CHAPTER FOUR

APRIL

Abe was skipping. Skipping! And singing a *Mary Poppins* song wildly off tune: *"Let's go fly a kite. Up to the highest height."*

What a goofball.

He tried to jump up at an angle to kick his heels together. Totally missed.

Patty laughed at him. "Face it. You are no Dick Van Dyke."

"Aww, c'mon. I've got a little bit of Bert the chimney sweep going here." Abe faked a soft-shoe tap as their newly made kite flapped around him.

"Hey, be careful!" Patty pulled the kite away. It'd been a battle to cut the thick paper into a precise quadrilateral shape so that the geometry of it would catch the wind correctly. His silly cavorting could tear it or knock its stick-ribs askew.

Patty's competitive nature was getting the best of her. She and Abe were on the Mall for the annual Kite Carnival the Smithsonian had started a few years back to coincide with the Cherry Blossom Festival. "We might win best-made if you don't break it!" she fussed.

Looking at the crowds of people gleefully dashing around the Washington Monument's wide-open grounds and launching a flock of colorful and creative kites—there was even a paper eagle fluttering in the breeze—Abe shook his head. "Best made? Not a chance, Pats!" He reached for the kite's string ball. "You hold, I'll run."

"Wait a second." Patty held the kite out of his reach. Running with the kite was the best part.

"The wind's coming and going, Pats. It needs real speed and a hard yank to lift."

"You think I can't sprint?" She'd seen him bolt down the Hill's tunnels—Abe was definitely faster than she was. But still. Coming today had been her idea. She should do the honors.

Tugging on his sideburns as he considered, Abe said, "Lady's choice. But if ya wanna maybe win highest-flying . . ." He pointed toward two National Air and Space officials with clipboards, jotting down notes as they watched a young boy race across the lawns, whooping, his bright red kite getting smaller and smaller as it climbed higher and higher toward the wispy clouds—his mom clapping excitedly.

With a bit of stubborn defiance, Patty kept her hold on the kite.

Abe laughed. "Right on, sister. Go for it." He took the kite as she unfurled the first few feet of twine, getting ready to run. "We'll make a feminist out of you yet, Ms. Appleton."

Patty ignored his teasing. What did feminism have to do with flying a kite? "Ready?"

Nodding, he held it over his head. "Go!"

Patty darted, feeling the kite dip and bob on the line.

"Go, go, go!" Abe shouted.

The kite swerved and rattled. The string wasn't pulling taut. The breeze was erratic—first strong, then tepid. Dip and bob. Dip and bob. The kite felt like it was going to trip and plummet. *Sugar!* She didn't want to hear Abe's ribbing if she failed to get it up into the air.

Patty leaned forward into her best fifty-yard dash.

"That's it! GO!" Abe's voice was getting distant as she ran farther and farther.

Suddenly she felt a sharp yank and then consistent tugging as their kite filled with wind. Patty let the string unspool and the

kite swam upward in zigzags . . . up . . . up to peacefully settle and skim along the air, its tail of red-white-and-blue bows sashaying prettily behind.

"Well done!" Abe called, jogging up to her.

Flushed and exuberant, Patty grinned her thanks, still a little breathless from her run.

Abe glanced up to the sky, back down at her, and then up again.

"Is . . . is something wrong?" Patty brushed her hair off her face. Did she look disheveled or something?

"Nope." Abe crossed his arms, uncharacteristically succinct. Of course, that lasted only a few seconds. "Anyone ever tell you that you look like Julie Andrews?"

"What? No!" Patty frowned. "Gross. She's old. She must be forty! Do you think I look like . . . like someone old enough to be our mothers?"

"I'm talking about ten years ago when she was in *Mary Poppins*. Beautiful, big eyes. Great smile." He looked back up to the clouds.

"Thank you. I guess?" Patty made a face. "My boyfriend says I look like Ali MacGraw, you know, from *Love Story*."

"Oh yeah?" Patty felt rather than saw Abe take an arm's-length step away from her as he asked, "We ever going to meet your Romeo?"

"In the fall. He's been accepted to Georgetown." Patty beamed.

"Oooooh. Georgetown. That's impressive." Abe's convivial tone felt a bit forced.

More kites vaulted into the low blue heavens and began sailing beside theirs.

"Keep an eye out for crossing lines," Abe warned.

Mmm-hmm. Why was it suddenly feeling so awkward? "Too bad Will isn't here," Patty murmured. "He'd have enjoyed this. Do you know when he's coming back?" She startled at the

feel of her stomach squiggling with butterflies at her mention of Will.

"In a couple weeks. Not until next month probably. He wants to help his mom settle. She's taking his brother's death hard. And the one who was a POW? Will won't say much—you know how he is—never wanting to say anything bad. But I'm getting the sense that brother came home pretty beat up in all sorts of ways."

