



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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Tim Rogers, Michael Bywater, Pete Becker
Tim Edwards-Hart, Ioa Petra'ka, Greg Ray
Kirt van der Woude, Sue Cowling, Jaysen O'Dell
Claire Woodier, Ian Philpot, Sam Pynes
Story by: Tim Rogers

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for Montr  e
a wonderful person
lost far too soon
we miss you

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

Tim Rogers

JEFFREY PALMER GAVE UP reading, with a sigh. “I really wish you’d stop having breakfast in my office, Mr President.”

President Gray locked eyes with Palmer while he slowly finished chewing a mouthful of toast.

“I can’t do that, Jeff. I’ve only just started.” He held up the plate. “Look! A whole piece of avocado-on-toast to go. If I don’t finish it all, three things will happen: One, I won’t get the important nutrients I need to see me through what promises to be another busy day in the office. Two, the chef will get grumpy and that means lunch will be both bland and boring, and three, Mrs President will also get grumpy with me, and that has other far more serious implications.”

“That’s not what I... I don’t mean today, sir. Well I do... but...”

The President crunched noisily on a piece of sourdough crust.

“What I mean, Mr President, is you have your own office, in fact you have two of them, as well as a private residence – with a dining room for that matter – and yet you’ve taken up

eating here for some reason.”

“Your sparkling personality, perhaps?”

“Yes, sir.”

Gray smiled his best endear-yourself-to-the-voters smile. “I just think people who work together closely should take time to get to know each other and bond.”

“Mr President, we’ve known each other for two years. I’m your Chief of Staff, not your best friend.”

“I know that, Jeff. I’ve not had a best friend since high school. I’m just someone who likes talking over breakfast.”

“Don’t you have a family for that?”

“Not this early in the morning, I don’t. It’s the school holidays; Lucy isn’t getting out of bed for breakfast with the old man.” He finished eating and stood up, leaving the plate and cutlery on his Chief of Staff’s desk. Palmer’s secretary would clear it up before his first meeting of the day.

“You’re the President, sir. Just order her to.”

“I might be the President, Jeff, but she’s fourteen years old. She outranks me.”

Palmer glared at the plate. “Tell the truth, sir. You just don’t like food smells in your office do you?”

“And yet strangely I don’t mind them in yours.” Gray opened the joining door between their offices. “Senior staff meeting in fifteen?”

Palmer smiled. “Yes, Mr President.”

The senior White House staff assembled in the Oval Office at exactly one minute before 8am. A steward followed them in to the room carrying a silver tray with a coffee pot, a small jug of half-and-half, and a single fine bone china mug bearing the seal of the President. Setting it down on the small coffee table, he asked, as he did every morning, if the President would like

him to pour. Also as he did every morning, the President replied with a polite “No thank you, John.”

The staff waited patiently while the President poured himself a cup. “Someone start,” he said, looking at Palmer.

“Mr President, we have a few things to cover. Not least of all how we want to capitalise on the press coverage of your Indiana visit yesterday.”

The President sipped his coffee and looked at his Press Secretary. “How are they covering it, Karl?”

“The traditional press have all printed stories I can live with,” replied Karl. “The worst they get is the New York Times, which calls your re-election campaign announcement the most inevitable political statement since Senator Grove resigned after being caught having extra-marital relations in a broom cupboard at the CNN TV studio in New York.”

“I’ll take any story that has your re-election and the word ‘inevitable’ in it,” said Palmer.

“They all had good art, though,” said Karl.

“Of me or the Senator?”

“Ha. Maybe in the Post.”

Karl handed the President a printed briefing note with the key headlines from the morning’s newspapers, and Gray glanced down the page quickly, nodding slowly to himself.

“You said that’s the traditional press,” said Palmer.

“Yes,” said Kyle. “There was some coverage in social media yesterday but – like the Times says – it wasn’t exactly a surprise to anyone that you’d be running for a second term. We pretty much got bumped already this morning by the weather.”

The President stopped reading and looked up.

“The weather?” asked Palmer.

“Have neither of you been outside this morning?”

“I slept in the car on the way over,” said Palmer.

“Don’t look at me,” said the President. “I live in the building.”

He wandered over to the window and stared out. “I don’t see anything.”

Kyle walked over and joined him. “No, it’s faded now. It’s been coming and going.”

“Faded?”

“Northern Lights. Well... Aurorae, I suppose, since we’re not really North enough.” Kyle said. “Apparently it was bright enough at 3am that you could read a book outside.”

“This is the District, Kyle. It’s always bright enough to read a book outside at 3am.” said Gray. “We have street lights and floodlit buildings.”

“Yes, sir. But I mean in Maryland. The countryside. On farms. That sort of thing.”

The President returned to the sofas and his coffee. “So what are we going to do to capitalise? Jeremy, have Comms worked up a proposal?”

Jeremy nodded. “Yes, Mr President. Kyle and I will do some interviews this morning to try and maintain our story. But if we’re being knocked out of the limelight, so to speak, by these Aurorae, perhaps we should try and find a way to insert you into that story somehow. Then at least all the official coverage of the Aurorae will include a sentence or two about yesterday’s announcement. Kyle and I will come up with some ideas and pitch them later, but in the meantime we’d like to clear some time from your schedule for this afternoon for whatever we come up with.”

“Okay,” said the President.

“Was that a pun? The limelight thing?” asked Kyle.

“Sorry,” said Jeremy

“No, it was good,” said the President. “Okay, come back to

Jeff with ideas by 10:30 please.”

“Yes, Mr President.”

The Senior Staff filed out leaving Palmer and the President alone in the Oval Office.

Gray took his jacket off and draped it over the back of one of the ornate chairs next to the Resolute desk. He moved a coaster for his coffee and sat down.

Palmer took the other chair and sat down. He handed the President a copy of the daily schedule. “Before I move things around, was there anything in the schedule you were hoping to avoid?”

Gray scanned the sheet and pointed to an entry. “Confidential Information Management improvement demonstration? What’s this?”

Palmer looked at the entry. “Oh, that’s the people who manage your, well, everyone’s really but especially your, briefing materials. They want to replace the paper-based system and install secure technology to make their lives easier and help the environment.”

“The environment?”

“Less paper.”

“Bump it.”

“I’ve seen the proposal, it would save money and make records more easily retrievable, sir”

“You can take the meeting if you like, Jeff, but bear in mind that if they give me a computer for this desk I’m just going to put it on your secretary’s desk and get her to print everything off. This stuff,” he waved the briefing note in front of Palmer’s face “*literally* grows on trees and is easily recyclable. Powering computers takes electricity, the production of which, I’m told, is terrible for the environment.

Bump it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t like staring into torches all day long. It kills your eyesight, tires you out, and makes you look older.”

“I never took you for a technophobe, Mr President.”

Gray picked up the telephone receiver from his desk. “I’ve got one of these, haven’t I?”

Palmer smiled. “That’s a twenty year old phone, sir.”

“Whateve... ow!” said Gray and dropped the telephone receiver.

“What happened?”

“Static shock!” said Gray.

“Maybe if you used it once in a while, Mr President.”

“Yes, very good, Jeff,” said Gray and carefully replaced the receiver. “I’ve got a laptop. I’ve got secure mobile thing. I just like reading paper.”

“Bumped, sir.”

“Thank you. Anything else?”

Palmer reviewed his own notes. “Nothing for now, Mr President, although your wife is meeting with some group today looking to set standards for improving emotional wellbeing in the workplace, and she wanted to know if you could drop in.”

Gray shook his head.

“I’ll tell her scheduler.”

“Thanks. I overheard someone in the office a week or so ago saying that they’d been on a wellbeing class on how to use a chair properly. I’ve never wanted to fire someone more in my life.”

Palmer smiled. He’d not been part of the last election campaign, but was looking forward to this one. He felt his mobile vibrate inside his jacket pocket. “Is that all, Mr

President?”

“Yes, Jeff. Thanks.”

Palmer stood up and gathered his papers and grabbed his phone from his pocket as he headed for the door. The President already had his head down in his next brief.

“Ow.”

Gray looked up and saw Palmer bending down to pick up his dropped mobile. “Yours too?”

Palmer nodded.

“Weather, I expect,” said Gray and went back to his reading.

“Marcy!”

Marcy opened the door and wandered into Palmer’s office.

“Morning, Jeffrey.”

“I missed a call?”

“Yes, Jeffrey. The NASA Administrator. He said it was urgent.”

“He couldn’t wait on the line?”

“It dropped off his end. Shall I call him back now?”

Palmer thought about all the material he had to review and turn into recommendations for the President before lunch and sighed. “Please.”

He sat down and waited. He’d long since learned that if you tried to fill every single second’s pause with something in this job, you’ll lose your marbles. That’s what apparently had happened to his predecessor, a frankly brilliant man who, as the story goes, managed to work himself into a minor stroke and major case of retirement.

The phone rang. Palmer stared at it accusingly for a second before picking up the receiver and putting it to his ear.

“Yes,” he said.

“NASA Administrator on line two, Jeffrey.”

“Thanks, Marcy.” He pressed the blinking light on the phone. He could have sworn he saw the room lights flicker with it for a moment. “This is Jeffrey Palmer.”

“Jeffrey. Good to speak to you. Sorry this line is terrible, can you hear me okay?”

“Yes, what’s up.”

“We’ve lost contact with the International Space Station.”

“Lost contact? What does that mean?”

“We don’t know. Probably nothing, just a comms issue, but we’re stopped getting all data from them and can’t raise them.”

Palmer rubbed his eyes with his free hand. The room light flickered again. He was sure this time. “You’ve checked with the others?”

“Canada, and Japan both confirmed they’ve lost contact so it’s not our end. We haven’t gotten hold of Britain or Russia yet, but didn’t want to wait any longer to advise the President.”

“Okay, thanks.” Palmer took a beat. “Can you be ready to brief the President in fifteen minutes?”

“We might know more in thirty?”

“I think the President would rather fifteen with evolving information maturity.”

“Okay, fifteen.”

Palmer pressed the line two button again to end the call and flicked over to line one, which was hardwired to Marcy.

“Yes, Jeffrey?”

“I’m heading out to the SitRoom with the President, Marcy. Can you clear my diary for a couple of hours, please, and then speak to Alice to do the same for the President.”

“Of course, is everythi...”

“Speak to Jeremy and Kyle. Tell them they’ve got an extra hour on the campaign piece. And can you let Mrs Gray’s office

know that he has to pass on the drop-in she requested?”

“Jeremy and Kyle, extra hour. Pass on Mrs Gray. Clear two hours for you and the President,” said Marcy. “Anything else?”

“Take all the reading in my inbox for the day and add it to tomorrow’s pile.”

The President met Palmer outside the Situation Room just as Palmer was putting his hand print up against the reader. It let out a discrete beep, drowned out by the sound of the electronic lock on the door clicking open. The Secret Service agent outside the room pulled the door and held it open to let them through. He spoke into his wrist mic. “I’ve got Bearclaw in the SitRoom.”

The room was already bustling. Some of these people, like the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the National Security Advisor, practically lived in this room. An Army Colonel was talking quietly into a wall mounted phone in the corner of the room. He covered the mouthpiece and announced that they were patching NASA through now.

The Administrator’s face came up on a large wall mounted screen. The image quality was poor but the audio was about there. “Good morning, Mr President.”

“What’s going on, John?” asked Gray. “Jeff here tells me you’ve lost the ISS.”

“Yes, sir. At about 6:30 this morning we think.”

“Why am I just hearing about it now?”

“No-one here was trying to talk to them at that point, sir.”

The President sat down at the conference table. “So what’s happened?”

“We think they’re fine, and it’s just a comms issue.”

“Okay, but I don’t know about you, but the idea of being

stuck in a tin can waiting to run out of oxygen or supplies sounds like a pretty horrible way to go,” said Gray. “So we need to find out for sure.”

“Yes, Mr President.”

“Do we have any theories on what could have caused it?”

“It’s not entir... ..but we thi... ”

“It’s a terrible line, John. Can you repeat that?”

“... I sai... ..rly clear... atmo...” The screen went to static.

The President looked over to the Colonel and said nothing.

“Sir, let me check, sir.” The Colonel reviewed the information on his screens. “Sir, I don’t think it’s NASA. I think our communication satellite just went offline.”

The President stood sharply. “Colonel, we’re transferring to the PEOC immediately. Find out what just happened before I get over there. And someone get the CIA Director in this meeting, ASAP!”

“Sir, yes sir.”

Palmer stood and followed the President out of the room. He had to jog to catch him. “Looks like you might get your wish to spend more time bonding with me, Mr President.”

“I was joking, Jeff. I spend more time with you than I did with my mother as a baby.”

chapter two

Michael Bywater

“APELIÓTES,” SAID EVANS AS they filed, in good order, out of the Situation Room.

“I’m sorry?” said the White House Chief of Staff. “You got some idea? One of your assets? You have some information? Maybe a hunch? Because now would be a very good time to share.”

There were mild issues between the Chief of Staff and Evans, whose text-book Teutonic good looks seemed to set Palmer’s teeth on edge.

The Director of the CIA shouldn’t be a 6’4” blond guy. Evans should, thought Palmer, be more in the Peter Lorre mode. It would be more becoming, and for Palmer – a realist, a man who had read *The Prince* and *The Art of War* before he was ten years old – *becoming* was a prime consideration, as was knowing when, and in whom, and exactly where, to slide the knife. It was at the heart of the job. A good Chief of Staff – *the* Chief of Staff – had to be be part buddy, part mentor, and all executioner.

Palmer was good.

Carl Evans was also good: ruthless, politically adroit, and subtle as a mink.

