



# The District

Without power  
...we are nothing



WRITTEN AS A 'NOVELLA IN A DAY'  
ON APRIL 4th 2020



# The District

written as a  
Novel-in-a-Day



# THE DISTRICT

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## **Time is no substitute for talent**

This NiaD was a special edition, run in addition to our normal annual event in response to the social distancing and mandatory isolation imposed on us by the global Covid19 viral pandemic of 2020. It was quickly prepared, even by our standards. But as we're fond of saying around here, time is no substitute for talent...

The book you are about to read was written over the course of a single day in April 2020. For those unfamiliar with the concept of Novel-in-a-Day, it's simple:

- A skeleton of a plot is worked out in advance of the day
- That plot is broken into sections, which are divided amongst the participants randomly
- The writers have most of the rest of the day to write and return their chapters, working with no knowledge of the wider story or their place in it.

**Tim**

April 4, 2020





# The District



## chapter one

*Kimberlee Gerstmann*

SUN BEAMED ACROSS LUSH green grasses of northern Italy: a beautiful day in the Alps. Andrew pedaled faster, a blue sports car whizzed past him on the winding road, followed by a motorcycle zipping along his left side. It unnerved him for a moment and his pace faltered. Clouds topped hillsides as the scenery lured him back in. The paved road gave way to one of pressed gravel, and finally, a dirt trail that led to a sparkling lake offering serenity. Andrew felt the sudden urge to strip off his clothes and jump into the lake, even though it was only a video. He laughed at his daydream. *A fat lot of good daydreams are going to do me now*, he thought. Shaking off the juvenile fantasy of playing hooky, he finished his ride and allowed the pedals to slow to a stop. As he reached for the button to power down, the screen flickered. He received a brief electric jolt that coursed from his finger to his arm, neck, and head, reverberating off the only filling he had in his mouth. *Christ!* He jerked his hand away and wiggled his fingers while his tongue explored his rear molar. A strange metallic taste filled his mouth. He stumbled off the bike and his legs felt like

rubber.

Lucy often teased that his lack of exercise could kill him, but at least when he was being lazy, he wasn't electrocuted. He grabbed a towel to wipe his neck, making a mental note to let someone know the bike was acting up. Just another item for that impossible to-do list constantly churning in his brain.

Andrew went to the residence to change and had just tied his shoes when Elizabeth poked her head in the door.

"Hey, Dad, your re-election kickoff speech trended for several hours on Twitter last night." She flipped through the images on her phone, pausing on a screenshot of #Again under the category of politics. She turned toward him.

"Ah yes, the twits," he smiled, intentionally using the wrong terminology.

"Ugh." Elizabeth reacted with the anticipated eye roll. "You were knocked out of trend by people claiming to see the Northern Lights over DC." She rolled her eyes again. "Also, I might need a new phone. Mine has been acting lame all morning. The screen is dying." She shifted her phone toward him for a second brief moment, proof of the telltale flicker. "They'll give me the newest model, right?" Now she batted her eyelashes at him, smiling with a Cheshire cat grin.

"I'll talk it over with Communications today," Andrew said. "Did you already have breakfast? And where's Mom?"

"I had some toast. And Mom is resting in the small bedroom. She said the noise last night gave her a migraine."

"Okay, I'll check in on her on my way to the office."

"I still think it is weird when you say that," Elizabeth noted. She braced her back against the doorjamb and continued scrolling through her phone.

"Don't you need to get to school?" he asked, straightening his tie and sliding an arm into his jacket.

“Unless you let me skip after last night’s craziness and jet lag,” she said, shifting her attention to watch him for the smallest hint of flexibility.

Seeing the look of anticipation on his daughter’s face, he had another gut reaction and a feeling of wanting to run away for the day. *Just the three of us hanging out and spending the day together.* He wished things were that simple—but they wouldn’t be—not for a long time.

“I’d love that, kiddo, but it isn’t going to happen.”

Elizabeth didn’t look as disappointed as he’d hoped. She blew him a kiss and traipsed off down the hall, security following her at a respectable distance.

“Check in with me after school, okay?” he yelled at his daughter’s back. She waved a hand at him without turning around, and it was all he could do to stop himself from going after her to keep her home.

*What is wrong with me?*

*Second thoughts?*

*Yes. Second thoughts.*

It was a foregone conclusion that he would run for a second term. His age and health weren’t factors against him. There had been no major financial or social upsets in his years in office. Of course, there were small bumps in the road, but he’d handled them well. His popularity hung in the low 60s, and the Dems weren’t even putting up a strong candidate to oppose him, choosing instead to focus their sights on 2024. He couldn’t just step down. It would be unprecedented in this day and age. Everyone counted on him. Lucy loved being First Lady, and her approval ratings were higher than his. *She should have been President.*

Andrew rapped his knuckles softly against the door of the small bedroom and then entered. Lucy had the television on.

Her favorite show, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, played at a low volume. He recognized the episode almost instantly. She would often turn that on as a mind-soother when she couldn't sleep. He crossed to the bed and sat down on the edge, careful not to squish her. He pushed the hair back off her forehead and placed a small kiss there.

"Hey, lovely. I heard you partied too hard last night."

"Who ratted me out? Dwayne? I always thought he looked shifty," she joked. "Or maybe it's just the dark glasses and earpiece that make him seem that way."

"No. I have another informant."

"Did she get off to school?"

He paused for a beat, thinking about telling Lucy of his strange internal monologue.

"Yes. Bandicoot is on the move," he smiled, referring to Elizabeth's Secret Service name. "Did you take anything for your head?"

"Not yet," Lucy admitted.

"Do you want me to get your pills?"

"If you have time. This pressure is killing me," she gestured to her head. "I'll love you forever."

"If that's all it takes..."

A semi-smile crossed Lucy's features. She looked pale. He felt like climbing in bed with her and holding her until she felt better. *But I can't.*

"Be right back." Andrew forced a smile. He retreated to the main suite and grabbed the prescription combination for Lucy's migraines. When he returned with a glass of water, he noticed the small table light flicker. He handed her the pills and she scooted herself up into a sitting position, reclining against the headboard of the bed.

"The tv is acting up," she stated after swallowing, wincing

for a moment as the pills went down.

Andrew turned and saw the picture flickering. “Maybe there’s a storm brewing.” He crossed to the window and pulled the curtain aside to check the weather. The sky looked clear and there were no signs of ominous clouds on the horizon.

“All good out there,” he reported. “I’ll have someone look into it.”

He walked back to the bed and leaned over to place a kiss on Lucy’s upturned lips. “I’ve got to review the PDB binder and get busy. I’ll check in with you after a bit.”

“Okay,” she whispered and slid back down under the covers. “I should be up within the hour.”

Andrew turned the doorknob. “Don’t push it if you don’t need to. Love you.”

“You too,” she said.

He checked his watch and realized he was already a few minutes behind his normal schedule and that Jeffrey wouldn’t let him hear the end of it. He lengthened his stride and smiled to himself when he caught his detail off-guard and heard the jingle of keys and equipment as they took an extra couple of steps to keep up. By the time they reached the Oval Office, he’d made up a couple of minutes. Jeffrey stood outside the office, binder in hand, waiting.

“Boss,” he stated simply, giving Andrew a nod and handing off the Daily Briefing.

Andrew stepped into the room and took a seat in an armchair, unbuttoning his jacket and opening the binder across his lap. He pulled a pen out of his inside pocket and jotted a few of the mental notes that had been piling up. Reading the pages prepared for him, he was pleased that there were no major issues on the radar. It gave him a tiny sliver of

breathing room.

Launching his re-election campaign took more out of him than he'd imagined, and he chalked up his earlier errant thoughts to stress. As his schedule got underway, the pressure and demands of back-to-back meetings pushed his thoughts of skipping town to the background of his mind.

*Two meetings down*, he thought. He scanned his schedule to see where he could squeeze in a few minutes to check on Lucy. There was a meeting with the Trade and Economic Development Council he might be able to leave early. He watched as the portly guy from TEDC came into the room. He could never remember the man's name but was annoyed by him, nonetheless. The officious man made a big pretense of plugging his cell phone charger into the wall behind him and then jumped back with a start as he received a shock. Andrew hid a small chuckle behind a forced cough.

"The air is supercharged today," the man said. "It could be from the Northern Lights. I know a fair bit about science."

*Sure you do*, Andrew thought and internally gave an eye roll that would have made Elizabeth proud.

There were a few murmurs around the table from others who had seen the lights themselves or heard about them from friends/family. A couple of people admitted they'd also been on the receiving end of minor electrical shocks. Andrew stared at the meeting attendees, surprised for a moment at how easily they let the facade of professionalism slide to gossip about the sky and static. He made a tapping gesture toward his watch, and Jeffrey called the meeting to order. Ten minutes later, Abby, from the secretarial pool, entered the room and came directly to Andrew's side.

"Sir. There's an emergent issue, and you're needed right away," she whispered in his ear.



His first thought was Lucy and his heart raced for a moment.

“You’ll excuse me,” he offered to the group more as a statement than a question.

Jeffrey walked out of the meeting as well and the three stood, inches from each other, in the hall.

“NASA, Homeland Security, and NSA are waiting in the Situation Room,” Abby started. “There’s been a glitch and loss of communication with the Space Station.”

Andrew let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “Can you check on Lucy for me?” he asked.

A look of surprise crossed Abby’s usually placid features and she seemed to struggle to control them. “Me?”

“Yes. I know it’s not in your job description,” it came out a bit gruffer than he’d intended, “but I just need to know she’s okay. Her head was bothering her this morning.”

“Of course,” Abby rushed. “Anything.” She turned on her heel and left.

Andrew sighed, surprising Jeffrey.

“Boss?” he asked as they walked toward the SitRoom.

Andrew started, “Do you ever...” and then stopped, realizing that he should not continue with the line of thought that had been bothering him all morning.

“What?” Jeffrey questioned.

“Nothing. Forget it.”

Jeffrey, not being one to pry, forgot it.

They reached the West Wing basement and stepped inside the conference room. A bevy of men and a couple of women were already seated around the large table. Andrew took his seat and David Clarke, National Security Advisor, made the perfunctory introductions of key players.

“We’ve lost contact with the Space Station. There’s nothing

we can find on our end to explain it. We've checked with allies and others, and everyone seems to be in the same boat. It doesn't seem like anything nefarious at this point, but we're still working our contacts to find any chatter," Clarke stated.

Andrew rubbed his hand across his face as Dr. Priyanka and Kamlesh *I-forgot-his-last-name* took over and started talking technical points. For a second, he wanted to ask if the flickering electronics and Northern Lights had anything to do with it, but he realized that might be embarrassing. Other than watching Cosmos with Elizabeth, he was not a science guy.

Several other scientists and security people spoke ad nauseum, and Andrew wondered if the meeting was ever going to end. *Have you tried shutting it off and turning it on again*, rolled through his mind as well, and he straightened his face to make sure he wasn't smiling at his own inside joke. Electric shocks, stuttering electronics, sky lights... he wondered if or how they were all connected.

Clarke suddenly reached for his cell, looked down and then interrupted. "Looks like we need to switch over to the phone. He stood and dialed into the conference call hub that was on the table. "Go ahead," he barked, placing his hands on the table in front of him and leaning toward the center.

"We've lost a communication satellite," came the reply.

"Can you explain?" Clarke asked.

"It's one of our main satellites, Sir. We're trying to get it back online, but..."

"Shit," Clarke shook his head. "How long?"

"It's been out of contact for about thirty minutes. We're redirecting some of the traffic to other stations, but we need to get it back online. As it is, we'll have services impacted. GPS is the first thing that is going to take a big hit."

"Keep me apprised," Clarke stated and ended the call.

An assortment of astonished faces and raised eyebrows surrounded the participants around the table.

“Who could be doing this? Is it an attack?” Andrew shot the questions to Clarke.

Clarke paused before answering. “Attack? No. Highly unlikely. Let me make a couple of calls.” He stepped out of the conference room, phone in hand.

Andrew had a sudden sinking feeling in his stomach. The strange vibe he felt earlier in the morning returned. He imagined pandemonium breaking out if people had no access to their electronics. Deep down, he knew it wasn’t an attack. Something was wrong though. “Maybe we should move this to the East Wing?”

“The PEOC?” Jeffrey asked, a note of surprise in his voice.

“Yes. Tell Cole to have his men pull Elizabeth from school and get her here asap. I also want Lucy down here.”

Andrew stood, smoothing his hands across the front of his jacket. He could feel a small trickle of sweat rolling down the center of his back.

“And get Aisling here too,” he added, nodding at Jeffrey.

“The campaign speechwriter?”

“Yes. I want her to help draft a statement.”

“We have staff here capable of that,” Jeffrey replied. He turned to face Andrew, a question on his face.

“I want her,” Andrew commanded, not giving Jeffrey further explanation. He ran his fingers through his hair before looking at his watch. It was only 11 AM but it felt like the day had lasted a lifetime already.

## chapter two

*Sophia Wickham*

**THURSDAY 29<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 2019.**

**The White House**

**11:10**

“Slow down John! I’ve already been for a run this morning!”

“Sir, we need to get you to a secure location a-sap.”

“If I can’t catch my breath, you may end up carrying me in a box!”

“That can be arranged. Sir.”

The President decides that it may be futile to try and get a human response from his chief protection officer, so he keeps quite and matches his pace to his security team. He knows two of the team, John and Tony, and although the other two are new they are very much cast in the same mould; black suit, ear piece, buzz cut. They form a protective rectangle around him.

“Four angels round my head;

One to watch and one to pray

And two to bear my soul away.”

Why has that suddenly come to mind? He shudders and

keeps jogging.

He is hurried through the labyrinth of White House corridors, the polished marble floors turning first to linoleum then to bare cement under their feet as they move further and further from the state rooms and descend into the working bowels of the building. There is no comfort here, no opulence, just safety. The safest place in the USA, or at least in the White House. Safe from all kinds of domestic and foreign attack, fire, flood and nuclear bomb. Top level security, state of the art tech. And yet, it is here that Andrew Gray feels at his most vulnerable. This underground bunker is the MRI chamber, the operating theatre, the morgue, the place of last resort. He hates it down here, he hates the smell of steel and concrete, the electric hum of neon lights and hidden servers.

He gives himself a mental kick up the butt; this is not how Presidents are supposed to think, they are supposed to come alive in a crisis and lead their people to victory. He can do it, he tells himself, he just wishes he could trade some of the security for a view, or at least for some fresh air.

