
ONE WOMAN'S HISTORIC BATTLE AGAINST EMINENT DOMAIN

LITTLE PINK HOUSE

A True Story of Defiance and Courage

JEFF BENEDICT

WITH A NEW
Epilogue on the
ASTONISHING
Aftermath



"AN ABSORBING READ . . . A MODERN MORALITY TALE . . . MS. KELO
IS A CLASSIC AMERICAN HEROINE." —*WALL STREET JOURNAL*

LITTLE PINK HOUSE

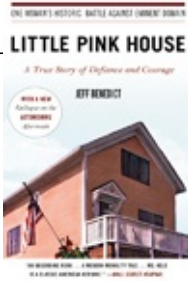
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JEFF BENEDICT



GRAND CENTRAL
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NEW YORK BOSTON



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I wrote much of this book in the attic of her home. Many afternoons she trudged up the attic steps and quietly placed a grilled-cheese sandwich on my desk before saying, “You keep writing, kid.” She knew I didn’t have time to stop for lunch. My grandmother loved this story and couldn’t wait to read the finished product. Sadly, she never will. On January 15, 2008, Josephine died suddenly, shortly before I finished writing. If only I could have written faster.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Eminent domain is the government's power to take private property for public use. Nobody particularly likes it. But occasionally it's essential to make way for roads, schools, hospitals, and the like. And Americans accept this practice as long as deprived property owners receive due process and just compensation. Under the Fifth Amendment, that's been the American way since the Framers drafted our Constitution.

But the Supreme Court changed the rules in 2005 when it decided *Kelo v. City of New London*. Now local and state governments can take private property from an individual and transfer it to a private developer in hopes of generating more tax revenue or creating jobs. The *Kelo* decision equated these public *benefits* with public *uses*.

Under this interpretation, there's no telling where the government's power to take private property ends. "The specter of condemnation hangs over all property," Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote in blistering dissent in *Kelo*. "Nothing is to prevent the State from replacing any Motel 6 with a Ritz-Carlton, any home with a shopping mall, or any farm with a factory."

The *Kelo* case is infamous. But the stirring story behind what drove Susette Kelo—a divorced nurse—to take on a powerful governor, a billion-dollar corporation, and a hard-charging development agency to save her pink cottage is a hidden drama that begs to be exposed. On one level, it's a uniquely American saga about power and defiance that makes the Supreme Court decision even harder to swallow. But at its core, this story is about pride, a virtue that breeds self-respect and a condition that is first among the seven cardinal sins.

Little Pink House is an inside account of how a political street fight over a neighborhood escalated into a high-stakes federal case. It's the unsanitized version that the Supreme Court never heard. And it's told by the people who lived it—the residents whose homes were taken; the local officials who authorized the takings; the development agency that designed the plan; the state officials who supplied the money; a *Fortune* 500 company that stood to benefit; and lawyers who fought ferociously over whether this was right or wrong. All of these parties cooperated for this book.

Between November 2005 and March 2008, I conducted close to three hundred on-the-record interviews. I also received via e-mail well over one hundred written responses to factual queries I posed to participants. Most of these queries involved detailed follow-up questions to prior interviews.

I also had access to deposition transcripts, video and audio recordings of meetings and events, and many documents (internal corporate correspondence, internal government memos, and lawyers' private notes), as well as private papers and correspondence, such as journals, diaries, and e-mails. In all, I obtained enough documents—including voluminous records obtained under the freedom-of-information laws, court papers, press reports, and photographs and maps—to fill more than a dozen large, plastic storage containers.

My primary objective in this is to tell a compelling story that is true to the characters who shaped this historic case. I am deeply grateful to individuals on all sides who afforded me their time and helped me understand this complex story about people whose struggle ultimately shifted one of the most enduring principles of our democracy.

Perhaps no writer had more influence on English common law and American jurisprudence than seventeenth-century English jurist Sir Edward Coke. He penned one of the most famous lines of all time: "A man's house is his castle—*et domus sua cuique est tutissimum refugium*." The Latin portion

of the sentence is less well known. The loose translation is: “and where shall a man be safe if it be not in his own house?”

Amazingly, after *Kelo v. City of New London*, Coke’s comment may be more relevant now than when the American colonists rebelled against the king.

Jeff Benedict

April 8, 2008

Buena Vista, Virginia

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE PRINCIPALS

John G. Rowland, governor of Connecticut

Peter N. Ellef, chief of staff to Governor Rowland

Jay B. Levin, lobbyist and attorney

George Milne Jr., president of Pfizer, Inc.

