

## Chapter 1

At first she wasn't sure he'd seen her. She was small after all. If she could stand up straight, she might be five feet tall, but she could not stand up straight, could barely stand at all. She cleared her throat. "I have an appointment with Grace Belgrade, an interview, actually." She handed her card to the receptionist, a young man with short spiky hair and big glasses with thick black rims. Abigail Bannister, CEO and founder of GSG Gimp Serving Gimps since 2014, it read.

Smiling, the man raised the one-moment finger as he checked the messages on his smartphone. Satisfied that he'd missed nothing important, he dialed the office phone. "Ms. Bannister is here to see you. Okay, sure." He hung up the phone. "She'll be with you in a moment. If you'll just have a seat." His face reddened, but he barreled on. "I mean, well, you're already seated aren't you, so anyway, she'll be right with you." He smiled again. The guy had amazing dimples.

Abby, as she liked to be called, spun her wheelchair around, then whirred toward the farthest corner where she wouldn't be in the way.

Her cellphone, which she kept in a Guatemalan pouch hung around her neck, chimed the first three bars of Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup>. She grasped the phone awkwardly, willing her left hand to behave. Squinting at the incoming number, she fetched her reading glasses from the top of her head where they rested in a nest of curly brown hair. It was a text from Robert, her oldest and best friend.

She adjusted her glasses. *Don't be nervous*, the text read. *Lunch? Meet u Cup, 11:30.*

Smiling, she typed in a single letter, K, and put the phone on vibrate. It was sweet of Robert to think of her, but Abby wasn't nervous. Why should she be? This was an interview, just a little personal interest thing about GSG for a spot on the local evening news. Presumably, she would know the answers to all the questions, since she was the founder and CEO of the company.

She shoved her cellphone and glasses back into her pouch, then absently massaged her left earlobe with its gold heart earring. When she had her ears pierced as a college freshman, she'd chosen puffy little hearts with screw backs so she'd never have to remove them. They were remnants of her youthful optimism: She often thought she should have them replaced with something more appropriate. What would that be? Two little crabs, perhaps? Or maybe a pair of tiny scorpions?

Abby combed the fingers of her good hand, which she referred to as the Mighty Claw, through her curls, then pushed herself into a more upright position with the Hammer, as she called her well-muscled right arm. Should she have worn lipstick? She had to chuckle at the notion that lipstick would make a difference. Her spine, twisted by scoliosis, left her rib cage resting on her hip. Her legs, atrophied by disuse, were nearly immobile, sometimes spastic and totally unreliable.

Miraculously, the oxygen deprivation at birth that had so scrambled her brain's messages to her limbs had not harmed the apparatus that controlled speech. Abby had a nice, crisp, clear voice and loved music. Her playlist was eclectic, ranging from Mexican banda to Yo-Yo Ma, but Diana Krall was her favorite; actually Abby wanted to be Diana Krall.

In college she'd taken piano lessons – there was lots of music written for one hand. She'd splurged on a keyboard so she could practice at home. Later there had been voice lessons – one

part to ease her anxiety and loneliness, one part to feed her lifelong fantasy of becoming the first pop star on wheels.

Her teacher had been one of her clients, a former local musical theater type who'd fallen off the roof while fixing his cooler. He was left paralyzed from the chest down, and though he no longer had the breath to sing professionally, he had been an excellent teacher. Abby, the queen of unrequited love, had fallen in lust with him even though he was married.

Despite the distraction of her infatuation, she'd learned from him that breath was everything. Once she'd internalized that, her life became easier. Getting in and out of bed was easier. Dressing was easier. Most importantly, she'd found that breath was essential to keeping at bay the tears that so often threatened to expose her.

Anxiety rising, Abby looked at her watch. She'd been waiting less than five minutes. To calm herself, she pulled out the newly purchased paperback from the side pocket of her wheelchair. This one she had dubbed the Chariot because it had more power than her last one, which she'd called Old Bessie.