“Easterly,” he said. “The ancient Greek word for the easterly winds. I was always fond of the Horologion of Andronikos Kyrrethe – The Tower of the Winds, you know. In Athens.”

“Athens?”

“I travel,” said the Director of the CIA. “For recreation, not just regime change.”

He laughed. Palmer did not.

“We have what may be a major incident on our hands—”

“Which is why I thought of the Horologion, you see. The current conundrum began with the Aurora Borealis. The Northern Lights. *Boreas*, the Greek north wind, also marked on the Tower. And now we are heading towards the *Apeliotes*, the East Wind, and the Presidential Emergency Operations Center, and these connections probably mean nothing at all, but I not only run networks but also I *make* them. I map events and potentialities, intersections and nodes and bifurcations. It’s what I do, my dear Jeffrey. I live by probabilities and exponentials, by Gauss and Bayes, and no need to go into that. I am a *geek*, Jeffrey, a geek being a nerd who knows he is a nerd and is proud of it. In our world what counts is not the certainty of a thing, but which of a range of things is the most likely. We turn left here. It is politic, I think, to wait for the President to catch up with us; he is shown the President’s bomb shelter on his – I nearly said ‘accession to the throne’ but that would be quite improper – on his inauguration. Ah. Mr President. Here we are. How surprised John and Abigail Adams would be to see the old homestead now. But even more hidden rooms and false walls and secret places of the stairs in their day. Now our secrets are all visible.

Are we all here?

“Everyone required,” said the Chief of Staff. If you would stand by the biometrics booth, Mr President...?”

Gray squared his shoulders as though fettling himself to encounter an enemy, then looked squarely into the camera lens.

“The right hand, Sir,” said Jeffrey.

The President of the United States of America, who had never felt less like the President of anywhere, but more like a small boy who was about to get into trouble for something he hadn’t done, placed his Presidential hand on the palm-reader.

The lens swivelled silently. Somewhere – where? Deep inside a mountain somewhere, a tunnel in Colorado, an armed and armoured 747 forty-five thousand feet above somewhere else? – a rack of mil. spec. servers quietly drained their batteries, and, with a soft, soothingly airport-like chime, the booth swung round, revealing a key-card.

“Match it with your own, Mr President,” said the Chief of Staff.

Magnetic fields aligned. Switches conferred. The cards exchanged data.

“Now I take yours and you keep the verified one,” said the Chief of Staff. Fortified doors slid open.

Stairs.

Grey concrete stairs, laminate walls, sensors, path-lights.

“Fred Hoyle thought we’d be thrown down a sort of helter-skelter,” said Evans.

“Thrown?” said the President.

“Jump. Into a tube. Down we’d go. A book he wrote. *Comet Halley*. The overthrow of civilization. The comet did it.”

“A bit close to home, considering,” said the President.

“Rather a long way away from home, actually,” said Evans.

“And he was wrong about pretty much everything any way. An astronomer.”

“Ah,” said the President.

“English,” said the Director of the CIA.

“*Ah*,” said the President. They walked downstairs, still orderly, eight or ten people shouldering an as yet unknown responsibility.

More stairs. More corridors, then an elevator with more, and more complex, passwords and keys and codes and biometrics and a tricky little moment when the Chief of Staff was not approved.

“It’s happened before,” said Jeffrey. “I am told it’s because I’m black. The sensors can’t be sure it’s me.”

“We have a security system that thinks all black people look the same?” said the President. “Is that giving the right impression?”

“Pretty much hits the mark, yes,” said Jeffrey. He was smiling, but not smiling. He tried again and the system relented.

Down they went.

After an hour or so the air in the long room of the PEOC was hot, stale, with a chemical tang of special-purpose anti-bio, anti-chemical and, it was said, something approaching, but not actually *being*, amphetamines. The Northern Lights – Carl mentioned Athens briefly but was hushed – had, yes, appeared persistently and unusually, but they were natural and Nature did odd things with natural phenomena; “That’s why they’re called ‘phenomena’ for God’s sake,” said General Williams, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who made a habit of being appropriately crusty, when he remembered; Jeffrey Palmer approved.

“But the ISS telemetry—”

“Is screwed,” said David Clarke, the National Security Adviser”.

“Do we have a Sit Room note of the situation regarding the suggestion of some sort of EMP—”

“‘Electro-Magnetic Pulse,’ said the General to the Vice President, codenamed ”Flyer”, rather improbably.

“Ah,” said the VP. “Yes.”

“The idea of a deliberate detonation of a—”

“No. Not that dark side of the moon stuff. If anything had—”

“If’ is no damn use. We need to decide on the *possibilities* and then on the relative *prob*—”

The meeting was getting scratchy. These were men who needed information, either to denounce as an Opposition fantasy or an act of a malevolent foreign power, or — as nobody would admit but all believed — the infotech deployed in that tunnel or mountainside or 747 was so far ahead of its time that the men who could *use* that information neither understood nor trusted it.

“We aren’t getting anywhere,” said the President. “Not getting anywhere is not going to become a feature of this administration. What do we *know*?”

General Williams leaned back in his overstuffed chair and popped another can of Coke.

“Goddamn stuff will kill me,” he said, emptying it at a single draft. “What we know is. One. People have started getting nasty shocks from their cellphones. Cars have started behaving oddly, just like in the movies. Anything with a microchip in it is playing up. Nothing serious but it all adds up; yet, put it all together and it all spells ”so what?”. But add in the fact that we have no contact with the ISS — the

International Space Station, as most of you know—”

“Bitch” murmured the Chief of Staff to the Director of the CIA.

“— and one of our ComSats has apparently gone down, though whether that means ‘gone down’ as in ‘Press Control+Alt+Delete and curse Bill Gates’ or ‘gone down’ as in the Titanic, nobody knows or is willing to hazard a guess. I am aware that mine is in its way a simplistic profession — we’re the good guys, they’re the bad guys, and you don’t win a war by dying for your country; you win it by making the other bastard die for *his* — but this is all looking like one thing and one thing only.”

“Nuke,” said the National Security Advisor.

“Whose?” said the Vice President.

“Fuck ‘whose?’ said the President. ”It doesn’t matter whose. It matters what, and why. What have they actually done, and why have they actually done it.”

The VP stood up, his face red with anger. “I’ve been sitting here for two hours— ” He looked at his watch — ”almost exactly; it was 11.00 when we came in here and it’s now *lunch time*—”

“There’ll be lunch,” said the Chief of Staff, soothingly.

“It’s not about lunch,” said the Veep. “It’s about getting to the bottom of what’s going on. Reconnaissance. Objective. Strategy. Tactics. What’s happening? What do the people who are making it happen want to achieve? What do we need to make them do to put a stop to it? And *how* do we best do that?”

“Root cause analysis, Mr Vice-President, is all very well. But we don’t have time.”

“We have no idea how much time we have because, *because*, damn it—”

And then the lights went out.

A chorus of men muttering “Shit” and “Jesus Christ what *now?*” and “Oh for Pete’s sake”.

A single flashlight punctured the darkness. “Is that all we have?” said the President of the United States of America.

“Everyone’s got a flashlight on his iPhone” said the Veep.

“Everyone’s iPhone is in the lead-lined signal-blocker safe” said the Chief of Staff, “as per standing orders”.

“I’m the fucking *President*,” said the President.

“And your iPhone is in the fucking safe,” said the Veep.

And then the lights came on again.

“Emergency backup,” said the Chief of Staff. “Excellent. I’ll get a sitrep.” He picked up the landline. “Excellent, excellent,” he said, “I’m getting the dialtone fine.”

He punched in a string of numbers, and then the lights went out.

It was 13:08.

At 13:15 the President of the United States summed up, in the dark.

“Building power and emergency power is down, and we cannot,” he said, “do the following things. Make phone calls. Charge our phones. Which are in the safe. We cannot open the safe and even if we could, we are on a secure cellular network which, if there is no power, will not operate at all. We cannot call for assistance. We cannot leave this room as we cannot open the doors. We cannot control the temperature and we cannot control the aircon. We have no idea what is going on or why the emergency power has failed, or how they’re doing up top; or indeed, not wishing to be melodramatic, if they still *are*

up top. We have no option but to wait here until the power comes back onstream. Any comments?”

“What if the power doesn’t come back on?” said the General, crustily.

“This is the United States of America. The power comes back on.”

“Or,” said the Director of the CIA, “we’re screwed.

“Or,” said the President of the USA, “we’re screwed.”

The Chief of Staff’s Mag-Lite flickered.

chapter three

Pete Becker

MIKEY AND SMILEY JOE

The rundown rooming house doesn't have a name. At least, not one that shows from the street. Just a sign with faded paint declaring in big letters "ROOMS", and in smaller letters "Day — Week — Month". What the sign doesn't say is that rooms can be had by the hour, if you know to ask.

If you shake the handle on the front door you can feel that it's loose in its frame. Amateur repairs after the last break-in have left it less than fully secure. But that's not important any more; the guest rooms all have their own locks, and there's really nothing valuable in the front office. Just a pair of worn chairs that had seen better days ten years ago, a counter that separates visitors from staff, and a half-open door that leads back into a dark, dingy room.

In the back room, Mikey and Smiley Joe are sitting on folding chairs on opposite sides of a long narrow table, flanked by a mismatched collection of three broken chairs. There's a television at the head of the table, showing a distorted view of a cramped bedroom.

Mikey holds a ham and cheese sandwich. A pool of mustard grows on the table as the sandwich drips, but Mikey just stares at the scene on the television.

“Mikey, get your eyes off the TV and take that damned sandwich outside. I’m sick of cleaning up after you.”

Mikey’s eyes light up with anger, but the moment quickly passes and he drops his gaze to the table. He swipes at the mustard with the paper napkin that he’s ineffectually using to hold his sandwich, not so much cleaning up the mustard as spreading it around.

“MIKEY! Get the hell out of here! Or do you want me to tell Lizzy that you’ve been ogling her again?”

Without moving his head, Mikey turns his eyes up toward Smiley Joe. “Sorry, Smiley. I’m going.” He rocks forward in his chair, shifting his weight and slowly rising. He grunts as he straightens his back, then slowly makes his way toward the door.

Smiley Joe glances up at the television screen; all is well in room 3. He turns back to his paper, picks up his pencil, and draws a circle around the name “Lightning Surprise”. Fifth race, Laurel Park.

His thoughts are interrupted by a loud rolling bang, like lightning hitting the building. He looks up at the television, then jerks his head toward the window, then toward the doorway, now blocked by Mikey. The television makes a high-pitched whine. There’s a smell of burned electronics in the air — the magic smoke has escaped, and the television screen has gone black.

Bob and Sheryl

Embassy Row is the informal name for Massachusetts Avenue from the Naval Observatory to Scott Circle in

Washington, DC. As the name suggests, this area is home to many embassies and diplomatic missions to the United States. Traffic along Embassy Row can be heavy.

“Well, we’re finally on the right street. I swear, I can never get this right! Next time we should take the Metro. It’ll be quicker!”

“That’s okay, Bob. We’ll be there soon.”

“Mmph.”

“I’m excited! When was the last time we saw Stephie and Alix? January, wasn’t it? No, February, when we came for the concert.”

“That sounds right.”

“I hope they’re not worried because we’re so late.

“They’ll be fine. Traffic’s heavy, but it’s moving. We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“I’ll text Stephie and let her know.”

The traffic light ahead changes to green, and the cars in front of Bob gradually start moving. He moves his foot from the brake to the accelerator, thinking again that the Metro would have been quicker. Massachusetts Avenue is always slow, but it seems worse today. Less than half a mile to Dupont Circle. And it will take ten minutes! Still, Kramerbooks and Afterwords beckons. And Sheryl’s two nieces, of course.

His thoughts are interrupted by a loud rolling bang, like lightning hitting the building beside them. He looks around, but doesn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Then something in the front of the car makes a high-pitched whine. There’s a smell of burned electronics in the air — the magic smoke has escaped, and the engine has died. He puts his foot on the brake and stops the car.

John and Tina

Tina Johnson, a newly-minted Secret Service agent, stands beside John Cole outside the door to the inner sanctum of the PEOC.

John glances at her. “Hell of a way to start your new job, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. I certainly wasn’t expecting anything like this.”

“Neither was I. Of course, it’s what we prepare for. We hope that things like this don’t happen, but we have to be ready for anything.”

“Yes, sir. But what, exactly, is happening, and what are we doing about it?”

“As for what’s happening, that’s above your pay grade. And mine. What we’re doing about it is ensuring the safety of Bearclaw, Flyer, and all the rest of the folks locked inside. It’s up to them to deal with whatever this situation is. It’s up to us to make sure they’re not bothered. So keep your eyes open for anything out of the ordinary.”

“You mean, more out of the ordinary than this?”

John shakes his head. “Don’t be a smart ass. Stay focused.” He turns away, and allows himself a small smile.

He walks over to the console that houses the telltales for the security systems protecting the PEOC. All green: blast door closed and latched, all electronic locks secured, external video cameras online. He watches the monitor screen cycle through the views from the cameras. All under control.

His thoughts are interrupted by a loud rolling bang, like lightning hitting the building. The telltales flicker as the power drops and the backups cut in. The console makes a high-pitched whine. There’s a smell of burned electronics in the air — the magic smoke has escaped, and the telltales have all gone dark.

Mikey and Smiley Joe

Mikey jerks his head toward Smiley. “What the hell was that?”

Smiley, fists clenched, looks intently at the paper in front of him. “Nothing to worry about. That old TV was ready to die. Looks like we’ll have to find another one somewhere. Pain in the ass.”

