

ELECTION 2064

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*For Jenny,
who makes me
want to be
my best me*

2060 Presidential Election Results

Ticket	League	Votes	Electoral College
Acton Granger [*] <i>(no running mate)</i>	Reformation League	54,297,115	272
Elijah Schroeder ^{**} John McNamara	Conservative League	46,222,867	204
Christopher Wilson Emily Shapiro	Freedom League	37,665,158	134
Aiden Ellis Juan-Manuel Ramirez	Progressive League	31,127,955	22
Brandon Thomas Christine Young	Values League	5,549,126	3
Amber Townsend Shadid Rabazz	Urban League	2,743,568	3
Adam Villanueva Rebekkah Sloan	Social League	1,645,639	-
Other	Misc.	901,138	-

* Elected President

** Selected Vice President

PROLOGUE

April 14, 2063

Loop. Around. Under. Through.

The knitting needles flashed in her hands, throwing off metallic jangles with every stitch. The only other sounds in the room came from the regular pings of the heart monitor and the less steady *whoosh* of the respirator pump. Her husband's chest rose and fell as the oxygen fed into him.

Loop. Around. Under. Through.

The blanket was coming along slowly. When she was really humming, she could do forty rows an hour. Right now she was barely managing half that, but it kept her hands steady and her mind occupied.

A cough seized him. She dropped a needle and took his hand, feeling the convulsions through his limp fingers. She massaged his palm, reflexively checking his pulse as it settled back to normal resting.

"Bear," she whispered. "Come back to me."

But he remained unresponsive. The monitor resumed its pinging drumbeat, the PanoScreen on the far wall dimming its glow. Another screen cocooned around his chest, projecting his vitals in a softly luminescent holo. She stroked his hair and leaned in, brushing a kiss on his temple for what felt like the millionth time.

Her Bear looked smaller already, as if the hospital bed was swallowing him at the edges, but he was still a giant of a man. She let out a quiet sigh, picked up her dropped needle, and resumed

working. He might already have plenty of blankets, they draped over his body in cascading layers – but she felt he needed this one to truly be warm. Because it came from her.

Loop. Around. Under. Through.

My husband might die at any moment, and all I can do is tie a bunch of knots.

As her fingers maneuvered the yarn, turning it around and back again – repeating, repeating – she felt the repeating of their lives. All of this was unnervingly similar to the time she met this sleeping giant, three decades ago. It felt like yesterday, in that she could still picture every detail of his face when she first laid eyes on it, and twenty lifetimes ago, in how that face had aged. But governing will do that.

And the circumstances between now and then, though mirrored in setting, had their differences. Then, the hospital didn't block off an entire floor for this single patient.

No, then he was just a kid who'd run into some hard luck (though, considering what could have been, he was lucky indeed). Another casualty of conflict, bouncing around the convoluted bureaucracy of the VA before finding his way to the Long-Term Recovery Ward. She almost forgot what war he'd been wounded in.

But she remembered that day, clear as noontime sun. She even recalled the thoughts going through her mind, as if she could pluck them like grapes from a vine – the first thought being, *How could someone that immense ever get wounded?*

And how he'd smiled at her from his hospital bed, sipping groggily out of a milk carton. "Ma'am, I got shot in the ass," he said, as if to answer her thought. A morphine drip may have slurred his speech, but it put him in a breezy mood. "You gonna fix me?"

Her second thought was, *Handsome, probably, when not doped up.*

"Fortunately," she responded, "the backside is an alright place to take a bullet, considering. My guess is, whoever shot you couldn't reach your head. Is the army growing soldiers in labs now, or are they breeding you with grizzly bears?"

He gave a mock bear's roar, clawing the air – then began to laugh, a gurgle of spittle escaping his mouth. Her toes inched toward him, as if she was drawn in by his gravity – a stray comet, chancing upon a star, finding orbit.

"I'm just a little larger than most," he said. "Growing up, everyone was telling me to play football."

"Maybe if you had, you wouldn't have taken a bullet in the butt."

"Ain't that the truth. I coulda been a contendah!" It was a truly terrible Brando, but he flashed that cocky smile like a reflex as he pulled another swig from his milk straw. *So he likes old movies*, she thought. *Maybe there's some depth to all that mass.*

"Doctor, um, what do I call you?"

Her thoughts became disconnected; relay runners dropping the baton. *Did I forget to say my name? Did I forget my name?*

"Oh...well, I'm Dr. Harper." His smile never wavered, even if the morphine rendered it askew. It was the smile that sank her, right then, and she offered a proposition rarely extended a new patient: "But you can call me Susannah."

Feeling awkward for putting that out there, she pulled back. "Or just, you know, Doctor," she said. "Doctor Susannah might work, too, I suppose."

Now she was floundering. What was happening to her? *Professional, professional*, she thought, trying to calm butterflies she never knew she had.

He held out his hand. It was coarse and heavy like a cinderblock, but warm. "Corporal Granger. You can call me Acton. You can remember that because if there's a problem, I'll *act on it*."

Something foreign escaped her. *Did I just giggle?* She hadn't giggled since junior high. "You know that's horrible, right? You should never use that line on a woman ever again."

Neither of them realized it at this point, but he wouldn't have to.

"Yeah, probably," he said. "But I bet now you'll remember my name." Susannah realized that her hand was still in his and yanked it away, too quickly. "Well, Doctor Susannah," he said, looking up from his own fingers, "I'd say it's a pleasure to meet you, but I have a feeling that before we're done here I'm not going to like you very much."

And he was right about that, for a while.

It didn't take her long to see why football wasn't an option – or any other sport, for that matter. He got around easily enough for someone his size, especially with shrapnel ringing down his left gluteus and iliotibial tract, but in the rehab room he was an oaf. All that muscle, and so little coordination.

The first few weeks were hard. They called each other every name in the book, and a few that weren't.

She wondered now, looking to pinpoint the moment those grueling, combative rehab sessions became something more – and beyond that, when he told her he loved her, that he needed her to

push him the rest of his days, or he'd be worthless – whether both their lives would be in very different places if he'd been born with just a little more coordination and picked up a football like everyone in his hometown expected.

Would they have met? Unlikely, unless you placed heavy bets on fate and fairytales. Would he have accomplished all he'd done without her? She doubted it, and though that felt self-important, it was probably true. Sometimes a star needed something to shine on to feel whole.

Susannah always assumed that if he'd had a shred of athleticism to match his bulk, maybe he would've retired from a nice, short career as an offensive lineman and gone back home to marry his high school sweetheart. But she had no idea that the goofy-grinned army man had bigger dreams. And he kept those dreams hidden for some time, as was his nature, until he trusted her enough to pick out a ring and offer his name.

He finally came clean on their honeymoon, as they slurped umbrella drinks poolside in Key West. It took a half-dozen Rum Runners to spill it. And it all sounded innocent enough – he wanted to try his hand at local politics, as a State Representative. In North Dakota, the races weren't especially competitive, and a seat had opened where he thought just about anyone could win.

Susannah didn't know it at the time, but the rest of their lives hinged on her response. *Of course*, she'd said, without hesitation. *It's perfect for you*. And he'd smiled again, the smile that she came to live for (turned out, it wasn't the morphine that made it crooked, it was just *like that*).

All right, I'm gonna do it! he said. And that was it – they'd flicked over the first domino of Acton Granger's political career. On and up he went, from one elected office to the next, toppling each new domino with a mixture of opportunism, fortune, and a loving wife's unique blend of encouragement and sacrifice.

Now, three decades later, here they were. They'd reached the end of the chain and toppled the biggest domino of them all, but some unknown force had exacted its price. Was it worth it, if his life was to be cut short like this?

Susannah's brain spun wildly. All the *what-ifs* swarmed like bees in her mind. Where would *her* life be, if in another strand of history she never crossed paths with this man? Was it even worth pondering?

She checked the time – dawn approached, and with it the doctors and nurses and aides and minders and hangers-on would sweep back into another whirlwind of a day.

Adding to the whirlwind – at eleven sharp, the Acting President was scheduled to visit, and Susannah didn't even know where to begin with *that*. The media had deemed the nation to be in crisis, and it appeared they were finally right about something.

She went back to her needlework, practiced hands resuming repetitive motion. She tried to empty her thoughts, to find her center. As her mind settled, her heart continued chugging – the rhythm of *willhemakeitwillhemakeit* pulsing in each beat, and it would not quiet, no matter her meditations.

Acton Granger was her beloved, and though she shared that love with all the millions that adored and revered the 54th President of the United States, she was the only one that shared his name.

She'd had two days and nights to absorb the shock of what had befallen her husband and brought them to this hospital room, but a new feeling brewed inside her. After the sorrow, the worry, the hope, the anger, and the fear, what came now was need, a need for answers. And it was a feeling no amount of knitting could quiet.

Loop. Around...

Who?

Why?

BOOK ONE

Getting In and Falling Out

October 9, 2062-April 14, 2063

CHAPTER ONE

"You may have noticed that I come to this distinguished convention without nominating a vice president. I am sure most in this League would prefer that I not take this step; they'd prefer I find someone of like mind and like beliefs and deem them my running mate and my successor. But this country is a house divided – with a divide so vast that no single League can bridge it by itself. With that in mind, should I prevail in this election, in the tradition of Washington and Adams, I promise the second-highest office to whomever my chief opponent may be. Only then might we become a nation united once again."

- Acton Granger, acceptance speech for the 2060 Reformation League nomination – July 24, 2060

The motorcade wound through traffic in the suburban Chicago flatlands.

It was a smaller procession than Elijah Schroeder was used to – protocol required the vice president have a police escort of at least four marked vehicles and multiple advance teams, to seal off upcoming intersections and on-ramps – not to mention the Secret Service and intelligence details. But for this trip, he just had one unmarked SUV in front and behind him, and he scrapped the limo for a less conspicuous (if no less armored) passenger van.

Feels good to get away, he thought.

In fact, it had been years since Elijah had ridden in a vehicle that actually shared a road with anyone not in his escort. He'd left his handheld pano back with Cassidy, and felt an acute anxiety without

the do-everything device on his person, but busied himself observing other vehicles and their occupants through heavily tinted glass. As he watched, curiosity budding, he tried to recall the last time a stranger within a few feet of him hadn't been pre-occupied, above anything else, with being in the presence of a national political figure.

Truth was, he reveled in this opportunity to observe natural human behavior. It was like scratching a voyeuristic tickle he forgot he had.

Before the Second Civil War, most cars on the road operated without human drivers. Known as Autonomous Vehicles (or AVs), they'd become almost universal, until an enterprising member of the Underground discovered that an AV made for a useful remote bomb. The government hastily passed an AV Prohibition, pulling all but human-ops off the road. As the war faded into history, the Granger administration scrapped the ban as their first executive order and AVs were making a comeback.

The vice president entertained himself by watching the new automatons integrate with the remaining human-ops. When he used to make his living as a professor of economics, Elijah would actively monitor episodes in human interaction to understand basic motivational behavior. He'd sit outside a coffee shop, for instance, watching who would hold the door open for others versus who would not. What was economics if not the study of altruism, people weighing the common good against their own wants and needs?

Most would find observing such routines implacably dull, to be sure, about as exciting as staring into a fishbowl. But Elijah remembered an old saying from one of his professors – in mathematics you might solve for y , but in economics you solved for *why*.

There are two types of people in the world – those who use a turn signal, and those who don't.

The left lane opened up ahead. Elijah saw this as an altruism at work – for the middle lane vehicles in front of them, traffic in the left lane would now be faster, thus worth the inherent risk of occupying it. This might even hold if more than one vehicle went for the faster lane. Sure enough, two cars pushed hard into the open lane, but one had cut the other off. The two jockeyed for position, swerving this way and that – but in doing so, they lost speed, and one almost veered into the motorcade.

The irony, Elijah considered as the motorcade passed them by,

was that if one car had let the other take the left lane and stayed in the middle, both lanes would've moved faster. AVs didn't have this problem.

Exiting onto Route 14, the motorcade transitioned from a stacked multi-level highway to a flat road, dotted with industrial parks and the occasional neighborhood. A string of trees framed the road on both sides, their leaves altered by the season to a menagerie of fall colors.

Elijah looked behind him, and through miles of film and haze he could still make out the skyline of downtown Chicago. For the most part, it still consisted of vacant skyscrapers with crumbling edifices. The Second Civil War – Civ-2, as it was widely known – had been hard on Chicago, but he saw signs of encouragement.

Six, no, seven construction cranes, he counted, their perpendicular silhouettes rising in the distance. It's a start.

The motorcade took another turn, this time onto a driveway and through a security gate that opened at their proximity. They coursed down a winding stream of asphalt that plunged into a thicket of trees, their leafy branches brushing the sides of Elijah's van. The foliage was so thick the sun only peeked through in spots, blinking on and off like a strobe. Disoriented, Elijah turned his eyes ahead.

Eventually the forest-tunnel opened into a small, nearly-vacant parking lot, dwarfed by an enormous building just beyond, hundreds of yards in width.

The caravan filed into a roundabout at the building's entrance as a man and a woman awaited them, next to a non-descript sign that read **Endure Technologies**. Elijah drummed his fingers on his thigh as the van parked. The driver came around to open the door, now assuming the role of the vice president's protecting agent. Though the sky was cloudless with rain in the forecast, the agent held an umbrella over Elijah's head as he disembarked.

Can't be too careful, Elijah thought. Goddamn drones everywhere.

Buttoning his coat, the vice president walked over to meet his welcome party. Yannik Vogel was tall and slender like Elijah himself, wearing a crisp black suit with a red bowtie. His face exhibited pronounced European features and though he had just celebrated his hundredth birthday, he appeared more like a man of some indeterminate middle age. As Elijah appraised Vogel closely, he could discern the handiwork of multiple reconstructive operations, a vibrant exterior stretched over something more ancient on the inside. Elijah noticed Vogel wore tinted enhancement glasses, the

new ones with a two-mile range, probably to keep tabs on his motorcade as it approached.

The woman was just an inch or two shorter, her hair tucked in a ballerina bun so tight her forehead looked pained. Unlike Vogel, someone Elijah recognized instantly (but had never met in person), the woman was unknown to him. She appeared slightly younger than Elijah's mid-forties, and no surgical procedures appeared to fudge her age. Though a lab coat concealed her figure, Elijah would've recognized through a potato sack the flattering shape underneath. She seemed to catch his gaze and adjusted her sunglasses uncomfortably, clutching at a PanoPad.

Vogel rushed up to take Elijah's hand. "Mr. Vice President." His voice contained enough of a Germanic accent that his syllables ran together – *Meesterveizprezheedent*, pronounced in one long word.

"Thank you, Mr. Vogel. Great to finally meet you in person."

Vogel removed his enhancement glasses, revealing startlingly white-blue eyes – wagon wheels with icicles for spokes, sparkling like diamonds in his skull. "Welcome to Endure," he said. "We appreciate your efforts to be here."

"It's not every day I pull out my tracking chip and go off the grid. The chip is safe with my wife – Cassidy went straight from the airport to the fundraiser, just as you recommended."

"We value your...discretion." Vogel occasionally paused in his speech as he searched for the proper English. "As I said in earlier...communications, I prefer our mutual friend not know we are meeting, at least at this time. I promise, we will make this visit brief so you can return to your duties." Vogel turned to the woman in the lab coat. "My companion is Dr. Meijer, our head of research. She will answer any of your questions."

"A pleasure," Elijah said. Dr. Meijer nodded in his direction, but held on to her PanoPad without offering a hand.

Elijah glanced at Vogel, as if to ask, *She's ok?* The German only offered a tight-lipped smile in return, then clapped his hands. "Well! Let us get right to it. Mr. Vice President, if you would follow us inside."

Elijah's protection agent handed over his umbrella and stepped forward silently.

"If you'll humor us," Elijah said, "he'll want to go in first and check the place out."

"Of course," Vogel said, opening the door. "We will be walking through the lobby, and then you may scout the rest as we proceed."

The agent walked through and disappeared for some minutes before reemerging with a nod. He took Elijah's umbrella and folded it away, then held the door.

Elijah stepped through the threshold into the building. He saw Dr. Meijer pull down her sunglasses, revealing the same diamond eyes as Vogel, white-blue irises that were nearly blinding.

"Oh," Elijah said, "Are the two of you related? I didn't realize."

"Dr. Meijer is my granddaughter, yes. Ours is a family business."

"That's quite a gene. Does it run through the whole family?"

"It is referred to as Waardenburg Syndrome, but we do not consider it some kind of...illness. It is genetic, as you say – the white part around the eye turns blue and the pupils become very bright. It is quite rare, but every Vogel is born with it, as far back as anyone can remember. My wife used to joke how easy it was to find our children in a crowd, and it always made for interesting family photos."

Elijah chuckled. "I'm sure."

They stood in a foyer as ornately decorated as the building's exterior was plain. A crystal chandelier dominated the space overhead, enormous but delicate. It refracted light and color in all directions, spilling millions of fractals onto the manicured arboretum (complete with hybrid orchids and other engineered botanicals), and highlighting the lavish modern art pieces that lined walls of grained marble. Elijah caught a glimpse of something darting around his feet before he realized the floor was transparent, exotic fish streaming underneath.

"An in-ground aquarium?" Elijah mused. "Business is good."

"These have been prosperous years of late," Vogel admitted. "But most of the...glitz and glamour is confined to this space. Our visitors typically remain in the lobby area, but as an honored guest, you get to see the whole dog and pony show."

Vogel took the lead, transforming into a tour guide. He gestured toward an area opposite the garden, a few lush chairs retreating into a dim hallway. "Some conference rooms and offices off that way, nothing exciting. Everything else is through here."

He walked them through the arboretum, complete with fluttering rare butterflies, and past an empty reception desk. A door stood embedded in the wall, fitted so neatly that Elijah barely noticed it. His protective agent stepped forward a second time to scout ahead, this time returning in just seconds. He affirmed the environment ahead was safe and they stepped into a hallway, walking past the

faint hum of a server room before arriving at another door.

This door was of brushed steel and appeared monstrosously heavy, as if to a bank vault. Upon their approach, a robotic arm emerged above where the knob might be, holding what looked like a foam sponge between two pincers.

Vogel pulled the sponge out and bit into it, making an impression with his teeth. He handed it back to the robot arm, which retracted back into the door.

After a positive buzz of identity confirmation, the door slid open. Elijah's agent stepped forward.

Vogel coughed nervously. "Ahem, I would actually rather not have someone in there unsupervised. I assure you, nothing in there is dangerous, you have my word."

The agent didn't take his eyes off Vogel, but spoke to Elijah. "Sir, I strongly caution against entering the premises without my checking them in advance."

"It's all right, this man is President Granger's Sponsor. If you worked with the president during the campaign, you should know him well."

Vogel interjected, "I would like to say I am the president's friend first, Sponsor second."

"Either way," Elijah reassured, "I'm sure whatever's beyond that door doesn't pose any harm." The agent protested, but in these situations the protectee had the final say, if they insisted forcefully enough. Elijah patted his guardian on the arm as he filed past.

Once through the door, he found himself on a catwalk overlooking a sunken floor. The catwalk branched out every forty feet or so, forming an elevated lattice pattern throughout, the occasional staircase spanning down to the bottom. On the floor, rows upon rows of steel cylinders stood like miniature grain silos, each about two feet in diameter and eight feet tall. They numbered in the thousands – no wonder this building looked so enormous on the outside! At about eye level, each cylinder featured a translucent window the size of a PanoPad, a pulsating light flashing from within – red, then blue, then white – all in unison.

"Holy smokes," Elijah said. "What is all this?"

Vogel offered a polite smile that looked strained on his reconstructed features. He led the vice president down a staircase and to the first cluster of cylinders, arranged in a ten-by-ten grid. Above this grouping hung a placard from the ceiling: *Females, 19-21, Caucasian*. Similar placards hovered over neighboring clusters, with

labels like *Males, 36-40, Hispanic; Females, 61-65, African-American*. And so on.

Elijah couldn't help himself – he leaned in for a peek through the window of the nearest silo and touched the surface. “Why isn't it cold?” he asked.

“We do not freeze them,” Vogel said, but he left it at that.

Elijah peered in further, looking for the light source inside – a PanoScreen, positioned a few inches in front of the face.

“That is Amber,” Vogel said. “She appreciates a clever advertising jingle, enjoys Christmas movies, and has a...soft spot for anything with cats. Sad to say, in this last election you had very little chance with her.”

“College females weren't my best demographic. Except maybe econ majors.”

Dr. Meijer stepped forward. “Grandfather, you know we shouldn't linger down here.”

“Of course. We don't want to disturb anyone's sequencing. Elijah, follow us, please.”

After a tour around the catwalk and a look at the data center, Vogel, Dr. Meijer, and Elijah sat in a conference room with the agent begrudgingly waiting outside – after he'd been allowed to case the room first.

Vogel rattled at some controls and the room's four walls went full pano as he cycled through environments. “Which would you prefer: *Spring Meadow, Caribbean Cabana*? Something else?”

“Anything is fine.”

“Oh! You'll like this one. *Coney Island*. Feels like home, no?” A boardwalk spanned the wall to Elijah's left, with Coney Island's famous amusement-park landscape beyond it. It felt like being there, so much that he could almost smell the cotton candy. The resolution was astounding. To his right was the beach, the water of New York's Lower Bay spilling out to the ocean, reflecting a sun-brightened sky.

Vogel stood up and poured himself an espresso. “Now that you have seen our little facility, some history. Many decades ago, before your long period of civil...unrest, Endure Technologies was created for persons suffering from the bovine flu. Those infected looked to preserve their bodies in a cryogenic state until a cure could be found. As the flu became an epidemic, Endure's owners were overwhelmed by the demand. They became victims of their own success – the

maintenance cost for each cryogenic unit was...extensive. They were losing millions of dollars a day. Then the war began, and a new problem – many of Endure’s subjects lost their next of kin, so their bills were no longer being paid. The company faced bankruptcy and the unfortunate...consequence of being forced to release these subjects. But the flu still had no cure, and that meant a death sentence for anyone in here.”

Vogel sat back down, sipping his espresso. “What an opportunity! When I was much...younger, I looked far and wide for a facility like this for my research. Thousands of people, from all walks of life and every state in the union – except for maybe a couple of the newer ones. This,” he gestured back beyond the security door, which now happened to be the Coney Island Wonder Wheel, “is now the best neuromarketing research facility in all the world.”

“And what is neuromarketing, exactly?” Since seeing the silos, Elijah found it hard to contain his brimming interest, but Vogel apparently wanted to walk him through every detail.

“I will get to that in a moment, but know this. Surveys, focus groups, polling – all of it is useless. In those studies, there is bias. You cannot get around it. The waking mind...interferes. Whenever you see something and decide whether you like that something or not, noise gets in the way. Whether you think your spouse or friends will also like it, whether you had a good experience with something similar, perhaps even what you had for breakfast or the last song you listened to. And there is always that voice in the back of your mind telling you how you *should* feel. All of those factors influence your decision, and it makes a mess. What we do is turn off the noise. To register accurate opinions, we remove the conscious mind and focus on cognitive reactions at their most basic.”

As Dr. Meijer tapped away at her PanoPad, Vogel smiled and resumed his history. “So, I purchased this facility and moved it in a new direction – not just preserving these...specimens until they might be cured, but utilizing them while we have them, applying their shared knowledge and testing their reactions to stimuli. I also got rid of all those expensive cryogenics as you mentioned – we found another way. This gave birth to neuromarketing. And what a success it has been! We test messaging, branding, product placement. Businesses consult us to know what drives a person to prefer one type of soda, toothpaste, vehicle, what have you.”

“So, like a subconscious focus group?”

“Precisely! Then, a short time ago, a new phase. It

was...accidental, if I am being honest. We had no intention of getting involved in electoral politics until someone approached us, working for a relatively unknown presidential candidate from North Dakota. I met this candidate, and I decided to become his Sponsor. And we put the full weight of what Endure can do behind him."

Schroeder remembered hearing whispers during the campaign, that Granger had some sort of technological ace in the hole, but his sources were never close to sniffing it out. Though sponsorships were not required to be publicly disclosed, Vogel was not shy with his support, but how his business operated and how it assisted the campaign were both guarded secrets.

Even now, after touring the building and hearing Vogel's initial summary, he still wasn't sure what went on here.

Elijah hoped the German was getting to the point, but after only knowing the man for an hour he sensed a penchant for theatrics. Vogel was still winding up, the pitch was yet to come. "Our subjects may have been confined in isolation for thirty years, but with our special incubation, their brains never age. We discovered that for the best response data, they needed to eat – not food, but a diet of information. We keep their PanoScreens active around the clock to keep them abreast of national events. Tastes can shift depending on the cultural mood. For instance, as the war ended, there was a...seismic change, a yearning for unity above all else."

That appeared to be Dr. Meijer's cue. She set her PanoPad on the conference room table and pulled at its corners, stretching it wide and flat. The vistas of Coney Island dimmed around them. Meijer used a nimble set of hand gestures and vocal commands to activate a holo display, hovering above the stretched pano. The holo showed a diagram of the human brain, divided into quadrants. Some statistics and other figures flashed below the diagram that Elijah could not decipher.

"This is a file for one of our subjects," Vogel said. "He is a forty-three-year-old pipefitter from... South Allassippi, it's called now? Let's call him Mark. The file is from May of 2060."

Elijah thought backward to the campaign season. May would've been toward the end of the primaries, two months before the conventions. With their League nominations wrapped up, the remaining candidates would be plotting their strategies for winning a general election. Granger had won the Reformation nomination easily, while Elijah's campaign had slogged through a bruising primary to limp away as the nominee of the Conservative League.

Next to the brain diagram, a video appeared – one of Granger’s old campaign ads. Candidate Granger loomed large in the foreground, surrounded by a dense forest of elm trees in his native Dakota environment. Meijer dragged a thumb across the timeline, fast-forwarding the ad. The brain diagram flashed different shades of color as the video moved forward, mostly confined to the area marked *Frontal Lobe*. Meijer zoomed in on that area, magnified enough that it resembled a maze of clotted spider webs.

She pointed to some of the starker colors. “Sequences are monitored using a blue-red spectrum, which show whether the different processing centers react positively or negatively.”

Vogel interjected, “It shows us if they like what they see.”

Dr. Meijer pushed the Play button, and the ad moved in real time along with the neurological readouts. “At this point in time, our pipefitter’s brain is reacting to the test ad. We can show hundreds of ads with various differences to find the most effective. This version performed rather well – you can see how the blue starts to overtake the red as Mark connects emotionally to Granger’s inspirational message.”

Elijah thought he recognized the ad – the future president was either flaunting his salt-of-the-earth background or his service in the Yemeni War. Mark’s frontal lobe reacted with splotches of blue in several places.