His phone buzzes with the tone he has assigned to Libby. She will have to wait, because they have reached The Door.

“Sir, if you could hold out your hand?”

Gray reaches out his right hand and holds it up against the reader. Nothing happens. He pulls it back, flexes the fingers a few times, shakes his hand as if warming up to play the piano or pitch a baseball. Holds it up to the pad again. Still nothing happens.

“Maybe I’m an impostor? Shall we just knock?”

“Your palm may be sweaty sir.”

“D’ya think?” He rubs his hand up and down his trouser leg, holds his hand up again. A green light comes on. The screen prompts him to enter the access code. Hidden among

all the random digits is Alice Gardner's birthday. Their secret. He smiles faintly as the door mechanism releases and hums as it slides open. He steps in to the Presidential Emergency Operations Room. Oh God, they are all here already, their faces turning expectantly towards him as he enters.

There's William, (who has Lyndon B Johnson fantasies), sitting in a ingratiating huddle with David Clarke and Jeffrey Palmer, (how did they get here so quickly, is there a shortcut?) and across the room from them the buzzcut head of Matthew Williams just raised from conversation with suave Carl, the military and the CIA together in perfect harmony (for now).

"Gentlemen, any new intel?"

**Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> August 2019.**

**The White House - Presidential Emergency Operations Room**

**11:30**

"We are still trying to ascertain the nature of the incident Sir..."

"It seems that only one other coms satellite, DN3 73, appears to be affected in addition to the three..."

Ok, so nothing new then, he can spare a few seconds. Gray pulls the phone from his pocket and looks at the first few lines of his daughter's message. He has promised her he will stop ignoring her texts.

**Trying to send Sam the spooky lights footage but Snapchat is glitchy. Is there something wrong with the WiFi? Mum can't get hold of IT guy....**

"The aurora might have been caused by a nuclear orbit detonation, that knocked out the satellites..."

Gray cuts through the eager recitations.

“Yes, but what we really need to know is WHO is responsible? Is it a terror attack, an act of war, the precursor to an alien invasion?”

“An act of war, seems the most likely, Sir.” Matthew Williams is not going to rise to the idea of an alien attack.

“Ok. Who by? The Russians? The Chinese? Is this the start of World War 3?”

“Sir ,with all due respect, World War 3 has been fought and won before we even noticed anything was wrong.” Oh God, spare him from Jeffrey’s pet conspiracy theory, “It turned out not to be the nuclear armageddon we prepared for, but a wholly alien hybrid conflict being fought with the mixed methods of technology and psychology - disinformation, destabilisation and the deployment of insidious, deniable and ditched assets instead of missiles, infantry and artillery. A war fought purely with lies, which Russia won hands down never having even made an official declaration.”

“Ok, ok, Jeffery, it was a figure of speech. Not the Russians then. Who else has this kind of capability? The Chinese?”

“I think it unlikely Sir, they use trade and finance as their weapons. This attack, and yes, I think it is an attack is most likely to be Russian, whatever the Chief of Staff may say,” Williams fixes the spluttering man with a gimlet eye to stop him interrupting, “or Middle Eastern in origin.”

“The intel I have been getting from various intelligence sources, has heard nothing about an attack of this magnitude...”

“What about sun spots or solar storms? Could it be something natural? Who are we speaking to at NASA?”

“NASA is still freaking out over loss of coms with the Space Station...it is highly unlikely to be a natural

phenomenon, these are targeted attacks...”

Gray, sighs inwardly. This room is too full of testosterone, these alpha men (and William) all squaring unto each other, forgetting they are supposedly on the same side, playing for the same team now.

“Can someone get Alice in here? Maybe the Director of National Intelligence has something new for us?” Dear God, please, if he has to be shut up in this room, could it at least be with Alice?

His phone buzzes. Libby again.

**Have you seen my Insta post? Check it out, my pics of the aurora are amazing...**

He taps to open Instagram. That should eat up some time.

**Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> August 2019.**

**The White House - Presidential Emergency Operations Room 13:05**

The Presidential stomach is beginning to rumble. He wonders if he is the only one to be hungry in the middle of a national crisis. Everyone else is very busy, but there is still no actual news. Some satellites are out, the Space Station is offline, there were lights in the sky and some people’s phones gave them an electric shock. Why does that warrant sitting in a hole underground?

“Any chance of some sandwiches?” He asks Jeffrey, who nods immediately. He hates me even more now, thinks Gray, sandwiches will mess with his keto/fasting regime, but God knows when we are getting outta here, and this is a national emergency. Ham, cheese and baloney...

The lights cut out. The bank of screens turn into a panoramic window onto a wall of text.



“What the FUCK!”

“Hey!”

“Jeezuz...”

Someone holds up the torch on their phone, pointless in the screens glow. Somewhere in the distance a warning klaxon can be heard. The lights snap back on.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Nothing to worry about Mr Vice President, just a temporary power outage, a glitch in the system, we have state of the art emergency power sources that will last for months in the event of a hostile...”

The room goes black again.

“Oh holy shit...”

“It’s OK, the power will come back online in a moment.”

They wait. Gray drums his fingers against his leg, on the screen on his lap. He should text Libby back. The lights don’t come back on. Carl Evans holds his phone up again. This time it seems to glow brighter. That’s when they realise that the light coming from the bank of computer screens is getting dimmer. Gray taps his phone screen with increasing desperation. Nothing. The phone is dead. Carl’s phone goes dead. The klaxon isn’t sounding anymore. Apart from the breathing of ten people it is very quiet. The background hum that he had attributed to distant computers is silent. He fears it may have been the air con unit. There is a loud click, a ratchet, and a flame flares. Shocked faces flicker as eyes adjust. This, this here is an emergency. He wants to be the first to say it. He is the President after all.

“So guy, we’re in a sealed underground bunker, with electronic doors, computer controlled air conditioning, no windows, our phones don’t work and the computers don’t work. And all we have for light is William’s half empty Zippo.

We are SO fucked right now...”

## chapter three

*B. Morris Allen*

AS SOON AS THE lights went, Cole put his back to the PEOC door. He'd been standing in front of it in any case.

“Team Bearclaw, dark on post,” he said into his sleeve mic. “Team, report.”

There was an ominous silence on the earpiece as he wait for the team to report in; not just a lack of answers, but none of the faint background hiss even the clearest radio signal provided.

The emergency lights came on. He could see the nearest agents, one at each end of the hall. “Six, report,” he called out quietly. Six was Hu, a new recruit to the presidential detail, but steady, with a good head on her shoulders, and three years experience in the Service. She was at the far end of the corridor to his left. Nothing down there but storage and electronics. No outside access.

“Clear,” came her low call.

“Condition Red,” he called back. Anything that could take out the power like this was serious. “Five, report.” This was Alvarez, a seasoned agent with several rotations in the

presidential detail. He didn't seem to care for President Gray or his politics, but it wouldn't affect his performance. He and Cole had never discussed it, and never would.

"Clear," came the response, low, assured.

Then the lights went out again. He waited, but they didn't come on again.

"Five, chain report," ordered Cole. "Condition Red." He could hear Alvarez heading quietly up the stairs. Six and Five at either end of this hall, Four on the stairway landing, Three inside and Two outside the door on the ground floor of the White House proper. It would be about a minute to get the full report.

He stepped left, and squatted, in case an intruder planned to rely on memory and dead reckoning to take a shot. They'd have fired long since, but better safe than sorry. He leaned his head back gently, felt the handle of the PEOC door, just where it should be.

It was pitch black in the corridor. It had been about two minutes now. The generators should have come on, or the backup generators. The emergency lighting was battery powered, and shouldn't have gone out at all. None of that had happened. And the radio didn't work. He tried the backup channel, and the second backup, but both were quiet, as expected. He pulled his cell phone from a pocket, held the screen at arms' length, facing away, pressed the power button. No screen glow.

He reached above and behind, to his left, pressed the buzzer on the PEOC door. He'd done it before, once or twice, interrupting whatever discussions they were having in there to report some new development. Well, this was a development, wasn't it? There was no sound from the buzzer, but there never was. The PEOC was hermetically sealed, completely

soundproof. He'd only know they'd heard him if the door opened.

Down the corridor, he heard Five come back down the stairs and creep down the hall. Alvarez' hand on the wall was a tell, but there was a table to avoid, just about ... the steps slowed, then sped up again ... there.

"Dark everywhere," Five reported in a whisper, his sibilants lisped. "Still light topside, of course." It was early afternoon. "No electrics. Two reports fair visibility, natural disturbance." Two was Henderson, a good agent. She was sharp, reliable, careful. A good shot, but sometimes too cautious. A good agent to have on the public-facing side. "Natural light from the lobby," — it was around two corners. Natural disturbance meant human nature — in this case the amount of chaos you might expect from having electricity stop working. "I told her to lock down, Condition Red."

There'd be no one coming in then, without a fight. No one at all. Only Cole or the President himself could countermand that order, and the President was locked in the PEOC. Safe.

"Thoughts?" Cole whispered. What could take out all the active and backup electronics at once, on two floors of the building?

"EMP?" suggested Alvarez. Of course an electro-magnetic pulse was the obvious thought. A power cut would have left the batteries unaffected. The generators were electronic but both simple and air-gapped from the internet; theoretically unhackable.

"Backups are hardened," Cole replied. In theory, anyway. "Pulse train, maybe." They'd had a briefing on this last year. A pulse train was a sequence of EMPs, though he hadn't been quite clear on why that mattered. "Check the generators, report back. Send Six over."

Five made his careful way down the hall toward Six and the electrics. He'd know how to restart the generators, if they worked.

“Sir.” Six, already. She was a quiet one.

“Six. We’ve got no radio, no electrics. Go topside. Find out what’s happening and how widespread it is. If you can, find ...” The VP and Chief of Staff were in the PEOC, as were the National Security Advisor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and a host of others. Poorly planned, but then no one ever listed to security, did they? Not until it was too late. “Find the Director of the Service if you can, or the Deputy. Commandeer a phone if you find one that works. If you can’t find them, use your judgment. Find out what’s happening.”

“Sir.” He could feel her nod.

“Two won’t let you back in. Give her the password ... ‘Cassandra’. Go now.”

“Sir.” She left as silently as she’d come. She was reliable; she’d do a good job. She was also the least experienced and most expendable of the team. If it came to fight, she’d contribute the least. A good choice for this mission.

At his elbow, he could feel Alvarez lurking, waiting. The lights hadn’t come back, and there was no sound from the generators. That was report enough.

“No go?”

“No, Sir.” As expected.

He spent a moment pondering weapons. They each had a Glock automatic, of course, and a backup. Thank goodness they hadn’t gone to smart guns; those might not work without power. The Glocks had tritium night sights, but those only helped aim the shot; they didn’t illuminate the target. All the agents had pepper spray. Most of the team had knives. Two, Three, and Four had Tazers. There was a locked cabinet down

the hall with Remington shotguns and rifles. With no light, though, those would be too risky to use.

There was only one entrance to this area – the door guarded by Two. Propping that door open wouldn't allow much light – down the stairwell, and then to this hallway – and would be a security risk. They were better off with it closed.

There wasn't much to do, then, but wait, and report to the PEOC. If he could.

“Pass the word to Two. Password ‘Cassandra’ to let Six report back. When she comes back, I'll go up.” If she came back. Who knew what was happening up there? Hadn't someone mentioned sort of natural lighting thing that morning? Northern Lights or something? And there had been some sort of satellite issue.

“Sir.” Alvarez straightened up and moved off.

So, that was the immediate tasks dealt with. Now for the tough one – reporting to the PEOC. He stood up himself, did a few stretching exercises. Not that he was avoiding the topic, of course. But it was a tough one.

The PEOC was locked of course. That was the point. It was a bunker of sorts, protected against everything up to a nuclear blast. The President was safe, that was the main thing. And the PEOC had its own systems. Perhaps they worked.

He felt his way back to the PEOC door, pressed the buzzer. No response, no sense that it was doing anything at all. He went so far as to knock on the door, with his knuckles and with his Streamlight – it wasn't providing any light for his Glock anyway. The sounds died away immediately, and almost certainly hadn't reached anyone inside.

He gave up on knocking and reviewed what he knew about the PEOC. No other way in, no other way to communicate with the inside. Someone hadn't thought this through, hadn't

anticipated a power failure. Even the... His blood chilled. Even the locks were electronic. Could they be opened manually from the inside? He couldn't remember. His job was to be on the outside. Never inside the PEOC. And now he needed to get in.

"Sir," came Five's voice from the side, and Cole turned away from the door. "Cassandra, Sir."

"Right. Take my place. Listen for anything from the PEOC."

"Yes, Sir. And, Sir...."

"What is it?" It was unlike Alvarez to be so hesitant.

"Well, that Northern Lights thing this morning, and the satellite. And my wife said something about the NASA space station."

"The International Space Station?" NASA hadn't had one of its own for decades, he thought.

"Yes. I'm just thinking. Protocol 52? I mean, I know..."

Cole smiled. From anyone else, it would have been a joke. Alvarez didn't have a sense of humor, though. He reached out gently, found an arm, patted it. "We're not there yet, Jandro. Don't worry."

Still, he found his way down the hall to the weapons locker, and felt through it for a couple of shotguns. Protocol 52 was mostly a joke – a would-be protocol for what to do in case of an alien landing. Hostile aliens, but still ones that could be shot. It wasn't different in any real sense from a terrorist lockdown or a hostile force invasion of the capital. Coordinate with the military, keep the principals safe. The same thing they were doing now, pretty much.

Shotguns in hand, he made his way up the stairwell, passing Four on the landing. He handed one shotgun off to Three, inside the topside door.



“Just in case,” he said. “Unlock.”

Three – Agent Kim – slung the shotgun over a shoulder, unlocked the door bolts with one hand, the other on his Glock, and stepped back, free hand now pulling out the pepper spray. Safest in tight quarters.

“Clear, Sir,” he said.

Cole turned the handle slowly, said ‘Cassandra’ in a low voice.

“Clear,” came the response, muffled by the door.

He pushed the door open, stepped out into the light of the hallway. It was bright after the dark of the stairway. Two would be behind the door. Six stood across from him, her gaze pointed down the hall, watching for trouble.

He let the door close behind him, acknowledged Two with a nod, and gave her the other shotgun.

“Six, report.” He gave her a nod to confirm that she could report in front of Two. They all needed to know what they were facing, and the more that heard it from the source, the better.

