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An Evening With Al Gore

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Toddy Makepeace had seen Al Gore speak the previous spring, and a year later she hadn't gotten over it. Toddy, born and bred a realist, was quite aware the former vice president hadn't particularly noticed her when he'd shaken her hand, though he'd looked slightly startled that her grip was so firm. But he'd nodded in approval when she'd told him she intended to join in his fight against people who trashed the planet.

Toddy's husband, Mark, joined in Toddy's new crusade with fervor. He'd seen too many changes in the world to deny that Earth was being damaged and polluted at an alarming rate. Mark and Toddy had no plans to have children, but they did hope to continue enjoying their happy life together. A big part of that happy life was the pleasure they took in their extended exploration of the Earth's remaining wilderness. Having plenty of forests left in the world, preserving an environmentally safe wilderness, was vital to the Makepeaces.

Through the years, Toddy had gradually assumed the role of moral compass for the pair, while Mark had slipped into a more logistical role. They played to their strengths. Toddy had been recycling newspapers, cans, and plastics for years, she rode a bicycle while she went about her errands in their historic New England village, and she and Mark shared a shower quite often to cut down on the amount of water they used. Mark made sure the accumulated recyclable material made its way to the correct collection site, kept the bicycle in good repair, and enjoyed the showers very much.

Toddy was both thorough and conscientious, and after her inspiring connection with Al Gore, she decided it was time to step up her slapdash "green" efforts a notch or two. Or three. She began passing out leaflets at the nearest mall. She put indignant handwritten notes under the windshield wipers of gas-guzzling SUVs. She established a compost heap at the back of the lawn of the charming Victorian house where she and Mark lived.

When Mark was sure Toddy wasn't around, he made a face at the smell of the compost heap. He quietly hired a teenager who lived nearby to come and turn the compost, a job Toddy had assigned to Mark. (Same difference, Mark figured. He'd been charged with getting the job done, and it was.) Perhaps Mark wasn't quite as passionate about confronting litterers and polluters as his wife, but he was always present to haul her out of the resultant trouble. Toddy had no problem at all pouncing on a woman who tossed her cigarette butt to the sidewalk; in fact, Toddy had

no problem tackling the CEO of a local company that had been caught dumping industrial waste into a remote pond.

Since Toddy had followed litterers, pointing out their transgressions at the top of her lungs, and also had quite literally tackled the CEO, the police had come to call at the Makepeaces' house more than once. Every time, Toddy's appearance always bought her some grace without Mark's having to intervene. Toddy was five feet tall, pleasantly round and bosomy, and had a head full of red curly hair. She certainly didn't look her age; in fact, Toddy looked like a naughty teenager who might need to be spanked for her own good.

Following the tackling incident, as Mark watched two patrolmen fall under Toddy's spell in ten minutes, he had a hard time concealing his smile. He'd been watching men fall for his wife for years. How could he blame them? Mark, who was tall and dark and unremarkable, thanked his lucky stars that he and Toddy had found each other in a most unlikely encounter. They'd been separately hiking the Appalachian Trail, and in a remote area they'd happened across a wounded deer some careless hunter had neglected to kill. Their eyes had met over the pitiful bleeding animal, and they'd been together ever since.

On this cool evening, when the policemen had departed, the Makepeaces settled in their gazebo with a bottle of wine. Some couples who'd been together as long as Mark and Toddy had lost the spark, but the two had the good fortune to still find each other exciting. They, enjoyed the evenings they got to spend alone together. It was dark, and they lit the candles on the table. The backyard of the old house wasn't huge, but it had been carefully planted to provide privacy.

"I feel confident Fenton won't press charges," Mark said after they'd each had a sip from their glasses. It was a cool Massachusetts evening, and their cobblestoned village, Bracefield, was quiet and serene, just the way they liked it.

Toddy laughed as if such a concept was ridiculous. "Of course he won't," she said. "Think of how silly he would look if he did." She took a deep breath and her smile faded. "Mark, I have to confess. I'm getting bored with Bracefield, even with town," she said, and Mark sat up straighter at the change in topic.

