

**THE  
KEYSTONE  
FILE**  
*Part 1*

A Jack Houston St. Clair Thriller  
Andrew Delaplaine

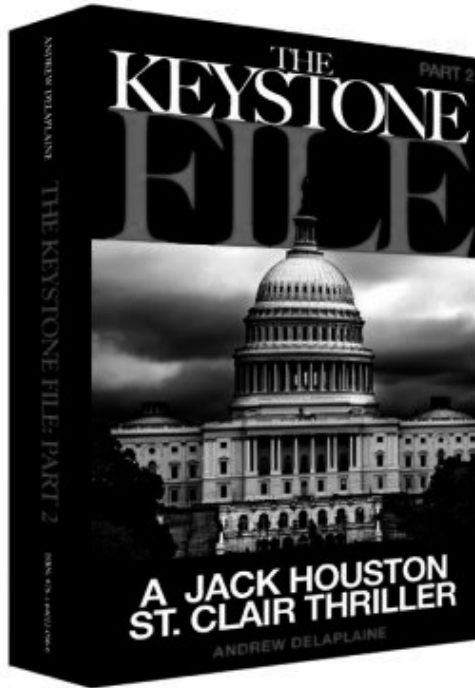


**Series Reading Order**

The Keystone File—Parts 1-7  
After the Oath – Day One  
After the Oath – March Winds  
Wedding at the White House  
A Long Day's Journey

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The action moves to Washington as the adrenalin level jumps dramatically in Part 2 of THE KEYSTONE FILE.



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1. <https://adelaplaine.us18.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=891cfd336d2649a62e3a50a07&id=8f0b8bd5fa>

A list of the author's other travel guides, as well as his political thrillers and titles for children, can be found at the end of this book.

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## ANDREW DELAPLAINE

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERSIn the White House

**Jeffrey Norwalk**, Republican President of the United States

**Eric Stathis**, Chief of Staff

**Phil Slanetti**, Aide for Congressional Liaison

In the Republican Campaign

**Sam Houston St. Clair**, Governor of Florida, Republican Candidate for President

**Jack Houston St. Clair**, his eldest son

In the Democratic Campaign

**Frederick B. Thurston**, Senator from Michigan, Democratic candidate for President

In the Congress

**Lamar LeGrand Perryman** of Virginia, Speaker of the House of Representatives

**Matt Hawkins**, Democratic Congressman-elect of Wyoming

In the Diplomatic Corps

**Lord Harold Ellsworth**, British Ambassador

**Fyodor Z. Kornilevski**, Russian ambassador

Other Principal Characters

**Patricia Vaughan**, prominent socialite

**Ramona Fuentes**, prominent lawyer in Miami

**Babylon Fuentes**, her daughter, lover to Jack

**Raven Fuentes**, her older sister and Jack's former lover

**Lieutenant Rafael St. Clair**, Jack's younger brother, first officer in the USCGC *Fearless*

**Derek Gilbertson**, member of the Fuentes law firm, former husband to Raven

**Omer Flores**, undercover DEA agent

**Laurencio Duarte**, undercover DEA agent

**Vlad Kucherov**, owner of the Kremlin Club on South Beach

**Article Two of the Constitution**

“The Electors shall meet in their respective States, and vote by Ballot for two Persons, of whom one at least shall not be an Inhabitant of the same State with themselves. And they shall make a List of all the Persons voted for, and of the Number of Votes for each; which List they shall sign and certify, and transmit sealed to the Seat of the Government of the United States, directed to the President of the Senate.

“The President of the Senate shall, in the Presence of the Senate and House of Representatives, open all the Certificates, and the Votes shall then be counted.

“The Person having the greatest Number of Votes shall be the President, if such Number be a Majority of the whole Number of Electors appointed; and if no Person have a Majority, the said House of Representatives shall in like Manner choose the President. **But in choosing the President, the Votes shall be taken by States, with each State having one Vote.”**

THE KEYSTONE FILE  
PART 1

## PROLOGUE

“Matthew Hawkins, please, the White House calling.”

Matt felt a growl come from his stomach. He knew it was a hunger pang, but he felt a sudden nausea come over him.

“Uh...”

“Is this Mr. Hawkins?”

“Yes... Is this some kind of prank?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, who the hell wants to talk to me from the White House?”

He shot a suspicious look at Jack Houston St. Clair, who shook his head and held out his hands and shrugged as if he didn't know *anything* about this.

“The President,” came the measured response from a White House operator who had heard the same reaction before.

Matt's mind went numb at the sound of the words: THE PRESIDENT. His eyes glazed over and he stared straight ahead, almost unaware what was happening, what he was hearing.

“*The President?*” he mumbled.

“Yes, sir. Please hold while I connect you.”

Matt stood still, looking down at the phone on the table below him, frowning, suddenly overcome with a case of nervousness mixed with his hunger. His head floated with the feeling, like a smoker's first cigarette in the morning.

“Matt Hawkins?”

“Yes, uh, yes, this is he,” he replied, suddenly coming to. He knew that husky voice.

“This is President Norwalk, Matt. I'm sorry to ask you on such short notice, but would it be possible for you to come see me?”

“See you, sir, I mean, Mr. President?”

“Yes.”

“Uh, when should I come?”

“As soon as you can. Right now if you can.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, Matt,” said Norwalk a little impatiently. *“If you can.”*

“Oh, yes, sir, I can come now.”

“I’m not interrupting you, am I?” asked Norwalk.

“No, Mr. President, I’m just here with Jack Houston St. Clair. He’s been trying to—”

“Trying to get you to vote for his dad, right?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Well, tell him I’ve got his dad sitting outside my office. Why don’t you just bring Jack along with you?”

“All right, Mr. President, I will.”

“Good, I’ll expect you in fifteen minutes.”

Matt’s mind was in a whirl.

“At the White House, Mr. President?”

“Yes, Matt, at the White House. That’s where I have my office,” said Norwalk indulgently, quickly adding: “I can send a car.”

“No, sir. We’ll just take a taxi.”

“Very good.”

He rang off.

Matt replaced the receiver with a clatter, finding the cradle after a few seconds, feeling for it but not really seeing it.

“And you’re saying you don’t know anything about this, Jack?”

“Swear to God,” said Jack.

“He says your dad is sitting right outside the Oval Office.”

“I don’t know anything about that, either,” said Jack.

Matt gave him a skeptical look.

“He wants me to bring you over with me.”

“Fine. But did he say what he wanted?”

“Don’t you think that’s pretty obvious?”

“Yeah, he’s gonna lean on you somehow, I guess.”

“Should I go?”



“You told him you were coming.”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re gonna have to face the music eventually.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Then let’s go see what the old man has on his scheming little mind,” said Jack.

Matt turned and walked towards the door and put his hand on the knob to turn it. He opened it and stood in the doorway thinking: *What could he possibly have to say to me?* He was nervous, fearful, unsure, hesitant. Matt couldn’t believe, couldn’t comprehend that he was attracting so much attention for his one lousy vote. It simply didn’t register that *he* could be so important that the President himself would have to intervene. He was saturated with apprehension, fear and elation.

He glided to the elevator in a daze, following Jack, reached the lobby and walked outside mechanically to take a taxi. The cold air and bright sunshine outside hit him forcibly and he realized he hadn’t even put on his topcoat. He stepped into the taxi after Jack.

“Where to, bud?” asked the driver looking at him through his rearview mirror.

Matt sat in the back seat looking straight ahead.

“What?”

“*Where to?*”

“Oh yes, the White House.”

He glanced at Jack, who wore a thin smile.

Matt half thought that a magic carpet would pick him up and deposit him on the White House lawn. He didn’t notice the impressed driver’s eyebrows rise as he drove off and joined the traffic on Connecticut Avenue for the short drive to the White House.

“Well, this is a first,” said the cabbie.

“What?” asked Matt.

“Twenty-six years driving a cab in D.C. and nobody *ever*—not *once*—gets in my cab and says, ‘Take me to the White House.’ Not one single time.”

“No?”

“No. I tellya, it’s a first for me.”

“That makes three of us,” said Jack with a crooked smile.

What could he say to Norwalk when he asked him to switch his vote? Could he just say “No” to him?

Matt rolled down the window to let the freezing air in. He breathed deeply, trying to restore his senses, which remained dulled to the point of numbness all over. He decided he would just tell the President that he’d made up his mind and that he would appreciate it if the White House would let him vote his way without any interference.

He felt his weakness and hated it. He gently massaged his forehead and then pounded his head with his fist. Everything was so sudden. He should’ve put off Norwalk a day or two. But no one put off the President when he called. *You had to be ready*, thought Matt. *You had to be ready when they threw you a curve. If you couldn’t measure up, you were out. They walked all over you and you were out, out, out!*

“*Hey, mister!*” said the cabbie for the second time.

“Huh, what?”

He focused on the cabbie, who looked over the seat at him and jerked his head backwards towards his window. Matt looked out. A uniformed guard was looking in at him through the cabbie’s window.

“Your name, sir?”

“I have an appointment with the President,” said Matt.

“Yes, sir, *but what is your name?*” asked the guard, who recognized that Hawkins had never been to the White House before.

“Oh, Matthew Hawkins.”

The guard looked at Jack.

“And Jack Houston St. Clair.”

“Thank you, sir.” He consulted his clipboard. “If you’ll leave the cab, we’ll take you up from here.”

Matt paid the fare and got out. The cab made a U-turn and left the grounds. An enclosed golf cart pulled up and Matt got in after Jack.

Matt’s attention was fixed on the curving driveway ahead as the golf cart moved along it. The White House stood out massive and solid before him, the top of it seemed lost to his peripheral vision as they got closer. The cart stopped and the doors snapped open as if by magic. He fumbled his way out and followed the one of the guards who led them toward the Mansion.

They gave their names and another guard made a telephone call as they were led to a waiting room in the old part of the White House. They sat alone in a room furnished with fine antiques and carpeted with one large Persian rug.

Matt wondered why they were alone. Surely there must be others waiting to see the President.

In a moment a man entered. They stood.

“How do you do, Mr. Hawkins? And Mr. St. Clair?”

They all shook hands.

“I’m Charles Roebuck, the President’s appointments secretary.”

Matt nodded and said, “Hello.” Jack just nodded.

Matt recognized Roebuck’s face now. He remembered seeing his picture in the papers.

“Please follow me, gentlemen,” said Roebuck, moving away gracefully. They walked alongside him down a long, richly furnished corridor to the West Wing.

“The President forgot to tell you which gate to use, Mr. Hawkins. You came in the formal entrance. I had to run down here to get you,” Roebuck said affably.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Oh no, it’s nothing. He seldom meets with people who haven’t been here before. It never crops up,” said the secretary with a friendly smile.

He didn't recognize how much Hawkins felt his remark. Matt felt the unique nature of his visit. *He was a nobody*. On the same level as the Boy Scouts coming to get an award from the President. They have to be told which gate to use.

They entered the West Wing and Matt noticed how much more like a normal business office the surroundings looked, only the ceilings were high and imposing. Expensive moldings. People were coming and going until they reached the area around the Oval Office itself, which was quieter.

"I'll take you right into the Oval Office, Mr. Hawkins. The President's been expecting you," said Roebuck, approaching unprepossessing white double doors. "Mr. St. Clair, you can join your father. He's waiting in the anteroom just through that door."

"Thank you," said Jack.

"Wish me luck," Matt smiled.

Jack took a long look at the naïve Wyomingite.

"Gook luck, Matt."

Roebuck turned and opened the double doors into the Oval Office.

As Jack turned to go where he was told, he caught a glimpse of President Norwalk sitting behind his desk. A thought raced through his mind:

*He's going to eat that boy alive.*

## Part 1

### SIX WEEKS EARLIER

# Chapter 1

## *General Yin*

General Yin concluded his conversation and put the telephone down. He called the staff in. The general rose and walked around the desk. He turned and spoke with authority, but quietly, earnestly.

“I have been ordered to proceed with the operation just as it has been outlined to you. Although you are all aware that the international situation is extremely volatile, we must prepare ourselves and our units to move fast when called upon.

“You will understand, then, the highest importance our superiors are placing on political negotiations. It is with this background in mind that I again urge you all to the efficient performance of your duties. By efficient I mean quiet. Move over to the map one more time, all of you.”

Yin looked at their faces, staring down at the map. How young they were. How ignorant they were. What did they know of the blood the desert had soaked up in the old days?

The staff marveled at General Yin’s maps. Every detail was noted, every piece of artillery, every supply route. In colors alternate supply routes were marked, as well as secret depots with supplies buried in the Xinjiang desert. Many of the marks existed only on his maps.

“Comrades,” the general continued when they were all in place, “you will note the proximity of our future positions to the Kazakhstan border. You are all closely acquainted with the underground network along and near the border between our tunnels at Huocheng and the Russian buildup across the border at Zharkent. You must have all your units established underground by morning and out of sight of Russian air reconnaissance. The Russians know about the network of tunnels, but they are not sure of their location, length, size or capacity. Since the Russians have begun to build up the Kazakh border positions, Beijing wants us to be in position if they cross. While in the tunnels, we will remain on full alert. I believe you understand why we are moving now.”

The general straightened himself and turned slightly to sit on the table.

“All attention is focused on America. This has eased our position here in the Xinjiang somewhat, but as Moscow and Beijing look to Washington, we cannot expect the same thing from our counterparts across the border. Let me discuss with you the importance of this most recent concentration of Russian troops in the Kazakhstan.”

With this he looked back at his maps and bent over the table.

