

**SYNOPSIS OF RACHEL KING'S 2007 NOVEL,  
"Tales of the District: Life in the Nation's Capital in a Time of Terror"  
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*"Tales of the District"* evokes the style of Charles Dickens and Armistead Maupin, whose highly successful *"Tales of the City"* inspired Kings *"Tales,"* which like it, could be made into a great film or television series. It is an amusing, fast-moving story of three endearing characters (each approaching 40) maneuvering through life in the nation's capitol in the post-September 11 political climate. The story explores themes of terrorism, sexuality, political rights and parties, vegetarianism, and most importantly, what it means to be a family and live in community. Once you start reading it, you're hooked.



**THE MAIN CHARACTERS:**

**Dan Canavan** – a lobbyist for OutReach (a fictitious human rights advocacy group)

**Claudia Connors** – a public defender, civil rights attorney and Dan's best D.C. friend and neighbor in the Tulip Lane Co-housing community (TLC)

**Rita Jane Spencer** – an aspiring artist and Dan's closest childhood friend

**Dave Austin** – a psychiatrist, recently moved to D.C. who becomes Dan's lover

**Paul Petrovich** – owner of Paul's Place restaurant and former Chief Counsel for the House Judiciary Committee, Democratic side

**Emad Khadonry** – a Saudi Arabian-born businessman, 20-year D.C. resident, immigrant's rights advocate, and suspected terrorist

**Congressman James Weymouth** – a powerful conservative from Mississippi and Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee

**SETTING:**

The story takes place in the fictitious Tulip Lane Co-housing community or "TLC" located in Takoma Park on the outskirts of Washington, D.C.

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The plot begins in fall 2002 with a frustrated Dan Canavan trying to persuade a roomful of congressional staffers to oppose SOFA – the Sanctity of Families Act – "a mean-spirited piece of legislation that cuts off federal funds to any state that legalized gay marriage." One staffer reflected the general sentiment when he asked Dan, "Why should our members stick their necks out to vote against a bill that's going to pass anyway?"

Chapter 2 opens with a regular membership meeting at TLC, which is overshadowed by two urgent concerns: the coming U.S. invasion of Iraq and the revelation that government agents have arrested Claudia's and Dan's friend Emad Khadonry on suspicion of aiding a terrorist organization. Emad had donated money to "Widows and Orphans," a charity affiliated with Hamas but with no connection to Al-Qaeda or the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.

Claudia offers to represent Emad and goes to visit him in jail but is refused access to her client – for the first time in her career. "Things are different now," the desk officer told her. That night over dinner Claudia shares her deep worries with Dan, "It's never been this bad

before. I fear for our country." To calm her nerves she drinks too much and asks Dan to stay with her. Then despite their homosexual orientations, both find comfort in spontaneous intercourse before sleep. The surprise encounter strains the friendship with mutual feelings of embarrassment and guilt in the following weeks.

Soon after, Rita Jane Spencer, an aspiring artist and Dan's closest friend from childhood, moves to D.C. and TLC from New York after losing her job and breaking up with her fiancé, who backed out of his promise to marry and have children with her. Her desire to have a child is so strong, that shortly after reconnecting with Dan, she suggests that he father her a child and that they raise it together. Dan isn't keen on her proposal, which he calls "messy," but says he'll consider it. Dan's and Claudia's friend Paul, owner of their favorite restaurant, Paul's Place, hires Rita Jane to waitress. Paul also offers to host a show of her paintings, which she will title "The Color of Fear." The event ends up doubling as a fundraiser for Emad's defense campaign.

Meanwhile, Dan learns from John, a man he picks up at D.C.'s "Meet Market," that Congressman James Weymouth, a powerful conservative from Mississippi and Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, which is considering the anti-gay marriage SOFA bill, has had sex with John and is himself a closeted gay. For days, Dan ponders what to do about this discovery, especially after he receives a letter from John confirming what he told Dan. When his matchmaking friend, Paul, introduces him to Dave Austin, a pleasant psychiatrist recently moved to D.C., Dan finds himself discussing it over dinner with his soon to be new boyfriend.

