



# 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

*Bron Hogan*

FEELING POSITIVE ABOUT HIS re-election campaign that kicked off successfully yesterday, United States President, Andrew Gray went about his morning ablutions with a spring in his step. While patting his hair, he looked at his reflection in the mirror and smiled. Thinking to himself that the grey speckles in his, previously brown hair, gave him the look of a man people could trust to look after America for another term in office.

He looked out across the Washington DC skyline and decided that bright northern lights were putting on such a spectacular show that before he went to the office, it was worth waking up Lucy to see them. After 31 years of marriage, he knew how much she enjoyed seeing the lights and, even after the considerable celebration last night, and he felt sure she would appreciate rising earlier than usual to see them on this particular morning.

“Lucy, wake up Lucy, there is something I want to show you.” he said, gently shaking her shoulder.

Lucy stretched and smiled. He didn’t usually wake her

before he left, so she put on her dressing gown and walked with him to the window. It was only just past five in the morning, so the lights of the city added to the beauty of the show that the northern lights was providing. They were enjoying a tender moment taking in the spectacle together when they heard a scream come from their daughter, Elizabeth's bathroom.

Upon investigation, they discovered that Elizabeth had received a sharp static electric shock from her hairdryer when she switched it on to dry her hair. She looked dazed and had begun to cry. The offending hairdryer was unplugged and unceremoniously tossed into the waste bin.

“Come with me and use my hairdryer, dear,” said Lucy to her daughter as she put her arm around her and comforted her.

The President smiled fondly at his ladies and said

“I will leave you two lovely ladies to sort out the hair drying issues of the day while I attend to the Affairs of America”.

Andrew had just begun his usual morning routine when the lights in the Oval Office began to flicker as if the power supply had been interrupted. He asked his Chief of Staff, Jeffrey Palmer

“Jeffrey, please go and see what is wrong with the lights”. Andrew wondered to himself if the recent upgrades to make the White House more “Eco Friendly” may not have been as efficient as one would want. He made a note to speak to Ian Thomson, his Secretary of Energy, to get those “echo-friendly upgrades” checked out.

As Jeffrey began walking out of the office, John Cole, Head of the President's Secret Service Security Detail, almost collided with him as he was so busy shaking and rubbing his

hands together.

“Wow, just got a hell-of-a kick from the coffee machine”.

Jeffrey Palmer, White House Chief of Staff, responded with

“I know how you feel, the toaster in the staff dining room did the same to me this morning at breakfast”.

“Really? Both of you experienced static electrical shocks from your equipment this morning? Lucy got shocked by her hair dryer this morning as well. Get someone to look into that too please Jeffrey, and maybe see if anyone else has experienced static shocks while you are at it.”

While Jeffrey was away, Lucy burst into the office and announced

“When I went to do my daily workout I was shocked by the gym equipment. I don’t think Elizabeth’s hairdryer shock was an isolated incident. My coffee machine and the toaster both gave me a shock as well when I went to use them. Andrew, I think we may have a problem with the electricity supply to the White House”.

Before Andrew could respond, the lights went off, and after the briefest of moments, flickered on again.

“Relax Lucy, I have just sent Jeffrey to investigate, and I am sure this can be sorted soon.” He put his arm around her shoulder and walked her out to the door “We will get this fixed as soon as we possibly can, please don’t worry”.

After Lucy had returned to her rooms, Jeffrey returned to the Oval Office and read out the list he had made of electrical equipment that caused people to experience static electrical shocks that day.

“One hairdryer, three coffee machines, four toasters, one fax machine, one photocopy machine, two computers, one electronic keypad on a security door, and two reading lamps.”

“I feel sure there are many more, most people I asked thought it was an isolated incident.”

As he read through the list, the lights in the Oval Office dimmed and flickered again.

“Electricians have begun testing the equipment and have found nothing wrong with any of the equipment or power points.” Jeffrey went on to add “they are checking out the power supply at this point”.

Coffee arrived, and the aide said

“Sorry that your coffee is a little late this morning, but our coffee machine is faulty, and so we had to make the coffee on the gas stove.” She went on to add “the coffee machine gave me one hell of a shock when I switched it on this morning.”

Coffee was being enjoyed as an aide came into the Oval Office and advised that the President was required to go to the Situation Room to receive a briefing from NASA.

The Situation Room, officially known as the **John F. Kennedy Conference Room** is a 513 square metre conference room and is the intelligence management centre in the basement of the West Wing of the White House.

The Situation Room is manned around the clock by five watch teams. The teams are sourced from a pool of approximately 30 senior personnel from various agencies in the intelligence and military community. The teams constantly monitor world events and their job is to keep senior White House Staff apprised of any significant incidents.

The room itself was created in 1961 on the order of President John F Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs invasion was attributed to a lack of real-time information. The room has secure communications systems and the wooden wall panels hide audio, video and other communication equipment.

As people made their way along the corridors and

passageways to the Situation Room, lights continued to flicker and become more unstable.

Among those in attendance was the National National Security Advisor, David Clarke III, the Secretary of Homeland Security, Alex Wilson, the White House Chief of Staff, Jeffrey Palmer, the Director of the CIA, Carl Evans, Head of the President's Secret Service Detail, John Cole, White House Chief of Staff, Jeffrey Palmer and Secretary of Energy, Ian Thomson.

Jim Bridenstine, Head of NASA appeared on the monitors. He began briefing the President and assembled attendees with:

“At 08:00, we lost communication with the International Space Station, engineers have been working tirelessly since then. Unfortunately, we have been unsuccessful in regaining coms with them to this point in time”.

As he begins to elaborate on the situation, one of the communications satellites went offline.

President Andrew Gray turned to the White House Chief of Staff, Jeffrey Palmer and said

“Mr Palmer, please arrange to move this meeting to the Presidential Emergency Operations Centre (PEOC) immediately.”

The PEOC is a bunker-like structure underneath the East Wing of the White House that serves as a secure shelter and communications centre for the President of the United States, in case of an emergency, including when the White House itself is at risk of attack. The PEOC is secure against attack from external factors, including nuclear weapons, as well as an internal assault. It has heavily reinforced walls and doors with electronic surveillance and locks.

During the September 11, 2001 attacks, Vice President

Dick Cheney, Lynne Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, Norman Mineta, Mary Matalin, Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Joshua Bolten, Karen Hughes, Stephen Hadley, David Addington, Secret Service agents and other staff, including a U.S. Army major who was a White House Fellow, were evacuated from their offices in the White House to the PEOC. President Bush was in Florida at the time of the attacks.

The modern PEOC space has modern communications equipment, including televisions and phones to coordinate with outside government entities. Day to Day the PEOC is manned around the clock by the joint-service military and non-commissioned officers.

The time was 11 am.



## chapter two

*Celine Oon*

### **THURSDAY 29 AUGUST 2019, 11:10: Outside the White House Situation Room**

“We have no time to lose, sir. Please pick up the pace.”

These were the words that John Cole, the Head of the President’s Secret Service Security Detail, directed to his charge to snap him out of his thoughts. The President in question, Andrew Gray, had been mulling over the effect that the morning’s events could have on his bid for re-election. It would, he thought, depend on how adeptly he was seen to manage the situation. As Cole had said, though, now was the time for moving.

“My apologies, John; you’re right. To the PEOC!” he said, with rather more confidence than he was feeling. He sped his pace as Cole had requested, and the Secret Service agents escorting him quickened their steps accordingly.

Though the PEOC – the Presidential Emergency Operations Center – was on the other side of the White House, the speed at which Gray and his escorts were moving ensured they reached it in record time. No, the real time

consumer here was going to be the long series of security measures required to enter. The first was the electronically locked set of twin steel doors that sealed the PEOC off from the rest of the world. Cole keyed the access code into the pad next to the stairs and ushered Gray down the stairs, down through the now-open doors. He turned back to his agents to dismiss them, then hurried after Gray. The doors hissed shut behind them.

The hallway that Gray and Cole continued along was brightly lit, tiled, and acoustically treated. There was no echo to their footsteps, and the sound of the doors opening again behind them was almost imperceptible. Soon enough, the pair came to another steel door, this one requiring palmprint authentication to unlock. After that was a retinal scan, then a voice authentication, and so forth.

In the end, it took Gray and Cole just over half an hour to clear all the security checks and reach the conference room at the PEOC's core.

### **Thursday 29 August 2019, 11:44: Presidential Emergency Operations Center Conference Room**

The dramatis personae of the 11:45 meeting to discuss the morning's events – not that Gray was marking attendance, exactly, but he felt good about thinking of it in this way – was as follows:

Andrew Gray  
*President of the United States*

William Campbell  
*Vice President of the United States*

Carl Evans

*Director of the CIA*

David Clarke III

*National Security Advisor (and a bit of a jerk, really)*

General Matthew Williams

*Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*

Jeffrey Palmer

*White House Chief of Staff*

Roberta Miguel

*Speaker of the United States House of Representatives*

John Cole

*Head of the President's Secret Service Security Detail*

... as well as some few assorted advisors and assistants who Gray did not feel the need to pay attention to. The people he thought were important today – the ones with names – had trickled in as they passed the security checkpoints. All except Cole were now seated around the solid wooden conference table, turning their mobiles off to concentrate on the meeting. Cole was standing in the corner by the door, also turning his mobile off.

Gray stood at the head of the table, his back to the videoconferencing screens installed in the wall, and spoke. “Welcome, everyone! Thank you for coming this morning to this very important mee—”

“Uh, no offence, Prez, but could ya maybe skip the formalities? Ya know, finish this meeting before yer hair goes fully grey?” Campbell asked from his seat at the other end of the table, fidgeting with a strand of his own remaining hair. A

ripple of murmured assent raced to the back of the room.

“Right you are, Will. Does anyone have anything to say before we begin?” Grey said, taking a seat.

“I got sparked by the palmprint reader on my way in. Did anyone else have this issue?” Miguel said, wringing her hands.

Evans and Palmer both nodded, and Palmer added, “My phone as well, if you’d believe it. Normally I’d chalk it up to a bad day, but with it happening to so many of our citizens as well...”

“The ISS is unreachable and one of our communications satellites has just gone down, and you’re worried about static shocks?” Clarke said. “We need to focus.”

“We do. I suspect an attack. Possibly a high-altitude nuclear explosion,” Williams said. The medals on his breast glistened conspicuously in the light, a reminder of his military experience.

“Can’t confirm that,” Evans replied, shooting a look at Clarke.

“We did not receive any intel saying so, to be fair,” Clarke said, returning the look.

“But we don’t have any evidence to suggest otherwise. I believe it’s prudent to prepare for the worst-case scenario, and what is more worst-case than a nuclear attack?” Miguel said.

“What else could it’ve been, anyway? ’S not like there’s much that could’ve taken out both the ISS and a comms satellite,” Campbell asked.

Various other theories floated around the room, including “a solar flare”, “high-altitude EMP blast”, and “inconveniently timed equipment malfunctions”. None of these alternate theories were particularly compelling, but those few in the group playing devil’s advocates did not see reason to believe that a sudden nuclear attack would happen during peacetime,

and continued to argue so. The debate, being over a stressful and emotionally charged subject, soon escalated to the point of raised voices and fists being slammed on tables, and it was at this point that Gray stood up once again.

“This is getting out of control, everyone. How about we all have a timeout, maybe 15 or 20 minutes, where we think quietly about how we’re going to move forward?” Without waiting for anyone’s assent, Gray continued, “Alright then! Be ready to discuss your ideas for next steps at 13:10.”

There was some quiet grumbling following this pronouncement, but everyone soon simmered down. Gray, for his part, was relieved that there was no more yelling. His thoughts drifted to his wife and daughter, who had not been directed to the PEOC. If what had happened this morning was a nuclear explosion, would they be okay? The Secret Service would surely bring them to the PEOC once they knew. But what if they weren’t okay? None of this worry was visible in his body language; years of speaking to cameras had taught him how to look as though he was in control. However, his thoughts continued in this fashion for some time, going nowhere productive despite his earlier speech.