“If the Russians move the bulk of their troops along the border, say, above Mongolia or above Manchuria, we may be able to move out of Xinjiang very soon and leave the Regional Militia to defend the area. I have always doubted the Russian High Command would ever do this because in the north, what is it they are protecting from Chinese invasion? They are protecting the Great Siberian *Plateau*, which they neither wish to defend, nor we to attack. Across Kazakhstan, however, lies the most direct route to Moscow, through the Kazakh Hills. To the north of the Kazakh Hills lies the Great Siberian *Plain*, the heart of Russian agriculture. The Russian base, then, will remain here,” he stabbed a point on the map, “in the regional capital of Almaty. Since we have news of the Russian advance to the border town of Zharkent, we will go to our tunnels and await their movements. When they withdraw, we will withdraw.”

The general sighed, weary with the constant game of hide-and-seek he and the Russian armies played along their mutual border which, when it was the Soviet Union, stretched across the face of Asia from Afghanistan to the Koreas. It had gotten much worse since the break-up of the Soviet Union. At least then there had been one army—now there was the Russian Army as well as the independent republics’ armies, but Yin knew it was worse for the Russians coordinating maneuvers and looking out for ruffled feathers than it was for him.

General Yin remained for several minutes leaning over his map table, his eyes squinting down as he surveyed the terrain of the Kazakh Hills, the marshy area around the mouth of the Ili River and Lake Balkhash.

Suddenly he spoke to his staff again, as if having forgotten they were there.

“Report to your units.”

Placing his pencil on the map, he stood straight again. His staff came to full attention around him. He jerked his chin slightly upwards in what looked like a nervous twitch, but his staff immediately recognized they had been dismissed. They were all particularly happy to have the heavy-handed expertise of General Yin on this silent desert campaign. By staying out of politics, Yin had remained alive and in power long enough to be considered the greatest tactician in the Red Army.

The door closed behind the last of his staff, leaving the general alone. He walked over to the window behind his desk and looked out. He was a short man with fine, gray hair. He had to stand on his toes to unlock the window. Lifting it, he put his elbows on the windowsill and looked west out across the desert into the eye of the sinking sun. His military enclave was on the western outskirts of Ürümqi and his office was in a small wooden building. He saw nothing but the desert stretching out to the west. A couple of hundred miles in that direction was the Kazakhstan frontier, and beyond that the high road to Moscow, a road he had never seen except on a thousand maps all his life and a road he hoped he would never see.

A wind was getting up and the sand whipped the few brush plants that hardly obscured the general's vision as he looked into the slowly fading light of the desert. The general, so old now after many bitter and difficult campaigns, found himself reflecting that with the full moon expected tonight, the desert would be a beautiful place through which to travel. The desert would not be as safe with a full moon, but he didn't worry about that because he couldn't do anything about it. From his window, the desert was lovely in the twilight. It had not always been so lovely. Its serenity cloaked a bloody past. Yin's own father, a decorated general himself, told him stories of the slaughter in the desert, of Mao's command

to drive hundreds of thousands of fleeing peasants into the desert where they preferred to die of thirst rather than return to be butchered.

So many struggles.

General Yin knew that the Russians had upwards of three million troops and that about a million of them hovered on China's border.

Against that one million Russians, Yin had two and a half million troops ready to field with an easy three million to match the Russian reserve. But even with such a vast superiority in manpower, Yin knew he would lose a long war with the enemy. The superior Russian armor, artillery and other matériel would overwhelm the vast Chinese hosts.

He had been in the Xinjiang now for two months with occasional trips northeast to Chining where several hundred thousand men were deployed ready to march into "independent" Mongolia to stop any Russian advance from the north. In the Xinjiang his forces were made up of many old tribes and former blood enemies crushed into obedience by the current regime: Uyghurs, Kazakhs (the same tribe that largely peopled Kazakhstan), the Tajik, Huis, Mongols and Uzbeks. He had trained them well and knew they would fight hard and, if necessary, to the last man. But it hurt him to think of them going by the hundreds of thousands against strafing fire from Russian fighters because his own outnumbered air forces would be driven from the skies. There were fourteen million people in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; it was General Yin Feng-hsu's job to make sure they remained "autonomous."

The sun sank majestically over the horizon. There was a knock.

"Enter."

A colonel entered with a piece of paper.

"The final weather report, Comrade General."

"Yes," said Yin, not raising his head, which he cupped in the palms of his hands as he leaned on the windowsill.

"Sunset," reported the colonel, "will be in three and one-half minutes, there will be no rain, clear skies, but wind up to fifteen mile per hour gusts. And a full moon."



“No rain. And yet this entire operation, the coming war itself is all about water. Water, water, water—and here we are in the middle of the desert to fight for water.”

The general laughed. The colonel laughed with him, having no idea what the general was laughing about.

“Yes,” said the general, looking out into the desert. He turned quickly and suddenly from the window. This sudden movement surprised the colonel, but General Yin didn’t notice the colonel’s surprise, for his mind was elsewhere. On an afterthought, the general turned around, lowered the window and stood on his toes and locked it. He turned back to his desk and began to collect his papers.

“Ten minutes after the official sunset time, Comrade Colonel, you will issue orders to all units to move out.”

“Yes, Comrade General.”

“As soon as you have done that, return here with the staff and help me with my papers and maps. We must move rapidly to be in place by morning, Colonel.”

General Yin turned for a final look at the sinking sun.

“It is time.”

## Chapter 2

### *General Tulevgin*

About three hundred fifty miles northwest of General Yin, Field Marshal Vladimir Tulevgin was riding south towards the Xinjiang border. Under the field marshal's direct command were one and a half million of Russia's three million troops. They were scattered along the fourteen hundred mile long border that the former Soviet Union (and now the independent republics) shared with China. He had well over half a million troops at his immediate disposal in Kazakhstan alone.

Surprising the officers of his senior staff, Field Marshal Tulevgin abruptly ordered the driver to pull over to the side of the road out of the way of the troop transports, tanks and trucks which continued to move south. Several cars containing the rest of the staff pulled over in turn.

The officers poured out of the big JDV-80 cars and watched with intense interest as their leader ordered a portable table set up and his maps laid out. They watched as this hulk of a man removed his hat and put it, together with his baton, on the table beside the maps. He had a head of gloriously furry hair, which made his already overbearing six-foot-four-inch height seem staggering. The sixty-five year old field marshal, an oft-decorated hero, stood hunched over the table with both hands, palms down, on the maps. His greatcoat fell heavy and massive from his high shoulders to the ground.

Any wandering minds were quickly brought back to the present moment as Tulevgin slowly straightened himself. As he stood, he revealed a twisted frown on his face that scarcely concealed the fury inside him.

Tulevgin had many things on his mind. He was angry, threatened, uninformed, frustrated, beset with tedium – but also excited. He was angry because he'd been forced to meet with elected officials in Almaty that morning, and with others in the national capital of Astana the morning before. He'd been ordered by Moscow to keep the local officials informed on his movements.

What could officials in Almaty or Astana do for him except waste his time and get in his way?

But he agreed to the meeting so he wouldn't ruffle any feathers in Moscow. The local officials didn't know what to ask and since Field Marshal Tulevgin offered nothing to them in the way of information about troop movements or activities or plans, he and his staff simply ate breakfast with the local government and promptly filed out of the hall, into their JDV-80 military cars, and away to the airport where Tulevgin flew far north to inspect some installations before driving south by car and ordering the advance to Zharkent.

Tulevgin was threatened because recent messages from Moscow seemed to shift much of the burden for the solution of the entire Chinese problem to his shoulders. He was in a quandary. He couldn't move forward beyond Zharkent and he couldn't move back. There was of course no need to move back because the Chinese were not moving forward and weren't about to do so, thought Tulevgin, so long as their crazed superiors in Beijing kept their heads about them. He was well aware at this stage political negotiations mattered much more than military movements. And yet, he was extremely uneasy about his position because he had ambitions, political ambitions, far beyond his present status in the military, which already conferred upon him enough political power to acquire the envy of many shrewd and devious men. Tulevgin firmly decided to return to Moscow as soon as the American position became a little clearer.

The field marshal felt uninformed and desperately lacking any new information from his intelligence unit. Moscow had ordered an all but complete cessation of air reconnaissance flights over Chinese territory until the Kremlin could be surer about the American position. The Kremlin didn't want to take the blame for any accidents that might happen because the already aggravated international situation could not be strained any further. Tulevgin was limited to a handful of air reconnais-

sance missions per day along the entire fourteen hundred mile border. This crippled him.

He was aware that General Yin was in Ürümqi, or on the outskirts of it somewhere in a desert tunnel, but he only felt sure of this because he kept his own whereabouts quite publicized. With the Russian military advantage, he felt sure that Yin would be following him wherever he trekked, up and down the long, long border, fearing that trouble could not be far from Tulevgin's headquarters. He was aware of the tunnel network near Huocheng, but he lacked much information on that network. It was built in the 1950s when China and Russia enjoyed better relations, and the Russians at that time didn't quite see how they could investigate without making the whole inquiry look a little bit unseemly.

Looking at the long-range situation, however, Tulevgin was more frustrated about the strategy worked out some years ago in the Kremlin. The bulk of Russian military strength was centered in the northern part of the Kazakh Republic so that quick swings could be made to reinforce other units defending the Kazakh Hills to the south and the Great Siberian Plain to the direct north, both of which areas the Kremlin considered vital for the country to survive a prolonged attack. This, true as it was, still placed the Russian Army in an unenviable position of having to counterattack into the heart of the Xinjiang, one of the great arid wastes of Asia. As a long-term danger, this annoyed the field marshal.

On top of this the man was just plain bored with running up and down the long border day after day, week after week, month after month. Yes, he thought to himself, as soon as the Kremlin knows more about the American position, he would get firm orders to move.

He stopped pacing and faced his staff, addressing them with superfluous stiffness.

"We will continue towards Zharkent near the Xinjiang frontier and we will proceed to establish our headquarters there." Two colonels looked at each other and shrugged. Then Tulevgin walked back to his map, looked at it briefly, grunted, took up his hat and placed it on his

head, scooped up his baton and struck the table twice with it. While the field marshal returned to his car, two officers collected the maps as another folded the table. In a moment all the cars were back in the column of onrushing vehicles, but this time their lights were on, for dusk had fallen while the field marshal paced. In his car, Tulevgin asked his chief of staff what time he thought they would get to Zharkent. The COS said in about an hour and a half. Tulevgin thought that was excellent, because he wanted to get plenty of sleep that night so he could inspect the Chinese border personally the next morning.

## Chapter 3

### *In the Capitals*

Meanwhile, the forbidding walls of the Kremlin were topped with snow. Inside, the President met in secret session with his closest advisors to discuss the current deterioration of relations between Moscow and Beijing. Also on the agenda was the position of the American government. Nothing was decided. The conversation throughout centered on monumental “ifs.” It was determined that the group would meet again the next morning in secret session to discuss the outcome of the American election.

Back in his office, the President sent a top secret scrambled cable to the Russian ambassador to the United States, Fyodor Z. Kornilevski. It read in part, “You will notify us, as previously requested, of any and all significant developments tonight and tomorrow morning. Owing to the extreme delicacy of the international situation at the present time, we require that you do anything you are able to do—including extreme measures—to forward our position in this matter.” Then the President, after a brief meeting with his foreign minister, went home to bed.

The winter sun had set in Moscow.

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In Cairo that afternoon an important CIA agent met one of his operatives in a little-known coffee bar off Marigalzu Avenue. Information was received and orders given as the senior agent mopped the perspiration off his forehead with a white handkerchief. Then they talked just like two ordinary persons who might be interested in the latest political developments in Egypt.

In the Middle East at this moment there were some interesting political decisions being formulated. On this day there had been a summit meeting the Arab League to discuss how they would react to events occurring in Russia, the United States and China. What this meant to

everyone in the world was the ultimate destination of the vast Middle Eastern oil reserves necessary to everyone in the world, and certainly vital to any nation that hoped to remain dominant.

\* \* \*

In Paris, the President of France met briefly with his minister for foreign affairs in the Elysée Palace. Back in the ministry building, the minister dictated a dispatch to his ambassador in Washington. When he left his office it was night and he was already late for a reception at the Polish Embassy.

\* \* \*

In London, the foreign minister had just concluded the dictation of a similar note to his government's representative in Washington before heading out to meet his wife for a concert (another dull Mahler symphony) at Royal Albert Hall.

## Chapter 4

### *Deadlock!*

In all centers of political and military power, every practiced eye was directed to the United States on this night. These eyes always regarded the United States with close attention, but every fourth November that attention turned into zealous scrutiny. For all day long in the United States was General Election Day. No one at home or abroad had been able to make any decisions all day. Individuals waited, emperors, princes, kings and Presidents and their ministers of state the world around watched silently, their policies in abeyance; armies stood quietly; governments paused to observe while America voted.

The excitement and tension in an American election came not during the polling, as it does in unstable countries, but in the tabulation of the votes. The artificial drama that came from merely counting votes seemed to grow more intense with each passing election.

By 2 A.M., there was no declared winner. Almost everyone in the United States not yet asleep watched TV. People who didn't ordinarily watch TV had put down their books or esoteric magazines to sit goofy-eyed inches from their sets. Even honeymooning couples found something more important than themselves—on TV. No one in America had ever lived through what was happening.

The bleary-eyed anchor on NBC News, Aaron Cross, was speaking, listening into his earpiece at the same time.

"I've just been informed that our computer has predicted the outcome of the Presidential race in Oklahoma, New Jersey and California, the last states to come in," he said. The camera cut to each state's figures on the tabulation board. Checkmarks appeared suddenly by a candidate's name. The camera then cut to the master board that showed cumulative popular voting and Electoral College tallies. The anchor's voice spoke over the picture before the camera cut back to him.



