

Chapter One

Wedding Jitters

I always resented breaking news, especially after I had kids. Reporters are, in a sense, like emergency service providers: even when they're home celebrating their child's birthday, fighting with their spouse, mowing the lawn, absorbed in a good book, shaving their legs, or having a nasty allergy attack-they can get called to work at the drop of a hat. The fire siren sounds, their beepers start vibrating, their cell phones ring, their e-mail flares up. There are just too many ways to contact someone these days.

Thankfully, I didn't have to walk into a blazing fire or administer CPR, but in February 2004, I did have to drop everything. This was to be one of those stories.



I had interviewed Jason the Sunday prior to the weddings. We probably talked about the sewer problems in the village, something we talked about often. With twenty inches of rain above the annual average, the century-old sewer system made of clay pipes had sprung another major leak. Raw sewage was flowing down village streets and entering into the Wallkill River, which eventually leads to the Hudson River, a national landmark. It was also flooding apartments.

Students of State University of New York at New Paltz and their landlords were pleading for help from the village board, particularly from their mayor, Jason West, a twenty-six-year-old SUNY alumnus, who had led a Green Party sweep at the polls nine months earlier, in May 2003, shocking the small village and becoming that party's first candidate ever to be elected mayor in New York State. Not only was Jason able to defeat veteran mayor Tom Nyquist, who had held the reigns of the village for sixteen years, but his two Green running mates, Rebecca Rotzler and Julia Walsh, were also elected to the five-member board that governed the village, ousting seasoned civic volunteers and causing quite a stir in the community.

"What else have you got for me," I asked Jason. "Any sex scandals?"

He laughed. "Well, I'm considering performing same-sex marriages. But I have to work out some details first."

"Same-sex marriages? That will definitely land you on the cover of The New York Times," I said naively, not realizing how fast and how far this story would take us all. "When will you be ready to go on the record with this story?"

"I'll let you know as soon as I can. Like I said, I have to work out some details first, like legal representation."

"Let me know when you're ready and I'll write it," I said.

"Don't worry, I will."

Four days later, on Thursday, February 26, the story broke in The Times Herald Record, a regional daily newspaper based in Middletown, New York, and a competitor to my paper, The New Paltz Times. "New Paltz Mayor to Perform Same-Sex Marriages This Friday," read the headline. The day that article appeared was also my fifth wedding anniversary. My husband, Kazik, and I had been given a gift certificate to The Locust Tree Ristorante, an elegant Italian restaurant located in an old stone and wood-framed house overlooking a public golf course and the Shawangunk Mountain Ridge. The restaurant was just off Huguenot Street, America's oldest incorporated street, with its original, circa 1600s stone houses intact and preserved. Although the food was delicious and the service sublime, I was anxious to leave.

"Why hurry, Erin?" Kazik asked, after ordering a double-espresso. "When we leave here, we leave Europe and enter New Paltz again."

Kazik and I had met six years before in a jazz bar in the Latin Quarter of Paris. I did not speak a word of French, and he, not a bit of English. After we married abruptly and decided to move to New Paltz, my hometown, we quickly churned out three towheaded kids who all looked like him. With work, young kids, a Kafkaesque immigration process, and the financial constraints of a young family, we could only make the sojourn to Europe to visit his relatives once every two years at best. So finding these little pockets of European-flavored ambiance, where wine was savored, the baguettes were fresh, and the walls decorated with faux finishes, his *métier* back in Paris, was a balm to his old world-soul.

While I empathized with his desire to linger a bit longer in the lush dining room, I felt a compulsion to return home. I was becoming increasingly more curious to talk with our boy mayor and find out why he hadn't given me the story-and to get the scoop on the impending weddings scheduled for noon the following day.

