

Copyright © 2013 **Danielle E. Wedgeworth**

All rights reserved.

ISBN: **0615847269**

ISBN 13: **9780615847269**

Library of Congress Control Number: **2013912955**

LCCN Imprint Name: **Once Upon A Time Press, Cedar Hill, Texas**

Dedication

I would like to offer special thanks to my partner, Gail Wedgeworth and stepmother, Bobbie Wedgeworth, for their endless hours reading and correcting mistakes and for their invaluable advice. Tom Terrell, thank you for sharing a guy's point of view and sanity checking the fight scenes. Gail, thanks again for the trailer art and putting up with me for the last year and a half. Finally, Lucas Wedgeworth, your cover art is amazing. You really do great work.

Regarding research, I would like to thank Associate Professor Brent Sasley, of the University of Texas at Arlington, who offered advice related to the Middle East. Mucho thanks to Rodney Walker, for kindly sharing his experience as a chief of police. Finally, I would like to say thank you to Glenn Repp for his perspective on Texas politics, based on his time as a state senator, and mayor of a large metropolitan city. Any mistakes that go to believability are mine alone, and in no way reflect the information so kindly provided by these very nice people.

Wedgeworth / The Phoenix Republic / 3

PHOENIX REPUBLIC

The Lone Star Gambit

By

Danielle Wedgeworth

Table of Contents

- 1 Hunted
- 2 The Daily Grind
- 3 Into the Dark
- 4 The Players Take the Field
- 5 Trials and Tribulations
- 6 Innocence Destroyed
- 7 Realizations
- 8 Deterioration
- 9 A Sister's Trust
- 10 Meetings
- 11 The Firm
- 12 Betrayed
- 13 Arrogance of Power
- 14 Pride Goeth Before a Fall
- 15 Serendipity
- 16 Shadows
- 17 Mea Culpa
- 18 Out With a Whimper
- 19 Revelations
- 20 Desperate Measures
- 21 Awakening
- 22 Men in Dark Glasses
- 23 The Measure of a Man
- 24 Valley of the Shadow of Death

- 25 The Contest
- 26 The Burning Phoenix
- 27 Home Again
- 28 On the Road
- 29 Proclamation is Policy
- 30 Power Play
- 31 Tools of Tyranny
- 32 Strong Measures
- 33 Random Acts of Panic
- 34 Hatreds Crucible
- 35 Reunion
- 36 Declarations
- 37 Fall of the Phoenix
- 38 Birth of the Phoenix
- 39 Once More Unto the Breach
- 40 Family in Crisis
- 41 Standing Together
- 42 With a Whimper, Dies Power
- 43 Phoenix Ascension
- 44 Cat's Paw
- 45 The Liberty Equation
- 46 Epilogue

Chapter 1 Hunted

Irritated, Sadie Cline stormed out of the Carrollton police station totally frustrated, followed by Detective Fernando Reyes. It had now been two months since he had first notified her that her mother had been murdered in her home. “Ms. Cline, please don’t be upset. I know that this has got to be very hard on you, but I can assure you that we are all doing everything that we can to find out who did this to your mother. I look at it every day. We just do not have any leads.”

Sadie stepped off the curb in front of the suburban police station. As pleasant as the quiet, tree lined medians in front of the station were, they still only represented one thing to her. It was the place where she first learned that her life had been completely turned upside down, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Although frustrated and furious, she had to admit that the detective had been kind, and probably was trying his best. As she neared the end of the line of cars where she had parked, she paused. She turned to face him, knowing that she should at least give him the opportunity to explain.

“Ms. Cline, Sadie, please give us some time here. There were no fingerprints, and nothing was stolen; thus, there is nothing to track in pawnshops. All we know for sure is that ballistics said that a nine millimeter pistol was used in the crime. They could not match the rifling on the recovered bullet fragments to any weapon in our files.”

In spite of herself, frustration had pushed her beyond her limit to accept.

“Detective Reyes, I know that you are trying, but it has been two months and all you can tell me is that my mom was shot with a nine millimeter pistol. I am a nurse, Detective. I work at a hospital, and I could have told you she was shot with a nine millimeter by looking at what the bastard did to her. Let’s be honest, what with all the Solidarity Movement protests you guys are dealing with, you are not spending time on Mom’s case. You don’t have the time to really dig for an undiscovered clue. Am I right?”

“Ms. Cline, we are looking, and we won’t quit either. The budget is tight, but we will do the best we can. We will find out what happened, and who did this thing. Please give us some time.”

Angry, but now feeling a little guilty about unloading on the man, she responded in a more reasonable tone. “I will check back next week. Please try to uncover something, anything to move us forward.” She forced a smile, nodded and turned to go. Unlocking her car, she decided that the detectives were just out of their depth and had no clue how to find her mom’s killer, or for that matter, why she had even been killed. Slapping her hands in frustration on the steering wheel she forced herself to calm down. It was almost not worth taking the half day off from work. Her boss had been really supportive, but she also knew that the chief of medicine at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital was not known for empathy.