Campbell was bouncing his left leg, trying and failing to think about how to tackle the issues at hand. He, too, was worried about his wife and two sons. The Secret Service was keeping an eye on them, that he knew. But there was only so much the Secret Service could do. An involuntary grimace worked its way onto his face. What could he himself do to save his family in the face of possible nuclear fallout? He was a part of this meeting. There had to be something. His thoughts thus redirected, he began to ideate in earnest.

Evans was thinking along more practical lines. Much of this situation had to do with loss of communications.

Restoring communications therefore had to be high on the list of priorities. He rubbed his chin absently. How long would it take to launch a replacement satellite? How long would it take the astronauts on board ISS to notice that messages from Earth were not reaching them? He made a mental note to contact NASA once quiet time was over.

Clarke had opinions about the level of competence in the room, and was keeping those opinions in the forefront of his mind while he considered the facts. Northern lights could certainly have been caused by a high-altitude nuclear explosion, but that would have obviously been worldwide. He had only received reports of northern lights above DC. And what did static shocks from electronics have to do with nuclear attacks? That being considered, loss of contact with the ISS and a communications satellite within a short time frame was suspicious. He needed more intelligence before he could give solid advice, and so he resolved to speak to the Secretaries of State and Defense after the timeout.

Williams thought that he had been justified to argue that there had been a nuclear attack. The real question was who had attacked. Russia and North Korea were both strong possibilities. Both had nuclear weapons. Both had possible motives. Toppling the leader of the free world was a big undertaking, but much easier if its leadership was scattered due to confusion and its populace was unsuspecting. Solid military tactics would be needed if the United States wanted to recover on the world stage. Knowing this, he started to consider his options.

Palmer was busy thinking about all the grunt work that would need to be done. He would have to book lots of time for negotiation with various parties into his calendar, and he would probably have to give the President a dressing down at

some point as well. Frankly, he suspected that the President had not been thinking about the actual situation, but rather about things like how it would affect his re-electability and his family. Gritting his teeth and holding back a sigh, he reached for his phone to make notes – forgetting that it was off – and got sparked again for his troubles.

Miguel squeezed the edge of her seat while she thought. The administrative work following this was likely to be tedious. On top of the admin, she also needed to ensure that the President and Senate would not be able to take advantage of the confusion resulting from this situation to pass policies that would unfairly consolidate their power. It would be unlikely, she thought, but the possibility was there. She silently vowed to do everything in her power to make sure life for the citizens would be able to continue as normal after this – whatever “this” was, exactly – had ended.

Cole continued to stand in the corner of the room, though he was subtly shifting his weight from one leg to the other to keep his blood flowing. Now, as always, he was thinking of only one thing: how to keep the President safe. Nobody without the proper authorisation would be able to make it through the numerous checks that kept the PEOC secure, so that was not a problem. The building itself was virtually disaster-proofed as well, having been modified to withstand the dangers of nuclear warfare. If power was somehow cut off from the outside, there was a backup power supply that would keep everything running smoothly for days, if not weeks. Cole continued to run through possible scenarios where the President might be endangered, but was convinced every time of the infallibility of the PEOC and the systems in place. Satisfied, he continued to watch over the President as the timeout continued.

## **Thursday 29 August 2019, 13:07: Presidential Emergency Operations Center Conference Room**

The timeout was still in session when the lights turned off without a sound. Within a second, they flickered back on. A small red light next to the videoconferencing screens turned on at the same time.

“Uh, that wasn’t me blinking, was it?” Campbell asked, voicing the thought that all the others in the room had no doubt briefly entertained.

“No, sir. The PEOC is now running on emergency power,” Cole said. He gestured towards the red light. “Regular power will come back at any minute, sir.”

“I should hope so,” Clarke said, “considering we’ve got work that needs doing.”

Evans, who had developed something of a frown upon hearing this exchange, pulled out the drawer on his left to reveal a telephone. Everyone instinctively looked to him as he put the receiver to his ear, ready to dial a number – but his frown deepened and a repetitive tapping sound started up which was quite clearly his foot on the floor – and the words that rumbled out of his mouth were, “Was going to call someone on the outside. There’s no dial tone.”

There was another moment of utter stillness at this point, much like when the lights had gone out; then all at once, everyone started reaching for their own phones to verify if this was an isolated incident.

Put simply, it was not.

The telephones built into the room all lacked dial tones, though none could ascertain if it was a problem with the power, the landlines, or perhaps even loose cables. And mobile phones were worse off – indeed, they couldn’t be turned back



on, no matter how many times their owners tried. Miguel got up to try the videoconferencing screens, but they refused to display anything but featureless blue.

Gray stood to attract everyone's notice, ready to make another proposal. "Everyone! Thank you again for your attention. We must remember to stay calm in this strange situation. General Williams, Mr. Evans – please head outside to gather intelligence, then return here as soon as possible."

This order garnered nods from both men in question, and the two turned as one to leave. But alas, the President had tempted fate in the cruellest of ways, for as Williams laid his hand on the conference room's door handle, the lights sputtered out once again.

With bated breath, everyone waited for the power to return. Electricity would save them – allow them to leave the PEOC, and to communicate again with the outside world, and to reassess the situation that they and the United States were facing. The tension in the room now was palpable.

They waited.

And though they waited, the lights did not return.

And in the darkness, the truth of the matter dawned on all – they were now prisoners of the selfsame building that was meant to protect them.

"Well now, everyone!" Gray's voice rang out through the darkness in its usual blustering way. "How about we take a bit more of that good old quiet time to gather our thoughts?"

## chapter three

*Gavin Dimmock*

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

**1305 hours.**

John Cole threw the reports onto his desk. The papers skidded over the polished wood surface before coming to rest against a low stack of manilla folders.

He took his cellphone, stabbing his thumb hard against the screen.

The iPhone remained unresponsive. He tried again, pressing harder this time. Still nothing. No power, no bright lights, no half-eaten fruity logo glowing dimly into life. No image of his parents, hugging tight to each other on their wedding day, his mother young and beautiful in the dress she and her sisters had made, his father proudly wearing his dress blues, shone up at him.

Nothing. Only Cole's own lean face staring darkly back from the glossy blackness of the dead screen.

Cole hadn't expected the phone to spark into life. Why would it work this time when it had failed on the many attempts he'd already made? As he asked himself the question,

he continued to distractedly squeeze the phone - *squeeze, relax, squeeze, relax* - his hands those of a surgeon massaging a heart, trying to pump a faint pulse back into a failing patient.

*Squeeze. Relax. Squeeze. Relax.*

Cole heard a grumble. He realised it was his stomach, he was starving. He hadn't eaten since earlier that morning. Then those strange lights had appeared above Washington. Moments later, NASA reported they had lost contact with the ISS and, if that was enough, contact with one of their comms satellites was lost.

*Squeeze. Relax. Squeeze. Relax.*

It soon became clear it wasn't only Cole's iPhone that was affected by the lights filling the skies above DC; every other phone and electronic device in the White House had stopped working at the same time.

While the strange lights and missing satellite didn't strictly fall within his area of responsibility, Cole had been busy all day trying to deal with the fallout.

It was right about the moment when an intern had handed him those printouts that all Hell broke loose and John Cole's day turned very quickly to shit.

*Squeeze. Relax. Squeeze. Relax.*

Cole glanced at the five sheets of paper he had just discarded; four of the reports contained details of staffers, each unknown to Cole, who had sustained injuries when their phones exploded as they were using them.

The sheer number of roles and positions at the White House meant Cole didn't immediately recognise the names of everyone employed there. He knew a great many of them and, given his role as Head of the President's Secret Security Detail, the smallest detail of any employee's life would normally be on his desk soon after a call from him.

Now, following the spectacular light show in the sky, no such discreet calls could be made. And, any information required would be slower to obtain.

Cole dragged one of the printouts towards him.

*Squeeze. Relax. Squeeze. Relax.*

He reread the page, sweeping once more over its scant details. Of the five reports handed to him by the intern, this final one had, at first, simply annoyed him.

The information was sketchy, the details scant. When he initially read it, Cole had been mildly disturbed by the brevity of its detail. It wasn't enough to state "White House analyst injured during cellphone outage. Medical condition unknown." What was the point of a report that reported few details of any discernible use? Cole had been asking this very question of the worried intern before him when he paused, the name of Annie Bolton name appearing to leap from the page at him.

The page shook in his hand. The young intern beside him had shifted uncomfortably.

Anne Bolton was one of the White House's employees that John Cole did know. He knew her very well and had left Annie sleeping in his bed before heading off to his office at oh-five-hundred hours.

*Squeeze. Relax. Squeeze. Relax.*

Cole stabbed again at his phone.

*Squeeze. Relax. Squeeze. Relax.*

Annie was a pretty thirty-three-year-old from Wyoming. They had met in January as they jogged separately towards the White House over the capital's ice-covered streets.

Cole had fallen twice on that New Year's run into work. Firstly, approaching the security entrance to the White House grounds, he had slipped and tumbled to the icy sidewalk. He sat on the cold concrete of Pennsylvania Avenue, winded and

embarrassed, as, a dozen yard away, members of his own Secret Service teams had looked on and tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the amusement from showing on their faces.

Running up behind him, Annie had stopped to assist. Sweating from her exertions, her warm breath rising to set as icicles in the curls of dark hair that tumbled from her headband, she had bent to help him. Cole had looked up to see Annie's flushed cheeks and her concerned expression. It was when he gazed into her cobalt blue eyes that John Cole fell for the second time that morning.

Limping past the grinning agents on duty, Cole, keen to prolong his acquaintance with his beautiful saviour, had arranged to meet Annie later to thank her. After showering and changing, and following a morning's work in which he was increasingly distracted by thoughts of Annie - so much so that he decided against calling the agents in for a dressing down - Cole had hurriedly limped to the refectory to meet Annie for lunch.

That first shared lunch was the precursor of many such meals. Dinners soon followed and, while neither Cole nor Annie would readily admit to calling what they had "*a thing*", by early March they both realised something was happening between them. His feelings for Annie, while very pleasant and deepening every day since, often confused Cole.

At forty-one, Cole hadn't dated anyone long-term; after one or two lack lustre liaisons, things would usually fizzle out, his dates realising that the Service would always be the only truly serious lover in Cole's life. Cole had believed it too for long enough. He felt he was married to the job and that, unlike his own father, he wouldn't - *hell, he didn't want to* - find someone to settle down with.

Then, on that frozen January dawn, a dark-haired lawyer

from Wyoming had thawed him. Annie Bolton had, literally, picked him up. And, in pulling him to his feet, had turned John Cole's world on its head.

*Squeeze. Relax. Squeeze. Relax.*

Now Annie was injured and Cole didn't know how badly. Worse, he couldn't contact Annie or get in touch with anyone who knew how she was.

He grabbed his phone again, stabbing at it.

*Squeeze. Relax. Squeeze. Relax.*

Cole paused. Hadn't Albert Einstein declared that, "Only a fool expected different results from the same actions"? It might not have been those exact words. And, now that Cole considered the statement, he decided it might not even have been the eminent scientist who had said them.

It didn't matter who'd said them. While he was no Einstein, John Cole certainly wasn't a fool. He thought again of Annie. Well, maybe he was a fool in love.

*Squeeze. Relax. Squeeze. Relax.*

Why was he even trying his phone? Who could he call when all the phones were down?

Realising his iPhone was still gripped tight in his hand, Cole stopped squeezing.

Sighing to himself, he dropped the phone into his jacket pocket. As Cole moved his arm, his sleeve rode up, revealing a battered watch face. Light from the lamp on Cole's desk glinted off the scratched glass of the timepiece. Cole's frustrations of moments earlier drifted away as memories returned to him. The watch was a gift to Cole's father by his wife, Cole's mother, on the morning of his first day in the Secret Service and he had worn it every day throughout the thirty years of his service.

His father had then given the watch to Cole the day he

died. For the last decade the faded brown leather strap, worn supple and smooth following years of use, had secured it around Cole's wrist. The watch still kept perfect time and, though originally inexpensive, its value to Cole was immeasurable.

Cole noted the time; 1307.

That's when Cole's desk lamp snuffed out followed by all the lights in the White House.

"Now what?" Cole asked of no-one.