Dr. Claire Gaudiani, president of New London Development Corporation and Connecticut College

Susette Kelo, lead plaintiff

Billy Von Winkle, plaintiff

Matt Dery, plaintiff

Rich Beyer, plaintiff

Byron Athenian, plaintiff

Michael Cristofaro, plaintiff

INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE

Chip Mellor, president

Scott Bullock, attorney

Dana Berliner, attorney

John Kramer, communications director

CITY OF NEW LONDON

Lloyd Beachy, mayor

Tom Londregan, attorney

Tony Basilica, Democratic Party chairman

NEW LONDON DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (NLDC)

David Goebel, chief operating officer

Stephen Percy, member of the board of directors

Mathew Greene, chief counsel

Edward O'Connell, outside counsel

COALITION TO SAVE FORT TRUMBULL

Kathleen Mitchell, speech writer and organizer for Susette Kelo

John and Sarah Steffian, financiers behind the litigation effort

Professor Fred Paxton, co-chairman of the coalition

Steve and Amy Hallquist, grassroots opposition leaders

Attorney Scott Sawyer, legal strategist for the local opposition

OTHER KEY PLAYERS

Reid MacCluggage, publisher of the *Day* newspaper

The Honorable Thomas J. Corradino, trial judge in *Kelo v. City of New London*

Jim Serbia, real-estate manager of Pfizer's research division

SUPPORTING CAST

STATE OF CONNECTICUT OFFICIALS

M. Jodi Rell, governor of Connecticut

Ron Angelo, special negotiator for the governor

Robert Albright, mediator for the governor's office

OTHER SUPPORT ROLES

Wesley W. Horton, argued before the U.S. Supreme Court on behalf of the City of New London

Aldo Valentini, head of the Italian Dramatic Club

Judge Angelo Santaniello, negotiator for the Italian Dramatic Club

John Markowicz, member of the U.S. Navy base reuse committee

September 20, 2005

U.S. Senate Chambers

Washington, D.C.

Clutching her notes and wearing heels, a gray skirt, and a white blouse, Susette Kelo approached the witness table, hoping the senators noticed her salmon-pink sweater. It matched the color of her house and had sneaker prints across the front, signifying “They walked all over me.”

“Are you nervous?” her attorney, Scott Bullock, asked.

“Not too bad.”

“You’ll be fine,” he said, patting her on the shoulder.

Facing a panel of senators, she sat down, grabbed a pitcher of water, and poured herself a drink. Bullock took a seat in the first row behind her.

Senator Arlen Specter pounded the gavel.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. The Senate Judiciary Committee will now proceed with a hearing on the issue of the right to take private property under what is called the doctrine of eminent domain for public use. Our hearing is prompted by the recent decision just a few months ago, in June, by the Supreme Court of the United States in a case captioned *Kelo v. City of New London*, where private property was taken for the use of a private company, Pfizer.”

Specter indicated that he and Senator Patrick Leahy had just been across the street in a conference with Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens. They had been discussing the harsh criticism generated against the Court by the *Kelo* decision. As the author of the majority opinion, Justice Stevens didn’t particularly appreciate all the fire the decision had been under. But Specter insisted the matter required congressional review.

“The Fifth Amendment,” Specter continued, “prohibits the government from taking private property unless it does so for a public use and with just compensation... But the *Kelo* case goes a significant step further and takes it for economic development, where there are jobs, increased taxes, and other revenues. The issue, which the Congress has authority to act on—this is not a constitutional issue where the Supreme Court is the last word—is to determine as a matter of public policy whether this is a wise, appropriate taking of private property.”

Specter yielded to Senator Leahy, who declared his respect for private-property rights. Leahy looked Susette in the eye and continued, “Ms. Kelo, I am probably one of millions of Americans who were distressed when we learned your story. We are concerned about what happened to you... It has been said that tough cases make bad laws. It can also be said that bad law can lead to bad remedies, and so we are going to have to figure out the best way to do this.”

When the senators’ preliminary remarks concluded, Specter introduced Susette as the first witness. “Despite her loss before the Supreme Court,” Specter said, “she continues to inspire and advocate for a return to sensible eminent-domain policy. Thank you for what you are doing, Ms. Kelo, and we look forward to your testimony.”

She took a deep breath.

“I want to thank Chairman Specter and the rest of the Senate Judiciary Committee for the opportunity to testify,” she began. “My name is Susette Kelo, and I live in New London, Connecticut.”

I am the Kelo in *Kelo v. City of New London*, the now infamous U.S. Supreme Court case.”

She cleared her throat and went on, “The battle against eminent-domain abuse may have started a way for me to save my little pink cottage. But it has rightfully grown into something much larger—the fight to restore the American Dream and the sacredness and security of each one of our homes.”

GIMME SHELTER

Spring 1997

Medic Eleven, come in.”

Forty-year-old EMT Susette Kelo grabbed the paramedic truck’s radio receiver. “This is Medic Eleven.”

“Respond to a man down at First Avenue and Niantic River Road.”

Susette’s partner, Jeff Douchette, whipped the wheel around and headed toward Niantic Bay, an inlet off Long Island Sound in southeastern Connecticut.

“Medic Eleven en route,” Susette said.

Married with five sons, Susette Kelo had become an EMT a few years earlier, after a drunk driver crashed head-on into her seventeen-year-old son’s vehicle, nearly killing him. Paramedics had helped save her boy’s life. Susette had begun volunteering on ambulance runs as a way of giving back.

The experience ultimately convinced her to become a medic. Emergency response offered Susette an escape from her unfulfilling home life in Preston, a small farming community twenty miles from the Connecticut coast. Susette and her husband, John Jorsz, had a ranch house, a barn, and farm animals on four acres. It had been a great place to raise boys. But now all of them except her youngest lived on their own. And with high school graduation approaching, he would soon be gone as well.