“According to our figures, and I don’t believe what I’m saying, *there appears to be a tie for President!*” As he said those words, he imagined a great breathless hush spreading across the land. “We are having all our computer predictions checked to be sure we haven’t made a mistake.” His voice was rushed and excited. “*The Electoral College is deadlocked!*” he said emotionally. “*There is no winner!*”

He called on Chuck Todd, the NBC News political director, to help him explain to the American people the peculiar legal technicality that could produce such an unheralded, unexpected and exasperating deadlocked election. (Producers in the control booth hurriedly scanned their list of experts to find people with knowledge about this esoteric conundrum.)

Chuck Todd, meanwhile, sat somber-faced before the cameras and explained that without a majority in the Electoral College, neither candidate could win the election. Of course, one candidate was ahead of the other in the *popular* vote, but under the American system, that didn’t matter.

Most of their listeners had heard of the Electoral College at one time or another, but most didn’t know what role it played.

“According to the Constitution,” was a phrase Americans heard over and over all night. The experts explained that the Constitution directed the House of Representatives to vote to determine who would be President. Each state would have only one vote, so small states suddenly became very powerful. Excited reporters and commentators were discussing all the ramifications on television. Congress was not to meet until January. Who would be the President-elect? How would the quiet transfer of power that normally characterized an American election be carried out? No one knew.

# Chapter 5

## *Senator Thurston*

The senior senator from Michigan, Frederick B. Thurston, stared into a black cup of coffee. He watched reflected light flicker across the surface of the black liquid and disappear. He had come too far, too soon to lose an election this close without a fight, and he meant to use every back-alley trick he'd ever learned from his blue-collar childhood to the rarefied air of the Senate to win.

He considered himself lucky to be the Democratic nominee. That honor rarely fell onto the shoulders of a forty-one year old up-and-comer. He knew most of the tricks already because he was a quick study and because in Michigan politics he had to learn faster than someone from Utah.

High up in the Pacific Arms Hotel in the dirty city of Detroit, Fredrick Thurston looked up from his coffee cup. His six-foot, one-inch body was lean and lithe. His skin did not yet sag anywhere on his body, except perhaps a little under the eyes, but that could be attributed to the frenetic pace of the last few days of the campaign. So could the condition of his muscles, which pulled and ached under his skin. His right forearm and hand were red and callused, having been shaken, yanked, pulled, scratched (and bitten twice) during the campaign. His neatly trimmed hair, wavy and black, hadn't been combed in five hours.

For the past hour, he'd been secluded in a sitting room in the hotel with his closest staff members examining the election returns. There was Jesse Epstein, his campaign manager, who went back ten years with Thurston as his original administrative assistant when he was a freshman congressman; Terry McAvoy, his press secretary, with his perfectly straight, well-cut red hair; Brian Gilbert, his long-time law partner in

Detroit, personal friend and advisor; and Steven Ressler, a toy manufacturer from New York who was introduced to him by McAvoy three years ago. Ressler helped with Thurston's campaign for reelection to the Senate two years earlier and was now a top strategist.

"What time is it?" Thurston asked no one in particular.

"Three o'clock," McAvoy answered.

"Well, let's take it from the top," Thurston said after a pause.

Epstein shuffled dozens of papers in his hands and raised his head with a skeptical look that always characterized him. He was a short, dark-haired man with pudgy cheeks and full lips.

"Are you going down to the ballroom?" asked McAvoy, the press aide. "They've been screaming at me all night."

"No, not yet," said Thurston. "Let's have a rundown, Jess."

"Right," said Epstein, looking down at his papers and figures. "We'll win the popular vote."

"Who gives a fuck ... now?" asked Thurston wearily.

"Right, that doesn't make any difference now. We've taken twenty-six states to St. Clair's twenty-four, and that won't make any difference, either. With the electoral vote even, the only way to keep it out of the House is for one or more electors to go against somebody. That shouldn't happen because of all the state laws around to make them keep their word, but if we could get only one to come over to us in a state that doesn't have such a law, we could keep it out of the House."

"St. Clair's people will try whatever we try," said Gilbert.

"We'll know by morning or tomorrow afternoon if we can count on all our people, and who on the other side might be," Ressler used the word archly, "*persuaded* to join us."

"If the electors start breaking ranks, it'll end up in court," said Epstein.

"We don't want to see Bush-Gore again," said McAvoy.

Thurston put his cup down on a side table and fell into a chair opposite Epstein, who spread all his papers out on top of other papers, reports and files on the coffee table.

“If it’s that much in doubt, I think we better support straight voting in the Electoral College and take our chances in the House. We ought to do better there, anyway. We have a great majority in the House, and I’d rather have a big majority there than one vote in the College. I’m just worried to death over some little elector somewhere who thinks he can play king-maker.”

Epstein looked hard at Thurston.

“What’s the matter, Jess?”

“I just want everybody to remember one thing. This election year, *everybody’s* going to be a kingmaker, whether it’s decided in a recount, in the College or in the House. Just don’t anybody hurt anybody else’s little ego. We’re gonna need them all.”

“You’re right, Jess. Let’s go on.”

“Well, let’s take it from New England and work our way across,” Epstein began. There were knocks at the door. McAvoy jumped up and answered it, admitting not only the pretty head of Peggy Thurston, but also the sounds of dozens of voices, telephones ringing and computer printers from the room beyond.

“Can I come in?” she asked, peeking round the door.

Thurston got up and crossed the room and kissed her.

“Not now, dear,” he said. “We’re trying to work out a little strategy. I was going to call you and tell you to get some sleep. Why don’t you?”

“I thought I’d wait up. You’ll have to go downstairs, won’t you?”

“Yes, but not for an hour or so.”

“I’ll wait up for you, then we’ll both go to sleep.”

“Okay, honey, we’ll be out in a little while.” He kissed her again.

She left and McAvoy closed the door. Thurston went back to his chair and sat down again, rolling up his shirtsleeves. McAvoy resumed his lethargic position on the sofa.

“Okay,” said Thurston, trying to relax by leaning back. There was another knock at the door. “God damn it!” he said, sitting up. He motioned to Steve Ressler with his head. “Get out there, will you, Steve? And tell them to leave me alone in here until I get ready. No exceptions.” Ressler jumped up and went to the door, opened it, and pushed the man there out as he talked to him, closing the door behind him as he went.

“All right, let’s try again.”

“Breaking the nation up into the usual eight regions, it lines up like this. In the Northeast, six states. Out of those, we took only Massachusetts. They got Maine, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont and Rhode Island. It was close in Rhode Island, but it’s theirs. Out of five Middle Atlantic States, they got only Pennsylvania. We took the rest: New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware. Thank God for little states like Delaware or we wouldn’t have a tie. In the South’s ten states, we took most: Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, the Carolinas, Texas and Virginia. They took Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana. The real clincher down there is Louisiana. It’s never voted Republican – ever! There’s one Republican representative. Everybody else is a Democrat: two senators, the governor, all the other congressmen. Nobody voted along traditional lines. It’s this damned foreign shit!”

Thurston lit a cigarette.

“I didn’t believe it about Louisiana, either,” he said. “Difference in votes?”

“Fifty, sixty thousand.”

“Not enough to contest.”

“No, that’s a lot down there.”

“Go on.”

“In the five Border States, they took Oklahoma, no surprise. We got Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, West Virginia.”

“Did all right there,” McAvoy commented. Steve Ressler opened the door and returned, sitting in a corner behind a writing table. Epstein continued.

“In the Midwest, we got it bad. They got Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin and Indiana. We kept Michigan and Minnesota. Six states there. The Farm States: Iowa, Nebraska, the Dakotas. We lost them all.” Epstein paused and shook his head sadly. “I’d have bet my mother’s teeth we had Iowa and North Dakota, especially in this election. Our polls showed they hated the Russians four to one out there. You know how those people feel.”

“You never really know how they feel until they vote,” said Thurston, quietly and with no trace of emotion. He crunched the butt of his cigarette in a tray. “You forgot Kansas.”

“Yeah, sorry: we lost Kansas, too. The eight Mountain States. They took Colorado, Utah, Wyoming. We took the rest: Montana, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico.”

“Surprise, surprise,” said Thurston quietly, referring to what they all knew without having to say it. They expected to take both Colorado and Utah easily.

“Then the last five states out West.”

Ressler lowered his eyes as if feeling pain, for he and the others all knew what Epstein was going to say.

“We got Hawaii and Alaska. They got the rest.” He half-crumpled the papers in a helpless gesture and leaned his aching back slowly against the rear of the sofa. They’d lost California, Oregon and Washington. Each state hurt a lot, and all had been undecided that morning.

The rundown revealed in a more formal and cohesive way what had come to them separately and in bits and pieces all night long, from the very first few returns in Maine and New Hampshire. People were indecisive, angry, confused over the foreign issue and seemed to have voted on the basis of that alone. All predictions based on past data were now proved useless in helping to foresee the crazy way in which the states had combined to bring about the present haphazard situation.

Thurston stood up, put his hands in his back trouser pockets and began pacing back and forth. His tie long since had been jerked loose. He sweated in the warm room.

“Gut feeling – we’re going to the House.”

“I’ve already got people going over our files on all congressmen, both sides of the aisle,” said Epstein.

“Good,” remarked Thurston, still pacing. “We’ll be doing a lot of face time with them between now and the new session. How much material on the freshmen coming up?”

“Plenty,” said Gilbert, “but we’ll get more.”

“Get a *lot* more,” smiled Thurston. “After a week or so we’ll know the exact final vote, and if it’s with us, we’ll lay it on thick, raise some hell!” Thurston’s voice began to move faster, rising a little in pitch. The aides knew he was ready to give orders.

“We’ll have to come out supporting changes in the Constitution to get rid of the Electoral College, moving for direct popular vote. The small states will kill it, but we have to say it.”

“You’ve been against that in the past,” noted McAvoy.

“I just changed my mind. Once the popular vote is in and pretty definite, we’ll move for recounts where we think we have much better than even chances. Less than that and we won’t move.”

“Right,” said Ressler, who would have his staff begin arranging details the next day.

“For now we plan as if we’re going to the House. Terry, go out and announce that I’ll be coming downstairs shortly.”

Terry McAvoy jumped up, found his coat somewhere in a corner on the floor, and straightened his tie before leaving the room in a rush.

“After I talk downstairs—oh, something on the order of carrying this thing right through to the end, fighting for principles, all that crap—Brian, you get Niles Overton and Stan Rifkin on the phone. Thank God they were reelected.”

Niles Overton of Minnesota was majority leader of the House. Stan Rifkin of New Mexico was majority whip.

“I’ll have to talk to them tonight. After them, I’ll talk to Lamar Perryman.”

“What’s Perryman got to do with any of it?” asked Epstein. He never liked the inimitable, irascible congressman from Virginia.

Thurston stopped pacing and looked at Epstein.

“Because I’ve decided he’s going to be speaker in the new Congress.”

The room erupted in protest.

When the noise subsided, Ressler spoke.

“Fred, you can’t be sure of Perryman. Nobody can. Why him and not Niles? It’s supposed to be Niles since the old man died. Everybody knows what. *Shit, Perryman didn’t even endorse you!*”

Ressler referred to the “old man,” who was the former speaker of the House. This venerable congressman died during the campaign before Congress adjourned. Overton was majority leader at the time and Perryman merely a congressman with a powerful committee chairmanship. When the speaker was struck, less than two weeks before adjournment, Perryman was elevated to the chair at the old speaker’s personal request for the remainder of the session. The honor was designed to cap Perryman’s long career.

Thurston’s suggestion to keep Perryman in the chair shocked everyone because the man was known to be fiercely independent. He bowed to no one, had a mind of his own, and his position on the Sino-Russian situation was even at this late date unclear.

“I am aware that he didn’t endorse me, but he hasn’t endorsed anyone for years, and he certainly isn’t for St. Clair. The main point is to keep Overton free prior to the session so he can work on individuals. If Overton tells the caucus to go with Perryman, it will. After the election, Perryman will resign and Overton will take the chair the way it was supposed to be. Brian, after I talk to Perryman, have White ready.”

“Got it.”



It would be unseemly for him not to call his running mate, the Honorable Dexter White, Governor of Nebraska, so he would do it, in its proper turn of importance.

Last.

“And that ought to do it,” he said. Gilbert and Ressler were scribbling notes. Epstein found a cigarette somewhere inside his messy clothes and started smoking it after bumming a light from Gilbert. Thurston went into the bathroom nearby and washed his hands and face a long time until soap obliterated his features. He dried himself, combed his hair and arranged his clothing, getting his coat from the closet.

“You ready?” asked Epstein. Thurston nodded. Epstein went over and opened the door. Gilbert and Ressler went out.

“Jess,” said Thurston as Epstein was leaving, “will you ask Peggy to come in here? Then we’ll go down.”

“Sure,” said Epstein as he closed the door behind him. Peggy Thurston came in half a minute later, fresh, beautiful, blonde, creamy-skinned, and bringing with her the scent of fine perfume. Really upper crust, thought Thurston to himself as he looked at her coming to him. He wondered how she always managed to smell so fresh after these long election nights, and especially this one.

They hugged each other and kissed deeply.

“How *are* you?” she asked, with a mildly worried look coming into her eyes.

He laughed from his throat, deeply, quietly.

“I haven’t been asked that all night. Every time it’s been, ‘How’s it goin’?’”

“Well, I’m asking you. How are you? How do you feel about it?”

He broke away from her softly, rubbing his upper lip with a forefinger, and walked over to look out the window at the dingy cityscape. Most of the lights in the buildings downtown had been off for hours. A few blocks away he could see into the only lighted floor of a tall office building. A cleaning woman in a long, shabby dress and a scarf around her hair

was dusting a desk. More than likely, he thought, that woman did not even vote today, had no interest whatsoever in who was elected President of the United States or which party might control the new Congress, or cared even slightly what the FTC, FAA, CIA or ICC might do tomorrow to change her life and the lives of millions of others. If she was even legally in the country.