“Each highlighted area,” Dr. Meijer pointed out, “is a connection to different qualities – trust, strength, and so forth. In this frame, Mark is connecting with the sense of unity and family that Granger made his central campaign themes. With your Civil War recently ended, these themes did very well. To measure this precisely, we compare Mark’s responses to the overall group.”

Interesting, Elijah thought, *but nothing earth-shattering so far*. Still, he felt Vogel had more to show.

The German smiled, as if reading his thoughts. “Still with us so far? Good. At regular intervals, we will run a test – a...snap poll, if you will. We show our subjects an image of each candidate and quantify the responses for the different qualities we measure. Because there’s no noise, our predictive models for determining who will win an election are precisely accurate.”

Polling had been the bane of every politician since the first democratic election, its methodology and accuracy the source of endless debate. But there had to be more.

“Can you play the ad one more time?” Elijah asked. Meijer

obliged, and Granger was again touting his roots. Elijah pointed to another quadrant at the back of the pipefitter's brain, marked *Occipital Lobe*, where shades of green were forming. "What's that there?"

Vogel jumped forward animatedly, the science clearly exciting him. "Ah! They told me how smart you are! This part of the brain controls vision, but it is also where ideas...originate. Where new thoughts are formed. Which is why this particular subject, and this particular ad, were so exciting." He turned to Dr. Meijer, who met her grandfather with a look of, *If you'll let me continue?*

Vogel sat back down.

Dr. Meijer pointed to some highlighted areas within the occipital lobe. "As I was getting to, opposite the frontal lobe, where you react to something, here you're acting on that reaction. At this moment, our subject is doing precisely that."

As Granger was going on about his uplifting backstory – war wounds healed by his wife's love, and how he would heal America's wounds the same way, or something dopey like that – the pipefitter's occipital lobe became a lit Christmas tree of green. Vogel was practically jumping up and down.

"The...brighter shades you see, the bigger the idea – you know, light bulb! Ding!"

Dr. Meijer ignored her grandfather's animations, something she'd probably been doing her entire life. "When we see something as vivid as this, it can be exciting. Observe – if you zoom in here, you can see the different areas have different shades of green – an emerald hue here, a mint color there. They are very specific and important. If we hit play again, slowing it down to just microseconds, we can take these different color patterns and approximate them."

Elijah thought Vogel might explode, but he wanted to make sure he grasped what Meijer was saying. "Approximate them? Into what?"

"Well, phonics, basically."

"Phonics? Like parts of words?"

"Yes!" Vogel exclaimed, jumping around and clapping him on the back. "String the phonics together and you can form words, even sentences!"

"That's – wait a minute, you can translate his thoughts into sentences? Are you saying you can read his mind?"

Vogel looked like a kindergarten teacher about to award a gold

star, but Meijer was more subdued. “These moments of inspiration can be mapped with enough specificity that yes; we can approximate it into language. I wouldn’t say translate, not yet. Each brain palette is slightly different; there is much trial and error. This is one decipherable sample out of millions.”

She zoomed in on the occipital lobe and slowed the playback further, slow enough that Granger looked almost fully still. “You see this splash of cucumber?” She touched it on the holo and text appeared.

Phonic designate: /ie/

“There are vowel phonics and consonant phonics, you may remember. This one, *ie*, is a vowel phonic, like in *tie* or *lie*. Taken by itself, it stands for the word *I*, like *I want this* or *I like that*, which is the beginning of most thoughts, really.”

The playback inched forward, nanosecond by nanosecond, and a splurge of darker green appeared above and to the left of the fading cucumber shade. Meijer touched it.

Phonic designate: /w/

“Our first consonant phonic,” Meijer said. “And then another two phonics right after it, here and here, a vowel and another consonant.” She pointed to an olive area and a teal.

Phonic designate: /i/

Phonic designate: /sh/

“I wish?” Elijah asked.

Vogel beamed. “We have seen this pattern often enough to approximate it with relative...confidence.”

Vogel signaled to Meijer to speed things along. She hurried through the rest of the playback, tapping out phonics until they appeared in a string.

/ie/ /w/ /i/ /sh/ /h/ /ee/ /d/ /p/ /i/ /c/ /a/ /c/ /u/ /n/ /s/ /er/ /v/ /u/ /t/ /i/ /v/

Elijah puzzled it out. “I wish he’d pick a conservative?”

Vogel clapped him on the back. “This is before the conventions, mind you, when the running mate...speculation is at its peak. Mark clearly likes our candidate, but something holds him back. We assumed Mark’s wish meant he wanted Granger to pick a more conservative Reformer, someone to balance the Reformation League ticket. We showed him everyone we could think of, but no one stuck – Granger still did not have Mark’s vote. Dismayed, we started to look...elsewhere. Candidates from other Leagues. The one that finally pulled Mark over the line was this handsome man.”

Meijer tapped her PanoPad and Elijah saw a picture of himself on the holo.

He stared at the image, trying to piece his thoughts together. "But Granger didn't say at his convention that he would pick me. He said he would pick whoever came in second."

"Well, we could not just go out there and say it! As his opponent, you would have said no thank you. But you were the choice. And given our polling data, we knew it would be you. Yes, it was a...gamble, that the electorate would associate a vote for Granger as one that essentially included you on the ticket. The media likes to make a game of polls, this person is gaining, this one is crashing – but people do not change their minds. They might pretend they do, but they lie – to pollsters, to friends, and to themselves." He pointed to brain on the holo. "But! Just to be sure, we run another scenario." He nodded again to Dr. Meijer, who keyed in more commands.

"Same person, same ad," Vogel said. "Now, we add your image while it's playing. And boom!"

The frontal lobe was almost blinding with light. Mark the pipefitter's brain was as vibrant as Vogel's body, the seams of the German's refashioned skin stretching in the light.

"We were curious about these results at first," Vogel said. "We compared Mark's readings with other subjects across a variety of...demographics. Then we pulled back to the whole group, the collective subconscious of all our subjects. We call this the Hive Mind. And the Hive Mind confirmed what our friend Mark saw – although you and Mr. Granger were two very different people, agreeing on almost nothing when it came to...issues, you were his perfect compliment. Granger conveyed strength, confidence, trust. These are classic Alpha Male qualities. Yourself, seen as intelligent, kind, sympathetic. You made the perfect beta." Vogel had clasped his two hands together, shaking them demonstrably. "The synergy of the two was tremendous."

Just how am I so sympathetic? Elijah wondered for a moment, then let it pass.

"I'm the beta to his alpha," he said. "Isn't that humbling. Mr. Vogel, did you bring me here to humiliate me?"

"No," Vogel said. "I assume you accepted my invitation because you had a question – *why did I lose?* Maybe that explains much of it. But I asked you here to tell you this. Since you have been vice president, we have seen some...changes."

"Yeah, my approval rating has fallen twenty points."

Vogel shook his head and tittered, as if humored by Elijah's lack of faith. "Actually, our responses show that as the president...governs, taking slings and arrows from all sides, you are gaining in some of those alpha qualities."

"Really?" Elijah was never good at sarcasm, but he hoped it came through here. "When I lost, the conservatives all turned on me. They thought I blew a winnable election – I guess it's nice to hear you tell me that I never had much of a chance. And that was *before* I accepted Granger's offer. Once I took it, they turned on me all over again."

"Based on our findings, we knew who would win this election very early on. And the next election, we will know as well, perhaps...earlier. Our science improves every day. But we are getting ahead of ourselves."

Elijah kept thinking backward, putting the pieces together. "I remember Granger's convention speech so well; it was like a kick in the chest. A brilliant maneuver. He invoked George Washington and John Adams – Washington won the presidency and Adams came in second out of a crowded field, which back then made him vice president. I guess at that point, I knew we were fucked."

Vogel's accent thickened the softer he spoke. "It made Granger the...front-runner almost overnight. As we had expected."

"And the rest of us scrapped at his heels for second place. But you knew how that would turn out, too."

Instead of responding, Vogel pointed to the brain diagram on the holo.

Elijah remembered the first days after losing the election – a dark, dejected time of self-immolation. He ran a good campaign with good ideas, or so he'd thought. Elections can hinge on thousands of factors, most of them out of your control, but at the end of the day it comes down to how many people believed in you.

A question popped into his mind. "How did you know I would take the job? I've never been hooked up to your machines."

Vogel shrugged. "Ah, our biggest gamble of all! You are correct, we did not know if you would or would not. But Granger trusted you to do it. He thought you might appreciate the...history it invoked, and that you would appreciate the symbol of unity."

"But all his talk of unity was a lie. A tactic to win."

Vogel jumped at the accusation. "Win, yes! But you must win to govern! And what a team you make. He inspires, you perspire. Can you not say that it works?"

Elijah sighed. Now he was looking for his words, even with English his native language. "It's been...bumpy."

He reflected on the night of the election and the painful concession call. The new President-Elect had been as gracious and kind as could be. *I made a promise to the country that sort of involves you*, he'd said to Elijah. *Help me keep it.*

Elijah made no promises then, merely saying he'd think about it. And think he did, when he wasn't feeling despondent. A week later, Granger called again, offering to discuss his offer in person. Elijah reluctantly invited him to his summer cottage in the Hamptons. Granger had looked even bigger to him then, barely fitting through the doorway, casting a shadow as wide as the living room. Elijah was prepared to turn him down, to say it would never work, but eventually he bought into the man's earnestness and the ebullience of his character. *This won't go over well with our factions of loyalists*, Granger told him. *The war remains fresh in so many minds. But I have your back, so long as you have mine.*

The last thing the president told him: *On the plus side, making history sure is fun.*

With that, Elijah accepted and the two rivals set about forming a government. And after two years of fits and missteps, setbacks and struggles, that nation was beginning to shake off the rust, an old locomotive churning out steam.

Elijah considered his original question. "So why *am* I here?"

Vogel looked at Dr. Meijer and nodded. She turned off the holo and the lights came back up.

"Such intelligent questions," Vogel complimented. "Granger was the first and only candidate we have sponsored. He won't be the last."

Schroeder studied Vogel as he twiddled his bow tie. The German tried to smile and look relaxed, but there was tension behind it – whether it was from the anti-aging treatments, his angled features, or something more, he wasn't sure. "I do not much care for politics," Vogel admitted. "I did not become Granger's Sponsor for any...partisan reason. I am not concerned with his policy to re-introduce immigration or his position on paying for reconstruction costs – nor yours, for that matter. I am a businessman concerned for my business. This company has made great strides, poised to make more. In time, we will need to sponsor another candidate. I am assuming you will again seek the presidency when the opportunity arises?"

"Honestly, I don't think I have it in me."

Vogel gave him a look as if to say, *My data tells me differently*. Perhaps he was right – Elijah's mind did ponder the future, even as it still litigated the past.

"Campaigning wears on your soul," Elijah insisted. "Maybe in '68, when Granger's second term is up. I'd have to think the president's re-election is a lock."

Vogel only said, "Possibly, but we have no way of knowing without knowing the candidates."

"It's still a few months before anyone jumps in, but I expect some will begin making noise after the midterms."

"A lot of time between now and then, to be sure."

"Well, I wouldn't dare run against him. If he asks me to stay on, I would. Right now, I'm a man without a caucus. Approval in the twenties, pilloried from all sides. Conservatives no longer trust me, if they ever did. And though it can be painful working under Granger's bleeding heart, I'm no Benedict Arnold. Like you said, against all odds, it does sort of work."

"As we knew it would," Vogel said with a smile, pointing behind him. "But they say in politics, circumstances are forever changing."

"Not according to your polling. But if they do, feel free to invite me back. Maybe by then I'll understand all this." There was catharsis to this trip, he supposed. He'd been comparing himself to Granger for years, during the campaign and after, now that he worked for him. Trying to find where he failed and the president succeeded. Knowing the cause of it, however jarring, brought some peace. The alpha to his beta, and all this technology. He wondered if he could have won with Vogel as his Sponsor – what a weapon this was!

"Tell me, what did Granger say the first time you showed him this facility?"

A flash of disappointment crossed Vogel's face, and he hid it with an air of wistfulness. "If he had ever accepted my invitation, I could tell you."

"He's never been here?"

"We have worked very closely with his...aides. Mr. Ricketts, mainly. The president, not as much."

You and I have that in common, Elijah thought. He checked the time, well beyond his scheduled appearance at the fundraiser. "I should be going."

"Ah!" Vogel exclaimed. "But there's one more thing to show you."

Dr. Meijer, may I borrow your handheld pano device please?"

Vogel's granddaughter fished in her coat pocket and handed it over. The lights went down one more time.

CHAPTER TWO

"I don't care what the nursery rhyme says, anything that falls down broken can always be put together again. That's the beauty of our Constitution."

- Acton Granger, debate excerpt – October 17, 2060

For Tess Larkin, her father's study was the most beautiful place in the world.

Her love began with the skylights – three of them, angled and wide, inviting broad bands of sunlight into the room. During the day, the light would journey from one side to the other, passing over the scores of books – *actual books!* – that lined the shelves, as if to highlight each of them for a period. Fiction novels, biographies, poetry collections, and classics populated the stacks, along with her recent contributions of legal dictionaries and briefing books. And there was her special corner, reserved for her romance collection when the occasional indulgence was required. Tess felt more at home here than in her own apartment, or anywhere else. She felt a sense of vigor, of enlightenment, as if the collective wisdom within all these storied pages hung in the air, waiting to be inhaled. This was why she never missed a chance to come by on Sundays.

Stuffing herself in her favorite leather lounger (quite possibly the most comfortable chair in the world), amidst piles of paperbacks and hardcovers, Tess looked up from her book and watched her father, seated at his desk a few feet away and attending to a soup bowl. *Funny, he never lets me eat in here*, she thought. Tess pretended to

read as she noticed the spoon quaking within his fingers, spilling its contents back into the bowl. He put the spoon down resignedly and attended to the surface pano embedded in his desk.

How many Sundays will I have left with him?

"Everything all right, Daddy? Chowder too salty?"

Richard Larkin replied without looking up. "You're thirty now, Tess. You can call me Dad, Papa, whatever. Just something, *anything* other than Daddy."

Tess tried again, with feeling. "Dearest Patriarch, how is the homemade bowl of clam chowder that I slaved over for you?"

He sighed but not without a subtle smile. "Dad will do," he said, returning focus to his pano without commenting on the soup. Tess noticed the bowl was still nearly full. *Must be stone cold by now*, she thought. *Does he notice?*

She went back into her book (Leonora, the constable's daughter, longed for Sergio, the pirate captain – but he'd rejected her for the high seas), as she kept one eye on her father. He struggled with the pano – his fingers, so nimble and sure when he picked up his guitar, lingered lost in the air. He dropped his hands to his lap, defeated.

"Tessa, help," he said quietly.

"What's the matter?" she asked, trying to sound chipper and nonchalant. She set down her book and took the few steps over in a *no-big-deal* pace.

"I'm trying to get to the news and this dang thing won't let me."

She reached around from behind and cradled his wrists. "Ok, not a problem. Just wave this hand to the right to open your favorite sites, like that. Now point to the site you want. ABCBS News is the third link down; I think you like that one? Good – now, to cycle through stories just move this finger, like you're flicking something. There you go."

"Thank you, I've got it now."

"Here to help," she said, still chipper. A fleeting memory jumped at her – her ninth birthday, the first time her dad had bought a pano and showed her how to use it. He hadn't been as patient, Tess remembered.

After a few more pages into Leonora's yearning tale, she saw him struggling again. "If you're looking for the crossword, just draw the letter C in the air."

"Ah." Richard followed her instruction. Soon he was working his daily puzzle, locked in, forefingers in a confident dance as he spelled out the various clues. Some skills, like reflexes, never dwindled.

He asked casually, without looking over, "Honey, where's Bruin?"

"The cat?" She tried to find a positive way to say it, but if he'd forgotten that Bruin had been gone for years that was more devastating than a difficulty in handling a soup spoon and trouble with pano controls. She fought the recurrent urge to take him by the shoulders and shake him, as if she could jostle the memories back. Maybe he'd remember burying Bruin in the yard, or that he still placed fresh gravel over his resting place each year.

"Oh, Daddy..."

But Richard broke out in a sheepish grin, waving his hand as if to say *Eh, I was just fuckin with you.*

"Dad, don't ever – Jesus, don't *ever* do that again." Now she wanted to shake him for a different reason. Tears welled in her eyes.

His smile vanished. "Oh, look...I'm sorry, sweetheart. You're right. It's just, I need to keep a sense of humor about some things." When she didn't look at him, all he could say was, "Please don't cry like that."

"I'm serious. I won't come over anymore."

They both knew she was lying. "You love it here, and you know it," Richard said.

She could not deny it, but every time he forgot something, her heart broke a little more. Pretending to forget was somehow worse.

Tess picked up her PanoPad – time to let Leonora's pirate-pining go for a while, and check in on work.

Some minutes later, after a completed crossword – and probably the quote acrostic, by now – her father piped up again. "Any men in your life I should know about?"

Tess rolled her eyes his way, making sure he registered her derision.

"Whoa," he said with a laugh, "sorry for caring. What's got you so busy that I won't meet my first grandchild in the foreseeable future?"

"Do you have to bring this up every time?" She squirmed with obvious unease, though the question didn't really bother her as much anymore – anytime he was engaged and lively, even at her expense, was fine by her. As for her dating and any potential reproduction, she had a valid excuse – there simply was no time, not on Speaker Cunningham's watch.

She held up her PanoPad. "If you must know, right now I'm reading through some White House petitions."

"But you don't work for the White House, Tessa," her father said, then paused. "Right?"

"Right, I work for the Speaker of the House. But part of being an Assistant Policy Director is finding new ideas. I check out these petitions from time to time and see if there's anything we can run with. This is one of the few places where anyone in the country can propose a new law, or push to strike down an existing one. And if a petition gets enough signatures, the White House has to craft an official response – no matter what."

"How does the Speaker feel about you combing through sites devoted to the Executive Branch? And...what's his name again?"

"Cunningham. He'd hit the roof of the Capitol Building if he knew about it, actually."

"Careful, Tessa. I hope you're not putting your career in jeopardy."

"I don't think it's quite that dire. Most of these petitions are pretty self-serving and small, but some are worth a read."

"Pardon my second cousin? Legalize whatever drug I just got busted with?"

She smiled. He hadn't been this animated in weeks. Tess referred to these moments as *Lucid Time*, those fleeting periods when her father was himself again – inquisitive, to the point of combative. His thirst for knowledge was an urgent one.

"Some petitions can be more off-the-wall. Here's one: 'Require the president to appear in Major League Baseball's Home Run Derby.' It has over five thousand signatures. He's big, but I heard Granger had two left feet when it came to sports. Oh, they want him to appear mainly so he'd be tested for PEDs beforehand. I guess that's clever. Another one you'd like: 'Issue a statement demanding the restoration of Milo Georgino's *Snark!* account, revoked unfairly by social media fascists who take bomb threats too seriously.' Eight thousand signatures for that one."

"Democracy in action," Richard Larkin declared.

Tess scrolled down her pano, looking for more examples while he was still engaged, a narrow window that could close at any moment. "Oh, you'll like this one: 'Introduce an amendment to the Constitution, one that nullifies the Constitution.'"

"Ambitious, that one."

"Whoever wrote this must be a first-year law student," she observed, and started reading. "'Herewith, on the occasion of the two-hundred-and-seventy-sixth year of its creation, we the people request proposal and passage of a Constitutional Amendment, and that this Amendment shall strike down the constraints of those who

may lord over us, so that Natural Law and not our so-called elected representatives shall govern this nation.”

“Natural Law, I think they’re on to something – I’ve always thought the trees should be in charge, myself.”

“I don’t think that’s what they mean. There’s more, if you want to hear it?”

His face changed. “That’s ok. You get back to what you were doing.” In a flash, he’d gone back to a distant stare – as if someone pushed a reset button and he was still booting up.

More like powering down, Tess thought.

Richard Larkin returned to his cold soup, listlessly stirring his spoon.

“I guess it’s not entirely crazy,” Tess said. “The Amendment thing, I mean.” But he was lost again, Lucid Time another runaway memory.

Tess thumbed through other petitions. A handful stood out as halfway plausible. A proposal for a New Orleans Dam Project. A request to further incentivize Automated Vehicles. A demand to prosecute the company that manufactured faulty pano battery casings.

But her mind kept going back to the Amendment petition. Apart from whatever Natural Law implied, was it really so crazy? Tess knew as well as anyone how ridiculous the system had become – Speaker Cunningham and his petty, backbiting politics a prime example. The original Constitution had created a beacon of freedom in its beginning, but all Tess knew was a nation torn apart by infighting and civil war. Had the country become broken enough that it required questioning its sacred foundation?

She didn’t realize that her father, in an aftershock of lucidity, detected her inner tensions. “You’re biting your nails again, Tess. Onto something?”

“I don’t know. Just wondering if I could convince my boss that America’s most hallowed document could use a rewrite.”

“I think I’ve told you the only way to convince anyone of anything.” She blinked, at a loss. The disappointment in his tone was cutting. “Get them to think it was their idea in the first place!”

It was amazing how he could seem completely disconnected one moment and then drop a bomb of wisdom the next. *Always with the grand pronouncements*, Tess thought, smirking. Was it his condition or, if her mother was still around, would she say this was how he’d always been – seemingly aloof, only to come in with perfect advice

when it was most needed?

"But Theresa," Richard Larkin said (and he only used her given name when it was Something Really Important), "if you're even thinking about a do-over for America's Constitution, it would probably be easier to rewrite the Bible – or the Koran, for that matter. My brain might be slipping, but you're the one off your rocker."

If he was being honest, he was more than slipping. *Daddy, we need to talk about selling the house.* She wanted to say it so badly, it threatened to erupt from her at any time – but she couldn't quite get there, not yet. Some things couldn't be unsaid. And it could be the one thing her father might never forget.

The truth was, there would never be a good time to bring it up.

Another part of it, probably, was selfishness. Did she just want everything to stay the same, if only to keep her weekly visits? Undoubtedly. These Sunday afternoons were her only rest stop from a life moving a thousand miles an hour. Cunningham was a more demanding boss than she'd ever imagined – which was amazing, since Congress accomplished so little.

Still, the house had to be sold, and soon – a glance at her father's quivering soup spoon confirmed it.

Just not today. If he was in the mood for argument, she'd keep it to politics. "I'm just tired of all the hacks in this town," Tess said. "They pretend they're all chosen disciples of the Founding Fathers, as if George Washington whispered some secret code through the centuries that only they can hear. Nothing ages perfectly. We have challenges that our founders never imagined. How does an eighteenth-century document apply to the post-information age?"

Her father adopted the slightly-chiding air that Tess remembered so well growing up. "Tessa, that's what amendments are for, what legal precedents are for. The damn thing wasn't written on a stone tablet. I did send you to law school, didn't I?"

"Yes, but look how divided everything is. Do you really think we'll ever pass another amendment again? Two-thirds of the states and Congress? They wouldn't be able to pass a law saying the sky is blue."

"It does look a little gray today."

"Not helping. You turn on the PanoNets, all you hear about is someone saying the other guy is crapping on the Constitution, only to cover that they're wiping their own ass with it. Accusations and finger-pointing, all day every day, while our problems mount and

mount. We can't do anything as a nation anymore. And that's not what our founding document wanted – it was meant for us to work it out so we can solve the big things.” She sighed. “I’m just tired of something so brilliant, so blessed, used as a weapon.”

“It’s politics, Tessa. Everything’s a weapon.”

She looked up at the skylights. The sun’s straight yellow rays broke through the cloud cover, blinding her face in radiance. She closed her eyes, mind churning. “Maybe what we need...”

And then it hit her.

CHAPTER THREE

"The effort to 'Stack the Senate' began in earnest in the late two-thousand-twenties. Under the Constitution, a state is assigned House Representatives based on its population, but receives two senators regardless. Red states with overwhelming margins in their legislatures opted to divide themselves, adding two loyal senators for each new state they created, hoping to forever hold a filibuster-proof Senate Majority. Some states split into two relatively equal parts, such as East and West Kentucky. Others were more ambitious, becoming three separate entities – as Utah divided into Salt Lake, Wasatch, and Brigham. Not to be outdone, Texas divided itself into fifths – Mountain Texas, Border Texas, Coastal Texas, Central Texas, and the most Texan state of them all, Greater Texas."

- from A History of the Five Texases, Francisco Aguilar, published 2057

"Mr. Richardson? The governor will see you now."

About damn time. Jamie grabbed his knapsack and jumped out of the waiting room sofa. A head rush turned his world inky-black for several disorienting moments.

"Mr. Richardson? Are you all right?"

Jamie blinked until his bearings returned. "I'm good, lead the way." He followed the assistant down the hall toward the governor's office, trying to steer his eyes from her backside's ample contours. For a white girl, not bad – must be the food down here.

Before reaching the office, the assistant turned abruptly to the right, reaching instead toward a side door leading out the building. She opened it for Jamie and they stepped onto an expansive lawn, a sandstone path meandering amongst the fescue.

At the path's end, Governor Shelby Monroe bounced in the grass with a fleet of tiny dogs – corgis, by the look of them.

The governor stood shorter than Jamie expected, her burnt-orange pencil dress reaching near her ankles. Famous for her fashion choices (or infamous, depending on whom you asked), today's selection was no less bold – the dress bore a pleated front, studded with oversized white buttons, and her signature tassels hung from the shoulders. The string of pearls around her neck almost exactly matched her white-to-silver hair, which reminded Jamie of a swirled bulb of cotton candy glossed with metallic spray paint.

Governor Monroe looked comfortable in the height of the afternoon, fanning herself intermittently as she ran back and forth amongst the dogs – sometimes chasing, sometimes being chased. As Jamie approached, he could hear the governor lecturing her pups in rapid monologue.

"Faster, Reagan! Lincoln, look at me! Don't bite your sister, try to keep up! Good boy!" The corgis were falling all over each other on stubby legs, their bottom-heavy torsos flattening the grass in wide swaths.

The assistant stopped Jamie a few feet in before the governor – *Don't interfere.*

In time, Governor Monroe stopped her frolicking and turned to face them. If she was at all embarrassed at being observed by a stranger prancing around with her pets, it didn't show.

Instead, she pulled a handkerchief from a dress pocket and dabbed her forehead. "Whew, it's a hot one! Maybe those global warming dorks were on to something." She smiled ironically as she tucked the kerchief back.

"Afternoon, Ma'am," the assistant said.

The governor cocked her head. "Trixie, you don't have to call me ma'am, I've told you that a million times. Who's that behind you?"

"This is Jamie Richardson, the...what is it, videographer?"

The governor looked at Jamie with an expression of surprise he instantly recognized. *This is why I don't put pictures of myself on my work*, he thought.