"I just want Weymouth to know that I know his secret," Dan tells Dave. "I'm hoping to guilt him into doing the right thing... If I had better proof, I'd probably out him." Dave proves himself such a sympathetic listener, Dan also confides in him about Rita Jane's parenting proposal. Dave tells Dan he was a sperm donor for a lesbian couple back in Boston, and continues to visit the child "a few times a year... like I'm a special uncle."

Things take a more ominous turn when Dan comes home to a pair of FBI agents doing a "sneak and peek" search of his condo. They are seeking evidence to use in a case the government is bringing against Dan's close friend, Claudia, on charges of aiding a suspected terrorist, Emad, because Claudia mailed personal letters for her client and his wife. The same agents would turn up again at TLC and the home of Claudia's parents in Texas, asking questions about activities and associates as they gathered evidence they would use to charge Claudia and force her off the case as Emad's defense attorney.

Claudia had been feeling nauseated for days and exhausted for weeks. News of the summons causes her to faint and be rushed to the emergency room. There Claudia is given the equally shocking news she is pregnant – in the uncomfortable presence of Rita Jane, her new friend and rival for Dan's attention. Rita Jane's own maternal aspirations seem dashed when she learns she has fibroid tumors that would make getting pregnant very risky if not impossible. So when she finds out Dan is the father of Claudia's baby, she tries to persuade Claudia not to have an abortion, but to give birth and let her raise the child, with or without Dan's co-parenting.

As troubling and confusing as their interwoven personal lives are, bigger challenges confront the three. Dan finally meets with Congressman Weymouth, telling him he knows his secret but that he won't out him, and expresses outrage at his hypocrisy in supporting SOFA. "What do you think would happen if I killed this bill?" Weymouth asks. "I'd lose the next election and probably lose my chairmanship." Dan constructively suggests another approach. "Why don't you frame the issue differently? Make it a state's rights issue instead of a gay rights issue. Tell your party you support limited federal government..." To Dan's surprise and delight, Weymouth expresses interest and ends up collaborating with Dan to line up enough votes to kill the bill in committee.

Shortly after, Claudia decides to keep her baby, and commits with Dan and Rita Jane to raising it together. Rita Jane takes Dan along to tell the news to her parents in Georgetown, who are puzzled but supportive. On the way home, Dan laughs, "Considering that you told them you are planning on raising a child with two gay people, neither of whom you are married to, I'd say it went pretty well." Being too wired to sleep, she stops in to talk with Claudia over a cup of tea. But Rita Jane, who has just assured her parents she's not a lesbian, soon finds herself attracted to and sharing physical affection with Claudia that leads to intense, wonderful sex. Happy but stunned, she asks Claudia if the encounter makes her a lesbian. Claudia reassures her it's her call. "It's not only about sex, it's about love... You're a lesbian if your emotional and sexual attachment is to women. It's the attachment that makes a person gay."

As Claudia's case moves forward, Dan organizes daily protest vigils and a march to support her and Emad and to draw media attention to the injustice of their prosecutions. "In the name of fighting an enemy, the government passes laws making it a crime to do innocent things," a representative of one participating group tells reporters. "What is happening to Claudia Connors may be legal, but it's wrong... There are people in this country who live in fear – not of another September 11<sup>th</sup> attack – but of what their own government may do to them or their loved ones."

But Claudia's and Emad's greatest help comes from Congressman Weymouth, who, inspired by his encounters with (and probably an unspoken crush on) Dan, calls for a Congressional Oversight hearing into the apparent abuse of power by the U.S. attorneys involved. Awareness of the upcoming hearing and positive media coverage of the protests, and public sympathy for the pregnant mother, pressure the federal prosecutors to offer to dismiss the case against Claudia, on the condition that she remove herself as Emad's attorney. She reluctantly accepts the deal at the urging of her friends and client who convince her Emad will be even better defended with his new legal team and that she must focus her attention now on the imminent birth and parenting.