"I really don't know how to feel," he said, holding his forehead with his left hand. "I know what I'm going to say downstairs in the ballroom," he chuckled, darkly, sardonically. "I always know what I'm going to say in public, don't I? But I don't know how I feel. It's so unexpected, this, this tie."

He drew his lips tightly over his gums as he clenched a fist. Several times without stopping he hit the back of the heavily padded armchair where he'd been sitting.

"This damned feeling of having it *so close* and yet still being able to lose it is what gets to me." He looked at her almost pleadingly. "We're so close, Peggy."

"I know," she said, a little wistful. She knew what he was going through. Throughout their marriage, she was keenly sensible of his urges to achieve, succeed, rise in the world. She did what she could to soothe him when his frustrations built to the point of breaking. Long ago she gave up trying to solve them completely. They were too many, too personal in some instances for him to be frank with her about them.

"But every time I get mad at myself I remember that St. Clair's in the same boat I am. He could just as easily have gotten an extra electoral vote as I could've, so I count myself lucky. I'm younger and stronger than he is, and we control the Congress. It'll work out. It just *has* to work out."

"It will, darling. It will," she said softly, moving over and kissing him.

"Thanks, honey."

"Look," she said, pointing to the television in the corner that had remained on the whole time in the room with the sound down. The camera

image just shifted from an exhausted anchorman to the ballroom of the Pacific Arms. “They’re downstairs now.”

“Turn it up,” said Thurston. Peggy walked over and punched a button. Thurston came over and stood beside her, looking down at the crowded ballroom packed with people of all ages who were waiting for them to appear. The picture shifted instantly to show a reporter, one of the more important reporters who followed Thurston from his first primary down to this night. Thurston knew him well, and as he listened, he appreciated the sometimes thin, sometimes thick wall that separated their professions.

“. . . And now we’re back here in the grand ballroom of the Pacific Arms Hotel in downtown Detroit. You all heard the announcement a few minutes ago by Terry McAvoy, Senator Thurston’s press secretary, saying the candidate would be down shortly to issue a statement.”

“Come on, let’s not ruin his timing, honey.” They smiled at each other, kissed once more, and then left the room to face the world.

## Chapter 6

### *Sam Houston St. Clair*

Governor Sam Houston St. Clair looked at his wristwatch.

Why, he wasn't exactly sure. Time seemed to be a cheap commodity tonight. All they did was sit around, wait and worry. It didn't matter if it was two, three or five o'clock. He knew *he* wasn't getting any sleep.

He sat at the end of a long table in a quiet conference room in his election headquarters in the Raleigh Hotel on South Beach. St. Clair was sequestered with his closest aides to work on the wording of his statement and to mull over the results so far. They were all gathered around one end of a long oval table with its shiny walnut veneer reflecting the overhead lights. It was out of place in the old room with its high ceilings and plaster molding. The walls had a faded look—not cheap or tawdry, but mellow and dignified.

To his left was Nathaniel Lizniak, his campaign manager. Ames headed one of the most successful Miami law firms and joined with St. Clair years before when they met in the state Senate. To his right was George Becker, his press secretary, a close personal friend who'd been his aide ever since he was in a position to need one. Next to Becker was Jocelyn Graham, who headed a management-consulting firm in Miami. Next to her was Howard Forbes, a prominent New York publisher, and across from Forbes sat Nathan Brooks, his personal aide and lawyer who handled St. Clair's private business affairs. His wife Sofia, who usually sat in on all such meetings, was with an interviewer in another part of the hotel. His sons, Jack and Rafael, were also in the meeting. Becker was talking.

"I think we ought to try for recounts in Idaho and South Carolina. The tallies are close in both, closer than anywhere else."

"When all the votes are in," observed Nathan Brooks, "I don't think it'll be close enough to do anything about." Jocelyn Graham agreed with a nod.

“You may be right,” she said, “but I think the greatest danger lies in the Electoral College. One vote either way and somebody’s going to win this baby! Just one vote either way and *somebody wins!*” she repeated heatedly, as if someone disagreed with her.

Ames spoke, and at once his easy demeanor and self-confidence quieted the others.

“Guys, I’d like for you to consider this suggestion. Perhaps we might make some agreement with the other side about where this fight ought to take place. Should we opt for recounts, wait for the College to meet, or go to the House? Only if this election is as close as it appears to be, will the contest ever enter the House. Someone will have a definite advantage if there are recounts, and whichever that side is will jump at it.”

There was a knock.

“Yes?” called Ames over his shoulder.

The door opened and one of his aides brought him a yellow file folder.

“Thank you, John,” said Ames.

“McAvoy just announced Thurston’s coming down to make his statement.”

“Okay. We’ll be out in a minute.” John closed the door.

“What about your statement, Sam?” Forbes asked.

“Lew has something,” he said.

“Yes,” said Ames, pulling a piece of paper out of a folder and handing it over to St. Clair.

“I would like to thank you all at this time for your steadfast support throughout the primaries, in the convention, and during the campaign. It has meant more than words can express to Sofia and me. We both know that we can rely on every single one of you to continue in this struggle with us until the House of Representatives make the final decision. We pledge to you our determination to carry the fight for moderation and dignity in our government right up to the last day. To the millions of citizens who supported me with their votes, I say to you that though the

decision has passed from your hands, your influence will still be the final and decisive factor in the selection of the next President. I offer you, my supporters and followers and citizens throughout the country, my heartfelt thanks and appreciation.' What do you think?"

"Strike 'by the House of Representatives,' " said Becker. "We don't know it'll go to the House."

"That's right," said Ames, and St. Clair drew a line through the clause.

"I think it sounds pretty good," said Nathan Brooks. "You don't want to say too much."

"That's right," added Becker. "It's too early."

St. Clair laughed a little cynically.

"Who ever thought election night would be too early to say anything?"

The others smiled.

"Well," said Graham, "we'd better go down the hall if we want to hear Thurston say as little as we plan to."

"They'll call us when it's time," said Forbes. "Let's go over the speech once more."

# Chapter 7

## *No Rest for the Weary*

Sofia St. Clair saw her son come through the door after an approving nod from the Secret Service agent standing there. He scanned the room quickly, with the military precision borne of his training, and caught her eye almost immediately. But she had spotted him first.

*A mother's eye is quicker than any sailor's*, she thought with an inward sigh.

He rushed over with the youthful energy he always had and gave her a big hug and a kiss on the cheek and then held her by the shoulders.

*A tie!* What an election!" he beamed, his full lips pulled back over immaculate white teeth. He took his hat off revealing jet-black hair. He looked like a movie star, a Latin movie star, she thought, except when the chandelier reflected a little amber light off his deep jade eyes (like his father's).

"We're all a little surprised," she said wearily. It had been a long campaign. She leaned in close to him and gave him a tired giggle. "I thought we'd lose and go back to Flagler Hall tonight right after his speech, I swear I did."

"No," Rafael said indignantly. "The fight's just beginning."

"I know, I know," she said again, her strength ebbing.

"Where's Dad?"

"In the room next door. We'll be going down in a minute. You'll come."

"Damn right I'll come. I just wish I hadn't been on duty, you know?"

"I know."

“That damned captain of mine, son of a bitch, Skye Billings. He rearranged the duty roster just to keep me working late. He wanted me to miss all this. I just got off.”

“I’m glad you got here in time. It’ll make your father so happy to have you on the platform with us.”

“That bastard Billings thought it would all be over.”

“Your father can’t use his influence with the Coast Guard. You know that, sweetheart.”

“I know, but I missed all the excitement.”

“I think there’s plenty of excitement to go around, even now.”

“Where’s Jack?”

His mood darkened slightly at the mention of her stepson.

“He was here a little while ago,” she said, looking around.

“Shouldn’t he be here with Dad?”

“Quit finding fault, Rafael.” She was too tired right now to coddle him. “Jack’s been here all night with your father watching the returns come in. So give it a rest.”

This was like a slap across the face to Rafael, a splash of cold water. He realized he was being petty, looking to pick a fight. And this was his dad’s night, and his mother’s, not the time to be forcing himself onto center stage. And anyway, Jack could wait.

“Sorry. You’re right. It just drives me crazy that we’re about to win the Presidency and I have a Democrat for a brother.”

“Other people think it’s funny.”

She saw his angry eyes.

“I don’t think it’s funny.”

*Why can’t these boys just get along?* she thought.

Her cell phone rang. She looked at the Caller ID and smiled.

“It’s Ramona.”

“Say Hi to her for me. I’m gonna find Dad,” Rafael said, kissing her on the cheek and rushing off.

“Hi, there, Ramona.”



“What do you think of all this?”

“I think I want you to buy me a drink.”

“Before the speech?”

“Yes, now. We’ve got a few minutes.”

“Come on over. I have your brand, baby.”

She hung up, told her Secret Service detail chief where she was going and left with another agent close behind, walking down the corridor to another suite where the door was open. She went in and every eye turned toward her.

There was an ever so slight pause, and then everybody broke into applause and wild cheering.

Her best friend Ramona Fuentes came rushing over to give her a big hug.

“¡Ay mujer! Are you happy?”

Sofia was caught flatfooted by the question. She’d been so convinced that they were going to lose, she’d been looking forward to making the short drive from the Raleigh up to St. Clair Island where they could once and forever relax.

In fact, she was so convinced they’d lose, she forgot to be happy they *hadn’t* lost.

Well, lost *yet*.

“Um, si, sure I am.”

Ramona’s daughter Raven came up behind her and gave Sofia a hug as well.

“¡Felicidades, Mami! I’ve never seen anything like this,” said Raven.

“No one’s ever seen anything like this,” said Ramona with a dismissive flick of her wrist. “Completely unprecedented.”

“About that drink,” Sofia poked gently.

Ramona threw up her hands and laughed like a wild woman at a Dionysian feast.

“¡Santo Dios! This lady needs a drink,” Ramona called over her shoulder to her always-nearby assistant. “Lourdes, get her Bacardi Black on the rocks, a slice of lime, si?”

“Lourdes knows,” said Sofia with a nod toward the beleaguered assistant. Working for Ramona Fuentes was no easy task. Most of her “assistants” didn’t last a year. What was the word “slave” in Spanish? *Esclava*, of course. But Lourdes had outlasted them all.

Lourdes was there in ten seconds with a highball glass half filled with Bacardi Black. Sofia took a welcoming sip of the dark-hued rum and licked her lips. She looked at the smiling Ramona.

“I can’t believe how *good* this tastes,” she said.

Ramona wagged a finger in her face and squinted with laughing eyes.

“And you thought the campaign was going to be over and you could go back to that island of yours and relax, did you?”

Sofia smiled and nodded. Ramona knew her every thought. She leaned in.

“I did. Between you and me, I thought this was it.”

“Between you and me,” Ramona whispered as she put her arm around Sofia, “so did I!”

They weaved through the crowded suite and glanced occasionally at the TV. Sofia polished off the Bacardi and as if by magic Lourdes appeared.

“Uno mas, Señora?”

“Si, Lourdes, por favor,” Sofia said, handing her the glass.

“And a glass of Champagne for me, Lourdes,” said Raven. She slipped away like a shadow.

Two of Ramona’s daughters came charging across the room when they saw their mom was with Sofia. Raven, the older one at thirty-seven, and Antonia (only twenty-one) gave Sofia kisses on the cheek.

“You must be so *happy!*” Antonia shrieked.

Lourdes returned with the drinks.

“Yes, you live to fight another day,” Raven added a little more somberly, drinking from her glass of white wine filled to the rim. *How many has she had tonight?* wondered Sofia.

She was well aware the toll a Presidential campaign took on anybody involved in one, none more so than the candidate and his wife. Sofia took an admiringly look at Antonia, who still had that blush of youth and the indescribable energy that goes with it. Raven, on the other hand, had been around the block a few times, and it showed in the tense lines around her mouth and eyes, no matter how many times she had them fixed.

And yet, their mother seemed not to have aged at all. Yes, she looked her age, fifty-three, but she was master of her universe in ways her girls were not and never would be. She’d lived as hard as Raven, but still had the youthful idealism and confidence of Antonia.

She wasn’t a victim of life, Ramona Fuentes, she was a conqueror of it.

Just then, Rafael came running in, glancing around for his mom. He spotted her with the Fuentes women and hurried over.

“Hey, girls! Señora Fuentes,” he said, kissing all three of them, mother first. Whereas Raven accepted a kiss on the cheek, holding her wine in one hand, Antonia put her arms around Rafael’s neck and gave him a hug along with a kiss.

The mothers exchanged glances and raised eyebrows.

“Oh, Rafael!” said Antonia, “you look so great in your uniform. *Tan guapo.*”

Rafael stood back and straightened his shoulders and executed a smart salute.

“Why, thank you, Miss Fuentes,” he said, throwing in that dazzling St. Clair smile. He took Antonia by the hand and turned to his mom: “Nat Lizniak says Dad’s just about to go down, so we need to go over now.”

Sofia and Ramona finished their drinks quickly.

“I’m ready,” Ramona announced.

Antonia gave a girlish laugh.

“Where’s Jack?” Sofia said, looking around. “I thought he might be here with—”

“I saw them leave together,” said Raven with a little more than a trace of bitterness. “Toward the elevator.”

“Well,” Rafael laughed, pulling out his cell phone, “Dad said he wants Jack on the podium so people can see at least one Democrat’s standing behind him.”

## Chapter 8

### *Moon Over Miami*

Jack Houston St. Clair and Babylon Fuentes were kissing under a palm tree down by the Raleigh pool. A Secret Service agent kept a discreet distance, looking for all the world like an unemployed shoe salesman lost in the festive surroundings. Guests splashed in the pool as political operatives clad in suits and ties moved up to and away from the busy poolside bar. But even they were laughing, smiling, enjoying the perfect South Beach weather as they realized they were celebrating *not losing* the election.