“Sir, all electronics are down. No cell phones, no computers, no land lines. I couldn’t find the Director or Deputy, though I imagine the Deputy will be here soon.” That was a safe bet. The Director would likely stay put to coordinate a response from all details. But the Deputy might well come to the White House, given the level of people in the PEOC. “Not just electronics. Nothing *electric* either.” It was a good distinction, and one he hadn’t thought to make, though it made no real difference here. No power tools then. No chance of drilling a hole into the PEOC, even if he’d wanted to. Of course, it would have introduced a weakness.

“Cause? Extent? Source? Motive?” Six was more rattled than she seemed, if she hadn’t remembered her base CESM

reporting.

“Yes, Sir.” She had the grace to blush a little at the reminder. “I found a staffer from the National Science Advisor’s office. No known cause. Loss of electronics and electrics appears to apply across all of DC, at least. Earlier this morning, NASA lost contact with the space station, and a satellite failed, so it may be much more extensive. The Science Advisor is working on an EMP theory of some kind. No sign of a nuclear blast, though, so they’re working on other origins. No thoughts on motive, Sir. Though ... well, the President launched his re-election campaign yesterday, of course.”

“Of course.” He’d thought of that, naturally, but taking out all of DC power seemed an extreme response, even in today’s polarized political environment. “Doesn’t seem like the ISS would be a natural target, though.” His mind went back to Protocol 52. Should they be more frightened of aliens? And how would one prepare for that, anyway?

“Good work, Hu.” And now what? “Keep at it. Stay in the White House grounds, but wander freely, try to pick up some actionable info. Report back every hour through Two. Two, you can allow Six back in if she feels it’s necessary. No one else. We’re still Condition Red until I say otherwise.”

“Sir.” “Yes, Sir.” they said, respectively.

Cole took one last look at the dim light of the beige hallway. You never knew when it might be your last. He went back through the door and down the stairs, stopping briefly to chat with each agent and update them on what little he knew. They were good agents all of them, and dedicated. Morale would be important, though, with little to do for the moment but hunker down and wait. For something.

## chapter four

*Tim Edwards-Hart*

“WHAT THE...?!?” SANJAY SLAMMED his hand on his desk in frustration as his screen went blank. He was almost finished! He turned to the desk beside him, “Hey Jess, it’s gonna take me a little longer...” he stopped as he realised that his wasn’t the only dark screen in the office. “Whoa, looks like we’re all gonna be in the shits with the boss today.”

As people started trying to reset their computers, someone called out, “Hey, who turned out the lights? This isn’t funny you know!”

“No-one did Janet, it’s a power failure. That’s why all the lights, and all our computers, and Bill’s microwave, all turned off at once.” Janet wasn’t popular on the fourth floor.

Sanjay hadn’t realised the lights were out. “Jess, do you think we should call Brian to let him know we’re in blackout? He was on my arse to get this done today, but if the whole building’s down he’s gonna have to let the boss know we can’t do shit.”

“I’m on it” came the reply, followed quickly by, “Oh fuck this!”

Jess stood up from her desk and called out to the office, “My line’s down, does anyone have a dial tone?”

A handful of people picked up their handsets to check. The phones were all out.

Jess called out again, “Janet, someone’s got to call Brian to let him know so I’m going use my cell phone to do it. If you’ve got a problem with it, you can send a memo to Brian about when the power’s back on. Oh for fuck’s sake! My phone’s dead. Sanj, can I borrow yours?”

Sanjay reached into his bike satchel and pulled out his iPhone. It wouldn’t turn on. “Mine’s not working either!”

Around the room others reached for their phones. None of the phones responded. They were truly in the dark.

When the power went out, and the radio went off, and the phones died, Steve knew he would be needed at work. He couldn't get his car to start so he rode his bike to the stables. The roads were in chaos. It seemed that every car had stopped at once. Those who were waiting at red lights were the lucky ones, while most of the rest had been able to pull over, some weren't so lucky. In the few minutes he was on the road he passed four multi-vehicle collisions, seven single vehicle accidents, and multiple confrontations between angry and confused drivers. Most days he would have stopped, but there didn't seem to be anyone seriously injured, and he suspected there would worse to come. He would be needed at work.

Jin, Lexi and Paul were already there, polishing their tack and getting the horses ready. Jin gave him a wave and signalled he'd saddle Bo for him. By the time Steve had a quick shower and changed into his uniform, the Sargent was waiting.

With the station's radios, TV, phones and computers all down, there was no news from outside and no instructions

from command. No one laughed at the sarge's joke about the police pigeon carrier service being retired too soon. The situation was unusual and they had to make decisions on their own. They were nervous. With power out across the city and no communication, it wouldn't take long for anxiety and annoyance to morph into panic and mob hysteria. A visible presence of order was needed and a calm police officer on a huge horse was a lot friendlier than the Special Operations Division in riot gear. One of the roles of Mounted Division was to prevent the need for SOD, but the city was big.

Steve was riding Bo onto within 30 minutes of arriving at the stables. He urged Bo into a canter when he saw the crowds starting to mill in the streets, whispering under his breath, "To serve and protect."

Clutching her handbag to her stomach, Jenny tried to stay calm and slow her breathing. She couldn't see a thing.

Lulled by the sounds of the train as it sped through the underground, she had been absently flicking through Facebook posts on her phone when the lights went out. The sound of the brakes screeching wasn't enough to drown out the noise of the people falling and crying out. And then everything stopped except for the sounds of the other passengers and the darkness.

At first she thought she'd broken her phone because the screen wouldn't turn on, but it seemed that no-one could get their phones to work. And there were no emergency lights. Weren't there supposed to be lights over the doors, or on the floor, or in the tunnel, or *something*? There hadn't been any announcements over the PA, so Jenny hoped the driver was OK.

Occasionally, someone would flick a cigarette lighter and

for a few seconds she could see some of the other faces in the pale light. Then it would go out again. In between these brief moments of light, the darkness was absolute.

She tried to work out how long they'd been here. A few minutes? An hour? More? She couldn't tell.

How long ago was it that someone had tried one of the doors? They couldn't move it, and there was nothing to be seen beyond the reflected flame in the window before the lighter became too hot.

How long ago was it that the woman at the end of the carriage had started screaming and banging on the window? A young couple, using the glow of a cigarette lighter to see her, somehow managed to calm her down. Jenny could still hear the three of them praying together.

In the darkness in front of her, Jenny could sense a man crying, just hear the rhythm of his breath. She couldn't remember what he looked like. She called out to him softly, "Excuse me sir? Excuse me, but... but would you mind sitting beside me? I can't call my family and I'm scared of the dark." He caught his breath and stopped crying, and she wondered if she'd embarrassed him. Then she heard him moving, felt the air stir as he moved across the seat, and a trembling voice say, "Thank you, I'd be honoured." His hand brushed against her, "Oh, I'm sorry, I can't see you..."

Jenny reached out quickly and grabbed his hand, "It's fine. It's good to know I'm not alone while we wait for them to come and get us out."

They sat in the darkness, holding hands, and waited.

Felicia was scared. After waiting for hours at work for the power to come back on, her line manager eventually said to go home. Her watch had stopped, and her phone didn't work, so

she had no idea what time it was.

The roads were full of traffic, but none of it moved. The cars cars, busses, trucks, vans, motorcycles – all of them were still.

Apart from the people, *everything* was still. And the silence was frightening.

All the roads were silent. There were no car engines, no sirens, no horns.

All the buildings were silent. There was no music, no hum of air conditioners, no refrigerators, elevators, or automatic doors.

Everything was quiet. Quiet and dark. No lights were visible through the windows. There were no street lamps. No traffic lights, no advertising screens. There didn't seem to be any artificial light at all. And no manufactured sound. The only thing Felicia could hear was people and birdsong.

At first, it was a comforting in a way. When Felicia realised The Metro was out, she decided to walk home. Walking amongst the people helped create a sense of being together somehow, despite the confusion and anxiety. But the longer she spent outside, the less comforted she was. There were fires. Someone said they'd seen a plane go down. She saw injured people being carried towards a the hospital. Someone said the hospitals had no power and were turning people away. Someone said there'd been a terrorist attack and another said it was an interstellar invasion.

As the number of people on the streets thinned, she began to feel vulnerable. She saw another fire, but there were still no fire engines. There had been police closer to the centre of town, but they all seemed to be acting on their own. But she hadn't seen a police officer for several blocks now, despite walking past three shops that had been looted. Occasionally

there were yells and screams.

It was getting dark, and Felicia estimated she still had to walk another hour or so to get home. She tried to remember if she knew anyone in the area. She had her phone, but it was of no use to her – it was a glass and titanium paperweight now. Maybe her mother's friend Maria used to have an apartment near her? But Felicia didn't know where, or even if Maria was still alive, and she couldn't call her mother to find out. Maybe she should head back to the city.

Felicia heard angry voices screaming at each other, then gunshots, and saw a sudden stream of people running out of a side street. She was outside an apartment building and without a thought ducked inside, ran up the stairs to the third floor and knocked on a door at random. When the door opened, she burst into tears and begged to be allowed inside to wait for daylight.

Inside and out, all was dark.



## chapter five

*Nate Kennedy*

“JUST REMEMBER, YOU’RE NEXT.”

“Aren’t you getting a little ahead of yourself, Andy?” She jerked open another drawer and shoved the junk around, but there weren’t any candles. Why did she keep this stuff? There’s a Swingline on top of the desk. Why have a backup stapler? And those black plastic clips? All those unused, or half-used Post-It notes with smudges on the last few digits of a phone number or something that seemed important to remember? When this was over she was going to dump it all in the trash and start a fresh collection of useless crap.

“Madam Speaker, everyone knows if Gray and Campbell go down, you’re the President.”

“Oh, save it with the formalities. Call me Roberta. We’ve been in this game far too long,” she said as she slammed the drawer. She turned, pushed her chair to the side and leaned on the frame of the open window. Strange to have it open at all. She looked out over the sharp shadow of the Capitol building etched on the dewy grass on the National Mall. The humid air was still for now, but chilled her as the morning rose.

“We haven’t heard from the White House yet. How do we know they’re even still alive?”

“They’re not dead, Andy. Not until I see bodies with my own eyes.”

The door to her office flew open. She had her security detail posted outside, but they were overwhelmed by the urgent, stoic rush of a dozen men in suits, guns drawn. They didn’t yell, they spoke firmly and didn’t answer any questions, confusing her security team even more. They weren’t letting these beat cops, as they saw Capitol police, get in the way of their mission. House Speaker Roberta Miguel leaned heavily onto both hands on top of her desk. Her shoulders peaked with tension and Andy jumped out of the way.

“I thought you might be coming, gentleman.”

“It’s time to go, Speaker Miguel. We need you at the White House. Now.”

“Who are these guys?” Andy’s face glowed red with heat.

“When sorrows come, they come not single spies. But in battalions!” Quoting Shakespeare, she looked up from her desk. “Secret Service, Andy. It’s about to get real.”

She gathered her leather sling briefcase. It was a gift for her wedding, something she’d wanted for some time. It would show the men in DC that she was a powerful woman long before she actually had real power. She felt as wealthy as the men around her when she wore it, and for the first time since the electrical grid went down, Carlos entered her mind. How comforting he would be in these worst times! He was a rock for her, right until. . . Well, that’s over, and it was just her now. Facing a world with no electricity whatsoever, and God knows what else would be wrong.

“Okay, I’m ready. Andy, let’s go.”

“Sorry, Madam Speaker. Just you.”

She protested, saying that Andy was vital to her entire political career, and as her top aide, she demanded he be with her. Not just for national security and strategy, but for support. When you jump into the big leagues, it’s best to take your proven team with you. It was a Republican White House, after all, and she most definitely was not.

“Just you. Let’s go.”

As they whisked her out of the office, she directed Andy to stay put. If nothing else he could let people know that she’s okay. She’d get word to him some how, at some time, as soon as she knew anything.

The Secret Service rushed her through the crowded Capitol Rotunda and out to another group of waiting agents, all with bicycles at the ready. The National Mall was filling up with rag tag bunches of people, starting to chant different protests in their small groups. One dread-locked caucasian 20-something with a dirty t-shirt and ripped shorts above soiled hiking boots called out, “What do we want?”

The 15 or so scared and scruffy people around him shouted back, “PEACE!”

“When do we want it?”

“NOW!”

Was the country at war? Outside of the election process getting into full swing, there were no signs of battle leading up to yesterday. Had China developed some sort of electric burst technology that would bypass the sealed processors National Semiconductor had designed for military satellites? The What-Ifs kept flooding her brain.

There wasn’t much talking. The Secret Service directed her to mount one of the green, public bicycles that are so easy to

rent. Without electricity to keep them secure, she guessed it was a decent option for travel. Not secure like her armored Chevy Suburban, but efficient, anyway.

Shots fired, one - two - three, then 2 more, from a different gun, back toward the original sounds. The noise echoed across the Mall as if striking all the gathering, helpless people with lightning. Panic! Speaker Miguel froze, and agents surrounded her as they all ducked lower, but the shots weren't aimed at her. Crowds scattered haphazardly north and south on the Mall, then flipped directions, and some rushed toward the Capitol building. Their screaming was getting louder, echoing off the stone facade, and the agents started to ride quickly up Pennsylvania Avenue, keeping a decent perimeter around Speaker Miguel.

Pennsylvania Avenue was chaos. The agents were yelling at people to GET BACK, GET BACK! as they rode through. Some moved, but many used the words not as a threat or an order, but as some sort of weak light of hope. Who was so important that they needed to make way? Did that person have the answers everyone in the country so desperately wanted?

“Help Us!” they shouted as they moved closer and tried to stop the bikes. “What the hell happened? How are you going to eat? Nobody’s talking! Help us! My baby needs food!”

“Keep riding, Madam Speaker,” a stern voice came from behind her.

She did her best to tune out the calls from the helpless citizens. “I’m helpless, too,” she thought. “Nobody knows. Nobody knows. How can we be a country when nobody knows anything? No wonder they’re scared.”

As they neared the White House the severity of the situation set in. The President must be dead. Vice President

Campbell must be dead. Secret Service wouldn't need her if they were alive.

Getting off their bikes she asked the agent in charge where the President was.

His answer wasn't exactly comforting. "The Secret Service cannot comment on protective operations."

They entered the White House. Several of the President's cabinet and other administration officials were waiting for her. The first to speak was John Cole, head of the President's Secret Service detail.