"Oh gosh. Is Will's dad helping them cope?" Patty was having a hard time envisioning her psychoanalyst father in that kind of situation. Would he be loving and reassuring to her mother? Or cool and analytical? He could be so dismissive of her mother's "annoying histrionics," as he called them, when Dot Appleton's controlled veneer finally cracked and she showed actual emotion. Her father was so much the center of everything about their family, Patty had always instinctively absorbed his take on things—including how to interpret her mother. But now Patty was beginning to wonder whether if her father was different—maybe a little less imposing, maybe more like Simone's dad—her mother might be less withdrawn and on edge.

"You didn't know?" Abe broke into her thoughts. "Will's dad died back in '65. He deployed with the first combat troops we sent—thirty-five-hundred marines to Da Nang to protect our airbase. A drill sergeant. Meant to just be advising South Vietnamese troop training. Will's dad was a few months off from retirement when he was blown up by a Viet Cong ambush. Will was only ten years old at the time. That's when they had to move back in with his grandparents, in a farm east of Raleigh." He sighed and added, "There's a family we as a nation screwed but good."

Hit with a wave of sadness for Will and unease with Abe's biting comment, Patty handed him the spool of string, wanting to regain the morning's sense of fun. "You fly her for a while."

Abe went silent, concentrating on gently tugging the string to keep the kite up in the air. "Sooooo . . ." he murmured.

"Sooooo?" Patty echoed.

"So, where's this girl you want me to meet? You plotting something, Pats? What's she like?"

Inconsequential banter—thank God. In truth, Patty was plotting a little—hoping that introducing Simone to a really nice guy she clearly had much in common with, politically and philosophically, at least, might thaw the frostiness she'd caused the previous month with her presumptions about Simone's sexual experience and possible lack of . . . well, what Patty defined as virtue. "She's a total lefty, a real smarty-pants, like you! A bit . . . mmm . . . blunt." Patty laughed lightly. "I never know what's going to come out of Simone's mouth next!"

"My kinda girl. So where is she?"

Patty checked her watch. "She should be here soon. She and her mom are picking up my mother at National on the way."

"Your mom's coming to town? I'd love to meet her."

"No, you wouldn't." The words just popped out of Patty's mouth. "I mean . . . She . . . You two wouldn't agree on anything." The last thing Patty needed, frankly, was for Dot Appleton to get a whiff of Abe's politics. She'd label him a socialist or worse. Patty would never hear the end of it. Simone was just as bad as Abe, but her mother tolerated her because she was Aunt Marjorie's daughter. Flustered, Patty rushed on, "I'm not really sure why she's here, to be honest. Easter break is next week, so I would have seen her at home in a few days anyway."

"Maybe she wants to experience the cherry blossoms. People come from all over the country to see them, you know." Abe nodded toward the lacy, rippling line of pink on the horizon, where the three thousand cherry trees Japan had given the United States back in 1912 were in riotous bloom along the Tidal Basin.

The pages had trooped down Constitution Avenue together a few nights before to stand beneath the small, graceful trees at twilight—holding up their hands to catch petals shaken loose by the evening wind, falling like rose-colored snow flurries. It had been totally enchanting.

Maybe, Patty conceded, although her mother hadn't said that.

"Is she going to fly a kite, too?" Abe grinned. "We could agree on that!"

Patty smiled ruefully and shook her head at the absurd visualization of her mother flying a kite. "She and my godmother are heading to the National Gallery of Art after dropping Simone with us. The NGA evidently just purchased a new Picasso that Mother is all excited about seeing. She was an art major in college." Patty paused. "She actually is a really good painter." Why the heck were her eyes misting up thinking about her mother's garage apartment studio, filled with landscapes and still life paintings that stayed locked up there?

"I didn't know that about your mom. I only hear you talk about your dad. Do you draw, too?"

"Not even with crayons."

"There you are!" called a female voice. "I've been looking everywhere for you. We should have walkie-talkies or something, like those Watergate burglars."

Patty turned. There was Simone, her face a pretty pink from the slight chill of the early April wind that was lifting her long hair in billows of gold. Abe's mouth dropped open in bedazzlement before he snapped it shut with an audible click of his teeth.

Well, she'd been right about Simone being Abe's type, given his reaction. But Patty had been dead wrong about something else. Simone wasn't single, like she'd thought. Simone was with a guy. Holding hands. And something else Patty never would have anticipated—he was Black.

"This is Julius," Simone introduced him.

Patty stared.

If Abe was disappointed that Simone had come with an unknown beau when he was expecting to be set up with her, he didn't let on for a second. "Hey man." Abe held his hand up and out, level with his face, waiting.

Julius grinned at the soul-power gesture. "All right. My white brother's hip." He put his hand below Abe's to receive a slap before the boys shook hands side to side, thumb to thumb.

"Glad to know you," Abe said to Julius, then turned to Simone. "You must be the famous Simone. I've heard wonderful things about you. A pleasure." Left hand to his heart, he bowed as he shook Simone's hand with his right.

