

Executive Order



a novel

DARYL GRAMLING

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Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Other books by Daryl Gramling](#)

Introduction

To call oneself an American is to solemnly declare that one loves freedom. It is to irrevocably claim the divinely appointed rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is to purposefully choose to participate in a form of government that has proven to be the best and most effective in history. Not perfect, but balanced by three separate branches of government. Not utopian, yet offering the most unrestricted opportunities for freedom and self-advancement in the world. Though our diversity is legion and our political colors vary, to properly refer to ourselves as Americans is to agree as if by covenant that we will support the union and all it stands for.

And yet, what happens when one or more branches of government conspire to subvert the very fabric that makes us American? What happens when the masses are sufficiently deprived of those inalienable rights? What happens when government gets too big for its collective britches, embraces corruption, and ceases to function with any semblance of effectiveness?

That is a question that has been argued forcefully at a million water coolers across the fruited plains, from sea to shining sea. But though we number nearly three hundred million, we are powerless against the 535 members of Congress, who, over the past thirty years have re-engineered the inner workings of America with such amazing shrewdness that we no longer have a voice. Oh, we can still vote. But the mechanics and the process have been so subverted by the men and women in power so as to construct a form of insulation from the true will of the people. It is but a little stretch to say that our rights as voting Americans largely are ornamental. They own us, and we know there's nothing we can do about it.

But suppose there were a way...

Chapter 1

President Jack Andrews walked silently to the clear bay windows of the Oval Office and stared unseeingly into the cold, dark skies of Washington, DC. The White House had been his home sweet home for all of seven hours, and from virtually every room there arose the excited chatter of friends, family, supporters, congressmen, senators, and aides. Every room except this one. On an evening that should have been enormously satisfying, only deep emptiness echoed within his troubled soul. On a night that should positively explode with unbridled excitement and anticipation, an incongruent heaviness lapped at his spirit like so many soft waves against the banks of the nearby Potomac. Unpacked boxes of photos and memorabilia lay forgotten on the

highly polished floor, and at the moment he could care less about exploring his new surroundings. He hadn't even sat in the chair behind his famous desk.

President Andrews narrowed his deep, blue eyes and stared intently through the clear glass at a distant light, as if its luminescence could somehow shine some light upon the wisdom of the plan that occupied every active neural pathway in his considerable brain. Sighing deeply, he crossed his arms and wondered for the hundredth time if what he was about to do was nothing less than bald-faced lunacy. Grinning slightly, he considered that if he dared utter his plan within the stark walls of an insane asylum, he would be straitjacketed and confined to solitary. He considered the response of his political opponents; they would laugh him to scorn. CNN would have a field day.

He shook his head and continued to stare at the darkness that had long descended upon the South Lawn. Every President held the future of the republic in his hands, that much was true. Within the rarified confines of this legendary Office, every President had the hubris to consider himself a great leader who would shape the nation and leave an indelible impact for generations to come. But as he saw his reflection in the clear windows, he knew in his gut that this was different. What he was about to do went far beyond making history. It had the raw power not only to change the republic forever, but also to utterly destroy it. One wrong move; one miscalculation; one stone left unturned in what would become the most dramatic plan since the creation of the Union; and this Office might no longer exist.

The faraway sounds of laughter and celebration seemed foreign, almost inappropriate. Grimly, he turned from the window and surveyed his opulent surroundings. Yes, he would make history all right. He might very well go down as the final President of the United States of America.

Chapter 2

"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States." -*Jackson Andrews, Inaugural Ceremony*

His alarm clock dutifully shook him awake, quite literally, promptly at 5:00 in the morning. Years ago he had asked a hearing-impaired friend how he managed to wake up in the morning, seeing as how his friend was single and had such poor hearing that he couldn't possibly hear any normal alarm clock on the market no matter how many decibels of power it packed. His friend told him of a device called a bed shaker that wakens by a persistent and rather rude series of

vibrations. No one can sleep with a crazed electronic device vibrating directly under one's pillow, and since it is about the size of a hockey puck, its silent workings wouldn't bother his wife sleeping peacefully just inches away. Since she wasn't about to get up at such an ungodly hour, she loved that bed shaker and insisted he take it whenever they traveled. She even kept an extra one in her own luggage in case he forgot to bring his own, a fact that amused him to no end. She was an amazing woman but she needed her beauty sleep.

Jack looked over at her in the near darkness, admiring the curve of her figure under the silken sheets. He was a lucky man, and he knew it. Heck, everybody knew it. At 49, Elena Andrews still turned heads. Her sparkling green eyes sat in perfect contrast to her dark hair, and her unimpeachable sense of fashion was already making headlines, maybe too many headlines. But if she somehow looked too attractive to be the First Lady, well, she could have worse problems.

Stepping into the expansive closet, he closed the door behind him and flipped the switch. Selecting a dark blue suit, starched shirt, and a blood-red tie, he carried them to the bathroom, hung them on a hook near the double doors, and showered quickly. After shaving, he donned his suit and quietly made his way out of the executive master suite. Twin Marines stationed ten feet from his bedroom instantly snapped to attention, and Mason Foley, his chief of security spoke crisply into his mouthpiece, "*Regal* is moving."

"So I'm *Regal*?" smiled Jack.

"Yes, Mr. President. That is your code name. And by the way, good morning, sir."

"Good morning."

"May I accompany you to breakfast?"

"Actually I'm not much of a breakfast person. I'd be honored if you would place a call to the kitchen and have them bring the largest, freshest glass of juice they can find. As long as it started out life as a fresh fruit or vegetable this morning, anything they have is fine. Fresh carrot juice is best though."

"Then fresh carrot juice it is, Mr. President." Presently they covered the distance to the Oval Office, and after opening the door for his new boss, Foley watched him enter the office, and then closed the door behind him. "*Regal* is in the Oval."

* * * * *

By 7:00am the President had placed over a dozen phone calls, read three staff briefings, gone over his calendar for the day, and arranged his personal possessions and a few photos at various locations in the office. If he could find someone who knew where in the cavernous bowels of the White House he could find a hammer and a couple of nails, he would hang an exquisite oil painting of Paul Revere on his famous midnight ride on April 18, 1775.

He marveled anew at the quality of the painting, which had been a gift to him several years earlier by a friend who owned a small art gallery. Riding atop a sleek, black stallion, it portrayed Revere charging boldly through a quiet neighborhood bathed richly in the glow of silver moonlight, galloping at full speed and shouting, “The British are coming” at the top of his voice. Andrews smiled and wondered if there were a hundred people in the entire nation who knew that Revere never shouted anything on that fateful night as he warned Samuel Adams and John Hancock of the pending troop movements of the British army. There were British patrols everywhere who surely would have stopped him and arrested him on the spot. The Brits had stationed a heavy contingent of soldiers known as the “king’s regulars” throughout Boston after the public display of American anger culminating in the Boston Tea Party. Any fool screaming against the British army in the dead of night wouldn’t have lasted a minute. Since secrecy was of paramount concern, Revere’s midnight ride was silent save for the urgent pounding of hoofs on the well-worn dirt streets of Middlesex County. But thanks to the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow taking a quite inaccurate and overly dramatic view of the night’s events in his poem Paul Revere’s Ride, schoolchildren for the next 140 years would be treated to a seriously flawed picture of this little-known Boston silversmith.

*Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-Five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.*

When Revere died in 1816, his “midnight ride” didn’t even make it into his obituary, and few people knew of his contribution until Longfellow’s poem was written. In fact, Andrews recalled, Longfellow had meticulously researched the night’s events but intentionally misrepresented the truth in order to create an American legend. Well, that he did, and when a hammer could present itself, this legend would be displayed on the walls of the most famous office in the world. And, thought Andrews, his decorating job for the next 4 years would be complete.

This thought would be the first time in his presidency that he would be wrong. At 7:30, the buzzer sounded and in walked Mary Beth Carver, overdressed as usual to the point of fastidiousness. Hired two years ago as an interior designer, she officially reported to the First Lady’s office in the East Wing and worked in coordination with the White House Curator to handle any and all decorations that were needed anywhere in the White House.

“Good morning, Mr. President, I am Mary Beth Carver here to discuss with you the upcoming plans to renovate your office. I will be able to handle your slightest request so that you will have everything in this office exactly as you want it.”

President Andrews glanced anew at his calendar. Apparently he had completely overlooked the 7:30 interior design meeting. Grunting in irritation, he waved her off. “It is okay, Ms. Carver, I will not need anything but thank you for your gracious concern.”

Mary Beth was taken aback; this was hardly the response she had been expecting. “But Mr. President, surely you don’t expect to keep things exactly as your predecessor!”

Andrews looked up sharply. “Heavens, no!” he exclaimed. “That most certainly would not do.” But before Mary Beth could breathe a sigh of relief that she would be able to keep her job in this tight economy, Andrews deflated her further. “But there is absolutely nothing wrong with this office the way it is. There is not one item out of order, everything is either brand, spanking new or so old it’s a priceless antique. And though I haven’t looked, I am quite sure there is not a speck of dirt anywhere within these hallowed walls. So I assure you I am quite happy and don’t wish to waste any time moving things around.”

But Ms. Carver wasn’t finished, even if this was the President’s own office they were talking about. “I understand, sir, but that’s not the way things are done...”

Andrews cut her off curtly. “Ms. Carver, did you vote for me?” he asked.

“I am quite embarrassed, Mr. President, but...”

“It’s okay, how you vote is your choice. But if you had voted for me you would have known that I don’t have the faintest concern for how things have been done in the past. In fact, if my predecessor had done anything remotely correct, my job today would be a hundred times easier and maybe then I’d have time to discuss what kind of doilies you might recommend for the table thingy right beside you. So thank you, Ms. Carver, and good day.”

Table thingy, she thought incredulously on her way out the door. What kind of President will this man be?

Chapter 3

“When honor and the Law no longer stand on the same side of the line, how do we choose[?]”
-Anne Bishop

Vice President Tyler Kennedy nodded politely to the composed but red-faced lady who brushed by him on her way out of the President’s office. Rapping lightly on the open door, he congratulated the President again on their unexpected victory.

“Good morning, Ty,” Andrews said. “How does it feel to be called ‘Vice President of the United States of America?’”

“It feels pretty darn good. I think I could get used to it for the next eight years.”

“Ha. Let’s see if we can survive the next four without being eaten alive. I haven’t been working for three hours yet and I’ve already managed to offend the White House Curator’s office. I imagine I’ll tick off at least a hundred people by the end of the day.”

“Get used to it, Mr. President. We have more work to do than we could wave an American flag at.”

“Amen to that, although when we’re in private please just call me Jack as you always have.” Suddenly getting serious, Andrews stood and walked toward him, a deep frown on his face as he struggled to find the right way to drop this ten-megaton bombshell on his unsuspecting right-hand man. Ty, do you remember a conversation we had in your dorm room at Yale? It must have been a full thirty years ago, and you were falsely sued for something.”

Ty remembered the conversation well. They were both junior law students at Yale, both from fairly prosperous families, Andrews from South Carolina and he from Kentucky. Against his parent’s wishes, however, Ty divided his time between studying law and building a side business. Ty’s father had a rather narrow view of what kind of career path his privileged son should take, and believed Ty’s average grades were the result of the amount of time his business required. “Son,” he warned as he pointed an angry finger at him, “drop that business or you’re looking for trouble.” And unfortunately, his father had been right, though not for the right reason. About midway through his junior year, one of Ty’s clients sued him for breach of contract. Although the charges were patently false, nonetheless it put him in a bind because he didn’t have the extra cash on hand to defend himself. And since his parents already wanted nothing to do with the business, he couldn’t even ask them for help. In fact he was just grateful the tuition payments kept coming in.

His best buddy Jack showed up in his dorm room one day when he was stressing over it. At length Jack said, “Well, why don’t I lend you about twenty G’s? That should get you some legal representation started and maybe this whole thing will blow over.” Though they were close friends, Ty couldn’t believe he was serious. But the very next morning they went to the bank and Jack transferred the money into Ty’s business account. Nearly a year passed before the charges were found to be without merit, and by that point most of the twenty grand had been spent.

With his business intact, Ty promised to repay him some each month, but Jack refused. “Reinvest it in your company for a while. You can pay me back later when you’re ready. I know you’re good for it.” And indeed he was. Shortly after graduation Ty sold the company for a sizable profit, and tried to repay Jack triple the amount of the loan. But Jack insisted only the original twenty grand be repaid, and would accept no interest, cementing their friendship forever. “Jack, all I can say is thank you for helping me to fight this thing. And I hope someday to have the opportunity to help you fight something.”

Congratulating his friend on his savvy business dealings, Jack said prophetically, “One day you will.”

Ty shook himself back to the present, looking curiously at his friend and boss. “Yes, I remember the conversation.”

“Well, I am about to pick the biggest domestic fight America has seen since the Civil War. And it is time I let you in on some plans that have been in the works for a number of months now. You will soon see why I couldn’t divulge it even to you, but now that we are in office I can’t have you in the dark for a single day.

Three hours later, Vice President Tyler Coleman Kennedy was beyond blown away. Shaking his head in disbelief, he looked at his friend and asked him for the seventh time if he were serious. “When we ran on a platform of ‘revolution’, it never occurred to me that you meant it literally. You realize that you are unquestionably the craziest son of a gun ever to sit in this office, don’t you?” Andrews acknowledged as much.

“And Jack, you realize that if we do this, there is a good chance this is political suicide.”

“Ty, to be perfectly honest, there is a good chance this will be literal suicide. If this goes bad, either the people or the government itself will demand our heads for treason. So think of your beautiful wife. Think of your four kids and your own future. If you want out, we’ll somehow find a way to keep you out of this. And then if it goes bad, you’ll be legally clear to take over my office for the rest of my term. Just please visit me in prison now and again.”

Ty grinned, but not at the thought of his good friend languishing in a forgotten prison. He grinned because he loved a good fight, and this would be the mother of them all. He saw the enormous beauty of it, and wondered if they might in fact be able to pull it off. He also saw the incredible danger of it and envisioned a hundred ways in which the entire plan could quickly degenerate into a second civil war. Or even a third world war. One way or another they would go down in history.

Chapter 4

“The politicians are put there to give you the idea you have freedom of choice. You don’t. You have no choice. You have owners. They own you. They own everything.” -*George Carlin*

Freshman Congressman Kevin Marks tossed his briefcase onto his cluttered mahogany desk, nearly upsetting the steaming cup of coffee his secretary had delivered just moments earlier. Pushing the door shut behind him, he tried to decide whether he was more excited or nervous

about his new job. The campaign was an unmitigated nightmare, and he had never worked so hard in his entire life. He tried hard to keep the campaign clean, but when his incumbent, deeply entrenched opponent started the name-calling, it was all he could do to maintain his cool. And when the opponent cooked up a sleazy charge of racism, every ounce of his body screamed out for the chance to drive over to his office and throttle him. In the end though, the voters decided they'd had enough of the old guy and turned to fresh blood. Kevin hated racism with a passion, and to be accused of it for political purposes was a sobering reminder of why he had wanted to come to Washington to begin with. He joined his fellow citizens in calling for a transparent, decent culture in this town. Time would tell if he was only kidding himself in hoping for real change, but at least now he had his chance.

So with the election out of the way, Kevin Marks joined a number of other freshman Congressmen, Senators, and the President in calling Washington his new home away from home. Good-looking, athletic, and still carrying some of the idealistic hope of using his legal background to make the world a better place, he had just celebrated his 35th birthday. And even if he lasted only one term, any former member of Congress could look forward to a lucrative career as a partner in a prestigious law firm or he wasn't trying.

So with that comforting thought in mind he decided he was more excited than anything else. He was young, healthy, had a fairly decent marriage, and by all accounts had nothing but a good life ahead of him. He smiled in spite of himself. Then he frowned as his office door opened and Gretchen, his newly hired secretary, popped her head in his office without knocking. "Kevin, there is a man here to see you."

"Tell him to come back later, I have some meetings to prepare for and need some time to get organized."

The door opened wider and the dark, imposing figure of Killian Stark, Speaker of the House, stepped into the office. "I am sure you will find plenty of time to get organized, Mr. Marks. This can't wait."

Cursing himself, Kevin stuttered an apology and fought to find the right words to undo his faux pas. "Please forgive me, sir, I of course had no idea that you would be paying me a visit this morning."

"Think nothing of it, Congressman Marks," Stark said, extending his hand formally in introduction. "And no apology is needed. I just came by to personally deliver your new laptop and another item or two."

"New laptop?" queried Kevin. I didn't realize there were any issues with the one I just received."

Turning to Gretchen, Stark said, "Ma'am, if you would excuse us please." Gretchen eased out of the office and shut the door behind her. "Your current laptop is fine, of course. But after following your campaign and studying you at length, I looked at the lay of the land and felt that perhaps it would be wise of me to take the initiative and reach out to you to start building what I

am sure will be a strong working relationship. The fact is, I need your support in a number of areas, and thus it is incumbent upon me to support you in any way I can.”

Kevin didn’t know what to say. This certainly was unexpected. Why would someone as powerful as Killian Stark show up unannounced and personally see to it that he received a new laptop?

“Uh, thank you sir,” Kevin managed. “I must admit I find this a very welcome, if curious thing.”

Killian smiled. “You look like you have belonged to a gym for quite some time. When you joined the gym you had several choices. You could get the basic package for I don’t know, maybe \$30 a month. Or you could get an upgraded package for \$50 a month. Or you could get the premium package for \$75 a month.” Ruefully patting his 42-inch waist in what surely was a rare attempt at self-deprecation, he acknowledged, “It is well established that it has been a long time since I have been anywhere near a gym, so maybe I am way off in my numbers here. But when you took this office, you were given the basic package. That means a laptop, a freshman office, and certain basic privileges. But with rank come privileges, and I hope you’ll forgive me for saying that I have more rank than most. So what I want to do is offer you an upgrade.”

“So it’s a faster laptop?” Kevin asked.

“Well sure it is. It is the fastest on the market with the most advanced wireless, security, and videoconferencing tools available. Anything stored on this laptop is encrypted with a cipher strength that few outside the National Security Agency could break. And it is pre-configured to wirelessly back up your data automatically to one of the most secure underground vaults in the country. But it’s not about the amount of RAM in the laptop. Rather, it is about being admitted to a more exclusive network, if you will, of Congressmen and Senators who can work more closely together. As Speaker of the House, I am in effect the head of this network, and I have a special budget that allows me to handle these kinds of things. This laptop is funded directly by my office, and should you have the slightest question about anything on it, you are to call my own technical support people. Do not call the regular congressional support staff for any reason as they will be unable to assist, especially when it comes to security since even they lack sufficient clearance to touch my network. Anything you need you let my people know and I guarantee it will be done for you at a moment’s notice no matter what time of day or night you call. There is a contact number affixed to the bottom of the laptop so you’ll never forget how to get in touch with us.”

“That certainly is quite generous of you, sir.” The man had a way of building you up rather quickly, and though Stark was a member of the opposition party, nevertheless Kevin knew his success in Congress depended heavily upon his ability to reach across the aisle and develop working relationships with as many of his peers as possible. This early success was being handed to him on a silver platter, and he wasn’t about to screw it up.

“There is one other thing before I let you get settled in,” Killian said, handing him an unmarked envelope. “This credit card here is unlike any you have ever seen before. For one, it has no credit limit, no interest rate, and no monthly statement.”

Kevin raised an eyebrow. “Sir?”

Stark spoke carefully. “I am going out on a limb a bit here, Kevin, but I believe I can trust you with this. As a substantial token of my appreciation for the relationship you and I are building, I am giving you this card that is funded by the same special budget as your upgraded laptop. It is true there is no credit limit, but I ask that you use it wisely and keep your total purchases to no more than ten grand a month. Use the card anywhere you like, but you may find it expedient to use in cases where you might not want a paper trail that could be tied to you.”

“No paper trail?” Kevin eyed him suspiciously.

“Exactly. There may be cases where you are on, say, a fact finding mission for your constituents, and it may be that you need to make a few purchases, or conduct some research, or whatever, in such a way that the purchases do not show up on your regular House of Representatives account, which you will of course still retain. But I speak sincerely when I say that there is zero accountability with this card.”

“So in other words you’re saying I could spend ten thousand dollars on illegal assault weapons each and every month, and there is no one on earth who will have the dimmest clue about where the money went?”

Stark shrugged. “If you ever need arms, I have a number of contacts who will deal with you discreetly. But you are precisely correct. Use it wisely, Kevin. And welcome to Congress.”

* * * * *

Later that evening Kevin arrived at his elegant townhouse a few miles from downtown Washington. He hadn’t been away from his wife, Cameron, two days and he missed her terribly. Congress actually started work a couple of weeks before the presidential inauguration day, but since he was just now getting settled in, somehow it felt like today was his first real day as a United States Congressman. He would call his wife later, but for now he wondered for the first time how he would maintain his sexual equilibrium when his wife was 580 miles away. Their marriage of twelve years wasn’t the best in the world, but at least they were both quite happy with that aspect of it. He sure could stand some marital bliss right about now, but that clearly would have to wait.

Guiltily, he decided on the next best thing. Opening his new, ultra-secure laptop, he logged onto the Internet and quickly found his favorite adult web site. As the erotic streaming video filled his screen, he was grateful that Stark had taken the time to explain that anything on that laptop was safe from the most prying of eyes. To the endless frustration of his campaign opponent, Kevin Marks was squeaky clean. About all they could find on him was an old traffic ticket, which he had promptly paid. In every respect he was squeaky clean indeed. Well, except

for his hidden porn addiction. He turned the lights off and admired the sleek, black-haired beauty filling the screen in front of him. He was mesmerized by her movements, completely in awe of her perfect beauty. So with the most advanced cryptographic technology at his fingertips, he relaxed and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that his dirty little secret would, in fact, forever remain a secret.

Chapter 5

“[The President] may, on extraordinary Occasions, convene both Houses...”
From Article II, section 3, of the United States Constitution.

The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room was filled to overflowing in anticipation of President Andrews’ first press conference. It was named in honor of James Brady, Press Secretary to President Ronald Reagan, who was shot and nearly killed during John Hinckley, Jr.’s, assassination attempt in 1981, just 69 days into Reagan’s presidency. Renovations on the room had been completed in 2007 at a cost of nearly \$8.5 million, and though the chief complaint of the aging room had been a serious lack of space, the lavishly renovated room had only a slightly larger seating capacity for the news media for whom it was principally designed. Your tax dollars at work.

But the buzz throughout the room had little to do with tax dollars. This was Andrews’ first press conference, and every news outlet in the country waited to see what Andrews would say. News-wise, today would be an intellectual no-brainer. Andrews would be the news, and all they had to do was quote him, photograph him, and speculate at length on how his early administration would fare.

Sandy Farmer of Channel 9 news couldn’t wait to get back to her office and start her next piece. An experienced, voracious consumer of all things political, she loved her job as a top reporter. It seemed to her that the press had exclusive ringside seats to the happenings in the nation’s capital, and though her seat was toward the back of the crowded room, nevertheless her vision and hearing were perfect. She would get her story, and making anchor couldn’t possibly be that far away. Knowing she could be on camera, however briefly, she again adjusted her professional attire and chatted with a colleague while waiting for the briefing to begin. She didn’t have to wait long.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States.” The room erupted in applause as President Andrews strode confidently to the podium and nodded his thanks to those who were assembled. First impressions would be important today, Andrews knew, and he would be at his

best. Looking to put everyone at ease, he opened with a joke. “I was hoping to save you all a lot of time dealing with Washington traffic, so my first order of business as President will be to shut down this room. Instead, I’ll just email you whatever it is I want you to print. Please make no changes and we’ll get along just fine.”

First Lady Elena Andrews had cringed when he had tried that joke out on her, saying it ranked perhaps a three on a scale of one to ten. She was being charitable. But he had insisted it was funny, and thankfully, the media seemed to agree. After a bit more of the light banter, it was clear that Andrews was comfortable and all smiles as he greeted the nation’s press.

“I am humbled, genuinely humbled, to have received such an outpouring of support from the American people. The campaign trail was long and hard, and though I remain upbeat about the months ahead, I am under no illusions that there is much work to be done and many difficult choices to make. The nation has grappled with out of control spending, heinous taxation to support that spending, health care, corruption, the economy, Iran, North Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan, the environment, scandal upon scathing scandal, and too many other critical issues to mention. So we have work to do. But I felt it would be good for me to personally brief you on a few things today and hopefully get us started on the right footing. All politics aside, it is critical for me to convey to you, and indeed to every American, that I have the nation’s best interests at heart. I will do everything within my power to serve this nation well, and I speak these words not as the President but as a regular, everyday American who loves this country and the principles upon which it stands.”

More smiles from the experienced press, and Sandy found herself already warming to her new President. She liked his speaking style and he had a disarming way of making it seem that of the over-crowded room, he was addressing her personally. On this day the press would be uncharacteristically gracious in the questions they would raise at the end, as a bit of a professional courtesy on the President’s first official day in office. Of course, that honeymoon period could be brutally short depending on how well the President’s agenda aligned with that of the media.

“So with the number of challenging situations we are dealing with, I wanted to begin by sharing with you some very positive developments that we are working on. These items are central to my plans for getting this nation back on the right track, and I believe we should begin working on them without delay. The first is...”

President Andrews did not get a chance to finish his sentence. The doors to the briefing room were nearly knocked off their hinges as teams of Secret Service men burst in and headed straight for the President. One team covered the front of the podium area with drawn weapons, immediately ensuring no unauthorized personnel would get within twenty feet of the startled President. The other team whispered urgently in his ear and all but carried him from the room.

Pandemonium broke out in the media area as the Secret Service teams exited in cold, silent steps. Not a soul present remembered anything approaching this level of disruption ever happening in the confines of the James Brady Press Briefing Room, and certainly not Sandy Farmer. With eyes trained on the front of the room looking for something to report on, she

suddenly felt very, very scared. Were their lives in danger? Had a bomb threat been called in? Was it possible a missile strike could happen any second, killing them all? She shook her head to dismiss such crazy thoughts and stood as Nathan Lawrence, Press Secretary to President Andrews, shakily took the podium and twice attempted to clear his throat.

With all eyes on him, it was clear he didn't have the dimmest clue what was going on. "Uh, ladies and gentlemen, we will keep you informed of events as more details emerge. I apologize for the, uh, consternation and confusion. This press conference is adjourned."

With that, the press made a mad dash for the exits. And for once in her stellar career, Sandy Farmer had no earthly idea what she would write.

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Speaker of the House Killian Stark slammed the phone down in a rage. Powerful, arrogant, and slimy to the bone, Stark thrived on controlling situations and people. Over the 16 years he had been in Congress, rising steadily through the ranks, he had mastered the twin arts of stealth and manipulation. Even those within his own party feared him deeply, and with good reason. They might vote along the same lines, but much of that was out of a healthy fear of retaliation from Stark. Toe the party line on the critical votes, everyone knew, or Stark would pay a private visit and cruelly explain what the bitter consequences would be. Few dared to oppose him, and incoming freshmen were often cautioned by their veteran lawmakers in how to best deal with him so as to make their stay in Washington at least a little bit pleasant. Tall and imposing with close-cropped gray hair, he took a dark pleasure in maintaining his influence, caring little for the occasional career he steered off a cliff when convenient for him to do so. He liked to be in control, and though he would never admit it, there were far too many situations over which he had absolutely no control. He stared at the phone in anger, as if he could somehow punish it for its grievous sin of ringing at the wrong time.

"*What is going on?*" he roared at the startled staff members gathered in his expansive office suite. "Chalmers, turn the TV on, this is already all over the news." Seconds later the young intern had the massive, state of the art television on, where a land-based news crew witnessed the mass exodus of the press corp. The scene would have been even more dramatic from an aerial view, but due to security concerns no aircraft were allowed that close to the White House. All eyes were glued to the screen as a breathless reporter gave an exhaustive rundown of everything he knew. Which was basically nothing.

"...it is unclear at this moment what prompted the President's security detail to remove him so suddenly during his first press conference. It certainly must have been important, and we understand that bomb crews are sweeping the entire facility. President Andrews presumably has been moved to an underground facility, but as of this moment the White House is not commenting on his location. Speculation abounds, wait just one moment I have a message here that says the terror alert has just been increased. The terror alert has just been increased. We will continue to keep you apprised of this developing story..."

The telephone apparently had not learned its lesson and dared to ring again. Stark snapped it up and listened, his hot anger gradually subsiding and replaced by a suspicious curiosity. The intern muted the useless television and the room grew silent, save for Stark's occasional grunt into the phone. At length, he replaced the phone in its cradle and stood, adjusting his exquisite Armani suit and eyeing his staff thoughtfully.

"That was the White House. President Andrews has just requested every member of the House and Senate to convene at exactly six o'clock this evening. I have business to attend to; you all are excused."

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Across the great city of Washington, DC and in scattered cities throughout America, 534 similar phone calls took place. Trips were cut short; meetings cancelled; important luncheons were postponed; chartered flights were hurriedly made to Washington.

And all of America wondered what the devil was going on.

Chapter 6

"I could end the deficit in 5 minutes. You just pass a law that says that anytime there is a deficit of more than 3% of GDP, all sitting members of Congress are ineligible for re-election."
-Billionaire Warren Buffett

From his much smaller office and far less ostentatious TV, Kevin Marks listened to the newscast with interest, wondering that this meant for him. He had cancelled several meetings with various constituent groups and was a little annoyed at the disruption this caused. He didn't believe the media's knee-jerk terrorist angle for one second. If there had been anything approaching a terrorist attack in the works, the last thing the President would do was to convene both houses of Congress, not to mention the Vice President and his entire cabinet, in a single building. Surely the moronic political analysts would grasp this basic point sooner or later, so he changed the channel to a sports network and listened while he tidied up his office and handled some relatively mundane paperwork that had already attempted a covert takeover of his desk.

His cell phone beeped out the first few notes of God Bless America, and he flipped it open. "Kevin Marks", he replied.

“Kevin, this is Killian Stark, are you ready to head to the Capitol?” Kevin paused, his curiosity at this unusual congressional gathering increasing by the second. George Washington had delivered the first State of the Union address on January 8, 1790 in New York City, since New York City was the provisional capital of the United States at the time. Obviously much had changed since then, and nowadays, any President wishing to address both houses of Congress usually did so in the House of Representatives chamber at the Capitol building. So even though today’s rather impromptu meeting was not a State of the Union address, nonetheless the location did not surprise Kevin. “Uh, I will be in about 20 minutes.”

“My driver will pick you up in 10 minutes,” Stark replied. “Someone will meet you in the lobby and you’ll ride with me.”

Kevin was about to object but the line went dead. He shook his head in frustration but decided to play along with the difficult man. “Pick your battles, Kevin,” he muttered to himself in resignation.

* * * * *

The chambers of the United States House of Representatives filled slowly as representatives and senators from all fifty states arrived expectantly, each more curious than they would admit as to the reason for their unorthodox summons. Veteran lawmakers did their best to look confident and appear that they already knew what was about to take place, as if they had been personally briefed by Andrews and were merely there to offer support to the president as he briefed the rest of those assembled.

Kevin followed Stark into the expansive chamber and sat in the seat to the left of Stark as instructed. In the old days Kevin would have been assigned a seat, but the 63rd Congress abolished that childish practice in 1913. He was, however, committing a bit of an indiscretion since he and Stark belonged to opposing political parties. He should have been sitting on the other side of the aisle, and indeed received questioning looks from a couple of his colleagues, as if maybe this freshman didn’t yet know his way around.

He knew his way around plenty, but he did not know the congresswoman sitting in the seat next to him, so he reached out his hand and introduced himself. She smiled graciously and introduced herself as a third term representative from Oklahoma. Neither would swallow their pride and ask what the other thought was the purpose of the meeting, and after a few moments of professional discussion regarding some upcoming votes, the rep from Oklahoma excused herself to accept a phone call.

“Have you had a chance to use your new laptop?” Stark asked unexpectedly.

“Uh, yes,” Kevin replied. “I was able to pull up some uh, documents last night. It is by far the nicest and fastest I have ever used, so I am quite sure I will enjoy it. Thank you again, sir.”

“Glad to hear that. It won’t give you the slightest problem, but if it does, get in touch with Hal, my senior support person.”

“Will do. Well, it’s about time for the President to arrive. It sure looks like most of our group of 535 are here.”

“Yes, well, most of them anyway. There certainly aren’t anywhere near 535 people though.” At Kevin’s questioning look, Stark demanded, “Don’t you know your history, boy? There aren’t enough seats to go around. The capacity of this room is about 448 seats, so do the math. Most of the time not all the seats are needed, but in a joint session many members are sent to undisclosed locations for security purposes, especially since the attacks on 9/11.”

“Anyway, as many as are able to be here are here. They’re not necessarily happy, but they’re here,” Stark noted. “Maybe Andrews will give them something to be happy about, but somehow I doubt it.” Kevin shrugged helpfully.

Moments later the House Majority Floor Services Chief and the House Sergeant at Arms took their traditional posts shoulder to shoulder, just inside the doors to the chamber, and announced loudly and succinctly: “Mister Speaker, the President of the United States!”

Respectful, if somewhat subdued applause filled the room as members on both sides of the aisle extended their first joint welcome to the new President, who smiled guardedly and shook hands with a number of legislators before eventually making his way to the front. Speaking without notes and without the aid of a prompter, President Andrews expressed his thanks for a warm welcome, and asked the assembly to be seated.

“Thank you again for your gracious welcome today,” Andrews began. He smiled, but it was not the excited smile he wore during his abbreviated press conference earlier in the day. He still exuded confidence, but his strong figure spoke of a man weighed down by an invisible burden that he must share. Gripping the sides of the rostrum for support, President Andrews surveyed the throng before him and spoke gravely.

“First of all, please allow me to apologize for the abrupt manner in which this meeting has been called. I know that some of you have sustained severe disruptions to your schedule, and some have flown clear across the country, hopping a plane literally within minutes of being notified. And for that I again apologize. But I bring you here for urgent business today and with the news that America is indeed under attack. As terrible as the events surrounding September the 11th were, and as angry as they made each one of us, and as many innocent lives that were lost on that dark, dark day in this nation’s storied history, nevertheless a greater attack has been made. And it is even more dangerous and more insidious because the attack has come not from a foreign entity, but from within.” Kevin raised an eyebrow and caught the eye of the congresswoman to his left, who mouthed to him, “from within?”

“Yes, from within,” President Andrews continued as if each member of Congress had asked that same question aloud. “Our nation is under attack by a group of men and women whose misguided philosophies and subversive ideals threaten the fabric of our society. They have no respect for our freedoms, no respect for our desire to be able to worship as we see fit, and no respect for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

As if once again reading the minds of those gathered before him, Andrews continued. “Regardless of whom you may have in mind, you would be wrong. It is not an external threat made by a foreign power. Nor it is an internal threat made by religious subversives, although the Good Lord knows there are many in our midst, waiting for the opportunity to strike at the heart of who we are. No, this particular group is far, far more powerful than a thousand fundamentalists, by whatever label you may wish to give them. So who would dare oppose the sovereignty of the United States of America? Who would stand in unholy opposition to the righteous principles for which we stand?”

“It is with deep, deep sadness that I speak these words. But I will speak the truth. The attack has come from none other than our own Congress.”

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The room was instantly abuzz with confused talk. “What is he talking about? Did someone try to stage a coup? Surely not! Why, never in US history...”

President Andrews quickly quelled the conversation. “Ladies and gentlemen, what I am talking about is the systematic attempt by both houses of Congress to completely ignore and subvert the will of the American people. This attack has gone on since perhaps 1968, making it by far the longest-standing attack on American soil in all of our great history. And as God is my solemn witness, it is about to stop. I have listened to a number of your own speeches over the past few years, as you piously campaigned against the corruption of Washington and railed against the crooks running this city, only to become part of the problem once you had a taste of the most beguiling power known to man. As Lord Acton wrote in 1887, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”

“Now I do not believe that all of you are bad men and women, for some of you still remain true to your calling. Some of you are deeply committed to your respective offices and fight for all you are worth to solve the vexing problems facing us today. You know who you are, and I commend you with no shortage of gratitude for your service today. But as a whole, you collectively are the most despicable breed of men and women ever to hold this nation hostage. You have lied your way into office, slandered those who actually deserve to sit in your place, and broken virtually every promise you have made to your constituents.”

“You have prostituted yourselves to special interest groups with flagrant disregard for the crushing impact it has on the masses who elected you. You have been utterly incompetent in governing our domestic affairs, and you have been unacceptably shortsighted in policies regarding foreign affairs. Like petulant schoolchildren you have bickered among yourselves with nauseating regularity, with Republicans fighting against Democrats and Democrats fighting against Republicans, as if the nation were founded along party lines. Did Republicans carry the day during the Battle of Lexington? Did Democrats single-handedly secure glory during the Siege of Boston?”

“Perhaps worst of all, you have stolen countless trillions of dollars from hard-working American families, forcing them at gunpoint to relinquish an increasing percentage of their rightful wages, only to squander it at the most spectacular level possible as if the money grew on

trees. You have taxed them on their wages, and on their cars, and on their houses, and on their food, and on their investments, and on their marriages, and on everything they touch. And if that were not enough, when they die you levy a massive tax on their estate, throwing the rest of their family into financial dire straits just so they can pay the almighty tax man.”

Stunned silence. The large wall clock installed high above the President’s head silently recorded the passage of a full minute as the President glared angrily at the shocked, sullen faces in front of him. Not a soul moved, and an unnamed Senator coughed nervously, completely unsure of what was about to happen.

“Around water coolers throughout America, men and women have expressed their growing, helpless anger at your systematic attempt to dismantle this once great nation. They have watched as many of you have been charged with tax evasion and yet have walked away scot-free like some mafia boss, immune to prosecution, because you are too cowardly and corrupt to prosecute one of your own. They have demanded to know why your heads were not served up on a plate and you made an example of, so that future leaders would tread more lightly. They have demanded to know why you have not all been placed under arrest and tried for treason. And since I accept my responsibilities as Commander in Chief of the armed forces of the United States of America, I hereby exercise the full measure of that authority and place every last one of you under arrest.”

“In just a few moments you will file out of this room in an orderly fashion. No fewer than one thousand US Marines are stationed outside of these magnificent doors, and they will relieve you of your phones and any other electronic devices you may be carrying with you. They will be held safely for you, but where you are going, I assure you, you won’t need them.”

And for the first time in the history of American presidential speeches, President Andrews walked quietly out of the room, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

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If Kevin Marks was annoyed at the President’s sudden meeting request, he was downright ticked at being arrested and forced to surrender his indispensable *iPhone* to a burly Marine sergeant. But seeing that he had no choice in the matter, he dutifully took the offered plastic bag, wrote his full name on the outside, and cringed as the Marine tossed it carelessly in a bin several feet away. Dazed, he boarded an unmarked bus and found a seat, staring at the cold streets of Washington DC and wondering if maybe he picked the right career after all. Was he going to jail? His legal mind said that was impossible, but then again, here he was on a bus with some people who he knew for a fact were crooks, so anything was possible.

Each bus was guarded from both the front and the rear by trucks full of heavily armed Marines. Kevin wondered what onlookers would think, and on a hunch he reached for his cell phone to call his wife, Cameron. Then he scowled when he remembered he didn’t have a phone anymore. Oh well, he thought, she would hear the news soon enough. The press would have a field day with this.

After about twenty minutes the bulky caravan of Marine-flanked buses pulled into a rather inconspicuous renovated office area, and at length the doors opened and hundreds of lawmakers hesitantly stepped onto the cracked asphalt. “Everyone inside,” yelled a Marine through a megaphone. “And make it snappy.”

The inside of the office building smelled faintly of dust, as if it had been unused for quite some time. It was clean, with inexpensive artwork adorning the walls and a dry fountain in the center of the lobby. The lawmakers didn’t have to ask where to go, because several Marines barked orders for them to gather in the building’s main conference room. “Have a seat” was the only further instruction given, and since they hadn’t heard of a recall on their right to freedom of speech, they engaged in animated conversation, each wondering what the President would do next. Most were angry, and a few were livid, cursing the President and vowing so much litigation against him that his grandchildren would need lawyers. Dozens of silent Marines guarded the exits, and they seemed to care little how much noise the angry legislators made as long as they stayed away from the doors. After nearly an hour of waiting, the room quieted as President Andrews made his entrance into the circular room and stood in the center. He spoke loudly, but thanks to the room’s excellent acoustics he did not require a microphone.

“Listen carefully, because I will not attempt to talk over anyone. The deal is this: you are all placed upon house arrest in this building until at which point I authorize you to leave. That may be a few months from now, or it may be next year, but you will not leave this building until I personally give the word. All of you will remember that I campaigned on the promise of *revolution*, and those of you who mocked me as being melodramatic should have paid more attention. This *is* revolution, and effective immediately you are no longer calling the shots in this land. I am.”

Daring to challenge the president, Senator Martin Schumaker stood and interrupted. “Mr. President, what you have just done is not only illegal but also detrimental to your own administration. I would advise you...”

“And I would advise you not to lecture me about what is illegal, Senator.” Andrews countered. “Or would you prefer we direct our collective attention to your office soliciting and accepting nearly two million in carefully laundered foreign contributions to your recent campaign?” All eyes immediately went to Schumaker, who reddened with rage, stuttering to find a credible response and wondering how on earth the President knew about that.

“Or you, Senator Bob Feinman,” Andrews said, turning around and looking for the familiar face. “Do you want us to inquire as to where that mysterious \$30,000 went last year? I understand you have a truly beautiful and gracious wife, but do you think she will forgive you when she learns that thirty grand went to high-class hookers?”

The President wasn’t finished. “I could go on for half an hour,” he said ominously. “Where is that scoundrel Sam Paige? It took a few moments to find him, and by the time Andrews stood before him, the skinny, 57-year old representative was whimpering with fear. “*How did the President find this stuff out?*” he wondered silently. His ugly face wrinkled with fear, and Andrews wondered in amazement how this pathetic windbag had ever managed to get himself

elected. “Should I tell them, Congressman Paige?” Sam was too terrified to speak, but his pale blue eyes pleaded with him not to say anything. “Seriously, I think your colleagues on the other side of the aisle would be mighty interested in hearing what you do in...”

“Mr. President, please!” he finally wailed. He told his family and friends he always had an affinity for authentic Thai food, not to mention he just loved the country and visited whenever he could. But if they knew about the young girls, his career and his marriage would be over the instant the next edition of the *New York Times* hit the stands.

President Andrews glowered at the wretched man, and then decided not to publicly share the nastiness. “You disgust me,” he said simply.

“So who wants to be next?” Complete silence met his demand. Clearly they had grossly underestimated him, and although most of the lawmakers’ sins weren’t quite so glaring, few were saints and none wanted to be the guest of honor at the next ethics investigation.

“So,” Andrews continued, “rather than have every last one of you stand trial for treason, which, as you certainly know, is a capital offense, I decided that each of you will be given a second chance. And that is why you are here today. Effective immediately, we are rolling back over forty years of congressional idiocy and peeling back the fetid layers of bureaucracy, corruption, and incompetence that have caused such unspeakable pain to this nation. I do not mean that we will nullify every law since the 1960s, although some would no doubt applaud such an approach. Rather, we will, together, enact what I am calling the Top 100 Plan. This plan will encompass the one hundred most important, vastly overdue changes this nation desperately needs to get back on track. Some of the plan I will dictate to you and you will agree to provide your unwavering support to it. There are other aspects to the plan for which you will need to hammer out for yourselves the language needed for it to become law. And still other aspects of the plan you will suggest, develop, and implement under my guidance. But make no mistake; you have exactly two clear-cut choices. Fix the problems you have created, or publicly stand trial for treason.”

Senator Lynn Fratelli raised her hand and coolly asked, “And after being placed under house arrest, Mr. President, why on earth would we agree to help you implement this plan? And after you eventually release us, what assurance would you possibly have that we would actually vote in such a way as to offer you something to sign into law?”

“Those are fair questions, Senator. But don’t worry about how I’m going to convince you to do anything. Present circumstances notwithstanding, you still have your free will. We’ll work that out later, but I ask, no, I resolutely demand, that you work together with your colleagues on both sides of the aisle to make this plan happen. As to how long you’ll be here, that is entirely up to you. If you elect to play the kinds of sophomoric games you’re famous for, I guarantee you will be here for the duration of my term as President. But if you pull together and use the phenomenal intellect God gave you to advance the cause of this great nation, I guarantee that you will be out of here in no time. Even better, you’ll go from pariahs to true American heroes.”

“Now, believe it or not, much planning has gone into the selection of this place. You may recall that you authorized a 92 million dollar renovation of this unused office building several years back, and at least one of you paraded it as a grand success of government at work. Well, I think it’s fitting that you love this place so much, and that after letting it sit empty for nearly three years we’re outfitting it with all the computers, showering facilities, beds, and entertainment systems to make it even better. By the time you get sleepy tonight there will be hundreds of twin-sized beds with nice, thick mattresses and luxurious linens for you to rest your congressional heads on.”

More stunned silence at this news. “Each office will be outfitted with two twin beds, and as much as possible, each room will be home to one Republican and one Democrat. No more of this “left or right of center aisle” stuff. The American public decrees that it is time you grow up and learn serious problem-solving skills. So maybe having someone on the other side of the aisle as a roommate will help you along in that regard. Wherever possible, we will make every effort to honor your modesty and room men together and women together, but where that is not possible due to the collective demographics here, nonetheless your modesty will be assured in the comfortable nighttime clothing that will be provided to you. There will be plenty of showers available, and you will have the utmost in privacy when it comes to showers and restrooms. Some of Washington’s best caterers will see to it that you have plenty of excellent food to eat, and we are more than prepared to handle any special dietary requests you may have.

A representative from South Carolina raised her hand and asked, “what about those of us with medical needs?”

“Ah, another fair question, and that brings up three exceptions that I will honor as part of our deal.” He spoke the word *deal* as if every lawmaker assembled had eagerly bought into his plan, which they most certainly had not. “If there are minor medical needs, those can be handled here, and with the outrageous health plans your constituents have purchased for you, basic doctor visits easily can be arranged on site. If there is something your doctor insists cannot be handled here, he is welcome to discuss the matter with the White House Medical Unit. If my Chief Physician so agrees, that person may be excused under military escort for as long as needed for medical purposes. Where possible please schedule such medical visits after our normal business hours, which shall be six o’clock in the evening. I am quite certain your taxpayer-funded physicians can handle the evening hours, and in any case I need you here and as healthy as possible. You will be more than provided for.”

“In addition, I do not wish to punish those of you who have not yet become a part of the problem. Any of you who have recently been elected to your first term may also leave at six, and for you no military escort will be required unless you specifically request it. Just make sure you are here promptly at 8 in the morning for work, or you will in fact be placed under *complete* arrest and will be unable to make your mark in history within the confines of this grand office building. And thirdly, the top three leaders of each political party will also be afforded leave in the evenings so as to conduct any meetings and critical party business that cannot be handled during the day. As the most serious and most distrusted of offenders, those leaders will of course require a full military escort to ensure their prompt return.”

Sighing with relief, freshman Congressman Kevin Marks couldn't wait for six o'clock.

Chapter 7

Sandy Farmer needlessly adjusted her immaculate suit and sat down in front of the waiting camera. Moments later she was on the air, sharing with millions of listeners a summary of the informational packet that had been sent by courier to all members of the White House Press Corp earlier in the day following the now-famous press conference. Apparently the individual responsible for the packet's distribution had not yet learned how to use email.

"Ms. Farmer, can you tell our viewers what on earth is going on and what President Andrews is doing?"

"I can," Sandy smiled pleasantly. "And I can tell you that this will be a day for the history books. In one sweeping move, incoming President Jack Andrews has sequestered every single member of Congress and has indefinitely placed them all under house arrest." In front of televisions throughout America, all activity screeched to a standstill and all eyes were glued on Sandy Farmer.

"It is true. As unbelievable as it sounds, the President has arrested Congress and is holding them for an unspecified period of time. We do not yet know how long that period will be, but sources within the White House say they will be amazed if it turns out to be less than four to six months. I am absolutely flabbergasted at this revelation, this is completely unprecedented, but these documents in my hands came directly from the President's office and they are absolutely serious."

"What exactly is the President's plan?" asked the host.

"First of all there is an executive summary of which I have obtained a copy, and the summary explains that America is tired of Congress holding the rest of the nation hostage, and so he has literally staged a sort of coup and is demanding that Congress rectify a host of wrongs perpetuated against US citizens. He promises that each and every member of Congress is safe and goes into quite some detail to assure family and friends that they are absolutely receiving the highest quality of care. The summary ends with the further assurance that when Congress successfully fixes the problems they have created, they will be free to go home."

"Wow. That truly is amazing, and we will be here throughout the evening discussing this and will be sure to reveal every detail we possibly can regarding this unprecedented move by a

sitting US president. Sandy, thank you so much, we have to break for a moment but we will be back momentarily with additional analysis and more details on today's incredible turn of events."

* * * * *

Charley Spratlin smiled and wiped his hands on a rag in glee. His little bar in a nondescript Texas town didn't even have a name, but it would be filled to capacity within an hour, and hearing that lady on the news talk about Andrews' plan got him in a mighty fine mood. "Boys," he yelled over the growing cacophony before him, "I'm throwing in a free plate of wings for every pitcher of beer we set on your table for the rest of the evening!"

Plenty of cheers went up around the tables as Charley's customers signaled his long-time waitress for their next pitcher. Most of these guys either voted for Andrews or at least would have if they hadn't been so lazy on Election Day. They were good men, Charley thought, maybe a little on the rough side some of them, but they were bona fide Americans and were every bit as sick of Congress as he was. To see those slimy traitors arrested and hauled off in those buses was the wildest thing he had seen since the wet t-shirt contest he hosted last year. That contest got a little out of hand, but he knew the boys wanted him to line up another one. He shook his head.

And across America, in bars too numerous to mention, and in an equal number of restaurants, office complexes, and even churches, men and women cheered the President. This, they said, was what they had been waiting for. But as Charley rang up another sale, he wondered just what kind of cat had been let out of the bag.

* * * * *

Chief Justice Daniel Pennington had an uncanny sense of impending doom, and he could feel his chest tighten as his bedside phone rang at five-thirty in the morning. The sixty-seven year old judge had hoped to sleep for another hour, but he grudgingly lifted the phone from its cradle, wondering if he were the only person in town who still had a landline. At least it was a cordless, he thought absently.

"Hello?" he inquired as he ran a hand through his thin, gray hair. And after listening to the voice on the other end, he hung his tired head in resignation. Turning to his sleeping wife, he shook her awake and said, "Mark my words, today will be a very, very bad day."

Eight other calls jarred the remaining justices awake in short order, and presently each summoned their drivers to pick them up at their respective residences. As Pennington's driver pulled in front of his relatively small but stately and well-guarded Tudor home, he picked up his briefcase and grunted his customary thanks for the prompt service. He settled into the rich leather seat, wishing again he could make this all go away.

"First Street?" the driver asked.

"Yes, please." The Supreme Court building was located on First Street in Washington, DC, and was the usual place of meeting for any Court-related business. There had been nearly a

dozen previous meeting points before former President William Howard Taft, who later became Chief Justice, managed to convince Congress that the Supreme Court justices needed their own building. At one point they met in the basement of the Capital's north wing before it was destroyed by fire in 1814. Among other places, the Court had met in private homes, in taverns, at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, and in a small conference room of the Capitol building. But ever since 1935 they had their own digs, and Pennington enjoyed the prestige it brought them. The driver slowed and brought him through dual security checkpoints while the trunk and underside of the limo were scanned for explosives, surveillance bugs, and even chemical weapons. Pennington opened the door for himself and marched inside. The other eight justices were already waiting, and together they followed Pennington to his office where he unlocked the door and ushered them into the richly paneled room.

"Dan, you know as well as I do what Andrews did to Congress yesterday, and frankly I don't trust this guy. I sure as heck don't want the same fate as Congress, so do you have the dimmest clue of what is about to happen?"

Pennington studied the frail frame of Justice Jerry Vanpelt. At 74 years old, Jerry looked like crap on a good day. And today, he reminded himself sourly, was not a good day.

"No Jerry, I'm afraid I don't know what this nut is up to. Your guess is as good as mine, other than I don't have a good feeling about this at all."

"Me neither," Connie Rickers added. The fifty-two year old justice was by far the easiest on the eye in this motley group, which wasn't saying much. Let's just say there's a reason you haven't heard of any Supreme Court beauty pageants, thought Pennington. And those bulky robes don't help. His thoughts were distracted when his secretary notified him that the President was on his way in and would be there in a few seconds. The doors opened and President Andrews walked in, followed by Mason Foley, the President's Chief of Security, and three other Secret Service agents who immediately swept the room, finally giving Foley the all-clear sign. Nine pairs of eyes centered on the President, quietly asking a thousand questions.

"Thank you all for agreeing to meet with me this morning," he began. With a nod to Foley, he requested privacy with the justices. Looking suspiciously around one last time as if the room harbored unseen dangers, Foley reluctantly made his exit. After closing the thick, solid oak doors behind him, the President was alone with the members of the high court.

Vanpelt couldn't stop himself, asking the question every justice was dying to know. "Are you locking us up, too?"

Andrews laughed. "No, of course not. That was just for Congress. And, as I'm sure you know, they aren't really locked up. It might not be Martha's Vineyard or the rarified standards to which they are long accustomed, but their accommodations are not lacking in any way. And please remember, all that has been required of them is for them to do their jobs, so at least in one sense I haven't asked anything unreasonable."

Vanpelt stared at him dubiously. “If you don’t mind my saying so, I think you’re the dumbest person ever to get himself elected in the history of the Union.”

“I don’t mind you saying so. We still have our freedom of speech, don’t we?”

“You tell me,” Vanpelt spat. As a liberal activist judge, Vanpelt hated Jack Andrews from the first time he heard about him. He didn’t know why, but something about him didn’t add up. He was too clean and too much of a newcomer to the political arena to be trusted. And he was running for President? And as an Independent, no less!

Andrews was unfazed. “Then yes, I assure you that you are free to say anything you wish. In fact, I will take advantage of that same freedom and be totally honest with you. And the truth is that all I came to do today was to wish you a good day and to tell you that you are free to go.”

“Free to go, sir? You drove over here this morning not to arrest us but to tell us we are free to go?”

