



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

Originally published: 2020

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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

Jacqueline S. Miller

IT HAD NOT BEEN a good day for the President and things seemed to be getting progressively worse.

The words Armageddon and Apocalypse flashed through his brain as he waited with his chief of staff and a crowd of other high-up politicians, cabinet-level officials and other key administrative staff, outside the Situation Room. They would soon be making their way to the Presidential Operations Center (the PEOC) where they would remain in lock-down until the situation of National Emergency was resolved.

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown and so it was for President Andrew Gray, despite being unusually popular, both at home and abroad.

Why was he so popular? Was it his Hollywood good-looks: handsome face, tall stature, and dark hair, now turning grey and which gave him an enhanced air of authority? Or the fact that he had been married to his wife, Lucy, for 31 years and doted on their only child, 14 year old, Elizabeth. Most media viewed Andrew as a family man who valued traditional family values. More than that, the populace applauded his innovative

attempts to bring in National Health Care for all, fairer taxes and ‘affordable’ college fees. New laws were pending, promising to bring a new age of equality and hope to the United States of America. Moreover, unlike many of his predecessors, the President believed in equality for women, both in the workplace and at home.

Overall, the media depicted Andrew Gray as an unusual sort of president. Elected in 2016, having previously served two terms as Governor of Indiana, Gray was a moderate Republican, and popular with the electorate. Why, only last week, the New York Times had said his approval ratings were around 60%.

However, on 29th August 2016, a completely unprecedented event occurred. The 9/11 attack right at the beginning of the 21st Century had been caused by terrorists but, so far, no one had been able to tell the President who or what was behind the current catastrophe.

His advisers suggested that something bigger and more life changing than anything that had gone before was happening: something which could change Society for ever.

Horror of horrors, every electrical device in the country had stopped working. Imploded. Exploded. The circuitry at its heart completely destroyed.

Even — and this was probably the worst thing of all — the one device that virtually every man, woman and child could not live without in the Modern Age: the Mobile Phone!

“Aaaagh!” Everyone in the country cried in unison on that fateful morning. They were appalled. How could they live without their mobile devices and all the associated apps and chat rooms? The Gamers felt it most of all, and started suffering pangs of withdrawal and thoughts of suicide.

Now as he waited outside the Situation Room, before

being escorted to his bunker room with his staff, Andrew flexed his toes in his new ill-fitting leather brogues. It had been a mistake to wear them today, but now was not the time to request a visit to his residential quarters to change them. The PEOC was a bunker-like structure under the East Wing of the White House. It was to be used in time of emergency as a secure shelter and communication centre for the President of the United States.

Andrew knew that it would protect the White House from external factors including nuclear weapons as well as an internal assault. The walls and doors were reinforced with electronic surveillance and locks.

He tried to dispel his vague feeling of nausea at the prospect of being locked away underground. He had suffered lapses of claustrophobia ever since being stuck in a lift in a high rise tower block in New York three years ago. Although he had been rescued after three hours, the irrational fears and PTSD symptoms still remained.

But hey, he was the President. He had to lead and inspire every American citizen. He owed it to them to display confidence and authority. Andrew Gray must pretend this was an everyday occurrence and show he had the means, power and intelligence to come through.

Instinctively, the company around him kept reaching for their cell phones, stopping short as they remembered the explosions that had rendered them useless.

“Ha, ha.” They glanced sheepishly at each other, shrugged and tried to laugh it off. “We rely on these things too much.”

“Yeah. My whole life is on my cell phone.”

“I’m going to miss that little guy.”

“Me too!”

Gone were the days when people memorised strings of

digits for phone numbers or used cameras to record family events. You didn't need to when your cell phone was your memory.

How would they manage to survive without constant communication and digital technology?

Now Andrew Gray reached for his cell phone. He wanted to call Lucy and Elizabeth. He looked sadly at the charred metal shell of a smart phone. The latest model, had cost well over a thousand dollars. He sighed and told himself not to worry. At least his wife and daughter were both safe inside the White House; but when he asked Jeffrey Palmer, his chief of staff, if his family could join him in the POEC, he learned it wasn't permitted.

"Don't worry, Mr President. Once we get inside the bunker, you'll be able to use electricity. We have our own generator. We'll sort everything out. You'll see."

Andrew slipped his dilapidated new phone back into his pocket and spread his lips into a broad smile.

"Sure," he said. He patted Jeffrey's arm in what he hoped was an encouraging manner. "Everything will be just fine. This is just some temporary power cut."

"Yes, sir. You never know with these things. It might be an April Fools' prank."

"Yes, of course."

Except it was August not April, and no one had sent an explanation.

Well, they couldn't could they if there was no electrical communication?

In most countries, a bunker would be provided for Royal Families and Heads of States. Their lives were more precious than those of the electorate or the societies they served. The status quo must prevail. Being forced to use a bunker was an

unprecedented occurrence in modern times, but a necessity under the current circumstances.

Andrew reached into his other pocket and retrieved a phial of pills. His ulcer was playing up as usual. He felt a sharp pain in his stomach and tasted the familiar acid reflux as it rose from his throat.

Coughing, he asked for a glass of water, and felt a pang of indignation as his request was refused.

“As soon as we get inside the bunker, sir,” Jeffrey Palmer said.

Andrew frowned and glanced across at the Vice President, William Campbell. Overweight and unfit, William mopped at his large red face and brow with a white handkerchief. Just then, the Director of the CIA, tall blond Carl Evans approached with the news they had been waiting for.

“They’re ready for us now. Mr President. Follow me.”

Somehow the company fell into line behind him and David Clarke, the National Security Adviser, with the President following close behind.

“No dawdling please!”

They marched in procession through the winding corridors. There was silence except for the sound of their footsteps thudding on the soft carpet, and the annoying squeak from the President’s new shoes. This forced a few grins from the more junior assistants who were intrigued and excited at the prospect of entering the President’s secret bunker. The rest of the company remained grim and stony-faced.

At last they descended several flights of stairs and arrived at a pair of reinforced metal doors.

Everyone looked nervously at each other, twitching and licking their lips, wishing they were somewhere else, trying to

make sense of it all

The security guards undid the locks and everyone was searched before their palm and finger prints were checked on the entry pads. Some tossed away their mobile devices. The electronics had completely burnt out. Others held onto them, stoically believing that they could be repaired.

At last everyone had entered. The heavy doors clanged shut and were locked.

The main chamber resembled a normal sort of conference room with a long wooden table down the centre, surrounded by chairs. Each place had a name-card and a file with pens and papers and even an iPad for their use.

“This is amazing,” William Campbell observed as he seated himself next to the President and activated an iPad. “We have plenty of electrical devices here.”

“And there are landline phones here.” David Clarke opened the desk-drawers as he spoke to show some secret compartments.. “So we have communications, electricity, food and water. Later on I’ll show you the bathrooms and sleeping rooms.”

Jeffrey Palmer handed the President a cup of water.

“Sir, I think we should start the meeting now,” he said.

Andrew nodded in agreement, clicked open his phial and swallowed a couple of pills. The whole situation seemed surreal as he stared at the familiar and strained grey faces of his companions.

He rose and cleared his throat. “Good afternoon. As you know we are in a state of emergency. We are not sure whether to give priority to the Satellite or our Space Stations. The NSA and the CIA will advise us. There is talk that this might be a nuclear threat. Or it might be an act of terrorism. At this stage, we just don’t know. What we do know, is that all

electrical devices from fridges, to phones, to electric cars and circuitry of any kind has been affected. Our whole country is without power...”

The fluorescent ceiling lights started flickering and suddenly the room was thrown into darkness— an utter complete darkness which would only be found in a windowless dungeon or an underground bunker beneath the White House.

“Don’t worry,” Carl Evans said. “We have another back up.”

A moment later the room was flooded with light. Everyone sighed with relief.

“Never fear.” President Andrew Gray tried to keep a tone of reassurance in his voice. “Everything is under control. Let’s...”

BANG! The room shot back into darkness.

“Hell! What we gonna do now?”

Someone tried the doors.

“We’re locked in.”

“And locked down!”

“There are no more back-ups. That’s it, folks.”

They heard the striking of a match. A single candle flame shone in the darkness.

“And then there was light,” Jeffrey Palmer said.

Nobody laughed.

chapter three

Kay Hannah

MARIA DURAN HELD UP her hand to stop the meeting.

“Can anyone else hear that?”

The small group of environmental protection officers seated round the polished table stopped talking to listen.

“Call John Cole”

“Call John Cole”

Aides were running in the corridor outside, shouting at each other.

“Where’s John Cole?”

“They need John Cole”

There was a thump on door and it flung open to reveal a sweating middle aged man in a too-tight pale grey suit. He glared at them, and rushed off.

Maria made a fake alarm face.

“Who’s John Cole?” she asked her colleagues, “he sure must be important”

“He’s the Secret Service Head of ... “

The reply faltered away. Overhead, the electric lights flickered, dimmed and went out. The windowless meeting

room on third floor of the White House was now gloomy, and suddenly chill. Before anyone could speak, there sounded a series of sharp pings and buzzes. Everyone grabbed their phones, a few people frowned.

“That’s odd”

“My phone’s off”

“Mine too”

Maria looked at the clock over the door.

13.07pm.

Less than a mile away, John Cole sat in the passenger seat of the Ford Hybrid stuck at red lights. His phone had abruptly cut off. On the other end of the line was Alex Wilson, Head of Homeland Security who had been telling him, in very unladylike terms, to ‘get his fucking ass to the West Wing Situation Room *now*’

If the situation hadn’t been so strange, Cole would have laughed. Alex Wilson was a petite, elegant black woman, always impeccably dressed and known for her enthusiastic evangelical christianity. Cole would put good money down on a bet that Wilson had never sworn in her life before this.

Cole realised the car wasn’t moving. He looked over at the driver who was already getting out to look at the engine. He noticed the other cars at the junction had also stopped. The traffic lights were out too.

John Cole, USA’s Head of Secret Service Detail, had been on his treadmill at home when the calls started coming in. He was still wearing his dark blue track suit and running shoes. He left the driver with the car, and set off at a steady jog across the White House lawns.

Maria kept to the wall as she pushed her way down the

crowded corridor towards the small office she used when on site. The power had come back on, and she had wrapped up the meeting, quickly reiterating which environmental threat protocols should be tightly adhered to. She knew they were solid, she had written them herself over her several years as Head of USA's Environmental Protection. As she pushed open her office door, the lights went out again. Maria felt that this time, it was permanent. She didn't bother checking her phone or laptop.

There was a change of clothes in the small private washroom. Maria took off her business suit then slipped into camouflage trousers and shirt, all terrain boots, and tied a khaki sweatshirt around her waist. She checked a zipped pocket in the trousers. The pistol was there in its holder, heavy and comforting.

Cole pushed his way through the staff exiting the building. The electric lights were off and some people were helping each other climb over the security gates. The Security staff snapped to attention when they saw Cole.

"We've been told to evacuate the whole building" A stocky guard with fists like baseballs spoke hurriedly. "To get everyone out as quickly as possible. Then we have to shut everything down. Only Senior ministers in, and all below ground." He named a Operational Codeword familiar to Cole.

"How long before the backup power kicks in?" Cole asked. He needed immediate access to the Gun Rooms and they were behind electronic locks.

The Security Guard looked at Cole.

"Sir," he said, "They are saying all of Washington is out. Maybe the whole country. It isn't just the White House."

This situation was unprecedented but Cole had practiced

the protocols many times. His only priority now was to take personal care of President Gray. Whoever the President was with, Cole as Head of Secret Service took priority immediately.

A woman tripped and pushed against the stocky guard, he caught her and she apologised. Behind her, a man swore. People were beginning to get agitated.

Maria filled several water bottles from the tap in the washroom, and shoved them into a small rucksack with her lunch box.

As well as her job in Environmental Protection, Maria sat on a secret committee. It was so secret it wasn't even known to the President or his Aides, in fact, it was deliberately hidden from President Gray and his Aides. At least those of them known to be under his complete influence.

This secret committee had been formed by Maria's father in 1952, the first year that strange lights had appeared in the skies over Washington DC. The remit was to factually record activity, to gather witness accounts and to develop a contact protocol. Maria had spent her life preparing for this time. She rolled a chair to the window, took her seat and looked out. It was 3pm. The sun was past its zenith, and streaks of pale gold were appearing amongst the still bright, glaring blue. On the far horizon, flares of acid green light curled up, looped, dropped, then swelled again.

Ever stronger, and ever closer.

"At last you're here!" Alex Wilson looked like she wanted to hug him. Cole acknowledged her, then turned to see who else was present. Michelle, Dan, Alice, several Cabinet members and senior officials sat around the Operations Table but none

from Security. All told, maybe only thirty staffers. Some were in business clothes. Others like him in casual wear, clearly called in from home. All looked at him expectantly. Cole frowned, the Situation Room ought to be packed out, even without power, everyone should meet here. Apart from the East Wing PEOC that was designed to be used as a last resort, it was the most secure suite in the White House.