Oh, he was smooth. Abe was sure to be a senator one day. Should be, anyway—if the electorate had any sense. The Republican Party would need to watch out for him. Patty might even consider the sacrilege of crossing party lines to vote for him.

Following Abe's lead, Julius held his hand toward Patty. "When Simone said she was hanging out with you today, I asked to tag along, so we could meet. Hope you don't mind my showing up unannounced."

Patty slipped her hand into his. Grasping hers firmly—not the way some men took a woman's hand gingerly, as if she might break—Julius patted it with his other. Up, down, up, down, lingering for several seconds. An earnest, embracing double handshake.

With a feeling she could not define, Patty realized Julius was the first Black person with whom she'd ever shaken hands.

After a half hour of kite flying, the foursome headed to the National Gallery to meet Patty's and Simone's mothers. Strolling along the Mall toward the Capitol, the guys walked up front, laughing loudly and punching each other's shoulder in some

shared joke. Given the sidewalk's limited width, Simone and Patty fell in behind, side by side.

"I hadn't realized you had a boyfriend," Patty said, trying to be careful in how she approached Simone's love life, given her inadvertently insulting her before with her stupid assumption Simone was no longer a virgin. "Where did you meet?"

Simone looked sideways at her, suddenly defensive. "School."

"Oh, right. Of course. I just . . . Sorry. My school was all-girls," Patty reminded Simone. "He seems really nice."

That softened Simone. "He is." She smiled. "He's in band, too. Plays trumpet. First chair. Crazy good. He's waiting to hear if he's got a full scholarship to one of the country's best music conservatories. Fingers crossed. He won't be able to go if he doesn't get that money."

"How long have you been dating?"

"A while," Simone added with her usual shrug. "We're not going steady or anything."

"But you were holding hands," Patty blurted. Why in the world would they risk so much if they weren't serious enough to go steady?

Patty had seen the movie *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. The screen daughter introduces her Black fiancé, Sidney Poitier, to her disapproving father—who worries about the challenges they'll face as an interracial couple in a country where more than a dozen states still outlawed mixed-race unions. Eventually the father blesses their marriage, seeing how much they love each other. But still. Real life rarely worked out as neatly as movie scripts.

Patty's own father had given her quite a lecture to that very point when he found Patty watching a special broadcast of the movie on TV. With the Black Panthers' increasing militancy following MLK's terrible assassination, her father and his friends were expressing real hostility to Black Americans and people

who advocated for them. It was pretty embarrassing to hear them talk the way they did. And her father's take on the Hill's Black pages—who were as small in number as females like her—was not to say they didn't belong, but that they were at Congress as "window dressing." Thank God he hadn't said it where any of them could hear him.

He'd also about had a fit when he learned Simone's high school was busing students to redistribute Alexandria's racial ratios and integrate T. C. Williams. Dr. Appleton had added "liberal idiocy" to his list of negatives about Aunt Marjorie, for being okay with Simone "being a pawn in a sociological experiment."

Simone's dating a Black guy would be a bridge too far for Dr. Appleton. Patty could easily imagine the ugly labels he'd use. It was the kind of thing that might make her father decide it was better for Patty to be at home than in Washington. He'd already been making noises that she could only attend a college that wasn't overrun with "ungrateful hippies."

All that rushed through Patty's mind before she realized Simone was glowering at her. "You going to imply I'm some promiscuous Jezebel again?"

"NO!" Patty protested loudly enough that Abe and Julius both glanced back at her, questions on their faces. "No," she said, lowering her voice. Maybe this was her opportunity to apologize. "Listen, I didn't mean anything when—"

"Sure you did," Simone cut her off. Then with a wicked grin, she needled Patty, "Want me to tell you how good a kisser a trumpet player is? You know they change octaves and notes mostly by shifting their lip position against their mouthpiece—they've only got three valves, not like all the keys I have for different notes on my flute. Gives them very subtle embouchure. Make-out heaven. Sexy as hell."

Patty turned crimson.

"Oh geez," Simone chortled, and put her arm through Patty's. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to push your buttons. Well, maybe I do. God knows you need some shaking, Patty Appleton, some serious waking up." She shrugged. "My brothers tease me all the time. I instinctively relate to other people that way. Maybe I shouldn't."

Patty started to pull away, but Simone kept their arms locked and walking forward, like Parisian ladies perusing shops along the Champs-Élysées in photographs Aunt Marjorie had taken and shown her.

"My mom wants us to be friends," Simone continued, "like she and your mother are. Don't think we'll ever get to their bosom-buddy level. Let's be honest: We probably would not gravitate to one another if we met at school. I mean, you're nice, even sweet sometimes, but . . . you could use some serious consciousness-raising, you know? And . . . well, seems like you're establishment all the way and I'm kinda counterculture."