Soon she was turning onto North Josey, and accelerating hard. Heading for the Turnpike, she thought about what to do next. The cops just were not going to resolve this. “Like I care about their stupid damn budget cuts!” They went through the same details from the case file they told her about a month ago.

The only new development was that ballistics indicated there was something odd about the bullets they recovered. They could not match the markings on the bullets to any known rifling pattern. The other thing not making today’s visit a complete waste, was that Detective Reyes believed that the death was professionally executed due to the lack of evidence, and due to the oddity of the weapon used. He had said that their department was fortunate to have a true expert

in firearms. If their guy thought the weapon was foreign, then Reyes was probably right in thinking it may have had something to do with her mom's past. She wondered for a fleeting moment if it was possible that she and her mom being of Persian heritage could be a part of this, but if so - why? We don't have any connection to the Middle East any more. Her mother told her that she was barely pregnant when she left Iran. Sadie turned it over in her mind. Mom had moved here before I was even born in 1983. She changed her name when she arrived in the United States specifically to make a clean break with anything from her life before coming here.

Why now, after almost thirty years, would anyone from her mom's previous life, have a reason to kill her now? Stopped at the traffic light, Sadie picked up her phone to call Reyes with another thought. Exasperated at getting his voicemail, she sighed before leaving a message. "I will get you mom's old letters and stuff from the shoe box that she, has on a shelf, in the top of her closet. It is all old stuff from when she lived in Iran. I don't know if that can help, but you said the gun was weird. Please let me know what you find out." She closed her phone as the light turned green. Stepping down hard on the accelerator, the Hemi under the hood of her Challenger propelled her forward sharply. She made the right turn and entered the on-ramp to the freeway.

Killing her blinker after a lane change, she caught a really odd look from the guy to her right, as she passed him. Momentarily distracted from her thoughts by the dark haired guy, she decided some music might clear her head of the omnipresent thoughts about her mom's killers until she got back to her apartment. Sadie drove on, trying to relax with mixed results, as she listened to the Rolling Stones and fumed about how angry she was at life just now. Turning her mom's past over and over in her mind, it just did not make any sense. Mom came here about the time I was born, so she obviously had something or someone she needed to get away from, but what or who? All I know is that she wanted to be an American. She never talked about her life before. If it was because her mother converted to Bahá'í, that might make someone angry, but why thirty years later? We don't make a big deal out of it, and anyway all our beliefs are about peace and the acceptance of God. Sadi shook her head, for she was not an overtly religious person herself, and to think someone might want to kill her over such things was strange.

Soon enough she exited the freeway, turning onto Parkwood and into her parking garage. Pulling up to her reserved spot, she rolled her eyes, noticing that the light over her space was out again for the third time this month. Losing her thought, for the moment, she heard Jagger belt out her favorite signature line from his song *Beast of Burden*. It did little to abate her foul mood as she pulled into her parking spot.

Putting the car in park, she angrily yanked her purse from the passenger seat and in the process spilled some of the contents, including her cell phone onto the floorboard opposite the gearshift of her beloved black Challenger. "I am a freaking beast of burden!" Exasperated, she reached over - stretching to retrieve the fallen items as the sound of gunfire erupted, and glass exploded, sending fragments raining down all around her.

Frozen in place, time slowed to a crawl. She could almost feel her heart stop. Her eyes fixed with terror. Her blood now running cold, she knew she had to react. She reached back with her left hand to jerk the gearshift into reverse and stepped hard on the gas. The Challenger's Hemi roared to life, slamming the car back and to the right - in the direction from which it had just come. Bullets continued in thunderstorm torrents of sound, as they punched holes all around her. Showers of the sparks from the tearing metal danced along the side of the car as lightening to the

storm. The Challenger scraped a concrete pillar and smashed into the SUV parked behind her. Still leaning over, but now rising up enough to see, Sadie slammed the gearshift into drive. Again she floored the accelerator, inadvertently clipping her assailant, knocking him into the concrete wall where he had been standing as he loaded another magazine in to his pistol. As she passed the man, she sat up and headed for the garage's exit.

On the street now, she knew that she was driving erratically. Blind with terror, Sadie thought of nothing but evasion as she drove away in a near panic. Wind blowing relentlessly through shot out windows created a slipstream, as a tornado vortex of her own long black hair whipped about her head, stinging her face. Thankful that her windshield at least was still mostly intact and that the car seemed to be performing for the moment, she accelerated away.

Driving madly and with no thought about where she was now going, Sadie realized that she should look down to see if she was hit. She knew that shock and adrenalin could mask pain from any wounds that may have already been inflicted on her. Finding no blood or perforations, she drove on, accelerating hard at every turn, of which she was taking several, in a blind rush to get away from her attackers. Looking nervously out through the opening where her back window used to reside, she didn't see anyone following. Thinking hard, she realized that she had no idea where a nearby police station was located. The only one she knew about for sure was in Carrollton. If the guy that attacked her was the man that killed her mom, he might figure that she would go there and cut her off.