But she recovered just as quickly, as any decent politician might,

and her natural enthusiasm returned. She bounded over a corgi toward him. "Oh, silly me, of course! Jamie, hi!"

"Governor, it's a pleasure to finally meet you." Jamie reached out formally to shake her hand, and she took it with an enthusiastic jolt, sizing him up as she did so.

"Call me Shelby," Governor Monroe said, breaking her grip and turning in one motion. "Walk with me! Come, come!"

Does she think I'll obey commands like one of her dogs? Jamie wondered, but by then she was heading back down the pathway. And damned if he didn't hustle up to join her. Behind them, Trixie gathered up leashes.

When he caught up, Shelby put a hand on Jamie's shoulder, a gesture that startled him. "I hope your flight was ok?"

"Fine. There was an overnight layover in Houston."

"On your way from California? Those shitbrained airlines will never make sense, even after we lifted the interstate travel restrictions." Jamie shrugged. He'd wanted to spend a night in Houston if only to see the Deportation Resistance Museum, so it was no big thing. "We'll cover your expenses, of course," she said with a wink. "I know they pack those planes like sardines now, but once we get a Sponsor, we'll be flying all over these United States, and in style! Ever been to Greater Texas?"

The governor shifted gears so often, Jamie found it difficult to keep up. "This is my first time in any of the Texases, Greater or, uh, not-so-great."

"Ha! Well, you picked the right one to pop your cherry on. Whatcha think so far?"

"Everyone's got a pistol on their hip."

"Safest place you'll ever be," the governor proclaimed, as if by reflex. "Let's go inside, hot as the devil's fireplace out here."

The governor led the way to her office. Textured adobe walls were adorned with oversized landscape paintings – depicting horsemen, cattle, and horsemen herding cattle. Jamie saw trinkets and knickknacks everywhere – ancient pistols on the bookcases, decorative mini-boots on the shelves, a massive longhorn affixed to the wall.

Is this a governor's office or the gift shop at the Alamo?

Shelby took her place behind a mahogany desk draped in cowhide. Above her, the Greater Texas flag – a large star in the middle, with four smaller stars at the corners – overlapped ceremoniously with the Texas Lone Star version from decades

before.

"Need a drink?"

Jamie sank into the leather of a low-slung chair before the governor's desk. "I'm all right, but thank you."

Shelby Monroe shook her head with a smile – *You'll not refuse my generosity here, mister* – and stabbed her desktop pano with a stout index finger. "Trixie, bring water. Yes, from the spring. You're my favorite!"

Trixie was in the office with a water tray within half a moment, setting it down and disappearing just as quickly. Jamie took a gracious sip. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been offered fresh spring water, a luxury in California and probably even more so here.

Monroe watched him carefully as he drank, her face like a mother saying, *I know what's best for you, don't forget that*. Jamie nodded in appreciation as he set down his empty glass.

"So!" she exclaimed, slapping her palms on the desk. "Welcome aboard. You're my first campaign hire, which is very exciting for me. Would you like to show me your equipment?"

Jamie was glad he'd just swallowed his water – else he might've choked on it. "My equipment? Oh, right." He dipped into his knapsack and pulled out his video instruments, carefully laying them out on the desk. Each camera was the size of a pencil eraser. "I mainly shoot with these. They're the new PZ330 PanoLenses, they work well for both tight and long shots. Versatile and reliable."

"I see," the governor said, picking up one of the floating drone cameras and examining it like a jeweler. "Are they quieter than the PZ220's?"

"Why...yes they are," he said, startled at her knowledge. "The stabilizers are just a tinge wider so they don't flutter as much. That's what made all the noise."

Shelby nodded. "My husband and I used to take those old 220's out on hunting trips. They'd wobble and scare away the ducks."

Jamie went back to the knapsack and pulled out his gloves, intricate wiring woven into the fabric of the palms, funneling into padded fingertips. "Like the 220s, they're controlled with these, using what's called Gesture Mode – well, I guess I don't have to tell you what that is. I've done some custom programming to these. They can do a lot more than the standard models. They have a better range than the 220s, about seventy-five yards, depending on how many are in the air at once. But the closer I am to a subject, the

easier they are to control.”

“How about for holo vids?”

“That’s more intrusive. I would need four cameras, hovering around you in each quadrant.”

“Can’t you do it with three?”

“I could, but the edges get distorted.”

“Hmmm.” She set the drone down, looking to Jamie for more.

“Right...there’s also a Pincam that you can wear, I would embed it to the flag pin on your lapel. It’s good for first-person, point-of view shots, like when you’re in front of a big crowd. It has a fish-eye lens, and can take stills.”

She scrutinized the Pincam, barely a dot as it lay on her fingertip. She looked pleased.

“So...is there anything you want to know about me?” Jamie asked.

She looked at him with a wry smirk. “All in good time,” she said. “But you’re still hired, if that’s what you’re getting at. I saw what you did for Governor Reynolds and it just about knocked me to the floor. You turned that poor old stiff into a compelling candidate, and somehow or another Utah’s reddest state elected a Progressive. If that ain’t remarkable, I don’t know what is.”

He laughed. “Wasn’t easy.”

Shelby leaned forward, sizing him up once again. “Now, I know I’m no Progressive, the good lord is kind. I don’t know what your politics are, but I’m assuming you’re a professional and that won’t get in the way of things.”

“Just here to do a job, ma’am. That’s to tell your story to the people, best as I can.”

“Good to hear,” she said, leaning forward. “Let’s be honest for a sec. Some of my colleagues in the Freedom League are going to look at your, uh, complexion and maybe have a hard time with it. It’s been a few years since the war, but hell, some folks are still broken up about the first one and that was two hundred years ago. You all right with that?”

“Of course, ma’am.”

“I know the Freedom League has some ways to go on social issues. Between ourselves, that’s part of what this campaign will be about. Your skin don’t matter to me, darling. Black, blue, yellow, don’t care. No matter where we go, you’ll be fine if you stick close.”

Jamie wasn’t exactly sure of that. The Governor’s quick register of surprise when she saw him spoke volumes – *Not a lot of my people down here*. He wondered if she would’ve called him out of the blue

and flown him across the country if she'd known his urban roots. She didn't ask his background when she called, and Jamie certainly wasn't going to offer it up. This was work on a presidential campaign, a step up in his career. And the money had to be better.

If I need to follow around filming a rabble-rousin', gun-totin' Greater Texan crazy enough to think she can get to the White House, then so be it.

"When do you want me to start?" Jamie asked.

"We have a meeting in the conference room in twenty minutes."

Jamie flinched. "So...now?"

She flashed a broad, matronly smile. "We move pretty quick down here, Jamie, you'll catch on. It's a gathering of my closest advisors, and I'll want it recorded – we won't announce officially until the Spring, but my staff needs to prepare for what's coming. Maybe it will make a good opening scene in the first PanoVid? Or maybe it can just be a practice run – of course, you'll be the judge of all that. I know I promised you creative control when we spoke. You were quite insistent."

Governor Monroe's fingers flew around on her pano and she wrote a number in the air above the screen. "Here's your first payment and a retainer. Our first trip will be to Washington in February. That's for FACPAC – as I'm sure you've heard, I was asked to give the keynote address – and we'll have you fully accredited as a member of my team by then."

The pano in his jacket pocket vibrated favorably and emitted a loud *cha-ching!* as it notified him that a payment was received. If that wasn't enough, it followed up with a gangster voice emitting a familiar rap refrain – *Git dat paper son!* – a download that Jamie considered amusing at the time.

Shelby gave no sign of hearing it, holding her natural disposition of warm amusement. "Yes, absolutely," Jamie said, pushing through any awkwardness. He certainly didn't know what a FACPAC was, but didn't really care at this point – now that he was gainfully employed and able to pay his bills, the rest was just details.

"I hope you'll find that generous. When we have a Sponsor, it'll only go up from there." Shelby paged her assistant one more time, who appeared within the office so quickly it was like she'd been beamed in. "Trixie will have some forms for you to sign after the meeting, but for now you should probably start setting up. I'll be down in the conference room in, oh, fifteen minutes now. Better hurry."

Jamie stood. "I appreciate the opportunity, ma'am. I'll do my best work for you."

The governor clapped him on the back, her smile never breaking – wide and knowing. *Now that, mister, was never in doubt.*

"Bless your heart," she said. "Now go on and get ready!"

The conference room was draped with similar cattle-rustling paraphernalia to Shelby's office, reminding Jamie of a highway rest stop. He barely had time to get his rig into place before the governor's staff filed in. A thirty-something woman was first to enter, strutting in cowboy boots and wearing a plaid tea dress. She flashed a curious, hesitant smile Jamie's way before sitting.

Two more women followed – one in a yellow blouse and the other in a patterned frock with leggings – both with footwear identical to the first. The three of them exchanged breezy, familiar pleasantries and after those initial *Hello*s and *How-are-yous*, they started messaging each other on their panos, tittering excitedly.

Which was when they cast their collective eyes at Jamie. "Excuse me, sir?" Yellow Blouse raised her hand at him. "Do you know what this meeting is about?"

Jamie was checking his monitor, making sure the float-cams were synced with the sensors on his gloves. "I don't know much at all. Just got here, really. But I have the feeling if I said anything, the governor might shoot me."

The women all gave a nod of understanding, as if to confirm that was indeed a possible outcome.

Jamie tried to remember the governor's instructions from a minute ago. *I want a tight shot down the hall as I approach*, she'd said. *One cam can be of my profile, one filming from the back, and a third a medium three-quarters shot from next to the conference table.*

But as she'd pointed out herself, Jamie had complete creative control. Governor Monroe was a woman who knew what she wanted, and he was already wondering if that would be an issue. Governor Reynolds, his last client, had been hands off, treating him like an afterthought until he saw how many PanoViews his films were getting. But Reynolds never interfered; Monroe, he wasn't so sure about. Nevertheless, this being his first day on the job, he gave the governor a pass and set everything up how she wanted – with a few flourishes of his own.

Two more women entered – Trixie the Assistant and someone

that looked like her twin, only with slightly darker hair and more business-like clothing. They took the remaining two spots around the table.

This could be trouble, Jamie mused. It didn't help that all these women looked like models, dressed for some kind of rodeo runway. However, before he could further reflect on these potential distractions, a pair of quick claps rapped from the hallway, ringing out like pistol blasts. His cue.

Jamie crouched into position and tapped his gloves together. They came alive with a faint glow through the wiring and a slight vibration in the fingertips. His left index finger controlled Camera One – by extending the finger, the camera floated down the hall. He pushed the rest of the cams into position with the remaining fingers on his left hand, controlling their focus and range with the matching digits of his right.

"Ready!" Jamie called, then counted down from five. He checked the monitor one last time, displaying images from each cam.

The governor clapped once in acknowledgement.

"Record," he said aloud, and in response to his voice command, the feed was live. Camera One opened with a slow fade into focus, beginning on a detail from one of the hallway paintings – a sheepdog, shown leaping across a Texas plain, herding cattle into a pen at sunset while cowboys looked on approvingly.

Jamie twisted his hand to the left and the camera panned down the hall, switching to a longer focus. It picked up the governor as she strode into view, staring straight ahead, walking like a prosecutor into a courtroom. Jamie pulled in the other cameras to form a triangle around her as she entered the conference room.

The five women around the table stood and greeted her with spirited applause. *Maybe they know more than they were letting on*, he thought.

The governor took a deep breath and clasped her hands together, beaming appreciatively at the adulation of her staff.

"Afternoon, Boot Squad!" she exclaimed. Jamie panned around the table to capture the atmosphere. Each staffer knocked on the table in response and leaned forward, breathless. The governor went into her speech, her voice gathering strength like a dust storm. "Ladies, we've been through a helluva lot over the years to get where we are. We went from rich, to poor, through war, and then took our first step to the City Council. After many wonderful years, we took another step to the Mayor's desk, and though that town was dry as a

powder house, we turned it into Greater Texas's biggest water supplier. That allowed us to take yet another step, to this here Governor's Mansion, and we've been kicking ass for the state ever since. Now, we are at a crossroads. I've thought long and hard about this, as you know. I want you to be the first to know that it's time to take one more step, the biggest step, the granddaddy of them all. We're going to run for President of the United States!"

She'd barely gotten the words out before the staff – er, Boot Squad, as the governor deemed them – erupted in cheers and applause. Jamie worked his gloves to catch every hug and hand-squeeze before turning the cameras back to the governor. The atmosphere was heavy with the weight of this momentous announcement, but light in their relaxed behaviors. They all looked like riverboat gamblers playing with house money. It took a full minute before Shelby spoke again, bristling with pride.

"There are exactly seven hundred and fifty days until Election Day. I want you to go home tonight, kiss your boyfriends and husbands, spend as much time as you can with your kids, and then tell them you will see them in seven hundred and fifty-one. Because holy hell do we have our work cut out for us."

The seated women exchanged glances, bemused but not at all surprised at the governor's candor.

"This is the last time I will ever say this," the governor declared, and she snapped her fingers at Jamie to emphasize, *This'd better not be in the final cut*. "President Granger may look like an oversized, clumsy gorilla, but he's smarter than he looks. He'll probably be the most difficult incumbent to topple in the last fifty years. The good news is, we can be smart, too. A lot of big names might sit this one out. And with a half-dozen Leagues making a bid, it might only take a quarter of the vote to win this thing. Shelby Monroe can get that in her sleep!" They laughed raucously, one of them chipping in a *Hell yeah!* for good measure.

"Believe it or not, ladies, our mission is bigger than the presidency." She snapped at Jamie again – *Okay, this you'll want to get*. "The Freedom League has become plundered by doomsayers and profiteers. They've stopped trying to win elections, instead clinging to old battles already lost. They're looking backward, resigning themselves to extinction – all sizzle, no steak. Worse, some are pledging allegiance to the Conservatives, who still think we're their sheep. It's time we stuck a hot poker in the eyes of these posers." Shelby started pacing side to side, her hands gathering

passion. Jamie moved quickly to keep the cameras out of her way. "Here's how we do it. They say freedom is the ability to live without fear, and I for one believe there are still too many scared people in this country. Freedom is not a regional issue. Small government is not some niche cause. If we practice what we preach, we will reap what we sow, and we will gain a following. It's time the Freedom League had a candidate with some friggin' balls, and despite what some suggest, it usually takes a woman to provide them!"

The room erupted so loudly Jamie was surprised the doors remained on their hinges. *A half-dozen women sure can make a lot of noise.* Shelby Monroe, not at all winded, breathed a slow inhale. "Besides the courage of our convictions and all that, we have another weapon in this fight. Everybody, meet Jamie Richardson. He's going to be my shadow for the next two years, filming our campaign. Everything that happens on the trail, from public events to candid moments with you gals backstage, goes on tape. Get used to him. Fortunately, he's easy on the eyes. The way he moves those cameras around, it looks like he's doing tai chi or something. Just adorable. If you saw the PanoSeries he did for Arnold Reynolds, he almost single-handedly got that bleeding-heart, ultraliberal gasbag elected in the capital of the Mormon church, of all places. Imagine what he can do for us!"

The governor turned to Jamie and gestured toward her staff. "Mr. Richardson, my daughters and I welcome you into our family."

Daughters? All of them? But as he regarded each one again, he could see it, though they must have gotten their father's height gene. *Well how do you do.*

"Trixie, you've met," the governor said, pointing them out. "That's Tammy, she's our Communications Director. Tawny, the brunette, is my Chief of Staff." In truth, she was only slightly less blond than the others – all had tresses of sun-soaked straw. "Tracy over there does the polling, and Trudy is my speechwriter."

The Boot Squad – also apparently known as the Monroe daughters – waved warmly, their collective resemblance to the governor now obvious: the curl of their mouths, light-gold skin, and expressive brown eyes. And of course, they all had matching footwear.

Jamie lifted his arm and waved back in response, just before remembering some vitally important bits of information: his four cameras were still filming, still floating around the room, and still in Gesture Mode. They swung sideways in one wild, sweeping lurch,

Camera Two knocking Trixie in the head.

“Ow!”

“Shit! Sorry!”

The governor looked his way. “Better tighten up, Jamie,” she said.
“You’re one of us now.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Audience member: *Do you prefer the old two-party system, or what we have now?*

Governor Granger: *Are you asking me whether I prefer half the country hate me no matter what I do, compared to three-quarters of it?*

Audience: *(Laughter)*

Governor Granger: *Seriously, though, I think the two-party structure was like trench warfare, where one side advances a few feet, the other side retreats a few feet, and then you get up the next morning where the opposite happens, and the cycle repeats itself in an endless loop. Over time, that exacerbated some fundamental problems, first being that as a country you never really get anywhere. The other problem is when you're stuck in a trench you sure learn to hate the other guy in that faraway trench. Eventually, you see them as something less than human.*

Today, the fog of war is lifted and we're back on an open field – and if we want to get anything done, we're forced to form alliances, to reach out to other Leagues. None of us can form a majority by ourselves – we're all minorities now, would you think of that! But if I want to make some headway on the environment, I might call up the Progressive League. If I need help shoring up our national defense, I might call on the Freedom League. I would certainly meet with the Urban League to discuss rebuilding our cities and infrastructure. The Conservative League – well, I'm not sure what I'd do with them yet, but I'll think of something. The fellow leading their primary now, Governor Schroeder, we might be able to find

common ground. I hope I didn't just kill his campaign.

Audience: *(Laughter)*

- Acton Granger town hall meeting in Claremont, New Hampshire
- January 15, 2060

When Elijah Schroeder returned home from Chicago, they were already stringing up the holiday lights.

In the middle of October?

It seemed both the holiday and campaign seasons started earlier with each cycle. But sure enough, as the motorcade (a full contingent this time) approached the front gate of the US Naval Observatory, volunteers were busy transforming it into a winter wonderland.

At the heart of the US Naval Observatory, One Observatory Circle had been the traditional residence of the vice president for almost a century. Just two miles from the White House – though this was, in essence, also a *white house* – it had its own charms, an old plantation residence affixed with neo-classical trimmings. Originally built for the Naval Observatory's superintendent, much had been added once it transitioned to the home of the nation's second-ranking official, but it remained relatively modest. Contrasting the white exterior was a sloping gray roof, tilted at a high slant, with black shutters framing an abundance of windows. A porch bordered the right side, its many-spindled railing wrapped around the home's niftiest feature, a tower running up the corner. On the inside, the tower's round rooms served as the dining room on the first floor and Nolan's bedroom on the second. Along the porch, pairs of white columns dripped from the eave every ten feet or so, the narrow spaces between them popular nesting sites for pigeons escaping the hubbub of downtown.

Apart from the house, the rest of the Observatory maintained its official functions as the Navy's national science center. A set of atomic clocks kept the official time of the United States. The Office of Astrometry measured the precise orientation of the earth and other bodies in the solar system, and the telescope (though now a relic, its vantage dulled by neighboring city lights) was still popular for private tours.

Schroeder rode in his assigned vehicle, a state limousine called Freedom Two. Weighing five tons, and with an armored body eight-inches thick, it was capable of withstanding plasma grenades. The interior felt cramped even when he sat in the back alone.

He was not alone on this trip, however. Whenever his wife rode with him, Schroeder was forced to sit uncomfortably close to her, so much that they joked the Secret Service was conspiring to have them conceive another child. It was a welcome intimacy on most occasions, but this was not one of those times. Over the last two days, Elijah had noticed a tangible silence in Cassidy, her stoic reserve turning into a cold shoulder as they scrunched together, hip to hip. Every turn that forced his weight into her only reinforced her lack of forthcoming.

Or, it occurred to him, probably several hours too late, was it something I started, that she's reciprocating? It was a difficult question in any marriage when games were played.

He watched her from the corner of his eye. She sat fully straight, a posture she'd perfected over the years, eyes set forward in a plain expression, punctuated by a hint of wistfulness.

She caught him staring, frowned in his direction, and looked out the window.

She wants to know where I disappeared to, he realized. But beyond that, she wants me to open up to her, to spill my secrets unprompted, and relieve her of the burden of having to ask.

Cassidy Schroeder had nursed a healthy competitiveness all her life. She was willful and proud, already a talented litigator when they met and on a partnership track at a prominent firm. At the time, Elijah was a yet-to-be-tenured Associate Professor at NYU. Cassidy awakened the ambition in him, becoming its driver. She pushed him to take risks he never saw himself taking, among them convincing him to leave his cushy faculty job to run for the New York State Legislature.

Once in his first elected office, his political aspirations took off. The Conservative League was always keen on credible numbers men with convincing smiles, and his career trajectory quickly trumped Cassidy's. If she harbored any misgivings, she never said, but as the demands of being the wife of a national figure grew, she was forced to quit her job and become a full-time campaign surrogate. She became a tremendous asset, and when she wasn't trudging along with him on the trail, she would hang back in Long Island while he shuttled back and forth to Washington. She found fulfillment in tending to their three children during his time in Congress, and supported him earnestly. But as his stature grew beyond anything they ever expected, she began to wither in his shadow. When he returned to New York to run for governor – and won – they had a

good few years, but suddenly she withdrew and never came all the way back, holding hands with only the fingertips. Most times, Elijah never quite knew where he stood with her.

As the limo passed through the gate and into the driveway, she let out a long sigh, as if fully deflating, and turned to face him. "All right, hotshot, last chance."

"Sorry?"

"We're not officially home until we walk through the front door. So technically, we're still on our trip. I'm giving you the opportunity to come clean before it's over. Where did you go?"

"It was state business, Cassidy. I told you that." Another strain on their marriage – as he trafficked deeper in national secrets, he was forced to withhold more of himself, though the secrets of Endure Technologies were more personal.

"Bullshit," Cassidy said. Her eyes blinked rapidly – a tell of her level of annoyance if there ever was one. "I had your pano in my purse. I let you stick me with your embedded tracker, traipsing around your donor friends with that thing in my skin for hours. That was un-fucking-comfortable, but I wore it because you promised to tell me why, and your exact words were *before we got home*." She pointed to the approaching residence, now a hundred yards away.

"I...I learned things. Unexpected things," Elijah said. "I can't right now, not until I sort it out." Her piercing stare, just inches from his face, drew a small concession. "I'm sorry."

She continued glaring at him as the limo came to a stop, her gaze probing and pointed, as if trying to pull the thoughts out from behind his eyes.

Yannik Vogel might be able to help you with that, Elijah thought. Maybe I'd know my own thoughts better if I plugged myself into one of his silos.

An agent opened Freedom Two's door. Cassidy filed out with a cursory, "See you inside," and swept toward the house, not looking back. How she loved to storm away from him! When he was governor and they'd come home from a fundraiser or charity event, Cass always made sure she was the first one in the door. She'd hightail it from the limo, in an almost comic sprint, anxious to greet the kids. It was a passive-aggressive gesture not lost on him. *She had to let me know they're more hers than mine*, he thought. *That because she's Around, she wins the game of Who They Loved More.*

As he exited the limo, he wondered if anything had changed.

* * *

Some hours later, following a quick dinner alone and a bit of work in the home office, Elijah decided it was time to check in with the children. He knocked on Ellie's bedroom door, paused a moment, and pushed it open.

Inside, Ellie Schroeder turned around in her desk chair and beamed over at her dad. "I knew it was you!" she giggled. Elijah stepped over a holo emitter by the door and smiled back.

Ellie was well younger than her siblings, what you might call an unexpected arrival. Cassidy, a mother who didn't always understand the difference between an insult and compliment, used to call her *My Favorite Mistake*.

"Hey there, Bubbles," Elijah said, using his own preferred nickname. "Can I hang out for a bit?"

"Of course! You can help me with some math stuff."

"They give you homework in kindergarten?"

"It's just some coin problems. I can do it but it's boring."

Elijah adopted a look of mock puzzlement. "Coins? What are those?" He scratched his chin exaggeratedly.

His daughter slapped him playfully on the thigh. "Oh, come on, *you know...*" She searched for the words. "They're those things that jingle in your pockets that you buy stuff with."

"I didn't know we still used coins anymore." Truth be told, he'd been advocating for shutting down the U.S. Mint for years, the production costs long outweighing the value of the currency they produced. But to do so would inflame the copper industry, so the Granger administration kept throwing money away, spending fifty cents to make quarters.

"Mom always says you're good with money stuff. Don't let me down."

"Whoa, pressure's on!" *So Cassidy does pay me the occasional compliment when I'm away.* "All right, whatcha got?"

Ellie pulled up to her desk and Elijah took a seat on the bed next to her, casually pushing aside some toys. She brought up her desktop holo. "Okay, here," his daughter said, gesturing for him to come closer. "It's all set up for you."

Elijah couldn't help but laugh, she was always roping him in to do her homework. *A crafty one, he thought, just like her mom.* "How about we do it together?"

When Ellie tossed out a frown that eerily resembled the one he'd seen from Cassidy in the limo, he said, "I don't think your teacher had

that in mind.”

“Oh, all right,” Ellie pouted, her mischief thwarted.

“What’s the first problem?” Elijah slid back to the corner of the bed, so he could see over her shoulder and not be in the way. The holo showed an animation on the desk, coins coming together in neat stacks before flying around again. Something that looked like a cartoon grizzly bear danced around the stacks, juggling more coins with his four arms.

“That’s Mookie the Coin Monster,” Ellie said. “You have to feed him the right amount. In the first problem he’s asking for twenty-five cents.” She plunged her hand into the holo, reaching for a quarter from the stack of coins with her forefingers. The image responded to her touch, the likeness of the quarter rendering inside her grasp as she brought it over and dropped the coin in Mookie’s mouth. The Coin Monster chewed on his treat quizzically before breaking into a broad smile, the holo dinging a correct answer. Mookie did a celebratory jig around the desktop lamp.

“You’re pretty good at this.”

“That was an easy one! They get harder. Now he wants forty cents.”

“Greedy Mookie.” Elijah watched her think it over briefly, placing her finger on her mouth and look at the ceiling, again just like her mother. Then she drag-and-dropped a quarter and three nickels, the holo again responding in congratulations, this time with Mookie popping confetti-filled balloons.

Ellie had Mookie up to asking for \$5.90 before she got stumped. Elijah pointed out the five-dollar coin floating by itself over the edge of the desk.

“Oh, I forgot they made those now!” Before feeding it to Mookie, she pulled it close. “Daddy, who’s on that one?”

“That’s Abraham Lincoln, our sixteenth president. He used to be on the penny, but they stopped making those before you were born.”

“What’s a penny?”

“It means one cent.”

“Oh. What could that buy?”

“Not much. It used to be worth something, but over time money loses value due to something called inflation, and there’s the consumer pricing index which...” He trailed off after realizing he’d lost her.

“Do they put all the presidents on money? You could be president someday, right?”