Bracefield lay outside Boston, which was very convenient for shopping

trips. There was a state park within easy driving distance where the two spent a lot of time, and they'd made a network of friends in the area. But Toddy seemed quite serious.

"We've been here a long time. Maybe we need a change of scene. We might have been more aware of this global crisis earlier if we lived in a more enlightened country, or if we were in less of a rut. Why don't we try living somewhere with a more positive attitude toward 'green' issues?"

"Like where?" Mark set down his glass. Toddy, as always, was challenging him to rise to the occasion.

"Oh, I don't know... one of the Scandinavian countries. They're much greener than the USA. Sweden?"

"That's an idea," Mark said slowly. "We'd have to learn the language. But we could do that." He found himself unexpectedly enthusiastic. How long had they lived in Bracefield? At least twenty years, he thought. As much as he adored the old house they'd restored, maybe it was time for a change. And as long as they were making a change, why not make it a really big one? Why move to somewhere equally predictable, like Miami or Seattle? "In fact, Toddy, that's a wonderful idea," he said and watched his wife's face glow. The more Mark considered the excitement of learning a new country, coping with daily living there, making new friendships and achieving new goals, the more stimulating he found the prospect.

"But I don't want to just slink away," Toddy said. Mark understood they'd entered phase two of the conversation. "I want to leave with a big bang. Like Bilbo in *The Lord of the Rings*."

"You want to slip on an invisibility ring and disappear in a giant explosion?"

Toddy laughed and refilled their glasses. "No, Mark. Not exactly. I want to do something for America before we go. I've always been a patriot, you know that."

"What form do you want this service to take? You know I'm willing to help you do whatever you want."

"You're so sweet," Toddy said. She laid her hand on his. "I'll think about it and let you know."

While Toddy considered her patriotic duty, Mark began to wind down the Makepeaces' extensive financial affairs. He knew Toddy; she wouldn't change her mind.

One evening after their housekeeper, Mrs. Powers, had left, Toddy put her arms around Mark's neck. "We're going to have a party," she told Mark. "A really special party. I think we'll need Purcell and Deena Collville to help us."

Mark raised his eyebrows at that. Purcell and Deena were old friends they hadn't seen in... well, years, Mark realized when he thought about it. "That'll be nice," he said, though rather doubtfully. The Collvilles were almost as wealthy as Mark and Toddy, and they were an attractive couple, but Mark had never been as fond of the two as Toddy was. Deena and Purcell were a little cold-blooded for his taste. But since he loved Toddy, he began thinking of practical arrangements.

"Tomorrow morning, I'll ask Mrs. Powers to make up the guest bedroom. And to put those extra-heavy drapes up so they can sleep in." The Collvilles might have changed in the years since the Makepeaces had seen them, but their sleeping habits were surely going to be the same.

"Thanks, darling," Toddy said. "Oh, please tell Mrs. Powers not to disturb anything on our office table. That's where I'm working this week."

The next time Mark went into the office to take care of his e-mail, he found the round table in the center of the room covered with lists. Toddy had moved her laptop from her desk to the table, and she was staring at the screen with an air of preoccupation. She was searching for something on Google, and when she found it, she read intently.

"No, not quite," she muttered and Mark smiled. Toddy talked out loud when she was hot on the trail of a project. She was so engrossed in her research that she didn't even notice when Mark left the room after making a few phone calls and sending some e-mails.

When Purcell and Deena drove in that night, they were treated to the best bottle of wine Mark's cellar could produce, and Toddy continued to be generous with the drinks all evening. Purcell and Deena were even more upscale than Mark and Toddy, in fact, sometimes Mark thought the two verged on pretentious, though he'd never tell Toddy that. Purcell was tall, slim, and gray-haired. He generally wore striped dress shirts, starched and rolled up to his elbows. He thought this made him look egalitarian. Sometimes he even tied his sweater sleeves around his neck as if he were posing for a J.Crew ad. Deena carried a purse that cost eight hundred dollars. Mark and Toddy knew this because Deena told them.

