



The Other Women  
Nicci Kadilak

## Deleted Scene: Prologue 2 – Proposal 4.14

“Women, led by political activist Annette Gordon, showed up by the thousands in major cities today, protesting the passage of what’s become known simply as ‘Proposal Four-Fourteen.’ This, of course, is the proposal expected to pass into law by large margins this week, requiring the use of nursery wombs for the birth of all children, and prohibiting women from conceiving and bearing children in the primitive way. When asked what effect the protests might have on the proposal’s passage, senior Council member Mohamed Abdi had this to say.”

The camera cuts away from the long-haired, airbrushed anchor who sits at an expansive desk with video of the protests perfectly positioned behind and to the left of her head. In her place appears the image of a handsome, olive-skinned man in his fifties, black hair dotted with gray around the temples. With two hands, he aligns the plastic-rimmed glasses in front of his eyes before speaking. “It’s laughable, really,” he begins with a smirk, “to think that this fringe group could have even a miniscule effect on the vote. This proposal simply codifies into law something that nearly everybody is already doing. The nursery wombs just make sense with where we are as a human race. From an economic standpoint, from a safety standpoint, from a public health standpoint, and I could go on. We have overwhelming support in the Council. We have overwhelming support in the public. This group of extremists will have no effect whatsoever on the outcome of tomorrow’s vote.”

The camera is back on the anchor, whose blonde highlights twinkle under the stage lighting. “That’s Councilor Abdi, sounding very confident that the vote on Four-Fourteen will pass. Last year, nearly ninety-five percent of families who had a baby used a nursery womb for the entire process. Maternal and infant mortality was down below a tenth of a percent for the sixteenth year in a row. The miracles of modern technology, right, Pete?” she finishes with a gleaming smile, turning her head to the left.

The camera pans outward, revealing a necktie-clad man who couldn’t be older than thirty. His black hair shines with product, and his teeth rival his co-anchor’s in their alignment and sparkle. “Sounds like a win-win to me, Marsha.”

“Oh, give me a fucking break,” says Delia North, punching a button on the media console with more force than necessary. She sits back in the oversized chair, crossing her arms over her chest as the screen on the wall fades to black and the lights in the conference room come back up. She’s wearing a dark gray jacket over a white top – the last of three she tried on before finding one that fit properly under her business suit. Still, the jacket feels tight in the shoulders, and she soon releases her arms and sits back up. *Can’t even be properly exasperated*, she thinks as her lips tighten and her eyebrows crease.

She looks across the table at Mohamed, who returns her glare with a neutral expression that infuriates her even more. “You can’t possibly believe that bullshit, Mo.”

Mohamed opens his palms toward the sky. “What’s bullshit, D?” he asks. “All of it is true. The state saves billions on healthcare costs, and mothers and babies stay healthy. There’s nothing bullshit about that.”

“The bullshit is that you make it sound black and white, and it isn’t,” Delia responds. “We’re humans, not machines. What about the nurturing bond that forms during pregnancy? There’s nothing in this world like making and carrying another person in your body, pushing it out into the world, feeding it from your breast.” She looks to her right at the only other person in the room, fellow Junior Councilor Gabriela Rojas, hoping for backup. Instead, she is met with downturned eyes as the woman scrolls through something on the screen embedded in the table in front of her. The three of them are clustered around one end of a long conference table, in the same windowless room where the subcommittee finalized the wording of Proposal 4-14 several weeks ago. The rest of the caucus has gone home for the evening. “Gaby,” Delia says, her voice coming short of desperation, but just barely.

Gabriela finally darkens the screen with a triple-tap, then looks up at Delia. Her look is impassive. Not disdainful, but also not apologetic. “Delia, this is probably not what you are hoping to hear, but I see Four-Fourteen as a tremendous opportunity for women. This is our chance to gain the equal footing we’ve been fighting for for generations. The shift of the responsibility for nurturing the developing baby to a gender-agnostic platform means that parents can finally be equal partners.”

Delia is so shocked that for a moment she can’t speak. “You can’t be serious, can you?” she asks finally, then looks to Mohamed, raising a finger in his direction. “Did you feed her this? What the fuck, Mo?”

“I’m perfectly capable of coming up with my own thoughts and opinions, Councilor,” says Gabriela in Delia’s periphery. “Come on, D. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. How many people do you know who gave birth in the primitive way, and then took years to return to their normal level of functioning – both professionally and socially?” She doesn’t give Delia time to answer before going on. “How equal can a partnership really be, when one person is solely responsible for serving as incubator? Practically no one chooses to give birth in the first place. But, as long as some are allowed to choose it, there can never be true equality.”