As he looked at the crowd (and listened to it), Jack realized that he hadn't been the only one thinking there was no way his dad would pull off an upset over Thurston. And while he hadn't really, the tie was even more surprising than the loss would have been. That's the only reason all these Republicans were wandering around like dizzy zombies, stunned by their *almost* success.

There'd been a never-ending rush of stories regaling a fascinated public with the fact that the Republican nominee for President had a son who was a registered Democrat. He'd been forced to give hundreds of interviews explaining why he was supporting his dad. Was he a hypocrite? His answer had been a simple one: he disagreed with his father on "certain points in the Republican platform," but not enough to support Thurston. (The truth was he did support Thurston's views more than his dad's, but he loved his father in spite of their tempestuous relationship, and he was not about to spurn him when he was running for President. Period. End of story.)

"It's kinda creepy with that guy watching us," said Babe, taking Jack's earlobe into her mouth and nibbling it.

“You used to think it was sexy,” Jack leered in the moonlight, listening to the gentle breeze rustle through the palm fronds high above them. They were just far enough away from the poolside craziness to be able to hear the surf crashing onto South Beach just a few feet away.

“Yeah, well, I guess I’m a little bit over it.”

“Want a drink?”

“Sure. We got time before your dad’s big speech?”

“We’ll make time.”

Jack took Babe by the hand and pushed his way through the crowd ten deep at the outside bar. He raised his arm just enough to catch the eye of Bubba, the big barrel-chested head barman. He saw Jack was with Babe and quickly poured a double Balvenie on the rocks for Jack and a rum and tonic for Babe. Jack made his way around the edge of the bar to the service bar where Bubba filled the waiters’ drink orders and picked up his drinks, which were in glasses, not the usual plastic handed out at the pool bar.

“Thanks, Bubba,” Jack smiled. “Can’t have that Balvenie in a plastic glass.”

“Special customers only. Babe, you’re lookin’ babelicious.”

“And you’re looking bubbalicious,” she smirked.

“You know, guys, that was funny for the first hundred times, but now it’s really stupid,” said Jack.

“*Hey!*” screamed an irate patron at the packed bar. Bubba flipped him the finger.

“When I get there I’ll get there.”

“We’ll leave you alone,” said Jack. “Throw these on my tab.”

“Hey, Jack, those are on me. And best to your dad. It was a close one.”

“Bubba, it’s *still* a close one,” Jack laughed.

They took their drinks and went back to the other side of their tree, the side facing the water, away from the glare of all the pool action, the Secret Service agent keeping a weather eye on their every movement.

“What about later? You staying over?” he asked. “We can swim naked in the pool.”

“There’s still Secret Service.”

“I’ll leave the lights out in the pool.”

“I drove over with Mom and Antonia.”

“So what? I’ll get you home tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

He leaned in to kiss her, the fragrant taste of rum on her tongue. He felt her hard firm breasts against his chest. The light from the full moon shone in her lustrous hair, the feminine scent of which filled his nose, making him giddy with expectation. Tonight would be a good night, the campaign be damned. He’d been away from Babe too much to deny himself tonight.

Just then his cell phone rang.

“Fuck it,” he whispered.

He pulled out his phone and looked at it before touching the screen.

“Hey, Rafael,” he said. He listened. “Right. We’re on our way.”

# Chapter 9

## *Path to the Presidency*

Sofia St. Clair was sitting in the next room near a bar set up by a window looking out over the Raleigh's famous pool. She'd left Ramona and her daughters in the room beyond. She saw her husband come through the doorway after Graham, Brooks, Ames, Becker and Forbes and two or three others.

"Hello, dear," she said as he came over, bent down and kissed her cheek.

"Hello, how was the interview?" he asked lamely.

"Oh, you know, one of those ladies' things for *Good Housekeeping* about election night jitters. As if I'd had 'jitters' in years."

St. Clair chuckled knowingly and looked at the TV set in another corner of the room around which people in his inner circle were clustered, sitting on the floor when the chairs and sofa were filled. Gradually an ominous quiet filled the room.

St. Clair spoke up so everyone could hear him.

"Don't get so excited, everybody. He isn't coming down the mountain with an eleventh Commandment."

Everyone laughed and the tension broke.

"If he did, he'd break that one, too," said someone, and the roomful of people rocked with laughter.

St. Clair turned to the makeshift bar and poured some Pinch over ice.

"I could use this before we go downstairs," he said in a low voice. "Are you ready?"

"Umm-hmm," she cooed wearily.



“Want something?” he asked, nodding at the bar as he took a generous draft of the fifteen year old Scotch.

“No, thank you, dear.” She beamed up at him. He turned his attention back to the television. “I had two Bacardis in the other room with Ramona.”

Sofia St. Clair was proud of her husband. Always had been. Still was. As he watched the TV showing a mass of people waiting to see Frederick Thurston, she admired her husband’s looks. He was a tall and powerful man in physical appearance—six-feet-two, a big forty-six inch chest, not at all fat, but strong and sturdily masculine in his bearing and manner of movement. He looked like the former Naval officer that he was, attached to General Westmoreland’s staff in the Vietnam War. He was awarded the DSC, DSM, a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. She kept them on the mantelpiece at home, even when his political aides wanted him to move them to his office where more people would see them. Her husband had engaged in actual combat more times than any other officer on the general’s staff simply because he always seemed to be in the hottest place at the hottest time. He’d been in more land battles, he often joked, than naval battles.

His fine dark hair was slowly turning to a silky silver. He hadn’t lost a single hair, and the upright dignity of his facial features made him a most handsome man for someone sixty-four years old. His face was not lined with age marks. The deep lines were those beneath his cheeks that appeared when he smiled. They slanted down on either side of his mouth leading to his dimples. His face seemed to say to those interested in reading faces that this was a nice man who knew when to have a no-nonsense air about him and when to clap someone on the back, but a man who felt his integrity and took it seriously.

Sofia was convinced he was the handsomest governor in Florida history.

St. Clair took another long draft of the powerful whiskey as he looked away from his smiling wife and down into the lights reflected in the Raleigh pool.

A year before the election no one seriously considered St. Clair as a Presidential possibility, although there was some talk; there always is. Then, while St. Clair headed a trade mission to Beijing, a Chinese naval vessel shot down an American jet over international waters. The crew was killed. The Chinese thought it was a reconnaissance plane from the Russian fleet, which was active off the coast. While still in Beijing, St. Clair denounced the act and the Chinese gave him his passport, their thinking being that the Americans should have the same fear for the Russian threat as they had. President Norwalk angrily recalled the entire mission, which included two Cabinet secretaries, and for a week or two the whole diplomatic community held its breath for fear the two powers would sever their relations. Neither country wanted that (China held too many U.S. dollars and the U.S. needed cheap Chinese goods) and the whole affair soon went away.

Its effect on St. Clair's political future did not go away, however, and when he returned to the United States, he got a hero's welcome.

Several Republican state delegations, headed by his own, went to the National Convention tooting St. Clair's name. The primaries were largely inconclusive. The Republicans had very little new blood injected into the party during the eight years of Norwalk's presidency. Leon Coker, current Vice President of the United States, was only a year younger than Norwalk, and though he tried to capture the nomination, the delegates opted for St. Clair, who, though he was a year older than Coker, seemed years younger and even more vital and charismatic. No one believed Coker could defeat the dynamic governor from Florida, so St. Clair got the Republican nomination on the sixth ballot, in a delayed convention nominating process that hadn't been seen in generations.

The campaign was a new experience for St. Clair and his wife, because the two-term governor had never really fought to get elected be-

fore. Although on election night he was not yet the winner, he had been able to stop Thurston juggernaut.

For the moment, anyway.

His sons had been involved in the campaign in a small way. His older son Jack had been a bigger help than he thought he would be. His younger son, Rafael, was executive officer aboard a Coast Guard cutter based in Miami, so there wasn't much he could do. Sofia was his mother. (Jack was born to St. Clair's previous wife, a Boston Brahman named Louise Perkins, who died years ago.)

St. Clair attributed getting this far to President Norwalk's vigorous campaigning on his behalf, a strain on the man none had wished to impose. But Norwalk was a great help because he was still a popular President. He hated Thurston's pro-Chinese policy. Everyone knew it. He made it plain to St. Clair in one of their meetings that he considered Thurston a menace to the balance of power that had preserved the peace for so many years. The whole importance of Norwalk's presidency depended on the election of someone who would continue his policies.

St. Clair frankly believed Thurston would defeat him if the question ever came before the House. He'd never served in Washington except at President Norwalk's pleasure. Thurston had been elected to both houses of Congress. The Democrats had a solid majority in the House. The Democrats controlled more states outright than the Republicans did. His only really important advisor, besides Sofia, was President Jeffrey Norwalk himself. St. Clair talked to Norwalk often during the course of the grueling, tumultuous campaign. He offered much good advice and St. Clair took all he could get, including the President's choice for his running mate, Senator Robert Degraff of Oklahoma, a young man who lost his bid for the nomination but who had a national reputation. St. Clair had learned much in a short time from the foxy old President. And he knew they would talk tonight before they both turned in. He knew the old man was far from asleep even at this late hour.

# Chapter 10

## *Lamar LeGrand Perryman*

Down in Albemarle County, Virginia, in the town of Charlottesville, in a large white clapboard house with four imposing wooden Doric columns surrounded by two hundred acres, a telephone rang and rang and rang. Finally a light came on and the ringing stopped.

Lights spread into the downstairs and upstairs halls. An old butler climbed the stairs in his plaid bathrobe. At the top, he turned towards the front of the house, walked down the long, elegant hallway with its subdued sofas, Chippendale armchairs, Persian rugs and French mirrors until he came to two large doors which stood floor to ceiling, a full twelve feet high.

The butler went in without knocking and walked to the closed drapes of one of two sets of French doors that gave onto the upstairs verandah. He sashed the drapes of one of the windows allowing the full moonlight to flood into the room, picking out for him the massive bed on the other side of the room with its stately canopy high above its ornately carved four posts. The butler walked silently across the room, approached the high bed, stopping just short of the two steps used to get up into it, and reached out to touch the shoulder of the Honorable Lamar LeGrand Perryman.

He knew the old man was awake even as he reached out to touch his shoulder.

“What ... is it, William?” said the old man. “... I heard you comin.” The voice was low, slow, yet distinguished and gentle.

“Telephone, suh,” said William in his higher voice. “Congressman Overton—says it’s impo’tant and that I oughta wake you up if’n I hadta.”

“Must *be* important, then,” the old congressman said, without moving, his head still wrapped in peaceful shadows while the moonlight playing through the trees danced on the white coverlet draped over his portly frame.

William went into the congressman's dressing room adjoining the bedchamber and returned in a moment with a dressing gown draped over his arm. He approached the bed, drew back the coverlet and sheet and held the gown. The old man gripped the post, as was his habit, and hauled himself up into a sitting position. He always refused help getting out of bed, saying that if he couldn't, he shouldn't by damn it, and that the affairs of state could damn well wait until he could. He stood and slipped his arms into the waiting robe. The moonlight provided all the light necessary for this business.

Perryman started out and William followed him, but overtook him going down the hall. He was holding the phone for Perryman by the time he reached the top of the stairs, where the upstairs phone was kept. Perryman wouldn't allow a phone in his bedroom.

"Thank you, William," said the old man, whose eyes were practically closed against the full light in both hallways. William retired out of earshot into another room. Perryman held the telephone to his ear and said, very slowly, "He-ll-o?"

So stood the aristocratic honorable congressman in his floor-length cashmere dressing gown as he listened to Majority Leader Niles Overton tell him the plan Thurston had divined to free the influential majority leader for other more important things prior to the assembling of Congress. As Overton talked, Perryman's hunched shoulders seemed to square themselves. But the change in posture and his suddenly alert mind did not come to him because he felt some great honor being temporarily thrust upon him. That was nothing to him. While Overton finished, Perryman's mind was already forging ahead to the floor of the House and other matters secreted inside his somewhat large head.

"Now it ... wouldn't do," he drawled to the majority leader, "to have two speakers die in the chair one right after t'other." They both laughed a little.

"I'm not worried, Lamar. I know you'll do just fine. We'll be getting together on this thing later. Thurston said he'd call you tonight, so you might want to wait up."

"I'll do that, Niles, now don't you fret," the old gentleman said.

"All right then, Lamar, I'll let you go."

"Good night, Mr. Majority Leader," said Perryman good-naturedly.

Overton hesitated just a second and Perryman caught it, just enough to show how badly Overton really felt about not being in a position to argue in his own behalf for the speaker's chair. But he replied with a little laugh in his voice meant to please and flatter Perryman.

"Good night, Mr. Speaker."

If anything could be said about the venerable representative from Virginia, it was that he could never be flattered, and almost never pleased. He was the only one who knew it, though. Publicly he pretended to be flattered often enough, but he even more publicly pretended to be pleased. He seldom was in the latter case and never in the former.

Congressman Perryman put down the receiver, rewrapped his dressing gown and tied it back again. When he spoke his voice was not slow and sleepy, as it seemed to be to Overton.

"*William!*" he snapped out sharply. The butler came through a door instantly.

"Yessuh?" answered William.

The old man started pacing, with hands behind his back and his belly leading him on by a foot, addressing William as he might a general staff preparing for battle.

"What time is it?"

"Fo'clock, suh."

"I'll stay up, William."

"Yessuh."

"Roust out Becky to get my breakfast. Juice, coffee, toast this morning."

"What kind o' jams, suh?"

“What? Oh, blackberry, I s’ppose – no, bring me some of that marmalade the British ambassador gave me.”

“Yessuh.”