Despite the Collvilles' affectations, they were good company, all in all. Mark found himself enjoying their visit more than he'd anticipated. While their guests took a stroll down the town's well-lit streets, Toddy popped *An Inconvenient Truth* into the DVD player. Mark could tell she was humming with anticipation. When Purcell and Deena returned to the house, relaxed and smiling, the moment was right.

"Toddy has something for you to watch," Mark said. "We think it'll interest you."

After the Collvilles had watched the film, Deena said, "I had no idea. Purcell, I think we're horribly out of touch."

Purcell nodded, looking rather self-consciously grave and thoughtful. "What do you want us to do?" he asked Toddy.

She began to explain.

By the time she'd finished, the Collvilles were on board with Toddy's plan of providing a grand gesture to mark the end of the Makepeaces' years in the United States.

Preparations began in earnest the next day.

Toddy had assigned Mark the job of looking for a house in Sweden. This was the kind of challenge Mark relished, so soon he was knee-deep in small boxes from Rosetta Stone and packets of papers from real-estate agents. He and Toddy had agreed that they'd wait to put their house on the market after they were out of it, which saved them a lot of grief. Mark reflected for the millionth time that having money smoothed out many jagged corners, as he examined a picture of a house for sale outside Malmo. Swedish homes tended to be wooden and barnlike, at least the ones he'd been viewing online. Mark thought Toddy would find them amusing. He was searching for a large home in the middle of a forest, which wasn't going to be easy to find.

Purcell was acting as social adviser. He was helping Toddy assemble the guest list and he was experimenting with the wording of the note of invitation.

Deena was working on assembling the paperwork Toddy and Mark would need in their new life. This involved a lot of trips into the city to consult with people who kept a very, very low profile. She was also arranging for the staff they'd need.

One night Mark went into the study to track down a crossword puzzle

book, and Toddy called him over. “Darling, look at this man,” she said, holding up a picture of a very heavy forty-year-old with big jowls and lots of blond hair. “Doesn’t he look like he needs enlightening?”

“Of course,” Mark said promptly. “And I’m sure he’d be honored to be on the guest list for your party. Isn’t that James Jeffrey Jamison, who imports rare woods for luxury homes?”

“Yes, he’s responsible for the clear-cutting of thousands of acres of rainforest,” Toddy said grimly. But then she caught sight of Mark’s worried face, and she smiled up at him, her blue eyes sparkling. “We’re going to have a great party, we’re going to show the film, and then we’ll ask them for contributions. I know they’ll be glad to write great big checks, even Jamison. We’ll persuade them!”

Deena was sitting on the other side of the table beside Purcell. She said, “Let’s invite Catriona McHughes.” She held up a magazine. “See? She’s the editor. She’s always printing articles about global warming for her readers, but she just flew from New York to Chicago in her private jet for a party! What a criminal waste of fuel!”

Purcell seemed to enjoy seeing his normally uninvolved wife on fire about a cause. Even a near narcissist like Purcell could be swayed by the passion of a beautiful woman. This was not the Collvilles’ usual style, so the novelty of it intrigued both of them. They’d probably drop their new cause fairly quickly, but Mark realized their help was essential in ensuring the Makepeace farewell party’s success. He would hate it if Toddy were disappointed the least little bit.

“Are we having the party here?” Mark asked his wife the next time he passed through.

“Oh no,” she said. “We’re making arrangements in the city. I don’t think some of these people would come if they had to drive out to Bracefield. They don’t know us, after all; though I’m sure they can find out we’re rich. I’m counting on that. Anyway, we couldn’t possibly handle all those cars. Deena, we need a competent driver for valet parking.”

Mark was beginning to appreciate the scope of Toddy’s planning. He didn’t want to sound mistrustful, but he had to ask one final question. “You’re asking them to bring the invitations with them?” he said.