It then occurred to her that she could call the police. She reached down to recover her cell phone from the passenger side seat where she dropped it when the bullets tore through her car. Retrieving it, she just stared at the device, realizing that it had one corner missing, having been shot to pieces moments before. Starting to shake now, she looked back again to see if she was being pursued. Seeing nothing that she could identify as a pursuer, she slammed a hand down on the dash of the Challenger. "I don't know what to do! I don't know what to do! Oh God, where do I go now? Why is this happening to me?" Once more, finding herself back near the expressway, she finally made a decision. She would just have to go back to Carrollton.

Pulling on to the on-ramp she felt no hesitation at driving there at the speed of her choosing. The trip back to Carrollton seemed to only take moments before she was once again back on North Josey, this time headed south. Stopping at a red light in front of a high school, just south of the expressway, she was on alert for the late model sedan that was screaming up from behind her. She watched, her pulse racing, as it pulled even with her in the left turn lane. The car slammed to a halt beside her, only a couple of feet away. The man that she thought had looked at her so oddly before, raised a pistol in what felt like slow motion.

Time almost seemed to stand still. Her eyes going wide with terror, she saw the black hole at the end of the barrel on the intended instrument of her death. It was rapidly moving into position to carry out its appointed mission.

Terrified she floored the accelerator, summoning the valiant Hemi forth once more to be her defender. The Challenger instantly sprang to life as Sadie pulled hard on her emergency brake and cranked the steering wheel hard to the left. As had happened when her friend Doug taught her the maneuver when she first bought the car, the back of the Challenger spun around, pointing the nose of her car north once again.

Still in slow motion, she could see others around her screaming in their cars as well as see that her assailant was robotically adjusting his aim to accommodate for his highly mobile target,

struggling to get a bead on her. He did not get the opportunity, as she rocketed forward leaving only the smell of burning rubber behind her. Looking anxiously in the mirror, she saw her opponent attempt the same thing, only to be T-Boned by a Fed-Ex Truck that had just entered the intersection.

Terrified and frantically looking all around her, Sadie drove off yet again towards the freeway.

Chapter 2 The Daily Grind

“Crap! No way, it was morning already. Where the hell do my weekends go?” The soothing harp music on her iPhone alarm was pleasant but persistent. “Damn it, I just want to sleep.” Catherine thought that it was probably a good thing that she didn’t stay in the army. She was just not a quick riser. She admitted to herself that in spite of being only thirty one years old, alarms, regardless of how gentle, made her furious. This was especially true at five-thirty in the morning. Lying there flat on her back, she blinked away the sleep. She recalled that it was Janice who suggested using soothing harp music to prod her awake without jarring her to consciousness – thus pissing her off before the day even began.

As she lay there, trying to get the nerve to face another day, she began accessing her agenda. It was a Monday, so she had to get the trash out to the street and get to her new temp assignment. Sighing, she realized that this gig was the one that was located all the way across town in Plano, so she would have to fight morning traffic for the next four months until the assignment ended. Perhaps she should have considered getting a place somewhere north of I-30, to be in a more central location, closer to where potential jobs were. Still, she loved the dilapidated old frame bungalow, purchased after her divorce, irrespective that it was located on the southern edge of the Dallas – Fort Worth metro area. The neighbors were reasonable enough, and it had a nice yard for her best friend, a boxer named Maggie. As her mind began to awaken, she realized that she felt more at home here than she did in the Mc-Mansion that she had shared with her ex-husband Dan. Catherine rolled over snuggling deeper into the soft blankets. “Really sorry, Dan, but I just couldn’t pretend any longer. You are a decent guy even if you are a prick half the time. Still, I know that it was my fault really, and you were damn sure sick of me griping about politics and about how things were headed into the toilet all the time. Trust me, you are better off.” Closing her eyes, she blinked away the single tear that was threatening, as she thought of what a wreck her life had become. “Dammit, I didn’t ask to be born gay. Aw, hell, Daddy! I tried to be what everyone wanted, I just couldn’t do it.”

She reflected that although she did graduate from college, she hadn’t exactly done a stellar job with her life since leaving high school. In only a decade, she was encouraged not to reenlist after her four years were up, because the colonel said she was not a good fit for his army, and she had managed to gain, and then subsequently lose, both a good paying job, and a husband. To top it off, she disappointed her father by announcing that she just wasn’t into guys, and was tired of trying to fake it to fit in. Now, she thought with a snort, she could not even keep her current love interest, Janice happy because of their disagreements on, well, just about everything. To be fair to herself, she decided, journalist or not, Janice was completely intolerant of anything she disagreed with, and she had absolutely no regard for facts.

Rolling over in bed, Catherine was immediately irritated as she rolled over potato chip crumbs left from the Thursday before, thus eliciting a diatribe aimed at her offending but absent culprit. “Damn-it, Janice! I hate that you eat in bed. Reporters are such pigs. I swear that I’ve just about had it!” Rolling away from that side of the bed, she recalled the previous weekend.

It was Friday night, and they were supposed to be going out to dinner and then to the Cinemark to watch a bunch of explosions and car chases. Instead, Janice started a fight about Catherine’s food storage taking up most of the space in the laundry room. She hardly even used the washer and dryer, and yet she was mad because Catherine thought things were going to get ugly and wanted to have some food around.