"Thank God they found you. We've got a team waiting to hear from the President, but for now, we're your new Security detail. Welcome to the safety of the Secret Service, Madam Speaker.

"They're not dead?" she directly asked.

"No, Madam. But they're inaccessible."

"Who's in charge?"

"The President. But in a sense, you are. But you have no executive power, unless the situation changes."

She turned away from the line of people in front of her, needing a moment to clear her thoughts. Carlos, again. If only she could call him. Maybe this would be the way to show him she didn't mean to be so brutal to him these last years, that she still had hope they'd find each other again. It's during the darkest times when people can safely push aside even their heaviest baggage and get the guts of their feelings for each other. She took a deep breath and almost turned back to the anxious crowd. Just like that they expected her to have a solution. Was she built for this? She signed up for the job, but no one ever thinks the situation will turn out like it does. Finally she turned to address them.

“Where is the President now? What do we know about the situation across the country?”

The team went from person to person, explaining what they knew, catching her up on the state of the nation as best they could perceive, with their limited view. The President, Vice President, and 4 other key administration players were locked inside the PEOC. There was zero communication with them. They were trapped. Did they have food? Yes. How about airflow? Yes. Not sure how long it would last, but there were mechanical oxygen tanks. Any sign of injuries before the lockdown? No. Until further notice, the President and Vice President would be considered alive and well, and in power.

“We need you, Madam Speaker, to stay with us in preparation for a worst-case scenario. We’re getting a secure office put together for you now, with conference table, natural lighting, food and water. You’ll be able to safely sleep here tonight.”

She resigned herself to this new reality.

Andy was alone in Speaker Miguel’s office. The sun came through the window of as it shouted its way down the National Mall from the Washington Monument to the glossy top of the Speaker’s refinished Maple desk. Did they plan for the monument to be a gigantic sundial when they built it? There was no electricity in 1848, either, he thought. But here it stood in the afternoon sun 171 years later, its proud shadow turning North toward the Smithsonian. It was 3:00pm, give or take a quarter of an hour, and he hadn’t heard anything from anyone. But who, he wondered, was he even supposed to wait for?

When her temporary new office was ready Speaker Miguel

called the White House Press Secretary in.

“I’ve got get word out to the people. They’re frantic, confused. What’s the backup plan for a time like this?”

“There isn’t one, really,” Karl Bailey replied. “We can’t broadcast on TV, we can’t let reporters in, anyway, it’s too dangerous - none of our security checks can verify or scan anybody. Christ, even the emergency amateur radios are down. Remember on 9-11 when the cell towers went out in New York City? We turned to the local HAM nerds to keep us all in touch. Even they are useless right now.”

They called in other Administration members and bounced ideas back and forth, finally agreeing that, for now, there was no possible way to contact the people of the nation with a message of hope, togetherness, and leadership from Washington. The people, they all agreed, wouldn’t care who exactly was in charge. It would simply matter that someone was running the show.

“But maybe we start with DC, and go from there, city by city, until we know more and can do more.” She explained her vision of a Pony Express style communication system. Start from one centralized location, and have its team reach out to the farthest edge of its web, and into the center of the next town’s centralized location. What does every city have? An FBI office? Yes, but they’re too spread out. A local government, and a local police force. Yes.

Speaker Miguel jumped from her desk and shouted at the people around her. “I’m going to see that loudmouth Mayor who’s on TV all the time. If his face isn’t on there because of the news, it’s on there because of the his shitty Mattress Outlet commercials.”

“Thomas Owen, you mean?”

“That’s the guy. ‘Tommy Gun.’ I don’t know if that’s what

they call him, but it seems like a nickname he wishes he had. We can't reach the whole nation at once, but we can reach him, and he can reach his Chief of Police, and the Chief can reach each of the precincts, and the precincts already have crowd-facing boots on the ground as it is. They can be our voice to the people.”

John Cole interrupted. “You’re not going, Madam Speaker. We’ve got plenty of people who can go.”

“I don’t want to hear it, John. The Wilson Building is not far from here. The Mayor will surely be there. He’s not going to listen to a stranger with a note that looks forged from me, I have to be there and look him in the eye. It’s worth the risk.”

With the Press Secretary as an advisor, Roberta Miguel, Speaker of the House, possibly future President of the United States of America by default, penned a short statement that could easily be spread by police officers across DC, and if needed, across the nation:

“Citizens of the United States of America, We are all afraid together. But we are strong. And your government is in tact, from the highest powers down to state and local levels. Be safe, be calm, go home. We will survive, together.”

She stood from her desk and walked toward the exit of the White House. Secret Service surrounded her, and in the afternoon heat, they walked out onto the lawn, sun shining on their already sweating faces. She took a deep breath as she crossed the threshold to the outside. They began the short walk to the gates, and into the growing crowd on the street.

She said to herself, “He which hath no stomach to this fight, Let him depart; his passport shall be made. ”

She loved Shakespeare.



## chapter six

*Hannah Morgan*

FROM ROBERTA'S OFFICE WINDOW, the street below looked more like the ocean than a sidewalk from the capital.

At least two hundred people pushed and shoved, baying for some word from the city's leaders, a seething mass only just held back by a dark streak of police uniform. Somehow Roberta couldn't blame them. Terrifying, yes, but these people had now gone without any electricity for multiple days. The crowd below was disoriented, without lighting, heat or water: living almost entirely in darkness and cold. The police were trying, nobody could complain they were slacking, but 'order' in these conditions seemed laughable. Even outside of luxuries like television or even hot water, the refrigerators weren't working, people were running out of basics. Across the city the police were trying to protect essentials, keep some level of civility: there'd been reports of fights in supermarkets as people scrabbled to stay alive. That's what it boils down to: the distinctly human urge to keep on living.

"Ms Miguel?"

Roberta was roused from her daydream , suddenly

embarrassed to have been caught idle in her office.

At the door was one of the interns, kept without pay to assist this select circle. The volunteer at the door could've been no more than twenty, a spindly redhead still carrying the awkward gait and shyness of adolescence. She stood reluctant in the doorway holding an envelope, practically shaking in her boots, poor thing.

“Oh, hi there. Yes, come on in. I was just- just thinking.”

“Very good, ma'am.”

Clearing her throat, settling definitively back into work-mode, Roberta clocked the smooth manila in the intern's hands.

“Is that for me?” Roberta nodded towards the envelope.

“Oh! Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am”

“Don't apologise, honey. Our jobs are hard enough at the best of times, you're doing just great.”

Opening the envelope, Roberta squinted. Low light as the sun went down as well as an old prescription meant the slanted scrawl presented to her was near impossible to decode.

“Sorry, before you leave- what's your name again?”

The intern blinked, obviously unused to anybody taking any interest in her.

“I'm... I'm Rebecca. Becky.”

“Will you read this out to me, Becky? I'm getting old. Can't get my eyes to work.”

Becky nodded, slit the top of the envelope open with her fingernail.

“Ms Speaker of the House,

We're writing to all our officials in order to make them aware of the situation ordinary people are facing in DC as of the previous few days”

Roberta sighed, she knew exactly the situation. Becky

smoothed the letter and continued.

“Ma’am, as of a few days ago, the emergency generators in our hospitals have stopped working. They’re designed to withstand loss of power, but have failed us, which has led to massive loss of life. We’ve got catering staff still on site, but our refrigerators have failed. That doesn’t just mean food, but medication and the deceased too. As horrible as it is to discuss, on a practical level, our hospitals need volunteers and more morgue space, our crematoriums need alternative power or we risk massive disease on top of the current problems.

We know, Ma’am, that this isn’t your area, but with the President silent and nobody to guide us, we need our elected officials. We need you to listen to us.

The police presence is misused. We don’t need holding back or penning in by officers- we aren’t animals. These people aren’t baying for blood, they’re begging for their most basic needs. There’s no use in cordoning off the grocery stores: who can pay for their shopping right now? Nobody has access to a cashpoint and all our cards have stopped working. We understand that police are trying to prevent theft, but if these supplies aren’t used, they’ll simply rot. What’s the point in that?”

Roberta held up a hand, and Becky fell quiet.

“There’s some more, another page or so ma’am-”

“I think I’ve heard enough, Becky. Who is it signed by?”

“6<sup>th</sup> floor nurses station, at the university hospital.”

Roberta felt the breath rush out of her- the *hospitals, the crematoriums*. An impossible problem had just become even harder to solve.

“Ms Miguel?”

“Yes, honey?”

“Are you okay? You look...unwell.”

Roberta put her hand to her forehead, felt the sweat there.

“I’m just worried, that’s all. Thank you for your help.”

Becky nodded, smiled a little, turned to leave-

“Wait. Becky?”

“Yes Ma’am?”

“Just- before you go. One last favour?”

Roberta reached for her desk, quickly finding her heavy pen and a few leaves of creamy paper. Leant over the desk, she scribbled a few quick words, finished it with her official stamp and scrawled signature, then passed the sheet to Becky. Scanning it quickly, her face changed, crimping itself inwards at the eyebrows into the very picture of distrust.

“Get it to whoever’s in charge, as well as anyone in uniform.”

“Ma’am, I hate to be impertinent-“

“By all means go on, etiquette is all but abandoned.”

“Do you have the authority to issue this?”

“It’s a request, a recommendation. The police can accept it or not. I haven’t ordered anyone around.”

“Sure, Ms Miguel... I just- won’t they want some official endorsement?”

“Is the Mayor still downstairs?”

“I think so, Ma’am.”

“Send him up, would you? That’s all.”

“Ma’am, I think-“

“That’s *all*.”

Becky bobbed her head, a quick embarrassed nod before scuttling out of the door and down to the lobby.

By the end of the day, police had relinquished their control of the crowds and begun redistribution efforts. Not beloved by any means, but trusted and long-serving, Roberta Miguel’s

name was good for something.

*Some progress*, she thought to herself, packing up to go home, *some good*.

She'd put on her coat and gotten to the door before Owen knocked.

Reluctant, already anticipating which man would be behind the door and the tirade that was bound to come with him, she sighed and opened the door.

"Thomas, come on in."

"It's Mayor Owen." Always one for a quip, the most likely man to pull rank. He straightened his tie and stepped inside.

"I'm not going to waste your time Roberta-" Already he'd begun to make himself comfortable, finding the nicest chair in the office and making himself comfortable.

"It's Ms Speaker of the House Miguel."

"Don't be clever."

"Why are you here, if not for my wit?"

"I'm *here* because your behaviour today was completely out of line. You do not have the authority to order police stand-down."

"I didn't make any order. I made a suggestion. Anything after that is an internal matter for the police."

"The police are all that's standing between civilised proceedings and complete chaos."

"For God's sake, Thomas." Roberta sat on the desk, looking down at him. "If I've proved anything today it's that nobody is interested in a riot. Look at what the people have done: not fighting over supplies or ransacking supermarkets but *co-operating*. I heard that there's an envoy of people on bicycles taking food to the old people's homes-"

"Just another rumour." Thomas met her gaze. "We can't know how much of anything is true."

“I know that fundamentally humans care for each other. That much is true.”

He stood now, pacing to the window and peering out with hands clasped behind his back.

“I heard a rumour that the President is dead.”

“I can’t comment on that, Thomas. It’s a house affair.”

“So you know, then. One way or the other, you know.” He turned to face her, the emerging moon casting an eerie blue shadow across his features. The nose was lengthened, his eyes more sunken and his expression indistinguishable. “Tell me. What’s true, and what isn’t.”

“I can’t do that, Thomas. Frankly, I won’t.”

“How am I meant to govern if I don’t have the slightest knowledge on the state of the country?” He returned to the desk, hands in pockets.

“I was going to talk to you about this...”

“What, Roberta?”

Miguel took her time, smoothing her hair and sitting back more comfortably before speaking.

“I think you should resign.”

“*You are ridiculous.*”

“I’m not joking, Owen. You’ve had days to begin some plan, try to help these people. As far as I can tell you’ve been twiddling your thumbs in that big plush house of yours—“

“It’s not as easy as that—“

“Isn’t it?” Roberta stood. Even in her heels she was a few inches shorter than him, but oh, she had his attention now. “If I take up the Mayoral responsibility, you’ll get a day off, and I’ll get a new system in place far faster than you ever could. Look at what I’ve done in an afternoon. Imagine what I could do in a week. Alternative power could be *that close*. It’ll take your administration months, and that’s generous.”

“Don’t get you hopes up.” Thomas sighed.

“Resign, or promise me faster.”

“I can’t do either of those things, Roberta. We’re waiting on confirmation from the higher-ups. Your trick today is going to take some talking to be forgiven too, we’re the only police district disobeying like this.”

“We’re warranted. You know that. Our responsibility isn’t to the higher-ups, it’s to the people who put their trust in us.”

“I know that-“

“Resign.”

“No. And that’s final. You snatch Mayor from me, you’ll only end up in the same knot as I’m in. My options are limited.”

“I can do more as Mayor than you.”

“I’m not giving it up, Miguel.”

“Its *Ms Speaker of the House.*”

“I won’t budge. You want to help? Go cook for the mob.”

“I’m not above that. I’ll serve my community however I can.”

“You’ll need a candle and a skillet.”

“You’re not funny. You are, however, dangerously close to an official complaint from me. This isn’t about pride, it’s about doing the right thing.”

“Do the right thing somewhere else, I want to go home to my wife. You’re doing my skull in.”

“At least I’m making change. By all means, lounge about in the Mayor’s office with your thumb up your ass, but know this: they won’t forget who sat idle.”

“Go home, Roberta.”

“I will, after I’ve fed my district. Lock the door when you leave Thomas, will you?”

She stood, headed for the door.

“Call me Mayor Owen.”

“Goodnight, *Thomas*.”



## chapter seven

*Nick Calvert*

ROBERTA MIGUEL WAS SITTING behind her desk, shuffling through her notes from yesterday's meeting, when a besuited Karl arrived with coffee.

"You're a Godsend, friend," she said, grinning, taking the mug with a monkey stenciled on it and inhaling the rich aroma from the brew.

"I know, I know," Karl said, sitting in the visitors chair. "You say the same thing every morning, when I bring coffee... I'm not so popular when I don't."

"Not surprising. When you arrive sans coffee it generally means there's some disaster brewing that needs instant mitigation."

"Not today, Roberta. At least nothing I've heard of."

"Good!" Roberta took a sip and sighed. "Whatever happens, we need to keep Huego happy. If the district loses him, there goes the world's greatest barista."

"The world's only barista." Karl said.

"Hmm." Roberta put her mug down, tapped her notes into shape and put them to one side. "So, what's on the agenda for

today, Karl?”