“Certainly. Because you’re all fired.”

* * * * *

President Jack Andrews figured he must be the only President in history to be greeted by stunned silence on so many occasions. That certainly was the shocked response of the justices, who blinked at him in surprise. “Yes, you’re all fired. In fact, I never want to see any of you ever again!”

Justice Jerry Vanpelt was the first to recover and stutter his protest. “Mr. President!”

“Do you *really* want me to be honest? Fine, you guys genuinely make me sick. If you had the collective spine of a sea urchin this nation wouldn’t be in anywhere near the colossal mess it is in. You sit there in your black robes and reason with the secular progressives in their mission to unravel the very fabric of this country. And even though you are supposed to be a check and balance against the corruption of Congress, you throw in your lot with them and join them in emasculating the land! You legalize abortion and thus have the blood of over forty-two million children on your hands. You force the greatest military in the world to deal with the divisive issue of openly professed gays serving in close quarters with the rest of the troops, caring little how it affects the morale of the 98% of the heterosexual troops. With nauseating regularity you side with the ACLU on their relentless, underhanded attacks upon the cherished Judeo-Christian principles that built this nation. You re-write the laws based on your own jaded opinions rather than interpreting the Constitution in its original intent, nullifying the votes of tens of millions of Americans. And you do it with the expectation that there is no one to stop you, secure in the fact that you have lifetime job security, something no other American can claim other than perhaps a tax collector or mortician. You are nothing more than an affront to America.”

“Mr. President, I’ll not stand for this slander!” shouted Vanpelt. “You have no Constitutional basis to fire us and there is no way you’ll silence us. I will make you wish you had

never..." The old man didn't even see the punch coming. His nose shattered in blood and all present heard the sickening crunch of bones as the furious Andrews stood back and surveyed the damage his fist had inflicted. Other than Vanpelt's pitiful whimpering as he searched for his spectacles, which had been knocked several feet away, the room was deathly silent. Not a soul moved, save Andrews, who slowly reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a monogrammed handkerchief to wipe the blood off his bruised knuckle.

"Do not dare lecture me about the Constitution, you coward! You won't make me wish anything." He suddenly grabbed the terrified Vanpelt and slammed him bodily against the wall, shaking him like a rag doll. It was nine to one, but the other justices were too shocked and afraid to interfere. "If you have the audacity to bleed on my new suit I will break something else of yours." He let go of Vanpelt, who collapsed to the floor, too afraid to stand up lest this insane idiot do more harm to his person.

"Now you all listen very, very carefully. If you think that I will hesitate to order your executions, you are sorely mistaken. I consider every last one of you to be guilty of more deaths than Hitler and Stalin combined, so I will be of clear conscience if I decide that all nine of you need to be gunned down as enemy combatants outside of your carefully groomed estates. So here is the deal. You will be receiving a check in the mail for the sum of one million dollars. Spend it wisely because it represents the last dime you will ever receive from the US government. "Your pension, your health benefits, and anything else you thought you had coming is history."

"Now, here is what you will do. You will hop in your chauffeured cars and instruct your drivers to take you straight home. You will neither apply for nor accept any position remotely associated with the United States government so long as you shall live. And you will keep your mouth shut about everything you have seen and heard and felt today." He looked in disgust at Vanpelt, who tried his best not to cry. "I can't directly stop you from spilling your cowardly guts to the press. But know this – if I hear of any of you saying so much as a negative word about me or anyone in my administration, or if you should write a book or even a blog post attacking anything I have done, I guarantee you that while you will live, not one but two of your fellow justices will die within a week. So don't give me the pleasure of dispatching you, for it will be a good service to the country."

Walking up to Chief Justice Pennington, he stood close to him and asked quietly, "Sir, would you prefer I go ahead and have someone engineer an unfortunate accident for one of you later today just so you are absolutely certain that I am not bluffing?" The Chief Justice swallowed nervously, looked at the sorry figure of Vanpelt hovering in the corner like an abused dog, and shook his head. "No, Mr. President." He coughed and cleared his throat twice before finding his voice. "I believe your message has been received."

With one final look of unbridled contempt, President Andrews tossed his soiled handkerchief in Vanpelt's lap and told him to get cleaned up. Turning, he marched out of the room without another word.

Minutes later, the last of the justices meekly stepped into their respective vehicles. A concerned driver noted the blood on Vanpelt's face as he held a cloth against his nose. "Sir, what

happened? Should I take you to the hospital?” Staring miserably out the window, Vanpelt shook his head. “No, just take me home. Take me home.”

Chapter 8

“History does not long entrust the care of freedom to the weak or the timid.”
-Dwight D. Eisenhower

President Jack Andrews signaled to his media team that he was ready to begin his first televised broadcast from the Oval Office. Dressed in a black suit with an understated striped tie, he drained the water from his glass and handed the empty container to an assistant who stood just outside of the camera’s reach. “Whenever you’re ready, Mr. President.”

“My fellow Americans, good morning to each one of you. It is with a heavy but hopeful heart that I greet you this beautiful January morning. Heavy because the events of yesterday and today weigh most heavily on my heart, and hopeful that I nevertheless will remain in your good graces after I explain the logic and reasoning behind two of the most dramatic decisions that I will ever make.” The sound was perfect, the lighting was perfect, and the media director gave a silent thumbs-up for the President’s benefit.

“As you no doubt have heard, yesterday afternoon I succeeded in placing all members of Congress, including the House of Representatives and the Senate, under house arrest. They remain safe and sound with the utmost in round-the-clock protection from no fewer than one thousand of the finest Marines I have ever seen. So let me personally assure the wonderful spouses, children, family members, and friends of these congressional members that they are in the best of hands. I know that you will miss them dearly during this time, but understand that they have been called to serve in a manner never before asked of any Congress. And I am confident that they will complete the work assigned to them.”

“What you have not heard, however, is that I have immediately terminated the employment of all nine justices of the Supreme Court, including Chief Justice Daniel Pennington.” At this, even several members of his cabinet who happened to be in the Oval Office, blinked. Only Vice President Ty Kennedy shook his head in satisfaction at the expected news. His only regret was that he could not have been there when it happened, but since the President and Vice President of course could not travel together for security reasons, he hadn’t even considered asking for the privilege. He was insanely jealous though when Andrews admitted to decking Vanpelt. What he wouldn’t have given to be the one to deliver that particular message!

“Now from a very early age we all have learned that the federal government of the United States is comprised of three branches. The Legislative branch creates the laws of the land. The Executive branch carries out the laws that Congress makes. And the Judicial branch is the final authority on the interpretation of those laws as well as their constitutionality. From the outset, our founding fathers correctly believed that a single branch of government fully vested with all power and authority would quickly get out of hand. So in their generous wisdom they orchestrated the creation of a republican form of democracy intended to prevent any one branch from exercising undue power. As we all know, our nation has not been exempt from trials, some of which were our own making. And our three branches of government certainly have not been perfect in that regard.”

“For example, on the judicial side, our nation’s Supreme Court once failed abysmally to protect the basic civil rights of all Americans, famously upholding the right to slavery in the Dred Scott case of 1857. They continued their enormous error in 1896, upholding in *Plessy v. Ferguson* the constitutionality of state laws requiring the segregation of whites and blacks within our private businesses. I will never understand how the Supreme Court could live with itself or reconcile these two decisions with the Constitution. President Lincoln warned that if government policy ever became ‘irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court...the people will have ceased to be their own rulers.’ And at least in the case of millions of our African-American citizens at the time, his words proved prophetically true. Their God-given rights were trampled and they were treated as the property of others. And lest we are tempted to believe that the erroneous decisions of the Supreme Court are merely the well-intentioned but misguided interpretations of the Constitution, we must remember the chilling words of Justice Thurgood Marshall, who said, ‘You do what you think is right and let the law catch up’. By those words he justified what we now refer to as judicial activism, which allowed the personal opinions of a small group of federal judges to hijack both the letter and spirit of the Constitution upon which our nation’s legal system is based.”

“On the legislative side, Congress has passed countless shortsighted and self-serving laws which have been to the sole and lasting detriment of our Union. I respectfully acknowledge this issue has been most divisive, but the law to allow the abortion of unborn babies in the womb stands in diametrical opposition to our founding principle of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Allowing doctors to perform the barbaric practice of ending a baby’s life during childbirth is beyond murder, and yet Congress as a whole sees nothing wrong with it. If the creation of horrendous laws were not enough, Congress sees fit to routinely exempt itself from the very legislation it foists upon the rest of us. At one time or another, Congress has exempted itself from all or a portion of the Freedom of Information Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the 1975 Age Discrimination Act, the Employee Polygraph Protection Act of 1988, and many other pieces of legislation far too numerous to mention here. Ask any member of Congress and they will insist that none of those acts are relevant to congressional activities, and yet the reasonable man or woman among us must ask, ‘then why bother to create the exemptions?’ And if these exemptions mean nothing to you, then surely you must want to scream in righteous anger whenever a member of Congress becomes embroiled in what they prefer to call ‘ethics disputes’. I am sorry, that is but a euphemism for criminal behavior. Yet in spite of the scores upon scores of congressional scandals, it is a rare

occasion for any member of Congress to be brought to justice. To a very large degree they have positioned themselves to be above the law.”

“And lest I forget, within the executive branch lies hidden some terrible, terrible misdeeds. Everyone knows about President Nixon and the relatively recent host of sexual scandals tainting the legacy of President Clinton. What you may not know is a gross misdeed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt who attempted to expand the Supreme Court in 1937. What was so insidious about his attempt to expand it from nine to fifteen justices? On the surface it might not seem wrong, but his intent was to pack the Court with handpicked justices who would gladly lend their support to his New Deal policies and related legislation. This “Court-packing Plan” as it came to be known, thankfully backfired in Congress and was an unmitigated disaster for President Roosevelt. Does that sound like something a presidential leader should have attempted? Does it sound legitimate for a sitting President to turn the judicial branch into a personal toy?”

“And if it were not enough to learn the tragic lessons from the Supreme Court’s Dred Scot decision, in February of 1942 this same FDR signed Executive Order 9066, which resulted in the forced interment of 110,000 innocent Japanese-Americans. So once again in our nation’s great history we find terrible instances of government run amok, with even more terrible consequences. Speaking of running amok, you recall President Obama’s disastrous expanse of government in 2009, culminating in a bitter mandate to force Americans to purchase certain medical insurance whether they wanted it or not, and at prices far higher than promised. Surprise, Congress itself was exempted, as were many entities which were selectively hand-picked for exemption. That, coupled with a government takeover and unprecedented interference with private industry, nearly sounded the death knell for capitalism as we know it. And we are hardly out of the woods yet.”

“You have protested the most frightening expansion of government and your Supreme Court did nothing to aid you. You have protested against the crippling and punitive taxation levied against you by Congress, and your Congress scoffed at you. And you have demanded that your President rise up and show true leadership, restoring your faith in government. And on that note, your President has heard you.”

“And so, I formally announce and execute Executive Order 18091 to sequester the members of Congress until further notice, and Executive Order 18092 to terminate the employment of all current members of the Supreme Court. While many will beg to differ, this is not an attempt at a personal power grab. Nor will I justify my actions or engage in public debate over the legality or wisdom of my decisions. What is done is done, and I stand before you with a clear conscience that both decisions were made in direct accordance with my solemn oath to ‘faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States’. So help me God, I will not only uphold my duties as I so recently promised you, but will insist until my last breath that Congress and the Supreme Court uphold *their* duties as well.”

“Fellow Americans, today may well go down as a dark day in our history. My decisions are fraught with more danger than even I can begin to fathom. I assure you that I have taken great

pains to enlist the unwavering support of our nation's armed forces so that we do not fall victim to a military uprising. On the contrary, I urge all Americans to exercise prudence and patience as these events play themselves out. Do your job, care for your family, and by all means offer your unfailing prayers to God Almighty for the continued strength and stability of this nation. Thank you, and may God bless America."

Chapter 9

Day 1: Thursday, January 26

Kevin Marks arrived at the unnamed office complex thirty minutes early for what would be the first official day of congressional house arrest. He didn't doubt the President's promise to have him formally arrested if he failed to arrive on time, and saw no reason to risk getting stuck in traffic. He had thought long and hard about the wisdom (or was it the completely lunacy?) of Andrews' move, and he had to admit that he was curious as to how this thing would play out. He certainly could see a million problems with it, each thornier than the last. And as of that moment he didn't even have an idea as to the mechanics of the plan. That would change shortly when the President arrived here at 8:30.

Kevin presented his credentials to the Marine guards, grabbed some bottled water and an apple from a concession table in the hallway, and made his way to the conference room. He had hoped that not too many people would notice his entrance, since he was one of the lucky few who had the luxury of going home on the evenings and weekends rather than staying here 24x7. Mercifully, his housebound colleagues were too deep in conversation with one another to notice him, and he took a seat without attracting any attention. Kevin sipped his water, lost in thought, until the President arrived, who wasted no time in getting started.

"Good morning. You all look quite refreshed this morning, so I trust that you have everything you need here. I know you are eager to talk with your family, and it seems unfair of me to prevent you from doing so. But work with me and we'll tackle that issue in due time. I have assured them however that you all are doing fine and that you will lack for nothing during your stay. Many phone calls have come in asking for messages to be delivered to you, and those messages will be distributed to you daily. If you have not already done so, you may request any personal items within reason be brought to you, with the primary exception of any electronics. Technical teams will be here today to set up a number of desktops and laptops to assist you in the document-intensive process of crafting legislation and searching through the annals of both congressional and public databases of a legal nature. You will have unrestricted use of the Internet for purposes of research and for accessing secure congressional material, except that

there will be a firewall that blocks any attempted email and instant messaging traffic whether inbound or outbound, and I should caution you that every aspect of your usage will be monitored for any attempt at outside communication. That would of course include everything from emails to chats to videoconferencing and so on. Please do not try it until I so authorize you.”

“So! Let us formally begin with day 1 of our arrangement. As you know, you are hereby sequestered until at which point you have fixed the things that you collectively have broken over the past forty-odd years. You will be deemed to have fixed the problems when you create, modify, or repeal various pieces of legislation, Congressional standards of conduct, and so on that this country needs most desperately. Collectively this endeavor is called the Top 100 Plan, and when you are finished with that legislation and have verbally given to me your solemn promise to implement it promptly, then as one you will be free to return to your jobs and to your waiting families.”

“Mr. President,” asked a Senator from Maine. “Out of curiosity what incentive do we have to work with you on this?”

“I am quite glad you asked. Item one on the Top 100 list is for the 27th amendment to be changed. Currently it states that ‘No law varying the compensation for the services of the Senators and Representatives, shall take effect, until an election of Representatives shall have intervened.’ Your first order of business is to add to that statement, “The salary of all Senators and Representatives shall be the sum of one million dollars annually.” Eyebrows rose around the room, and one representative joked that they now made over twice as much as the President. Quite suspicious though, many members crossed their arms and waited for the other shoe to drop. Speaker of the House Killian Stark was immediately angry that some idiot freshman representative would start out making the same thing he did.

“In exchange for that enormous pay increase which by further amendment shall be made retroactive as of this calendar year, you will immediately forego any and all benefits from the federal government, including any health benefits, pension, and so on. The logic is that with a million bucks annually, you can well afford to buy whatever health insurance plan you please.”

“What about taxes?” someone asked.

“What about them? You’re the ones that establish taxes, so whatever rule you apply to those in the private sector will determine how much you bring home. If you think your taxes on a million bucks are too high, you are free to change the tax law. Now, when I say that your salary will require you to forego any and all additional benefits, I mean that in the strictest sense. That means no trips, no concert tickets, nothing during your term that you have not purchased with your own funds. If you accept so much as a meal valued at over \$25.00, you must document it and show a proper paper trail that you have reimbursed the person or company for it out of a personal checking account in your name. Failure to abide by the spirit of this law will be a felony and will be punished to the fullest extent of the law.

“A felony?” someone asked incredulously.

“Yes. That presumably is the only way to prevent the crooks among you from weaseling their way out of it.”

“So basically you’re trying to buy us off, bribing us with a million dollars each and making us promise in return to pass your Top 100 Plan, 99% of which we haven’t even heard about yet. Is that correct?”

“Of course not. The one million dollars is a salary increase that you will give yourselves, and you’ll index it to inflation so its value never erodes. So it is not a bribe from me in any shape or form, and I resent the implication.” Pausing slightly, he continued, “The bribe from me is that in exchange for the passage of the Top 100 Plan, each of you will receive a tax-free gift of five million dollars upon completion of this term. Five million dollars. That is my bribe to you. As much as I detest bribery, I nonetheless detest a broken America even more, and am willing to see to it that each of you are extravagantly compensated if the end result is that we get this nation back on track. Five million times 535 of you equals 2.675 billion dollars, which is about the amount of taxpayer dollars you spent last Thursday afternoon. So trust me when I say that America will come to consider this the best investment made since the Louisiana Purchase. The only catch is you have to stay quiet about it. If the press gets wind of it, I’ll of course have to deny it.”

Another hand rose. “What guarantee do we have that you’ll follow through on that generous gift?”

“The same guarantee I have that you will honor your word to pass the Top 100 Plan after I let you out of here. For the first time in recent history, you and I are going to have to learn to trust each other. Now let’s take a quick break before we continue.”

Stark immediately walked over and put his arms around a couple of his more senior colleagues. He was known for an ability to sense even the slightest weak point in the armor of his opponents, and he had the tendency to move sooner rather than later. “Guys, he just gave us an out. Let’s play along with him and give him whatever pieces of paper he’s looking for, and later on we can tie this thing up with so many procedural hurdles it’ll never see the light of day. Other than, of course, the pay raise. And if you’re worried about him hijacking another joint session of Congress, heck we can all watch this loon’s State of the Union address on TV like everybody else. *Capisce?*” They most certainly did.

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With item one on the Top 100 Plan apparently checked off nicely, President Andrews immediately went for the jugular. “Item 2 on the list is an eight-year limit on congressional terms. If no President should be in office more than 8 years total, then neither should any Representative or Senator. Retroactive this election cycle, congressional terms will be four years each, just like the President, and members may serve for a total of eight years maximum. If you have already served more than eight years you may complete this term of office, meaning you still have four years of service left. After that, you have an extremely lucrative partnership in a private law firm waiting on you.”

“Screw you,” an unnamed voice called out from the back of the room. “He’s right,” a more eloquent voice piped up, “not going to happen.”

“Yes it will. And since you’re so eager to please, item 3 will be a breeze: the Supreme Court will no longer be appointed for life by the President or confirmed by the Senate. Instead, the public will elect justices for a four-year term, and they, too, shall serve no longer than eight years maximum. America is tired of career politicians and judges who answer to no one, and they will be exceedingly glad that you have agreed to make these things happen. I feel quite certain that the nine former members of the Supreme Court have already settled into their unexpected retirement, so we will just need to set up our voting machines and elect us some new ones, won’t we?”

“Now in a few minutes I’m going to leave you to begin your work with each other to hammer out the language and the legal details. But let me give you two more items to chew on. Item 4 I have actually already alluded to above. You will make it a felony offense for any candidate for federal office to receive any monetary gift, however small, from any corporation or entity, whether domestic or foreign, for-profit or not-for-profit, at any time. Any such entity that knowingly makes a financial contribution to such federal candidate shall be subject to the seizure, without limitation, of any assets based within the United States. You’ll have some details to work out there, but as federal workers it absolutely will apply to you. There is simply too much outright corruption in this room, and it starts on the campaign trail with you selling votes and making irresponsible promises that aren’t yours to make. So going forward, the American public can continue to donate to your campaigns to the fullest extent of current law, but corporations cannot. There simply is no other way to solve that problem.”

“Lastly for today, item 5: Congress may not exclude itself from any law, nor avail themselves of any benefit not generally available to federal employees. You’ll notice that most of this stuff primarily has to do with how you conduct business. Pardon me for pointing this out again, but since you are the single biggest problem in this country, if we want to get back on track, we have to start at the top.”

And with that, President Andrews exited the room before anyone could object. He really didn’t care what they had to say.

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Promptly at 6:00pm, the group broke for dinner. Stark grabbed Kevin’s arm. “Well this is a crock,” he snarled. “He’s full of it and there is no way we’re going to pass this thing. He can dream on.”

Kevin walked with him to the parking lot, shoving past the group of Marines over-zealously guarding the front doors. “I’m just glad a few of us can go home in the evenings.”

“Yeah, there’s that.” Stark conceded grudgingly. “What are your plans for the evening?”

“Go home, eat, do some research on a couple of topics the President brought up today. I’m pretty sure I can access everything from home.”

“Most of it. There are a couple of restricted areas that require a bit of extra clearance to access outside of the official congressional offices though. I can get you set up easily, just need to get you a couple of digital certificates installed on your laptop.”

“Can you email them to me?” Kevin asked. “Believe it or not, I have installed certificates before.”

“No, this has to be done in person, but I’ll have someone swing by your place later on. It won’t take but a few minutes to do.”

“Oh no, you don’t have to do that tonight. We can work it out later. Good evening, sir.”

An hour later Kevin once again found himself alone in his townhouse. His *iPhone* remained securely in the hands of the Marines elsewhere in the city, but President Andrews had placed no limits on the use of any other phones he owned. He picked up the nearest one and dialed Cameron, his wife. No answer.

He frowned and tried again. “C’mon, pick up,” he instructed her as he unpacked some takeout food and spread it on the kitchen table in front of him. “Pick up.” She didn’t, so he left a brief message for her to call him at the townhouse, explaining that he would not have access to his cell phone for the foreseeable future. And with nothing else to occupy his time for the next hour, he opened his laptop.

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Kevin Marks wasn’t the only one eating takeout that evening. With his mouth full of some of the greasiest Chinese food the city had to offer, Hal Snipes smiled. Hal was the technical guru to Killian Stark. “Overweight, junk food addict, and entirely unprincipled” is how people described him. And those were his friends. Like most of the men who worked for Stark, he was driven primarily by money and the perks of being close to one of the nation’s foremost power brokers. Plus, he got to play with a lot of serious technology, more or less without having to obey the law. He was usually too good to get caught, and if he did, Stark would pull some stunt citing “national security interests” that would quietly get him off the hook. Hal never ceased to marvel at such power.

Shoveling another mouthful of fried rice down his considerable gullet, he wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve and smiled again. For the second night in a row he had hit pay dirt. It was time for the next round to begin.

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Sandy Farmer relished her job even more so than usual today. Arriving at the studio after a light dinner, she carefully brushed her teeth and submitted to the expert ministrations of the

stylist and makeup artist before she stepped back onto the set. The familiar On Air light captured her energetic face as she re-opened the discussion about the sequestering of Congress. Filling the high-resolution screen behind her was the slogan: Congress Held Hostage: Day 1”.

“Ms. Farmer,” the host began, “I understand that you have been in touch with a couple of members of Congress this evening, and they have just completed their first full day of work in their new surroundings. Two questions. First is how were you able to get past the Marines, and secondly, tell us more about the President’s plan that he has presented so far.”

Sandy smiled as if her host had given her too much credit. “Actually no one is getting anywhere near those congressmen,” she replied. “But he did make a few exceptions, notably those just beginning their first term, who President Andrews said ‘haven’t yet become part of the problem’, so in a gesture of goodwill he lets them go home each evening. So in answer to your first question, I got my story from a freshman senator as he was leaving the office complex where the legislators are being held. He agreed to share the details of yesterday’s meeting but insisted on remaining anonymous for the time being. So that’s how we were able to gain access to these details,” she concluded.

“And to answer the second question, that’s the thing nearly every American is most curious about right now. Namely, what is taking place in those meetings?” For the next few minutes Sandy gave a rundown of every detail she knew, spending most of the time discussing the first five items on the Top 100 plan.

The host indicated they had time for just one more question. “Do you really think they will agree to term limits? The topic has been debated for years but gets little more than lip service.”

“Well, after talking with this senator, he really thinks President Andrews fully intends to stick to his guns on this whole thing. While it is true that there is no telling what will happen over the next few days, the sense is that this is not a short term public relations gimmick, but the real deal. We can debate all we like about the wisdom of the President’s agenda and how it will all turn out, but it appears that if these legislators want to see their families any time soon, term limits are just around the corner.”

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Kevin Marks sat in front of the TV and settled on the first sporting event he came to. It was a hockey match between Boston and Montreal. He wasn’t much of a hockey fan, but he needed something to get his mind off the day’s events. An enormously focused worker, he prided himself in pouring his mental energy into whatever task was at hand. But for the moment he needed to forget he was a lawyer, forget he was technically under house arrest, and forget that he had no clue what the next few weeks would look like. In fact he wanted to forget just about everything and focus on a hockey game that had absolutely no meaning for him.

His plan worked well for about seven minutes, then his phone rang. He grabbed it, hoping it was Cameron returning his call. He answered with a hopeful “hello?” then scowled when an unfamiliar voice announced that one of Killian Stark’s assistants would be arriving at his

townhouse in about one minute. His annoyance rose several notches and his interest in the game was forgotten. "Oh, for crying out loud."

The doorbell rang, and he reluctantly stood and unlocked the door, a dozen insults at the ready for whoever it was that was unfortunate enough to have been selected for this job today. He couldn't have Killian running roughshod over him for the next four years, not even for a no-limit credit card.

He opened the door and stared in confusion at the patently stunning woman in front of him. "Uh, yes?" he managed.

The woman smiled easily at him but appeared as taken aback as Kevin. She had perfect skin with the silkiest black hair Kevin had ever seen. Was she Asian? No, decided Kevin, not Asian. She had no discernible accent, and the type of skin that could have been American or a half dozen other nationalities. Either way, the moment their eyes met Kevin forgot his irritation.

"Um, I apologize for Mr. Stark sending you all the way across town for this. This was not necessary."

"Please think nothing of it, Congressman Marks. I assure you it is no problem and Mr. Stark wanted to make sure you had everything you needed, so here I am. Oh," as if forgetting something, "my name is Anne Roberts. I have a bit of a technical background but am more of a glorified gopher than anything else."

She was glorified, all right, thought Kevin. She looked to be perhaps a few years younger than he, and wore no wedding band. As if noticing that Kevin did indeed have a wedding ring on, Anne asked tentatively, "Do you think your wife would mind if I intrude upon you guys for just a moment while I configure a few security settings?"

"Oh, my wife is at our primary residence in Indianapolis, so you won't be intruding at all. Come right on in."

Kevin watched her as she sat down in front of his laptop and expertly waded through several layers of menus to set up the required security privileges. She wore a light fragrance that Kevin couldn't quite identify, yet was somehow intoxicating. He leaned toward the screen as if interested in the technical gibberish before him, but all he could think about was how good she smelled. Anne didn't seem to mind his proximity in the least. She continued working for another minute, then announced with a smile that he was all set. "May I use your restroom before leaving?"

"Certainly. Down the hall on the right." Kevin watched her as she disappeared into the guest bathroom, his mind running wild at the crazy possibilities. Being away from Cameron was already far more difficult than he had anticipated, and now he had an exquisite beauty in the privacy of his townhouse that he didn't know what to do with. What if she were undressing at that very moment? What if she had noticed how much she had affected him? "Good grief, Kevin, get hold of yourself," he thought angrily. "She's a computer techie and had to pee."

“You look disappointed,” Anne commented when she reappeared fully clothed a moment later. “Did I take too much of your time?”

“Oh, of course not,” he blinked. “You did a fabulous job and again I am sorry you had to come out here. But I am very glad you did so.”

“Me too,” she said with a bedazzling smile. “And of course, as you know, you can call me with any uh, technical questions you may have. Mr. Stark has requested that I am to give you top priority day or night.” With that, she held out her hand and said it was a pleasure meeting him. Kevin took the hand and held it, relishing its warmth and forgetting to release his grip on her.

Anne made no effort to withdraw her hand and just looked at him with interest until Kevin finally remembered himself and let go. “It certainly was a pleasure to meet you as well. Thank you again for dropping by.” Seeing her out, Kevin shut the door behind him and wondered why temptation had shown up so uninvited. He sighed and sat back down in front of the TV to watch the hockey game. The Bruins led 2-0, but he was no longer interested.

* * * * *

“So how did it go, Anne?” Hal Snipes asked. “Did you get any from the dashing new congressman?”

“You are *such* a pig, Hal,” Anne retorted. “Seriously, you’re a pig.”

Hal’s grin turned into a sardonic smirk. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said about me. But you didn’t answer my question.”

“Shut up, because I don’t answer to you.”

“Maybe not directly. But you do answer to Stark, and I’m the project lead on this whole thing, so you might work on your attitude a bit so I can put in a good word for you. In fact, maybe you and I should get a drink tonight and...”

“Not in your wildest dreams.” Anne cut him off, shivering at the very thought of a date with this disgusting man.

“Don’t worry about my wildest dreams. Just make sure you stay in Kevin’s dreams.”

* * * * *

Dr. Stanley Redmond set his worn briefcase on the desk in the lecture hall of Tuskegee University and gave a brief welcoming glance at his assembled class. It was the last class of the day for his night-time political science students, and he was tired of standing on his feet. “Good evening,” he began, reaching for a steaming mug of coffee as he quickly scanned his notes. His students were primarily political science majors taking the class as a graduation requirement, but

there were a few who chose it as an elective since it seemed to them a reasonably easy class. Dr. Redmond wasn't sure how easy he was, but at least he required no major papers.

Without even thinking about it, he launched into the "professor voice" he had practiced for years. "In keeping with the class syllabus, today we will begin a series of lectures covering the history and role of the executive orders of the President. As you know, the authority to create legislation falls to Congress and to Congress alone. And as I am absolutely certain that you all remember, that authority comes from Article I, Section 1 of the United States Constitution." A few scattered laughs from the class confirmed his suspicion that none of them had the faintest idea what article or section it came from.

"Let's begin with the definition of 'executive order'. An executive order is simply an order issued by the President, who is, of course, the chief executive. The concept of an executive order dates back many centuries and spans many nations. Other countries may refer to them as orders-in-council, edicts, or decrees. Fans of the Holy Scripture may recall a Gentile historian and physician known as Luke, who, writing in the second chapter of the Biblical book that bears his name, refers to a decree by Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. I am quite certain that our own Congress loves at least that bit of scripture, if nothing else." More laughs. "I find it intriguing that an ancient executive order by a godless ruler was in fact the singular reason that prompted Mary and Joseph to travel to the tiny town of Bethlehem, which is where the baby Jesus was born. Intriguing because the ancient prophet Micah predicted the birth of just such a future leader in that very town seven hundred years before Caesar issued that decree. Had the decree not been issued, Mary and Joseph would have had no reason to make the journey to Bethlehem, and the 700 year-old prophecy would not have been fulfilled. So we find that executive orders are nothing new, and that their mark in world history is well established."

"Let's return to American politics. An official, numerical list of executive orders was established in 1907. While the modern phrase was not even coined until the early 1900s, executive orders date back all the way to 1789. Now we know the President may not create legislation, but may only sign into law legislation that Congress has duly passed. So in many ways it would seem that the ability to issue an executive order would allow the President to entirely bypass the legislative branch and effectively allow the President carte blanche to do as he pleases without the requirement to even work with Congress." Pausing for another sip of coffee, he posed a question to the class: "So what gives the President the authority to issue an executive order?"

"The President's wife?" joked one student.

Dr. Redmond smiled. Lord knows his political science lectures needed all the spicing up they could get, so he was happy for the brief banter. "I am sorry to disappoint any of you women's studies majors that the First Lady is not the source of that authority. Interestingly, the President derives his authority to issue an executive order both from the Constitution as well as from Congress itself. In the former case there is a rather vague reference to "executive power" in Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution. Clearly the founding fathers did not intend the President to be a figurehead, so the President is of course vested with the authority to carry out his duties.

It is this general understanding from the Constitution that lends authority to the President's ability to issue executive orders."

"In addition, certain acts of Congress explicitly authorize the President to carry out certain functions that may not be specifically granted in the Constitution. So from time to time a sitting President may issue an executive order that specifically cites this authority that has been received from Congress. This is known as 'delegated legislation'. Executive orders created under the umbrella of delegated authority have the full force and effect of law, since Congress specifically gave the President the discretionary authority in that particular matter."

A hand went up in the back. "Are executive orders ever questioned, or even ruled unconstitutional?"

"Absolutely. And when the class meets again we will talk about that very question."

Chapter 10

"It's unconstitutional!" spouted the irate lady from the set of Channel 9 News. The constituents of the great state of Minnesota had never seen their Senator's wife so visibly furious and animated. But the normally reserved and elegant Barbara Dawes, longtime wife of Minnesota Senator Frederick "Freddy" Dawes, couldn't care less what the public thought of her at the moment.

"There's outrage, and then there's illegal," she stormed. "And if it were possible, this goes far beyond illegal, with this President making a mockery of our government. He has demonstrated the most blatant form of treason possible against the United States of America, and he must be removed before he destroys the nation, which clearly is his intention."

"I completely disagree," countered another participant on the set. "I have talked with a dozen people on my street, and with all due respect, Ms. Dawes, for the enormous disruption this has caused you, the common folk are dancing in the streets. I certainly will not disparage your husband on a personal level, but Congress in general has had it coming for far too long, and this is exactly what the nation needs right now. It's us against Congress, and finally we have a President who is on our side."

"*Disruption?*" Barbara Dawes exploded. "You think I'm worried about how this disrupts my personal situation right now? You should be worried about how this disrupts centuries of democracy!"

“Ms. Dawes,” interjected a third participant, “I’ll be more blunt than my friend here because I think your husband is a crook, and the only reason he isn’t behind bars for tax evasion is because his buddies in Congress chair too many powerful committees. So let me be candid when I challenge your assertion that America is a democracy anymore. Yes, we still elect our representatives, but they’ve rigged the game so much and are so thoroughly corrupt, as your husband’s shenanigans have aptly demonstrated, that many Americans don’t even have faith in their government anymore.”

Barbara Dawes face turned crimson, and several viewers across the state turned and remarked to those around them, “If looks could kill, the person speaking to Barbara Dawes that way would need a casket.”

* * * * *

Charley Spratlin could not believe this. Hearing about a common citizen going head to head with Barbara Dawes had caused an instant firestorm on the Internet. Even his tiny little bar had an old computer he had purchased to keep track of his modest finances, and though he still suffered with the slowest dial-up Internet service available, nonetheless he was just as informed as anyone.

“So what do you think, Spratlin,” asked one of his customers. “Do you have anything else to put on the list?”

Charley chewed his lower lip before responding. “I reckon the list is about as good as it’s gonna get.” When the “Congress Held Hostage” story broke, someone had immediately called for some bets on how the whole thing would go down. Charley scratched his head and found the notepad where he had scrawled everyone’s suggestions. Charley would keep track of all the bets. He studied his chicken scratch, marveling that he could read his own writing. He could probably get a prescription filled with that abysmal quality of handwriting. It sure looked like something his doctor would write when authorizing a refill on his arthritis meds. Thus far the list of possible endings to the crisis included:

Congress lawyers up, goes home, and it’s back to politics as usual.

President Andrews is assassinated.

President Andrews is impeached.

“Well boys,” Charley finally replied. “I think this is a good list, but I’m afraid there’s one more possibility you haven’t thought of. And although as keeper of the bets I’m not going to place an official bet, it’s the one I’m most worried about.”

“What’s that?” asked one of the regulars.

Charley cleared his throat and spoke quietly, staring somberly at his group of friends. “I think there’s something a lot worse than the President getting assassinated. I think America’s enemies will use this confusion against us. If I’m right, the scenario we need to add to the list is nothing short of World War III and the unthinkable destruction of the United States of America.”

* * * * *

Day 2: Friday, January 27

Killian Stark scowled in controlled fury. His hold on power was often described as a chokehold, even by members of his own party. He thrived on that control, and there was little he wouldn't do to maintain it. Sometimes he wondered if he would even kill to stay on top. He doubted it, but never say never.

He loved being in control, and this lockdown situation threw a giant monkey wrench into his usual control mechanisms. He knew that for the time being at least, President Andrews dealt the cards. With his communication lines disrupted, thus far the best Stark could do was to continue surreptitious discussions with his colleagues on both sides of the aisle, including member of both the House and the Senate. No one was sure whether the plan would work, but Stark pushed the plan as if its success was all but guaranteed. "Just play along with the President. Work with him, draft a thousand pages of the finest-sounding legislation, and make him happy. We'll bust out of this place soon enough, and Andrews won't be left standing."

A new thought came to him. Stark's eyes narrowed and he wondered if it came down to it, could he have the President killed? It was possible, he acknowledged. He would best be careful about making any comments that could be remotely perceived as threats against Andrews in case he hit upon a workable plan that could be carried out without it getting traced back to him. But then he'd have to hire someone else to kill the assassin so the assassin couldn't blackmail him. And then he'd have to kill the secondary assassin to prevent him from talking about who hired him to kill the first assassin. It could get out of hand. His dark ruminations were interrupted when the President called everyone to have a seat and get started with the day's business.

"Welcome to day 2," Andrews began. "The press is calling this 'Congress Held Hostage'. I suppose from your point of view I could see quite a touch of validity in that description. But let's just focus on getting things done, shall we. I should point out that I know some of the things I'm asking for are not things that can be hashed out with an evening of legal planning, so of the five items we covered yesterday, I recognize there still may be work to do. But would someone like to get me up to speed on where we stand?"

Killian spoke immediately. "Yes, Mr. President, we definitely have made progress on a number of points. Allow me to address the issue of term limits first, which I believe was item 2 on your 'Top 100' list. We discussed the matter at length yesterday evening, and believe we have a proposal that would work well and satisfy the spirit of the mandate. I'll keep it simple here, but in essence we will agree to enact term limits as suggested, but will allow members of Congress to serve for three 4-year terms. In addition, a grandfather clause will be inserted to protect the jobs of existing legislators so that the change will not affect our currently elected members. So anyone elected to Congress in the future will be restricted to three four-year terms, whereas..."

Andrews interrupted. "I am sorry you misunderstood, Mr. Speaker. But this is not a negotiation. You were not authorized to water down the instructions, and they certainly aren't suggestions. I would like for you to treat the Top 100 Plan as the Ten Commandments, if you don't mind the analogy. God didn't hand down the Ten Suggestions so that we can pick and choose like a cafeteria plan. Neither is the Top 100 Plan negotiable."

Killian remained unfazed. "But you are a realist, Mr. President. And a highly skilled negotiator if ever there was one. So I am confident that we can agree of the impossibility of simply rewriting centuries of American law based on a whim. We see the sincerity of purpose behind your administration's plans and we are working in good faith with you on this. So as a group we respectfully look forward to some give and take so that this plan can be implemented as quickly as possible."

Andrews stood before him. He had known this would happen, and it was no surprise to him that Killian would take the lead. There was enormous truth to Killian's words, and it wouldn't serve Andrews' purposes to dig in too deeply. "I, too, respectfully agree with your assessment on give and take. I also know that we can debate the contentious topic of term limits for the rest of the year and get nowhere. So let's acknowledge that endless debate and posturing will serve neither my interests nor yours, and agree on an immediate compromise. You concede that term limits will remain at the requested two terms of four years each. And I will concede that current members of Congress will be allowed to complete this four-year term as well as allow them to run for one additional four-year term."

In full view of the 535 members of the United States Congress, Jack Andrews extended his hand in a symbolic gesture of agreement. "Deal?"

Killian Stark's blood began to boil even though he was a master of keeping his composure. He hated it because he knew it was a perfectly reasonable compromise, and that ran contrary to his winner-takes-all approach. But with the President's outstretched hand awaiting a reply, all he could do was to remember this is all for show. *Just make the man happy for now.* With a broad smile, he shook the President's hand. "Of course, sir. We have a deal."

Andrews seemed genuinely relieved, as if he almost couldn't believe this was happening. "Good! Good," he finally managed. And over the next five hours, punctuated by occasional breaks, the President and Congress hammered out a preliminary plan that would enable the drafting of formal legislation on the first five items on the Top 100 Plan. As Andrews had suspected, Congress didn't have quite as much at stake when it came to switching Supreme Court justices to an elected plan, so they hastily agreed to it without compromise. This, Andrews knew, was merely posturing to smooth the way for a slew of serious objections to legislation that would make it a felony offense for any corporation or entity from making financial contributions to any federal candidate. The whole notion of barring corporate money was unthinkable, and yet Andrews knew that the behind-the-scenes political machinations of campaign financing and the resulting post-election horse-trading were deadly evils that had to be dealt with. He conceded much more than he would have liked on that point, but felt the end result was something that would at least bring more transparency to campaign finance. "Well, it is way more than my six most recent predecessors managed to do," he concluded.

Likewise, Andrews knew there would be little problem to Congress accepting a massive pay raise. Any real objections would have been how to do so without incurring the wrath of a public already incensed with the stratospheric levels of perks their leaders enjoyed. So Andrews agreed to openly position it in such a way that the push came directly from the Oval Office rather than from behind congressional closed doors. Maybe by agreeing to take the heat for that one he could gain a few brownie points for some of the items where he knew Congress would balk. It was not likely to matter much, he knew, but was worth a shot.

At length, Andrews signaled to Mason Foley and the rest of his immediate security team that he was ready to return to the White House. “Since it is Friday and I have a flight to London to catch for a couple of days of meetings with Great Britain’s Prime Minister, we will break a bit early today. My office has arranged for some extensive weekend entertainment to be brought in. There will be movies, plenty of excellent food and desserts, and even a sizable library of books brought in for your reading pleasure.”

“Most significantly, now that we are settled in here there is no reason why your phones cannot be returned. We have taken an inventory of the types of phones and have purchased new chargers so you may begin using your phones quickly. I appreciate your patience with this and once again I genuinely apologize to you for the frustration in being cut off from your families.”

He expected no accolades for the gesture, but exiting the room between the members of his security detail, one Congressman caught his eye and said sincerely, “Thank you, Mr. President.” It was hardly the heralding of a kinder, gentler atmosphere in the embattled city of Washington, DC, but Jack Andrews nodded in appreciation.

Wasting no time in leaving his less fortunate colleagues behind, Kevin plugged his *iPhone* into his car charger and pulled out into the Friday afternoon traffic. Within minutes he had enough of a charge to call a couple of the guys over for a hastily arranged cookout. *What a week*, Kevin muttered.

Chapter 11

Kevin opened the door of his townhouse and welcomed his two friends. He clapped David Herd on the back and gestured for him to hang his coat in the foyer closet. David was an insanely brilliant computer security analyst, known widely as “Herd the Nerd.” Formerly a black hat hacker, he crossed over to the light side after an early run-in with the law. Given the choice between a lengthy prison sentence for selling over 25,000 stolen credit cards to a foreign criminal network, or joining the National Security Agency to offer his top-tier technical skills to

the US Government, he chose the NSA. Herd and Kevin had been buddies in high school, but it was only recently since Kevin's ascension to the hallowed halls of Congress that the two had renewed their old friendship. Having barely settled in to his new townhouse, this was the first time his friends had seen the place.

"Kevin, my man!" exclaimed Herd. Looking around in admiration at the townhouse, he remarked, "I guess you've done pretty well after all. Well, except for the fact that the President of the most powerful nation on earth saw fit to personally put your sorry butt under house arrest."

Kevin grinned. "You can't say nothin'. You ought to be in prison, you know."

Behind David was CJ Thrower, one of David's colleagues at the NSA, albeit a far junior support analyst. "Ain't that the truth? CJ shook Kevin's hand and said simply, "nice place."

"You guys come on back here," Kevin invited as he turned and led the way into the kitchen. "Tonight won't be fancy but we've got burgers and steaks. Take your pick and throw it on the indoor grill here. Anything else you find in the fridge or pantry that sounds good, grab it."

Minutes later, the appetizing smell of mushrooms and onions sautéing in a pan filled the air. David took it upon himself to clear some papers and the laptop off the kitchen table, and then sat down in front of the laptop as if he couldn't help himself. "Mind if I check my email, Kevin?"

Kevin looked over his shoulder. "Uh, sure, go ahead." He didn't bother asking Herd if he needed any help. He knew the answer to that one.

Indeed, in mere seconds Herd had looped through three servers in three different geographical regions before finally arriving at one of his ultra-secure servers and using a portable multi-factor authentication device to log himself in. And that was just for his personal email. "Nice laptop," he said. "Almost as good as the one I use."

"Yeah, one of the perks of being in Congress, I suppose. I haven't played with it all that much but it is supposed to be the fastest on the market."

"Pretty close," David agreed. "It's loaded for sure."

* * * * *

"Turd the Nerd", sneered Hal Snipes from a cluttered office that reeked of fast food burritos. Several miles away, Hal had recognized the security analyst almost immediately. Few in the upper echelons of computer security were as revered as David Herd, and most security experts would have recognized his photo from Herd's security blog, which was one of the most respected on the Internet.

One of the reasons for the selection of that particular model for Kevin's laptop was the placement of a small but advanced camera built into the top center of the laptop, far more capable than the run of the mill web cams. As long as the laptop was open and not in sleep mode,

the camera could be accessed remotely without Kevin knowing he was being watched. As a bonus, the video was compressed and sent to Hal's systems in case he ever found a use for it.

For general purpose spying, the camera was just the start. A snapshot of Kevin's screen was taken every five seconds and sent to Hal's system, and it happened so fast that Kevin would never have the dimmest clue that he was being monitored. Even with the five-second delay Hal would see exactly what Kevin was looking at on his screen. He would know the name of every file Kevin accessed, every picture he looked at, and every web site he browsed. Even with the volume muted and headphones plugged in, crystal clear audio would be recorded in high fidelity onto Hal's system in case Kevin played an audio attachment that might contain sensitive details.

And finally, Hal had installed a keystroke logger that would record every key typed. Any password would thus belong to him, and there soon would be little of value that he wouldn't own. From Herd's login he already knew his username and password, but the multi-factor authentication meant that it was largely useless. Without the additional security components, the password alone was worthless. Plus, Hal would never use Herd's security details since anyone of Herd's caliber would remember the recent places he had logged in and would soon suspect Kevin's laptop had been breached. He didn't care to mess with Herd, just Kevin.

But considering his present adversary, Hal's eyes narrowed and he quickly executed a backdoor utility that would silently shut down any programs he used, including the camera. There was no sense in risking Herd's suspicions if he by chance looked at the list of programs running in the background. In a couple of hours an innocuous-looking program masquerading as a hard drive defragmenter would automatically start up on a pre-determined schedule. When it did so, it would quietly reload Hal's monitoring software, restoring his eyes and ears into a world Kevin Marks thought was so secure it was practically impenetrable.

With his spying activities temporarily curtailed, Hal Snipes turned his full attention to his next burrito.

* * * * *

"So how is Congress?" asked CJ before digging into his medium-rare steak.

"It is interesting," responded Kevin. "I am not quite sure what to make of it given the extraordinary circumstances of late."

"I'm hearing all over the place about what a sorry, corrupt bunch of crooks you are," David offered helpfully. "Is it true?"

Kevin sighed. "It's complicated."

"Not to me, it's not," interrupted David. "How many corruption charges has Congress had to deal with among its own rank and file in the past ten years anyway?"

“There is that,” Kevin admitted. “But I don’t think most people in Congress are all that bad. The power is intoxicating, in part because even though you’re smack in the public eye 24x7, at the same time there is a huge gulf fixed between Congress and the people. Let me give you an example. If you watch an old western you might find the local troublemakers have the judge in their pocket. So pretty much anything the troublemakers do goes unpunished even if the entire town knows what they’re up to. Multiply that by a factor of a hundred and you begin to get an idea of how many law enforcement agencies in effect report to Congress for all practical purposes since Congress holds the purse strings. It’s hard for them to bite the hand that feeds them.”

“But by the same token, I believe there are many in Congress who are patriotic men and women who genuinely love their country and are doing the best they can to rein in their wayward brothers and sisters. I’m still the new kid on the block, but it doesn’t seem like that’s going to be an easy job.”

“Well,” noted CJ, “at least you get to come home in the evenings. I think it’s a fine gesture by President Andrews to let you freshmen come home like that while the veterans are in the slammer.”

“It’s not a bad slammer,” Kevin commented. “It is mainly the perceived indignity of it that has everyone ticked off at Andrews. You may have noticed that Congress isn’t used to being pushed around.”

“Boy did you guys have this coming,” David allowed. “Present company absolutely excluded, of course.”

“Just shut up and eat.”

* * * * *

Day 5: Monday, January 30

Dr. Stanley Redmond adjusted his nondescript tie and took an appreciative sip of his morning coffee. It was a good thing he loved his job, because he was about to give the exact same lecture to four different classes today. In this case, he thankfully was able to use the same set of notes for each of his classes. The days, times, and students would change, but the content remained the same. And the coffee. Always the coffee.

Calling the class to order and frowning slightly at a few stragglers, he welcomed everyone to class. “Good morning, I hope you all had an enjoyable weekend even though the temperature was about ten degrees out. So on this fine Monday morning we will pick up where we left off during our last meeting. We have covered the basic history of executive orders, including the twin sources of authority that lend the President the ability to issue those orders. You’ll recall that various acts of Congress grant the President a measure of discretionary power that he normally cites as his permission, if you will, to issue an order. And secondly the Constitution itself

includes a generic and rather vague reference to executive power that Presidents for generations have used as legal justification for their decrees. A student recently posed the question about whether an executive order has ever been challenged, and the answer to that question is yes.”

“President Harry Truman had the dubious distinction in 1952 of being the first US President to have an executive order overturned. Prior to the 1950s there was very little, if any, guidance or precedent that governed what a President could do with regards to an executive order. Obviously the Constitution itself provided somewhat of a framework by virtue of specifying that Congress would make the laws of the land. But aside from that, it might be argued that the executive order playing field was surprisingly muddy.”

“In 1952 however, the Supreme Court ruled in *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Sawyer* that Truman’s Executive Order 10340 was in fact illegal. The high court ruled that Truman did not have the authority to place the nation’s steel mills under federal control. Such a move effectively created a significant new law rather than support a law that Congress had already created, and thus it was ruled invalid. So the ruling served to put future presidents on notice that they should issue executive orders under the expectation that those orders will meet with serious judicial scrutiny. Any overt attempt to create major new legislation or to subvert existing legislation could well be overturned, as it was in 1996 when President Bill Clinton tried to prevent the federal government from contracting with corporations that employed strike bearers. Feel free to *Google* it if you want more detail on that topic.”

“And even more recently, the *New York Times* reported in August of 2010 that President Barak Obama’s executive order from 2009 regarding the expansion of stem cell research, ran contrary to federal law prohibiting federal money being used to destroy embryos. So while the number of unchallenged executive orders dwarfs the overturned ones by a factor of roughly 5,000 to one, we do see the potential for the more egregious abuses to be challenged and overturned by the Supreme Court.” A hand went up.

“Dr. Redmond, what are your thoughts on the two recent executive orders of President Andrews? He used one of the orders to kidnap Congress, and the other to single-handedly fire the Supreme Court. If that isn’t an egregious abuse, I don’t know what is!”

“No, you idiot,” countered another. “It’s Congress and the Supreme Injustices that are the egregious abusers. Andrews is the only one with the guts to rock the establishment.” Within moments the room erupted in a heated dispute, with a slim majority of the students voicing support for President Andrews.

Dr. Redmond smiled and nursed his coffee while listening to the lively debate. It wasn’t every day the class got this interesting.

* * * * *

From the St. Louis Times-Constitution, January 30th
By staff writer Victor Staub

The excitement surrounding President Jackson Andrews' bombshell executive orders continues unabated. Not even if an American president had declared war could the nation's interest be so thoroughly captivated. And in a very real sense, he has done just that. By sequestering Congress with Executive Order 18091 and firing the entire Supreme Court with Executive Order 18092, President Andrews has declared a type of war heretofore unseen within the annals of this great nation.

Amid round-the-clock political commentary and over 27 *billion* related hits per day worldwide, everyone wonders what comes next. Indeed there are a thousand questions and, thus far, exactly zero answers. One topic that is garnering particular attention is the Supreme Court's schedule, which happens to be incredibly packed with critical cases, including a landmark ruling on healthcare. It is entirely unclear as to how long it may be before new justices are appointed, and thus it is anyone's guess as to how much of an additional judicial backlog will be created in the meantime..."

*From the Atlantic Post-Dispatch web site, January 30th
Compiled from wire reports*

"...Lost in the speculation of the President's unprecedented executive orders are reports confirming a rapid re-deployment of troops and naval resources which have caught many observers by surprise. The Pentagon has confirmed that the *Dwight D. Eisenhower*, *Carl Vinson*, and *Ronald Reagan*, all Nimitz-class super carriers, are in route closer to home waters, although the exact destinations are not being released at this time. Each supports between 85-90 fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, and the sheer size and firepower of a single nuclear-powered super carrier are such that its very presence in a given area can serve as a deterrent to the potentially hostile acts of foreign nations."

Chapter 12

"Soon it will become necessary to call upon the U.S. military to take control from the corrupt politicians. As a former member of the Armed Forces, I took an oath to defend the constitution from all enemies. Foreign AND domestic." -*Comment from 'akaBillyBob' on the Internet.*

Day 5: Monday, January 30th

President Andrews exited his armored limousine and walked quickly between the members of his security team towards the open doors of the Congressional Slammer. Security surrounding the former office complex was a hundred times tighter than anything its planners had ever envisioned, and even more so when the President was on site. Even with a thousand Marines and dedicated air support, Andrews wondered whether the site was vulnerable to terrorist attack. Lord knows it was a big enough target, with the entire legislative body of the United States encamped therein like so many bureaucratic sitting ducks. *Hmm*, thought Andrews. *Maybe he should arrange for just such an attack and let the voters get themselves a new, improved Congress. That at least settles the issue of term limits.*

Then he noticed the smartly dressed Marines offering a snappy salute as he passed through the double doors of the office building. And in that instant he saw a crystal clear mental picture of the wives and children waiting for their daddies to return home to push them on the swing outside. *No*, he thought. *No way would he give an order for these honorable men to be killed just to rid the world of a few corrupt politicians. No way.* He sighed and strode into the main conference room, reluctantly following his original plan. *A far more difficult plan*, he knew. He pressed his lips together and forced himself to keep walking.

“Good morning,” he greeted them. He saw no need to point out that it was Day 5 of Congress Held Hostage. They knew full well what day it was, and calling attention to it would only sour a day that was already guaranteed to be bad. There were some tough decisions, and Andrews didn’t look forward to any of it.