Lying deep underground beneath the West Wing, the Situation Room comprised 5000 feet of high tech operational and communications equipment that was kept fully maintained at all times. It was designed to safely house the President no matter what threats came from abroad, or the country internally. Like the PEOC, it was secure against biological threats, as well as warfare and was stocked with months of supplies. Where the PEOC was designed to primarily protect, the Situation Room was fully operational so the President could guide and lead his country out of danger.

It looked very odd now, almost pitch black, with no lights or equipment on. The air was stifling with no air conditioning running. The only light came from candles and a few hand wound torches that had been found.

“Where is Gray?”

Cole barked the question.

“I assume Clarke and Evans and their teams are with him, but he needs to get down here”

Cole looked at Alex.

“Where is he, Alex?”

Cole joined the uniformed officers at the door of the PEOC. He held a handful of glowsticks high so he could see their faces. There was no hope in them. They had been trying to break through the sealed door for nearly three hours now. At

13.00 hours, the President has taken a phone call. No one knew who from, or what was said. At 13.08, one minute after the first power break, the President had gathered five staff, his Vice President, Chief of Staff, Director of the CIA, National Security Advisor, the Chair of Joint Chiefs, and taken them down the secret route to the PEOC, where he had taken them all in and sealed the door behind them. When the power went out for the second time, the electronic security systems failed completely, and all communications stopped. It was impossible to know if there was any light, or even air inside. It was impossible to know whether President Gray was alive or dead. It was impossible to know whether President Gray had intended suicide, or whether he was saving a precious few.

What did seem possible, in fact increasingly evident, was that President Gray had no intention of trying to help the Country he served ; he had turned his back on his country when it faced its greatest threat ever.

Cole returned to the Situations Room. One by one they fell silent. The Head of This, The Director of That, the Chief of What Not, and the several Principal Officers of Who Cares Anyway. None of them, not one of the most important people in America had even the slightest idea what to do next. Despite years of planning, arguing, talking, talking and more talking, not a single one of them had anything to offer. Together they just looked like a bedraggled and anxious group of tourists lost in a foreign city.

He took a candle and cupping his hand around the flame, left the room and made his way to the stairway.

He climbed the stairs and padded down the now empty corridors, his soft running shoes barely made a sound.

He passed open doors to empty offices, some left neatly,

others with papers strewn everywhere and open laptops, their occupants clearly bolted in a panic.

Then near the next stairwell, he saw the office was not empty like the others. A woman sat by the window, looking out. She was young, wearing camouflage gear and had pulled her hair back into a pony tail. Cole joined her. It was not quite dark and half the sky was grey with a pale crescent moon and faint stars sparkling softly. The other side was filled with swathes of acid green light, swirling to pus yellow, darker green, blood red, and back to acid again. The movement and colours made Cole nauseous and he looked down. Beside him, Maria watched the display with shining eyes.

“Its so beautiful,” she said, “Don’t you think so?”

Cole laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Come away,” he gently pulled her round to face him. She didn’t resist.

He took her hand and led her from the office. They kept their hands clinging tightly together as they left the White House unseen by human eyes, by a back gate. There was a tingle in the air. Cole felt the hairs on his arms lift and prickle. He could hear - no not hear, *sense* – he could sense a muted hum all around them, a vibration that also carried a scent of energy, electricity, the smell of an electrical storm brewing.

They walked over the perfectly kept lawn where just a few hours earlier, Cole had jogged cheerfully across, confident there was no security problem he couldn’t help to solve.

Suddenly, shockingly, deafening noise

crack, crack, thwomp

a shotgun

pistol?

gunshot

GUNSHOTS

chapter four

Jeanette Everson

The man stood on the street corner and shook his phone again, then cursed quietly and stuffed it back into his pocket.

Across the street, two teenage girls did something similar. Bent over their phones, they pressed buttons, shook the phones, glanced at each other and muttered something no one else could hear. Each bent again, gave their phone a sharp shake, looked up, and shrugged at each other. Simultaneously, they shook their heads and flicked their hair back over their shoulders, before darting out into the deserted street towards Peet's, phones still clasped in manicured hands.

In Peet's, they would be disappointed, as there, the spotty-faced student from the counter had just stepped out into the street, wiped sticky hands on a coffee-smeared apron and was now holding his phone to the sky as if searching for a better signal. He too, sighed, swore, and muttered a frustrated greeting to the girls as he held the door open for them to enter.

“Power’s out, whaddya want? Can give you anything you

want so long as it's cold or already made.”

The girls giggled into the gloom of the interior, “Nah, don't worry then,” and left again.

Further back, in the dim innards of the coffee shop, two of the three seated customers pressed buttons on their phones, and struck up the awkward conversation of strangers caught in a situation.

“Yours off too?”

The middle-aged suit nodded assent. A grunt. “Yeah. Must be a cell tower out, with the shortage.” He tried to sound as if he knew what he meant. The twenty-something in the light summer blouse nodded, before scooping up her bag, tossing down some loose change beside her empty coffee cup, and clacking her heels across the short distance to the exit. The third customer did not look up from his newspaper, feigning oblivion to either the problem or the conversation. *Bloody phones*, he thought, determinedly maintaining the pretence of reading a newspaper it was too dark to see clearly now. A wedge of sunlight momentarily highlighted a patch of scuffed linoleum in a vibrant orange. The brightness faded as quick as it had come as the door swung shut again. The lino reverted to its usual shade of dirty footsteps and spilled coffee, and the girl teetered away.

Pennsylvania Avenue was quieter than normal. The twenty-something in the blouse stood, undecided, at the junction. The roads, usually light on traffic at this time of day, were almost entirely free from traffic. She looked up from her unresponsive phone, alerted by the silence. *Light traffic, normal. No traffic, odd. Nice, but odd.* A solitary cyclist freewheeled towards the centre of his lane, a smile stretching across his face as he relished the lack of competition. How pleasant it was to stray away from the curb without fear of delivery vans cutting him off or

tipping him into the gutter. His smile widened and he gave the girl a cheery wave. She didn't wave back. The only other movement in the road was a pair of taxi drivers, now out of their vehicles, and calling bewildered greetings to each other as they closed the short distance between them. Their respective car doors hung open, and the girl realised that there was not one single moving car within either eyesight or earshot. *Weird*. Usually when the power went down, the district would echo with the cry of alarms, sounding off in fury in response to their interrupted connection. Now, though, there was nothing. *Definitely weird*. A prickle raised the hairs on her arms, despite the heat of the sun. The only sounds were the gentle clink of a flag's rope against its pole, moving softly in the faintest of breezes; the barely audible hiss of the bicycle tyres on asphalt as the cyclist pedalled on, and the two men's voices carrying clear across to her from the opposite carriageway. She looked at her phone once more, then strode determinedly towards the taxi drivers. The clock on the building behind them showed seven minutes past one, although she felt it must be a good ten after than that. It had, she knew, been exactly 1.05pm when she had rejected the call from her office in favour of the barista slopping her latte down in front of her, just moments before the power went out.

Further out, in a tower block in the residential district to the southeast of the city, neighbours stepped out of their homes and took faltering steps up to front doors of people they would only occasionally wave at. In unavoidable situations, such as inconveniently arriving at their doors at the same time, or waiting for the lift together, they may mumble "how're you?" without looking up, but generally, social interactions were rare around here. The old man at number 23b crossed

the landing in 2 strides to rap tentatively on the door of number 25, but even as he raised his fist, the door swung open. Both spoke at once, and although neither listened, their answers were the same, “It’s not just the electric; my phone’s off too. Nothing works.” Shrugging, they made the unspoken decision to turn towards the lifts, then as one, they chuckled self-consciously, swung around, and made for the stairs instead.

Outside, other neighbours had gathered in the tarmacked stretch— the building details called it ‘car parking’ but in reality it held no more than two cars up on blocks; a half-filled skip, and some clumps of parched grass poking through the cracks— an impromptu street party in the sun, without food or bunting.

They stood, mingling, almost neighbourly: “spect it’ll be back on in a minute.” “Lovely weather.” “You lived here long, have you?” (*Eighteen bloody years*, he thought to himself.) “I’ve some lemonade in the fridge, who wants some?”

It wasn’t a sound that caused them to stop the small talk and look up— perhaps a slight shift in the air, or a glimpse of the unusual in someone’s peripheral vision, but after a sudden exclamation— no one could say who from, after— one by one, the little group turned to the east and watched in horror in mutual understanding that a plane’s descent should not be silent. Usually— everyone knew but no one said— the noise from the jet engines would tear through the air and rattle the crockery on their tables as planes made their descent over their building, flying onwards towards Regan airport on the far side of the river. Being directly under the flightpath was what made this area a hair’s breadth more affordable, and although each one of them was fully aware of the air traffic noise, it had become so normal they almost forgot it.

“It’ll clear us,” one man volunteered— an offering of hope to drop into the stunned group. They followed the silently-gliding aeroplane, craning necks as it passed overhead, until they lost sight of it beyond other buildings. A collective exhale rippled through them, although it was some moments before the silence was broken by speech.

“Maybe he’ll be able to bring it in safely, with it being so low? It’ll get to the airfield, at least, so they’ll be ready for it,” someone finally suggested, but without real conviction.

Back towards the capitol, and with the sun a few fractions lower in the sky, the clock on the Old Post Office Pavilion also showed a static and silent 13.07, but the streets had become busier.

Up in the clock tower, a tourist couple looked down onto a steady pattern of antlike creatures closing in towards the government buildings, or the mayor’s office, or somewhere around that area. Honeymooners, first time in the capital, they didn’t know which building was which, couldn’t make head nor tail of the shitty little tourist map the daft cow on reception had insisted they take. Didn’t even know which way they were facing, truth be told. They’d already been up here a while, an hour or two, probably, but had spent the majority of that time making out, turned on by the dizzying heights, or thoughts of being discovered, or by being the only visitors up here this lunchtime, who knows what excuse they needed— They are young and in love, aren’t they? It was only now, that they had finally drawn apart from each other, slightly breathless, patting down and straightening each other’s clothes, giggling like school kids that they agreed they might as well see the view, now that they had, er, seen the view...

From the ground, people saw the honeymooners’ antlike

army as what they really were: armed police, hurrying in twos and threes, occasionally a foursome, a six, or at one intersection of main streets, even a cluster of nine, as they drew nearer to their destination. It was not an easy progress, as by now, pedestrians, shop keepers, bar tenders, and office workers had spilled onto the streets. For every step the officers took forward, their passage was aborted by an arm on their sleeve, a person in their path, questions that began as curious, light-hearted even – “What’s going on?” “Has something happened?” but grew to higher panic the further on the clocks would have ticked if only they had been ticking at all.

Police officers, trying to remain calm, also became increasingly short with the enquirers.

“Probably just an outage, be back on before you know it.”

“It’s fine, madam, don’t worry, we’re dealing with it.”

“We don’t know, we’re going to find out.”

“Stay in your buildings.”

“Go back inside.”

“We are trying to find out, but we have lost communication. We don’t know.”

“Yes, we are going to the bloody White House, someone there will know what’s going on, now get out of the bloody way, *Madam*.”

As the words became less reassuring, their patience ebbing and their panic rising, so too did the tone of their answers. Professional training could not stop the slight rise to their voices, or the tremor in their words, and by the time the sun was dipping into an orange sky and plummeting towards the river, some had even inadvertently shoved the odd passer-by quite roughly, in response to yet another question that could not yet be answered.

The eerie silence was broken occasionally, by what people would describe wonderingly as fireworks, explosions, bombs, or planes, unless they were those unfortunate enough to have witnessed the exact cause— these people had far greater cause for panic, for they knew for sure that the noise, the flash of fire, plume of smoke, whatever, was indeed from a plane landing awkwardly on the edges of the runway, bouncing twice, then bursting into a fireball, or another that had landed in a still more catastrophic condition, next to a school 20 miles from the airport.

Other, more localised noises rose from the clamouring, hammering, and rising voices from the unfortunate few trapped in an increasingly airless subway train, or from those running, rushing, pushing, as they clambered over each other in their haste to get up from the underground entrapment of the stations, or the subway carriage from which a pair of office workers had managed to prise an exit by pulling apart the doors with more brute force than they knew they possessed.

Without discussion or logical planning, many of the city's workforce gave up waiting for a restoration of power at what they judged to be a reasonable amount of time, and left their workplace. Reasonable time, of course, varied, according to dedication to the work – government officials, lawyers, waited longer, for example, than the student waiters in the Hard Rock Café, or the underpaid cashiers in the newsagents or convenience stores, but in most workplaces the grumbling about a long walk home on a hot summer's day was almost universal.