“Do you even realize what you’re saying?” Delia says, suppressing a sardonic chuckle. “In order to gain truly equal footing, half of us have to give up one of our basic physiological functions? I don’t know who’s gotten to you, Gaby. Maybe the same people who managed to convince the entire feminist alliance that this would be better for gender equality. Remember, though, that we are responsible for making decisions for the common good – for carrying out the will of the people. This is not what the people want.” It couldn’t be, but somehow the supporters of the bill have made it seem that way. Her right hand reaches up to toy with the small pin on her lapel, a purple lotus blossom. *These flowers rise up out of murky waters, and that’s just what you’ll have to do if you’re going to make a change*, Annette told her when she pinned it on, the day Delia was inducted into the Council.

“I think you’re too close to this one, Delia,” says Mohamed. “This *is* what people want. This is what more than ninety-five percent of the population is choosing on a daily basis—”

“*Choosing*,” Delia echoes. “They deserve a *choice*, that’s all I’m saying. And, by the way, ninety-five percent of the population isn’t choosing to sterilize their baby girls on a daily basis.” She leans forward, hands on the chair’s armrests, hurling the comment as if it were a fireball at risk of burning her tongue. “That is assault, and anyone saying differently is delusional. If a grown woman wants to subject herself to safeguarding, then she can make that choice. But no one has the right to mandate such a horrific procedure on an infant.”

“Oh, come on,” says Gaby. “Stop being so dramatic. What woman alive wouldn’t kill for a respite from her monthly curse? Who wouldn’t want perfectly controlled hormones that take away the mood swings? Skin problems? Cramps? The safeguarding procedure is nothing – and when they have it at such a young age, they don’t know anything different. It’s a part of evolution, Delia. It was always going to go this way.”

“It’s not natural,” she says. “Evolution is natural, and this is not that.” Delia’s exasperation turns to fury as she realizes, finally, what is now nauseatingly obvious in retrospect: This entire interaction has been scripted from the beginning. Gaby didn’t agree to join this meeting so she could support Delia’s stance; she is here to be the female voice for the other side. “What the fuck, Gaby? You talk about equality among the sexes, but I don’t see Mohamed over here lining up to get his balls removed – or his son’s and grandson’s – in the name of evolution,” Delia spits.

“My anatomy and that of my progeny are not at issue,” says Mohamed, sighing heavily and sitting back in his seat. “Only one sex needs to be safeguarded in order for the law to be effective, and women suffer far more, what with their monthly hormonal swings – not to mention the discomfort of pregnancy and the pain of childbirth – than do men. Delia, you need to face the music. You’re the only holdout. Think about that for a second. Out of a thousand Councilors, you are the only one still considering opposing the proposal. The vote is going through with or without you. The best you can do is embrace it, before you alienate your constituency even more than you already have.”

Delia shakes her head vehemently. “I got this position by promising to stand up for what’s right, even when it’s not popular. I am not simply going to change my position because it’s more convenient for the rest of you.”

Gaby picks up from here. “Delia, I think it’s time you realize that your strong personal feelings are getting in the way of the objective reality of the situation. This is government. Politics. You and I were inducted at the same time. We’ve both been behind the curtain for more than a year. You should know by now, there is more at play than any civilian can know. A few protests by people who don’t know the whole story won’t change that fact. The proposal will pass, and soon enough those voices will retreat back into the noise, and find another cause to get worked up about, and that will be the end of it. A hundred years from now, no one will even give Four-Fourteen a second thought. It will just be the way we’ve always done things.”

Mohamed leans forward, steepling his fingers together on the conference table. “Instead of wasting your time fighting a losing battle, and damaging your reputation in the process, why not focus your attention on your

greenhouse proposal? Preliminary polls are still back and forth on that one. A vote for Four-Fourteen would go a long way towards showing good faith to some swing voters.”

For a moment, confusion passes over Delia’s face. “What are you talking about? The public garden proposal has nothing to do with Four-Fourteen.” Then her eyes widen and seem to catch fire. “Are you trying to blackmail me?” she asks, her hands balling unconsciously into fists on the armrests of her chair. “Is that how you got the rest of the reasonable Councilors to support this bill of yours?”

“Quid pro quo,” is Mohamed’s response. “It’s the way things are done. Think of it as a show of unity and humility.”

“Politics,” Gaby says simply, shrugging as if that one word explains it all.

Mohamed places his palms on the table and pushes up from his chair, his face approaching Delia’s across the table as he stands. “Think about it, D. You’ll realize, I’m sure. It’s the only way.”

Gaby doesn’t even bother throwing a glance in Delia’s direction as she follows Mohamed out of the room, leaving Delia alone to fight back the tears of fury and helplessness that threaten to spill over.