Schroeder felt a swift kick in his abdomen that only a child's innocence could provide. *Thanks, kid.* "I don't think they'll make any new coins for a while, most people use biometric payments now." He poked at her playfully. "But maybe if I was president, I'd make a new coin just for you."

She pulled back, giggling. "You can do that?"

"Sure I could. Even though I'm just the vice president now, I could even ask the president for you, if you're really good."

"I'll be good! I'll be good! Wait, you're the vice president?"

"Yes, silly, that's why we're in Washington now."

"Oh, right. You know, my friend Marco said in class that most companies have lots of vice presidents. He said America should too. Do we have just one?"

"Yes, sweetheart, there's only me."

She scratched her chin, perplexed. "Well, I'm sure you do as good a job as twenty other vice presidents would!"

"Bubbles, I can't wait till you can vote. Give daddy a kiss. Let's do a couple more problems, then get you ready for bed."

After feeding Mookie more coins and reading Ellie to sleep, it was a little before nine when he knocked on Charlotte's door.

Charlotte Schroeder was not yet a teenager, but had long discovered her teenage angst. When they told her Ellie was coming into the world, Charlotte was none-too-pleased that her status changed from Younger Child to Middle Child – and her irritation never dissipated, becoming resigned withdrawal. Elijah and Cassidy had been left with an ever-growing mystification in how to connect with her.

From behind the door there came a half-hearted, "Yes?"

Elijah poked his head in. "Hey, Charlie," he said. Charlotte didn't turn, instead her face pressed close to the makeup mirror that her parents had argued over buying for her last birthday. It was on full magnification as she practiced applying a new eyelash hue, her blinking eyes the size of saucers in the reflection.

"If you keep looking at yourself through a microscope, you'll forget how beautiful you are."

"I know what I look like. Boys are already trying to look down my shirt at school."

Elijah took a hesitant step forward, brushing past the holo inside the door. "Boys aren't too discriminatory," he said. "When I was a

boy your age, I tried to look down every girl's shirt."

He got her head to turn slightly that time – it was with a look of startled disgust, but still. "Gross, Dad," she said, and went back to makeup practice.

"Why don't you put that away for a minute? I want to talk to you. What are you working on in school?"

"Just the usual."

"Anything I can help you with?"

"Well...it's not economics."

Elijah and Cassidy had spent many nights debating the best strategies for getting your tween-age daughter to respect you, but those lessons were far away now. The frustration of being shut out by someone he loved so completely drained any clever retort.

So all he said was, "Show me anyway."

Charlotte finally turned fully around and assessed his resolve for a long second. When he didn't appear to waver, she acquiesced with a simple "Fine," and waved him in.

Elijah weaved through the debris of clothes and books that were strewn about the floor – biting his tongue about the mess the whole way, reminding himself that an adolescent's bedroom is supposed to be a shithheap. He sat at the foot of her bed, careful not to disturb anything.

Her desktop holo was active, displaying the planets of the solar system. It was a fancier model than Ellie's, with a wider image range, floating planets orbiting the sun in a looping time-lapse.

Charlotte fidgeted at the controls and the solar system expanded, covering half the room.

"Astronomy?" Elijah asked. Charlotte looked at him like it was the most obvious thing in the solar system.

"We're studying Mars, the Asteroid Belt, and Jupiter this week."

"Neat." He put his hand through the holo. The image wavered as his fingers waded in and out.

"Actually," she said, "we did have a question come up at school – how come China was able to send people to Mars and we weren't?"

"Well, China never intended to bring those people back. They decided a one-way mission was worth it, and I guess they found volunteers that agreed, but it was very sad when they died. But the president and I have had some long discussions about a Mars mission, actually."

"The president? What did he say?"

"Well...he would like to do it. It's incredibly expensive to get

people there, but many more times that to bring them back. Maybe the Chinese had a different calculus when it comes to human life.”

“But what if someone volunteered to stay there, and said it was ok? Or if they were super-old anyway?”

“Well, the president says there’s no price on a person’s life. I agree with him on that.”

“But in Civ-2 thirty million people have died. Thirty million, and for what? What’s another two lives to reach another planet?”

“It’s not that simple, honey. It’s not the American Way.”

“What is the American Way? Kill each other over petty squabbles?”

What is she always rebelling against? he wondered, realizing he’d been asking himself this question for years. *Is it me, or something bigger?*

“Those days are over, sweetie. That’s in the past.”

“Is it?”

“Ah...” Elijah wasn’t about to get into an extended argument about the country’s penchant for civil wars so he changed the subject, walking over to her window. Across the yard, the bubble of the Observatory Telescope was framed in a full moon’s beneficent halo. “Have you ever used the telescope over there to see Mars in person?”

She shook her head. “What telescope?”

“It might be old, but it can still be useful sometimes. You know, like your father.”

He got a chuckle out of her that she tried to keep him from seeing. *Too late, I got you*, he thought. *There’s my Charlie.*

“How about I take you sometime? Seeing actual stars in person might give some perspective.”

She met him with hesitance, but was considering it.

“Come on, it’ll just be you and me. We could shut the whole place down for a private tour, and then get sushi delivered.” Charlotte had found a love of sushi on a state visit to Japan when Elijah was governor. When in doubt, a little bribery never hurt – that was Econ 101.

“Yeah...Ok. That sounds kind of fun.”

“Awesome,” he said, with a slight hesitation. *Did kids still say awesome?* She didn’t roll her eyes, so maybe. *Better quit while I’m ahead.*

“Goodnight, Charlie. Study hard, but give me a kiss first. I love you.”

* * *

Now that he'd reached some measure of connection with Charlotte – however fleeting it may be – he went to Nolan's door and banged loudly.

No answer, so he knocked again. After another moment of waiting, Elijah pushed the door open a couple inches.

He was met with the deafening sound of gunfire.

This is exactly what I needed, Elijah thought. *What's he playing this time, Orion's Minions or Civil Strife?*

When he didn't see any alien hordes or space battles, he confirmed the latter.

He ducked into the room and was instantly riddled with a string of virtual bullets through his chest, but they passed through him unencumbered. He looked at his feet, making sure he avoided the holo. Nolan crouched by the bed, facing away from him and spraying ammunition in the opposite direction, having more success in ducking the return fire than his father. *Doesn't count if I'm not activated yet*, Elijah thought.

Once he got close to his son, he still had to shout in his ear. "HEY! PAUSE!"

Nolan whirled around with his holo rifle up, before realizing his dad wasn't an enemy combatant. "Oh, sorry," he said, triggering a controller slung on his hip. The game stopped and silence engulfed the room.

"They did a good job with the soundproofing," said Elijah. "I couldn't hear you at all outside. Your mother will be pleased."

Nolan shrugged. "Pretty cool I guess. What's up?"

"Just saying hey. Dad stuff. Do your homework?"

"Had a little bit of history. It's done."

"How's Allie?"

"She's good. She wishes I had a car so, you know, we could go on a proper date."

"She wishes? Or you do?"

"Hey, she did mention it at school the other day," Nolan said defensively. Though Elijah's son had always been popular, Allie was his first real girlfriend, and their relationship was in those initial, self-conscious stages.

"You know the deal on that one."

"Yeah, mom made it pretty clear. But I still don't get why we can't even go out together in a state car."

"I'm not allowed to ride in an AV either, if it makes you feel any

better.” Because they ran on operating systems that could potentially be hacked, the Secret Service had banned the use of AVs for protectees and their family members. “But don’t worry, I have some agents that would love to chaperone. They’re excellent company.”

“What about Dwight?”

Dwight D’Amato had been Elijah’s longtime body man when he was governor. “Dwight hasn’t been around in a while,” he said softly.

When Nolan didn’t say anything, instead looking at the floor and absently fingering his holo rifle, Elijah clapped his hands to pick up the mood.

“All right, enough catching up. Plug me in.”

Nolan smiled. “How much time you got?”

“Your mother is a little ticked at me, so let’s say half an hour.”

Nolan pulled up the game menu and selected *Add Player*. The holo scanner took a quick measure of Elijah’s figure and body mass before coating him in virtual soldier’s fatigues, complete with patches of body armor and other high-tech gear.

“What level are you on?”

“Frisco.” Nolan pointed to the Golden Gate, crumbling in the distance by the bedroom window.

“Wow, you got pretty far.”

“You’re gone a lot. We could do other levels – New Orleans, or Houston? The bridge battle in New York was cool–”

“No, not that one,” Elijah said, body seizing. “San Fran is fine. What’s our weaponry?”

“I’ve got an extra AR-95 you can use.”

“That’ll do.”

Nolan tapped up his inventory and tossed the simulated rifle to his father. “Do you want me to restart the level?”

“Nah, let’s frag!”

“Nerd.” Making sure his father acknowledged his eye-roll, Nolan keyed the start button and the room again became a war zone.

Elijah took stock of his surroundings. He and Nolan were members of the Majority Coalition during the last year of Civ-2. The San Francisco level would be recreating the Majority’s assault on the Underground’s West Coast headquarters. If Schroeder remembered his history, the Majority came in by sea from across the bay in Vallejo, amassing forces overnight on the far side of Alcatraz Island. Just before sunrise, two hundred assault boats made for Fisherman’s Wharf on the north coast. They established a foothold at the Wharf

after incurring heavy losses, and those remaining charged inland to take back the city.

Elijah saw that Nolan had already gotten through some of the heaviest fighting on the wharf and made it a few blocks to the southeast. He'd done well – most of their squad was still alive and his health and armor were nearly full. *Maybe we should've let him enlist a year early*, Elijah thought.

A handful of enemies came out from under cover behind some overturned trolley cars. After Elijah took one down and Nolan dispatched three others, father and son jogged in place together, moving the game map forward. They trucked down Columbus Avenue, bearing straight for the Financial District.

They crossed an intersection, low-slung apartment buildings lining both sides of the street. A few Underground forces emerged from the rooftops, raining fire from above. Nolan took the left side, clearing one roof with an inferno grenade, leveling the entire building. Elijah took the right, picking off troops with a high-caliber rifle. After the area was clear, they jogged in place again, moving further south toward Bay Street.

They ran into a barricade and were forced into a detour to the east, away from the rubble of Chinatown. Two walking tanks clambered down the façade of a shelled-out office building – halfway down, they sprang off the bricks in a reverse swan dive, blasting rockets as they dropped to the road in front of them.

"Take cover! Go for the claws!" Elijah shouted, but Nolan was way ahead of his father, already firing his grenade launcher. After dispatching both tanks with a few precision plasma grenades, they pushed forward into a clearing, where they encountered heavy sniper fire. Elijah lost his leg armor and took some health damage. He squatted down to apply his healing balm while Nolan blasted away at the sniper nests. The shooting let up once they moved along Bay Street, but they hit another barricade at Stockton Street and were forced further to the south.

A block later, they found themselves looking at a narrow lane on a sharp uphill slope, tall buildings in all directions. Strategically speaking, it was a horrible position to be in.

All the barricades they'd come across started to make sense – the Underground was controlling their movements, herding them into an ambush.

A voice barked out from behind – "COMPANY, HALT!" Father and son, along with the other digital members of the squad, stopped and

turned as the Sarge came forward.

The Sarge was their platoon commander throughout the game, briefing them before each mission stage and interrupting at key points to offer strategic advice. "Take heed," he said, pointing ahead. "The elevation works against you. You're going to need to get up Telegraph Hill as quickly as possible. You'll come to a park where there's little cover, but you need to take out that tower in the middle. There are some fallen trees you can advance behind when you get there. Now let's move out!"

It was only then that Elijah noticed it. The sea-foam eyes. The chiseled jawline that gave way to softened cheekbones. And the most telling feature, the sheer size of the man.

The Sarge was almost an exact likeness of President Granger.

Was Vogel behind this? he wondered, but after learning what the German was capable of, he thought he knew the answer. *I'm sure the game developers asked for a fortune.* Civil Strife was the latest in the series, and like the other entries – *Civil Conflict*, *Civil Clash*, and *Civil Engagement*, among others – it was a smash hit, far out-grossing any movie release. He tried to think which episode came out right before the election, was it the one where the Sarge led an air battalion through the Rockies?

The game-version of the president had harder features – a more protruding nose, a steelier gaze – but the resemblance was undeniable. There were even some flannel patterns on the Sarge's uniform, mimicking the president's go-to casual wear.

No wonder he crushed me with the younger male demographic, Elijah thought. Anyone who played *Civil Strife* regularly knew that the Sarge was the best damn commander the world had ever known, his awesomeness surely projected in young minds onto a presidential candidate who happened to look just like him.

"Nolan, pause it!"

His eldest again froze the game. "What is it, Dad? The ambush is the best part."

"Who does that remind you of?"

"I don't know. Patton?"

"Look harder."

"Actually, he kind of looks like The Preacher from the *Vampire Coven* games."

Elijah supposed that wasn't surprising. *If he's in one game series, he's probably in a dozen.* Come to think of it, he also resembled Orion in *Orion's Minions*. "Don't you think that looks like the president?"

"Huh?" Nolan looked at his dad, something not computing with him. "Which one?"

Isn't it obvious? Elijah was about to respond as the bedroom door swung open and three agents filed in.

"Sir, sorry to interrupt," the lead agent said to Elijah, "but we're on lockdown."

"Again? What is it this time?"

"A foreign object came over the fence. Might just be an errant drone, but we need time to confirm. Until then, you'll have to come with us."

Elijah looked over to Nolan, throwing up his hands. "Sorry bud, to be continued."

Nolan shrugged. "Hey Dad, I didn't know you had so many friends," he quipped. "Tomorrow night, maybe." He saved their progress with a tap and turned the console off.

Elijah turned back to his protection team. "All right, let's go," he said. The other two agents took their positions, one in front and one behind. The lead agent stayed back to collect the rest of the family.

Elijah leaned forward and tucked his head, clasping his hands behind his ears as he'd been taught. The agent behind him pushed a forearm into his back to bend him further, and they moved out of the room as a unit, down the stairwell and toward the bunker.

As if history were repeating itself, Elijah was once again in an armored, cramped space with his wife. It was after midnight, but the grounds had yet to be cleared, so they were 'asked' to spend the night in the bunker. It was dark except for the tea lights recessed in the ceiling, and quiet enough that he could hear his own breathing.

Cassidy rolled over, seeing he was awake. "Last, *last* chance?" she offered. Her tone was warmer this time – perhaps this latest safety scare, however common it was becoming, had reminded her how she felt about him. Or she'd had some wine.

He turned on his side to face her, and they met nose-to-nose.

"How did you get the embedded chip out?" she asked.

"It's not deep. If you stick a placeholder that's roughly the same size the skin doesn't heal over it, and you can just slide it back in." He pulled down his pajama top to show her the scab on his collarbone, but it was too dark to really make out.

"I don't think Granger would be happy to know you're going off the grid."

"I think he would be less happy to know that Vogel insisted on it."

"Vogel? The president's Sponsor?"

Elijah nodded.

"What were you doing with him?"

"He invited me to his headquarters. Endure Technologies...some amazing stuff over there. Let's just say I found out why I lost. And...maybe, how I might win if there's a next time."

"A next time? I sincerely hope for your sake that your next words were, 'I won't begin discussing that without talking with my wife first.' You know what that did to us."

"It was a grueling campaign. But it got us here."

"Yes, in this wonderful, amazing steel box. How far underground are we right now, a hundred feet? Two hundred? Super fun. Well, I suppose I should be glad we're locked away in a bunker, if that's what it takes for you to talk to your wife." Her tone was sharp as ever, but she smiled and her body relaxed next to his. "I hope you also told Mr. Vogel that running would be one of the dumbest moves you could make. This experiment that Granger had in mind, you and him together, it's actually starting to pay off. The country is warming to peace."

Elijah marveled at his wife – every now and then, she was downright optimistic. But she wasn't wrong – his own popularity might be down, but something was stirring in the country. Brawn and brain, a former army man from North Dakota and a math nerd from New York, made an impressive team.

Every alpha needs a beta, as Vogel had said.

And since they hailed from rival Leagues, when they worked together they could have that rarest of political commodities: a mandate.

"When I took this job," Elijah said, "I knew I'd have to hold my tongue a hell of a lot. But I didn't realize quite how hard that would be."

"Just in public. You can vent to me whenever you want."

"I'm holding you to that."

"More importantly, I've seen you change. You were so goddamn glum after the election, it was as depressed as I've ever seen you. Except for...well. I was just worried that this time you wouldn't come back. But you swallowed your pride when you went to work. I'm really proud of you for that, maybe even more so than if we'd won."

He'd never heard her say that before, and didn't know how to

respond.

Fortunately, she decided not to wait for an answer, instead looking around the room. “Do you think there are any PanoCams embedded in these walls? Is someone watching us down here?”

“I’m sure of it,” he said.

She kissed him anyway, and before he knew it she was on top of him.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Voters don't want to elect a president. They want to anoint a savior."
- Victory in 2048, Freedom League strategy memo

Jordan Cromwell looked to the stars.

It was well before dawn, an hour before his usual early wakeup, but he found it difficult to contain his excitement. Today was a big day.

He often consulted the stars on nights like these. As a child, whenever his mother had deemed his behavior poor – and she found almost every excuse to do so – she sent him to his room and locked him in. Left to his own devices, with no television or smartphone (this was before the invention of the pano, which rendered both devices obsolete), he would lay on his bed and stare through the room's single skylight, his only window to the world.

The room was often dead quiet, and he would be free to contemplate the stars, the heavens, and everything in between. Most children would find this mind-numbing to the point of psychosis, but Jordan grew to relish spending his formative years in solitary confinement. He'd lie awake, looking upward as celestial bodies crawled past, night after night. He even created charts and made up his own constellations. He would often imagine pointing them out to a stranger. *There's Megatron, and to the east, Darth Vader – that little triangle is the front of his mask, see?*

Jordan didn't remember exactly when he first heard the Voice, but

it was shortly after his fifth birthday. Per usual, he'd been on his bed, watching a particularly clear night sky play out above him.

See that bright star? That's the tip of Boba Fett's antenna.

And shockingly, something answered him, in a voice deep within his mind.

That's Polaris, said the Voice.

At five years old, Jordan had yet to pick up an astronomy book – he was born slow, as his mother never failed to remind him, so most books he read were still the size of construction paper, with at most two sentences per page.

For most children that age, memories grew shrouded over time, fleeting. But this night he would never forget, as if each moment was preserved in amber.

How did I just know that? he remembered thinking.

Polaris is also called the North Star, said the Voice. It's over four hundred light years away.

At first, the Voice came to him occasionally. But it *knew things*, not just about Polaris. It helped Jordan with his schoolwork – explaining big words, walking him through math problems, providing answers on tough tests. More importantly, it taught him how to behave, how to act around adults, and how to get people to like him. Or, if they didn't like him, to at least respect him.

The Voice came from someplace *other*, in a way that he could not explain, but would never dare to ask – to do that, he thought, would risk losing it. It came from inside, even though it felt *beyond* somehow, but it didn't really matter. All Jordan knew was that he should pay attention.

And that his life had a purpose.

Jordan Cromwell began dressing up for school. He said *please* and *thank you* to all his teachers. He socialized with his schoolmates, to the extent that they considered him a trusted acquaintance. He ran for class president in Third Grade, and after Laura Ogilvy peed her pants in Show-and-Tell (through another little something the Voice had taught him), he won easily.

Jordan would be class president the rest of his academic career.

The Voice taught him how to turn every conversation into the means of achieving a goal. It taught him the little under-and-up trick that rescued his first sexual encounter from disaster and made it a triumph. It taught him how to put his stamp on the world around him, showed him what the force of his will could accomplish. It set him on a path, and he dared not deviate from it.

So when the Voice told him in his final year of Harvard Law to ask the meekly pretty Helen Sanders for a date, he did. And when it told him, some months later, to ask her to marry him, he did.

And when it told him to fish out an old ski mask from the attic, sneak up behind her late at night in a shopping mall parking lot, take a tire iron to her kneecap and then force himself upon her, he did. That had been harder – she'd almost wrested his mask off in the struggle (the Voice had commanded him to do five hundred push-ups every morning for as long as he could remember, and sometimes that came in handy, plus he had to remember not to do the under-and-up move), but it had worked, too. In his first real campaign, when Mrs. Cromwell told her harrowing story of assault and how her husband's love brought her back, voters – especially women voters – ate it up without bothering to chew.

The Voice told him that having daughters instead of sons would also help him connect better with women. That took some improvised chemistry and a little luck, but it worked.

In fact, everything the Voice told him to do worked. And that was how a loner kid with a barely-average IQ became the Freedom League's junior senator from East Kansas.

When Jordan came to Washington, the only thing the Voice hadn't told him was how achingly boring it all was. When he spent his early career working up to District Attorney, courtroom procedure could be dull as hell, but at least there were the occasional fireworks. You had the visceral pleasure of locking someone away, having the privilege to watch their faces drop when they lost their freedoms. In the Senate, it took an hour to get a meeting together, another hour to decide what the meeting was about, then the meeting itself lasted three hours. A set of procedural votes would take half a day. And if there was a committee hearing – the Voice had him join both Judiciary and Homeland Security – the entire workday was shot. And Jordan couldn't get things done by himself anymore, he was trapped by colleagues who loved nothing more than hearing their own voices rebound off the hallowed walls around the Senate floor.

He attempted to lay low during his freshman term, to learn the ropes and keep quiet. He accepted a few invites to the Sunday shows, and was always surprised when they introduced him with labels like *The brashest voice in Congress* or *The East Kansas firebrand*. He didn't remember ruffling so many feathers, he was just doing what the Voice instructed.

He was biding his time those first couple of years, waiting for the

big move. And now, as far as the Voice was concerned, his time had come.

In his Inaugural Address, President Granger proposed something Jordan considered radical, even if the president had campaigned on it and won. Granger wanted to re-open the nation's borders and allow immigration to flow again. The Voice had been active that day, but when Granger went into his incomprehensible argument that allowing foreigners to trespass on the nation's sovereignty would be a good thing, it rattled in his head, louder than ever before.

This is your chance! The cross you have to bear! The Voice was so loud in his mind, Jordan half-turned to Helen to see if she'd heard it.

Bear that cross he would. But the first several months of the new president's term showed little progress on the immigration front. First, Granger spent an inordinate amount of time with his wishy-washy vice president crafting a set of giveaways and concessions that they sold as economic recovery. Once that piece of pork was fried, Granger then lifted the interstate travel restrictions and abolished regional tariffs. Cromwell had little interest in these issues, only doing a few interviews each week and holding minimal demonstrations outside the Capitol. Most of his colleagues in the Freedom League tried to fight these losing battles more directly within the walls of Congress, only to get steamrolled.

So Jordan waited until the immigration issue came to the fore. He sat back while Granger and that patsy Elijah Schroeder met with congressional leaders to formulate some broad goals. He remained idle while the Reformers and the Progressives and the Conservatives hammered out its finer points – as with any major legislation, it took several fits and starts just to get through committee. And he sat on his hands when the legislation nearly died there – it took leveraging the lone Urban League member, Senator Umberto, into a yay vote, buying him off with a new Chicago park that would get shot up and overrun by the homeless by summer. Congress was disgusting.

But Jordan's wait was over. Because today, the immigration bill was coming to the Senate floor.

It was finally his turn.

As one member in a hundred-and-fifty, it's difficult for a United States Senator to stand out from the pack, to *grab headlines*. You could be fiery and brash in your interviews to get attention, but for real coverage as a mover and shaker, you had to get results by flexing some legislative muscle. Really, there were only three ways: you could put a hold on an executive appointment; you could be the

deciding vote on something (which was how Umberto got his shitty park); or, you could play the ultimate power card. The filibuster.

Jordan had only put holds on a few judges, so he wasn't making many waves there, and he probably wouldn't ever be the swing vote on anything. So when his moment came, the filibuster would be his weapon. He could still hear what the Voice had told him during Granger's inaugural address.

This is your chance! The cross you have to bear!

It would all come down to his willpower and stamina. When the Senate votes on a bill, a simple majority rules. But before a bill reaches the Senate floor, it needs something called cloture, which requires a sixty percent vote (or super-majority) to pass. Why it took super-majority to permit voting on a bill, and a simple majority to actually pass it was anyone's guess, but rules were rules.

So it would be during the cloture vote that he would mount his filibuster, where that super-majority would have to break it. In today's Senate, getting such a coalition together could take days.

And all during that time, he'd have half the Legislative Branch of the United States Government all to himself. All eyes in Washington would be fixed in his direction.

As Jordan sat in his back yard pondering, the stars soldiered on across the heavens. Snake Eyes, his favorite made-up constellation, drifted toward the horizon. Night tilted toward dawn, and the atmosphere's color brightened from black to purple. He lowered his eyes, scanning his earthly surroundings. Dew formed on the ivy shrouding the shoddy back fence. Icy condensation filled the cracks of the patio pavers, the moisture burrowing and creating new cracks every day, which would soon bleed into the foundation.

This old house is becoming a shithole, he thought.

A light flickered on from the kitchen inside. Helen. He watched her silhouette float from one window to the next as she called for him, searching. It took her forever to realize the back porch door was ajar, but eventually her head poked out.

"Jordan, it's freezing out here! What are you doing?"

"Hello, sweetheart." He forced a smile. "I couldn't sleep. Thought I'd get some air. It's not that bad once you get used to it."

She stepped out into the cold, immediately shivering, clutching her robe at the shoulders. "I know you have a big day, but you're not going to talk for very long if you catch cold."

"I just wanted to sort my thoughts."

"You can't do that inside? Where it's warm?"

"Jesus, Hel—"

Go with her. The Voice popped into his mind like a bursting bubble.

"Hang on, one second," he said to Helen, standing up. He listened to the Voice again, then added, "And another thing – I love you."

She looked back at him before retreating inside. "Oh, darling, *I love you.*"

Once back in the house, with Helen making coffee (using milk, not cream, like he told her), Jordan checked the morning headlines on his pano, perusing through some of the friendlier press outlets to the Freedom League. There he was, a couple of links below the fold: *Filibuster Drama – Senator Readies Launch to Kill Immigration Bill*. In the article, it took two paragraphs to even mention his name.

You won't be below the fold after today, the Voice told him. *Not ever.*

"The chairman recognizes the senator from East Kansas."

Jordan rose from his seat and the typical murmur that percolated Senate proceedings fell into a stony silence. "Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to submit a commentary, for the record, about this piece of legislation."

The chairman looked down on him from the Senate pulpit, grunting into the microphone. "Yes...so we've heard. Very well. The chairman yields the floor to the senator from East Kansas."

Cromwell reached into his bag and pulled out an oversized thermos of coffee. He would have to monitor his intake wisely, needing enough fuel to keep him speaking for hours – but not so much that he'd require a bathroom break. If he stopped at any time, the filibuster would end and he'd yield the floor back to the chairman, who could immediately call for cloture.