She could hear Janice's words now. "It is ridiculous to have all this food; it isn't normal. A disaster isn't going to happen, Kate. You will never need a year's worth of food. It is just a stupid waste of money."

Reliving the fight, she should have known right then that the evening was hosed. The debate soon morphed into how terrible it was that banks ripped off college students and how education was really a right that should be financed by the government anyway.

Snorting in derision, Catherine recalled her benign comment that nobody forced anyone to borrow six figure loans every year so they could go to their snotty Ivy League schools and party.

That was enough; however, the comment sent Janice into hysterics about how evil rich people were always getting what they wanted.

Groaning, Catherine knew she just needed to get up. Reliving her argument with Janice was going to do her no good, but it was all just so frustrating that she continued to replay it in her mind, searching for something she could have done to achieve a different result.

When Janice got wound up she decided any logical argument was pointless. Pointing out that many of the kids protesting were going to the best schools in the country and had rich parents was pointless. Janice would simply not acknowledge the stupidity of spending that kind of money for something like Women's Studies, and then being surprised, when they couldn't get real jobs to pay back their student loans.

Regardless, Janice left abruptly, saying she would come over after work on Monday to talk things over.

"Fat chance that will end well, it's hard to argue with you when your feelings trump facts; and I'm not just going to drink the damn Kool-Aid to have a love life." Catherine closed her eyes in frustration knowing that their problem was that they were both opinionated, with radically different world views. Anyone not mainlining fairy dust, she thought, could see that her view was, of course, the right one.

Looking down at the time displayed on her phone, she realized that her morning was going to be gone if she didn't get a move on. Swinging her feet out from under her comforter and onto the cold wooden floor, she stood, stretched and pulled on her old threadbare robe. She then stumbled towards her bathroom and then on to the kitchen for some coffee. She hoped that she could find something tolerable in the way of food to eat for breakfast. With her head in the fridge, she felt Maggie's cold nose nudging her, lest she forget that she too enjoyed eating things which originated from the refrigerator. Reaching back to scratch the light tan boxer on her head, she pulled out the last of her lunch meat and what was left of a package of sausage. She handed the lunch meat to Maggie. "You know that you are the only creature on God's earth that really gets me. Why can't people be more like dogs?"

Thinking about what she had that was reasonably clean to wear to work, Catherine trudged over and placed some buttered toast into the little toaster oven and began frying the last two links of sausage. Rubbing her face, she decided that grey suit with the black velour collar would be a sufficient compromise between looking professional and being comfortable on another first day. Thankfully, it was not too badly overdue for the cleaners.

As the smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the tiny kitchen, she poured herself a cup and nodded at the back door to let Maggie know her wait was over. She let the boxer out, almost tripping as the animal charged out the door after an insolent squirrel, taunting her from the back yard.

An hour later, her makeup applied and dressed for work, Catherine left a note for Janice on the dry erase board mounted to the wall next to the fridge. She wanted to let her know that she had no idea what to expect about when she would be home since her job was across town and there was no telling what sort of idiot she would be working for this time. She read the message one more time and shrugged.

If you want to hang out until I get here, perhaps we could grab some pizza and watch a movie. Hesitating a moment, she picked up the marker and added one last thought. *I will try to call this afternoon if I can.* With the note complete, she went to the back door, whistling for Maggie, keys and coffee in hand. Watching her running through the yard, Catherine realized yet again that she really loved this little house. She decided that although it might not be fancy, it was home. She could afford it, and to be really honest, the most important thing for her was that it reminded her of a simpler and more honorable time. With news stories every day about Europe going into the toilet and Israel preparing for war, at least her little corner of the world felt comforting. She had at least some protection from what she knew was coming.

Catherine's black four-door Jeep Wrangler threaded its way past another fair sized group of loser protestor types that kept clogging up major intersections. Stopping at the traffic light, a pretty young blonde woman with manicured nails and wearing an SMU sweatshirt began chanting and pounding on her driver's side window. "Capitalism is murder; we are the 99%! Stand in solidarity with those taking back what the bankers have stolen!"

Rolling her eyes in exasperation, Catherine decided that she was in no mood this morning. When the light was about to turn green, she toggled the window switch on the center console of the jeep to lower her driver's side window. As the window disappeared into the door, she flipped off the girl. "Grow up, Loser Bitch! Why don't you try being responsible for yourself for a change." Somewhat cheered by the look of shock on the girl's face, she turned on the radio to find the news emanating from the vehicle's speakers.

"...Iran's Chief of Naval Operations warned this morning that his country can easily close the strategic Strait of Hormuz at any time. While this is not a new threat, the administration reiterated once again, that the United States and our allies, cannot, and will not accept any threat from Iran, that seeks to disrupt the freedom of nations to trade such a vital resource. As the Strait of Hormuz is located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, the passageway through which a sixth of the world's oil flows, the industrialized nations simply cannot tolerate any such provocation. The United States continues to work with Israel and other parties in the region to lessen the tension caused by that country's declaration that it will never accept any peace proposal based on a border being set along the 1967 lines..."