She broke off to laugh at the face Patty was making, the question "*kinda* counterculture?" all over her face. "Yeah, yeah, okay. We're just diametrically opposed on a lot of things, right?" She waited for Patty to nod. "But Mom's very into sisterhood right now, no matter differences of opinion or style between women. Sticking together is how change will happen, she says. And," Simone added with a rebellious smile, "totally disappoint all the men who harbor fantasies of catfights between us."

Abe and Julius had stopped in front of the beautiful wide, white staircase of the National Gallery of Art. The city really seemed all glistening-pearl marble and domes. Simone slowed their approach and whispered in Patty's ear, "You know that guy Abe is sweet on you, don't you? There." She pulled back and said, "I don't have many friends. I seem to intimidate people for some reason—but I think that's the type of revelations girlfriends are supposed to share. Jane Austen certainly seems to think so."

She let go of Patty's arm before Patty could whisper back, *is not!* about Abe, or *hell yes* about Simone being intimidating.

Simone approached Julius and took his hand. "Mom said to look for them in the Picasso exhibit. You coming, Abe?"

Patty didn't know whether to insist he come or shoo him away. What the heck would Simone say next? She didn't want Abe to get any kind of wrong idea. She was devoted to Scott.

Maybe sensing her hesitation, Abe declined. "Naw, I need to do laundry. Next time though. Thanks for the kite flying, Pats. See ya Monday. Rest up and be ready to run! You never know these days what could happen next on the Hill with Watergate. All hell could break loose this week!" Promising to give it back on Monday, Abe kept the kite, turned and strode away, once again singing, "*Let's go fly a kite . . .*"

Inside, the trio passed through the museum's rotunda with its centerpiece fountain and statue of Mercury, gracefully balanced on one winged foot as he sprinted. It was crowded. Patty couldn't help but notice as they winnowed through bodies that Julius was the only Black person she could see in that sea of white art lovers. Did he note it as well? Neither he nor Simone seemed the least self-conscious if they did. They had, however, stopped holding hands.

Following signs to a gallery promising paintings by Pablo Picasso and fellow cubist Georges Braque, they found Patty and Simone's moms standing in front of a tall, thin canvas of brown, gray, and cream interlocking patterns. Both women had their heads cocked sharply to the right as they looked. Like Simone had done with her, Aunt Marjorie held Dot Appleton close by the arm, the onetime college roommates talking in animated whispers.

Something about their embrace stopped Patty in her tracks. She'd never seen her mother linger in such an affectionate stance. Even with her father. Even with Patty.

With a strange pang of jealousy, Patty turned away to read the gallery's description of the recently purchased Picasso, completed by the artist in 1910, that the mothers were admiring. "An extraordinary transformation of the human figure to an almost complete abstraction expressed in fragmented planes." *Femme Nue*. That was supposed to be a woman? To Patty, the painting simply looked like a jar of geometry shapes had been dumped in a pile atop one another.

She followed Simone and Julius across the room to a more traditional image in soft pastel colors—a delicately outlined couple standing in front of a window, the man's arm around the woman's shoulders. The woman looked down, modestly but also . . . Patty inched closer, edging around other patrons gazing at this Picasso. On the woman's face, a shy hint of hope.

The Lovers was the title. Patty nodded. *Yes.* Picasso had captured a heart-stopping aura of guileless anticipation, of unexpected, nascent chemistry between the two. The way the man was looking at her, the way the woman had taken his hand, the painting promised a coming kiss, one that was gentle, reverent, perhaps even their first. Oh, it was lovely.

Clearly spellbound as well, Simone sighed. Without turning from the painting, Julius reached out and took Simone's hand. Rapt.

Patty caught her breath at the sight of them, their mirroring the romance depicted in the painting. They might not be going steady, but there was an obvious commitment, a sweetness, a tenderness between Simone and Julius that was palpable. Beautiful. Pure.

Hussy.

Patty whirled around. She stared at a phalanx of older women, perfectly coifed, pearls at their throat, brooches shaped like blossoms on the lapels of their tweed jackets, right above pins that

indicated they were donors to the gallery. They seemed to be looking straight ahead at a painting of a mournful family, all in blue, next to *The Lovers*. Austere, but silent.

Had Patty imagined the hissed slur? Simone didn't seem to have heard anything. Patty turned back to the painting.

Then she heard the voice again, answered by others. *This is what the world is coming to. Give them an inch. What did her mother teach that trashy girl?*

Patty turned on her heel again. But this time Aunt Marjorie was walking briskly toward them, head high, saying "excuse me" with pointed iciness to the doyennes as she brushed past.

"There you are, sugar," she burbled, hugging Simone. Then, in a stage-loud voice, "I'm so glad you came to see the collection, Julius. Aren't the Picassos breathtaking?" She put her hand on his shoulder and smiled at him, gracious, warm, even protective.

The grande dames shook their heads and *tsk-tsked*.

"How about some lunch?" Aunt Marjorie herded the trio toward Patty's mother. "Shall we, Dottie?"

