

HEART OF THE MATTER

by
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CHAPTER ONE

And we're away.” Kate Foster looked up from the camera whose light had just blinked off and yanked out her earpiece. Abruptly rising from her chair, she jerked the microphone from her jacket as well. “What the hell happened with the video, Mike?”

Even without the microphone, Kate made herself heard through the glass panels of the Channel 5 sound booth. Some people claimed they could hear her on the floor below as well, which secretly pleased her.

“There was an error on the clip number,” Mike Spencer, her producer on the evening news program, replied. His voice sounded tinny and hollow over the speakers in the newsroom. “The numbers were transposed, and when someone caught it, there wasn’t enough time to get it on air. Sorry about that, Kate.”

“Jesus Christ.” Kate shoved a hand through her dark, shoulder-length waves. “Let’s get it right next time, people. This isn’t some Mickey Mouse operation in a third-rate market. This is DC, for cryin’ out loud. We’re supposed to be the best.”

An intern about to cross her path paused, then detoured to the back wall. The room hushed as Kate hurled the mike and earpiece onto the console in front of her. Grabbing her notes, she started to stalk out of the room, then stopped and took a deep breath. The politically correct thing to do was to soothe everyone’s ego, but God, she hated that crap.

“Okay, everybody.” She kept her voice subdued. “I know we’ve all worked hard to turn this program around, and the ratings show it. But the little things make a difference, and we didn’t achieve what we have because we let them get away from us. Let’s try harder, because the guys over at Channel 2 are dying to knock us off our pedestal.”

She strode out the door, but before it closed behind her, the room returned to its normal buzz of activity. She shook her head and continued down the hallway. *Christ*. Today it was the video on the three-alarm fire in the South Capitol area, yesterday the inane comments by a moron reporter. She was almost to her office when she heard footsteps behind her.

“Kate, do you have a minute?” Mike Spencer caught up to her.

“Sure, Mike.” Kate stopped and waited for him.

She had an idea what was coming. After lengthy negotiations between the station’s lawyers and her lawyers, they had finally been able to hash out a contract acceptable to both sides. Management wanted Kate to sign it, something she had been putting off.

Since Kate had come on board two years ago, Channel 5 had risen from the bottom to number one in the ratings. She was their star quarterback, and they knew it. Kate loved a challenge and had told them she could turn the place around. And she had.

Now the rush that success always gave her was fading, and she was once again searching for the high that went with it. Why was she so dissatisfied with her progress so soon? She wanted more, but she couldn’t quite determine what the more could be.

She followed Mike into his office where she was surprised to see Sheila Dalton, chief programming officer, already waiting for them. They were obviously attempting to nail her down and get her to sign. Kate sat on the plush leather sofa and laid her arm across the top, knowing that her body language connoted expansive self-assurance. Mike closed the door behind them and poured three tumblers of scotch.

“Hello, Kate.” Sheila smiled warmly.

“Hi, Sheila.” Kate returned the smile and took the glass from Mike. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Well, everyone seems satisfied with the contract, but you still need to sign it. We just didn’t want to let it go any longer.”

Kate nodded and took a sip. As the single malt burned its way down to her belly, she almost closed her eyes in ecstasy. There was nothing like a good scotch at the end of the day, and Mike always kept her brand in his office. It was a small thing, really, but she appreciated it.

His thoughtfulness had made her feel welcome ever since she joined the station, and she remembered how they had fawned over her. She was the new kid on the block, the award-winning investigative journalist everyone wanted. It was all bullshit, but she had played the game, knowing they needed her more than she needed them.

“I don’t have to tell you, Kate, that we are very pleased with the turnaround Channel 5 has made in the past two years,” Sheila began. “And any fool can see the direct correlation between our rapid rise in the ratings and your arrival in the anchor chair. Our audience loves you, in almost every age and race category we’ve polled. We see nothing but a bright future, and we want you to play a major part in Channel 5’s growth.”

Sheila removed the contract from a leather portfolio and slid it across the glass coffee table. “Everything’s in order. Just put your Jane Hancock on the last page.”