The book, *How to Craft Your Life – Strategies for Joy and Fulfillment*, was a slender one. She'd never heard of the author, but she liked the title. Despite the fact that she had completed her MBA and owned a business and a home, Abby was both surprised and disappointed to discover that those accomplishments had brought her little fulfillment and even less joy. Chapter 1 in the book promised to help her find her luck. She turned to it now.

*Often what seems like luck, Dale J. Nagery had written, is simply recognizing an opportunity when it presents itself. Sometimes opportunity comes in the guise of misfortune.*

Abby considered that for a moment. Had she ever in her life experienced a misfortune that later revealed itself as an opportunity? She couldn't think of a single instance. Perhaps she needed to be more observant.

The door opened and a slender, perfectly groomed woman strode over to her corner. Abby tucked the book back into the Chariot's side pocket.

"Ms. Bannister." The woman held out a hand, which looked a lot older than her face. "I'm Gracie Belgrade."

For a moment, Abby's courage faltered. Her knit tunic – she always wore stretchy knits – had ridden up over her flaccid thighs. She was suddenly conscious of her slouchy and disheveled appearance, her ugly black shoes with their Velcro straps. She hoisted herself up with her good arm then extended the Mighty Claw. "Very pleased to meet you," she said with more enthusiasm than she felt.

She stuffed the black knit sweater she'd needed this morning into the side of her chair then connected her cellphone to her earbuds. It was a typical early October morning for Tucson, dry, sunny, hot. Abby exited the TV station, then headed down Elm Street to the sweet, jazzy sound of Diana Krall and through the quiet neighborhood with its older homes, some rehabbed, others awaiting transformation as new, more affluent folks moved into the area. From a stanchion at the back of her chair flew a series of banners. The top one was the Stars and Stripes, beneath that the eagle and snake of Mexico, then, just for the hell of it, the rainbow flag. The trio snapped smartly as she sped down the sidewalk to the streetcar stop by the university. Although the Chariot was capable of doing 10 miles an hour, safety, her own and those sharing the sidewalk, dictated a more sedate pace. At her approach, passersby, students mostly, stepped aside even as they pretended not to notice her. Though this was standard, today it grated.

As she waited for the streetcar she replayed the interview in her mind. She had expected to be asked about the services GSG provided, maybe a few questions about her background, but it had taken a sudden, personal turn. Well, at least she'd been honest and straightforward. Honesty, of course, was not always the best of policies.

Abby whirred through the doors of the historic Hotel Congress. Built in 1919, it was once the playground of the notorious gangster John Dillinger. Despite the great ceiling fans that beat the air year-round, a faint but unmistakable odor of disinfectant wafted through the dim lobby, belying its faded elegance.

Robert was waiting. He waved, then lurched toward her, knees collapsing into each other in a great impersonation of Jerry Lewis doing a great impersonation of a guy with cerebral palsy. He was classic C.P. His speech was halting and sometimes unintelligible to the casual listener, but he drove a sporty red Chevy Camaro equipped with hand controls and a knob on the steering wheel, was a well-remunerated engineer at Raytheon, lived in a nice condo and had a loving family that accepted him unconditionally for who and what he was. In other words, he had most of the things that Abby did not.

He involuntarily grimaced. "How'd it... go?" The "d" got swallowed, as did the final "o," and his voice sounded as though he were being garroted. This was Robert's normal.

"It went. You can see how well on the 5 o'clock news."

Robert looked her up and down, scowled. "Is that ... what ... you wore?"

"Yes, this is what I wore. This is what I always wear. What's wrong with it?"

"It's okay... but a little... makeup would have... helped."

"Makeup, Robert?"

"Yeah ... a little lipstick. Appearance ... matters, Abby."

"To you." Robert was also the board president of GSG, for which she was truly grateful, but sometimes he asserted his opinions into the little holes in Abby's confidence, and it made her want to smack the guy.

"You seem... pissed," he said, eyes swimming behind thick glasses that magnified their hazel color and gave him a misleadingly dreamy appearance.

"Not really," she lied. She turned, then whirred through the lobby toward the back entrance and the patio where there was wheelchair access to The Cup, the hotel's funky/hip restaurant.