Cole rose from his desk and moved to the doorway. The Secret Service agent stationed outside Cole's office, was speaking rapidly into his sleeve. Despite the subdued light remaining in the corridor, Cole could see the agent's face breaking into a growing mass of confusion as he spoke repeatedly into his transmitter, his voice rising steadily in alarm. The agent pulled his earpiece out, rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger then pushed it back into place.

"That didn't work, did it?" Cole asked. Though trained to an exacting level and selected for White House duty only after extensive evaluations, Cole recognised the agent was young and new to the West Wing. Furthermore, the agent was worried and a worried agent was a worry for Cole.

The agent looked at Cole for guidance.

"Rubbing the earpiece. Didn't work, did it?"

The agent shook his head.

"It never does." Cole said calmly, pulling his Glock 19 from its holster. He ejected the clip, checking it swiftly before snapping it back into place. The whole procedure completed in a heartbeat.

"It's Morris, isn't it?" Cole asked.

The agent nodded. "Yes, sir. All comms down, sir." Reassured by Cole's calmness, Morris's composure returned.

He pulled out his firearm, mimicking Cole's checks.

To further calm Morris and keep the agent focussed, Cole issued instructions.

“Morris, with comms down I want all agents within visible sight-lines of each other. All weapons checked. I want this place on immediate lockdown now. Everyone away from the windows. You organise this section, get every sixth agent to do the same, then get back here.”

Morris nodded in acknowledgement.

“I'm heading to PEOC to secure the President.” Cole called over his shoulder as he ran down the corridor, heading for the East Wing.

Breathing steadily after his dash across the White House, Cole entered the East Wing, taking the stairs two at a time. The guards stationed on each landing moving out of his way as Cole hurriedly descended toward PEOC.

As he made his way down, the emergency power kicked in and the stairwell lights burst into life.

Reaching the bottom, Cole called out to the two uniforms guarding the Presidential Emergency Operations Center.

“Bearclaw still inside?”

“Sir, yessir.” One of the guards barked in response.

Cole stepped to the door. As he did something bothered him. He moved his security pass over the electronic lock.

The doors failed to open.

The guards looked at Cole. Cole looked at each guard in turn.

Cole tried his pass a second time. The doors remained tightly closed.

“Who's still in with the President?” Cole asked.

“Sir, Flyer, sir.”



“The Veep? Anyone else?”

“Sir. The Chief of Staff and the Director of the CIA, sir.”  
The guard paused, thinking who had gone in and out of the room. “Sir. And The National Security Advisor, sir.”

Cole tried his pass again.

As his pass failed to work for the third time, John Cole realised what had been bothering him about the security lock; the panel was unlit. The electronic lock had no power.

That was why his pass hadn't worked. The doors were locked permanently.

The lights shut off again.

“Sir?” The guard spoke, this time his voice didn't bark. It sounded hesitant and unsure.

“Yes.”

“Sir. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs is in there too.”

“Great.” Cole replied. “You're telling me that we're stood in the dark, with no power, no comms and no phones, while the entire US government is locked in a secure, airtight room that we have no means of accessing?”

In the darkness, the guard coughed.

## chapter four

*Angie Titus*

“AW, COME ON!” ALEC Hayes yelled at the TV as it went black. He was in the middle of a particularly exciting fight, and he was tempted to throw his hand controller at the screen.

He shouldn't have been home. Not really. The fact was, he'd pretended to be sick that morning so his mom wouldn't make him go to school. First weeks at new schools were always tough, but this one had been particularly rough. After only three days, there were kids out to get him already. It didn't bode well for the rest of the year.

“Hey!” his sister's high pitched voice could be heard all the way from the bathroom. “Did you blow a fuse or something?”

Desiree came into the living room with her hair dryer in her hand and shook it at him. She was dressed in a fuzzy pink bathrobe, and her hair fell in wet, messy tangles around her face.

“I have to be to work in twenty minutes,” she continued.

Alec shrugged. “I didn't do anything.”

She sighed heavily. “All right, squirt. Never mind. I'll go check the fuse box.”

As older sisters go, she wasn't a bad one, really. A lot of his friends back in Maine had much worse.

Desiree clumped out of the room and opened the door in the hall.

“Basement light's out, too,” she commented. “I'll need a flashlight.”

While she went to fumble in the kitchen, Alec went to the front window and peered through the curtain. It was eerily quiet outside, and he wondered if the power failure was for the whole block.

His mouth dropped open as he saw the people. They were milling around their cars, gesturing to each other and looking lost.

“Alec, do you know where the spare batteries are? The flashlight's not working,” Desiree said, coming back into the room. He barely heard her. “Alec?”

“The cars aren't working...” he whispered.

“What?”

“The cars.”

“What about them?” She came to the window and pushed him out of the way. After a few seconds, she added, “What the hell is going on?”

Everything was strangely quiet. It was so abrupt that Sarah, who was having a late lunch in the break room, stopped shoving salad into her mouth. Why was it so quiet? Had the ancient fridge finally decided to give up and die?

Noise from the main room caught her attention.

“Are any of them working?...Better call maintenance and tell them the power's out...Well, use your cell then...What do you mean?” Her boss's voice buzzed above the rest.

The chatter rose, and it sounded as if everyone's cell phone

had died at once. Sarah frowned and took hers from her pocket. The screen was black. She pressed several buttons, feeling panic start to tickle and curl in her belly.

Forgetting her salad, she shoved her phone into her pocket and stumbled out of the break room.

Matt Jones, head of her department, was looking frazzled as he tried to get the phone on Tera's desk to work. He pressed the hook switch several times, his eyes a little wild.

Sarah sidled up to Tera. "What's going on?" she whispered.

Tera shook her head. Her face was so pale it was almost translucent.

"There's got to be a reasonable explanation for why both power and cell phones are out," Norris Ward was saying evenly, his calm, quiet voice cutting through the rising panic. "Maybe it was a magnetic pulse inside the building."

"Then what about the cars?" someone near the windows asked.

Sarah hurried over to the window, fighting off a feeling of dread. The dread tightened at what she saw. Traffic along their whole busy, busy street had come to a complete standstill.

Iris sat in her car for several minutes. She was so stunned that she couldn't move.

Her car had died. Every car around it had died. Lights went out. Noises stopped.

People were coming out onto the street—out of houses, out of cars and apartments and shops. They milled around on the sidewalks and in the street, all echoing the same question: What happened?

Iris stared at them until she thought of her husband. He was alone at home with the flu. Had everything mysteriously stopped there, too?

She took out her phone to call him and blinked at the blank screen. Her eyes rose and met those of another woman who also had her phone in her hand. Iris shook her head at her. The woman's eyes widened.

Iris got out of her car and asked, "Does anyone know what's going on?"

"No." The woman's voice was barely above a whisper.

"I wonder what could have wiped out power and phones and cars."

"I don't know."

Iris looked around and saw a policeman moving through the gathered people. "Maybe he knows."

She left the sad looking woman and approached the policeman. His name tag said, "Perkins."

"Excuse me."

Perkins looked at her. His face was calm, but his eyes were not.

"Do you know what's going on?"

"It's best to remain calm and make your way home if you can."

She frowned. "That's not an answer."

"It's the only answer I've got."

Anna fought to keep her frayed thoughts from her face. Twenty-five seven year olds were depending on her to stay calm and lead them through to the end of the day.

"It's just a power outage," she'd told them when it happened. She kept telling them that all through the afternoon, even though it was now obvious, from whispered conversations with colleagues, that this was not the case.

She kept teaching, masking her fear, trying to keep things as normal as she could for her kids for as long as possible.

It seemed to be going well. It was hot and a bit dim, but the kids were working away at their math without complaint.

Anna had her cell on her desk and kept glancing at it, hoping it would miraculously come back to life. She didn't even know what time it was. Would someone come and tell her when it was time for dismissal or would she and her students be stuck there together forever?

A chill went down her back when she thought of technology not coming back. What would they do without it? How would she teach? How would she live?

She felt a little like the musicians on the Titanic who kept on playing as their world disappeared.

Jane hurried down the street, determined to get to her mother's house. At eighty-five and frail, her mother wouldn't be able to fend for herself if things went bad.

And they were going to go bad.

Jane warily looked around, seeing panic and fear and anger everywhere. Occasional gunfire peppered the air. People were yelling at each other and fighting. One lone young man was walking blank faced down the road. He didn't even seem to notice the cars broken down on either side of him. A teenager tapped helplessly at his phone. More encouraging were the groups who were crying and hugging.

What had happened? Jane wondered. When she'd woken that morning, things were so normal. She had kissed her dog good-bye and gone for groceries. After a quick lunch, she'd been heading home and fallen into an alternate universe.

A small boy was lying on the sidewalk moaning and crying just a little. Blood was coming from a scrape on his forehead. Jane hesitated. Her desire to check on her mother was almost overwhelming, but there were no other adults close by.

Feeling guilty for almost not stopping, she leaned down in front of him and said, "It's all right. Everything's going to be all right."

Everyone else had gone home, but Ian, as owner of the small store, didn't want to leave it. It had been his father's before his, and it felt more like home than the small apartment he slept in above it.

He was watching the chaos in the street when he first saw them. They were like a crazed wave. None of them looked sane. They held all sorts of make shift weapons—ball bats, knives, crowbars, pipe wrenches. There were even some real guns. As they swarmed the buildings, glass broke and flew. Goods were thrown into the street and trampled underfoot.

Ian backed from the window, realizing suddenly that he was in danger. He kept backing away slowly and wished there were a way to access his apartment from inside.

The wave got closer, and he ducked down behind a shelf. Bags of chips fell all around him, but he didn't bother to pick them up. His stomach twisted as he heard his front window, the window that had proudly proclaimed Hall's Convenience for forty years, shatter.

The noise that followed was deafening. People shouting, things falling over, and over it all, a voice shouting, "Where's the toilet paper? Find the toilet paper."

Ian shivered. He wasn't a brave man. He'd been robbed before, but one kid with a knife was nothing like this brainless mob.

He was going to die.

Troy Dunn had been called a nut. He new this. People thought he was crazy because he liked to be prepared. The shelter

under his house. The cupboard full of nonperishables that had enough food to last at least three months. Flashlights with lots of batteries (damn things didn't work now, though.)

Paranoid was he? If he were the type to laugh, he'd be laughing now. Since he wasn't, he watched the horrified people in the street as they went from shocked to bewildered to scared and mean. Mobs were already out there preying on the weak, breaking into homes and businesses. There was the body of a homeless man lying in the street, and no one seemed to even notice.

“What should we do?” his wife asked quietly from behind him.

Marta had always thought he went a little overboard, but she'd never said anything against it. He loved her for that.

And now he had to protect her.

A few rage filled faces were stumbling a little too close to his house.

“Go get my gun.”

Emmy had been hiding in the bathroom when they came through. Hiding and holding her breath and shaking almost hard enough to knock her teeth all out. Even after it fell quiet, she waited. She waited for so long, she forgot what light looked like, and then she waited some more.

Finally, wanting to go home, she slowly opened the door and gasped. The neat grocery store where she worked now resembled a war zone.

Food was strewn everywhere. It was ripped and broken and trampled. Shelves and coolers were broken, hanging at all angles, with metal shards poking through their pale skins. Lights dangled, a chip rack had toppled.

A set of sneakers, still attached to feet, poked out from the



nearest shelf. Emmy pressed a hand against her mouth and let out a small, fractured sob.

Her legs wouldn't hold her anymore, and she slowly sank to the cold cement floor. Wanting to block everything out, she curled into a ball and waited for the world to make sense again.

Night fell, unremarked and impossibly dark. The streets were deserted, and a terror filled hush walked the sidewalks. Creatures of the night came out, able to walk freely where they'd always had to hide in shadows before. Rats were the least dangerous of these.

Without the hum of technology, everything was quieter than it had ever been. The sounds of breaking glass carried much further. No alarms rang and no one went to investigate. Doors and windows were barred tight against the darkness—both outside and inside the hearts of neighbours and former friends.

Down what was usually a busy, bustling street, even at night, a newspaper rustled as it tumbled across the pavement. A baby's cry rang out, a long, thin wail that was quickly silenced.

The city of Washington hid away from the deepest night it had ever known, but it was too afraid to sleep.

## chapter five

*Charlotte Barker*

MARK RUBBED THE BEAD from his forehead and squinted his eyes towards the sunlight. Alex looked up at the sun and noticed that time was beginning to slip before them.