Kate placed her drink on the table and picked up the contract, scanning to see everything she had asked for. She should feel ecstatic, but she yearned for more and realized what it might be. She laid the contract down. “Very generous, thank you. But I want to add one more thing.”

Sheila glanced warily at Mike, obviously surprised at this unexpected turn of events.

“I want more time out in the field, special assignments, that sort of thing,” Kate explained. “At least once a month, schedule permitting, of course.”

“We just got you into the anchor chair and now you want out?” Sheila grinned nervously.

Kate leaned forward, wanting to impress upon her boss the importance of her request. “I need to be out there,” she gestured vaguely toward the wall, “to keep fresh, to keep my finger on the pulse of the city. Our audience is smart enough to know when the person sitting in front of the camera is feeding them a line of bull or knows what the hell they’re talking about. And that will keep us number one, Sheila. If I become stagnant in that chair, those ratings will drop like a lead balloon.”

Sheila walked over to the window, the night sky lit up by the adjoining office buildings. After staring outside for a moment, she turned back.

“I need to take this upstairs,” she murmured. “I’ll have to get back to you, Kate.”

“Great. Thanks, Sheila.” Kate rose and extended her hand. “Once you know for sure, I’ll be happy to sign.”

That would give them something to think about.

Kate left Mike’s office and strode down the hallway to her own office, where she deposited her notes and picked up copy for tomorrow’s broadcast. Glancing at it, she grabbed the phone and punched in a number.

“Jerry, what’s this shit on my desk? This isn’t what I wrote. Who’s editing my work?” She paused, listening to the response. “Well, fuck that. Tell her if she touches my copy again she’ll be working the night shift at some single-watt in rural North Dakota.”

After slamming the phone down, she left her office and took the elevator to the parking garage. She climbed into her Porsche Boxster and sank into the seat with relish. “It’s good to be me,” she said aloud.

Kate was right on her career track from where it had begun ten years earlier after grad school. All those years of hard work, first as an intern at the *Chicago Tribune*, then as an award-winning reporter for the *Washington Post*, had culminated in turning around this station.

After making the transition from print journalism to television,

Kate found being on air a challenge compared to her routine at the *Post*. Anything could go wrong in front of the camera, and it frequently did. She had to stay alert throughout every show and prided herself on making each one appear to come off flawlessly, despite the behind-the-scenes glitches.

No wonder Channel 5 had been at the bottom of the ratings, with as many screwups as they'd had. Without her, they'd still be seeing the backside of Channel 7, a station that really sucked. She'd had to step on quite a few fingers and toes in the process and knew what they called her behind her back at the station, but she didn't care. The thrill of success was worth alienating a few lazy employees.

She flipped open her cell phone and pressed the number five, holding it down until it connected.

"Hey, girl. So did you sign already?" Dean Parker, her agent, inquired jokingly.

"Almost."

"Almost?" He sobered immediately. "What do you mean, 'almost'?"

Kate sighed. "Don't worry, Dean, you'll get your cut. I decided I want special assignments written into the contract, but I don't think they'll object. It's a deal breaker and they know it."

"But, Kate," he was clearly exasperated, "I thought everyone had agreed to all the stipulations."

He was beginning to annoy her. "Everyone but me. Don't worry. They'll give it to me. They don't have a choice."

"We should celebrate, then." His mood readily shifted. "Champagne and all that. We need to talk anyway, about your future."

"I'll have to take a rain check." Kate glanced at her watch and turned the key in the ignition, revving the Porsche to life. "I've got a hot date tonight and have to get home first. But let's talk this Tuesday over dinner."

Kate said good-bye and flipped her cell phone shut. She still had time to shower and change and make the quick commute to Chevy Chase to pick up her date. The Beltway at this hour would be fairly calm and, absent any traffic accidents, she would be there in

an hour. *What was her name again? Pamela, no, Paula, that's right.* They had met at a dinner party last week and the chemistry had been instantaneous. Kate hoped to get lucky, especially now that she had something to celebrate.