Fed up, Catherine pounded the dash to exorcise her fury. "How can so many people be so damn stupid?" Like you political assholes don't realize that you are leaving the Israelis with no viable options! She thought. "That's right, dip-shits, keep supporting the Islamo-fascists and then act all surprised when they start another freaking war." Once again, she was completely pissed off before nine in the morning. She didn't care what the idiots in D.C. said; she would stand with Israel because they are God's people, not to mention that they actually have freedom and respect women. They didn't just give the idea lip service.

Shaking her head at the colossal stupidity of politicians everywhere, she switched the dial to her favorite CD. Forty five minutes later, Catherine pulled into the visitor parking lot in front of

Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital to start yet another first day. Taking the keys from the ignition, she heard her phone beep to let her know that she had email. As she was a little early, and did not really want to go into the building anyway, she pulled the phone from her purse and flipped open the cover. Tapping the email icon revealed that Dan wanted to once again talk to her about some urgent matter of the highest importance. She decided that as a responsible and a career oriented young woman, she could not deal with him now after all. Smirking, she put the phone back into her purse. Dan would just have to wait. Her parents always said that it was important to be early on a first day anyway.

“Well, Daddy, here I go again.” She wondered if he, or anyone for that matter, realized how hard she was trying. She thought that someone should give her some credit for that much at least. I keep getting up, after being knocked on my ass over and over again. The severance isn’t going to stretch much further, and the contract gigs are getting pretty sketchy, too. “They may say that unemployment isn’t over ten percent, but they don’t count me, do they?” She fumed that if you gave up job hunting, worked part time, or worked in a lesser job than you used to have, then you didn’t count. “If the bastards were honest, unemployment would be closer to thirty percent.” With that thought, she checked her look in the rearview mirror. Her warm reddish brown hair was reasonably together so she grabbed her nerve, her wit, and her purse and headed for the main lobby entrance to the hospital.

As she sat alone in a pleasant corner of the onsite cafeteria, Catherine opened her phone to her email. Five messages were now present, as indicated by the numeral 5, highlighted with a small red circle, indicated in the corner of the email icon on her screen. Opening her email she was presented with five nice little blue dots corresponding to the five messages. Listed atop her older messages were the unread emails arranged from newest message to oldest. Leading off was a note from Dan, then Janice, her sister Meg, the earlier email from Dan and an email from Dennis, the local Tea Party leader. Deciding that the curiosity would get to her if she didn’t look, she tapped on the last note from her ex-husband.

Hi Kate, I just got my appraisal back on the house. I told you that I was trying to do the refi thing. Anyway, the appraisal value sucks bad! We need to talk about the arrangement that we came to. If you recall, it was based on an assumption that the market would recover in time. I know you won’t want to hear this, but things are not recovering. Call me.

“Like that is gonna happen dumbass.” Deleting the message brought up Janice’s email.

Sorry I got mad at you on Friday. I know that you are just having a lot of stress and that you didn’t mean that stuff about college kids being coddled and stuff. Don’t worry, I have forgotten all about it. I’m not mad, I promise. Looking forward to seeing you tonight! Hugs, J.

Delete.

Just checking in with you, Sis. Don’t have much time, but wanted to see how you were. I realized that you called me a week ago, and I never got back to you. I am totally loving life here in New York. You really should visit now that you have the time. I have been invited to a Giant’s game next weekend. We will be in a sky box complete with a full bar and catering. Have I mentioned that I love this job? Anyway, let me know if you need to talk. I am always there for my big sister. Love you, Meg.

“Yeah Sis, that’s right. I am not really employed, so I have nothing at all to do but come listen to you talk about yourself and your self-important corporate bigwig friends. Must be nice.”

Delete.

Hey Kate, I have some news to talk to you about. Can we meet for drinks?

Love ya, Dan.

Acknowledging her ex-husband’s attempt, she smiled weakly. “Well, at least you lead with a pleasant opening.”

Delete.

Hey Kate, we are going to do another talk on preparation for a Tea Party group in a couple of weeks. Can you do your readiness training class? Call me, Dennis.

Reply.

Not sure, Dennis. You guys have not been all that accepting of me in the past. Besides, I just started another temp gig. I will let you know. Depends on how late this thing goes every day.

Send.

Shaking her head she got up, looking around for some clue as to where one might dispose of a lunch tray. Seeing Jack Reynolds, her good looking, twenty something cube partner and supervisor from the hospital’s little project office, she forced a grin, acknowledging his help as he pointed to indicate where the trays went. Moving the direction indicated, she dropped off her tray to find Jack waiting for her by the entrance to the cafeteria.

“So, how did you like our elegant and ever-so-well equipped dining opportunity?”

“It’s not too bad. Do you guys always eat here or do you ever go out for lunch?”

“We used to do that more, but lately there is usually just too much work to afford the time required to eat out.” That his mind had just drifted back a year or two was visible on his face. “We used to do that a couple of times a week but layoffs and extra work put the kibosh to the practice.”

Nodding in complete understanding, Catherine walked back to their cubes with him. Once there, she nodded politely and headed for her cube. Reaching her desk, she sat down and clicked on Fox’s website for the latest headlines.

Radioactive Material Stolen in Egypt was the lead story. Catherine really didn’t want to read the story, but knew that she would wonder what happened until she did. She clicked on the link.