Earlier that day, my editor at the paper, Deb Alexsa, had been very irritated. "Jason already gave the story to the Record," she said. Deb did not embrace Jason as I did. She was skeptical of him as she was skeptical of all politicians-just waiting for them to make a mistake, go back on their word, or do something foolish. I was the eternal optimist, a real advocacy journalist, while she in essence was from the muck-raking school. Where I saw good intentions, she smelled foul play. Where I imagined people to be motivated by the best and most sincere intentions, she concluded that they were up to no good. I guess, in a way, we helped to balance each other.

"We went to The Bistro for lunch and saw Jason there eating all alone," she said. The Bistro, located on Main Street in downtown New Paltz, just a stone's throw from The New Paltz Times office, was Jason's second home or, more accurately, his second kitchen, as he could be seen eating lunch there on a daily basis. It was a favorite

haunt for crunchy types and college students, offering tofu scrambles, veggie burgers, homemade granola, and bran muffins, while also catering to the average greasy-spoon lover, who wanted nothing more than a well-done cheeseburger with a side of coleslaw and french fries. "We went to say goodbye to him but he 'hushed' us because he was on a cell phone call," she continued. "I bet you he was talking to Jeremiah." Jeremiah Horrigan was a seasoned reporter for the *The Times Herald Record*.

That's what you get for being a nice reporter, I thought to myself. "He told me about this days ago," I admitted to Deb. "But did I press him? No. Did I talk about it to anyone? No. I was patiently waiting for him to get all of his ducks in a row and trusted that he would tell me first, when the time came," I explained.

"Did he have to go public with it the day after we went to press?" she retorted, now vindicated that Jason wasn't as honest as I portrayed him to be. Deb had a desire to break every New Paltz-based story, despite the fact that we were a weekly newspaper and our competitors were all dailies who have far more staff and funding than our modest operation. But her drive to do so was valiant, I thought. I was inherently a much lazier journalist, wanting the news to come to me, believing that if I was fair to everyone and portrayed them in a certain home-spun light that they would naturally come to me first. And more often than not, they did.

"I don't know why he did that," I said honestly, switching my baby girl, Zofia, from arm to arm while I talked. "We've been good to him. Who else even gave the Green Party the time of day before the elections?"

"We did," she said. It was true. There had been four different slates running, two of them filled with well-known, civically minded individuals who were respected in the community. And then there was Jason's slate, "The Innovation Party" as they called themselves, since village elections are required to be non-partisan. Of course, Jason and his two running mates were Green, and everyone knew it. Most of the dailies had marginalized them to such a degree that they were either absent from any pre-election stories, or at best had a one-line description, like an afterthought. We interviewed and

profiled all the candidates, giving them equal space and opportunity to express their platforms to the reading public, regardless of who they were.

"Go yell at him," she said, dead serious.

"Easy, easy," I said. "Let me find out what happened."

After Kazik finished his espresso, which he admitted wasn't half bad, we paid the bill, drove to my mother's where we gathered the kids, then headed home for our nightly routine. I read to our boys, Seamus, four and Tadeusz, two, put them to bed, then nursed our baby girl Zofia to sleep. At 10:30 p.m., I finally headed downstairs to reclaim my ad hoc journalistic life.

"Hi, Ryszard," I said, calling Kazik's Polish friend who lived directly across from the Village Hall and was in the mayor's inner circle. "What's going on?"

"It's quite a scene," he said, with that melodious Polish accent. "There are satellite trucks and television reporters all lined up in front of Village Hall. You should come down here. It's a media circus."

"Where's Jason?" I asked.

"He's inside Village Hall. He keeps coming out to give interviews and then goes back in."

I was tired. It was my anniversary. The kids were sleeping and I was in the middle of a good book. But I was angry as hell with Jason and I had to talk to him. "I have to walk down to Village Hall," I told Kazik.

"Why?" he asked.

"It's easier to do it this way than to have to play catch-up with all of the news tomorrow," I explained.