“First of all I wanted to say that I am pleased with the progress thus far, early on though we may be. I was on Air Force One last night coming back to the States when I was briefed that a number of documents supporting the first five items on the Top 100 Plan have been uploaded to our collaborative document sharing area. Even better was the fact that so many of you had personally contributed changes and suggestions on the precise language needed to make it happen. So it is on that positive note that we begin today.” *Great*, thought Andrews. *The easy thirty seconds of today sure was fun, wasn’t it? Hope you enjoyed it.*

“Item 6 of the Top 100 Plan is next, and let me just say that I know some of these items are going to be extremely bitter pills to swallow. The newness of my administration notwithstanding, I am not naïve about any of these issues. These are extraordinary measures, and the tough times we are in demand nothing less than extraordinary solutions. So without further ado I introduce to you Item 6, which will become the 28th Amendment to the Constitution: ‘The budget shall be strictly indexed to inflation, and cannot be increased by any means except during times of declared war. A request for budgetary increases may be initiated and authorized only by the President. Additionally, the debt ceiling shall be decided and signed into law by the President.’”

Funny, Andrews thought. *They didn’t applaud.*

“The logic is simple. The past few administrations have promised a balanced budget, and though the plans varied widely on just about everything, they all had one thing in common: nothing would be balanced or even seriously discussed until the President that signed it into law had already left office. So everybody felt really good about passing a ‘balanced budget’ while resting supremely confident that it would never actually happen except on paper and in front of media spotlights. That ends today. I am far more interested in seeing if it is possible to avert the nation’s utter financial destruction than I am in getting credit for a budgetary measure. I’ll leave you to work out the legal language, but I request that we stick to the spirit of the amendment’s intent. The federal budget cannot continue to change at the whim of those in Congress. It must be permanently indexed to inflation. And when we go on irresponsible spending sprees, we cannot correct our actions by raising the debt ceiling yet again. Everyone is terrified we’ll shut down the government. But if I have to shut down this government, I will do so before I raise the debt ceiling!”

“Well if you keep firing everybody,” grouched an unnamed voice, “there won’t be any government to shut down!”

Andrews smiled. “I like your thinking! But perhaps we should keep in mind that I have fired exactly nine people. And based on the actual decisions they have collectively rendered over the past 20 years, few of you could offer convincing argument that as a group they have been particularly competent. Now each of you can quote the Constitution where it says that federal judges, including Supreme Court justices, ‘shall hold their Offices during good Behavior.’ Well, it just so happens that I think they haven’t been very good little boys and girls, and not one of you can offer serious proof that I am factually incorrect.” He realized that sounded ridiculous, but it was too late to worry about that.

“*It is interpreted,*” Andrews said with a grand flourish of double quotes, “that ‘good behavior’ means a lifetime appointment, and that Article II, Section 4 of the Constitution provides that they cannot be removed unless they have been convicted of treason against the Republic. And yet I cannot fathom that the founding fathers could have envisioned the extent of judicial activism in recent years, nor would they have stood by and watched as the judicial branch hijacked the very system of justice they were sworn to protect! So it is through the employment of some basic common sense, rather than through an eloquent constitutional argument, that if I as the President can appoint a Supreme Court justice, then I as the President can remove one. So since we are dealing with a mere *interpretation* and not a divine decree, then my action is just. As God is my witness, their firings absolutely were essential to the solemn execution of my oath of office. It goes to integrity, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Speaking of which, Item 7 is the second amendment we will be adding to the Constitution. Amendment 29 will be known as the Federal Ethics amendment. Many details need to be worked out, but the spirit and intent of this amendment is that any federal official or candidate for federal office who is guilty of, or has at any point been found guilty of, a serious ethics or legal violation shall be immediately and permanently ineligible for employment or contract with the federal government. So a member of Congress who is found guilty of a serious ethics violation, or who is guilty of a serious lapse in paying his or her income taxes, will immediately lose his or her post and be forever disqualified from working at the federal level. Candidates who previously

failed to pay their own taxes can stop applying for membership in Congress, and the same standard certainly will hold true for the President and the President's cabinet."

"And you claim to be a saint?" queried another unnamed voice. Andrews paused, maybe for too long.

"No, ma'am," he responded quietly. "I am afraid none of us are saints. But for someone who has been convicted of tax fraud to be elected to Congress and placed on a committee that oversees taxation is a joke. Good grief, do you remember how many people ultimately had to be dropped from consideration for a major post during President Obama's administration? History shows that many of them couldn't be appointed because they were known crooks! Are there not enough qualified, law-abiding citizens of the United States from which to choose?"

And on that taunting note, President Andrews left the House and Senate to work out the unappetizing details of the legislation foisted upon them.

* * * * *

Congresswoman Tamara Kravitz of Vermont looked around the room regretfully. Almost without exception, the instant the confiscated phones, laptops, and other devices had been returned on Friday afternoon, Congress made a beeline to their rooms or found an outlet somewhere to reconnect with their loved ones. Wives were enormously relieved to hear their husband's voices, and the husbands of the many female members of Congress were equally relieved. Including her own. Children squealed in delight as their mothers and fathers shouted to them, "Come quickly, guess who is on the phone!"

The overriding emotion was one of general relief to hear that everyone was doing well, followed by intense anger at President Andrews for pulling this entire stunt. One of Andrews' advisors had suggested they eavesdrop on the outgoing phone calls to make sure no one got the bright idea of trying to hatch an escape plan, but Andrews summarily dismissed the suggestion. "The American public could too easily get wind of that, and they would not stand for the government spying on the private conversations of loved ones intent only to know that their husbands, wives, and parents were safe and sound."

But after she had contacted her own husband, she spent a good part of the weekend online, reading every news story, blog, and political analysis she could find to gauge the mood of the nation during this unique time in US history. And what she found depressed her to no end. First and most surprising was the solidarity of the American people. Her money would have been on a bitterly divided nation. On one hand would be the irrational exuberance of those who thought tossing Congress into the slammer was the best idea since sliced bread. On the other hand would be an equal number of people so outraged at this travesty that they would rise up and denounce the President with such fervor that he would have no choice but to cave.

And yet that patently had not happened. There were dissenters, to be sure. A good portion of the dissent came from the usual suspects. The *ACLU* was coughing up hairballs and had already filed a lawsuit against the President. They were joined by a host of political action groups

already hostile to the President, as well as the *New York Times* and similar ultra-liberal ilk. Many individuals were angry with the President, but their voices overwhelmingly were drowned out by Americans who for the first time in their lives saw an opportunity for real change. Not hype, not suave promises during election season. But a real shot at change.

But the really depressing part was that she knew Jackson Andrews was right. She sure didn't vote for him, but she held a grudging admiration for someone who knew how to take a stand. She was an honest person, and in her two terms of Congress had worked at least sixty hours a week nearly every week. So she took umbrage whenever the President casually lumped her in with the sordid crooks that dotted the congressional landscape. But she knew those crooks existed, and more or less could tell you who they were even if she could never offer a shred of proof. And she knew America was disgusted with politics as usual in their nation's capital. She wouldn't admit it, of course, but in her vastly intelligent mind she saw the unique opportunity afforded her. Though fraught with danger, a part of her relished the chance to set aside business as usual and bring about sweeping, positive changes.

So the question that Tamara Kravitz had to answer was the same question that everyone else in the room had to answer. Could I dare to swallow my pride and stand with the President for a greater, stronger America? Could this be the defining point in my lifetime that will determine my entire legacy? Can I really do this?

Yes, she finally concluded. Yes, I can.

* * * * *

The Joint Chiefs of Staff were assembled in the inner recesses of the Pentagon, each deep in thought or conversing soberly with colleagues. This could be an interesting day, and perhaps a deadly one. For all their analysis, predictions, and multi-million dollar computer models, not one of them could say beyond a reasonable doubt what would happen when the President made his decision. There was a massive database of scenarios that could impact national security, including countless variations and contingent scenarios that attempted to form a sort of play book upon which the nation's military leaders could quickly develop a working plan when a pivotal event occurred. Interestingly, this scenario existed in that database, and had been discussed at length even if no one had ever guessed that a President would actually do it.

The Chairman stood and paced silently around the room, pausing in front of an array of darkened monitors and studying his associates thoughtfully. Admiral William Michael Lowery was gifted with one of the sharpest minds in naval history, and he thoroughly enjoyed being the principal military adviser to the President. He would certainly leave his mark on history. Speaking of history, he allowed his mind to wander back to the beginning of the JCS. In the 1800s no real coordination existed between America's armed forces. Though the ultimate goals of the army and navy might be the same, the tactical planning simply was not well coordinated. This led to some serious criticisms being leveled, particularly in the aftermath of the "Cuban campaign" of the Spanish-American War.

At length it became painfully evident that the complexities of war were too great for the heads of the armed forces to engage in ad hoc planning. The stakes were too high, so a powerful guiding mechanism was needed to allow the effective coordination of all of the armed forces. Admiral Lowery studied a plaque on the wall and chewed his lower lip. It wasn't just the coordination of firepower, he knew. The presence or absence of administrative efficiencies could make or break a military campaign, and of course both the tactical and strategic planning had to be handled skillfully. In a time of war it was unacceptable for the process to break down over bureaucratic pettiness or lack of cohesive vision. The JCS was created to serve just this purpose and to advise the President whenever called upon. Comprised of the heads of the Army, Marines, Air Force, and Navy, the JCS more or less succeeded in providing the collective military wisdom of the nation's finest into an incredibly focused package suitable for presidential consumption.

By statute the JCS had no executive control over the troops, but the head of each service reported to the President, who alone wielded ultimate control. Even Admiral Lowery served at the pleasure of Jackson Andrews, and he considered that thoughtfully. The President had no military record, but certainly he had the nation's best interests at heart. Were good intentions enough to warrant his unconditional loyalty? No, certainly not, he concluded. But Andrews was a highly intelligent man, and according to the Constitution he was his Commander in Chief. Was that enough? Darn straight.

The room stood at attention when Andrews entered the room, followed by Vice President Ty Kennedy. Admiral Lowery joined the others seated around the historic table. Each had earned his spot at that table a hundred times over, and President Andrews knew he could not have asked for a more capable team of military advisers.

"Gentlemen," he began immediately, "we have a decision to make. You have read your briefings, you know what is at stake, and you know the astronomical cost of failure." Starting with the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force, President Andrews went around the table asking for final assessments on the matter at hand.

Thirty minutes later, Vice President Ty Kennedy cleared his throat to ask but one question. "Mr. President, are you certain you want to do this?" The room was deathly silent.

"Yes, Mr. Vice President."

"Then sir," Ty responded, "the Joint Chiefs have spoken. Every branch of the United States Armed forces is ready to stand with you."

Chapter 13

Standing in front of an ornate mirror, Vampelt stared bitterly at the swollen nightmare that was his face, and made his decision. He would release the full details of President Andrews' fateful meeting with the Supreme Court justices. As a member of the Supreme Court, or at least a *former* member, he thought with mounting rage, his words would be taken seriously. The public, he was confident, would turn on Andrews in a heartbeat if they knew of his bribery, his murderous threats, and the devastating assault on his nose. They would not forgive that, for the public rightfully expects their President to act in a manner befitting his office. Yes, he would ruin this man.

Walking purposefully to his mahogany-paneled office, he sat down in front of the screen and tapped out an email to the one person in the media he trusted. The email was simple. "Meet me in two days at the restaurant where we last talked," it invited cryptically. "I have some news for you."

* * * * *

Sandy Farmer greeted the familiar faces at Channel 9 News and made her way to her spot in front of the camera. The on air light soon signaled her to begin, and her trademark smile and upbeat demeanor welcomed her viewers.

"Today has already been an exciting news day," she began, "and President Andrews will be making a televised broadcast in just a few moments. My sources in the White House have shared few details in advance, but have strongly hinted that the President's message will include broad ramifications for the nation." Minutes later, on Channel 9 News and on stations around the country, coverage focused almost exclusively on the President as his strong voice echoed over the nation's airwaves.

"...There have been those over the years who logically and rationally insist that since the federal government operates at so many orders of magnitude beyond its means, that the only possible solution to out-of-control spending is to simply stop the flow of funds. If we cannot afford a given entitlement program any longer, the rationale goes, then we should simply pull the plug. If a given department of the federal government causes more problems than it solves, then we should simply eliminate that department. There certainly is no shortage of departments that various groups would like to completely shut down, and the logic, on the surface, holds true."

Andrews continued. "The chief problem with this logic is that at the federal level, the economic complexities are too great to treat so simply. When two parents realize they are spending far more than they are making, they can and should cease all borrowing, slash their expenses, and slowly repay their debts until they are once more on sound economic footing. But when a nation of three hundred million has borrowed trillions from both domestic and foreign sources, and continues to borrow *daily* just to pay the bills, the problem becomes a thousand times more complicated. Yes we can strip all federal funding of the arts. Yes, we can strip all funding to controversial organizations such as *Planned Parenthood* which do not support the values of most Americans. Yes, we can arbitrarily strip a percentage of Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and fifteen hundred other entitlements. Yes, we can eliminate all farm

subsidies, many of which primarily benefit major shell corporations rather than the small farmers for which they were intended. Yes, there are literally scores of thousands of other expenditures which could be magically erased from the federal budget, and few of these would be noticed by the typical American.”

“And yet, the instant we fire 100,000 federal workers we have problems, because in this economic environment most of those federal workers would then be added to the welfare rolls, at least for the short term. How, then, have we saved money? We can all agree that there are far too many government workers, and that the federal government is a hopelessly bloated bureaucracy that should never have approached its current size. But it has. Decades of both Republican and Democratic excess have created the problem, and because each dollar of spending directly or indirectly supports jobs in either the public or private sector, or both, any serious cuts will be felt throughout the economy. While the economic picture of a typical American family might be fairly straightforward, at the federal level, the analogy of a ‘plate of spaghetti’ doesn’t even begin to do it justice. There are too many complex relationships that exist, and there is no way to make gross simplifications of the nation’s economic models without making notoriously dangerous and short-sighted assumptions about cause and effect.”

“The example of an oil tanker is useful here. A loaded tanker weighing a combined 500,000 tons and traveling at full speed can take five and a half miles to stop, and nearly fifteen minutes just to make a 180-degree turn. You or I driving down the road might think nothing of putting on the brakes and coming to a screeching halt when needed, but there is no such thing as a screeching halt for an oil tanker, short of plowing into another tanker and sending both tankers straight to the bottom of the sea amid a fantastic, deadly fireball. Put in perspective, when compared to America, that tanker is a bath toy floating in Boston Harbor. Indeed, attempting to materially change the direction of the world’s most powerful nation seems the stuff of mere fiction.”

“So what do we do? We cannot afford to keep the government operating at anywhere near its current size. But neither can we blithely put it on the chopping block. This gargantuan problem has vexed each of the most recent presidential administrations, which without exception have grappled with the problem unsuccessfully because the political will to do anything substantial did not exist. Few members of Congress had the gall to tackle the problem, and certainly no president would touch it. Until now.”

“During the past 14 months, even while still on the campaign trail, I conducted over seventy different meetings with economists at all levels and from all political affiliations to develop a number of economic solutions, just as I promised you I would do. Nearly twenty distinct plans were developed and given serious consideration, and they all had two things in common: they all required immediate, drastic action; and they all carried an agonizingly high probability of failure. You have complained to your leaders for years about the lack of action with respect to the economy, and while you no doubt are coming to the realization that I will never defend the actions of an incompetent Congress, I can tell you that one reason for inaction is that the choices are stark and bleak. There simply are no lasting solutions except those that entail a serious amount of pain at the national, state, and local levels. Had we acted twenty years ago it would

have been a different story, but at this point there are no solutions that can be implemented without sending shock waves throughout the nation as well as the world.”

“In a nutshell, America has been on a collision course with economic disaster for at least fifteen years. We have continued to tax and spend, as if a nation could tax itself into prosperity or spend its way out of chronic problems. Each time the public cried foul, Congress would say ‘we will pay this back later when the economy improves.’ When the economy improved Congress would say, ‘we need to spend this new money while we have it.’ There was never a time when fiscal restraint truly carried the day. Not for one day.”

“The problem now is that our economic woes have snowballed to the point of no return. I am an eternal optimist, but I stare reality in the face when I get up each morning, and I can tell you that America is bankrupt. Not will be, but is. Few people realize the actual debt is over 112 trillion dollars, thanks to Congress blatantly lying to you about how much we owe. *Google* the term ‘unfunded liabilities’ and you will see what I mean. Congress might officially owe \$19 trillion based on their laughable definition of debt, but if they would show you the full picture of how much they have borrowed from Social Security and how many other creative accounting solutions they have employed over the years, even the astronomical sum of \$19 trillion in officially reported debt starts looking like a dream come true. And to make a point, I hereby offer any member of the House or Senate the sum of one million dollars if he or she is willing to debate me on national television and successfully refute a single material statement that I have just made. They won’t do it. They can’t, because they know the dark and terrible truth like no one else. Each election cycle they trot out the familiar ‘return to fiscal responsibility’ mantra, but they know it is too late. The smoke and mirrors they employ are primarily defense mechanisms to prevent the civilian population from rising up in outright war to topple a thoroughly corrupt government.”

“When Congress talks about reducing debt, what they really mean is reducing the amount of planned, obscene increases in debt spending, then claiming billions in ‘savings’. When a senator proposes a hundred billion in unnecessary annual spending increases, then makes a production about slashing twenty billion a year of waste, he sure looks like a hero on the air waves. Saving \$20 billion makes for a great sound bite, doesn’t it? But all it means is that he agreed to add a mere \$80 billion in wasteful spending each year. So over the next 10 years that senator ends up costing you an extra 800 billion dollars while claiming he saved 200 billion during that same time frame.”

“America can no longer afford to pay back its debt. The time to do that was 30 years ago, and we failed to do it. We failed to rein in our Congress and insist on some dim degree of financial responsibility. We wanted our entitlements and we got them. We each are to blame, regardless of our political stripes. We wanted the government to pay our bills for us, and it has. But now comes the mathematically inevitable payback, and there are no more loan extensions available to us. We cannot pay the \$19 trillion in pretend debt. We certainly cannot pay the \$112 trillion in actual debt. We cannot even pay the interest, which is why we are still borrowing every single day of the year.”

“Based on this stark but undeniable reality, I stand at a crossroads today to make the most difficult decision any president has made since atomic bombs were released on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on that terrible, terrible day in 1945. I have but two choices. I can either make the conscious decision to postpone an inevitable disaster of epic proportions, and thus do a grave and permanent disservice to this nation. Or I can initiate a series of actions that will send seismic shock waves throughout not only the nation but also the world. If successful, those actions will serve to dramatically alter the course of America in the turbulent waters of human history. But the course correction will come at great cost.”

“Today I uphold my duties of office by assuring you that I will not allow America to be destroyed without a fight. And so today I announce Executive Order 18093, which effectively nationalizes and cancels our obligations for all foreign debt except that which is owed to America’s closest allies. This seemingly simple step hides a mountain of complexity since the debt of the United States government is owed both to foreign governments and foreign investors.”

“There are many nations that this will directly affect, and within a week our ambassadors will be delivering detailed, if somewhat preliminary plans for each nation affected. These plans will include a high-level summary as well as financial justification for the cancellation of that debt based on an extensive analysis of foreign aid that has been given to that country in times past. America has been called upon and even expected to shore up the economies of other nations; to finance numerous post-war efforts to rebuild nations which have attacked us. And we have done so repeatedly. It is now time for the world to repay America for her largesse, unparalleled in the history of mankind. And so it is that since America cannot afford to repay, perhaps it is time to consider that America has *already* repaid her debts to these nations over and over. Whether in terms of freedom; or financial aid; or military protection; or marketplace opportunities; or in inventions ranging from the automobile to the airplane to the telephone to the computer; or in major contributions to medical science and to any industry you care to name. America has paid her debts.”

“Of all the nations affected, the most notable is China, to which the United States government owes an embarrassing sum of money. And yet it is with righteous anger and indignation that the USA recalls China’s perpetually unfair trade policies, which have forced the USA to lose countless billions in fair trade over the past twenty years. The nationalization and cancellation of China’s debt immediately levels the playing field.”

“Due to the sheer amount of money involved, this Executive Order is expected to meet with a fierce, and perhaps immediate, military response. I have therefore raised our security alert accordingly and have, as many have recently noted, initiated a substantial restructuring of US military personnel worldwide. While I will not name full figures, most of our armed forces are or soon will be within five hundred miles of our nation’s borders. It is time to circle the wagons; it is time to protect the home base.”

* * * * *

“You unbelievable imbecile!” screamed the irate man on the other end of the line. President Andrews adjusted the volume on the speakerphone. Mason Foley was in the office, and from the look on his face he sorely wished Killian Stark had been there in person. Andrews had no doubt Foley would have torn him apart on the spot. *Maybe next time he could arrange that*, Andrews thought wryly.

“And good evening to you, Stark,” Andrews replied. “I take it you’d like to share your most heartfelt views on the debt nationalization speech?”

“Mr. President, you may have just started a war. Please tell me you are aware that the Chinese have nuclear weapons, and please tell me you have paid attention during the daily chats with your National Security advisers.”

Andrews sighed. “I am well aware, sir.”

“Mr. President, the reason we have security committees and all manner of due process is to prevent one well-meaning but clueless person from getting us blown to bits in the foreign policy arena. What you just did circumvented any number of highly complex controls that have governed our relationship with the Chinese for decades.”

Andrews had been expecting this call, and none of this was news to him. “I always appreciate your candor, Mr. Speaker. Do let me reassure you that none of these extraordinary steps represent the whimsical actions of anyone in my administration. On the contrary they have been in the serious planning stages for several months now.”

“Two questions, sir,” Stark demanded hotly. One, how did you coordinate those plans while on the campaign trail without the press getting wind of this and burning you at the stake before you were even elected? Two, what does your own cabinet think of this?”

“Well, the secrecy issue was solved by hiding the whole thing in plain view. I simply spent a lot more time analyzing hundreds of security and ‘what if’ scenarios. Much of it would have been expected of a candidate. You didn’t expect me to show up on my first day at the job and meekly ask for a clue, did you?”

“But you didn’t even have security clearance at the time!” protested Stark.

“There are ways, sir. Perhaps serious presidential contenders sometimes have a bit more access to the nation’s security mechanisms than you were aware. And as to the second question, my cabinet is very concerned and they should be. There are some who have expressed privately their wish that I had picked a more traditional set of battles this early on. Why couldn’t I have tackled Medicare or taxes like a normal president? Why did I have to pick a schoolyard fight with the world’s fastest-growing military?”

Killian lowered his voice. “You have no idea what you have done. I don’t even know what your end game is with this, but nationalizing a single dime of Chinese debt has about a ten percent chance of success. And that’s what our optimists tell us. Quite frankly you’re going to

need Congress to undo this mess, so you better seriously consider wrapping up these shenanigans pronto or we will bury you, sir.” Andrews glanced at Foley, who clearly wanted to bury Stark. No love was lost between the two men.

“You don’t give me enough credit, Stark,” Andrews responded, ignoring the thinly veiled threat. “Several different computer models give this plan a twenty-two percent chance of success without the United States engaging in a serious military conflict.”

“Twenty-two percent?” spat Stark. “You went out on the biggest limb of your political career with a 78% probability of failure? You, sir, are an even bigger idiot than I thought. With all due respect, *Mr. President*,” he added sarcastically.

“Mr. Speaker,” Andrews replied quietly. “You are quite familiar with many of the contingency plans that are in place. Are you remotely familiar with National Security Plan 6476-B? That would be the plan that outlines one of the scenarios facing the United States in the event that the treasury of the United States becomes insolvent. So I have a question for you. There are 129 different scenarios that comprise Plan 6476-B. Of those 129 scenarios, what is the best case scenario in terms of the probability of success that the United States can expect to avoid a prolonged military conflict as a result of a failure to repay its colossal debts to a hostile world?”

Silence.

“As well versed as you are, Mr. Speaker, I concede that is not a question you could possibly have answered from memory. So let me educate you just a bit. Best case scenario, *best case*, is 7%. Seven percent, sir. Now you have been in Congress for 16 years, sir, and during that time you have overseen some of the biggest, almost criminal increases in public debt to pay for some of the most boneheaded pork projects ever conceived. You lecture me about paying attention to the daily NSA briefings, yet you have ignored the NSA’s advice so completely that they have complained to me there is no point for them to keep you in the loop anymore.”

More silence.

“Seven percent, Mr. Speaker. So the bottom line is that the longer we wait to take decisive action, the sooner we have, at best, a 93% chance of going to war against not one but several of the world’s most powerful military forces. I am fully aware of what you think of me, but if you want to know where the blame lies for the financial mess this nation is in, you should find yourself a good mirror. This happened on your watch, not mine!”

Chapter 14

“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.” --Friedrich Nietzsche

Day 6: Tuesday, January 31

Penelope Castle eyed the drunken man in front of her with distaste, trying to remain professional and fighting the urge to call security. “*I’m getting paid for this,*” she reminded herself.

As the United States Deputy Attorney General, she was the second highest-ranking member in the Department of Justice. Appointed two years prior by Andrews’ predecessor, she had a terrific legal mind and was widely known as a wise and capable leader. Andrews liked her style and made it clear he wanted her to continue in her post during his administration. The position of Deputy Attorney General had been created in 1950 to oversee the daily operations of the Department of Justice. Penelope Castle was the 38th American to hold the office, and only the third woman to be appointed to the position.

Frankly, she wondered how anyone was ever appointed to her role, especially after the national controversy of the unprecedented mid-term firings of seven US Attorneys by the George W. Bush administration in 2006. The impartiality of the attorneys general and related posts was critical given the enormous power they wielded, and the entire fiasco had raised serious doubts about the hiring and firing practices of the Department of Justice. Congressional hearings ensued, and by the time the nasty political fight between Congress and the Bush administration was over, Deputy Attorney General Paul McNulty had resigned. Not long afterwards, even the Attorney General, Alberto Gonzalez, had submitted his resignation to the president. The political mudslinging brought even more scrutiny to the appointment process for future candidates, and whenever Penelope Castle got around to writing her memoirs, she was sure she would list the confirmation process as her absolute worst nightmare.

Speaking of nightmares, her thoughts returned to the one standing ten feet from her. She wanted so badly to cut this meeting short and return to her regular office on Pennsylvania Avenue, but she waited for the man to begin. If the Attorney General wanted her to handle this, then handle it she would.

The man sighed deeply and sauntered sadly over to the window overlooking Washington traffic sixteen floors below. He squinted as the bright sunlight of a Washington morning flooded the room. It was a rare man who could be inebriated at such an early hour, but he managed. Penelope wondered if he would have jumped had the window been open. Indeed, the man placed his forehead against the tempered glass and tried to focus on the concrete below. She cleared her throat as if to remind him she didn’t have all day.

“This is private, right?” the man asked, still not facing her. “No recorders, no wires, nothing. I just have to sign the paper and that’s the end of it?”

“Yes, sir,” Penelope confirmed. “That was the agreement. Would you like to review the document?”

He dismissed the offer with a clumsy wave of his hand and rubbed his forehead as if struggling with where to begin. “Oh, the things I’ve done”, he finally began.

“Tell me.” Penelope prodded. Not one but two digital video recorders captured the conversation. Neither was in sight. “Start at the beginning.”

The man finally opened up, however reluctantly. “In the beginning it wasn’t so bad. It started out so innocently.” He paused, wishing for a stiff drink and settling for the bottled water the receptionist had provided him. “In the beginning we would just take what we needed for some things that were a little off the record. Who was going to find out?”

“‘Take what you needed’? What specifically are you referring to?”

“Well, money of course. If you’ve ever worked in a big corporation there are certain things you can do and never get caught. Have you ever worked in a big corporation?”

She ignored the question. “Besides money, what did you take?”

The man snorted, obviously annoyed. He didn’t like being at the mercy of another, and didn’t take kindly to her apparent refusal to do things on his terms. “Well, let’s talk about the money some more since you didn’t even ask how much.”

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Penelope offered with a shrug. “How much?”

“Oh, you have no idea. And frankly, neither do I. The beauty of it was that it was done so perfectly well it was virtually untraceable. When we first started it was on a relatively small scale, because we were just testing the waters.

If anyone had gotten wind of it we had a quite plausible plan to show where the money went and a stack of documents that detailed how the money would be repaid.”

“What happened to those documents?”

“They’re in a landfill somewhere, I guess. After a year passed and it was clear no one had the faintest clue, we shredded the documents and threw them out. Might have even burned them after they were shredded just to be safe. Seems like a waste now. If we were going to burn them, why bother with the shredder?” He rubbed his temples again, as if the logic made his head hurt.

“What is your best estimate as to how much you took?”

“Well remember there were four of us. But we split it roughly evenly, and my mind is muddled right now but I think it amounted to about \$16 million over six years.”

Penelope raised an eyebrow. "Sixteen million dollars, split equally four ways?"

The man smiled for the first time. "Sixteen million apiece."

"And no one ever questioned it?"

"You don't listen very well do you? Of course no one questioned it. And even if they had it wouldn't have done them any good, we had too many exit plans. Heck if I had to I could have left the country in a New York minute and you'd have no idea where I was today. Most of that is still in a bunch of offshore accounts right now, and though I wouldn't want to underestimate someone of your caliber, I seriously doubt the Department of Justice could find it all. There are six numbered accounts, and if you miss even one that leaves me plenty enough tax-free money to live on." The thought of all that cash suddenly brightened his mood. "And the best part is, after I finish this meeting with you today I'm a free man and you can't even touch that money. I might just sell my home, head to the Caymans, and make like a bandit. Yeah, that's what I'm going to do. Gonna do me some drinking when I get there."

Penelope had no doubt the man would keep his word. "Anything else you want to share?"

"No, that's about it. You can ask the others; maybe they remember more details than I do. Ask them."

"I will," Penelope glared at the smirk on his unshaven face. "I will."

* * * * *

Kevin Marks was en route to the unnamed office building that temporarily housed his fellow members of Congress. His cell phone rang and he answered it. "This is Kevin."

"Good morning," said a female voice.

"Hey, good morning. I haven't been able to get in touch with you in what seems like ages." Hearing his wife's voice made him realize how much he missed her.

"We've been married 12 years and this is the hardest it's been," Cameron agreed. "This is not easy."

"Then come to Washington," he offered. "You know I would love that."

"It's not that simple. We've been over that so I'll just skip that part of the conversation."

Kevin frowned. Life had been busy and complicated enough even before he was elected, and he dearly wished he could somehow simplify things so they could be together more. He made a mental note to check their calendars and see if they could spend a few days together soon. "Anyway, good morning again. What's on your mind?"

“Just catching up on some things. Today will be a whirlwind of activity what with the planning of three different charity events and a wedding.”

“A wedding? Who gets married on a Tuesday?”

“No, silly. The wedding is not today, but I have an old friend getting married this weekend and have agreed to have lunch with her today and do some girl things.”

“Have fun, and please tell her I am extremely happy for her and wish that I could be there. By the way, what’s her name?”

Cameron dismissed him. “Don’t even bother,” she replied. “You’ve never met her and she wouldn’t vote for you even if you sang at her wedding.”

Kevin laughed. “Well, then I wish I could be there just so I’d be beside you.”

“I know. And we’ll work that out soon, hon. Hang in there and we’ll hammer out a more workable plan. I miss you.”

Kevin sighed softly. “Miss you, too.” He pulled into the office complex and presented his identification to the Marines, who nonetheless did a complete sweep of his car before allowing him to proceed. Grabbing his briefcase he joined his comrades and waited for President Andrews to arrive for Day 6 of Congress Held Hostage.

“Good morning,” the president greeted, getting right to the point. “A number of pressing issues need to be addressed. I am painfully aware that this arrangement is causing an incredible backlog in legal and legislative work, and if it is any consolation, it is proving painful to my early administration as well since we are not able to conduct certain types of business efficiently. As my aides have already communicated to many of you, we will be breaking up into power sessions to conduct some of the more pressing business today and tomorrow. Many of you have already contacted the White House to weigh in on the ‘debt nationalization’ speech, and that in fact is one of the things I need to meet with some of you about. There are other meetings that will need to be conducted as well, so today will be a whirlwind of activity as I meet with many of you to discuss matters particularly suited to your various areas of legislative specialty. On other news I have welcomed a host of suggestions that you have made regarding our current arrangement, and someone else will be summarizing those changes and addressing you later in the day.”

“But before we break up into sessions I did want to introduce a single point as part of the Top 100 Plan so it can be added to our list of accomplishments. It is something the American public has long wanted, and something I firmly believe is the right thing to do. Item 8 of the Top 100 Plan will become Amendment 30 to the US Constitution. No law of Congress shall be put to a full vote without the complete, unabridged version placed on a federal web site and made publicly available no fewer than thirty calendar days before the vote. The American public deserves to know what their elected Congress is up to, and a closed-door policy by which a large percentage of Congress is on occasion forced to vote on legislation they themselves have not

been given the chance to read is unconscionable. Furthermore, any changes proposed at any point in the legislative process must themselves be posted online and given an additional 30 days for unrestricted public review before they may be voted on. The legal language behind this Amendment must make it abundantly clear that any portion of any law passed that is not in accordance with this rule is null and void, with the only exceptions being Congress' ability to declare war or to promptly respond to a clear and present national security threat.

Congresswoman Tamara Kravitz of Vermont immediately requested and received permission to speak. "Mr. President, I would like to note that I campaigned on the issue of greater transparency in the legislative process, so this is something many of my colleagues are able to support in some form or other. One serious concern of course relates to security matters that do not necessarily constitute a 'clear and present national security threat' but which nonetheless cannot be made public. May we assume anything directly related to security can be removed prior to posting on a publicly accessible web site?"

Andrews agreed. "The spirit of the Amendment is to ensure an open and accountable government, so that must be maintained at all costs. But national security must also be ensured at all costs, so a sensible balance must be struck to provide for the public's right to know while not diminishing our security. As a general rule, matters of policy and budget must be clearly available for review. Anything whose public release would clearly harm national security interests must be removed, so the White House shares your fundamental concern in that area."

"So who is tasked with making the final determination as to what can be published and what must remain off the record?" a nameless voice asked.

"Ah, that is the \$64,000 question," President Andrews acknowledged. I have my views but would like to see what you guys come up with. I say we should err on the side of safety, but want to make it clear that any attempts to falsely claim 'security concerns' will backfire."

Killian Stark didn't feel like getting involved in this particular discussion, but he motioned for his buddy, Senator Freddy Dawes, of Minnesota, to step in.

"Mr. President, many of us object to the additional bureaucratic hassles this will cause. A thirty-day delay might not seem like much, but due to the sheer number of revisions undertaken to make a bill into law, thirty days can effectively kill the bill."

"I disagree with that statement, Senator. I didn't say every time you make a change to the bill it has to sit on the backburner for a month. You are free to make any number of changes as the bill progresses through committees and whatnot; the only real requirement is that before you put any bill to a full vote, the public must know what you are voting on. I don't need to tell you that we live in an age of micro-blogging, and the public is more educated today than ever before. I dare say that there are a number of laws on the books now that if the public had gotten wind of, you would never have stood a chance of passing them. There would simply have been too many people up in arms, so you pulled a fast one in the dead of night to get what you wanted. The additional transparency isn't about your convenience, it's about America's right to know."

Congresswoman Kravitz spoke again. “Plus, I believe a better informed public will be more engaged and far more likely to vote, so I make no bones about wanting to push this type of legislation through as a means of increasing the number of likely voters.”

That didn’t sit well with Senator Dawes. “That sounds nice but any way you look at it, anything approaching this nightmare would hinder our ability to move quickly.”

“And when is the last time you moved quickly?” retorted Andrews. “Come on, you’ve been here for at least ten years, maybe more. Name a single time where you fast-tracked a bill.”

Senator Dawes glared at him.

“I thought so. So for ten years you do nothing of substance to move bills effectively through the system, and now that I’m trying to make it harder for you to ram your heavily partisan, anti-American legislation in the dead of night without anyone knowing about it until it’s far too late, you’re concerned about how long it will take for a bill to become law. I don’t buy that, sir, and neither does America.”

Stark was glad he hadn’t wasted his breath in opposition. There was no arguing with this idiot. Andrews was going to say whatever he wanted to, and all the voices of reason in the world wouldn’t deter him. He had no idea what he was doing, and at the rate they were going, the best-case scenario was for Congress to wrap up item 100 about four months down the road. And they hadn’t even put the final touches on a single item yet. Anyone with a month of legislative experience knew that 90% of the battle was in the details after the initial draft was completed, and he didn’t relish the prospect of living in this dump for the next two years while those details were resolved to everyone’s eternal satisfaction.

* * * * *

Chinese President Zhong Li unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat stiffly at the head of the expansive table. Li is Chinese for power and strength, and the name fit him well. In addition to the title of President, he held the position of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, as well as Chairman of the Central Military Commission. An interesting characteristic about Chinese power structures is that one’s power was not strictly a function of one’s title. Rather, certain types of power were based on who the person is. A particularly strong and capable leader with an outwardly inferior title could at times trump a higher-ranking official who was struggling. Zhong Li had the best of both worlds. He had these titles and more, both at the Communist Party level and within the state government. Few could match his strategic acumen, so his firm leadership of the 1.3 billion residents of the People’s Republic of China was uncontested.

He adjusted his understated blue tie and leaned forward. No call to order was needed, and his strong voice and piercing gaze commanded attention. “The Americans have acted unwisely,” he began. Deferential nods of agreement greeted his introduction.

“The audacity of their new president is surprising, and we take extreme notice on a number of levels. Militarily we note a significant movement in troops into what is clearly defensive in nature. Given that no known credible threats to their security are active at this time, this could indicate additional action on the part of the US, in particular an action they expect could warrant a military response against them.”

Folding his hands slightly, he continued. “After reviewing President Andrews’ televised address, their plans are clear, which brings us to the second point. The financial implications are serious, not only for our great nation but also the rest of the world. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that the Americans do not follow through with this plan. Our investments there remain of strategic value to us, and we therefore will quickly take steps to protect those investments. He paused for effect before dropping his own bombshell question.

“Are we prepared to execute Project Xīgài?” The already quiet room became deathly still as several leaders held their breaths. *Was he serious?* And yet, each knew that Zhong Li never joked whenever he had a suit on. And no one had ever seen him without a suit.

Shen Chung, one of the ranking members of the Central Military Commission, stirred uneasily and cleared his throat. “That, sir, is of course a possibility,” he hedged. “The CMC certainly sees the potential in such a decision to protect Chinese interests. Extensive analysis of course has shown a number of likely outcomes which could put us rather quickly on a war footing, perhaps eventually involving nuclear weapons being detonated on the Chinese mainland.”

Zhong Li nodded in acknowledgment. It was true that the United States would react swiftly to such an action by the Chinese government, one which would be almost impossible to hide. But while he was not at all eager to become embroiled in a serious conflict with America, nonetheless he had known that a showdown was coming. He was known for many things, but backing down in a fight was not one of them.

A full three hours later, Zhong Li stood and signaled the meeting adjourned. “I accept the analysis as valid, and I also accept the risk. At my word, Project Xīgài will commence.”

“Xīgài” is the Chinese word for knee. And that is exactly what the project intended to do. It would bring the United States of America to its knees.

* * * * *

“What a day”, Kevin muttered absently as he left the office building and stepped into his car. I need a good meal, a good woman, and a good night’s sleep. Well, two out of three isn’t bad, he thought sourly. To occupy his mind he considered the various pieces of legislation he was working on for the President.

As they settled into something vaguely resembling a routine, the President would begin the day’s meetings and more or less dictate what Congress would work on next. His lectures would

be brief and he would explain the logic behind it and how it would result in long-term value to the nation. Andrews admitted that the short-term results could be painful, possibly catastrophic, but the man genuinely believed in what he was doing and his earnestness and sincerity of purpose no doubt went a long way in convincing a fair number of legislators to jump on board.

There were plenty of dissenters, of course, and there was no way for the President to gloss over anything. Nor did he try. But after the lectures he would leave to attend other presidential business and a sizable team of staffers would assist with the administrative aspects of it. One brilliant move on Andrews' part, Kevin thought, was to cull the top administrative and legal aids of the legislators themselves. The ones who had proven themselves and had earned the *workhorse* moniker were the ones selected. None from Stark's team were selected, he noted, probably because no one working for Stark had ever voluntarily reached across the aisle to do anything other than punch the opposition in the face. The fish rots from the head down.

As he drove, Kevin considered the gargantuan task before him. He fancied himself quite the legal expert and was not afraid of complex legal planning, but essentially they were rewriting the law of the land. Not since the last founding father had dipped the quill into that ancient inkwell and signed his name to the Constitution had a team of leaders done anything nearly as dramatic. Kevin hoped their collective efforts would work and not seriously backfire, but he doubted it. This was just too much at once, he feared.

Arriving at home he disabled the security alarm, checked a few pieces of mail, and rummaged in the kitchen for something to eat. Opening his laptop, he clicked on the icon to check his mail and received the cryptic message: OMNI-5220: Communication Error.

That's odd, Kevin thought. He had never seen that one before. As he expected, clicking the icon again produced the same message, so he tried rebooting the laptop for good measure. Same thing. Finally he attempted to log into the collaborative document sharing system that Congress was using to hammer out the details of the myriad pieces of legislation they were working on at the president's behest. The laptop insisted:

OMNI-5220: Communication Error.

After a second reboot and double-checking to make sure he was logged in correctly, he looked under the laptop and noted the phone number of the special tech support team. *Let's see how good this congressional tech support is*, he thought as he picked up the phone.

* * * * *

Hal Snipes smiled when his phone rang. In fact, he was expecting it. After all, he was the one who had disabled Kevin's laptop moments ago. In techno-speak, he hooked into the operating system and essentially caused a small program to display an error message whenever a program was run, be it an email application, spreadsheet program, or a solitaire game for that matter. In effect when it detected any program starting, it would intercept it and instead display an error message. 5220 was the number assigned to a situation where the client program could not communicate with its host, which lived deep in an underground vault about 5 stories below

Hal's office. And the OMNI prefix was an abbreviation for the project that served as the foundation to Killian Stark's enormous power base.

Over the 16 years he had been in Congress, rising steadily through the ranks, Stark became the ultimate master in the arts of stealth and manipulation. He knew that information is power, and with extraordinary cunning he set about to find ways to avail himself of as much information as possible and to ruthlessly use that information against his political enemies. This culminated in Project Omniscience, which is a hidden network of computers, bank accounts, and people, most of who unknowingly work for him. One of his strategies was to dangle a variety of unexpected perks in front of incoming members of Congress. Few of the freshmen could say no to him, and those who did soon found themselves with a multitude of unexpected problems. So with careful planning, Stark would give "upgraded" laptops to incoming Congressmen, as well as a special type of credit card that he guarantees is untraceable. The Congressmen can use that card pretty much anywhere they need to and never have to pay or report it. Behind the scenes however, Stark is in fact recording purchases to be used against them later on if it suits his purposes. Machiavelli would have been proud.

As far as the magic credit cards go, he never used the information immediately. Instead he allowed the holder to test the waters and see if it was, in fact, free of strings and free of the usual accounting controls. After a couple of years the holder would usually be emboldened, and the monthly charges would often rise substantially. Purchases and expenses that were more or less expected were logged under a normal expense account, and anything else would go on the special card. In relation to the cards, Stark was the only one officially authorized to even access the reports. Not that he could have prevented Hal from using it, and in fact Hal had appropriated just such a card for his own use. Stark was of course aware of it, but Hal was valuable enough to him that he never made it an issue. Instead he took Hal aside and coldly warned him of the inevitable consequences of throwing money around to excess. "You've got a good thing going here, Hal," Stark pointed out. "Don't screw it up with anything stupid."

Hal often wondered just how much money Project Omniscience cost the taxpayers. Not that he really cared, but he was curious. Stark knew exactly how much it cost the nation, and he didn't care, either. It solidified his power base in part because of the way he could, from a distance, help steer a wayward colleague into the path of an oncoming train. Case in point was a junior Senator from South Dakota who had crossed him in one too many a policy debate. Realizing he would never be useful to him, Stark saw an opportunity when the Senator fired one of his aides. A few days later Stark quietly released some revealing memos from the Senator's system that pointed to a string of ethics violations that had never come to light. The timing of the leak was such that everyone would blame the disgruntled ex-employee, though in fact the aide had no knowledge of it.

Stark made sure the right reporter saw the documents, and as luck would have it, the timing was also close enough to the next election that the Senator didn't survive the ensuing scandal. Never venturing so much as a private comment on the topic, Stark stood by quietly and coldly watched as the man's public service career ground to a halt. The massive project had many other uses to him, of course, and he had used it for everything from illegal wiretapping to insider trading. Now he would use it to bring yet another unsuspecting colleague under his domain.

In the most professional voice he could muster, Hal picked up the phone. “Technical support, this is Hal Snipes speaking, how may I help you?”

“Hal, this is Congressman Kevin Marks calling to report an issue that just cropped up with my laptop.”

“Certainly, Congressman, and I apologize for the inconvenience. What seems to be happening?”

Kevin described the error message. “I have no idea what it could be.”

“Ah, a 5220. I know exactly what the problem is.” In reality Hal could have re-enabled the program remotely, but that would be no fun. “The good news is this is an easy fix, but the bad news is I will have to send someone over to fix it. Are you at home right now?”

“Uh, yes. I’ll be home this evening.” Kevin gave him his address, which Hal pretended to take note of, though he knew exactly where Kevin lived.

“We will be there within thirty minutes, sir, and we won’t take but a moment of your time.”

Kevin hung up the phone with relief. *Not bad*, he thought.

* * * * *

Not bad is right, he thought again when he opened the door for the technician. Anne Roberts stood before him, looking like anything but a computer technician. Clad in a clinging black dress that showed off perfect legs and a voluptuous figure, she looked at him tentatively with eyes that were one part sultry and one part pure innocence. How she managed that, Kevin could not fathom.

“Anne?” He smiled and stepped aside so she could enter. “I wasn’t expecting you, but come on in. I figured they’d send, well...” Kevin realized he might have just offended this bombshell.

“... You thought they’d send someone who looks like they’re dressed to work on a laptop?” she finished for him. She laughed, and Kevin grinned sheepishly. He attempted some damage control.

“But seriously you look incredible. I just hope I haven’t caused you to miss anything. The laptop can wait if you need to be somewhere, honest.”

“No, not at all,” she assured him with a soft touch on his arm. Seeing the laptop in the living room nearby, she passed by him, taking care to brush by him as if the expansive hallway weren’t wide enough for the both of them. The light scent of her perfume drove him crazy, and he struggled to keep his mind out of the gutter.

“Give me just a few minutes here to look at some system settings,” she began. As he did before, he stood behind her and looked over her shoulder. Or at least he pretended to. Hal had told her exactly what to do to enable communication with the host, and with a flourish she saved a configuration file and pronounced the laptop ready for action.

“That’s great,” Kevin enthused. “What do I owe you?”

“How about a bottled water and, if you’re not in too much of a hurry, a chance to get out of these heels. They’re killing me.”

“Sure,” Kevin responded, and left briefly to retrieve the water from the fridge. “Feel free to kick back on the sofa if you like. You’d think a Congressman has a hundred things to do, but tonight is a bit of a slow night.” In reality Kevin did have a hundred things to do, but he was sorely lacking in the companionship department, and Anne was too easy on the eyes to drive away so soon. “Are you sure I’m not keeping you from a formal dinner?”

Anne scoffed. “I’m sure. Actually I already went to something and was on my way back when I got the call. Hal asked if I would mind helping out and I told him I was free. So here I am.” She smiled.

Kevin did find it unusual, but oddly plausible. He watched as she plopped down unceremoniously on the leather sofa and all but hurled her shoes to the other side of the room. He sat next to her and she turned to face him, smiling. Kevin’s mind went blank, and he hated himself for the effect she was having on him. *Pull yourself together Kevin, you’re a United States Congressman and she’s a, well, a darn good-looking woman.*

“Kevin, tell me about what you guys are doing in Congress right now. That’s all anyone is talking about and yet most of it is just speculation. Give it to me straight.”

Kevin shook his head. “I wish I knew how this will play out,” he began. “The fact of the matter is we just don’t know. The President has given us back our cell phones and we can communicate with our staff and our families all we want now. But basically we’re cooped up in an office complex and given the job of taking the President’s directives and turning it into something that looks like law.”

“Fascinating,” she responded. “So you’ll just pass one law at a time until the President thinks you’re through?” Kevin fought the temptation to stare at the sculpted body just inches away.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he admitted. “The legislators have discussed a number of ways it could happen, but there are endless problems with every approach we consider.”

“How so?”

“Well, a law doesn’t become law because someone wants it to. It just isn’t that simple. During normal times, let’s say someone in the House of Representatives has an idea for a law,

and after considering it he pitches the idea to other representatives to see if he can drum up support for it. If it looks like there is enough support, the representative might try to find a sponsor for the bill, or he may become the sponsor himself. The representative then introduces this bill, which is a fancy way of saying he drops it in a special box that resides in the House of Representatives.”

“Sort of like a glorified suggestion box,” Anne giggled.

“Sort of. The clerk then reads the bill and assigns a number to it for ease of reference. So if you hear someone talking about H.R. 123, then that would be bill number 123 of the House of Representatives.”

“I see. So then you vote on it and if there are enough votes it becomes law, right?”

“Actually, the real work is just beginning at that point. Now that it has been assigned a number, the Speaker of the House sends the bill to one of the House’s standing committees. Many committees exist with various areas of specialization. So while as the new kid on the block I haven’t been appointed to any committees just yet, I might one day be on a committee specializing in areas of finance, or the military, or taxation, or agriculture, or just about anything. After reviewing it, the committee may turn it over to a sub-committee to basically do some expert analysis and a lot of the grunt work associated with refining various aspects of the proposed law.”

“The sub-committee eventually turns it back over to the committee, who further reviews it and may then decide to send it to the House floor. They still don’t vote on it, however. Rather, the representatives get a chance to debate the relative merits of the bill, propose alternative language, and so on. Eventually they do vote on it and if a majority votes in favor, the bill is turned over to the Senate. You guessed it. When the bill hits the Senate it has to go through more or less the same gauntlet of committees, revisions, and so on.”

“In a best case scenario, the Senate likes the bill exactly as passed by the House of Representatives. But the more complex the law and the more it stands to cause division within the various political factions, the greater the likelihood the Senate will insist on a number of changes. There are all sorts of parliamentary gimmicks the Senate can use to effectively kill the bill, some of which border on childish. But the methods are nonetheless quite effective. To make a long story short though, if the House and Senate can come to terms, then after both houses pass the bill it is of course sent to the President for him or her to sign. The President can sign it or veto it, and in the case of a veto it goes right back to the House of Representatives where the process starts all over again.”

“Wow,” Anne replied. “I work in DC and didn’t realize it was that big of a deal.”

“Yes,” Kevin acknowledged. “It’s quite a bit of work, and in practice the process goes much deeper, with proponents and opponents duking it out in the press and trying to spin it to their advantage. The hard work of a lot of very sincere people goes into the process, but of course not

every bill becomes law. In fact, sometimes bills are introduced that no one wants to become law.”

Anne looked quizzical. “Why is that?”

“Well, suppose I wanted to score some points with my constituents on a given issue. I want to get the message out that I’m tough on crime and not afraid to stand up to the Washington establishment. I craft this bill and introduce something that on the surface looks really good, but which is worded in such a way that has no chance of being passed. Some of my fellow representatives jump on board and together we start making some serious waves. People get excited about it and are blogging all over the place about how good this will be for the nation.”

“We’ll soon have enough votes to pass it in the House, but it will then die quietly in the Senate. Since I sponsored the bill I am credited with having the vision to stand up for what is right, and the Senate lets it die quietly without anyone having to take personal responsibility for its lack of passage. Everyone wins.”

“Except the taxpayer,” Anne pointed out.

“Except the taxpayer,” Kevin agreed. “But that does happen sometimes. I just use that as an example of some of the things that a bill has to go through before it gets promoted into law.”

“Well I think it is fascinating, and if you don’t mind me saying so, I think you’re fascinating.” She rested her hand on his arm and gazed at him intently. “I could sit here and talk to you all night,” she said softly. She could tell Kevin liked that idea, but he brushed it off.

“I doubt that. I’m sure you’re just being nice.”

In reply, she leaned over and kissed him before he could react. Now do you believe me?”

Kevin’s mind reeled. He had wondered how men of power could become embroiled in extramarital affairs so easily, and marveled at how quick they were to throw their lives away over a woman. But for some reason he found himself in a situation where pushing this woman away seemed impossible. What made it so almighty difficult for him to resist was the fact that she was almost the spitting image of the woman on the web cam he frequented on so many nights. Her hair, her face, and everything about her were the stuff of his wildest dreams.

Though he wasn’t about to communicate any of these truths to her, Anne Roberts already knew. For that is why she had been selected for this assignment. Through Project Omniscience and the elite technical skills of Hal Snipes, Killian Stark was well on his way to ensnaring Kevin Marks.

Anne Roberts smiled inwardly. Like so many in this town, she loved power and thrived on it. And though she had no distinguished title below her name, she now influenced one of the men who ran the country. She had nothing against Kevin Marks, and in fact was drawn to him. He

was sincere, good-looking, and highly intelligent. She smiled again, and the only regret she had was the knowledge that someone she detested was watching her every move.

Indeed, a few miles away, Hal Snipes looked greedily at the couple on the sofa. The laptop's camera was pointed at just the right angle, and he made sure every move and every sound was recorded.

* * * * *

On the other side of town, former Supreme Court justice Jerry Vanpelt stepped outside to enjoy a fine cigar on this clear January night. It was one of his few remaining pleasures, he thought ruefully. Well, maybe with a freshly delivered check for a million dollars and an unexpected retirement, he could find some new pleasures.

As Vanpelt stood silently on his veranda and considered his newfound circumstances, he was brutally grabbed from behind. The expensive cigar dropped harmlessly to the cobblestone landing below the veranda, where it would be forgotten. Vanpelt couldn't see his assailant, who was nearly 45 years younger and incredibly strong. But he could hear the quiet, calm voice perfectly. The utter lack of emotion terrified him even more than the deadly knife held at his throat. "You were instructed not to breathe a word."

"But I haven't said anything to anyone," Vanpelt protested.

