

The Fourteenth of September

Excerpt

Rita Dragonette

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A few hours later, they were let out in a parking lot in Washington.

“Listen up,” the driver said. “We’re at the corner of Fourteenth and Constitution, just across from the National Museum of American History. See it? I’m leaving from this precise spot at six o’clock. That’s exactly seven hours. So be here or stay here.”

They filed out, amped up with excitement and sleep deprivation, carrying bulky signs and milling around Wizard, who had taken charge. He herded them all like little kids to make sure everyone had a hold of a portion of banner, a poster, or handfuls of leaflets, ready to hand out to the crowds. Judy declined a high-profile spot with the banner and reached for the leaflets.

“Hurry up,” he called to everyone, as most of the CIU group merged into the larger swarm of people surging toward what they assumed was the march origination site. Half-thrilled, half-terrified, Judy pictured her mother watching television and catching maybe the edge of her sleeve or an inch of her hair, and she would know. She probably already knew. Maggie probably told her. Or she just sensed it. She wouldn’t be surprised to see her on the grandstand watching the parade, pointing Judy out to the military police, telling them she deserved to be thrown in prison.

David clutched the sign he had carefully selected as the one most likely to end up on camera, the one she designed with the barbed wire around a stop sign, STOP THE WAR: CIU. He kept craning his neck in every direction. She knew he was looking for Lori, or even Donnell, but she didn’t see either of them. As a group, they continued to follow the crowd and waited for

Wizard and David to tell them what to do. They knew it had to be happening soon. It was freezing. Judy put on her hat and sunglasses even though there wasn't a camera in sight. Soon, they stopped moving.

“What’s going on?”

“Why did we stop?”

“Is this where we’re supposed to be?”

“Don’t know.”

“Who does?”

There were shrugs all around. They started to jump up and down to keep warm. One of the guys lifted Vida onto his shoulders so she could get a better look.

“I just see people, miles of people. I don’t see any line or starting point or anything.”

“You call this organization?” Wizard whined. “Hell, where are the march marshals? The signs? *Something!* We’re just standing here.”

David was pacing. “I’m going to find out what’s going on.” He didn’t want to give up his sign but couldn’t get through the crowd with it. He finally gave it to Wil, demanding assurance that he would get it back as soon as he returned.

“Listen,” Wil said, cocking his ear. There was a faint noise of loudspeakers, though they couldn’t hear any actual words.

“Wait here,” David said. “Vida, stay up there as long as you can so I’ll be able to find you.” He and Wizard headed for the sound.

They stood around and hugged each other to keep warm in the November damp. Judy wished she had worn her heavy coat and not this thin jacket. The guy set Vida down every so

often to rest but then lifted her right back up again. Judy kept moving so he wouldn't ask her to take a turn, a sure photo-op on the evening news.

Slowly the dense wall of people began to loosen up a bit. They picked up the signs they were resting against their legs. The banner holders got in position, one team on one side, one on the other, carefully trying not to tear the paper as they turned.

"Keep it rolled," Wil said, clinging to one of the corners. "Don't open it till we get in position."

They waited longer. Their arms started to ache, but they didn't want to put anything down, sure they would be on the move in a minute. Judy was chilled to her core. At one point, they began to realize the crowd was spreading out and on the move, but heading in the wrong direction. People pushed past them, knocking them off their ground.

Suddenly, David broke through the crowd.

"It's over. We fucking missed it," he said, beet-red and fuming.

Wizard came around behind him. "The permit ran out before even half of us could march."

"What do you mean, ran out?" Vida asked.

"There was only a three-hour permit. After that, the DC pigs wouldn't let it keep going, even with so many people who obviously had yet to march," Wizard explained.

"Fuck. All this way and we can't even march?" Wil said.

Judy was disappointed and relieved at the same time.

Someone bumped into David, and he pushed back at him vigorously.

"Watch it."

"Watch it yourself, asshole."

David grabbed the guy by his jacket and was about to punch him. Wizard took David by his arm and spun him back around.

“What the hell?” He aimed his fist at Wizard but caught himself.

“Fuck. Fuck.” He threw the punch into his own left palm. “Let’s find the SMC Summit.” He grabbed his poster from Wil and headed off into the crowd, Wizard right behind him, struggling to keep up.