"Hurry back, I'll try to wait up," he said, giving me a quick kiss, as he worked on a portrait he was painting of Seamus. Because we had so little space in our house, he was forced to paint in the kitchen, leaning his canvases against the baby's high chair and spreading out his paint tubes on our kitchen table. I didn't want to leave. I loved reading on the couch in the silence while he painted,

peeking in every once in a while to check on his progress. But after hearing Ryszard's description of the "media circus," I began to feel territorial. It was one thing to be scooped by Jeremiah, but the idea of being scooped on my own turf by the New York City papers finally pushed me out the door, notebook in hand and Kazik's leather jacket draped around me.



It was a crisp February night. The last time I had been called out of the house at odd hours was in the early summer of 2001. That was when a young New Paltz High School graduate, Jared Bozydaj, went on a downtown shooting spree that kept the entire village hostage from 2 a.m. to 9 a.m. It was only after he had emptied more than sixty rounds from his various semi-automatic weapons into the offices, restaurants, and apartments in the small village, nearly missing two New Paltz police officers and wounding a county sheriff, that Bobby Knoth, another New Paltz High School graduate and now the village's canine police officer, was able to convince him to surrender.

This time, the air had a different taste to it, not threatening but oddly hopeful. While the village slept peacefully, the old red-brick Village Hall building, just south of Main Street, which also housed the town justice courts and police headquarters, had been completely transformed. As I approached, I couldn't believe my eyes.

All the major New York networks were there. The light from the satellite trucks and cameras cast an unnatural glow into the late winter night. The Village Hall parking lot looked like the chosen landing site for a fleet of extraterrestrial visitors. It was almost 11 p.m. on a Thursday night and the television news reporters were lining up for their live reports, ready to announce that the very next day, February 27, 2004, a small-town mayor would begin marrying gay couples.

"You know, when I heard on NPR that a mayor in a small New York village was planning to marry gay couples, I said to myself, 'That can only be New Paltz,'" said my brother-in-law, a northern

Vermonters who had been brought into the funk-town fold by marriage himself.

New Paltz has a population of approximately 12,000 people, with another 6,000 added to the mix when SUNY New Paltz is in session. Like many old communities in the Hudson Valley, New Paltz comprises a village, the more urbanized part, within a township that includes the outlying rural area as well as the village. The village and town have their own separate governments. Jason was now in charge of the village, the small yet dynamic inner sanctum with a population of 6,000, many of whom were students.

New Paltz had collected both the artistic and dissipated residue of Woodstock overflow in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, Main Street had as many head shops and bars as drop-in counseling centers and county drug rehabilitation programs. Beneath its arty exterior lie the lynchpins of its magnetism. Founded by Dutch and French religious refugees in the 1600s, European influence is etched into New Paltz's agriculture, education, and architecture, in the many stone foundations that still anchor its village streets.

Just an hour and a half drive from Manhattan, New Paltz has become a weekend home or a getaway for New York City's rich and famous, or not so famous but still rich. It is an amusement park for those who live to play. Rock climbers, canoers, bird watchers, hikers, mountain bikers, cross-country skiers and nature enthusiasts are quickly drawn to New Paltz's 6,000-acre Mohonk Preserve-home to lakes, waterfalls, and the Trapps, a rock face of the Shawangunk Mountains famous for its' technical climbing routes.

Because New Paltz is also a college town, it is infused with student exuberance, intellectualism, art and funk. It has evolved to include an intriguing enclave of rank and file IBM and new media techies and SUNY New Paltz alumni, who after graduating get sucked into the rural vacuum. As New York City grows ever closer, modern transport, technology, and increased development continue to economically nourish our provincial dwellers. Yet our town is anchored by the born and bred, the ones who till the land season after season,

year after year-the multigenerational Italian apple and corn farmers and Irish working-class families. Added all together, it's a place that is seductive, complex, and often explosive.

I walked into Village Hall, which always smelled of stale cigarette smoke from the volunteer fire department's downstairs meeting room-even though the former village board banned all smoking in the building more than three years ago. Instead of encountering Jean Galluci, the fashionable yet shy village clerk, and her various assistants, I was greeted by members of the Radical Cheerleaders-a SUNY New Paltz group that conducted subversive feminist cheers at rallies, elections, in front of the public library, or just when the mood struck them. Decked out in black fishnet stockings, combat boots, short skirts and various body piercings, the cheerleaders were "manning" the village phones, along with friends of the mayor, politically minded residents, and Green Party members.