“Oh yes,” Toddy said. “It’s the best means of preventing gate crashers.”

“Have you hired the caterer?” Purcell asked. “They’ll expect good food.”

"I'm on it," Deena said. "Sweetheart, did you know Toddy and Mark are friends with *Anna Clausen*?" Purcell looked suitably impressed, though neither he nor Deena was a foodie. Anna Clausen was the hottest caterer in the Boston area.

"Is Anna Clausen an, ah, environmentalist like you two?" Purcell asked, conscious that Mrs. Powers was still in the kitchen.

Toddy nodded. "Yes," she said. "She sure is. In fact, she's donating her time to the cause."

When the guest list had been gone over with a fine-tooth comb, Toddy and Purcell tossed it on the table in front of Deena and Mark with an air of triumph. The list was short—only twenty-six names. "Why so few?" Mark asked.

"No waste," Purcell said. "This is the maximum number we can persuade, I think."

"How'd you pick them?" Mark could think of many major offenders that weren't listed.

"They're not the most important figures, as you see, but they're all on the blacklist. Just, the B or C blacklist rather than the A. We had to pick people who would come without hangers-on or media. We want this to be a private affair."

Mark recognized most of the names, though Deena was looking rather blank. "Oh yes, the car manufacturer who won't look for alternative fuel," he told Deena. "Here's an EPA inspector who's under indictment for taking bribes... good choice. Bella Bordelon?"

"Her beauty products are tested on bunnies," Toddy said. Her face was stiff with indignation.

"Is that strictly a global-warming issue?" Mark asked, trying not to smile. "After all, you've eaten rabbit before."

"*Bunnies*," Toddy said. "And I didn't torture them first."

By the time the big evening rolled around, a lot of things had changed in the beautiful Victorian home in Bracefield. Many of the Makepeaces' possessions had been sold or stored, Mrs. Powers had been bid farewell with a lovely large check, and Deena and Purcell had thrown their bags in the trunk of their car, since they'd be returning to their own place in Westchester immediately after the festivities. Mark had been at his town office ten hours a day for the past week, ensuring that when they arrived in

Sweden they'd have a place to stay while they viewed homes, and a secure financial base.

Toddy and Mark were dressed to the nines, Toddy looking delicious and elegant in silver-spangled vintage Dior, Mark in a very conventional but tailor-made tux. They stood in the living room of the home they'd shared for two happy decades. Toddy had trouble holding back tears.

"Come on, darling, the future promises buckets of fun," Mark said. Toddy was so seldom melancholy that he wasn't used to having to raise her spirits.

"I know," she said. "What a great evening this will be. Mr. Gore will be so proud of us. I started to put in the notes, 'Come share an evening with Al Gore.' Though that wouldn't have been entirely honest, because we have the film, not the man himself. Purcell said none of them would come if they thought Mr. Gore would actually be there."

"When he gets the checks," Mark said, in a gentle reminder that the former vice president would probably never know how much they'd personally contributed to environmental fund-raising, "he'll be so pleased."

"Yes, of course," Toddy said. "I've got the mailing envelope ready." If she sighed very gently, Mark was not going to offer any rebuke. His wife was amazingly optimistic, so much so that she'd already put stamps on the envelope. He was afraid she was in for a disappointment.

Their trip into the city in their Prius was a silent one. Deena and Purcell, dressed to the teeth in up-to-the-minute designer finery, followed in their own Lincoln Town Car. Mark was mentally reviewing all the arrangements, and perhaps Toddy was saying a quiet good-bye to the country she loved so much.

When they reached the outskirts of Boston, they followed the route to the venue. It had been chosen with some difficulty, and Toddy and Purcell had debated fiercely about the selection. The location had to be quirky enough to engage the invited guests, but the party couldn't be held in any of the beautiful hotels or restaurants Boston had to offer. Toddy had designed the evening to be an expression of her own nature, and crowded areas just didn't fit in with that expression.

