

CHAPTER ONE

THE GLOW OF fluorescent streetlamps was the only light as I squinted through cracked blinds at the early morning world outside the window. Two stories down, in front of our town house on Dogwood Lane, a black limousine waited.

Grumbling, I asked the dark sky, “What the heck is it this time?”

“Blake...?” asked my waking wife, looking peaceful and warm beneath the covers. It took all my willpower not to slip back into bed.

“I’ve got to go into work,” I whispered, kissing her forehead. “Sorry, go back to sleep.”

She mumbled something incomprehensible and drifted off. I released the blinds’ aluminum slats and the bedroom snapped to black. Using my phone as a flashlight, I managed to find a pair of khakis on the closet floor and a mostly clean button-down in the laundry basket. I felt reassured that my blazer would hide my wrinkled sleeves, but the pants were old and kind of a squeeze.

I kissed my love again and headed down to the first floor. I couldn’t find my winter coat anywhere and was already two steps back up the stairs to look for it when I

saw the thing crumpled in a ball on the sofa. I put it on, went outside, and tapped my phone to lock the door.

As soon as my phone reentered my pocket, I realized I'd forgotten my work bag. With a short wave to the limo, I unlocked the door and went back inside. A few quick laps around the living room led me to the olive messenger bag sitting on the piano bench. I groaned to see a stain on the bag's bottom; it smelled of sweet raspberries. Oh well...there wasn't time to worry about that.

I locked up again and gave the door a good shake to make sure my phone had done its job. So as not to waste any more time, I clipped my government ID card to my belt while trotting toward the limo.

Warm air rushed into my face as I opened the car's door. Sinking into the creamy leather backseat, I let out a heavy sigh. Made it. I felt a queasy weightlessness as the wheels lifted into the undercarriage and the car lifted two feet above the ground.

"Your socks don't match," criticized a thin, Asian-American woman sitting across from me, as the hover limo whisked me away from my cozy townhouse. She was attractive in a praying mantis kind of way. While she was just a young intern, she wore a tailored, pin-striped suit that looked more expensive than my entire work wardrobe. I was pretty sure her name started with a *V*. Veronica?

"It's intentional," I said without checking the socks. "I'm testing your observational skills, which as you know are critical in public relations."

"My powers of observation also say you didn't shower."

"I didn't get to brush my teeth, either," I complained

while using a couple fingers to comb my greasy hair. “Did I have time?”

“No.” She—Vanessa, maybe?—gave me that eyebrow-raised smile young people give to out-of-touch elders. Did she think I was old? I’m only thirty-five! And what’s she? Twenty-five? It wasn’t really a big age difference.

The hover limo increased velocity until my neighborhood was a blur. I felt like throwing up. My mind said it was a good thing I skipped breakfast, though my stomach didn’t agree.

“Hey, what’s the rush, anyway?” I asked.

The intern’s expression turned grave. “One of Our Leader’s hounds got loose.”

“Oh,” I said, taking this in. “TGIF.”

Just another morning in Washington.



The hound isn’t really a dog. Sure, it runs on four legs and has pointy ears like a Doberman, but it’s actually a machine. The thing’s coated in polished steel and wields a mouthful of sharpened razors. Our Leader’s scientists designed the hound to protect the Compound and kill any would-be intruders.

Virginia, or whatever her name was, told me how the thing had jumped the fence of the Compound and made a break for it into Embassy Row—a wealthy neighborhood where a lot of diplomats used to live, back before Our Leader sent them packing. It was a nice place; my wife and I had thought about moving there, but we ended up deciding it was a little too close to work.

“Any vics?” I asked in the mode of a TV detective.

“Two.” She handed me a tablet with video footage from neighborhood surveillance cameras.

I couldn’t believe anyone would be up so early, especially with the outside temperature near freezing. Leave it to the physically fit to break all rules of rationality. In this case, they were a thirty-something jogger and a middle-aged power walker.

The jogger never saw the hound coming. Like a cheetah, the steel creature had burst from the shrubs and sprang ferociously toward her throat. The woman was dead before she knew what had mauled her.

The power-walking guy witnessed the attack from about fifty feet down the street. Surveillance showed him dropping his weights and sprinting the other way, but I guess the clang of the barbells against the pavement got the thing’s attention. The mechanical beast bolted toward the walker at sixty miles per hour. It then pounced, claws extended, and slammed him into the asphalt.

“Cripes,” I commented.

“Cripes?” repeated the intern in disbelief. “You watched that fucking shit, and all you can say is *cripes*?”

I wagged a finger at her. “You’re here to learn, right? Well, here’s your PR lesson for the day: Never curse. Not at work, not at home. Never. Because if you get too much in the habit, it might slip out in front of the microphone. Do you know how many PR reps have lost their jobs by blurting out profanity?”

She rolled her eyes. “What if you’re too bottled up? You might explode one day.”

Choosing not to be provoked further, I returned my gaze to the video on the tablet. The mechanical beast

was still chewing on the man's face when the Hound Handlers showed up. They zapped the hound into stasis, zipped it into a burlap sack, then tossed the bundle into an unmarked white van to be returned to the Compound. A cleanup crew arrived to take the bodies and wash the blood off the street.

