

The Wives of Marty Winters
by Alec Clayton

Excerpt from opening chapter

Pride

There was always the chance, however slim, that some nutcase in the crowd would pull out a gun and blast somebody away. Marty and Chloe knew it, so they kept their eyes peeled. They might have felt a little silly about being so cautious; after all, nobody'd ever shot a Pride Day speaker, but they weren't taking any chances. Marty stayed on his feet, keeping one eye on Selena and one eye on the crowd. Chloe did the same. The crowd was happy and boisterous. Most of the people were seated in the grass, a lot of them with heads resting in lovers' laps, some in outrageous costumes and more than a few practically naked. So much exposed skin was distracting to Marty, but not to Chloe. A top Secret Service agent couldn't have been more single-minded. Both Chloe and Marty would later say that alarms went off at the sight of a man wearing a red baseball cap and a camouflage T-shirt.

Marty's wife, Selena, was slated to speak to the crowd in Volunteer Park. She was a fifty-year old mother of two grown children and grandmother to a set of twin boys. A small woman, proud of her still-girlish figure and resplendent in her simple red cocktail dress, Selena was Grand Marshall of the Pride parade.

The crowd shouted hurrahs, applauded and whistled as a punk band called Muthuh Effer finished its set. A minute passed as band members and their fans who had been crowding the stage left the performance area. The Mistress of Ceremonies, a well known Seattle drag performer named Mother May Belle, took microphone in hand and said, "Thank you, Muthuhs. Now, let's hear from a real mother, our Grand Marshal Selena Winters."

Mother May Belle's introductory spiel was filled with glowing references to Selena's work as a civil rights activist. She finished with, "Let's give this little lady a great big welcome." Marty applauded along with the rest of the crowd. He watched the big drag queen step to the edge of the stage to take Selena's arm and help her up the three rickety steps onto the stage.

He was proud of his wife. He thought she looked as beautiful as ever she had, more beautiful even than she had been at seventeen. Of course he was seeing her through a veil of memory. He knew that. He wasn't blind. Objectively, he knew that age was catching up with her. Just in the past few months she had begun to look like a worn and fragile version of the lost little girl he had first met thirty-four years earlier in a Nashville bus station. He couldn't help but notice how frail she seemed as she leaned into Mother May Belle while walking to the microphone. Still, there was an inner beauty, a strength of character, that shone through; and he had no doubt it was just as clear to everyone else in the crowd as it was to him. Besides, fifty wasn't very old at all. It was just that in his mind's eye she was still nineteen years old, and he was always somewhat shocked in those moments in which she clearly looked fifty.

Marty kept moving, aware that he might be blocking someone's view, but unwilling to sit down. He thought: If I was sitting in the grass trying to watch and some asshole kept walking around in front, I'd be pissed. Too bad. Chloe also kept moving, her brilliant cape and rainbow wig like flags flying over the hundreds of people seated on the grass in the park. The two of them were Selena's self-appointed guardians, even though only one of them — and not the one you might think — was in any way capable of reacting decisively in an emergency.

Marty could tell that Selena was nervous. Despite years of public speaking, she never got over the terror that gripped her every time she had to speak in front of a crowd. He could see that the smile on her lips was forced. Scanning the crowd in the area right in front of the stage, he caught a glimpse of their son, William. Then, focusing back on the stage, he tried to catch Selena's eye and flash her a reassuring glance. That was when he saw a blur of motion in front of the stage.

Whatever it was that moved so suddenly was unclear to Marty, distracted as he was by other bits of motion: small clouds moving quickly overhead in a mostly blue sky, bits of paper flying in the wind, people moving about, semaphore flashes of bright sunlight across the assembled crowd. For just a moment Marty had begun to let the flashing light lull him into a reverie, remembering a sparkling disco ball and a beautiful young girl at a high school dance — not Selena, but Maria, his first wife. All day he had been haunted by memories from long ago. Where they had come from, he had no idea. This one came and went as quickly as the flash of a strobe.

Then he saw that other more immediate and dangerous flash of light. For a glimmer of time less than a full second it was a meaningless flash of light, and then he realized that it was light reflected off the barrel of a gun. He shouted "Gun!" and rushed toward the stage. At the same instant, he saw Chloe go flying like some kind of circus performer, her ridiculous but beautiful rainbow wig and fiery cape streaming behind her, trying with all her might to put her own body between Selena and the gunman, willing, if she only could, to take the bullet for her friend.

But she was too late.

Selena clutched at her head and crumbled to the boards. It was almost as if she melted there. Rivulets of red between her fingers. Marty reached the stage in seconds. He clambered up the steps and fell to his knees in front of Selena. He lifted her head and cradled it in his lap. Their son, William, also rushed to the stage. He leaned over his mother's body and wailed in a loud keening voice like the call of some huge bird. Blood gushed from Selena's head wound, soaked into Marty's shirt and dribbled down her limp arm where it drooped to the hardwood stage.

In the crowd, Chloe's dive through the air had landed her in the middle of a group of people. Frantically she tried to extricate herself from a tangle of arms and legs. People scrambling out of her way. She pushed to her feet and scanned the crowd for the gunman, but there was so much chaotic movement it was impossible to spot him. She then turned toward the stage and attempted to push herself to where Marty and William hovered over Selena. By then policemen had taken up position in front of the stage and would not let anyone approach. "But I'm family," Chloe said. "Marty, tell them. Tell them I'm family."

There was an ambulance nearby. At major events such as the Pride celebration, there was always an emergency vehicle posted in the parking lot in front of the art museum, that hulking old art deco building that sat just across the open field from the outdoor stage. The ambulance made its way across the grass and through the parting crowd. Uniformed medics hopped out, leapt to the stage, lifted Selena to a gurney, hooked oxygen to her nose, and carried her into the ambulance. They were swift and efficient, not a word or a motion wasted.

Marty stood up, his hands hanging helplessly by his side. William put his arm around his father's shoulder. "I'll go with them," William said.

"Are you a relative?" a medic asked.

"Yes. Her son."

Marty asked, "What hospital are you taking her to?"

"Harborview."

He told William he'd get Chloe and meet them at the hospital. Quickly he scanned the crowd for Chloe. "Chloe, where are you," he shouted.

"I'm right here. Let's go."

She was standing at the edge of the crowd. They ran out of the park. At the sidewalk they panicked momentarily, unable to remember where they had parked.

"This way," Chloe said, and they ran the four blocks to Marty's car.

Harborview was no more than ten minutes away, depending on traffic. On the way, Marty said, "Why were you standing back in the crowd?"

"The cops wouldn't let me near. Didn't you hear me? I was yelling, 'Tell them I'm family, Marty.'"

"I'm sorry. No, I didn't hear you. I don't know. It's hard to think straight right after seeing the love of your life get shot." (Much later Marty would recall that a strange memory had come to mind right in the middle of the most chaotic moments following the shooting. He suddenly recalled a scene from Alan Rudolph's great cult film *Trouble in Mind*. In the film, there was a shooting melee in the gangster's mansion, guns going off all around while the hero walked calmly away, completely unnoticed. The hero in the film was Kris Kristofferson. The gangster, played by the great transvestite Devine, was named Hilly Blue. Marty remembered that scene and thought Selena getting shot was like a parody of the scene. Her assailant must have escaped by walking through the milling crowd in the same calm manner. And here comes the irony: that scene in the movie was shot in the same location. The art museum in the park served as Hilly Blue's mansion in the film.)