Patty's mother did nothing to hide the fact she was appalled by Simone's choice of beau. It was smeared all over her perfectly made-up face.

Seeing it, Julius let go of Simone's hand.

Patty felt her stomach turn with a terrible recognition—that her mother's sour expression was a physical manifestation of what Patty had been feeling when she first saw Simone with Julius: fear of what others would say. The thoughts were that ugly.

"Mom! It's starting!" Snapping on their television a few days later, Simone fiddled with one of the rabbit-ear antennas to sharpen the set's image before pulling off her purple suede boots and plopping into the chintz-covered love seat next to Patty. "This ought to be good," she pronounced. "I'm stoked to hear the president of

NOW take on Madam anti-lib, anti-choice, anti-empowerment. Schlafly's somehow managed to run roughshod over other people. I think it's because they just can't believe the whoppers coming out of her mouth."

She pulled her feet up and hugged her knees, sinking into the soft cushion so much that she listed over onto Patty's shoulder. "MOM! You're going to miss it!"

Wiping her hands on a bright-pink apron, Aunt Marjorie hurried into the small living room. She'd insisted on making a special Julia Child dinner—the PBS French Chef's signature beef bourguignon—for Patty and her mother before they flew out together the next morning for home and Easter vacation.

Patty wondered if her godmother would be going to so much trouble if she knew where Dot Appleton had been the previous day.

Somehow, at some luncheon back home, Patty's mother had met and been charmed by Phyllis Schlafly, joining her housewife crusaders who'd descended on the Illinois State House the previous month to lobby its lawmakers. Her mother had baked a dozen loaves of her delicious banana bread, attaching handwritten love notes dictated by Schlafly: "From the bread-bakers to the breadwinners. Please defend motherhood."

What had been anticipated to be a sure win vote for the ERA was reversed—the bread-bakers prevailed. Wanting to impress their leader, Patty's mom had shared the fact her daughter was a Capitol Hill page. So she could always schedule a visit to D.C., if she could be of help in any way while in town.

That was why Dot Appleton was in D.C. *really*—not the cherry blossoms, or the Picasso. It seemed Senator Sam Ervin—the powerful chairman of the Watergate Committee whom Patty so admired for his seeming courtliness—was continuing his campaign against the ERA. Just like Simone had accused him of doing

that night at dinner. He was using Schlafly's mailing lists to send out his own anti-ERA speeches paired with her missives—adding the clout of his Senate office to the STOP ERA argument and his postage-free, congressional franking to mail them. Patty's mother was hand delivering a new batch of Schlafly addresses.

"This is so exciting," her mother had purred as she drove Patty to Capitol Hill in Simone's borrowed Bug. "I never thought I'd step into a political debate. That's for your father to do. But"—she reached for her purse and put it in Patty's lap—"open it, and read Phyllis's newsletter. You'll see why I'm doing this. Our very way of life is being threatened."

Patty unfolded a cream-colored paper titled *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, with an eagle outstretched over the word *Report*, and an oval, sorority-style portrait of a beaming Schlafly to the left. The essay was long, peppered with church dogma—about family being the most important unit of society, that women gave birth and men didn't, and if anyone didn't like that fact "they'd have to take up their complaint with God." Patty mostly glossed over it until she reached *"A noisy movement has sprung up agitating for 'women's rights.' Suddenly, everywhere we are afflicted with aggressive females . . . yapping about how mistreated American women are."*

Whoa. Aggressive? Yapping? Simone, maybe, thought Patty, but not Aunt Marjorie.

She read on through Schlafly denigrating Gloria Steinem and *Ms.* magazine as being pretentious, shrill, antifamily: *". . . a series of sharp-tongued, high-pitched, whining complaints by unmarried women . . . to sow seeds of discontent among happy, married women so that all women can be unhappy in some new sisterhood of frustrated togetherness."*

Patty felt carsick. Or was it a little shock at the vitriol? Simone read *Ms.* religiously. She had every copy ever printed in her room. Patty had picked it up a couple times to thumb through. It was

liberal and pointed, sure, but she didn't see anything as . . . as spiteful as this in the magazine's articles. God, women could be so hateful to each other.

"See what I mean?" her mother said.

Patty wasn't so sure she did.

Driving back to Alexandria that evening, her mother was almost giddy about the three-minute encounter she'd had with Ervin: "What a charming gentleman," she'd cooed. Then she admonished Patty to not tell Aunt Marjorie. "We've never really agreed on politics. A bleeding-heart, your godmother. And in this case, what Marj doesn't know won't hurt her. I'm going to say I revisited the Picassos. And I did, half the day. So, it's not a fib."

Patty had been unable to do anything but stare at her mother. She'd never seen her so energized. And rarely did her mother let Patty in on her thoughts.