“No, Smiley, I think it’s worse than that. Look outside, no lights on the street. Cars aren’t moving! I’m telling you, that was a hell of a big bang!”

Smiley pulls his gaze away from the paper. He swallows. “Okay, Mikey. Let’s see if we can figure this out. You go ask around, see what you can find out. I’m going to check on Lizzy and her date.”

Smiley stands, but has to wait while Mikey makes his way slowly out of the doorway. He rushes past him and down the hall to room 3. He hears a crash from inside the room, and a man’s voice: “Shit! How the hell am I supposed to get around in here with the lights out?”

Smiley hammers on the door with his fist. “Lizzy, are you okay?”

A woman’s voice: “It’s okay, Smiley. We just got a little mixed up with the noise and the lights going out. But we’re done here. Give me a minute to get dressed.”

“You sure, Lizzy?”

“Yes. All good.”

Smiley shakes his head as he makes his way back down the hall to the front office. Mikey comes in from the street. “Smiley, something big’s going on. No power anywhere for at least four blocks. Cars stopped in the middle of the street. Can’t start ‘em! Traffic lights are out. Not just blinking, like when the controls break; all dark!”

Smiley pulls his cellphone out of his pocket. He holds it up in front of his face, but it doesn't respond. He taps the front; no reaction. Pushes the power button. Nothing.

Mikey picks up the handset from the desk phone and holds it to his ear. His face falls. "Nothing, Smiley. No dial tone, no nothing."

"What the fuck is going on?"

Bob and Sheryl

Bob looks in his rearview mirror and sees that the car behind him has stopped, too. No danger of being rear-ended.

"Bob, what's going on? Why did you stop?"

"The car died. And from the look of things, we're not the only ones. Look — nobody else is moving, either."

"And the lights all went out in that office building. It looks like a power failure. But that wouldn't affect cars!"

"Let's see if anyone else has any ideas." He opens the door and steps out of the car.

He's not alone; drivers and their passengers on both sides of the street are emerging with puzzled looks.

Sheryl gets out, too. She sees a man on the sidewalk looking in her direction and asks "what happened?" He slowly shakes his head and looks away.

A woman next to Bob turns to him. "What's going on? My radio died, and my car died!"

Bob shrugs. "Mine too. Beats me."

The woman looks up the street. "Look, the traffic light is out! Not blinking, completely off!"

"What the hell is going on?"

John and Tina

The lights are out. The emergency lights have not come

on. There are no windows; this far underground they wouldn't have done any good, anyway. The security area is as dark as a cave.

John's voice pierces through the exclamations and mutterings of his agents. "Okay, folks, stay calm. Is anybody hurt?" The voices quiet down, and nobody complains. John pulls the walkie-talkie from his waist and thumbs the PTT button. Nothing. "Does anyone have communication with outside?" No response. "Johnson, get upstairs to the Secret Service Room and find out what the hell is going on. Stosh, make sure the door is still secure. Does anyone here smoke? No? Jerry, don't pretend. Everybody knows you do. Do you have any matches?" A small orange flame flickers. Jerry holds the match up high and John glances around the room. The flame quickly goes out. "Thanks, Jerry. Save the rest."

While the flame burned, Tina located the entry door. Now, working from memory, she makes her way around the outside of the room, bumping into people as she goes, and reaches the door. She pulls it open. It's as dark outside the room as inside. She makes her way to the stairs and starts up. She hears the door swing shut behind her.

She climbs the stairs, counting landings as she goes. Two floors to the top, that's four landings. First landing. Second landing. Third. Fourth.

She feels around the walls and finds the panic bar on the exit door. She pushes it, and is rewarded with daylight in the East Wing hallway. And chaos. People hurriedly moving about, often with no apparent destination. But her destination is ahead: the Secret Service Room.

Inside the room things aren't much better than downstairs. There's light, but without John nobody seems to be in charge. She asks the room in general, "Does anyone know what's

going on?”

Nobody pays attention. It's time to be firm. She grabs the arm of the nearest agent and blurts out “Nice suit.” He looks blankly at her, and she forces herself to be calm. “Cole needs to know what's happening.”

The agent replies, “Nobody knows. No communications. Power is out everywhere. Nothing works. Nobody knows what to do.” He sits down and buries his head in his hands.

Tina looks around the room. None of the half dozen agents looks back at her. “Does anyone know what's going on?” No response.

She returns to the stairway, dreading being back in the dark, but there's no choice. The door slams shut behind her and she starts down the stairs. Four landings. First, second, third, fourth. She opens the door into the security area.

John calls out, “Who's there?”

“Johnson, sir,” she replies.

“What's the word from upstairs?”

“Noting helpful. Nobody knows what this is. Power is out everywhere. Communications have all failed.”

“Mmph. Okay, it looks like we're on our own. We can't leave Bearclaw trapped in there. Jerry, see if you can open the electronic locks. They're battery powered, so they should work even without outside power.”

A match flairs and by its light Jerry peers at the lock. He pushes buttons on it but nothing happens. “Damn!” The match has burned down to his fingers, and he drops it on the floor. It goes out.

“Sir, the lock doesn't respond.”

John raises his voice. “People, any ideas?”

“Maybe we could drill the lock,” from a voice in the back.
“I think there's a drill in the tool locker.”

“Try it.”

John hears the sounds of a cabinet door opening, things being shuffled around, then about thirty seconds of mostly silence, broken by occasional clicks and muttered curses. “Sorry, sir, no joy. There are three batteries here, but none of them works.”

“What in God’s name is going on?”

chapter four

Tim Edwards-Hart

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Occasionally, someone would flick a cigarette lighter and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

she had no idea what time it was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

there were yells and screams.

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

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

Inside and out, all was dark.

chapter five

Ioa Petra'ka

TWO ELABORATE BELLOWS, FORMED of a thin membrane called resilin, were pumped by an encasing latticework of delicate musculature. The sudden contraction of these chambers produces a resonance, a click that all on its own would scarcely be heard, but when such clicks were paired, and produced rapidly enough, they cause a wave of shrill song to shiver into the air around them. Much of this melody becomes trapped within a hollowed chamber, the raised bell of which, though no larger than a thumb, served to make sound into a violence louder than the howl of the Metro at full tilt.

Without the leavening of highway traffic, aircraft, or even the hornet-like drone of lawnmowers from the surrounding 'burbs, the collective roar of countless cicadas' ritual mating songs dominated the sonic tapestry around the fifteen agents. Special agent Lorena Keir hitched the simple nylon backpack over her shoulder and stood up, giving the surrounding neighbourhood a surreptitious sweep beneath her half-lidded eyes. Eighteen and a half hours into the blackout, nine or so of which had elapsed over the night, meant that for the most

part the world around her was unaware of the nature of what had happened yesterday.

The very nature of the blackout greatly limited the spread of information. There would be many out there right now who knew enough about technology to know that the scope of impact was beyond what could be explained by a typical hot summer power outage, but of those people there would only be a subset who had noticed. Even so, if that subset of a subset told everyone around them that something was seriously fucked up when even cars won't start, the spread of information beyond that point would travel merely at the speed of those people's physical capability to walk from one location to another.

Even so, Lorena was operating under protocols which presumed widespread unrest and a complete collapse of civil order. The first and most important part of that protocol was to blend in. They were not here to enforce order, or to right any wrongs they may come across along the way, but to merely get from point A to point B without anyone realising that fifteen Secret Service agents had done so—and that was the easy part of the job. To the casual onlooker, she and the rest of her team would have appeared as an unremarkable cluster of pedestrians spread along the road—the sort of wolf pack that naturally occurs when a dozen or so humans instinctively moderate their pace and end up walking in proximity without even realising it.

A trained eye might have noticed that certain otherwise innocuous gestures were uncannily replicated among the group, but even these signals were designed to pass beneath skilled detection. How often is it that when one person lifts a cup of coffee to their lips, three or four others around them do the same? You might notice once, and chuckle inwardly at

the oddities of the human mind, but in most cases you wouldn't notice the second time it happened, even if mere seconds had elapsed. You certainly wouldn't think to link the "coincidence" to yourself. Yet if for some reason you had been walking down Connecticut Ave, crossing Van Ness at 7:28, August 30th, then this social tick would have very much been all about you.

So it went that when Lorena noticed Agent Poulter hitch her purse higher along her shoulder with her left hand, she followed suit with her backpack to pass the word along, and knew that coming around the back of the coffeehouse down the street would be a lone entity displaying suspicious behavioural patterns. It could be nothing more than a philosophy major wandering for an early coffee and wondering if today were a major holiday he hadn't heard of, but her duty wasn't to speculate, but rather to presume the worst. To help create an invisible pocket of space, within which an assailant would find themselves already surrounded and bested, even as they thought they had breached a weak front.

Of course in this case, there was no principal to pocket, yet. Lorena reminded herself that this was the easy part. They would probably not be able to afford the luxury of strolling down Connecticut Ave with their untrained and highly recognisable client in tow—at least not without turning every other city block into a town hall meeting. There were protocols for that, and in time it was inevitable they would be applied, but today's mission was as much about stealth as protection. They were to get the Speaker of the House to the White House at highest priority, but most importantly without anyone knowing that action had been taken.

For not the first time, Lorena found herself going against her training, and speculating upon the implications of that

pairing of orders. It surely could not be that both Bandicoot and Festival were down, that they were in a succession situation after an afternoon without electricity? Granted, given the pervasiveness of the damage, if either were on a pacemaker it could at least elevate the importance of getting the third in command in the fold. *Sombra*, she reminded herself of the new code name for Roberta Miguel, and then gave out a small huff of amusement. Code names were of limited use without words being broadcast over radio waves, it seemed to her. But that aside, if the Executive were to find itself suddenly short-handed, why the secrecy? More likely they had been commanded to bring her in based on some old routine from the '70s, premised around a cold war threat that had never been updated, reassessed or field tested in the decades since. An old clockwork with the central pin suddenly shot out, gears and flywheels still ticking and tocking as they fly apart, even as the whole no longer counts time.

They also probably hadn't envisioned bringing the Speaker on a covert hiking trip, from Bethesda to D.C., across 13km of potentially hostile metropolitan terrain, in festering swamp-like conditions wherein you couldn't hear someone coming up on you with all the clattering of an assault rifle thanks to the cicadas—where calling for help meant sending a runner to quite literally run all the way back and speak words with their mouth. Also, not for the first time, Lorena found herself cursing the second half of their orders. Without the secrecy, they could have used horses and already had *Sombra* through the front doors.

The second to last weekend of summer recess was one of the few moments of time throughout the year wherein the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Roberta Miguel,

allowed herself to withdraw from it all. Most people figured the whole of congress went to Bermuda for a month, but the reality was that these extended breaks were the only time to practice what she and many of her colleagues had taken on this career for in the first place: to spend time in the places they represented, to hear the concerns of those who had entrusted them to relay those, and pose that delicate balance between local concerns and national policy.

Well, that was the idea anyway. In practice it seemed more to be a process of trying to find where one's track suit had gone to, and then once you finally found it, as you inevitably always do, realise it's too late to go running anyway.

Roberta rolled over in bed and frowned at the blank surface that should have been her bed-stand clock. When the power had gone out yesterday afternoon, she had welcomed the enforcement of her little ritual reclusion. She embraced the sudden and inescapable inability to thumb through the ceaseless social media that splattered between the feet of society like so much vomit. Like many others, she had strolled out into the street to gaze about with only one question on the mind: am I the only one? Is that a sparkle of electricity down the way, a few streets over? Once she had, like everyone else around her, been satisfied by the fact that her immediately neighbourhood was equally bereft of creature comforts, she found herself going through the rare ritual of remembering how to live without power.

It happened every time there was a storm, and on each occasion the sudden transition was equally jarring. The flipping on of light switches as she went down to the garage for candles, the sudden urge to make tea before remembering the range is electric. Roberta flicked the button on her phone again as the screen refused to budge from black, before

settling on the realisation that she must have forgotten to charge it last night, which then lead to the realisation that it was of course nothing more than a costly pocket calculator with the power down. With that reassuring thought connected, the frustration of mismanaging one's *devices* was lifted.

That night she had drifted off into the contented slumber that few of her caste ever found these days—to for example, fall asleep with the sun, paper book slipping out of the hand. She was spared the concern that many others faced that night, after the sun had well and truly departed, and one could see that the power was not only off in one's own neighbourhood, but so thoroughly as to blanket the land in total darkness, from horizon to horizon. Those who stayed up late found themselves shivering on their porches, despite the balmy summer night—the stars burning fiercely from a sky that had not even a hint of distant city light to frame it.

But that was yesterday. She sat up on the side of the bed and picked up the lifeless clock. Of course she had intended to sleep in, so the lack of any alarm was of no bother, but surely the power couldn't still be off in Bethesda, Maryland, of all places? It might be a small town, but one could safely say there were more than a few strings being pulled around here. Roberta picked up her phone and thumbed the power switch before grimacing, remembering that she'd forgotten to charge it last night.

She was halfway down the hall, and halfway toward the disappointing understanding that it would be a cold shower this morning, when the pounding on her front door startled her into full wakefulness. It was the sort of knocking that very serious people do when serious things have gone down.

The journey to the White House was something Roberta

hoped she would never have to suffer again. She considered herself fit for her age, but such considerations were shattered cruelly when attempting to keep up with a gang of extremely athletic youngsters whilst trampling through insect infested woods and bogs you never knew existed between the eight mile volume of land between her house and the White House. Her ears still rang from what she suspected would be permanent hearing damage from the out of phase cicada swarm that had, up until today, been a distant nuisance beyond thick walls and windows.