“Blaze, we won’t get there in time.” Mark turned from his stride and looked at Alex,

“Course we will Brighton, just got to pick the pace up a little.” Alex rolled his eyes,

“Yeah, but how about getting back? It’s hard enough getting there but with Miguel, she won’t want to come in a hurry will she?” Mark stood up at the top of the inclined street and assessed his direction.

“Sun’s coming over pretty quick, it must be around eleven. She’s only a few blocks away but the sun’s hitting us hard.” He squinted his eyes further and notice a side street that looked relatively shaded.

“Come on Brighton, we best get moving.” They both continued through the street until they reached a crowded recreational area.

“You don’t think she’ll be in here do you?” Alex glanced

at their faces trying to match the description they were given. Mark shook his head,

“We were given orders on where to find her.” They jogged through the park, hoping they would be considered as joggers and made their way to Roberta’s block. Mark stopped in his tracks and looked towards Alex,

“What was the number?” He bent down to fasten his shoelace and pulled down his trainer sock,

“53.” He stood up and rejoined Mark looking for the house.

“Looks like this is it,” Alex sighed and opened the white wooden fence to her property. Mark strided through and knocked on the door. A woman opened the door ajar.

“Roberta Miguel?”

“Hello?”

“Brighton and Blaze here, with orders from Bearclaw and Flyer.” She looked at their feet and nodded, opening the door further to invite them in. She pulled her hair into a ponytail and motioned them to follow her upstairs.

Once she was in her spare room, she closed the door and sat around a small chess table that she had yet to pack away. She let out a sigh,

“I think I know what this is about.”

Alex nodded, “The shutdown.”

“So why are you here? What are the orders?” Mark opens his inside pocket and pulls out a crumpled envelope. Roberta opens the letter and reaches for her glasses next to a packed box. Mark looked around,

“Going somewhere?” She lifted her head from the letter,

“Was.” She continued to read about the president’s current situation and how she was requested to return to the White House. She went to fold the letter away and then re-opened it

and frowned.

“How did you get these orders if Bearclaw is locked away?” Alex began to tap the chess table to a rhythm. Mark rolled his eyes at Alex’s hint,

“Morse code against the door,” he leaned closer to Roberta, “you must remember though that the president is not dead. Many people are probably hoping he is dead, as his plane has just been sent away for weekly maintenance.” He leaned back on his chair, “There could be riots,” and looked at Alex.

“Which is why we need you to come with us.” Roberta folded her arms and leaned back.

“How can I know to trust you about these orders?”

“You don’t.” Mark stood up and walked towards the door.

“But we wouldn’t be here trying to protect you with everything that’s going on at the moment, if we weren’t ordered to.” She contemplated what he had said and began to rub her temples.

“Fine, I’ll just get a few things.”

She walked into her bedroom and closed the door ajar. She went to her closet around the other side of the bed and pulled out a few shoe boxes away from the wall. She tried to look but her trousers kept getting in the way. Instead she felt her hand around the painted wall until she felt a coarse paint mark and a latch. She opened the hidden door, grabbed as many dollars as she could in one hand and pushed them into her trainers. She reached in again to retrieve a necklace and what appeared to be a Swiss army knife. She got ready, put her feet into her trainers and wore her necklace under her vest. She was just about to emerge from her closet when she grabbed her denim jacket and hid her Swiss army knife in the inside pocket. Roberta began walking around her bed and felt like she could

feel eyes watching her every move. She hovered at her dresser and put some lipstick on.

“You know, it’s rude to watch someone getting dressed.” She continued to look into the mirror whilst she heard a shuffling outside her door. She opened it and smiled at both Blaze and Brighton looking at the floor sheepishly. She took off her glasses and put them into her bag.

“So how are we getting there?”

Alex frowned, unsure if he had misheard,

“By foot?” She rolled her eyes and walked down the stairs to retrieve her keys.

“I meant what route?” Mark looked out onto the back yard.

“I’d say just your casual walk to work. We don’t want to raise suspicion.” She let them out of her house and locked the door behind her. They began to walk down the steps onto the sidewalk, when Alex tilted his head towards the sun.

“We can always find a quicker route Roberta if we have to.” He smiled to ease any tension between them and they made their way east towards the White House.

Their journey was rather pleasant at first, cutting through recreational areas, past the river until they reached the carpark of Walgreens. Alex frowned when he could hear a commotion close to the doors of the store. Roberta frowned, aware of the same noise and went to move closer.

“We can’t Roberta we need to get going.” She rolled her eyes and looked both ways whilst crossing the road.

“Calm down Blaze, I know where I need to be. Just wanted to get an insight into what’s happening.” They didn’t walk much closer but instead used the sidewalk next to the carpark to get a better look. They all made sure that they stayed close

together as they noticed two young women fighting over what looked like the last trolley. Roberta continued to watch the commotion and noticed that near the entrance there were two men fighting over what looked like a new smart screen tv.

“Come on Roberta, we need to keep moving.” She nodded but began to feel conflicted. She knew this was just the beginning. She shook her shoulders to release tension and began to keep on walking.

By now they were only a few blocks away from the White House, the famous white building was beginning to protrude out of the park ahead. The three of them continued through the park when they could hear a beatboxer in the park. Alex looked down and noticed that his rag was pretty much full of dollars weighted down by a few dimes. He smiled and then looked up at the beatboxer. He went to smile back when a man twice his age tackled him to the floor. Alex pulled Roberta in-between himself and Mark and tried to hurry her on. She glanced over Alex’s shoulder and noticed that the man that had tackled him to the floor, had swiped up his rag and the money that was in it.

“Can’t you help him?” Mark continued to pick up the pace.

“Unfortunately we can’t. Our orders were to get you here on time. By doing that we will be helping him.” Roberta frowned and pushed her hands further into her jacket.

“How?”

“If we get you to the White House, we can begin to try and restore some order.” He jumped and reached for an apple from a nearby tree.

“By restoring order, no one else will have to go through what that beatboxer went through.” He shined the apple and was about to take a bite when he noticed how close they were to the gates. He pushed the green apple into his pocket,

“Looks like we’re here.” Mark pulled Roberta to the side,  
“Lets use the side gate. We don’t want to look obvious.”

Roberta walked through the metal detectors and began to walk down the entrance corridor. Mark leaned closer,

“They’re waiting for you in the Oval.” She nodded and made her way there, were she was left to enter autonomously. She looked around, a little embarrassed at seeing everyone in their casual wear and closed the door behind her.

She took in a deep breath to calm her nerves. “Good afternoon everyone, thank you for getting here under the circumstances. What do we currently know?”

“All transport is down and we’re currently looking into communications with navel and aircraft operations.”

“Any luck?”

“None as of yet. We’re hoping to use their last whereabouts to give us an indication of potential casualties that may need treatment.” Roberta nodded and turned to Amelia.

"How are the health services holding up?"

“There’s been a rise in basic medical equipment but all life supports have been hit, meaning many casualties in the hospitals.” Roberta began to pace the room.

“How are people accessing medical equipment and so forth? I noticed fights occurring in supermarkets on my way here.”

“Ma’am, everyone is taking whatever they need. Money does not define a currency at the moment.” Roberta frowned,

“What is?” The office remained silent for sometime until Catherine cleared her throat,

“life.” Roberta nodded and addressed everyone.

“What have we heard from the president?” The room fell a

second time into silence before the Secretary of Defence stood up,

“Only that we were summoned to stay protected here until a cause of action has been directed.” Roberta looked around the room and stared at a portrait of the most recent president. His eyes pierced into hers, grounding her with a sense of what must be done.

“We need to get a message out to everyone, this won’t just be happening to Washington. Does anyone know what state New York is in?”

“Negative Ma’am. All previous contact has been lost from our satellites, phones and tracking devices.” Roberta folded her arms,

“So how are we to communicate with the rest of America?” Karl shrugged,

“We can’t.” She began to consider her options and how to potentially communicate to the people.

“If we can’t communicate to America, we’ll have to communicate to the people of Washington.” She began to pace,

“People will come to the gates of the White House as they know this is where the president is and will request direction and structure. We can give them that.”

“But how?”

“If we have no electronics Michelle, our last resort is our voices. Be it to be heard or written down, we need to find order through our voices. Michelle, Amelia and Angela, we need to come up with a structure that will be heard by thousands. Karl, how many people are in this House today from the press?”

“Around twelve?” Roberta nodded firmly,

“Good, we’ll need them to write down our plan of action



to provide each neighbourhood in DC with, so that we can give them some reassurance.” Roberta went to leave when Karl called her back.

“What about paper? We only have so much and cannot provide enough to give out messages constantly.” Roberta stood still and turned her head to the left,

“Then we need to make sure our direction is clear and final.”

She walked out of the office and went to go to her actual office as a breather from everyone. The further she walked down the corridor, the more she noticed that Blaze and Brighton were following her. She stopped in her tracks and rolled her eyes,

“What do you want?”

“To protect you.” She shook her head,

“I need some air.” She went to take the door to the right when Alex stepped in front of it.

“I’m afraid you can’t. We need to keep you in the White House.” She sighed and went to reach for the handle.

“Why? Don’t you trust me?”

“No, I never was told to trust you — just to keep you safe.” She rolled her eyes,

“Then come out with me then.” Alex looked at Mark and nodded.

They both followed her into the courtyard, near the side gate. Alex and Mark watched her looking beyond the gate, almost as if she was in a trance.

“Are you okay?”

“Hmm?”

“You just seem a little distracted.” She realised how close she was to the gate and retreated closer to the House.

“Sorry Blaze, I just can’t help thinking about Ma.”

“Ma?” Alex inquired. Roberta nodded and sat on the grass, allowing herself to feel the sun on her face.

“She was due in for heart surgery but I don’t know if she has been seen to.” Her face turned pale, “What if she was in the *middle* of surgery?” Her head fell onto her chest and her fingernails dug deeper into the grass. Alex crouched down beside her,

“It’ll be ok you know. You just can’t think like that.”

She looked up, her eyes close to tears,

“Why not? It’s the truth.” She looked back at the grass, “I don’t even have the time to reassure me.” Silence filled the air. She rubbed her eyes and stood up. She glanced outside a final time before returning her gaze to Mark.

“You’ve got to let me see her.”

He scratched the back of his neck,

“You know we can’t Roberta, we have to keep you safe.”

“What about who is keeping my Ma safe? Please Blaze and Brighton, I need to see her.” She looked away from them and up at the sky.

“You know, I trust you both more than any of them inside that office.”

Alex frowned, “Why?” She turned to him,

“Because you call me by my name.” She looked at Alex and grinned, “I won’t be gone long, it’s only a 30 minute walk away. All I want to do is see if she is ok.” She shrugged and looked up at Mark,

“I might even be able to help in some way, after hearing about the state of the hospitals anyway.” She looked at the gate.

“It’s not sanitary and it’s not safe.” She turned back to face Mark without realising how close he had come to her. Their noses were almost touching.

“Be quick Roberta. We’ll keep this door guarded but we can’t do it for long.” She frowned and stepped back towards the gate.

“Won’t you both get caught?” Alex popped his head around Marks shoulder.

"Not if the camera’s aren’t working. Our word against yours.” This time Roberta grinned.

"Be quick,” he warned. She muttered ‘thank you’ and made her way out of the gate and back into the chaos that surrounded her.

## 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 scabbled 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

*Accordion Bruce*

THE AVIATIONISTS HAD FINALLY gotten out of hand. They ridiculed the green revolutionaries, but the Church of the Air and Space wasn't getting people fed. The Curator, Desoto Clark, had lost his partner to a pacemaker when the old times crashed. Now his followers faced a choice, stay with Clark in his belief that the world would return, or take hunger for truth and do their part for the present. They'd hit the October deadline. Those who didn't work this last harvest, wouldn't eat when winter came.

Dressed in sharp suits, Church-members spent the past summer clinging to electronic nostalgia while listening to their dead earbuds. It was as if the pressure for survival had accelerated their delusion. Since the spring it increasingly looked like they were worshipping an age of reason they thought had stopped when the lights went out. Now a schism meant some had given up work entirely to wait on the return of the science they venerated. Faced with competencies they couldn't master from behind desks, they rejected new experts and fetishised the old world's broken tools. Any future they

had ever invested in had no future.