He hoped the dehydration tablets he'd taken earlier would sufficiently dry out his bladder, but silently reprimanded himself for not resorting to a catheter. That would have removed the possibility entirely. He didn't want to pull a Laura Ogilvy in Show-and-Tell.

The coffee wasn't his only fuel. Food wasn't permitted on the Senate floor, but some members stashed candy and other snacks in their desks, which would come in handy if he needed a rush of sugar to keep him going.

And as he approached the lectern, the plasma-gel inserts he had Helen sew into his shoes warmed his toes. Even sitting for a moment

could end a filibuster, so foot comfort was paramount.

Jordan looked to his left as he walked forward. Other senators were standing up to file out, perhaps believing their time would be better spent elsewhere. *Fools*. He saw some in the leadership moving among them, whipping votes. It would take ninety to stop him. Jordan was sure that would happen eventually – and the bill would no doubt pass immediately after – but that’s not what this was about.

Keep whipping, pissants, Cromwell thought. *In the meantime, I’ll be streaming on every pano from coast to coast.*

Jordan strode with swagger as he reached the lectern that would serve as his defining moment, the Voice resounding like a choir of angels in the cathedral of his mind.

You’ve reached the brass ring! it exulted. *Now grab it!*

And grab it he would, but he needed some of that extra fuel first. He stopped in front of Eldrick Higgins, senior senator from Pennsylvania, whose desk was traditionally stuffed with Hershey’s chocolates. Higgins could only bite his lip as Jordan dug his hand in and pulled out a few Kisses, unwrapping one and plopping it in his mouth.

Almond, nice. He reached down to deposit the wrapper in his pocket, but missed – the candy wrapper slipped out of his fingertips and fell onto the floor.

Jordan bent down on a knee to pick it up.

He heard a shout in his head: *No! Don’t—*

Just as his knee made contact with the carpet, a hand shot up behind him.

“The chairman recognizes the senator from Pennsylvania.”

“Mr. Chairman, I propose we move to a cloture vote.”

“Motion considered,” said the chairman. “Any seconds?”

“What? Wait!” Jordan protested, jumping back to his feet.

The chairman rapped his gavel. “The senator from East Kansas yielded his time when his knee made contact with the floor.” He looked around the floor again. “Any seconds on cloture?”

“But I didn’t sit! It’s not the same!” Cromwell was gesticulating his arms wildly enough that the wrapper, still on the floor, flitted farther away.

Another gavel-rap, more strident this time, rang through the chamber. “Senator, I would be happy to bring in a football referee to explain the specific rules, but down is down.”

Several voices from behind clamored, “Second!”

"The motion is seconded, moving to cloture. We'll schedule the cloture vote for three in the afternoon, and vote on the bill immediately after. With that, we are adjourned."

The chairman let out a happy whistle of relief and the gavel came down once more.

As he sulked down the long corridor back to his office, a parade of delivery drone 'copters passed over Senator Cromwell's head. He stopped and watched as they flew down the hall like aerial ants, marching through the door at the hall's conclusion to deposit their cargo. A moment later, each drone swung back into view, empty-handed, filing back towards him.

Jordan's moment had gone viral. Since viewers could pause and zoom in on the Senate floor's live PanoStream, the offending candy was easy enough to identify, and offerings of Kisses mockingly poured in. Looking at the 'copters, many candies were already unwrapped for his benefit.

Let's get this over with, he thought, and hurried forward. Charging through the door to his office lobby, he was nearly rammed by a 'copter as it was setting down a fresh basket of Kisses on an un-sturdy pile above his assistant's desk. Cromwell jumped backwards to avoid the drone, giving a startled shout that silenced the room.

The eyes of his dutiful staff, trying to corral the hordes of Kisses into manageable quantities, turned to him. Cromwell panned his eyes across theirs, their looks of despondent concern telling him everything he needed to know. When they flooded toward him with their empty consolations, he brushed them off. "I have a private meeting to attend to!" he erupted, and dodging mountains of candy he raced to his private office, locking the door behind him. Flopping messily into his desk chair, the senator sat back and shut his eyes, digging inside his mind to seek out the Voice.

There was no response.

He supposed he wasn't surprised. The only question was, had his Voice abandoned him forever? That shouldn't surprise him either – in his biggest moment, he'd failed spectacularly and now had to live down a national embarrassment.

Helen called, offering vague sympathies. He wasn't even in the mood to yell at her for calling him at work, instead hanging up wordlessly when she started to repeat herself.

In an act of self-flagellation, Jordan activated the screen

embedded in his desk and checked his office PanoMail, which was already exploding with interview requests from media members. Fucking vultures, they just wanted to pick at his political corpse.

He looked at his *Snark!* social media stream, and 'CandyCromwell' was the highest-trending buzzterm.

He turned to the news and he was indeed above the fold on every PanoSite's front page. Most had his travails as the main headline – must have been a slow news day – complete with looping animation of the wrapper floating downward and his feckless effort to retrieve it. The headlines clearly reveled in their own wordplay:

Failbuster – Candy Wrapper becomes Senator's Achilles Kneel
Senator Takes Knee during Filibuster, Gets Fili-busted
Chocolate Meltdown on the Senate Floor

And the most direct one, with a close-up image of the wrapper itself:

Kiss of Death for Politician

So that's all it took these days – in the span of a few seconds, his career was ruined. Everything he'd worked for his entire life collapsed when his knee did.

It began to dawn on him that, guided by a Voice that he never questioned or understood, he'd been gliding on autopilot, ever since he was a kid looking through a skylight. He'd never experienced a major challenge or setback since. No hardships, not even a minor failure.

As a result, he'd never had to cope with losing. And now, in this utter calamity, his mind was a wasteland, his ego scorched earth. He wasn't prepared for this.

It was all too much to bear.

Years ago, back when he was about to ask Helen to marry him, the Voice had instructed Jordan to seek her parents' blessing first. They invited him to dinner, Helen's mother roasting pheasants that Helen's father had bagged on a recent hunting trip. The Voice had prepped Jordan for this seismic encounter with detailed instructions, but it all left him the moment he set foot in their house. The pheasants were consumed in awkward silence.

It wasn't until dessert that Helen's father lowered his glasses to the tip of his aristocratic nose and said, "Jordan, did you perchance have a reason for joining us tonight by yourself? Might there be something that maybe you wanted to ask us?"

Before Jordan could muster a response, Helen's father dropped his spoon and said, "Come with me."

Jordan followed him into his study. He filled two lowballs with fingers of fine bourbon and handed one over.

"You seem a decent young man," he said, "even though it's like you're always waiting for someone to tell you what to say before you say it. My advice to you is be a little less cautious and speak your mind. If you're going to be a successful litigator and politician someday, you're going to need that off-the-cuff ability. Politics is all about gut – not about rehearsed, canned lines. Some people can be disarmed with a smile and a pithy witticism, but more often it takes what's in your heart. Especially when you're courting voters, am I right?"

Jordan nodded. They clinked glasses and Helen's father went to his desk. "If you want our blessing, you have it. In fact, my wife has a ring for you, the ring that her mom gave to her. I know law school has been expensive, so you may borrow it until you can afford one of your own. And I have a gift for you as well."

He reached into the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a lockbox. After pressing his thumb to the seal, he pulled open the lid.

"Since my little girl is going to live under your roof, I want her to be protected. Take this, keep her safe. It's been in our family for generations, but it still shoots and shoots well. Promise me you'll use it to protect my Helen, and you're welcome in our family."

He promised, and his future father-in-law handed him the revolver.

In his office, Jordan now reached into his own bottom desk drawer and retrieved that same lockbox. His own thumb now triggered open the lid. With a suddenly trembling hand, he pulled out the revolver and placed it on his desk. He didn't immediately notice that this reactivated the desktop pano, showing all his new mail messages.

He decided to call Helen back.

She answered his link immediately. "Hi sweetheart," she said, her voice colored with empathy. "I must have lost you earlier. Are you feeling any better?"

He ignored the question. A drip of water fell on his desk and he realized he was crying. "Listen, Helen," he said. "There is something you should know."

"What is it, honey?" Her words were rushed, nervous at his tone.

Jordan wasn't sure where to begin. He lifted the revolver. Had it always been so heavy?

"This is difficult to say..." he started, and could hear her trying to

stifle the quickening of her breath.

"...Yes? I'm listening."

The gun in his hand, he glimpsed at the swell of new mail messages, almost closing the surface pano before something caught his eye. It was from a sender he did not recognize, a man named Landon Breaux, but it was the title that intrigued him.

Cromwell in 2064, it read.

Jordan set the revolver aside to tap open the message, remembering after a moment his wife was still linked.

"I haven't always been the best husband," he said to Helen. The message on his desktop opened to show the picture of him with the wrapper that all the PanoNets were running, minus one thing. The candy wrapper in the foreground was edited out. Instead it focused on Jordan – kneeling, hand outstretched, eyes wide.

He gestured to zoom on the image, at the look playing across his face while he reached forward. Without the wrapper, his face seemed to have a whole new meaning. He looked awestruck, but at peace, in the same moment. He looked like a man who had just seen the face of God.

A single paragraph sat below the image, but before Jordan scrolled down to read, he let go of something he'd held onto for a very long time. He found the words and began to speak to his wife. "Years ago, Helen, you went out one night to pick up a few things for your sister's birthday party. The night you were attacked. I don't think you ever knew this, but I followed you to the mall."

He absently fingered the revolver as he talked, the weight of his sin already beginning to ease. He began to read the message from Mr. Breaux, how the Voice had trained him to multi-task!

Senator Cromwell, Landon Breaux's message started, *Maybe you heard of me, maybe not. But I've been following you for a long time.*

"When you were inside shopping," he told Helen, "I waited for you in the parking lot."

What you did today, Breax's message continued, *is what my poker buddies might call a royal flush of fuckery. But to me, it was something else entirely – a sign.*

"Helen, if you remember, it was really goddamned cold that night, and holy hell if you weren't taking your time."

That picture of you kneeling shows me you're a penitent man. And penitence, my friend, is something I can appreciate. It's not important that your filibuster failed.

"I remember thinking about you while I was out there. Your face,

your eyes. Your heart.”

What’s important is that you mounted one at all.

The other end of the pano had gone terribly silent. Jordan kept on with it, even though as he read he felt his voice growing more absent. “I remember thinking about how I’d sworn to your father that I would protect that heart.”

I’m the CEO of a company called Monochromatic Industries. We used to be a government contractor, but since we went private, we’re really poised for growth.

“I failed you in that. I failed him in that.”

Our main goal is to protect the people with what we build. Personally, I fear for the safety of our great nation.

“And I failed because I was selfish. I listened to something—”

I’m sure that like a lot of your Senate colleagues, you have aspirations. To make that happen, you’ll need a Sponsor.

Jordan suddenly stopped talking as he read the remainder of the message. It was just one more sentence, but by the end he forgot Helen was even still linked and waiting for him to continue. It took nearly a minute before her quavering voice came back on the line.

“You can go ahead, honey,” Helen said. “You can tell me anything.”

Jordan blinked when he heard her, then started talking very quickly. “What? Oh...well you see, I just wanted to say that, when I was waiting there, you know, because I’d followed you, you know...I wanted to bring you that jacket you’d forgotten, the brown one, because it was so damn cold. But what happened was, I decided to go home after a while, because I wasn’t sure where you’d gone inside, and it wouldn’t do much good to give you a coat when you were already leaving. And for a long time, you know, I felt responsible for your...because if I’d have stayed, you know, maybe I could’ve been there, and what happened, maybe, wouldn’t have happened.”

Silence. Then, “Oh, honey...” she said, awash with sympathy. “You’ve been living with that all this time?” He could hear her crying on the other end as he put the revolver back in its lockbox and clicked the lid shut. “Look, you know what that did to me. I broke into a million pieces that night. I was in a dark place for a long time, a very long time, for what I thought would be forever. But with your love, and your understanding, eventually I was reborn. And I’ve come to realize that I’m stronger for it.”

As Helen kept talking, Jordan suddenly wished he had some of his

father-in-law's bourbon. That was good shit!

"Sometimes," she went on, "things happen to you that are horrible, worse than you can imagine, but that's how it's meant to be. Because those bad things humble you. And over time, they strengthen you."

"You know," Jordan said, "you couldn't be more right. Thank you for that, and your forgiveness."

"I love you with my whole heart, Jordan."

"I'll be home a little late tonight, but, uh, maybe we can talk more then."

"I'll have dinner waiting."

Exhaling deeply as he hung up, Jordan read the last sentence from Landon Breaux's PanoMail again. His pulse quickened with every word.

Reach out to me, as I am fully prepared to sponsor your campaign in becoming the next President of the United States.

Somewhere inside Jordan Cromwell, a familiar echo returned.

It always works, said the Voice.

CHAPTER SIX

"I know some of you have argued, after decades of division and war, that we should we simply call ourselves 'The States of America'. Some have asked if there's anything united about us that's left. I am here to say there is, and there always will be."

- Acton Granger, State of the Union Address – January 18, 2062

The House chamber was bedecked with all the trappings expected of a presidential visit.

Every balcony dripped bunting of red, white, and blue. Each member's chair had an armrest affixed with a miniature flag. Stars and stripes framed the aisles.

Patriotism was making a comeback.

A buzz simmered throughout the House floor. The president would have a lot to brag about in his third State of the Union. The economy was expanding at a steady clip, with job creation at solid margins. Even the former Underground districts were showing gains, though whether the administration's Reconstruction Initiatives inflated those gains was open to debate.

The Initiatives had been Elijah Schroeder's first test as the president's second-in-command. Due to Schroeder's background in economics, Granger had personally directed him to construct the policy for economic stimulus, get other Conservative League members on board, and shepherd its implementation.

That was not what happened.

After consulting everyone he could think of – fellow academics, think tanks and policy shops, and members from every League – Schroeder locked himself in a room and crafted legislation that he surmised could please everyone. President Granger praised it upon review, saying it was both daring and pragmatic.

Once it leaked to the public, everyone immediately shat on it.

The view from the right: The Initiatives were a deficit-busting, runaway expansion of government. Schroeder had become Granger's shill faster than anyone could have expected. If he hadn't switched his League affiliation by now, he should. The president had a hand up Elijah's ass and was using him as a ventriloquist's dummy.

The view from the left: Half the Initiatives were tax cuts – where were the investments? Was there nothing for education? Why would the president trust this signature policy to someone who opposed him, whose ideas had been defeated in the last election?

Two months after being sworn in, the vice president found himself in the vortex of a flushing toilet. He lost all his old friends without any new alliances to show for it. The ink was still wet on his political obituary, but it would dry up soon enough and cement his fecklessness as a two-time loser.

Then, during one of their weekly lunch meetings, Granger reiterated his promise. *I said I had your back, remember?* He stepped into the fray with the full force of the bully pulpit still in its honeymoon phase. The president supported his deputy, dismissing the rancor as outdated tactics of division that had taken the country toward war in the first place. Those same tactics would not fuel its reconstruction.

It still took a well-timed dip in the stock market to force all parties to the table, but the Initiatives passed mostly intact in a nail-biting vote.

The only problem for the vice president – though the policy had been his brainchild, the president received the acclaim for getting it through.

Now, though the Initiatives were unwinding, the country was beginning to find its feet. Elijah still worried that the economy had yet to reach escape velocity from the need for stimulus (as a Conservative, this was something he never thought he'd admit), but progress had been made, no doubt there. Beyond that, there was a larger progress, a sense the country was on the mend.

It was ironic, then, that as America began to stretch its legs, ready to stand again, partisanship returned in earnest to the Hill.

It had never gone away, as the fight over the Reconstruction Initiatives had shown. But elected leaders had grown careful after the war, speaking in muted and cautionary voices, trying to at least hinge to truth and fact. This was in stark contrast to the time before, when the country sank into a morass of dog whistles, gaslighting, and vile rumors. The underlying problem was money, and nobody fundraised off of being an adult.

It was an old adage – outrageousness got attention, and attention got money. Now that the country’s economic engine was creating wealth to spread around, members realized all too quickly that grandstanding produced dividends.

After all, Sponsors looked for victories, not compromises.

Elijah Schroeder chewed on all this as he paced in the wings just outside the House chamber, awaiting his introduction. States of the Union always had a long procession of notaries, with the vice president being one of the first officials called, announced after ranking members of the Senate.

The Deputy Sergeant at Arms strode forward, bringing forth his booming voice to hush the masses. Even when he cleared his throat, it sounded like cannon fire.

“Mister Speaker,” he roared, “the Vice President of the United States!”

A smattering of cheers and applause drizzled from the galleries as Elijah entered. He wore his politician’s face, smiling and waving enthusiastically to no one in particular. It deeply conflicted with his mood.

Dozens of House members had lined the procession aisle. To attain such premium real estate, which included the opportunity for a face-to-face moment with the Cabinet and the Supreme Court, they had to arrive hours before everyone else. Of course, the real prize was a handshake with the president, especially when in full view of the PanoCams broadcasting to their districts. Some members even slept in the benches the night before.

Elijah did a quick face-check as he proceeded down the aisle – it was lined with mostly Reformers, several Progressives, the few elected Urbanists, and even a rogue Freedom Leaguer; all staking positions for a fleeting interaction with the leader of the free world.

The entire Conservative League, he noticed, had shied away from this ritual, massing together on the opposite side of the floor. *It’s come to that*, Elijah thought. *Not even the pretense of feigned collaboration.*

The vice president made his way slowly, attending to each outstretched hand – and he shook them all, even when sensing limp energy in their grasps. None of these members had waited hours for him; these were not his people. He felt like the class nerd dragged to the party by the prom king, and only because the prom king had lost a bet.

Elijah ran out of hands to shake and stood listlessly for a moment at the center of the floor, which was dominated by the House rostrum. Elijah always felt the rostrum resembled a wood-stained wedding cake, with its rounded shape and multiple tiers. During regular House sessions, the bottom two tiers comprised of clerks, notaries, and other unelected parliamentary officials, with the top tier reserved for the Speaker. The seat assignments were different for the State of the Union – the president spoke from the second tier, with Elijah and Speaker of the House sitting directly behind him on the third. During the speech, the PanoCams would be on all three individuals; Elijah didn't realize how much he detested this until the president's first speech, when every tic in his body language was analyzed by an obsessive media. From then on, he tried to remain as stoic as possible.

In the nineteenth century, the rostrum had been made of marble, but was so heavy the Capitol's foundation bent under the weight. Following that, it was constructed of a fine walnut that had lasted upwards of two hundred years, laurel wreaths etched into the front panels with the words *Peace* and *Justice* ingrained alongside.

Elijah traced a finger on the rostrum's polished wood as he paced around it, climbing the back steps to its highest tier. The Speaker of the House awaited him.

A lifelong member of the Conservative League, Speaker Archibald Cunningham had been a congressional fixture for forty years. A Capitol meeting room and adjoining hallway were already officially named after him, but the Speaker's wing had been informally referred to as Archie's Lair since Elijah was in Congress. Though rumors of Cunningham's retirement always were rampant, Elijah knew only death would force away his gavel. The Speaker hailed from Pensacola, representing Florida's first district, and had a bigger hard-on for the military than anyone Elijah could think of. In his time as master of the House, Cunningham had forged a coalition of Conservative and Freedom League members that amounted to an overwhelming, unbreakable majority. He'd been able to juggle the multitude of competing interests with remarkable ease, and any

threats were either quickly squelched or offered shots at a Governorship or Senate seat.

Cunningham was scratching his birdlike nose as Elijah reached the rostrum's top tier.

"Mr. Speaker, good to see you again."

"Elijah." Cunningham acknowledged him with a terse nod. The vice president knew Archie would profess he had precious little time left to dabble in formalities, but the indifferent greeting surely had purpose. With Archie Cunningham, even small-talk could turn into a verbal wrestling match, and he was always maneuvering for leverage. Some people never stopped debating.

Schroeder nestled into the plush leather of the vice president's chair. It didn't feel quite right – he wondered absently if Cunningham had ordered it lowered. The two men sat side by side, looking out at the congressional members milling about the floor as they awaited the rest of the procession.

"I haven't seen you since the midterms," Elijah said. "I hope you weren't too disappointed."

"The president might have made some modest gains, but we're still in the majority. The country will reject him in time."

"Come on, Archie, we both know that anytime a sitting president *gains* legislative seats, it's damned impressive. It's practically unprecedented."

Cunningham only offered a mild shrug. Elijah had come in a little hot; the Speaker's weapon of choice would be indifference, even as his words had teeth. "Now that he has a better chance at passing his agenda, people will see him for what he is. He'll overreach, they always do. Just look at the immigration bill. We gave him an inch and he tried to lasso the moon. There will be a reckoning in the next election. Immigration scares people, and scared people vote."

Elijah smiled in spite of his spiking heart rate. Few pushed his buttons so adroitly. "I thought you weren't one to operate on fear."

It was the Speaker's turn to smile, his wrinkled mouth split wide to reveal the glistening capped teeth of a professional statesman. "I'm not, unless the people have something to fear."

The murmur in the chamber rose audibly as movement surged in the wings. The president was in the building.

"I remember an old mentor of mine," Elijah said, "who once had wise words. He told me that to understand the pulse of my electorate, I shouldn't worry about the GDP, or my macro employment model, or other data that might consume a numbers-

obsessed economist like myself. Keep it simple, he used to say. Count the number of construction cranes in the skyline of your district. If you see a couple, you're doing okay. A half-dozen or more, you'll get reelected. Now tell me, Mr. Speaker, how do you think that mentor of mine would respond if I told him in my trip to Chicago, I counted seven cranes?"

A trickle of pride penetrated the speaker's contemptuous demeanor. "Never forgot that, did you?" He patted his knee, thinking. "I suppose I should appreciate that you've retained one of my lessons. How I wish it were more. To counter your argument, I would remind you that a Conservative House has kept your president at bay, curbing his worst intentions, and allowing the people to grow instead of the government. We have succeeded as a check and balance, where his vice president has not."

"I'm not supposed to be his check and balance."

"You're not supposed to be his hostage, either." An edge had darkened the Speaker's voice. It disappeared just as quickly. "Sometimes, Elijah, to stand with someone, you have to stand against them."

"Is that what you're doing with me now?"

"My boy," Cunningham chided, "I fought like hell for you in both the primaries and the general election. You were a son to me. When you lost, we lost."

That stung Elijah, and the Speaker well knew it. The worst part of losing any election was failing those who'd invested in it. Elijah Schroeder was by no means been a perfect candidate, but he'd run a strong, principled race, or so he thought. Now that he knew how Granger's technical operation was leaps and bounds ahead of his, with the neuro-sorcery of Endure Technologies behind it, Elijah felt his loss had less to do with his own shortcomings. Still, when ballots are cast and more are for the other guy, it's impossible not to take personally.

Elijah remembered another thing his old mentor used to say, during one of their many nights at the Capitol Club. *When you're losing, change the game.*

"My fight continues," Archie said. "I hope yours does as well."

The Sergeant at Arms strode forward, this time announcing the Supreme Court. All six were present, though some hobbled with their collective seven hundred years of age, and they proceeded down the aisle at a snail's pace to the front row.

"I've found it better to fight from within," Elijah said.

Cunningham scoffed, his vitriol tangible. “Please. You’ve thrown your lot in with these Reformers.” He gestured to the left side of the House floor. “Reformers. Progressives. Two sides of the same coin. Why can’t they just all call themselves liberals anymore? It used to be easier to keep track of ‘em. Another example of how slippery they are, I suppose.”

While Elijah offered no reaction, the Speaker continued. “The thing about liberals – they sink their claws in with promises of change, of puppy dogs and rainbows on a bright horizon. People can be suckers for handouts, or empty job titles where they don’t really do anything.”

Elijah knew exactly where this barb was trained, but had come with ammunition of his own. “Speaking of jobs, I heard there’s been some turnover in your office.”

“Yes, I had to fire one of my chief aides. She’d come aboard the term before last. She was my policy...well, something-or-other, can’t remember exactly. But she was good, a data head not unlike yourself.”

“Why’d you let her go? I thought you liked those types, to do the heavy lifting.”

Cunningham dismissed this attack with a half-hearted sneer. He looked as if he’d end the conversation there, but couldn’t help indulging for a moment in a juicy disclosure. With Cunningham, you never knew if he was sharing anecdotes with a friend or leaking information. “This aide comes to me with the nuttiest idea I’ve ever heard. She actually suggested – and get this – that we should hold a second Constitutional Convention to rewrite our founding document.” Cunningham actually laughed at the notion, a scoffing titter escaping his nostrils. “She’d written a whole manifesto about it, too. Completely absurd. I don’t know how the liberals got to her, or maybe she was one of them all along. Either way, it was a shame. I let her go before she finished the next sentence. Can’t have those kind of ideas going around.”

Another Constitutional Convention, Elijah thought. *You don’t hear that proposed every day.* Elijah tried to bury the curiosity in his voice, asking casually, “What was her name again?”

“I never said her name. But it’s Theresa...Larkin, if I recall. You should tell your buddy Granger about her, he’d love it. Maybe he planted her on my staff as a joke, who knows.”

Theresa Larkin. He tucked the name away, changing the subject. “Any expectations on the speech tonight?”

Speaker Cunningham shrugged, perpetuating his contrived air of disinterest. "More of the same. A lot of moral shaming mixed with pie-in-the-sky optimism. His level of naiveté is the only thing that continues to surprise me. Why should I suppose any different?" He turned to Elijah, eyes narrowing. "And why would you ask? Expecting something special?"

"Well, I'm hopeful that we can finally make some progress on the tax front. Maybe you and I could find some room on that."

"Yes, that's right...didn't you have a big proposal that you expected to be shared tonight? Another plan to please everyone, like your Reconstruction Initiatives?"

Elijah stared back at his former mentor, giving away nothing. But on the inside, knots were forming.

"Sorry to say, your plan was left on the cutting room floor. Taxes only get a fleeting mention toward the end."

"How do you know that?" Elijah demanded. "You've seen the speech?"

Cunningham pointed to the back of the House chamber. "See the young page by the door over there? That's George. His parents have been generous supporters and asked me to find a position for him. He's been loading the text for the HoloPrompter for almost a year now. He just has to make sure I get an advance copy of everything he puts in."

Look at him revel in this underhanded maneuvering, Elijah thought. He's positively giddy.

"You'll learn someday, Elijah, about liberals. What Granger just did with you and your tax plan is nothing new. Liberals smile at you and wave fifty cents in front of your face. Then they steal a dollar from your back pocket."

"Actually, it's understandable," Elijah countered, burying his disappointment from view. "You and I both know this speech is all about immigration."

"He got his bill. The Senate gave up the store after that joke of a filibuster. The Freedom League can't hold their peckers without us Conservatives. Bunch of imbeciles."