A young woman, who introduced herself as Agent Poulter, had surely drawn the short straw. Acting as part human walking stick, she was also responsible for explaining why they were hiking to the White House on a Sunday morning, instead of acting sensibly and arranging for a black car. The rest of the large team had melted into the background the moment they set out, spreading across an area large enough to ensure nobody would even happen across her path.

“We’re calling it a power outage in public, madam, but the best intelligence at this point indicates all electrical capability has ceased to function.”

“What does that mean, how can electricity cease to function?”

“I can’t explain it, madam, there will be a team of people at the White House that can go over the physics if you’re interested. All we know, or I should say all that is practical to know, is that nothing that uses electricity works right now.”

“All right, so my phone, the lights...”

“Everything, Madam Speaker, everything. You need to think even bigger than that. If you had an electronic watch—”

Roberta gave Jane Poulter a sideways glance.

“—right, presume you had a thing for sport watches for a

moment. It wouldn't work. The myriad little things in your car that use electricity, wouldn't work."

"I don't understand, how could everything stop working like that?"

Agent Kier reached out her hand and helped Roberta jump across a stream. They were somewhere in Rock Creek Park, if she had to guess, taking the most obscure and difficult way back that they could conjure.

"They've got some theories, I'll leave them to explain it. The important thing to know, and why you've got a high priority escort right now, is that the President, Vice, and a good chunk of the cabinet are at the moment trapped in the PEOC, madam. It's..."

She paused to help Roberta crawl up a small rock strewn incline. Roberta straighted herself and looked into the Agent's eyes for the first time, "The Presidential Emergency Operations Center is entirely controlled by electronically hardened security, is it not, Agent Poulter?"

"Precisely so, I'm afraid."

Roberta huffed and puffed up the rolling hill and tackled another series of brush in silence. The woods were thick with cicadas screaming at one another, and it was doing very little calm her nerves.

"At the moment," Poulter shouted across the noise, "chain of succession hasn't been invoked, but you can see why we need you back."

Her clothing was drenched with sweat when she arrived, legs and arms bloodied from thorns—but after the House doctor cleared her of any serious dehydration or exhaustion concerns, they had granted the mercy of use of the facilities to wash up and get a fresh pair of clothes on.

And now Speaker Roberta stood, shouting in the doorway of the White House at the security guard blocking the way.

“We must as a first priority get a firm message of comfort out to the nation.”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry but we can’t do that.”

The science advisor at her elbow chimed in apologetically, “Speaker, we don’t even know what is going on around what we can see from the ground here, with our eyes. If the rest of the continent is like this, it could take months on horseback to convey your speech to what would be left of the nation. Even if you do decide that is the best course of action, there is no urgency.”

She composed herself, realising she was flipping on light switches in a darkened house. This was going to take some adjustment, some thumbing at the phone in vain, before the implications were part of her thinking.

“All right, your point is well made. And in such a case, it seems to me the most important thing to do right now, with urgency, is to convey a message of some sort to our immediate surroundings. To create a wave of *sense* to stave off what is going to surely turn to panic and chaos otherwise. It will, at a most pragmatic level, be a matter of self-preservation, and at a political level, of a preservation or reconstitution of the state. We built this nation on horseback, good sir, and we’ll do it again if that’s what it takes.”

“This is all very stirring...”

“I’m not finished, what it is, is the recognition that politics has very swiftly become a personal matter again. I cannot project this message from here, I must do so out there, in front of the people! Do what you must to make that happen. We cannot bunker down in this dead building and expect the city around us do anything but revolt, unless we get out there

first.”

“Very well, Madam Speaker. Understand, again, the chain of succession has not been invoked, but as the highest visible representative of the nation, I defer to your wisdom on the matter of politics. I don’t like it, it puts you in a very exposed position, but we’ll do what it takes to keep you safe out there.”

“Being exposed to the ‘out there’ is what I was born to do, I will not shirk from that when we are at our most vulnerable.”

“Very well, at your discretion...”

The front door to the White House cracked open, and the already sweltering heat of the 30th of August billowed like an unrealised nightmare across Roberta Miguel’s face.

chapter six

Greg Ray

THE AFTERNOON LIGHT WAS tainted by smoke and ash. Roghan Taylor, junior officer of the U.S. Capitol Police, stood at his post and squinted. He tried to discern the extent of the haze they were under, but could not tell if it was very local or very general.

There were lane trees in front of the shops there on Massachusetts Avenue. His partner and lead officer Craig Farley, back from taking a turn of the grounds, put one foot and then another up on one of the planter benches, stretching his legs each time. Roghan's back was aching too from the long day's stint. Sleeping the last few nights at the precinct hadn't helped.

"They're saying it's not just here, but the whole country."

Roghan frowned. "I don't know, we're a big country. Really possible, you think?"

"Has to be, way I figure it. Otherwise the Air Force would be all over this place. Helos, army vehicles, you name it. But we're getting nothing. That's the whole Eastern seaboard anyway."

He didn't like thinking it, but Roghan had to admit it made sense. Mid-afternoon and the sky was dark, so filled with smoke — fires burning somewhere, maybe everywhere; and everything gone to hell. "People say a lot of things, but what do you personally think it is."

The two men had been detailed to this area, because word was some folks sheltering over at Stanton Park had tried to break in here. It was a small group of upscale shops, *Brumble & Fitch* menswear, a boutique women's apparel called *Fetish*, upscale grocery *Big Food* and *The Jewel Box* — a small jewelry store which had been the target of the break-in attempt. There was a stationary shop, too, but it was like anyone was going to come looting for greeting cards. But there was real looting happening all over D.C. and police were stretched to the max. Everything had gone to hell and looking forward to the days ahead, every cop knew this situation was full-on hopeless. But this close to the police station, there was something you were supposed to do about it.

"Gotta be nuclear." Farley switched legs and stretched again.

"Why nuclear?"

"Everything's gone to hell, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Yeah, but did you see a flash or anything? Where are the flattened buildings?"

Farley snatch up his cap and put it back on. "Man, I don't know."

"What about radiation sickness?"

"I don't know, okay?"

Sunlight filtering through the ash in the air cast an orange glow on everything. "No, this has got to be something else. That's why nothing works."

"Yeah, like what, smart guy?"

"I don't know. But something."

"Oh, *something*, is it? That's good."

"Those night heavies / their wired up signal / for sound and fury / pulsing its fool's iron."

Farley stared at him. "What the hell was that? What are you talking about, Taylor?"

"It's nothing. Just something I read."

"Hey, will you look at that."

A large crowd of people was coming down Massachusetts Avenue. Everyone was on foot now and small clusters of people ranged through the streets everywhere, but not a group of this size all marching together.

As the full trail of the crowd came into view, Roghan saw congresswoman Roberta Miguel, the Speaker of the House, marching along in the front of the group. Roghan had just seen her at an event earlier that day at Union Station.

"Wonder where they're going?"

That morning, Roghan had been detailed up to Columbus Circle. He and some of the others had been sent there, because officials were going to address the crowds there. Union Station was packed with people who had been at work in the city and suddenly found themselves with no way to get home. That was days ago. No trains were running — nor anything else for that matter. Drove of people had just been holding out there in the cavernous rail station.

The Speaker of the House stepped down from the makeshift speaking platform. The congresswoman let out an audible sigh. Roghan made way for her to pass. She had been up there trying so hard to do the almost impossible — keep people calm and at the same time be honest about the sobering reality they were all facing, and readying them for

how things were going to get worse.

Mayor Campbell was next. He and his entourage had arrived with some pomp, having made something of a procession of the long walk from the District Building to Columbus Circle. It wasn't Roghan's business to notice, but some stiff words passed between the Speaker and the Mayor before he stepped up.

It was also not Roghan's job to listen to what these people were saying. His job was to be vigilant, but he was as anxious as anyone to know what was going on. After all, he himself was one of those commuters now trapped in the city unable to get home to his wife, unable to find out if she was okay or tell her where he was. The Mayor's voice boomed. He told the people they should not worry, that he had things under control. He said a lot of things. "—and we are going to get the trains running very soon." Applause. "We have the best people working on that. They're great people, the best, and you'll be getting that very soon. And food. That's on the way." Applause. "Some people say it's not. But they're wrong. And it's going to be good food, great food, and there's going to be plenty of it." Applause. "My people are working on that and that'll be very soon."

From where Roghan was stationed at the backside of the platform, he couldn't see the Mayor as he spoke, but he did have a clear view of Miguel as she listened also to what the Mayor was saying. She was furious.

Farley snapped his billy club idly against one thigh. "Thing I don't get is why isn't the military doing anything? They must be prepared for a thing like this ... whatever it is. You think the President is dead?"

Roghan was suddenly reminded of the morning and a look

he had seen on Roberta Miguel's face. Mayor Campbell had said something to her just before he stepped up to address the crowd.

"You know it's true. If you won't step up, I will."

Roghan suddenly realized now that the Mayor had been talking about the President. Miguel's face had registered her surprise at this remark, but there was something more. When he started speaking, she had that certain look, like she had taken the true measure of this man. Roghan could see it now in her face — she knew something that Campbell did not.

The crowd on Massachusetts Avenue had crossed the intersection before the row of shops where Roghan and Farley were stationed. They were not passing, he realized, they were coming *there*.

"What do I know, Farley? We don't know anything. Let's just keep the peace."

"Amen to that." Farley saw it now, too. It wasn't clear what this was, but crowd had definitely turned their way, and some of those people were not empty-handed. When it became clear that the group was headed for *Big Food*, the two officers took up a position in front of the glass doors.

"People, this store is closed to business and under police protection, by order of the Mayor."

Roghan's pronouncement was general, but it was the Speaker of the House who stepped forward to answer.

"I am aware of that, officers. But these people need food and first-aid and other supplies."

"You know we have our orders, ma'am. There's not to be any—" He pulled himself up short, realizing he was about to call the congresswoman a looter. "No unauthorized taking of personal property."

"Officer—" she looked down at his name badge, "Officer Taylor, the world just went to hell. Union station is full of hungry, desperate people."

Roghan lowered his voice. "But we can't have people ... looting, ma'am. These people are to shelter in place and await relief."

Miguel looked at him. "You. I know you. From this morning. So, you heard all that, did you?" She stepped up to him. "The Mayor is a pompous ass who is out of his depth. There is no food coming. Not in time for these people's needs anyway." Miguel took a step back and spoke up. "Officer Taylor, we need to break those chains and get help for these people."

One of the men from the group stepped forward. He was holding a sledge hammer. Farley stepped right putting himself between that man and the chains on the door. The congresswoman had not taken her eyes off Roghan.

A long moment passed. Roghan nodded, "Madam Speaker." He looked over at Farley and the man facing him. "You heard the lady."

Farley looked wild-eyed at him. "Are you kidding me?!"

"You heard what the lady said, Farley. Let's keep the peace."

The sledge hammer made short work of the chains. Roghan looked over to where Farley had stalked off. Whatever happened now would be all on him. Had he made the right call?

The door bolt broke next and the doors to the grocery swung wide. But no one moved. There was no rush to the door. What were they waiting for?

Roghan stepped forward. "All right now, only a few at a

time." He felt an enormous wave of relief. These people were not looters — and this wasn't law and order, but it was order, and it was the right thing — the only thing — to do.

The Speaker was up on the planter bench, giving direction. "Remember, something for yourself and one other. We gather back here and we head back to the station together."

Miguel caught his eye and nodded. People began filing into the store.

"Remember what we said," Miguel continued, "No fish, no meat. It's not safe. Fruits and juices, yes. Dry cereal, yes. Ready-to-eat only."

The crowd remained remarkably well behaved, many waiting outside while others were in the store. Of course, most people came out with more than they were meant to have taken. But even in this, the people showed themselves well — tolerant yes, but with limits. When one curmudgeon came out with a pretty full shopping cart, he was roundly booed and finally went off with only a hand basket of stuff.

Roghan kept his post by the front door, not sure what his function was in all this.

Farley came over. Another officer, Comiskey, had ridden up on bicycle and the two had been talking. "Come on, Taylor. There's nothing more for us to do here. Listen some of the guys have rounded up some bicycles."

"How's that?"

"You're married right?"

"Well, yeah."

"It's gonna be a long commute by bike, so we all want to get started, right?"

Roghan watched as an elderly lady struggled with an armful of too much stuff.

"Yeah, you're right. That's right."

Comiskey rolled up on her bike. "Come on, the guys are down at the park."

The three of them moved off in the direction of Stanton Park. As they walked, Comiskey pulled a crowbar from her knapsack. "Brought this for you." She held it out to Roghan.

"What's that for?"

"A lot of stopped cars on the interstate. There's going to be some still got people trapped in there."

It was a sobering prospect, but Roghan knew this was right too. He needed to get home, to take care of his own, but there was no such thing as just going home. There was hard work to do everywhere you looked.

Roghan took the crowbar. He wondered when he would really see his wife again.

chapter seven

Kirt van der Woude

“COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO!” It was coarse-sounding cry from an even coarser looking cock. Parading about the still nearly dark room, its yellow claws clacked on the fine marble tiles. It fell silent as it stopped to peck at some unseen bug around the edges of the room where the fine marble flooring met even finer hardwood-paneled walls. It looked towards an ornate wooden desk flanked with flags near the back wall, head tilted in the way that roosters do when contemplating the meaning of life. “Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

“Shut up, you *puta*,” a woman’s voice sleepily mumbled from under a tangle of blankets on top of the desk. Roberta Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez de la Nina de Pinta y la Santa Maria Miguel - or Roberta Miguel for short - pulled her pillow over her head and wished there were still alarm clocks around that could shrilly beep her awake instead of this barnyard nonsense. She sighed, yawned, and let her eyes adjust to the pre-dawn light quickly filling her office.