Roberta called for a calculator. A 14 year old chess player stepped up. The young Kafaela could remember pi out to Bethesda, and was keeping the books. Aided by an old-school numbers runner, the youngster worked with the collective to document the Mom's orders. When copy machines had broken, hip-hop came to the rescue. Rhymes replaced clerks, and record keeping (and the news of the day) got a whole lot more entertaining.

Regardless of the sideshow that Clark's actions demanded, there was much work to do. Roberta muttered to Deshawn Montme from USDA, "Practicalities. We need natural history, not yesterday's future." Montme had come down Rock Creek from the National Zoo to check on the harvesting of the Mall. He stood, strong and stocky, though his natural hair had grown white (he blamed the trials of the last year). Dutch grad students Harriet and Myriam, wearing tiger and panda hats from the Zoo, joined him to parcel out this final month's harvest plan.

Roberta gave silent thanks for this crew. The two women had overstayed their visas after being stuck here while working on a plan for "greening the city" — just when the District needed to plant its first crops. Their data was lost when the Cloud evaporated, but between the students, their mentor Montme, and the leadership of women like Kafaela Menga from Natural History, they'd put in practice their prize winning theoretical project. Now it was the basis for a real-world battle against hunger. "If there's a best part of the end of the world," thought the Congresswoman, "it's the islands of competence that show how much worse it could be."

They had gotten the National Parks crew running what

amounted to a massive room-and-board internship program throughout the city. The District's groundskeepers know what was going on, and FDA's field workers were mostly happy to be outside. It would all have been much simpler if it wasn't for the Air and Space worshippers.

The Gift-shop gangs had finally settled in to help out. Once the political parties lost it and skipped town, the Moms got together on The Mall and started parcelling out chores. Now every Saturday, The Next Steps Go-Go Band lifted people up with drums, horns, and a Dominican accordionist. They played while people took the big weekly break together. It became a thing over the summer, and looked to continue, hopefully keeping people warm that second winter.

January and February had been tight. A lot of furniture and even whole houses went into furnaces. The District had been heavy with wood smoke for the first time in a hundred years. If the old steam trains were for real, some promised coal from across the river, but other people thought that wouldn't hold. Why ship all the way to the District? There probably wouldn't be enough food to trade. Maybe the Libraries and Archives had enough hard knowledge to be worth something? They would see soon enough.

The city had enough paper to last a few decades. Letter press printing and mechanical typesetting were returning. But the old museum presses were falling apart under actual use. Roberta hoped the Aviationists who stuck around would cooperate with the Congress of Librarians and take over book-binding, reproduction and preservation. There really was a need for training the children and harvesting the useful past as the Rappers kept up with today's day-to-day.

Hundreds of thousands of people were lost or fled in the

weeks right after the outage. And that first winter had punished those who didn't work together. Things had quieted down, literally, as the worst hoarders realised they couldn't move their stashes out of town, and the rest were shut down when The Moms took charge. Some wished they had negotiated with the mobs rather than facing The Moms.

Since The District got through the winter, generous rations from the collected stores were being shared based on the promise of harvest. Everyone hoped it would continue since the season looked like it had gone well enough to feed folks for another year.

The zoo had been a tragedy. The pandas were gone, but remembered for putting up a fight. They had made it clear they never liked visitors, despite their reputation as vegetarians. The lost animals had become something of a mascot for the scrappy new District. Now the Agriculture people had taken control and put the surviving alpacas and even elephants to work. The bison might take a while before they'd cover the Plains, but if folks could manage the Mall well enough, there was hope for a few burgers come winter after it was cold enough for the meat to keep.

There certainly weren't many little dogs running loose. They'd mostly been penned as they appeared on more and more menus. The doctors were commissioning rhymes about how if you didn't want worms, treat everything like pork. "Cook a chow, to make good chow" was something few people had thought they'd hear over a public education beat.

The riots had been bad, but the (mostly) white-flight had cleared out folks who couldn't contribute much. Turns out rebel congresswomen like Miguel, who'd worked blue-collar jobs in their youth, got more done than lobbyists who wanted to take turns running scams on the public. The District was

run by residents now. They voted with their work, declaring statehood-in-practice while others had fallen apart.

The daily schedule was clear: “If you don’t work, you don’t eat.” And some of the divided tasks weren’t even that hard. It could get rough or monotonous, but elders got to catch and tend the fish in the Reflecting Pool, and if you got bike messenger duty, you didn’t have to rush, and the streets were safer than they’d ever been before. Another thing that had changed was people were singing together while they worked. The last hits from the pop charts had become work songs shared in the great new joint labour.

If it wasn’t for this guy constantly waving a phone with updates from a satellite only he could hear.

Clark’s people got jumped wearing Parks Service colours They’d never earned. Somebody recognised him, and they brought him and his crew to Roberta to figure out what to do. He’d been at the Arboretum with his group, trying to grab supplies locked down for winter. This was the unforgivable. The Moms were clear: stealing food was terminal. Clark was out, with as many of his followers as wouldn’t renounce him and his distractions. About half of the Aviationists were tired of him. The rest, mostly libertarians from the old Waterfront district, had been given until today, the first of October, to roll the fuck across the Potomac. They’d been suburbanised.

The Curator stood on the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge and straightened his tie. He looked toward the museum he’d spent decades maintaining. The centre of his world had shifted, and the District’s women were denying his vision of the Past. He raised his voice and Silenced Cell-Phone and cried out, “Signal! I have Signal!” Most of his former followers looked



away, but the remaining supporters shifted angrily, some wanting to get across the bridge and past the Pentagon's parking-lots before dark, others looking for some last hope of reprieve.

Holding his device high on a selfie stick, Clarked raised his voice and broadcast a threat of revenge. "The System will restart and the Museum will have visitors! You're trying to lock the doors of the future! When the engine start, we'll cross this bridge again and delete you!"

Deshawn leaned over to Roberta and said, "Pretty sure that's not gonna happen."

She agreed, "Shit's getting cold. It's October. They won't make it through a winter outside the District."

The bigger question remained, how long would any of this last? Maybe their new community was just one version of the future?

## chapter eight

*Rusella Lucien*

ROBERTA MIGUEL THREW OFF the thin cotton sheets, looked out the window and wiped the sleep from her eyes. She looked at the watch on the small table beside the twin bed. The watch read 6:40 am. Roberta rubbed her tight shoulder, walked toward the narrow bathroom and brushed her teeth. She pulled on her National Smithsonian T-Shirt and khaki pants and walked outside.

Roberta walked up and down the neat rows of crops that dot the Arboretum. She picked up a juicy raspberry from the bush, popped it into her mouth and savoured the tart and sweet fruit. The community decided that raspberries would be perfect fruit to grow; a low-sugar fruit that can be made into several different dishes, a fruit that can be canned and preserved for later and offers a natural defense of thorns surrounding the precious fruit. A little girl named Lupita with large brown eyes and dark hair in braids ran up to Roberta and said, “Tia (aunt) Roberta! Tia Roberta! My brother got cut by the thorns!” Roberta followed Lupita to a patch of thorns and saw a boy with a thin line across his forearm and several small

scrapes along the left side of his stocky frame. Roberta held his forearm and said, “What were you trying to do? Were you trying to cut across the field?” Her brother Tommy said, “Sure. But then the thorns caught my arm and...” Roberta interrupted and said, “Next time, don’t cut across the field. Go see Dr. K at the main house to get cleaned up. Tell her that I sent you.” Tommy said, “Will you tell mom?” Roberta replied, “If you stop cutting across the Raspberry patch, then this is between you and your sister.” Tommy walked with his sister around the raspberry bushes and towards the large home.

Roberta walked through the neat rows and looked at the sky. She thought about her previous life as Speaker of the House and how she made deals to get the government moving. This incident with Tommy is no different. She saw a problem and resolved it by cutting a deal with Tommy.

Roberta could feel the wind cut through her thin shirt. She walked back to the small shed to get a hoodie. She didn’t hear the wind that loosened a slender spear of wood from the ceiling of the shed. As she picked up the hoodie from the table, she let out a primal scream. The piece of wood jammed into the edge of her shoulder blade and her eyes fluttered. Roberta thought, “I need to keep my eyes open. If they close, I may never open them again.” She screamed, “I’ve been hit and I can’t move my arm.” Roberta staggered towards the front of the shed and felt a numbness in her legs as she stumbled over, hitting the ground face-first. Her breath became laboured and she pulled her body along the ground with her working arm. A young woman saw Roberta and yelled out, “Everybody, Roberta is hurt and needs help.” Amy said to the growing crowd, “Carry her to the big house. Be careful, we can’t remove the beam until she sees Dr. Khan.” Roberta could hear her ex-husband Carlos say, “We need to

move her carefully due to the wound. Get the trolley and carefully place her on it. We can't move her too much." The four people carefully lifted her from the ground. Roberta let out a little groan. Her entire body looked crimson and felt wet. They placed her body on the trolley and wheeled her into the big house.

Dr. Amelia Khan looked at Tommy's scrapes and said, "This looks worse than it is. The nurse will clean it up and then you're free to go." Tommy walked out of the examination room as a crowd of people wheeled Roberta into the room. Tommy saw that it was Tia Roberta and followed the crowd. Amy said to Tommy, "Stay back. Roberta got hurt." Tommy waited in the hallway with his sister. Then the nurse Karen asked, "What's going on?" Tommy said, "Roberta got hurt." Karen said, "I'm going to clean you up and then you can go home." Tommy said, "I'll stay here if they need any help." He turned to his sister and said, "Tell mom that I'm helping out at the big house." Lupita ran outside. Dr. Khan looked at Roberta and saw a narrow 18-inch spear sticking out of the shoulder. Dr. Khan asked, "What happened?" Roberta tried to talk but could only gurgle saliva and blood. Amy said, "It looks like a piece of the shed fell and stabbed Roberta in the back." Dr. Khan walked around the trolley and asked Roberta, "If you can hear me, blink twice." Roberta blinked twice. Then Dr. Khan asked, "Can you feel your feet? Blink twice." Roberta could blink once. Dr. Khan said, "Get the operating theater ready. There might be some paralysis. Also, we may need blood donors since she is wearing most of her blood on the outside. Can you all please move Roberta to the operating theatre?" The four people that moved Roberta include the doctoral student Amy McDonald, Roberta's ex-husband

Carlos Miguel, the former Secretary of Agriculture Darren Marshall and Army Sergeant Christopher Caldarone.

Roberta looked around the pale room. She felt stuck to the operating table and thought about Carlos helping her out. Before the event, they barely spoke. The divorce was just a formality. There were no broken vases or the smell of another woman's perfume or the smell of another man on the bedsheets. Roberta devoted her life to public service. Carlos didn't want to be the fifth task on Roberta's to-do list. Roberta thought, "I'm glad Carlos helped out. I wish I was a better wife to him." Roberta's thoughts were interrupted when Karen walked into the room with her arms raised and said, "You are in good hands. Dr. Khan is a great doctor." Karen cut the clothes off of Roberta, leaving her exposed and feeling cold. Then a paper sheet was placed on Roberta with an opening for the spear. Roberta winced and closed her eyes.

Dr. Khan scrubbed her arms with the orange carbolic soap. This event refreshed memories of her time as an emergency physician. Dr. Khan thought, "This is coming full circle. Before the government, I dealt with this all the time at my hospital." Dr. Khan worked in an urban hospital in Washington D.C. with gunshots, stabbings, and mayhem. The former Secretary of Health and Human Services Dr. Amelia Khan slipped into her role like an old pair of operating scrubs. But the lack of electricity made this operation tricky. Dr. Khan walked into the operating room and Karen said, "Roberta is stable and ready for surgery. She's one of the good ones." Dr. Khan injected Roberta with a sedative and she fell into a deep sleep.

Lupita ran to her mother in the kitchen and said, "Tia Roberta is hurt and at the big house." Linda took her hands out of the minced meat, rinsed them in a bucket and said,

“What happened ‘Pita?’” Lupita said, “Mommy, Tia Roberta got hurt and Tommy said he’s going to help them fix her.” Linda thought back six months ago to that cool spring day.