Now, in her godmother's cozy family room, with Simone practically sitting on her, Patty squirmed with guilt at keeping a secret from people who were being so nice to her. As if Simone might hear her thoughts, pressed together this close, Patty scooched away to lean against the tiny sofa's rolled arm as Aunt Marjorie shouted, "Dottie! The talk show I wanted you to see is starting."

"Here, I'm here." Patty's mother swept into the room—still clutching a folded sweater, obviously mid-pack—just as the show's host, Mike Douglas, announced he had two guests, representing the opposing sides of the ERA argument, which "has stirred controversy throughout the United States." First up was national chairwoman of the STOP ERA committee, Phyllis Schlafly, an author, a wife, and a mother of six.

The studio pianist struck up "I Enjoy Being a Girl," as the stage doors—painted in enormous flower-power daisies—parted dramatically. In glided Phyllis Schlafly, trim in a blood-orange

suit-dress, the gleam of the gold eagle pin on her lapel outshone only by her beaming, beauty-queen-worthy smile.

"There she is," the two moms said simultaneously, their tone of voice completely different from each other.

But only Patty seemed to note it.

"Good grief," muttered Simone. "You could bounce a dime off that beehive." She elbowed Patty and pointed to the screen. "At least she's not wearing one of those obnoxious stop-sign buttons. You know what her STOP ERA stands for? Stop Taking Our Privileges. She just wants to stay queen of her suburban castle. Not every woman is married to some rich lawyer or lives in status-symbol land. Julius's mom used to clean house for a Pleasant-Valley-Sunday woman like that—imperious and oblivious—before she finished night school and got her job at the library. Mrs. Allen loves working with books. But she *needs* the income. Working is not some lark like this woman Schlafly insinuates a woman having a job, or a career, is."

Aunt Marjorie nodded in agreement, while Patty's mother settled into unreadable stone.

Patty felt her gaze swivel back and forth between the mothers: How in the world was she to please both her mother and her godmother, who hosted and encouraged her with such kindness? Honestly, Aunt Marjorie may have already complimented Patty more in the last three months than her own mother had in her entire life. Where could she safely land during this political debate?

On the television, Douglas explained that Schlafly had seven minutes to detail her position. When she heard piano music, she had one minute to wrap up. "Fine," Schlafly replied, smiling, blinking, her white eye shadow shining.

With an on-camera savvy that a seasoned broadcaster would admire, Schlafly turned to directly face the TV audience. She explained that when she first heard of the ERA, she thought it

might be a good thing. But then she realized the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 promised all Americans equal pay for equal work. So, if any woman felt discriminated against, she could simply file a complaint with the government.

"And then hope the EEOA commission will actually do something," murmured Aunt Marjorie. "And that it won't take years to resolve."

But more importantly, Schlafly continued, the amendment would have many unfortunate consequences. "For example, the laws of every one of our fifty states *require* the husband to support his wife and family." She reached behind her chair to pull up a massive law encyclopedia—American Jurisprudence 2nd, volume 41, which "spells out all these wonderful rights that the wife has to be supported by her husband and to be provided with a home by her husband. Things that are very precious to women."

"Precious indeed," Patty's mother breathed. Barely a whisper.

But Patty heard.

The ERA, Schlafly grew emphatic, would invalidate those protections. "Because under the ERA no longer can you have any law that imposes an obligation on one sex that it doesn't on the other . . . This is what the proponents want . . . to take away from the wife her legal right to be a full-time wife and mother."

"Oh, for pity's sake." Aunt Marjorie crossed her arms. "That's not what we want at all. We—"

Dot Appleton held up her hand for silence, before sitting down slowly into an armchair, mesmerized—as one does when getting bad news.

Schlafly talked on for another four minutes about a dangerous, "unisex" world the ERA would create, where women could be thrown into prison cells with male inmates, about women being "just as smart" but certainly "not able physically to compete with

a man," about the possibility of wives' Social Security benefits being denied.

With each dire prediction, Patty's mother slumped further into the chintz armchair. Patty had never before seen her sit without ramrod-straight posture.

Aunt Marjorie paced.

Chewing on her fingernails, Simone grumbled about being able to lift a bass drum as well as any guy.

Patty anxiously watched them all, trying to plan out what she'd say that could appeal to them all if asked her opinion, as flummoxed as a chameleon thrown atop a paintbox of hues.

During her remarks, Douglas had leaned toward Schlafly, frowning slightly, trying to eyeball the various reports she held up as supposed corroboration of her claims. "Ooooo-kay," Douglas said as she concluded, sitting back in his chair. "The other side after these messages."

"The next woman is who I'm excited for you to hear," Aunt Marjorie explained to Patty's mother. "She's so even-keeled and smart. A mother herself. Not like some of the more radical feminists you find offensive, Dottie. I think she'll impress you. And help you understand why I'm volunteering with the caucus." She smiled hopefully. "Maybe she'll convince you, too. We could use you! An elegant, moderate, articulate Republican."