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!” Sitting up, Roberta picked up a candle stub from the cabinet next to her desk-bed. With a deft

throw, she hit the alarm with her snooze button. Magically it disappeared, through the office door that was ajar in a squawking cloud of indignant feathers.

“Roberta? Everything okay?” Her assistant Cole groggily poked his head into the room through the doorway from the attached office. “Should I get the Shake ‘n Bake?” He smirked, pleased with his early-morning cleverness.

“No, let’s try and put up with it for another few months ‘til we’re really hungry” she replied, only half-kidding, as Cole rolled his eyes and retreated back to the front room of her office that doubled as his bedroom. It was almost Halloween, and the fall days were getting shorter and colder. Another winter spent eating SPAM and canned beans for protein would be appalling, and she inwardly shuddered at the idea. But it shouldn’t come to that anymore. As long as everyone kept pulling their weight anyway.

Roberta turned and slid down from the heights of her desk-bed. Glancing out the window of her not-so-long-ago congressional office down the length of the National Mall, she found the pastoral view eerily beautiful in the rose-coloured morning light that was gathering. With a sense of pride, she surveyed the neat plots of crops and pens of cows, pigs and sheep that extended all the way down the Mall to the Washington Monument. It looked so... neo-colonial. So different from only a year ago. She might not be Speaker of the House, nor even Congresswoman Miguel anymore, but she could still get *la mierda* done.

Rousing herself from her deservedly self-congratulatory reflection, Roberta opened the armoire in her office to begin preparing for the new day. “*Dios mío*,” she spoke aloud to herself as she flipped through the motley assortment of outfits hanging within. “Is today a Rosa Parks, Amelia Earhart

or Louisa May Alcott kind of day?”

Cole had just filled the French press with water heated on the kerosene camp stove that was a centerpiece in the office when Roberta stepped into the front office, ready to start the day. He was dressed in what had become a perennial favourite of his: *Leaves of Grass* Walt Whitman, circa 1865, with an open-collar white shirt and black hat jauntily laid over his long hair. All that was missing really was the long beard, though he was desperately trying to remedy that.

“Good news, Walt! This isn’t the Department of the Interior so I won’t have to let you go today on account of your immoral character.”

“Thanks Rosa,” he countered. “Fraid to tell you the buses aren’t running today either.” They both chuckled as they poured some coffee.

Roberta thought back to when they had first pilfered costumes from the Smithsonian collection during the desperation of that long, hard first winter. She remembered being beside herself with the idea of desecrating the exhibits at the time. Now it had just become a big joke when they went back, and she even treasured it as an unexpectedly enjoyable new way to express herself in the vacuum of Twitter, Facebook and the rest of the social media hubris that had been left behind with the Electric Age. Funny how the end of the world puts things in a different perspective.

“I grabbed the mail bag already. There’s a note here from one of the folks on the livestock detail. Sounds like there’s some drama between the livestock boss and one of the District residents assigned to that detail.” Cole continued, “says the livestock boss fired one of them. The resident told him he has no authority to do that and is still showing up for

work. Things are getting tense over there and they wanted to let you know about the drama to see if you could help.”

Roberta’s eyes rolled. “We can’t just fire people anymore,” she said exasperatedly. It was true. They really did need everyone to work together nowadays just to survive in their sometimes more anarchic, sometimes more libertarian pre-electric sort of socialist reality. Aside from missing the astounding convenience of electrification she and everyone else had taken for granted before, that suited her just fine. From her humble roots growing up in Maryland, getting involved in politics and ultimately becoming Speaker of the House, she had always been a left-leaning Democrat – eventually even identifying as a democratic socialist. The ironic thing was that American socialism was being cultivated in a post-apocalyptic dystopia rather than the utopia she had always envisioned. Crisis begets a lot of change, she thought, but there is always good to be found with the bad.

“He tried to fire someone last month too.” Roberta drained the rest of her coffee, grimacing as the grounds from the bottom of the mug hit her tongue. With all the big things in life that had been turned topsy-turvy, it always seemed to be the smallest things that were hardest to get used to. “Okay, let’s go have a chat and set him straight.”

As Roberta and Cole walked down the Mall together past the plots of crops toward the livestock pens, the early morning autumn crispness in the air was beginning to wane as the sun rose in the sky. The District’s residents were now going about their daily tasks; harvest was in full swing. Johnny Appleseed was digging up sweet potatoes in the middle of the Mall, while George Washington Carver stood atop a ladder in an orchard grove nearby filling a bucket with apples. The absurdity of it

all had already been eclipsed by the practical needs of day-to-day life.

Eventually they came to the livestock pens, teeming with cows, pigs and sheep. Of course, there weren't nearly as many sheep as cows and pigs; the world could be turned on its head but still the preferences of the American palate lived on. Still, more and more post-electric citizens were developing a taste for mutton, not to mention the utility of wool for textiles and – gasp – non-period clothing!

Nearby the pens stood an odd barn that appeared to have been constructed from grotesque collection of garden shed kits from Home Depot, which it had been. Cole pulled the door open for Roberta and followed her in. Inside, the livestock boss Don sat at one end of a long, rickety folding table on a cheap, high-back executive chair that had likely been salvaged from Staples. Wearing an expensive but ill-fitting business suit that had seen better days, he was exchanging glares down the table with a man seated on a milk crate at the other end.

"It's nice to see you, Roberta," Don said disingenuously as he continued to glare at the resident seated at the other end of the table.

"Likewise," Roberta replied, struggling to conceal her disdain for Don. She found him to be a petty barnyard tyrant.

"I fired Mike because he's lazy and stupid. I already told him that his ration of food and supplies was getting cut off until he started pulling his weight around here, but that never happened." Mike returned Don's glare evenly. He was dressed as someone from America's agricultural mythos; Roberta couldn't decide if it was Paul Bunyan or Pa from *Little House on the Prairie*.

She noticed Don toying with a small, shiny object. "Is

that... a phone?" It was bizarre to see such a commonplace Electric Age item in the here and now. Smartphones had become nothing more than useless bricks of metal, glass and plastic. Don looked irritated about the attention he and his phone were getting and slid the device out of sight into his breast pocket. "Okay listen up Don," Roberta continued. "Everyone has to pull their weight around here so we can make sure there's enough food this winter. We can't just fire people on a whim. What's the issue?"

Don stared at her for a moment with look of conceited superiority before responding. "I already told you. This man is lazy and stupid. And he stole a sheep."

Mike's eyes bulged as if his head were about to explode and stabbed his finger toward Don at the other end of the table. "YOU stole the sheep!"

Don stared blankly back at Mike. "That's not true. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Then why's it tied up in the hayloft where you live?"

"Is that true, Don?" Roberta reeled. She had already had enough. "Cole, take a look up in the hayloft." Cole walked to the end of the Home Depot garden shed barn, climbed up the ladder and promptly laughed.

"Uh, Roberta?"

"Well?"

"There's one unhappy looking sheep tied up here." As if to further prove the point, a sheep's baa echoed down to them.

Roberta crossed her arms and sighed, turning to Don. "Here's what's going to happen." There might not be anyone officially in charge anymore, but if anyone's judgment came close to being actual law in the Mall and Aboretum District, it was that of former Congresswoman (D) from Maryland and Speaker of the House of Representatives, Roberta Alexandria

Ocasio-Cortez de la Nina de Pinta y la Santa Maria Miguel - Roberta Miguel for short. “We don’t fire people in this District, but neither will I abide with an arrogant, pompous, sheep-thieving nitwit as my livestock boss. I am officially exiling you. Pack your things and hit the road. Oh, and that sheep stays with us.”

As if to sign, seal and certify Roberta’s summary judgment, Mike and a handful of other livestock hands that had slipped into the barn to witness the spectacle stepped behind her in a show of silent solidarity. Clearly out of options, his ruse up, Don simply stared back at her. He rose from the cheap executive chair, straightened his shabby, rumpled suit jacket and walked out the barn door.

The sun was now high enough in the sky that it was bringing real warmth to what was sure to be a fine autumn day. Roberta breathed the clean, warm air in deeply. In an upside-down, post-electric world, some blessings remained the same, she thought as she and Cole watched Mike and the livestock hands escort Don away down the Mall toward the District’s boundaries. Roberta turned to Cole. “Wonder why he stole the sheep?”

“I have no idea, Rosa.” Cole grinned as he shrugged his shoulders, looking full-on Whitman. He seemed lost in thought for a moment before turning back to Roberta. “Y’know, I just remembered where I saw that guy before. Didn’t he used to be on TV before the Great Lights Out? But I think back then he went by Donald.”

chapter eight

Sue Cowling

THE ARBORETUM HAD ALWAYS been one of Roberta's favourite places to visit before the world become a place of stasis, after power and electronic devices just stopped working, life as anyone had known it just stopped. Many people died from the riots and from disease. Others just up and left DC, hoping to find a place that had not been affected, a future that did not mean hardship and hard work, they were looking for paradise.

Maybe that place exists, and one day Roberta thought, maybe there would be people that were willing to risk their lives to explore that world, who could search and see if there is anywhere on the planet not affected. For now the only thing that mattered was survival, and that meant food, shelter and care, that had been a shock to many people, that to survive you had to work at it, and work hard.

Entering area one, the Salad Bar, named by those who looked after the most delicate of the crops, was a large piece of board nailed to a fence post and in thick red writing, the words "Subsistence and Endurance," a reminder that for everyone the only way forward was to endure. When Roberta

thought back to the first wave of getting organised, that is what it had been constantly, removing all those beautiful, but useless plants, bushes and trees that were not edible, or shielded the sun that was needed to nurture growth. Preparing the land with hand tools, and historical farming finds in museums all over DC, fighting the growth of weeds and brambles, creating at first just an illusion of any order, but now fourteen months later it worked like a well oiled human machine.

Roberta moved on, just slowing to wave at the bent over workers endlessly weeding or harvesting into large plastic crates rescued from the local Costco, by evening they would be neatly stored in the large wooden barns spread out around the Arboretum, ready for distribution to the workers, and drying for the future, including seeds for future crops.

Today Roberta's agenda was to visit the livestock area and the slaughter house, rumours that there had been unrest with the crew kept circulating, and it was going to be up to her to check it out. As she walked along the well kept paths she could hear the quiet, the stillness, in the work area fields off to each side there was the quiet murmur of voices singing, laughing and crying, each person with their own memories working the land to survive. In the undergrowth the rustle and scurry of mice and squirrels looking for small snacks. Roberta made a note on her paper that it was a possible location for the children to catch squirrels and mice, always a good source of fun for them and an additional source of food that was much needed.

As she neared the livestock area she could smell the smoke coming from the smokehouse, they were curing the slaughtered meat, a good way of preserving their food for the winter months. At that moment her walkie talkie buzzed,

another find in the Costco warehouse, allowing a few people to talk to each other.

It was Rich from the land parcel running down to the anacostia river, past the old Hickey Hill Road. “Roberta?”

Roberta sighed, it sounded urgent. “Yes Rich, what is the problem?”

The walkie talkie let out some garble, then cleared. “Get yourself down to Clearing area D we have a problem, its urgent.”

Roberta started running down Crabtree, and turned off onto the cleared road running along side the river, the quickest route to area D, as she approached she could hear screaming and shouting, and she could smell the fear.

Rich was standing next to a figure on the ground, he turned as Roberta approached, relief written over his face.

“The godam idiot he was clearing the bushes using this wood handled scythe,” he pointed at a blood covered tool laying on the grass. “I did tell him a hundred times to stop hacking and chopping, that done right there should be a rhythm, a fluid rhythm, he ain't got those skills and now he has near on dam chopped off his own foot.”

Roberta stepped back, nauseated by the stench of blood in the heat, and the fly gathering, then she saw the open gaping wound on his lower leg. Turning she vomited onto the ground, her body convulsing as she tried to gain control. Wiping her mouth she turned back and looked down at the guy laying their sweat and tears mingling with snot on his face, fear in his eyes, and she finally pulled herself together.

“Rich get the first aiders, a horse and cart, you men,” she pointed to a group standing gawping, “for christ sake fix up a stretcher, and someone get that wound covered, let's try and stop some of that blood.”

Bending over the man, she looked him in the eye, "Listen to me, you are not dying today, do you hear me." She waited keeping eye contact all the time, and he nodded his head in response. "Good, so what I need you to do is keep as calm as you can, while we work out the best course of action."

Stepping back Roberta turned and pulled Rich away from the guy, while others took over stripping strips from clothes to bound the wound and soak up the blood, and an old sweater put under his head.

"Rich, he is not going to make it back we are going to have to do something here, we need more cloth, any alcohol your workers have on them, and we need a hacksaw, and a sharp knife." Roberta paused and looked at Rich who had gone white, "We also need Doc and anyone with any medical experience, and I mean any medical experience, and we need them now, so get on that walkie talkie and get everyone and anything you can."

"We also need to get some tarpaulin on the ground make the area as sanitary as we can." Looking around Roberta pointed to a flat, cleared piece of land. "Just there would work, get tarpaulin down and gently move him, after he has a gulp off something strong."

Rich run off to organise things and Roberta stepped back to the man, who by now had passed out, she had not even got his name. Looking around at the cleared area and the men, all tired and inexperienced, she wondered how they had got this far without any major accidents, she heaved a big intake of breath. Even before when there were hospitals and ambulances and everything known to man that could be used to keep a person alive this was a serious accident. Looking down at his leg, the cloth was covered in blood and cut too deep for anything other than amputation, poor sod was

not going to be doing this work again for sure, that's if he did survive.