She was thinking about moving on, too. Her marriage had soured, the relationship reduced to constant bickering. She felt like her husband showed more affection for the bottle than for her. He felt like she didn’t appreciate how hard he worked to provide for them. But it didn’t matter who was right; the romance was drained. And with the kids gone and the animals sold, the ranch felt empty and cold.

Susette knew she needed a change in scenery when the highlight of her week had become weekend EMT shifts. Most calls took her to waterfront communities on Long Island Sound. The water had a way of brightening her day.

“There he is,” Douchette said, pulling up beside an elderly man sitting on a sidewalk curb, his feet resting on the street. Sweat saturated his shirt. An elderly woman and some pedestrians huddled around him.

“Grab the monitor,” Douchette said.

With the summer temperature pushing eighty-five degrees, Susette had her long red hair pinned up in a French twist. Her form-fitting, navy blue uniform stuck to her tall, slender figure as she grabbed an oxygen bag, a heart monitor, and the drug box from the truck. But even while doing this she couldn’t help noticing the attractive beach cottages lining the avenues along the water.

“Boy, it’s beautiful down here,” she said to her partner.

He headed straight for the patient, whose wife explained that they had been out for their routine morning walk and her husband had collapsed with chest pains. The man labored to breathe.

Susette gave him oxygen and applied cardiac-monitor cables to him while Douchette checked his vital signs. She saw fear in the elderly couple’s eyes as an ambulance arrived.

“You were probably overcome by the heat,” Douchette told the man, reassuring him that he would be okay. “But just to be safe, we’re going to bring you to the hospital. And I’m going to go with you.”

Susette helped the patient onto a stretcher before packing the equipment back in her truck and taking the keys from Douchette, who climbed into the ambulance. “I’ll meet you back at the hospital,” he told her.

Pulling away, Susette spotted a house with a private dock, a small patch of beach, and a “For Sale” sign. That afternoon, when her shift ended, she returned to the scene to get the Realtor’s name and phone number off the sign and take a closer look at the house. The setting sun put a sparkle on the ocean water that lapped up to the property’s sandy shoreline.

I really have to move down here, she thought.

For more than a year, Susette had been trying to talk her husband into selling the ranch and moving closer to the water, convinced she could cope with an unfulfilling marriage if she had the water as a friend. But Jorsz consistently resisted. A machinist at a paper-recycling mill, he spent sixty to seventy hours per week at work. The ranch offered a place to unwind on the weekend doing what he enjoyed—tinkering on engines and fixing things. Besides, his job was only fifteen minutes from the house. He really had no interest in leaving a rural town for a more congested coastal community close to an hour away from his job.

Susette called the Realtor and got the price for the beach house: \$170,000. If her husband would agree to sell the ranch, she figured, they could pay cash for the beach house and still have enough left over for a small retirement nest egg. She hoped a house with a private boat dock might be enough to finally persuade him. That evening, Susette approached her husband in the yard while he worked on a piece of farming equipment. She described the house.

“You wouldn’t have to work anymore,” she told him.

“I don’t want to leave,” Jorsz said, not bothering to make eye contact.

She could tell he had been drinking. “You know, you might like this place,” she added. “There’s a dock. We could get a boat.”

He ignored her.

“I’m going to ask you again for the last time,” she said in desperation.

“I’m not leaving Preston,” he said.

Susette took a step back. “Well, if you don’t want to go, I’m going anyway.”

He showed no expression. Neither did she.

She had been let down her entire life. It had begun with her father, William Stevens, who had walked out right after Susette’s birth on June 14, 1956. Stevens had left Susette with nothing, not even a last name. Destitute, Susette’s mother, Josephine Chasse, had waited tables at a diner to support her six children in Millinocket, Maine, a remote rural town over sixty miles north of Bangor, not far from the Canadian border.

While her mother worked, Susette and her siblings fended for themselves during the long, hard winters. Her older brothers often fed her water with chocolate flavoring for breakfast. She wore socks on her little hands for mittens. At age four, Susette learned to keep warm inside their frigid house by climbing under the kitchen sink to be near the hot-water pipe. She had few friends and very little to look forward to.

In need of more steady work, Susette’s mother moved to New London, Connecticut, before Susette’s tenth birthday. She enrolled Susette in a Catholic school. After getting pregnant at age sixteen, Susette married Michael Kelo. By the time Susette turned twenty-five, she and Kelo had five sons.

Two years later, she divorced Kelo but kept his name. When her ex-husband failed to pay child support, Susette and her sons ended up on welfare for a short time before she found employment as a

shipyard electrician at Electric Boat, a division of General Dynamics that manufactures submarines. With her five boys, she moved into a small house next to a chicken farm in Preston.

That's when she met thirty-two-year-old John Jorsz, who lived down the road, alone on his ranch. He had never married. At thirty-one, Susette had a body that defied the fact that she had delivered five children. Her fiery red hair ran all the way down to her waist. After a hurricane took down a tree in her yard, she asked Jorsz to cut it up, which he gladly did. Then when her boys' dog died, Jorsz helped them bury it. He even made a grave marker—a wooden cross bearing the dog's name.

In 1988, Susette married Jorsz and moved into the ranch house, along with her sons. Although the marriage never sizzled, it suited their needs. Jorsz provided a roof and three square meals a day, and he cared for the boys as if they were his own. Susette brought livestock to the farm and used her green thumb to dress the place up with gardens and crops.