This was the place where you went to pay your water bill or to attend a village board meeting to ask the trustees if they might consider putting in a "Drive Carefully-Children at Play" sign to slow traffic on your street. It was where you complained about a parking ticket or asked the building inspector for a permit to construct a fence around your property. It was the center of village bureaucracy, the thing that tied us all to the same water and sewer grid, collected our taxes, organized spring clean-up, and sent out letters warning us that our toilets and bathtubs might have brown water for a given day when they flush the lines in an attempt to wash rust out of the old pipes. Yet, in only a few hours, just enough time for the story in The Times Herald Record to catch the attention of the New York City TV stations and papers, our Village Hall had been converted into a same-sex marriage planning headquarters, and the last buffer between the village's young controversial mayor and the swarming media. I leaned against a municipal bulletin board advertising a diabetes clinic and rabies shots for pets, to get my bearings.

"Where's Jason?" I asked.

"He's doing an interview with CNN," said Chris White. "I

just popped my head in here to see if Jason needed any help and I've been here ever since." He was moving around the room in a flurry, carrying a clipboard with a list of news agencies and reporters vying to get a quote from the mayor. Chris worked for U.S. Congressman Maurice Hinchey, a Democrat from Saugerties, New York, who was about as far left as any congressman in the House, without having turned Green himself. Chris had been on his way back from the gym when he heard of the impending weddings. A slight shade of embarrassment crept over him as he looked down at his sweatpants and sneakers, since he normally wore ties and slacks at the congressman's headquarters. "I haven't even taken a shower!" he said.

"I just want to ask him a few questions," I said to Chris.

"I'll let you speak with him when he's done with this interview."

While I waited for the mayor to emerge from the village clerk's office, I decided to get some fresh quotes from the impromptu staff that had assembled. I began with Wazina Zondon, the head of the Radical Cheerleaders, which I had just featured in the local paper a few months earlier. She said that in the last several hours the mayor's office had already received hundreds of calls. "They've almost all been positive," she said, tucking her shiny black hair behind her ears.

But they had also been receiving a few calls, mostly from locals I guessed, with questions like "Why doesn't the mayor worry about fixing all of our potholes instead of marrying gays?" I wanted to know more about what all of these people who were suddenly calling Village Hall were saying. "Oh," she said with a smile. "There was this one guy from Long Island who called and said that Jason West is the best thing to happen since Cher was nominated for an Oscar."

"I think I'm going to make that into a t-shirt," said the mayor, as he walked out of his makeshift office into the room. "I'm the best thing to happen since Cher was nominated for an Oscar."

All heads turned towards him and for a moment the room was silent. I had never seen Jason wear anything more formal than a chamois shirt, a pair of jeans, and his paint-splattered Carhart jacket.

Even stranger than seeing Village Hall being run by radical cheerleaders was seeing Jason dressed in an ill-fitting, navy blue suit with a Village of New Paltz pin on his jacket lapel. I almost started laughing. It was like he was playing dress up and had just stepped out of his father's closet, not realizing that there were other people in the room.

"I've never seen you in a suit," I said, looking him over. I noticed that his shoe laces were untied.

"Well, I was going to be on TV. I had to dress up. This was all I had," he explained. "Let's go talk in here," he said, gesturing towards the village clerk's small private office off to the side.

"Before I start interviewing you, can I just say that I'm so mad at you?"

"Why?"

"Because you gave the story to The Times Herald Record the very next day after our paper came out. Now I'm a week behind and you decide to go national the day before I'm supposed to go to Vermont for the weekend."