Karl made a show of pulling out his notebook and thumbing through it. “Well... We start with your daily walk through the Mall and the Arboretum.”

“Ah. So the same as yesterday, then?”

“Mmm hmm. And the day before, and....”

“So, what’s with the notebook and suit?”

Karl took a sip from his mug, then pursed his lips. “Way back when, way back before, there was a program on PBS called ‘Keeping Up Appearances.’ I don’t know if you ever saw it?”

Fascinated, Roberta shook her head. Occasionally they broke the norm by telling each other little personal details. It was a way of deepening their relationship, which, over the past fourteen months, had gone from initial vituperous politicking to a deep friendship. She almost couldn’t believe he was the same White House press secretary who had come close to destroying her career. Almost.

“‘Keeping Up Appearances’ was a British comedy that my wife and I loved. The kids were still young enough to be in bed by the time it came on, and on the odd occasion I wasn’t stuck in the West Wing and made it home, we’d have a take-away and kick back and laugh until we cried.

“The point is the title. ‘Keeping Up Appearances.’ What’s happened is all so nutso I could see myself joining the idiots that wear costumes from the museums. So last night we came to the decision to try and get back to what was once normality. Thus, the suit.”

“Riiiiight.” Roberta said, conscious she was wearing a pair of George Washington’s worsted pantaloons, along with one of his waistcoats over an Angora sweater. She didn’t think Karl had meant anything personal with his ‘idiots’ comment,

but what the hell! It was Autumn, and she'd far prefer to be warm than freezing on her daily rounds.

Half an hour later Roberta and Karl were standing in the food court at the centre of the mall, watching the families that inhabited the McDonalds and the I-Hop doing the communities washing in what had, until the apocalypse, been a large pool with a fountain. Luckily, its water supply had been drawn from an artesian well and engineers had somehow managed to convert the pump to Donkey power.

“Do you need anything, Administrator?” Bess Brooks, the head of the washers, asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Not today, thank you Bess. Everything alright with you and the families? No problem with supplies?”

“We're fine, thank you for asking. Though... I heard a rumour from one of my boys who works in the Arboretum.

“Oh yes?” Karl said.

“Yeah,” Bess said. “Remember in the old days when there were activists, and union troubles?”

“I do,” Roberta said. “It wasn't that long ago.”

“No, it wasn't, though it seems like another lifetime....”

“Well, Brian tells me, there's a man who is spreading descent among the planters and horsemen. He's telling them supplies are plentiful and there's no need to work. Brian says he's gathering a small group of people around him. I thought you ought to know, Administrator.”

“Thank you Bess. I much appreciate it.” Roberta said, watching Bess as she walked over to pat the two working donkeys before going back to chivy the families along.

“She's good folk.” Karl said.

“She is. Most of them are. It's just the odd rotten apple.

“Come on, Karl. We'd best get to the Arboretum and nip

whatever trouble is brewing, in the bud.” She chuckled.

Karl groaned. “Mixed metaphors? Really? It’s a pity it’s autumn. Not that many buds to nip.”

“Even one could be problematic,” Roberta said.

“We ain’t lifting a fucking finger,” John Dengue said, sneering at Roberta. “And I don’t think there’s a lot you can do about it!”

“Oh, I think you’ll find there’s quite a lot I can do, if I choose, Mr. Dengue.” Roberta said. She was flanked by Karl on her left and two of the best militiamen Karl had managed to find on their way from the mall to the arboretum.

Dengue was flanked, too. He had six planters behind him, along with two horsemen holding onto their horse’s bridles. Roberta thought four of them looked embarrassed, and smiled inwardly. Maybe this wouldn’t be so hard.

“You do realise that our future relies upon cooperation. If we don’t work together, the world, even as it is now, will not survive for future generations. I....”

“Think I give a fuck?” Dengue interrupted, his hand now resting on his holster. “There’s enough food in the warehouses to last forever. Why should we work our fingers to the bone, planting, and weeding, and hoeing, and sowing? Why don’t you come and do a bit of graft rather than sitting on your fat arse in your cozy little office, eh? Madam Speaker?”

The four who had looked embarrassed turned and walked away.

“Oi! Where do you think you’re going?” Dengue said, visibly shaking with anger. One of the three planters stopped and turned around.

“She’s right, John. This isn’t the me me me world it once was, my friend. If we don’t work together to rebuild, then

what's the point?"

"Turncoat!"

"If you say so, John. If you say so." He turned to Roberta. "Apologies, Administrator. John can be quite persuasive when he chooses. We'll be back to work now. Goodbye."

Roberta was about to speak when the rest of Dengue's coterie turned away and followed the first four. She watched them go, and almost allowed herself a smile.

The sound of the two militiamen ratcheting rounds into their guns startled her. She turned back to Dengue, who had half drawn his sidearm, and took a calming breath.

"Work with the others, Mr. Dengue. Work and draw your rations as we all do... Or don't work and your rations will be withheld. It's your choice. Good day to you." Roberta, Karl, and the guards turned to leave.

"Bitch!" Dengue said, almost too quietly for Roberta to hear. As they walked towards the arboretum's exit she saw Karl give her a thumbs-up, and allowed herself a satisfied grin.

"...and that's the problem with the 2nd amendment, especially now." Karl said, thumping Roberta's desk with his hand. "Well? Any response?"

"Karl, this is the most pointless, circular argument. And it's not that we don't have it on a regular basis. I'm just not in the mood right now."

"But Dengue was about to shoot you! If we hadn't had the two militiamen with us, he would..."

"But we did! And he didn't! Leave it Karl. Dengue must have gone back to work. We'd have heard by now if he hadn't."

"Yes, Administrator." Karl said.

"Do not fling a moody on me, Karl. I've enough on my

plate without that.”

“Sorry Roberta.”

There was a peremptory knock on the door.

“Are we expecting anyone?”

“No,” Karl said. “Nothing scheduled until afternoon.” The knock repeated, louder and more urgent.

“Come in!” Roberta said.

The Captain of the Militiamen pushed open the door and strode into the room, snapping to attention in front of Roberta’s desk. He saluted, then stood at ease.

“Good morning Captain Fender, and how may I be of help?”

“Madam Speaker, we...”

“Please, Captain. If it’s anything it’s Administrator and that’s debatable. What I once was was finished the moment the apocalypse struck. The world is now a very different place.”

“Apologies Ma... Administrator, M’am.” Fender said. “We caught a thief in warehouse three. He’d been in warehouses one and two as well, but got away undetected. He was pushing a handcart loaded with food and other supplies. By the quartermaster’s rough reckoning he had enough for several years.”

“Several years?” Karl said.

“Two or three, the quartermaster thinks. Though that entirely depends on the number of people. There was no fresh produce.”

“Ah... and his name?” Roberta said, with a sinking feeling.

“Dengue, M’am. John Dengue. We have him in the lockup.”

After the results of the straw poll had been accepted, Roberta and Karl took the last remaining carriage across the district to

the Militamen's home. Painted in pastel colours with a large trompe l'oeil garden, it was as cheery a set of buildings as Roberta had seen.

The concrete yard behind it was a different matter. Six trailer boxes were set side by side, all connected by welded walkway. They were lead to the last trailer in line, guarded by a young, heavily armed militia man who saluted as they approached, then opened the door.

"Lord, this is a bleak place, Captain Fender." Roberta said.

"It's seldom used, M'am. Just the occasional drunk. We've been lucky."

"In there?"

"Yes, M'am."

"Hello Mr. Dengue." Roberta said. Dengue grunted. He was handcuffed to a metal table that was welded to the floor in the middle of the trailer. A barred skylight above, the only illumination, rimming the top of Dengue's greasy hair and casting a shadow over the table. Slowly, he looked up and Roberta could see his face was badly bruised.

"You are a BITCH!" Dengue screamed and started panting.

"And you are a thief, John Dengue." Roberta said quietly. She took a deep breath, and the paper Karl offered her, then began.

"John Dengue. Today, the district took a straw poll on your future here.

"Today the district decided that you are culpable of theft from the community.

"Today the district decided that this will be your last night within.

"Tomorrow morning you will be escorted to the gate and expelled. Forever.

“That is the...”

“I want a fucking lawyer! I want...” The guard backhanded Dengue who started sobbing.

“There are no lawyers anymore, Mr. Dengue,” Karl said. “It’s one of the only real boons of the apocalypse.”

In the pale light of the autumn dawn, Roberta and Karl sat on the seat of a horse drawn wagon next to its driver, an old man who kept muttering to himself as he flicked the reins. The horse, almost as old as its driver Roberta thought, kept wickering and tossing its mane in response. Behind them, in the bed of the wagon John Dengue stood, surrounded by guards.

They arrived at the gate and the guards escorted Dengue off the wagon, one removing his handcuffs, a second handing the man a brown valise, and a third trotting over to help the gate guard at the fence.

Dengue frowned at the bag in his hand and for the first time looked at Roberta.

“John Dengue,” Roberta said, “You must go. All your worldly possessions, except for firearms, are in the valise, as are two days worth of food. We wouldn’t want you to go hungry.

“Travel where you will, but never return to this district, Mr. Dengue. You really wouldn’t like the reception. Goodbye.”

Without a word Dengue walked through the open gate and up the road, pausing only once, to turn and give the district the finger... or perhaps, Roberta thought, the finger was for her.



## chapter eight

*E. Kinna*

“HEY, LACY,” ADAM YELLED from the kitchen, “it’s almost noon. Time to go.”

He wasn’t sure she’d heard him over the mechanical clatter of her sewing machine. It was one of those glossy, black built-like-a-tank Singer treadle machines that had found itself back in demand after the meltdown. His fiancé, who had never sewn a day in her life before August of 2019, had become an enthusiastic if less than passable seamstress.

Adam peeked around the corner of the kitchen doorway into the living room. Hunched over the machine with her feet moving the cast iron pedal in a steady, rhythmic motion, Lacy cursed as the needle thread snapped.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, I heard you,” she said, and tucked a stray, blond strand of hair behind her ear. “I was hoping to finish your new shirt, so you could wear it.”

Lacy pulled the beige and red flannel fabric out of the machine and held it up. She grinned. “What do you think?”

Adam searched for the right words as he noticed the

uneven collar and how the left sleeve seemed a good inch or two longer than the right. “You really didn’t have to go to all that trouble. I have enough shirts.”

“Oh, I know, but one day they’ll wear out,” she said, getting up to hold it against his chest. “Try it on, so I can see how it fits.”

“I would, hon, but we don’t have time. Eli will be here soon, and we have to be at the church by one o’clock.”

“You hate it.” She sighed and tossed the shirt onto the sewing table.

“No, I don’t...it’s great,” Adam lied. “It’s just that I don’t want to be late.”

“I wish we didn’t have to go. I hate that we have to pretend to be Christian.”

“It’s not easy for me either. But, it’s what everyone does, and we need to fit in as best we can.”

Lacy nodded. “I know you’re right, but I can’t help feeling like I’m going to be struck by lightning every time I sit down in the pews.”

Adam laughed. “Well, if that happens, I’ll be a smoking pile of ash right there beside you.”

They both chuckled and walked outside to wait for his friend, Eli Jones, who’d offered to take them to Sunday services.

As they waited, Adam watched a couple of dogs run down the street past the row of Georgetown flats, and thought about all that had happened over the past year.

Learning new skills like sewing weren’t the only things they’d had to embrace in their quest to survive in a post-meltdown world. As those first few weeks had turned to months and the city’s food supplies had dwindled to nothing, hundreds of thousands of their fellow DC citizens had fled

the city. Lacy, Adam, and their remaining neighbours had struggled to stay alive without any of the conveniences they'd known since birth. It had been the toughest thing he'd ever faced.

The worst part for Adam had been the shift from well-paid software engineer, to day labourer. Like most people who'd made their living from technology, he'd had no choice but to work where the need was greatest, which meant working at one of the District's agricultural farms on what had once been part of the famous National Mall.

Lacy had been luckier. As an elementary school teacher, her job had remained pretty much unchanged, apart from a lack of computerized educational tools and larger class sizes. Neither of which seemed to bother her, in fact, she seemed to enjoy teaching more.

Apart from a lucky few like Lacy, most pre-meltdown jobs had become irrelevant overnight on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019. But that hadn't been the hardest adjustment. Learning how to cultivate food, butcher livestock, and form an ad-hoc societal structure had been harshest challenges facing everyone who'd stayed in the former U.S. capital.

The clapping sound of horses made Adam look up, and he saw a shiny streak of red coming down the street. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“What on earth is that,” Lacy whispered.

“That,” Adam said, “would be Eli.”

Instead of the horse drawn wagon they'd been expecting, the former car restoration expert waved to Adam and Lacy from the front seat of a horse drawn red Ferrari.

The gleaming 812 Superfast, once one of the most expensive and lusted after high performance race cars in the world, had been hitched to two tired plow horses that

transformed it into a wretched looking franken-wagon. As it came to a halt in front of their flat, Adam thought the only thing missing was the cowbell laden song ‘Low Rider’ blaring from the radio.

“I can’t believe you did this,” Adam said. “That poor car”.

Eli just grinned and threw his arms wide open. “I always wanted one of these babies. Too bad it took the end of the world to make it happen. Come on,” he opened the door and gestured for them to get in, “your chariot awaits.”

It took some effort for the three of them to squeeze into the two-seater sports car, but they were soon on their way.

“So, what do you think?” Eli asked. “Me and the boys went car shopping a few weeks ago.”

“Car shopping?” Lacy raised a brow.

“Yep. Well, okay...not actual shopping. But hey, there are all these fancy houses over in Great Falls with no one in ‘em, and just about every garage there has a car I used to only dream about owning. So, what’s the harm in taking a few?”

“What if the owners come back?” Lacy asked.

“So, what if they do?” Eli shrugged. “It’s not like I’m going to show up on their security cameras, right? Besides, in a couple years I should have enough supplies saved up to get out of this town, and when I do, I wanna go in style. Yeah, baby! Yeah!”

Adam saw a look of surprise pass across Lacy’s face as she said, “Leave? Why? We don’t even know if any other people survived outside of DC. No one who left after the meltdown ever came back.”

“That’s probably because things aren’t as bad in other places like they are here in DC.”

“But,” she said, “we don’t know that for sure. Don’t you find it odd that no one came here at all? Don’t you find it odd

that no one has seen the President since it happened? No one talks about him at all, not even Roberta Miguel.”