Without the need to hold their ground, the rest of them were propelled along with the crowd. Judy tried to hang on to Wil’s sleeve so they wouldn’t get separated, but it was useless. She kept her eye on his familiar jacket, so she would have some sense of her bearings, glad he hadn’t bought that new winter coat. She saw Vida and headed toward her, but the crowd swallowed her up. They slowed but kept moving steadily away from the march site, she wasn’t sure where. They were sometimes on the sidewalk, sometimes on the grass or the street.

“How many people do you think there are?” she finally asked someone next to her.

“It’s a million, easy,” one voice said.

“No, it’s at least two,” another said.

Judy felt tremendously excited, at last. She wasn’t sure how much of it was because— with the march over—she was now safe from cameras, and how much was the sheer force of numbers in the city. They could see one famous white building after another—the Capitol, the National Gallery of Art—like a series of postcards of sights she had seen all her life. When they came to a cross street, she looked sideways and caught her breath. There were thousands of bodies, packed wall to wall, building to building, the width and length of the street, all moving in the same direction. She had never seen so many people. Not on television, not anywhere. Where was Wil? He had to see this.

“Trade ya?” a cute blond guy said.

“What?”

“Your button.” He pointed to the blue-and-white CIU/SMC button on her chest.

“How about this one?” He unpinned a green SMC button with a white reverse-out of the state of Texas.

“Hurry,” he said, as she fumbled pinning it on her jacket. “We don’t want to miss the rally.” He pointed down a long thoroughfare, covered with bobbing heads, all walking toward the Washington Monument. “Can’t you hear it?”

She could, slightly, and looked around for Wil’s jacket, or anyone she knew. She didn’t see a familiar face, but it didn’t matter. Everyone was her friend now. They called to her to follow them.

“Where are you from?”

“Chicago,” she found was easiest to answer. CIU’s little cornfield town didn’t register.

“You?”

“Boston.”

“California.”

“Did you get to march?” asked a girl walking beside her.

“No,” she said.

“I missed it, too,” said a guy on her other side.

“Doesn’t matter,” said yet another girl. “Didn’t you hear? We shut the city down, proved we’re stronger and more powerful than they are. Running out that permit was the best thing that could have happened. Who knew?”

Judy hadn't thought of it that way, but of course they were right. She wondered if David would buy that. It was the biggest protest march in American history, people were saying. At the same time, no one would ever know she was there. It was the best of both worlds she'd been hoping for. There was no reason to worry. She took off her glasses and hat and put them in her pocket.

The crowd slowed as they started up the hill to the Washington Monument, and eventually she sat down with everyone around her to listen to the music. She hugged her knees and knew she would never have forgiven herself if she hadn't come.

"Oh, wow. Do you believe this?" Vida suddenly appeared, plopped herself on the grass and was joined by Wizard and about a dozen others from the bus. The blond guy with the buttons sat down next to her.

"Your friend tells me you're Judy Blue Eyes," he said.

She lowered her eyes but was pleased. Who needed David? They huddled against each other in the cold, flashing peace signs and waving to everyone. They couldn't exactly hear any music or see anything, but people were saying Peter, Paul and Mary, Country Joe and the Fish, and other big acts were there. The button guy offered her some of the peanut butter cheese crackers he had in his pocket and told her he was a psych major and a Pisces. She told him she was science and a Virgo. She didn't tell him she wasn't particularly attracted to blonds but what the hell, David had slept with someone covered in zits.

"The scientific and the cerebral, compatible signs," he said. "Solid." He bumped his fist against hers, and she tried not to laugh. She had seen it done on *Mod Squad* but not in real life. But it didn't matter, nothing mattered right now other than what they were there for.

A wave of sound came over them, and they realized everyone was singing: “Give peace a chance.”

They joined in and sang it over and over, soon swaying in unison from side to side, smiling from ear to ear. She wondered if Donnell was bored with it, somewhere.

“This is how a movement begins, people,” a voice said from a megaphone, “and how a war ends.” People started cheering and singing, and singing and cheering, and even crying. Judy found herself choking up but didn’t want the button guy to laugh at her, so she held it in until she noticed tears in his eyes. She used her scarf to wipe his cheeks, and he kissed her, first slightly and then deep. He was a much better kisser than David.

He sat behind her so he could wrap both his arms and his legs around hers. They kept each other warm until Vida tugged at Judy’s arm.

“I have to pee,” she said. “Come on. The Smithsonian’s open. We can go there.”

But before they had gone far, Vida saw Donnell.

“I’ll catch up with you later,” she said and ran to him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Judy kept on toward the museum. She was anxious for a mirror and a sink. She realized she had kissed the button guy even though she hadn't brushed her teeth since she left CIU, and she felt a sore bump next to her nose and was worried she was beginning to look like Lori.

