

Chapter One

The fuzzy black-and-white picture showed a young teen, face wasted and body rail thin, pulling away from an older man. The man was tall, well-dressed, Hispanic. He looked as though he was trying to drag her down the street. The flier headline screamed, “Saturday night on Central Avenue: Orlando Garcia likes them young. Is this the man we want running our state?”

Orlando Garcia stared at the flier his aide had handed to him. She said she found it on her lawn that morning. His stomach churned. There had already been the rumors, the attack ads. He’d fought those off, but piece by piece they’d cut at his credibility. He knew that the moment people saw this picture his political future would be over.

It didn’t matter that the photo was not what it seemed, that he was not harming the girl but trying to stop her from another drug overdose. None of that would make any difference now. He wished he could make it disappear, undo its existence, roll back the clock. But one shredded flier made no difference. There were probably hundreds of fliers out there by now, and thousands of eyes would see them—HAD already seen them. That was how the political game worked. Your opponents would seek out a tiny vulnerability, something meant as a good deed 2 rosalie rayburn

in a dark world, and they would forge it into a deadly weapon. He could try to fight back, but he would always see the doubt in people’s eyes. He’d seen that happen before to other candidates. You never got over a smear like that. It was over, everything he’d worked for.

He squeezed his eyes shut and felt dizzy, as if he stood at the edge of a cliff, hearing the voice inside his head praying to a god he no longer believed in to deliver him.

There would of course be no deliverance. When Orlando opened his eyes, the pieces of the poster still littered the floor; what had happened, had happened. He could see no way out. He’d failed them: his family, his supporters. He sat down at his desk, found a notepad sent to him in thanks for his contributions to helping the homeless, and wrote a note to his wife, pleading for her understanding. He wrote a note to his son and daughter, begging them to look after their mother. Then he went out to the garage, got in his car, backed out without looking, drove out of the city, and onto to the freeway, speeding south through a night sharp with stars, heading toward the canyon. Yes, that would be the place.