Anyone who paid even a cursory idea of the patterns of the sun in August would have guessed that it was roughly 6pm before the first looting began. With hindsight, the gaggle of teenagers from a rougher area in the southernmost tip of DC

would wish that they had raided a food store. Unfortunately, in the excitement of the moment and the knowledge that they would not get caught (“No CCTV, right,” they laughed, nudging each other) they eschewed the food stores and went for what they short-sightedly thought would be the valuables. With all that happened afterwards, throwing a half-brick through the un-alarmed window of the electrical goods store and grabbing the biggest TV they could each carry, and a couple of laptops balanced precariously atop for good measure, hardly seemed sensible. As the sun set further, the liquor stores were the next to fall victim to those who were yet to understand that this may not be *just a temporary blip in the power supply of the city*, as one solitary police officer had been overheard saying.

Officer Bradshaw had in fact said this to a bewildered old lady whom he had discovered standing at a road junction, too afraid to cross because the traffic lights were out.

“You never do know when one of those juggernauts might come around the corner, or a young hooligan on a motorbike,” the poor dear had dithered to the policeman, as she moved her laden carrier to her other arm and jostled her walking stick menacingly toward the imagined offenders. Still confident in the imminent restoration of power, Officer Bradshaw had simply offered his arm and customary patience and escorted her across. He refrained from asking her if she had noticed that not a single vehicle had moved in the neighbourhood for several hours, and noted what a wonderful day it was, with the sun so warm. In gratitude, she had offered him a cookie from the already opened package in her plastic carrier, which he accepted gratefully, wishing aloud for a cup of tea to quench his increasing thirst.

The old lady chuckled softly as she caught herself midway

through offering, “Oh no, I am losing my marbles, Officer, there’ll be no way to boil the kettle... in my day we’d have had them old gas stoves and I’ve have whipped you up a cuppa without a bother but my son has it stashed away in the attic and my old bones aren’t what they used to be and I ain’t climbing up there after it, an’ I’d be askin’ you to pop up there an’ fetch it down, but what’s to say it won’t all be fixed and up and running back to normal just as soon as you have it done an’ I bet that dear Tom has it just about fixed already... would you believe I knew that lad when he was just a wee boy, and now he’s our mayor, god bless his mother, she’d be so proud —”

The policeman, having escorted her safely to her front door, cut her off. He did this not by voicing his query as to how Thomas Owen could fix a power cut that was clearly a larger fault than usual to have taken the phones out with it. He also didn’t voice the thought that followed that one— whether the President was in fact the one on the case seeing as it must be major, or still holed up in a hotel somewhere in Indy... *he should’ve paid more attention, was the bloke home yesterday, or still off and away campaigning? Dammit it’s this lack of attention that don’t get me promoted and has me still helping old ladies over the street...*

What he said aloud was “Have you some candles, love?” as he mentally ransacked his own kitchen drawers wondering if he should find some from somewhere on his way home or if they already had some; *better call the missus*. He was halfway to his pocket before he remembered the phones were down, but retrieved his mobile to check it anyway. Still off. Luckily, the heat was going from the day, and his shift would be over soon... *sunset at about twenty to eight, this time of year, so I’ll know well enough when the day is over...* after an 8-8 twelve-hour shift, he’d be ready for some cold beer on the porch. His mind

wandered again, as he imagined himself in a rocker in the quiet summer evening, enjoying the darkness for a change. It wasn't often they got to watch the stars, here in the suburbs of the city. *Maybe it would turn romantic... must be ages since the last time they'd got amorous, what with being married 26 years or so...*

The old lady interrupted his meanderings once more, and he realised she'd been wittering on about something for the past few minutes, *no idea what...* She patted him on the arm, and stood on the stoop to wave him off, before turning into the house in search of the candles she'd assured him she kept handy for "Just such purposes Officer Bradshaw, don't you worry about me, sure wasn't I born in wartime, I can just about live through anything I should think."

As he walked away, he automatically reached for his radio, but for the umpteenth time since being directed out to patrol the area shortly after the power cut, he made no contact with his station. The nagging feeling that not only were the phones and the city's power crippled, but also that it couldn't be coincidence that the radios also wouldn't function, and that cars were abandoned where they'd stopped, threatened to come back into the forefront of his mind. He shook his head and forced his thoughts back to his wife, the porch, the beer... Stretching out his back, and flexing his neck, he turned towards the station.

"If I walk steady, I'll be there in time to check out for the day," he said to a scrawny cat mewling from a patch of dry grass. "A quick handover and a brisk hour's walk if the car still won't start, should be home before full dark." The cat turned its back, disinterested. "Don't envy the night shift, what with all the lights out everywhere. I guess it mightn't be fixed till morning now." He bent to pet it, but it slinked away into the long dark shadows thrown by a pair of overflowing rubbish

bins.

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

Cindy Pinch

"WITH NO WORD FROM the White House, we have to assume the worst." Captain Giles gripped the sides of his podium as he looked over his assembled officers. "It is up to us to keep our citizens safe by any means necessary. Mayor Owen has issued a shelter-in-place order. Unfortunately, that seems to have caused more panic than anything. I'm dividing the city into quadrants. You will be in charge of keeping the peace in your quadrant."

A young officer raised his hand. The captain acknowledged him with a nod.

"How will we keep the peace if people aren't in their homes?"

"By using," the captain rubbed his temples before looking back at the officer. "By using any means necessary."

Roberta paced her office floor. She had been pacing for so long she was surprised she hadn't left an indent in the plush blue carpet. Sunlight streamed in through the large window, illuminating the various souvenirs from her travels.

Owen had put her in a tough spot. But not one she couldn't squeeze out of. She just had to find a loophole. She was, after all, the next in the chain of command. A frown darkened her face as she thought of the report she'd received. The president might only be trapped but trapped was as good as dead if they couldn't get him out. Her pace quickened as guilt heated her face.

A knock on the door made her pause. She turned towards it as it opened a crack and her assistant, Sara, poked in her head.

"Ma'am?"

Roberta gestured for her to enter.

"Mayor Owen is here to see you."

Roberta rubbed her temple, exhaustion making her eyelids heavy.

"Take him to the conference room. I'll be there in five. Oh," Roberta raised a hand. "And get Mike in there. He's better at negotiating than I am."

The conference room was a narrow room three doors down from Roberta's office. The fact that she sent them there told Thomas that she was scared. He might have admired her power move under different circumstances. As it was, he only felt annoyed. But two could play that game, he thought as he took the high backed chair at the head of the table. He wove his fingers together and put them behind his head, leaning back in the chair. Propping his feet up on the edge of the conference table, he waited for Roberta to arrive.

Though her assistant had promised she'd arrive in five minutes, Roberta made him wait nearly forty-five. By the time she entered, his patience was exasperated and anger had taken it's place. Her assistant sat at a chair in the middle of the table.

And a man, Thomas recognized as Mike Lambourgh sat next to her. Lambourgh was an environmentalist who had caused several riots with his so called peaceful protests. Despite dozens of arrests, he'd somehow found a home on Roberta's team.

"Mayor Owen, good to see you." Roberta smiled without warmth. "I've considered your offer."

Thomas leaned forward, elbows on the table.

"And what do you think?" He asked, pulling his sideways smirk that had won him several hearts.

Roberta ignored him as she shuffled a stack of papers she'd brought in.

"You are very eloquent Mayor Owen." She said. "I have to admit that, after reading your proposal, I can see how you won your office. However, I didn't reach the position I hold by bowing down to every man who could sweet talk. I have to decline your offer. And as you know, the succession rules state that I am the next in line for control. Since I refuse to back down, I guess you could say we're at an impasse."

Derek's palms were sweaty as he stood on the sidewalk in front of General's General. The drugstore was built some thirty years ago and it's red paint had long ago faded to pink. He switched his pistol to his right hand as he wiped his left on his pants.

"Careful with that D." His partner, Greg, said.

"It's just so damn humid." Derek said, placing the gun back in his left.

The August heat rose off the pavement in waves, blurring the horizon. Derek could feel the sweat rolling down his back and pooling in his waistband under his bullet proof jacket and uniform. Greg's face was red and his blonde hair was damp.

"How long have they been in there anyway?"

"Long enough." Greg checked his watch. "Man, I keep forgetting. But I'd guess a little more than an hour."

"How much more time do they need? We have deliveries to make." Derek's frustration riddled his voice.

"Go check on them. Maybe they lost track of time."

Derek cursed as he made his way to the door of the store. He yanked it open and stepped in and waited for the air conditioned air to whisk away the sweat from his skin. He cursed again as he remembered that was no longer an option. Irrationally, he worried how they'd stay warm in the treacherous Maryland winter.

"Johnny," he called into the shadows. "Fredrick? We've got to go guys."

Faint laughter echoed through the store and hushed whispers spoke rapidly. Derek found the officers in the snack aisle, chip bags and soda cans littered the floor around them.

"What are you guys doing?" Derek squinted in the darkness.

"You made it." Johnny shouted as if Derek were across the room rather than two feet away.

Johnny rose to his feet from his place on the floor and gave Derek a hug. Derek froze at the sudden contact and then anger flashed through him as he smelled the alcohol on Johnny's breath.

"Dammnit guys. Have you been drinking this whole time?"

"Not the whole time." Johnny said. "We've only had a couple. We took a break. They've had us delivering food for three days straight now."

"We deserve it after all of this. Here. Have one." Frederick thrust a can at Derek.

"We're on duty." Disgust filled Derek's chest with anger.

"Take a look around dude." Frederick threw his arms wide and gestured at the near empty shelves. "The rules are moot. This isn't society anymore, it's survival."

"We're police officers." Derek's voice was firm.

"Not anymore. Now we're just errand boys for the few people left in charge. The only reason we're not locked in our homes like the rest of the population is because they need to make them believe that they have a solution. It's a facade. For all we know the world ended and we're all that's left. So I say we just enjoy ourselves while we can."

"It's our job to keep people safe. Especially when things go south. We vowed to protect and serve at all times, not just when it's convenient. Not just when the world seems to already be in order."

"Look dude, you can join us if you want." Frederick was frowning now. "But if you still want to play cop like you're some savior of the people, then keep following orders like a good sheep but leave me out of it. I'm done. We stopped being officers the second the world went down."

Frederick grabbed the badge from his uniform and ripped it from his chest. The sound of the fabric tearing echoed as loud as any gunshot in Derek's ears. He tightened his grip on his pistol as he raised his left arm.

"Get out." He struggled to keep his voice even.

"Hey man, you're not gonna shoot us." Johnny backed away from him, hands up in front of his chest.

"Get out." Derek repeated.

"No." Frederick crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Don't make me do this man." Derek said, raw emotion tightened in his chest.

"That's the point. No one is making you do anything. They can't. Not anymore."

"You know our orders Frederick."

"Seriously? Forget the orders Derek. Get what you need for your family and go hide out somewhere. It's not worth it."

"I'm sorry." Derek's vision blurred as his eyes filled with tears.

He furiously blinked them away as he tightened his aim on Frederick.

"Leave now. Please."

Roberta glared at Mayor Owen. His playboy arrogance had gotten under her skin long before the world turned upside down. She'd voted for his opponent and prided herself on speaking against him any time she could.

"With all due respect Mayor, I cannot in good conscience turn the country over to you."

"And with all due respect Madame Speaker," Owen practically spit her title at her. "You may have a higher rank but you have zero experience leading anybody, let alone the country. Tell me, how will you handle the riots. What about the looters? Or the injured. There are so many moving parts. The country needs someone with experience if it's going to survive."

Deep down, Roberta knew he was right but he wasn't the best option even with all of his experience. Quick footsteps echoed down the hall and the door burst open. Captain Giles burst in, eyes frantic, chest heaving.

"Mayor Owen, Madame Speaker," he nodded his head to each of them respectively. "There's been an incident. Well, several actually."

"Explain." The mayor rose from his chair, concern etched on his face.

"Two officers were shot this afternoon. It appears that

they looted a grocery store when they were supposed to be gathering supplies for the citizens. One of the officers on duty with them shot them according to their orders when they refused to leave."

"What orders?" Roberta asked.

"They were ordered to shoot any looters, ma'am." Captain Giles looked at his feet.

"Whose orders?"

"Mine, ma'am."

Roberta cursed.

"You said there were several incidents?" Owen said.

"Unfortunately the officers who were shot are not the only ones who have forgotten their oaths. Not all of them were caught by those still loyal to the badge."

The captain let out a sob and Owen quickly closed the distance, patting him on the back.

"It's all my fault. I shouldn't have given them such a harsh order."

"This is not your fault, Giles. You couldn't have predicted this. No one could. It'll be alright."

As the captain sobbed into the shoulder of the mayor, Roberta closed her eyes and took in a deep breath.

"I accept." She said. "The people need supplies. You're going to need all the help you can get."

The mayor nodded as he continued to console the grief stricken captain.

chapter seven

Shadow

FOURTEEN MONTHS WAS NOT long enough to get used to the darkness. Roberta Miguel sat on the little balcony of the apartment she'd appropriated and looked down at the parking lot where the husks of cars were still parked neatly within their allotted spaces.

Yearning for a menthol cigarette swept through her, though it had been years since she quit. I have Carlos to thank for that. But Carlos hadn't been concerned with her health. The money, the inconvenience, the appearance; all more important and immediate than some vague threat of cancer in a distant future. Did that future exist in some alternate timeline?