"Ah, but had I given you another 24 hours, that statement wouldn't still be true, now would it?" Vanpelt's mind reeled. *How could he know?* But it didn't matter. All that mattered was that his blood was about to spill onto the ground, and no one would ever miss him. The assailant had other plans though.

"Now. I want you to go back inside, pour yourself a stiff drink, and go watch the news. It seems your good friend Woodburn has unfortunately overdosed on a bit of medication just shortly after your unwise email was intercepted." Vanpelt's eyes widened. "This should not surprise you, and it is a shame you failed to heed your warning. But since it is true you didn't yet open your mouth, he is the only justice that has been killed today instead of the promised two. Make no further mistake, sir, because another justice has already been singled out and is within minutes of meeting a similar, if perhaps much more gruesome, fate. *Understand?*"

Vanpelt could say nothing; he was too terrified to do anything but breathe freely as the vise-like grip on his scrawny throat was released. "Now, walk straight inside and don't turn around. Not that it would do you any good anyway. And by the way, your \$20,000 security system is worthless." Vanpelt did exactly as he was told, not even bothering to lock the door behind him.

"*I can't believe it,*" he thought incredulously. "*I can't believe he was serious. President Jackson Andrews actually ordered the killing of a Supreme Court justice!*"

Returning to his office, he shakily began to compose a new email, correctly assuming that everything he did was monitored. Typing carefully, he called off the meeting with his contact. “I have reconsidered, and decided that what was on my mind is not particularly newsworthy.”

* * * * *

Elena Andrews hugged her husband. It had been a long day and she was getting an early taste of the enormous demands placed on the First Lady. She was a remarkably strong woman and had no doubts that she would survive, but the adjustment was proving more challenging than she had expected.

“Hopefully you had a great day today. Did you hear about Justice Woodburn?”

His face clouded and he nodded gravely. “Yes, that was quite an unfortunate ending. He didn’t even enjoy a week in retirement. They say it was an accidental overdose of some powerful heart medication.”

“Yes. So they say.”

“Well, he was 71 years old, and had a known heart condition. This isn’t the first time he overdosed.”

“Really?” She was surprised.

“Really. I believe it was about three years ago he was admitted to the hospital after ingesting a bit too much medication. His stomach was pumped out and it turned out to be a relatively short-lived ordeal. But this time, no such luck. Back in the day he was known to use drugs, but that was, oh, 30 or so years ago. So he does have a known history.”

“Hmm. Well, if he had a history of that, I don’t suppose the timing looks too suspicious.”

With that, Elena went to take a phone call, leaving Jack Andrews alone with his thoughts. He felt sick to his stomach, and sat down in a recliner to think. Was he doing the right thing? And if so, why did he feel like such a scoundrel? The overhead chandelier shined brightly, but it did nothing to brighten his spirits. He thought back to a time when he was about twelve years old.

He remembered the day with remarkable clarity. It was picturesque, a father and his young boy walking along the banks of a small creek positively teeming with fish. They weren’t very large, but to a young boy, it was short work to take a six-inch pan fish and transform it into a ten-pound catfish that put up the most incredible fight. His friends would never know the difference.

It was a bit of a dark time in the Andrews’s household. Jack’s mother had filed for divorce from his father, and every indication was that Jack would become the latest product of a broken home. The thought terrified him, and it didn’t make things any better when his dad sent him away to live with some cousins for a while.

His dad was a good man, but somehow he had gone wrong in his marriage and didn't quite know why. He certainly didn't realize things had gotten that bad until the doorbell rang and a young man had quietly asked him to sign for some papers. He stared unseeingly at the divorce papers in his hands, and sat down in a daze on the front steps. *He would fix this*, he resolved.

The very next day he listed his beloved boat for sale in the paper, and quietly took the proceeds to a travel agent. "I want four weeks in France," he ordered. He had saved for nearly six years for that boat, and he was willing to trade it for four weeks in France. The agent told him he could afford three. He took it.

So with plane tickets in hand, he approached his wife and convinced her to take the trip. On that trip he agreed to quit his job, change his attitude, and go to counseling. He did so, and the marriage was saved.

Jack reflected again on the day of fishing. His dad had promised him that as soon as he got back from his trip that he would take him fishing. He tried to assure his son that everything would be all right, and he certainly hoped it would be. But Jack didn't remember the fish he caught that day. Rather, he remembered what his father taught him.

"Son," he began as he cast a line into the still water, "some things are going to be changing at home. I've had myself a good scare, and I'm going to be a better father to you and a better husband to your mama." As the day wore on, his father was in an increasingly reflective mood and he sensed that it was as good a time as any to teach Jack about love, risks, and rewards.

"There are two things I want you to remember," he intoned. "One is that the end never justifies the means. But two, sometimes you have to do something extraordinary to save something you love." Jack's father had no way of knowing that his son would one day be the most powerful man on Earth. But there sat Jack under an exquisite crystal chandelier, rubbing his temples and trying desperately to glean some direction from his father's wisdom.

On one hand he knew full well that sanctioning the murder of Stephen Woodburn went against his father's first command. *The end never justifies the means*, the haunting words reminded him. And yet, fate chose to place him at one of the most important moments in history, in a time where nothing short of extraordinary action would be sufficient. *I love this country with a passion*, Jack thought desperately. *How else will I save the Union?* Could this be the exception that proves the rule? Could this be a case where the end in fact justifies the means? Could the murder of a single man change the direction of a nation of three hundred million?

Only silence greeted him as he rose wearily and collapsed in bed, thoroughly exhausted and tormented by the gaunt face of the late Stephen Matthew Woodburn.

Chapter 15

Day 7: Wednesday, February 1

Kevin awoke to sunlight streaming through his bedroom window, and in a flash realized the enormous trouble he was in. If it weren't enough to see Anne Roberts sleeping next to him, the alarm clock silently accused him of forgetting that he had to be at the office complex in less than 40 minutes. Cursing under his breath, he ran into the closet and threw on the first suit he could find. He needed a shower and some breakfast, but both were luxuries he couldn't afford.

Anne stirred and glanced at the clock. She dressed quickly, apologized for causing him any trouble, and presently they left the town home and went their separate ways. Traffic was terrible, and he pulled into the parking lot just in time to see President Andrews enter the building.

He rushed in, nearly bumping into Andrews who was conferring in the lobby area with some of his staff. He paused when Kevin entered, fully twenty minutes late.

"Mr. President I am so sorry, this won't happen again," Kevin began.

"I believe you," Andrews said simply, and turned to walk into the conference room. Kevin shook his head, kicking himself for being such an idiot. The day was not starting well.

The day was not starting well for President Andrews, either. As he knew would happen, locking up 500 lawyers would not come without an immediate volley of lawsuits, and this had his legal team working overtime. The last thing he wanted was for an unfriendly federal judge to rule that he must release Congress immediately. Do that and it could be game over.

The most serious were the charges that President Andrews had suspended the Writ of Habeas Corpus. Essentially, Habeas Corpus means the government is forbidden to hold someone against his or her will without a legally valid reason for doing so. The founding fathers implemented this to protect civilians from being thrown into jail without just cause. The fundamental importance of Habeas Corpus is evident when we consider that it is the sole civil liberty that is expressly mentioned within the Constitution. Since Andrews did not formally charge Congress with a specific crime, the lawsuit contended, any further holding was expressly forbidden by the Constitution itself.

Leave it to Congress to wait until they are locked up before they become concerned about upholding the Constitution.

Andrews could have responded by officially charging Congress with numerous violations, thus setting in motion the due process of law. This presented any number of legal problems for the President's team, and while he didn't want this to drag out a day longer than necessary, nonetheless he felt the need to keep this out of the court system in order for the Top 100 Plan to

succeed. So in response to the lawsuit, Andrews' legal team issued a brief maintaining that both the letter and the spirit of the Constitution were being upheld. According to the brief:

In response to the charge that the Administration has suspended the Writ of Habeas Corpus, we must note that the Constitution itself provides for certain extenuating circumstances in this regard. As is it written, 'The privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it.' The Administration firmly maintains that both circumstances are pertinent to the present situation. We maintain that Congress collectively has acted in rebellion against its fundamental duties; and we insist in the strongest terms that the long-term safety of the public is at stake.

Furthermore, we note that Congress has neither been formally arrested nor charged with a crime, but rather that for the purposes of expediency the President has merely sequestered Congress until at which point it is able to fulfill its sworn duties to the American people according to the Constitution itself. While we freely acknowledge the self-evident fact that the movement of Congressional leaders is necessarily restricted during this time period, in no way does this constitute the suspension of any core civil liberties.

So far, that brief was holding water, but who knew for how long. Either way, a lawsuit was the least of the President's worries. His intent to nationalize the vast majority of debt owed to foreign countries had sent every major stock exchange in the world into a nosedive. While on the surface it might sound like positive news to domestic investors weary of the government's crushing debt load, those same investors knew that such an action inevitably would come with serious international consequences. Devastating wars had been fought over much less money, and the prospect of adding another war to the national task list was not being well received in the investment communities. Countries such as China could not be expected to sit by and meekly accept the loss of countless billions of dollars without considering serious reprisals. These reprisals ranged from those of a military nature to the seizure of property and assets of US-based businesses overseas. Companies with extensive Asian operations took the biggest beating on Wall Street, but the uncertainty caused nearly everything to take a hit.

If the threat of war weren't enough to initiate a bad case of Presidential heartburn, the American press was already tired of being kept in the dark about the whole situation. In an age where the press believes it is entitled to be embedded with troops and to have ringside seats to all but the most sensitive of national security meetings, being blindsided with the President's "sequestering" of Congress raised its collective ire. Americans, too, were anxious to know how things were coming and to be reassured that their way of life was not at risk. Which it most certainly was.

A slew of other issues simmered beneath the surface, including early calls for impeachment. But only the House of Representatives could initiate the impeachment process, and in case anyone hadn't noticed, they were all in time out. So with their voting privileges temporarily curtailed, any calls for impeachment would have to wait until Andrews released them. He could hardly wait to see what they would do when they were back in their element.

So with the combined weight of these responsibilities upon his shoulders, Jackson Andrews entered the conference room to begin Day 7 of Congress Held Hostage. He attempted to begin but paused to recognize Senator Freddy Dawes of Minnesota, a big crony of Killian Stark. Andrews sighed and motioned for him to speak.

“Good morning, Mr. President. We wanted to bring a matter to your attention that merits your immediate consideration. At this point we have been given but a handful of items to consider for your ‘Top 100 Plan’, and frankly to have this many of us involved is wasteful.”

Andrews smiled bleakly. “That is the very first time I have ever heard you call anything wasteful.”

Dawes ignored the comment. “Sir, the point is that it doesn’t serve the national interests to have 80% of us whiling away our time while the rest of us work on a few small tasks.” Dawes immediately realized his mistake, since if it were only a few small tasks, why in the name of everything decent and holy had Congress been patently unable to address it at some point during the past thirty years?

Andrews stared at him coldly but held his peace on that point. “I shall assume you are speaking on behalf of the majority of your colleagues,” he responded, “and I will agree with you. This could go much more quickly if I share a much larger portion of the plan rather than giving you a few per day to work on. I am certain that such a talented group of legal minds could do wonders if only you had something to do.”

Senator Dawes took his seat, and shared a look with Stark that they could do wonders, all right. By this time Killian and gang had enlisted the support of a large and growing number of legislators who were instructed to give Andrews what he was asking for with the express promise from Stark that Congress would never in a million years pass it. They would play both sides of the fence and the world would know that they did everything Andrews demanded of them. But the Top 100 Plan was dead and would never see the light of day. Already there were nearly a dozen scenarios Stark could use to ensure nothing passed, and there was nothing the President could do about it. Of that he was certain. For all his talk about executive orders, and present circumstances notwithstanding, Andrews didn’t have a shred of authority over Congress. So he and his gang would play nice for now, and Andrews would pay a steep, steep price in due time.

* * * * *

“So,” Andrews continued, “In recognition of this point, I will see to it that a document is submitted to you today outlining many of the remaining items of the Top 100 Plan. I won’t say the list is complete but it’ll get you guys working. Keep in mind the ‘100’ is a goal, not a guarantee. The final list may be much higher than 100 items.” He could tell by the looks of those closest to him that they hadn’t considered such a possibility. “But by the same token the list could be a bit shorter than that. The Plan is nothing more than a vehicle for getting this nation back on track, and I am not fixated on the specific number of changes that need to be made.”

“So by the end of the day I’ll have to you at least a third of the remaining items. Let me give you a taste of them right now in fact, along with a brief rationale behind them so that you can keep in mind the spirit of the law as you develop the requisite legal language.

“Item 9 of the Plan is that the rules of order governing both houses of Congress shall be promptly redesigned from the ground up by an unelected civilian panel which shall be created for the express purpose of serving as an official watchdog over Congress. This panel will be chosen by lottery from a pool of registered voters, with equal representation among Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, and Independents. Former members of Congress, former judges, and any legal or subject matter experts as may be needed can be consulted to assist this panel in its duties. Such consultants serve only in an advisory capacity, however, and will have no authority over the panel.”

“Decisions by this panel shall be legally binding upon the Congress, and Congress shall make no laws concerning the panel. Congress shall abide by the rules established by this group and will make no material changes to them at any time. In fact, the language must be crafted in such a way that any law established outside of these rules is immediately null, void, and of no force and effect. The intent is to end the political games and procedural tricks which prevent necessary votes from taking place, and which prevent the government from moving forward in a reasonable manner.”

“Item 10 follows logically and is vastly overdue. Effective retroactively, any legal, ethical, or procedural violations by Congress will heretofore be heard and decided by the aforementioned civilian panel. Gone are the days when Congress is charged with punishing the gross and willful criminal conduct of its own members. Not that I am aware of many cases where you have actually allowed someone to be tried as a mere American under the justice system you are supposed to protect. This is a key reason why citizens have lost their faith in us. Whenever foxes guard the henhouse, well, we all know how that goes. And you guys are one mighty fine group of foxes.” He ignored the sullen scowls. He knew there were a lot of good guys in this room, but as a group, their actions were corrupt.

“Item 11 effectively abolishes the “left and right of center” rule. Whenever it meets, members of all political parties will intermix in such a way that it is not discernible that conservatives are gathered in one area and liberals in another. I know this is largely symbolic, but it makes sense, people. You are *one body*, elected to serve *one nation*, and there should be no artificial divisions within the body. A house divided cannot stand, and yet you intentionally divide the house in order to put your party’s interests above the nation’s interests. Item 11 is a small thing, really. Please, agree with me that there is no defensible reason to continue such a thing.” And on that point let’s take a short break.

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Anne Roberts walked into the ladies room and set her purse on the counter. She considered her reflection and smiled. She was beautiful, and on that point no one would disagree. Almost absent-mindedly she pulled out a hairbrush and ran it through her silky, black hair while thinking

of Kevin Marks. He had been on her mind for several days, and after the fireworks the night before, she was probably on his mind as well. She paused and wondered what he was thinking right now. He was a good man, she thought seriously, and she wondered how this whole thing would play out. She was merely doing her job, she told herself, and yet he was growing on her.

Chapter 16

Day 7: Wednesday, February 1

Sandi Farmer was resplendent in her perfectly color-coordinated suit. Her well-kept brown hair was the proper length for a reporter aspiring to be anchor, and her dark green eyes twinkled with excitement as she again submitted to the ministrations of the makeup artist. She loved her job, and it showed.

Moments later she was introduced and her familiar face greeted viewers. “Good morning on this bright and cold day in our nation’s capital,” she began. “The round-the-clock coverage of Congress Held Hostage continues without slowing down, and in fact things seem to be gaining momentum. There is so much to cover but I’d like to start with a brief video that has surfaced on *YouTube*. This video has captivated millions and is trending now all over the Internet. It takes place in the refurbished office building that our Congress is temporarily calling home. It is not at all clear who made the video, and the White House simply says ‘no comment’ on this.”

“So we don’t know if someone in President Andrews’ administration is behind this, or if it was taken by one of the members of Congress after their phones and other electronic devices were returned to them. Either way, it offers us a rare glimpse into an explosive and candid situation between the President and Congress.” The camera switched to an amateur video that appeared to have been produced with a smart phone, and since the sound proved less than ideal, snippets were transcribed and placed on the screen for the viewers’ benefit:

(President Andrews) - “Listen carefully, because I will not attempt to talk over anyone. The deal is this: you are all placed on house arrest in this building until at which point I authorize you to leave. That may be a few months from now, or it may be next year, but you will not leave this building until I personally give the word. All of you will remember that I campaigned on the promise of *revolution*, and those of you who mocked me as being melodramatic should have paid more attention. This *is* revolution, and effective immediately you are no longer calling the shots in this land. I am.”

(Senator Martin Schumaker) - “Mr. President, what you have just done is not only illegal but also detrimental to your own administration. I would advise you...”

(Andrews) - “And I would advise you not to lecture me about what is illegal, Senator.” Andrews countered. “Or would you prefer we direct our collective attention to your office soliciting and accepting nearly two million in carefully laundered foreign contributions to your campaign?”

(Andrews) - “Or you, Senator Bob Feinman. Do you want us to inquire as to where that mysterious \$30,000 went last year? You have a truly beautiful and gracious wife, but do you think she’ll forgive you when she learns that thirty grand went to high-class hookers?”

(Andrews) – “I could go on for half an hour. Where is that scoundrel Sam Paige? ... Should I tell them, Congressman Paige? ... I think your colleagues on the other side of the aisle would be mighty interested in hearing what you do in...”

(Senator Paige) - “Mr. President, please!”

(Andrews) - “You disgust me.”

The nation’s viewers stood transfixed, never having witnessed such a candid exchange at the highest levels of government. Charlie Spratlin nearly spit out the beer he was enjoying in his little bar in Texas. He turned up the TV to drown out the hoots and hollers of his customers.

“Ya’ll shut up,” he bellowed half-heartedly. But he couldn’t blame the boys. It was all he could do not to pound his fists into the air in support of the President. *Wow*, he thought in admiration. *This guy is the real deal.*

The video finished playing and the camera again rested on Sandy Farmer. “This truly is an amazing verbal exchange between Andrews and members of Congress, who the President clearly accuses of criminal acts, infidelity, and more. Now we need to be clear that at this point these are simply verbal revelations, or should I say accusations, the President has leveled; no proof or corroborating evidence has been forthcoming. Nevertheless, we would think the President would not make such potentially libelous statements if he were not sure of his facts.”

“Let’s now go to Times Square, where our own Michael Burns is checking the nation’s pulse and getting a feel for public sentiment in the wake of this video. Reaction is all over the board, but it is clear that the video is having a very real impact in characterizing this battle as a David and Goliath struggle. No one has ever stood up to Congress this way, and in that regard, Andrews’ young and unproven administration is seen as battling Goliath itself. Michael?”

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Zhong Li did not care for the sophomoric *YouTube* video, and he was not impressed with Jack Andrews. Indeed, the time had come for China to respond decisively to Andrews’

declaration of intent to nationalize every dollar the United States government owed China and its good investors.

Picking up the phone, he spoke tersely. “Project Xīgài begins now”, he breathed quietly. And as if realizing for the first time the full gravity of his actions, he offered a prayer to the God he didn’t even believe in. *God help us all.*

To his credit he personally had initiated a phone call within an hour of Andrews’ now-famous televised address. “Mr. President,” he had urged earnestly, “let us not act with haste and let us discuss your intentions and carefully consider our alternatives. Surely you realize China would win any trade war, not to mention the fact that there are those in my government who would not stand for anything less than an outright military attack if you move forward with such an ill-advised plan.”

But Andrews’ didn’t back down, gambling wildly that it was not in China’s interests to go to war over this. The phone call remained civil, yet the rhetoric let each leader know that the other would not be bullied. After the lengthy call, Zhong Li knew in his heart that Jack Andrews would do what he promised. And so would he.

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Jimmy Couch got up from the array of monitors in front of him. He was the shift supervisor of a solid group of men and women who monitored the technical systems of the New York Stock Exchange. Like most people in high tech jobs, he thrived on complexity and was not intimidated by the long rows of expensive servers he managed. From the backup systems to the power supplies to the redundancies built throughout, he knew it was a beast. But he held the reins steadily, and he was very good at his job. When anyone asked him how he dealt with the pressure of millions of dollars in tech, he brushed it aside. “The technology is easy,” he would say honestly. “The hard part is dealing with people.”

Stretching and stifling a yawn, he regretted the late movie he had watched the night before. It was a stupid B movie that shouldn’t have qualified for any of the 638 channels his overpriced cable company delivered. But somehow he had gotten interested in it, and now he was paying for the lack of sleep. All the caffeine in the world wouldn’t help him, but he intended to try. Checking his email once more, he turned and walked toward the cafeteria and the comfort of an ice-cold *Coke*.

The NYSE certainly was a storied place to work. So much had changed since May 17, 1792, when a group of stockbrokers had converged upon Wall Street to hammer out the rules for trading. By March of 1817, the official corporate constitution had been developed and they became known as the New York Stock & Exchange Board. That was a bit of a mouthful, and it was eventually shortened to the New York Stock Exchange, then to simply NYSE. Jimmy thought it should be even shorter, as he hated typing the letters NYSE in all caps all the time.

The building itself had undergone many changes over the years, but even from the start it had been high-tech. One of the crowning creations of architect George B. Post, this neo-classic

design would go down in history as one of the first buildings in the world to use air conditioning. Oddly enough, its planners saw fit to include its own emergency hospital with a staffed physician. Annunciator boards were installed on each wall of the trading floor, and members could be paged from these boards. Nearly 25 miles of wiring were employed to run those boards, and Jimmy was glad his extensive domain didn't come anywhere near those boards. Wiring wasn't sexy.

Arriving in front of the nearest vending machine, he reached into his pocket to pull out some change. His phone vibrated, and he read an urgent message. Something had happened to the backup generators, it said. He forgot the *Coke* and hurried back through the maze of the NYSE building to the server rooms.

Only everything was black, save for the mandatory emergency lights embedded at regular intervals in the hallways and throughout the cavernous server rooms. *What is going on*, his mind screamed. Never in history had the primary systems failed like this, and even if they had, the backup generators would have kicked in instantly. Trading would continue, or in a worst-case scenario, would be brought to a graceful close. But for all intents and purposes it looked like a careless janitor had waltzed into the room and unplugged the one cable that powered the whole building. This couldn't be happening!

But it was. The New York Stock Exchange had just been brought to its knees.

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This time Sandy Farmer didn't get the limelight; the network anchor totally stole the show. "In a cataclysmic event that already is becoming known as 'China Wednesday,' the Chinese government has tacitly acknowledged that they are behind today's complete shutdown of the New York Stock Exchange. As you can see from the video here, confused traders are standing around wondering when the lights will come back on. This is the first significant case of cyber-terrorism perpetuated on US soil, and it is unclear as to what the US response will be, or when trading might be resumed. This has completely crippled the Exchange, which so far seems to be the only business that has been hit. Nearby businesses have not been affected in any way, so this would appear to be a highly successful surgical strike by the Chinese against American financial interests."

Had he been watching the news, Jack Andrews would not have needed the anchor to tell him any of this. He knew exactly who was behind it, and though Zhong Li would not take his call at the moment, he knew the Chinese would relent soon. They just had to.

* * * * *

Day 8: Thursday, February 2

Twenty-four hours later, Jack Andrews wasn't so sure. His secretary called to let him know Ty Kennedy was moments away, and presently the Vice President entered the Oval Office and sat down. Clearly he was unhappy.

"Jack," he began, remembering the President's request that Ty address him informally in private, "we have problems."

Andrews rose from his desk and chose a seat next to him. "Any new developments on the NYSE?" he queried.

"No, and unfortunately it gets much worse. It doesn't look like the NYSE is coming up today, and I regret to inform you that hackers just took down the NASDAQ."

Andrews looked up sharply. "The NASDAQ, too? How are these guys doing this? I thought we had anti-cyberterrorism controls in place to prevent this, or at least a means to quickly regain control after an attack. He fought to remain calm but the implications were staggering. Together, the NYSE and the technology-heavy NASDAQ exchanges represented a combined market capitalization of nearly twenty-one trillion dollars. For both of those exchanges to go down would cause yesterday's panic to spiral to historic levels.

Kennedy looked out the windows, hoping a messenger from God was arriving with step-by-step instructions on how to restore a major stock exchange. For his part, Andrews wondered how he would face Congress. He could only imagine the smirk on Killian Stark's face. He knew there would be consequences for his actions, but he clearly miscalculated the speed at which China would react.

Looking at his watch, he jumped up and got his secretary back on the phone. "Get the Joint Chiefs together, and have some lunch brought in. We've got a long meeting ahead of us."

"Absolutely, Mr. President. Do you have any lunch preferences?"

"Anything but Chinese" he replied as he slammed the phone down in disgust.

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As they had been before, the Joint Chiefs of Staffs were assembled and waiting for him. They stood immediately when he entered, then sat down quickly to begin business.

"Gentlemen, you're aware of the speed at which the Chinese hackers have moved. At this point the NYSE is down and I'm told we aren't having much success getting things back up. Ditto for the NASDAQ. Seeing an unfamiliar face on the far side of the room, he paused. "Who's this?"

Admiral William Michael Lowery, Chairman of the JCS, spoke. "Mr. President this is David Herd, Senior Analyst with the National Security Agency. He is eminently qualified to brief us on

the technical issues at hand, and his security clearance is sufficient to handle any related topics we may discuss.” Turning to David, he motioned for him to speak.

Herd cleared his throat, knowing he was far out of his league. But he knew his stuff, and in fact there was probably only one question they could ask him that he couldn’t answer. “Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, and members of the Joint Chiefs...” he began. Andrews cut him off.

“Skip the formalities and just relax, David. Tell us what is going on.”

“Of course, sir. As you know the Chinese are behind this and we have traced the hackers to several locations in Yunnan Province, in the far southwest region of the country. It is unknown how many hackers we are dealing with, but through these technical feats they have made it abundantly clear that they are among the world’s elite. Within minutes of the attack on the NYSE we had a team working on it to discover the specific attack vectors the hackers used. It appears to be a variant of the *Stuxnet* computer virus.”

The JCS exchanged glances. *Stuxnet* wasn’t a topic they publicly discussed. Created in 2009, the virus primarily targeted specific computer hardware designed by the industrial giant, Siemens. It spread through Microsoft’s *Windows* operating system. Though technically a computer worm and not a virus, most people referred to it as a virus, including Herd, who of all people knew the difference. A virus was a piece of code that spread by attaching itself to other computer files. Among many other ways, computer users could inadvertently spread the virus through infected email attachments and by sharing infected documents and spreadsheets.

In contrast, a worm did not rely on the actions of a user and instead exploited any of a number of security vulnerabilities to create copies of itself from one computer network to another. And whereas many viruses are benign and are created more or less as a technical challenge to see how many computers a hacker can infect, worms almost always cause damage. More serious hackers, sometimes operating on different continents, often conspire and plan coordinated attacks using a number of viruses, worms, and other tools to subvert the target system. If the hackers know some basics about the target system, they can attempt to gain access via one means, and then use that access to cause further mischief using other means. As part of this strategy, it is not uncommon to create viruses that transmit other viruses, which in turn release one or more worms. Herd had personally done all this and more before he graduated from high school.

But whatever they called it, *Stuxnet* gained notoriety in 2010 when it was used to actively sabotage the development of the nuclear program of the Iranian government. Although various types of sanctions and military options were discussed to slow the regime’s nuclear aspirations, none were guaranteed to work. Economic sanctions did have an effect, but were of limited value in convincing the belligerent government to change course. And unlike the Israeli’s successful attack on Saddam Hussein’s Osirak nuclear power plant in 1981, a direct strike wasn’t as likely to succeed. For one, numerous Iranian plants were spread over a significant geographical area. Those plants were often placed far underground and protected against so-called “bunker busting” bombs. So even a direct nuclear strike was not guaranteed to stop the development. And that was

assuming the attackers knew the location of all the plants. In the assessment of the JCS, that was doubtful.

But there was another option, one that was completely deniable and yet could have the intended effect of disrupting the development. Iran fiercely denied it was developing warheads and insisted it was using nuclear energy only for peaceful purposes. But those lies were exposed when it was discovered that Iran had successfully enriched uranium to levels far above the level required for the production of nuclear energy. That was an incredibly difficult technical feat, and one that carried but a single benefit: it could be used for the production of Iran's first nuclear weapons. Weapons that could be used to carry out then-Iranian President Ahmadinejad's public threat to completely annihilate the nation of Israel. And America, in due time.

Enter *Stuxnet*. Despite a comprehensive technology embargo, the Iranian government was able to clandestinely acquire a significant amount of hardware originally developed by the Siemens Corporation. And it was this very hardware that *Stuxnet* was designed to find and infiltrate. Neither the United States nor Israel would admit to having anything to do with it, but both nations would clearly benefit from any disruption the virus could cause to Iran's nuclear development program. And though it proved relatively short-lived, it did in fact succeed in disrupting the Iranians' work. It so thoroughly tied up multiple integrated systems that when Iranian security analysts managed to clean one machine, it was immediately re-infected by another machine on the same network.

The JCS knew all of this. "But how would it attack the NYSE and NASDAQ, which use vastly different hardware?"

"That's where the 'variant' part comes in," Herd responded. "The initial release of a virus is rarely the last one. Subsequent versions are developed, sometimes by other hackers, who take the initial virus and make it more powerful. If you want to look at it this way, there are two parts to a virus. One is the means through which the virus can be transmitted, and another is the action the virus takes when the program it attaches to is executed. It looks like key portions of both parts of the virus were essentially re-engineered to target the different host systems powering the two stock exchanges, thus in effect creating a new virus that we haven't seen before. Given the complexity of the original *Stuxnet* and the gauntlet of world-class security measures that protect the targeted systems, I acknowledge the likelihood of inside access."

Admiral Lowery stepped in. "On that point we have begun an immediate personnel investigation. Anyone who had access to so much as a toilet in any of the affected buildings is being questioned. Finances, criminal backgrounds, political affiliations, the works. No expense will be spared."

Ty Kennedy spoke. "David, do you think the same variant attacked both systems?"

"There probably are two different variants. I haven't seen much analysis on the NASDAQ variant yet since we just found out about it, but each virus has a 'signature' and in this case it really does look like a variant of *Stuxnet*, similar to the one that hit the NYSE."

Andrews raised a more important concern. “Now for the trillion dollar question. How do we get these systems back online?”

And this was the one question David Herd couldn’t answer.

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Andrews spent the remainder of the day conferring with the JCS, discussing other security issues with the NSA, and debating with his staff as to how to address both Congress and the nation. In the end it was decided that White House Press Secretary Nathan Lawrence would do the honors, addressing the issue as best as possible and formally acknowledging that the Chinese were behind the attacks.

Public opinion would be critical. The early wave of positive public sentiment wouldn’t last forever, and could erode in a day, Andrews knew. The images of Congress locked up certainly had a large percentage of the population smiling, and the leaked *YouTube* video certainly had been a hit. But Andrews hadn’t staked his public relations game on a video clip.

Anyone in his administration remotely involved in public relations, press relations, advertising, or with good relations with industry professionals had been tapped to keep the momentum going. Ty Kennedy was golfing buddy to several media executives who shared many of his political views, and one of those executives was an outspoken critic of pretty much everything Congress did. He considered it pure joy to divert a non-trivial amount of his corporate resources to rallying his viewers to Andrews’ side.

Prominent columnists and like-minded owners of countless media web sites received personal calls from various members of the Andrews administration urging them to push positive content, even if they didn’t necessarily agree with Andrews on every point. “This is *us* versus *them*,” the message went. “Congress has set themselves up against the core interests of its citizens, and it is time to take our government back.” Any organizations promoting greater freedom from government controls were quickly enlisted.

The biggest guns were focused on enlisting the support of major conservative and independent columnists, talk show hosts, and television stations. The administration begged them to milk this for all it was worth. “You’ve been railing against the secular progressive agenda all these years, and liberals in Congress are your sworn enemies. Don’t screw up your one chance to shift power back to where it belongs!”

Andrews himself called *Fox News* and within an hour had a live teleconference in play. His host was a sharp critic of Congress and though he had repeatedly voiced doubts that Andrews had a chance in the election, he clearly saw the country’s historic opportunity.

(Host) - “President Andrews, you have pulled a fast one on the American people. I thought I had seen it all but I haven’t found anyone who would have bet on you arresting all 535 members of Congress. The question on the minds of many Americans is, how did you manage that?”

(Andrews) - "Ah, obviously secrecy was of paramount concern, and the inner circle was very, very small. I didn't even bring Vice President Kennedy into the picture until the last moment."

(Host) - "It is quite a surprise to hear you say that. Why not?"

(Andrews) - "Ty Kennedy is a long-time friend of mine, so he was my friend before he was my Vice President. Early on I made the decision to keep him out of the planning loop. It went contrary to what I wanted to do, but the intent was to protect him since I knew we were talking about doing some things that were, let me just acknowledge are of highly dubious legality. And I didn't want Ty getting tied up in that before we knew for sure we could launch this thing."

(Host) - "So who exactly knew about this?"

(Andrews) - "I eventually will make that information public, but this early on I will hold onto those details for the same reason I wanted to protect the Vice President. I think America should know, and I think we need to usher in an era of vastly greater transparency in the political process. Many candidates campaign on that, but the list of folks who pay it more than lip service is quite short."

(Host) - "You mean there's a list? (laughing) I think in the minds of Americans, this Top 100 Plan puts you in a class by yourself. Americans feel distanced from the political process. What are some things you plan to do to bridge that gap?"

(Andrews) - "We could actually talk all day on that, and there are so many things in play. Topping the list is Amendment 30 to the United States Constitution, which requires that any proposed law must be posted a full thirty days before a vote can be taken. Currently the full text of a law is available only to Congress, and even then some of it is available only to those who are working on the specific committees and sub-committees charged with hammering out the specific language. This is quite un-American if you think about it, because not only do Americans not know what Congress is doing, sometimes Congress itself doesn't completely know what it is passing."

(Host) - "Let me come back to that Amendment in a moment, but allow me to switch gears. Tell me about China, and what happens next."

(Andrews) - "Right now the response of the Chinese government is our biggest challenge, in part because they acted far more rapidly than I thought. In our response scenarios we envisioned a bit of diplomacy and protocol being followed before any real action would be taken. We had re-deployed a number of strategic and tactical military assets, and we thought we were prepared for a cyber-terrorist attack as well. I will just be candid and say that our plans fell short, and our top priority is regaining control of the New York Stock Exchange and the NASDAQ."

(Host) - “At least for the time being you are enjoying the support of your nation, and I admit I am shocked to be saying that given the radical steps you have taken. But what do you plan to do to maintain that support?”

(Andrews) - “Let me be clear in saying the support of the American public is the only way this plan will work. I love America, and I love Americans. I believe our model of democracy is the reason why hundreds of millions of people around the world now also enjoy similar freedoms, and I believe the world still needs a beacon of hope rooted strongly in the freedoms of everyday citizens. And I believe the United States Congress is Public Enemy Number One to these freedoms. An unelected, out-of-control Supreme Court came in a close second. So I encourage every American to carefully consider these things. Not to respond along party lines because this isn’t about a political party. It is a shame that American politics have been reduced to the narrow views of two parties. We can do better, and that is why I need the active and vocal support of every true American.”

(Host) - “Let’s go back to that Amendment, and I understand you have quite a few other amendments in the works as well. But here is what people want to know: How will you drive these changes home? How will these fantastic plans become a reality?”

(Andrews) - “Why, Congress will vote on them, of course. They will pass them as law.”

As Andrews stood and nodded his thanks to the production crew on his way back to the Oval Office, he fervently hoped he could connect with those Americans. Decades of being ripped off by their public officials had left many voters in a deeply cynical mood. Many had stopped voting altogether, deeming it a complete waste of time since the deck was stacked. So with that background in mind, and given his crazy actions of late, asking America to trust him was a tall order indeed.

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Day 9: Friday, February 3

The Constitution requires Presidents be at least thirty-five years of age and a natural born citizen of the United States of America. But one requirement the Constitution failed to cover was the requirement that the President get a decent night’s sleep. There is never a slow day in the life of a President; there is always at least one crisis going on, or ten. So at the end of the day the President must possess the natural ability to fall asleep to gather the rest and energy the next day will no doubt require. Jackson Andrews had been royally blessed with the ability to sleep well at night, and he could sleep through a severe thunderstorm.

He could not, however, sleep through a sharp knocking at his bedroom door. The alarm clock advised him that it was just after three o'clock in the morning. He pushed the covers back and pulled on a robe. "What is it?"

A flustered Mason Foley apologized for the intrusion. "Mr. President, there has been a new development with China. They have partially shut down the Federal Reserve Bank, and over the past three hours have siphoned off a billion dollars in US funds on the hour."

Fully awake now, he strode to his closet and five minutes later arrived in his office, where key members of his team were beginning to arrive in various stages of disarray. "So let me get this straight," he began as he accepted a strong cup of coffee. "China has shut down the Fed and is stealing a billion an hour?"

"That is correct, sir. As you know, there are actually twelve Federal Reserve banks, and ten are effectively out of commission. Only the ones in Cleveland and Richmond are operational, and it is not clear why. It may be that the attackers were unable to gain sufficient access, or it may be that they are keeping a couple of locations open for the purpose of initiating automatic transfers."

Andrews shook his head. "Is that all? You got me out of bed because someone robbed a bank?"

At that moment, members of the JCS arrived, looking more angry than grim. Jackson had a really bad feeling about this.

"Mr. President," Admiral Lowery began, "I was briefed on the issue with the Fed on the way over here. I am of course furious at this third attack on our financial infrastructure, but I am afraid we have a much, much worse problem."

The blackness of the Washington night seemed to penetrate even the bright lights within the Oval Office. "Sir, I'm afraid the Chinese have just taken down Andersen Air Force Base."

Chapter 17

Andersen Air Force Base, Aspra Harbor, Guam

Andersen Air Force Base was abuzz with activity. Whereas it was shortly after 3:00am in Washington, it was 6:00pm in Guam. The island was a significant tourist attraction, with over a

hundred miles of shoreline and eighty miles of coral reefs. Even in February, the island's coolest month, daytime temperatures hovered in the low 80's, making it a paradise any time of year.

Except today. Frantic phone calls were being made and all military personnel were placed on high alert. Someone had pulled the air raid siren, sending tensions to the breaking point even though no aircraft were visible in the clear sky. The airmen were far too young to have even been alive on December 7, 1941 when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, and yet in the confusion their anxiety could be forgiven. The US Navy had used Guam for communication and refueling purposes until 1941. Just hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Guam fell to the Japanese and remained occupied until 1944. A dwindling percentage of the island's aging natives still remembered that terrible time, which included campaigns of rape, torture, and even beheadings by the Japanese.

The siren mercifully stopped, but nerves remained frazzled. Virtually all communication systems were down, and no one knew what that meant. Most Americans would be surprised by the amount of technology on this island, but it was vital to the interests of both the Air Force and the Navy. It serviced nuclear submarines as well as aircraft carriers, and its high-tech hangars made it one of the few facilities equipped to protect the radar-evading skin of B-2 bombers. Unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs, routinely landed on its airfield. The super-carrier *George Washington* was in port for refueling, and it was armed to the teeth. So with this amount of firepower and defensive capabilities, communications were critical. And most of the mission critical communication lines were dead.

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The phone in the Oval Office rang, and Andrews' secretary informed him that Chinese President Zhong Li was calling. Andrews quickly put it on speaker for the assembled leaders.

"This is President Jack Andrews speaking."

"Mr. President," Zhong Li began, "I hope I have not caught you at a bad time."

Andrews bristled. "I am quite touched by your concern."

"Oh, I am concerned all right. The whole world is. And yet we must remember who initiated this conflict. It may be that you have already forgotten our last conversation, during which I urged you not to pursue this. Given the late hour I will be brief, but I wanted to extend an invitation to you. Perhaps it would be good for you to drop by for a visit."

This Andrews was not expecting. "Pardon? A visit to China?"

"Of course. I believe we can find a way to put a quick end to this."

Without needing a moment to think, Admiral Lowery jammed his finger on the hold button before the President could respond. "Mr. President, this is not remotely possible. Whether we have declared it or not, as far as I'm concerned we are at war with China. As sneaky as the

attacks have been thus far, this could be nothing more than a trap. Your life, the lives of your officials, as well as the sensitive technology of Air Force One would be in Chinese hands the instant that plane lands.”

Ty Kennedy agreed. “I am especially concerned about putting ‘a quick end to this’. That could be a euphemism for an unfortunate accident or an outright attack upon you.”

Andrews considered this. “I cannot prove you wrong, but China wouldn’t do that. If the Chinese were to kill me, it would guarantee a nuclear war. They wouldn’t risk it.”

Admiral Lowery shook his head. “We didn’t think they’d all but shut down one of our most strategic overseas military bases, either. We need to consider the possibility that this has already escalated far beyond our estimation.”

After additional discussion, Andrews concluded that the trip was worth the risk. “I don’t know what Zhong Li has planned,” he acknowledged, “but he is a pragmatist and I have to believe he has something better in mind than a punch below the belt.”

Ty Kennedy stood. “Mr. President, I must go on the record as opposing this in the strongest possible terms. If anything happens to you, if there is so much as a car accident that claims your life, I personally will see to it that every target of value in all of China is obliterated before the sun goes down.”

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Within minutes of the call with Zhong Li, Air Force Colonel Nicholas “Nick” Tanner received a phone call from Porter Steadman, the Secretary of Defense. Even the slightest trip in Air Force One was treated as a full military operation, complete with a mission number. For scheduled tours, these operations were planned weeks and sometimes months in advance. Everything from meals for the President and his entourage to the last detail of press relations had to be in place for a smooth visit. And every one of these details had to be vetted with the most rigorous of security protocols in mind. “Failure is not an option,” Tanner’s staff would often be told. And never had they failed.

But whereas most missions had thorough advanced planning, Tanner and his team were ready to move literally any hour of day, 365 days a year. Tanner pulled on his uniform and was shortly settling into the cockpit of the huge VC-25A, a highly customized version of the Boeing 747-200B. At six stories high with a wingspan of 195 feet, it projected American power wherever it went. He loved flying this beauty, which was the most well-known and photographed plane in history. He began the extensive pre-flight checklist while the rest of his team prepared for the arrival of the President.

Against the wishes of his advisors, Jack Andrews insisted that a relatively small team accompany him. The Vice President of course couldn’t travel with him, but he also insisted Admiral Lowery, Porter Steadman, and his entire cabinet remain behind. He certainly planned to

return in one piece, but if anything went wrong he wanted his core team intact to ensure the continuity of government.

Within the hour the “flying White House” was airborne, accompanied by two fighter jets and a C-5 Galaxy heavy transport aircraft. Normally two of the C-5 aircraft flew with them, carrying the president’s armored limousine and as many as several backup limousines sometimes used as decoys in particularly troublesome spots of the globe. You didn’t call a foreign rental car company when dealing with the head of the US government. Vehicles for the President’s team were also flown in, as well as a fully equipped ambulance should one be needed. But with the comparably small team, only one transport accompanied them, filled mostly with a small army of Secret Service agents. The press would get wind of this late-night trip within hours, but the rear of Air Force One, usually designated for the press, was empty.

Colonel Tanner spoke into his headset and confirmed that Air Force One was airborne, secure, and manually provided his coordinates and direction. He also requested an in-air refueling when the plane was halfway to its destination. Speaking of which, he had never heard of. He picked up the printed flight plan, which confirmed he would land at Lijiang Airport in Yunnan Province, China. Notes attached to the flight plan informed him that the airport had been built in the mid 90’s with a single runway of 9,800 feet. It would be plenty long enough for the VC-25A. But what in the world could have prompted President Andrews to hop a plane to this remote airfield in the middle of the night?

As if reading his mind, Andrews’ chief of security, Mason Foley, knocked on the cockpit door with the same question. “Is there even anything at the airport?” he asked the pilot.

Tanner shrugged. “All I know comes from these notes here, which tells me it’s a public airport and gives me some specs regarding runways, surrounding security, things of that nature. Prior to the 90’s it was a military airfield used by the Allied Powers for missions against the Japanese in World War II. So my guess is they repaved the runway and turned it over to civilian management after the War. As to what’s out there, I don’t know if there’s so much as a *McDonald’s* within a thousand miles.

It was curious, Foley agreed. But after waking the President with the news about the Federal Reserve, and learning the additional details of the attack on Anderson Air Force base in Guam, he doubted anything would surprise him. Along with every other American he knew China was at the center of the present crisis, but he didn’t have the faintest clue why they were at that moment headed to Lijiang Airport, smack into enemy territory.

Jack Andrews didn’t quite know, either, and with every passing mile his doubts grew. Was he making a big mistake? Was he making his last mistake?

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Day 9: Friday, February 3

Lijiang Airport, Yunnan Province, China.

The big wheels of Air Force One touched down on the runway, and US Air Force Colonel Nick Tanner made his usual perfect landing. Within minutes he made a note in his logbook that the landing occurred at 5:14pm (Washington time), then got up to coordinate the extensive security sweep that occurred before the President could step outside.

About an hour later several drab green armored personnel carriers rumbled into the airport, with a pair of black limousines sandwiched in the middle. Communication between the Chinese government and Air Force One confirmed that President Zhong Li was in one of the limousines, and that President Andrews should ride with him. After some discussion, the exact details of the protocol were worked out and Andrews' team of Secret Service agents took up the rear of the motorcade. Mason Foley rode with the President, along with a man referred to simply as Agent Samuels. Samuel's sole job on this day was to be the "carrier" of the nuclear football.

The nuclear football is an exotic *Zero Halliburton* briefcase weighing about 50 pounds. Containing sensitive communication capabilities and the launch codes for all nuclear weapons in the US arsenal, this suitcase must accompany the President wherever he goes. Carriers are selected by a top-secret rotation of military aides selected from all branches of the US armed services.

While the codes were supposed to remain in the suitcase itself, Foley knew that some presidents preferred to keep the launch codes in their pockets, presumably for added security. If the suitcase were ever misplaced, a random citizen would not end up with the ability to actually do anything with it, since the requisite codes would be on the president's person. Thankfully that had never happened, although he had once read a report indicating that Great Britain's carrier once left the briefcase in a public area by mistake. When his mistake was discovered, he was summarily transferred to "other duties".

Nonetheless, one of the first things Foley learned when he took this job was that any habit of keeping the launch codes on his person was fraught with danger. Jimmy Carter once sent his suit to the cleaners, forgetting that he had the codes in the suit pocket. And when Ronald Reagan was shot in 1981, emergency crew had to cut off part of his clothing while saving his life. The launch codes in his clothing were tossed on the floor and forgotten for quite some time. No fewer than five presidents have on at least one occasion left without their carrier.

Thankfully, there was never a situation in which the nation's safety was put at risk, and Foley began each day with a promise to himself that it wouldn't happen on his watch. He relaxed, glad that President Andrews preferred leaving the codes in the suitcase currently strapped to the wrist of Agent Samuels.

The ride from Lijiang to a nondescript warehouse complex several miles away was relatively quiet. Zhong Li and Andrews exchanged pleasantries, but Andrews remained patient, opting to allow his host to choose the time and place for an explanation of this most unusual meeting. It was all Foley could do not to grab Andrews and demand permission to strangle

Zhong Li with his bare hands. But he valued his job too much, so he stared silently at the floor and busied himself by counting all the ways he could kill Zhong Li without breaking a sweat.

The warehouse appeared deserted, with no visible security outside and what appeared to be a solitary light overhead that just barely began to penetrate the gloom of the expansive, empty space. Foley was alarmed when the limo drove straight into the warehouse, where the Chinese personnel carriers flanked them before the huge warehouse door was quickly lowered behind them. The Secret Service agents following them were locked out.

Andrews was alarmed, too, and the Secret Service agents immediately exited their vehicles with weapons drawn and safeties off. The curt voice of their commander instantly asserted that they should hold their fire and instead surround the warehouse on all sides. Communication back to the White House began within seconds, and a meeting of the JCS and Secretary of Defense began in earnest.

Zhong Li smiled reassuringly, as if this would put Andrews at ease. “Mr. President, please follow me and forgive the consternation I have caused you. It will be clear within the next few minutes why these extraordinary procedures are in place. Gesturing to Foley, he added, “Please take a moment and communicate that you are with the President and that he is safe. The three of you will be traveling with me underground and your communications devices will be of no value past this point.”

Andrews considered this, although he doubted an underground trip would cut off his communications. Part of the suitcase’s weight was due to highly redundant, military grade communication capabilities of the strongest signal variety. He nodded his approval to Foley, who looked suspiciously at Zhong Li as he made the call. This call did little to quell the near panic in Washington as word was received that President Andrews and the carrier were virtually cutoff from their security team and the President was no longer in control of his location. Hearing of the underground visit, Secretary of Defense Porter Steadman made an urgent call to get David Herd on the line. “What can we do to ensure we don’t lose the signal?” he barked.

“Don’t worry sir,” David responded from his office. “The suitcase will work even through 400 feet of solid rock.”

“Don’t tell me not to worry!” Steadman growled as he slammed the phone down in frustration.

Without a further word, Zhong Li gestured that they should follow him down a hall. At the end of the hall were stationed six members of the People’s Liberation Army. After taking a look around Foley realized that the apparent lack of external security was a decoy to conceal what must be a military installation of rather serious value to the Chinese government. And while it wasn’t his job to remain current on foreign military installations, he was well versed in the area and was positive he had never heard Lijiang mentioned at any point in his considerable career.

Leader of a billion plus people or not, Zhong Li was required to produce extensive identification and submit to voice, thumbprint, and retina scans. Prior to performing the voice

scan he also carefully selected a small card from a key ring and inserted it into a slot. His selection from the cards would confirm additional details such as the number of visitors with him and whether he was acting under duress. All this must take place before the reinforced, fully automated elevator doors would open. There were no buttons on the outside or on the inside. Noticing the lack of fire safety controls and a solid metal ceiling that prevented any emergency exit, Foley quipped that the building was not in compliance with US building codes. Zhong Li did not smile, and Agent Samuels gave him a wry look that said, *way to go, Foxworthy. You might be a redneck if you make idiotic jokes in front of a Chinese President.*

About a minute later the solid titanium elevator doors opened into a small landing and six guards promptly greeted them. Zhong Li moved forward without a pause, with President Andrews dutifully following. But when Foley and Agent Samuels moved to join them, the guards immediately stepped in front of them. "Sorry, you may not enter this restricted area," one explained.

Andrews stopped and looked at Zhong Li, eyebrows raised.

"I apologize again," he explained. "But President Andrews and I must proceed alone. You will wait here."

"Mr. President," Foley protested, "I cannot allow this enormous breach of protocol. We must accompany you!"

"It's all right," Andrews sighed reluctantly. He had come this far; he may as well see what Zhong Li wanted to show him.

* * * * *

Nearly 8,000 miles away, David Herd felt sick to his stomach. On the monitor before him, the signal for the nuclear football flickered briefly, and then disappeared. He stared at the phone in front of him, wishing someone else could do his job just for today. Knowing they couldn't, he reluctantly picked up the phone and dialed the number for the Secretary of Defense.

"Mr. Secretary, the signal for the nuclear suitcase has been lost. As of this moment we do not know the status of the carrier, and we do not know the exact location or status of the President."

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Zhong Li proceeded silently to an unmarked door and submitted to the same security scans as before. When the door opened, he and Andrews stepped inside. They were on a raised walkway that afforded them a clear view of the facility. Andrews couldn't help himself; he caught his breath in a dizzying combination of awe and terror.

He surveyed the cavernous room containing thousands of computer monitors, long banks of massive servers, and scores of images projected onto large wall-mounted screens throughout the

room. He had of course seen the largest and most advanced command centers in the United States, and yet they seemed tiny in comparison to the gargantuan room before him.

His mind reeled, thinking of a football game he had once attended at Michigan Stadium. With a nickname like “the Big House” one expected it to be huge, and first-time visitors invariably marveled at the 109,000 seating capacity. Andrews roughly estimated the entire stadium would easily fit within these walls. But instead of stadium seats filled with screaming Wolverines fans, this place was filled with the tools and technologies with the capacity to monitoring and perhaps attack nations around the world.

The Chinese leader watched him for a full minute as he took in the scene. The aisles were clear and the facility organized with several layers of strategic detail in mind. It clearly was run with military precision, and it was equally clear that President Jack Andrews had no idea this place existed. Not knowing how much time he would have, he tried to take mental snapshots of the room so he could brief his own military chiefs and provide as many details as possible. Perhaps a third of the monitors were turned off, and this seemed curious.

Zhong Li finally spoke. “It seems you have forced my hand, Mr. President. I would like to make you aware that you are the first – and the last – foreigner to see this facility and live. Your own intelligence teams have long been knowledgeable of what you call a cyber-terrorist base in Siping, with a smaller, backup facility in San Yuan. I could inform you that you have exactly six missiles directed at these two facilities, and if you really wanted to know I could tell you the serial numbers and the current launch codes of those missiles.” He ignored Andrews’ look of disbelief.

“But your advisors believe those are the main and secondary cyber-terrorist arms of the great nation of China, and they are entirely mistaken. Both are merely redundant diversions, and we would not be set back in our capabilities for one instant should you succeed in obliterating both facilities.”

Treading carefully, Andrews queried, “And what is to prevent the United States from obliterating this very building in which we now stand?”

“About 460 feet of concrete and steel superstructures, sir. You have known for years of China’s ‘massive military buildup’, and at least that portion of your highly overrated intelligence reports is true. But what you did not know is the full extent of our electronic surveillance and countermeasure capabilities, or what you like to call cyber-terrorism. I know what your advisors tell you we spend annually on this, and they have underestimated by many billions of dollars. A large portion of that went into the development of this building, which was specifically designed to withstand scores of successive ground-penetrating nuclear weapons without so much as a power outage. In fact there are sufficient quarters here for the top members of my administration should we ever need a completely secure means of conducting business during a time of full-scale nuclear war. It was designed by a team of engineers working with China’s top experts on plate tectonics. We have sustained a fairly large earthquake here since the building was completed, and because of the advanced earthquake mitigation architecture, there was not even a crack sustained anywhere in this place. Sir, not even God could sink this place.”

“They said the same thing about the *Titanic*,” Andrews cautioned.