“To be fair,” Adam said, “it was pretty obvious that she and President Gray hated each other. Some people even went so far as to speculate she killed him so she could take over.”

“Oh, that’s nonsense,” Lacy said.

“Maybe, but as popular as she is, and as good as she is at keeping the peace, she’s a Democrat. Even the smallest hint that she had something to do with Gray’s disappearance, might put wind in the sails of the people who think another Republican deserves to be in charge.”

The franken-wagon came to a stop across the street from Capitol Hill Baptist and Eli said, “Right. Enough of that political shit. Time to go in and pretend like we’re good old God-fearing folk.”

Dozens of men, women, and children were filing through the stone archway of the century old brick church, and Pastor Whitlock greeted each one of them with a plastic smile of feigned humility. Even though there were other churches operating to accommodate the remaining one-hundred thousand or so DC citizens that had stayed in the city, Capitol Hill Baptist was the most iconic and drew the largest crowds.

Adam took a deep breath. It looked like it was going to be a full congregation, which meant everyone squished together like a bunch of sumo wrestlers flying coach.

“There seems to be a lot more people here than usual,” Lacy said as they slid into one of the middle pews.

“Yeah, looks like it,” Adam said. There was also something else in the air. A palpable excitement had replaced the usual din of duty-bound reverence. He wondered if it had to do with the rumours about the Deacons meeting several times over the past few weeks.

As soon as everyone was seated, Pastor Whitlock rose to the pulpit. “Ladies and gentlemen, before we immerse ourselves in our scripture today, I am bidden to share with you all some exciting news. I, along with my fellow Pastors and the Diaconate Council, have agreed, under the guidance of God and scripture, to a proposal put forth by the city’s District Council.”

Twittering murmurs erupted from the crowd, but the Pastor waved his hands to beg for silence before continuing. “The good Lord has blessed us all with good fortune after the fall of the sinful and false Gods of gluttony, greed, and technology. We have toiled and we have prayed, and we have prevailed. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to whom God has bestowed his glory, to go forth now and seek out our wayward brothers and sisters who left our flock and may find themselves in need.”

Another round of excited murmurs erupted as people started to understand the meaning behind the Pastors tedious verbosity. Adam noticed that Lacy remained stoic, while Eli looked like he was ready jump out of his seat.

Pastor Whitlock continued, shouting over the volume of the crowd. “Over the past three months, we have prayed to God for the wisdom to find a path, and the Lord, in his almighty wisdom, has shone his guiding light upon us as we devised our divine plan. Henceforth, it has been decided that ten men will embark on this holiest of endeavours. They shall be chosen by the hand of God, to travel across our great country in search of our long-lost brothers and sisters.”

Lacy leaned in to whisper, “Chosen by the hand of God? What does that mean?”

“No idea.” Adam whispered back.

“Today, on this greatest and holiest of days, all across our

wonderful city,” Whitlock said, “my fellow Pastors will join me in choosing who among us will go along on this Holy venture. As our congregation is the largest, we have been blessed with choosing two out of the ten. For those of you who have been loyal members of our flock this past year, your names have been placed into the sacred chalice.”

He lifted a large, golden goblet so everyone could see it, and then placed it on the altar before pulling out two pieces of paper.

“The first name chosen is our good brother, Harold Findlay! The second is our good brother, Adam Wright!”

Adam felt like someone had punched him hard in the gut. He sat frozen until Lacy nudged him to stand up. When he did, there was a deafening roar of applause and cheers. Beside him, Eli looked furious. Across the room, Harold stood looking as stunned as Adam felt.

The rest of the Sunday Service passed by like a blur for Adam. He didn’t hear anything the Pastor said after his name was called. All he could think about was that he didn’t want to leave Lacy or DC, and he in no way wanted to go on some journey to look for people he didn’t give two shits about.

His mind raced with ideas of how he might get out of it, and nothing else registered until Lacy stood up to greet Pastor Whitlock, who was first in line to congratulate him on being chosen.

All Adam heard were a bunch of hollow sentences that included a smattering of “glories” and “holies”. He just wanted was to get the hell out of there and go home.

Lacy grabbed his hand and held firm until the last of what seemed like a never-ending lineup of well-wishers had offered their congratulations. To them, it seemed, he’d won the equivalent of a multi-million-dollar Power Ball lottery.

As the church cleared out, Eli was the first of the three to speak. “Well, aren’t you one lucky son-of-a-bitch.”

“Hey, that’s not fair,” Lacy said. “It’s not his fault, he didn’t know anything about it!”

“Sure,” Eli said, “whatever. Let’s get out of here.”

They left Capitol Hill Baptist and climbed back into the makeshift wagon. Eli steered towards Georgetown, and nobody said a word until they arrived at Adam and Lacy’s flat.

As Adam and Lacy exited, Eli got out too. “You know,” he said, “something just ain’t right about all this. I mean, there I was, telling you about my plans to get out of DC, and what happens? You get an all-expense paid trip across the country, and with God’s blessing to boot. Now, what am I supposed to think?”

There was something in Eli’s tone of voice that made Adam wary. “Look, I had no idea this was going to happen.” Adam said. “Tomorrow we’ll go to see Whitlock and if he won’t let us switch places, then we’ll go to Roberta Miguel and get it sorted out. I don’t think she goes to church much, so I’m sure she won’t care if you go instead of me.”

Eli scratched his forehead and took a few steps closer. “Yeah, that’s not going to work.”

“Why?” Lacy asked, moving closer to Adam.

“Well, you see...it all goes back a couple of years ago. My friend Lucas and I were out having a good time, when the prettiest lady we’d ever seen was out jogging. Everything about her looked and smelled like money.” Eli chuckled and lit a cigarette.

Anxiety fluttered in Adam’s chest as he imagined where the conversation was heading. Lacy held tighter to his arm. “Look,” Adam said, “you don’t have to say anything. We won’t go to Miguel. Forget I even mentioned it.”



Eli didn't seem to be listening, because he continued to tell his story. "So, Lucas and I, we thought, hey she probably wouldn't miss a few bucks. Maybe if we asked nicely, she'd be nice to us in return."

"Listen, Eli," Adam said in a firmer voice, "why don't you go talk to Pastor Whitlock instead. I'm sure he'll change his mind."

"The thing was," Eli said laughing, "the dumb bitch screamed bloody murder. Like we were gonna hurt her or something. Well, I wasn't going to, but my friend Lucas, well he's got a bad temper and it didn't turn out to good for the lady."

"Lacy," Adam whispered, "get inside."

She hesitated but nodded and started to pull away from Adam with slow movements.

"So, you see," Eli said, "I don't think that Miguel lady would be too happy to see me. Ya know?"

Adam nodded. "Yeah, I get what you're saying, Eli."

Eli squinted at Adam and Lacy, and Adam felt that fluttering of anxiety transform into a piercing chill of fear. There was something off in Eli's eyes. Unhinged, maybe. Dangerous, definitely.

"I really fucking hate this goddamned city, you know?" He flicked his cigarette on the pavement. "Have I ever told you how much I hate it?" Eli seemed to deflate a bit as he said it. "Aw fuck, I shouldn't have told you the story about the lady. I promised Lucas I would never tell. If he finds out..."

"But he won't find out." Lacy said, in the voice she used when speaking to distraught children. "We don't even know who he is."

"No," Eli said, "you're right. He won't find out."

In an instant, Eli pulled a small, silver handgun out of his

pocket. Two loud shots exploded, and Adam slammed into the sidewalk. A bright, hot pain seared in his shoulder.

People started rushing out of the neighbouring flats. Some were screaming, others were rushing towards him to help. It took him a minute to remember Lacy had been beside him, and he looked over to see her laying lifeless a few inches away. A dark, red stain was spreading across her stomach.

Within minutes helping hands lifted and loaded them both into a cart. From the jostling and sound of hoofbeats, he knew they were travelling fast. He reached out to feel for Lacy, but someone kept holding his arm back.

When the cart slowed, he saw they were in front of the main city hospital. New people came running out, and once again he was being carried. He kept trying to sit up, to see where Lacy was, but he couldn't see anything. A young man with a stethoscope around his neck was trying to take Adam's vital signs.

"Lacy, how is she?" Adam asked, out of breath.

"I don't know yet, another doctor is with her, but I'll find out as soon as I can. First, I need to check your wound."

Adam nodded and closed his eyes, concentrating on the sounds around him. It seemed like dozens of voices were shouting orders in a language he didn't understand. He knew it was about Lacy.

"You're lucky." The doctor said as he poked around Adam's shoulder. "The bullet went through and didn't leave any fragments. You only need a couple of stitches."

"I need to see Lacy. Please."

The doctor patted Adam's arm. "I'll check on her for you."

It seemed to take forever before he came back. When he did, another doctor, and older woman, was with him.

"Mr. Wright," she said, "I'm Dr. Davis. Your fiancé is in

critical condition, but she's stable for the moment. The bullet entered near her liver. Of course, without the ability to do x-rays, it's impossible to tell the extent of the damage. She's going to need emergency surgery, but she's losing a lot of blood. That means we'll need to arrange for some registered donors to come in before we do that. Would you happen to know her blood type?"

"Yeah," Adam said, "she's O-negative and I'm A-negative."

Both doctors looked at each other, and Adam didn't like what he saw.

"What? I thought O-negative was good, or universal, or something."

Dr. Davis took a deep breath and said, "To donate yes, but to receive no. People with O-negative can only receive O-negative, and unfortunately, it's one of the rare types. Only about 7% of the population will have it."

Adam sat up so fast it made him feel dizzy, but he didn't care. "What does that mean? You can't help her?" His voice was louder than normal, and he could feel panic constricting around his heart like a vice grip.

"No...no, that's not what I'm saying. It just means that without refrigeration, there isn't a blood bank anymore. So, it will take some time to find a donor. We do have O-negative donors in the registry, and we'll do everything in our power to get them here as soon as possible."

Someone rang a sharp, staccato concierge type bell, and it caused Dr. Davis to turn and run towards Lacy. Adam tried to stand up, but his doctor held him back.

Adam was furious and he wanted to punch that goddamned doctor in the face.

It seemed like another eternity before Dr. Davis came back. With practiced, clinical efficiency, she said, "Mr. Wright,

Lacy's internal bleeding is more severe than we thought. There is no time for a donor...I...I am so sorry."

"Take my blood then, all of it if you need to."

"Mr. Wright, I understand how hard this is, I truly do, but your blood type is A-negative. It's incompatible and would most likely cause her death as surely as the internal bleeding."

"Most likely? That means she might not die from it, right? Can't you try?"

Dr. Davis sighed and a flash of irritation crossed her face. "Mr. Wright, I can't do what you're asking."

"Yes, yes you can. You're telling me that there is a 100% chance she dies without blood and surgery. What's the chance she dies with my A-negative blood?"

"Statistics show that between 20-60% of patients with Hemolytic Transfusion Reactions will die."

"So, a 60% chance she'll be fine? Then what are you waiting for? Do it, please!"

There was a long pause and an exchange of glances between her and the other doctor that was hovering in the background, but she nodded and said, "Very well. I'll have a nurse get you prepped for the blood donation, while I consult with the Medical Director. But be warned. There is no guarantee that he will agree."

"Thank you," he said, "and please...hurry."

Adam woke up with a pounding headache. He felt groggy and didn't remember falling asleep. A sharp pain in his shoulder made him gasp when he tried to move, and then he remembered. *Lacy!*

Before he could get up, he felt a firm hand on his chest. It was Dr. Davis. "Relax, Mr. Wright."

He looked up to see her tired but smiling face. "How's

Lacy? I want to see her, please?”

“She’s okay, Mr. Wright. She’s in the Intensive Care Unit, and you can’t see her just yet.” She removed her hand from his chest. “You’re very lucky. As predicted, she did have a Hemolytic Transfusion Reaction, but it was surprisingly mild considering how much blood she received. She also responded well to the mitigating treatments and I am cautiously optimistic that she’ll make a full recovery.”

Adam let out the huge breath he’d been holding. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said and gave him a big, genuine smile. “I have to admit, I didn’t have much hope she’d survive. I put her odds somewhere on par with the odds of being struck by lightning.”

Adam laughed. “Oh Doctor, promise me you’ll tell her that as soon as she wakes up.”

## chapter nine

*Dañiel Garcia*

OLIVER KELLY'S THIN FINGERS combed through his thick, dark hair as he looked across the expanse of the Nation Mall. He self-consciously felt the uneven length of his self-cut hair. Oliver and his small caravan had just arrived at Constitution Avenue by 23rd Street. His eyes lingered on the Lincoln Memorial before locking on the Washington Monument further away. Further in the distance he could just make out the Capitol building. His eyes weren't as sharp as they used to be, but but he still recognised the distinct shape. He had visited with his parents back when he had been a lanky teenager. He had been in awe back then. Everything here had seemed larger than life, as if a Grand Destiny were waiting to be imposed upon him.

What awed Oliver now though was the smell and surprise of the new normal of the National Mall. Across what were now unkempt grass fields, instead of mowed lawns, grazed a mix of cattle and sheep, with the odd goat or two walking around. The air had that fresh 'country air' quality of manure and cold that could invigorate and choke you at the same time.

He looked back at his motley crew of helpers, and smiled sheepishly.

"Looks like we've finally arrived!"

A man with thick, dark scraggly hair, wearing an old fashioned sailor's hat and red coat, harrumphed loudly. "I've seen better sheep back home." The man's Scottish accent was thick, almost incomprehensible to Oliver.

Oliver's smile did not waver. "I'm sure you have, Bane."

"Cap'n Bane! Don't you forget it." Bane looked annoyed at their surroundings before turning his attention to a pair of men behind him.

Oliver could only shake his head as the wagons began to move forward. "What have I gotten myself into?" His small caravan was an eclectic mix after all. But I have no choice, he thought. The people need this equipment.

The half dozen wagons that trailed behind his horse creaked slowly along the street. Considering the weight of their cargo, the wagons had been quite sturdy. Oliver let his eyes sweep left to right, keeping a lookout for anyone not a cow or sheep. Besides the animals, the area was surprisingly bereft of the usual tourists, which he remembered from his last visit. "No surprise there," he mumbled to himself. "The country has basically been thrown back to the wild west." He chuckled at the thought.

It wasn't long before, somewhere between the White House and the Washington Monument, a few people appeared on the street. An elderly couple with a dog walked by. They stood still, surprised by the small caravan with its large equipment.