Testimony and evidence presented at the oversight hearing reveals that the decision to bring the case against Emad was made "by someone high up in the Justice Department" apparently "motivated by the fact that Mr. Khadonry has been involved in anti-war protests," as Weymouth assessed it. Immediately after giving her own testimony, Claudia begins to go into labor, two weeks early, and her friends take her to the hospital where her doctor orders her to be on complete bed rest.

Dan returns to the hearing with Rita Jane, where Weymouth calls him as the next witness. One homophobic congressman, Blake, grills Dan about his relationship with Claudia and being homosexual, and asks, "What kind of a man impregnates his friend and then leaves her to have the child on her own?" Weymouth rules Blake's attempt at character assassination "out of order." Dan denies the slander stating, "We are not married, but I will support her and the child."

On their way back to the hearing after the lunch recess, Rita Jane is horrified as Dan is shot in the head by a violent anti-gay fanatic and rushed to the hospital. Surgeons repair the bullet's damage and give Dan's family and friends hope that he will survive. However, "what should have been a wonderful family reunion on the occasion of the baby's birth had become a somber wait." Rita Jane cries out her rage and pain and fear. "I just don't understand why someone would want to kill Dan," she prayed. "Why is there so much hate in the world?"

Weymouth visits the hospital to see Dan and extend condolences to his family and friends, and to tell them he's holding a press conference that afternoon that they should watch. At the event, Weymouth praises Dan's talent and efforts for protecting civil and human rights, and deplors both the shooting and continuing "institutionalized discrimination." He says, "Gay people, with a few exceptions, do not have the right to marry, ... legally adopt children together, share health benefits or make end of life decisions. This legally sanctioned discrimination makes it socially acceptable to treat gay people as second-class citizens. It also leads some misguided people to believe that they can use violence against gay people."

Weymouth concludes his remarks by courageously coming out: "The only way for laws to change is for people to change and that is why today I am choosing to publicly announce that I, too, am a homosexual ... I always thought that it was okay for me to have my public career and my private sexual identity. I rationalized, as do many others, that whomever I chose to love is nobody's business. Now I realize how wrong I was." Watching the astonishing announcement from her hospital bed, Claudia observes, "Dan would be proud."

That night, Claudia's water breaks and she gives birth to a healthy boy, whom she and Rita Jane name Daniel Canavan Connors Spencer. Dan, survives, and the novel's epilogue finds him gleefully holding little Danny as he relaxes and recovers at home surrounded by the love of his new family, and eating yet another gourmet meal cooked by his partner Dave. As for Claudia and Rita Jane, their love for each other also continues to blossom. And with the guys caring for the baby that beautiful afternoon, they were able to both do chores and make time for "a little indoor recreation." In the concluding sentence, the two new mothers "took each other's hands and went upstairs leaving the groceries and boxes to be unpacked later." ###

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### **PART I – Dan and Claudia – Fall 2002: CHAPTER 1 – Hill Life**

Dan Canavan sat in a room full of Democratic House staffers searching for the words to convince the skeptical group that their member of Congress should take a vote that most considered political suicide. Why he bothered, he couldn't say. Hope sprang eternal, and maybe, one day, the Democrats would decide to act like Democrats again, and give up the notion that if they just acted more like Republicans they could regain the majority.

Dan's navy blue suit and polished shoes contrasted starkly with the jeans and t-shirts worn by his audience. It was Friday, casual day, a risky choice for a meeting, since most staffers were thinking about their weekends instead of listening to Dan.

Dan was a lobbyist for OutReach, the country's largest gay rights organization, with a membership of almost half a million. It was his job to convince the Republican-controlled Congress that it should oppose SOFA – the Sanctity of Families Act – a mean-spirited piece of legislation that cut off federal funds to any state that legalized gay marriage.

"You've got to stand firm on this issue. It's a matter of principle," Dan beseeched the assembled group, but his voice rang hollow, even to himself. "Gay people vote, too. We're going to score this vote. All of our members will know how your members voted on this issue, and they'll remember when they go to the polls next month."

"Give me a break," cooed Ken Parker, the head lawyer for the Democratic staff of the House Judiciary Committee, who reported to Ranking Member Bobby Reynolds. Tall, dark-haired, and handsome, Parker appeared frequently as a talking head on Washington talk shows. "Your members are going to vote for Democrats over Republicans, regardless of this vote. You can't expect our Democrats in the Bible Belt to vote against SOFA. It would be political suicide."