"I didn't give it to Jeremiah," he pleaded. "After the President made his announcement the other day"-proposing an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to prohibit same-sex couples from legally marrying-"Jeremiah must have begun calling local town clerks to ask if they had any gay couples applying for marriage licenses. The New Paltz town clerk must have said yes and implied that I was planning to solemnize the marriages. Jeremiah called me and asked me flat out. I told him that I promised you the story, but he said he already knew I was going to do it and asked if I would just confirm it."

I was studying his face. He looked tired, a little jumpy, and eager for me to forgive him, not because my forgiveness was essential in any way to his mental health, but because, as the local reporter, I was the one person who covered the ins and outs of his more mundane mayoral activities, and he certainly didn't want to alienate me or have me think he was a snake.

"What can I do to make this up to you?" he asked, flashing me that boyish grin.

"Let's start talking."

And so we did. I slumped against the wood-paneled wall of the clerk's office and

Jason leaned forward in the swivel chair, in an attempt to concentrate but also, I imagined, to try to calm his thoughts and prepare himself for the camera lenses that were poised outside, aimed in his direction.

"First of all, the New York State Domestic Relations law is gender-neutral.

Second of all, the New York State Constitution requires that all citizens be treated equally regardless of race, ethnicity or sex. I took an oath of office. That oath obligates me to uphold the law and the New York State Constitution. If I refused to marry these couples then I would be in violation of the law and the constitution. It is my legal obligation and my moral obligation."

I was always impressed with Jason's ability to answer questions. Obviously he'd thought this one out, researched it, and knew what he wanted to say and what he would be saying ad nauseam for at least the next ninety days to prosecutors, judges, the public, and the local, national, and international media. He looked polished and sounded articulate, even if the suit didn't fit him too well. (He had bulked up since he took office.) When I first began writing about Jason West, he was just a sinewy college student, a civil and environmental rights advocate, and one of the usual suspects at town and village board meetings, generally there to oppose something. Whether it was the Starbucks application for a new location in downtown New Paltz, or the pepper-ball spray gun the police had purchased without town board approval, Jason was there putting in his two cents. He was remarkably astute and informed for someone his age.

He grew up in the town of Latham, just outside of Albany, New York. He was from a long line of proud blue-collar workers. Apparently his political consciousness began at a very young age when he learned that styrofoam could never be broken down. He convinced his parents to shun McDonald's, and the little activist born.

"The only college I ever wanted to go to was Hampshire College," he admitted to me one time. "I applied and was accepted and just imagined that's where I was going. It wasn't until much later that I actually looked at what the annual tuition was. There was no way in hell I could afford it. So I came to SUNY New Paltz instead."

He rode his bike almost everywhere. Not only because it was a more environmentally friendly mode of transportation than a car, but his beat-up old Ford Taurus station wagon with rust spots the size of bullet holes pock-marking the blue frame could not be trusted to deliver the mayor safely to any destination farther than the Village Hall. The village building inspector, Alison Murray, a large-framed woman with a militant interpretation of the village codes, had informed me one day that I should "follow up on a real environmental violation."

"Our new Green Party mayor's car is unregistered and is leaking radiator fluid all over the Village Hall parking lot!" she said. "Why don't you reporters investigate that?"

Murray, whose delicate, almost pretty facial features were in direct contrast to her personality, was a controversial local character in her own right. The previous year she had been charged with verbal assault when she got into a sparring match with a plumber at Murphy's, the local Irish watering hole. "He called me the c- word," she stated in her own defense. "And there are only so many times I can have men call me the c- word before I say something back. I'm one of only a few women in this line of work and a lot of times, the men I deal with don't want me telling them what's up to code and what's not."

Mayor Nyquist had chastised her for the reported display of vulgarity, but had not fired her or reprimanded her in any formal manner. "Let's just say that Alison is not a real 'people person,'" said the mayor as diplomatically as he could. "But she is a very good and very passionate building inspector." Passionate she was, but she was also someone-especially if you were applying for a building permit-that you didn't want on your bad side.