Toddy had handwritten each invitation, following Purcell's model. After the correct opening salutation, each one read:

Mark and I hope you'll come to Mark's offices at the Huntleigh Building

at eight o'clock on October 10. We'll provide further transportation after that. We have an evening of surprises for our very select group of guests! In addition to enjoying your company and an excellent meal, we're touting our favorite charity, so please don't forget your checkbook. We hope to see you then.

Toddy Makepeace

The Huntleigh was a respectable downtown Boston office building. Though this was an odd invitation, Toddy and Purcell were hoping the Makepeace name and fortune and the Huntleigh's staid but lavish appearance would stoke the guests' curiosity while making them feel secure. Not all of the twenty-six invitees had accepted; there'd been eight refusals, fifteen acceptances, and three of the proposed guests hadn't let the Makepeaces know one way or the other. "So rude," Toddy had told Mark, her sweet face looking anything but sweet for a moment. "But of course, the ones who've accepted are all bringing escorts. So, thirty for sure. And the most important guests have said yes."

After they arrived in the city, the Collvilles and the Makepeaces parked their cars at the party venue and got a ride to the Huntleigh from one of the hired staff members. When they stepped into the marble lobby, the rest of the staff was waiting.

The results of Deena's labor looked good. The people she'd hired were dressed in white serving jackets and black pants. They were all attractive and smiling. They'd been extensively prepped. At this pre-party pep rally, Toddy gave them even more careful instructions and handed them their paychecks in advance. The three women and the six young men, all apparently in their early twenties or younger, looked very happy.

Toddy got more and more anxious as the party time grew near. "Oh, Mark," she said, "I hope this all goes well."

"Darling, it's a win-win situation," Mark said. "If our guests see the error of their ways, we'll have a lot of checks to contribute to environmental issues. If they don't, well, we'll have the satisfaction of having done our best in our own way."

Toddy nodded, determination in every line of her rounded face. Then a car pulled up to the lobby door and Toddy prepared to greet the first guest.

To her delight, the first arrival was James Jeffrey Jamison, looking even

more like a blond frog than he had in his picture. Jamison was accompanied by a ravishing young woman who was not Mrs. Jamison. Though Toddy realized this was an insult, she greeted Jamison with apparent delight and introduced him to Mark. Other guests arrived almost immediately on Jamison's heels. Unmarried EPA Inspector George Puffman arrived with a young man he introduced as Selim, who appeared to be Puffman's bodyguard. Puffman didn't seem to be relaxed. In fact, he looked around him with suspicion.

But Toddy greeted George Puffman, Selim, and all the subsequently arriving guests with an optimistic cordiality, and Mark, too, was at his best, asking all the right questions about their welfare, their business ventures, their sports opinions. Mark was quick to learn all the names and relationships of the guests' escorts, too. Toddy reflected, not for the first time, that she'd been incredibly lucky to find Mark. The Collvilles acted as backup hosts, stepping in when any guest looked abandoned. Deena and Purcell definitely had on their party faces; they were dazzling in their charm and animation. Deena herself made a point of collecting the invitation notes; to her pleasure each guest had remembered to bring it.

When all the guests had assembled and their cars had been parked in the building's garage, a gaudy bus pulled up to the doors. The guests exclaimed, in confusion or derision or good humor. "I don't think any of them have ridden in a party bus before," Mark murmured. He hadn't himself. He hadn't even known they existed until Toddy had shown him a brochure.

"Come on, friends, this is the easiest way to get you all to dinner," Toddy said gaily, and because they would have been embarrassed to do otherwise, the guests climbed on board the bus. The driver, a dark, almond-eyed young woman with dreadlocks whose name tag read *marchesa*, gave them a cordial nod as they boarded. Despite the presence of his mistress, James Jeffrey Jamison visibly appreciated *Marchesa's* appearance. He chucked her on the cheek as he passed. He said something to her that sounded to Toddy like, "Hey, dark meat." That puzzled Toddy, who'd never heard the expression. *Marchesa* didn't seem to take offense; in fact, she looked pleased.