“Perhaps, but the discussion is largely irrelevant because you are still unaware of the full extent of our facilities. There is yet one more facility with similar capabilities as represented here. So in terms of limiting our capabilities, bombing this location as if it were a mere weapons depot in Iraq provides you with exactly zero benefit.”

Andrews considered this and didn’t like it. He had no reason to believe Zhong Li was fudging about the undisclosed location, largely because it made perfect sense. The US didn’t keep all its eggs in one basket, either.

He walked down the catwalk a ways and heard no challenge from Zhong Li. Walking a bit closer to a bank of many hundreds of monitors that were off, he gestured toward them and inquired of his counterpart. “Why are a third of your systems down?”

Zhong Li seemed to find this amusing. “They are not down, sir. The monitors are simply turned off so that you are unable to see our targeting of other nations during your visit. Nearly three quarters of our targets currently are in the continental United States, you see.”

Watching carefully to gauge Andrews’s reaction, he continued. “For some time we have known that China and the US would meet for a showdown, as you Americans like to say. We certainly did not plan on it happening this way. Not even our most absurd of scenarios envisioned your shenanigans of late. But we knew a showdown would happen, and we had no intention of allowing the United States to prevent us from securing what we need, particularly with respect to energy, finance, and the military. So quite simply, you are the biggest target, and it will not escape your notice that there is nothing in America worth protecting that is not already mapped out herein. Anytime one of your own traitors sold us secrets, particularly nuclear secrets, those secrets were verified and then put to good use in facilities just like this one.”

“So as I indicated earlier, this room is essentially impenetrable, and though I never had any intention of bringing you here, you have forced my hand. I feel it is in my nation’s best interests to let you see for yourself our ability to cripple you, without so much as firing a shot. Mr. President, make no mistake, at my word I can effectively shut down a serious percentage of your nation, and there is not a thing you can do about it.”

Staring at him cruelly, he crossed his arms and prepared to deliver the next blow to Jack Andrews. “So having said all that, it is time for the next day of the attacks to begin. The New York Stock Exchange, the NASDAQ, the Federal Reserve Bank, and Andersen Air Force Base represent a respectable opening volley. But we are just getting started, sir. Fittingly, the next target on the list is Andrews Air Force Base, home of your very own Air Force One and the entire Presidential Airlift Group.”

Andrews looked at him in surprise. Dare he disbelieve the Chinese leader on this point?

“Now, I will admit we do not have the ability to completely shut down that site. Your airplanes would continue to fly, of course, and there are some systems we have been unable to breach. Nevertheless, there are several sub-systems over which we have established control that will not only affect Andrews, but also several other sites that interact closely with it. Shall I add them to the list of systems that are experiencing such unfortunate technical difficulties?”

Andrews stared at the dizzying sea of blinking lights in front of him, wishing this were something out of a movie and nothing more than the fantastic fantasies of an over-imaginative producer. But this was real. *Too real*. And unfortunately for him, having to back down from China this early in the game would be humiliating. He could imagine Stark, Dawes, and crew having a field day, licking their nasty chops at his public defeat. Maybe he could stand his ground and hope like crazy his technical teams could find a breakthrough that would get him out of this fine mess.

As if reading his thoughts, Zhong Li cut in and said, “Not a chance, Mr. President. Rome wasn’t built in a day, and neither was this multi-billion dollar, enormously successful operation. Don’t get me wrong, your people are plenty smart enough to figure it out. I’ll give them that. But one of your key problems is that too many of the people you think work for you in fact work for me.”

At his startled glance, Zhong Li continued. “Money certainly works miracles. And you, President Andrews, of all people, should know that.” A heavy coldness suddenly filled Andrews’ stomach. *How much did this man know? Could anyone in his administration be on China’s payroll?* The very thought of those implications made him nauseous.

Then Zhong Li went for the jugular, standing almost in Andrews’s face. “As a result of your recent actions, I promised you I would attack you financially and militarily, and just as you once forced Japan to its knees with the atomic bombings of the great cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, so I now force you to your knees. Mr. President, the attacks on your systems over the past few days are part of Project Xīgài. ‘Xīgài’ is the Chinese word for knee. So yes, we are well prepared to continue the systematic assault on your infrastructure that will quickly and painfully bring you to your knees.”

Andrews closed his eyes and tried to drown out what he was hearing. But the combined noise of the countless systems aligned against his country shouted at him, mocked him, and dared him to remain defiant in the face of certain disaster.

He sighed and opened his eyes, looking straight into the steely eyes of his adversary. “And how might we avert further escalation,” he managed.

Zhong Li didn’t hesitate. “Go before your nation and apologize for your actions against the good people of China. Rescind your order, at least as far as my nation is concerned. And that very hour your systems will be restored to you, just as good as new. As a measure of my good faith I will even return the billions to your Federal Reserve system.”

“And if I refuse?”

He shrugged. "It is your choice. It will take you about twelve hours to return to Washington. Beginning the moment your plane is in the air I give you a head start of fifteen hours. Should I not see your apologetic face on national television within that time frame, you may need to avail yourself of a new home base for a while. Andrews Air Force Base will not be a good choice."

The irony was not lost on Andrews. But Zhong Li had one other incentive. "And if you refuse my reasonable offer," he concluded, "Not only will I retain as liquidated damages the billions from your bank, I also will increase the frequency of my withdrawals. Instead of taking one billion dollars per hour, I will begin taking one billion dollars per minute until there is nothing left."

The sick feeling in the middle of Andrews' stomach returned. No longer interested in the technological wonders the Lijiang facility had to offer, he walked back to the entrance in silence.

Mason Foley nearly hugged him when he returned to the landing area. But his enthusiasm at seeing the President perfectly safe lasted only until he took one look in the President's eyes. *Uh oh. What just happened in there?*

The trip back to Air Force One took a lifetime, and the President said not one word. Lost in thought, dazed and weak, he considered the choice before him. Some choice. Even before the landing gear retracted, he knew what he had to do. The battle with China was over before it had begun, and it was no contest.

President Jack Andrews had just been handed the first major defeat of his administration.

Chapter 18

Day 10: Saturday, February 4

The huge wheels of the VC-25A touched down at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland. The gentle impact roused President Andrews, who had fallen asleep after working ten hours straight on the specifics of his upcoming national address. As the door opened and he walked quickly to his waiting limo, he hoped there would never be a time when a foreign nation interfered with this place. He loved it here. Some years ago the base merged with Naval Air Facility Washington, and since then the two bases have been known as Joint Base Andrews. But he hated that name and would forever refer to it as Andrews Air Force Base.

The base was named after Commanding General Frank Maxwell Andrews, one of the most important commanders in World War II as well as one of the founding fathers of the United States Air Force. He was killed in a plane crash in 1943. Despite the shared name, he claimed no relation to the base's storied namesake.

His mind returned to the present, and he yawned, wishing he had gotten more than two hours of sleep on the return flight. He felt like he had been beaten, and in a way he had. He glanced at his watch. It was eight o'clock on this bleak January morning, and the weather set an accurate tone for the type of day Andrews had coming. He hunched his shoulders and rode in gloomy silence to the White House.

The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room already was prepped for his arrival, and with a sigh he put on his best presidential face and looked at the curious gaggle of journalists seated before him. No doubt they remembered the staged drama from Andrews' first press conference, but there would be no drama today. Andrews' tone was necessarily subdued, though he forced himself to exude strength and confidence.

"Good morning," he lied. "I wanted to brief you on a few things that have happened since our last conference, and then I will field a few questions. First and foremost I am pleased that the sequestered members of Congress are making serious headway on a number of key components of the Top 100 Plan. They may not be happy, but they're working hard." That brought a few smiles.

"The reason this is significant is because our citizens have demanded these changes for so long, and all they have received is an insulting package of smoke screens, broken promises, and political games. So if you're one of those people who have been calling for term limits for Congress, you will in fact have them in the very near future. Not only for Congress, but also for the Supreme Court. Citizens of voting age will also make history by voting for the first elected Supreme Court, and I'd like to use this moment to announce that we have nine openings at this very moment and are encouraging qualified men and women to brush up their resumes." Andrews smiled genuinely at that.

"So we look forward to getting those seats filled as soon as Congress wraps up the legal framework and we work out the logistics of organizing a provisional Election Day for this very purpose. Equally important is a long overdue overhaul of crime and punishment of federal officials. Very soon it will be ordinary citizens chosen by lottery who will decide the fate of elected officials who are guilty of crimes. This covers everything from general abuse of office to tax evasion. They *will* be accountable to you as they were meant to be."

"Indeed this special civilian panel will be given a fair amount of oversight powers over Congress. Among other things, their contributions will include an overhaul of congressional procedures to implement something that makes sense and that makes it a bit harder for Congress to play political games at the expense of the nation. The intent here is to return power to the people so that the foxes no longer guard the henhouses."

“These are just a few of the items that are being worked out as we speak, and there will be many more to follow. Before I take your questions I have one last item on the agenda. This morning I returned from a very impromptu meeting with Chinese President Zhong Li. As you would imagine we had quite a discussion about the events of the past couple of days. Suffice it to say that while I stand by the earlier announcement of the nationalization of much of America’s foreign debt, nonetheless the nation of China has been added to the list of exempt nations. We have come to an understanding that attempts to balance both Chinese and American interests, and that understanding has resulted in the immediate cessation of the attacks upon our interests.”

And with that, President Andrews threw himself to the wolves.

* * * * *

“This is what you get with an inexperienced leader who knows absolutely nothing about foreign policy!”

Killian Stark nearly had to wipe spittle from his mouth as he spat out those words in front of the camera. Andrews had established a daily time to allow Congress to speak freely to the press, which proved to be one of the busiest times of day as the legislators took the opportunity to update their constituents and the nation on what was happening in their new digs. Stark had nothing but disdain for the President’s actions regarding China, and could easily have predicted the Chinese response. His only surprise was that they didn’t do even more damage.

“President Andrews clearly has no business leading the nation. And though I have my own issues with China, I don’t blame China on their response for one second. When a country strikes at the heart of American interests we will rise up and defend ourselves. We should expect nothing less from China. So I lay all of this at the feet of this incredibly naïve President. Again, he has no business here. He has no foreign policy experience, and if he had bothered to at least consult with those of us most experienced in the vast complexities of Chinese-American policies we could have prevented every minute of this humiliation.”

* * * * *

The guest on CNN agreed wholeheartedly.

“This represents an enormous defeat for the President,” he exulted. “He tried his best to put a positive spin on it at the press briefing earlier, but this was a President with his tail between his legs. You could tell he cherry picked a few ‘pieces of legislation’ our captive Congress is working on to serve as a distraction, but even there we’re just going on the word of an unproven President still in the first hour of his administration. Show me some proof, Mr. President! Give us one reason to believe anything you say stands the faintest chance at becoming a reality!”

* * * * *

Chinese President Zhong Li was more than satisfied. He cared little for the American news outlets, but he was pleased that Andrews had promptly made his announcement.

Addressing his administration on the subject, he spoke briefly. “Until if and when it becomes further necessary, Project Xīgài is concluded. Call off all attacks.”

And for once, Zhong Li smiled.

* * * * *

Kevin Marks smiled, too, as the bright morning sun filtered through the windows of his DC townhouse. He and Anne had slept in on this gorgeous Saturday morning, and he was glad the weekend was here. Kevin’s cell phone rang, and he picked it up, not taking his eyes off Anne.

“Good morning Kevin,” it was the clear voice of his wife. “Come open the door. I wanted to surprise you and spend the day with you. It’s freezing out here and I don’t have my keys!”

The smile left his face and he fought to control his panic. *Oh no*, he thought wildly. *Anne’s car is outside, her stuff is all over the place. So this is how my career and marriage both end.*

“You’re here?” he managed.

“Well, I wish. But no, I’m sticking to the plan and will arrive tonight. We’ll meet at the airport and I’ll stay for at least a few days. Can’t wait.”

Kevin breathed again, color returning to his unshaven face. “I can’t wait, either. I have missed you so much,” he said truthfully. He was painfully conscious of Anne silently listening to his conversation a few feet away. This was incredibly awkward, and after hanging up a few minutes later, he didn’t quite know what to say.

Mixed emotions flooded him. Physically speaking, Anne had stepped out of his dreams, and he didn’t know how to end the affair. But guilt overtook him, knowing that Cameron had always been faithful to him and not bearing to see her heart broken. He could just imagine her accusing eyes. *You’ve been in Washington less than a month, and already you’ve turned into a cheater?* And Kevin had thought he was one of the good guys.

For her part, Anne was torn, albeit for entirely different reasons. Her job and her power came from the underground network she knew as Project Omniscience. She did not dimly comprehend the size and complexity of it; all she really knew was that Killian Stark ran it, and that without Stark, she would be looking for a job. She had been tasked with any number of duties, but seducing a Congressman for the express purpose of bringing him under Stark’s covert ownership was the hardest one yet. Some people, like that pig Snipes, genuinely enjoyed the prospect of ruining someone. She just did it for the money, and never really wanted anyone to get hurt. Like Kevin.

It made it especially hard since she was falling in love with him. Far beyond the physical relationship, they found themselves laughing and enjoying each other’s company. Anne knew that Kevin loved his wife, and she couldn’t help but hear it in his voice as he talked to Cameron

on the phone. How Anne wished he were single, then she wouldn't feel such enormous guilt. But since that first explosive night they had gotten together at every opportunity, and she didn't want it to end.

But it would end, all right. And it would be Anne Roberts who would be destroyed.

* * * * *

Ty Kennedy closed the heavy, wooden door of the Oval Office behind him and sat down. President Andrews was of course there, along with Secretary of Defense Porter Steadman, and Pepper Morris. Pepper was Jack Andrews' unlikely Chief of Staff. Brilliant and capable, she nonetheless was a bit of a Washington outsider. Her positive, upbeat demeanor set her apart from the usual suspects Andrews interviewed for the job, and he felt she would be a terrific asset to his Administration. Her relative lack of political experience raised some eyebrows, since the Chief of Staff is the highest ranking employee in the West Wing, second only to the President. But the duties of the Chief of Staff were largely up to the President, and he felt it would fit well with his message of small government to appoint someone to the post who wasn't known as a career politician. He had no intention of having her embroiled in endless politics, preferring instead to lean heavily upon her considerable managerial skills to handle his schedule and of course the White House staff.

Since the Nixon administration, the Chief of Staff had been a permanent position at the White House, and to be sure it was a tough job. The average Chief of Staff held the job for a little over two years. Few thought Pepper would last twelve months, but Andrews hoped otherwise. She was known to be hardworking and loyal, traits Andrews sorely needed on his team. He nodded at Ty Kennedy and wrapped up the light banter.

"Guys, this China thing has been rough, and I don't need to tell you that."

Kennedy agreed. "Ah, we'll make it through this, you know that. The honeymoon is over and the networks are raking us over the coals, but it wasn't unexpected."

"True," Andrews acknowledged, "although I didn't expect to have my head handed to me quite so quickly. So China whipped my butt, the Communist News Network is gloating, and Congress is even more in love with me than they were before. Did I miss anything?"

"The ACLU filed another lawsuit against you this morning," Pepper added helpfully.

"Big surprise there. We saw most of this coming of course, but I need to know if you guys are still with me on this. Steadman, it is especially important that the military remains on board. What say you?"

"We of course remain at your service, sir. I have assured you and will continue to assure you that the support of the armed forces will remain strong. I am not suggesting that voices of dissension do not exist. I'm sure there are some in the military who did not vote for you."

Andrews stared at the floor. “Oh, I know that for a fact.”

Steadman continued. “But those in the military do tend to be on the conservative side, and though you are an independent, the conservative base is your strongest constituency. We have worked very, very diligently to communicate through the ranks to make sure people are aware of what this is and what it isn’t. They have to know this isn’t a subversion of the United States government, which they wouldn’t stand for.”

Pepper raised a question. “Are there any areas of real concern with respect to the military?”

“Not substantially. To ensure transparency and to help the public remain calm, President Andrews has placed a mountain of details on the White House web site regarding the steps he is taking and the extensive rationale behind those steps. Again, voices of dissension are there, but many of our military personnel have been incredibly frustrated with Congress for many years. The socialistic agendas foisted upon them threaten to make their sacrifices in vain. When bullets are flying, how do you maintain your focus and discipline while liberal bureaucrats are subjecting you to social experiments? Why risk your life fighting on foreign soil for freedom when some of your own Congressmen are trying to sabotage you for political gain?”

“I agree,” Ty Kennedy spoke. “They are frustrated because so many disdain their discipline and willingness to die for their country, as if serving is dishonorable. Our military of all people understand what America is about and what sacrifice is all about, and it is infuriating to see the country waste away under the twin loads of diminishing moral fiber and oppressive government.”

“So yes,” Steadman continued, “you have the solid support of the military. Tread carefully and remain as transparent as you possibly can. Visit the troops and get all the photo ops you can with them, including the National Guard. That will be critical in showing the nation we are not descending into civil unrest. People really are worried about that, and they’re afraid of what might happen if the military tries to step in and wrest control. But we are with you.”

Andrews had hoped he would say that, and he looked genuinely relieved. “Thank you,” he said seriously. “I know that every night you guys must go to bed wondering if a loud knock on the door will signal someone coming to arrest you for treason and high crimes. I’m not immune to that fear, and I know I’m the biggest target on earth. Thank you for your support on this. I will not forget it.”

“So we continue with the plan,” Kennedy concluded. “Does the China situation change anything?”

“The issue with China changes nothing other than we will not be stepping on their toes again anytime soon. If another nation tries to pull a similar stunt, we’ll deal with it when we come to it. But yes, we stick with the plan. And speaking of the plan, we need to begin working on the next phase even as recent events continue to play out. Pepper, do you have the list?”

"I do," she confirmed. "And per your request this list has been carefully and excruciatingly vetted. The highest secrecy has been maintained, and as the gatekeeper to the President I certainly will be seen as operating within my expected range of duties in setting up meetings with those on the list. So my contact with them will be seen as plausible."

"Excellent," Andrews said. "Copies of that list are not to leave this group under any circumstances. I don't need to tell you that the success of this entire administration hinges on getting these guys on board, at any cost," he added solemnly. Pepper Morris didn't like the sound of that, but she nodded in understanding. As part of the President's inner circle, she was one of the very few who knew the truth about the unreported attack on Vanpelt and the murder of Justice Woodburn. Even the First Lady didn't know. She still couldn't believe it, and was trying to look at it through the lens of a nation at war. *Could anything be justified if one is at war?* She asked herself that question several times a day, but she didn't have an answer.

"Pepper, the work represented by that list remains your primary objective. Focus every available resource on it without drawing undue attention. Does anyone have any questions on that topic?" No one did.

"Very well. As far as Congress goes, they're working on the legislation as planned. I have every reason to believe there is organized opposition in terms of subverting the Top 100 Plan, and am not surprised in the least. But the documents are in fact being worked on and revisions uploaded daily. Not everything I've asked for is there, but I must say that the bulk of it is. They're humoring me just enough to get by so they can get out of jail, and I'm sure they look forward to tarring and feathering us in the public square at our earliest convenience."

Andrews prepared to conclude the meeting. "Speaking of Congress, they have plenty to work on, with topics all over the map. You've seen the items I've given them, and as radical as they are, they're not nearly enough to pull this nation out of its colossal mess. Take welfare, for example. 'Welfare reform' is such a joke. I don't wish harm to anyone, honestly, but I just want to turn the faucet off and shut down most of the broken system right this minute."

The Secretary of Defense raised his eyebrows in alarm. "And that of course is one thing I wouldn't advise."

"Oh, I'm not going to do it," Andrews conceded. "But give me your analysis on why I shouldn't."

"Well, you'll have rioting on a national scale, of course. The military would be brought in to quell uprisings, and so many people would die it would very much herald the start of a civil war. Without speculating on what the final outcome of that conflict might be, I could say unequivocally that a civil war would not serve your interests."

"Indeed," Andrews replied. "And in a way I would agree that it would be the height of irresponsibility to even think of it. After all, the federal government bears enormous responsibility in hooking people on the entitlements that sustain millions of families year after year. What do we expect out of some guy who has sat in his living room for years, not bothering

to keep his skills current because he knows Uncle Sam is good at writing checks? Now I wouldn't think of ending support for those over 50. Most of them have paid into the system long enough to be genuinely entitled to the promised benefits. I also wouldn't touch benefits to veterans. Anyone who has donned a government-issued uniform and declared they will defend the United States of America to the death deserves our unconditional loyalty. But the number of those who abuse the system or who shouldn't be in the system are legion, and you're right - I don't want a war on my hands." He sighed.

"I agree with Mr. Steadman," Kennedy stated. "Let's stick with the plan. We have several items in there that will go a long way to eliminating abuses, and if those measures fail, then God help us all. If only citizens knew what we know about the national condition, they would be terrified. I firmly believe the nation will completely disintegrate if we don't stop hemorrhaging those trillions of entitlement dollars."

"Speaking of dollars," Andrews noted. "Have the accounts been set up to fund our, uh, activities?"

"They have," Pepper confirmed. "There are 28 accounts total, and the exact sum of five billion dollars has been quietly transferred. Even I am amazed that we can move that much money around without anyone noticing."

Ty asked, "Are you really planning to give Congress five million each if they finish the legislation for the Top 100 Plan? Even that crook Stark?"

"Well sure I am," Andrews replied. "I couldn't betray their trust now, could I?"

Chapter 19

It was still early Saturday afternoon. Anne had long since left, and Kevin had gone over the place ten times to make sure there was nothing larger than a strand of DNA that could incriminate him when Cameron arrived. He vacuumed the place, washed the sheets, and filled the air with enough air fresheners to kill any hint of feminine perfume that may have lingered.

He was glad Cameron was coming to town. He missed his wife and hoped that a few days with her would knock some much-needed sense back into him. He still had no idea what to do about Anne or even what his true feelings toward her were. But he certainly hadn't planned any of this, and hoped he could get his mind and heart straightened out. He had invited his friend David Herd over for an early dinner since Cameron's flight wouldn't land until later, and he was glad for some male companionship.

Herd arrived on schedule, and as before, burgers were on the menu. Along with countless others, Herd had put in some serious overtime that week trying to stop the cyber-attacks. Knowing his friend's legendary skills, Kevin asked him about those efforts.

Herd shook his head. "I have to hand it to them; they knew exactly what they were doing. They had the access and the technical chops. They knew way too much about our systems, including exactly where the weak points were. Every server, every operating system, every firewall can have weak points no matter how well it is designed. And sometimes the weak point isn't the system itself, but the people who run it."

"You mean they paid people off?"

"Well sure they did. But they also used social engineering to gain access." Seeing Kevin's quizzical look, he explained. "You wouldn't believe how many hackers show up at companies dressed as air conditioner repairmen with a clipboard and an unmarked blue cap. 'Uh, I'm here to fix the compressor. Where's the server room?'"

"And people fall for that?"

"All the time. It doesn't mean they get access to sensitive areas just by sweet-talking the receptionist, but sometimes they end up getting close enough to do damage. They might see an unoccupied office and quickly insert a flash drive in the PC and load a small app designed to communicate sensitive data outside the company. Or maybe they leave behind a wireless device that takes advantage of an unsecured portion of the network. It could be weeks before anyone even notices it, and by then the hacker may have made off with the corporate crown jewels."

"Wow."

"Yeah, and in this case they did a lot more than steal data. It's not like the Federal Reserve lets the AC repair guy in without proper credentials, and in fact they have armed escorts for situations like that. They forbid the use of repairmen who are not on a pre-approved, pre-screened list. And some of those repair guys are even required to have some heavy-duty security clearance. But mistakes happen, and as you said, sometimes people are just paid off."

Kevin shook his head. "Well I'm just amazed that China infiltrated our systems to the degree they did. We spent days calling everyone we could and coordinating as best we could to make sure all available resources were on it. But it was humiliating for everyone to see that the nation that ushered the world into the information age couldn't protect our own information."

"Ain't that the truth? It also was humiliating on a personal level for me to tell my boss there wasn't much I could do to stop it."

"Sorry about that. Obviously the kind of technology you deal with is far above my ability to dimly comprehend. I'm amazed at the power of my laptop and can't imagine some of the systems you work with."

“Yeah I remember your laptop. You have some mighty fine tech there.”

“It’s pretty cool. Supposedly top-notch security but in light of the past few days, I don’t know how secure anything is.”

“Let me see that thing,” Herd offered.

Kevin produced the laptop and said, “It’s all yours. See if you can hack it. If you break it, don’t worry, I’ve got someone who will come out on a moment’s notice to fix it.” He looked at his watch and remembered what time Cameron’s flight would arrive. Maybe having Anne come out to troubleshoot the laptop tonight wasn’t such a good idea.

Herd took out his car keys and opened a small but high-capacity flash drive affixed to the key ring. “This is my portable hard drive,” he explained. “It has 256 gigabytes of storage, plenty of space for a ton of high-tech security tools that I use. Let me see what I can do while you finish those burgers.”

Kevin busied himself with the food prep while David tried to log into the laptop without making use of Kevin’s password. He was pleased that it required “two-factor authentication” meaning a password alone was not enough to gain access. Each time Kevin logged in he had to insert a small device into one of the laptop’s USB slots. The device held an encrypted digital key that, combined with the password, helped ensure that the user was in fact Kevin Marks. So even if Kevin did something stupid like tape his password to the front of the laptop, someone who stole the laptop still couldn’t get in because they wouldn’t have the key. Without both of the security credentials, access to the system was denied.

Getting around these types of systems is how David Herd cut his teeth in the information security arena. He was impressed with the security, and yet because he had physical access to the system and plenty of top-secret security tools in his arsenal, he soon slapped the table in triumph. “Ha! I’m in.”

“Really?” Kevin was impressed.

“Yep. It’s good though. Not too many folks would get into this thing even if they knew the password, which I didn’t use. So in all modesty someone would have to have some mighty serious security skills to get in. Let me see what kind of software is in here.”

As the minutes passed, David Herd grew quiet. “I’m not sure what it is, but something troubles me.” He pounded Kevin with questions about the software he used, what it was for, and how he connected to everything from email to the collaboration area Congress used for working on legislation. “Kevin, something isn’t right. There’s something going on here that doesn’t add up.”

He ran a security tool designed to monitor any program that made a connection to the Internet. He knew that such a monitoring tool could draw attention to him, but if everything was

above board he could show that he was running a legitimate security scan. He then ran another tool that sent him an exact copy of anything sent from the laptop to the Internet. Whether it was an outgoing email or a document uploaded to a remote server, Herd would now receive a copy of it. "This is interesting indeed," he concluded. "But I'm hungry, let's hit those burgers."

While they ate, the secret servers at Project Omniscience continued to record a snapshot of Kevin's screen every five seconds. It picked up the sports conversation going on in Kevin's kitchen. And unknown to Hal Snipes, a copy of all this data was quietly sent to a private system run by David Herd.

* * * * *

"Cameron!" Kevin called out.

Cameron Marks turned and smiled at the sight of Kevin walking toward her with arms outstretched. The terminal in the Ronald Reagan Washington Airport was packed, and it had been a long day for her. She was relieved to see Kevin, and they hugged each other tightly."

"Ah, it feels so good to hold you," he said sincerely.

"Same here. Let's head to baggage claim and get out of here. It seems like ages since I've seen you!"

"No kidding. I've been out of my mind lately. I've got to come up with a new tact in convincing you to move here, or at least spend more time here. But I can also fly home on the weekends. This house arrest thing won't last forever, and when Congress isn't in session I promise I will have more flexibility."

"I know. We'll work something out. I've been reconsidering and wondering if maybe I can split my time between Indianapolis and Washington."

"Really? That would be super."

They retrieved Cameron's bags and within twenty minutes Kevin slammed the trunk shut and started the car. He was still a little nervous about Cameron finding or sensing something amiss, but he pushed those thoughts out of his mind. At long last he had his bride all to himself. He wouldn't ruin it by thinking of anyone else.

On the way home Kevin could tell that Cameron was quite tired from traveling and not much in the mood for conversation, so he tuned into a talk show host who was interviewing President Andrews.

(Host) - "Mr. President, thank you so much for joining us today. The world is riveted by the drama unfolding from the White House and with respect to the sequestering of Congress. There are a thousand questions I want to ask you, but this segment of our program focuses on what you're doing with Congress and how that aligns with what

Americans want. Initial reactions were very surprising in that so many Americans loved the thought of Congress being ‘locked up’. And yet over the past few days the polls are starting to swing in the opposite direction, as if maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. What are your thoughts there in terms of giving Americans what they want?”

(Andrews) - “I guess I should start by pointing out that my job is not to give Americans what they want.”

(Host) – “But surely...”

(Andrews) – “Let me finish. For a number of years a debate has raged around the Constitution and the concepts and principles upon which this nation is founded. Much of our history has been rewritten by the secular progressives and it is extremely difficult to counteract their efforts because of their tight control on education. They largely control of the media, and people don’t know what else to believe. Take George Washington for instance. He was revered for nearly two centuries until a history book was published in the 1920s depicting him in an entirely different light. Well then a second history book was published, quoting the 1920s book as its authority. Then a third book was published that quoted the book that quoted the 1920s book. And so on, until a completely false record of history had been established. All of these quotes, inaccuracies, and misconceptions are traced back to a single, unsubstantiated book from the 1920s. But since secular progressives control the Department of Education, they have succeeded in rewriting this portion of history. Two generations of kids have been graded on their ability to remember this propaganda.”

“They did the same thing with our Christian heritage. There were over 100 founding fathers, the vast majority of which were devout Christians, and some were theologians. Libraries are full of the writings of these highly intelligent men who came together and crafted a series of documents from the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution that outlined the godly principles by which they wanted to be governed. This nation wasn’t founded because colonists were fed up with ‘taxation without representation’. Contrary to what the textbooks are now printing, that was a minor reason, way down the list if you read the grievances voiced by the colonists. But ask any schoolchild today and that’s what they will tell you, since the progressives have devoted their entire lives to removing God from our public discourse. They have replaced our religious heritage with economic traditions, as if America was founded because we merely wanted a different model for our economy.”

(Host) – “That is surprising to hear. But back to what Americans want...”

(Andrews) – “Ah, I think the late Steve Jobs said it best. He was a visionary and in a class by himself. Perhaps his most famous line was when people asked him about plans to conduct focus groups and find out from consumers what they wanted. He

scoffed and said there were no such plans. ‘Customers don’t know what they want until we show them.’ And more often than not, he was right. Think of it; when Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak started Apple Computer, there was no such thing as a personal computer. No such thing as an *iPod*, *iPhone*, or *iPad*. No such thing as an *App Store*. He didn’t come up with the ideas for them all, but they exist today because of his vision and his ability to make things happen that others said were impossible. Why ask them what they wanted from a product that didn’t yet exist?”

“And that precisely is what we are dealing with right now. Americans are among the world’s elite in intelligence and education. And yet we have chosen to allow our government to rebuild our public schools upon a bedrock of lies. How are schoolchildren expected to know the difference when their teacher tells them Washington was a crook and Columbus was a thief? Maybe they don’t use quite those terms, and yet the most important parts of our history are no longer being taught. And how are adults supposed to fend off the constant barrage of misinformation fed to them by a corrupt mainstream media? The few voices that consistently speak the truth are derided as ‘entertainment’ rather than true news outlets. So by largely refusing to do honest reporting on the issues that should matter most to Americans, the media decides what they want Americans to hear rather than reporting it objectively and letting Americans decide for themselves.”

“So with all due respect to the folks who don’t know their nation’s history, I’m not interested in debating the mechanics of how to get this ship back on course. I’m not interested in debating whether the Constitution needs to be updated for modern times. I am interested in doing the job according to the time-tested instructions upon which our nation was built. Congress made the laws that have largely caused these problems, so Congress must be required to fix it. Let’s fix some things and prevent the ship from sinking altogether. Then the time for debate will be at hand and Americans will have the opportunity to chart a new course.”

(Host) - “So in spite of the firings of the Supreme Court justices and the current sequestering of Congress, is it correct to say that at the proper time you are committed to hearing the voices of Americans and honoring their wishes?”

(Andrews) - “Absolutely. The problem right now is that Americans don’t have a voice. The legislative and judicial branches have rendered them silent. We saw it in California where the overwhelming majority of the population would vote on a statewide referendum, sending an unmistakable message on how they wanted to be governed. Their lawful votes would soon be thrown out by a handful of political activist judges who wanted an entirely different course. It has happened in other states as well. And wherever it happens, the clear voice of the people is squelched by the ambitions of a few corrupt men. What is worse, this happens at the national level every single day. It is a key reason why Americans so distrust their government. So if you oppose me on this Top 100 Plan, I respect that. If you think it is extreme, I agree wholeheartedly. But give me a chance to give you back your voice, and I promise I will hear you.”

Chapter 20

Day 12: Monday, February 6

Senator Lynn Fratelli sipped her Monday morning coffee and arranged the stack of legislation in front of her. Ever since Andrews agreed to speed up the process by distributing a large portion of the remaining legislation in play, things had been picking up speed. She and a number of colleagues chosen by Andrews' staff had been assigned several pieces to draft. She at first thought it was curious that Andrews handpicked the legislators who would work on each item of the Top 100 Plan, but she had to give him credit for the move. Otherwise they would probably still be arguing over who got to work on what.

She was amazed at how much work could be accomplished outside their normal trappings. Normally, entire days would be spent talking with lobbyists and special interest groups. That wasn't to say that talking to lobbyists was necessarily a bad thing. But she knew the long months it took to take a new legislative item and gradually shape it into something that had at least a fighting chance of becoming law. So with professional lobbyists barred from even entering this place, and without the armies of agenda-driven congressional aides to deal with, it boiled down to putting ink on paper. For someone with a skilled legal and political mind, it really wasn't that hard to draft legislation. She smiled to herself; she was good at this, and today she would have the rare opportunity to be unusually productive.

She whistled, briefly drawing the attention of those nearby. At the top of her list was legislation to halve the number of members of the House of Representatives. No wonder this particular task was assigned to the Senators. In essence, the logic was that having 435 members in the House created massive bureaucratic and logistical problems. Reducing the size of the House by 50% would make it much easier to move legislation forward. To counteract this reduction, each remaining rep would be given 2 votes, which would retain the fair representation among states of disparate populations. That way the relatively small populations of Wyoming and Utah would not be dwarfed by more populous states like California and New York. So the voting power of each state would remain the same, and with half the reps as before, countless millions in salaries would be saved, plus there would be fewer reps carving out useless pork projects. That would probably shave three billion a year, she estimated. *Let's jack up the number of aides we can hire to help the remaining reps with the increased workload, and we'll write this thing. Not that it has a snowball's chance in Hades in passing, of course.*

Next on her list was a mandate to remove any so-called czars that have been appointed to any capacity. *It must be National Shrink the Government Month*, she thought. Reading from Andrews' notes, she smiled at the comment, "This ain't Russia". The mandate would not prevent the President from appointing someone to an advisory or research role, but would expressly forbid the conferring of any authority to such a post, which is not constitutional. She did an online search to see how many such czars had been appointed over the years and realized why this had shown up on Andrews' radar. Eisenhower appointed only one. Carter had appointed two, and Clinton eight. George W. Bush went to the races at thirty-three czars, and Obama continued the upward trend at thirty-eight. Not all of the individuals necessarily had any real authority, and yet their expanding presence had engendered suspicion and controversy. Andrews wanted them gone, and it was her job to outline how it would come to pass.

Taking a deep breath, Senator Fratelli finished her coffee and started typing.

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On the other side of the room, Rep. Tamara Kravitz of Vermont was looking at the legislation assigned to her group. As she read it she understood why President Andrews had handpicked her for this task. After all, she had campaigned on this issue and had tried unsuccessfully to introduce legislation to combat a very real problem in the way complex legislation was passed. This came to light when Senator Harry Reid (D) submitted the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. This monstrosity known as Obama Care weighed in at a whopping 314,000 words. Republican Don Young narrowly topped Obama Care's word count with his "Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users, 2005".

Shaking her head at the length of the title, she noted that it at least had a cheesy acronym. *But why on Earth should a new law be two and a half times longer than a John Grisham novel?* So this would be one piece of legislation she would exult in working on. Reading the summary from President Andrews, she smiled:

"No bill of Congress may be more than 200 pages in length in its entirety, and it must be single-focused in its intent. Congress may not put the President in a political bind by submitting a good bill, then loading it down with so much self-serving pork the President is forced to either sign the whole mess or take the blame for holding up needed legislation. As part of this legislation, you will find a compromise on the line item veto debate by allowing for a special 'omnibus' bill, which will be subject to the same page length requirement but which may contain multiple pieces of unrelated legislation. Whereas the President will not have a line item veto on single-issue bills, he will have veto power over any distinct portion of an omnibus bill. So if ten items are sent to my desk and it is convenient to lump them together in a single omnibus bill, feel free to do so. Maybe I'll sign the whole thing, or maybe I'll cross out a couple of things and the rest will promptly become law. This certainly will affect congressional earmarks, which going forward must be placed in omnibus bills."

Finally! Something that made sense and something that would make it far easier for Americans to become more involved in the political process by being able to better comprehend the legislation that is put before Congress. She quickly went to the White House web site and clicked on the new “Open Government” link the President’s team had recently posted. Within moments she found the text from Item 8 of the Top 100 Plan:

“Item 8 of the Top 100 Plan will become Amendment 30 to the US Constitution. No law of Congress shall be put to a full vote without the complete, unabridged version placed on a federal web site and made publicly available no fewer than thirty calendar days before a vote. The American public deserves to know what their elected Congress is up to...”

Smiling again, she got to work. Her constituents would love this stuff.

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But if Rep. Kravitz was excited about the work cut out for her, Rep. Sam Paige manifestly was not. Andrews had accused him earlier of doing something illegal, yet had mentioned no specifics. But though he didn’t spell it out, Paige knew there was only one skeleton in his closet that would be of the faintest interest to his political enemies. He had no idea how Andrews would have known the true purposes of his trips to Thailand. Was the President bluffing? He couldn’t take the risk, and in an awkward way this caused him to be deeply indebted to Andrews for keeping quiet about those sordid details.

Because of that unfortunate indebtedness, he must put aside his personal distaste for the task the President had handed him. Not only was it a patently impossible piece of legislation to write, he fundamentally disagreed with at least half of it. He knew about Stark’s quiet plans to scuttle any legislation developed for this Top 100 Plan, but still he felt like he was the guest of honor at a hanging. And this task was President Andrews’ way of saying, “bring your own rope.”

Groaning audibly, he spread the substantial contents of the folder in front of him and read further. It was filled with statistics and analysis compiled by sources ranging from the Congressional Budget Office to various think tanks. He was familiar with some of it and knew, for example, that fully half of American households pay zero federal income taxes. That is obviously why the tax burden is so high on everyone else. He also wasn’t surprised that forty-four million Americans currently received food stamps, or that nearly twenty-three million claimed the Earned Income Tax Credit last year.

Created in 1975, the EITC allowed low-income Americans to receive tax refunds. “It isn’t fair that the rich and middle class often receive tax refunds when the poor typically do not,” went the logic. Never mind that the poor generally didn’t *pay* federal income taxes. So the EITC was created to make up for this “unfairness”. Every year, nearly forty-five billion dollars in checks from the US Treasury are mailed to those in lower income brackets as a form of tax refund even though they hadn’t paid any income taxes. It was the simplest form of redistribution of wealth. You make one American pay taxes, and you send a check to another.

But if President Andrews miraculously succeeds in signing this legislation into law, all that would go away and he would likely be out of a job. It covered every political hot button topic remotely related to welfare. He sighed and read through a few of the bullet points:

- Implement a “welfare ceiling” not to exceed twenty percent of federal tax revenues. However Congress chooses to divide the welfare money, it cannot at any point exceed this pre-set limit.
- Individuals who pay no federal income taxes are ineligible to receive a tax refund. Goodbye, EITC.
- Future tax cuts must be distributed commensurately to those who paid the taxes.
- The cessation of all welfare benefits to those in the country illegally so as to better care for US citizens.
- Legal assurance that hospitals and businesses may not be sued in civil courts by those in the country illegally. They could however continue to be sued in criminal courts.
- The complete closure of the US border for five years, with the only exceptions being highly skilled and degreed workers.
- A thorough review of all Social Security numbers, including a requirement that all citizens confirm their SSN is valid as a means of reducing Social Security fraud.
- Anyone arrested or ticketed and who cannot prove citizenship will be deported without trial.

This thing was so fraught with complexity he didn’t even know where to begin. But it was the last item on his list that made him fear for his job: “Individuals receiving federal welfare accounting for more than one third of their Adjusted Gross Income for three of the past five years may not vote in or make a financial contribution to any federal election. Additionally, direct employees of the federal government will be ineligible to vote during the term of their employment.” He read the notes from Andrews’ staff:

“The sacred right to vote for citizens of voting age will not be infringed. But the receipt of federal welfare is not a sacred right. Individuals receiving more than a third of their income from welfare will *temporarily* and *voluntarily* waive their right to vote as a condition of receiving that welfare. The intent here is two-fold. First, it is to ensure that those who are not contributing to the nation’s finances do not unduly influence those who do contribute. And second, that those whose primary employer is the federal government do not exercise an inherent conflict of interest in their voting. Americans sixty years of age and over will be exempt from this waiver of voting rights, as will both active-duty and former military personnel who received an honorable discharge. But other than for these exceptions, the people who receive free funds, services, or employment from the government should not have influence over the ones who give them those resources. With apologies to George Bernard Shaw, ‘if you rob Peter to pay Paul, *you’ll always have Paul’s vote.*’”

Seeing that quote stopped Paige cold, and he wondered if perhaps President Andrews was enjoying a little joke at his expense. So with that, Representative Samuel Paul Paige went to work.

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Kevin Marks was glad when the workday was finally over. Gathering his belongings, he briefly stopped by his office on the way home. Gretchen, his secretary, seemed surprised to see him. "I don't see you around too often," she commented.

He shrugged. "This isn't exactly how I thought things would be when I was elected. Anyway I just wanted to drop a few things off and pick up some paperwork. I'll be out of here in a few minutes." Pausing, he asked her how she was doing. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Kevin. This whole thing is just very unnerving and I hope it is resolved soon."

"You and me both."

Kevin was soon in his car and on his way home. Cameron had insisted on making reservations at an Italian restaurant in the heart of Washington, so within minutes of arriving home he was back in the car and battling a second round of evening traffic. But when they arrived at the restaurant and dug into their appetizers, Kevin acknowledged it was a great choice. "I could get used to dating you again, you know," he said with a smile.

Cameron looked at him. "I feel the same way. This is the first time we've had a long-distance relationship and it has not been easy for me. Has it been difficult for you?"

"You have no idea," he replied honestly. "Things have been so crazy ever since I set foot in this town, I almost don't know which end is up these days. But I think you know how much I have genuinely missed you."

She touched his hand. "Like I said, we will get through this adjustment period and we're going to figure out a plan so we at least aren't away from each other so much. I promise. Now, tell me what is going on at work. I hear the most absurd things being said about this, and I know some of it isn't remotely true. So really, what are you guys working on?"

Kevin slathered too much butter on a piece of sourdough bread as he considered his response. Had she been a reporter he would have had to keep his guard up and expect his words to be twisted one way or another. It was nice to have someone to shoot straight with. "Basically the President is trying to push this massive set of legislation through known as the Top 100 Plan. It's pretty much his vision of how America should work. Some of it the country desperately needs, and some of it is about as misguided as it can be. Either way, since we're under lock and key all we can do is work through the legislation day by day. Each piece is assigned to one or more members of Congress, and I have no idea how the President decides who works on what."

"What have you been assigned?"

Kevin shook his head. "I'm, uh, not sure you would believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

“I, Kevin Marks, am authoring legislation that says that upon conviction, there is a mandatory ninety-day period in prison for possession of illegal drugs with intent to distribute. At the end of that time period the criminal is automatically extradited or otherwise expelled to the country of their choice.”

“Hmm, you’re right, I don’t believe it.”

“Yep. So if you’re convicted with possession and intent to distribute, it’s an automatic ninety days in the slammer followed by an automatic expulsion. Once expelled you cannot return to the United States at any point, not even as a tourist.” He wondered how Cameron would react to that. Conservative though he was, Cameron was quite liberal, and it made for some highly interesting debates. Usually no marital blood was shed during these debates, and Kevin often quipped that their marriage was unimpeachable proof that Republicans and Democrats could get along.

Cameron took a sip of water. “So the President thinks that drug dealers shouldn’t be allowed to live in the US. Oh, I don’t even know where to start on that one. I used pot in college, though I never sold it to anyone. At least not that I remember,” she laughed. “So you’re saying that if I had, then Andrews would deport me?”

“Not exactly. For one, the Constitution makes it clear that no *ex post facto* laws can exist. Since it wasn’t law at the time, you couldn’t be made retroactively guilty for something you once did. So former pushers need not worry. Secondly, for practical purposes there is also a minimum amount of drugs that must be involved, so someone selling a joint or two would not be affected.”

“Still, it’s clearly a case of someone having good intentions but fooling with things that are fraught with danger. What if the person convicted is a minor? What if it’s a mother with three kids in grade school selling drugs just to keep food on the table? Will you rip the family apart to punish the mother? Will you force an entire family to pack up and leave the country? What about someone who was framed?”

The waiter arrived with their entrees. The veal and pasta were heavenly, and in the quiet ambience of the restaurant Kevin wanted to forget about everything political.

“Cameron, that’s part of what makes this so very, very hard. When you get right down to it, there aren’t many pieces of legislation that are fundamentally ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in and of themselves. Politics boils down to deciding who gets what, when, and how. Most of those decisions are not moral ones, and even if they were, everyone has a different idea of what is morally correct.”

“True. So how are you going to make this work?”

“I’m still trying to figure that out. You bring up some valid questions, and there are plenty of other thorny issues to deal with. For example, we’re often dealing with violent criminals here, so what if no other country wants them? And we’re not exactly dealing only with foreigners. What

about someone born three houses down with extensive family and business ties in six states? How does that person pick a foreign country in which to spend the rest of his or her life?"

"I hadn't thought of that. But then, that's what we taxpayers pay you the big bucks to figure out."

"Well tonight I don't plan on figuring anything out. When this meal is over you and I will have another chance to make up for lost time."

The twinkle in her eyes reminded him of one of the reasons he married her.

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Pepper Morris worked well into the night making contact with as many people on her list as possible. Beginning with the most influential leaders, she made direct contact over secure lines and emphasized that secrecy was of the highest concern. The time would come for others to be brought into the circle, but for the moment, she ordered, do not breathe a word. Not to your wife. Not to your political friends. And certainly not to the press. "Loose lips sink ships", she warned ominously. *"Keep this to yourself or your country is as good as dead."*

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Three days later, Kevin drove Cameron to the airport and reluctantly kissed her goodbye. Their time had gone by entirely too quickly, and as he watched her smile at him and turn toward the security checkpoint, he sighed with disappointment. They had had a wonderful time, but now that their little reunion was over, he didn't look forward to another wait. He realized that he just wasn't happy without her around. Maybe the marriage was stronger than he had figured. That lone positive thought would go down as the one bright spot of this February evening.

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Half a nation away, Charlie Spratlin thought the day couldn't get any better. The owner of the small Texas bar turned the TV down and bellowed to no one in particular, "Did ya'll hear that?"

"Yes we did!" came a chorus of replies. "This is just amazing!" They referred to a news program that shared some of the latest aspects of the President's Top 100 Plan.

"Amazing, indeed. President Andrews is going the whole nine yards with this thing. He's going to shut down the entire border to try to stop the constant flow of illegals taking our jobs. Then he's going to slash the percentage of tax dollars that can be given away in entitlements, which right now is over half the nation's budget. Is that right?"

"It seems so," Charlie replied. He returned to the task of putting away freshly washed glasses on the shelf behind him but remained tuned in to the conversation.

Someone else spoke. “But the biggest bombshell by far was when he promised that those on welfare can’t vote in federal elections. Do you guys realize just how big of a deal that is?”

“Sure we do. That will change the face of politics right there. It will completely change the playing field come the next election. Think about it. Who votes for liberal Democrats?”

The answer was obvious. “Well, partly the folks who get the free stuff liberal Democrats dish out. Scores of millions of Americans pretty much have their bills paid year in and year out on the backs of everybody else.” The truth wasn’t quite so simple, but it was undeniable that without the support of those who received an endless supply of money and services from various welfare programs, many Democrats would soon be out of jobs.

“Then they talk about how federal employees won’t be able to vote. It doesn’t seem right to me, though.”

“Maybe not. But they said there were over two million people employed by the federal government. *Two million*,” he exclaimed in amazement. “Imagine how that influences each election. As a federal worker, are you going to vote for a party that might promise to shrink the size of government even if that would be the best thing for the nation? Two million people. That doesn’t count the state and county workers, who can still vote of course. And you also have to remember that a lot of federal employees are paid way, way more than what they’d make in an equivalent job in the private sector.”

“That’s because the private sector has to make a profit or they die,” someone chimed in. “Whereas if the government runs out of money they just print more money, or raise taxes, or borrow, or all of the above. I’m not sure how I feel about it, but I reckon I see the point. If your boss is Democrat and asks for your vote, what are you going to do? So I see why they’re saying it’s a conflict of interest.”

* * * * *

As Spratlin and his customers chatted, Kevin Marks entered his silent DC townhouse and locked the door behind him. Hanging his jacket on a hook, he stared out a window and watched as the last faint rays of sunlight disappeared. His phone vibrated, silently signaling to him that he had a new, unread email. He didn’t recognize the sender and the subject line said simply, “Read this now!” It sounds like spam, he thought, and deleted it without opening.

He slipped the phone back into its holder, but something nagged at him. Sighing heavily, he navigated to his Deleted Items folder and clicked to open it. What he saw nearly caused his heart to stop beating.

Someone had emailed him an explicit photo of him with Anne.

He couldn’t remember being so scared in all his life. Once, when he was eighteen, he briefly held a job at a grocery store. Three weeks into the job he managed to lock himself in the massive freezer at a time when they were low on staff. With the safety mechanism apparently broken and

so few people in the store, his frantic banging on the icy door was fruitless. For a short while he wondered if he would die. Would someone on the next shift open the door and find him frozen to death next to crates of ice cream? Up until now, that was Kevin's scariest moment. But this? *Oh no*, he thought with sudden sickness. *Someone is blackmailing me. Who? Why?*

He tried to breathe, and beneath the picture was an ominous message. "There is LOTS more where this came from. Tons of pics, even audio. Meet me in thirty minutes and I will tell you more."

Kevin closed his eyes. The address provided was not far from his house and was in a highly public area. *Thank goodness it wasn't a deserted warehouse*, he thought. Still, what if it were a trap?

He was on the verge of panic, but he forced himself to think rationally. *If they wanted to kill me, they wouldn't be blackmailing me. Now pull yourself together.* He took a deep breath, and went to the kitchen for a glass of ice water to see if that would counter the hot feeling rising up from the pit of his stomach.

You're dead, he thought with a terrible certainty. *You are so dead.*

* * * * *

Twenty-eight minutes later, Kevin miraculously found a parking space a short walking distance to the designated meeting area. He exited his car and shrugged into his jacket, feeling like a deer about to walk into some bright headlights. Indeed, there were plenty of lights around to illuminate the area. It was in one of DC's safer neighborhoods and there were plenty of people about, even at this hour. His eyes scanned the tops of nearby buildings, half expecting to see a sniper squeezing off a high-caliber round into his chest. It would be the last thing he ever felt. Would Cameron ever discover the truth?

He hung around for several minutes, feeling terribly exposed and completely out of place. He had no idea who he was looking for. Plenty of people were nearby, and when no bullet pierced his heart, he gradually relaxed. He studied the joggers, the business types, and a vagrant. None paid him the slightest attention. Then a familiar voice rang out behind him.

"Kevin!"

Turning abruptly, he raised his eyebrows in complete confusion. "Herd?"

"Kevin, I am so, so sorry. Walk with me, there's a well-lit park nearby and probably a spot where we can talk in private."

"Uh, my car is right over there and it's warmer. We could talk privately there."

"Your car might be bugged." Kevin hadn't considered that.

“What is going on?”

“We’re almost there,” Herd replied. He could tell his friend was bewildered, and he genuinely felt terrible inside.

Moments later they indeed found a park bench with no one nearby. Herd opened his laptop and began the process of logging in. Kevin could barely contain himself but forced himself to wait for Herd to explain what the devil was going on.

At length, Herd cleared his throat and spoke. “Seriously Kevin, I am so sorry about this.”

“So that email was from you?” This was making less and less sense.

“Yes. It wasn’t my usual account, it was just a free account I set up for this purpose.” He had tried to rehearse the best way to say this, but at the moment his mind was in almost as much of a jumble as Kevin’s. “But yes, it was me. I sent that email from an unknown account since I’m not sure who all is behind this or how big it is. So I have to try to stay off the radar.”

“Forgive me if I am completely lost here.”

“I know, I know.” He rubbed his forehead nervously and looked around. They were alone. “I don’t know everything myself, but remember when I played around on your laptop not long ago? I thought something wasn’t right, and since then I have uncovered some things that are definitely wrong. Kevin, I’m sorry to say that you are being targeted for something.”

“Such as?”

“I have no idea. I feel so bad for two reasons. For one, you’re my friend, and I hate it that someone is unmistakably planning to blackmail you. And two, because, well, because I saw all those pictures. I listened to the audio.”

Kevin groaned. “All of it?”

“I had to,” Herd insisted. “I had to know what was recorded because it might help me in tracking these guys. “If you don’t believe me, look at this.” He turned the laptop toward Kevin and quickly went through a series of images that brought him instant shame. Then he clicked on an audio file and allowed Kevin to hear Anne’s voice. He remembered the words only too clearly.

Herd ran his fingers through his hair. “Listen, I’ve moved the only copy I have of this to this laptop, and when you’re done looking at it, I’m going to delete it beyond retrieval, okay?”

Kevin waved his hand. “Trust me, I’m done looking. Delete it.”

Herd complied, and seconds later it was gone. He paused. “Kevin, buddy, I’m afraid I have bad news.”

Kevin looked at him incredulously. “You don’t call those pictures and audio bad news?”

“Point noted. But I’m afraid it gets much worse. See, I’ve been successful in turning this into a bit of a cat and mouse game. Previously you were of course the mouse, but at least for now I’m the cat and I’m hunting a mouse of my own.”