"If I recall, bills have to pass both chambers. What happened to yours?" Cunningham only rolled his eyes. Elijah had scored on this point – above all else, the Speaker took pride in his ability to corral his caucus.

Elijah pressed further, leaking a tidbit of his own. "The president is going to re-open Ellis Island in March, big ceremony. Will you be

attending?”

The Speaker smiled derisively but offered no answer. “Will you?” was all he asked.

The two men left it there. Elijah looked around the floor, where House and Senate members were backslapping jovially, inquiring about each other’s families – normal workplace chatter. It was nice to see this typically rancorous setting in a pleasant mood. Up in the domed ceiling, a ring of light framed a stained-glass eagle, taking flight. Or it was landing, Elijah could never tell.

The gallery was full now; all honored guests had made their seats. Susannah Granger, in a breathtaking gown of light pink, took her place in the first lady’s balcony. She looked like a long-stemmed rose. The Sergeant at Arms announced the Cabinet, and they filed down the aisle to great applause.

All chatter then dissipated to a whisper, and finally there was no noise at all. The Sergeant at Arms took another step forward. Elijah could hear his inhale.

“Mr. Speaker, the President of the United States!”

It was always a marvelous moment. As the president strode in to the familiar rousing beats of *Hail to the Chief*, a tumultuous uproar greeted him like rolling thunder. The noise billowed off the walls, engulfing the room.

From Elijah’s vantage, the president crossed in front of the oversized holo portrait of George Washington, protruding from the far wall of the left wing. Acton Granger waded through a sea of outstretched bodies, beaming at each representative as he traded handshakes and high-fives and fist bumps. He allowed some of the female members a peck on his cheek, gazing up sheepishly at Susannah with each one.

Elijah always thought the president’s physical size was most apparent in a crowd. Some members standing on benches still barely reached his chin. Granger kept working down the aisle, making businesslike progress. He shared a look of respect with each Supreme Court Justice and a look of resolve with each member of the Joint Chiefs. Then he bounded up the steps of the rostrum, standing all at once directly in front of Elijah. Even though they were on different levels, the president stood eye to eye.

He shook Elijah’s hand with his routine vice-grip, then the Speaker’s. As was custom, the president offered printed copies of the speech to the two men. Elijah almost wanted to tell him not to worry about handing one to Cunningham, but demurred. Instead, he

set down his copy and continued his applause as the president turned his back to him and addressed the nation.

The speech concluded, and Elijah had to admit it was a soaring, left-center argument for inclusive progress and a positive vision of an accountable government. He only had to tally how often Speaker Cunningham squirmed and bristled in his seat to gauge its effectiveness. As the president hammered his points, the visible delight from the left side of the aisle boiled to exultant fervor.

After a triumphant conclusion, the president again whirled around to face Elijah and shake his hand. This time, the handshake was different, more direct – Granger held Elijah’s palm in his grasp for an extended moment, patting his shoulder with hefty solemnity. The president then reached into his coat pocket and handed him a slip of paper. With a final nod toward the stewing Speaker of the House, Granger descended from the rostrum.

Elijah sat down and waited for the president to work the congressional rope line, fielding praises from fellow Reformation Leaguers and the bulk of the Progressives. The members huddled around him with an eagerness so tangible, it was as if they wanted to swallow the air he breathed. Granger gave an inclusive speech, a reaching out, but his followers surely recognized the partisan thrusts within and basked in the canny context of his barbs.

Speaker Cunningham had retired without a word, likely to his chambers for a scotch and cigar with someone new to mentor, likely one whose loyalty he wouldn’t someday have to question.

Minutes later, as all camps migrated to their respective corners to spin the speech for the PanoNets, the chamber was all but empty. Elijah had been booked for an interview with *ABCBS News*, but he found himself at a loss for what to say. Which side was he on, anyway?

He retreated further in his chair, pulled out the slip of paper the president gave him, and began to read.

Eli, I know you're disappointed. If the midterm results taught us anything, it's that the opposition Leagues will band together to fight us tooth and nail – though I can't figure out if it's in spite of, or because of all the progress we've made. I hate to say it, but we're back to the trenches for now. Learning from our setbacks on the Reconstruction Initiatives

and this recent victory in immigration, the team felt it best to rally the Reformers and pull in the Progressives. Enthusiasm from our side will force those against us to piss lines in the sand. That way, when it comes to your tax plan, the Conservatives and Freedomists will already be backed in a corner. And that's when I'll call on you, to come in like a rising tide and lift all our boats, and forge a lasting compromise on this important issue. You're my ace in the hole, don't forget that. My mistake last time was leading with that card instead of waiting for the right time to play it, but we're getting smarter and playing the long game now. Give my best to Cassidy, the four of us are long overdue for dinner again. – AG

Elijah folded the note carefully, tucked it in his jacket pocket, and went out to do his interview.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Governor Granger: *Hello, little lady! Do you have a question for me?*

Audience member: *Um, yes, Mister Governor sir. (Reads from card) Could you tell me the difference between a Reformer and a Purgressive?*

Governor Granger: *Kid, holy hell are you adorable. How old are you?*

Audience member: *I'm this many! (Holds up six fingers)*

Governor Granger: *Wow, that's a lot! That was a great question for someone your age. Ladies and gentlemen, I swear to God this girl isn't a plant.*

Audience: *(Laughter)*

Governor Granger: *What's your name?*

Audience member: *Sarah Watkins.*

Governor Granger: *You know, Sarah, sometimes I wonder about the difference myself. All I can say is we switched to this League system some years back, instead of what were called parties, not that a group of politicians is much of a party. There were only two of those parties but they kind of split apart because different groups within them had different ideas. And I guess they decided to call themselves Leagues because a lot of people are invested in the horse race of politics, thinking campaigns are just a game or a sport. You'll see more of that when we get to something called Debate Season, but that's for later.*

What I've said before, Sarah, to people all across the country, is that the League system is better than what we had, because there's more room for ideas and more need for consensus. Our differences with the Progressives aren't very wide, that's true, but we do have them.

I would best describe a Reformer as someone who wants to make big changes that hopefully help everyone live better lives, and a Progressive is someone who wants a lot of little changes that someday becomes big change. Now, if you were to ask me the differences between some of the other leagues – like the Conservatives and the Freedom League, for example, though they try to get along for strategic reasons – well, Sarah Watkins, I would probably be talking until you were this many. (Flashes ten fingers over and over)

- Acton Granger town hall meeting in Cedar Rapids, Iowa – June 22, 2059

FACPAC was bustling.

The Freedom and Conservatism Political Action Conference was an annual opportunity to spend a weekend casting indictments and invectives against the president and his liberal enablers. The conference drew supporters of right-wing politics like an electromagnet, and they descended on the District with unrivaled passion.

Per tradition, the event was held at a ritzy convention center on the Maryland side of the Anacostia River. The governor of Greater Texas, Shelby Monroe, waited just outside its main entrance, assessing her reflection in the tinted glass.

A sharp gust of wind came off the water, and the tassels on her royal blue ensemble fluttered violently. The governor widened her stance, leaning into the gale and giving a quick nod to her youngest daughter and assistant, Trixie.

“We all set in there? Jamie?” Trixie rapped a knuckle on the glass. She likely couldn’t make out anything more than shadowy outlines through the tint.

From inside, Jamie Richardson put the finishing touches on his rig. He could see the governor struggling against the elements and getting impatient. *It’s a good thing her hair is an immovable object*, he thought, as he knocked on the glass twice in response. Trixie relayed a thumbs up to her mom.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Shelby said to Trixie, grinning in sarcasm. “I feel happy as a clam at high tide!” As the double doors swung open to welcome her, the governor stepped across the threshold and into the conference center, the wind at her back.

Jamie had his first camera floating in front of her at knee height,

tilting upward, so she came in like Gulliver descending on Lilliput. In Gesture Mode, he curled an index finger to pull the shot wide, zooming out, as her five daughters fell in side-by-side behind her, boots clacking the linoleum floor in harmony. The six of them turned to saunter down the wide, curving concourse that ringed the inner assembly rooms.

Thirty feet above the floor, Jamie's second camera swept in for an aerial shot of the crowd responding to her entrance. People were everywhere, lingering around vendor booths that hawked holobuttons and animated placards with slogans like *Keep America American*, *GRANGER MUST GO*, and *Schroeder's a Traitor*. A holo booth allowed people to make PanoClips of themselves shaking hands with prominent League figures in digitally-constructed settings like the Oval Office and Senate floor.

All around them, the inside of the building's glass wall served as a long, continuous PanoScreen, ten stories high, broadcasting a highlight reel of accomplishments made by Conservatives and Freedomists alike.

As Camera Two held its broad, top-down angle, it captured every double-take as the governor and her familial entourage approached. A spontaneous rush of cheering erupted, along with several wolf whistles – whether in support of the governor's politics or approval of her contingent's attractiveness, Jamie wasn't sure. Nevertheless, the multitude dove toward Shelby and the rest of the Monroes, begging for a handshake, autograph, or PanoPic.

"Oh my heavens!" Governor Monroe exclaimed, giving out hugs as the throng encircled her. The aerial cam drifted toward her silently, tightening its zoom.

Once she'd greeted everyone within a stone's throw, the governor broke away. "Sorry, y'all," she shouted behind her, "but I have a meeting to get to!" They groaned momentarily before a parting round of applause and at least one *Give 'em hell!*

Trixie escorted the group down a side hallway to a private lift tube.

"Top floor," Monroe said, but nothing happened.

"Mom?" Trixie pointed to a panel next to the lift tube door.

"Oh, my access pass. Jamie had it. Jamie?"

"Right, my fault." Jamie pulled the lanyard from around his neck and handed over the governor's access pass, which Trixie waved in front of the lift tube sensor before absently handing it back.

"Top floor," the governor said again, and they were whisked

skyward.

When the lift tube opened at its destination, Jamie's third camera was waiting, picking them up as the Monroe team marched out in unison. The uppermost floor was packed with offices – mostly for League insiders and event coordinators, along with green rooms for the political talent. Stepping out from the lift tube, the floor was a labyrinth of corridors.

Jamie's first thought was, *Where's the reception team?*

Down one hallway, two men and a woman were talking hurriedly. One of the men finally turned and noticed the new group. He sidled up to greet them, tugging at his collar.

Something's very wrong. Jamie sensed that Monroe could see it too.

The man wore an electric blue suit with champagne-colored boat shoes, fingers bedecked with blocky gold jewelry. A blonde comb-over made a lazy effort to cover his sunburnt scalp. "Governor Monroe!" he said, forcing a toothy grin. "Welcome to FACPAC!"

With his Southern drawl, it sounded like *We'll come to fuck pack!* Jamie had no idea what that might mean, but it still sounded funny.

"Myron, good to see you. We do appreciate the invite."

"I must say, we didn't expect you until the afternoon."

"Oh, nonsense, my man has been setting up for hours if you didn't notice. Jamie, this is Myron Collins. He's the Commissioner of the Conservative League and he runs this event." Myron glanced at Jamie quizzically, a polite nod hardly masking his suspicion.

Shelby eyed the Commissioner. "What's the matter? Why are you sweating?"

"Well," Myron said, again fingering his collar. "There's been an issue with the schedule."

Monroe said nothing and stood still, waiting for him to elaborate.

"Um, well," he continued, "we were sort of forced to offer the keynote to someone else."

"Forced? By whom? Aren't you the one that puts this thing together?"

"We have a planning committee, but I chair it, yes."

Governor Monroe was suddenly very aware of Jamie's camera, which floated silently over Myron's back shoulder. She cast Jamie an annoyed side-eye and took a deep breath. "So, Myron, which of your Conservative League friends is important enough to take my spot? The vice president wouldn't be so nuts to show his face here, would he?"

"The committee opted for Jordan Cromwell, the senator from East Kansas."

Jamie checked the video playback on his wrist-mounted monitor. For the first time since he'd met her, the governor appeared at a loss for words. All she could do was stomp her feet at the frazzled organizer, and then she regained her voice. "Cromwell? *Candy Cromwell?* Are you fucking kidding me?"

Myron stepped back from her range and adjusted the cufflinks of his suit jacket. "Senator Cromwell has made it very clear that it wasn't some silly candy wrapper that caused him to kneel in the Capitol, it was a gesture of subservience before God. Apparently the secularists in the Senate simply could not handle this saintly man's public display of worship, so they tried to punish him with some lame parliamentary ploy. They may have been able to silence our friend on the Senate floor, but we will give him a voice here."

"Jiminy Christmas," Shelby said, bewildered. Then it dawned on her. "He's going to run for president, isn't he?" It was more statement than question. "He must have a Sponsor – who is he? How much did he give you?"

Myron took another half-step backward. "Mr. Breaux has always been a generous friend of FACPAC, but that's hardly the reason—"

"Oh, spare me. Breaux, was it? Never heard of him."

"We still have a speaking slot for you tomorrow afternoon," Myron said. "We also added you to one of our group panel discussions, where you'll be the main attraction." The governor remained unimpressed. "And you are, of course, in the straw poll."

That was at least some consolation. The straw poll was a conference tradition, where after the last speech was given, attendees voted for their choice for president. Whoever won was guaranteed front-runner attention from the media and a lasting interest from top Sponsors.

Shelby Monroe let out a long, low murmur of resignation. "What's the panel?"

Myron checked his organizer's pano. "Let's see...ah. *Uniting for a Cause: How Conservatives and Freedomists Will Take the Country Back Together.*"

Jamie's cameras caught a sparkle in the governor's eyes that Myron seemed to miss.

"Yeah, sure," Shelby said. "All I need is a microphone."

* * *

Back in the lift tube, the governor nudged Jamie. “We’re obviously not using that footage,” she said. “Be sure to erase it.”

Jamie shook his head. He would entertain her notions of creative control, but deleting footage was sacrosanct. “I’m not here to shoot your best angles,” he said. “I’m here to get every angle.” She bristled, looking around at her team. They collectively shrugged, and to Jamie’s surprise the governor didn’t protest further. “Look,” he continued, “no one wants to watch something whitewashed. They want human struggle. An underdog story is the best kind of story.”

The lift tube slid open back on the main level. Trixie led the team again through the throng toward the Potomac Ballroom. The governor paused for more autographs and pictures, smiling as ever, but Jamie noticed the sharpness behind it, like a knob dialed up. Newfound purpose saturated in her eyes.

They mingled around the floor until Shelby had a moment with just about everyone. Above them, the giant PanoScreen switched off its live feed of the previous discussion panel and reverted to the taped loop of Conservative and Freedomist accomplishments. Jamie noted that the loop included a clip of a man on one knee, head bowed, on what looked like a floor of Congress, with someone angrily pounding a gavel in slow motion in the background. *That’s good camera work*, he thought.

“Mom.” Trixie brushed past a conference attendee dressed in colonial militia regalia – for a lot of these folks, the Revolution never ended – and took Shelby’s hand. “We should get going.”

“Very well,” the governor chirped. The group made their way into a side ballroom.

“Wow, not even the main stage,” one of the daughters moaned. Shelby pretended she didn’t hear.

Inside the ballroom were dozens of rows of mostly empty chairs facing a mostly empty stage. A few signs encouraged heavy PanoPosts on *Snark!* and other social media.

For group panels, the stage was arranged with a line of plush sofa chairs, situated armrest to armrest, each with a tiny table in front. Mugs with the *FACPAC 2063* emblem rested on each table. A crew of gaffers moved about quickly during the intermission, checking the lighting and sound. Some in the back switched around a set of flags, positioning the Greater Texas sigil in prominent view.

Shelby took the lead and trotted onto the stage for a quick inspection. She tested the cushions of the sofa chairs, grimaced disapprovingly, and then went backstage. “I’ll get swallowed up in

that thing," she lamented, as a crew member fastened a microphone to her lapel. "All right, girls, time to prayer up."

The Boot Squad formed a circle. They joined hands and bowed their heads as the governor tried to squelch her foul mood with some words of divine invocation.

Jamie had gathered his cameras, checking their settings and signal strength. Her prayer concluded, the governor wandered over and placed a hand on his shoulder. Her annoyance and frustration had fallen away, replaced by a kind of possessed focus.

"If you're going to get every angle," she told him, "don't miss this one."

He nodded and went out to the floor to finish his configuration. His attention would be on audience reaction – and as intermission was winding down, a stream of people began to file in and find their seats.

The room was halfway full when the house lights came down. As a measure of the National Anthem blared through the speaker system, the voice of a faceless announcer cut in. "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome your moderator. You know her, you love her – from the Conservative Channel's *Riley'd Up*, Riley Hastings!"

A woman Jamie assumed was Riley Hastings sprang into view as the lights popped off in a sequence better suited to a rock concert. Riley beamed a radiant, practiced smile as she waved to the audience like someone who'd never outgrown her pageant past. Jamie's first thought was that her wavy blond hair betrayed too many roots. She strutted up and down the stage in a skirt that appeared to strongly favor freedom over conservatism.

"Welcome, everyone!" Riley announced, doing her best to lift the energy in the room. "It's so great to be back at FACPAC with all of you! Today's panel is here to discuss something we talk about all the time on *Riley'd Up* – which incidentally is available to PanoStream anytime, anywhere. It's something we all need to be better at. But first, let's bring out our distinguished speakers. My first guest, from the Freedom Channel's own *Freedom Hour*, Michael Rothchild! Our second guest, hailing from South Alassippi's fifth district, Conservative League Congressman Michael Lamb! And finally, in a special treat, the distinguished Governor of Greater Texas, Shelby Monroe! Oh, it's so wonderful to have you all here!"

The two Michaels waved generously to the audience as they sank into their cushioned chairs. Shelby waited an extra beat before coming out and went straight to her sofa, eschewing the normal

waving routine that Jamie had come to recognize – a blend of pointing over the crowd mixed with a victorious boxer’s two-handed fist pump.

Jamie maneuvered his cameras around the floor, Shelby’s voice fresh in his mind: *Don’t miss this one.*

Riley Hastings paced the stage delicately. “As I mentioned earlier,” she said, “and as any watcher of *Riley’d Up* can attest, today’s topic is perhaps the most important of the weekend. It’s about how we can come together, as Freedomists and Conservatives. This conference needs to be the beginning of something big. Did you all know that if our Leagues were combined in the last presidential election, we would’ve had over seventy million votes? Hello, landslide!”

The audience stood to cheer this hypothetical victory.

“Our divisions have hurt us for too long,” Riley went on. “Michael Rothchild, let’s start with you. What do you see as the advantages to getting the Freedom League and the Conservative League back together again?”

“Thanks for having me,” Rothchild said. “The good news is this has started already. They say nothing unites like a common enemy, and in our case that’s the president. We’re seeing this in Congress as members realize that they can only stop him if our two Leagues vote as one.”

“Quite right!” Riley assented. “Hopefully the passage of the immigration bill was the last straw. We have to stand together against this leftist, divisive, imperialist president! Congressman Lamb, is this what you’re seeing on the front lines?”

“First of all, it’s great to be here,” Michael Lamb said. He immediately jumped into his canned remarks. “And what a crowd! Personally speaking, if we just remembered that God is the great unifier, those on our side of the aisle would speak with one voice, the voice of our Creator. I’ve spoken to Speaker Cunningham personally about this very thing.”

Riley took a long, earnest nod. “Truer words have never been spoken – we need to listen to and speak with God’s voice, indeed. And how about you, Governor Monroe? I must say again, it’s such an honor to have you on our panel. I’d love to have you on my show sometime! What are your thoughts about Conservatives and Freedomists coming together?”

Here we go, thought Jamie, and though he had no idea what was coming next, he saw the governor coiling like a cobra. He gestured

delicately, bringing his cameras in tighter.

Shelby shifted in her chair, mulling it over. Then she threw up her hands. "Well, Riley, I'm frankly at a loss here. I don't believe I was invited to the right panel, because frankly that's the last thing we should do."

Riley stopped her delicate pacing. "I'm sorry?"

Shelby turned to the audience. "Have we lost our collective memories? What the Conservatives mean by *coming together* is asking the Freedom League to shut their collective traps and follow along with whatever self-enriching establishment nonsense they deem fit to jam down our throats."

If Riley had been thrown off by Shelby's tack, she recovered quickly. "I am sure you would agree, governor, that in a democracy it's better to have more votes than the other side?"

"Sure, darling, I can count. I don't expect you to remember why the Freedom League was started in the first place – I'm guessing you didn't get your job based on your sense of history. You probably just swallowed the Kool-Aid just a smidge faster than the thousand other blondes that applied. If it was only Kool-Aid you were swallowing."

"My swallowing has nothing to do with—"

"Sweetheart, it has *everything* to do with it. You're here because you're a pretty package that can sell. This whole conference is built on selling. You're filling people's minds with what-ifs and coulda-beens, and while you do that, you're taking their money. These fine folks in the audience worked hard for their income, they don't deserve to spend a thousand dollars to get filled with your vapidty. Besides, if they paid close attention, they'd realize that what you're selling is nonsense. You're not *empowering* them; you're convincing them to give power to you! What are you offering in return, besides listing all the ways the president is screwing them? What would you do that's better?"

"Our philosophy is better," Michael Rothchild said, unbuttoning his suit jacket. "The Conservative philosophy helps anyone who works for it."

"I'm sure that looks great on a book jacket," Shelby retorted. "My daughters came with me today. You know what I told them growing up? If someone asks for your money, they're not working for their own. And they expect that you aren't working either, or else they'd have some respect for what you earned. It's no secret that Conservatives think the Freedom League is their ugly stepchild. They make fun of us from within their ivory towers, and then trot us

out when they want to show how salt-of-the-earth they are. You are right, I was invited here, and you had some nice things to say about me in front of these nice people, but I'm just a puppet to the people who put these things together. They're just trying to pull my strings to give you a show, and then they'll go back to their towers, same as before. Only now, they'll remodel the ivory with gold."

Riley Hastings let out a long sigh directly into her microphone. "Your accusations would have more merit if FACPAC hadn't asked Jordan Cromwell to be its keynote speaker. He is the Freedom League's fastest rising star."

"Don't even get me started with him. He's a puppet that knows he's a puppet, which is worse. He does his little dance, feet moving so fast you don't look up and see the ones pulling the strings. That's not what the Freedom League is about. We're supposed to be the renegades, the independent thinkers. We go it alone. If you want to win, then you can follow us. But we only follow ourselves."

The ballroom had fallen into a confused silence. Riley offered a rebuttal. "So...you just expect everyone here to fall into your way of thinking? Is that freedom?"

"Poor girl, you miss the point entirely. They should fall into their own way of thinking, because that's in their interest. Politics has become the new religion. And look, religion is a wonderful, beautiful thing. It goes beyond our sense of self, to a greater humanity that connects us. But we have to acknowledge that for a very long time religion was a tool that powerful people used on the poor and uneducated, to keep them in line. And we have to ask ourselves if we'd rather sit in a church pew stuffing our savings in the donation basket or maybe, just maybe, we'd be better off trying to connect with God in our own personal way."

Jamie's cameras scanned the room, capturing blank faces and open mouths. It dawned on him that Governor Monroe was the smartest person in the room, by more than a little. Still, as he looked through the monitor at all those faces, he couldn't help but think Shelby was committing political suicide.

And she wasn't done. "And let's not forget, religion can motivate people to kill. Democracy should never do that. Who in here wants another Civ-2? The last time the Freedom League got doped into supporting your candidates, that's what happened. Thirty million lives lost! Look, I realize that when you break up with someone, there are many conflicting emotions. It's horrible at first, and you pine and ache and wail at what you lost – even if you know the

relationship was destructive. But we have to remind ourselves why we left. It was to forge our own path, a better path."

Shelby was standing now, pacing the stage. "So to my Conservative friends, what has this conference done for you? Has it helped your family pay its bills, or your children go to school? I shook hands with Myron Collins an hour ago, have you seen what he's wearing? His suit alone could've put my daughters through college. People, casino owners don't get rich if the rest of us are winning!"

A slow creep of boos began to dot the audience, like the first leaks in a dam. If Shelby heard them, they only sharpened her. "Frankly, true freedom lovers have more in common with the Reformers – with the president – than they do with you. At least Granger sees what's really broken, and is trying to fix it, instead of charging people money to tell them how he *would* fix it. Elijah Schroeder saw that, saw the need to throw his lot in with him, and now you all hate the vice president, too. One of your own. I might disagree with what they're doing, but I recognize they're trying to solve a problem. The so-called Conservatives and their Freedom League lackeys – *they* are the problem."

Jamie didn't know if it was the mention of the president or the vice president that broke the silence, but the invectives that rained forth were loud and unkind. The audience turned into an unhinged mob, casting a deluge of curses upon Shelby Monroe.

The governor remained on the stage's forefront, standing tall.

"Shout me down if you must! But I'm the only one here actually with your interest in mind. I ask you, please – tonight, in a quieter moment, consider whether what I say isn't true. Reflect on the people in your life that are looking out for you, that are cheering you on, not basking in your cheers. Who came here to be heard, and who came to hear you."

A modicum of silence had returned to the room. "Thank you," was all the governor said, and turned away. She pulled off her lapel microphone and tossed it to a flinching Riley Hastings – when it hit the floor, a loud pop rang through the speakers. But Shelby was already out the door, her daughters scrambling to keep up.

"Well, you wanted an underdog."

Shelby nipped at the straw in her margarita. She and Jamie sat across each other at a kitschy resort bar. The Boot Squad had long

since retired to call their spouses and children, perhaps to inform them the campaign had ended before it began.

Jamie could only offer a sympathetic smile. Three gin and tonics had loosened his nerves. "I thought it was amazing."

"Think they'll invite me back next year?"

The governor laughed, a wistful chuckle, but Jamie was more serious. "If you're winning primaries by then," he said, "they'll have to."

Shelby appeared to doubt this possibility. She took another pull of her margarita, long diluted by melted ice.

"Well, Myron was pretty clear about tomorrow. You know, some say campaigning is poetry and governing is prose. But the truth is, campaigns are done in black and white, and governing is gray. Those people don't understand gray. And they vote for nitwits in the primary, idiots who promise the world but are quickly revealed as idiots once they have an office. Then, when it comes to the general election – the vote that matters – the Conservatives have the only viable candidate. It hurts me that they force themselves into going against their own interests. Sadder still, they don't even realize it." She drummed her fingers restlessly on the table. "I guess it's kind of nice knowing I don't have to give a speech tomorrow. I don't get many vacations!" Her laugh was louder now, if no less wistful.

Jamie looked around the bar, which had mostly emptied out. A few stragglers played hologames in the corner, paying them no attention.

Suddenly, the governor leaned in over the table between them, setting down her elbows and tucking her fists under her chin. She examined Jamie with a new appreciation. "You're a quiet one, aren't you?"