Breaking news... Sources associated with the Egyptian government’s Dabaa power plant project admitted today that nuclear material is missing from the plant following continued tension between secular Egyptians and the Muslim Brotherhood. When asked about the theft, leaders with close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood denied that there was any terrorist connection to this crime. IAEA, (International Atomic Energy Agency) officials confirmed that this incident is the second time in the last two years that radioactive material was stolen from the facility. More than twenty people were wounded last week when military police confronted hundreds of angry Egyptian protesters, demanding that constitutional guarantees be reinstated.

Catherine sighed, having seen far too many stories like this, over the past few years. No one seemed to really care. Shaking her head, she wondered how long it would be until some terrorist did something that people did care about.

Chapter 3 Into the Dark

Upon arriving home after her exciting day at First Texas Health Presbyterian, Catherine noticed Janice's yellow hybrid Lexus parked in her gravel driveway. "Why you think that thing is attractive I will never know." Getting out of her jeep, she grabbed her purse and reached back in for her coffee mug from where it rested from the morning drive. Fumbling with her key ring, she singled out the key for her house, and walked towards the door on her small screened-in front porch. Hearing Maggie's urgent barking from the back yard, she smiled. As she reached the screen door on the porch, the front door to the house opened to reveal Janice, smiling, her silky blond hair hanging down, partially obscuring bright green eyes.

"Hi Kate, I am really sorry about the weekend." Catherine could see that Janice had a look on her face that announced that she was back to thinking of her as the woman with which she wanted to make a life. "Kate you are hardnosed and stubborn, and you get ticked off at someone about something way too often, but no one would deny that you are sincere. Anyway, I am glad you are home."

Relieved not to have to put up with the argument that she was expecting, Catherine let her partner help her by taking her purse, keys, and coffee mug as they made their way into the house.

Catherine smiled. "Thanks, Sweetie." She realized as she took the screen-door from Janice, that she was really relieved to see her smiling warmly back at her. "I am really glad that you are here and not angry."

Janice waved away Catherine's comments. "You know, I love your smile. You are beautiful Kate, how can I stay mad? Besides, we are just too great together, if you know what I mean? Still I am insanely jealous that you get the soft curls around your shoulders without even trying and my hair requires actual work to look good."

"Give me a break Janice, you always look great, and you know it."

"Well, I guess, but I just love it when you tell me." Janice winked. "Did your day go ok by the way? You didn't blast anyone this time for not caring sufficiently about your conspiracy theories, I hope."

"No, as a matter of fact, I did not, as you say, blast anyone. Besides, that was last year."

"Ok, you're right. It was mean to bring that up. Oh, by the way, we have company."

Catherine grabbed the worn handle on her front door, waving off Janice's apology with a tired but heartfelt smile as she crossed the threshold into the little house for Maggie's enthusiastic welcome home. Once in the house she noticed her human best friend Drake Sabol sitting on the couch with his feet propped on her coffee table watching the news. He turned it down as she came through the door.

Thinking that Drake really was nice to look at without being over muscled, she sighed and began the relaxation process after work. She had always admired his piercing blue eyes, athletic build, and his easygoing manner. She smiled recalling how they met. He pulled her over the day she moved to Cedar Hill. Having just left the court house following her divorce in 2008, she was a complete mess and blew past a stop sign. He followed her for two blocks to her coworker's house where she had been staying since she had moved out of the house with Dan. Recalling that day always made her feel better about people. Seeing that she was distraught, he was decent enough to take the time to make sure that she was ok.

"So Kate, now that you are home, where is my beer?"

“You are a funny boy, aren’t you? Are you always this cute, or did they teach you that in cop school?”

Drake snorted and shrugged, deflecting Catherine’s look of protest. “Besides, I gave up bringing beers to men a while back, if you will recall. I tried driving stick because I loved my family and wanted to be Daddy’s Little Girl, but let’s face it, men are fun to hang with, but you just can’t live with them and stay sane.”

Laughing, Drake shook his head in mock despair. “If someone would have bet me in college that my number one wing-man would be a hot woman with no appreciation for a man’s unique and adorable qualities, I would have lost for sure.”

“Yeah Drake, that’s me, a freak of nature. I’m an enigma for sure. Not a lot of unemployed, lesbian, Tea Party types, running around bitching about the need for small government, for sure.”

“True enough, but you left out impatient, short tempered, and overly critical of others.”

“Thanks, just what I wanted to hear after a long day’s work. What is on the news by the way?”

“The usual depressing stuff, of course. Some radicals stole radioactive material in Egypt and another ass-wipe killed his entire family in some sort of honor Jihad thing. They were just talking about how the daughter would come to school crying, saying that her father was nuts. He spied on them, followed them, etcetera. It was the usual story; Western culture is corrupt and must be snuffed out.”

Catherine sighed, rolled her eyes and turned the sound back up on the television.

“... Iran’s chief religious figure, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said earlier today that Iran will support any faction, or any nation that confronts the cancer that is Israel! Further, he admonished worshippers at prayer in Tehran to remain vigilant and warned that any military strike by the U.S. or Israel would only make Iran stronger. ‘We have no fear expressing this. The age of Western dominance is now at an end.’”