"There are gay people in the South, too," Dan retorted.

"Only they don't know it," another staffer joked. People laughed tentatively, looking to see Dan's reaction.

Dan kept his cool and joked, "Some of them know it. Why 'dya think they need those sodomy laws down in Georgia? They need to control the ho-mo-sex-u-als."

Dan's light-hearted joking hid his frustration. He was fighting a losing battle.

Ken continued, "If it was a close vote, if you had any chance at all of winning, I'd ask the Chairman to whip it, but there's no way in hell you're going to win. Why should our members stick their necks out to vote against a bill that's going to pass anyway?"

Dan couldn't argue with Ken's logic, but his position wasn't principled. Dan stopped himself from saying, "Because it's the right thing to do." He had been in Washington too long to think that members of Congress cast their votes because it was the right thing to do.

The day, which had started out so promising, had turned out to be a failure. Dan who had stopped smoking six months earlier, still craved Virginia Slims, the kind his mother smoked when he was a kid, whenever he was frustrated. He walked to the CVS after the meeting, swearing under his breath, which startled several homeless people, and made his way to the counter, gazing longingly at the display, which contained dozens of options. Like a lion before it devours its prey, Dan paused, long enough to decide to buy a peanut butter and chocolate protein bar instead. Pleased with his abstinence, he quickly left the store before changing his mind.

There wasn't much left to do that day. He had already written a letter to each member of the Committee, which he would send by blast fax so that it arrived before the scheduled Tuesday hearing.

He was heading to the metro by 8:30, earlier than he had left work in weeks. He took out his cell phone and scrolled down to the entry for Claudia Connors, his best friend in Washington. Claudia also lived at TLC, and was also single, so the two spent most evenings eating late dinners and processing their stressful jobs and their lack of love lives.

"Middle Eastern take out or Paul's Place?" he asked.

"How about soy cheese pizza?" she replied. "If you're not too tired we could watch 'Erin Brokovich. I'm in need of inspiration.'"

"Your place or mine? They lived in the same Co-Housing Community, but spent most of their time at Claudia's place because she had recently bought herself an outrageously expensive television set for her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

"Let's see, should we watch on your 10 year-old 12-inch screen or on my brand new, state-of-the-art, high-definition, LCD, large screen digital TV?"

By 9:30 they were settled in front of The Television with a large vegan pizza and a six-pack of Coronas, ready to escape from the craziness of their work lives. Dan took the comfortable red sofa and Claudia stretched her long frame out on an old lazy boy recliner that she had found at Value Village. Although Claudia had a dining room and a countertop in the kitchen with barstools, they always seemed to end up eating in the living room. They didn't always watch movies. More often than not they watched the news together. Dan had a crush on Jim Lehrer, and dreamed of one day being interviewed by him.

"How was your day?" she asked with her mouth full of pizza.

"Same old thing. I'm trying to bang down the doors of the Democrats and not making much progress."

"Maybe you should try the Republicans," she joked.

"That's funny. OutReach can't even get meetings with some of the Republican committee members. One member told my boss there was no need to meet with her because there weren't any gays in his district."

Claudia laughed.

"How was your day?" Dan asked wanting to change the subject.

"I got a few criminals back on the street," Claudia joked. Her tone turned serious. "I also got a call from a woman who hasn't heard from her husband in three days. She thinks he may have been arrested and detained incommunicado. The FBI had been at their house interviewing him, but when she called the agent to try to get information, he wouldn't return her calls."

Dan shook his head, not wanting more worries than the ones already occupying his mind. "Let's not talk about work any more. I need a break."

Claudia put in the DVD and turned off the lights. Dan stretched out on her long blue sofa where he had more than once woken up in the morning.

Claudia passed him an afghan. "Do you want me to wake you up if you fall asleep?"

Dan shook his head. "Not unless you're worried about what the neighbors will say when they see me leave in the morning."

"Not to worry. The neighbors already know you're a degenerate." [*End Chapter 1*]