The hired servers had left at least fifteen minutes before the huge vehicle began to roll through the dark streets, the guests gaping around at the bus's

cheerful disco lights and the liquor cabinet. Another server whose name tag read paula began passing around glasses of wine. Conversation between the guests began to flow more easily, and finally the party began cohering. The Makepeaces and Collvilles circulated like mad. In fact, the guests were already in the dingy warehouse area close to the water before they knew it. A few of them exclaimed at the “neighborhood.”

“I thought this had all been gentrified,” said a real-estate developer.

“There are pockets here and there that haven’t been touched,” Deena said. She’d searched hard for one of those pockets.

“Don’t worry, friends,” Toddy called. “You’ll love our surprise venue.”

One or two still seemed uneasy as the bus pulled up to an old warehouse, but once they’d been ushered inside the large rolling door they saw that the old place had been beautifully decorated. There were carpets strewn everywhere on the old wooden floor, and the walls had been camouflaged by swaths of hanging material in rich colors. The round tables were draped with white linen and the place settings were perfection. There was a centerpiece on each table, and a large movie screen was set up at a strategic point. The waitstaff was fully briefed. They began taking coats and carrying around yet more wine the minute the door had rolled shut behind the last guest.

Anna Clausen entered soon after. Clausen was a tall, angular woman with jet-black hair and a face like a hatchet. She was elegantly dressed in a severe gray-blue evening dress. All of the guests exchanged happy, anticipatory looks as she entered. Anna Clausen was well-known among the rich and nearly rich. None of them dreamed that Clausen had driven the catering truck herself. It was loaded with excellent food, though Clausen certainly wasn’t used to delivering and serving it herself.

“Deena, Toddy! Beautiful as always!” Anna kissed their cheeks, shook the hands of Mark and Purcell.

Toddy said, “Anna, I can smell the wonderful aroma from here. You’ve become so famous you don’t just feed the celebrities, you *are* a celebrity.”

Clausen looked pleased. “When you called me to explain,” she said in her heavily accented English, “I could hardly take in the audacity of the idea. The Makepeaces always think big. That Deena, she agreed with my menu completely.” Anna was impressed with Deena’s intelligence. The truth was, Deena had never cared a thing about food. Prime rib, salmon,

it was all one to her. But Anna was happy, that was the important thing.

“Thanks for agreeing to be one of the big draws for the evening,” Mark said. “Thanks to our money and the reputation of your cooking, we’re hoping this party will be a big success.”

“I’m ready to start the evening,” Toddy said. She looked around to make sure everything and everyone was in place. The waitstaff was circulating with a so-so choice of wines (“No reason to waste money,” Mark had decided) and hors d’oeuvres. A CD of chamber music provided a soothing background. A lone man was stationed in front of the rolling door. There was another door at the back of the warehouse, but it was concealed by a swath of material.

Deena murmured to Toddy, “I notice that ass Jamison brought his mistress, not his wife.”

Toddy shrugged. “Then he’d better be in a generous mood,” she said, and Deena laughed.

Bella Bordelon had dressed for the evening in full warpaint, glistening and gleaming with every beauty product she could slather on her skin or in her hair. Bella was an aging beauty, and she had arrived on the arm of her latest husband, a man just old enough to keep her from being a figure of fun. She greeted Anna Clausen as if they were very old friends. She didn’t notice the gleam in Anna’s eyes as she threw her arms around Anna’s neck.

When the guests had had a few glasses of wine and a bacon-wrapped fig or two, Toddy took the microphone and tapped on it. The courteous silence was relaxed; a result of the alcohol, Toddy thought.

“I’m so glad you’re all here tonight,” she said sincerely. “Each of you is our very special guest, and we hope you’ll join with us in our effort to save this wonderful planet. We chose this warehouse to meet to emphasize our commitment to reclaim buildings that are still usable, buildings that for tax reasons are allowed to fall down and become blights on the landscape. Throwing this dinner here cost a sixth of what it would have cost at a hotel. That’s money we can use to scrub our planet clean!”