Roberta paced and waited while everything was put into place and finally they had a very basic field operating area, and medical help. The doctor, and it turns out he was a veterinary surgeon before, looked around and demanded the alcohol, taking a large swig, he wiped the top of the flask and then poured the rest down the now semi conscious patient, he then put a cloth over his nose and mouth, Roberta could smell the chloroform. At this she felt the need to intervene. "Do we have any pain meds we can use to sedate him? We must have something?"

The Doc shook his head, I have some antibiotics left, few Advil and not much else, we can wait, see if anyone else has anything, but if we do, well..." he made a cutting motion across his throat and Roberta shuddered.

"Okay let get started, Hacksaw please?"

Roberta watched as the Doc washed his hands in pail of water, poured the last of the alcohol over the open wound and took the scalpel out. Using it he cut a flap of skin below the wound and pulled it back, then taking the hacksaw he sawed through the damaged bone that was almost severed already, making a neat cut he pushed the foot away and tied off the ends of the arteries with thread. Rich passed him another small bottle with an amber liquid inside, the Doc took a quick gulp and then poured the rest over the wound, before sewing the flap up over the cut.

The Doc turned to Roberta, "I need a universal blood now," he looked around him, "anyone universal blood needed now?"

Roberta had given blood in the good days in a hospital, in a sterile clean place, but here. "I am universal, where do you

want me?”

Doc smiled. “I knew that, okay let’s get him bandaged up and in the back of the cart and I will get you set up ready, you can sit in the back beside him, no chance of you fainting then.”

Roberta half smiled and waited as he got out needle and tubing contraption and as he went to put needle in, she looked away and cringed, as she felt the sharp end of it enter her skin. When she was sure that it was done she turned her head back, flustered to see the doctor still watching her.

“Your a good woman Roberta don’t let anyone say otherwise.’

Clean bandages appeared and before long the man was bandaged and still unconscious on the back of a cart, Roberta sitting along side, while the Doc set up the rest of the tubing to the patients arm. Once the blood was flowing from Roberta into the man he seemed satisfied and climbed up front, alongside the driver. Pulled by two draft horses they were soon on their way to cleaner and more comfortable surroundings. Leaving Rich to organise the clean up and disposal of one foot.

Once the patient was settled, with Roberta sitting beside him still donating blood, but with a cup of tea and a sweet biscuit rummaged from supplies, the events of the day came back to her in rushes. Tomorrow she would have to go see what was going on at the livestock area, maybe they had an issue too with inexperienced people. Maybe it was time to think about more trains resources, it might be a barter world now but even so it was important to protect the workforce. Finishing her tea she leant back and closed her eyes, and was awoken by a commotion in the room. Her first thoughts were that something awful had happened, there was so little good

news these days, but then she looked up into song blue eyes and she smiled.

“Hello, how are you feeling?” he squeezed her hand, a good sign.

Then she remembered, “What is your name?”

He looked at her and a slight smile lit up his face. “Name is Sam, thank you”.

Roberta looked towards the doctor and he gave the thumbs up yes he was going to be okay, and Roberta relaxed, maybe the first time in fourteen months, she relaxed , and squeezing Sams hand she knew they would all make it.

chapter nine

Jaysen O'Dell

OLIVER KELLY WOKE UP.

“Fuck. Not a dream.” Oliver said it every morning. Not because he expected to wake up with electricity, but because he hoped that one day he would just ... not wake up.

“Sam! ... Sam! ... God damn it! Sam! Where the fuck are you?!” Sam was supposed to be right next to Oliver. The first thing Oliver should have seen, after whatever was “up” sheltering him from rain, should have been Sam.

Oliver crawled to his feet. He was tired of sleeping under trees. Under bridges. Under the open sky. “I’m too old for this” he muttered to himself. “Eight years of college, ten years of being a god damn rocket scientist for the feds, six years working to solve the same god damn problem and I’M SLEEPING ON THE FUCKING GROUND!!!”

Oliver was leaning on the tree he had slept under. He hadn’t realized his voice had gone from a mutter to a shout. A sharp cough from behind, shocked him back into the moment. As he slowly turned, Tim and Sarah lifted their chins in acknowledgement.

“Oli, you don’t look good. You need to eat more.” As she was speaking Sarah handed him a spit with a rabbit on it. Oliver took it and bit a piece out of it.

“Damn. That’s good. Wait. Where did these come from? We haven’t had meat in weeks.”

“Sam brought these in this morning. I think he is out looking for more. He had his share before he headed out.” Tim was the quartermaster of the group. He knew exactly what they had and where it was.

“Well, that explains him being gone. When was the last time anyone saw him?”

“Vic said he saw Sam about 15 minutes back. Said Sam just a peeked over that ridge to check in. Then he took off again.”

“Fine. He can catch up with us. We need to get into DC before nightfall. It’s the last place where we can find the components we need. There is a large number of people still there and I really don’t want to repeat the mess from Baltimore. Dead reckoning says we are less than 4hr walk if that road leads us into town.”

“A’ ‘ix fe’t ‘all ya don’y wal’ as ‘low as us!” Vic said with conviction.

“What the fuck?” Sarah never could figure out what Vic was saying.

“He said I’m tall, he’s short, so make it a 6 hour walk.” Oliver smiled at Vic. Half the time Oliver was guessing what Vic said too. Keeping the stocky welder happy was important if Oliver was going to turn the lights back on.

Oliver finished his rabbit. As he wiped his hands on his pants he counted the carts of equipment. Still six carts. Still 12 pushers/pullers, 4 support, Sam and 2 other hunters, and the 8 armed guards. Thank god pushing a cart didn’t require more than two strong legs. Most of his lab techs were as useless as

he was in the “real” world. “How in the hell did I become the leader? Of this?”

“Let’s get moving!” Oliver yelled to no one. He bent over to roll his bed; one comforter taken from Baltimore, one sheet taken from Wilmington, the wool blanket he took from the first person he killed. The flight into Philly was just supposed to be a layover. Oliver and his staff were already headed to DC to talk to the brass at the Pentagon. They needed to know just how vulnerable we were. This one time, Oliver hated being right.

“Sam had better catch up”.

“HEY! YOU! WAIT UP!” Oliver yelled to the person that might have been a lookout. Not sure why the first living person he saw ran further into a deserted city. Looking behind him he realized that leading with armed thugs may not present the most peaceful image.

“Sal, Roger, Karthik. You all need to be less... you. Make the guns less obvious. Try not to be ... you. More like... Tim or Vic. We aren’t an army.”

“We are Marines, not Air Force. When you can get Sam to stop with the squirrels and rabbits maybe we can stop being ... Marines.” While Roger talked he and the other soldiers made their armament vanish. Hats removed. Pants shifted. Shirts and jackets ... somehow changed. The little army was suddenly just 8 men and women resting from their turn a pushing carts.

“I don’t know how you all do that.”

“If you did I’d have to kill you.” Karthik’s eyes smiled even though his face made Oliver wonder if killing Oliver was actually Karthik’s goal. Karthik was the one who pulled Oliver off the man with the blanket. Taking Oliver back to Roger,

Karthik somehow seemed to feel responsible for keeping Oliver alive but “in his place”. He was very effective.

“Yeah yeah yeah. You’re always saying that.”

As Oliver talked Tim made his way forward. “Oliver, there are a lot of places we can ... check for supplies. We should take some time now.”

“Tomorrow. I suspect we will need all our energy real soon... Look at Sal.”

Sal had slowly moved close to cars on his the side of the road. “Fuck” Tim muttered and headed back between the carts. Sal held up 2 fingers on each hand and pointed about 8 houses up on each side of the street. Rog held up a fist. Karthik put his hand on Oliver’s shoulder and stepped in front. “I have a fucking human shield” Oliver said to himself.

Everyone knew the drill from Baltimore. Sal spotted danger, he was never wrong, Roger stopped everyone. The marines did... marine things. From nowhere, Oliver saw Jill emerge on the other side of the houses Sal had pointed out. Squinting, Oliver still could not see what Sal had noticed. Kim emerged opposite Jill. Last time Rog’s team did this, 4 shots were fired. There were 5 bodies. One did not have a bullet hole. Jill just smiled when Oliver asked her “what happened to him?”

Jill threw a can in the middle of the street and there was motion in the second story windows of both houses. Oliver had to accept the fact the these men and women had skills that Oliver would never develop. The only time Sal ever spoke to Oliver directly he said “you learn things killing people... don’t be ashamed you don’t know what we know.” That was two days after killing the man with the blanket.

“Hey there. We don’t want to fight you. But if you want to fight us... you should know we’ve already gotten behind your

flank and you probably won't make it out." Rog always gave the same warning. It was never lie. By the time Rog gave his speech there were always at least two of the Marines behind the people being talked too.

"We don't have weapons" the people in the house yelled out. "Can we come out?"

"Sure! Just give me a minute... J! K2! Contain and control. Confirm!"

"Aye" was the unanimous reply.

"It's safe! You can come out!"

Four men walked out of each house. Karthik reached back to Oliver's arm and guided him toward Rog. Rog and Oliver walked forward with Karthik just behind. "Smile and don't be a prick" Rog said to Oliver. "Notice they are scared and unarmed. Be nice."

"I'm Rog, this is Oliver. Behind you are Jill and Kim. This mountain behind us... that's Karthik. We've been trying to get Oliver and his crew back there into DC. Now let me tell you, if you try anything, it won't end well for any of us. I can promise you, no one will make it past Jill or Karthik. They are really good at this. So let's be calm and see what Oli has to say. Oli?"

"Take me to your leader."

Rog just shook his head in disbelief.

"Roberta Miguel" she walked forward with her hand outstretched.

"Oliver Kelly."

"Democrat. Massachusetts. Speaker of the House. Divorced. No children."

"Jesus Rog... at lest you don't know her age."

"I do. That's impolite. I have a mother." Rog was looking

directly at Roberta. “Roger Kirsh ma’am. Republican. Kansas. Master Gunnery Sargent United States Marine Corps. Married, I think. Two boys, 6 and 2. I’m 36. 3 Purple Hearts. 2 silver stars.

“Ma’am, I’m not hear to start anything, but you need to listen to Mr Kelly here. He was our mission from the minute he touched down in Philly. I was ordered to ensure he arrived safely in DC and that was BEFORE this all started. If you or your people endanger Mr Kelly... we have a lot of ammo and very sharp blades.”

“Is this a threat?”

“No ma’am. If it was a threat you wouldn’t have seen us coming. I just want you to have the lay of the situation.”

“Well Mr Kelly, Master Gunnery Sargent Kirsh has informed me that I am to listen. What do you have to say?”

“I need 100 of your skilled craftsmen for a week to fix it.” Oliver blurted as if he had been holding his breath. Rog just shook his head. Karthik laughed from wherever he was standing.

“Well... even if I had the power to just make that happen, I wouldn’t. Guessing by the squad of Marines that someone sent you, I’m guessing you are much smarter than you seem at first ... sentence. Let me go first and then you can try again.

“Here in DC we are building a new democracy. One where the people have a real say. One where we don’t have to worry about violence. We don’t have money. We share the work and the harvest. So while folks may have brought you to me, I’m not the decision maker. The people are.

“Now, you try.”

Oliver thought about the man with the blanket. He was as condescending as Roberta Miguel. Acting like he knew more about the electrical failures than Oliver. Not listening to his

intellectual better, infuriating. He had it coming. But Roberta... he had to handle her differently. He needed more than carts from her.

“It is called a ‘Carrington Event’. It is a coronal mass ejection of such size and force that a magnetic disturbance is created that effectively ruins the most basic electrical components. If it has a wire, it gets fried. Did you all see the northern lights? That’s the clue. We saw it coming several years ago but no one took it serious. I know how to get the electricity back. I just need people to help.”

Looking at Rog, Roberta asked “Is he always like this?”

“Actually, that’s the simplest opening I’ve heard him give so far. It helps if you ask him questions.” Rog was smiling at her. Oliver was relieved to see that Rog was on his side.

“Ok... can you explain this with words normal people would hear? ‘Coronal mass ejection’ sounds ... dirty.”

“Mr Kelly, use ‘solar storm’ like you did in Baltimore. That went well.”

“Right... the ejection is a ‘solar storm’ when you hear about it on the news. If the normal solar storm is a thunderstorm, Carrington Events are category 5 hurricanes. Or E5 tornadoes. Things don’t survive storms like those. If it wasn’t for the earth’s magnetic field, we would all be dead. The magnetic field intercepts the storm, that’s the northern lights, but some gets through. Large electrical systems are more susceptible. Large in this case is not “big” like the power grid, but anything that has more electricity in it than say ... us.”

“And you say you can fix it all?”

“No. I can’t *fix* the things. We need to start over.”

“What exactly do you need from us?”

“100 people skilled with their hands to help us.”

“This is too much. Why should I believe you? Why should we give up our most important people in the most important time of the year? This is the harvest time. We need to process crops, livestock and prepare for winter.

“Why don’t you stay with us and help with the harvest activities. Then, once we are done, we can help you with your project. You become part of our community. You all look like you could use a couple of good meals. A nice bed. Hot water for baths.

“But, like I said, this isn’t *my* decision. Let me call the people together.”

Roberta’s speech fell on deaf ears.

“I need the people. I can’t wait”.

Roberta smiled. She called out to an assistant. “Go call an assembly. Mr Kelly wants to put a question to the vote.”

“For not being ‘in charge’ you sure give a lot of orders.” Rog said it so only Oliver could hear.