Things worked for eight years. But when Susette hit forty, she yearned for something more. Tired of the day-to-day grind of maintaining the ranch and a marriage headed nowhere, she wanted to pursue something for herself. Childhood poverty had cheated her out of an education. Early pregnancy and a determination to be a good mother had negated any chance of a career. She had worn out her life raising five sons and trying to make two unfulfilling marriages work. There had to be something better out there. To figure it out, she needed a fresh start.

But the beach house wasn't the answer. It was nothing but a pipe dream without her husband's help. She knew she could never afford it on her own. *That's all right*, she figured. One way or the other, she'd find a place of her own by the water. And when she did, she'd leave Jorsz.

Any hope of landing near the water rested in New London, one of the oldest cities in America. Established in 1658 and named after Great Britain's main city, New London, at the juncture of the Thames River and Long Island Sound, thrived as a colonial port. Whaling made it a commercial power in the 1800s. In the twentieth century, though, New London was transformed into a blue-collar, industrial city, with the defense industry exploiting the city's seacoast for U.S. Navy and Coast Guard installations. But as the cold war wound down and the defense industry cut back, New London's unemployment rose, and its property values fell.

Susette's EMT unit had its home base at New London's city hospital, where Susette spent most of her weekends. A few weeks after her husband insisted he'd never leave Preston, Susette and Jeff Douchette got called to an emergency at New London's Naval Undersea Warfare Center, a thirty-two-acre vacant campus of buildings and laboratories on the banks of the Thames. The call turned out to be a false alarm. As they left the base, Susette asked Douchette for the keys and suggested a scenic route back to the hospital. Douchette agreed.

Susette exited the base onto East Street, which ran between the base and a civilian neighborhood settled by Irish and Italian immigrants in the early 1900s. Some homes on East Street had views overlooking the base and the water. Susette coasted to a stop sign at the end of the street.

"Wow, look at that house," she said, pointing at a two-story Victorian that occupied the corner of East and Trumbull streets.

Douchette was not impressed. The house looked abandoned and had no yard or driveway.

Susette parked the truck to get a closer look. Vines and overgrown brush concealed a set of brick steps leading from the street to the front door. Dreary beige paint, cracked and peeling, covered the exterior. A weathered "For Sale" sign dangled from a fence.

"I think I'd like to buy that," she said.

“Are you crazy?” Douchette said.

“No, I’m serious.”

“You gotta be out of your mind.”

The front of the house’s foundation abutted the cracked sidewalk on East Street. The left side of the house went right to the edge of Trumbull Street. Fewer than ten feet separated the right side of the house from an almost identical Victorian that also had a “For Sale” sign on it.

Susette didn’t care. The place had a water view. The fact that it needed work convinced her she just might be able to afford it. She jotted down the phone number and the address “8 East Street” on a scrap of paper and stuffed it in her pocket.

BIG AMBITIONS

John G. Rowland had reason to smile. The Republican governor's polling numbers had top Democrats backing off from challenging him in his upcoming bid for reelection. Rowland had strung together an improbable series of convincing victories at a remarkably young age. After winning election to the state legislature at age twenty-three, Rowland had become a U.S. congressman at twenty-seven. Then in 1994, the state had elected him governor at age thirty-seven. Handsome, charismatic, and immensely popular, the governor had established dominance in a blue state in the heart of the northeast.

His meteoric rise had not gone unnoticed by the Republican National Party. Another four-year term as the state's chief executive would solidify his hopes of reaching the national stage. In this campaign however, Rowland had more in mind than just winning: he also wanted to carry some of the state's most Democratic cities.

No Connecticut town voted more Democratic than New London, where Democrats outnumbered Republicans more than four to one among registered voters. Democrats absolutely dominated local, state, and federal elections there. But these overwhelming odds only fueled Rowland's ambition. He figured the city's economic woes gave him an opening. New London's unemployment rate was twice as high as the statewide average. Industry and business had fled the city. The crime rate was up, and a feeling of hopelessness had set in.

Rowland had in mind a massive urban-renewal project along the city's waterfront. But he didn't want to deal with New London's Democratic city hall. To wrest redevelopment authority from the city, Rowland looked to his loyal friend Peter Ellef, the head of the state's Department of Economic and Community Development.

Tall with silvery-black hair and deep-set eyes with bushy black eyebrows, fifty-three-year-old Ellef had a big say in the state's construction projects, as he controlled the purse strings for urban development. Ellef used his position to establish himself as the governor's toughest political ally. He liked control, loyalty, and results.

Ellef elected not to bulldoze the governor's agenda into the city. After all, the city's Democratic Party leaders despised Rowland and distrusted anyone closely associated with him. And if the city suspected the state was trying to invade its turf, there would be immediate opposition.

Ellef needed a foil—an envoy, a person of influence with an inside track to the city's political players. He needed a Democrat, but not just any Democrat. The task called for a powerful Democrat willing to help a brutally partisan Republican governor circumvent other Democrats—someone more loyal to personal ambition than to the party.

Jay B. Levin had wanted to be governor of Connecticut, and he had made all the right career moves to get there. After graduating from law school in 1976, he had served as staff legal counsel to Democratic Congressman Chris Dodd before becoming a prosecutor and then a partner in one of New London's most respected law firms. He had served two terms in the state legislature, but in 1990 he had run unsuccessfully for attorney general.