Entering the Smithsonian, she found herself under the Wright brothers' *Flyer*, a small fragile airplane suspended from the ceiling. It looked like a toy.

She joined a long line of girls and settled in for a wait, grateful for the warmth of the museum's heat reaching deep into her chilled bones. A guy got in line behind her. She pointed out that it was the line to the ladies' room.

"I know," he said. "They turned all the downstairs restrooms into women's and moved the men's upstairs. See the signs?" Judy followed his pointing finger and saw that one door had a metal plate with the word LADIES, and the second had a hand-lettered paper sign taped over what was obviously the men's plate that also spelled out LADIES.

"But the line's too long up there, and you've got urinals down here that aren't being used." He pointed to the door with the makeshift sign. "I don't care who sees me."

His long hair was clumped behind his ears, but he had eyes like James Taylor.

Guy after guy got in line behind them, everyone thinking it was tremendously funny.

"Can you believe the security in here?" one of them said. "Museum guards, DC police, even the military. What do they think? We're going to trash the Star-Spangled Banner or maybe take off in the Wright brothers' plane and fly down the mall and crash the Capitol dome?"

Judy looked up the full expanse of the multistory atrium, past the wings of the plane, and saw them patrolling every level, with many stationed along the railings, scanning the crowd.

She teased “James” about how embarrassed he would be if he had made it all the way to Washington to march against the war only to get arrested for using the ladies’ restroom, but he pointed out that they would both be in there, so she would probably get arrested, too. She hadn’t thought of that.

“Don’t worry, though,” he said. “We might get hassled, but so far they aren’t arresting anyone. Just checking IDs to be sure you aren’t an instigator like at the Democratic Convention.”

“That’s no problem for me,” Judy said, “I left my ID at home, even my driver’s license.”

“Bad move,” he said. “You draw more attention to yourself if you don’t have it. Then they *have* to take you in and check you out.”

Judy froze. She looked up at all the uniforms, watching as the restroom line snaked through the lobby, changing sexes as it went like some exotic reptile. At some point, it was sure to attract their attention.

Part of her knew she should leave and not take a chance. But it was almost her turn, and now she really did have to go.

She was glad to finally get into the bathroom, but just as she was about to sit down she heard an authoritarian male voice yelling, “Any women in here, get out *now*.”

Any women? Surely, he meant any men, Judy thought.

“I said out. There are cops out here. Any women not out by the time I count to three will get arrested.” She stopped mid-pee, and pulled up her pants. They were tight and didn’t come up easily.

“One . . .”

She kept at it, and then her scarf got caught in her zipper. She couldn't believe it. She had just joked with James about how he could be arrested and now here she was, with her pants down, her scholarship at stake, her mother waiting to say I told you so—

“Two . . .”

She fumbled with the scarf. Two seconds! Her future passed before her eyes: dishonorable discharge, a lifetime as a secretary. Would the army put her in jail for being AWOL? She should have listened to what Pete was trying to tell her about that.

Finally, the threads of her scarf broke loose. She zipped up her pants, swung open the stall door, and ran for the door, noticing it no longer had the paper sign, just the metal plate that said, very clearly, GENTLEMEN.

She pushed past the guys in line and made it to the exit just as the voice said, “Three.”

She felt a vice clench over her arm. She spun around and stopped dead in front of a cop whose huge hand was holding her entire bicep like it was her wrist.

“I believe the man said ‘Three’ before you cleared that door.”

Next thing she knew, she was in and out of a paddy wagon, marched down a long brightly lit hall, and sitting in a tiny, windowless room at a table next to a sobbing girl of about her age. Another demonstrator, she assumed. She was about to ask, when in one continuous motion, a cop burst in, took two long steps to the table they were sitting behind, threw down a yellow legal pad, and barked at the girl.

“Name.”

He issued the order with pencil poised, expecting immediate obedience.

Judy was glad she didn't have her ID after all. She didn't think you actually had to give them your name. That would be like incriminating yourself, wouldn't it? Or did you have to give

them your name, and it was the rest you didn't have to say anything about? Even without the army situation, she had rights, didn't she?

What was this girl going to do? Judy wondered, turning to her. Right now, all she was doing was gurgling.

"Eyes straight ahead," he said to Judy.

"Name." He said it again louder to the girl, who flinched from its force but didn't move from her protective position, crouched low in her metal chair, arms below the table top, one hand cupping an elbow, supporting it as she clenched a chunk of hair just below her ear. She pulled at it, just like Marsha.