Linda and a couple of the other women in the area run a communal kitchen. They cook food for members of the community in exchange for a variety of duties. Some people clean the kitchen in exchange for a free meal, the butchers get free meals for the meat and the farmers get free meals for the produce. This system of barter and trade worked properly until the farmers complained that they didn’t get the fair amount of meals for the number of vegetables and fruit they contributed. In one meeting between the farmers and the cooks, farmer Alex Crawford complained, “Why am I sweating my ass off for these greens and getting just one plate of food.” The other farmers cheered. Linda said, “The amount of decent, edible vegetables you bring justifies the meals that you get.” Alex said, “With that attitude, what can you do with no vegetables?” Linda retorted, “Well then, no meals for you!” Alex walked up to Linda and said, “You’re not just punishing us, you’re punishing the rest of the community. See which meals you can come up with no vegetables!” The farmers walked out of the lunchroom. Linda looked towards the rest of the cooks and said, “We’ll just make do with what we have.” Linda looked at the pantry and saw all they had were rice, flour, and beans. Linda realized that she messed with the wrong group. People in the community were only going to put up with carbs and beans for a couple of days. Linda walked back to the rest of the cooks and said, “We need to come to some agreement with the farmers. People are only going to tolerate rice and beans for so long.” Roberta walked into the hall and sat down to drink her Chicory tea. Linda saw Roberta

around the community and knew she was the Speaker of the House in the past. Linda walked up to Roberta and said, “Hey, you used to be Speaker of the House?” Roberta replied, “In a previous life.” Linda said, “Well, I could use your help. We’re having problems with the farmers. They don’t think they’re getting a fair deal for the meals. Could you help us out?” Roberta’s eyes perked up and said, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Roberta walked over to the sweet potato patch and saw Alex tilling the ground. Roberta said, “I hear you’re having a little difficulty with the kitchen. What can I do to help?” Alex heard her but continued to till the ground. Roberta knew he heard her but continued, “I know you want to get the meals from the kitchen. You can’t eat all the vegetables that you grow. You might make a deal with the butchers but I admit the meals are much better from the kitchen.” Alex looked up, turned around and said, “If you can set up a meeting with Linda, maybe we can work something out.”

The next day, Roberta sat in the dining room with some museum pens and paper. Linda wiped her hands and sat down and Alex walked into the hall. For the next couple of hours after dinner, the three wrote down and crossed-out ideas to establish a formal agreement based on the exchange of vegetables for cooked meals. For example, 20lbs of vegetables equals 10 meals divided among the farmers. After Linda and Alex agreed to the new rules, the agreement was dated and signed by all three. Roberta couldn’t help but smile while conducting these negotiations. This is what she loved doing; resolving problems among groups of people for the common good. Linda was happy that vegetables will be included in the meals and Alex wasn’t going to miss the burritos bowls.

News spread that Roberta had suffered a life-threatening

injury. People walked towards the large house, offering to help in any way they could. Amy pushed the crowd back and said, "If anyone of you is blood type AB, come in." Most of the members of the community got their blood tested and their blood types were filed away for these situations. Linda knew her blood type and walked through the crowd. Tommy was taking out the bloody bags of waste left in the hallway. Linda looked at her son, walked towards Karen and asked, "How is she doing?" Karen replied, "Dr. Khan got the spear out of her back but she lost a lot of blood and her situation is unstable. Are you able to donate? Do you have type AB blood?" Linda said yes. Karen said, "Follow me." They both entered a room with a chaise lounge and a blood bag hung up. Linda laid on the lounge while Karen told her to squeeze a tennis ball while she placed a needle in her arm. The bag filled with blood. Linda closed her eyes until Karen carefully removed the needle and helped Linda up from the lounge. Linda walked towards the waiting room and joined Lupita and Tommy. Lupita asked, "Is Tia Roberta going to be ok?" Roberta said, "I hope so."

Karen washed her hands and transported the two bags of blood to the operating theatre. Dr. Khan sewed up the wound and then connected the blood bag via tube to Roberta. Once the bags were emptied, they waited for any adverse reactions. Dr. Khan heard a steady heartbeat from Roberta. Then they carefully wheeled her to the post-op room/library where the four people that brought her in slowly flipped her over on to her back. Roberta slept through the entire operation.

Roberta felt a dull pain on her shoulder and slowly opened her eyes. She saw Linda and the kids, the four people that helped her, Dr. Khan and nurse Karen. She opened her mouth to speak but Dr. Khan told her to relax. Roberta felt relieved



yet she could barely wriggle her toe.

## chapter nine

*Barbara Neill*

AT LAST THEIR DESTINATION was in sight. Oliver Kelly was desperate to reach the District before nightfall and the inevitable darkness and, provided there were no hitches, would make it with time to spare. The horses were tiring and the human beings in the group weren't faring much better. Their journey had been arduous and as well as rest every one of them, equine and human alike, needed food and water.

"Thank God," Oliver muttered under his breath as the District came into view. Self-elected leader of the group, he had successfully hidden from them his own need of sustenance and rest. The wheels of several carts clattered under the strain of their cargo which consisted of a collection of large, heavy metal objects.

"These, my friends," Oliver had enthused at the start of their journey, "have the power to restore the power!" He had grinned, broadly, at his own pun but his sense of humour had since fled and all he wanted to do now was locate whoever was in charge, put forward his proposal and get some much-needed rest.

"Hey!" Oliver called out to a dishevelled young man who

appeared to be wandering aimlessly.

“Who’s in charge here?” The young man appeared thoughtful for a moment. There wasn’t anyone ‘in charge’ as such.

“I guess that’ll be Roberta Miguel.” He didn’t seem too sure but Oliver was in no mood to press the point.

“Where can I find her?”

The young man shrugged and turned away. ‘At least we have a name,’ Oliver thought to himself. Several more enquiries pointed him in the direction of an office building in the centre of the District.

“Roberta Miguel?” he asked the attractive, dark-haired, business-like woman who appeared very much in control.

“Who’s asking?” she shot back at him.

“Oliver Kelly,” he responded, sticking out his right hand in greeting. Appearing slightly bemused, Roberta shook his hand with a firm, confident grip.

“What brings you here?” she asked, whilst simultaneously beckoning one of her colleagues.

“I have the solution to the power outage,” Oliver began, “but I need help.”

He had Roberta’s undivided attention.

“I have a small group of people with me but I need more; skilled workers, about a hundred,” Oliver continued.

Roberta’s brow buckled. That was a lot of manpower and she wasn’t convinced that they could be spared, even for the week that Oliver went on to request.

“First things first; you and your group need to rest up. I’m guessing you’re hungry too. Joe, show our guests to some accommodation and get someone to take the horses to the Arboretum.” The colleague she had summoned nodded in agreement.

“We’ll talk more in the morning Mr Kelly.”

“Oliver,” he corrected her.

“Oliver,” Roberta echoed, her features melting into a smile.

Oliver Kelly smiled too. For the first time in ages he was feeling optimistic.

“Take your pick,” Joe waved his hand in the direction of the houses and apartments within the District. “Most of their previous occupants abandoned them right after the outage. They’ll have all you need for a night’s sleep, as long as you don’t mind a little dust,” Joe beamed. The horses had already been fed, watered and settled into the paddock at the Arboretum. Oliver had lost track of the others in his group but Joe assured him that they had eaten and had probably retired for the night. It was already dusk and they would have to move quickly before the light was lost altogether.

“Here...” Joe had rummaged in the canvas bag that was slung over his shoulder and produced a sandwich that was, clearly, past its best. He had almost forgotten that Oliver hadn’t eaten. “There’s water at the pump over there,” Joe gesticulated. “It’s safe to drink.” Oliver nodded in appreciation. He chose an apartment in the block that was nearest to the water pump

He slept fitfully, aware that so much was resting on the agreement of those in power at the District. He knew he would have to present his case convincingly or risk being written off as a crackpot. Oliver was a practical man; a do-er who was good with his hands but, when it came to being good with words, he wasn’t so self-assured and the thought of giving a presentation left him cold. He had secretly hoped that his idea would just be taken on board the moment he and his

group arrived in the District, rather than giving him a whole night to stew about it first.

Oliver washed as best he could at the pump while the sun was rising. It was a relatively warm day for the time of year and he hoped that was a good omen. He was looking forward to his meeting with Roberta with some trepidation. So much was riding on his ability to create a good impression and he didn't want to mess it up.

“Mr Kelly; Oliver.” Roberta Miguel immediately corrected herself. “I trust you slept well.”

“Yes, thank you,” Oliver lied, taken aback by the appearance of Roberta while he was still engaged in his ablutions. Roberta picked up on this straight away.

“I hope I'm not disturbing you.”

“No, not at all,” Oliver lied again, wiping droplets of water from his face.

Roberta was skilful at ‘reading’ people and had already picked up on Oliver's possible reluctance to front a presentation. She offered to do so, on his behalf, but stressed that she would need to be fully versed in the details of his proposal, and insisting on his presence for a question and answer session.

“How about we meet here in, say, an hour?” she suggested. Oliver agreed.

“So that's the gist of it. What do you think?” Oliver had presented the details to Roberta, who was rubbing the back of her neck.

“How do you know it's going to work?” she asked. Oliver thought for a moment and decided that honesty would be the best policy in this situation.

“There are no guarantees, of course, but I believe it’s worth a try. What alternative do we have?” He had a point, Roberta conceded. There was no alternative that she was aware of.

“I’ll put it to the committee. They’ll have to agree before we can do anything at all.” Oliver felt a warm glow of optimism at her use of the word ‘we’. It meant she was already on his side.

“Joe, can you send the runners out to gather the committee? I need to meet with them urgently.” Joe was on it straight away and headed off. The runners were assembled at their station in the central administration building. One runner was attached to the acting private secretary of each member of the administration. The arrangement was semi-formal but it had been working well since shortly after the electronic shutdown, so was likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future.

The system, as efficient as ever, ensured that a necessary quorum had assembled in less than an hour. Roberta was to chair the meeting and she was keen to reach a conclusion before nightfall. The daylight hours were getting shorter and necessitated all business to be conducted as efficiently as possible.

“Welcome, everyone,” Roberta began, “Thank you for coming at such short notice. It’s much appreciated. Mr Kelly, here, has what he believes to be the answer to the power outage. He and his group have brought some pieces of machinery which, he claims, will get us all up and running again in as little as a week!” She paused momentarily, to allow the gasps and other audible reactions to quieten down. Roberta had deliberately piqued the interest of her colleagues from the outset. She was, indeed, on Oliver’s side and was

keen to at least try his idea. They had very little to lose in doing so as far as she was concerned.

“Mr Kelly will be happy to take any questions during the course of the meeting but the reason he is here at all is because he’s going to need our help.”

“What kind of help?” a voice came from the floor. Roberta responded by dipping her hands in a ‘quieten down’ motion. “I’m coming to that. We’ll need skilled workers...”

“Anyone who’s good with their hands,” Oliver interrupted. His enthusiasm had overcome his nerves. “So, butchers, doctors...”

“The same thing!” came a voice from the floor, amidst a chuckle from a handful of the participants. Oliver smiled eager to gain their confidence.

“I believe I know what caused the failure of the power supply.” Oliver was on a roll. “I’m as sure as I can be that it was a ‘Carrington Event’...”

“A what?! You’ll need to give it to us in layman’s terms if you want our help.” Colin Booth was the Director of the Office of Management and Budget and something of a financial wizard but was happy to admit that he was no scientist. Oliver was undeterred. “It’s a massive solar storm that creates magnetic disturbances large enough to fry anything with wiring.” Iain Thomson, Secretary of Energy, nodded thoughtfully.

“How much manpower will be needed?” asked Catherine Bradley, Administrator of the Small Business Administration. “A week doesn’t seem very long.”

“We’ll need a hundred people,” Oliver assured her. Catherine puffed out her cheeks. She didn’t say anything but her demeanour revealed that she thought it was a big ask. Roberta chipped in.

“That’s a lot of manpower, of course, but it’ll be worth it.”

“Worth it if it works!” Catherine added.