She pulled out of the parking garage and waited for a break in the traffic before turning onto the street. While she idled, she glanced up at the fifty-foot poster of herself plastered to the side of the Channel 5 building. Her arms folded confidently across her chest, she gazed out at the city with a look of piercing intelligence. She acknowledged that physically she wasn't the typical female news anchor. She was brunette instead of blond, her face chiseled and strong rather than feminine and muted.

But she didn't really care, and neither did her audience, from all accounts. Fans frequently e-mailed her, saying how relieved they were that someone finally delivered the news honestly, with integrity, in-depth analysis, and understanding. She had worked grueling hours to reach this point in her career, and her efforts were paying off.

As the first raindrops fell she turned right and headed home. Tonight was definitely looking up.



Ellen Webster pressed the mute button on the TV remote and placed it on the end table beside the couch. The image of the striking newswoman still burned in her mind, though no longer on the screen, and she sighed. Kate Foster was every lesbian's fantasy, and Ellen was no exception. Worse, Kate was Ellen's next-door neighbor, and she had the pleasure, and pain, of seeing her more frequently than most. The condo building off Dupont Circle had only four units, two downstairs and two up, where Ellen and Kate lived, so they had regular contact.

Of course, Kate was way out of her league. Handsome, in an androgynous sort of way, slender and athletic, she was too glamorous to ever notice someone like Ellen. Kate had a powerful magnetism onscreen and off, and she oozed sex in both contexts. All

Ellen had ever managed to say to her was “hello” or “nice weather we’re having.”

She got up off the couch and trudged into the kitchen to take out the leftover Chinese from the night before. After dumping the contents onto a plate, she covered it with plastic, shoved it into the microwave, and punched in a few minutes. As she poured herself a glass of wine, General Beauregard, her brown tabby, jumped up onto the counter and pressed into her.

“Hey, Beau.” She petted him gently. “Are you hungry, my little pumpkin, hmm?”

A loud motor was his only response and she opened a can of cat food, emptying half of it into his bowl on the floor. He leapt down and devoured his dinner.

“My God, you’d think you hadn’t eaten in days instead of this morning.”

The ping of the microwave interrupted her conversation, and she carried her meal and wine to the living room where a stack of papers waited. Normally her teaching assistant would grade these undergraduate papers, but Jenny was busy trying to finish her own graduate work by the close of the spring semester. Besides, Ellen loved to read the papers of the American history survey class she taught to freshmen and sophomores. Hopefully a few of them would go on to advanced study in American history, her area of expertise, and she might spot them early on.

She ate a forkful of Kung Pao chicken and picked up the paper on top of the stack. After a while, her thoughts drifted back to Kate and she wondered if the newscaster would arrive home at her usual hour. Ellen glanced at the time on the DVD player and saw it was almost seven thirty, when Kate usually returned to change and leave again. She always looked devastating and Ellen assumed she went out on dates. Maybe she could glimpse her through the peephole in her door.

“Oh, geez, get a grip,” she chastised herself.

Having polished off the Chinese and downed the remnants of her wine, Ellen took the remaining papers into her bedroom. She placed the stack on her nightstand and was about to undress when

her doorbell rang. Surprised at the late-night intrusion, she hurried to her door and peered through the peephole.

She momentarily froze, stunned to see her handsome neighbor on the other side, then quickly threw open the door. “Hi,” she exclaimed a little too brightly.

“Good evening,” Kate said. “You had a package sitting outside your door.”

Ellen glanced down to see a small box that Kate held. “Oh! Yes. Thanks for letting me know.” She took it from Kate and waited expectantly; for what, she didn’t know.

“Well, good night.” Kate backed away and headed to her condo.