Roberta looked up at the stars, the full moon suspended between eternity and the city. Natural light was supposed to be so much better for the psyche. But as she stared off in the direction of the Washington Monument, she visualized the gentle light flooding up the base. The things you miss. The sounds of car horns and sirens. When she had been a freshman congresswoman a decade ago, Ralph Burton (R-ND)

had complained about not being able to sleep.

“Get used to it,” she’d said. “The district is never quiet.”

Famous last words.

Intrusive thoughts of business threatened her serenity. Tomorrow, she should go to the National Mall but she knew, already, that she wouldn’t. Instead, she would bike over to the Youth Garden before ending up at the Capitol Columns, her impromptu office this past summer. I’ll have to find a new spot. Not the Capitol. If she never saw another marble floor, that was just fine. Perhaps Irving would think of a suitable place. The former Sergeant at Arms of the House, and his peacekeeping force, were invaluable.

Sooner or later, we’ll have to institute a formal government.

And the people would look to her. Roberta remembered her mother brushing her wavy brown hair.

“Some day, Mijita, you will be President.”

Oh, Mami, but you never expected me to grow up to be James Madison.”

Without a clock, she could stay up all night and never even realize it. Only years of discipline forced her to her feet and back into the little apartment. Chilly. It might be days, rather than weeks, before she would have to move. Rodrigo was pushing for her to come back into the house he shared with several other families, a tiny Hispanic community that had sprung up in one of the abandoned Victorians that had fireplaces. A thought. But not a welcome thought. I have time to decide.

“Roberta! Come see the potatoes,” Raven Coleman gestured wildly from where she knelt in a row of plants that reached right up to the edge of the road. The botanist, wearing a

florescent pink sweatshirt that read, “What happens in Washington, Stays in Washington” greeted her.

“How’s the harvest?” Roberta asked.

“Good.” But there was no smile on Raven’s face. The genetically engineered vegetables being harvested now would form a staple through the winter that loomed ahead, but food was never not going to be a problem.

Packing more calories per person into any one crop didn’t solve the yearning for a large meal. Rationing people who still mourned the memory of “Super-sized” would never be popular. The portions rationed out each day might be generous from an objective standpoint, but there was no way to please everyone. There never has been.

“We should get enough to make it easier through the winter.” Raven started to run a soiled hand over her head, then grimaced, letting it drop.

“But?”

The other woman’s lips tightened. The mocha face betrayed little emotion, the distress was in her eyes. “I’m not one to tell tales, Madame Speaker.”

Nodding, Roberta averted her gaze, staring at the dull chrome of the handlebars of the ten-speed. This was a recurring problem. Once Roberta had been third in line to run the country. Now, although everyone knew there was no United States anymore, they looked to her to coordinate the community effort to survive. Efforts by others to seize control of the people had been squashed, but they were a long way away from anything resembling democracy.

“Raven, this isn’t a grade school. Your problem is everyone’s problem.” If she said that once, she said it a hundred times a day and it wasn’t the first time Raven had heard Roberta’s truism. When did I become my mother?

Roberta met Raven's gaze and smiled encouragement.

Taking a deep, slow breath before speaking, Raven said, "It's Craig."

What more needed to be said?

Craig Fischer was a sixty-seven-year-old, white, Republican Congressman from Wyoming who had been the Minority Whip. While most of Congress had departed D.C. for greener pastures, Craig had insisted he was too old. A widower with no children, there was no reason for him to leave. But Roberta suspected there were reasons. Craig's was the loudest voice when ad hoc groups got together to discuss the future of the "government". Having no practical skills to contribute to survival in this new reality had not kept Craig from demanding that he hold a position he considered "important". Irving had quickly dismissed him from the peacekeepers when Craig demanded he be furnished with a firearm and then demonstrated his inability to hit the broad side of a warehouse. Privately, Irving told her that the other men and women in the little band that handled security found the vertically challenged Craig to be an insufferable bully when he wasn't being a bore. After that, he'd been sent to the National Mall to be a farmer, a milker, and then a soup-stirrer. Now, Craig's tenth assignment put him in Raven's charge, working in the Youth Garden planting the fall crops of cabbage and broccoli.

"I'll deal with him," Roberta assured her friend.

"It's nothing personal," Raven said. "I would give him something else to do, but we can't afford any mistakes and we need people to pull weeds."

No one rational would believe that the old political rivalries of before would be driving work assignments. But no doubt, Craig was probably convinced of it.

“I am not failing to do my work.”

Whereas most of the people Roberta met on her rounds through the community found their fashions in abandoned gift shops, Craig was dressed as if he was going to a Town Hall, complete with tie. A shirt and tie, to pull weeds!

“Craig, I’m not suggesting you’re failing. My understanding is you’re not doing anything. You have to do something to fail at it.”

Pot-belly all-but-gone from the past year of hardship, Craig’s clothes hung limply on his frame. But there was no evolution evident in the red flush that spread over his cheeks. Roberta might as well be watching him on C-SPAN as he prepared to pontificate at the House lectern.

“Please,” she held up a hand, palm out to forestall him. “I’m not interested in an argument, Craig.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you,” he spat. Ears back, he was more like a rabid dog than an enraged ex-Congressman. “Assigning me to weed plants.”

“It’s an honest job.” Roberta winced as she heard her own words. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Talk about the pot calling the kettle black,” Craig responded.

“Look, whatever Raven needs you to do, you have to do it.”

“Or what?”

That’s new. Roberta tried to force herself to take stock of Craig in a way she normally eschewed. Same worn shirt, tie. Brooks Brothers from head to toe. But the set of his shoulders were stiff in a way she hadn’t seen in a long time. His tell for when he was planning trouble.

“If you want to share in the bounty of the community, you

have to contribute. You know that, Craig.”

There were few rules that it was possible, or even preferable, to enforce but this was the one that was inviolate. Unless age or sickness directly precluded contribution, there was no room for dead weight. And, sadly, few of the people with legitimate claims to that exemption had made it through last winter.

“You think you’re in charge.” Malice gleamed in Craig’s dark eyes. “But no one put you in charge, Roberta. This is still America. I’m still a free man. And I’m not going to pull weeds in the field just because you think it’s entertaining to have me, literally, on my knees.”

When Roberta was three, her older brother, Martin, had stolen a toy car from another boy at school. Papa had beat him on his bottom with a belt. Listening to her parents arguing later that night, her mother weeping, Roberta now heard her father’s voice in her mind. I have to stop this now. Permanently. If there are no consequences, how will he learn?

“You won’t do the work?” she asked Craig.

If he were a more perceptive man, he might have shown alarm at her tone. But emotions had never been Craig’s strong point. “No. I’m not going to do menial labor. I’m an educated man. I can serve some function more in line with my background.”

Roberta snorted. “We don’t need bills written, Craig. We need weeds pulled. Either you’re willing to do what I’m asking you to do, or you’re not.”

There wasn’t even a pause before he answered. “I’m not. I won’t be doing any job you assign me. I’m a free man, and this is a free country.”

“All right.” Roberta made sure to meet his gaze and hold it. “That’s your choice. But I will let Raven know that when the

rations come in today, you don't get any.”

How quickly the red indignance could fade into pallor. “You can't do that.”

“I just did.” Roberta told him.

The Capitol Columns in the center of the Arboretum was the hub of what passed for government these days. Andrea Carmichael, once on the short list to be a Supreme Court Justice, ran a small mediation practice from one corner next to where someone had set up a folding table for Roberta. A flea-market-like atmosphere of barter and conversation filled the little platform, spilling down the sides of the small mound. Given its central location, the memorial had been a natural choice for people working out of the Arboretum to gather.

The one thing I don't miss is paperwork. Roberta sank into the folding chair beside her “desk” with a sigh. No briefcases, no bulging binders. Just the messenger bag she kept slung over her back when she was on the bike. Now she let it drop to the stones beside the table.

The platform was quiet. Sparsely populated in the fading light. In the far corner, a teen holding a pair of boots was in deep debate with another who stood beside a small stack of denim. Irrationally, she suddenly missed the sound of a crowd. Though she liked working outdoors, had never loved the crowding of the Capitol, she still wasn't used to the new “normal”.

“Trick or treat,” Andrea said, settling into the chair across from Roberta.

Andrea was the thinnest white woman Roberta had ever met. The thinnest and the whitest, even to her hair which was a pure white the former judge kept cropped close to her head in a fashion that used to be reserved for the military.

“Is it Halloween?” Roberta asked. Where had the days gone?

“All day.” The judge smiled. At seventy-two, she was as agile as Roberta was at forty-seven.

This was the nightly check-in. The two women sat quietly in the dusk, listening to the sounds of insects coming from the woods not far from the platform. Roberta watched Irving make his way up the steps, noticing the set of his shoulders, the scowl on his face. Not good news then. Bad news from the leader of the peacekeepers was just that, bad.

“Happy Halloween,” Andrea offered as Irving approached.

Nodding, Irving barely spared her a glance. Roberta straightened in her chair, feeling the air of authority take over her body.

Irving’s crew tended towards camouflage, there being no shortage of that in the district. From the start he had eschewed any formal uniforms while insisting that his group dress in a similar fashion so they could be identified on sight. Behind him trailed Craig Fischer, flanked by two of Irving’s peacekeepers, taking mincing steps in his cowboy boots.

“What’s going on?” Roberta asked.

Irving gestured at Craig. “He stole two bags of beans from the garden storage.”

“I have as much right to eat as anyone,” Craig protested loudly.

This was it then. The confrontation.

Though the amount of people on the platform was sparse, there were plenty within earshot. Roberta felt more than saw a small group of people arriving behind Craig. Supporters perhaps. The teens in the corner, along with everyone else, had stopped their bargaining to watch the drama.

Consciously, Roberta raised her voice to ensure it would

carry. “I told you that you wouldn’t be entitled to any rations unless you contributed.”

“And who put you in charge?” A hint of a smile graced the edge of Craig’s lips. This kind of confrontation was what he lived for. No doubt he thought this would be like a debate on the House floor.

“No one is in charge,” Roberta said loudly. Refusing to take her gaze from Craig’s face, she was nonetheless aware of the mood of the others who were present. They were waiting. Anticipation in the air like at the beginning of a sporting event.

Whatever Roberta did, the entire community would hear of it. And they would all live with it. In a way no bill had ever done, this conversation would set the tone for the community from this point forward.

“No one is in charge,” Roberta said. “But everyone has to do their share. You refused to work; therefore you have no right to enjoy the fruits of other people’s labors.”

Craig straightened. “You’re the one who has no right. No right to say who gets to eat and who goes hungry.”

“Until you do your share, you won’t get rations.” Roberta said, rising to her feet.

More stragglers were arriving on the platform, conversation dying as they became aware of the spectacle. The sounds of nature seemed incredible loud in the absence of human noise.

Craig was aware of the attention, most likely reveling in it. “I say again, what right do you have to give orders?”

Andrea had not shifted in her chair. The judge was watching Roberta and when she saw the Speaker glance down, she dipped her chin just a fraction of an inch in encouragement. Do it, Roberta interpreted that to mean. And really, what choice did she have?

“You won’t contribute to the community?” she asked Craig.

His voice, like hers, was pitched for everyone to hear. “If by that you mean I won’t submit to your rule, then you’re right. I damn well won’t.”

Leaving a moment of silence was critical. Everyone had to take in what Craig was saying before she passed judgement.

“If you won’t give, you can’t take.” Keep the words small. Fourth grade reading level or lower. “We can’t have you stealing from the people. We all need to work together now, especially with winter coming.”

Craig’s minions gave off an air of uncertainty. There were nods from onlookers. The politics of before were completely obsolete.

“You don’t run this community,” Craig said.

But I do. The thought was uncomfortable but not foreign. “If you won’t contribute, then you have to leave.”

Some of the crowd portrayed shock, but most didn’t react. Craig frowned as if he were trying to calculate the political outcome of her pronouncement. Poor Craig. In some ways, he had never left the floor of the House.

“Irving, are there any carts around?”

The Sergeant at Arms nodded.

“In that case, I want you to escort Mr. Fischer out of the district.” Craig’s mouth dropped open but she left him no time to speak. “I’m sorry, Craig. If you won’t give, you can’t take.”

Nodding to Irving, Roberta sat back down in her plastic chair. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Andrea give her a nod of approval.

“You can’t do this!” The flush was back on Craig’s face.

Irving nodded assent and turned to Craig. “Come on.”

“You can’t do this!” Tie askew, Craig moved towards

Roberta, his fists balled. The peacekeepers beside him each grabbed a linen-clad arm, clamping down when he tried to shrug them off. “Let me go! You can’t do this!”

As they dragged him from the platform, Roberta looked at the little cluster of minions standing nearby. Eight white men with mostly uniform expressions of alarm. But there was no rebellion in that group. Fair-weather friends. Eager to push the issue if Craig had succeeded, now they retreated, disappearing into the gloom.

“Good job,” Andrea softly congratulated her.

“I hope I haven’t made a mistake.” Craig’s protests were becoming faint as Irving and his force moved out of hearing.

