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EMERGENCY POWERS

James McCrone

An Imogen Trager Thriller

“Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.”

-Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1735)

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Just before 5am, FBI Agent Imogen Trager gave a low growl and reached for the phone, buzzing officiously on the nightstand. She sat on the edge of the bed she shared with Duncan Calder, glowering at it as her eyes focused in the dark. Fixing a strand of red hair behind her ear, she scrolled through texts and posts from colleagues and friends. Her anger turned from dismay to sickening fear.

“Duncan!” She shook him awake and handed him the phone. He sat up and took it, scanning the news, instantly awake.

Imogen rose and picked her way to the living room in the dark where she turned on the television. The piercing glare of the screen stung the murky Northwest morning. Some 3,700 miles away, Vice President Robert Moore approached a phalanx of microphones, manfully fighting back tears:

“My fellow Americans,” he said, “it is my sad duty to confirm that Diane Redmond, the President of the United States, is dead.”

Bob Moore, a towering figure in person, looked small on screen, standing in the rain under a canopy of black umbrellas at the entrance to Walter Reed Medical Center. Duncan joined Imogen in the darkness, and she reached for his hand.

They stared, dumbfounded, as Moore continued: “Her doctors have informed me”—here he paused to clear his throat—“that the cause of death is believed to be a heart attack; that it was sudden and fatal. A full autopsy is underway, and it will give us a clearer picture. Our prayers go out to her family and loved ones.

2

“The Chief Justice has administered the Oath of Office to me here in the presence of cabinet members and hospital staff. The preservation of our great nation’s interests, its security and the continuity of government are assured.”

Duncan turned to Imogen: “Is it starting again?”

“I don’t think it ever stopped,” she brooded, her green eyes smoldering. “We failed. We didn’t cut the head off the snake.” Fury rose within her, sharp and raw like nausea.

Duncan handed her back the phone. It continued buzzing as reporters swarmed, asking for a quote from her as the public and photogenic face of the Faithless Elector investigation. She’d learned her lesson there and declined each call.

Their texted questions—the ones she bothered to read—were, as usual, off the mark: Would the Faithless Elector task force be revived to look into the President’s death? Would unanswered questions from the investigation strengthen or weaken support for the new President? Regarding the first: the task force was alive, if not well, she thought, and at any rate, she’d be one of the last to know about any official changes or developments. As to the second: Take a fucking a poll.

None of them asked the real questions—the ones *she* needed answered: Was this the final move of the conspiracy she had chased madly into a blind alley? If so, how had the dark network assassinated a President inside the White House? Who was moving the pieces, and what were the next moves? Most pressing: How would she get herself back in the hunt? From her phone, she deleted the draft email bearing the resignation she had planned to send on Monday morning.

Dawn was still some two hours away as Calder sat down on the couch next to her. “So you won’t be resigning, I take it,” he observed.

“No,” she said, not looking up from her notebook.

“How will you begin?”

She looked up. “We were digging in the wrong place. I’m going to go back over the associates and links we’ve established, see where or how any of them point at Bob Moore.”

“So Moore digging, eh?” he quipped.

Imogen sighed. She loved him, but how was he able to have distance at a moment like this? she wondered. She eyed him wearily. “Duncan, I’m going to get stonewalling from Nettie at the office about this new direction. I’m—”

He held up a hand. “What will you do?” He looked at her notebook. “And who’s Carla?”

“I’m going back to the data.”

“You’ve gotten nowhere with that,” said Calder acidly.

“Because we were looking at it in relation to other actors. Not Moore. And Carla’s not a who, but a what—short for ‘CARLA F BAD’: Character, Associates, Reputation, Loyalty, Ability, Finances, Bias, Alcohol, Drugs. It’s what you look at in a security clearance, among other things. It helps define spheres of influence and interaction. The disclosure dossiers on the men who’ve been working directly under Moore will have looked precisely at these CARLA factors. And I want to look at them, too. And his associates. So I’ll go backward, this time with Moore in mind. I want to look at his campaign finances. Who funded him early on in the race? Who else was involved or associated? Maybe something jumps out at me. Maybe that’ll point me in a direction.”

“It’s a lot of maybes, ’Gen.” He scratched at his iron gray hair.

“It’s where I’ll start. There’s always a gap in the armor somewhere. The really hard part is that I can’t just request materials the regular way through regular channels without telegraphing what I’m trying to do.”

“Or looking like you’re still part of the Faithless Elector case.”

She nodded and looked at him uncertainly. “And...I think I should cut this weekend short, if I can get a flight back to D.C.”

“I’m wondering what you’re still doing here,” he said.

Imogen leaned in and kissed him.

On the East Coast it was early morning, but across much of the country the sun was still not up. In the darkness, the

announcement of Redmond's death in office set off a series of moves seemingly unconnected and largely unremarked, as pawns were sacrificed and battle pieces were moved into place for the final gambit.

Rocky Mountains

Snow lit by headlights split the darkness, blinding the Highway patrolman who waited for the tow truck to pull out a car buried in the snow. Working in the dark about 14 miles west-by-southwest of Aspen, Colorado, the tow truck was having a difficult time dragging the car out. In what must have been whiteout conditions, the car had plunged through a guardrail and into the ravine.