His defeat had marked the end of his statewide political aspirations. Yet his interest in politics remained, and in the mid-1990s Levin got elected mayor of New London. But then, at age forty-five, he abruptly walked away from politics to make some money. He joined the prestigious Hartford law firm of Pullman & Comley and was appointed chair of its governmental-affairs department, the firm's lobbying arm.

Ellef didn't have to go far to find Levin. Pullman & Comley had its office within blocks of the state capitol. No one had better political connections in New London than Levin, especially in Democratic circles. A lobbyist who made a living off his Rolodex, Levin fit Ellef's needs to a T. The trick would be the job title—"lobbyist" was too blatant.

On March 15, 1997, Ellef posted an official request for proposals for a consulting job to assist the state in developing New London's waterfront. The posting described the job as analyzing the factors affecting this development and providing an assessment of the political support needed to complete it. "The contractor must fulfill the duties listed to the satisfaction of Peter N. Ellef," the posting said.

All the action was headed to Levin's hometown. Within three weeks, he submitted a two-volume proposal, promising to devote himself to directing the project until completion. Levin's proposal spoke of the political landscape in New London. He warned that numerous public and private boards, along with the city's influential local newspaper—the *Day*—had the ability to derail the governor's initiative even before it started. No one, Levin suggested, was better positioned than he to navigate the city's politics and local media.

Levin was offering just what Ellef wanted: connections. His price was \$196,000.

Ellef didn't hesitate. He didn't need to study the voluminous appendices and paperwork stuffing Levin's binders—those were just bureaucratic nonsense. If Levin succeeded in steering the state around the city's politics, his price was cheap.

Eleven days after Levin submitted his proposal, Ellef awarded him the contract, along with a \$65,000 up-front payment. Effective April 21, 1997, Jay Levin answered to Peter Ellef, who answered to Governor John Rowland.

THIS OLD HOUSE

Summer 1997

Real-estate agent Geoff Hausman had just obtained his broker's license. He had yet to sell his first house when the phone rang in his agency's main office on a slow Saturday morning. Hausman picked up and identified himself.

"Hi," said the person on the other end. "My name is Susette Kelo, and I want to look at the house 8 East Street in New London."

Unfamiliar with the property, Hausman put her on hold and grabbed a listing sheet. It indicated the house was 107 years old and had a stone foundation and an unfinished basement. Total living space amounted to barely 1,100 square feet, with just two rooms on the first floor—a kitchen and living room—and two bedrooms upstairs. Each floor had a bathroom. The asking price had been reduced to \$59,000 after the place had sat on the market for years.

Hausman got back on the line and asked Susette when she wanted to see the house.

"Today," she said.

"Okay, great," he said. "Let me give you directions."

"You don't need to give me directions. I'm already here."

"You're at the house now?"

"I'm standing in front of it."

Hausman said he'd be right over.

Before leaving the office, he told a colleague where he was headed. The colleague joked that he was going to show the house that no one could sell.

Waiting for Hausman to arrive, Susette put on some gardening gloves and took a pair of hedge clippers from her car. In sandals and shorts, she carved a path through the overgrown brush that blocked the front steps to the house. Eager to reach the door, Susette ignored the thorns that scraped the tops of her feet and the bottoms of her legs.

Hausman pulled up and removed the lockbox on the front door. "You're bleeding," he said.

"I'll be all right."

Just inside, a narrow staircase led to the second floor. Susette scooted past it and into the dark, empty front room. Hausman went through the house, looking for light switches.

Susette pulled back the old, drab curtains covering the front windows. Sunlight immediately flooded the room, revealing a breathtaking view of the water and of boats sailing on the Thames River.

Overcome by an instant, strange sense of belonging, Susette stared out the window. She felt like she had been there all her life. *This house is calling me*, she told herself.

Embarrassed, Hausman emerged from the unfinished basement, trying to figure out how to talk up a house he felt needed to be demolished.

"There's not much to see here," he said.

She kept looking out the window.

The rooms are small, he reported. Besides being unfinished, the basement had a boulder in it. The kitchen had only an old gas stove.

“I want to buy this house,” she said, her back to him.

“This place?”

She spun around. “Yes, this place.”

Hausman suggested she consider some other options and offered to show her other listings.

“No,” she said, determined to defend the house, “I really like this place. This is my house.”

Hausman hesitated. For more than a year his agency had been unable to talk anybody into looking at 8 East Street, much less buy it. Now he couldn't talk Susette out of leaving the place alone.

“Look,” he said, “if you are going to buy it, you need to at least see what you're buying.”

“That's fine. But I'm not changing my mind.”

She followed him upstairs. Both bedrooms felt cramped, but one of them offered an even better view of the water than the living room did.

This is my room, she decided.

Without even bothering to inspect the basement, she offered \$42,000 for the house, \$17,000 below asking price. She had nothing to lose; the house had been on the market for years without an offer.

Hausman escorted Susette out, locked up, and hustled back to his office to write up a contract.

“I sold the house,” he announced when he arrived at the office.

“Which house?” a colleague asked.

“Eight East Street in New London.”