There was a murmur of comment. Mark, standing at the side of the crowd and keeping a sharp eye, could tell that the tone was contemptuous.

Toddy’s smile never wavered as she met Bella Bordelon’s scornful face. If anything, it brightened. “She’s thinking of the bunnies,” Mark whispered to Deena. “Do you think there’s any way they’ll be talked around?” “No,”

said Deena. And she smiled a little herself. “Before we serve your excellent meal, supplied by the great Anna Clausen,” Toddy said, “we’d like to show you a film that’s made a huge impact on our lives. We hope it’ll do the same for yours. I have a feeling it will.” And the young man in charge of the movie equipment began to show *An Inconvenient Truth*.

At least the audience was quiet during the showing. But by the time the showing came to an end, the guests were hungry and restless, and the applause was lukewarm.

James Jeffrey Jamison was not being subtle about pawing his mistress, and she was struggling to keep a pleasant expression on her face. She wasn’t drunk; she’d been quite careful in her wine intake. Bella Bordelon and her husband were more decorous. Bella was whispering to George Puffman, who’d been seated next to her, and Bella’s young man fell deep in conversation with Selim, the bodyguard. As a whole, the audience of environmental offenders didn’t seem to be showing the contrite attitude that Toddy had yearned for.

But she smiled and persevered. “My husband, Mark, the host of this wonderful event, will be passing among you with the proverbial hat, hoping you’ll contribute generously to our cause.”

“We’re hungry,” said George Puffman. “I’ll write a damn check if it means you bring the food.”

“Of course, Mr. Puffman,” Toddy said.

There was not a wave of check writing. In fact, as Mark passed through with a battered porkpie hat (which Deena had pronounced highly symbolic), the contributions came lightly, and when Toddy riffled through the collected checks, looking at the amounts, her sweet face fell. Mark was angry on her behalf, though he hadn’t expected great things. The guests had been selected for their poor track record on environmental issues, and they were running true to form.

Toddy raised her hand in the air in the prearranged signal. She picked up the microphone for the last time.

“I’m sorry you didn’t come through for the cause,” she said sadly. “I had hoped this evening with Mr. Gore would persuade you. We planned our party so carefully, to give you all a chance to redeem yourselves.”

Bella Bordelon called, “I don’t need your redemption. I’ve done nothing for which I need to apologize.”

“Give ‘em hell, Bella,” said Puffman. Jamison echoed the sentiment. His mistress, who was a canny young woman, looked around at the white-clad waitstaff. They’d moved to form a loose circle around the cluster of tables. She rose and excused herself quietly to go to the powder room. Instead, she walked as swiftly as her feet would carry her over to the big rolling door. The sharp-eyed waiter guarding it glanced at Toddy, a question on his face. Toddy gave a tiny nod of assent, and he rolled the door open just wide enough to permit the young woman to exit. She stepped outside with an unmistakable air of relief, and began walking quickly through the deserted warehouses on her high-heeled sandals as the door rolled closed behind her. She may have sensed someone following her for a few blocks, and she took care not to run.

But no one else in the warehouse seemed to pick up on whatever had spooked Jamison’s mistress. In fact, the guests were beginning to look more and more restless and angry.

“Since you don’t seem to feel the need to help the Earth, we’ve decided to give the United States a present before we leave these shores,” Toddy said, her voice sad. “I’d hoped we’d have a huge sum to hand to the former vice president, and I’d hoped we’d all serve you a great meal and you’d get to go home replete with food and virtue. But now, I’m afraid, that won’t be happening.”

“NO FOOD?” bellowed Puffman.

