her hair done differently than she'd worn it in years. She smiled at the reflection with a satisfaction that felt entirely natural.

Summer Nagas will be pleased.

The elevator. The lobby. The revolving door releasing her into the warming morning, the air thin and electric, the city moving at its normal frequency.

She had eight minutes. She started walking, running mental slides for a presentation that didn't exist, thinking about how capable she looked. How employable.

How dateable.

The crosswalk light changed to white.

She stepped off the curb.

Someone shouted. A bicycle bell. A blur of movement at the wrong angle — too fast, too close, the geometry already wrong before she could process it. Impact. The

world shattered into color and then into silence.

Her last thought was not fear.

Summer Nagas won't like this.

Then everything went dark.

You have been reading a preview of

Starfish

*Starfish is a standalone novel
and the fourth charm in the GW Canyon Series.
No prior book required.*

Middle Fork Press

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