“It’s not easy passing judgement,” Andrea said. “But it’s necessary.”

chapter eight

G.B. Retallack

DR. PRIYANKA MEHTA'S ALARM clock went off at 6:45AM, as it had for decades. She didn't need it, since a pre-dawn rhapsody of birdsong had awoken her nearly an hour earlier. Prior to the Great Event last summer, she hadn't registered that there were any birds at all in Washington, but in the preternatural quiet that had reigned ever since, they were the noisiest thing around. Apart from the alarm clock, of course, which was an entirely mechanical model she'd brought from Mumbai to remind her of home. Ironically, in these times with neither electricity nor battery power, it was one of the few things that still worked. She treasured it all the more for that.

She shut the alarm, got up, and moved over to the nightstand. An old-fashioned pitcher and ewer provided the only means of washing up at this point, and she finished her ablutions quickly. Most days, she worked from home, exchanging whatever medical help she could in exchange for food and laundry, or anything else, even if she didn't need it. She could always give it to someone who did. In any case, it was Monday, and on Mondays and Thursdays Priyanka went

down to the Mall and set up an impromptu clinic on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. With temperatures likely to reach 90 degrees, Priyanka threw on a plain white cotton blouse and slacks, and pattered downstairs.

Stepan was already in the kitchen and served her up a simple breakfast of eggs, toast, and jam. With that and a mug of coffee under her belt, Priyanka went to the front hall and checked the big duffle bag to ensure it contained all the necessary supplies. It was far too heavy for her, but there was no point doing the clinic without it. Fortunately, there was solid, quiet Stepan to carry the load. She couldn't help smiling at him as he shouldered the bag and led the way out into the warm Washington morning.

The walk to the Mall of the Americas took less than half an hour, and they emerged halfway between the two great memorials that punctuated its length. They automatically turned towards the Lincoln Memorial, but Stepan suddenly stopped and cocked his head, frowning. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Priyanka asked. Then she heard it too, faint and far away, but unmistakably a cry for help. They looked at each other in silent query, then turned as one and headed off towards the source of the noise. The closer they got to the Washington Memorial, the louder it became, and they accelerated from a fast walk to a run. Soon enough they caught sight of a dozen or more people clustered together — a startling large crowd in this empty city. Most of the bystanders stood motionless, staring, but one or two were turning slowly in place, calling for help in desperate, resigned voices. Disconcertingly, a horse drawn cart loaded with bulging flour bags stood off to one side, an anachronism that was rapidly becoming normal once again.

When they reached the perimeter of the gathering,

Priyanka got a clear look between the bodies at what was holding their attention — an African-American child lying motionless on the pavement, surrounded by a spreading scarlet halo. A shirtless man, presumably the girl's father, knelt beside the still form, holding a sodden T-shirt to her head and wailing wordlessly.

Priyanka pushed her way through the gawkers, repeating "Excuse me. I'm a doctor. Excuse me," until she reached the child's side, Stepan trailing in her wake. She dropped to her knees beside the small, still body and felt for a pulse. It was strong but racing dangerously. She registered the gray cast to the girl's skin and put a hand on her forehead. Cool, almost cold. Whatever else might be wrong with her, the little girl had already lost a lot of blood. Fortunately, a quick palpation suggested there were no broken bones or obvious internal injuries. Priyanka patted the ground beside her, and Stepan dutifully deposited the duffle as indicated.

As Priyanka rummaged through the bag for the supplies she wanted first, she shot a glance at the weeping man across from her. "Are you her father?" she asked. He nodded. "All right. I'm going to need your help, but first I want you to take a few deep breaths, in and out, slowly. Can you do that?" He nodded again and tried to breathe as instructed. Priyanka looked up at Stepan. "Can you check that head wound for me, please?" He nodded and crouched down, gently removing the father's hands from the bloody T-shirt and peeling it away. Satisfied that Stepan had it under control, Priyanka turned her attention to the circle of faces around them. "Can anyone tell me what happened?"

"It were my fault," said a deep voice. A stocky young man stepped forward. He wore jeans and an eye-watering Hawaiian shirt, and was methodically strangling the blue baseball cap in

his hands. “Name’s Mike. I come in to deliver flour to the bakeries, you know, and maybe came around the Finger a bit fast like and the little one tore out in front of Martha and she like, she...,” he broke off and started sobbing.

“It’s all right,” Priyanka reassured him. “It was an accident.” It was an automatic response. She frankly didn’t care if it was an accident or not. All that mattered was saving the victim if she could. “Stepan?” she asked.

“It’s not good, Pri,” he replied quietly. She looked over and saw what he meant. Amalia had a six-inch gash across her forehead, still oozing blood. That was the new first order of business. She rinsed the wound with two bottles of sterile water, followed by a disinfectant. Then she Superglued the edges shut, added a strip of surgical tape to hold it down, followed by a clean cloth.

She returned her attention to the distraught father. He seemed to have regained some self-control, although tears still coursed freely down his face. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Ellis,” he said, then nodded at the child on the ground. “And that there’s my baby girl, Amalia.”

“Do you know what Amalia’s blood type is, Ellis?”

He shook his head again and gazed at her wide-eyed. Priyanka sighed inwardly. She was going to have to go old-school on this one. She handed Stepan a pen and notebook with instructions to document the blood type of anyone in the crowd who already knew it. Then she extracted the Eldon blood typing kit and processed a sample of Amalia’s blood, grimacing when she saw the result.

“What’s the matter?” Ellis asked anxiously.

“Nothing. I’d hoped Amalia would have the most common blood type, but she is A-negative.”

“Is that a problem?”

She shook her head no, although it certainly could be a major problem. A-negative was comparatively rare and could only be transfused with more of the same or with O-negative, also not common. With only a dozen or so potential donors, the odds were not good. Hoping against hope, she repeated the test on Ellis himself. No go. He was AB-negative, possibly the worst possible candidate for transfusion.

Priyanka's hopes lifted when Stepan returned with the results of his survey but were quickly dashed. Nobody was a decent match, and only a few remained to test. She reset the testing kit and stood up. "Can everyone who doesn't know their blood type please step forward. I'll test each of you in turn. Thank you."

One by one, she tested them, refreshing the kit in between, and one by one the results came back, useless. She had almost decided to take the unthinkable risk of using an A-positive donor when Stepan nudged her and pointed to a man standing a little away from the others. "He hasn't been tested," he said.

"Is that so?" Priyanka said, already striding towards the man in question. He was tall, whiplash trim, and wore what looked like an original Confederate jacket, probably stolen from the Smithsonian.

"Hey, buddy," she called. "You deaf or something We need to get blood types from everyone, including you."

"I don't got to do what you say, you Paki bitch!" he snarled.

"I'm an American bitch," Priyanka replied evenly, "and yes you do. Both President Gray and the mayor passed laws requiring all citizens to give blood when asked by a medical professional."

"Oh yeah? Are they here too? Maybe if they ask nice, I'll do it. Oh wait. That's right — them fat pricks all ran away a year ago, dint they? Too good to stick it out with the rest of

us. So frankly, *ma'am*, I don't give diddly-squat about their laws. Besides, you're prob'ly not even a real doctor anyway."

"Yes she is," said Stepan, stepping in front of the man. He lifted his voice so everyone could hear him. "And I think you're just afraid to do it, that's all. Can't stand the sight of blood, maybe? Needles scare you?" There were a few titters of nervous laughter. Not much, but enough."

"I ain't afraid of nuttin," the guy spat and stepped closer to Stepan. "And I sure as hell ain't afraid of a pussy like you."

"Let it go, Stepan," Priyanka said, placing a hand on her friend's arm. "He's not worth it."

"Maybe not," said a new voice, "but that little tyke is." Mike the cart driver pushed through the crowd to stand beside Stepan. "And this prick's going to get tested, one way or another."

The tall hoodlum started to say something but stopped when another man stepped forward, followed by two more. He was surrounded and outnumbered, but Priyanka figured there was no way a guy like him was going to run away. She was right. After a tense moment, he shrugged and thrust his hand at her. "Hell with it. Just do it so's I can get out of here."

Priyanka needed no further urging. She set about preparing a new sampling kit as fast as she safely could. She talked to him absently, as if that might prevent him from taking off. His name, she discovered was Alvin, and she heard Stepan's snort of suppressed laughter at the admission. By then the test was ready. She pricked Alvin's finger and deposited a sample of blood on each test strip, holding her breath. When the result came up, she stared at it for a moment in disbelief. Against all odds, the jerk was A-negative. The best possible donor for Amalia. She looked up at him with a smile.

"So, what's the good news?" he asked. "Can I go?"

“Well, it may not be good news for you, but you, my friend, are a match.”

Alvin squinted suspiciously at her. “OK. So what?”

“So we need to take your blood and give it to Amalia.”

“What! No friggin’ way.”

Priyanka lost her patience. “Oh, for God’s sake, don’t be such a baby. It doesn’t take long, and it won’t hurt, but it just might save someone’s life. So, suck it up and stop whining.”

Amazingly, he did shut up, shucking off his jacket and shirt, and thrusting a well-muscled arm at her. Moving quickly, she swabbed his elbow, applied the tourniquet and inserted a catheter. Once the blood started to flow, she took one end of the collection tube from Stepan and inserted it. Moments later, the collection bag started to fill with the precious whole blood that Amalia desperately needed. When it was somewhat over halfway full, Priyanka figured she had enough to supply a small child. With Stepan holding the bag aloft, she inserted another catheter in Amalia’s arm, and waited impatiently as the bag emptied.

After an eternity, Amalia stirred and immediately started to scream. It clearly terrified Ellis, but to Priyanka’s ears it was pure music. She pulled out a precious vial of morphine and injected half of it into Amalia. In moments, the girl fell silent and fell asleep.

“I’m afraid that’s about all I can do for her,” Priyanka said. “The best thing now is for you to take her home, replace the cloth regularly, and monitor her for any signs of fever or infection. Our friend Mike here will check in every day,” she continued, raising an eyebrow at the carter, “won’t you, Mike?”

“Absolutely,” Mike said fervently. “Let’s get her loaded up on the wagon. I’ll get the two of you home safe.”

“Oh, crap!” Ellis suddenly exclaimed, “how’m I going to

explain this to her mama?”

“Don’t you worry none about that,” Mike grinned. “She can wale on me all she likes. Least I can do.”

A few minutes later they were gone, and the crowd dispersed, leaving Priyanka and Stepan alone in the echoing mall.

“Pretty nice afternoon,” Stepan observed, hunkering down beside her. “But you look like shit.”

“No doubt. But I feel pretty good.” She tilted her face to the warmth of the August sun, and laughed at the joyous chatter of the birds.

chapter nine

Ritsa Bowie

OLIVER KELLY STRODE WITH purpose along the hard black asphalt of Pennsylvania Avenue. He had a spring in his step despite his weary body, his legs sore from days of walking the hard surface of Route 66. All the time travelling west, through Amish country where the people were finally at peace, to their destination here at the end of the road.

Bright early morning sunshine glinted sharply off the iconic White House building looming ahead of him. Kelly squinted into the sunlight. He could make out a sign pointing up a curved path to his left. It read ‘White House Visitor Centre’.

Kelly glanced back to the group of friends accompanying him on this journey. “Wait here.” he said, smiling with his crinkly eyes at the woman called Rachel. Rachel returned his gaze as she pulled to stop the big chestnut horse hitched to one of the heavily laden carts making up their travelling show. The rest of the small group shuffled to a halt, backpacks thudding to the ground.

Making his way up the manicured path, Kelly could see a

man dressed in a blue suit with a red tie. The red headed man was running his hands through his hair and fidgeting with a lanyard that was round his neck as Kelly approached the now defunct automatic entrance doors. Once upon a time everyone had a lanyard. Not anymore.

“Why, hello there! Welcome to the White House!” the man boomed in an overly friendly Southern drawl. “Is this your first time to the White House? You probably recognise me from television but let me introduce myself in person. Yes, I am Karl Bailey. I am the White House Press Secretary.”

Karl Bailey beamed a perfect pearly-white smile and extended his hand in greeting.

Kelly looked at the battered but official looking lanyard swinging loose around Karl’s generous girth. Karl’s lanyard confirmed he had indeed been the White House Press Secretary. Kelly also noticed with a grin that Karl’s official position title had been upgraded by marker pen. Karl was also the Director of First Impressions.

“Have you come to see the White House?” Karl asked as Kelly shook his hand.

“Actually, I have come to see the President,” replied Kelly. “It’s important. I have important information that I know he will want.”

Karl was crestfallen. “Oh. Well. Mr President doesn’t see visitors. Have you tried to write him a letter? He doesn’t read very well, but he has someone to do that for him. I used to do that for him. I used to be on TV. All the time I was on TV. Do you remember me? Surely you must have seen a press briefing on CNN or FOX before? I was known as Ballsy Bailey. Best briefings ever. Everyone said so. Do you remember me?”