Nobody in the office believed him.

The prospect of owning her own home left Susette excited but anxious. She started researching the property. The only thing between it and the water was Fort Trumbull, an eighteenth-century octagon-shaped stone fort used by George Washington's troops in the Revolutionary War. In 1781, Benedict Arnold had led a British assault on New London and captured the fort before setting fire to the city. The navy then acquired the fort when it built its thirty-two-acre base between East Street and the Thames River. Neglect, though, had reduced the historic treasure to a decaying fortress.

The cottage had originally been constructed in 1890 in a more residential part of the city. It had been relocated to the Fort Trumbull neighborhood just after the turn of the century and jammed onto a vacant, postage-stamp-sized lot not much bigger than the footprint of the house. John Bishop, one of the city's most prominent carpenters, had built the house. After Bishop died in 1893, the house had passed through many hands until fifty-year-old Avner Gregory, a preservationist, had bought it in the late 1980s. Gregory had restored more than thirty-five historic homes in New London.

At 8 East Street, Gregory had removed the crumbling cement-block steps leading from the street to the front and brought in a mason from San Francisco to build redbrick steps. Gregory then accentuated the brick with a white picket fence that he ran across the front porch. He replaced the house's asphalt siding with cedar clapboard and installed all new doors and windows. Inside, he upgraded the plumbing, added a baseboard heating system, and added a bathroom with a nineteenth-century bathtub to the second floor.

Then he bought the house next door and did all the same things to it. When both houses were completed, Gregory sold them to an individual who bought them as investments. But the investments never panned out, and eventually the two houses ended up back on the market. The longer the homes sat unoccupied, the more overgrown they became. Ultimately, the outside appearance deterred potential buyers from examining the insides.

The neighborhood's tough appearance didn't bother Susette. A hodgepodge of industrial properties

warehouses, and old, small homes, the Fort Trumbull neighborhood was cut off from the rest of New London, sandwiched between Amtrak rail lines on the west and the abandoned naval base on the north. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, European immigrants—first Irish and then Italians—settled in the dirty, urban stretch, turning it into a close-knit community of shops, gardens, and pubs. Over the years, the immigrant families never left, passing their homes from one generation to the next. At the height of the cold war, two thousand people worked in the neighborhood at the Naval Undersea Warfare Center, then known as the Naval Underwater Sound Laboratory. Some of the Defense Department's top physicists, nuclear scientists, and sonar specialists studied and monitored underwater acoustics in relation to submarine warfare. But after the cold war died down, the Pentagon closed the base in 1995, and the neighborhood began to resemble a ghost town.

Undaunted, the more Susette learned about it, the more she felt she had in common with the house. It needed her, and she needed it.

Hausman called with bad news: the seller had rejected the offer. She wanted \$56,000.

Susette did the math. Her joint bank account with her husband had plenty of money in it, more than enough to afford the house. But she never considered that money hers. Her husband had put away a lot of money before they married, and he had earned all the money since then. Besides, she didn't want him to know she was pursuing her own home.

Instead, she secured preapproval for a first-time homebuyer's loan for up to \$53,500, on the condition that the home gets a paint job before the closing. But she had no money saved for closing costs, let alone a paint job. She told Hausman her final offer for the house was \$53,500 if the seller absorbed the closing costs and paid for the paint job.

The seller agreed.

A friend loaned Susette \$2,500 for the down payment. She turned to another friend—a painter who specialized in historic home restorations—to paint the place. Together, they read up on the house and examined paint colors that fit the time period and building style. Susette settled on Odessa Rose, a subtle shade of pink.

WE NEED A VEHICLE

Peter Ellef's instructions to Jay Levin were straightforward: identify and determine ownership of all the sites with strategic-development potential around the area of the state pier and then recommend a comprehensive plan of development for the area.

Levin had a lot to work with. The nearby infrastructure gave the waterfront a big upside for development. Interstate 95 ran right alongside the pier. Two major rail lines—the Central Vermont Railway, which ran all the way to Canada, and the Amtrak line running between Boston and New York—connected to the pier area. And a major ferry service occupied a portion of the waterfront.

First, Levin identified the owners of each parcel around the pier. Then he set up individual meetings with the railroad and port operators, with the ferry services and shipyard operators, and with the various city, state, and federal agencies that had interests along the waterfront. The meetings were fruitful. Vacant land existed for development, and all parties had ideas and enthusiasm for redevelopment. The pieces were falling into place fast. For Levin, the challenge was now to identify a device, a legal mechanism that would somehow enable the governor's administration to control a massive development project without interference from the city.

It didn't take long to come up with a solution. In 1978, the city had established the New London Development Corporation (NLDC) to assist in planning economic development. Set up as a nonprofit corporation, the NLDC had its own by-laws and operated under the direction of a president and a board of directors. But after a strong start, the NLDC had faded into dormancy. It had been years since the agency had been registered with the state to do business. Yet nothing stood in the way of reviving it.

The NLDC was a familiar entity to city officials and therefore would not generate unnecessary suspicion or opposition. Ellef liked the concept. The governor did, too. But Levin's idea raised a concern: who would run the NLDC?