While she admitted that she thought the former mayor's political tenure, after having served four terms, had come to its natural

end, she was no great fan of her new boss. "How can he come to a board meeting dressed like that?" she whispered to me during one of the newly elected board's first public meetings. "It's shameful!" Jason wore a flannel shirt, drooping jeans and a baseball hat, which I noted, in his defense, he did take off while reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

"This is New Paltz," I whispered to her, trying to get her to see Jason with a little more compassion, since we were all going to have to work together, in some form or another. "He's twenty-six and a housepainter. Did you think he would go out and buy a new wardrobe of double-breasted suits once he was elected? He makes only \$8,000 a year."

"All you reporters just romanticize him," she said with a grunt. "He just gets by on his good looks and charm. But soon you'll find out who he really is."

"Did you meet Billiam van Roestenberg and his partner, Major Jeffrey McGowan of the 82nd Airborne Division in the First Gulf War?" asked Jason as his two good friends, also the first couple scheduled to be wed by him the next day, entered the cramped office where I was interviewing him. "I just love saying that," Jason said with a laugh. "Major Jeffrey McGowan of the 82nd Airborne Division, First Gulf War."

"I met Billiam but not Jeffrey," I said, looking at this handsome major and wondering how in the hell he made it so high up in the Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell army without anyone knowing or alerting the military authorities to the fact that this beautiful man, with his sparkling blue eyes, was not what the army wanted to believe he was. Jeffrey extended his hand and gave me a firm grasp, very military-like, but I noticed that for a man with such large hands, the skin was soft, as if he did everything, even shooting a gun, wearing gloves.

I had snatched Billiam aside after he finished talking with the television news cameras, before I went in to look for Jason. Billiam was very tall and spindly and almost had to bend in half while he

spoke to me. If you could combine the straw man from the Wizard of Oz with Dorothy Parker and dress it up like a Versace model, you'll approximate something close to Billiam. "I love your paper," he said, a bow tie affixed neatly to his neck; everything about him was immaculate, inviting, and kind. "Thank you," I said. "Is it okay if I ask you a few questions?" "Go ahead," said Billiam. "I'm just still a little blinded from all of those lights. Why don't we talk inside?"

The two men had been together for six years and lived in Clintondale, a small town just southeast of New Paltz, in an old white farmhouse with bright red shutters, where they raised farm animals and grew organic produce. Billiam sold real estate and Jeffrey, now retired from the army, worked for a pharmaceutical sales company in Westchester. Billiam was quick to point out that he and Jeffrey were not getting married to make a political statement.

"We're doing this because we love each other. We are both very active in our community. We contribute to society, we love this country, and my fiancé is a decorated war hero," he said proudly, but in a pleading sort of way that made me sad. Why couldn't they just get married without having to defend their reasons? "We're not asking for anything special," he said. "We just want to be made equal under the law and have the right to get married like everyone else in this country."

Unlike Jeffrey, who would come out of the closet the next day, for the first time, on national TV, Billiam had been navigating the world as a gay man since he was young. He told me of a revelatory moment he had at age eighteen while walking out of an army recruiting office, after signing up for the draft: He realized that although he was ready and willing to put his life on the line to defend his country, that same country, at least by law, could not accept him for who he was. Since Jeffrey, who served overseas, had to abandon his career as a military officer for fear of being revealed as a gay man, Billiam became even more incensed when President George W. Bush announced that he wanted to prohibit gay couples from being married. Jeffrey proposed to Billiam on Christmas Eve. They planned to have a ceremony in the spring, while their apple trees were in bloom. "You know," said Billiam dramatically. "Put a rent-a-tent in our yard, invite friends and family."

When the mayor of San Francisco, Gavin Newsom, began marrying gay couples, making headline news and raising the level of the gay marriage debate nationally, Billiam and Jeffrey asked Jason if he would consider marrying them once he was elected mayor. Jason, true to his belief in civil rights for all Americans, said that he would—but none of them knew just how soon that wedding would take place, or how far from their apple-blossom-backyard vision it would stray.