Kelly grimaced. “I am sorry. I don’t remember you. I just

really need to see the President. It's critical. Perhaps you can help me talk to the President?"

Karl stared blankly into the middle distance. "Karl, can you help me? Please?" Kelly prompted.

"Oh. Yeah. Sure. You gotta see Roberta. Roberta Miguel. She's the one in charge here. You'll find her at the Lincoln Memorial."

Karl wedged open the dead automatic doors with his elbow and disappeared inside the dark and empty visitor centre. Kelly turned, and ran back down the path.

As the group marched quickly now towards the memorial they noticed more and more people walking in the same direction. Several people had old iPhones adorning their outfits like precious treasures on show. One woman even had an iPhone in her hair. Oliver exchanged a raised eyebrow with Rachel.

A voice from behind called, "Hey pretty lady. You want a ride? How 'bout I give you a ride and you give me a ride?" A pedicab pulled up alongside, the driver smirking under a blue baseball cap emblazoned with the slogan 'Be Best' as he peddled slowly.

Rachel snorted. "Come on dude. Cut it out. We're on our way to the Lincoln Memorial – is it far?" she asked.

"Not far, just past Kinko's the barber and take a left. Everyone will be headed that way – it's where the market is. If you change your mind about the ride, just look out for Be Best," he laughed as he rode off.

The group drew some stares from the locals as they made their way up the Mall to the Washington Monument. The group of 10 men and women looked out of place, leading horses pulling carts with what was obviously very heavy machinery on board.

The farmers trading market was in full swing as they made their way through, wooden tables laden with produce radiating out from the base of the concrete spire. A shoe repairer called out to potential customers while a barber applied hair wax to the gravity-defying bouffant of an elderly gentleman customer.

The group paused as they came upon a class of middle-school-aged children, sitting on the grass listening to their teacher. Kelly heard the teacher say in a sad voice “yes, and that was the day the music died.”

The group pressed on.

Reaching the Lincoln Memorial, Kelly again left his friends to wait. They had begun to attract even more attention and Rachel smiled nervously as people began to gather around the horses and carts pointing at the machinery. Kelly went alone up the steps through the columns towards the statue of Abraham Lincoln seated in his grand granite chair.

He joined a line of people. “Is this the line to see Roberta?” he asked the woman in front of him.

Before she could reply, there was a commotion in the line ahead. Kelly heard a man’s raised voice “I am not leaving her here. She comes with me everywhere. I can’t leave her – she won’t be here when I get back!” A man was attempting to drag his pedicab up the memorial steps in the line with him. But it had rolled backwards, knocking into a man in the line who had in turn tripped backwards onto the person on the step below creating a domino effect.

“What’s going on?” a voice called from further up the line.

“Oh, Roberta,” said the man yelled back in reply. “I am sorry but you know I have to bring Betsy with me. I can’t leave her at the bottom of the steps. She’ll be stolen!”

Roberta! Kelly took his chance. He left his place in the line and raced up the steps. A middle-aged Hispanic woman with

shoulder length brown hair was seated at a trestle table at the head of the line.

Roberta looked up from writing on a Kinko's brand Post It note with a startled expression. Kelly noticed she was using a pencil with a White House shaped eraser.

“Ballsy Bailey sent me,” Kelly blurted. “Ah, I mean, I have some critical information. I need to speak with you. It’s urgent. Please Roberta, can we talk?”

“Are you with the wagons circled down there?” she asked Kelly, waving her arm towards Rachel and his friends below.

“Yes. That’s what I need to talk to you about. I believe I know what happened.”

“Really, you know what happened? What happened about what?” she said dismissively, looking down again at her Post Its.

“I have an explanation for what happened to the electricity. I know why the power grid and all electronic devices went down. I know what caused all electric power to go out. And I want to work to restore it. I believe I can.”

Roberta snapped her head backwards as she breathed in sharply. “Leave now,” she told Kelly in a calm and quiet voice. “When I am done here I will meet you at the top of the Reflecting Pool.”

Kelly was disappointed, but he didn’t want to blow his next opportunity with Roberta. “OK,” he said, “we will be waiting for you.” Slowly he turned and descended the steps.

Roberta looked at the young woman standing to her right and rolled her eyes.

Kelly and his friends circled the wagons at the Reflecting Pool as Roberta had instructed. While they waited, they led the tired horses to the water but they couldn’t make them drink.

After about an hour of waiting, Roberta and an offsider

arrived.

“So, tell me what you want,” Roberta asked calmly and directly while looking around at the assembled group. “But, you oughtta know, we have heard it all before. The last thing people around here need is more false hope.”

“I have come to talk to you about The Event – I think I know what caused it, and I know how to fix it. I almost have everything I need,” Kelly pointed to the loaded wooden carts, “ But I need help to put it together. I need people who are good with their hands. At least 100 of them.”

Roberta looked at him quizzically. “Go on,” she said.

“I believe it was a phenomenon called a Carrington Event that caused the massive power collapse. It’s a huge solar storm that creates a magnetic disturbance large enough to fry anything with wiring. We’ve had one before – back in 1859. It’s named after the astronomer Richard Carrington who first saw it.”

“How do you know about this?” asked Roberta, her nostrils flaring. “Why should we believe you?”

“Because,” said Kelly, “I read about it in the Encyclopaedia Britannica.”

There was a collective intake of breath. The many people now gathered were astonished. Shock and awe showed on their faces.

“Right,” said Roberta, “I know just what to do.” Turning to her offsider, she said “Carmen, go and find David Clarke. You know the guy, pointy headed goof, used to be a National Security Advisor. He usually stands around the entrance to the Library of Congress, hassling people. Anyway, ask him to look up ‘Carrington Event’, in the Single Source of Truth. Got it?”

Carmen nodded and hurried off.

Roberta turned once again to the small group. “There’s not too many copies of the Encyclopaedia Britannica left about. Don’t let David Clarke catch you with it. He’ll probably arrest you.” she smiled.

Then turning to face Kelly head on she leaned in and said “If this checks out, I’ll meet you at the Ulysses S. Grant Memorial at 5pm. OK? Don’t bring the entourage.”

5pm – Ulysses S. Grant Memorial

The sun was setting behind the statue of Ulysses S. Grant, casting a long shadow across the white marble steps on which Kelly was waiting. He shivered, feeling a momentary pang of jealousy for his crew. They’d managed to pull the horses and wagons into a deserted car park building and were presently gathered around a garbage can fire, toasting the last of Rachel’s secret hoard of marshmallows.

He turned up what was left of his jacket collar. Perhaps he’d see if he could find a new jacket in one of the gift shops. He’d passed The Museum of The Bible on his way here, and they seemed to have a little stock left. A warm coat would be very welcome this winter, even if it did have a quote from Ephesians across the back.

“Mr Kelly?” a disembodied voice called. Roberta Miguel emerged from behind one of the bronze lions guarding the monument. “Ah, there you are!” she said. “Let’s go, they’re waiting for you in Committee Room Four.” And with that, she turned and headed for The Capitol.

“Who’s waiting?” asked Kelly, jogging to catch up. Boy, for a small woman, she sure could walk fast!

“The man in charge, and his cronies,” she answered, casting him a sarcastic glance. “That’s who you wanted to see, right?”

They arrived at Committee Room Four remarkably quickly. Roberta looked tidy and calm. Kelly was puffing from the exertion of running up several flights of stairs to keep up with her. Carmen was pacing outside the huge mahogany double doors, looking worried. When she saw them, she let out a sigh of relief. “They’ve just finished debating the bailout package for the airlines,” she whispered. “You’re up next.”

“The airlines?” whispered Kelly. “Surely they’re done for after all those planes fell out of the sky.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” hissed Roberta. “But the chairman of United is a close personal friend of the Vice President’s. They’ve decided United should take over big tobacco. Smoking business is going great, and Phillip Morris is sadly short of a CEO, since he fell out of the sky in a United plane.” Kelly wasn’t quite sure, but he thought he saw the glimmer of a smile at the corner of Roberta’s lips.

There was shuffling and scraping heard from behind the big doors. Roberta pulled Kelly to one side, put both her hands on his shoulders and her forehead against his. “Look, just stick to asking for what you need.” She whispered urgently. “Speak loudly – most of them can’t hear well. And definitely don’t mention...”

Just then the huge mahogany doors swung open and a trio of middle aged men emerged, laughing, slapping each other on the back, and shaking hands. They were amazingly well dressed in pressed blue suits, with red ties and gold tie pins. Roberta immediately let go of Kelly’s shoulders and stood calmly by his side.

“Wait, what were you going to say?” he said as they walked in.

“Never mind,” she said. “Remember to speak loudly.”

They entered a very stately room. Directly opposite the

doors were two enormous windows, swathed in blue velvet curtains. In between the windows was a carved dais, with three tiered rows of mahogany benches curving in a semicircle. Each seat at the benches had a set of headphones, a microphone, and a name plate. Most of these seats were unoccupied. About a dozen or so people sat dispersed across the top row. In the centre, directly underneath an ornate carving of a bald eagle sat a blow-up effigy of Andrew Gray, President of the United States.

Kelly, Roberta and Carmen were motioned to take a seat at a ramshackle trestle table on the floor level of the room. From there they had to crane their necks to see the people seated in the top tier.

Roberta stood to speak. As she did, a few of the assembled committee put on their headphones and leaned forward towards their microphones.

“Mr Vice-President, members of the District of Columbia Recovery Committee...”

“Speak up!” bellowed the man seated to the right of the blow-up President. His name plate identified him as William Campbell, Vice President. Kelly had never seen him before. ‘But then again, who does see Vice Presidents?’ he reasoned.

“Sir, if you remove the headphones you’ll be able to hear me,” yelled Roberta.

“No way! I won’t be able to understand anything you say without them!”

Some members of the committee shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Most notably the three men at the very end of the bench to the left of the inflatable President. They wore straw hats, grey jackets and shirts fastened right to the top. All three men sported full beards without moustaches. They looked... Amish!

“Sir,” Roberta persisted, “I’m speaking English, and the translator headphones don’t work anyway!” The Vice President had cautiously lifted one ear of his headphones.

“Alright then,” he said, taking them off, then leaning very close to his microphone, “Proceed.”

Roberta sighed quietly, then began. “Mr Vice President, members of the District of Columbia Recovery Committee. I wish to introduce you to Mr Oliver Kelly, who has come to us with a very interesting proposition.” She sat down, motioning Oliver to stand and speak.

Kelly introduced himself and explained his theory of what caused The Event, including the Carrington Event, just as he had done earlier to Roberta. He explained the resources he would need to execute his plan.

When he’d finished, the Vice President leaned forward to speak into his microphone.

“How can we be sure this isn’t fake news?”

Roberta stood. “Sir, you don’t need to speak into the microphone. They don’t work. We’ve checked with the Single Source of Truth – the story of the Carrington Effect is true.”

The Vice President turned to his right and bellowed “Janice!” A young man wearing an Abraham Lincoln sweatshirt and Smithsonian baseball cap shuffled into the room from a side door.

“You’re not Janice!” yelled the Vice President.

“No sir. Janice left about six months ago to go back home to Ohio. I’m James. I’m your Private Secretary now.”

The Vice President swivelled slowly in his chair. “I don’t like James. I’m going to call you Janice, OK? Janice, go and Google the Carrington Event will you.”

“But sir...” sputtered James, “Google doesn’t...”

“Just do it!” spat the Vice President. “Old Janice never gave me this kind of shit!”

“Yes sir,” sighed James dejectedly. He turned and left the way he had come in.

The Vice President turned to face the front again, and leaned forward smiling to speak into his microphone. “So, while Janice is fact checking, are there any questions from the committee?”

One of the Amish men stood. “Excuse me, Mr... er... Oliver. What if we are not wanting to go back to the way it was before?”

“Listen, Zabidiah,” the Vice President said, speaking again into his microphone, “You’ve been very helpful with all the advice about how to grow shit and what to do when you can’t watch television. But we need the television back. So sit your ass down!”

The Amish man sat down, and exchanged weary looks with his companions.

“Ummm... Mr Kelly,” trilled an overweight woman with a bouffant hairdo. “When you say you need people who are good with their hands... Ummm, I hope you’re not intending to take Carson from the Kinko’s on Capitol Hill. He’s the only one that’s mastered the coalfired bellows to give me my blow dry each week!” Her hand written nameplate identified her as Candy Merryweather, Committee Secretary.

Kelly eyed her hair. One side was markedly more puffy than the other, and there was a poorly covered singed patch above her left ear.

“No Madam Secretary. I think we can do without Carson on this occasion.”

“Ahem...”, the man seated directly to the left of the blow-up President cleared his throat, “Councillor Rigby Pill,

representing the L G B T Q I V X Y community of the District of Columbia. I do hope you plan to have a diverse team working on your thing-a-me?”

Kelly turned to Roberta - he was lost. Roberta stood. “We were planning to ask Wilson to join the team Councillor... as long as you can spare him. You’ve always said he’s good with his hands.”

Councillor Pill smiled, and nodded imperceptibly to Roberta.