Head wagging, Robert pitched alongside her in silence. Abby had a little problem with depth perception, and neither one could negotiate well while talking. Given her black mood, this was a good thing.

Abby picked at her cauliflower taco, while Robert tackled a pulled pork sandwich, not a pretty sight. Between them was a platter of sweet potato fries.

"So how did the blind date go the other night?" Abby asked.

Robert put the sandwich down, took a couple of paper napkins from the stack the waiter had automatically provided and wiped his hands and mouth. "Didn't." His face cracked, and he began to laugh. "I just... stood there like ah, ah, ah. Couldn't talk. Picture Frank ... en... Stein crossed with... God... zilla."

Abby had to laugh. Sometimes that was the only thing either of them could do. "Well, it took guts. I'll say that."

“Guts?” He paused, gearing up for the next phrase. “More like … stupid … dity. You should … have seen … the look … on his face.” He resumed the sandwich challenge.

Biting into a fry, she nodded. “You never know, you might have clicked.” For both of them, “clicking” with someone was a quest on the scale of the Holy Grail, daunting, dangerous and ultimately just as elusive.

“You look sharp today,” she added by way of consolation. And it was true. Robert always looked sharp, buttoned down, spanking clean. His face, like the rest of him, was lean and angular, handsome even, when he wasn’t trying to talk or eat. When they were in high school they had vowed to lose their virginity before graduation. There were no takers so they had turned to each other, determined to get the deed done. At the time, sex wasn’t an act of passion or even compassion, but rather a job that needed to be done, a job that had been both awkward and painful. Shortly afterwards, Robert announced that he was gay. Still, their friendship endured despite, or maybe because of that, and the fact that in so many ways they were complete opposites. Robert was fiscally conservative, she was … well, she had no real fiscal to conserve. He was a Republican, she a Democrat. She was, well, emotional, whereas Robert was analytical. And he was fanatically neat.

“So are you going to try the online dating thing again?” She asked. “I mean it’s better than the bar scene, right?”

He wrestled his mouth into a frown and shook his head.

“You’re not going to give up the quest, are you?” A suppressed smile twitched the corners of her mouth. “So have you thought about volunteering?” A line she knew he’d heard a dozen times from friends and family.

“Not … funny.”

Abby pointed to the front of his crisp, white shirt where a blob of sauce had landed. Hands dripping, he put his sandwich down with resignation and took a couple of swipes at the spot with a napkin, then shrugged. Abby knew from experience that a brand new shirt still in the bag always lay on the back seat of the Camaro for just such emergencies.

He flung the soiled napkin aside. “It’s hard… putting myself out there.” You should try it… Abby. When was the last time… you made an effort to get… a date? How long … has it been since you had… a relationship?”

“Pardon?”

“Sex. How long has it been?”

“Are we talking sex in the technical Clinton definition as in ‘I did not have sex with that woman’ or the broader definition.”

“You… define it.”

“Quite honestly I haven’t had any since….” She shook her head. “I can’t remember.” This was not true. It was over a year ago. They’d met in her Conversational Spanish class. She came; he did not. She’d assumed it was first-time jitters, but when he didn’t call or return her texts, she figured his apparent interest must have been driven by curiosity or worse, by pity. Perhaps he hadn’t been prepared for the reality of a woman made crabbed and crooked by cerebral palsy. It must have been something like that because he never came back to class. His loss. The class had been very helpful. Her Spanish had improved a lot.

Robert wiped the last of the sauce off his hands. “You know … what I mean?” he was saying.

“Um?”

“You weren’t … listening.”

"Sorry I was distracted by this ... canker sore kind of thing. I've tried saltwater but I ..." Abby could tell by his expression, which was no expression at all, that he wasn't buying it, but that's one of the reasons they were still friends. They didn't call each other on their lies. She handed him her napkin and pointed to his chin. "So what were you saying?"