"Not always," Jamie said, slightly uncomfortable. "I'm just better at expressing myself through my work."

"We can't all be the Chatty Cathy, I guess. But by now, you should know all about me – and what you didn't know already, you sure learned today! My turn."

Jamie squirmed and wished his drink was full. "Not much to tell. Grew up in a small town. Progressive area, still diverse. My parents split during the war."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Dad was pro-Majority, in that he just wanted the violence to end. He was white, maybe I never told you that." Shelby's note of surprise answered that for him. "Mom supported the Underground,

supported it *hard*. She left to fight when I was twelve. Never saw her again." He lost himself, staring off at nothing in particular.

Shelby sat back, saying nothing, letting him speak.

"That was half my lifetime ago. Feels longer, but also like yesterday, you know? I dunno, a lot of people went through worse. I ended up going to school – a good school for someone like me, learning computer science, but then there was the Education Hiatus, when the war got really bad. The Hiatus only lasted a couple months, but I didn't see the point in going back after."

"Just an awful time," Shelby conceded softly. "On all sides."

"Governor, can I ask you something?"

"You know you can."

"You had no idea I was black – or half-black – when you hired me, did you?"

"Does it matter? It didn't to me."

"I was just curious. Some folks looked pretty shocked when I showed up at your mansion."

"They're mostly good people. It takes time. The war divided us, but the war's over. Divisions should end when wars do, but it doesn't work that way. Still, you be careful. Not everyone knows you—"

Jamie had a habit of tuning people out whenever they stressed caution. He was still thinking about his mother, leaving in the dead of night, sacrificing all she loved to join a hopeless cause. The governor would have liked her.

As Shelby talked, Jamie subtly reached into his knapsack and palmed one of his cameras. He set it on the table while she wasn't looking, making sure it had a decent angle. Instead of answering her questions, it was time to ask a few.

"You know, Governor, you said I should know everything there is to know about you by now, but that's not the case. Turns out, I did about as much research on you that you did on me – I thought it might cloud my impressions."

The governor chuckled gamely. "That so? All right, ask away."

"What was your husband like?"

"Benjamin? A selfless man. Grossly outnumbered – he had no idea what to do with all us girls, bless his heart, but never complained. He worked all the time to keep us afloat. Then he struck it big – oil made a comeback at the beginning of the war, you might remember, but then the bottom fell out. He took it pretty hard, leveraged debt up to his eyeballs, and then his heart gave out."

"How old were the girls when that happened?"

"Teenagers, most of them. A handful, all of them. Each in their different way – you'll see when you get to know them. But they turned out better than we could've imagined."

"Why do you want to be president?"

The shift in his questioning threw her for a moment (the margaritas might be at fault in this), but she adjusted ably. "I would remind you that I'm not a candidate yet. But it's something I think about, usually at night. Maybe that's what happens when you sleep alone. Frankly, I wished more people asked that of a candidate – why can you do the job better than the other guy, or gal? It's amazing how many can't answer. For me, like most things I guess, it's simple. I want to teach people to help themselves."

Jamie followed up with more questions, and her responses, if just a little boozy, were direct and honest. This openness, the dropped guard, was his focal point. He felt more drawn in as she went on, laying bare her dreams and her fears, both for her family and the world at large.

They talked until the bar closed, then parted with a friendly goodbye. Jamie checked to make sure his camera hadn't run out of power and rushed up to his room to work through the night.

The sun shone brightly the next morning, the last day of FACPAC. Jamie's main entrance pass still worked, and he was one of the first ones in. He wandered around the main hallway, pretending to look for souvenirs in the maze of vendor booths, but checked his pano every few feet. He could detect the wireless signal that fed the giant PanoScreen, but where was it coming from?

Not surprisingly, he discovered the source came from well above the convention floor. *Must be up around those offices*, he thought.

Fortunately, he still had the governor's pass. He found a lift tube and used it to access the top floor. Since Shelby had decided to fly back early, he wouldn't have much time if he wanted to catch his ride.

The hallways weren't as empty as he hoped, but he had his rig with him. If he pretended to set up a camera as he did yesterday, no one would interfere. A few personnel might give him an extra glance, but he was used to that by now.

Jamie swept the halls with a practiced nonchalance, tracing the signal power through his pano until he found what he was looking

for.

Several hours later, Jamie boarded the governor's plane and slunk down the aisle, nearly tripping over a loose corgi (Jackson or Thatcher, he wasn't sure). He passed Shelby's office – the door was thankfully closed – and since he didn't see the girls, he figured they were all in together for their regular Squad meeting.

Which was just as well. He found a seat in the back row and pulled out his pano. After keying in a few commands, he turned the device off and tucked it back in his pocket. He closed his eyes and silently counted the seconds.

As it turned out, there weren't many to count – they were still idling on the runway when the office door was thrown open.

"JAAAAMIE!" Shelby's head jutted out sideways from the doorframe, locking immediately on him, no matter how low he slunk in his chair.

Jamie attempted to look puzzled, innocent. He expected a shocked response at first, but not outrage. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Don't call me ma'am. Get over here! Inside! Now!"

He shuffled up the aisle like a death row inmate on his final march. The Monroe girls passed by in atypical silence, avoiding eye contact. Trixie closed the office door behind her, shutting Jamie in with the governor.

"Put your ass in that chair," the governor said, pointing. Jamie vaguely recalled an incident when his mother had said the same thing, back when he'd gotten in a fight in third grade. "I just got off the line with Myron Collins. Any idea why?"

Jamie gave a single nod. No sense playing coy.

"I thought you might. As you can imagine, Myron is very upset. Apparently, a video has been playing on every PanoScreen in the building for the last ten minutes, and they can't get it off."

Jamie kept his head down, speaking to the floor. "I can take it down if you want me to."

"What's the video?"

"It's the first episode of your PanoSeries. It's, well, everything that happened this weekend. Meeting people on the floor. Your conversation with Myron. The discussion panel. Our conversation last night."

"Last night? Jesus, you were filming that?" She paced around the cramped office, boots stomping audibly on the shallow carpet. After

a few laps, anger gave way to curiosity and she sat down. “How’d you do it?”

“I put a camera on the table while we were talking.”

“Not that. How did you get the video to play on all those screens?”

“Oh, sorry. I took your pass, but I erased all the records where it was logged. Each time it’s scanned, like for the lift tube, the record exports to a log file. I just had to find each log file in the security database—”

“Actually, don’t tell me! Fuck!” She couldn’t seem to decide whether to sit or stand. She stood up again and walked around her desk. “Computer science, you said. Guess you paid attention in those classes. So then what, you hacked the feed?”

“Yes, I can control it with my pano. Every screen in the building.”

The governor whistled. “They have cameras everywhere around there, you know – oh, you did something about those, too? Wow. Well. Jamie, listen to me. None of that really matters. Look at yourself. You have to know something. With that crowd, some people’s eyes were fixed on you, whether they would admit to that or not. They’ll figure it out sooner than later.”

A part of him knew that, of course. He felt suspicious castings on his skin the moment he set foot in the building. But he spent a lifetime trying to block that out, and sometimes it even worked.

I have to believe they see me as I see me, he thought. The alternative was a lot more painful.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally.

“I’ll call Myron back. I can tell him it was just a silly stunt. Then you can take it down.” Her eyes flashed to the door, dismissing him. As he turned away, she said, “But take your time doing it.”

Jamie exhaled, reaching for the door.

“One other thing, Jamie. Actually, sit back down. In politics, there are always a million variables from each day to the next. Poll numbers go up, they go down – most of the time, you have no idea why. Could be some new economic report, could be a speech you gave, or a law you signed – if you did all that between one poll and the next, you can’t tell what’s pushing you up and what’s putting you down. It’s not very often you get a chance at a controlled experiment, to know the direct effect of a cause. I know it pissed everybody off at the time, but I wanted people to be thinking about what I said at the discussion panel going into the straw poll. It’s going to be a crowded field and we have to stick out somehow. We’re going to define our turf and stick out in this election, but first I

need to know if that turf is solid. It will tell us whether we have a viable strategy moving forward.”

Jamie nodded.

“We have something the other campaigns don't. Know what that is?”

Jamie shook his head.

“A message. It's not one that people want to hear at first, but they need to. And we will live or die by that message, but we will never stop preaching it. Got it? Glad you understand. Now – tell me more about the video.”

“I wanted to show people why you are who you are. So they see you as I do.”

“Then don't apologize. But if you have another crazy idea like that, you see me first.”

Shelby walked back around her desk and plunked back into her governor's chair. “All right, that's enough berating. Let me make this call. Once you take it down, bring in your pano and get the girls, we'll have a little viewing party.”

He did as she asked. After watching the episode, the Boot Squad was stunned into silence. But they were smiling.

“Every angle,” the governor said.

“Yes, ma'am.”

At some point over South Arkansas, results from the FACPAC straw poll came through. Governor Monroe came in second, losing to Senator Cromwell by three points. No Conservatives cracked the top four.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"As a nation, we need to look backward and ask where we went wrong. How did the greatest country on earth get to this place of strife and division and war? Those are good questions, worthy questions, but we must also look forward and ask what's within ourselves to turn wrong into right."

- Acton Granger, speech to the Coastal Florida National Guard –
March 12, 2062

Tess Larkin was crushing her interview.

She'd been rehearsing for the last two weeks, focusing on how to transcend the usual talking points and make a sincere connection. She practiced demonstrative, sharp gestures when trying to reinforce her arguments and open-handed, inviting ones when turning anecdotal. She had to be both cold and warm, and able to switch between those attitudes without betraying any stress.

To successfully interview for a politician, I have to act like one.

She bristled at the irony, for a politician she was not. She had the policies down cold, no problem there. Tess was every wonk's wet dream. The problem wasn't the knowledge as much as her demonstration of it. She was well aware of her abrasive, dismissive nature – what her father deemed in her younger years the *I-know-its*.

Tessa, he would say, you'll know things better than anyone, and they'll resent you for it. So try not to hold it over their heads.

For both father and daughter, that was easier said than done.

Tess would argue she simply followed his example, and that anything incorrect was worth correcting.

Everything she'd learned, a lifetime of learning, came from him. But now, in the twilight of his lifetime, she had to watch him fade away, his fighter's intellect losing round after round. After moving back in with her father last month, she'd gotten a front row seat, to watch him toil against an impossible opponent. She was happy to play the corner-man; to tell him he wasn't fighting alone. But the worst part was, his spirit was losing as much as his mind. *It's hopeless, Tessa – why bother?*

On top of all that, her lack of employment was giving her cabin fever. In her old job, her every opinion mattered, her every decision had consequence; she felt like a cog in the wheel of the world. Now, she was a full-time caretaker, her father's sole companion as he diminished.

Before Speaker Cunningham unceremoniously fired her, she'd been the best policy advisor he ever had. But the *I-know-its* had reared their ugly heads, and Cunningham had no appetite for unconventional thought. He was a knife-fighter, not a visionary – so any talk of refurbishing the pillars of American democracy fell on unwilling ears, and she found herself toting her belongings in a cardboard box.

But that was in the past. Today, she could put all that behind her. She no longer advised the country's third-most powerful person, but she could leverage that experience into a new life on the other side of the Hill.

So now she sat, deep in the bowels of the Russell Building, the Senate's main office complex. She kept her back rigid in perfect posture but her arms loose and free-wheeling, and mashed every interview question served her way screaming back over the net.

Earlier, riding the MetroLoop to the Capitol, she remembered her father's words: *The only way you convince anyone of anything is to get them to think it was their idea.* She didn't want someone to hire her, she wanted them to think they couldn't live without her.

Senator Barbra Duncan was the second-ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee (and a card-carrying Conservative like Speaker Cunningham), but Tess was betting the similarities ended there. When she'd called, the senator asked Tess for a face-to-face interview immediately, something Tess found curious – policy and advisory personnel met with a Chief of Staff initially, or someone even below that. But Tess took it as a positive sign of the senator's

serious interest, which only heightened the intensity of her interview preparation.

And that preparation was paying off. Duncan was a serious player, known to hang around the smoke rooms of Washington's most exclusive clubs, indulging in a cigarillo and a flavored martini after long legislative sessions. Her hair was reddish-orange, like a simmering ember, with streaks of silver running from the roots to the tips. *Most politicians would dye those out*, Tess mused, *but Barbra Duncan doesn't have to*.

As the interview began, the senator took an informal perch on one end of a sectional sofa and Tess settled into an ornate wooden chair. A delicate coffee table lay between them, a paperweight of the Capitol Dome pinning down some document folders.

Tess flashed her best inviting smile, which she'd practiced until her mouth was sore the previous night.

Duncan played it nice at the open with an abundance of pleasantries and small talk, with a natural warmth Tess could only dream of adopting. Her voice was like a fingernail raking over the teeth of a comb, gravelly from the cigarillos, yet soothing. Then, before Tess could realize, the senator moved to business. The interview didn't feature questions in the exact sense of the word – Duncan merely orated for a few minutes before stopping suddenly, waiting for Tess to pick up on her thought. It was as if the senator was better suited to a larger audience feeding off her perspective and eloquence, rather than the back-and-forth of an actual interview. Her monologue opened with a grandstanding statement about the lasting damage the liberal strands of the Reconstruction Initiatives had done to the economy. Tess tried to beam genuinely as if her dithering pronouncements were the greatest insights she'd ever heard, waiting patiently for her to get to the flipping point. As she moved into a denunciation of the larger ethos of the Reformation League, she then waxed mournfully on the denigration of free enterprise. This was where she paused, looking on Tess to restore her faith.

Since Speaker Cunningham had obsessed over the Reconstruction Initiatives to the umpteenth degree, fighting the vice president over every clause and condition, Tess was intimately familiar with them. She wisely omitted her admiration of some of the genius that Schroeder had integrated to the bill – such as tax credits for crowdsourced infrastructure projects – but proffered that as the Initiatives wound down, the free market's invisible hand would

naturally take over. She concluded her point by walking through the financials systematically, recalling exact figures and projections from the Congressional Budget Office's latest restatement.

Tess could sense Duncan was studying her responses carefully, but aside from that the woman was a blank slate. She assumed the senator would appreciate a good sparring partner, someone she could work with into the night, perhaps intermingling deep legislative policy dives with some old-fashioned girl talk. Tess swam in the possibilities – *maybe we share a weakness for romance novels!* What a difference this new life could be, compared to her job before, where Speaker Cunningham had a reflexive aversion to anything personal.

Tess crossed her legs to punctuate the conclusion of her answer. Duncan smiled enigmatically before launching into another monologue, waxing at great length on the campaign sponsorship structure and arguing that Sponsors needn't be disclosed to a prying electorate. Then she stopped, practically midsentence. Tess picked her up, citing the two legal decisions from the last decade that saw no reason to compel such disclosure. She didn't mention her elemental disdain for these decisions, nor detail the dangerous precedents they'd set, but did allow that candidates with sponsorship transparency tended to connect better with a distrusting public.

So asked, so deftly answered.

The senator's third question, which turned out to be her last, was in a rather different vein – and not just because it was an actual question.

"Can you tell me a little bit about your master plan to destroy the Constitution?"

Tess recoiled as if punched, but tried to maintain the warmth in her smile. "Sorry?"

Duncan stood from her perch in the sofa. The silver in her hair flashed in the light. "I don't typically mingle with House members, they have their side of Capitol Hill and I have mine. But I ran into Archie Cunningham after the State of the Union and he was just dying to tell everyone about this advisor of his. He wouldn't shut up about you. Frankly, I wanted to meet you in person, if only to make sure the man wasn't pulling my leg."

"I have no intention of destroying anything. I don't know where he got that."

Senator Duncan sighed and reached into a pocket of her pantsuit.

"Ms. Larkin, I've kept a copy of the Constitution on my person for the better part of two decades. I know every word – forwards, backwards, sideways, upside-down. Now, if you think the Bible comes from a divine source as I do, then this document is the greatest composition in history authored by human hand. So when Archie Cunningham tells me he had a policy advisor who thought she could do better – well, I thought, *I have to meet this girl*. I expected wings, or a halo, so I'm a little disappointed."

"I don't know what the Speaker told you, ma'am, but that is far from what I proposed."

"Either way, you're out your damn mind. How can you work for the Conservative League if you aren't a Conservative? I asked you two questions – red meat that any faithful League member would pounce on – and you toss up figures and court cases with the passion of a doorjamb."

"I was speaking in policy, not agenda."

"My dear, you can't have one without the other."

A sudden spasm coursed through Tess's body, like a rubber band snapping. She wanted to grab the paperweight on the coffee table and throw it out the window – but her body tensed up, fighting any movement. The only thing she could manage was uncrossing and then re-crossing her legs, and then she didn't know what to do with her hands. She straightened her back even further, and Duncan looked at her, puzzled.

"You're an odd little bird, aren't you?" the senator asked.

Perhaps the only reason Tess didn't completely explode was the horrifying realization that her past exploits had spread through Washington like a viral PanoVid, and any further misadventures were likely to circulate just as quickly.

Don't be anyone's punchline, Tess thought – as Duncan looked on, smirking.

Finally, after an interminable silence, she found her footing and stood. As she pushed for the door, Tess decided to take one parting shot.

"Fuck you very much for your time, Senator Duncan. I'm sure your constituents appreciate that this is what you do with it."

"Nice meeting you, Ms. Larkin. Best of luck with your mission."

You won't cry, you won't, Tess promised herself in the lift tube, and immediately broke that promise when she exited the Russell

Building. She found a bench and let her emotions run their course, shooing away any concerned passersby with a flippant backhand. Eventually the tears abated and she collected herself, recalling one more Richard Larkin pearl of wisdom.

Don't let anyone see you struggle, Tessa. Always keep your chin up and your shoulders back.

She stood up and breathed a long inhale, then started walking. But as she scuttled down First Street toward the Capitol South MetroLoop, her eyes remained downcast.

Chin up, shoulders back.

She tilted up her head, fixing her eyes forward, and straightened her torso. As if by miracle, there was a tangible elevation in her humor.

She looked around the Hill – there really was nothing like this place in all the world. As the sun crested over the marble frieze of the Supreme Court building to her left, it bathed the elongated dome of the Capitol in a yellow glow. Tiers of scaffolding still bordered much of the building, and a construction crane stretched over the North Wing – a completed restoration after the damage inflicted during the war was another year away – but the structure was never not beautiful. Neither was what it stood for, the Statue of Freedom at the dome's tip punctuating the sky.

Tess wondered if she'd ever be back – to work on the Hill again, to see the restoration finally finished, to be part of something that mattered. But she had to face the truth that she'd likely lost the privilege of working here forever, landing on some hidden black list fostered by Speaker Cunningham and his many cohorts.

Chin up, shoulders back.

Her pano started buzzing as she passed the Library of Congress. It wasn't a link she recognized, but she answered anyway – she'd put some feelers out on possible caretakers for her father.

"Good morning, Ms. Larkin? Hold one moment for the Vice President of the United States—"

"Oh, for chrissakes. I don't know who this is, but I've had enough of games!" She closed the link with a flourish. There had been plenty of embarrassment for one day.

Pano still in hand, Tess decided to check in on her father. Their devices permanently linked, she could see where he was at all times. *Still at home, good.* Remembering to keep her chin raised, her shoulders back, she descended into the underground MetroLoop.

* * *

But he wasn't home. She called his name as she came inside, first expectant of a response and then longing for one. She darted through the rooms of the house and her heart dropped when she saw his pano on the desk in his study.

Ohshit, she thought, words blurred in panic. *Ohshitshitshit*.

She checked the back yard. No sign of him, but the gate was still locked.

Her pano buzzed again. She thumbed the answer button without looking at the link.

"Dad, that you? Where the hell—"

"Ms. Larkin, please hold for the Vice—"

"Seriously, fuck off!"

She thrust the pano in her coat pocket and rushed out the front door.

Fortunately, he hadn't made it far. After a few heart-bursting minutes, she spotted the back of his head bobbing amicably down Calvert Street. It wasn't on his old walking route, but it was close.

She hesitated a moment to let her pulse normalize. Then she came up behind him.

"Dad! *Dad!*"

He cocked his head at first, as if he wasn't sure her voice was real. Then he turned around. "Oh, hiya Tess. What's the matter? You're not wearing any shoes!"

"Took them off a few blocks back," she panted. "Heels aren't easy to run in. But that's beside the point. What the hell are you doing out?"

"I was trying to find the garage. You know, with the pattern on the door? I was looking for my gardening shears. Then, well...I guess I decided I'd go on a walk."

Tess paused, still breathless. They didn't have a garage. "Pattern? What, the woodgrain? That was our old house in Brookline. Remember?" She touched his upper arm, careful not to let him go. "How long have you been outside?"

He thought it over, gears spinning but not connecting. "I'm not really sure," he said finally.

"Dad, you got lost. Do you understand?"

He looked around, searching for a recognizable landmark. Though it wasn't his usual route, he'd still been on this street a

thousand times over the years. "Lost? Guess I am," he confessed.

"Listen to me. You can't do this anymore, ok? If you want to walk, I'm more than happy to go with you. Looks like I'll have lots of free time, actually. Otherwise, you can't leave the house by yourself. It's dangerous out here. I know it sucks and I'm sorry."

She expected him to protest – to put up a fight, to say she was making something out of nothing. But could see behind his shy, embarrassed smile a concrete, entrenched fear, and with it an acknowledgment: he had no idea where he was or how he got here, and the realization must be terrifying.

"Sorry, Tessa," he finally said.

She put her arms around him and squeezed. "I know, Daddy. You're all right." She pulled back and stroked his hair. "I'm gonna get you one of those tracking chips, ok? I can't lose you again."

She saw tears brimming in his eyes, and he looked away as she noticed, but he nodded.

Her pano hummed again. Another unfamiliar link, but she clicked on it. Maybe chewing someone out would make her feel better.

"Whoever you are, I'm sure you're just thrilled with your own hilarity, but this is *not the time*."

"Theresa Larkin? Don't hang up." It was a familiar voice, just not one she'd ever heard in person.

"Okay..."

"Apparently, you're difficult to get a hold of. My assistant said you thought she was pulling some kind of prank, so I thought I'd try you myself."

She panicked for the second time that day. "That...really was her? I mean you? Oh, *ohmygod*. Mr. Vice President, I'm so sorry. Today's been...um, not great."

He chuckled. "Believe it or not, I get hung up on more often than you'd think."

She was afraid to ask why he was calling, so she remained quiet.

"Look," he said, "I heard you had some interesting ideas and I was wondering if you could meet for lunch sometime."

"Sometime?"

"Well, sometime...as in now? I can have a car pick you up in five minutes. It'll just take you to the Observatory."

"Five minutes?" She calculated how far she was from home, added it to the time it would take to look halfway decent again. God, she was a sweaty mess. "How about fifteen? I, uh, just worked out."

A short pause. "Fifteen would be fine."

"One more thing. Can I bring my dad?"

The vehicle arrived exactly as scheduled and whisked them westward to the Naval Observatory. It was a short ride – about a dozen blocks to Massachusetts Avenue, and then a few more through Embassy Row – that had the advantage of not giving Tess enough time to overanalyze what had just happened.

Still, her mind raced faster than their AV, which wound through traffic with startling efficiency. Her father seemed to be enjoying himself – it was his first trip in an Automated and he kept asking why there wasn't a steering wheel. "Where is it taking us?" he asked.

"The vice president's house," she replied.

"Really? Who's that now, Truman?" He gave her a wicked grin. Lucid Time, and his sense of humor, still made the occasional appearance. But Tess would bet anything his joke was just a cover; he really had no idea who the vice president was.

They pulled into Observatory Circle as a chilly rain began to fall. Tess admired the house through fine streams of water drifting down her window. The mansion looked like a relic from another time, but the rain gave the window shutters a reflective sheen.

Tess was surprised to see Elijah Schroeder waiting for them in person, standing at the edge of the porch with his wife.

Elijah even clambered down the steps toward them with an oversized umbrella, while Cassidy Schroeder hung back. The rain intensified as Tess climbed out with her father, and they hustled toward the house at the vice president's side. Once out of the weather the pleasantries began.

"So glad you could make it on such short notice," Elijah began. "This is my wife, Cassidy."

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Schroeder," Tess said. "My father and I admire you very much."

"That's very kind, Theresa. Mr. Larkin, I'd be happy to give you a tour."

Richard Larkin looked to Tess. "Go with her?" he asked, nodding at the second lady.

"Yes, Daddy. She'll show you around. I'm sure there's a library somewhere."

"And it's enormous," Mrs. Schroeder said.

Richard smiled as broadly as ever – he would feel at home around books, no matter where he was.

Mrs. Schroeder took the umbrella in one hand and Tess's father in the other, leading him across the lawn toward the Observatory Annex.

As Tess entered the house, Richard called back, "I thought I told you never to call me *Daddy!*"

Lunch was a pickled salmon salad with parmesan crisps and pomegranate seeds, but that wasn't the best part.

"Have all the water you like," Elijah told her. "There's a reservoir out back."

It was crisp and clean, even compared to the Congressional Cafeteria.

Tess, feeling nearly drunk from the water, admitted, "This is actually my second interview today."

"Interview? Is that what this is?" Elijah smiled, adjusting his glasses. "In a way, I guess. Just curious, what was the other one?"

"Duncan, Western Michigan."

"Barb? She can't say hello without giving a floor speech."

"I got that sense." Tess watched the vice president closely as he tended to his meal, nodding to the housekeeping staff and referring to them by name. They looked relaxed around him. It was a stark contrast to the sanctimonious politicians she was used to being around, blind to anyone below their level – whether they be foodservice help or policy advisors.

Elijah Schroeder was also blatantly attractive in person – in a Clark Kent, handsome-but-overselling-the-nerd-part way. But he seemed much more natural than he came across on the PanoNets. Tess was careful to push any indecent thoughts from her mind.

The vice president reached over with a pitcher and refilled her water glass. "So you're probably asking why you're here," he said.

"It occurred to me once or twice."

"Well, look, I'm sure you know this, but you used to work for my old boss."

"I was afraid of this. So Cunningham told you, too?"

"Relax – can I call you Tess?"

She nodded, dumbly.

"When Archie mentioned your name, it sounded familiar. Turns out, I'd read one of your policy proposals – on eggplant subsidies. Sometimes I get stuck with the less glamorous bits of executive governance. But it was remarkable how you framed your case, I was

moved.”

Tess tried to contain her shock – she wasn’t so surprised that the Vice President of the United States had read that proposal as she was that anyone had. “A vital source of vitamin K,” she heard herself saying.

Elijah laughed. “Yes, an essential vegetable.”

“Officially it’s a fruit, but...” Tess stopped, kicking herself. Sometimes the I-know-its couldn’t help themselves.