As the patrolman stood at the side of the road waiting for the winch operator to do his work, he took off his right glove to read an alert on his phone. Speechless, he watched the news clip of now-President Moore at the hospital. Bewildered, numb—and not just from the cold—he stared over the still-dark, bleak expanse of mountains.

“Damn,” said the winch operator, breaking the patrolman's reverie. The contorted steel shell of a car came into view and slowly ascended backwards up the steep hill. “You guys close Route 82 for more than half the year. Maybe you should think about closing this one, too.”

“We serve and protect,” the patrolman countered. “We can't protect them from their own stupidity.”

Maricopa, California

Ninety-five miles northwest of Los Angeles, near Bakersfield, west of where the lush groves of San Emidio return to desert, police had responded to a call reporting shots fired.

The bodies of four men lay strewn around the living room and kitchen of a battered, double-wide trailer home, victims of an apparent drug deal gone bad. Even before forensics got to work, it was obvious the house had been used as a meth lab. An acrid stench burned the eyes and throats of the responding officers, who quickly backed out and awaited the Kern County forensics team.

As two officers sat in a squad car in the dark guarding the site, news reached them of the death of the president. They watched Moore at Walter Reed on the lieutenant's phone. The death of these four drug dealers now seemed even less important. Desultorily, they searched the onboard police computer for information about the four corpses. Two of them had arrest records, known agitators and members of a border vigilante group.

"Right," the lieutenant said to the patrolman. "Illegally funded law and order."

"For some," the officer added.

In Seattle, Imogen packed her bags, while fewer than six miles away but as blind to one another as opposite sides of the same coin, a sleek Eclipse 500 jet touched down at Boeing Field. The light jet taxied rapidly in the damp winter darkness, coming to an abrupt stop on a dimly lit portion of the tarmac at the north end of the field.

The hiss of its engines became a plaintive whistle as the doors popped open and two young men, Dan Cardoso and Eric Janssen, ran down the steps. They immediately turned round and helped close the stairs. But for this gesture of help, anyone witnessing their arrival—and no one did—might have mistaken them for two young executives returning from a casual outing.

Its doors sealed once more, the small jet in the tan-on-beige livery of Flintlock Industries, pushed on, the whistle of its engines discordantly climbing the scale as it taxied away. Cardoso and Janssen walked toward their cars parked just outside a chain link fence, fist-bumping as they separated at the gate.

"See you April 20," Janssen said.

Cardoso gave a thumbs-up as he turned away. Though the tarmac was deserted, the bravado exchange was a crucial performance. They had each been schooled in the need for watchfulness—especially of one another. Any sign of dissent, hint of doubt or fading spirit should be reported.

Alone for the first time in more than 24 hours, each man allowed himself to think about what had just happened. On orders, they'd dispatched the members of a cell near Bakersfield, California, much like their own, though a failing one according to their handler. Although they had kept their misgivings to themselves, each had arrived at the same conclusion: when given a list of people marked for death, the quickest way to get your name added to the list was to refuse or even question the job. Each ruminated on the final step to come, and whether they would receive their just, or their eternal, reward.

Before their cars were started, and as Imogen zipped her suitcase closed, the light jet was in the air, headed east to another rendezvous.

2

Reactions to the death of the President were swift across the nation and the political spectrum. Imogen, now waiting at the airport gate, had inadvertently seated herself between two television monitors, each tuned to a different 24-hour news channel. They faced each other, across her and the political divide. At times, they seemed to be arguing with each other, and she found herself glancing back and forth like someone watching a tennis match. Travelers congregated silently at screens large and small throughout the terminal.

The remarkable unanimity of official emotion on television and across social media made it seem that everyone in Washington had been issued the same talking points memo: Redmond was praised for her "integrity," her "dignity" and

“strength,” each promising to uphold the unity she had embodied and to deliver on her legacy while offering support to Moore. There were, Imogen noted, still a few unfilled cabinet positions left. Snapchat, she mused tartly, seemed like a better venue for all the disposable preening and jockeying.

The news was rife with speculation about what had befallen President Redmond, and what a new Moore administration might look like. Between the two televisions and along the political spectrum, while politicians hewed to their “unity in adversity” tropes, the talking heads seemed to be going through their own peculiar stages of grief: conservative hosts, when not in denial about the larger implications, presented with over-modulated anger; whereas mainstream pundits registered shock and dismay, their interviews with Democratic leaders manifesting pain, and above all bargaining. Only religious leaders seemed to have progressed to acceptance and hope, anointing Moore as one demonstrably chosen by Providence. In all cases, speculation was rampant, and there were no facts in evidence, save the obvious—Redmond was dead and Moore was president.

Bob Moore was taciturn by nature, the pundits opined. He had a reputation for bloodless pronouncements, heavy on procedure and mindful of every political angle, earning him the ironic nickname “ad lib Bob.” But on the campaign trail, and during the contested fight for the Presidency, they noted, he had been a different man. All dispassion spent, he became a man of conviction. It remained to be seen, the pundits agreed, as to which version of Moore would prevail now that he was President.

[end of excerpt]

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