Strangely, I had a sudden craving for a jelly donut.

"You're still wearing the old badge," the intern said as she took back the tablet. "Security's not going to take it."

My eyes shot to the red ID fastened to my belt. The new one was blue, and I'd picked up mine last week but didn't remember what I'd done with it. Panicked, I flipped open my bag and dug through an impressive stash of empty soda bottles and candy bar wrappers. I could sense the judgmental youth raising her eyebrows at me again, but I soldiered on. Finally, the blue badge materialized inside a secret inside pocket that heretofore hadn't existed. Relieved, I switched out the IDs.

"Perhaps you have a matching sock in there, too?"

"Shut up, Vivian."

She scowled. That was the wrong name.

"Vanessa?"

So was that, and now the intern bared her teeth.

"Veronica? No, wait, don't tell me—"

"Vic—"

"Victoria Chu!" I exclaimed, cleverly throwing in the last name to prove that this was all a joke and in fact I had known her entire name all along.

Hoping to avoid further awkwardness, I gave my new ID an extra close inspection. In fact, I hadn't really looked at my new picture before, but here in the car, I saw it was a big downgrade from the one that had been on the

red card. My cheeks looked chubbier, my hair looked unkempt, and—to top it all off—I'd forgotten to smile.



At the security gate to Our Leader's Compound, I had to flash my blue badge and send my bag through a metal detector. The concrete manor and military base made for a pretty big eyesore. I had much preferred the residence where Our Leader began his presidency, but he'd insisted it wasn't big enough and ordered the construction of this new Compound on his first day in office. A building can go up pretty quickly if the President declares its construction a national emergency. We moved in just under a year later.

Victoria and I walked up the long path to the main entrance. A wintry gust shook the cube-cut hedges and sent a chill right through the wool of my coat. There hadn't been any snow yet, but something in the air told me it was coming.

A burst of heat welcomed us inside. While true that the building's concrete and steel lacked the warm aesthetic of the old place, its central air truly was superior to the plug-in units we'd had to use there. I stopped to warm my hands on one particularly large vent, but Victoria whisked me down the hall to the Comms Situation Room.

Yes, I know the Comms Situation Room sounds important, but really, it's just an ordinary conference room. Its central feature is a big round table with a high-back mesh chair for each member of the communications team. There were large screens on all four walls. Gener-

ally, we used one for presentations, and a second to constantly play the National News Network, more commonly known as “Triple N.” The other two displayed mystifying screen savers.

When I entered the room, the first screen displayed a blood-splashed slideshow of the hound, crimson eyes gleaming through horrific carnage.

Sitting around the table on laptops were Communications Director Scott Jones and Press Secretary Rico Fuentes. Rico sighed morosely, but good old Scott cheered my arrival: “Hey, hey, here comes the Hammer!”

The “Hammer” is me: Blake Hamner—the *n* is silent. I’m the government’s go-to guy whenever things go way south. Because while Our Leader certainly knows how to control the people with an iron fist, he’s not great at keeping up a friendly public image. I worked on his election campaign, and I like to think it’s thanks to me that the people actually *chose* the whiny bastard to lead. Naturally, the new government asked me to stay on after the election to serve as Communications Director, but I knew I’d be bored with the day-to-day nonsense like taking pictures of Our Leader eating ice cream. So, I let my buddy Scott take the job with the understanding that he’d create a special role for me: Crisis Communications Manager. The idea was that they’d call me in to finesse the worst PR disasters. And to be clear, that’s not a part-time role in this administration.

The stress lines around Scott’s eyes showed me I’d made the right choice. All those ice-cream photos had left him looking positively refried. There was this thing that happened to his hair. He’d gone bald on top, but the poor guy never had any time to go to the barber, so the hair

on the back and sides of his head had just kept getting longer. Now it looked like a wig slipping off the back of his head. I sometimes fantasized about grabbing hold of all that scruff and tugging it back up.

Rico seemed to be deteriorating, too. He was a young guy we'd hired to be our public face and point man with the media. Rico's pearly whites contrasted handsomely with his dark, carefully coiffed hair, and he understood the magic of a tailored suit. In front of the cameras, he carried the winning personality of a TV game show host. Behind the scenes, however, it was more like the losing personality of a disgruntled actor who wanted to do something—anything—other than host TV game shows.

I took my seat at the round table. Victoria plunked a mug of coffee in front of me. "Oh!" I called after her. "And a jelly donut!"

But she was already gone.

"Some intern," I grumbled.

"A donut's the last thing you need, Blake," said Rico.

Scott chuckled. "I wouldn't worry about refined sugar. It's the job that's gonna give us all heart attacks."

I smirked. "And a good morning to you both as well."

"Morning?" asked Scott, checking his watch with disbelief. "Oh fuck, it is morning. Fuck me dead, Blake. Fuck me dead on this very table."

I chose not to query if that meant he wanted to be screwed until or while he was dead. Instead, I asked how the hound got loose.

Scott shrugged. "They're doing some repairs on the fence. Apparently, the workers left a cherry picker out and the thing managed to climb it."