The selection of the agency's president had a lot riding on it. From the state's perspective, this individual would essentially become the governor's agent in New London and would be expected to advance the most massive, ambitious redevelopment project in the city's history. The situation called for someone with clout and popularity, yet who was not under the thumb of the current Democratic leadership. This was a tall order.

Always one step ahead, Levin already had a candidate in mind.

No New London institution had more prestige than Connecticut College, a private school that occupied some of the most valuable real estate in the city, on a hill overlooking the Thames. The school came off like an ivory tower in a blue-collar town, fostering resentment from many of the city's political leaders.

But in 1988, the school hired a new president, Dr. Claire Gaudiani. She arrived with impressive credentials: a Ph.D. in French literature, a slew of published articles, the Rolodex of a socialite, and a knack for fund-raising. Under her hard-charging leadership, the school's academic ranking and its endowment soared. Her star rose quickly in the city's social circles, too. She stole the show at the

city's annual birthday gala when she showed up in an elegant, sleeveless red dress, showcasing just enough to tantalize. ~~When the music started, she kicked off her shoes and danced, revealing her red toenail polish. Men couldn't help admiring her look.~~

A press photographer couldn't help himself, either. The next day, Claire's picture appeared on the front page of the *Day*. She was the closest thing New London had to a diva.

Some faculty didn't like the message Claire was sending. It simply wasn't dignified for a college president to be on the front page, dancing barefoot in an eye-catching red dress. Claire knew her way weren't always politically correct. She characterized herself as "a feminine misfit in my own generation."

But she was unafraid and unashamed of her beliefs and her ways. While president of Connecticut College, she contributed a chapter to a book on Italian Americans, in which she wrote about one of her private rituals. Shortly after getting married, Claire began setting her alarm for 4 a.m. While her husband slept, she'd get out of bed to freshen up, do her hair, and apply mascara and blush. Then she get back in bed. When her husband awoke, he'd find Claire looking desirable, closer to what she wanted him to see. She followed this routine for years. Lack of self-confidence, vanity, and a desire to keep romantic love alive with her husband were all reasons she cited for this practice. But her upbringing had a lot to do with it, too. "My grandmother had always told me," Claire wrote, "to take precious care of my husband, to try to please him in what she mysteriously called 'personal ways,' and never do or say anything to break his heart."

Claire stood out in New London, and she knew it. But she seemed to relish that. And people in the community loved the idea that she wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty trying to help solve some of the city's financial and educational problems. On top of her college duties, she started spending time mingling with minority leaders, local churches, and other civic officials in an attempt to build bridges between the campus and the community.

Then, in early 1997, around the time that Jay Levin signed on to work for Peter Ellef, Claire had an epiphany that convinced her to take a more hands-on leadership approach in the city's affairs. That spring, she taught a course about service and social reflection. One day, an African American student publicly challenged her during a lecture. Pointing out that Claire had done so much to help the college financially and otherwise, the student asked why she hadn't used her standing to help the swelling number of minority students in the city that were on federal assistance and attending substandard schools.

At this same time, Claire read an opinion piece in the *Day* that lamented the city's poor political leadership and cried out for a new leader to emerge. A Roman Catholic who was unafraid to acknowledge her belief in Christ, Claire felt like the newspaper piece spoke to her. "It seemed like the hand of God in my life," she later said.

Jolted by her student and the Op-Ed piece, Claire embarked on a mission. She met one-on-one with more than two dozen of the city's most respected businessmen, civic leaders, and clergy. She asked each of them what was needed to help turn the city's economic fortunes around. The consensus answer that emerged was to take some of the city's most successful, civic-minded residents and create an organization that could produce an economic-stimulus plan for the city. To Claire, this was the best way to ultimately improve the educational opportunities and social services for the city's poor and underprivileged.

As an alumnus of Connecticut College, Jay Levin knew Claire well. And as word of her effort spread through the city, Levin talked with her privately. He told her an organization capable of mobilizing some of the city's civic leaders outside the elected political process already existed—the

NLDC. Claire had heard the NLDC mentioned in her talks with city officials. But realizing it had been dormant for years, she had dismissed its significance. “Jay said that he could bring it out of mothballs,” Gaudiani said.

Levin made it sound easy. Living members of the original organization would have to be contacted to get their blessing. Some paperwork had to be filed with the secretary of state, along with a registration fee to reactivate the agency’s corporate nonprofit status. And then Claire could be elected the agency’s new president. The way Levin explained it to her, Claire simply had to say yes. Levin and others would handle all the details.

When Levin floated Dr. Gaudiani’s name past Ellef, it didn’t mean much to him. It wasn’t immediately clear why the governor should entrust a massive redevelopment project to a woman already tasked with running a liberal-arts college with 1,700 students. Did she have the juice to push the state’s agenda through City Hall?

Levin believed she did. Claire was no typical academic—she possessed an uncanny power of persuasion and a captivating presence. Claire’s combination of brains, charm, and relentless ambition made her an irresistible force in New London. Everywhere she went, Claire had the ability to win over people, especially men. Numerous men’s organizations in New London made Claire an honorary member. “Blue-collar men understood what I was trying to do,” Claire said of herself. “They were terrific with me.”

Perhaps most important, Claire knew just one speed—full throttle.

Ellef had heard enough to take the next step. He agreed to meet with Claire.