Elijah laughed harder, a pleasant melody in his amusement. “All the same. But eggplants aren’t why you’re here, Tess. Something’s been stirring inside me. Maybe it’s from being around all these Reformers these past couple years, but we need some big ideas. Something that makes us better as a people, makes this country whole again. When the Speaker told me he what you proposed, I thought it was an idea so big that it warranted exploration. I know it got you fired, but he’s a little more set in his ways than I am.”

Tess tried not to snort at the understatement.

Elijah pulled his chair closer. “Tell you what – if this is an interview, I’ll ask you a question. Put yourself in a primitive society. You’ve got four loaves of bread, but you have to feed five people. Imagine that you can’t split the loaves, cut them in half or anything. It’s a whole loaf, or it’s nothing. What do you do?”

“No matter what, someone doesn’t get a loaf?”

“Could be one person, could be all but one person – if you give one person all the loaves. You’d be creating a dictatorship, then – but yes, assume at least one person would be without any bread.”

“I guess I have some questions of my own, then.”

“Thought you might.”

“Are they, relatively speaking, the same people? Age, gender, ability?”

“Assume they’re a microcosm of a larger society. So, no – some are more productive, but they might also take more to feed.”

“Then I could give the bread to the four most deserving...”

“Not sure how that would be determined, but all right.”

“...Or the four hardest working...”

“Darwinism, natural selection? Most would call it a cruel system, though humans are the only species that doesn’t fully abide by it. Do you think defying natural order makes us more naïve than our animal friends, or more evolved?”

“...Or I could give the bread to the four hungriest, and leave the strongest one to find some other means.”

"Hewing towards socialism?" He was teasing her now.

Tess squinted. There had to be something else. "Can I exchange the bread, trade it for something more divisible?"

Elijah smiled at her, slapping the table. "Ah, you've discovered the barter system! You're thinking like an economist – better be careful. If you're going to work for me, keep this problem in your mind. You can see with each answer you lay the foundation for a different kind of society. And isn't that what a constitution is designed to do? So, that brings us back to your big idea. Can you tell me what you had in mind?"

"Well..." she demurred, her morning's confidence shaken.

"This isn't a trick. It's not like we hang people for treason anymore. At least, I hope not."

"You don't sound so sure! But all right, I'll lay it out for you. How much time do you have?"

"The afternoon is pretty clear. Cass can keep your father entertained, take him to the telescope. There's some pretty cool science stuff in the Annex."

"He'd love that – the science stuff, I mean. As long as he's supervised."

"If you're still here by dinner, maybe Nolan will want to play hologames with him, or Ellie will braid his hair."

Wait, what? Tess dropped her fork, clanging noisily on the salad plate. Was that some kind of joke?

Elijah seemed not to pick up on her momentary confusion. "How long has he...been like that?"

"The dementia? It was early onset, but it only really took hold in the last few months. Or maybe it was years ago, and I've just been in denial. He'd wandered off when you called. It scared the living daylight out of me."

"Cassidy's grandfather had something similar, though later in life. If you should need one, I know a top-rate facility that's affordable. We used it back when I was a lowly House member."

"We're not there yet, but that's very kind, thank you."

"Offer's on the table. Anyway, first things first – this is for you." He slid a pano across the table. "This is how we'll communicate, keep it on you at all times, don't tell a soul, et cetera et cetera. If I can convince the president to give this idea a chance – I'll be honest, it's a longshot – I'll officially add you to the payroll, so you can get benefits and all that. You'll be compensated as a contractor for now, but until then, I need you to keep a lid on this. You can't tell anyone you're

working for me, not yet.”

“I’m not known for leaks. Even if Speaker Cunningham trashes me about everything else, he’d back me up on that. And you don’t have to worry about my father, he’ll forget he was ever here by midnight.”

He nodded, having assumed as much. “Second, that’s a secure pano – no open links – but you can’t be too careful. It’s best you and I never mention the word ‘constitution’. We’re not there yet, anyway. That being said, we can call it the Convention Project. If anything does get out about this, for whatever reason, that would be better for both of us.”

“Convention Project, got it.”

The vice president took the last bite of his salad and set down his silver. “All right,” he said, “tell me what you’ve got in mind.”

CHAPTER NINE

“Over many generations, the divided halves of this country led each other to the edge of a cliff. From this precipice, they stared into an abyss called war. It was inevitable, then, that when one side jumped, the other was all too quick to follow.”

- Acton Granger, speech at Yankee Stadium Memorial – August 5, 2060

The ferryboat churned through New York’s Upper Bay.

It didn’t have far to travel – the trip from Manhattan’s Battery Park to Ellis Island was only a couple miles. It was a windy morning, with a fine, misty rain that kept one’s skin in a perpetual tickle. The sun had dwindled into memory, buried behind clouds the first two weeks of March.

But it was a beautiful, bright day to Benjamin Allen. As he stood on the ferryboat’s prow, his eyes drilled through the fog at the vista ahead. Standing across the bay was the magnificent Lady Liberty herself, her statue looking resolute as always, flaming torch hoisted high.

Liberty Island was not their destination, however. In the middle of the bay, the ferry slowed and pivoted ceremoniously toward Liberty’s little sister, Ellis.

Built up in the late nineteenth century, Ellis Island became known as a beacon of opportunity for American immigrants from across the globe. At its peak, the immigration center processed ten thousand

souls each day, including future American icons Bob Hope and Cary Grant. Ellis Island was America's primary immigrant hub until the 1950s, as the majority of prospective citizens began arriving by plane instead of boat. The island stood idle for a time, until becoming a museum in the late twentieth century, but interest eventually waned and Ellis faded into obscurity.

Until now. With the passage of his immigration bill, President Granger had decided to reintroduce Ellis Island as a national symbol, making it the first immigration center for the country's newly open borders. A savvy politician recognizing an opportunity, the president had decided to make a national event of it, with all the pomp and circumstance befitting the monumental occasion.

"Beg your pardon sir, a cocktail for you?" Ben Allen looked down to his left and saw a hand outstretched with a highball of gin fizz, his favorite. He turned to face its server with mock incredulity.

"This boat ride is barely twenty minutes long, how'd you find that?"

Dylan Tomlin only responded with a teasing smile. He handed over the highball and squeezed in next to Ben on the railing, a tight fit amidst the crowd of other passengers. Dylan was quite a bit larger than Ben, but he managed to fit in wherever he went, and he could always find a drink.

The two of them watched in silence as the ferry drew closer to land. Ellis Island was largely manmade, built up on excavated soil from New York's first subway tunnels. The island's layout was in a basic rectangle with a docking area cutting a narrow vertical through most of the middle, so it resembled a squatted *U*-shape.

The two sides of the *U* were distinctive, Ben remembered, having toured the island as a child almost sixty years ago. When it was operational, Ellis's right side held the Main Building, a limestone behemoth that resembled an old train station. It warehoused incoming migrants as they were processed, which included a medical exam and often took several hours. Just beyond the Main Building stood another large structure used for storing baggage and valuables. A courtyard lay to that building's side, open to views of both Manhattan and the incoming ferry.

Ellis's left side had always been closed to the public, containing a private hospital and assorted administration buildings. Ben remembered a bridge connecting the island to Jersey City on the opposite side, but the bridge had long been taken by water. He wondered if it would be rebuilt now that the island was open again –

the latest studies were indicating that sea levels had finally begun to recede. *There's a positive to the world running out of oil*, Ben thought.

"They've really cleaned up the place," Dylan observed, as the island came into view. He was right – after the museum had closed, Ellis had gone to seed, its buildings crumbling under their own heft. Most of the island's thirty acres eroded, but it had been re-dredged and ringed with levees that Ben hoped might also shield them from a frigid breeze.

The closer they got, the better it looked. The reconstructed Main Building shone even through fog, the fresh glass in the windows looking like tiny beacons. A small, triangular jetty stretched out toward them from the island's right side, a single flagpole hoisting the seventy-five-starred American flag, rippling favorably.

Dylan tucked his hand in the crook of Ben's elbow, giving it a squeeze of nervous anticipation. *After all this time*, Ben thought, *we're a country of new beginnings again*.

Now that he could see over the levees and into the courtyard, the setup for the ceremony became clear. Opposite sets of bleachers faced each other, with a wide procession aisle running between them. A stage had been erected at the aisle's end with some VIP seating and a backdrop of flags and banners.

"This is incredible," Dylan breathed.

"I'm just happy we got an invite."

"Don't give me that. You've championed this cause for a generation. I may be the only one that knows it, but none of this would be happening without you."

"I'm just a rich guy in a backwater state that's seen lots of residents either die off or move south. We need people, wherever they come from."

"Maine isn't backwater," Dylan protested.

"Maine is the definition of backwater. That's what makes it so wonderful. But there's a difference between backwater and desolate, and that's what we're becoming."

Dylan's pride may have clouded his outlook, but Ben knew his husband agreed, deep down. "All the same," Dylan said, "But look who changed all that. I couldn't be prouder of you for this. After all, who was asking for an open border before you? Who forced the issue by only sponsoring candidates that supported it? The president's seal is on that podium, but this is your party. Drink your drink."

Ben was happy to oblige, taking a long pull of the gin fizz. He

looked back at Dylan, who was typically dressed to the nines and in full fashionista mode. Even his raincoat stood out, a grooving purple and all straps and flaps, looking like he belonged on some kind of Galactic Council. Somehow, it fit him.

In so many ways, Dylan was Ben's opposite – brash where he was quiet, impulsive where he was methodical – and in most of their two decades together that had worked just fine. Ben had spent so many years dialed into his work, he considered Dylan the spritely relief to his dullard self, the colorful contrast in his grey palate.

But in the year since his retirement, Ben was spending considerably more time at home, and the colorful contrast was now full up in the foreground, constantly needling for attention. Ben had to admit that thoughts of moving on crept in, something he would've figured to be the last thing to ever occur to him.

Lately, however, there was some restraint in Dylan's whirling dervish. He'd become newly capable of muting his eccentricities when needed. Ben had no desire to see his companion lose any part of what made him special, but appreciated that his specialness could be controlled. As a result, they'd been clicking better than they had in years.

Today, however, Dylan's fashion choices appeared to defy that recent restraint. Ben couldn't withhold his opinion any longer.

"Care to explain that coat?"

"You like it?"

"I didn't say that," Ben said, with a whiff of amusement. "The president's going to be here, you know."

Dylan mock-pouted in protest. "Don't be surprised if he points me out during his speech. Look, this is what happens when you let me go to Fashion Week. Check this out." He raised a sleeve as the misty drizzle intensified. Ben puzzled at what he was seeing. Raindrops were gathering a few millimeters above the coat's material before pushing sideways around it, as if repelled by a force field.

Ben brushed the sleeve with his fingers. "Huh. It's completely dry."

"Amazing, right? It's made of something called caliphan – I have no idea how it works, but it's the new rage. Rumor is the government invented it. No doubt, this is the finest raincoat ever made. It never gets wet, even in a hurricane!"

"It's a neat material, but do they make anything out of it that looks normal? A lot of those flaps seem impractical."

Another look of protest was shot Ben's way. "You can convert it a bunch of different ways. I'm not sure how that works yet. But I'll get you one before we head back."

"Why buy one, when you can get two at twice the price?"

"Now you're learning how to govern. What do you think, hood up or hood down?"

"Down. Your hair would hold up better in a hurricane than the coat."

The ferry crept closer to land and slowed to prepare for docking. A few men hustled about on shore, readying ropes and a disembarking ramp. Ben's view of the courtyard was now fully clear, a holo of the presidential seal rotating slowly in front of the podium on the stage. He found himself fixating on it.

"You still think about running, don't you?"

Ben scoffed. "This old queen, president?"

"You've broken barriers before, what's another one?"

"I don't think the country's ready for a president and his First Husband."

Dylan feigned grievance. "They would love me!"

They sure would, Ben thought, until they saw your White House decorating budget.

"Besides," Dylan continued, "you've sponsored so many candidates, no one would notice that you're sponsoring yourself. I think it would set a good example, for a Sponsor to put their mouth where their money is. And the country could use someone with your genius."

The ferryboat eased into docking and the engines went full stop. Ben and Dylan moved to exit with the rest of the passengers. They stepped down the ramp and followed the stream of people toward the courtyard.

As they reached the bleachers, an event official approached, giving Dylan a brief smile before turning to Ben.

"Mr. Allen," she said.

"Yes?"

"I'm from President Granger's advance team. The president has requested that you appear on stage with him along with other distinguished guests during the ceremony."

Ben felt an urgent tug at his sleeve. "Just a moment," he said to the official before turning to Dylan. She nodded politely.

Dylan pulled Ben back a step, keeping his whisper out of earshot. "You know what this means, right?"

"You can handle a couple hours without me. I'll just be a few feet away."

"No, don't you see what he's doing?"

"Who?"

"Granger, that's who. He's pulling you close. He *sees you as a threat*."

Ben scoffed. "Really, I'm glad you think so highly of me, but that's probably the last thing on his mind. I'm just a guy with deep pockets that maybe the president would be interested in dipping into. Aside from you, no one's even considered me a possible candidate, let alone felt threatened by me." *Plus, I get a better view of history.*

The official leaned toward them. "And you're Mr. Tomlin, I assume? We also have a special arrangement for you in the front row."

Dylan tried not to beam, but this clearly pleased him. "Well then," he said. "Hanging out with Big Shot over here has its perks."

"You're just now realizing that?" Ben teased.

The official brought out her pano, gesturing to forward their new credentials. She frowned and tried again.

"Here, allow me." Ben took hold of the pano and used the same technique, encircling each virtual pass with a forefinger and flicking it first at Dylan and then toward himself. He handed the pano back to the official, who smiled in dubious thanks and returned to her post.

"She actually was doing it right. The new release has trouble registering smaller hands."

"Don't go crazy," Dylan said. "You're retired, remember?"

"If there's one thing I hate, it's a buggy interface. That shouldn't happen with a major release."

"It's not your problem anymore. Look where we are. Besides, you have bigger dreams, remember? And today, one is coming true."

They kissed goodbye briefly, and Ben turned to the stage entrance. He spun back after a few steps. "You know, you're right," he said to Dylan. "Maybe tomorrow, we can talk about that other dream."

Dylan smiled his *gotcha* grin, turning away with a bounce in his step.

It was coming upon noon and the president was late. Ben passed some time trading small talk with the dignitaries on the stage –

mostly ambassadors and members of Congress. He seemed to be the only one from the private sector. A few empty seats remained for those in the Cabinet traveling with Granger.

As conversation stalled, Ben retreated into his thoughts as his eyes settled on the rotating presidential seal a dozen yards away. Could Dylan have been right, that the president invited him only because he thought he was a threat? If so, was it a mistake to come? Ben wouldn't have missed this occasion for the world, but he did check to see if he'd be in the background shot during the president's remarks, and even shimmied his chair a few inches to the left, as if that would make a difference.

Two years into office, Acton Granger was already a historic figure, racking up legislative wins and presiding over a resuscitated economy. How could Ben Allen beat someone like that, given that the country only knew him as a tech magnate? When the president first announced his campaign, he was dubbed the *North Dakota No-Name* – an unknown from another backwater state. He'd worn his anonymity like a badge of honor, saying it kept him free-wheeling and loose, until suddenly he was the front-runner. Could Ben do the same, if he ran? Did the *Maine Mogul* have the same panache?

As for strategy, funding would of course not be an issue, but his appeal might be. He was an old computer geek and not exactly a natural politician. Most Progressives would sit this one out, given the president's popularity. That meant a limited primary. He had deep ties to the Progressive League, sponsoring many of their campaigns, but would they see him as viable given that he'd never run for anything himself? And if by some miracle he won the nomination – what about the general election, what chance would he have?

Progressives ran strong in the Northeast – where there were almost two hundred electoral votes, if you included all three Pennsylvanias. The president would own the Midwest, the Conservatives and the Freedom League would fight over the South, and the West Coast might be up for grabs. The calculus was tricky, but if he could hold his home turf and spend heavily in the coastal states, it was possible.

New York might be the biggest challenge. Elijah Schroeder, as a native Long Islander, might complicate things if he chose to stay on as vice president, but no one could say if that would happen. It was one thing to govern with someone in a different League, it was another to campaign with them. Granger might consider him a drag

on the ticket and cut him loose. If he stayed on, Schroeder could turn away progressive-minded Reformers who looked for a less compromising option.

Which best explained why the vice president wasn't here today, even though Ellis Island was his back yard. Granger had been wise to give Schroeder some distance on this issue – especially since most Conservatives adopted, at best, a wait-and-see position.

The other question on Ben's mind – why run? It couldn't be just about breaking barriers. He would have to play down his sexuality to all but his most ardent supporters. Dylan would get frustrated by that, always quick to wrap himself in a rainbow flag. His husband also wouldn't understand the effort involved. No more sunset walks, thermoses of gin fizzes in hand, down to the shore. He'd be un-retiring and then some.

Then there was the money. He made so much on the pano there was an almost limitless supply of it, but a presidential campaign was tens of billions of dollars, nothing to sniff at. To justify the investment, he would need a cause – and without his realizing, the president had just outflanked him on immigration. He would apparently need to fine-tune his political instincts as well.

But what cause? What could he champion that might launch him into a contender?

The sound of approaching aircraft snapped him out of his reverie, and Marine One seemed to appear all at once against the backdrop of the Manhattan skyline. The quadcopter was a beautiful bird, sleek and stealthy, its four horizontal rotors dancing across the mist. It was flanked by a pair of hoverjets, and they flew past the island at a distance, with all eyes watching their arcing path. Marine One settled down regally on the other side of the island, behind the old hospital. Once it touched down, the hoverjets vaulted upwards into the cloud cover, the only hint of their presence now a low hum.

Music began to play from pano speakers around the stage, lending the scene a campaign event vibe. Those wandering around in the bleachers took their seats and waited. After a couple of upbeat pop songs, the familiar notes of *Hail to the Chief* rang out, and Ben closed his eyes, just briefly, his imagination taking hold. *I could get used to hearing that*, he thought.

Acton Granger soared onto the stage, throwing his massive arms out in a figurative embrace of the crowd. Many politicians now mimicked the president's greeting, in various degrees of failure – you had to have arms that long for someone in the back row to think you

could reach them.

Granger took to the podium, speaking without notes. He effortlessly ticked off the names of those who'd joined with him in this common cause of furthering the interests of diversity and strength, tossing out quick anecdotes for each. When he got to Ben Allen, his tone turned personal, heavy on admiration with even a tinge of awe. How courageous this tech pioneer and philanthropist had been for all these years, when most everyone had turned against this cause in fear.

In the front row of the audience, Dylan was smiling and probably thinking, *Told you so*.

And now, the fruit of Ben's labors sped towards them. A cigarette boat streaked toward the island, hovering smoothly over the chop. At the boat's aft, with hands on hips and a foot propped up casually on the side railing, stood the man who would be America's first immigrant in two decades, looking like Washington crossing the Delaware.

He was a man that Ben knew well. About three years after the war broke out in earnest, Ben had felt a twinge in his ear, then a nagging, dull thrum. Turned out, some of the microfusion batteries in the second-generation pano had a faulty casing, leaking radiation. Pano-related cancer exploded into a firestorm – big enough to warrant a media-coined nickname, the Pancer Crisis. As someone who was glued to multiple devices in work and in life, Ben was a prime target. Dylan had always told him his addiction to his little magical device would be his undoing, and he'd been right.

"I have Pancer," Ben told Dylan, once he'd heard the news after ordering MRIs for everyone in his company. "Stage four." He remembered how Dylan, who didn't always keep up with current events, reacted with a fit of laughter.

When that subsided, all Dylan could ask was, "What the fuck is Pancer?" But he grew more serious as Ben relayed each grim detail. He helped Ben scour every medical journal they could find, no matter where it came from, until happening upon a theoretical procedure detailed by a prodigious Osaka neurosurgeon by the name of Hijori Nakomuri. They liquidated most of Ben's fledgling fortune at the time and flew to Japan for the procedure.

Months of recovery followed – multiple tumors in Ben's brain had been cored out and replaced with stem cells, which took time to develop. He never would have survived without Nakomuri, but he wouldn't have lived without Dylan Tomlin either. He drove Ben

crazy back then, too, but was at his side during those agonizing few months when Ben didn't know if all his cognitive and motor functions would return. For the most part, they did – Ben still had some episodes now and then (Dylan called them Space Cases), as if someone had tripped over his power cord before hastily plugging it back in. But on the whole, his brain had grown nimbler and more agile with the younger, fresher stem cells at the helm.

Now, so many years later, Nakomuri wanted to bring his talents to the United States. With no small amount of lobbying (and promises for future sponsorships), Ben Allen had secured for his old doctor the honor around which this Open Borders ceremony revolved. Other boats bearing other passengers would follow, but Nakomuri was to be the first. And once admitted into the country, he was coming to Maine – Ben had gotten the surgeon a residency at the Portland Medical Center, which would immediately jump twenty spots in the national rankings with his tenure. There were still thousands of Pancer patients stateside who had been stuck in the country once the war broke out, though many had long since died.

Nakomuri's boat docked opposite the ferry and the foreign neurosurgeon set foot on American soil, greeted with buoyant eruption. The doctor waved and smiled awkwardly, unused to such public fawning outside of medical circles.

Taking it all in, Ben didn't know which he enjoyed more – the scene itself or watching it play out on Dylan's face in the front row. He looked back at Ben, shedding visible tears. Ben fought back the urge to hop down from the stage and watch it all unfold at his husband's side.

Any doubts he ever harbored about leaving Dylan, his heart answered them in that moment. He loved him. He loved him. He loved him.

Nakomuri took the long walk around the courtyard, along a red carpet that took him between the sets of bleachers and up to the stage. There, the president waited, ready to ask the Japanese doctor the famous set of twenty-nine questions that once greeted every American immigrant when Ellis Island was open.

What is your name?

How old are you?

Are you able to read and write?

What is the Constitution?

And so on.

Once completed, America would have a new ingredient in its

melting pot.

Nakomuri paused his approach while the president formally introduced him. The applause reached a crescendo, and Hijori bowed and blew kisses to all quadrants of the audience. Ben brushed back his own tears, overwhelmed by the spectacle. The stagecraft was simply better than anything he could dream. He dismissed his half-baked idea of running for the presidency, as if he had any prayer against the giant in front of him, the man who had just fulfilled Ben's most ardent aspiration. He only felt an enormous surge of pride, in his country, in humanity, and in his own part in this magnificent day, pride so swelling he worried his flesh might not hold it in, that he might explode and shower all these dignitaries with his gratified innards.

In the blink of an eye, it all splintered into chaos.

From his periphery, Ben saw a faint blue flash from halfway up one of the waterfront skyscrapers in the Manhattan skyline. Just as quickly, Hijori Nakomuri, famed regenerative neurosurgeon and soon-to-be first immigrant, spilled forward onto the carpet as that same pulse of light flickered through his skull. His legs and arms twitched in the throes of instant death. A wisp of smoke exhaled from the hole in his head, liquefied brain matter gargling out, forming ragged clumps in the doctor's hair.

The crowd reeled from celebration to horror, then shifted into panic as other light-flashes followed, peppering the bleachers indiscriminately in deadly spurts. It was a weapon Ben had never seen before, seemingly harmless bolts of light carving through anything they touched, even the ground.

A larger flash blinked from the skyscraper across the bay – red this time, like a muzzle blast – and Ben could see a pinpoint growing larger as it trailed toward them.

Someone fired a missile at us, he thought. We're all dead.

But Ellis wasn't the missile's target. Instead, the javelin-shaped projectile screamed past overhead, as it made for Liberty Island and the statue bearing its name. Breaking the sound barrier, the missile left a shuddering boom in its wake, and anyone who hadn't taken cover was thrown to the ground.

A focused sphere of bright green light detonated in the Statue of Liberty's upraised forearm, just below the base of the torch. At first, nothing happened. The crowd, pausing to bear witness even amidst raining death, initially gasped a breathless sigh of relief. Someone next to Ben questioned if it was a dud.

Slender fissures started to appear around Lady Liberty's wrist like infected veins, rippling into seams and cracks as acid ate its way through the oxidized copper of the statue's patina. The structural framework inside the arm began to liquefy, dissolved by ravenous chemical reactions. The statue's hand – and the torch it grasped – wavered on its dissipating base, slipping downward. It tipped forward hesitantly, tottering, then pitched into open air, tumbling hundreds of feet to the ground below. It landed on its side, half bouncing and half breaking apart, spinning out wildly upon impact. The sound of it rang across the bay like a terrible church bell, delayed slightly by the distance between the two islands, as if it took an extended moment to confirm the horror of the sight.

"Great God Almighty." Ben Allen didn't know if the words came from his lips or someone else's. *Even during the worst of Civ-2*, he thought, *no one touched the Statue*.

Cries of anguish spilled out across Ellis Island, as a disbelieving audience absorbed what it was witnessing. Then, remembering their danger, they tumbled toward the ferryboats in a tsunami.

In front of Ben, a blanket of agents had fallen upon the president in a protective ring. They activated the Hamster Ball, an inflatable shelter sphere, furiously pushing Granger inside it as if trying to stuff a newborn back in the womb. No sooner had the president been enclosed that a beam struck the bubble in a glancing blow, turned away by the Hamster Ball's reflective outer layer. Four agents gathered at one side, pushing hard in poetic unison, and the sphere rolled forward. Plunging off the stage, it picked up speed and barreled toward the quadcopter on the other side of the island.

In the sky above, the two escorting hoverjets dropped back into view from the cloud cover. They hurtled toward Manhattan and the source of the carnage, scanning for targets. But with the Statue of Liberty an amputee, America's first immigrant murdered, and the president spinning away like an oversized marble, the perpetrators must have decided their work complete and the shooting stopped.

The jets listed aimlessly in the wind and rain, either unable to find something to shoot at or unwilling to take the shot. The offenders had chosen their vantage deliberately, a densely populated structure where collateral damage from retaliatory fire would be enormous.

The hoverjets returned and lingered over Ellis Island at a low, deafening altitude. Beyond the hospital, Marine One blasted off, nestling between its escorts, and the three aircraft darted away at impossible speed, fading to hazy specks over open water.

Ben realized in all the madness he'd barely moved. The dispersant crowd was streaming aboard the ferry, their shouts and screams moving with them, leaving an unearthly silence after such monumental noise.

Dylan!

His eyes moved back and forth with frantic urgency, looking for his love. He did not take long to find. Before the stage were dozens of scattered bodies, some shot, some trampled. A few were still twitching, others writhed in soft moans, but most had gone still. Enshrouding one, in the first row of risers, was a coat of purple caliphan with the hood down, rebuffing both rain and blood as its excess of flaps rippled in the wind.