He swiped at his chin. Screwing up his face, he said, "I was saying that it hurts... like hell. Admit it. You know the problem ... is public ... perception. Gimps aren't supposed to have sex. You're a good... looking woman when you... want to be. But let's... face it. People see that ... chair and it never... occurs to them that you might want to... get laid."

Abby laughed then. "Jesus, Robert, you put it so delicately." She pointed to his chin once again.

He took another swipe. "Okay?"

"Got it"

Robert looked at his watch, a big, gold expensive looking thing. "Gotta get back ... to work." He motioned the waitress for the checks.

"You go ahead. I'm not quite finished."

The waitress laid the checks on the table. "Whenever you're ready, guys."

Robert glanced at each. "I'll get the tip. You're too cheap."

"I'm not cheap. I'm fair."

"You're fair ... ly cheap." Chuckling at his own joke, he fished out a five from his wallet and put it on the table. He patted her head. It was easier than trying to land a kiss on her cheek. "Take care."

"You too, Robert, and I am not cheap."

She stuffed another fry in her mouth. It was cold, and she pushed the plate away with finality. Robert's take on the perception, or rather misperception, of people in wheelchairs was true, at least in her experience. Because she was small, people inevitably viewed her as "the girl in the wheelchair." She imagined as the years progressed she'd become the "little old lady in the wheelchair." Never would anyone see her simply as a woman, a sexual being, and no amount of lipstick was going to alter that.

Thanks to a grant she'd written for the owner of the building to make it wheelchair accessible, the automatic glass door opened at her approach. Abby whirred through and down the narrow hallway. The old brick building was a two-story converted warehouse on the fringes of the downtown arts district. The offices facing Sixth Street were pretty upscale with large windows and high ceilings. She rented an office, one of a warren of windowless spaces entered from the rear of the building. It wasn't much bigger than a cubbyhole, but GSG could afford it, just, and it was located directly across from the bathroom. Best of all, it was close enough to her house to buzz there in her chair, and it was home to Tucson Acupuncture Cooperative, where she indulged in weekly treatments that eased the neuropathy in her legs and feet.

The downside of the place, in addition to its dark and shabby interior, was that one of the spaces was occupied by the Church of the Red Word and Pastor Glorie Praise, a name she assumed when she accepted Christ as lord and master. The woman kept cheerfully pressuring her to join the congregation, which was a bit insulting in and of itself. It was as if Pastor Glorie naturally assumed that she couldn't possibly have anything better to do on Wednesday and Friday nights or Sunday mornings than hang out with a bunch of upwardly mobile homeless people and toothless ex meth addicts. Fact was, she really didn't have anything better to do, but Glorie had no way of knowing that. Moreover, Abby didn't believe that the red words in the

Bible were actually Christ's and was fairly sure there was no God. Certainly, he/she'd never lifted a finger on her behalf, even after years of fervent prayers on the part of her child self and her mother's very Catholic Aunt Sally. The old lady, a spinster and a successful businesswoman, had been devoted to Abby's mother. She would have gladly paid for a visit to Lourdes so Abby could take the waters had it not been for her father's equally fervent faith in modern medicine. By the time she was 12, she'd had 14 surgeries to improve her mobility. In retrospect, Abby wondered if all those surgeries had done more harm than good. Well, she'd never know and seldom gave it any thought.

There was a second set of automatic doors opening into Abby's small office. Abby whirred through, happy and a bit surprised to see that Rita Sotomayor was actually at work. The stout Mexican matron, her silver hair freshly dressed, was called Rita by everyone but her 91-year-old mother, who called all of her daughters *mija* – daughter in Spanish – because she could no longer remember who was who. *Mija*, was an inclusive term of affection that didn't actually require one to be a daughter, so it worked well for all of the old lady's female relatives and any friends she might have that were under 85.

Rita, who at the moment was sitting at the desk drinking tea and perusing the Arizona Daily Star, tripled as office manager, accountant and plumber – the building's old toilet had a tendency to overflow at the least provocation. She'd lost a leg above the knee and a foot to a bacteria resistant infection she acquired while in the hospital for a hernia repair, then a husband to a younger woman, but was otherwise fully intact and indispensable. She put the paper down now. "*Hola, mijas.* So how did it go?" she asked, dunking the tea bag in and out of her cup.