“Fellow citizens of the District of Columbia! Thank you for coming. This man is Oliver Kelly. He is a scientist from before the event. He wants to talk to you about what happened to us and what he needs from us. Mr Kelly, you have the ... well ... here.” Roberta walked to a seat and sat down.

Oliver gave his best explanation. Rog helped prompt him with a facial expression or gesture when Oliver strayed too far from the topic. As he finished his explanation, Oliver looked into the crowd he noticed 12 cart pushers/pullers, 4 support team members, 2 hunters, and 7 armed guards. Faces smiling back that believed in his mission.

Roberta stood up next to Oliver. “Mr Kelly wants to take 100 people with hand dexterity to work on the problem. Don’t

forget this is the harvest. I recommend that Dr Kelly and his group join our community. Once harvest is over we can all help with his project. The survival of our community is all that matters to me.”

The crowd became a bit agitated. From the crowd one voice was raised. “We are building a new society! We are building for when our friends and neighbors come back! We have to protect the harvest!”

Oliver could not be quiet. “There is no one else out there! We’ve traveled here from Philadelphia. The only places we encountered living people are in the cities. Outside the cities, it is just bodies. NO ONE IS COMING BACK!”

“How dare you! My family is out there!”

“No they aren’t.” Oliver knew this was pointless. Rog was fidgeting. Oliver regretted telling the Marines to hide their firearms and large knives.

From the crowd someone yelled out “you know he’s right. Your family is dead. My family is dead. If they weren’t dead they would have come back by now. We all know it!”

“You bastard!” a man shouted and ran toward Oliver. Karthik was too far away. Rog was already wrestling with another person. As the man raised his fist to punch Oliver a gold and black blur emerged from a shadowy corner with a scream. In a fraction of a second the man was on the ground. A gurgling sound coming from his neck where his throat used to be.

Standing between Oliver and the body was a German Shepard. The dog was wearing a police vest. On each side of the vest, just above the word “POLICE” were three letters.

“Sam, I’m glad you found us.” Oliver said it just loud enough for Sam’s ears to twitch.

It only took the Marines a few seconds to quell what little resistance remained. Roberta cried quietly behind Oliver. Jill and Kim pulled the body of the dead man away. Jill smiled at Sam as they passed him.

After a few moments Oliver faced the crowd. “Uh... Sam here... He found us in Philly... Just kind of latched on to me... I don’t think we can Blame him...”

“Shut up Oliver” Roberta said. Gathering her composure she stood in front of the community. “Friends, we see what they bring to us. In less than 2 hours among us they have killed one of us. They insist that we are wrong to plan for our future. They have an agenda. I say no.”

At the end of her speech, Roberta walked to a post with a large letter N on it. She pointed to a post with a large letter Y on it and motioned Oliver to stand next to it. One by one the citizens of DC walked to a post of their choosing. Sam sat between the posts. Behind him 8 Marines stood prepared for anything. When the last person picked their post Sam lay down.

From her position Roberta yelled “the people have chosen. Tomorrow 100 volunteers will join Oliver Kelly and his group to bring back our lights.”

chapter ten

Claire Woodier

IT STRUCK KELLY THAT the Capitol building would not have seen such presence; quite so many people or such noise since The Shutdown. Right now there were many, scuttling around the marble floors, their voices echoing in the expanses of grandeur. This revered place had become surplus, a cenotaph to the memory of the life that was. It seemed like such a long time ago.

The group of volunteers brought in to work had made the entire scene look like the bizarre, a Dali version of life. This building was accustomed to housing suits, the robes of officials. The men and women of the Capitol building meant business, they had purpose, a cause, their attire reflecting their drive and their gravitas. These people were wearing the clothes afforded to them by the generosity of donations. The museums had sent out what they had, which meant some citizens were wearing items from dictator's uniforms, some were in iconic fashions from significant eras, whilst some were dressed in the mismatched items from those they had managed to keep before they left. The lack of electrical items

had also left this new world ungroomed. Gone were the slick shiny people of pre- Shutdown. This group resembled Captain Caveman's fancy dress party. In the Capitol building.

Kelly shook the thoughts away to engage his focus. The team he had installed in the cellars were close to completion. The groups in the other rooms shutting off the surplus circuitry needed to catch up.

A man wearing a red hunting jacket and a pair of jodhpurs came running over.

"We're almost there Mr Kelly." He said, doing up the laces on his Air Jordan 1 sneakers. "The west wing circuit should be sealed off in the next few minutes." He was breathless with exhilaration, his eyes bright with hope for what could be about to happen.

Kelly smiled. "We'll see." This guy was panting like a happy Labrador. He played it down. "Its a shot."

Pete was oblivious to Kelly's attempts at calm. "Can you even imagine what it'll be like Mr Kelly? A light on! Air conditioning! Oh my god WAFFLES!"

"Hold *on* Pete, just, breathe." Kelly took a deep breath himself to calm his cohort. "We're on our way. We're not blast-chilling or toasting Pop-Tarts yet."

Oliver Kelly's blood was pumping though. Despite his outward patience, he too was fizzing with excitement for the prospect of the return of civilisation. "Jesus Kelly, CIVILISATION? You're not the messiah." It felt like it though. Civilisation was continuing but back to basics. Grow or kill your food, heat by fire, sleep at night. If this worked we could all be on our way home. He could *taste* the cold beer right now, a delivery pizza in his lap, his mind and ass going numb on a box set. He shook his reminiscences away again.

"So where are we?" Pete asked, looking at his plans. "Has

everyone finished in the cellar?”

“Uh-hmm” said Pete. Going through his own checklist. “Team A are done.” He chewed his bottom lip. Kelly didn’t like that as a sign.

“But?” This aroused Pete from his papers.

“But? Oh! No, they’re there. They’ve got all the conduits going into the building sealed off. They *were* running low on the materials but we’re pretty sure we’ve got away with it.”

“What?” Pete’s mouth went dry. “Running low? There isn’t any more! If they’re run out it’s because they’ve used too much! I have calculated the exact amount of product we need to fill in EVERY SINGLE way into that basement, if we’ve run out then we’ll need to check EVERY-“

“Ohhh no no no Mr Kelly, no no don’t worry! Its all there! Its done. We’re going to check and check again but I think we’ve got it right.”

Oliver Kelly took a turn to take a deep breath.”Right. Right okay then.”

“Keep your nelly on.” Pete muttered. Kelly couldn’t quite discern.

“Keep my what on?” Kelly blustered.

“Your nelly.” Pete mouthed. Almost silent.

“My nelly? Kelly blasted.

“Erm.” Pete was practically on mute. “Yup.”

“You bloody idiot Pete. Nelly? Keep my NELLY ON? JESUS!” He turned his back on him, heading towards the team that had been installed in the basement of the Capitol building. Pete fussed along behind him, deciding to change the subject.

“I’m 99% sure we’ve got the product sealing off all the adjoining conduits to the basement. With all the unnecessary rooms now removed from the building’s circuitry, I think

we're there.”

Oliver Kelly had come up with a plan that he thought could solve the world's problem, but he needed to try it on a small scale and experiment on sophisticated electrical systems but in a building that was surplus to requirements. The Capitol building, now uninhabitable, a cold and uncomfortable marble mausoleum to politics, had been disregarded by citizens looking for cosier homes, and had now been left to stand empty. He could isolate the control room and minimise the scale of the electrical supply by disconnecting the circuitry to the vast wings of the building and just attempting to supply electrical current to a small store room next to the basement's utilities boards.

All he needed to do, was block the signalling from the plant hormones that was causing the interference with our electrical signalling. Since early 2019, many citizens had become vegans, adopting more plant-based diets and contributing to our over-production of ethylene from rotting and ripening fruit in our waste bins. These higher levels of ethylene had mutated to not just encourage the ripening of fruits, but encourage the senescence of them, bringing shorter life to our produce. In working to inhibit these processes, Kelly believed that science had come up with a way to solve this problem but had as a side-effect mutated the process for it to inhibit all electrical signals too. By inhibiting the deterioration of fresh produce and our food sources, science had inhibited all our electrical systems. We had food, but we had no electricity.

Kelly came across the solution one day in the library, reading old newspapers.

He needed to find a way to re-stimulate electrical currents.

What could do it? What substance or organism could possibly bring us back into 21st century technology? The answer lie in a product generated in 1932 but largely ignored and rendered relic by the early 2000's.

The plant hormones that produce the ethylene are made up of receptors similar to those found in bacteria and yeast. We would need to replicate those characteristics to create the double negative to jump start the electrical signals. Bacteria? Yes, we have that but, we would need electricity to isolate them and utilise them. Yeast? Yes, but where? The answer lay in an abandoned factory in the next town that had been reported in a newspaper in the library's archive.

Pete shrieked as he and Kelly watched a light bulb flicker on in the darkness of the basement of the Capitol building. Everyone held their breath as they witnessed the resurrection of 21st century civilisation, symbolised in that one display of hope.

"Who would have thought it!" Rhapsodised Pete, as Oliver Kelly fought back the tears.

"Who would have thought a factory full of tonnes of unwanted Twiglets would be the precious resource the world needed to bring us back into the light!"

"Love it or hate it?" Exclaimed Oliver, choked with emotion and relief. "I LOVE it!"

chapter eleven

Ian Philpot

“THIS IS JUST THE beginning,” Oliver Kelly told the growing crowd. He took another step back, up another stair so he could see every face in the crowd. He had started talking to just three people at the bottom of the Capitol steps, but the group was now nearly three hundred and he was up four steps to see them all.

“When can we expect power in our homes?” called out on voice.

Kelly smiled wide. “Now I could give you an answer like someone you’d expect to hear on the steps of this building and say, ‘These things take time,’ or tell you that it’s going to take more resources to repeat something like this. You have already volunteered a hundred people to this cause, and I owe you a solid answer. It’s hard to say for sure, but I can say it will be soon.”

“Months?” a faceless voice asked. “Weeks?”

“Weeks,” Kelly said with an assured nod. “Maybe days.”

The crowd gave out a cheer, and Kelly gave a confident smile and a short wave.

“While I appreciate the questions,” Kelly said as he started his short descent, “I need to have a quick word with my team for a moment as we call it a day.” There was a small round of clapping, and Kelly gave a final “thank you” before meeting with his small team.

While some of the congregation had dispersed with lots of chatter about a possible return to normal, a line began to form of people wanting to speak with Kelly and his team.

“Tomorrow, we’ll meet after breakfast and talk about power diversion and...” Kelly was interrupted with one of his men who met eyes with him but nodded past him. Kelly turned around and saw the large group still standing around, waiting for a chance to speak with him. “Let’s just plan to meet after breakfast,” he told the team. “Good work.” With a smile and a nod, their meeting was done.

“Mr. Kelly?” a woman asked as she stepped forward.

“Yes?”

“I just wanted to say thank you for all that you’re doing, and let you know how hopeful this has made my whole family.” She stepped to the side to show her two small children. One wore a shirt that said “I Heart DC” and the other was wearing a blue and red shirt with the face of a former president on it.

“I’m glad that we can help,” Kelly said with a smile. “How old are the kids?”

“Four and six,” she said grinning. “They’ve been growing so fast that I’ve had to get their shirts from a gift shop.”

“And their father?” Kelly inquired.

She looked down. “He left to be with family in Baltimore when the power went out. He wanted to go. I wanted to stay.” She put her hands on her kids. “But I bet they don’t have power in Baltimore,” she added.

“I bet they don’t,” he responded.

“Oh,” she said as she pulled a large purse from off her shoulder. It had the letters D and G in a pattern all over it, and it could probably hold 10 gallons. “I wanted to give you this.” She handed him a flat package wrapped in wax paper and tied with twine. “One of the farmers by us had to kill a pig last night, and we got some of the bacon because I...uhh...well, I wanted to share some of it with you in appreciation for what you’ve done.”

“That is so kind of you,” Kelly said warmly.

As Kelly continued speaking with the people in line, his team walked away. Some people stepped out of line to thank them for their help, but the response was the same — “All in a day’s work” or “Just doing our part.”

Kelly’s receiving line dwindled over time and the sun had almost set on Washington D.C. The sky above was a deep purple, but the horizon was a shocking pink and orange.

Across the National Mall, Roberta Miguel was drinking a beer with Maya Miller. The beer was warm and old, but the taste was still a treat to Roberta. They sat on a curb on Madison Street in front of the National Museum of Art with just the sounds of their sipping and small conversations in the distance.

“I would never order a beer,” Roberta said to break the silence. “In a restaurant. In a bar. At a backyard barbeque. It’s not that I don’t like beer. I just never preferred it when there were other options. Sometimes you just don’t know you’ll miss something until it’s no longer available.”

Maya raised the bottle to her lips, “Let me guess — wine?”

Roberta took a long sip, let out a light sigh, and gazed off at the almost harvest-ready fields in the Mall across the street.

“Whiskey,” she replied with a smile.

“Huh,” Maya said, and she took a short gulp of her beer. “Did you ever put any in your coffee while you were Speaker?”

“You’re asking if the Speaker of the House of Representatives ever drank on the job?” Roberta scoffed. “Never.” She took another sip. “But when I was the junior congresswoman for the state of Maryland, I may have snuck a little Lagavulin into my cup when the Republicans tried taking credit for the Return to Work program I put together all those years ago.”

In the distance, the scuffs of footsteps could be heard. It was a man walking in the street coming from the Capitol Building.

“Speaking of,” Maya gave a nod toward the Capitol, the lights of which had just come on to shine like a beacon, “maybe the newly acquired electricity will help all of us return to our regular work soon.”

“Maybe,” Roberta said. “Maybe.”