Catherine snorted her disgust. “Augh, I get sick of hearing these dirt-bags.”

“Yep, and yet most of the country could care less.”

Sighing, she changed the subject. “You staying for dinner aren’t you, Drake?”

He smiled innocently and gave a knowing look of amusement at Janice. “I am not staying long. Ginny had a late interview for the Assistant City Manager’s job around the corner at City Hall. She is nervous and wanted the support, just not too much support, if you know what I mean. She didn’t want me watching over her shoulder, so she dropped me off here until she finished up.”

Catherine nodded. “I knew that she was concerned about things over at Arlington. Is she worried about getting laid off before she can find a new gig? It would be really great if she didn’t have to make the drive to Arlington every morning.”

Janice headed back to the kitchen to look after dinner. “I saw your note about pizza, but I finished early today and went to the store so I could make a nice dinner. How does lasagna sound to you? I made it with hamburger instead of sausage just like you like it.”

Kate glanced towards the kitchen. “I noticed the aroma when I came through the front door. You really didn’t have to do that, but it would be illegal to argue with lasagna. I wouldn’t want Drake to have to arrest me or anything.”

Smiling from the little galley kitchen, Janice continued. "I made a nice salad, and I know that you can smell the garlic bread, too. I tried to convince Drake to stay, but he has yet to agree."

With a small shake of her head, Catherine smiled at her friends. "Let me go change. I will be right back." She headed for her bedroom followed by Maggie, who always demanded to be the center of attention, if possible. She closed the bedroom door and again, thinking of how she met Drake; she chuckled. They bumped into each other again at church a few days after her stop sign encounter, and again the following week, when he witnessed her breaking a teenager's nose as she came out of Penny's. The nimrod tried to take her purse in the parking lot. Drake had just finished his shift, so he took her to dinner to help settle her nerves.

"It really was nice of you to take an interest, Drake" she mumbled to herself, as she recalled the day. It was cool, too, that we both grew up so close together, she thought. You from Weatherford, and me from Mineral Wells, how could we fail? I knew that you got me when you were cool even after you realized that I just was not interested in putting up with a man in bed again. What we have now is a much more relaxed and comfortable friendship than I have ever had.

Returning to the front room, Catherine plopped down beside her friend.

He smiled at her. "So! Do you think that you will be able to afford Ranger's tickets again this year?"

"I would sure like to but honestly, I am not sure. You know I wouldn't go with anyone but you. Besides, Blondie in the kitchen there is pathetic about sports."

As the two couples ate lasagna with hamburger instead of sausage, Janice suppressed a grimace, realizing that she was about to have to endure another Ginny story when Catherine asked her about her interview.

"Actually, I think that it really went well. I was able to relate well to the structure here in Cedar Hill since Arlington also has a city manager as well as a mayor. It didn't hurt that I have lived here since 2009." She looked fondly at her soon-to-be-husband. "It always helps to have a local cop in your corner, right? The biggest issues here, like everywhere, are about the drastic budget shortfalls that everyone is facing."

Everyone but Janice nodded assent with Ginny's comments. Janice smiled inwardly as she noticed that Catherine held her tongue, no doubt because of how well things were going tonight. Drake, on the other hand, was not so restrained.

"Despite the grand pronouncements made by pundits on television and by the nauseating platitudes made by government leaders at all levels, no one who's honest in America today is unaffected by the disastrous economy. Everyone with a job is holding on to it for dear life. I don't know anybody who is about to take any risks, or invest in anything until something changes in the debt picture, both in and out of government."

Janice just sighed and listened. Thinking that it was better to let her mind drift than to point out where they fundamentally didn't understand the drivers behind what was happening every day. She decided that with Catherine in a good mood, maybe she could be enticed to give her a nice massage after Ginny and Drake left. Thinking about her strategy for the evening she effectively avoided much of the tale of civil tedium that was Ginny's interview. Looking on blankly, Janice noticed that Catherine gave her a subtle but sultry look, and blew her a kiss. She

then mimicked a smile as a reminder to remember to be polite. Janice shook her head to acknowledge her lover's request, but she decided that way too many of Catherine's friends viewpoints were just simplistic. It always had to do with an antiquated view of the Constitution or about God's law. Texas had been a reasonably decent place to get sent by the network, at least compared to some third-world location, but the self-righteous stuff here was getting really old. Making up her mind she decided to send another email to Rodger about getting a temporary assignment some place less provincial.

"Are you ok, Janice? You seem a little out of it." Coming out of her reverie, Janice saw that Catherine was eyeing her closely.

She smiled sheepishly in response. "I'm fine. I guess I just went down a rabbit hole about something at work. The network has me on the road a lot in the next few weeks. Anyway, I'm sorry. What were you saying Ginny?"

Ginny looked at her fiancée. "Um, I was asked about police budgets. Drake just asked me how I thought that we should deal with the cost overruns the police were faced with as a result of the constant protests that seem to be a fixture of modern life these days. He said the police budgets were really being strained."

Drake looked fondly at his wife-to-be. "What did you suggest?"