Now, ladies and gentlemen of the Committee, I think we should take a vote on whether we agree to provide Mr Kelly with the manpower he’s asked for,” said Roberta authoritatively. “Everybody, write either Yay or Nay on your Kinko’s Post Its. Please, don’t mess it up, they’re in very short supply! I’ll come around and collect your slips.”

After collecting all the voting slips, including one that had mysteriously appeared in front of the inflatable President (although the penmanship bore an uncanny resemblance to the Vice President’s), she sat back down to count.

“Mr Vice President, members of the District of Columbia Recovery Committee. The ballots have been counted. Yay. Six votes. Nay. Five votes. The Yays have it!” There was a sprinkle of clapping, and a murmur of dissent from the Amish corner.

The Vice President leaned forward and spoke into his microphone. “Thank you for your time members of the committee. We’ll adjourn to the Oval Office now for our weekly drinks. Rigby, grab the President.”

chapter ten

Annie Percik

EVERYONE WAS WORKING SO hard. Kelly continued to be amazed by the response he'd received to his request for volunteers. He'd had to turn a lot of people away as there were only so many tasks he could assign and only so much space to work on the Capitol's electrical systems. Hope was a powerful motivator and these people hadn't had much of that in the last year. Kelly just prayed what he was selling them wasn't false.

"Hand me that screwdriver, would you? The one with the yellow handle."

The tool appeared in his field of vision before he'd even finished the words. He glanced over at his helper with a warm smile. Tabitha was eleven and had begged to be able to assist with the project. Kelly had made sure to check with her parents first and they seemed glad just to get her out from underfoot. With the proviso that her time with him wouldn't interfere with whatever schooling she was receiving, he had agreed.

Kelly had thought he might just be burdening himself with an unwanted child, but Tabitha had proved a valuable addition

to his team. She carried messages from one part of the building to another at high speed. She could fit into the smallest crawl spaces (where it was safe to do so, of course) and she was happy to sit by him for hours on end, handing him tools and listening to him explain what he was doing.

“See here?” he said now. She nodded, her eyes wide and bright. “This is where one of the main connections for the power supply has been broken. Luckily, I have just the right replacement part to fix it.”

He waved in the direction of his bag of electrical components. But, before he could explain what he needed, the exact right part arrived before his eyes. Kelly rocked back on his haunches and stared at Tabitha.

“How did you do that?”

She grinned at him. “Easy! I just picked out the piece that looks like the bit you’re working on. Only not black and jagged.”

Kelly gave a low whistle. “You’re a marvel, you know that?”

He wouldn’t have thought her smile could get any wider, but it did. She practically vibrated with pride at his praise. If only they could get the world back to normal, she might have a bright future. That thought brought him back to the task at hand and he turned his attention back to the fiddly task of replacing the burnt-out component.

Later in the day, Kelly did the rounds to check on the rest of the team, Tabitha close on his heels. The hardest part of the job had been tracking through all the wiring to identify where the problems were. After that, it was just the hard grind of finding and fitting replacement parts, completing extensive rewiring and repairing things where possible. Everyone had

been working as many hours as the light conditions allowed, as the mammoth task approached completion. Kelly could see anticipation in their eyes, where previously only weariness and dull despair had been present.

They were all eager to show him what they'd accomplished. Even adults, plenty of whom were considerably older than him, wanted external validation and he was happy to give it to them.

“Great work, Dipesh! Looks like that connection should be secure now. Hey, Valda, how's it going? You're doing a good job with that circuit. Keep that water coming, Jeff! Hydration is really important.”

A little praise went a long way and it didn't take much effort on Kelly's part to keep the team motivated and feeling valued.

The shadows in the entry hall were starting to lengthen. Soon, it would be too dark to carry on most of the work. But Kelly had an idea that it might be about time to test whether or not his grand experiment was going to be a success. Once he'd checked in with the last team member, he grabbed a lantern from the supply and lit the candle inside. He beckoned to Tabitha.

“Follow me, kid. I have a very important job for you.”

She took his hand and he led her to a door at the back of the chamber, which opened onto some stairs leading down.

“Where are we going?” Tabitha asked.

“To find out if I'm going to be the genius hero of all time, or if I'm going to have to make a run for it before the townsfolk hunt me down with pitchforks.”

“Huh?” Tabitha looked at him quizzically, but he just smiled and shook his head.

“Wait and see.”

They carried on down the stairs and along corridors until they reached the basement, or what Kelly considered the true heart of the building. This was where the back-up generators lived and where his fate would be decided. He pointed to a big orange button on the side of the bulky machinery, just visible in the shadowy depths of the room.

“Okay. Make or break time.” He took a deep breath. “Tabitha, press the button.”

“Me?” she squeaked.

“Yup! It’s all in your hands now.”

Tabitha skipped over to the generator, reached out, then hesitated. She glanced back over her shoulder at Kelly and he nodded with a strained smile, his chest tight. She rested her finger on the button, screwed her eyes tight shut, and pushed.

Outside, Roberta sat on the steps of the Capitol Building, looking out and along the Mall. The sun was steadily sinking towards the horizon. She used to love watching sunsets over the Lincoln Memorial, the colours spreading across the sky with the white monuments in the foreground. It was a beautiful sight that, only just over a year ago, would have filled her with a sense of peace and perspective in the mad world of Washington politics. Now, though, all it brought was dread. Another long night of almost unrelieved darkness, leading into another long day of people expecting her to know what to do.

How much longer could they go on as they were? Wasn’t anyone ever going to come and put things right? Well, to be fair, Oliver Kelly had come and he was trying to fix things. What Roberta really wanted to do was go inside and pester him for an update, but she knew she would just be getting in the way. She wasn’t sure how much confidence she had in Kelly and his grand plans, but she was grateful to him for

giving the residents something new to focus on. Even if it didn't come to anything, it had kept a fair few of them occupied for the last few days, and had been the topic on everyone's lips for just as long. If nothing else, it had given Roberta a small break from listening to their complaints and grievances.

But what was the likelihood that this stranger would really be able to achieve anything? Nobody really knew anything about him and he was annoyingly tight-lipped about his background and even his more recent experiences. Could he really bring power back to the Capitol?

As the thought formed in her mind, light poured down the steps around her, bringing her shadow into sharp relief. Roberta gasped and rose slowly to her feet, almost frightened to turn around, in case it was some kind of malicious illusion. She heard shouts and cheers from further down the Mall and figures started moving towards her. She spun round and blinked in the glare of the golden light that was streaming from the doors and windows of the Capitol Building.

Kelly and his team had done it!

Ahead of the inevitable crowd, Roberta jogged up the steps and entered the building, the light almost blinding her after 14 months of candles and oil lamps.

Down in the basement, Tabitha let out a squeal as the lights came on. She squinted over at Kelly, who grinned at her.

"You did it!" he said. "Now, come on. Let's go and meet your adoring public."

They made their way back up the stairs and emerged into the entry hall.

Kelly almost immediately staggered backwards a step as a figure launched itself at him and collided with him with some

force. He instinctively brought his arms up to embrace Robert Miguel, who was hugging him fiercely. After a moment, she stepped back and cleared her throat, straightening her jacket. She couldn't hide the wetness on her cheeks, though.

“Um, well done, Mr Kelly. Very good job.”

“You're welcome,” Kelly said, trying to suppress a smirk.

“How much functionality do we have?”

He gestured at their surroundings. “Well, lights, as you can see. And refrigeration should work, if nothing else. Communications will obviously depend on what is and isn't up and running elsewhere. But it's a start.”

Roberta's face cracked into a delighted smile. “It is indeed. How quickly can you repeat the achievement in other parts of the city?”

Her question was drowned out by the growing crowd of people pushing into the building from outside. As soon as they saw Kelly, they started cheering and applauding. He was quickly swamped by well-wishers slapping him on the back. He grabbed hold of Tabitha and hoisted her onto his shoulders. She was a bit big for that kind of manoeuvre but Kelly didn't care. He took her on a victory lap of the chamber, accepting high fives and congratulations as he went.

Questions about the next phase of restoring power could wait until tomorrow. Right now, he just wanted to enjoy the moment.

chapter eleven

Paddy Hall

ROBERTA SAT AND WATCHED the celebrations. It'd been a while since she'd seen people this happy; for the first time in about fourteen months, she could sense hope. People had set up tables in the street and were sharing food they'd prepared, singing and laughing together. She smiled to herself, families who – just a few days ago – would've been consumed with worry about what would come next, now dancing with each other as if nothing had ever changed.

“Roberta!” a voice called, she span her head around to catch Jess, a tallish woman carrying a plate of food which, from the distance, couldn't quite be made out. “Come join!” Roberta laughed and walked over, pausing to let a group of children playing tag pass. Jess placed the plate down on the table next to her and embraced her, tightly.

“Are you feeling okay?” Roberta asked.

“Better than I have been for a while, it's just a relief to see a working lightbulb for a change.”

“Tell me about it.” The two laughed, it'd been a while since things felt so carefree. Yet, something didn't quite sit right in

Roberta's stomach, she couldn't pinpoint what exactly but something about this Kelly character didn't quite add up to her.

Loud applause started behind her, flying down the street like a large wave. She squinted, trying to make out the figure walking down the road, followed by a small group of others, but she already had a glaring idea of who it might be. Surely enough, the blurry figure slowly faded into view, Oliver Kelly, surrounded by his team. He walked down the road, hand over heart, thanking his many applauders. Kelly stopped in his tracks as a young child, maybe nine or ten years old, walked out into the road to greet him. He bent down as the young child looked back at his mother, before offering him what looked like a cake of sorts. Kelly took the cake, ruffled his hair, and said something quietly to the kid, who smiled and ran back towards the crowd. Roberta wondered if Kelly was actually going anywhere, or if his walk was just an excuse to parade himself through the town, to lap up the affections of The District. Kelly turned around, catching Roberta's eye, he gave her a smile and waved, which she reciprocated. There was definitely something artificial about him, as if he was performing to everyone. The smiles, the waving, there was something like a politician about him, as if he was trying to win them over. He went back to greeting people, shaking hands, thanking them for their kind words.

"He seems to be enjoying himself," laughed Jess, still watching next to her.

"Well, he's definitely earned it," Roberta responded.

Roberta watched Kelly climb up onto the table and start beckoning for people to come and gather around. It was quieter now, the sky was dark, people were eager to hear what

he had to say and a small crowd began to form. A youngish man walked up to him with a satchel in his hands and passed it over to Kelly, who dramatically began opening it. Slowly, he took out a megaphone with a small box attached to it by a few wires. He flicked a switch on the side of the box, and then another on the megaphone, before slowly lifting it up to his mouth.

“It works!” he shouted! The listeners began clapping and cheering.

“People! People! I’d like to say something.”

They slowed their claps as silence swarmed over them again.

“Now, first of all I’d like to thank each and every one of you for the kindness you’ve shown me over the past few days. I understand that these are difficult, even dangerous times, but for you all to welcome me and my friends, all absolute strangers, into your midst’s is truly a testament to your good nature. I honestly cannot begin to tell you how thankful I am.” Another cheer erupts, Kelly grins and waits for them to die down.

“But of course, there are some people, in particular, that I’d like to thank for this effort. First of all, every single volunteer who helped us in restoring the power, I cannot thank you enough, and you,” he gestured to the audience, “shouldn’t stop thanking them anytime soon either.”

Another clap ensued, as Kelly soaked it in, still smiling, charismatic. “And then, I’d like to thank my wonderful team, who’ve been working on this breakthrough for months now. They’re new to you, but they’re good friends to me. In fact...” he paused for a moment, letting his words sink in, leaving the audience on tenterhooks, “Why don’t you all show your faces!”

He signalled to the group of people who accompanied him

and slowly, somewhat unsurely, they waved at the crowd. Kelly knelt down and put his hand on the shoulder of the young man who handed him his megaphone. "I don't think even they understand how talented they are." The young man smiled and bowed his head slightly, hiding a slight blush. "I'm very proud of you all."

A rock star. That's how they were treating him. Like some kind of celebrity on the red carpet of a premiere. Worse, actually. Like some kind of prophet. Roberta, despite her calm, felt somewhat disturbed. Was she the only person for whom he didn't sit right? She shook the thought from her head as he approached her.

"Roberta Miguel," he said, holding out a hand to shake, which she firmly grasped. "It's nice to see you here."

"I think we owe you a lot right now."

"You owe me nothing." He beamed at her, but she gave little in return.

"I've been meaning to ask you, actually, whereabouts are you from." She had to dig, now was the perfect chance. He cocked his head slightly.

"We're from all over, picked different people up while travelling."

"Travelling here?"

"Eventually."

"Why DC?" Kelly laughed in response.

"Centre of America, where else should we have headed? I'm sure you understand, Congresswoman Miguel."

Roberta smiled and nodded. "Well, I hope you've found what you're looking for."

The young man from earlier tapped Kelly on his shoulder and gestured to two parents with their child, the mother of

which was holding a Tupperware box filled with what looked like lasagne.