Oliver let himself slide off his horse, holding its reigns as he walked towards the old couple, a bald man and a man with thick grey hair. "Hello. Things look pretty changed here. I was

wondering if you could tell me which authority is in charge." He gave the White House in the distance a quick glance, but its broken gates and the graffitied walls told him that it was not a place of authority anymore.

The old couple looked at each other before the bald headed man answered. "No one's in charge anymore. You'll find no government here. Almost all of them officials moved out when they realised no one was listening to them."

The grey haired man smiled. "I remember that old orangutang setting speed records when he realised he couldn't drive out in his limousine. Sourest expression I ever saw." Both men laughed heartily.

At least some folks are taking this in stride, thought Oliver. "You said almost no one. So there is still someone leading?"

"Oh, no. Not like that," said the bald man. "That's the Miguel woman. She's more of an organiser than a leader here."

The grey haired man pointed towards the former Capitol building in the distance. "You can find her around there when she isn't busy running around from place to place."

Oliver looked towards the Capitol, his eyes tried to make out any kind of figure running around. "Thank you for the tip. We'll be glad to find her." He said his goodbyes and led his horse on foot towards the Capitol. Would do me good to walk, he thought. My butt hurts from all that riding.

The caravan followed Oliver at an even pace. Bane, who was at the head of the caravan, wrinkled his nose at passersby. "Copycats, the lot of them."

What Oliver had found unusual as they met more and more people along the road, was that many wore a mix of last years fashion and clothing you'd expect to find in an 18th or 19th century exhibit. It really is starting to feel like the old



west or such. From this distance he could finally see people around the Capitol. Looks like there is some semblance of government still around, he thought.

But as they arrived at the front entrance he saw that it was mostly children or small families playing around the grounds or peeking out of the Capitol's windows. The doors stood open or unhinged and broken. Oliver signalled Bane to keep the caravan in front. He motioned to one of the women playing with her small twins. "Excuse me. Where can I find Ms. Miguel?"

The woman, blond, mid twenties, looked up and smiled at him. "Hello. You mean Roberta? She's inside, not too busy today. You can find her in the Old Senate Chamber on the second floor." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "There should still be signs that show the way." She stopped paying attention to Oliver as the twins began pulling on each other's hair.

Oliver thanked her and made his way inside. On his way through the building he found goats roaming the halls. The stray people he ran into were all children. He finally found the Old Senate Chamber, its large wooden doors stood wide open. It was a spacious room with many benches arranged in a half circle. On one of the central benches sat a woman, probably around his own age, with shoulder long brown hair. She had her back to him and hadn't noticed him.

"Ahem." Oliver cleared his throat. "Are you Roberta Miguel?"

The woman did not flinch, she had heard the steps echo along the hall. She turned round from the slim stack of paper around her. An inkwell next to her and quill in hand. "Yes, I am Roberta Miguel." Her voice held a faint trace of a Spanish accent in her Rs. Something left over from her mother's side

that she could never fully silence over the years. Her mother had been abusive to her when she had grown up and matured. Roberta wanted nothing that reminded her of her mother. "How can I help you?"

Oliver descended the steps. "I'm Oliver Kelly. I was hoping to find someone in charge and help set up some equipment. After passing through the streets I'm surprised that there is anyone left here."

Roberta looked at Oliver with a cool, steady gaze. "Not everyone has a sense of civic duty when there is no money involved." She motioned with her hand around the room. "Besides, I always wanted a larger office." A faint smile showed on her face, but began to fade. "What kind of equipment? We already have all the farming tools we need."

Oliver smiled back. "Not farming tools. I want to set up a generator. My caravan brought the components.

"Generator...?" Disbelief flickered over Roberta Miguel's face. Her eyes narrowed. "You're joking. There is no working electric equipment that we know of for hundreds of miles. We already had people out looking for anything that worked or could restore power. The people here call it an act of God that all the machines were fried."

"It was a Carrington Event! Not an act of God." Oliver's face remained friendly, but earnest. Before the worldwide outage, before he had lost his job, he had been a working engineer at an astronomical research institute. It had been his job to know about these things to protect sensitive equipment. He looked at the disbelieving woman. "It's the term for a massive solar flare or solar storm. That's what must have hit the earth. A millennium event of such size and intensity that it destroyed all our known electronic equipment. To top it all off it disrupted the earth's magnetosphere to such a degree that

our usual methods of generating electricity will be suppressed for decades. Making all electronics useless."

"And you bring an electric generator?" If Roberta had had her former staff from her time as Speaker of the House of Representatives, she would have had this man thrown out immediately. "You're saying that the laws of physics changed, but you have the only working generator?"

Oliver's smile kept on. "Yes and no. The laws of physics are being suppressed, and it's more of an arc-fusion-reactor."

"We already have people working on getting steam engines up and running again to transport our harvests to people in need. And you come here with this kind of hoax?"

Oliver's expression turned into confusion. "It's not a hoax. I used to work in a research institute that builds equipment like this with special shielding. And it should output enough power to counteract the suppression."

Roberta's eyes narrowed more. She was not convinced, it sounded too good to be true.

"In theory," added Oliver.

Roberta cocked her head "In theory?" He sounded truthful. But a fanatic can also believe his visions to be true, her mother would say. Roberta shook her head. "I'm not convinced. And what would you want in return for your gracious gift? You want to establish your own little dictator state like so many others?"

The blank expression on Oliver's face lasted several seconds. "Uh, no. I want to set the equipment up here as a sign for the people. To get the nation's capitol back up and running." He looked embarrassed. "Show everyone that we can get everything back to normal or at least as close to how it used to be."

Roberta remained silent for several minutes as she stared

hard at Oliver's pale face, the uneven cut to his hair, and the stubble on the verge of becoming a beard. A long career in politics had taught her to be mindful of well groomed, smiling strangers bearing gifts. But, he struck her as sincere, his smile seemed genuine, and his grooming looked to be more for convenience than style. When she had things to take care of outside, she would on occasion encounter people who still placed more value on superficiality than earnestness. Just look at those silly people wearing all those museum clothes, she thought.

"I'm not looking for fame. If the people are looking for a new leader. I guess you'd make a great president," said Oliver. He scratched his head with one hand in embarrassment.

Roberta let out a sudden laugh. "Believe me, that's not much of an argument. Anyone after Trump is more qualified." She remained quiet for a few more moments. A smile played on her face. "Okay, I'm willing to get some people together to help. How many do you need?"

"About one hundred," said Oliver.

"Excuse me? I thought you just needed some help setting up?"

"Well, yes. I brought some basic equipment and materials to start setting things up. I need more people to help build and transport the rest. It's not a garage kit project. I need people that are good with their hands. Maybe some doctors as well, just for a week."

"I'll see what I can do." Roberta's voice was tinged with doubt. "It's a lot of people. Where exactly do they need to go?"

Oliver paused. "I can't tell you. It needs to be kept a secret. At least until everything is done. There might be others that want the generator for themselves."

Roberta nodded. "I can imagine. All right. I can probably convince some people who have responsibilities here, and we'll vote. I can't guarantee they'll go for it. We need everyone we can get to help with the harvests. But if it's only a week we can probably spare some hands for that time."

Oliver beamed his smile again. "Thank you, Ms. Miguel. You won't regret it. We'll have lights and phones, and everything else running again in no time." He held out his hand.

"Roberta is fine." She shook his hand.

## chapter ten

*Dan Gregory*

IT GETS TO YOU like the sound of a swarm of bees or wasps. No, worse than that.

That high pitched whine.

Or, when you do get a recorded voice they first blame it on the Democrats, then if you press the right number, it's the whine again. Or eventually just as your battery runs out it tells you "you are one thousand three hundred and sixteen" on the waiting list.

Now my phone is dead. It will take hours to charge up again even in this hot desert sun.

Feeling isolated. Only because of that damned message that seems to have gone out to all phone users. "Wash your hands. Stay isolated wherever possible. Do not make unnecessary journeys." So I try to find out why. Why?

I came here to get away for a few weeks. But thanks to that damn message I tried to make contact. Hank told me he was running on a generator as the power company was kaput. Gray was generating a report and the President had disappeared. Haven't they checked the frigging golf courses? Then Hank

himself lost power before he even had time to tell me what the hell was going on. His cough didn't help make it much clearer either, so that's why I called the Government Information Service in the first place.

This caboodle of classless claptrap emanating from the White House was what made me come out here in the first place. The trumpeting clown with the orange face, the sycophantic hangers-on, the put-downs of anybody who asked a serious question. The sexist smug look in my direction if I raised my hand to ask one.

So I got a transfer to a foreign desk where I thought things might be more grown-up. London was an option. My French is too rusty for Paris. There was an election going on and things could not possibly be worse could they?

My judgement must be seriously lacking. They voted in another clown with hair to boot. A Bojo belligerent, waffling, quasi-classicist who contradicts himself with unerring duplicity, and unwavering wackiness.

So I filed my reports and asked for some leave. Needed to get away from it all. Something big was coming down in China, maybe I'd go there in the spring. But I needed time away from it all. Time to think. Time to be alone.

There is still a great amount of pleasure to be had in packing enough onto a motorcycle to travel, feed yourself, and sleep away from others for a few weeks.

A sound like no other is the soft purring of 1200cc of BMW throbbing away beneath you. Far removed from that damn telephone sound. It accompanied me from DC to here in the Arizona canyon I had made my destination.

I could, of course, walk back to where I'd left the bike and charge my phone from the battery, but there was no rush, the pocket solar panel would have to do. It was nearly dusk,

whatever was going on could wait. I never tire of the taste of ramen and I still had enough for another couple of weeks. There is water close to my tent. But best of all is the silence.

Looking up at a turkey vulture, so high it looked like a black cartoon against the sky, I suddenly realised something really strange was happening. It had been for several days, but I hadn't been consciously aware until now.

I hadn't seen an aircraft for days. No sound. No vapour trails. Just blue sky and occasional wispy clouds.

I slept fitfully. When I woke a scorpion was on the net of my tent door. Was that an omen of something about to happen?

I waited patiently for it to wake and scuttle back into the scrub nearby, crawled out and made a coffee.

The aircraft thing had made me more than aware that something big was coming down. Much as I love the solitude, the howls of wolves and coyotes, and the scuttling of other invisible creatures, there was a human element that was missing. Hank? He doesn't smoke. What was that cough? He lives in Manhattan. Why is his power down? Okay Con-Ed is not the greatest in the world but ...

Sometimes the answers just happen. It's strange how things do.

I am just getting back to my bike near the highway when a dust devil blows across my path. Benign enough, not a giant man eating monster that will suck me up and deposit my remains somewhere miles away. Just begin enough to shower me with grit and dust and the remains of somebody's rubbish.

A semi-shredded front page of a big city tabloid. "WHERE IS THE PRESIDENT? NATION IN TURMOIL! Gray report seeking to decipher coded messages. Pel....."

I cannot make out the date. How recent was it? My mind is



racing. What has happened? A day is a long time in politics and I've been away for weeks. Deliberately cutting myself off from what little civilisation I perceived. Clearly not a war. That headline would have been even more hysterical. Not quite the New York Post but clearly aimed at the same audience. ".....sales of AK47s have rocketed ..."

I get back to the bike. Put my phone on charge. No signal! There was one a few days ago. My GPS shows me exactly where I am.

My speedo is hovering well over the speed limit, and the rev counter is on the edge of the red zone, as I head west. There are long, long stretches of empty scrub here. A few more dust devils as the temperature climbs and nothing to see but the bottle brush, and valentine bushes, until eventually I arrive at a Navajo settlement.

I know from previous visits that the Navajo are friendly and welcoming. Never shall I forget the old code-talker who regaled me with tales of his family history and his experiences in the Pacific during the war. But he is long gone now along with nearly all of his generation.

I pull up outside the store. The dusty street is uncannily deserted. The doors are shut. The windows shuttered. I walk up and down the street. Nobody.

The small hospital is nearby. Modern looking, a tidy approach leading up to it. If anybody knows what is going on it will be the hospital staff.

The doors are closed, there is nobody to be seen. No sound of voices, even the school I can see across the way is still and silent, no children running and playing even though it should be lunchtime now. God I'm hungry, that cup of coffee is all I've had today. But that can wait. I am starting to worry now, Something really is not right.

I look through the glass doors. There is a large notice on a stand facing me. "Please use hand gel, and press entry button to wait for help."

I see the gel disposer. Press the button.

And wait.

And wait.

A figure appears at the end of the corridor. Walking slowly towards me. Not what I expected.

This is a scene from a Crime Scene Investigation, a Science Fiction Movie, not a rural, miles from nowhere hospital.

A tinny voice crackles from the speaker next to the door. "How may we help you? Do you think you are infected?"

Oh Christ, It is war! Germ warfare!

"Er no. At least I don't think so. What's happening?"

"You are aware of the pandemic?"

"Pandemic, no, sorry I ..... I've being camping in the canyon. Pandemic? Jeez."

"Unless you have symptoms I am afraid you may not enter the building. If you do have symptoms we will send a team to admit you."

"Is there any where I can go then?"

"The Motel may have a room, or better still, you said you have a tent, Best if you have not caught the virus that you self isolate. Oh and use the gel again as you have touched the door."

My body seemed to deflate as I turned away with a mumbled thanks.

"I hope we may meet again in happier times," said the voice behind the mask with the hint of a smile.

The joy of being alone with just the stars and nature for company has evaporated.

I saw one person in the last few days. He crossed to the other side of the street when he saw me where I had pitched my tent in a disused building lot.

He told me what had happened in his expressive Navajo way seeded with some choice Anglo-Saxon and Mexican slang.

“The prez yeah, he gone golfin’ they say. Others say he’s gone see his buddy in Moscow, ‘long with dat English guy who look like him. May not be true acourse, so many tales now. Still no lectric, no TV, so don’t really know. Still they say only one person here got it. Flew in with his private Cessna to escape, and brung it wid him. My brother in the hospital think he’s gonna survive mebbe.

Oh if you want food the store open at six. Leave a list outside, they’ll put it out in a box for you. Just holler.”

So I guess I’ll just holler and wait, and see what happens.

## chapter eleven

*Katie Quintero*

AUTUMN LEAVES BLEW LAZILY through the district, strewing optimism in their wake. People exchanged hopeful glances as they worked, heartened by the restoration of power to the Capitol Building.

Where once evening brought desolation with its enveloping shadows, there was now a literal beacon of hope shining down the National Mall.