Ginny shook her head sadly. "What is there to say or do, really? I shrugged and said that if a group of people wanted to force a city to spend money for police and the cleanup resulting from a protest, there was not much a city could do. A governmental body cannot really prohibit people from congregating without getting sued for civil rights violations. Anyway, I thought about it for a bit, and said that any answer would have to be based on transferring the costs of the protest onto the protestors. I said that there might be a way to recover the costs in permit fees, etcetera."

Regretting that she was back in the present, Janice rolled her eyes. "Humph! You have got to be kidding me Ginny, really? The Solidarity and Occupy protestors are really struggling, and there really is no way out for them. They don't have Halliburton or the Koch brothers paying their way."

Drake cut her off in mid thought. "You're right; they have Soros, Bloomberg and Buffett."

Janice's voice rising, she replied to his challenge. "Do you think it's fair for the Wall Street ass-holes to make all that money when most Americans are being forced into poverty, or have to live on the street? These people may not be polite and civil but who can blame them? They are being ripped off daily! Come on guys, I am really concerned here. If this country doesn't find a way to have more fairness, there are real problems coming!" Janice looked from face to face, trying to make some sort of connection. "Who can blame the protestors? Back in 1980, less than 30 percent of all jobs in the United States were low income jobs. Today, that number is almost 50 percent! I get that you guys don't see this all the time, but I report on the crap that some greedy bastard does almost every day."

Catherine snorted. "I am sure that government over-regulation has absolutely nothing to do with any of that."

Ginny glanced at Catherine before responding in her usual controlled manner. "I can't say about Cedar Hill, but it occurs to me that most of these jerks, in Arlington at least, are often bussed in and paid to protest. I am not saying all of the Occupy stuff is fake, but at least some of

the outrage, maybe a lot of it, is made up! The truth is that too many people expect others to take care of them.”

Janice saw that Drake patted his fiancée’s hand in an effort to keep a lid on things. He then nodded at her encouragingly. “So what did you tell them, Ginny?”

“I said that maybe we could find a way to charge anyone coming here from outside the city by implementing a fee based on the transportation angle perhaps.”

Truly angry now, Janice replied, her tone ice cold. “You should have asked what the city was doing to help those who are forced to rely on low wage jobs. I am not saying that there are not professional protestors, but I think that we can all agree that people are really hurting. The answer to all of this is to level out the disparity in wealth that exists before things get worse. I was covering a story two weeks ago where a company put a bunch of people out of work just because the greedy owners simply refused to pay them a living wage!”

She didn’t miss that Catherine rolled her eyes again, but she thought that at least she didn’t say anything. Likewise, Drake passed a subtle look to Ginny who finally seemed to realize where she just went and where things were headed.

Ginny’s tone becoming more conciliatory, as she looked down at the table. “Look, nobody wants people that are honestly trying in life, to suffer. Everyone at this table agrees that there are some really greedy people out there in corporations and in government. Actually, there are greedy people all around the world. I was just making a point that there are folks here in the U.S. and internationally too, that are trying to ruin things for everyone.” Surprised by Ginny’s intensity, Janice found herself looking into her eyes as she, too, was trying to make a connection. “I have no problem with government, Janice; I work in government for heaven’s sake. We all just need to find a way past all the hype that we know that the politicians trade in. Anyway, let’s change the subject.” Janice was about to reply when she was interrupted by the obligatory emergency tone, broadcast from the television in the front room. As the tone died away it was replaced by an official announcement.

“An explosion took place moments ago in...” In mid-sentence the lights went out in a wink following a loud pop coming from down the street.

Author's message to Americans from all walks of life.

I hope you enjoyed “Phoenix Republic” as much as I enjoyed writing it. I wrote “Phoenix Republic” because I love my country and desperately want to help find a way for all Americans to find a way to live together.

It is my belief that there is far more that binds us together than separates us. The problem, as I see it, is American culture tends to encourage people to get on a team and support that team, right or wrong. Most of us view our environments through the prism of what our “team” promotes as its core values. My question for you is this:

Do you believe in one-hundred percent of what your team says you should believe?

I'd love to hear from you. Here's how...

If you liked the novel, it would be amazing if you would take a moment to “Like” us on Facebook. Also, if you want to take a look behind the scenes or interact with me and other readers, check out the following links.

Website

Phoenix Republic – The Lone Star Gambit: <http://www.daniellewedgeworth.com/>

Blog

Phoenix Republic Lone Star Press: <http://phoenixlonestarpres.wordpress.com/>

Facebook

Danielle's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/DanielleEWedgeworth>

Twitter

Danielle's Twitter handle: @Danielle_Wedge

Coming in late 2014

***Sovereign's Journey - A story about
the price of freedom.***

The year is 2084. After decades warfare between western nations and the Islamic cultures of the Middle East the savage battle of civilizations is abruptly concluded following a horrifying nuclear exchange.

Exhausted and horrified, Earth's war-weary populations succumb to their increasingly totalitarian government's solution to ban religious practice of any kind.

Now ruthlessly persecuted men and women of faith only have one option to regain their freedom...

They must escape!