“More like a rat,” Kevin spat bitterly.

“Right you are. Anyway, not all of this data is being saved to a single place. If that had been the case, I would have just deleted it and you might possibly be home free. But since the data is spread out to at least three servers I’ve found so far, deleting it from one place could tip my hand. Someone would know this has been discovered and that we’re trying to delete the evidence.”

“It is evidence, all right,” Kevin lamented.

“And without knowing why they’re doing this, it is impossible to know what they would do if they knew we were onto them. I’d hate to delete 99% of it and have one image remaining that would be sent to some tabloid. We have to assume there are other servers out there I haven’t found.”

“So we just leave it all out there?” Kevin asked.

“For now, we have to. I will keep digging, and when I think I have it all we’ll delete everything at once. Better yet we’ll destroy everything on the affected servers so it won’t be obvious that it’s you we are trying to protect. But back to the part where I mentioned more bad news.”

“I guess I may as well get this over with.”

“The name of the person you’re seeing. Anne Roberts. The bad news I was referring to is that she is involved with this.”

“Anne is involved?”

“Yes, without a doubt. I won’t bore you with the details but suffice it to say that the software they’re using to spy on you is programmed to send pictures and audio data to a certain network. By hijacking all outgoing data I can see the IP address of the network, which is how I knew where to start looking.”

“I’ll pretend I understand what an IP address is,” Kevin replied.

“The IP address gives guys like me directions to your network, just like your mailing address lets the mailman know how to get your *Reader’s Digest* subscription to you. Anyway, by knowing the IP address I found the entry point server. It was protected by one of the best security

firewalls I've ever seen. A firewall is, well, you don't want to know." He was right; Kevin did not want to know. "But let's just say whoever set this up has some serious technical chops and presumably quite a budget at his disposal since he or she is hiding behind some mighty expensive technology. I had a tough time getting through it, and the deeper I dug the more I found that I wish I didn't know."

"How do you know that Anne is implicated?"

"Kevin, I found a stash of documents. Not everything was saved on the same server for some reason. Audio was sent to one server, pictures to another. I don't know why and that might not be important. But once I was in the network I snooped around and saw another server filled with a massive number of documents. To make a long story short, I was able to search for your name and found several documents that referenced you. In one of those documents, it was made clear that Anne's primary job right now is to get you so tangled up in a web of deception that for all practical purposes, someone will own you."

"Who? Who is it that is doing this?"

"As near as I can tell, the person Anne is working for is Killian Stark."

"Stark? Oh man." This was bad news indeed.

"Do you know him personally? I mean, I know that you know who he is."

"Oh, I know him personally all right. He was the one who gave me the laptop. And now that I know this stuff, it is clear that he was the one who sent Anne right to my doorstep."

David Herd was apologetic. "It does make perfect sense. I saw the web cam you frequent most often, and Anne could practically be that woman's twin. Kevin, it looks like he set you up with Anne because she's like the perfect woman for you."

Kevin was filled with shame at these words. The pieces were falling into place now. Herd was right about all of it, with one exception: *Cameron is the perfect woman for me. I've acted like such an idiot.*

As if reading his mind, his friend tried to console him. "Let's just worry about turning the tables on these guys, okay? I still have a lot of work to do and I have a lot more cards up my sleeve than this guy could imagine. I promise you he will get more than he bargained for."

That sentiment did offer Kevin a glimmer of hope. This guy wasn't known as "Herd the Nerd" for nothing. "And what do I say to Anne?"

His friend looked at him blankly. "Actually, Anne Roberts is not her real name."

Chapter 21

“A man's intentions should be allowed in some respects to plead for his actions.”

–George Washington

Day 16: Friday, February 10

It was Friday morning, and the assembled legislators were more than a little surprised when the doors opened and First Lady Elena Andrews walked to the front of the room. Dressed in a simple pair of blue jeans and a casual shirt, she smiled and greeted them warmly.

“Some of you may know that Jack and I have made plans to fly to Camp David this weekend, and we leave this morning. It was time to take a day off and spend time with family, so that is exactly what we are going to do. But I know we aren’t the only ones that need some family time. So about a week ago I took the liberty of organizing an effort to bring your families to town for a weekend. All of their expenses have been paid, and especially those of you with younger children will love seeing those beautiful little faces.

Motioning to the Marines guarding the doors, she grinned as the place erupted in virtual pandemonium as spouses, children, and significant others found each other. She laughed as a little girl shouted *Daddy!* at the top of her lungs and jumped into her father’s waiting arms. *This took some doing, but that one moment made the effort worthwhile*, she thought happily.

She watched the scene for another minute and then slipped quietly away to a waiting limousine for the brief ride back to the White House. An hour later she and Jack boarded Marine One and watched as their familiar surroundings faded below. She turned to her husband.

“I think they liked that.”

“Well of course they did. That was quite a good idea you had. They have been cooped up for what, sixteen days now, and there’s not exactly a lot to do at the complex. They’ve earned this.”

“Expect to take some flak for the expense this entailed,” she warned.

“Ah, you can’t win can you? But I doubt too many people will complain. Most likely for every day we’ve kept them locked up we’ve saved a billion dollars in pork projects, so this was a good investment if you ask me.”

She smiled. “Just don’t try that trick with me. I don’t think I’d like house arrest.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t need to keep you under lock and key.”

Elena agreed. “I think I’m caught up on just about everything you’re doing right now and have read the summaries of everything you’ve given to Congress. You have covered a truckload of things that this nation sorely needs, but I’ve been thinking. I believe you have missed something quite fundamental.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the number one reason the nation is falling apart. I think in your haste to get the nation back on track economically you’ve forgotten it completely. Namely the loss of the spiritual and moral principles that guided us for so long.”

Jack sighed. “I haven’t forgotten it. In fact, it weighs heavily on my mind. But you know what they say; ‘you can’t legislate morality’. Or don’t you watch *CNN*?”

She scoffed. “I love it when they call it the *Communist News Network*. Even the President’s wife enjoys humor. But seriously, don’t you need to bring that issue to the forefront?”

“I know that I need to do so. I just don’t quite know how. Every time someone of faith rises in politics, their religion becomes a dividing issue. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a member of Congress, or a judicial nominee, or the President. Anything that person says will be misquoted, twisted, and abused by the press until the person loses the battle in the court of public opinion. It is completely unfair, and the double standard against Christians is appalling. But it’s there. And the minute I tell people they need to quit killing each other, to hold their families together, and to find a good church, I become Public Enemy Number One.”

“You’re right, it isn’t fair,” she acknowledged truthfully. “But I know your heart. I know your faith. And though you haven’t spoken about it very much publicly, not even on the campaign trail, I know your sincerity and your high moral character.”

He quickly looked out the window. *Do you know the truth about the death of Supreme Court Justice Stephen Woodburn?* That, more than anything else he was doing, ate at him like a cancer. He had justified it a million times over, but the justification seemed hollow, especially when talking to his God-fearing wife. He wondered how she would react if she knew the truth. Would she understand? She was right about his faith. He never wavered in his strong belief in God, but thus far he had chosen not to make it an issue. “I don’t know how I would go about it, and am afraid it would just become a massive diversion that would derail everything we are working to accomplish.”

“I disagree,” she countered. “I think you’re focusing primarily on the economy, which in most people’s minds is the nation’s biggest problem. But the reality is that our economic problems are rooted in societal problems; and societal problems are rooted in spiritual ones. Do you remember what George Washington said? He said, ‘Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.’ And elsewhere, ‘The propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained.’”

“I remember,” he replied quietly.

“Forget for a moment the misguided fools who ignore the massive pile of accumulated evidence and claim America wasn’t founded on Christian principles. For two centuries our nation grew and prospered like none other because of those words. Do you still believe George Washington was correct?”

“But don’t forget that he was also President at a time when common decency was held in high esteem. He never had to deal with the nastiness of a national campaign; or the brutality of a secular press; or a sizable percentage of younger Americans who abhorred authority in any form.”

She waved her hand in irritation. “You’re missing the point. Was he right?”

That wasn’t the only thing George Washington said that he kept in mind. From a letter in the mid-1700’s he had written, “I have diligently sought the public welfare; and have endeavored to inculcate the same principles in all that are under me. These reflections will be a cordial to my mind as long as I am able to distinguish between Good and Evil.”

“Yes, he was right,” he finally admitted. “But what do you want me to do about it?”

Now it was her turn to pause. Even though she was but a breath away from the most powerful man on the planet, nevertheless she had never sat in his chair or felt the crushing weight of the world on her shoulders. In that moment she gained a bit more respect for what he dealt with twenty-four hours a day.

“Jack, there is a heaviness in your heart that wasn’t there before.” She forced him to look at her. “What is it?”

But he couldn’t tell her. He had never kept secrets from her, but he couldn’t tell her. “It’s just that everything we’re doing right now could fall apart at a moment’s notice,” he finally spoke. “We saw how quickly things can blow up on China Wednesday. I think I aged three years in a single week, and I promise you I have more gray hair now than I did a month ago. After seeing the kinds of technology the Chinese have amassed against us, it isn’t a stretch to say that at any given moment I am only one step away from a disaster of epic proportions.”

She was certain there was more to it, but chose not to press him further at the moment. “I guess I can understand that,” she said simply. She was grateful for the time alone with him and looking forward to the relative quiet and privacy of Camp David. Maybe he would soon share the rest of what was on his mind, but for now she would have to wait.

* * * * *

Transcription of a portion of a campaign speech by Jack Andrews eight months before the election.

“Now let’s talk about welfare. Let me give you an example here, suppose we have a family of ten Americans. We have a mother and father, and eight children. The mother and father both work and draw an income, but the children are not yet of working age and therefore do not contribute financially to the family. This family has a rule by which whoever is working shall have one vote on any given family matter. When the family decides on an upcoming vacation destination, the mother and father therefore consider the opinions of all eight children, but only the parents have a formal vote in the matter. This is fair, since it is the parents who work for their income and it certainly is their right to decide how to spend their own money.”

“Now suppose Junior reaches age eighteen and begins working. He gives half of his income to the family, and upon doing so gains a vote in the finances. Alone, he is unable to overrule both parents, yet his vote dramatically alters the picture. Again we have a basic concept of fairness in play. Those who contribute financially are rewarded with a vote in how the money is spent. Those who are not able to contribute are still just as much a part of the family, but they are not given the opportunity to vote on financial matters. Maybe they are too young, or maybe they are old enough and choose not to work; either way, they are loved and accepted in every aspect. Their voices are heard during family discussions, and yet when vote time comes they are ineligible to cast a vote.”

“Now suppose several of the teenagers decide they do not like this arrangement any more. Collectively they raise such a fit and cause such a ruckus that the parents agree that all family members should vote. These kids threaten the very unity of the family and in order to restore peace, the parents shortsightedly give in and agree that everyone will have a vote.”

“This thrills the remaining children, and they immediately vote themselves a 50% raise in allowance, easily overriding the three breadwinners. The parents don’t like this, but they agreed to do this, so they find ways to cut back elsewhere to provide for the increased allowance of the seven children who are not contributing. A few months later the kids decide to test the waters again, this time demanding an additional 75%. Finding themselves far outnumbered in a numerical vote, the shortsighted parents again give in. They no longer are able to contribute to their children’s college funds as before, but at least the seven children are happy. Junior is peeved because he sees his income being wasted on children too young to use the money properly, but for the moment he stays on board. Worse, because of the entitlements, Mom and Dad mortgage the house and apply for a few credit cards. The debt cycle has begun. Then a couple of kids next door move in, uninvited. They don’t even have a legal right to remain on the property, but the other kids decide they should receive an allowance, free toys of their own, and plenty of food from the pantry.”

“Then the final straw comes. Six months later the seven children and the two live-in neighbors conspire to pass the equivalent of an omnibus spending bill that includes

yet another massive increase in allowance, the purchase of a truckload of expensive toys, and a guaranteed vacation in *Disneyland* each year. At this point Junior has had it with these kids. He moves out, taking his income with him. Without Junior's income the parents are unable to afford the allowance any more, much less able to keep current on the family's legitimate expenses. Any semblance of a budget is long gone, and what was once a peaceful family with order, love, and discipline, has turned into a case study in anarchy. The family has imploded, and the parents and children are now at war. Even worse, as the children grow older they don't move out. Though they may be perfectly able to find work, why do so when they have everything they need at home and parents who are able to support them, though it costs them everything they have? And so a perpetual welfare state is born, which benefits no one and enslaves everyone. It enslaves the parents who no longer have a real say in their own finances. And it enslaves the very children it was designed to help by making it easier for them to accept a perpetual handout than to learn how to provide for themselves."

"This. This is what America has turned into. We love our every citizen and we genuinely desire to help our neighbor in need. I believe Americans are the most generous society that has ever lived, and I challenge you to find another people who have given more or done more for other nations, even our enemies. We have sent our soldiers to die for the freedom of other lands. Through the Marshall Plan we rebuilt a war-ravaged Europe, a war we didn't start. We even helped rebuild Japan after it attacked us in World War II. But there is no way we can survive when seven children and two young neighbors gang up on the two parents."

"Forget for a moment what you may deem is *fair*. It simply is not mathematically possible for these two parents to survive this way. By the same token it is not mathematically possible for the federal government to levy taxation approaching fifty and sixty percent of one's paycheck. No matter how much we might want to help, this is not humanly sustainable! It is time to return power in America to those who have built it, and I will not be satisfied until we have done so!"

"So please do not misunderstand my heart or my motives in developing sound economic policy. It is not to take away the privileges of those who for various legitimate reasons are unable to contribute financially to the national treasury. It is not to stigmatize someone who is undergoing a temporary financial struggle, or who is unable to work due to an insurmountable medical condition. We have the moral obligation to do what we reasonably can to help. But we have no obligation to waste scarce resources. We *must* fix this system in order to survive as a nation."

"So I would like to propose some serious changes that will enable us to help those who fundamentally cannot help themselves while ending the wholesale abuse that sucks the lifeblood out of hardworking Americans..."

* * * * *

Kevin hung around the office complex for a while longer, and then asked if he could leave since the First Lady had given them the day off. One of the Marines at the front door actually smiled at him and bid him a good weekend. As he fastened his seat belt he wondered what he would do with the day and with his weekend. Cameron was gone and he had no plans. Should he take the unexpected time to find a good novel? Or fly home and surprise Cameron? Decisions, decisions.

He pulled out his cell and placed a phone call. Ten minutes later he hung up and dialed another number.

“Hello?” Anne’s voice came through sweetly. “Would I like to spend the weekend with you? Well, of course! I don’t have the day off, so I’ll see you at your place around six.” Anne was thrilled to receive Kevin’s call, and decided that tonight she would bare her soul. She had fallen in love with Kevin, and tonight she would come clean, tell him that she loved him, and let the chips fall where they may.

For his part, Kevin wondered if he were the biggest idiot in the entire world.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes after six, the doorbell rang at Kevin’s townhome. Taking a deep breath and wondering if he would forever regret this evening, he steeled himself and opened the door. Anne smiled and hugged him tightly as she entered.

“It’s been awhile, Kevin. I’ve missed you, I really have.”

“Yeah, it’s been crazy lately.”

“So what’s on the agenda for tonight?”

“Well,” Kevin breathed. He was so nervous he wondered if his knees would buckle. “Well, I think the first part is a no-brainer. Why don’t you head straight to the bedroom and get comfortable? I’ll be there in just a moment.”

“I have no objections,” she laughed. “But hurry.”

His mind reeled and he fought to remain clear-headed. Could he really do this? Maybe he should simply walk away and let this woman ride off into the sunset. He was torn beyond belief.

Sighing deeply, he opened the bedroom door and walked in.

* * * * *

She smiled up at him from under the covers. “You look like you’ve had a long week. I’ve never seen you so tense.”

"I'm tense, all right," he confirmed. He pointed to the small pile of clothes Anne had dropped at the foot of the bed. "I don't guess you'll need these," he said.

She smiled again. "Guess not. Now why don't you join me?"

Kevin could barely look at her. For the longest moment he just stood there. Then Anne gasped as a shadow appeared behind Kevin and a burly man approached silently. Anne was too scared to scream and looked at Kevin frantically as if to demand he take action against this intruder. But it soon became clear that Kevin was not surprised at the presence of the strange man standing behind him. He didn't even turn to acknowledge him, and this alarmed her even more. *What in the world is going on?* As if suddenly remembering her nakedness before these two men, she clutched the covers tightly.

"Get her clothes," Kevin said sullenly.

The man reached forward to stuff her clothes into a small bag. Anne noticed he wore dark sunglasses and had a cap pulled down on top of his head. But he also wore an official shirt with a badge. She couldn't quite make out the lettering, and remained too unnerved to speak.

But Kevin soon found his courage. There was no going back now. Looking straight into Anne's eyes, he instructed the man, "Per our discussion, incinerate those clothes promptly." He took no pleasure in seeing Anne's eyes widen with fear.

"Kevin! What is happening? What are you doing? Who is this man and why would you tell him to burn my clothes? Why..."

Kevin cut her off abruptly, angry now and eyes blazing. Speaking in a low voice, his words were like blades of ice that cut through the thin bed sheets and chilled her to her core. She shivered.

"Do you think I am the only one with a dark secret? Hmm? Well, I think you have quite a dark secret, too, *Anna Robertos*." At this, Anne froze, completely speechless. With a sickening feeling she finally recognized the lettering on the stranger's shirt and understood the terrible significance of the border patrol agent in front of her.

"So, Anna, you like power, huh? Well, so does Killian Stark. He owns you on so many levels and has manipulated you far more than you ever imagined. I bet you thought that you were in control of our relationship didn't you? But you never had the first bit of control, it was all Stark." Unable to respond and unable to flee the room with nothing but a sheet wrapped around her, Anna could only stare in complete fear.

"Did you ever wonder why your application for citizenship was denied on eight different occasions? It wasn't because you didn't deserve it. It was because Stark's men have an electronic block on any application bearing your name. He knew that if you gained citizenship his hold on you would be loosened, so he made sure you never had a chance, effectively enslaving you. Now as you are fully aware, you were hired to seduce me because you look exactly like my 'dream

woman' from the porn your boss accessed from my computer. *That* was my dirty little secret. You seduced a happily married man who just happened to have a little weakness on the side, perfectly content to destroy my career, my life, and the life of my spouse of 12 years. Well, it's your turn now to have everything dear to you stripped away."

Turning to the border patrol agent, he spoke the words that the agent already knew based on their previously discussed arrangement. He said it for Anna's benefit, and strangely, took no pleasure in it. "Take her back to Mexico and do not release her until she is at least 250 miles south of the border. Put some old, smelly clothes on her, knock her out with some *Rohypnol*, and make sure she doesn't have a dime on her when you turn her loose. Let's see how she likes being on the receiving end of the illegal actions of the US government."

Before she could react, both men grabbed her and the agent quickly stuck her in the arm with the needle. Her last horrified thought before blacking out was that she would never get the chance to tell Kevin she loved him. Her mouth desperately tried to form the words, but darkness overtook her.

* * * * *

An hour later, Kevin's apartment was forever free of the last vestige of Anna Robertos. With the plots of half a dozen crime shows running unchecked through his mind, he cleaned and vacuumed every square inch of the place that Anna may have touched. He knew he wasn't equipped to do the level of cleaning that would guarantee a forensic search wouldn't find incriminating evidence that Anna had stayed there, but he had to try. He threw away the bed sheets, wiped down the furniture, emptied the trash, and even poured a gallon of bleach down the shower drain as if that would eat away any stray bits of Anna's long, black hair that may have lingered.

He was furious at her, furious at being trapped and toyed with. Furious at being placed in such an utterly impossible position. Furious at believing a single thing she had ever told him and knowing at this point that it was all for show. *She probably hated men and took cruel pleasure in leading him like a sheep to the slaughter*, he thought bitterly as he dumped three bags of trash in a bin at the curb. Every other minute his heart seemed to skip a beat in fear over what he had done. If the simple rumor of a congressman having an extramarital affair wasn't juicy enough to make the media salivate, he shuddered to think of the wolf pack cutting him down over something as explosive as this. He could kiss his entire career goodbye if the faintest hint of this sordid mess ever leaked out.

And losing his job was the least of his worries; how many laws he had broken that day? *Let's see*, he thought against his wishes. *Conspiracy to kidnap; conspiracy with a border patrol agent; conspiracy to acquire and use a date rape drug; conspiracy to illegally transport a human being across state and federal lines; the list went on and on.*

Kevin looked at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Cleaned and polished in his frantic attempt to forever rid the place of the memory of Anna Robertos, the mirror seemed clear

enough to allow him to peer into his own soul. He had woken up that morning as a bright, respectable member of Congress. Now he was a felon.

He shook his head and resolved not to focus on his fears. Things had happened so fast and he knew a thousand things could still go terribly wrong. His first concern was whether his trust in the border patrol agent was warranted, but the agent was a personal acquaintance, and one that Kevin knew wasn't a big fan of the federal government after it was clear during the Obama administration that the federal government had utter disdain for his job. But after explaining the situation, the agent agreed to handle the situation according to Kevin's wishes. Kevin just hoped the man never tried to blackmail him; he'd had enough of blackmailing already.

Then there was Stark: what would his reaction be when Anna didn't show up for work on Monday? How long would he wait before realizing something was wrong, and what kind of resources did he have that could tie her last hours to him? Kevin did have an ace in the hole in David Herd, of course, and was insanely grateful for the dogged work on his behalf that the computer genius continued to do. Of the growing list of documents David had found, several pointed to the selection of Anna Robertos. One of the reasons Stark valued her was that she had no known relatives. Her parents had left her at an orphanage when she was four years old, and when Stark tried to find them, he got absolutely nowhere. That suited him perfectly. If Killian Stark couldn't find them, they weren't going to be a problem.

But that didn't mean she wouldn't be a future problem to Kevin. The biggest risk by far was that Anna would make it back to the States and resume contact with Stark. If that were to happen, Kevin suddenly realized, Stark would know that he was wise to Project Omniscience and his life would be in immediate danger. *Indianapolis Congressman Kevin Marks found dead in an apparent suicide*, the headline would soon read. Kevin tried to dismiss the thought.

But what was he supposed to do? He couldn't kill anyone, and yet he couldn't stand for Anna not to be punished for violating countless laws of her own. Pursuing it through the courts hardly provided any guarantees and would force him to publicly acknowledge his relationship with Anna. That alone would amount to political and probably marital suicide. The dueling forces of intense fear and blind anger threatened to overwhelm him. But the more he reasoned it out, the more his fear gave way to anger, and he made up his mind to do the unthinkable.

Killian Stark was going down. He would stake his life on it.

Chapter 22

Day 19: Monday, February 13

It was a bright and cheery Monday morning, and Governor Wilson Bennings peered out the expansive window of his Atlanta office. He watched silently as two squirrels chased each other on the beautifully manicured lawn below. It was a perfect day, and not even a handful of rowdy “Occupy Atlanta” protestors loitering on the steps of the Capitol would ruin it. He had personally walked out to talk to them a few days earlier and had been patently unsuccessful in finding a single person who could explain what, exactly, he or she wanted. He heard the usual “tax the rich” and anti-Wall Street slogans, but even upon repeated questioning, no one could define his or her beliefs in a way that could result in a productive dialog. He had finally smiled, shook a few more hands, and walked back inside just in time to hear a derisive shout of, “*Why don’t you fix some of this mess, Governor!*”

He shook his head hopelessly at the memory. He wanted to connect with these guys, but it was like a child with a hundred toys complaining of boredom. Angry at his parents, he is nonetheless unable to explain to them why his discontent is their fault. The 58-year old Georgia native and father of four had always made sure his children knew what they believed and why they believed it. Even if they fundamentally disagreed with him on a policy, he was enormously pleased that they could debate him forcefully and confidently, making for some mighty interesting family dinners. And knowing they would still get a big hug afterward no matter where the discussion went. If only people would be that nice in real politics, he lamented. But his idealism had long been tempered by reality.

Turning away from the window, he walked back to his chair and sat down, facing the small group of staffers who waited patiently for him to comment on the papers in front of him. “Personally I’d rather deal with a thousand Occupiers in my own backyard than this nightmare from Congress,” he began. Heads nodded in sincere agreement.

“We knew this would happen, we argued against it from the outset, and all the arguments in the world fell on the deaf ears of those who shoved this bitter pill down the throat of an unsuspecting nation.”

The pill referred to Obama Care, easily one of the most complicated and controversial pieces of legislation ever conceived in the history of government. Though years had passed since its passage, new surprises that made his blood boil continued to emerge. And the small stack of papers in front of him represented a huge, huge problem. This particular issue dated back to 1946, when Congress passed the Hospital Survey and Construction Act, otherwise known as Hill-Burton. The supposed intent was to provide much-needed construction funding for hospitals around the nation, and in return for federal funds the hospitals agreed to provide a “reasonable” amount of free health care services to those who were unable to pay. Though the requirement of free services was initially scheduled to last only twenty years, Congress eventually cut the funding and kept the free care mandate.

In a nutshell, Governor Bennings thought angrily, that was how Congress ran the nation: push nightmare legislation into law with promises of plentiful funding and benefits galore, then yank the real or perceived benefits once the dust settles. And the dust had long settled on the

multiple facilities in Georgia still bound by the 1946 edict. So with dubious constitutional authority, the federal government made it a perpetual requirement for states to offer free health care, with no regard for the states' ability to actually afford the massive burden from one year to the next.

With a strong financial mind, the governor knew what his state's situation was. He knew how many millions in budget shortfall he faced; how many millions in additional taxes he must raise in a bad economy; and even how much money he had already trimmed from critical services in a seemingly futile attempt to erase as much red as possible from the budget. There was very little pork in his budget, and any discretionary funds that were available were needed for serious infrastructure repairs like crumbling bridges and overwhelmed sewers.

But in what would make Hill-Burton seem like a small co-payment, the papers in front of him spoke of open-heart surgery paid out of pocket. Clearing her throat, one of his staffers finally spoke, summarizing the message for the assembled.

"Sir, these documents apparently were drafted some months ago and were just recently delivered. We have reviewed them documents carefully, and the long and short of it is that Congress is redefining the scope of Hill-Burton to require all states to increase current hospital capacity by 25% to allow for the continued influx of additional patients. Barring significant increases in construction costs, this will cost the state of Georgia in the neighborhood of \$700 million over the next eight years."

His senior and most trusted aide agreed. "And of course, they aren't giving us much time to get started. Construction must begin within six months. Sir, I'm at a loss here. It seems they have us up a creek and have practically guaranteed our bankruptcy. Please forgive me but for once, I am of the opinion that all is lost."

Governor Bennings looked at him carefully. "Not quite," he said cryptically. "We have one very, very important ace up our sleeves."

When the governor finally concluded the meeting, the senior aide held back. "What ace are you referring to," he asked quizzically.

His boss just smiled. "It's like they say, if I were to tell you, I'd have to kill you."

"Ah, come on, I know you trust me."

"Indeed I do. Honestly though, I can't provide any details at the moment. The gist of it is that we're not the only ones royally ticked off at this latest encroachment on the rights of the states. For nearly two years I have had private discussions with other governors, legislators, and key business leaders over issues like this. It didn't start with Hill-Burton and it doesn't end with Obama Care. It's an ongoing problem that Congress always wins because Congress ultimately wields the power. The rights of the states, and by extension, the rights of the citizens, have been fantastically eroded over the past few years because of this kind of legislation."

“But?”

“But during those two years I have noticed a very angry and growing undercurrent among movers and shakers in both the public and private sectors. The anger stems not merely from what Congress is doing, but from the fact that every battle we wage against them leaves us weaker and more vulnerable to their next move. What can we do?”

“And yet you’re saying there’s a light at the end of the tunnel.”

“Maybe. I certainly hope so. When you get some common citizens angry, usually nothing comes of it. Oh, they talk some smack at the water fountain and maybe blog about it, but nothing comes of it. But when you get the likes of me and a bunch of serious political power behind it, well, now you’re talking. I think we may be reaching critical mass.” Seeing the burning curiosity in the eyes of his assistant, he nonetheless couldn’t divulge further. “Remember that old saying we love? ‘The South will rise again’?”

“Yeah.”

“Well keep this to yourself, but let’s just say we are about to rise.”

And in offices of immense power across the nation, similar conversations took place as Chief of Staff Pepper Morris completed her work on “the list”.

* * * * *

Sandi Farmer adjusted her mike and smiled for the cameras. The dark green eyes of the rising star of Channel 9 News shone brightly, and a light wind ruffled her brown hair.

“Good morning, we are on site at the White House, where President Andrews has just delivered a scathing rebuke of Congress for what he calls ‘*Hill-Burton, The Dark Sequel*’, named after a little-known law from the 1940s that provided federal funding for hospital construction in exchange for the hospitals providing certain amounts of free health care to poorer patients. While many hospitals initially welcomed the desperately needed funds, it left a bad taste in their mouths because while the federal funding didn’t last forever, the requirements to provide free health care unexpectedly did.”

“As medical costs began their historic climb, this became a serious burden on many healthcare providers, which had tried to honor their agreement with Congress but were financially unable to satisfy increasing federal demands. Adding insult to injury, the federal government filed a number of lawsuits, accusing some hospitals of providing insufficient levels of free services. So it is safe to say that many hospital administrators feel betrayed and left holding an increasingly expensive bag as the population grows and the number of patients needing those free services skyrockets.”

“President Andrews also used the opportunity to berate both the House and the Senate for trying to ‘foist big government into every nook and cranny’ of the nation. Let me quickly read from the President’s remarks.

“Well-informed taxpayers are largely tired of big government, partly because they are unable to name a single, federal division that really works. The Fed; the IRS; Department of Energy; Department of Education; farm subsidies; the list goes on and on. None of these monstrosities work and none fulfill their most basic mandates, yet they suck billions from our paychecks each year. Philosophically, big government is fine if the people are willing to pay for it, but the place for big government is at the local level, not the federal level. Slowly but surely, Congress has usurped states’ rights and built the most bloated government in human history to serve their own interests. Their programs do not work, and they have bankrupted the country in the process.”

“As this drama continues to unfold, we are asking our viewers to log into our web site and take a quick survey titled, ‘Where do you stand?’ The survey takes thirty seconds and will let us know what you think about the President’s remarks. Thanks again for watching Channel 9 News!”

* * * * *

Penelope Castle studied the curious man in front of her. She no longer knew what to expect in these “confessionals”, as she called them. Her idealistic enthusiasm for law and justice had long been hardened by the iron foundry of Washington, and nothing should surprise her any more. And yet she found herself intrigued, and yes – surprised, at these revelations.

The man wore a rather inexpensive suit. His tie was loose and an ill-fitting shirt seemed to fluff out at the waist, reminding her of a mushroom. The man seemed plenty intelligent, and yet conducted himself in a manner befitting an absent-minded professor rather than a true professional. He was a curious sight indeed.

“And so,” she repeated. “Your job was to coordinate the production and dissemination of fictitious identities on a massive scale, ranging from state-issued drivers licenses to Social Security numbers?”

“Well, not exactly. You make it sound so bad. They weren’t strictly fictitious. I mean, some of the people really did exist, at least at one time. But yes, it was on a pretty large scale. Half a million, maybe.”

Penelope stared, flabbergasted. “You created *half a million* fake identities and never got caught?”

He fidgeted sheepishly. “Not bad, huh?”

Penelope shook her head and tried to speak. She was almost speechless. “Forgive me if I have trouble believing this, because this is unheard of. I have two main questions here. First, how on earth did you succeed in doing this? And second, what were the goals?” She was afraid she already knew the answer to the second question.

“Well, technically it was easy. All it takes is a few data entry operators who work from home. A PC, a remote connection to various systems, well, you just start typing. See, when someone is born and we register him or her in the SSN database, it’s not rocket science. It’s just data, and though there obviously are security safeguards, the people ultimately in control of the data have ways of getting around things. So setting up a fake one becomes just as easy as setting up a real one. The biggest concern by far is keeping a lid on the data entry operators. But they are given such huge cash payments, ten times more than what they’d earn in the private sector, that they won’t say anything. ‘Course, we give them a good scare on occasion, threaten their children or something to make sure they stay quiet. We only pick the ones that have kids and plenty of reasons to live.” Panicking, he backtracked and waved his hands. “But we never hurt anyone. It was nothing like that”, he insisted.

She couldn’t imagine this guy threatening anyone, but of course, someone else would do the dirty work. “I still don’t see how you could do this on that kind of scale.”

“Well, for these types of IDs we included a tiny electronic marker, if you will, that would allow our programmer to easily identify and track them. That was a full-time job in itself, and basically if anyone by chance started an inquiry or investigation on a fake ID, the programmer would monitor it and maybe even delete the ID entirely. Or he could insert some notes about identity theft or some other such nonsense, and in this day and age people would believe that. So he could easily make it look like someone got grandpa’s credit card and used it to create a new identity. The fact that grandpa passed away three years ago in some ways actually makes it easier to create identities based on him. Heck, we could create a dozen fake identities from a single real person, living or dead. There are ways.”

Penelope considered this. He wasn’t divulging names or sufficient detail, but she sensed he was being straight with her. Coming clean was his only means of staying out of prison.

“And on your second question, the ‘why’ of it all.” He sighed and rubbed his hands through graying hair. “Let’s just say there are people who will pay top dollar for this, and the list of possible uses for a fake ID are of course endless. It could be that someone entered the country illegally and wanted to land a decent job. Could be some lady hiding from an abusive husband and trying to start fresh in another state. Could be someone trying to create votes. All sorts of things.”

“Create votes?” Penelope was about to be surprised again.

“Yeah.” His body language indicated this might be the one area where he harbored true remorse for his deeds. “Basically it’s a numbers game. If you want to pass a law and you know the vote will be tight, you need to manufacture some votes. If you want to elect someone in a close race, sometimes these races are decided by a few hundred or a few thousand votes. Good

grief, by one count the 2000 Presidential election was decided by as few as 493 votes. And no, that wasn't me. There weren't any manufactured votes in that one. Well, at least not that I was directly involved with," he added quickly.

The implications were too much, and the recorders picked up the long, low whistle that came from Penelope Castle's lips.

* * * * *

Senator Dennis Blythe looked at his *iPhone* and opened his *Angry Congressmen* app. Created as a spoof of the *Angry Birds* game, it featured a caricature of President Andrews using members of Congress as ammunition. One by one the smiling President gleefully loaded a bound legislator into a slingshot and hurled him into the side of a building until the building crumbled. It also gave a running count of the number of days Congress had been held hostage. Today's count held at 19, and he sighed. It might not seem like much, but it was 19 days without his family and friends. As luck would have it, his wife had been ill with a particularly nasty stomach virus when the First Lady had coordinated the day off, and had not been able to make the trip. So while he was genuinely happy for the other legislators and appreciative of the gesture, nevertheless the day had held a particular emptiness for him. In all his years of marriage he had never felt so alone. Would it be a mere 19 days longer before he was released from his artificial prison? Or 19 months? He had no earthly idea, and it was the uncertainty that depressed him the most.

Putting the phone away, he turned to the work before him. Like the others, he had been assigned specific legislation that more often than not focused on the legislator's legal specialty. At least in his case it did. As he scanned through the documents he realized that President Andrews' team had chosen him because he was one of the few members of Congress to attempt to do anything tangible to break the stranglehold of the unions from corporate America.

If only unions worked the way they did back when they were first created, he thought wistfully. Unions were designed to inject some fairness during a time when greedy corporations were flagrantly exposing their workers to inhumane conditions while paying them a pittance. Workers clearly needed protection, and through unions they were able to secure better wages, vastly improve safety standards, and gain more of a voice in company affairs. Senator Blythe believed the creation and early success of unions was a triumph of the American spirit.

But fast-forward to the present day and his tune changed entirely. Greedy corporations haven't gone away, but in many cases, powerful unions held the entire company hostage, not just from the ever-present threat of strikes but also from a standpoint of intentionally hamstringing corporations with unproductive regulations that made it difficult for the company to function. Horror stories abounded ranging from union thugs pressuring non-union members to join or face beatings; to sky-high employee pension costs such as the utterly criminal rates paid by New York City.

On average a unionized worker makes up to 30% more than a non-union worker for doing the same job. Where's the economic justice there? So with grim determination the Senator read through the summary of Andrews' plan regarding unions:

"Unions have played a critical role in American history, and it was essential that employees have the means to level the playing field when it came to the basic tenets of employment such as working conditions, fair wages, environmental concerns, and so on. But with the passage of time it is now long overdue that the playing field be tilted back toward the companies whose investments provide jobs for us all. Something is wrong when a company's owner cannot make a decision that he or she feels is vital to the company's survival on account of a union dispute. We must take the painful steps to break free from this form of tyranny."

"The solution requires extraordinary measures that fundamentally rewrite the rules of the game. Going forward, we must ensure that no union shall be established which receives materially greater benefits or protections than their equivalent non-union workers, nor shall management of any company or corporation be obligated to conduct business according to the demands of any union. So while no one may infringe upon the right of workers to unionize, neither may any union infringe upon the basic rights of the business."

"The senior management team of the union must be elected annually by the unionized workers, and the senior management team must be employed on a full-time basis in some capacity by the business in which their union is employed. Industry, cross-industry, and similar conglomerate unions will be made illegal and will have 90 days to either restructure or completely dissolve. Going forward, both the business and the union shall work with each other in good faith. Any business acting in its best interests and within applicable state and federal laws will have the unqualified right to terminate any employee regardless of union status. Significantly, government or public unions are hereby declared illegal, and the law must make it clear that public employees may not earn materially greater salaries or benefits than they would earn in the private sector for similar work."

"Additionally, the entire federal workplace will be converted into an 'employment at will' entity, effective retroactively. A low-performing employee or one whose function is being eliminated will no longer have any legal recourse to sue the government when he is fired or laid off. I'm sorry the job is being eliminated, but the threat of a lawsuit cannot keep an unneeded division operating indefinitely on the taxpayer's dime. We are long overdue for a return to common sense."

So far, so good, he could probably work with this. But the union-related legislation was just one piece of a complex puzzle. Unionized or not, America has been hemorrhaging jobs at a suicidal rate. Reading again from Andrews' notes:

"We must make radical moves to restore and protect the jobs that make America possible. At the federal level we must stop rewarding other nations for business and

economic practices that harm our national interests. For example, our businesses give Pakistan, China, and Mexico countless manufacturing jobs in the apparel industry because they don't have crushing environmental and safety controls as we do. They certainly don't have out-of-control unions artificially compounding the price of labor. So we have to change this and change it quickly, because we have lost too many millions of jobs."

"How about we establish a 10-year tax-free zone on new manufacturing business in the United States? Build a new facility or bring a closed facility back into production. In exchange for putting Americans back to work we'll reward that with massive tax benefits to offset the costs and risks involved. Not only do we come ahead by virtue of having large numbers of Americans removed from the welfare rolls, America becomes more competitive long-term. Our shortsighted policies have gutted our manufacturing capabilities and we must turn this trend around rapidly just to survive. It is embarrassing that we cannot fully manufacture the parts of our advanced fighter jets and other military equipment because the manufacture of certain parts is done overseas. And it is a fact that some of our more recent military operations have been delayed and hampered because of our laughable inability to secure the needed parts."

The Senator rubbed his head and wished he were anywhere but here. His depression returned, and he felt as if he were an unwilling participant in the Angry Congressman game. Andrews had grabbed him, placed him in a slingshot, and was calculating the trajectory through which his victim would travel. It seemed that either way he looked at it, he was headed for a brick wall. *Well, you get an A for effort, Mr. President, but could such a thing really be accomplished? Could a ship the size of the United States of America be turned in such a manner?* One way or another, he feared he would soon find out.

Chapter 23

Day 19: Monday, February 13

Computer Security Analyst David Herd had never been so angry in his entire life. Fiercely loyal to his friends, he was furious to no end that someone had targeted Kevin Marks in such an underhanded manner. But for the perpetrator to be one of the most powerful men in America made it a hundred times worse. How many crimes had Killian Stark committed in the development and maintenance of this obscene business? Entrapment. Abuse of power. Gross

misuse of taxpayer money. Extortion. Conspiracy. There were criminal violations on so many levels it made his head spin.

His considerable duties at the NSA kept him quite busy, but at every possible moment he found himself drawn inexorably into the growing web known as Project Omniscience. As a federal employee, he realized the irony of the situation. In making plans to shut down Killian's empire, his technical brilliance was simultaneously put to use both to further the interests of the federal government, as well as to undermine it. And the deeper he went, the murkier the legal waters became. But if Stark was on the wrong side of the law for building this thing, so was Herd for the methods that would be required to tear it down. His quiet rage compelled him forward. He would take down this obscenity, and he would do everything within his power to see that its evil puppeteers would rue the day they were born.

His hands moved over the keyboard with lightning speed, traversing network after network, deftly stepping through the iron bars of some of the most secured systems in the country. There were innumerable methods of gaining unauthorized access to systems, and he kept thinking he should write a book about them. Maybe when he was caught trying to take down one of the nation's most powerful politicians, he would while away his time in prison writing books on computer security. And it would be serious time, because the only way he had avoided prison for his computer crimes of yesteryear was to agree that if he stepped out of line at any point in the future, it was three strikes and go directly to jail. Do not pass *Go*, do not collect two hundred dollars.

By this point he could tap into Stark's extensive domain at will, having traversed the same digital paths many times now in his search to explore the scope and boundaries of Project Omniscience. Each time he was careful to erase his online tracks by altering various system logs and disabling the electronic alarms that would alert others of his intrusions. A computer network with sufficient security logged all access attempts, and the techies who monitored those logs could gain valuable information about the attacker from those electronic logs. So to avoid incrimination he edited the logs, replacing his actions with innocuous ones that would be easily ignored. Supremely confident of his abilities, he nonetheless remained sobered by the irreversible consequences of a single mistake.

Finally arriving at his destination, he began a copy operation. Though he could have installed a program to automate the process, such a measure ran the risk of someone noticing the tool and shutting down access forever. For all his wizardry, physically speaking if the network cable were yanked from the back of the targeted server, he was dead in the water. He had to be careful.

Herd watched as enormous numbers of incriminating files were copied from Stark's system to a server under his control, hoping the amount of network traffic he was generating wouldn't be noticed and investigated by Stark's team. He wondered what the documents would reveal about others who had been targeted, and wondered if there were state secrets involved. Was he the first person to discover this? Remembering the humiliating cyber-attacks by the Chinese, he wasn't so sure. Lost in thought about the implications of foreigners getting their hands on this stuff, he was startled when his boss tapped him on the shoulder.

“What the heck are you doing?” he demanded.

“Uh, running some penetration tests,” he managed. That *was* true, he was trying to penetrate Stark’s illegal network.”

“Well we’re having issues with one of the servers and you haven’t responded to emails. Get moving, whatever you’re working on now can wait.”

“Absolutely. I’m on the way.”

His boss turned and exited the room, leaving him nearly shaking at the close call. Forcing himself to breathe, he carefully closed his network connections and got back to work.

* * * * *

President Jack Andrews had thoroughly enjoyed the weekend trip with Elena at Camp David. As presidential schedules go, it was a relatively low-key affair, with a sprinkling of briefings for various situations going on around the world. With Congress corralled and the Top 100 Plan taking up the lion’s share of his time, things were blessedly quiet on the foreign policy side. Well, at least now that China had been placated.

There were rumblings about a new genocide developing in Africa, and in North Korea, the bellicose hermit state had finally showed signs of imploding from within. The impoverished citizens were no longer content to be a hard-core military state if it meant they couldn’t eat three square meals a day, and he didn’t blame them. The smart money said for the United States to stand by and observe, although they were doing everything they could to surreptitiously supply the opposition with food, money, supplies, and arms. Chinese-made arms. Andrews smiled at the irony, but the last thing he wanted was for the arms to be traced back to the United States. With China being the staunchest ally of the North’s oppressive regime, it could cause plenty of confusion when the government realized their closest friend was apparently supplying the ones who sought to overthrow them.

Of course, China would deny all involvement, but that’s what China always did. He smiled again; ultimately the ruse would be of negligible value, and China would then accuse the USA of supplying the arms. He would happily deny all involvement and feign amazement at the suggestion that he would do the slightest thing to offend China so close on the heels of his recent humiliating defeat.

But fortified with some much-needed rest from his weekend, he was ready when his secretary informed him that Vice President Ty Kennedy was on his way to meet him.

“Welcome back,” Ty greeted him with a strong handshake. “You look quite refreshed.”

“Yeah, I needed that,” he admitted. “We haven’t been in office three weeks and yet it feels like a year has passed.”

“I believe I have aged a year,” Ty responded, “so you are not far from the truth. Do you know what the biggest source of stress has been?”

“I think I know what you’re going to say” Andrews said simply.

“The hardest part has been not knowing how this will turn out. We’re not dealing with a budget or a foreign policy decision or a staffing issue that will pass. In any other case, life would go whether we won or lost.” He paused soberly. “But this? We bet the farm. If this had gone the wrong way, the entire nation could be rioting and our heads hanging from pikes.”

“Well, I’m sure there are pikes around here somewhere, and this isn’t over yet. We still could have our heads handed to us, I’m afraid.”

“Mr. President, something tells me that those concerns relate to why you asked me here today.”

“Quite perceptive, you are,” Andrews responded. “And quite correct as well. Very simply, I wanted you to come here today because we need to work out the details of our exit plan.”

“Hmm. I should say that sounds ominous.”

“Possibly. I rather doubt there has ever been a President who settled into the Oval Office this quickly and was already thinking about exit plans. Maybe second term plans,” he conceded with a slight wave of his hand. But under no circumstances will I survive politically to so much as consider a second term, and there are quite a few contingencies that you and I need to work out so that hopefully, you’ll stick around and continue what we’ve started.”

“Mr. President, my goal is to support you...”

Andrews waved him off. “I know you’re a loyal man, Ty, but I’m serious. I will not run for a second term, and if I had to bet, you will finish my first term.”

Ty looked up sharply. “Sir? Do you think your life is in danger?”

“Well, I imagine it is,” Andrews responded. “The Secret Service is already working overtime to investigate any number of death threats, but that is not what I am referring to. I have no credible information that should immediately concern me, and as you know, I have quietly boosted security for both of our families on several levels. In fact, I am more concerned about your family than mine. When I step down I need to make sure you’re going to be fine because at that time I will cease to be the primary target.”

“Step down? Mr. President, I guess I should just shut up and let you explain, because I am totally lost here.”

“Yes, and please quit referring to me as ‘Mr. President’ in private. We’ve been over this.”

“Sorry. Anyway, I’m listening Jack.”

“Very well.” Andrews stood for a moment and walked around the expansive office to collect his thoughts, then sat back down in a chair adjacent Ty. It was clear he didn’t know quite where to begin.

“First of all, I’m not exactly sure I’m going to step down. Certainly not at this juncture, so don’t be worried that I’m going to bail on you any time soon. We’re just now getting started, and this whole thing has been about setting up a series of actions that will get this nation back on track. We’ve barely gotten our seats warm, so we still have tons more work to do. So don’t worry. Maybe I’ll step down, and maybe I’ll finish out the term and do everything I can to help you become the next President. Then I’ll bug you endlessly by calling you ‘Mr. President’ in private,” he added wryly.

“Ha.”

“And yet I still feel that I need to have an exit strategy in mind. All my life I have done my best to play by the rules. But for the Top 100 Plan to have a fighting chance, I’ve had to do some things that were so far outside the law that the public really would have my head if they knew about it. Some of it you know about, some of it you don’t. And before it’s over, well, let’s just say my list of crimes against the nation will be longer than any bill of Congress you’ve ever read. Without a doubt I will disappoint some people, and I will pay some very serious consequences.”

The Vice President considered these words carefully. The heavy hitters of the political world could size up a situation almost intuitively. As could Jack Andrews. Jack could walk into a room of thirty politicians, and ten minutes later be able to tell you who is solidly in his corner and who is playing games. He would be wrong only once in a blue moon. But peering into the eyes of the President, he knew that no amount of intuition would reveal the mystery within this man’s heart.

Taking a deep breath, the Vice President loosened his tie and got comfortable. He had a feeling this would be a very long meeting.

“All right, Jack. Tell me about our exit strategy.”

* * * * *

From the blogosphere, February 13

Do we love this President or hate him with a passion? That question is on the minds of quite a few people as we grapple with this brand new administration that has turned Washington upside-down in more ways than you can shake a congressional yardstick at. The challenge in answering that question is that we don’t have an easy way to label this guy, and in this culture we assign love or hate based on the label. So what is he?

Let's see, he wants to slash the size of government, he hates taxes, and he wants to "take our government back". Sounds like a classic conservative to me. But wait. Over half the members of his cabinet are African-Americans, and a review of even his pre-campaign speeches and writings shows a solid interest in bridging America's racial divide. Not since the days of Bill Clinton has an administration boasted of such a diverse cabinet. Clinton appointed seven African-Americans to his cabinet, for example. George W. Bush appointed 4, and Barack Obama, mystery of mysteries, appointed only one. C'mon, we finally have our first African-American President and he appoints only one African-American to a top cabinet post? He had a vast field of the brightest minds in the nation from which to choose, and Eric Holder was the only one he could find?

Lost in the vast sea of analysis related to the firing of the Supreme Court and the congressional sequester, are a number of moves this President has made to advance the cause of women. He's a solid proponent of education and job development, perhaps more so than the mainstream media gives him credit for. Behind the scenes he has even heavily courted the environmentalists, a move which has neo-conservatives shaking their heads. So we have quite a few ideas that, in all fairness, will be of far more benefit to minorities and other groups than traditional liberal policies that simply throw money at the problem while making it much worse due to lack of common sense.

So what is Jack Andrews? He is not your typical Washington insider, and most of the hastily-applied labels don't stick too well. So how do you intelligently categorize him? Maybe the best way to describe him is that he's, well, an American.

* * * * *

Day 20: Tuesday, February 14

Kevin Marks was rudely awakened by the shrill blast of his home security alarm. His eyes darted quickly to the dim glow of his alarm clock, which reported that it was barely midnight. He hadn't been asleep for half an hour, and was instantly awake and alert. His first thought was that it was a false alarm. Probably just a system malfunction, he tried to tell himself. Then he froze as the wall-mounted monitoring system in his bedroom showed a red light in the front foyer area. That red light indicated motion; someone was in the house, and it wasn't Cameron. He knew that for a fact since he had talked with her earlier and she was clear on the other side of the country visiting her mother and sister.

Who could it be? A terrible feeling rose in his gut that this night was not going to end well. The irrational fear of Stark's goons slicing him up rose foremost in his mind. *But why would Stark have him killed?* Stark did not even know that they were onto him. It didn't make sense. Maybe it was some common punk? Some random burglar who just happened to pick his home

out of all the targets in this town? But if so, the burglar wasn't being deterred by the shrill noise of the security alarm.

Thinking quickly, he looked around the darkened room for a weapon, his shaking hands somehow managing to flip on a lamp. He cursed himself for not purchasing a firearm as he had planned. In fact, Cameron had insisted he get one and he had promised to do so but had been too busy. He had a bat in the garage somewhere, but it may as well have been in Yankee Stadium. He was in the middle of cursing himself yet again when the door to his bedroom was kicked open.

And in walked Anna Robertos. She apparently had not been too busy to find a firearm.

* * * * *

Terror didn't even begin to describe how Kevin Marks felt. Not in a million years could he have imagined such a paralyzing, nauseating feeling of coldness in the very pit of his being. He could sense the dark, unfeeling eyes of this vengeful woman bear into him, stabbing him with a thousand accusing questions that he didn't want to answer. Her voice sounded much different, and all the sweetness was gone.

"Shut off the alarm," she ordered. Anna closed the bedroom door, slowly backing away as he approached the monitor to key in the required code. The ensuing silence should have been welcome, but the sudden silence just made Kevin all the more terrified as he directed his gaze into the icy barrel of a Glock Model 19 semi-automatic pistol. He had to assume it was fully loaded, and if his memory served, that meant 15 rounds of 9mm ammo were directed squarely at his chest. He could rush her, but it was doubtful she would miss at that range.

"Anna, I'm so sorry," he began.

"Shut up, I don't even want an explanation, and I'm not wasting time on giving you a speech, either. Just turn around so you don't have to see it. Goodbye, Kevin."

Kevin's couldn't breathe. He blinked, trying to think of a way out of this but clearly there was none. *So this was it.*

Anna apparently was in no mood to wait for him to comply. Without another word she clinched her teeth and pulled the trigger, sending blast after blast of white-hot lead into Kevin's chest and stomach. Then total darkness.

* * * * *

An hour later Kevin awoke. He was in his bed with the sheets soaked with what must have been blood. Only it wasn't blood, it was sweat. His hand flew to his chest, and feeling nothing out of the ordinary, he momentarily closed his eyes again. Nearly weeping with relief, he realized it had all been a dream.

The night was quiet, and in the February chill, not even a bird chirped outside his bedroom windows. His heart was racing, but gradually the pounding in his chest subsided as his mind mercifully caught up with the reality that he was safe. Pushing back the covers, he flipped on the lights and padded down the hallway to the kitchen for a glass of milk. With a dream that real, there was no way he would be able to go back to sleep. He shuddered, wondering if Anna might indeed be plotting her return. Maybe the dream wasn't so far-fetched after all.

Milk in hand, he flipped open his laptop and navigated to *The Drudge Report* for a good dose of the latest news. Figuring Stark's team was still tracking his every move, he decided not to give them any more ammunition to use against him and kept his travels to innocuous sites. He needn't have worried, however. Unknown to Kevin, Hal Snipes had already moved on to other projects. With tons of audio and plenty of the most incriminating video imaginable, Stark had all the dirt he could ever ask for. The monitoring tools were still turned on, but Snipe's attention was elsewhere for the time being and he didn't care where Kevin went.

Kevin grunted as a new thought hit him. Navigating away from the news site, he did a quick search for laptops, selecting the nicest model in stock. Heading back to the bedroom, he returned with his wallet. "I might as well put this fancy credit card to work," he said to himself. It was now clear to him that Stark would be able to trace the purchase, but at least he would have a laptop that offered some real privacy. After completing the purchase, his next stop was an online gun broker, where he found a compact .38 Special revolver and added it to his shopping cart, also courtesy of the Killian Stark Bank. Due to regulations the weapon could only be shipped to an individual or company with a Federal Firearms License, so he chose a gun shop a few miles away. He would pick it up as soon as it arrived.