“Light the library.”

“Yessuh.”

“I’ll eat in there.”

“Yessuh.”

“I’ll take calls from now on.”

“Yessuh.”

“Lay out a suit of clothes.”

“Yessuh.”

“Roust out Tyree. Tell him to get the car ready. I’m goin’ to Washington this mornin’.”

“Yessuh.”

“You and Tyree will come with me. Becky stays here ’cause we’ll be back.”

“Yessuh.”

Perryman stopped.

“William?”

“Yessuh,” said the butler, looking back with interest at Perryman. He liked to see the old man excited.

“William, you are looking at the next speaker of the House of Representatives and not just speaker for a couple of weeks.”

“Lor’, Mr. Perryman, I’m proud fo’ that.”

“No need to be, it doesn’t mean much to most people down in Washington. Not much glory in a thing like this. I won’t be speaker long, William,” he said with a glint in his eye, “but I have a hunch, yes, William, a mighty solid hunch, people will remember I was speaker when the time comes I’m not again.”

“Yessuh.”

“All right, light the library and get on about it.”

William “lit the library” and then ran around waking Becky the cook and Tyree the chauffeur. Then he went upstairs to arrange the congressman’s wardrobe before going down to his quarters to get together his own.

Becky got out eggs, bacon, grits, coffee, bread she’d baked fresh the day before and a jar of Tiptree Tawny Orange Thick Cut Marmalade made by Wilkin & Sons, Ltd. (a little on the bitter side for her taste), and started making breakfast for Perryman and the two other servants.

The congressman’s light breakfast was ready very soon and she took it into the library where he was at his desk with his feet propped up, thinking. She scolded him for eating so little and said she put some bacon on the tray. She stayed and watched him eat, fussing around him.

“You didn’t eat that bacon,” she pointed out, standing arms akimbo as he blithely looked the other way. “*Eat that bacon!*” she demanded.

He looked at her sharply and extended his arm slowly and with imposing majesty towards the library door before he snapped out at her.

“Woman, get out of here *and leave me alone!*”

“Not till you eats all that bacon!” she snorted back at him, not moved a bit by his imperious command. “*Eat!*”

He rolled his eyes to heaven.

And then ate the bacon.

Tyree went into the garage and took the old Lincoln limousine to gas it up for the congressman’s trip later that morning.

Finishing his breakfast to Becky’s satisfaction, Perryman climbed the ladder as she went away with his tray. He was looking for a certain reference book. He was just down when the telephone rang again. He snatched it up eagerly, but answered in a slow, sleepy drawl.

“He-ll-o?”

Thurston’s voice was slow, steady, respectful.

“Hello, Congressman—Fred Thurston. I’m sorry to wake you up, but I guess you’ve already heard from Niles.”



“Yes, indeed I have, Senator. He has informed me of your strategy and I concur wholeheartedly. He’ll be of much greater value to you in the weeks before Congress convenes.”

“That’s what I was thinking, Lamar. He’ll have to make some trips for me I couldn’t ask you to make.”

Perryman was not flattered. He knew he wouldn’t have been called on to make the trips anyway.

“I’m glad I can be of some help, Senator,” said Perryman politely.

“And you can be ... Lamar. You’ll have to keep a tight rein on the House and the caucus after you’re elected speaker. It might not be easy. Niles and Stan are coming here tomorrow to plan strategy.”

“Senator,” injected Perryman, “I will be happy to jump on an airplane and come myself, if you think it necessary.”

He knew Thurston would not think it necessary.

“It’s nice of you to offer, Lamar,” replied Thurston, “I wouldn’t want you to go to the trouble, but I appreciate it. Niles will fill you in later.”

What he meant, thought Perryman, was that he not only didn’t think his advice meant much, and never had, but that he didn’t think his influence was that substantial. His influence might not be now, he thought, but his power soon would be.

“Thank you, Senator. I’ll look forward to hearing from you and the majority leader, then, after you have deliberated.”

“Thank you, Lamar. Good night.”

“Good *morning* to you, sir.”

“Yes, it is morning, isn’t it?”

Perryman heard a click as Thurston disconnected. He slowly lowered his receiver and replaced it in its cradle. His mind was working faster than it usually had to.

Perryman wiped the palm of his hand across his mouth, removing the thin film of sweat on his upper lip. He realized that he would have to make some basic decisions rather soon and he wanted to be prepared to make them for the benefit of the country. He was asking himself ques-

tions Overton and Thurston thought he'd answered for himself long ago. Perhaps, thought Perryman with a slight smile, they thought he was far past the age when men made all their final decisions lest death should catch them short.

Perryman returned to his books and pressed a button on his desk that brought William to the library door.

"Yessuh?"

"I'll dress now, William."

"Yessuh." William turned and moved slowly up the stairs to prepare to dress the congressman. Perryman himself went back to his ladder and fetched down some books he wanted to take with him to Washington.

In an hour he would be dressed in his habitual winter worsted suit, heavy topcoat, Homburg, gloves and walking stick, the picture of a distinguished elderly gentleman.

*But I've still got some poison in my fangs,* he smiled to himself as he moved slowly up the stairs.

# Chapter 11

## *Matt Hawkins*

It was five o'clock in the morning in Jackson, Wyoming, and in the pre-dawn light that filtered into the room, Matt Hawkins was making love to his wife, Sue.

The snowy November landscape cast a pale, muted half-white light through the heavy-hanging drapes. The light played across the muscles of Hawkins's body, creating quiet rippling shadows among the bulging sinews of his back and thighs. The well-defined muscles shifted as he lifted for each new thrust, and beads of sweat rolled off his back. The prickly sweat between his legs lubricated his movements. The small of his back was a puddle of darkness. The room was quiet but for their labored breathing. He was thinking now of the time they behind a waterfall roaring off a mountain in the Teton Range. They'd been in college then.

His head was on her shoulder, turned away from her face. He stopped momentarily, lifted himself on his elbows and kissed her smooth shoulders, sweaty neck and lips.

There was no mistaking the fact that Matt Hawkins was handsome and his wife beautiful. It was something all the people agreed on, whether they voted for him or not. He was twenty-nine years old and she was two years younger. He had dark, curly hair that gave him a boyish attractiveness that brought out more than a maternal instinct in women. His complexion was such that he retained the slightest tan and looked exotically dark to the bleached faces of Wyoming, used to long and bitter winters. He was healthy and warm looking, having what many women voters called a cozy personality.

Many women who went to Moran High School with him remembered that "cozy" personality and the times they curled up with Matt in front of warm winter fires in isolated mountain cabins. Many wished then and now that they could have caught Matt and married him, but he always moved on to someone else, even though he never hurt anybody

when he left. No one he ever made love to could say she'd been hurt by Matt Hawkins. Most were happy for the experience and didn't try to argue when his restless nature asserted itself. Matt knew he never hurt people and was very proud of the fact that he could bed most of the women he wanted without causing any trouble when they broke up. He never gave them false hopes. The word "love" was never used.

Sue Williston, with her gleaming dark brown hair and light hazel eyes, was the one who finally got him. She met him at the University of Wyoming, she studying English, he preparing for the law. They married in his first year at law school, but even now they had no children.

He kissed her lips again. It was getting lighter outside.

"Happy?" he asked, still inside her.

"Um-hmm," she purred.

"About this?" he said, flexing.

"I thought you meant about the election," she said, laughing slowly, "not the *e-rec-tion*."

"Well, it rhymes. You *might* be happy about both," he said. "After all, you are married to the new representative from the state of Wyoming."

"Succeeding defeated William R. Crampton," she intoned. "Well, you're not the congressman from Wyoming yet, hot shot," she pointed out.

"Well, not yet. But *sooon*," he leered. "Crampton's a lame-duck till I get sworn in next January."

"I never liked him."

"I didn't either, at first, but I didn't know him then. As the campaign went on, I liked him more and more. Kinda hate to see him go."

Crampton had been the single representative from Wyoming for many, many years. He'd been considered untouchable by anyone in either party. Republicans never fought him and many people thought Hawkins was just plain lucky to beat him in the Democratic primary. The combination of his youth, looks, obvious legislative talent and his law back-

ground and reputation in Jackson and Cheyenne pulled it off even without campaigning in every part of the state.

Hawkins once said to an aide that if the voters could see him, *not on television*, but in the flesh, he knew he could win. Throughout the campaign, Crampton refused to debate him publicly, knowing Hawkins had the kind of magnetism that would turn Crampton into Nixon—and Hawkins into Kennedy. So the main push in Hawkins's campaign had been to show himself in person to as many voters as possible. It worked. They were electrified by his warmth, outgoingness and youthful brashness. Especially the women. One poll of two thousand women in Cheyenne found only three hundred fifty two who wouldn't vote for him.

"You're losing it," said Sue.

"Oh," said Matt, bringing himself back and forgetting about old man Crampton.

Sue could tell his heart wasn't in it as he pushed deep inside her, again and again, a soft, wonderful grunt coming from him each time. But his body was certainly there, and when she thought about it, that mattered more to her—his body. That's what attracted her to him in the first place. Yes, she was attracted to the other things in the man, but his body was what kept her. For her part, without sex there wouldn't be much else to their relationship. For a man like Matt, for whom sex was always available when he wanted it, other things she didn't even consider mattered more. And though Sue was beautiful, and had a gorgeous body, she fell behind him in those "other things," such as ambition, glory, power and money, all of which Matt thought about endlessly. To the point of boredom, in her opinion.

And now they had to go to Washington.

Matt propped himself up on his arms, looking at Sue as they made love, but her eyes were closed and she was breathing heavily, about to come. She always closed her eyes just before. Now she clawed his back, and he laid his head back on her shoulder, away from her face, scarcely

feeling her fingernails in his tight, agile back, thinking how, over the years, the emotion had slipped away from their love-making, one fuck at a time. He knew they wouldn't be together forever. So did she. He wouldn't be surprised if he came home one day and found a note on the refrigerator.

They finished. He lifted himself on his strong arms and rested beside her, running his index finger across her sweaty forehead, down her nose and onto her neck. The house was hot, sealed against the snow and cold outside, and they were both lying in pools of sweat. He pulled the top sheet up over them gently, the coolness of the cotton soothing his hot skin and muscles.

"We'll have to start packing this week," he said.

She rolled over on her side to face him, though she could barely make out the contour of his face in the half light.

"It's going to get pretty tense in Washington, isn't it?"

"Sounds like it—from the way things are shaping up."

"Will it involve you much?"

"Nobody even knows I exist outside of Wyoming."

"You never know," she said.

"I know," he said, moving closer to her and kissing her again. He slipped his arm under her head and held her to him.

"Get a little sleep, Mrs. Congressman."

She closed her eyes.

But, try as he might, as exhausted he was after all he'd been through, he was wide awake as his mind raced ahead to think about the wonderful challenges that lay ahead.

# Chapter 12

## *The Last Call*

Governor St. Clair was on the telephone most of the night, too. He was extremely tired after he returned to his suite from the blaring convocation of trumpeting voices and noise that had been the ballroom's sendoff. He only talked to three people, however: Congressman Duncan Olcott, Robert Degraff and Jeffery Norwalk, in that order.

At 3:30 A.M., St. Clair called Minority Leader Duncan Olcott of Illinois. His secretary answered and said Mr. Olcott was on another line and had two calls waiting but that she would tell him St. Clair was on the line. In a moment Olcott answered.

"Hello, Sam?" Olcott said in a rush.

"Yes, hello, Dunc."

"I've been waiting for your call," said Olcott, "I've already called all my part of the delegation. All my people are steady. I've been working on theirs, but they're afraid to talk to me before they meet with Healy. He's called them all to Chicago tomorrow, but I'll keep trying to get at 'em."

"Thanks, Dunc," replied the candidate, thinking now about the troublesome mayor of Chicago, Edward Healy, a real force to be reckoned with in Illinois, and Olcott's bitter enemy. "But what are the chances it all might be settled in the College?"

"Don't know. I'll tell you this, Sam. The people that vote against their party on this one, whether it's in the College or the House, and I don't care which way their state voted, are going to be crucified. I don't care who they are or what they feel on the issues. We've got to make sure all the Republicans in the House know exactly what's expected of them. In this kind of fight we're looking for bodies and everybody knows it."

"I guess you're right. Then you think it'll go to the House without much doubt?"

“I’m pretty sure of it. Even though it hasn’t happened in over a hundred years. Since we’ve only got twenty states for sure, we’ve got our job cut out for us. It won’t be easy, Sam, you know that.”

Yes,” said St. Clair. “What do you suggest I have my people do?”

“I’ll fly over to see you tomorrow, Sam, and we’ll meet with your people. We need files on every congressman and we’ll have to divide them up and somehow go to them all—the crucial ones, that is.”

“All right, Dunc. I’ll see you tomorrow. You talked to Frank?”

“Yes, I called Frank an hour ago. He’ll come with me.” Frank Holtzman was the minority whip from Waterbury, Connecticut.

“All right, Dunc. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Fine, Sam. And Sam...”

“Yes, Dunc.”

“Don’t you worry, boy. We’ll pull this one through somehow. I’m not sure how just yet, but we’ll pull it through.”

“All right, Dunc. See you tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Then he talked to the junior senator from Oklahoma, Robert Degraff, his running mate. Degraff said his own House delegation, though Republican, was in some doubt because of the enormous influence of John Fulton, who controlled the four-to-two Republican majority in the delegation.

Fulton personally hated both Degraff and Norwalk. Degraff said he was still working on his fellow Republicans, but that they were afraid to commit themselves without first talking to Fulton. He said he would fly to Miami the next day. St. Clair was very pleased with his running mate. He was serious, hard working and idealistic—and just thirty-eight.

Then St. Clair placed a call to the White House.

“This is Governor St. Clair. Is the President awake?”