"I should have been wearing lipstick apparently."

"No, really. How did it go?"

"You can see for yourself on the 5 o'clock news. What's been going on here this morning?"

"Not much." Rita took a sip of tea and continued to dunk. "I'm trying out this new Karma tea. Each bag has a little saying on the paper thingy, so it's kind of like opening a fortune cookie." She paused to read the tag. "*You will always live happy if you live with heart.*"

"Yeah, that plus a million dollars would probably do it." Abby hung her sweater on a sawed-off coat rack standing in the corner of the tiny office. "What else is going on?"

"Your brother wants you to call." She arched one finely shaped brow. Unlike her hair, her eyebrows were dark brown. They accented her eyes, which were sometimes brown, sometimes green, but always warm and wide open. The woman missed nothing.

"Josh called? That can't be good. What else?"

"And Stewart."

"What did he need?"

"I have no idea. Couldn't understand a word, but I told him you'd give him a call when you got in."

Stewart, a stroke victim, paid Abby to handle each piece of business he absolutely had to conduct over the phone. "Okay. Anything else?"

Rita drained the last of her tea and set the cup on the counter. "Susie, that cabrona from Lane's, says she's got a first floor, wheelchair accessible condo just on the market if you know anyone who might be interested."

Abby had to smile. Rita had a dustup with Susie when the woman tried to wriggle out of sharing a sales commission. She'd never gotten over it, but Abby couldn't afford such grievances. She'd learned all the ins and outs of financing when buying her home. Next she got

her real estate license. Now she worked with other agents around town, and GSG got 3 percent of the 7 percent commission on all sales initiated by Abby. Then if the house needed to be remodeled to make it wheelchair accessible, GSG got 10 percent above cost to organize the workers and oversee the project.

Rita gathered up her newspaper and purse, then shrugged her shoulders into the sweater that hung on the back of her chair. "Come on, Honey," she called, and a little dog, part Chihuahua, part something hairy, bounded out from under the desk and onto her lap. The dog sported a little vest that declared her a service dog, but she was just a mutt that Rita had picked up on the street, the vest a ruse that allowed her to go everywhere that Rita went. "And don't forget the non-medical care training for Pima Help at Home."

"Right, 10 o'clock tomorrow." The trainings, along with fees for services GSG provided, paid both Rita's and her meager salaries. Of course, Abby was GSG. She only hoped that one day she'd be able to give herself a raise so she could afford some of her own services. She had a screened-in back porch off the kitchen. When she bought the house, she had visions of pots filled with flowers, a place where she could sit with friends, maybe even have a dinner party in fine weather, but the floorboards were termite infested. She had replaced the five steps that went down to the yard with a ramp, but that was all she could afford. Each time she went out to her backyard she crept around the edges of the deck fearing the floor might collapse under the weight of her 200-pound wheelchair and she'd fall into the crawl space below. She'd love to hire herself to organize a work crew to rebuild it, but for now its main function was home to her cat's litter box.

"So, do you want me to pick you up tomorrow and take you to the training?"

Rita was also her personal chauffeur. "No. It's downtown. I can manage."

"Okay *mija*, you're on your own." Rita blew her a kiss and she and Honey buzzed out the door.

Abby took her place behind the desk. Who should she call first? On one level, talking to Stewart would be less of an ordeal. Josh's call could only be about money. That could wait.

Bruno Mars was singing *Uptown Funk* into Abby's earbuds as she whizzed down Sixth Street, bits of dust and debris swirling up around her each time a bus or truck passed. On Ash Avenue, which was actually no more than an alley, she turned north. On her right was Bica's rear entry. Housed in the basement of a crumbling old warehouse/cum artists studios, its mission was to supply bikes to the bikeless. This section of town was surrounded on three sides by recently designated "districts." There were the West University Historical District, the El Presidio Historical District and the Fourth Avenue Shopping District. All were hip and happening and rapidly undergoing gentrification. In contrast, her neighborhood, by virtue of its lack of distinction, remained low rent and quasi-industrial. The area was traditionally marginal, and its occupants embraced its marginality and abhorred the creeping affluence that threatened to displace them.