“*We’ll eat,*” Toddy said gently. “See my teeth?” At that unexpected question, all the guests stared. Toddy Makepeace shucked her vintage Dior and parted her lips to show her white teeth, and the assembled crowd watched as they grew longer and sharper. Then Toddy bent over and jerked and spasmed, and when it was over, she was a huge wolf.

There was an appalled and unbelieving hush.

Then Toddy leapt on Bella Bordelon and ate her up.

It was a very noisy process.

Mark became an even larger wolf. Deena and Pur-cell stayed in human form, but their incisors extended and became needlelike. Deena yanked Puffman from his table, drew him into a loverlike embrace with superhuman strength, and sank her fangs into his neck. Purcell enjoyed the same pleasure with Puffman’s bodyguard, Selim, whose gun never left its holster.

Most of the guests were still frozen in their seats for a few important seconds, unable to believe the sights in front of their eyes. But that didn't last long.

The guests that tried to run provided the most entertainment for the serving staff, some of whom had changed into animal form, and some who'd turned out to have fangs like the Collvilles. Marchesa took particular pleasure in hunting down Jamison. She said something before she bit him, something that might have been, "White meat."

The sounds in the old warehouse reached a crescendo of screams and growls and moans, broken by the occasional howl and crack of bone: this quite drowned out the chamber music.

A good time was had by all—at least by all the survivors.

After it was over, and the replete staff had heaped what remained of the guests in the middle of the warehouse (and had hosed themselves down outside and donned clean clothes), Anna Clausen left with the truck of excellent meals. She would take them to the homeless shelter downtown, so the food wouldn't be wasted. Two of the staff went with Anna to help distribute the meals. Three others returned to the parking garage to begin ferrying the cars left there to an automobile graveyard Purcell owned, where they'd be crushed and recycled.

Marchesa and her friend Paula searched the bodies for metal objects that fire might not consume. They assembled a bagful of disabled cell phones, belt buckles, jewelry, and the like. These identifiable objects would be tossed into one of the cars before it made its final trip through the crusher.

The cash from the bodies was tucked thriftily into Marchesa's pocket.

Paula, whose mouth was still bloodstained, had the job of stomping skulls. She was of the fanged persuasion, and terrifically strong. It would be better if the bodies were never identified, or at least not for a long time, and Paula went about her job with the enthusiasm of the young. Marchesa laughed when Jamison crunched under Paula's heel. Paula took extra care to pulverize him.

The young man who'd played the music and started the film had a new task. He was pouring the contents of a can of accelerant around the

warehouse, making sure everything would be consumed. It would take a while for the fire trucks to get here.

Toddy hugged Deena and Purcell. “Thanks so much for helping out,” she said, and hiccuped. She covered her mouth and giggled. “They’d had so much to drink,” she said apologetically.

“It was a ton of fun. Sorry it turned out that way. I really hoped they’d see the error of their ways,” Purcell said, not too sincerely. “I thought about using mind control, but I decided that really would have been cheating. They needed to earn their own redemption.” He tried to look righteous.

“But you weren’t counting on that,” Mark said. Purcell shrugged. “I was pretty hungry,” he admitted with a charming smile. “It’s been a long time since Deena and I hunted and drank our fill. Got to be so careful these days! Now we’re full, and the environment is safer.” He practically glowed with virtue and Selim’s blood.

They all left out the concealed back door and emerged into the cool night. Their cars were parked there, ready for their departure. Toddy and Mark’s Prius looked a bit prissy next to the Collvilles’ Lincoln. The couples bade each other farewell, and Mark took a package of papers containing their new identities from Deena’s hands.

Toddy and Mark, both full and exhausted, exchanged only the occasional comment on their way to the airport. They’d reluctantly decided to fly to Sweden rather than take a boat. All their possessions were in storage, to be retrieved some day in the very distant future. They’d narrowed their home search down to three ecologically friendly structures designed by forward-thinking architects. Despite her anticipation of a great new chapter in their lives, Toddy still had regrets.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t convert them,” she said sadly as they waited to board. “I did everything I could.”

“At least they’re being recycled,” Mark said.