“Yes, Governor. He left instructions to put you through immediately.”



# Chapter 13

## *The Oval Office*

President Jeffrey Norwalk stood looking out the windows on the south side of the Oval Office into the dark but glittering Washington night. The winter having killed all the leaves on the trees between the White House and the Washington Monument, the President could see the monolithic slab of rock pointing like a pin-prick to heaven, towering over the city with undiluted brilliance and unmolested majesty, the harsh spotlights seeming to coat the monument not with a garish night time make-up, but with an invisible shroud of honor and dignity. He knew the same kind of lights were shining on the White House, making it look, even in the night, like an undefiled object, clean and pure in its neoclassical simplicity, overpowering in its quiet strength, sturdy and immovable in times of shifting factions and restless masses, representing to many millions of Americans who thought they were as pure, unadorned and inviolable as the great big house where they put their best man every four years, a kind of self-image.

Early in his administration, when he was in the Oval Office late one night and looked out the windows as he was doing now, the brilliant lights that flood the building were located forty yards from his office windows, pointing straight at him. They blinded his vision and he couldn't see outside clearly. And they made him restless. To him the lights immediately symbolized (so briefly had he been in office) the attention of the world, so powerful was their focus on him and his new home. The very next morning he ordered them to be shifted so as not to obstruct his view of the city at night.

He turned away from the south windows into the Oval Office itself, which was very dark, illuminated only by his small desk lamp. He walked

over to the French doors on the east side and looked out into the Rose Garden whose now absent blooms, so healthy and life-restoring in the spring, he would not see again as President: perhaps never again, he thought. Former Presidents seldom returned to the White House, much less the Rose Garden. He took pleasure in that garden more than any other part of the grounds. He'd planted bushes there himself, and recalled one occasion when the wholesome dirt covered his hands, and the sudden rush of reporters when someone spotted him with a couple of staff members and the secretary of state on their hands and knees. He mused that perhaps it was his love for growing things that urged him on to become President. It was his habit to look at nations and peoples as flowers and plants. They had to be cared for, nurtured, fertilized, watered, protected from winds and frosts, or from great heats.

He knew that was all a lot of bullshit. It was his lust for power that made him President. And his full appreciation of power that made him a good one. He had no apologies.

How strange, he thought, returning to the Rose Garden, that the President of the United States should have only this small, neat garden in which to stroll when the kings of France had had the acres of formal gardens at Versailles.

Of course, he thought, there *weren't* any more kings of France. Maybe the Rose Garden wasn't so bad, after all.

He opened one of the French doors, eleven and a half feet high, and swung it outwards, bringing in a sudden rush of cold November air that chilled him more than he thought it would. He was getting old, he thought: seventy-three and he felt each one of those years. He was a long way from the forests of Ohio where he grew up and camped out on many a wintry night.

Stepping out onto the small portico outside the French doors, Norwalk felt the winds whip round his head, mussing his gray hair. He walked down into the Rose Garden, feeling the frost crush under his feet.

It was cold, he thought again to himself, as though having to remind himself that he was freezing.

He'd been thinking all evening about the inconclusive election, and finally made up his mind a little earlier what he would do about it.

His mind was overburdened with the election, with Frederick B. Thurston, his enemy, and Sam Houston St. Clair, his protégé. He was skipping around in his mind from thought to thought, impression to impression, sensation to sensation, trying to judge his life, weigh the effectiveness of his two terms as President, Russia, China: their feud and totally irreconcilable destinies.

He forgot them for the moment.

Norwalk was lost in his daze, though his vision was as sharp as the air was biting cold. He felt numbed, however, as though his eyes were not connected to his brain. He looked around the garden as if seeing it for the first time. It was all clear but strange. He walked out of the Rose Garden, around the West Wing to the front. Only a few cars were cruising Pennsylvania Avenue at this late hour, slowing even as they passed to stare at the place he'd called home the past eight years.

He walked toward the fence that surrounded the grounds. The curving drive sloped slightly away from him to one of the two car entrances on this side of the White House. Two guards were chatting together in the warm guardhouse. Norwalk stayed out of the light by walking beneath the bare branches, strong and outstretched, of a tall ancient oak tree.

Walking down to the fence, he took one of the bars in his hand and held it. He felt slightly dizzy. The iron bar was freezing and seemed to sear his hand with the cold.

Just then he heard rapid footsteps and turned towards the guardhouse and drive, his hand coming off the bar.

Running towards him at a fast clip were the two gate guards and several White House police and soldiers who were running down the drive as fast as they could, their greatcoats flapping in the light breeze. He was

startled and for a moment physically afraid, having for the moment forgotten where he was. He felt the threat of assassination every President lives with day-to-day flash through his mind until he remembered where he was. In an instant he was fully surrounded and several flashlights made him close his eyes. He faintly saw some of the light reflect off the cold metal of drawn revolvers. There were two of three gasps from astonished guards.

“Mr. President,” said one of them. “We had no idea it was you. The Secret Service didn’t tell us you would be out walking tonight—and unescorted.”

There was a hint of irony in Norwalk’s voice when he spoke.

“No, because I didn’t tell them. I’m sure the sensors on the door I opened have them running down here right now.”

And he was right. From the direction of the Rose Garden half a dozen agents were running toward them frantically. They slowed down when they saw the President with an escort.

“I’m sorry, Mr. President,” said an Army officer who had run down from the White House portico with the others. “We have to take every precaution. Back to your stations, men,” he ordered crisply. The flashlights were lowered and the men went away. The officer came to attention and saluted smartly.

“I’m sorry that you were interrupted in your walk, Mr. President.” He hesitated. “Would you permit me to offer you my coat, sir? You aren’t wearing anything and it’s very cold out tonight. Less than twenty degrees.”

Norwalk was quite aware of the cold now that his stupor was gone.

“That would be very kind of you, young man.” The officer rapidly slipped off his coat and draped it over the shoulders of the old President.

“I’ll go back now. Don’t know why I stumbled out here in the first place. Must have given the others a shock, and you, too,” he paused and chuckled. “What’s your name, son?”

“Benson, sir.”

Norwalk looked at his insignia.

“Well, Lieutenant, thank you. You are very efficient. I don’t know you, do I? Are you new here?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve been here about three months.”

“Three months,” mused Norwalk.

Both men were thinking the same thing: the President always welcomed staff members of the White House to their new jobs. But such occasions were group affairs and were set up only several times a year. While the individuals remembered everything about the informal chat they had with the President, he himself could not be expected to remember every individual.

“Three months,” Norwalk mused again. “I’m sorry, Lieutenant Benson, I don’t remember you. You will understand, I’m sure.”

“Of course, Mr. President.”

Norwalk smiled at the young man’s serious face and ramrod back. Then he lightly laughed.

“Will you do me a favor, Lieutenant Benson?”

Certainly, Mr. President.”

“Stand at ease.”

“Yes, sir,” said Benson, relaxing as much as he could.

“Why don’t you walk me back to my office, Benson. You and my detail here can protect me from any would-be assassins leaping from the trees.”

“I’d be delighted, Mr. President,” said Benson, smiling.

They walked back the way Norwalk had come.

“Will you be missed at your post?”

“No, sir. The captain won’t mind when I tell him where I was.”

“No,” remarked Norwalk, “I suppose he won’t.” They went into the Rose Garden where Norwalk stopped.

“Do you like flowers, Benson?”

“I haven’t had much time for flowers, sir,” replied Benson, thinking it over and using the perfect excuse for any question.

Norwalk smiled broadly, then laughed. All his laughs seemed to grow out of slowly broadening smiles.

“Do you think I’m a busy man, Lieutenant?”

Benson flushed with excitement at being there in the Rose Garden talking about flowers with the President of the United States in sub-twenty degree weather. He could only answer one question at a time.

“Sir, you’re the busiest man in the world.”

Norwalk held his finger up in mock admonishment.

“There then, Benson, let that be a lesson to you. If I, the President, can take time to smell flowers and even to plant and pot one now and then, it follows that a young lieutenant can do the same.”

Benson blushed and held his head down, saying, “Yes, sir.”

The President turned to the Secret Service detail.

“The rest of you can return to your posts. I won’t be slipping out again. Not tonight, anyway,” he added with a twinkle in his eye. “Come to my office with me, Benson,” said Norwalk on an impulse as he shot up the portico and through the French doors.

# Chapter 14

## *The Keystone File*

Once inside the Oval Office, Norwalk looked over at Benson.

“Close the door.”

The lieutenant closed the door and the heat quickly returned to the room. Norwalk took off Benson’s coat and handed it to him and sat behind the desk.

“Sit down, will you, Benson?”

Benson looked around him into the dark shadows in the corners of the quiet room.

“Thank you, sir,” he managed to say as he sat down.

“Tell me, Benson have you been in here before?”

“When I first came here they gave us a tour.”

“Not since then?”

“No, sir.” He paused. “Are you sure I’m not keeping you from anything, Mr. President?”

“Of course, my good man. You wouldn’t be here if you were. I was just thinking about the election, the result, and waiting for a phone call.”

Benson looked startled.

“You have to wait for a phone call?” he asked. The tone of his voice was unmistakable. The President doesn’t have to wait for anyone to call him—*anyone*.

“Well, it’s not that pressing a phone call, and I had to do some thinking for myself, Lieutenant.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. President I didn’t mean to pry.”

Norwalk laughed again.

“I’m sure you didn’t, Benson.” Norwalk paused. “Tell me, what did you think of the election results? Be honest.”

“Well, Mr. President, I voted for Governor St. Clair and I’m sorry he didn’t win.”

“Well, he hasn’t *quite* lost, Lieutenant.”

“No, Mr. President.”

“But then, he hasn’t quite won, either.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Why did you vote for St. Clair?”

“Because I don’t like the Chinese, sir.”

Norwalk raised his eyebrows and said, almost to himself, “That’s pleasantly simple.”

“Excuse me, Mr. President?”

“Never mind. Do you know what’s going to happen with this election?”

“I’ve been on duty since eleven o’clock, Mr. President, and from what I’ve heard from the captain, it’s going to go to the House of Representatives.”

“Do you know anything about all that?”

“No, sir. I never thought what would happen if there was a tie. It’s never happened before, has it?”

“Well, a long, long time ago, but not quite under these circumstances,” he said, looking away from Benson into the dark shadows in the room, looking into his past, his own and the nation’s. “It happened a long, long time ago,” he said softly.

“To which President?”

“To Thomas Jefferson, for one.”

There was a long pause as both men thought the same thing: Why was the President talking to an inconsequential first lieutenant about a matter of such great national importance?

The console buzzed. Norwalk touched a button.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Slanetti is here, Mr. President.”

“Very good. Send him in.”

“Ah,” said Benson with a slight smirk.

“what’s that mean, Lieutenant?”

“Come in,” said Norwalk.



The door opened admitting a flood of white light from an outside corridor and a man in his early forties walked in.

“I’ve looked over those files of mine you asked about, Mr. President,” said the man as he walked into the room, the white light behind him, looking rather curiously at Lieutenant Benson as he came over.

“Yes, thank you, Phil,” said Norwalk. “Lieutenant, this is Phil Slanetti, my—”

Benson jumped up quickly and faced Slanetti.

“Your aide for congressional liaison,” he interrupted, eager to show that he knew all White House staff members who had access to the area.

“Yes, very good, Lieutenant,” said Norwalk. “Well, I think that will be all, Benson. You may return to your station.”

“Yes, Mr. President. And thank you, sir,” said Benson, coming to full attention. He performed a neat about-face and left through the open door Slanetti used.

“Have a seat, Phil,” said Norwalk. Slanetti took Benson’s chair. “You’re probably wondering what in God’s name he was doing here.”

“I *was* wondering,” Slanetti offered.

Norwalk laughed again. “I just bumped into him a minute ago when I was outside walking.”

“Outside *walking*, sir?” asked Slanetti, skeptically.

“Yes,” said Norwalk. “Even Presidents take walks. Now tell me about those files you’ve been keeping.”

“They are up-to-date, Mr. President. The only information they lack is what I will add when the freshmen members come to Washington. But for all existing members, they are quite thorough.”

“You mean you’ve been keeping them up-to-date all this time?”

“Yes, sir. Just a habit, I guess. Once I have a file, I like to keep it properly until I deactivate it. You never said to deactivate them.”

“I guess I didn’t.”

“No, sir.”

“Actually, I forgot all about them right after the election,” said Norwalk. “I’m waiting now for St. Clair’s call. Mind staying with me a little while?”

“Of course not, sir. Happy to.”

“Good,” said Norwalk, reaching for his pipe. He filled the bowl and then lit the tobacco, saying out of the side of his mouth as he puffed to catch the flame, “You can smoke if you like, Phil. But you don’t smoke, do you?”

“That’s right, I don’t, Mr. President. But thank you.”

“Hmm,” said Norwalk, puffing contentedly. “My wife would have patted you on the back, Phil. She hated my smoking. I finally gave it up for this damn thing, but since she died I’ve grown to like it.”

“Yes, sir,” Slanetti said unemotionally.

Norwalk caught the lifeless tone in Slanetti’s voice. A real functionary. A minion. But you needed people like him in a job like this. They *did* things. Things you couldn’t do.

They sat for a few minutes, Norwalk quietly rocking in his large, high-backed, black leather swivel chair, blue smoke rising and clouding the light, Slanetti observing the man he served, his head safely covered in shadows as he sat just outside the small circle of light cast by the old desk lamp.

It was at this point that St. Clair placed his call. There was a clear, and in the quiet room, sharp buzz as a light registered on the President’s console. He leaned up and punched a button activating the speakerphone.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Governor St. Clair is holding, Mr. President,” said a White House operator.

“Put him through.” There was a familiar click and Norwalk knew the line was open. “Hello, Sam.”