Ha! Thought Patty. *If you only knew, Aunt Marjorie.*

Harp music fit for a Disney princess movie filled the sitting room as the TV screen flickered to an ad of a woman in a miniskirt and heels sashaying alongside a vacuum cleaner. *"Glide through your housework with a Hoover . . ."*

Next up, a cuddling couple in their pajamas, sitting on the edge of their bed. The man talked, the woman remained silent, smiling.

"My wife's incredible."

"Oh my God!" Simone jumped out of the love seat as the TV man went on about his wife being able to take care of their baby all day, make a great dinner, go to a PTA meeting, and still look "better than any of her friends."

"This is that unbelievably sexist ad! NOW wants us to boycott Geritol because of this baloney!" Simone tried to dash to the set to turn off the volume but stumbled on her boots. "Arrrrggggh!" she growled, finally reaching the dial just as the ad ended with the husband saying, "*My wife—I think I'll keep her.*"

Patty's mother looked baffled. "What's wrong with that? I take Geritol."

Simone stared at her, literally biting her lip, before glancing toward her own mom.

"Well, Dottie, it's that he's objectifying her," Aunt Marjorie said gently. "Honestly, I might not have seen it before myself. I take Geritol, too. You and I both want to stay attractive, especially to our husbands. But what my Women's Caucus friends would say is if the wife in the ad wants to take a vitamin supplement, that's great, but—"

"She should do it for her own health," Simone interrupted. "Not to give some guy bragging rights."

Inwardly, Patty winced. At every cocktail party Dot Appleton had hosted for his Republican cronies, her father inevitably put his arm around her when a male guest commented on the evening's success, and said, "Thanks, I think I'll keep her." His way of giving her mother credit for the event. Direct compliments or thanks were not his style.

Her mother had always seemed pleased by the comment. And whenever she witnessed it, Patty had thought it nice, too. That her father was showing appreciation for all she did to create and sustain his aura of importance within their community.

"I'll keep her?" Simone rolled her eyes. "Like some hat? Or pet

dog? Grown women should have more self-respect." She shrugged and tossed out her usual "Just saying."

Simone might as well have lobbed a grenade into the room.

Patty's mother drew herself back up, sitting straight as a flagpole. "Do you always allow your daughter to belittle your existence, Marjorie?" Her voice was steely. "I happen to be proud of my role as helpmate and homemaker. But perhaps you don't take that as seriously as I do." She glanced pointedly around the cozy, jumbled room, the books lying about, the faded slipcovers.

Patty wanted to fade herself to undetectable—embarrassed by her mother, embarrassed *for* her godmother.

Taken aback, Aunt Marjorie stiffened. "That's hardly what Simone is saying," her voice uncharacteristically frosty. "She—"

"It's back on!" Simone interrupted, turning up the volume. She flopped onto the sofa, bouncing Patty and seemingly oblivious to the sudden arctic chill between their mothers.

"Now speaking for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment," Douglas announced, "is a homemaker, parent, registered nurse, and president of the National Organization for Women, Ms. Wilma Scott Heide."

The daisy-decorated stage doors parted again, the piano played, this time something bland and schmaltzy. NOW's new leader entered briskly, wearing a blue pantsuit with white piping and bright white shoes, her bobbed hair soft in its graying curls.

"Awwwww. She looks like Nurse Edmund in the pediatrician's office," Simone said. "Doesn't she, Mom?"

Still distracted and eyeing her college best friend with sharp questions in her expression—which Patty's mother was studiously ignoring—Aunt Marjorie didn't respond.

"Mom? Doesn't she look like—"

For her daughter, Aunt Marjorie regained her congenial composure. "She does. You're right, sugar. Now, there was a saintly

woman. Nurse Edmund convinced all children to get their shots without a whimper."

"Could they find anyone more frumpy?" Patty's mother sniped.

Aunt Marjorie startled, frowned again, but kept quiet.

Douglas gave Heide the same instructions. Instead of facing the camera, Heide turned to him, and in earnest tête-à-tête, said, "First of all, let's state what the amendment—already overwhelmingly passed by Congress and supported by the last four presidents, including the incumbent, and both parties—what it says." She recited the ERA: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

Without this simple, succinct amendment, Heide explained, "as a matter of law and fact, women are not included in the intent or the content of the constitution, which is the basic legal document of the land." She paused to let that sink in, before adding that because the Supreme Court had never "declared unequivocally that women are to be considered persons under the law," women "can be and have been denied due process and equal protection."

She listed some of the most detrimental ways women were treated as second-class people—as if incapable by virtue of their sex of being responsible, independent citizens. Women could not open a business on their own, and were denied loans and credit cards unless their husbands or fathers cosigned. Many universities and colleges denied women admission, greatly reducing their educational opportunities.

"Exactly!" Simone sang out. "It's outrageous—UVA only started admitting female coeds three years ago. And there's still only four hundred and fifty women in a class of six thousand–plus students. My brothers say a lot of professors won't even call on girls in their classes."