Abby passed the vacant lot with its ugly chain link fence topped with razor wire and wondered for the umpteenth time what the owner was trying to protect. Despite the fence and old warehouse, Abby loved this alley. Rarely did she encounter traffic or other people. She could buzz right down the middle of the narrow lane in high gear. At Fourth Street she turned west into the glare of the late afternoon sun hanging just above "A" Mountain.

Her house, one of many little stucco homes built shortly after WWII, was held together by chicken wire and chewing gum, she was pretty sure. Thanks to dear old Aunt Sally, who had

remembered Abby in her will, it was hers – well, hers and the bank’s. She had it gutted and made everything from the shower to the stovetop wheelchair accessible. Unfortunately, she’d run out of money before she’d gotten to the back porch, but one of these days, she’d get to that too. As she whirred up the wooden ramp to her front door, she admired the bougainvillea veiling her neighbor’s porch in a profusion of magenta. It bloomed its heart out from last frost to first. Though Abby couldn’t see her, she knew old Mrs. Soto was tucked back into the recesses of her front porch. She took out her earbuds and called out, “*Buenas tardes, Señora Soto. Cómo está?*”

“*Bien, bien, gracias a Dios,*” the old woman croaked. “*Y tú, mijita?*”

“*Bien, bien,*” Abby replied, as she unlocked the door.

The moment she entered the house, Tito, the 8-year-old tabby who shared her home, leaped onto her lap. He’d been a shelter kitten, and when he first arrived he bounced around the house with such manic joy that she’d named him after the famous Latin jazz bandleader, Tito Puente.

“Hey, you,” she whispered, scratching the little pleasure spots at the base of the cat’s tail and under his neck. Abby whirred into the kitchen, Tito riding shotgun.

She inhaled the fragrance of Windex. Stella, a whirling dervish of a cleaning lady, had been there. The woman was mildly intellectually impaired. As her mother put it, Stella was not the brightest candle in the menorah, but she worked hard and had a sweet, docile nature. It appeared to Abby that her mother allowed the woman precious little leeway to be otherwise.

Thanks to Abby’s connections, Stella had a number of clients. She wore the keys to their houses on a chain around her neck like a piece of prized jewelry. And the nice thing about Stella was that Abby rarely saw her. It worked like magic. Abby would leave forty-five dollars on the kitchen table. When she got home the money would be gone and the house clean. The two women might go weeks without seeing each other. It was the perfect arrangement.

A cellphone charger and little television were perched on a Formica-topped dinette, a chipped but cheery yellow prize she’d found at Goodwill. In fact, all her furniture – the two wooden stools tucked under the kitchen table, the tattered love seat and matching chair, none of which could she sit in, the coffee table and overhead lamp on a swag – came from Goodwill. Robert had set up board and block shelves for her books and bric-a-brac, and tacked up some old movie posters featuring Bogart and Bergman, Hepburn and Tracy, she’d found in an antique shop while still in college. That was it.

Abby put her phone into the charger and turned on the television. While she waited for the 5 o’clock news to begin, she gathered the ingredients for her dinner: two eggs, two bread heels, a nearly empty carton of skim milk and a small carton of strawberry yogurt for dessert, setting each item on the counter by the stove. She made a mental note to buy bread and milk. A few vegetables wouldn’t hurt either, her inner scold admonished.

“Good evening,” said Brent Campbell, a stout, older gent with a mellow baritone.

She reached over to turn up the volume as the man began emoting about the city council and plans to widen Broadway as if these were matters of great consequence. Abby supposed they were to someone, but she just wanted to see her interview. Keeping an ear cocked to the news, she grabbed a tall plastic glass and whirred back over to the fridge. She poured herself a big glass from the ice water dispenser. Unlike her furniture, she’d bought her appliances new, and the fridge had all the bells and whistles.