"I first met Jason four years ago when I attended a 'Meet the Candidates' night at the SUNY New Paltz campus," explained Billiam. This was when Jason, then twenty-two, was running for the second time, on the Green Party ticket for a seat in the State Assembly. He was running against local Republican county legislator Fawn Tantillo and Democratic incumbent Kevin Cahill.

"I remember coming home that night and telling Jeffrey about this amazing young man named Jason West. I was so impressed with him. He sounded like a polished politician who was in his forties, yet he was a young gentleman still in college. He was smart, wise and concise and I liked his politics." The three men became friends, and Billiam and Jeffrey, shortly after Jason became mayor, hired him to paint their house.

While Jason scraped paint and applied primer to the couple's old farmhouse, the issue of gay marriage, which had exploded onto the national scene during the previous months, as judges and local officials from all over the country aggressively attempted to redefine marriage, reached a fevered pitch. At least thirty-four states had already enacted "defense of marriage laws," with the New York State Legislature considering a similar bill. Amid the furor, the president announced that he would back a constitutional amendment banning gay marriages. This announcement created a groundswell of gay marriage activity, most notably in San Francisco, where 3,400 gay couples were married, including talk show diva Rosie O'Donnell, one week before Jason stood up to the plate and took center stage in the national debate. The events in San Francisco coincided auspiciously with Jason's painting job at Billiam and Jeffrey's. While Jason was up on the ladder, Billiam watched and listened to all of

the gay-marriage news, and he succeeded in convincing the young, house painting mayor to jump on the gay-marriage bandwagon and carve out their own same-sex nuptial trail on the East Coast.

While Jeffrey asked Jason his opinions on various wedding reception details, Chris White rapped at the door. "Jason, they want to interview you live for the early morning news round."

"What time would I have to be here?"

"I think by 5 a.m."

"Do I have to?"

"It's up to you. You have the right to say no to them. You have a big day tomorrow. But at the same time, the morning news has the highest ratings. You'll get a large audience."

"Okay. What was I saying?" Jason asked me, rubbing his eyes.

"You were about to eviscerate the president," I noted.

"Oh, yeah.... I'm appalled that for the first time in U.S. history a president has tried to amend the Constitution to restrict freedoms for Americans rather than expand them," he said. "Any more questions, Erin?"

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm exhausted. I haven't slept in forty-eight hours."

"You look good."

"Thanks."

"You look, well, mayoral."

He laughed. I gave him a kiss on the cheek and told him to knock 'em dead.

"Hang in there, Jason. You're doing great."

"Thank you, I needed that."

With that I said goodbye to the volunteers who were still answering phones and providing callers with the Village of New Paltz e-mail address. Then I walked back to what would soon be referred to locally as ground zero: the village parking lot and Peace Park, a small wedge of Japanese-style landscaping with sculptures from the village's sister city, Osa Town in Japan.

I stood back and chatted with Ryszard, who was watching the scene with a bemused look on his face. His wife, Rachel Lagodka, who taught freshman composition at SUNY New Paltz, was the

local Green Party recruiter, and was arguably the person who almost single-handedly got Jason and his running mates elected. I gave him a hug goodbye, but as I walked away he shouted after me. "I told you this was going to be big," he said, with a knowing grin spreading across his face. "And this is just the beginning. You wait."

Their Green Party golden boy was on his way, peddling their left-of-center ideologies and carrying the banner for what Jason himself refers to as the "flowering of the greatest civil rights movement this country has seen in a generation." The mayor walked out of Village Hall, as if he were walking out of his house to pick up the morning paper. Only the papers had come to him.

"Those who would attempt to deny these people their civil and constitutional rights are the same people that would have told Rosa Parks to sit at the back of the bus. And that will not happen in New Paltz. I will not let it happen," I heard him say to the television reporters.

By the time I got home, the mayor's sound bites had already flashed across all of the nightly news programs. "I just saw Jason on TV," Kazik said laughing. "He was wearing a suit!"