"You mean the fence is all that's keeping the hounds inside? Couldn't those idiots have programmed them not to leave the area?"

Scott swirled the coffee in his hand. "Our Leader didn't want to constrain their boundaries."

"So...what? Those things just roam around, killing everyone they see?"

"Smell," corrected Rico. "The eyes are decoration."

"They won't kill everyone," added Scott. "Just anyone without Compound access."

"So," I said, shaking my head in disbelief, "everyone."



We had one hour to figure out a plausible explanation to give the media for the hound's rampage in Embassy Row.

Not every PR rep gets this, but the media is an important ally. Most people don't trust people in power, whether it's the government or a big corporation. All the "everything is great" press releases in the world aren't going to change that. Too much good news might actually increase people's suspicions. Better for the news to come from Triple N's star anchor Maria Worthington, who speaks to viewers as if they're sitting together at the city's coziest café.

"Mm," I murmured, picturing Maria's cinnamon-brown hand as it brings a hot cappuccino to her sultry lips.

Scott shook me. "Blake? Blake? Are you there, Blake?" I opened my eyes. "I was just thinking."

"We are fucked," grumbled Rico, tugging his ID card

about a foot out from its retractable holder and letting it snap back to punctuate the sentence.

I scowled. Rico was becoming a really crappy Press Secretary. A PR flack has got to maintain some level of optimism. He can totally be a cynic—seriously, I’m fine with that—but pessimism just holds back the imagination. Rico started this job bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, but now was behaving like a diseased donkey.

“You need to cool it with the profanity, Rico,” I reprimanded, then turned to the Communications Director. “You, too, Scott.”

“You’ll have to excuse us,” the older colleague said. “We didn’t get to go home yesterday because of the Annual Late-December Holiday Celebration.”

I didn’t go to the state dinner, though I appreciated Our Leader’s progressive effort to be inclusive of all religions. My father is half-Jewish, half-Buddhist, while my mother is half-Christian, one-quarter Muslim, and one-quarter Hindu. In what I consider a stroke of pure brilliance, I synthesized all these contradictions into a single belief system known as atheism.

Scott continued. “We had a prepared speech in which Our Leader was going to formally forgive everyone who didn’t vote for him, but instead he spent his full twenty minutes tearing a new asshole out of Funnyman Dan for that monologue he did Wednesday night.”

My favorite late-night host had been ribbing Our Leader for months, but earlier this week he had apparently hit a nerve with a joke about the President’s steady weight gain since taking office. “No wonder there’s no First Lady,” Dan had joked. “She’d have no room in bed!”

“I had a fucking lot of Merlot, followed by a fucking

lot of coffee,” Scott said. “I thought they’d balance each other out. They didn’t. I’m not even sure I’m really awake.”

I decided that their night sounded awful enough for me to let the cursing slide this time. “Oh, you’re not dreaming,” I chirped, running a hand through my full head of hair. “I am actually this handsome in real life.”

“How are you so fucking positive?” Rico growled. “You know I haven’t stepped outside the Compound for an entire week? I haven’t even had time to get my new ID card. My partner dumped me by text yesterday, claiming I wasn’t putting any effort into our relationship!”

“What did you say?” asked Scott with concern.

“I haven’t replied yet.”

The Communications Director’s eyes blinked with disbelief.

Since I didn’t care about Rico’s love life, I changed the subject. “What do we know about the victims? Surely there’s some dirt to be found.”

Scott pulled up the file on the jogger. “Lawyer, thirty-seven years old, divorced, no children...”

“I said *dirt*, not her life story.”

Scott scrolled down to a category labeled *Questionable Activities*. The government had flagged a few concerning library borrows—books about criminal justice—but it didn’t seem too shocking of a list for an attorney. Her recent credit card transactions looked more promising. She’d recently donated money to Jason Stonybrook, the conservative who’d run against Our Leader in the last election.

Scott clapped appreciatively. “OK, and what about the power walker?”

We didn't have to scroll long to find a questionable enough activity. Scott and I shot up from our seats and chanted the words on the screen: "Disgraced pedophile priest! Disgraced pedophile priest! Disgraced pedophile priest!"

"I had one of those growing up," commented Rico, killing the mood as usual. Scott and I lowered our arms and sat down. Miserably, the Press Secretary asked, "What about neighborhood witnesses to the attack? Won't we have to discredit them, too?"

I wouldn't let Rico's grumpiness derail me. "Most people were sleeping, right? A few might have seen the Handlers cleaning up, but it was still dark, so they'll be hazy on what actually happened. That means they'll buy a good story."

Rico blinked. "You really think we can *spin* this?"

"Maybe you see a vicious killing machine that got loose and went on a rampage, but I sure don't. No, I see a hound who, minding her own business inside our compound, sniffed out two highly questionable people and took initiative to save the day!" I pointed to the photo of the blood-soaked beast. "Why, that there is a *Hero Pup*!"

Scott didn't look convinced. "I admit that sounds fucking *cute*, but c'mon, that thing looks like a monster."

"No," I said, "she looks like a monster *now*."