She set the glass on the table and busied herself with pill preparation. The pill slicer sat alongside the salt and pepper. She spilled out a dozen large pills prescribed for her spastic bladder, arranged one just so in the device, which was very much like a miniature guillotine, then

pulled down the blade. She always experienced a little pulse of satisfaction when the pill fell into two perfect halves. It occurred to her that this was probably not a good thing.

Midway through the pill splitting, Brent interrupted himself with a local news alert.

“Early this morning on the side of a quiet, midtown street, a man was found slumped in his wheelchair with obvious signs of trauma. Responders performed CPR, but the man was pronounced dead at University Medical Center. Police have not released his name or cause of death, but neighbors identified him as William Strand, a 42-year-old quadriplegic who often took late-night wheelchair strolls through his neighborhood.”

“My God, William Strand?” The man had been a client. Well, not a client – they never got that far. Turned out he only wanted free advice on financing his remodel. When she suggested he use GSG to oversee the project, Strand was agreeable until she mentioned the 10 percent fee. For no apparent reason, he went ballistic. Abby didn’t know if it was some kind of drug thing or maybe some kind of PTSD, but Strand was a very angry man. Well, she could certainly understand why that might be, but he really was way-over-the-top out of line. It didn’t surprise her that someone might want to bash his head in or whatever. Still, it gave her pause. She’d never known anyone who’d been murdered. It felt pretty creepy.

Just as she’d guillotined the last pill, Brent announced, “We turn now to ‘Your Town Tucson’ with Grace Belgrade.” And there was Gracie, smiling sweetly into the camera, totally cool and in control. Abby’s throat went dry and she took a big gulp of water.

“My guest this evening is Abigail Bannister, founder and CEO of a local nonprofit with the unlikely name of Gimps Serving Gimps, otherwise known as GSG.”

The camera closed in on Abby, hair a mass of dark corkscrews, pale face, thick brows arched over wide, brown eyes. She never plucked her eyebrows, maybe she should have, and used a little rouge and lipstick. Would that have saved her?

“Ms. Bannister.” Gracie smiled her encouragement. “I understand that you’re one of our native Tucsonans.”

“That’s right, I was born here, attended the University of Arizona. After I got my master’s degree in social work, I went to work at Davis-Monthan Air Force base in hospitality for several years while I geared up to start GSG.”

“Can you tell us a little bit about your very special company?”

“I’d be happy to.” Abashed, Abby watched her face screw up as she soldiered on, oblivious. “GSG was incorporated in 2014 as a nonprofit. It is the embodiment of a public-private partnership model where investments from federal, state and local governments, grants from private corporations and the gifts of individual citizens play a vital and ongoing role. For most people, work provides independence and is a measure of value. This is no less true for people with physical or mental challenges.”

She watched as she struggled to hoist herself upright then carry earnestly on. “The mission of GSG is to provide a wide variety of support services and employment opportunities for people who, when given a bit of help, can join the workforce and make a positive contribution to society. For a minimal fee, GSG connects people and services so that we can maintain maximum independence in a world that seems to conspire to keep us in our place – that is out of sight and out of mind.”

“Ms. Bannister can you explain why you use the term ‘gimp,’ twice I might add, in the name of your company? Isn’t that a word that your clients, who are all handicapped, might well find offensive?”

There was an edge to Gracie's voice, a hard glint in her eye. Abby hadn't noticed that during the interview, but she could see it now. Her chest tightened.

Again the close-up. As Abby searched for the lucky opportunity presented by this unfortunate interview, she could feel the heat climb up from her chest and into her face, which was turning red right before the camera. She turned off the television, throat aching with angry tears.

She heard the familiar commanding voice, her mother's, *Now don't cry, little girl. Don't you cry*, and she did not cry. She almost never did.

Robert paused over his dinner, two small lamb loin chops, mashed red potato with butter and chives, and arugula salad tossed with lemon and olive oil, as Grace Belgrade's focus narrowed in on Abby like a rattlesnake on a baby bunny.

"I can barely make myself say the word, 'gimp.'" The woman said the word as if it were a turd lodged in her throat.