Slowly, the hours passed as Kevin clicked on whatever links caught his fancy. He knew he would be sleepy later on but for now, he had no interest in returning to bed lest he invite another nightmare. Or maybe he was afraid the next nightmare might prove to be real. As the first rays of dawn reached tentatively into the room, Kevin stretched tiredly and reluctantly headed for a quick shower. Soon he was on the way to the office park where his colleagues awaited him.

* * * * *

"Good morning, everyone," President Andrews greeted them. "I hope everyone got some good sleep last night." Obviously the President hadn't checked with him, Kevin thought with a yawn. He needed coffee.

"Today we're going to spend some time discussing the legislation you've crafted to date and we'll attempt to iron out some of the stickier details. I will also introduce a new item. While it most certainly will be part of the Top 100 plan, my own team has worked out the details of this one, so it is already complete."

"Oh boy," muttered Killian Stark to no one in particular. He could hardly wait to see what kind of casserole the loon had cooked up this time.

“I know that you, and the nation, believe I am fixated on the negative impacts the legislative body has had on America in recent years. But astute observers have pointed out that this is simply because Congress makes the laws. You make the rules by which everyone else is governed, and thus you obviously are the biggest target here. But by no means are you the only target. Of course the former members of the Supreme Court come to mind, but also my own office. We have had both Republican and Democratic presidents who have greatly erred, bringing shame, scandal, and misfortune to the nation. So while you have been hammering out the details of some items that largely pertain to Congress, I have been hammering out the details that pertain to the executive branch. The presidential standard needs to be reviewed, and the standard needs to be raised.”

Rep. Tamara Kravitz of Vermont looked at him thoughtfully. “Hmm, interesting that he would bring himself into the picture like this,” she whispered to her neighbor. *I wonder where he’s going with this.*

“So where am I going with this?” Andrews answered the unspoken question. “In essence, we must end the corruption in Washington, DC. This town is a thoroughly corrupted political machine, and we must act not only to throw a monkey wrench in it, but to shut down the machine. Not to gum up the works, but to remove the works that shouldn’t be there. And in spite of all of our promises, I believe the reason this has yet to be done is because we have policed ourselves and more or less set ourselves up above the law. So the time has come to put some teeth into our own bite.” He stopped briefly to pick up some papers. “It looks like we have been working overtime lately, and we are now up to item 58 on the list that has been given you, even though I know some of these items haven’t even been touched yet. All in due time. So what follows will be item 59 on the list.”

“Item 59 of the Top 100 Plan is that any President who either confesses to, or is convicted of, a serious crime, shall serve a mandatory ten-year prison sentence.”

Stark put down his pen and stared shrewdly at the President. He licked his lips, the dark neurological pathways in his brain already working to see how he could take advantage of this, and he hadn’t even heard the details.

“Not only is the prison sentence mandatory, it may not be commuted in any way, and it is specifically exempted from a presidential pardon. Furthermore, the full cost of incarcerating the President must be accurately computed, and the prison sentence funded by whatever material assets the President may have.”

Stark continued licking his lips. Before sundown he would post a reward of one million tax-free dollars for whoever came up with enough dirt to stick it to this man. He had tried before, but Andrews was too clean. Yet there *must* be something with which he could nail him. Heck, he would fabricate it if he had to, but Andrews would pay. Such was Stark’s hatred of this man that he might just resign his position and take over as Chief Warden of whichever prison Andrews was assigned. Would he do that? Maybe. Just to torment him non-stop for ten long years.

Senator Dennis Blythe of Ohio raised his hand and received a quick nod from Andrews to speak. “Mr. President, to clarify that last point, are you saying the President’s personal assets would be confiscated and used to pay for his own prison sentence?”

“Yes, Senator, that is exactly the intent. Not only would such a President spend ten consecutive years in prison, every meal, every pair of shoes, and every clean linen provided for his benefit will be tallied. The President would in effect pay for his room and board, including the substantial additional security he would require over and above that of the typical inmate. This isn’t coffee and doughnuts, folks, and I would hope future members of this office would take careful note of that punishment. Is any crime worth ten years of one’s life?”

“But I fear that some of you are looking too happy out there, so this might be a good time to let the other shoe drop. This new law extends not only to the President, but to every employee of the federal government.”

Audible gasps could be heard from around the room. *Every federal employee?*

Andrews smiled. “So yes, it most certainly includes present company. It includes the executive, judicial and legislative branches. It includes full-timers, part-timers, and contractors, anyone who draws a paycheck courtesy of the federal government. So one need not be an elected official to fall under the domain of this sobering new law. I believe this law will be the first of its kind in all of history, and if this doesn’t put an immediate chilling effect on the illegal actions of federal employees, my name is not Jack Andrews.”

Stark considered for a moment that Project Omniscience would have to be quietly scuttled, then chastised himself for even allowing the thought. There was no way this buffoon would get any of this passed, so he would be safe. Of that, he was certain. Dead certain.

“I believe I have your attention, because though I certainly do not think you are all individually guilty of crimes, I specifically know that some of you are, and others are living dangerously close to the line. But do not think that your fellow members of Congress will be able to see things your way, because it will be up to our new friends over in the civilian panel to decide your fate.”

“The only silver lining, if one could call it that, is that any violator who signed a formal confession of any crimes would, after serving the mandatory sentence and being forever barred from any public office, would be legally free of any and all civil and criminal charges remotely related to the misconduct. Meaning someone would not be able to come back and sue him or her civilly later on. Their ten-year sentence would be “debt paid in full”. Again, the person does not have to be actually convicted, so if they know they’re guilty and want to get the 10 years over with, they can simply confess and turn themselves in. That bypasses any sort of lengthy trial as well as the civilian panel. So it’s quite a long sentence, but once you’re done, you are home free. So I hope all of our successors will stick to the straight and narrow path. Mark my words, we will clean up this town and restore faith in the system.”

Somewhere in the room, someone let out a long, low whistle.

* * * * *

After President Andrews left the building, Congress returned to work and entered various stages of productivity with regards to the items that had been assigned to them. To a degree, the old adage, “many hands make light the work” applied. There were 535 of them, and to date only 59 items of legislation had been given to them. Simplistically, that averaged to about nine legislators working full-time on each piece. But collectively, some of those items deeply conflicted with tens of thousands of pages of existing law, and it wasn’t at all clear how to reconcile those differences.

Kevin Marks was one of those people who didn’t know how to turn his particular pile of legislation into something coherent that the President could sign. But at length, the workday mercifully drew to a close and he sighed, utterly exhausted. The sleepless night and the impossible task before him weighed heavily on his tired shoulders, and all he wanted was a hot meal, a remote, and eventually a solid night of unbroken sleep.

He pulled into Washington traffic, easing unhappily behind a dump truck with serious emission problems. He coughed and tried to hold his breath while searching futilely for an opportunity to pass. He failed, but presently came to a national burger chain on his right. Impulsively, he pulled in and headed for the drive-through. Fast food was generally against his policy, but he was far too tired to cook and didn’t really want to stop at a real restaurant. The service was worse than terrible, and the cashier was peeved that she had to cut short her cell phone conversation with her BFF. After getting the order incorrect, he finally lost his patience with her.

“Come on, I’m a United States Congressman. Who do I have to know to get a hamburger here?”

“You? A Congressman? Yeah, right. If you were in Congress, your sorry butt would be locked up.” She shoved a sack of food at him and went back to her phone call.

Kevin sighed and drove off, reaching for a French fry to quiet his growling stomach. *What a day*, he thought miserably. Could it even get any worse? Ten minutes later it seemed clear that the day could, indeed, get worse. He pulled onto his street but was unable to move past a moving van that was completely blocking his driveway.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” he grumbled. Picking up his food and drink, he parked his car illegally on the side of the street and absently hoped a traffic violation wasn’t enough to qualify for Andrews’ new 10-year prison sentence. He was alarmed to see his front door slightly open, and wished his new gun had already arrived. He set his food on the ground and hurriedly punched in 911 to summon the police.

“Kevin!” a feminine voice called out to him from above.

He spun around in confusion. “Cameron?”

His wife was in a pair of blue jeans and an old sweatshirt, but she had never looked more beautiful. She smiled at him and kissed him.

“What’s this?” he finally managed. Then the significance of the moving truck hit him, and it was too much to hope for.

“Yep,” she read his mind. “I have considered your offer to move in, and I have accepted. Happy Valentine’s Day, Kevin. I love you!”

It was too much. And for the first time in more years than he could remember, Kevin Marks hung his head and cried.

Chapter 24

Day 64: Thursday, March 30th

Gretchen Feldman enjoyed being the secretary to Kevin Marks, though thus far the experience had understandably been different than expected. She had expected that from day one she would be right in the middle of a bustling office, as constituents, lobbyists, and a host of other parties constantly arrived to curry favor with what would surely be a rising congressional star. She liked Kevin, and instinctively felt he was one of the good guys. But without Kevin on site during the day, the office certainly was nowhere near as busy as she had envisioned.

There were people around, of course. By law, each member of the House of Representatives was allowed to hire up to eighteen full-time staffers with public funds, and that doesn’t count part-timers and temps. So a typical Representative would have a chief of staff, a legislative director, several legislative assistants, multiple legislative correspondents, a press secretary, and so on. Her official title was Executive Assistant and Scheduler, but at fifty years young, she nonetheless was old school when it came to titles, and she preferred to refer to herself as a mere secretary. This amused Kevin, who cracked that she certainly didn’t have much ambition in this town if she simply wanted to be known as a secretary. But Gretchen had over twenty years of experience in law offices around the country, and had probably forgotten enough law to fill an entire legal volume. She knew her stuff and was more than equipped to handle anything Kevin could ask of her.

She smiled as Kevin walked in the door. He had phoned in advance that he would swing by the office at noon to work on a few things and asked if she would have lunch brought in for them both. "Hello, Kevin", she greeted him.

"Good afternoon Gretchen, I don't get to see you enough, do I?"

She nodded in agreement. "You won't be locked up forever. But it certainly is nice for you to be able to swing by like this on occasion."

"Indeed. I was able to clarify with the President that it's fine if I want to take lunch in my office on occasion, and now that things have settled down into a bit of a routine he really doesn't care if I take a few hours on occasion to work from here. Has the lunch arrived yet?"

"Yes, it is on your desk."

"Thank you, I appreciate it. Talk to you later." Kevin loosened his tie and grabbed a bottled water from the small fridge he kept in his office. The grilled chicken salad looked perfect, and he speared a bite of chicken with his fork while unhappily eyeing the sizable pile of documents he needed to review as part of his assigned work on the Top 100 Plan. Some of those documents contained a dizzying amount of complex legal analysis, presenting several possible impact scenarios and sticky international complications that would arise when forcefully expelling convicted drug dealers to other countries. Kevin sighed and for the tenth time wished that particular nightmare had been assigned to someone else.

He took a sip of water and decided work would have to wait. Rooting around under some papers, he found the remote and decided to watch a bit of TV as he ate. *Judge Judy* immediately filled the screen. Annoyed, he clicked past a dozen channels that held absolutely no interest, then recognized Georgia Governor Wilson Bennings who was about to begin a news conference. It was as good as anything, he supposed.

Kevin had never heard of Hill-Burton, but Governor Bennings gave a quick summary of the law's original intent as well as the new requirements Congress demanded. He did a fine job of explaining in plain English what the law had already cost Georgia's taxpayers, as well as what it was projected to cost when the new mandates kicked in. But Kevin's interest was piqued at the Governor's assertive, almost belligerent tone.

"Listen, the state of Georgia has bent over backwards time and time again for this Congress, as if we have not learned the many lessons from history about appeasing tyrants. But this is the last straw. I will not, I repeat, will not bankrupt my beautiful state to implement one additional requirement. Not one. This is yet another illegal power grab, and we have drawn the line in the sand. Enough is enough, and I hope that with Congress being sequestered, they will perhaps come to view the states as partners for a strong union rather than servants to be exploited."

Wow, Kevin thought. Looking past the bold rhetoric, the Governor exuded confidence that he would come out on top of this battle. Something more than confidence, even, as if the Governor knew something everyone else didn't. Though he had never met Governor Bennings,

he knew the man to be an increasingly influential figure. Some said he one day would be presidential material, perhaps becoming the first Georgian to become President since Jimmy Carter.

Thinking quickly, Kevin tapped out a quick email to David Herd. He offered no details under the ever-present assumption Stark was monitoring his online activities, but this couldn't wait. "Let's meet today," he requested. "I think I have found us a new friend."

* * * * *

Herd was also about to have lunch, but something about Kevin's email sparked his curiosity and he let his colleagues know that he would be taking an extended lunch away from the office. Half an hour later he presented himself before Gretchen Feldman, who led him to Kevin's office without delay.

"Hey, David!" Kevin greeted his friend enthusiastically. "I really didn't expect you to drop everything but I think you'll want to hear this."

"Sure, fill me in while I munch on this sandwich. I hope you don't mind if I eat while you talk."

"Well, as you know over the past few weeks you have made some rather shocking discoveries about Project Omniscience. The more digging you've done, the more spellbinding this whole thing has become. Am I correct?"

Herd nodded and swallowed his food, admitting that the search for fresh, incriminating evidence against Stark had begun to consume him. He had stashed multiple copies of tens of thousands of files on various servers under his control to make sure no one could destroy the evidence once all of this came to light. He encrypted all of it, partly because of the embarrassing photos and video of Kevin and Anne, but also because some of it was too sensitive to risk anyone stumbling over by accident. His head spun at the thought of some of the unbelievable dirt his persistent snooping had unearthed. If the public ever caught wind and realized the true extent of what was being done to them...

"Yeah," Kevin concurred. "I get madder every time I think about it. The problem is how do we break this news? I think we will only get one shot at this, and we need to make sure we do this in such a way that not even someone as powerful as Stark could recover. This needs to go off with the force of a ten-megaton bomb, such that Stark won't be able to do any real damage control. I have some ideas but we need to think this through some more."

"I agree," Kevin replied. "And I think I know just the person to contact. We need someone who will not only be in our corner, but who will take this thing and run with it in ways you and I can't."

"So who do you have in mind?" David asked.

“Ever heard of Wilson Bennings?”

* * * * *

The man standing in front of United States Deputy Attorney General Penelope Castle was the diametrical opposite of the drunken slob she had interviewed some time ago. Coldly calculating and with a razor-sharp mind, he looked at her with an equal mixture of mistrust and disdain. It wasn't the first time they had met, but it was the first time under less than ideal circumstances, and the nasty undertones of the man's character were coming through even before he had brushed past her into the office without so much as a *hello*. Penelope Castle was herself a woman of steel and not to be trifled with, but the depth of the man's icy stare caused her to shudder.

He noticed but did not smile.

“So, Ms. Castle, what important administrative task have they asked you to handle today? I assure you my time is valuable and would ask that we move quickly.” He was a man of many talents, subtlety not being one of them.

Penelope remained cool. “I am quite sure you are precisely aware of why we are here and what is required of you. As to how much of my time you choose to take today, that is entirely up to you. Tell me what happened, and I'll be the last person to detain you.”

“I can accommodate that, ma'am, and in fact I have done all the hard work for you so you can save your great, big mind for more important things.” He knew full well the brilliant legal mind of Penelope Castle, but took a cruel pleasure in seeing her bristle at the cheap insult. He knew she would be too professional to respond. Retrieving a nondescript document from an insanely expensive briefcase, he tossed it unceremoniously on the table before her. “I have taken the liberty of preparing my statement in advance.”

Penelope frowned as she quickly scanned the document. The agreement had been for a verbal statement to be delivered, not for the delivery of a prepared statement that this man didn't even produce himself. They were much more likely to receive candid testimony with an open conversation, and they wanted everything on video for other reasons as well. “It certainly appears your attorney has prepared for you a document containing a detailed outline of your criminal violations, but our agreement included a verbal discussion.”

“So would you like me to read my little letter for you, is that what you want me to do?”

The word on the street was this man was rotten to the core, and Penelope could almost see fragrant waves of evil emanating off his polished hair. “It would seem redundant for you to read this eleven-page document,” she agreed. “So for the sake of protocol, you hereby certify and affirm that the contents of this letter represent a materially complete and accurate record of the criminal and ethical violations to which you are confessing?”

A simple *yes* would do, but he wouldn't give her the pleasure. "It is per our agreement, ma'am."

Since she also was on camera, Penelope Castle kept her voice civil and professional, but the contempt in her eyes told him exactly what she thought of him. "Then sir, you are officially discharged and free to go."

As he left, she sat down and scanned through the contents of the letter. As far as his admission went, he didn't directly steal a single dime at any point. What he did steal was much worse – he stole the rights of registered voters.

The process of gerrymandering is nothing new, and happens in countries all over the world. Politicians use it to redraw voting districts to achieve political goals. While in theory gerrymandering can produce positive results, it usually carries negative connotations because of the sheer amount of power those districts represent. Gerrymandering of course tends to be done by incumbents, who attempt to redraw districts in such a way that cements their hold on power. By using updated demographic and voting data, it is possible to draw the lines in such a way that large groups of voters are transferred and grouped together. A Republican might look at a series of counties and draw the lines such that the "red" counties form the basis of his district. A Democrat might look at that same set of counties and carve out the "blue" counties for himself. Complain about a lack of cooperation among the political parties all you like, but they can get along famously when a closed-door redistricting session is underway.

Collaboration between Republicans and Democrats can achieve incredible benefits to the incumbents, who must work far less during election cycles because they are surrounded with a statistically significant group of reliable voters. In effect it creates a very real and yet completely deniable non-compete agreement between party leaders. The effects on voting rights are devastating. In the 2002 election year, for example, only four challengers were able to win seats in the US Congress because of a vast web of gerrymandering. Expressed as a percentage, that translated into a 99.25% chance of reelection for incumbents. Four successful challengers out of 525 total seats meant that 2002 went down as the most lopsided victory of Congress over the American public in recent history.

Studying the papers, she now knew who the mastermind was. Back in law school she had once been assigned a paper on the topic, so she was familiar with some of the more common strategies politicians used. But as she read more detail she was impressed, and then angered, by the scope of the activities.

It was clear that he had spent the vast amount of his time playing to party interests rather than to his constituents' interests, which was a huge problem with gerrymandering. With his own power base virtually assured he could afford to act in the interests of his party and thus increase his chances of being appointed to higher posts within the party. Rather than waste time crafting legislation for the betterment of the nation, he collaborated with members of both parties and spent considerable time in key battleground states analyzing how the district lines might be redrawn to advantage. Tens of millions of taxpayer dollars were expended on elaborate and

highly accurate demographic analysis and reporting to find out who the voters were and how the votes could be aggregated for maximum impact.

Special attention was given to areas with higher prison populations, and a controversial practice known as “prison-based gerrymandering” factored significantly in certain areas. With prison-based schemes, prisoners were counted as residents of the district where the prison was located, even though their primary residence could have been in a completely different district. This artificially swelled the populations of the prison districts and had the potential to change the political demographics substantially. This caused true residents of the prison district to be effectively disenfranchised, and this by people who were not even legally eligible to vote!

If that weren’t bad enough, the United States Supreme Court ruled in 2006 that states could re-draw and gerrymander districts as often as they wanted. This ruling gave the high court’s formal blessing to a highly controversial redistricting from 2003 engineered by Republican Tom DeLay, a former House Majority Leader.

Penelope Castle shook her head in anger as she finished reading the letter. *This means that the American people paid this guy millions of dollars during his lengthy term in Congress, and rather than represent their legitimate interests he spent his time systematically transforming their votes into little more than symbols. And the Supreme Court sided with him! No wonder President Andrews fired them all.*

* * * * *

The day’s session with Congress in the office complex was blessedly over, and President Andrews sighed, trying not to convey how tired he was. The reality was that his day was just beginning, and as usual there was no telling when he would be able to rest for the night. He sure could use an hour or two with Elena. The relative leisure of Camp David was long forgotten, and he had been reluctant to schedule any more getaways because he wanted to avoid the perception that he was vacationing while Congress wasted away under lock and key. The people rightly expected their President to work, and his detractors would at least never have reason to question his work ethic.

His security team escorted him to a nearby office where Killian Stark waited. Andrews had requested the meeting, and the two shook hands cordially.

“Mr. President,” Stark greeted him. “To what do I owe this honor?”

“Thank you for joining me, sir, I will not keep you but for a few minutes. Given the influence that you have I wanted to check with you and see what kind of timeframe we should expect to wrap up the remaining items of the Top 100 Plan. Human nature being what it is, I felt it would help if we communicated a definite completion date.”

“I’m sure that would be fine, Mr. President.” Killian paused. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well we definitely are having some challenges on a few of the items but I genuinely believe we can work through them. What I’d like to do is to have a bit of a formal ceremony on July 4th. It would be a fitting day to celebrate your freedom from this place, and I think the symbolism for the public will be significant as well. They’ll see it as a break from the past and a new chance at freedom with a smaller, less intrusive federal government.”

Killian chewed on this for a few moments. He had envisioned several such scenarios, and if the President hadn’t come to him, he would soon have taken the initiative. Nonetheless he stroked his chin as if considering for the first time how the final chapter would play out.

“Well, Mr. President, I would have to say I like the symbolism of that myself. Perhaps what we should do is let everyone know the formal signing will be on July 4th, and we’ll make sure everything is ready about a week in advance. With the work done, we can return home to our families for a couple of days of rest, then regroup here in Washington for the grand finale.”

“I’m not sure I want everyone heading home,” Andrews countered, “but I can see how having a few days off would lift some spirits, so we’ll just have to work out a few details.”

“We could compromise on that and agree to stay in town. Sounds like we have a deal then.” Stark decided to leave it at that. In reality all he wanted was to get his top guys out of here with a 15 minute head start, and they would disappear for months if need be to disrupt this entire chain of events. There was no way Andrews would claim victory on this mess. It would go down in history as the greatest presidential failure in the nation’s history. He would pen that portion of history himself.

“Sounds like we have a deal,” Andrews echoed.

Chapter 25

“Now more than ever the people are responsible for the character of their Congress. If that body be ignorant, reckless, and corrupt, it is because the people tolerate ignorance, recklessness, and corruption.” –*President James A. Garfield*

Day 65: Friday, March 31

For the second day in a row, Kevin left his sequestered colleagues and had lunch in the comfort of his office. And for the second day in a row, David Herd joined him. Kevin had some turkey sandwiches brought in, and after instructing Gretchen that he did not wish to be disturbed

for any reason, he closed the door for privacy. Kevin watched with interest as David unlocked a small suitcase and in short order had a secure satellite phone ready.

“Is this the baby you were able to borrow from the NSA?” Kevin queried.

“It is,” David replied. “They don’t give these things out to just anyone, but I assure you it is fine, and we’ll have the secure line we need.”

“That sounds great. I don’t need to remind you that I have recently been burned quite severely by a false sense of security, so this makes me feel a lot better.” Kevin paused. “But while this means we don’t have to use my phone, which is probably bugged, what if there are other bugs around here?”

David smiled. “What kind of sorry computer guy do you take me for? I’ve got you covered, which is what the rest of this stuff is for. We’ll jam any other signals in the room. Heck, half the building will be cursing that their cell phones won’t work.”

Kevin ran his fingers through his hair. “Thanks, I just want to make sure we do this right. Are you ready?”

David was ready. “Let’s call him.”

* * * * *

Governor Wilson’s secretary buzzed him. “Sir, I have Congressman Marks on the line as scheduled.”

“Thank you,” the governor responded. He confirmed the Secure light was on, and wondered anew what kind of discussion this would be. He was very curious as to what would prompt such a call. “Congressman Marks, this is Wilson Bennings speaking. Are you doing well today?”

“Yes, Governor Bennings, I am quite well, and will try not to take up too much of your time today. Uh, just to be sure, can you confirm this is a secure line?” David cringed when Kevin asked the governor such a question, though it certainly was an understandable one. The reality was that the phone equipment would not even work if the connection were insecure. In lay terms, Kevin spoke into an encryption device rather than a phone. Everything Kevin said was encrypted before it was actually transmitted. On the Governor’s end, a compatible device decrypted the words in real time for the Governor’s waiting ears. Anti-eavesdropping technology was deployed on both ends to ensure that Kevin and the Governor were the only parties on the line, and if either side detected any anomalies, the connection would simply end.

“The line is secure, Congressman, and I am alone in my office. What can I do for you?”

“Thank you for checking, and please, call me Kevin. I am rather nervous and as this is the first time I have ever used a secure line, well, just bear with me a bit. Just be assured that when

we conclude this call today, you will fully understand the gravity of the situation and you will fully understand the precautions.”

“Very well, Kevin. I admit you have caught my curiosity, so I am at your service.”

Kevin paused and looked at his friend as if for assurance that this was the right course of action. He was frustrated with himself. Why was he acting like such a schoolgirl? *Maybe it's because my life is on the line.* He finally found his voice.

“Governor Bennings, I am taking a very large risk by calling you, but I believe we may have a common enemy. I watched your news conference yesterday, and did a bit of research on you afterward. If you'll pardon my being direct, I believe that it is fair to say that you are genuinely incensed at Congress right now, and that your words yesterday were not posturing.”

“You would be correct in saying that, Kevin.”

“Then I am also correct that we have a common enemy, or at least partly so.” He realized he wasn't making any sense, so he took a deep breath and decided to let the chips fall where they may.

“Governor, this is my freshman year in Congress. I came here to make a difference and I certainly still hope to do some good. But since taking office, a number of things have transpired that collectively are so unbelievable that you will be forgiven if you question my authenticity. I thought I was one of the good guys and that I could be trusted with the power granted to me. But within the past few months I have personally been blackmailed by the Speaker of the House. As a direct and planned result of the crimes of Killian Stark, I have been seduced by one of Stark's employees. Stark has conducted illegal surveillance of me, capturing the most explicit audio and video of me with the woman in question. It was almost by accident that my friend David Herd of the NSA stumbled upon this surveillance, and in the ensuing weeks he has uncovered a major, thriving network called Project Omniscience. The purpose of that network is to consolidate power through any and all means necessary, operating fully outside the law by a small handful of people too drunk with power and money to ever reveal its existence.”

“Sir, when I found out about the blackmailing and the scope of this project, I made a promise that Killian Stark would go down. I'm the new kid on the block and hardly naïve enough to think I can take him. But you, sir, are a man of significant resources and growing influence. I am asking for your help. I'll do whatever you need me to, but this needs political capital and resources I just don't have.”

It was unusual for the Governor to whistle, but he let out a long whistle and paused briefly to gather his thoughts. “Kevin, I am profoundly affected by what you just shared, and given that we have yet to meet, I genuinely am surprised that you trusted me enough to share these kinds of details with me. I don't mean to alarm you, as your trust happens to be well-placed, but may I ask why you think I will work with you on any of this?”

Kevin swallowed. “Like I said, we have a common enemy, and my gut tells me I can trust you.” Kevin looked at Herd once more, who nodded at him in answer to his unspoken question about whether it was time to play their biggest card. Yesterday evening, while Kevin was doing research on the Governor’s position to try to gauge how strong an ally he might be, David Herd worked well into the night on a wild hunch that paid off. David also felt Governor Bennings could be trusted, but they needed to guarantee it. He silently motioned again for Kevin to drop the bomb.

“Oh, and Governor? There is another reason I know I can count on you. I am not by any means the only one that Project Omniscient has done a dirty number on. David checked for me last night, and let’s just say your name came up a few times. Thus far he has not uncovered anything that your wife wouldn’t want to know, but yeah, you’re in this thing every bit as deeply as I am.”

* * * * *

Day 66: Saturday, April 1

President Andrews greeted Chief of Staff Pepper Morris as she arrived at his office for the briefing. Ty Kennedy was already present, as well as Secretary of Defense Porter Steadman. The four sat seriously, and Andrews wasted no time in starting the meeting on this blustery Saturday morning.

“I’m guessing it has been at least a month since any of you have had so much as half a day off.” No one corrected him. “The time will come for us to take a bit of a break but in the meantime it seems our already aggressive timetable has been moved up a bit. From a time standpoint I don’t know what I expected when I originally hatched this crazy plan, but since our last meeting I have talked with Killian Stark about setting up a formal signing date. Miracle of miracles, a very large percentage of the work that I have given to Congress has been more or less finalized. As expected, challenges remain, and I am under no illusions that all of it will be wrapped up nice and tidy. But we also know that it doesn’t have to be perfect. If we can get even 90% of it in place quickly I will be ecstatic.”

Vice President Ty Kennedy piped up. “How quickly, Mr. President?”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to report that the signing ceremony for the Top 100 Plan will be July 4th.” He smiled at the raised eyebrows. “Yes, as in July 4th of this year. I certainly am amazed but yet in a sense I am not surprised. Take away the unbridled power of these guys for what, not even ten weeks, and we have squeezed more productive work out of them than in the past ten years. Is this amazing or just plain infuriating?”

“It is both, Mr. President,” Steadman noted. “What surprises me the most is the response to your mandate that Republicans and Democrats are roommates for the duration of their stay in the pen. They have actually had to rub elbows with people of a different political stripe when a camera isn’t around. Rather than giving lip service to bipartisanship, they have had to live it.”

“And for many of them, that is a first”, Pepper added. “It surely must have been quite a slice of humble pie for some of them to choke down. So July 4th it is?”

“That is correct. Even if there are a few items to wrap up, I have no plans to extend it. Let’s get this thing in action and any tweaks can be made afterwards as needed. That is, of course, if you can step up the pressure regarding the list. Is every available resource on it?”

“Yes, Mr. President,” she confirmed.

“Then double the resources. With the timetable moved up we cannot afford to miss this opportunity. Not unless we all want to go to prison.”

“Yes, Mr. President,” she repeated. “And speaking of the list, late last night I received a very interesting call from our friend Wilson Bennings. Not only is he on the list, but as you all know he is proving to be quite a capable quarterback for us. He has been a real asset.”

Porter Steadman spoke. “Why was the call so interesting?”

She smiled brightly for the first time that day, relishing the looks of amazement she received as she shared the juicy details of Project Omniscience. It might be April Fool’s Day, but she assured everyone she was dead serious. If ever they had mined for dirt on their political opponents, they finally had struck the mother lode.

* * * * *

Business had been rough for Billy Mansfield, and there had been a time or two over the past year when he had wondered if maybe it was time to sell the place and cut his losses. He had lived in Colorado Springs, Colorado for most of his adult life, and it was home. After receiving an honorable discharge from the Army he got a job helping to manage a modest conference center on the outskirts of the city, and many years later when the owner became unexpectedly ill and needed to sell quickly, he risked everything he had to purchase the place.

Now he winced, wondering if that was the worst decision of his life. He still loved it here in this town of less than two hundred square miles of pure Americana. *Business Insider* once ranked it as one of the most patriotic cities in America, with veterans comprising nearly one out of five adult residents and a whopping 67% of residents turning out at the polls. It didn’t get much more patriotic than that, but unfortunately, patriotism doesn’t pay the bills. It was a slow day and there were no events planned, so he was the only one in the office. Everyone else was enjoying their Saturday, and he was about to join them. He tidied up his desk and stood to leave just as the phone rang. With a sigh, he almost ignored it, then picked it up.

He was glad he did.

* * * * *

“Billy Mansfield speaking.”

“Billy, this is Governor Wilson Bennings of Georgia. I understand you are the person I need to talk to about some upcoming convention space needs I have.”

“Uh, Governor, I am definitely the person to talk to. We have several good meeting rooms, and a seating capacity of...” The Governor politely cut him off.

“My team has actually already researched the various sites in the city, and we know exactly what you have available. It isn’t by any stretch the largest, but it will suit our needs perfectly. We will have a conference on July 4th, and will be reserving the full facility for the entire preceding week, all the way up to the 4th.”

“That is excellent, Governor, and I will just take a moment here to double-check the calendar to be sure...” He again did not get a chance to finish his sentence.

“We have already checked your online calendar. It seems there is a small local charity that has reserved a couple of rooms that week, and I am quite sure that refunding triple their deposit will leave them on quite good terms with you.”

“Triple?”

“Sure, and we will cover that for you of course. Just let me know what the amount is. In addition to the full facility we will need you to rent every sound system, big screen TV, and teleconference system in the tri-county area. We’ll need these types of resources not only inside the facility but also outside, so I am quite sure you’ll be able to turn a tidy profit for a massive amount of top-tier equipment rentals. Can you do that?”

Billy didn’t know what to say. “I sure can, sir.”

“Good. Now, do you know the mayor personally?”

“Uh, no sir.”

“Expect a call from him within a few days. He’s a big Rockies fan, so brush up on your baseball team so you’ll have something to talk about. In fact, you will be good friends with him by the time July rolls around, and I’m pretty sure he’ll be able to swing some business your way as a token of gratitude for what you’re about to do for this nation.” Bennings smiled, imagining the guy on the other end of the phone speechless, which he most certainly was.

“Anyway I know I can count on you to make things happen. We will spare no expense, and whatever the town spent on last year’s Fourth of July parade just got doubled, so make sure you spend plenty on marketing. I don’t know how much business you’re doing right now, but this will get you on the map for sure. Oh, I can’t believe I almost forgot. Fireworks! We will need fireworks!”

Billy's head was still spinning, and he wondered if he had the resources to pull this off. None of this stuff was cheap. Once again, the Governor was one step ahead of him.

"Billy, I need to know right now if I can make this reservation. If you are on board with it, I'll make an advance deposit while I have you on the phone. You will need a lot of capital so let me go ahead and advance you a million. When that starts running low we'll do another million, and in July we'll settle up with whatever else is fair. I want this done right, so don't skimp anywhere."

Billy Mansfield stared at the phone.

"Governor, that'll be fine," he managed at last. "I will have everything you need."

* * * * *

Governor Wilson Bennings hung up the phone and smiled. It felt good to do something nice for someone, even a total stranger like Billy Mansfield. In the conference world, Billy Mansfield was small fry, and that precisely was why Bennings' team chose him. It was precisely why he chose Colorado Springs for the location. Anyone in Washington would have chosen a massive venue in the most expensive metropolis available. Whether left or right of the center line, any Washington insider organizing something like this would have spent tens of millions on this event, nearly all of it going to some corporation with deep pockets and a long history of greasing the right palms.

But he needed the exact opposite of Washington, DC, and Colorado Springs was about as far as you could get from the corruption that fueled his anger on so many levels. He couldn't wait.

* * * * *

Day 82, April 17th, Monday

"Things are starting to happen..." —Julie Doiron, *Lovers of the World*

This was Sandy Farmer's first appearance as a guest on *Fox News*. She felt sure she would disagree with the host on a few political points but her invitation to appear on the show was additional evidence of her rising influence in journalistic circles. Indeed, as she walked up the steps to the studio she felt she was literally climbing the corporate ladder. And in a sense, she was. There were several guests who would be contributing, and the topic was the rhetorical question, "Is it time to take down the President?"

After polite introductions the host turned to Sandy. "Ms. Farmer, you have covered this entire story beginning at Ground Zero 82 days ago. You've seen the initial euphoria in having Congress locked up, and you've covered the changing polls now that some time has passed and people have started second-guessing this. Cracks have appeared in the President's armor and

there are increasing calls for him to step down. In fact, we have learned that the governors from several states are planning a secret meeting for just this purpose. Can you comment?"

Sandy smiled. "I sure can, and it is interesting you mentioned the governors' involvement. It is no surprise that the governors are getting involved. With Congress unable to do their jobs and the entire Supreme Court given their walking papers, powerful local officials are beginning to make their voices heard."

"I wouldn't quite agree with that," another guest interjected. "If they wanted to make their voices heard, why all the secrecy? Why did someone have to uncover this? I mean, we have called these guys and to say they are stonewalling doesn't even do it justice. They flat out deny there is anything going on."

Sandy responded. "The secrecy is necessary so they have time to build consensus about their agenda and about their strategy. I'm sure it would not suit their purposes if Andrews knew who all was involved or what their tactics would be. And at any rate the details will be forthcoming once they have a plan."

The host jumped back in. "But given this unique time in American history, these things shouldn't be happening behind closed doors. Now more than ever the public has a right to know, and I think we are asking for lots of trouble if we don't quickly find out what their game plan is."

A third guest spoke. "That is a great point, and one major concern is whether the military will be called in. Will participating governors call in their state guards? Will the National Guard be involved? And what is the potential for conflicts between state and federal forces? This quickly could disintegrate into a nightmare, and that nightmare could incite a second civil war."

"It is premature and wildly speculative to be worried about a civil war," countered Sandy. "What we need to find out right now is who is involved. Some communications have been intercepted that the governors of Indiana, Ohio, Georgia, and Oregon are involved. To what extent, we don't know, and at this early stage we might also point out that it isn't clear whether these communications are even authentic. So until we know their veracity we need to take this with a grain of salt. All we really know at this point is that the governors are going to have to step in and somehow take down President Andrews."

"Are you sure about that?" the host challenged. "Are you sure that's what their game plan is?"

"Well, of course," Sandi replied. "Things have changed, and there is no other explanation."

Chapter 26

Day 85, April 20th, Thursday

Kevin smiled as he left for work. As congressional lives go, tonight would be the equivalent of meat loaf night. He had no idea what Cameron would cook for dinner but it would be low-key, and she had already phoned him to let him know she had picked up a movie. She was dressed in jeans and an Indiana Department of Corrections t-shirt. Neither of them had the faintest idea how they had acquired that shirt, but Kevin liked to quip that it was proof she was a “bad girl”.

He arrived, kissed his beautiful wife, and asked what kind of movie it was. “Please tell me it is an action movie and not a chick flick.”

“It’s a chick flick,” she replied. “Sorry.”

Kevin sighed lightly, but really he didn’t care. He was just happy things were going so well for them. It felt really good to start putting the past behind him and spend time with his bride.

Cameron laughed at his expression. “I’m kidding, it is definitely an action. You’ll love it.”

Kevin was about to respond when his phone rang. He answered.

“Congressman Marks? One moment, please hold for the President.”

Cameron must have seen the surprise on his face and looked at him inquisitively. He whispered, “*The President?*”

“Kevin?”

“Yes, Mr. President.” He clearly recognized his voice. “This certainly is a very nice surprise. What can I do for you, sir?”

“I hope it is fine for me to have called you at home this evening. I would have simply met with you today but had to leave early. Anyway I wanted to extend an absolutely last minute offer to you. Would you and your wife join me and Elena for dinner this evening at the White House?”

Kevin quickly glanced at Cameron and wondered what the First Lady would say if she walked into the White House with that t-shirt on. She might call security.

“Um, let me check with my wife, Cameron, please hold for one very brief second Mr. President.” Putting the phone down on the kitchen counter, he grabbed her hand and pulled her into the next room. “You’re not going to believe this but you and I are having dinner with the President tonight.”

“What?” A mixture of amazement and horror flooded her and she instinctively pointed to her clothes. “Like this?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He rushed to pick the phone back up and somehow spoke calmly, as if this were an everyday occurrence. “Mr. President, we certainly can be there. Please give us an hour.”

* * * * *

Kevin and Cameron arrived at the White House and passed through security without incident. At length they were escorted into a private dining area. Kevin wondered if there would be a photographer; this certainly was a high honor and the enlarged photo would be framed and placed directly above his desk. He would blog about this and in his mind was already crafting a letter to his constituents that would casually begin with, “As I was having dinner with the President the other night...” The President’s arrival cut short his thoughts. Elena was at his side and she greeted them both warmly. Her green eyes sparkled and thanked them for coming on such short notice.

“The timing for this is unusual, but we are honored to dine with you tonight. It might not seem very presidential but tonight is meat loaf night.”

Kevin laughed, then wondered if his laugh was appropriate. But the First Lady immediately put him at ease. “Trust me, you two are in good hands tonight, we do hope you’ll enjoy this.”

Dinner was indeed superb, and it didn’t dawn on Kevin until later that the conversation never once veered into political territory. After dinner, President Andrews posed a question to them. “If you could view only one room in the White House, what would it be?”

“The Oval Office,” Kevin responded easily.

“The China Room,” Cameron countered.

Elena smiled. “Both are excellent choices. Cameron, walk with me and we’ll let the men head to the Oval Office.”

Kevin of course had read numerous descriptions of the famed office, but he agreed that no written description could do it justice; you had to experience it in person. He could see how foreign leaders could be intimidated in these surroundings. He certainly was.

“Kevin, you and Cameron were very gracious in coming over on such short notice tonight. Have a seat and I’ll explain.”

“Mr. President, it was the highest honor to receive your call. It has been a thoroughly memorable evening, and forgive me that I am not sure how to properly thank you.”

Andrews waved him off. “Think nothing of it. I know that sounds impossible coming from the President, but we have to eat, too. Anyway some very interesting things have come to light

lately and it seems that you have been right smack in the middle of it. And by that I refer to a certain subject matter which you recently shared during a call to Governor Bennings.”

Kevin was alarmed. “Sir, was that call intercepted?”

“No, sir. The Governor shared those details with me privately. I need to assure you that he was not breaking confidence, but on the contrary he is very concerned about your safety and has in fact asked for additional security to be placed on you and Cameron. There is no specific reason that we know of that should concern you, but from a selfish standpoint we need you to be safe.”

Kevin stared at him blankly. He simply did not know how to respond.

“The additional security would have to meet with your approval, of course, but I agree with the Governor that it is a good idea, at least for the next few months. Question. Do you have any plans for July Fourth?”

* * * * *

Kevin thought for a moment and then responded. “I believe we will be participating in an Independence Day parade back home. It should be fun and I’ll have a few good photo opportunities.”

President Andrews considered this. “What if I could offer you a photo opportunity on a national scale?”

“Then I would have to say that would be a very hard offer to turn down. What can I do for you?”

“Kevin, on July Fourth everything will become clear to you, and I regret not being able to share as many details with you as I would like. Suffice it to say that on Independence Day we will be letting the public know the full, sordid details about Project Omniscience. The people who are responsible for it will pay dearly. And I need you to handle a couple of the uh, administrative ends.”

Kevin’s mouth went dry. “Mr. President, I would love to help, but just how much detail did Governor Bennings share with you?”

The President eyed him evenly. “Everything.”

“Then you know that my direct involvement means a very real risk to my marriage when this comes out. People will ask why I’m involved and the photos...” his voice trailed off.

“I understand fully, and while you made a serious mistake there, we also know the federal government specifically targeted you. I don’t want this to get to Cameron either, but that is not the reason I need you. Again, it is more of an administrative role but it has to be someone inside

Congress, and under the circumstances you are one of the very few people I believe I can trust. So what I propose is for you to ask your wife to trust you for the next few months, and then you'll be free to share why the additional security measures have been necessary. On July Fourth your wife will see your involvement which will include nothing that connects you to Stark's evil empire, and she'll see it for the precaution that it is."

Kevin ran his fingers through his hair and tried to think of all the reasons why this was a very bad idea. The President could make all the logical arguments in the world from the safety of the Oval Office, but he knew that there was little a pit bull reporter couldn't find out given enough time.

"And if it helps, I will owe you a personal debt of gratitude, not to mention that the nation will owe you as well. The only thing I ask right now is complete secrecy. I promise you will understand everything in the course of time but for now, please do not even breathe a word of your visit with us tonight. Normally we would have a photo opportunity but that will not be possible tonight. Instead, sometime in July I'd like to have you guys back over for a second dinner, and we'll make up for it then."

Kevin swallowed, trying to think ten steps ahead and having no idea how this would impact his marriage or his career. He needed time to think, but the President needed an answer.

* * * * *

Day 86, April 21st, Friday

Dr. Stanley Redmond set down his briefcase in the lecture hall of Tuskegee University and carefully placed his ever-present mug of coffee next to it. His political science students had rarely seen him without the briefcase and coffee combo, so it often seemed that they were extensions of him, much like the hat and whip were extensions of Indiana Jones. None of the ladies were falling in love with Dr. Redmond during class, however, and the last time Dr. Redmond had witnessed any hair-raising adventures had been while watching Indiana Jones. The students filed into their seats, half asleep and half excited that it was Friday. It has been awhile since he had completed the discussion of executive orders but in light of present circumstances he was too fascinated by them to pass up the opportunity to take one last detour on the topic. After calling the class to order and meandering through a few thoroughly useless formalities he addressed his subject.

"Awhile back we discussed various aspects of executive orders and as you no doubt have been following the recent effects of such orders, I wanted to take another look at how they can be abused."

"Effects?" scoffed a sarcastic voice from the back. "More like aftershocks."

"Well said," acknowledged Dr. Redmond. "Now for purposes of today's subject matter I want all of us to momentarily set aside our personal political preferences so that we can look at this objectively. Let us all agree that abuses have been made by Presidents of both major political

stripes, and I say that because I don't want to focus on the man but on the instrument. That is, the executive order itself. And specifically, I want to look at it with an eye toward its potential for abuse. So for today I care not a whit if someone is a Republican or a Democrat or a rabid Communist; let us look at how this tool has grown more insidious in recent times."

"We have witnessed Act One from our current sitting president, Jackson Andrews. We have discussed his actions at length and are eyewitnesses even today as the impact of his actions continues to unfold. But let us examine how this tool has been abused by comparing modern presidents to earlier ones. George Washington held office for 8 years and issued an average of exactly one executive order per year. John Adams, our second President, issued only one executive order during his entire four-year term of office. Thomas Jefferson issued four orders, followed by one each for Presidents Madison and Monroe. Clearly in the minds of our early leaders, this was intended as a tool to be used selectively and with great respect. For his part, President Harrison seemed not to even be aware of the tool, and remains to this day the only President not to use it."

"But fast forward to Theodore Roosevelt, who issued an executive order on average over twice a week. His total count was a whopping 1,081 executive orders. And not to be outdone, Franklin Roosevelt issued a gargantuan 3,522 executive orders, a count no President has begun to equal."

"And so we find that modern presidents have not only used this tool with increasing frequency, they have more importantly begun to push the envelope in terms of how they use it. President George W. Bush angered millions with his Executive Order 13233, which basically shredded the Presidential Records Act. Mr. Bush did not want documents associated with his presidency to become public, and so he effectively rewired the system to his liking. The cumulative effect of his presidency on our privacy was devastating, with overreaches ranging from wiretapping to detainment policy. He of course presided during a very unique time in American history, as the nation grappled for the first time with global terrorism, but was not immune to sharp criticism for his orders."

"And yet, even the frightening overreaches of that Republican president did not reach critical mass until President Barack Obama. Now, many will point out that he used executive orders on fewer occasions than previous presidents. Indeed, if we go strictly by the first term, Obama used this tool fewer than any President since Grover Cleveland. But using Congress as an example, I think we would agree that it would be better for Congress to pass one really good law than a dozen disastrous ones. And in the case of a president, it is not about the number of times he chooses to use this powerful instrument that matters; rather, it is the constitutionality of his orders. Does his use remain reasonably within the scope and spirit the framers intended? Or does he use it to intentionally circumvent a very carefully engineered political system to advance personal or party goals? The problem with President Obama was that he willfully used it as a means of bypassing Congress entirely, and even bragged of it. Now the Constitution provides that Congress shall make the laws, not the president, so Mr. Obama clearly acted in a manner quite outside the Constitution. And what is worse, after surreptitiously passing a very unpopular health care reform bill, he then used executive orders to repeatedly change his own law in an attempt to correct the errors that obviously plagued it. For a president to change his own law

through the use of executive orders is unprecedented in American history. In the eyes of many, this is what justifies the term ‘tyrant’ that has been used to describe him. And that is of course the potential danger of executive orders in the hands of a runaway president.”

“No discussion of abuse of executive powers would be complete about Mr. Obama’s handling of the ‘DREAM Act’ during his re-election campaign in 2012, which covered amnesty for certain young illegal aliens whose parents had brought them across the border. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida had developed a strategy to put the gist of these ideas into place, and Congress was duly considering them. Rather than let Congress do their job so that we would end up with something that passed political muster and represented at least some semblance of consensus, Obama literally created a law out of thin air by executive order.”

“Now for various reasons, some of you would argue that he was justified in taking those actions, but if you make that argument, what kind of precedent are we setting? If you excuse the one man for egregious constitutional overreaches, then you must sit quietly when the next president of a different political view chooses to do the same thing. So whether we are talking about Bush, Obama, or our own President Andrews, by allowing these abuses, Americans have made their beds; now we are forced to lie in them.”

* * * * *

Day 131, June 5th, Monday

It was barely 10:00 Monday morning, but Representative Tamara Kravitz of Vermont brushed past the door to the ladies room and muttered that it already felt like Wednesday. Her companion, a somewhat senior representative, agreed.

Ms. Kravitz stood in front of the mirror and wished for the thousandth time for the distant comforts of home. But at least for now, this was home. They were hurtling toward July 4th, when Congress would honor its commitment to President Andrews and sign the Top 100 Plan so they could go home, already. She vented at the mirror, caring little if there were any ears in nearby stalls. “What do you really think Stark will do on July 4th?”

Her fellow representative sighed and said, “We’ve been over this. When is the last time you knew him to honor anything? Just when you think you’ve figured out what his end game is, you find yourself not only outflanked but also realizing you haven’t even been playing the same game. You think he’s going for a field goal only to watch him do an impressive slam dunk. On second thought, I rather think there is little chance that man could slam dunk anything.”

Ms. Kravitz smiled thinly. “That’s why it feels like Wednesday already. He had his way with me earlier and threatened me on so many levels I almost called security.”

“Let me guess, he absolutely needs us to circle the wagons against Andrews and guarantees you’ll never work in this town again if you dare to sign that thing.”

“Pretty much. And whatever my views on the Top 100 Plan, truthfully I have my own signature legislation well into the pipeline and have quite a lot of political capital invested in it. We all know how this town works but he’s being truthful with me that if I don’t toe the party line and join Stark in opposing this, there is little chance of my legislation ever seeing the light of day. It’s good stuff, but of course that doesn’t matter to him.”

“I hear you. And that really, really bites. Let’s get back in there.”

They left the ladies room and surveyed their working area with a mixture of pride, foreboding, and resignation. Pride because they had really come together and made some quite amazing progress. The unfamiliar surroundings had had some unexpected benefits in the relationship of many members. New friendships had been formed, with more than a few liberals finding that at least on a personal level, they had more in common with conservatives than previously thought. Apparently we all bleed and have hopes and dreams, even at the top echelons of government. Seeing Stark conversing with one of his buddies caused her pride to give way to foreboding. She knew that for all Andrews’ enthusiasm, all was by no means well in the land. There was no kinder, gentler nation, and if anything, the land was more divided than ever.

She had gone over a dozen scenarios in her mind and if she were a betting woman, she didn’t even know where she would put her money in terms of what Stark would do. And though she respected him more, she would say the same of Andrews. Both men had something big up their sleeve, and it was impossible to know what would happen. And that was where her sense of resignation came in. The actions of both men were far outside of her ability to control, so she forced herself to take a deep breath and try not to worry about it. They were hurtling toward July 4th, and she realized that it was just under four weeks away.

She sighed and sat down next to her colleague, who opened some bottled tea and took an appreciative swig. She asked if it were fine to open her folder, and the representative nodded politely and continued to drink her tea. Her folder included a summary of the last five items President Andrews had given Congress to complete. As with so many of the previous ones there were enough mines to secure Boston Harbor. She read a few of Andrews’ bullet points:

- Item 96: Annual tax law changes must become a thing of the past. Businesses often are afraid to invest, not knowing what the tax landscape will be. Tax law should mimic congressional and presidential terms so that businesses in particular will be able to better estimate costs, and thus make better judgments that will positively impact the economy.
- Item 97: The size of the federal government must be indexed to GDP. We’ll need to work out exactly what that percentage will be, but it is national suicide to think that the government can grow non-stop.
- Item 98: As a last-ditch effort to avoid a calamitous collapse of the national financial system, within 12 months we must reduce federal spending to be no more than 20% of the GDP. This will further be reduced by an additional 1% annually until a simple majority of Americans vote via national referendum to leave it. The more we reduce spending the more freedoms Americans will enjoy.

- Item 99: Unfunded liabilities must become illegal. Americans must be aware of all debts their government is hanging around their necks, and an extensive breakdown of where the money goes must be made publicly available.

So true to form, this President had in some form or other completely changed the way the federal government does business. Love him as the economic savior of the land, or hate him as public enemy number one, he had succeeded in forcing Congress to do his bidding. Ninety-nine pieces of hot-button legislation were the product, followed by the last item on the list. She already knew it, of course, but she read it again:

- Item 100: By the end of the calendar year a preliminary review of all government departments must be conducted by the best unelected political, business, and economic minds in the nation. This covers everything from the DOE to the IRS and the purpose will be to gauge whether or not they are effective. If not, a non-partisan decision must be made as to whether the department should be restructured or abolished.

And there you have it; the ultimate reminder that the government really did belong to the people, and that there should be no sacred cows foisted upon the citizens whose blood, sweat, and tears paid the bills. If it didn't work, either fix it or remove it, but don't let it grow and fester.

Chapter 27

“And what country can preserve its liberties, if its rulers are not warned from time to time, that this people preserve the spirit of resistance?” -Thomas Jefferson

Day 157, July 1st, Saturday

Billy Mansfield shook hands with the Mayor and watched him leave his office in Colorado Springs. Governor Bennings had been true to his word; he and the Mayor, as well as his own Governor, were forming friendships already, and that could only be very, very good for him as the owner of a modest conference center. Since receiving the unexpected call from Governor Bennings he had just about killed himself pulling this thing off. He had never worked so hard in his life, and today was the first day he could honestly say things were going to go very well. The Governor had also kept his word and paid for virtually everything in advance, so he was in prime position to get on the map and have his strongest year ever.

One thing the Governor didn't do was tell him just what was going to happen on the Fourth. He had expected political figures, and he thought all the security he'd brought in would be sufficient. Then the Secret Service showed up, thanked him for his fine efforts, and promptly took over anything and everything that might be remotely related to security. He might have been slightly miffed except for the obvious fact that if the Secret Service were inspecting every square inch inside and outside of his conference center, it meant he would be entertaining a very exclusive guest. He could hardly sit still thinking of the implications, and he thanked God for it first thing every day. Things were going to turn around, he just knew it.