“I think it’s exciting to have the electricity back on,” Maya said. “As exciting as it is to see vegetables we planted months ago finally getting close to being picked and eaten, it’s more exciting to live in a world where we accomplish so many more things. A world where I don’t have to go scavenging through deserted houses just to find six bottles of beer that have been left behind by God only knows who. Whoever they were though, they were rich,” she said as she clanged a ring on her finger against her bottle. Roberta saw it was thick and gold and held what was at least a two-carat diamond on it.

The footsteps got closer. A year and a half ago, a strange man approaching at this time of the evening would have been a little concerning, but there was no threat of crime in D.C. for several months.

Maya stood up, grabbed the carrier of beer, and said, "Time to share. See you around."

"Can I have one?" the man asked.

He was short — possibly 5' 7", but maybe shorter than that. He had a heavy, brown beard and big, green eyes. He wore a red flannel shirt and clean blue jeans.

"Sure," Maya said as she handed him a bottle. "Enjoy."

"Thanks," he said and wasted no time twisting the top off.

Maya left.

"You're one of Kelly's men," Roberta remarked.

"Jeff Cisco," he said extending a hand. "Mechanical engineer."

Roberta took his hand. "Roberta Miguel. Care to join me?"

Jeff looked around. "I've got nowhere else to be." He sat down on the curb and stretched his legs straight out into the street. He unbuttoned his sleeves and methodically rolled them up to his elbows.

Roberta raised her bottle to Jeff.

"To you and Kelly's team for getting the lights on."

Jeff clinked his bottle against hers but said, "Could we just drink to world peace?"

Roberta took a sip as if she hadn't heard Jeff's request.

"Where were you when the lights went out?" she asked.

"You sure you want to hear it? My story isn't for the faint of heart."

"Maya — the woman who gave you that beer — was on a plane twenty-thousand feet in the air. She was the only survivor," Roberta said as a matter of fact. "If I can handle her story, I can handle yours."

Jeff took a long swig and gave a deep sigh.

"I was in the second basement of a hospital in Philadelphia. Just a normal day looking at large mechanical

equipment, understanding the space, figuring out how to handle a massive replacement and retrofit project. Kevin Antle, the director of facilities for the hospital, opens the door to this 60-year-old boiler room and the lights go out. In the confusion, the giant steel door of the boiler room closes and he's stuck in there. I'm on the other side, lights are out, and I know how to get back to the elevator but have no idea where the stairs are. He's banging on the door. I'm yelling that I'll get help. It took me nearly an hour to find a stairwell that only took me up to the first basement. By then, the hospital personnel must have cleared out, because I was alone. Took another two hours to find the next set of stairs that led outside, and the world was chaos. The first floor ER was packed with people running and crying and screaming. It was a mess.

“It was clear that no electronics were working, but I went searching for a hardware store to see if I could get a blow torch — they don't require electricity and could probably get through the steel door to free Kevin. That takes another hour. I find a welding torch, but it doesn't have a propane tank. So I think go get one from a gas station. The first gas station I go to has a guy pointing a shotgun at anyone who comes close. The next gas station is closed, but the case of propane tanks is outside in plain sight, so I find a way to rig up the welding torch with a propane tank and melt off the lock. My actions garnered a lot of attention, and when people saw the lock was off they started grabbing tanks. Someone took a tank and threw it into the gas station to try to loot the place, but they threw it too hard and it exploded.

“When I woke up, it was dark out. The welding torch was by me, and so was a tank of propane. So I head back to the hospital, but there's no light. I thought about using the welding

torch as a light source, but I noticed too late that the propane tank I grabbed was mostly empty — probably exchanged for a full one at the gas station. I don't want to waste the little fuel I have finding the basement. I talk to someone who works at the hospital, and they tell me that I can try in the morning when they may have other lighting options, and that there's still a chance the lights could come back on. He said the hospital was too full, and I needed to stay away until the morning.

"I slept on the sidewalk across the street. At 5 in the morning, I awoke to a rumbling on the ground. I got up and started running, and a minute later the hospital collapsed."

Roberta kept quiet for a moment before saying, "I'm so sorry."

"The crazy thing is," he paused to drink his beer, "it was probably Kevin."

"What do you mean?"

"Kevin was trapped with no sense of time and no contact, so he was probably doing whatever he could to get someone's attention. He didn't know what kind of chaos was going on in the world above, so he probably screamed all he could until he fell asleep exhausted. When he woke up the next morning, he probably just started pulling levers or doing whatever he could to get attention. He could have caused the boiler to overload and explode two stories below ground, which would have caused the earthquake and eventual collapse of the hospital. If I had just gotten down there the night before — even if I didn't get him out — he would have known someone was trying to get him."

Roberta did not respond. She knew the story was too heavy for her to say anything worthwhile.

Jeff took a long pull from his beer to finish it off and

stood up. “That’s my story.”

“That’s not all your story,” Roberta replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that there’s more to your story.”

“Yeah,” he scoffed. “A couple of months go by, Kelly shows up and builds a team to ‘bring back the power.’ It took us long enough to get here, but here we are and—” Jeff pointed to the Capitol building, “—here it is.”

Roberta looked at the beacon. The sun was long gone and the Capitol was as bright as could be.

“Why was D.C. the right place to ‘bring back the power?’”

“We needed somewhere with a large backup power supply system so we could use the electricity to make what we need to repair larger power generation stations.”

Roberta thought for a moment.

“That sounds like Kelly put in a lot of effort and planning into this,” Roberta mused. “Very...strategic.”

“He’s the man with the vision,” Jeff shrugged as he started to walk away. “I just work for him.”

“Thank you for your efforts,” Roberta said raising the volume of her voice. “Have a good night.”

Jeff nodded and walked off.

Roberta stood, brushed herself off, and began a walk to the Lincoln Memorial. She thought about all of the individual stories of the people around and how Jeff’s story likely wasn’t uncommon.

When she made it around to the other side of the Mall facing the Capitol Building, she thought about the arrival of Oliver Kelly and his team — a savior and his disciples showing up and providing light in a long season of darkness. She had heard stories from several trusted people that thought Kelly and his team were heroes, but something rubbed her the

wrong way. *How did Kelly know D.C. had a large backup power supply system?* she asked herself. She was the Speaker of the House, and even she didn't know the extent of the capital's electric capabilities. She let her feet continue to carry her all the way to the Capitol steps.

chapter twelve

Sam Pynes

AS ROBERTA CLIMBED THE Capitol stairs she reflected on how often she had made this climb, looking up at the building brilliantly lit at night, sounds of traffic in the distance. The world had gotten much quieter in the past year, but here was the old building, lit almost as before. If one ignored the dead plants, and the corner piles of composting leaves, one might think the building was just waking from a year-long nap, ready to again hold sway over a continent, and influence a globe. She almost expected John Cole to come whipping around the corner ahead of a delegation from President Gray to make some ridiculous demand or a concession on a bill up for debate, but it was just a mangy dog which passed by her on the stairs. She paused and looked back at it. It stopped, turned, and gave a panting smile in the disarming way that only guileless animals can do. He looked happier than Secret Service Agent Cole ever had.

The cooling air wheezed around the stone building as she walked inside. Some of the lights were on, but fainter than she remembered, and the fluorescents flickered slightly. The quiet,

which would have seemed unnatural the year before, was broken by a steady hum, the menacing moan of the repaired generator, somewhere below.

So much had changed. She walked past the many statues in the building, many of them depicting long-dead men and women who came from a world more like the one she had entered than the one she had left but a year before. Here she still was, though, doing the same job as before: trying to make people's lives better. Living had gotten harder, but in a lot of ways things had gotten much simpler and easier. There were no lobbyists badgering her on behalf of corporations to use the coercive power of government to their favor, because there was effectively no government. People just seemed to live and work and get along well together, each doing their part. Wasn't this something like the future she had always hoped for and striven to achieve as a politician?

She had never felt herself naive enough to be a utopist: money and power were natural evils that you just had to deal with. There had always been regimes, whether democratic or autocratic, but had anyone ever really lived through their situation before? Could it actually last?

Hardworking, educated people just living together, trying to make a difference in their community, but now without the distraction of cars, and internet, and a myriad of other ways that others try to influence and control. Suddenly those flickering fluorescents casting weird shadows behind the statue of Charles Carroll took on a certain malice. Electricity could take it all away again, or it could usher in a new democracy like the one she always dreamed that the country could have.

She was in the crypt now, among the pillars and statues. It was much warmer than the floor above, the heat emanating from the center of the room. The generator sat there, over the

star that represented the center of Washington D.C. itself, like a pulsating dragon, guarding the only source of electrical power in the city, maybe in the whole world.

Where were Kellys' cronies? And what was he really up to? Did he really just want to make people's lives better?

The room was lit by a single worklamp which wheezed brighter and softer in rhythm with the machine, like a living ghostlight, waiting impatiently for the drama to light up the stage again. The floor was littered with tools, the scattered hoard of this frankenstein creation.

She walked closer and noticed a small electrical panel bolted on the side, evidently from another machine altogether.

"That's the voltage regulator. I had to dig through a lot of garbage to find one that worked, but the machine won't run without one."

Roberta almost jumped out of her skin as she whirled around to face the speaker.

"How long have you been there?"

"Long enough to appreciate your admiration of my work," he said, but the way he said it made her feel like he had been admiring something else. His outer shirt was unbuttoned, and underneath he wore an 'I love NY' t-shirt. The shirt was brand new, with its original fold-lines still intact, and it was slightly too large for his wiry frame.

"I've been looking for you," he continued, "I think we probably have some common interests to discuss." He ran his hand through his dark hair, then noticed it was dirty, and irritably pulled a rag out of his back pocket to wipe off the grease. As he did so, she could see the gleam of a pistol under his shirt. "The thing is, I didn't think I'd have to start from scratch again."

"You weren't always a mechanic?" Roberta had a hard time

keeping the sarcasm out of her voice.

He laughed bitterly. "I was in highschool, but until recently I never thought I'd work on another engine that wasn't attached to a sports car. I figured if I worked hard, life would treat me right. Well, I did work hard, and, between you and me, I became more wealthy than the past several generations of my family put together." His stance became a little more inflated, but she thought his chest seemed hollow. "What about you? You were Speaker of the House. You must have accumulated a nice little nest-egg over the years."

"I did alright, but I didn't become a politician to acquire wealth."

"Maybe not, but it doesn't hurt, does it?" He smiled. "Besides, you must find it frustrating to have spent decades..."

"Things change."

"Things don't change." He shook his head. "Situations change. People change. But things? Things don't change. Someone will figure out how to get the power back on. If I could get this generator working, there must be a way to restore the grid. My wealth, the entire fruits of my life's labor, are locked in digital databanks. If it is still there, I mean to get it back. It is only a matter of time before someone figures it out, and I won't have them taking what is rightfully mine. When power is restored, people are going to need government again, too."

"Maybe, but if that happens Gray's cabinet will reassemble to deal with it."

Kelly gave a mocking laugh. "Gray!? No one has seen Gray or Campbell since this whole mess began. Sure, he might be buried in some bunker under Offutt, but is that really such a good look? To go AWOL for fourteen months during a crisis? If you ask me, though, I think those jokers are long gone." He

looked pointedly at Roberta, much in the way as he had when he'd first begun, and steadily said, "as Speaker you are next in line when society wakes up from this weird agrarian nightmare."

"If."

"When. This can't last. This strange little cultish utopia is an illusion. Even if the grid is never restored, people will need government. The people of this community, the ones that stayed, look up to you. They won't bat an eye if you make yourself president of the new administration. And to do that, you need power. You need me." He patted the generator. "If you had told me that my crazy uncle Ted, stockpiling gold and copper was going to look like some kind of genius..."

"What if I don't want things to go back to the way they were?" She hadn't said it out loud before, but now the idea didn't seem all that bad. What had electricity given to them that it hadn't also taken away?

He snorted. "It's all looks. The old order will reassert itself, and when it does, I don't want to start again from the bottom."

"You have to admit, though, things are pretty pleasant as they are. Maybe things don't have to go back to the way they were. People are happy and well fed..."

"Well, I'm fed up," he interjected, talking so close to her face that she could smell the coffee on his breath, "I didn't build a whole career just to see it blink away into some communist dream! I am owed!" His voice became thick with emotion.

"And now you are just like everyone else."

"No one. Is. Like. Me."

She saw it then. All those wraiths of lobbyists haunting the building, the corporation cronies, coalesced into this single,

angry man. He was the dragon standing over the unused grave of George Washington, not the machine. The American Republic might be sleeping, but the special interests lay in wait next to its bed to take control of whatever would take its place when it awoke. Maybe human nature couldn't be changed, maybe this was just the calm before the storm, a peaceful period before the next wave of human history would crash upon them. But she wasn't ready to let go of it. Not yet. She reached into his belt and pulled out his gun, pointing it at him and cocking back the hammer. He backed away, eyes wide with surprise. She stared unblinkingly at him, then turned the gun on the voltage regulator. And fired.

A shower of sparks fountained over the machine, as the bark reverberated through the crypt and made her ears ring. The generator's revolutions became more irregular, the worklight pulsed like a firefly, each time fainter and fainter as the generator wound down to a standstill. The worklight stopped pulsing and gave off a warm, fading red light.

Kelly's eyes glowed with hate as he said, through gritted teeth, that she could barely hear over the ringing in her ears, "You. Will. REGRET! THAT!"

Shocked at her own boldness, and the man's viciousness, she backed quickly out of the room and fled.

Kelly's voice rang after her, "I will rebuild it! I'll never stop till I get back what is mine!"

She fled out into the cool night.