“That’s a good point. How sure can we be that it WILL work?” Angela Morgan-Bell, Secretary of Commerce, enquired. Her concern was that a whole week of taking vital members of society away from their normal day-to-day activities could have a devastating effect on the community. Oliver shot a glance at Roberta. He didn’t want to jeopardise things at this stage.

“Of course there are no guarantees, but what alternative do we have?” Roberta bailed him out. “In fact, I respectfully ask that anyone who has an alternative to Mr Kelly’s plan present it right now.” The room fell silent.

“Catherine, do you think you can get the small business people on board?” Roberta was keen to involve Catherine Bradley.

“I can try,” Catherine agreed.

“How soon do you think we can get a hundred volunteers together for Mr Kelly?” Roberta threw the question open to the floor.

“We haven’t agreed to it, yet!” Alejandro Flores, United States Trade Representative, pointed out.

“My apologies,” Roberta conceded. “Perhaps the time has come to take a vote on it. A show of hands unless anyone objects?” A quick glance around the room confirmed that there were no objections.

“Providing a hundred skilled volunteers for one week to help Mr Kelly with his project; all those in favour.” The room was filled with a sea of hands.

“Against.” A mere handful of delegates were opposed to the proposal.

“Anyone abstaining? None. Good. Motion carried. Mr



Kelly, we will do everything in our power to help you find the volunteers you need. Good luck.”

“Thank you.” Oliver breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“...and it’s Oliver!” he added.

## chapter ten

*K.R. Pynes*

OLIVER WAS DREAMING AGAIN. Like a spectre, he watched the beginning of just an average day in his past life. He saw himself waking in the old twin bed, and almost felt himself rise and wander sleepily through his narrow apartment hallway into his immaculately clean kitchen, the coffee already steaming hot in the old steel carafe. Coffee. The dream was so vivid he could smell the rich, enticing aroma, driving him almost to madness. It had been a long time since he had tasted his favorite drug.

“Kelly.”

Someone was speaking. He glanced around his dream kitchen; no one was there.

“Kelly, wake up, damn it.”

The walls of his home disintegrated into the blackness. Oliver opened his eyes unwillingly, in a total stupor. It wasn't pitch black, but pretty close to it. The only light which came into the vast cavern in which he found himself was still fairly dim, the first lights of a crisp autumn morning.

“Guess I'm going to have to find someone else to drink

this.”

Roberta crouched next to him, leaning up against the sandstone wall with two large mugs in her hands. Could it be? Oliver darted up immediately, scrambling out of his makeshift sleeping bag.

“Where...? How? Coffee?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. The first taste of the dark nectar made him feel like he was dreaming again.

“You’re not Speaker of the House for naught.” Roberta laughed mirthlessly. The irony was not hidden in her voice. “Just don’t tell anyone. I found a stash last year; I’ve been saving it for a special occasion.”

It was Oliver’s turn to laugh. They’d been working in the Capitol for days. Volunteers of all ages and abilities labored dawn to dusk following every direction to his crazy plan. The hope in their eyes while they followed his instructions without question made him feel a little queasy. What if his plan didn’t work and he dashed all their hopes? He felt like the blind leading the blind. “Yeah, special occasion.” He sighed.

Roberta had been the first to catch wind of his idea, and it had really been through her that it was all coming to fruition. There was no way he could have assembled the team of hopefuls without her support, and letting her down made him more nervous than anything else.

“Today’s the day, Kelly. Let’s make it happen.” Roberta thumped him on the back and stood to leave. “Finish that shit before more of our fearless volunteers show up, yeah?”

“Yeah, sure.” Oliver replied, but she had already turned her back on him and strutted confidently across the rotunda. Oliver shook his head. Whatever anyone said about that woman when she was in office, she certainly had a heart of steel. He might have not liked her or her politics, but he could

appreciate her candor and consistency. He'd watch many people become cowardly, debased versions of themselves while the world had tumbled down around them in the past year. The most self-righteous of his friends had been the first to pillage the grocery stores, citing desperate need as their motivating factor. In the first days, he'd watched people actually mowed down in the streets by those trying to escape D.C., as if the world could really be worth dying for outside the city. Watching these unbelievable scenes had brought to mind a quote from a high school American history class "These are the times that try men's souls." The time had surely tried them, and most were found wanting.

Oliver continued his contemplations as he savored the last sips of his coffee. The dawn crept slowly over the horizon as the Capitol's rotunda began to illuminate. He'd found his bed in this sacred room the last few nights. The city had slowly been stripped down over the past year, but this room remained mostly untouched. All of the benches had been removed by the desperate citizens of the capital city, but no other alterations had been made. A last attempt at reverence had forbade its desecration, from the polished stone floors to the magnificently frescoed ceiling. All of it was left mercifully intact.

Certainly, the lack of temperature control had an effect on the majestic building. The painted murals which lined the hallways had begun to peel, and the water which had crept uninvited down the minute cracks gently stained the walls. But in the dim morning light, none of that was noticeable. Among the paintings which lined the rounded chamber was a depiction of Washington, resigning his post as general. Old George did his time in the service of his country, and had consequently laid down his commission and voluntarily

returned to his humble farm. His eyes drifted from the gentleman farmer, up to the ethereal figures represented in the darkened dome. The painting was hard to make out in the dim light, but Oliver had examined it enough times to see it in imagination--The 'Apotheosis of Washington,' contrasted sharply with the previous scene. The giant fresco imagined Washington rising to Mount Olympus as a deity, accompanied by Liberty and Victory. This clearly wasn't how the humble George had seen himself, but it certainly represented the modern pagan government which had commissioned it a hundred years later. How ironic that in one single day, the gods of government had been dethroned and now so many of the elite career politicians labored unwillingly on D.C.'s community farms just to survive. They hadn't chosen to surrender their power like G.W., but damn if it hadn't been stripped from them in the most absolute way.

Oliver took a slow turn around the room, admiring the marble ghosts of the greatest U.S. Presidents. He smiled to himself, finishing his last sip of coffee with a gulp. Who would have thought that he might be a companion among them? A nobody? Damn, he would make them proud if it was the last thing he did. He set down his mug next to his neatly rolled sleeping bag and with renewed vigor he plunged, almost gaily, down the steps, back into the dark of the capitol's lower levels.

The conglomeration of supplies which Oliver and his compatriots had gathered from around the city hung like Christmas lights around the lower levels of the capitol building. He knew a little about rewiring systems, but only the basics, and his idea was essentially a shot in the dark. After rewiring the back up power supply multiple times, they had achieved very little result. At one point in the past few days a spark had resulted from one of their many attempts, but it

quickly shorted and died. Trying to recreate the situation proved to be impossible and they plopped back down onto square one.

One by one, the volunteers began to trickle into the capitol. Some had found resting places in the building like Oliver, but most had headed home to their families, wherever 'home' now lay. Some had attempted to work through the night on what little they could see by the moon and candlelight until Oliver had urged them to rest. The hope which seemed so high a couple of days before had faded somewhat; not everyone showed up today. Oliver sighed. Today could be a long one.

They had lit a few candles in order to work before the sun really lit up the utility rooms. The old wiring of the building was a puzzle to Oliver, a bigger puzzle than he had wanted to admit the first day his dozens of volunteers had eagerly gathered. His ideas, though admirable, had been weak. Sure, the electric grid had gone out all over D.C., but what about the backup systems? Couldn't there be a chance to get that back online without the entire system reviving? Together with his many faithful volunteers, wires and components had been stripped from surviving buildings nearby in the city. Pillaging had felt immoral in those first few weeks after everything went out, but now everyone participated without qualms. In a strange way, the remaining inhabitants of Washington gathered together as one for the first time in a long time, working towards a common goal: to revive their past life.

Fried wiring throughout the capitol building was only the first and least of Oliver's problems. Many hands, even unskilled hands, had made light work of replacing and repairing the key components. The real struggle would come with feeding the backup generator. Like most generators, this

one ran on an exclusive diet of natural gas, which ironically was also disconnected 14 months ago. It'd taken weeks to siphon gas from the abandoned cars nearby, and even longer to come up with a new system to feed the generator. It was worth a shot he'd told himself and his dozens of hopeful volunteers, but Oliver knew that chances were slim.

Oliver smiled wearily at the team of volunteers who greeted him at the door of the generator room. They'd been forced to quit early last night before another test could be conducted. The autumn sun, which trickled in through small windows, dictated their working hours to end earlier and earlier every passing day.

“Let's give it another try, friends. Everyone man their stations. I don't want anyone else in here in case this goes badly,” Oliver commanded. Playing with electricity was dangerous enough in the old world, but here without any modern resources, it could easily kill. The volunteers shuffled down the hallways, ready to test on his command. He heard Roberta's commanding voice ringing throughout the lower levels as the command was distributed throughout. Oliver closed the door to the windowless generator room in an effort to contain whatever fallout might occur.

Everything was in place; all he had to do was complete the circuit. He wondered if this is what Edison felt like on his thousandth trial for the lightbulb. No way, Edison was much braver than Oliver Kelly. “Here goes nothing” Oliver said, blowing out his candle. His hands fumbled forward in the darkness as he connected the last crudely repaired rope of wires.

Sparks flew and Oliver fell backwards, hitting his head against the wall and his tall, thin body collapsed onto the floor.

A minute later, Oliver regained consciousness. He heard

shouts from outside the room. And then he saw it. The first glimmer of light slid under the door as gently as the light of a candle. Oliver turned his head slowly, hardly daring to breathe. The luminosity grew as he heard joyous cries from outside, and finally Edison's dream filled the generator room with abrasive fluorescent light. Oliver choked on his own tears, as if he was the first man to spark a fire, except the light he embraced hung from the ceiling in the ugliest man-made fashion. He didn't care. Damn, it was beautiful.

"We have a freaking refrigerator on downstairs!" Roberta yelled and she slammed the door open, electric light pouring in with the welcome of the sun on an overcast day. "We did it, Kelly. YOU did it." Her voice shook with excitement as she pulled him up off the floor. "Are you ok?"

"More than okay." Oliver smiled. "But I think it's time to resign my commission" he laughed, brushing himself off. There were tears in his eyes and he couldn't help beaming with pride at the success which they had achieved.

"Whatever dude." Roberta rolled her eyes. "You've only just begun."



## chapter eleven

*Madeleine Chester*

THE FOLLOWING MORNING EVERYTHING felt lighter, sunlight streamed in through windows all over the city. There was an energy that Oliver could feel from the remaining people, which he had never felt from Washington. The people were glowing. They raced all over the place, hope plastered on their faces. Stalls and all sorts of activities were set up on the green outside the Capitol Building. Children danced and blew bubbles, adults drunk wine and ate cheese made from their own cows. Despite it being the morning, the whole district seemed to have come alive.

Oliver sat outside on the steps of the Capitol building. Many looked over to him in admiration as they walked by. It was impossible for anyone to not be aware of the significant breakthrough Oliver and his team had made. Several of Oliver's team had left early this morning to continue work on the power. The others, like Oliver, sat around enjoying the attention.

Stallholders at the market started to bring wine and food to Oliver and the engineers. Before long, the space next to Oliver

was covered in cups of wine, hot mugs of cider, creamy cheeses, and flatbreads.

A little blond in pigtails pulled her mother by the hand towards Oliver. When they finally reached him, the girl passed him a bright purple flower from a small bouquet she was carrying. She grinned, revealing her missing teeth, and she continued to hand out flowers to all of the team who sat on the steps. Her mother mouthed thank you to all of them, and a grateful smile filled her face. Then the child spotted something else, and the mother ran to keep up with her. It was only a couple of seconds until someone else came along. This time a farmer, she handed Oliver a basket full of sweet berries, some dirt-covered potatoes, and a pumpkin so big it might as well be used for a jack-o-lantern.

A man in a dark green suit with a bright face moved briskly toward Oliver and held out his hand. Oliver took it, warily.

“Joe Trawley. I used to own a small paper in this area. If you manage to get the rest of the power back on, there’ll be a front-page article for you, Oliver Kelly.” Joe’s eyes were wide and full of excitement.

“Well, good luck, I’m counting on you.” Joe grabbed Oliver’s hand again and shook it wildly. Then he waved in Oliver’s direction and headed off.