So security, check. Public Relations, check. Technology and media, check. He spent several more minutes going down a detailed checklist of everything that had to be in place in 72 hours. A dozen things needed attention but after the past few weeks of at times round-the-clock activity, the remaining tasks were minor. Billy Mansfield smiled. He was beyond exhausted, and it was time to go home and get a good night's rest.

* * * * *

Georgia Governor Wilson Bennings boarded the Delta flight with his wife and searched for a couple who appeared to be traveling alone. His secretary thought he was joking when he insisted he wanted to fly Economy, and by the time he realized he had been assigned to First Class it was too late to change it. He looked for a suitable couple, then his eyes rested on two members of the Georgia National Guard. He smiled. Even better.

"Gentlemen, my name is Governor Wilson Bennings, and seeing as how we are at peacetime your unit is under my control. I am giving you a direct order to upgrade yourselves to first class and vacate your seats for me and my wife." He said it with such a smile that the two guardsmen remained at ease.

"Are you serious, Governor" one of them asked.

"Absolutely. You guys do an incredible job. Here are the tickets, and if you should have any reasonable expense during the flight you are authorized to instruct the attendants to send me the bill." He shook hands with them and smiled as they left.

His wife sat next to him and poked him in the ribs, hardly fitting treatment for a governor. "You are having way too much fun with this."

He smiled again. "True. I am nervous about what this trip represents but I have never in my political career been more energetic about something. This is going to change the nation, I'm telling you."

She nodded. "And I do look forward to seeing what on earth you are up to. This is the first time you have kept such a big secret from me."

He considered that. "Uh, yeah. Pretty much." And with that, he buckled his seat belt and waited for Delta to take him to the great state of Colorado.

* * * * *

“Mr. President, what are you trying to pull?”

President Jackson Andrews wasn’t always so bluntly challenged while sitting in the Oval Office, but when he was, it was usually the courtesy of Killian Stark.

“Mr. Speaker, what can I do for you?” Andrews had been expecting this call.

“An explanation would be a great place to start,” snarled Stark. “You and I had an agreement. Congress would have some time off before the 4th, and you have not kept your end of the deal. I’ve done what you asked me to do. You’ve got your Top 100 Plan, now let us go, immediately. We’ll be there on the 4th to do the formalities, and all we had asked for was a bit of freedom so we could be with our families. Was that too much to ask for?”

“I have had a slight change of plans,” Andrews replied. “You will not be signing this on the 4th but please be patient with me and I will keep my end of the deal. In fact I have already confirmed that your \$5 five million bonus checks have been cut, and I will personally hand them to you next week. I will make you a promise, by this time next week everything will make sense.”

The prospect of five million dollars in hand certainly mollified him somewhat. He was still incensed, and hated not being in control. But this was the President, he reminded himself, and further unloading on him would be unproductive. “Then Mr. President, I will hold you to your word on this. By this time next week, I do expect an answer.”

“You shall have it. Good evening, Mr. Speaker.”

And with that, Andrews ended the call and turned to his Vice President, who had listened silently to the conversation. “I deeply hate this part of the process. Intentionally misleading someone like that, even a slime ball like Stark, is distasteful.”

Ty Kennedy agreed. “And yet, the worst part is behind us.”

“You sure about that”, Andrews raised an eyebrow.

“I sure hope so. We’ll see.”

“Indeed,” Andrews responded. He nodded to his chief of security, Mason Foley. “Bring David in.”

Mason complied immediately, and David Herd entered. He had never seen the Oval Office before, and tried to act normal. Which was basically impossible.

“At ease, David,” Andrews assured him graciously. “Thank you for coming over tonight.”

“It is a pleasure, Mr. President.”

“The team has already covered this with you in advance, but I wanted to hear this from you personally. Is everything in place?”

“Yes, Mr. President. All of it is ready to go, and I have brought everything I need to begin the process.”

“Then David, you are hereby instructed to proceed.” The President offered his hand, and Mason Foley escorted him out of the office.

Twenty minutes later Killian Stark tried to place another phone call but could not get through. Cursing angrily he tried a different phone, then a land line. Skype would not work, all Internet service was down, and not even a simple text message would go through.

The power was on and everything looked normal. But for whatever reason, Congress was cut off from the world.

* * * * *

Day 158, July 2nd, Sunday

Kevin Marks smiled as he remembered the shocked expression on Cameron’s face when he woke her up this morning and told her to get dressed. “You’re going for a ride on Air Force One.”

“What?” She was instantly awake. Even after the unexpected visit to the White House and a personal tour by the First Lady, Cameron was shocked that she would get to ride on the most famous aircraft in history. “Are you serious?”

“Come on, let’s get packed. I couldn’t tell you until the last minute for security reasons. This is going to be amazing.”

Cameron blinked. “Wow. Just wow. And you promise that this week you’re going to tell me what on earth has been going on?”

Kevin grabbed her in a tight hug and kissed her. “Yes! Everything is going to fall into place and you won’t be guessing anymore. “Now get moving, you do not want to keep the President of the United States waiting!”

Hours later, it was Kevin’s turn to be floored. Air Force One was truly a beauty, a work of engineering like none other. He tried to memorize every minute detail of the aircraft that projected American power wherever it went. He was also surprised to see David Herd.

“Herd?” he smiled at his friend.

“Yep. Seems we have the gang here. Do you know what all is going on?” he asked.

“No,” Kevin admitted.

“It’s okay. You’ll find out soon enough. It was clear David enjoyed seeing Kevin in the dark. But within hours of landing in Colorado, the clouds lifted and Congressman Kevin Marks finally realized how he would make history. The dazzling memories of Air Force One were already fading quickly as he realized that he was about to do something no American had ever done before.

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Day 159, July 3rd, Monday

Sandi Farmer did not know the answer to the question the host posed to her.

“Truthfully, we just do not know at this point what is about to happen. As we’ve discussed, the word on the street was that Congress would be doing the formalities to make the President’s Top 100 Plan a reality. As far as we know that is still the plan, but since sometime late Saturday evening we have been unable to reach any members of Congress for verification. We have to assume that they are hard at work finalizing a million details to the law and that the communication issue is necessary. But with the White House Press Secretary issuing another ‘no comment’ this morning, we will have to wait and see how this plays out. Let’s just say there are some mighty curious Americans who are following this very closely as we approach the annual celebration commemorating our independence.”

Chapter 28

“Watch what we do, not what we say.” -John Mitchell, Richard Nixon’s Attorney General

Day 160, July 4th, Tuesday

Independence Day dawned bright and early in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The day would be hot and the sky cloudless, which perfectly suited visiting Governor Wilson Bennings. He pulled on a pair of blue jeans and donned a new shirt purchased with this occasion in mind. A

bald eagle emblem was embroidered on the front, and the letters USA were embroidered in bold letters on the back. They would begin at noon, and would have the attention of virtually every American within moments. True to his wishes, half the city had been turned into a giant parade, and he had to hand it to Billy Mansfield for paying attention to detail. It might be small town, but it was world class. The White House was feeding the media, and news stations across the country were already urging citizens to listen in for an important announcement by the Andrews administration. His eyes shone with resolve as he laced his shoes and stood before the mirror. It was time to make history.

Within an hour he passed through a mountain of security and entered the conference center. Minor technical glitches were being ironed out and presently the technical team leader gave the all clear. Governor Bennings took a deep breath, checked the program once more, and turned to his group. "Let's roll."

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Governor Wilson Bennings stood before the mike and received the thumbs up to begin. He was on air.

"Fellow Americans, I boldly wish you a fantastic Fourth of July. I am excited beyond measure to be here at the newly-renamed Patriot Center in the wonderful town of Colorado Springs, Colorado. We have a full day of festivities planned, but my excitement is joined by a deep sense of duty as I publicly oppose my government. Does it surprise you that I should begin a Fourth of July speech with such an unbecoming comment? Thomas Jefferson is attributed with saying that 'dissent is the highest form of patriotism.' Whether or not he is the original author of those words has been debated among historians, but I believe with all of my heart that he would agree with that statement. And thus it is by necessity that before we commence our usual celebrations, we must first attend to some serious business."

"Without further preamble I will summarize my grievances against the federal government of the United States, led and controlled by the joint houses of Congress, which, as a body, has become almost wholly corrupt. You thought you knew about a scandal or two, but just as the captain of the Titanic thought he might have seen some ice, it was but the tip of a deadly iceberg. Today we announce the full details of a hidden project that for many years has been headed by Speaker of the House Killian Stark. I apologize if this sounds too much like a futuristic 'Big Brother' movie, but unfortunately it is the reality here and now and is known as Project Omniscience. Quite simply the goal of this project was to completely subvert and control not only Congress, but by extension the public, through the most treasonous means imaginable. And I do not use that word lightly."

"What makes this project so vile that you should care on this national holiday? For starters it includes multiple levels of intimidation and blackmailing within both houses of Congress. We have captured literally scores of servers which are filled with millions of documents, images, and videos explicitly detailing how Stark and his team were able to abuse their office through the dirtiest of political tricks. Through this project Congress has bought Supreme Court justices, bribed officials at all levels of government, participated in extortion, and rigged elections.

Innocent civilians have been mercilessly targeted and intimidated into perpetual silence. And some of those brave souls who have resisted have been murdered at the direct orders of your very own leaders. Homes have been torched, churches destroyed, marriages ripped apart, all to further the agenda of what has become a very evil system. Congress has repeatedly changed the rules and redrawn voting districts to reduce your vote to a mere symbolic civic gesture. But the truth is that they control you. They own you. And the knowledge of that has fueled Project Omniscience to a level of power Stark once dared not dream of.”

“So what to do? Your complaints about Washington gridlock have fallen on deaf ears, and the thinly veiled collusion between Democrats and Republicans have left you without viable choices. Indeed they have conspired in a criminal sense to deprive you of your rights, redefining the landscape so that instead of a given topic fundamentally being a battle of liberal versus conservative viewpoints, the battle is actually about pitting American against American. ‘Brother against brother’ didn’t die out at the conclusion of the Civil War; it rages nightly in homes, families, schools, and business across the land. Your demands for change have been mocked as an increasingly brazen Congress believes there is little of substance that you can do. And without great bloodshed, they are correct.”

“But there is one other option the nation has never explored.”

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“The founding fathers carefully debated the merits of every aspect of the republic which they were forming. And yet, even in their careful wisdom they could not know whether they were giving one branch of government too much power, or perhaps even too little power. And thus we have our system of checks and balances. Congress shall make the law, but if Congress has grown too strong, there must be a counter-measure. And that counter-measure is what we legally, lawfully, and morally execute today. Our authority to use it comes no less from Article V of the United States Constitution.”

“Article V states that upon application, or request, of two thirds of the States, Congress must call a Convention of states, whose authority is granted by both the Constitution as well as by Congress to propose an amendment to the Constitution. Congress itself has no authority over any such proceedings other than to assist in an administrative role. Power over Congress, therefore, ultimately rests in the States, and today we appropriately exercise that power, effectively transferring that power from the closed doors of Washington, DC, to your hometown where it belongs and where it can be used for the most good.”

“Toward that end, over the past few months a flurry of activity has taken place, the likes of which the nation has not seen since World War II. You are of course aware that President Andrews has sequestered Congress and given them the choice of fixing the problems they have created or standing trial for treason. Congress promised the President that they would sign this legislation known as the Top 100 Plan, but, well, Congress has promised many things. With some very small changes, this legislation was penned by Congress, and as the documents were completed they were transferred to a highly guarded list of concerned and patriotic leaders at the state and regional levels, of which I have been given the highest honor to lead. We have

considered the legislation, and at just the right time and with the utmost confidentiality, have duly exercised Article V.” Governor Bennings paused for a sip of water, then motioned for Kevin to join him.”

“Article V allows that upon application of two thirds of the states, Congress shall call a Convention of States. We have found a shining example of what Congress was originally intended to be in Congressman Kevin Marks from Indianapolis, Indiana. He is a first-term Congressman who loves his country, loves his wife, and loves the people of his state. Congressman Marks has been made aware of the situation and as a member of Congress he has honorably agreed to receive our applications and call this Convention according to Article V. Upon calling the Convention, the States have finalized their proposal this morning to take the Top 100 Plan that Congress has written, and adopt it in the form of a single amendment to the Constitution.”

“Might I point out that this is not a kangaroo court; countless hours of round-the-clock planning, debating, and coordination has taken place among your state and local leaders over the past several months. Though they did not know about the planned Convention, some of the brightest business, economic, social, and religious leaders have lent their incredible expertise to make this happen. And so, today we witness the first-ever Convention of States under the sanction of Article V. The Constitution does not interest itself in the size of each state’s delegation. Suffice it to say that in the seats before me sit the delegations of all fifty of the United States of America. As your representative from Georgia I hereby make motion that according to the authority of the Constitution, we hereby ratify this plan in the manner which I have just described. This measure must receive the support of three fourths of the states in order to pass. Delegates, I hereby charge you to take your stand. All delegates who are in favor, say ‘aye’.”

The convention center positively erupted as the delegates of all fifty states called out, “aye.”

Governor Bennings did not smile. “All opposed, say ‘no’”.

Deathly silence engulfed the room.

Taking a deep breath, Governor Wilson Bennings declared, “The motion is carried. We the people have hereby and lawfully amended the Constitution. I wish to remind you that the founding fathers fully intended for us to make use of this Convention. It is the very reason they included it. And I wish to remind you again of the evil perpetrated against you and your family by Project Omniscience. The Speaker of the House is the chief embodiment of that evil. This, people, is the face of your Congress. This, people, is why we are having this convention. Now, without further ado, I present the President of the United States!”

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Those present clapped their hands with enthusiastic applause, but President Andrews quickly quieted them.

“The time for applause and celebration will come within the next few hours as we wrap up the details here and confirm that the proper procedure has been followed to the last letter. Non-partisan teams of attorneys trained in constitutional law will wrap up their conclusions shortly, and at that time we will celebrate.” The President paused, thinking back to the first night in the Oval Office where he felt such heaviness at the things he must do. That heaviness did not lift; if anything, it had grown heavier and weightier until it threatened to crush him. In truth, he would not celebrate today, at least not on a personal level. His time of sacrifice would come all too quickly, and he would pay very dearly for this day.

“I wish to thank Governor Bennings for the incredible leadership he has shown during this process, and extend that heartfelt thanks to every member of every delegation present for your unanimous support. Such a level of support is uncommon in our bitterly divided nation, and yet you have realized that the sole point of the passage of this amendment is to avoid the total and fiscal suicide of America. You have been privy to what Congress has shielded from the public, and I thank you for your service during this time. Truly, you have saved the nation. I wish to thank Congressman Marks, a true American hero, for the risks he has undertaken in agreeing to be a part of this.”

Struggling to find his voice, Andrews continued. “Richard Nixon’s Attorney General once quipped, ‘Watch what we do, not what we say.’ So with respect to John Mitchell, today we make history not by our words, but by our actions. The Top 100 Plan is the real deal, and the convention is the kickoff party. Today you witness your government being given back to you, and it is with the deepest of apologies for the years of abuse which the federal government has enjoyed over you.” He looked down, unable to stare straight ahead lest his eyes fall on his wife, whom he specifically asked to be seated well out of camera range. He did not want to see her reaction or to be reminded of it over and over on video.

“But an apology is not enough; Congress and the President both must pay for these crimes. With the super-amendment known as the Top 100 Plan now every bit as valid in the Constitution as the Bill of Rights, Congress must necessarily pay for their abuse of power. Part of the Top 100 Plan provides that federal employees guilty of serious crimes must endure a prison sentence of ten consecutive years. There is no alternative to this, and you will no longer witness Congress excuse the crimes of its members. They will pay, and future members will take note not to tread on you.”

“And though in my heart my service to you has been honorable, yet to accomplish this it was necessary for me to violate the very Constitution I swore to uphold and protect. A greater irony you will not find, and my sins against the nation are many. It will not happen immediately but at the proper time I, too, will submit to my mandatory ten-year sentence, a sentence which is immune from future presidential pardon. Any soldier can tell you that our freedoms came at a great price; and today I stand before you as a soldier willing to pay that price. And so, as you process the events today and as you support me or vilify me, I ask but one thing of you, and that is to honor my ten-year prison sentence as the ultimate proof that I truly love this nation.”

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Charley Spratlin stared at the TV, dumbfounded. He literally could not speak. He carefully wiped down another glass and put it back on the shelf, ready for the next customer. Then he picked it back up, filled it, and took a long, slow drink as he continued to stare, unable to believe what he had just witnessed. For a politician to show such character and to be willing, nay, to insist upon enduring discipline... His thoughts trailed off as he struggled to remember a single time he had witnessed such a thing. If he had to bet, he would bet that this was a first.

And speaking of bets, he remembered the money he had collected some time ago when Andrews had thrown Congress in the slammer. The customers of his bar had come up with a list of suggestions and bet on which one would best represent the outcome. He found the list and read it:

Congress lawyers up, goes home, and it's back to politics as usual.

President Andrews is assassinated.

President Andrews is impeached.

The entire fiasco results in World War III and America's destruction.

Charley Spratlin was a fair man, and he would have to figure out a fair way to put that money back in the hands of those who had placed their bets. Looking again at the list, the reality was that none of them won.

Then he smiled broadly. How wrong he was! For today, everyone won. *America won.*

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So this is how it feels to make the transition from senior reporter to anchor, Sandy Farmer thought as the show began. She had worked so hard for this, and those efforts finally had come to fruition. The familiar lights, camera, and action were brought to bear, and for the first time she was the star of the show. It felt great, and never was there a greater time to lead the discussion than now.

"Hello, and welcome to Channel 9 News," she began with a dazzling smile. "President Andrews shocked the nation and the world when he sequestered Congress and fired the Supreme Court. We knew something major was up but had no idea that an Article V convening of the states was the end game. I must humbly admit we did not see that one coming. I have here with me Dr. Stanley Redmond, a well-known Professor of Political Science at Tuskegee University. Dr. Redmond, it would come as no surprise that you have followed these events very carefully. What is your reaction to today's bombshell?"

Dr. Redmond smiled. For once his trademark coffee and briefcase were nowhere to be found, but he certainly looked and sounded like a professor as he responded. "Well, you are right that it was a bombshell, but there certainly have been those who have hoped for this very event to occur. I did not foresee the drama of the past few months playing out like it did, it certainly was a surprise. And yet in many circles there has been an undercurrent of hope that somehow the states would reassume the mantle of power the founders intended."

“So do you really think Jefferson, Madison, and crew would have supported this?”

“Oh, without a doubt. Times have changed, of course, but I don’t believe they would have resorted to this contrived scene. I rather suspect they would have gone straight to the militia and unabashedly declared war on Congress. I for one am glad it didn’t come to that, as this has happened very peacefully, and that in itself seems to be a tribute to the President’s careful planning. I must say I am impressed.”

“That is a good point, Dr. Redmond. And yet on the other hand we have already heard from so many that are outraged. They are claiming that this was done illegally and that the Constitution never actually authorized this type of situation. How do you respond to that?”

“My response would be for those detractors to actually read the Constitution. This is not new, and far more is known about the intent and history behind this type of convention than academics will admit. During the time of the founders, this is how states handled business. Writings are plentiful that carefully outline the protocols and procedures that have been carefully developed so that state delegations can assemble for the purpose of effecting very real change. I believe our primary concern right now should be to get the rest of the story. Was the President correct that proper procedure was followed? Will he indeed be transparent and quickly communicate the details to the public?”

Sandy Farmer replied. “That is absolutely my question as well, and we are confident that we will find out those details as the story unfolds. Thank you, Dr. Redmond, for joining us for this segment, and we’d love to have you back on later this evening as we begin dissecting the constitutional law governing the first-ever convention of states.”

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The nostalgic sight and smell of the post-convention fireworks show in Colorado Springs faded from memory as Kevin Marks settled into his luxurious leather seat on Air Force One for the return trip to Washington, DC. He certainly assumed this would be his final opportunity to take in its grandeur, but he could barely sit still. Frustration and angst filled his mind, along with a thousand questions, and he seriously doubted he would be able to sleep tonight. Presently the lights were dimmed and he stared suspiciously at the other passengers, silently accusing them of some unspoken offense that they should be able to sleep at such a time.

He closed his eyes and willed himself to think. Taking a few deep breaths, he struggled to collect himself, and felt a hand on his shoulders.

“Kevin?” It was President Andrews.

“Yes, Mr. President. What can I do for you?”

“Come with me.” With that, the President led him into a private conference room and closed the door. Have a seat.”

Kevin obliged, a million questions on the tip of his tongue. His curiosity must have been evident, as President Andrews smiled ruefully at him and said, “Go ahead. Ask away.”

“Ah, Mr. President, I do not know where to begin. You know I have supported you on the passage of the Top 100 Plan, though I certainly did not have the dimmest idea that it would end up as a convention of states. I’m still trying to process that one. I guess my biggest question right now concerns your comments about Congress serving a mandatory 10-year prison sentence. Being a member of Congress, well, that concerns me. I’ve done what you asked me to do, and I don’t see how I have earned ten years in prison.”

Andrews looked at him sadly. “You don’t deserve that punishment, Kevin. On the contrary, you have been more instrumental than you realize. There is great wisdom in the old adage about letting a thousand guilty people go free than to punish a single innocent person, and that is one of the things that make this so hard for me. Honestly, I know there are men and women in Congress who are straight-up, good folk. They are model citizens and they don’t deserve this. But I don’t know of any other way to accomplish this without causing, as they say, ‘collateral damage’. It wasn’t my desire, but I don’t see a way out.”

“But what crime have I committed? Why do I have to suffer the same fate as Killian Stark?”

It seemed incongruent for the President to look so helpless aboard his own aircraft. The most powerful man in the world was going to prison through a series of events he himself set in motion. Kevin waited for a response, a dark gloom settling over him as he sensed that his sentence had been irrevocably passed.

The President looked away for several minutes, and the only sound was a faint humming of distant engines as Air Force One sailed through the night. At length Andrews responded.

“Kevin, let me just say that everyone in Congress necessarily must go to jail, and I will join them. But you have done your country a great service, and for that I will give you exactly one piece of advice. Listen to me very carefully: When I try to hand you a check tomorrow morning, you must decline it. Don’t ask me any more questions, but trust me. Trust me when I say that you do not want that check.”

* * * * *

Day 161, July 5th, Wednesday

President Andrews strode into the office complex. How many days had he arrived at this place dreading the job before him? He had lost count, but whatever the count, today he would chalk up another one. Only today was different. He walked silently to the center and immediately received the full attention of the angry legislators. They were angry because Andrews had promised them freedom in the week leading up to Independence Day. Not only did he fail to honor that promise, he added insult to injury by failing to restore their communications. It had been the most frustrating and boring Fourth of July ever for the assemblage.

So yes, they were angry. Killian Stark caught his eye with a look that could kill. Unbridled hatred emanated from his eyes and he simply shook his head with contempt. It was a rare man who burned Killian Stark, and one day he would exact his revenge. For his part, Andrews stared at him thinking, “You think I’ve burned you? You haven’t seen anything yet.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have made many promises this year, and ironically I have come here today to make good on them.”

That caused a nearby senator to bristle. He blurted, “Well, Mr. President, you can start by....”

Andrews waved him off. “You’ll have your chance later. Whether I could ever convince you otherwise, I do regret that I did not honor the plan to give you guys your freedom last week. I also regret doing nothing about the communications issues, so I am aware that you haven’t been able to so much as watch the news for several days now. I’ll explain more but for today I shall indeed honor my promise to pay the bribe money in the sum of five million tax-free dollars to each of you for your help in crafting the legislation comprising the Top 100 Plan. The Lord knows how many laws I have broken to make this day happen, so you may as well enjoy it. I will not keep you long, but with the assistance of my team I shall stand by the door and call each of you by name. Take your check and cash it. Deposit it in a numbered account in some remote country where we’ll never see it.”

And with that, he walked to the door to stand by an assistant with 535 checks. One by one he called them by name, and one by one a hidden camera recorded President Jackson Andrews distributing bribe money stolen from the United States Treasury to each member of Congress. Some looked him in the eye and nodded a silent thanks, glad that this process was over and assuming their freedom certainly was forthcoming. Others refused even to look at him, accepting the illegal check and walking out the door without looking back.

“Killian Stark.”

The Speaker of the House walked angrily toward him, blind rage consuming him. He had no idea just how badly he was about to be burned, but the very fact that Andrews controlled him caused his blood to boil. He stood coldly before Andrews, nostrils flaring, every inclination wanting to strangle this man.

“Take it,” the President offered. He held out the check, but Stark didn’t budge. Come on, take it. Andrews fought the urge to panic. He hadn’t considered what would happen if Stark didn’t take the money.

“Go ahead, Mr. Speaker. You, too, have earned this. And let me just say that I threw in double for you.”

A flicker of greed registered in Stark’s eyes as the thought of a ten million dollar payout hit him. At last he snatched the check from Andrews’ proffered hand and exited the room. Andrews sighed, shaken.

There was one last member of Congress left in the room.

“Kevin Marks.” Kevin walked toward him but maintained his distance. He was unaware of the camera but Andrews prior warning on Air Force One the night before had told him that there was more to the scene than meets the eye. “Your check, sir.”

But Kevin took another slight step back. “No thank you, Mr. President. I cannot accept that.” And with that, Congressman Kevin Marks quietly exited the room, leaving President Andrews holding the check.

Chief of Security Mason Foley closed the doors to the conference room and stood in front of them. “It is done,” he said with a prophetic air of finality.

Andrews looked back at him and nodded. “Yes. Yes it is.” Of the 535 members of Congress, 13 had refused their check. And unknown to them, 13 had secured their lasting freedom.

* * * * *

“I would have loved being a fly on the wall when Killian Stark looked at his check and found he wasn’t given double after all.”

Andrews allowed himself a brief smile. “Yes, Ty, that must have been a moment of the most intense anger for him.”

Andrews had just returned to the White House, and the two were in the Oval Office. They were joined by Pepper Morris and Secretary of Defense Porter Steadman.

Pepper asked hesitantly. “Mr. President, how do you feel? I mean, you won.”

He shook his head and winced as if in physical pain. “It doesn’t feel like I won anything. In fact, it feels like I lost an ax fight.” No one laughed. They could tell he hated what he had done.

“Pepper, I feel terrible, that is all I feel. I gave them a bitter taste of their own medicine, tricking them just as they have tricked the American public on issues untold. Yes it was for what we believed to be the common good, and in the name of the common good I just burned nearly every last member of Congress. With every communication line thoroughly jammed and blocked, they of course still have no idea that a convention of states has convened. They have no idea the Top 100 Plan is now part of the U.S. Constitution. And they have no idea that whether they even cash their check, they will soon begin a mandatory ten-year prison sentence. So how could I possibly feel good about any of this?” No one dared to answer.

And no one dared to remind him that soon he would suffer the same fate.

* * * * *

An hour later, Mason Foley followed the President from the Oval Office to his bedroom.
“Good night, Mr. President.”

“Good night, sir.”

It was a rare moment to find the First Lady in tears, and the sight of her betrayed look made the rest of his day feel like a million bucks by comparison. He quietly shut the door behind him and placed his hands on her shoulders. She cringed, but did not pull away.

“Elena, I am so sorry. So sorry.”

She wiped a tear away and collected herself. “I had to hear about this as part of your speech yesterday. I couldn’t even look at you afterward, much less sleep beside you. This is the way you tell me? I had no idea about any of this!”

“Keeping this from you was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life, and since it started on the campaign trail it was really the secrecy that tore at me more than the bitter politics. Politics is my career, but you are my life. The reason I couldn’t share it with you is because I knew you would not be able to stomach the idea of me sacrificing ten years of my life.”

“Ten years of *our* lives,” she responded hotly.

Andrews sighed. She was right, of course. He stared at his opulent surroundings, and for a moment wished he were an insurance salesman living on Main Street and trying to find the money to pay for his daughter’s braces. What he would give for a problem that didn’t carry the weight of the nation on his shoulders. He had known this moment would come but had forced himself not to think about it. Giving Congress a taste of its own medicine was one thing, but Elena patently didn’t deserve this.

“True. Ten years is such a long time. As far as the family is concerned I guess I tried to justify it by likening it to a soldier boarding a plane to be stationed abroad. His wife knows how long he’ll be gone, but she also knows there is a chance he won’t come back. Well, I am the Commander in Chief of the armed forces, so the soldier analogy isn’t such a stretch.”

“But what about me? I am your wife, and you kept this entire plan from me from the beginning! Are you saying I won’t even be able to see you for the next ten years?”

“Of course not. There will be special arrangements made, and we have special places for political leaders who are sent to jail. My freedom of movement will be somewhat restricted, of course, but I will not be in the general prison population or even in what would look like a prison. Secret Service will be there around the clock so I’ll be guarded of course. But it will be more like house arrest than anything else. So,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes, “conjugal visits will not be a problem.”

Elena wasn’t amused. “I will decide if and when you receive conjugal visits,” she shot back.

The room was silent for a few moments as husband and wife searched for words. Finally Andrews spoke.

“Elena, I do fervently hope that you will forgive me in due time. When I first started considering the million ramifications of this crazy plan I knew it would cost me dearly. I discarded the idea outright probably half a dozen times, but it kept coming back to me. And the more I thought about it the more I realized something. I realized that this was the reason I was born. Some men are called to greatness, and I suppose history will be the judge of that. But this nation is broken. It has been ripped apart. We used to be united, now we can’t even celebrate Christmas without threats of lawsuits over the baby Jesus in a manger scene. The reason I was born was to make a last-ditch effort to save this nation before the floodgates of debt and the gargantuan size of the government literally cause the nation to collapse. If I am willing to risk my life on this, I had to be willing to risk a mere ten years.”

Elena considered this. “I will need some time to work through this, Jack. Right now I don’t even know what to say, only that I am filled with grief and oh, so many questions. The main one is, what else have you not told me?”

Andrews dropped his shoulders and forced himself to say the most terrible words he had ever uttered in his entire life. “I killed Justice Stephen Woodburn.”

Elena gasped. “You didn’t!” She collapsed on the side of the bed in shock, one hand covering her mouth as she stared at the man she thought was her husband.

“I did. Of course I didn’t do it personally but the horrible truth is that it was at my direct order, which is just as bad. Vanpelt was about to spill the beans about the truth surrounding some of the details of the firing of the Supreme Court, and it would have risked the whole Top 100 Plan. I warned them in advance that if anyone ever talked, another justice would pay, and that was supposed to keep them quiet. But Vanpelt wanted revenge and he forced my hand. I didn’t want that to happen.”

Elena closed her eyes. This was just too much. “What happened to you?”

That hurt, and Andrews winced. “Nothing happened to me. I haven’t lost my way but how else would you have done this? It is easy to say we’ll take the high moral ground and play nice even when you’re on the battlefield of Washington. And you know just what kind of battlefield this is. Under the hood there is no difference between Washington and the most war-torn city anywhere on the planet. We just have a lot of fancy cars.”

“It has torn at me so much, and I think on some level you have known something was wrong. I remember our flight on Marine One to Camp David awhile back and we were talking about spiritual matters. So much was left unresolved, but I promise you I have not forgotten that, and I haven’t changed what I stand for. Somehow I want this nation to return to Christian principles, morality, and common ground. But I feel like David trying to build the temple.”

Elena looked up at him quizzically.

I forget where it is in the Bible, but King David wanted to build the most majestic temple in Israel. It would have been the most amazing undertaking, and he had the resources to do it. But God said no. He said the task of building his temple could not be given to a warrior, which is exactly what David was. He was nothing short of a legend, and he had too much blood on his hands. So God said no, the temple couldn't be built by someone like that because it would be tainted by the memory of David's battles. So God said David's son, Solomon, would be the one to do it."

Andrews walked silently to the bed and sat down beside her, sighing with a thousand regrets. "I guess what I'm saying is that because of what I've done, I won't be the one to get this nation back on track spiritually. My heart is right, but I have lost that credibility. I will be content if the changes we've set in place prove to be strong enough to last."

* * * * *

Day 162, July 6th, Thursday

Had the President been crying? Kevin thought he looked more than simply tired. His bloodshot eyes and melancholy demeanor seemed to give him away, and it seemed that he didn't want to look at anyone. He wondered what was up. The doors to the office area closed and once again the assembled members of Congress turned their attention to their captor.

For his part, Andrews had barely slept. He wondered how anyone could do this job for eight years and not lose their mind. The pressure was enormous, and normally he had to force himself to project the strength and the proper tone for whatever the occasion demanded. Today however he was not even going to try. Today he would come clean with Congress and tell them just what kind of a sorry double-crosser he really was. Last night when Pepper Morris told him he had one, he hadn't felt the faintest bit of victory. So he wasn't here to gloat, he would just tell the truth and leave. He briefly had toyed with the idea of writing them a letter, but he had discarded that notion. That was a copout, and with ten years away from their family coming down the pike, he owed them the dignity of delivering the message in person. So here he was, and there was no sense in glossing it over or putting a good spin on it.

"I'm going to jail." He said simply.

The members of Congress looked at each other with raised eyebrows. They sensed this was no game, and no sound was made as the President collected himself.

"I uh, owe you some answers, so I came here today to wrap up some things. As far as I know this will be the last time I come here. But yes, I am going to jail, and I planned to do so from the very beginning. As I am sure you can attest, crazy things can happen on the campaign trail, and in my case, insisting that I go to jail before my first term runs out has to be the craziest thing I did. I have to assume I am the only politician ever to actually plan something like that.

Lots of politicians have gone to jail, but to plan on it?" He threw up his hands in resignation. "That takes talent," he said self-deprecatingly. "But it is the truth."

"So where do I begin? For the past few months you have of course been painstakingly writing the Top 100 Plan. But I only wanted you to write it, not pass it. I never expected you to honor your commitment because you would lose too much power. And yet, it is power that doesn't rightly belong in your hands, and I genuinely feel that as a body, you aren't able to handle that level of power. It needs to be transferred back to the states, which up to this point have quietly paid the terrible price for what you do in Washington. So I never really expected you to sign it. Instead, while you worked on the legislation I very quietly lined up support at the state level for something the nation has never done before. And that is to have a Convention of States under the sanction of Article V."

Audible gasps could be heard. This wasn't a stupid crowd, and in a sense, the phrase 'Article V' represented the sum of all fears for this Congress. Short of a bloody revolution, it was the only thing that had the power to upset the opulent apple cart that Congress had built. Andrews noticed several looks of genuine alarm, but even that failed to give him any satisfaction. He continued.

"I am quite positive that you would not like it if the states were to become so angry with you that they would exercise the power the founders gave them. I imagine that would be your worst nightmare. And in fact, that is exactly what has happened. Over the July 4th weekend, a valid Convention of States was duly held in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The state delegates had already reviewed and intensively debated the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of the Top 100 Plan. No detail was taken for granted, and everything was considered with the utmost of care. But though you haven't admitted it, the nation was hanging by a thread in more ways than one, and the time for quick fixes has long passed. Unanimously, on July Fourth, the state delegates approved the passage of the Top 100 Plan essentially as a super-amendment to the Constitution. With minor changes, the legislation you crafted has become part of the highest law of the land."

Andrews paused to look at the shocked faces. They knew him too well by now to ask if he was joking, and he allowed himself a certain satisfaction for pulling off the impossible, even if he had been forced to use some underhanded means to do so.

"Of course, you had no idea of this due to some unfortunate technical glitches in the office complex here. But even if you weren't aware of it, you most certainly were aware of the bribe money I offered you. Hidden camera recorded each of you accepting the five million dollar checks, and that same camera recorded me handing them to you. Now you may remember that part of the Top 100 Plan provided that any President, and indeed, any federal employee, who either confesses to, or is convicted of, a serious crime, shall serve a mandatory ten-year prison sentence. You'll further recall that you no longer have authority to police yourselves; that authority has been given to a true civilian panel. These civilians reside in the states who have just sent the strongest message possible that they unanimously support this plan, warts and all. So the chance of you avoiding conviction is virtually nil, and though the choice certainly is yours, you would be wise to bypass the panel, confess the crimes which have already been recorded on video, and get the sentence started."

“The states have passed the laws you would have refused to pass, and because you in fact knowingly accepted bribe money after its passage, you in fact violated the law. You therefore would not be able to claim ex post facto,” referring to the Constitution’s prohibiting of punishing someone for something that was legal at the time the action was committed.

“Simply put, you violated the Constitution, and your ten-year sentence can begin just as soon as you like. The 13 souls among you who refused the bribe money are free to leave. You have served your country during this time, and you may continue to do so. Only remember to serve with the highest levels of integrity, lest you qualify for that prison sentence at some point down the road.”

“I will work out the details of my own timing, but what I have done, I have done. As is the case with you, I will pay for my crimes in full. Every last day.”

* * * * *

Kevin nearly collided with Cameron as he ran up the stairs to share the news about his unexpected freedom. “I’m free!” he nearly yelled. He had already enjoyed far more freedom than his colleagues, so he really couldn’t imagine how elated the 12 other members were as they collected their meager personal effects and caught the first flight home to be with their families. He was just so glad that chapter of his life was over, and his freedom of movement no longer carried any restrictions. “Maybe we can fly to the Bahamas for a few days,” he said excitedly.

“Well, while you were driving home making plans for a quick vacation, the rest of the nation watched *YouTube* videos of the crimes of Congress. Saying those videos have gone viral doesn’t begin to cut it.”

“Huh?”

Cameron smiled and couldn’t resist teasing him. “So it really is true that Congress doesn’t have a clue?” She led him to the office and played the video again. “It appears that over the past few months, in addition to all the stuff you guys have been working on, the President has found some rather serious dirt on a select handful of legislators. Since he had so much proof, he basically promised him that they wouldn’t be punished if they signed formal confessions, which was handled by the Deputy Attorney General.”

“Penelope Castle?” I haven’t met her, but I certainly know who she is.

“Well, it looks like those meetings were recorded, and the videos were leaked earlier today. The complete video and unabridged transcripts are now floating around on the Internet for the world to see. And boy are these videos trending like crazy!”

“Wow! I wonder who leaked this?” Kevin stood transfixed as he absorbed the details of one of his colleagues who had admitted to a conspiracy to directly steal about sixteen million dollars of taxpayer funds for his own personal use.

“I don’t know, but it was clear these guys had no clue this was coming. Apparently they thought they were getting off the hook with a private confession, only it isn’t private at all now. But at least they don’t have to go to jail.”

“Actually, they do, even if it isn’t for these specific crimes.” It suddenly dawned on Kevin who had authorized the leak. President Andrews had arranged for the confessions as part of his grand plan to show America just how corrupt its leaders were. Even though any legal document would have given them immunity from prosecution for the specific crimes to which they had confessed, it was a moot point. They would still go to prison for accepting President Andrews’ bribe money. He shook his head at the ingenuity of the plan. America had been lulled to sleep, drunk on the perpetual entitlements coming from the land of milk and honey that was Washington, DC. Only the milk had spoiled and the honey ran out. The bitter truth, at long last, was now known, and an angry electorate would soon hit the streets in protest.

Ironically, being held in an office complex and guarded by Marines might be the safest scenario for Congress.

Chapter 29

“The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”
–Amendment 10, United States Constitution

Three Years Later

Kevin welcomed David Herd into his office and gave him a hearty handshake. “How have you been doing?”

“Doing well. I’m enjoying our monthly lunches. Today is Chinese day, so get your chopsticks on.”

Kevin smiled. “Chinese is good.” The two friends quickly dug into their meal and talked about sports for a while. When the last bit of chicken fried rice had been put away, Kevin discarded the trash and sat down again.”

“So, David, did you handle the Snipes matter?”

Herd smiled. “Indeed. Now that the entire fiasco is over, things have settled down, and we know for a fact that all of the files have been either gathered or destroyed, the time certainly has come for a certain Hal Snipes to stand trial. Only he won’t be seeing the inside of a courtroom.”

“Yep. I just hope you were quite careful, since I don’t want to see you doing a ten-year stint in prison, either. You remain a federal employee, after all.”

“Ah, careful doesn’t even begin to describe it. But honestly, the idea wasn’t even mine. I still maintain close contact with plenty of the best hackers in the land. We talk shop on the most advanced techniques around, and it keeps us all on the cutting edge. China hasn’t messed with us again but we know they’re out there and if nothing else, we may one day have to band together against them again.”

“True. So what did your friend suggest?”

“Well, it was a group of elite hackers, we got together one evening and the subject came up of how Project Omniscience was never discovered from a technical standpoint. I mean, they must have had some serious chops to be able to maintain that level of secrecy. Anyway, during the discussion one of the guys asked about the details of what Snipes did. He didn’t know your name of course but he had heard that Snipes had recorded sensitive discussions about a number of members of Congress, and I told them what I could.”

“Were they mad?”

“Livid is more like it. These guys aren’t saints, Kevin, and I could smell trouble brewing in a heartbeat. But seeing as they were intent on destroying this guy, I thought why not let them? So I told them I would have nothing to do with it in any shape or form, and I didn’t want to hear about the matter ever again.”

“So what are they going to do?”

“In essence, every government-hating hacker in the country will be enlisted to make his life permanently miserable. They’ll basically rotate in an endless scheme to steal Snipes’ identity at regular intervals. They’ll nickel and dime him, snoop on him, and make his life miserable for the rest of his days. The guy won’t even be able relieve himself without fear of a hidden camera snapping a photo that will be uploaded to his *Facebook* account.”

“Wow. Talk about poetic justice.”

“That’s exactly what it is. So in all honesty, I didn’t have anything to do with it, but I can say for a fact that he will pay dearly for his crimes. In fact, his career in computers probably is over.”

“How so?”

“These guys will hound him even at work. They’ll find ways to make it look like he bungled his work. Maybe some critical backups will be lost, maybe his boss will find evidence of embezzlement, and the list goes on and on. Even if he chooses never to break the law again, this will be his lot for the damage he has wrought against so many innocents. So it isn’t likely he’ll be able to hold down a meaningful computer job for too long. But he’s not the only one paying penance. What about Congress? How are they enjoying life in prison?”

“I don’t imagine they are enjoying it at all,” Kevin responded. They couldn’t exactly have been placed in a regular prison, as not one of them would have lasted a month. That would have been cruel and unusual punishment. So I thought it was a stroke of genius for President Andrews to simply convert the office complex into a semi-permanent prison. I hear the Marines are asking for a turn at guarding them, in fact.”

David laughed. “Yeah, I can imagine how that would bring them some satisfaction after so many of them had hung them or their relatives in the armed forces out to dry. Bitter feelings remain about so many veterans being unable to get basic healthcare during a time when illegal aliens seemed to be given an all-you-can-eat buffet of free healthcare. I’m not xenophobic but that’s wrong right there. Our veterans and their families deserve way better.”

“I agree. Anyway, with the deck stacked so strongly against them, Congress of course decided to go ahead and get their sentences started. They signed their confessions, resigned their seats, and worked their last day ever as an elected official, at least in this country. The taxpayers were of course upset that they got to keep their five million dollars, at least until they read the rest of the Top 100 Plan. They must have howled with laughter when they realized that convicted federal employees must foot the bill for their own room and board. So with the estimated cost to taxpayers being half a million dollars a year, after ten years “funding” their own prison sentence, they’ll be left with nothing from the five million.”

“Say what you want about Andrews,” David said with a sigh. “But no one can deny he has gone a long way toward cleaning up this town. I never believed it possible.”

Kevin reflected sadly on the world of hurt perpetrated by those men and women who had so thoroughly abused their office and the trust of their constituents. “Poetic justice, indeed.”

* * * * *

Vice President Ty Kennedy entered the oval office and shook hands with Andrews. “Good morning, Mr. President.”

“We’ve been over that...” Andrews rolled his eyes.

“Yes, but today is the last day I will have the opportunity to address you as President. So indulge me, old friend.”

Andrews nodded his head in appreciation. “Well said, then. So this is it.”

Kennedy agreed. “Yes, it would seem so. I am on record for saying this but honestly, I would rather see you run again and keep this office for another four years. And most of America would agree with me.”

“I do appreciate that, Ty. And the irony is that according to the polls, 63% of registered voters would vote for me if the election were held today. But, of course, I am no longer eligible. Well, I accomplished what I set out to accomplish, and as I’ve said before, that will be enough. I will be content if you carry on what we have started. A tough road lies ahead, and I shall be rooting for you.”

Andrews walked over and stood before the painting of Paul Revere. With a tear in his eye, he reached up and carefully lowered the artwork, studying its beauty with blurry eyes. “Do you think they’ll let me hang this picture on my wall in prison?”

Ty Kennedy paused, unsure of how to respond. “Mr. President, I imagine that they would be quite fine with that.”

“I hope so. Truly I do.”

Chapter 30

“Have you honestly forgiven me?”

Elena sighed and wrapped her arms around her husband’s neck. “Yes, Jack. You know I have forgiven you. Well, at least as long as you promise never again to keep a secret from me.”

The movers were scheduled to arrive any moment, and Jack and Elena Andrews had slept in their presidential bedroom for the last time. Surveying their surroundings, she whispered. “I’ll miss this place.”

“Me, too,” Andrews replied honestly. “It has been a great ride. I genuinely have enjoyed the honor of holding this job, even with all the insanity I injected into it.” He paused soberly. “Of course, we both know I will pretty much be unemployable for the rest of my life.”

Elena closed her eyes and once again fought the urge to panic. “I am still so afraid there won’t be enough for us. We have exactly \$1.8 million in assets right now, so I need you to write a book from prison. Make it a best-seller so we can avoid bankruptcy. I don’t want to be the first ‘first couple’ to file bankruptcy. We’ll have enough footnotes in history as it is.”

“Actually I wouldn’t be the first president to file bankruptcy. Jefferson, Grant, McKinley, and even Abe Lincoln are ahead of us in that regard. But to your question, Elena, yes. Yes I promise never again to keep a secret from you. So I suppose that at this time I should come clean and share with you the final secret.”

“Oh no. Please, no.” She shut her eyes again.

“Ah, but this one you’ll be relieved to hear. Yes, I’ll have to pay for my room and board during prison, and due to the added security I’ll be given, it will be quite a bit more than the half million a year Congress is paying. But that \$1.8 million is safe, no one will be touching that. I promise.”

“But how?”

“And there’s the secret. When we took all that money that would be given to Congress as bribe money, let’s just say I took a little extra. So don’t worry about the finances, I took enough to pay my own way through prison. It probably will ring up to the tune of about five million annually, maybe six. So you need to know there are enough accounts both domestically and offshore to cover everything we will need. I’ll do what I can about that best-seller, but we’ll be earning 10% off enough millions that you will never again have to worry.”

“But won’t you have to give it all back?”

Andrews shook his head. “Ah, but you have forgotten. Remember, they won’t be able to touch the rest of it because my 10 years in the tank completely clears the charges against me, both past and future, related to anything I confess to. My signed confession includes bribery, extortion, theft, embezzlement, misappropriation, and just about any other criminal term you can think of. I did it for the good of the nation and for anyone who wants to question that in light of the untold millions I’m taking, I planned the sacrifice of ten years of my own freedom long before I figured out how to pay for it. But if innumerable men and women have given the ultimate sacrifice of their very lives on the battlefields for this great nation, then I am willing to sacrifice what is probably a third of the rest of my life in prison. I just hope a future president doesn’t conspire with Congress to undo everything I’ve worked for.”

Elena was blown away. “I somehow doubt that will happen for a very long time. Ty Kennedy will make a great president, and I have good reason to believe America is ready for some positive change.” She paused, suddenly uncertain again. “But about the money. I’m of course relieved that we’ll have enough, but I don’t know that I can live off of stolen money. What if I want to give it all back?”

“In some form or other, I expect you to give it all back,” Andrews replied. Remember when I told you that I had lost the credibility to lead this nation spiritually? Well, you haven’t.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you need to go ahead and start the Elena Andrews Foundation to Restore America. The people trust you, and you’ll need millions of dollars to get that ball rolling. Imagine the good you can do, and imagine the hope you can bring. You have the heart for it, and now you have the resources. Think of it as taking a very bad situation and turning it into something very, very good.”

“Maybe.” Her eyes brightened at the possibilities. “We could focus on rebuilding families, coming together in unity as a nation, restoring racial harmony...” her voice trailed off.

“And of course at some point I would need for you to offer me a job. Any job, any title would be fine for this old jailbird.”

“Well, it sure as heck won’t be ‘President’”, she quipped.

Andrews smiled and hugged her. “You are going to be fine. *We* are going to be fine.”

Chapter 31

“We have a positive vision of the future founded on the belief that the gap between the promise and reality of America can one day be finally closed. We believe that.” –Barbara Jordan

President Andrews stepped out of the limo and into the chilly Virginia afternoon. He thought he would dread this day, and yet his soul was lighter than ever. The weight of the world had lifted, his job done. Mason Foley opened the door on the other side of the limo and helped Pepper Morris to her feet. He and his team surveyed the surroundings yet again, though there were no dangers within a mile. This would be Jack Andrews’ home for the next ten years.

Pepper walked to his side and sighed. “I admire you for this.”

“Don’t. I haven’t earned your admiration.”

“We’ll let history be the judge of that.”

“Perhaps. I admit to you that I did all this with a good heart and good intentions. But you know what they say about good intentions. I’m just glad that we were able to pull this off and bring about many of the changes this nation needed most. I really wish there had been a better way, honest I do.”

Pepper walked closer and hugged him. “I know.” She sighed, finally letting him go. “It is hard to believe that a man of your character and integrity actually got elected President. Tell me again how you managed to convince America to elect you.”

To which Andrews replied, “I didn’t, and they didn’t.” At Pepper’s puzzled expression, he continued, “I think the actual vote was a little under 17 million, far short of the 42 million I am given credit for. But thanks to some unparalleled technical genius and quite a lot of luck, we literally stole the election.” The President stared silently at the ground for a full minute, genuinely amazed at the fact that his scheme hadn’t been detected at the outset and grateful that he hadn’t been fed alive to the 535 alligators living in the pits of Congress before he cleaned house. This would go down in the record books as the greatest hoax ever perpetrated, far eclipsing anything to date.

“Now Pepper, I have been waiting for just the right time to give you a parting gift. Since this is the last time I will see you, I should do this now. Here’s a little check from my personal bank account for your enormous support. You have been with me from the beginning, and truly history would not have been changed without you. From my heart to yours, thank you. You are a jewel.”

Jaws agape, Pepper watched in shocked silence as Andrews slowly disappeared down the walkway and around a corner to begin his sentence. How on Earth did he pull that off? Why, that’s impossible! Then remembering the unmarked envelope in her hands, she quickly opened it. Staring unbelievably, her shaking hands held a check for the sum of one million dollars, drawn from President Andrew’s personal checking account. Numb with disbelief, Pepper nonetheless smiled at his gutsy move and marveled at the thought that she was an eyewitness to a man who changed the course of American history forever.

And then she threw her head back and laughed.

* * * * *

Epilogue

This is a work of fiction. The Top 100 Plan is not my grand plan for America, and in practice some of the ideas depicted herein would backfire. But the frustrations President Andrews expressed throughout the book are very real and represent many of the frustrations scores of millions of hard-working, generous Americans have expressed from sea to shining sea.

While the plot is fiction, great care has been taken throughout the work to ensure historical accuracy, and I certainly have learned more about constitutional law than my teachers and professors ever dared to hope. But the truth is that the drama and plot herein are wholly unnecessary. The founding fathers fully intended for the states to hold Congress in check, by an Article V-sanctioned convention if need be, and it is a shame that this has not happened. The success of previous power grabs has emboldened Congress to the point where they no longer feel threatened by anything, but the truth is that we have always had the power to keep them in check.

The direct election of senators and the presidential term limit are dual testaments of the power of the states to make application for a convention. Both sets of applications resulted in nothing short of an amendment to the Constitution. So not only does this remind us of the enormous powers wielded by the states, it also testifies that this is how things are supposed to work. Congress is not supposed to grab power but to represent their constituents with dignity and with at least a reasonable concern for the common good. And when things don't work out that way, the founders' thorough experience and understanding of the principles of interstate convention provide for the balance of power to swing back toward the states which undergird the federal government.

State applications for convention are not rare; scores of such applications have in fact been made, and yet the states seem to have forgotten the power of unity. It is fair to say Congress has sensed this weakness and has simply stopped responding. Regarding such applications:

“Congress proved less responsive to later application campaigns, particularly those to limit its own power or the power of federal judges. For example, Congress stonewalled when, during the 1960s, thirty-three states applied for a convention to partially reverse Supreme Court decisions requiring all state legislative chambers to be apportioned solely by population. Congress was similarly unmoved when state legislatures repeatedly applied for an amendment requiring a balanced federal budget... [Additionally], thirty-two of the necessary thirty-four states were at one time on record for a balanced budget... [which Congress obviously never honored].”*

Wait – 32 states demanded a specific, common-sense act of fiscal responsibility and Congress mocked their demands? This is a cold reminder of the decision of a certain group of patriotic citizens who once separated from England and formed a new republic. As our Declaration of Independence sets forth, “In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.” Those founders had played by the British rules and had exhausted every peaceful option before taking matters into their own hands. Today, Americans have exhausted every opportunity. For the solution we must turn to the last remnants of the Constitution which have not yet been shredded.

Friend, at heart I am neither Republican nor Democrat, neither Libertarian nor Independent. Ask me to describe myself and I might say that I am a God-fearing believer in the American spirit, and if you share those two fundamental traits then we share enormous common ground. I do believe in the principles for which our forefathers fought and died. It is not perfect and has never been so, but upon a proper study of the available alternatives, I unapologetically conclude that America is by far the best. If, indeed, Jefferson penned those words suggesting that opposition to the wrongs of one's government being the highest form of patriotism, then this work is my contribution toward increasing the interest in setting things straight. It is not rebellion that we should require our leaders to humbly honor the principles of the republic which affords them office.

The truth is the drama of this novel is wholly unnecessary to effect change. All it takes is for 34 state delegations to sign a document, and but for a few mechanics and guiding principles, we have our government back in check. If you are frustrated with your leaders and cynical about our prospects, I encourage you to join the growing movement toward a convention of states.

Visit www.ConventionOfStates.com and find out for yourself that maybe this book isn't so fictional after all.

*Natelson, Robert G. *A Compendium for Lawyers and Legislative Drafters*. Rep. Citizens for Self-Governance, n.d. Web. 16 Aug. 2014. <https://www.i2i.org/files/2014/04/Compendium-2.2.pdf>, hyperlink last verified on August 22, 2016. See page 11, including the footnote.

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