The praise and excitement for their work was endless. Oliver Kelly and his team were showered with gifts, from dinner invitations to offers of some of Washington DC's most beautiful finery, such as costumes taken from Ford's Theatre or Neil Armstrong's Apollo 11 spacesuit from the National Air and Space Museum. While most of his team were thankful but downplayed their contribution as "just doing their jobs," Oliver Kelly basked in the acclaim. His self-importance didn't go unnoticed by Roberta Miguel.

In the few days since power had been restored in the Capitol building, little things about Kelly had bothered Roberta. Nothing she could quite put her finger on to discuss

with others, but enough to question Kelly's professed heroics.

As she wandered down the Mall, Roberta stopped to chat with former lobbyists and politicians turned-farmers, helping harvest or bundle their given crops. Carrots were a great favorite, as were turnips and peas.

"If I never see another turnip, it will be too soon," Roberta joked as she helped yank the dirt covered root vegetable from the ground.

"Yes, because there is such a variety of things you can make with cucumbers," said John, chuckling as he carried a full basket, setting it down on the broken sidewalk. "Not to go full nerd on you, with turnips at least you can 'boil them, mash them, stick them in a stew!'"

Roberta almost dropped the handful of turnips she was carrying. "Did you seriously just quote Samwise Gamgee at me?" she asked, laughing.

John smiled and nodded, rescuing his crops from her grasp. "These will do nicely for the celebration dinner being planned for Kelly and his team," he said.

Looking thoughtful, Roberta asked, "Don't you think Kelly is...well, milking it a bit? He practically requested the celebratory dinner tomorrow night."

"I know it's only been a little more than a year since we lost power, but having a little electricity seems like a miracle," he replied. "While we've found ways to function without it, we all remember how much easier life was...how the loss of one thing affected so much. I'm not even talking about superfluous things like entertainment - movies, tv shows or concerts - but being able to store food in a fridge or put ice in your lemonade. What's the point of lemonade if it's not cold?"

Roberta laughed. “Guess I know the first thing you’re making once we have freezers again. And I do appreciate the larger implications, like life returning to some place of normalcy. But there’s just something about him and his behavior. I can’t quite put my finger on it...”

John shrugged and kept moving. Roberta finished pulling turnips from the little patch she was working on and bid him a good day. She moved slowly along the Mall, her shoulder length hair blowing in the wind. She saw others preparing for the festivities, some gathering food, while others worked on rudimentary decorations. She wished she could get into the spirit of the celebration. If only she could articulate what was bothering her...

The preparations continued into the next day, with dozens cooking to feed the massive number of people anticipated to gather that evening. Most people were expected to find a place to sit on the ground or retaining walls, though a few tables were scattered along the mall. A special one was set up for Oliver Kelly and his team. Joining them would be some of what now passed for dignitaries. Roberta helped with what she could, though her 5’5” stature prevented her from assisting with the homemade garland and paper lantern hanging. She layed out countless candles, enough to light up a small city...which the Mall had become for them at this point.

The crowd began to gather at dusk, mingling for drinks before wandering to the different spaces set up with food. Roberta smiled to herself as she watched people pass by, drinks in hand. The world might be falling apart, but someone will always find a way to make booze. She also enjoyed seeing the vast array of clothing choices, from the more casual partygoer sporting a Smithsonian Air and Space Museum glow-in-the-dark tshirt to a dress from the 1930s someone

obtained from the National Museum of American History. What an odd time future archeologists were going to have when they excavated this site!

After filling her plate, Roberta made her way to the head table, sitting down next to a member of Kelly's team. Introductions were made and pleasantries exchanged. Just as she started to ask how long he'd been working with Oliver Kelly, another member of the local delegation stood up and began thanking Kelly and Co for their hard work, dedication in bringing the power back on in the Capitol Building.

"To see it lighting up the sky is truly a wonder," he said as he sat back down, on the verge of tears.

His expression of gratitude was followed by several other people standing to raise a glass and offer a toast. It reminded Roberta of a wedding she'd attended a few years back, where far too many people felt it was necessary to stand up and offer tedious stories or banal words of encouragement to the bride and groom.

Glasses began to empty, so a couple people stepped up, offering refills between salutes. Since she barely sipped her drink each time, Roberta declined refills along the way. She continually glanced down the table, attempting to appear nonchalant as she watched Oliver Kelly's reaction to the praise. His smile increased in smugness with each round of polite applause.

When the tributes finally ended, she turned back to the engineer beside her. His sluggish movements told her he had been partaking in several rounds of the stomach-burning hooch that had been liberally distributed during the speeches.

"So, how long have you been working with Oliver?"

"Oh...a while...now," he said, not quite slurring.

"As you know, we're all beyond grateful. Even though I'm

from Maryland, DC feels like home to me.”

“Happy to help,” he said, slowly grinning into his glass.

“Before everything fell apart, I was a member of Congress. As much as people make fun of or get angry at politicians, I loved what I did and cared about making a difference.”

“Mmm. I’m...sure.”

“Just as you’re doing now. Making a difference. Trying to help people. And DC is such a symbolic place to start. Is that why it was chosen?”

He shook his head and took another swig from his half empty glass. “No...not our first stop. Kelly...we all’ve been working on...all of this...for while.”

“Really? I had no idea.”

“You know what they say.....”

“Yes?” Roberta prompted.

“Location.....location.....location,” he chuckled, pausing unnecessarily long between each word as he waved his glass at someone pouring another round of refills.

“What makes DC particularly desirable?” Roberta asked, trying to sound indifferent to his response.

“The backup power...power supply system.”

“Oh?”

“We needed somewhere with a large backup power spppply syz-time.”

Desperately hoping to find out a little more before his alcohol soaked brain stopped stringing words together, Roberta patted him heartily on the back and laughed, hoping to jar him back toward consciousness.

“And boy howdy did you find one! Washington’s was designed to power everything in case of an emergency or natural disaster, though I guess you can’t plan for everything!”

He nodded slowly.



“So why did you need to find a place with a large backup power supply system? This is all above my paygrade, so I find it fascinating.”

“To make repairs. So we can use...use...the electricity to fix....”

Roberta jostled him again, trying not to panic.

“Repairs are important...so important. Repairing what exactly?”

He slumped forward, resting his head on his folded arms. “Prrr stations. Gener-er-eration stations. Fiiix ‘em.....zzzz...”

Roberta glanced up, grateful that it seemed like no one had noticed their discussion. She patted the engineer’s back and moved his glass so he wouldn’t knock it over when he got up. As others rose, she followed, gently gathering the plates and cutlery near her. While most people ate from paper plates or improvised platters, the head table’s place settings came from the White House dining room. Nothing was too special for the bringers of light.

Time passed and the crowd began to scatter. While most people returned home for the night, there were a few stragglers left along the mall, some deep in conversation, while others were swaying from an excess of the rarely shared moonshine. Roberta circled the area, blowing out a candle here, stopping someone from falling into a pond there.

Finally, instead of calling it a night, she turned and slowly strode toward the Capitol Building. It glowed, almost as a beacon, drawing this pensive moth toward its light. Where better to mull than in the place at the heart of all her questions?

## chapter twelve

*Noé Ramalleira Fernández*

ROBERTA STOOD STILL FOR a moment at the foot of the staircase. The sun was setting behind the Capitol Building, and as the shadow of the dome enveloped her, she immediately felt a pang of uneasiness. A sudden sound at her back startled her, but when she turned back she realised it was only a duck fluttering as it ran down the middle of East Capitol St. It had ventured a long way away from the pond in Union Square; it was probably trying to find its way there before it got even darker.

She still hadn't got nights back, even one year in. For all that society had improved, and reality and routine had settled, nights were still only for animals, still as cold and dark as the first week, and Roberta felt weird being out so late. It wasn't that she was scared, but she felt a tingling in the tip of her fingers. She felt as if she wasn't supposed to be there, as if she should also be looking for the way to her coop.

Roberta caught a glimpse of something changing up on the dome, but she couldn't figure out what at first glance. She stared intently at it for a moment, and then a feeble light lit up

out of one of the windows. Roberta realized it was the second one in a row that had been switched on. There was somebody running around the cupola of the building, switching on all the windowsill lights of the dome.

It still wasn't so dark outside that it was obvious, but in an hour the lights would be visible from all around the area. Kelly had a sense of the spectacle, it seemed. The House on the Hill lighting up the city once again, the light of hope beaming... there was a good speech in it, for Kelly or her or whoever got to make it.

It didn't feel like her life. The speeches, the theatrics of it. There was so much in her life before the power outage that she didn't recognize anymore. Her days had been focused on problems that didn't matter anymore, and she struggled to imagine how they could have mattered at the time.

When she got divorced from Carlos, she had a meeting with four or five PR people to decide if she should keep the Miguel or go back to Fernandez. They debated whether using Fernandez, which would be read positively as a sign of empowerment, was worth losing the name recognition that "congresswoman Miguel" already had. They all seemed brilliant people. They probably had fought hard to be in that meeting with one of the luminaries of the party. Roberta wondered how their crops were doing now.

"Ms. Miguel", a voice called from the top of the stairs, "what do you think of them?"

Oliver Kelly met her at the bottom of the stairs and looked back with her at the row of lights slowly lighting up, one by one. "There used to be an automated system that switched the lights on and off all at the same time, but it's toast now. We had to rewire them, and so far the only solution we've come

up with is to switch them one by one. Still, I think the message it sends is more powerful like this, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?"

"Things coming back to normal once again, but only one small light at a time, you know. Even pointing out that there's somebody running around and going up and down stairs to switch on the lights, to emphasize that there's a hard job ahead... I don't know, that's more your area of expertise than mine"

"Can I see it? Is it safe?"

"The generator? Yeah, it's safe alright. We have to be careful getting there, though. We are keeping most of the lights off, in order not to overload the system, and so we'll be walking in the dark. We weren't expecting an official visit, people have mostly left."

"I don't do official visits anymore, mr. Kelly. I just wanted to see what you'd been doing, is all".

"Of course. Follow me, I don't think you know this bit of the building."

Kelly guided her through an unhinged utility door, and into a dark corridor. They moved along slowly, feeling the wall as they did so. Eventually, their eyes got used to the dark, and Roberta could make out that the corridor they were in was, in fact, quite wide and functional. "Were you used to these bits of the buildings?"

"Excuse me?"

"I don't really know anything about you, Kelly. Did you work in maintenance, engineering...?"

"Ah, I've seen my fair share of utility stairs and service lifts, I guess. What about you?"

"There was a day when we did 'extraction drills', I think they were called. Mostly for the secret service agents, but it

was required of us to also take part in them. They guided me from my office, through a maze of corridors that might as well have been in another building, and into an SUV in seven minutes and change. It wasn't a good enough time, apparently."

"Really?"

"I thought it was impressive, and of course I couldn't trace back my way if you gave me a whole hour."

Kelly opened a metallic door, and Roberta found herself in a small, mostly empty, room. There were a bunch of scary looking safety posters tacked to the inside of the door, and a fireman's axe that was mounted to the wall next to her. There were sprinklers hanging from the ceiling, and a lot of debris from the work that they had been doing (bits and pieces, fragments of cable, empty rolls of electrical tape, some tools). Standing smack in the middle of the room, there was a light grey prismatic box, the size of a small European car. It had an array of vents covering one of the smaller sides, and a window into an electric switch box. "Well, here it is", Kelly said.

"Really?"

"It doesn't look like much, I know. But that's the whole point. This is only a machine, and it's working. People have been talking for months of the power outage as if Gaia or Pachamama had cursed us all. 'God sent us a signal to repent and go back to Nature', and all that. Well, no, it's just that some machines stopped working, and we are going to fix them."

"You make a point of making it sound unremarkable."

"That's because it is. It's just a matter of having electricity readily available again, and the motors will work again, and so will the computers, the internet... And just like that we'll come back."

“Are you looking forward to it?”

“Aren’t you?”, Kelly replied, surprised. “Yes, of course, I miss hospitals, and treated water, and fridges...”

“I’m asking about your life, Kelly. What’s in it for you personally?”

“So you keep doing. I used to have a good life, ok?”

“You were rich, you mean”

“I was comfortable. I was happy with my life. And then, one day, I all went away just like that. The cars wouldn’t start, I had to leave the penthouse because my landlord wanted me to somehow pay him. I still can, of course, but there’s no way of proving it. I should have invested in real estate. Something solid, you know? But bitcoin was more profitable, of course. So, yeah, you got me. I used to have money and there’s a server somewhere in a basement that will prove it, once we get the power grid going again.”

“But, listen,” Kelly continued, “what’s more important is what’s in it for you. Nobody knows whatever happened to the President and the VP. And, look, we would have known. They are out of the picture for good. That leaves you as the next in line. The first female President, guiding the nation out of the biggest crisis in History.”

Kelly tried to read the expression in Roberta Miguel’s face, but he wasn’t able. He pressed on. “A hundred volunteers got me this far, but I’m going to need more people. This is a national emergency, and you are the highest authority. I don’t think anyone would be against mobilizing the entire population in this time of need. Let’s spare the farmers, of course, and, like, the cattle ranchers. But I’m going to need all hands on deck, the rest of them, all those who are now idling and bartering and exchanging favours with one another as if we lived in the eighteenth century and we didn’t have money-”

Kelly's monologue was overwhelming Roberta. He wouldn't shut up. He was so full of himself, so sure he was in the right. It was a constant noise, his speech. Constant static, like the hum of the generator, so ineffable, so inevitable. Roberta unclipped the fireman's axe and in one swift motion she swung it into the window of the power generator, making some electric sparks fly. It stopped humming. Kelly shut up, too.

He was pale and visibly shaken. He was leaning against the wall, in a corner of the room. He checked her expression again before talking again. He couldn't read any aggression in her face, but then again, he couldn't read much at all. "Well, that was something else. Are you done, already? That was... Can you please let go of the axe? Wow, that was... Fuck that was unexpected! We should walk outside for a bit, ok, please? Maybe get some air?"

"I... I don't know what-". Roberta dropped the weapon, and Kelly coaxed her gently to walk out of the room. He then closed the door, and locked it behind them. Roberta Miguel now looked clearly remorseful, as if the full extent of what she'd done was just landing.

"I hope you understand this changes nothing, right, Ms. Miguel? There was a broken machine, and we fixed it, and then you broke it again. For good. But tomorrow, we'll be working on it, and we will repair it again. You have made your point, but you won't convince anyone. The only thing you've done today is slowing us down. Poor Dev, he has been running around and turning on the lamps for almost an hour. I hope somebody got to see them."