Claire didn’t know Ellef. She didn’t know about the governor’s big plans for New London. And she had no idea Levin worked for Ellef. She agreed to meet with Ellef only after Levin said Ellef wanted to meet her.

When Levin brought Ellef to Claire’s office at Connecticut College, Claire kept them waiting. Ellef didn’t appreciate it; he wasn’t used to waiting for anybody.

“I didn’t know who he was, and I didn’t care about him,” Claire later explained.

Irked after standing around for roughly half an hour, Ellef threatened to leave. Before he did, Claire emerged and invited Ellef in. A quick study, he didn’t take long to size her up. Attractive, energetic, and articulate, Claire came across as advertised.

After the meeting, Ellef wanted Claire at the helm of the NLDC. The governor was persuaded, too.

Only one nagging question remained: *could she be controlled?*

Ultimately, they determined she could be. After all, the state had adequate incentives to keep her in check. Along with the prestige of overseeing a very high profile development, Claire would receive a lot of the credit if the project succeeded. An opportunity of this nature would enable her to punch her own ticket for her next career move. As long as Claire remembered the source of her power, the governor had nothing to worry about.

Levin now anticipated some opposition from one of the city’s most influential political forces—attorney Tony Basilica, the chair of the city’s Democratic Party. Husky and balding with dark eyes, Basilica had the looks and vocabulary of Tony Soprano. He spent his career defending criminals as a trial lawyer. When he wasn’t in the courtroom, he was in a back room practicing politics in a way that

would make Machiavelli proud.

Basilica had established himself as New London's kingmaker. In that role, he had fought and won a lot of political fights alongside Levin. Basilica had even managed a couple of Levin's campaigns. The two were tight.

Levin wanted Basilica's blessing before revamping the NLDC and turning it over to Claire, so he and an associate met with Basilica and one of his associates. Basilica listened while Levin explained his consulting role with the governor's office.

Hearing nothing that sounded problematic, Basilica said little while Levin talked up the idea of reviving the NLDC. Then Levin got to the hard part—he wanted to appoint Claire Gaudiani to lead it.

Basilica grinned and shook his head from side to side. “No way,” he said.

Levin attempted to explain.

Basilica cut him off. “No way,” he repeated. “You're not doin' that. No way.” Basilica reminded him that Levin had previously convinced him to work with Claire on a city initiative to improve the public schools. Reluctantly, Basilica had gone along but felt that Claire had embarrassed him. Basilica had not forgotten. “Look, we've already had our experience with her,” Basilica said. “We don't want her. It's a bad idea. Tell her to stick to French history or whatever the hell she teaches.”

Levin left the meeting unsuccessful, even though, Basilica later recalled, “He told us, ‘It's the only way Rowland is going to send money to the city.’ “

GETTING TO YES

Buoyed by Levin's suggestion to jump-start the NLDC, Claire started rounding up people to fill board seats at the agency. She didn't have trouble finding takers. Many of the key civic leaders she'd been brainstorming with were eager to volunteer. None was more enthused than Steve Percy, a New London real-estate broker who specialized in businesses and marinas. Percy had written the essay calling for leadership in the city that had prompted Claire to take a hands-on role months earlier.

Claire had asked Percy what resources the city had to put against its economic problems. Among other things, Percy suggested a twenty-four-acre peninsula known as the New London Mills property—a prime piece of vacant real estate along the city's waterfront. Other people Claire polled said the same thing. Claire didn't know anything about the land in question or why it was vacant. Percy knew the background well.

The New London Mills property had been home to a linoleum manufacturer. Before that, cotton mills and other industries had occupied the land. But all the brick mill buildings had since been demolished, leaving behind nothing but piles of rubble atop land contaminated with all sorts of industrial pollutants.

A few years earlier, a company called Ocean Quest had approached the city and proposed building a \$41 million aquatic facility on the site. Ocean Quest promised to build a water camp for kids, complete with a mock submarine and other tourist attractions.

Eager for jobs and tax revenue, the city embraced the project. The state took an active role, too, pledging millions of dollars to rid the site of environmental contaminants as preparation for development. But after all that, the Ocean Quest backers lacked the money to carry out the project. Suddenly, the twenty-four-acre brownfield was available. It wasn't the prettiest piece of real estate, but it had a grand location—right on the water, at the mouth of the Thames.

Claire, Percy, and the others in the small group emerging to take over the NLDC quickly settled on the idea that one of the agency's primary objectives should be to try to lure a *Fortune* 500 company to the site. Something like that could generate some instant momentum. But no one Claire was talking to in New London knew what it would take to attract such a company.

Claire didn't know the answers either, but she knew someone who did—George Milne Jr., an executive at Pfizer, the world's largest pharmaceutical company. Pfizer had a massive research facility in nearby Groton, just across the river from New London. As president of central research, Milne ran the Groton facility and ranked among the most respected corporate executives in southeastern Connecticut. He also served on the board of trustees at Connecticut College, which his son attended. And Claire's husband, Dr. David Burnett, worked under Milne at Pfizer and ran the company's corporate university. These kinds of connections were among the reasons Levin had recommended Claire to lead the NLDC.

Claire figured she had to get someone like Milne to join the board of directors and help them figure out how to market the New London Mills property to a major corporation. She decided to call him at home and request a face-to-face meeting.

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