"Shhhhh, honey." Her mother put a finger to her lips and then pointed to the TV as Heide addressed the most inflammatory of Schlafly's statements: that the ERA would upend a wife's "so-called right to support." Such support was only stipulated when a woman had to sue for divorce, Heide explained. The same was true with pay inequity. The discrepancy between a man's paycheck and a woman's for the same work, or with what kind of job a woman was allowed to even apply for (typically clerical) was addressed only if a woman took her employer to court and convinced the judge that her boss had engaged in discriminatory practices.

By comparison, the ERA would *codify* equal pay for women—eliminating reliance on costly, time-consuming lawsuits and the opinion of judges—whose decisions could be unpredictable or influenced by their own personal prejudices.

The piano played and Heide summed up: "When we look back to this time in our history, we will probably consider it primitive—if not barbaric—that we even considered it debatable in a country that pretends to be a democracy whether or not the majority of its citizens should be included in the basic legal document of the land." She ended with a small, expectant smile, waiting for what was to come next: Q and As, direct rebuttal between the two women.

Schlafly went straight for scare tactics, saying the ERA would require women be drafted.

Really? Patty sat up, alarmed—she didn't want to fight in a war.

"All I can say is thank goodness that Congress had the good judgment not to ratify this amendment ten years ago, or instead of having fifty thousand boys killed in Vietnam, twenty-five thousand of them would have been girls," said Schlafly, her tone less silky now. "I don't think this is an invasion of my rights that women weren't snatched up and killed in Vietnam."

Pointing out the draft was ending in June and the armed forces would become all-volunteer, Heide countered, "The fact that we are willing to have our boys and our men killed and maimed" says something wrong about "what we think of boys and men."

Patty found herself nodding with Heide on that point—remembering Will describing his POW brother as the kindest and gentlest of his family—terrified that he would not be able to survive the cruelty of his captors. Why assume a sensitive boy like that was suited for combat just because he was male? Then Patty caught herself and stopped mid-nod, worrying her mother would see her agreeing with the feminist.

Heide was about to go on, but Douglas noticed Schlafly's itchy urgency and leaned toward her. "Mrs. Schlafly?"

Abruptly changing topic, Schlafly spouted, "Well, I think the ERA will give husbands who want to get out of their marriage obligations a great opportunity to do so . . . Marriage is a contract . . . If you buy an automobile and you make your payments on time, the court doesn't interfere . . . Most people fulfill their contracts because it's the honest thing to do. But quite a few of them will only pay up because they don't want their car repossessed . . . If we pass the ERA, we will be proclaiming to all the world that this contract no longer includes the obligation of a husband to support his family."

"You see," Patty's mother said, pointing toward the TV screen, "under the ERA, Philip could just up and desert me—leaving me with nothing."

"Oh, Dottie, Philip would never leave you—"

What? Patty turned to her mother. Was that something she feared? Should . . . should Patty be concerned about her father abandoning them?

"*Shhhhh*," Simone shushed. "Is Schlafly trying to compare women to used cars?"

It was Heide's turn.

"C'mon, nurse-lady," Simone cheered, "dish it."

"The truth is—and we stick to the truth here—" Heide added politely but pointedly, clearly impatient with Schlafly's fear-mongering. The truth: No law specifically required a husband to support his wife. The question only came up during divorce hearings. With the ERA, that decision "will be made—not on the basis of sex—but on the basis of individual resources and needs."

In her final salvo, Heide said, "I find it interesting, even amusing, that Mrs. Schlafly is going around the country arguing *against* the right of choice provided by the ERA, when she is herself exercising free choice." Schlafly's extensive travel and lobbying seemed very "liberated" from a traditional homemaker's role.

"Ha!" Simone erupted. "Go for it!"

Heide concluded with asking if it felt right "for one sex to be excluded from the basic legal document of the land and denied the right of choice?" She paused before finishing with, "Let us leave it to individuals to make choices about how they will live their own lives."

"Right on, sister!" Simone jumped up and raised her fist in salute.

Patty's mother also stood, her expression thunderous in its disapproval. She smoothed her skirt, picked up her sweater, and left the room without a word. Aunt Marjorie watched her go, shaking her head, her face sad and frustrated.

Patty filled with dread at the thought of the long plane ride home with her mother. How in the world was she going to hide that a lot of Heide's arguments made sense to her? A fact that startled the heck out of her.

Her foreboding only increased that night when her mother downed a cobalt-blue pill at bedtime—a new addition to her rainbow of meds—and icily responded to Patty's surprised

another-pill? look that *your father* had prescribed them to help her sleep. Patty's worry skyrocketed as she watched her mother fumble about in the bathroom to brush her teeth and then listened to what sounded like muffled crying as her mother tossed in the bed next to Patty's before finally falling silent in a heavy, drugged slumber.

Patty lay awake a long time, disturbed and discombobulated.