Ellen stood in the doorway, still holding the package and wishing she could think of something to say. Should she invite her in for a drink? No, too obvious. A cup of coffee? *Shit, I used the last of it this morning.*

The sound of Kate’s door closing jarred her from her thoughts. It was too late now. Sighing, she retreated into her condo and shut the door, leaning back against it. She closed her eyes and thumped her head back and forth against the door. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

General Beauregard rubbed against her shins and meowed. He could always make her feel better and she bent down to pet him. She glanced at the package, recognizing the return address. A colleague at Princeton had sent her an advance copy of his latest biography of Lincoln. He wanted to know what she thought of it, and she was curious to see what he could possibly say that was new about the beloved president.

Scooping up Beau in one arm, the box clamped to her side with the other, she returned to her bedroom and tossed both on the bed. She undressed, turning on her closet light to grab her nightgown off the hook just inside. As she stood naked in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the door, she frowned at the image.

She had gained more weight this year. Her breasts were full and heavy, her hips round, and her belly further from flat than ever. Her skin, however, was still smooth and unwrinkled, belying her

forty-two years, and she could still find her hipbones—after a bit of searching. She was what her mother would politely call a “full-figured” girl. Her sister, Joan, would simply say “fat.”

She sighed unhappily at the thought of her thin, petite sister. Joan was married to an orthopedic surgeon in Baltimore and had two kids and a dog. She had exactly the kind of life their parents had envisioned for both of them, but only Joan had managed to achieve. She seemed to have it all, but still found an inordinate amount of time to criticize Ellen—about her single status as well as her weight. Ellen always tried to convince her she was a lesbian and would never change, but Joan simply ignored her. She could get nothing but women because of her weight, Joan argued, and if she got into shape some great guy would snatch her up.

Ellen surveyed her figure in the mirror again. She knew this wasn't the body someone of Kate Foster's caliber would ever find attractive, let alone sexy. She imagined the tall, willowy blondes Kate probably went for, draping themselves over her arm at a gala function. Ellen chuckled at the thought of taking her to a faculty party with everyone dressed in their tweeds and cheap suits, discussing the unglamorous topics of their latest research.

She jerked the nightgown over her head, concealing from view the body she no longer recognized. Inside, she still felt like the twenty-five-year-old grad student she had once been, lithe and athletic. Nearly twenty years of research sitting in front of a computer or cocooned in books had taken their toll. As had the countless years of pizza and beer—quick and easy take-out—with other PhD candidates in her department to get them through their program. Once she could have eaten like that and more because back then she would always play tennis or jog. But with her workload and now the impending sabbatical, which would mean more research sitting in museums and libraries, she saw her future predictably unfold in increased clothing sizes. She silently vowed that this year, this sabbatical, she would make time for exercise and eating right.



Kate drove along the inner loop of the Beltway, cursing the idiots who couldn't drive in good weather, let alone when a little rain fell. Glancing at her watch for the umpteenth time, she swore again. She would be later than she thought, but at least she had called ahead and told Paula she would be there as quickly as she could. Paula's obvious disappointment had only made Kate more anxious. Paula was clearly not a patient woman, and Kate didn't want her to change her mind. She never liked to hurry a seduction, and the mere thought of what she would do to the willowy blonde caused her heart to flutter.

A large semi passed her on the left, spraying water onto the Porsche's windshield. Kate flipped the wiper switch to high and watched as the truck driver signaled to switch back into the lane in front of her. She slowed to let him in, conceding that big trucks always had the right-of-way when it came to little Porsches. She never wanted to try to prove who was stronger, although if the traffic had been lighter she would have definitely proved to him who was faster.

The taillights flashing bloody red first alerted Kate that something wasn't quite right about the truck. And the quiet, proverbial lull before the storm really struck her; she saw everything as if standing outside herself. The semi jackknifed onto its side and a white SUV careened out of control to avoid hitting it, rolling over and smashing into the concrete highway divider. Another car collided with the SUV, a dark sedan of some sort.

Intellectually she knew that all of this occurred instantaneously, but everything moved in slow motion. By the time the events registered, it was too late for her brakes. She crushed the pedal nevertheless, a reflex, nothing more, because she intuited that her reaction would be useless.

She endlessly slid on the wet pavement as metal crunched and glass shattered. Then all went black.