She was going to crack. Judy could see it coming, and then it would be harder for Judy, too. We both plead the fifth, she imagined saying. Could you do that in a police station, or do you have to wait until you're in court? Shouldn't they be offered a lawyer? A phone call? Who would she call? She certainly couldn't call home. Pete?

Whack. The cop slammed one hand down on the pad, the other still hovering with the pen. Name, rank, serial number, Judy thought. She could do it. That would blow his mind.

The girl flinched again. How much smaller could she get?

The cop's move altered the way the light hit him, harsh overhead fluorescents flashing on silver everywhere—badge, belt, pen, gun. It was blinding. Judy bet it was all on purpose as an interrogation technique. She couldn't believe it. Not any of it. How could she have been this stupid? Spending all this effort trying not to call attention to herself and now getting busted and facing a federal crime for using the wrong bathroom.

She could tell the cop wouldn't wait much longer. He wasn't angry, just expressionless. How did they do that? Judy swore his eyelids weren't even moving. The girl made a stifled noise, and Judy hoped she wouldn't cry. He didn't look like that would work on him at all.

She wondered where they put everyone else? The paddy wagon had been full. The first thing they did was grab IDs. That's how they had isolated her. The girl must not have one, either.

"No," Judy said, a little surprised at the sound of her own voice.

"What did you say?" He immediately switched his attention to her. His eyes were gray, silver-gray, like everything else. For the first time he was mad, kind of shocked, too, she thought, but definitely angry.

"We don't have to tell you our names."

The girl sat up, fearful but alert.

The cop stared at Judy. She felt sweat raining down her sides and brought her elbows in close to sop it up. She waited for him to quote regulations or the Constitution—or *something*. That's when she would ask for the lawyer. Yes, that's what she would do.

But he slammed down his pen, picked it up with the pad in another single motion, and was out the door. They were sealed up again, the stale air seeming to reel around them as if a locomotive had just zoomed through. The girl grabbed Judy's hand. It was dry as a bone; Judy's was hot and wet.

"Thank you," she said. "Just so you know. I would have told him my name. If it weren't for you, I would have, and my parents would have yanked me out of school and thrown away the key."

"I wouldn't get too excited. This isn't over yet."

"What do you think is going to happen now?"

“No idea, but I don’t think it’s going to be good.”

Judy felt like she had been trapped in the room for hours. Or did it just seem like that? No clock. Her shirt was soaked. She had a bus to catch.

After way too long a time, the door opened again and a short female officer entered. She said she had to search them. She was as nice as the other cop was hard. It wasn’t much of a search, waistbands and tight spots. Judy was so relieved, she actually smiled at the policewoman as she ran her finger under the elastic of her soaking-wet bra explaining that they just have to do this sort of thing.

“Okay,” she said when she was finished and held the door open.

“Okay?” Judy asked.

“Okay. You can go.”

“Go?”

“You’re free to go.”

The girl was already up and moving toward the door.

“I’m sorry you had to wait so long,” the officer said. “I was off duty, and they needed a female officer to search you.”

Judy wanted to say, “That’s it?” but didn’t dare.

Once outside the station, the girl was suddenly assertive. “They were just giving us a hard time, the pigs,” she said. “I bet they would have arrested us if they could have. God bless the Fifth Amendment.”

She and Judy hugged, as if they actually knew each other, and separated as quickly as possible.

Judy checked her watch. It was 5:40. She had twenty minutes to get to the bus. She asked for directions to Fourteenth and Constitution, put her sunglasses back on, and pulled the hat out of her pocket. She was fairly certain no one was following her, but she couldn't take a chance or lead the cops to her friends. She ran for the bus.

She was one of the first back and was glad not to have to talk to anyone. She sat in a corner of the bumper seat at the very back of the bus, sank down with her feet on the top of the seat in front of her, and tried to calm her breathing. Too close, much too close a call. She couldn't take another one. At this point she wondered if she might even want to be a nurse, maybe in the army, and was just being a jerk fighting her mother about it because it had been her idea, or if she genuinely wanted to give it all away. It would be comforting, in a way, just to go with it. No money worries, all of school worked out, no decisions until she was twenty-five. Right now, that sounded good.

Look what she did when she had to make decisions on her own. Her mother was right. She was an immature, ungrateful little punk who was biting the hand that fed her. What was she thinking? She just had to keep her head down now, and figure it out later. All she wanted was to get back to CIU as fast as possible.