Robert grimaced as the corners of Abby's mouth tugged down the way they always did when she got mad. She pushed herself up with her good arm to make herself taller in the chair. "Uh-oh," he said. "Here it... comes."

"You mean because it is politically incorrect? I guess that's the point. We, people like me, are nothing if not politically, and I might add, socially incorrect. We are the proverbial elephant in the room, the one people pretend is not there."

"You go... girl," Robert shouted at the television.

Only a few women were in the common room watching the news. When she heard the name, Fey looked up from her sudoku and leaned forward. Abby Bannister – she hadn't seen her in nearly 20 years, and there she was on television being interviewed like some kind of celebrity.

"There are many posters of children with a variety of challenging conditions," she was saying, "spina bifida, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy – photos usually used for the purposes of fundraising. But where are the images of challenged adults? The fact is, we do grow up, most of us, but we are not in the public eye. When, if ever, have you seen a blind person or a person like me, with cerebral palsy, in a television sitcom or miniseries? Let me throw out some statistics. Characters on television with disabilities are less than 1 percent. Given that nearly 20 percent of Americans live with disabilities, that's a pretty poor showing."

"Do you realize," Abby paused again to push herself up in the chair. "Do you realize that the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law over 25 years ago? I wouldn't be sitting here before you without ADA, yet over 80 percent of disabled Americans are currently unemployed."

Fey could see that she was pretty steamed by the way her whole face kind of went into a spaz. She'd done that when she was a little kid every time she got mad or sad or simply tried too hard. Abby had been what, 9 or 10, when Fey left; the woman probably wouldn't recognize her if they met on the street, but Abby would remember how it had been back then. Who could forget?

Abby, the CEO of a company! She'd certainly be in a position to lend her a hand, a loan, maybe, or a job. A gift of cash would be the best thing, enough to get her off the streets so she could regroup. Tomorrow she'd go to the library, she did most days anyway, Google GSG and see what came up. Then maybe she'd just drop by Abby's office. Lay it all out for her. Maybe Abby would let her stay with her for a while. It would be like old times, almost sisters, they'd been. Maybe there would be a chance for... reconciliation would be too strong a word, but

something else, that would allow her a sense of... What was it that what she wanted? Revenge? Maybe.

A woman in a Sponge Bob T-shirt got up and changed channels.

"Hey, I was watching that." The woman flipped her the bird. What a bitch, she thought, but knew better than to get into a hassle. Of all the shelters in town, this one was probably the best, but she hated the smell, hated the way people treated her as if she were a 3-year-old, or simple-minded. She was homeless, for God's sake, but that didn't mean she was stupid.

He was amazed that someone so physically disabled could be so assertive and articulate. At once, it both pained and fascinated him to watch her struggle to sit upright. There was something so moving about her appearance, her earnest expression, the tousled brown hair.

"As for my use of the word 'gimp,' I don't claim to speak for everyone who is physically or mentally challenged," she was saying. Her face contorted as she adjusted herself in the chair. "That group is too diverse, but as a teen, my gimp friends at school and I started to use the term with one another as a way to... I don't know... create a sense of community, perhaps, since we were excluded from the greater community, or maybe it was a way for us to thumb our collective noses at people who are appalled by the word, gimp, and the image it conjures."

"I see." The interview's eyes narrowed. "Still, it seems to me, Ms. Bannister, that the use of the term is insulting to people already sufficiently challenged and afflicted."

"Afflicted. Okay. Most people, Ms. Belgrade, are afflicted by something, allergies, for instance, or bigotry, say. But most people are not defined by their affliction unless they have a so-called disability. Then you become the cerebral palsied woman or the quadriplegic, or the retarded guy rather than the CEO of a company, the artist or the employee of the month at Safeway."

"I guess you've made your point. I'm just glad you don't expect everyone to use the word 'gimp.' So what do you want to be called?"

"Abby. Abby Bannister," she said looking directly into the camera.

He took out his notebook and added Abigail Bannister to the list. She was just the kind of person who deserved his help.