“Yes, Mr. President. I hope you weren’t asleep. I’m sorry for being so late with this call.”

“I understand the reasons, Sam. Tell me what your people think.”

“Well, they’re pretty upset, as I guess we all are. I’ve talked to Dunc Olcott. He’s called Frank Holtzman and we’re going to have a meeting out here tomorrow to look over the roster of the new House and see how things stack up.”

“They feel pretty sure that it’ll go to the House, then?”

“That’s what they think, sir. Dunc is sure of it. I myself am afraid of an elector swinging the decision one way or the other, and as long as they aren’t controlled, that could as easily happen against us as for us.”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking, too. I may have an answer for that, if what I have in mind works out. And I think it might. But listen, you meet with your people, make your decisions about the various members involved in a contest in the House. When you feel sure about the individuals that may cause trouble, on either side, you get back to me and we’ll set up a meeting. We’ve got a while before the new Congress comes to town and there ought to be time to do something.”

“Very good, Mr. President. I’ll do just that. What have you got in mind?”

“Well, you just leave that to me. When you get your list, you call me up.”

“All right, Mr. President. I’ll get back to you.”

“Good, Sam. Give Sofia a kiss for me, will you?”

“Yes, indeed, Mr. President.”

“Good night, Sam.”

“Good night, Mr. President.”

Norwalk punched a button and leaned back in his chair. Blue smoke once again clouded the yellow light from the old-fashioned desk lamp, a gift from his late wife, whose smile shone out from his favorite photograph of her at the lamp’s base. (She was precariously balanced high atop a disgruntled camel in front of the Pyramids, a side trip they’d made on a state visit to Egypt.)

“Well, you heard that, Phil. What do you think?”

“I think you’re going to want me to work with Governor St. Clair’s people on this.”

Norwalk leaned up in his chair and put his hands on his desk, looking into the darkness around Slanetti.

“Partly. You are going to work *for* St. Clair and his people, not necessarily *with* them. I’m not quite sure how I want this thing handled. You can understand that. This is going to be delicate work. Very delicate work, indeed. I haven’t asked you what kind of information you have in those files, but I can imagine. Some of the stuff the whole town knows, but nobody talks about. I’m sure you know which is which.”

“I’ve made myself acquainted with all the details, yes sir. Even some of the most scandalous items could not be used because everybody knows about them already and the member involved knows he’d be protected by the silence of his friends and associates. But there’s enough material for your purposes, I think, Mr. President.”

“For *my* purposes, Phil?” the President asked, raising his eyebrows.

“For the purposes ... at hand, sir.”

“Considering the turn of events, I’m glad to know you’ve been keeping those files. I’m also glad we didn’t have to use them four years ago.”

“I know what you mean,” said Slanetti.

“I’m sorry we have to use any of it at all, Phil.”

“I can understand that, Mr. President.”

Norwalk leaned back again and thought back to his own campaign for reelection four years back. He was under considerable pressure in that election. The Sino-Russian enmity had had a particularly violent flare up, but that was nothing to compare to today’s dangerous climate. There was a well-funded third party candidate of extremely dangerous potential that Norwalk was afraid might conceivably take enough electoral votes to throw the election into the Democratic Congress. Without question, had that happened, Norwalk would have lost the election. So he had a young aide of his, fresh from the Justice Department, this same Phil Slanetti, work up an in-depth file on the private lives of every congressman

and senator, including anything that could remotely be used publicly or privately against the member's reputation, his career, his family, his business interests, his dignity, welfare, etc. It was an ambiguous assignment in its description. Norwalk never had to use the files, and only he and Slanetti knew of their existence. He hadn't been told even his campaign manager.

Norwalk now realized Slanetti had in his possession some of the most highly inflammable information the government had anywhere. It was the kind of information no one liked and of which everyone, in varying degrees, was afraid. The question was: Would they be afraid enough to vote for St. Clair against their wishes, against their consciences, senses of personal integrity and constitutional duty? *Of course they would*, thought Norwalk, cynically, *they're politicians*. There were damn few of them that weren't crooks in one way or another by the time they got to Washington, and the ones that weren't were soon converted by the piles of cash coming out of the expensive leather briefcases of K Street lobbyists.

"Yes, very delicate, indeed," Norwalk repeated. Slanetti waited patiently. "Here's what you do, Phil."

"Yes, sir."

"Sam's people are going to meet with Olcott. They'll do what we can't do right now, which is make a canvas and find out where the members stand today. When they know I'll have Sam come down here. We'll—you and me—we'll have a look at this list. Then we'll just see what they can do on their own. I'll work with them in the open, pressure as many members as I can in the conventional sense. I don't want to have to use you if we don't have to."

"If I may say so, Mr. President, they won't be able to do it on their own."

"You're right," Norwalk sighed, puffing away.

“If I may, Mr. President, I’ll draw up my own estimate of the way I think the House will vote so that when Governor St. Clair brings his list, we’ll have them to compare.”

“Good idea, Phil. Do that. It could be interesting to see who’s not on whose list.”

“Yes, sir.”

Norwalk hesitated, something he seldom did.

“How *good* is this file, Phil?”

“Good, Mr. President, very good,” said Slanetti with the same unemotional voice he always seemed to use but which struck home to Norwalk as it never had before.

“Then it’s very, very bad, Phil.”

“You could say that, Mr. President. Or you could say it’s very, very good.”

“Let me just give you a name—a file you’re bound to know. What have you got on, say, Niles Overton?”

“The majority leader is so-so. But even his hands are dirty.”

“He’s wanted to be speaker for years. Much on him?”

“There is one thing that could ruin him completely. He’s not a silent partner, exactly, but more of a beneficiary, in a land development company in Minnesota. Most of the money is funneled through his ex-wife, and she gets over two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year off the company’s developments.”

“Is that illegal?” said Norwalk.

“Not until you find out his ex-wife—well, not her exactly, but a shell company controlled by her—started invoicing the company just before it bought large tracts of land along the eventual route of a new interstate highway that went through the state, something Overton knew about in advance because of his position on the House Public Works Committee.”

“That’s big enough to drive him out of office.”

“That’s what I assumed, Mr. President.”

“How about, oh, someone like John Fulton of Oklahoma? Bob Degraff will probably have a hard time with his own state if it comes to the House. Fulton hates me and he hates St. Clair.”

“Fulton is easy on the surface, but he’ll be hard in fact. He hates Robert Degraff, that’s common knowledge. But he’s guilty of extortion. Because he’s ranking member on the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, he’s had plenty of opportunities. He’s been accepting great sums of money for years for his influence and support of the oil lobby. But it’s not directly from the oil lobby – it’s from the equipment and parts manufacturers that the money gets filtered, from subsidiaries all based abroad, not here in the U.S. Those parts companies have a much smaller profile than the big oil lobby. He’s smarter than most, though. He keeps it all in an unnamed, numbered bank account on the Isle of Wight. It’s unreported, untaxed and very illegal.”

“John Fulton, huh?” said Norwalk with a slight smile on his face. “How much has he got over there?”

“It’s hard to know exactly, sir, but easily more than twelve million.”

“My God, Phil. There are no surprises in politics, you know?” Norwalk said rhetorically as he got up and walked to the windows on the south side of the office and looked towards the Washington Monument. He turned back to Slanetti who rose and faced him.

“How did you find all this out, Phil?”

“In Overton’s case, it wasn’t easy. Well, none of them are easy. I checked his IRS. file. It showed nothing, so I checked his wife’s file. Nothing again. The partners’ files. Nothing out of the ordinary. Run-of-the-mill private sector multimillionaires like most of the hogs eating the pork. But if you look at the uncles, aunts and nephews of Overton’s *ex-wife*, not his current wife, you hit pay dirt. They’re all millionaires many times over. And it all comes from Overton. Even his current wife doesn’t know about any of his illegal activities. And when you check the company’s transactions and compare them to Overton’s voting record in his committee, it all works out.”

“And bingo, just like that,” said the President quietly.

“Yes, sir,” said Slanetti unemotionally, bland as sand.

“How’d you track it down?”

“Not so easy. I have informants in most lobbies that I can count on when I need them. I was aware of the payments to Fulton in recent years, though I have no full retrospective accounting. At any rate, I knew what he was getting. It was never reported, I checked that first. Then it was just a matter of time and looking before I found out where he kept it. I have some discreet contacts in Switzerland, which led me to the Isle of Wight. A little money works wonders with regard to information, Mr. President. Then I checked the deposit amounts on the Isle of Wight—I was able to get those for the past few years—with the amounts I had been informed he was paid. Bingo. That’s where he keeps his money.”

“So you also have files on Overton’s ex-wife, Fulton’s people, their aunts and uncles and partners?” remarked Norwalk as he returned to his desk and sat down. Slanetti remained standing.

“Yes, sir. I have expanded the original concept somewhat, just to make the files complete.”

“Expanded it?” Norwalk’s eyes showed extreme interest.

“Yes, sir. I investigated any person who could be connected in an illegal way with the person I was interested in. You can often go through someone to get the man you’re after. I also made investigations of selected persons on our own side, purely for defensive purposes.”

“I see,” said Norwalk. He banged his pipe upside down in the ashtray and refilled it. “It’s a sound assumption, Phil. It’s good to know what others can use against you, even your friends.”

“Just my thinking, Mr. President.”

Norwalk was tempted to ask Slanetti one certain question pertaining to his own life, his “forgotten” past, if a President can have one, but he assumed that if no one else in the country knew certain things, maybe even Slanetti didn’t. He looked sharply at Slanetti, but as the aide for congress-



sional liaison was standing, he could just barely see his face, which was above the circle of light on the desk. He did ask something, however.

“Funny the media doesn’t dig deep enough to find more of this stuff, don’t you think, Phil?”

“Not really, sir. Maybe in the seventies and eighties, but now it’s all about drugged out rock stars and whether they’re wearing underwear. The media is pretty much in control.”

“It’s amazing when you invite a network anchor to a state dinner for the French President how tame the questions get at the next interview.”

“Exactly, Mr. President. Of course, you have to throw them a fish every now and then, even one of your own.”

“When they’ve been attacked, anyway, and bleeding from a wound.”

“Yes, sir. Unfortunate, but it happens. The people think that person’s just a bad apple, the rest of the apples are okay.”

“So your investigative system is better than anything the media can throw at Congress.”

“It is unexcelled, Mr. President. Newspaper reporters, network reporters, insurance company investigators, even most police, don’t have the resources of private information that I have at my disposal.”

“What resources?” asked Norwalk. It was the only stupid question he ever asked in his life. Even Slanetti took the liberty of thinking so.

“The federal government,” replied Slanetti.

Norwalk blinked, feeling incredibly stupid. Maybe it was the late hour.

“Yes, well, we’ll talk more about it later,” said Norwalk. He rubbed both his eyes with his hands. “God, I’m tired,” he said, standing up. “You can go on with your work, Phil. I appreciate your thoroughness, and even more than that, your loyalty.”

“Thank you, Mr. President,” said Slanetti. He then turned and went to the door.

“Oh, Phil?”

“Yes, Mr. President?”

“What are you planning on doing after we leave office?”

“Haven’t decided, Mr. President.”

“Right.”

Slanetti closed the door behind him.

Norwalk watched him go and then touched a button on his console.

“Yes, Mr. President?”

“I’m going up to bed now.”

“Yes, Mr. President. Good night.”

Norwalk went towards the door that led down the corridor to the elevator. A guard was standing by the elevator.

“Good night, Mr. President.”

“Good night, Alfred,” he said.

Oh well, he thought as he went up to the second floor living quarters, bad as all this was, he felt completely justified in using the information Slanetti gathered simply because of the volatile nature of the Sino-Russian conflict. Nothing was more important to Norwalk at this point in his life and career than the certain election of Sam Houston St. Clair to succeed him. He was willing to suspend the laws of the land in order to acquire the information needed against the opposition. He saw that Slanetti had already done most of the footwork necessary and already compiled what he needed.

He knew he could sleep a little late tomorrow. The Russians and the Chinese ought to be quiet for a few days owing to the inconclusive election results. Chances were they were as startled about the developments as everyone in Washington was. The elevator doors opened and he walked down the hall to his bedchamber. Lonnie, his night usher, came out of another door and opened the door to his bedroom.

“Long night, Mr. President, yes?”

“Long night, Lonnie.”

Minutes later, as Norwalk fell asleep, his mind slipped back to earlier in the evening when he’d been watching the results come in on TV and realized a tie existed in the Electoral College.

He'd called Slanetti, who was working late in his office, when he first remembered those old files. He'd asked if Slanetti still had them.

"Oh, yes, Mr. President. You never told me to deactivate them, so I've been keeping them up-to-date all these years. They're quite thorough."

*Perfect, Norwalk thought. What great good luck!*

"By the way, Phil, what was the name we gave those files?"

"A very fitting name, Mr. President. You said you'd had one term to construct a firm foundation on which peace could prosper and you desperately wanted to have another term to put the last piece in place so the whole structure would hold."

"Noble words, Phil."

"Yes, sir. Code name is the Keystone File."


*Black Kitty Cottage  
South Beach  
6 June 2012*

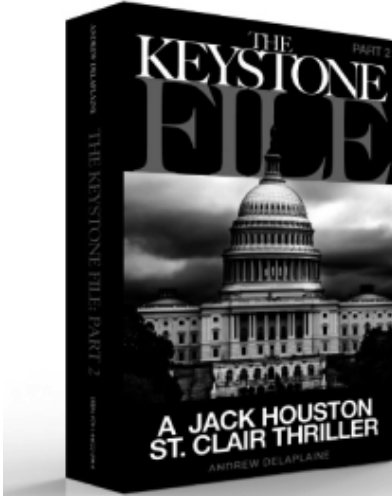
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