Interactions of this kind have occurred over the past couple of days. Oliver and his team have soaked up every minute of it, ever-increasing their egos. The food, wine, and the general admiration of the residents of Washington was enough to make him feel like a celebrity. Oliver leaned back on the step and watched over the district in satisfaction.

###Roberta eyed Oliver on her way through the marketplace, giving him a look of absolute distaste. Roberta had been conversing with many of the people, trying to find

out what they needed and if there was anything she could do. She couldn't help but feel that Mr. Kelly was preying on the vulnerability and naivety of the people. Oliver was practically being hand-fed grapes from a silver platter, all for putting power in *one building* in the city. She eyed him warily. There had been something off about him recently. Not to mention how disgusting Mr. Kelly's behaviour was. She was determined to find out what was going on.

Roberta walked over to a stall trading fresh fruits in the marketplace to talk to the people who ran it about what they needed. The marketplace was not only set up for the party, as it could become a central location for trade since power was close by and accessible.

Out of the corner of her eye, Roberta spotted one of Oliver's engineers, Lawrence. Lawrence was gripping a clipboard tight to his chest as he ordered a cider. Roberta watched as a smile broke out on his face when the seller gave it to him for free. He tucked a piece of his mangily blond hair behind his ear and took the cider. His face lit up as he drank it. Roberta had waited long enough. She strode over to him.

"Hello, Mr. Myers."

The engineer turned around and squinted his eyes, looking down at Roberta. After a couple of seconds, he seemed to recognise who she was.

"Oh, Ms. Miguel, how are you?"

"I'm good, yourself?"

"I'm doing fine, been up to much lately?"

Roberta ignored his question. She was going to get to the bottom of this.

"Have you made any more progress on the power?"

"Honestly, we've been moving pretty slowly." Lawrence looked around absently and took another sip of his cider.

“Some of the team have been using this breakthrough as a chance to have a rest. Which I suppose is fair enough. We have been working for a while, after all.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Mainly in D.C., I presume?”

“Yes. Well, all over the place, actually. The only reason we’re in D.C currently is because we needed a place where there was a large backup supply system.” Lawrence flipped his clipboard around and skimmed over the messy handwritten list that was on it.

“Why?”

“Oh. Well, we need the electricity to be able to make the tools we need to repair some larger power generation stations in several locations.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. Well anyway,” The engineer glanced down at his clipboard again. “I better head back to work; otherwise, we won’t make any headway, and I won’t be able to tick off items on my list. You know how it is. Have a good day Ms. Miguel.” He nodded politely to Roberta, and then before she could say anything else, he was gone.

*Using our back up supply system, huh?*

Roberta’s mind continued to swirl with thoughts of what the engineer had said. It wasn’t long before the sun started to set behind the Capitol Building, blood-red filled the skies. Something felt off to Roberta, and she was going to find out what.

As the sun finally disappeared, clouds covered the stars, just like her swirling thoughts were clouding her judgement. She looked up at the Capitol Building, a beacon of light against the pitch-black streets of Washington D.C. After she had indulged her thoughts for a while, Roberta headed towards the entry to the Capitol Building. She needed a change

of setting and a chance to clear her mind.

Many of the people had gone home now that it had gotten dark. Roberta found the quiet to be a small relief. She listened to the echo her footsteps made on the stairs of the great Capitol Building. The icy wind kicked in, her thin black cardigan not enough to shield her from the cold. She moved slowly and cautiously up the steps, burdened by thoughts. She needed time to process everything that was going on. She finally arrived inside to the warmth and comfort of the Capitol Building. She sat down on the first seat she saw, a leather couch, and closed her eyes. She allowed her thoughts to surround and attack her with full force.

## chapter twelve

### *Invisible Forces*

WHAT HORRIBLE NOISE THESE carriages make, she thought and sank deeper into the velvet softness of the cushions. The darkness inside was such, Roberta could not see her own hands, only when they passed a civil patrol post with burning torches, golden light illuminated the interior and she could finally check the time - it was nearly eight.

She touched her wristwatch: a vintage number her ex-husband, then still a proper husband, bought her at the flea market in Havana. She thought it was a fake then - an Omega for a hundred dollars seemed insane. But, then again - Cuba, a few years before Castro died, lived in a parallel universe with its own monetary value system for quite some time. For the two Americans visiting Cuba through a so called “cultural mission”, which amounted to nothing more than a honeymoon in a gorgeously rundown colonial apartment and a shed on the beach, everything felt surreal, like a theme park or sorts. The empty shelves, the farmers markets without much produce, black market barter deals between neighbours; the power cuts, which brought discomfort at first, but became

a source for anthropological studies: the ingenuity of Havana inhabitants in dealing with electricity shortages, water shortages, broken pumps, lack of supplies and general ability to navigate almost total lack of anything a regular American cannot live without was an eye opener. And boy, was she grateful for that experience now.

The carriage stopped. Roberta gathered her skirts and stepped out - there, shrouded in darkness, with a torch lit paths leading to it, looking like an eerie temple stood the Capitol.

How quickly our perceptions change, she thought, taking in the imposing view. A temple of money and power, sitting empty. What use is it to a handful of city inhabitants who simply had nowhere else to go, and now plough the Mall, planting seeds, hoping for a crop of potatoes better than last year. Everyone else - including her own now ex-husband - fled the cities, back to the roots. Roberta idly wondered how many of them succeeded in their “back to the roots” attempts and how many perished in the ensued chaos and looting, but with the mail system thrown back some hundred years without the electronic sorting and transport, letters took ages. Besides - where would she write to? Back in the day, her mother still kept a small leather-bound notebook with addresses, birthdays and landline telephone numbers of her, now all deceased, friends. What did Roberta have? A stack of useless digital devices, dead. Tinder. Tinder was gone too, with its carefully screened (for a speaker!) hookups after the divorce went through. Roberta’s last was right on the steps of this very building, and what a failure that was.

These days she felt almost wholesome. Old-fashioned good girl. Well, almost.

She tugged at her corset: my god, whoever designed these

had clearly been a man with a torturer's streak. But riding in horse carriages still decked out in nauseatingly boring D.C. office attire felt so out of place, that Roberta, true to her penchant for slightly theatrical outfits and general eccentricity, which she could never show at work before the collapse, now had a ball - she was, after all, the queen here. A small queen, a princess, perhaps, "Queen of the hearts", she liked to think. As a career politician she never got anything close from common people to what she was getting now - actual street admiration, respect and warmth of the predominantly black and Hispanic communities still remaining in D.C. She took a step towards the Capitol - when, unnervingly synchronised with her step the central part of the building lit up in full electric glory.

So, it still works - she smiled to the spectacle - Kelly delivers. She wondered what will happen when last reserves of diesel will run out. Where does he get it from, anyway?

She took another step, chin high, posture of a true monarch, and, skirts up, in a less-royal kind of way - well, where does one supposed to learn this crap now - she slowly walked up the enormous staircase, re-enacting every childhood fantasy about princesses she ever had.

Inside, the light was almost blinding. Roberta looked up, as if seeing the imposing architecture for the first time. If she ever was to write a memoir, she will use tonight's arrival as the opening scene. There, another grand staircase - the sound of her heels on marble floor echoed all the way up to the spectacular dome. To her, a girl born to Mexican parents, throughout her entire life proving herself in the Anglo-Saxon male-dominated world - now was the time. Screw the old life. She has arrived. She loved the intimacy and simplicity of the new life, which so swiftly replaced the chaos and the preceding



rate-race. She felt at home now, in this small, manageable world, with more freedoms that she could have imagined; her cynical ambitions thrown out of the window, or, perhaps, if she'd be entirely honest, pushed into a faraway corner of her soul, and replaced by a newly emerged decency and desire to make the world a better place. This better place, she discovered, bore no semblance to the world as it used to be a mere 14 months ago.

“Miss Miguel!” - Roberta jerked at the sound of Kelly’s voice.

She looked up but saw no one. Assuming he is somewhere on the upper floors, she continues her journey up the stairs, suddenly feeling quite ridiculous in the outfit. Why on earth did she do that? She was immediately reminded -the package under her skirts was scratching her thigh – the homemade explosive device she procured through a vetted line of shady characters. A good thing – these characters never asked too many questions.

Then, rewinding just a year and a half back, she remembered walking up these very steps surrounded by uniform men with grand universal ambitions and very little human in them. Most of them, with minor exceptions, always had their own means of destruction, albeit not of such crude nature. She remembered the emotional exhaustion at the end of every day of trying. Trying to be human, trying to prevent this or that human disaster, triggered by someone’s insatiable greed.

Kelly’s hand touched hers - she screamed. He was right behind her.

“I am so sorry! I startled you,” Kelly stepped back a touch.

“Jesus. I have expected anything but this,” Roberta quickly gathered her senses.

Kelly stood a few steps below, in a perfectly tailored expensive suit and a t-shirt. More of a Silicon Valley type, but a little too neat. With all dress code clues long gone, it was hard to interpret his current choice of attire. Last time she saw him, she was, of course, looking normal, so to speak, without the theatrics. And he - he looked strange. Yes, too neat, she remembered. Even then. There was something about him she couldn't quite pinpoint, a whiff of something that unsettled her on some cellular level, like an animal that senses danger, but can't see it just yet.

Roberta leaned on the balustrade, and looked him straight in the eye. "Oliver, you wanted to meet. It's all quite spectacular in its way, and yes, I played the part, but why drag me out here, with all the letters and couriers... we could have met at the office." Kelly softened his voice. "I apologise, if you thought it was over the top. But I wanted you to feel what it would be like to walk in here as a leader of this country."

Roberta scanned his face for any trace of irony. "Oliver, your lighting up the Capitol building every now is very, how shall I say, is nostalgically beautiful, but is nothing more than a Christmas decoration. I am yet to see a comprehensive proposal of how you plan to provide electricity to the city, not to mention the country, with zero oil reserves and the industry essentially dead. How you plan to mobilise people for any work that needs doing, in numbers somewhat higher than your spectacularly effective, but tiny team of volunteers. Don't get me wrong - your efforts are admirable. And, last but not least - if you fail to deliver the "promised land" - wouldn't you do more damage to the society that is just beginning to stabilise and become self-sufficient?"

Kelly came too close for comfort. "Roberta, I know your background, and I don't mean being the Speaker. Look a bit

further than your own “allotment” with seasonal vegetables. Remember what we had. If we succeed - and I only need a bit of your help - if we succeed here - we can expand further. The grid is not irreparable. There is still data to extract, and there is still money. And If we are ...”

“We?” - Roberta stepped back.

“Without you I am nothing,” Oliver smiled, extending his hand, “you have the people. The working class we will need. The common families. The volume. We need the re-educate the masses. Think about it.”

Throughout the tirade, Roberta’s poker face of a career politician remained unchanged. Now, she shook his hand with a smile, as she would, back then, shake hands with an NRA lobbyist, who might give her a deal on something in exchange for something she could offer but had no intention of delivering.

“I think we should keep talking,” she said. “I am so pleased,” Kelley let her hand go and smiled, “I shall see you next week and talk you through the plan.”

Roberta started down the steps, then, on half turn, took a last look at Kelly: “Where is your team?” “All gone for today. It’s just us,” he shrugged. Sincere? She wasn’t sure. Roberta just nodded, waved, and made her way to the main entrance.

Outside, she hastily made her way to the left of the building, disappearing into the dark.

Inside, Oliver Kelly replayed the conversation in his head, trying to gage how much persuasion this stubborn woman might need. He didn’t like her manner today – he felt cheated. Perhaps he should try a different tactic. Deep in thought, he walked to the utility room of the main hall with the light controls. Flicking the switches off one by one, he suddenly remembered Roberta’s strange walk up the stairs – a glimpse

of her physical discomfort, shown momentarily, a sudden lurch for her thigh. Fingers on the main switch for the dome lights, Oliver hesitated, his mind, like a supercomputer, analysed every minute detail of Roberta's odd movement, as if

— ...

A distant explosion shook the glass and reverberated through the empty building, drowning the Capitol building in darkness. What fool! - Oliver sank to the floor, cursing under his breath. The thought of trying to salvage whatever is left of the generator and spending another year rebuilding it, this time in secret and clearly, with no support from the only power in D.C. made him sick. Never again, he thought, never again.