“Miss. Miguel, I’m sorry to cut this short but I think people are asking after me. I’d love to continue this another time?”

“I’d like that too.” Kelly held out his hand once more and shook hers.

“Lovely talking to you.” He turned away and walked towards the family, the father placed his hand on Kelly’s shoulder and gave him tight hug. Roberta looked away, catching the eye of the young man who seemed to be assisting him. She gave him a small wave and beckoned him over.

“Hello, ma’am,” he said, somewhat timidly in a rather strong Chicago accent, offering his hand to shake. Roberta accepted, placing her other hand on his arm.

“Please, not ma’am, Roberta is okay.” He smiled at her. “I wanted to thank you, for everything you’ve done for us. The man smiled, but looked away a little bit, he couldn’t quite hold eye contact.

“Thank you, but it’s not- you don’t need to thank us. It’s what we’re here for.”

“What’s your name?”

“Jason.”

“Lovely name, and what’s your role?”

“Thank you very much. I’m an engineer.”

“Well, thank you for everything you’ve done.” She paused for a moment, before leaning in slightly, “Jason, what do you mean when you say it’s what you’re here for?”

Jason looked slightly confused. “I’m sorry ma’am- Roberta, sorry- I’m not quite sure what you mean.”

“What’re you here for?”

“To fix the electricity?”

Roberta felt like she might be able to get somewhere here, Jason was willing to talk.

“Why here?” Jason looked confused for a moment, then realised what she’s asking. “Oh! Why DC?”

“Exactly.”

“There’s a large backup system here, larger than most other cities.”

“Why’s that important?”

“With a backup system this size, we could use it to start repairing larger power systems, with enough time and work we might even be able to bring power back to the whole state.”

Roberta leaned back slightly, this was the first she’d heard about a plan this size, why hadn’t it been mentioned yet? She realised she was staring and smiled at him.

“Jason, I should probably get going, it’s getting quite late, but thank you again, it’s been lovely talking to you.”

“As I said, Roberta, you’re more than welcome.”

They shook hands again, his palm was a little sweatier now, he seemed nervous. Roberta looked up at the sky, it was starting to get very dark now, it must’ve been about ten, maybe later. The party had begun to die down now, there were still people, but most of the younger children were inside. She needed some time to think by herself, and the Capitol Building was only a fifteen-minute walk away. She looked back to see Kelly passionately shaking hands with a young woman, waving his other hand around enthusiastically as he spoke. Why couldn’t she trust him? She shook her head and set off. *Better to think this through properly*, she thought to herself.

chapter twelve

Carolina Quintana

THE CLICKING OF HEELS on the marble floor filled the ghostly building of the capitol. In fourteen months, that same sound had turned into a source of vague comfort, not only for Roberta Miguel, but for the people that surrounded her and looked up to her. Every day, that sound kept her grounded on her recent, yet unclear role, as an administrator. It held her accountable for what she currently represented for the remaining inhabitants of the District, the expectations put on her, while providing her with a small echo of her past life, at the same time. She carried flat shoes in her purse just in case, although those had never touched the capitol building floor. As impractical and painful as heels were, without any kind of transportation available other than walking, she was determined to stand tall and proud, play the part right for all of them. She wouldn't allow herself to forget the present and the past.

Especially not now.

The clicking of heels stopped, as she came to a halt in the hall, right before entering the Capitol Rotunda. The large,

domed room known for its architecture and for holding a variety of historic paintings in its walls. The one room still capable of astounding her.

A sigh escaped her lips, her gaze drawn to the painting of the Declaration of Independence, President Gray's favorite. At least according to an interview he gave long ago. *How appropriate yet unauthentic of him*, she'd thought back then. As his words rang in her head, she positioned herself at the center of the circular room, feeling smaller the more she observed the thirty-six windows and the impossibly tall one-hundred-and-eighty feet ceiling.

Her lips pursed in a tight line, when her attention went straight to the electrical lights illuminating the Rotunda, instead of wandering to the rest of the paintings as usual. Her stomach twisted at the sight. There was a time those lights had a purpose.

Without the sound of her heels, the buzzing noise in the background produced by the generator, became painfully obvious. Forcing herself to ignore the sweat in her hands, she glanced above, at the frieze, the painted panorama of significant events in American history. Nineteen scenes, to be precise, from Columbus to the first flight. She'd memorized them all by now.

Roberta began circling the room, slowly taking in each of the scenes. To think of all the progress society had accomplished in centuries and standing right there, at the center of it all... she couldn't help but feel she was a piece of that history as well.

Not only her, but the people in the District. She had no certainty of how the rest of the world was doing, but after the power outage, she had been nothing but a witness of what humanity could do when united, even with most of the

residents of the District gone. Every single member was bound to contribute to public life now, achieving a true sense of community based on equality. Not to mention the dramatic environmental improvement that brought the lack of technology.

However, in spite of the debatable, newfound peace in her own little world, Roberta couldn't possibly ignore how regaining electrical power would impact the world at a larger scale, allowing for communication, hospitals, factories, transportation... the return of globalization.

The sound of footsteps stopped her train of thought. Roberta's back straightened, regaining her poise in a split second. She pretended not to notice him, continuing to look at the room.

The steps stopped near her. She heard the man clear his voice, before he spoke in a polite tone. Rehearsed, she dared add. "Good afternoon, Miss Miguel. I am glad you agreed to speak to me."

Only then, she gave him a curt nod in acknowledgement, "Mr. Kelly." She noticed his shoes were particularly bright, unlike last time she saw him. His clothes were more formal too, his dark hair groomed. Right before he replied with that polite smile of his, forced in Roberta's opinion, she added, "I heard the people of the District have been offering you many favours and services since you made the generator work." She paused, returning her gaze to the painting of Cortez entering the Aztec temple. "You caused quite the impression. You must be proud of yourself."

The lanky, significantly taller man shrugged, letting out a soft chuckle, "What can I say? I believe it's the duty of any American citizen to do whatever is in their hands for their people, that is all," he held his wrist behind his back, taking a

step closer, “much like yourself. It’s nice to recognize a fellow true patriot as well. I’m sure there’s more we have in common.”

Roberta resisted the urge to humph at that remark. “Mr. Kelly, why did you ask to speak to me in private?”

Oliver’s grin widened. “Straight to the point, I see. You do justice to your reputation, Ms. Miguel. Very well.” In that moment, Oliver stood taller, his features hardening. Roberta was suddenly aware she was alone with a man she had very little time knowing. He cleared his throat once more, “Like I mentioned before, you and I are fellow patriots. You are a woman of service, as you have demonstrated long before the power outage, when you were Speaker of the House. A woman who cares for her people. The District follows your lead.”

“May I remind you, Mr. Kelly, we haven’t had a hierarchic system in a long while? No one is in charge, if that is why you chose to speak to me.” Roberta slowly continued to circle the Rotunda. Oliver followed right after.

“Oh, I am very aware, madam. However, I believe defined leadership roles would bring security and stability that society needs. Progress is not possible without structure and organization, do you not agree? ” He waited for her response, which never came, before he followed her gaze above to the paintings in the frieze. “I mean, just as the founding fathers intended. Those leadership roles have been present all throughout history.”

“What do you ask of me, Mr. Kelly?”

“Ask of you? Oh, you misunderstand me, madam,” Oliver shook his head, chuckling softly. “My apologies, I am not being clear. My reason to speak to you today, is to make myself of service to you.” Only then, Roberta met his eyes

with her own. Her gaze still guarded, but a good sign to Oliver, who had come this far thanks to his way with words and attempts at reading people. No matter how incorruptible you think you are, in Oliver's opinion, everyone has a price. "You see, I believe I can reestablish electricity. Not just here in the District, but in the USA. I can restore the economic strength and the system it took Americans so much effort to build." He motioned towards the paintings and the busts, while Roberta had apparently stopped blinking, listening attentively to every word he spoke. "I am sure you understand. After all, you came very far in your career, built your own wealth through hard work. Isn't that what the American dream is all about? Before the power outage, I had quite the wealth of my own as well. And the worst part is, even though we cannot communicate with other states, I'm sure many Americans are in our position. I think about them all the time, just imagine, lost the effort of their lives, what they worked hard for... And based on the values of justice that made this country, I believe it's only fair each person receives what rightfully belongs to them, do you not agree?"

He paused, waiting for any change in Roberta's expression, as little as it could be. None. He cursed in his mind. "My point is," he lowered his voice, closing the distance between him and Roberta, who did not step back, "we can work together to restore the USA to its former glory. Let me help you help our people. Like you said, my team is growing each day and we're ready to make a difference. Let's show the world what America can do." He grinned in excitement, motioning towards the building, pausing, as if admiring the architecture. "And when the old order is restored... America will need a new leader. A new president." Oliver placed his hands on Roberta's shoulders, almost whispering the next sentence. "I

can't think of anyone more suited for the role. People already look up to you and respect you. They trust you. If we work together now, you and I... we can change the course of history. What do you say?"

Several moments went by in silence, neither averting each other's gaze, before the corner of Roberta's lips curled. "Mr. Kelly, are you familiar with the story of Pocahontas?" She turned around, heading towards said painting.

Oliver blinked twice, baffled at the sudden change of subject. What sort of reaction was this? He recovered quickly, "Uh, o-of course. She was a key figure."

She motioned for him to follow, before pointing at the fireze. "That painting over there. It depicts the scene of Pocahontas saving Captain John Smith from being clubbed to death."

Oliver's eyebrows went up, "A very intelligent and noble heroine, if you ask me. She also surprised everyone when she helped economic progress. It was thanks to her knowledge of agriculture and the environment, that Colonists finally succeeded growing tobacco. I'd say she's an example of what two forces working together can accomplish."

Roberta took a bottled water out of her purse, had a sip and continued, as if he hadn't spoken a word, "There are scholars that believe that this scene was in fact, scripted. It is likely it was all part of some sort of adoption ceremony within the tribe, and Pocahontas was doing her part in the ritual, but Smith misunderstood it all. No one was attacking nor saving him." She stared at the painting for a few moments, "And *the key figure who contributed to economic progress*, as you call her, died sick at twenty years and didn't live to see her people lose their political independence, lands, resources, and turn into slaves and workers for Englishmen."

Oliver watched Roberta walk away from the Rotunda, towards the Statuary Hall of the Capitol, and the generator. His jaw tensed, his patience reaching his limit.

Still, he followed after her once more.

Roberta traced her fingers on the generator, her voice louder, in order to speak above the buzzing sound. “If you think about it, Mr. Kelly, humankind hasn’t changed that much throughout the course of history. Only fourteen months ago, our society used to be very similar to that of Powhatan people and Englishmen, centuries ago. A disproportionate distribution of wealth, social division, a class working for another, wars...”

“Um, I wouldn’t say that.” Oliver shifted uncomfortably, rubbing a hand across his forehead, “Capitalism offers you opportunities. It’s about fairness and working hard enough. It’s about your legal right to own private property...”, pressing his eyes shut, he held his breath, “Madam.”

“I know you have recently arrived to the District, Mr. Kelly,” She kept her stony expression in place, holding her bottled water with both hands, “so I do not blame you for not being around long enough. But ever since money was reduced to worthless paper, every member of the District actually contributes to public life. Did you know that social inequality and crime are almost nonexistent for once, since most basic needs are taken care of? And quite generously, I might add, thanks to everyone’s efforts? We have no pollution and no resources go to waste, as people only use what they need. They value each other’s work more than ever.”

“Madam, I think you-“

“Since people have been forced communicate face to face, to trust and rely on each other, and not on machines, nor on a system, perhaps for once, we have a chance at genuine

progress.”

“What true progress means is not for you to decide, Ms. Miguel.”

“Neither for greedy people such as yourself, I’ve known my fair share of your kind.” She untapped her bottled water, “This society is finally rising above selfishness. I refuse to collaborate with people you.”

A heavy silence settled over them, as she lifted her bottled water to her lips. Oliver glared at her, barely able to keep himself in control. What now? He needed her, the credibility she’d bring him in front of the people.

With the tip of her finger, she cleared the drops from the rims of her lips, giving him a bitter grin. “We are not the makers of history, Mr. Kelly.” She stood next to the generator, much to Oliver’s confusion. “We are made by history.”

Finishing her sentence, she spilled the bottled water over the energy generator.

Oliver’s gaze widened in horror. Heart hammering against his chest, he hurried to his project, violently slamming the woman against the wall, before throwing her to the ground. Sparks flew, and a series of small electrical explosions began. His screams were drowned by the deafening buzzing, before he ran out of the room, looking for cover in the Rotunda.

He caught glimpse of an orange flame, before the building fell to darkness, the dim twilight visible through the windows above.

Rage burned in his insides, scorching his skin. Hate he’d only felt few times in his life before. He screamed one last time in frustration, stopping to glance at the John Smith painting. He’d made the generator work once. He could do it again. Panting, he decided he would demonstrate the former Congresswoman how much of a history maker he could be.

Several minutes went by, and after running his hands through his face, wiping out the sweat, he rolled up his sleeves, cracked his knuckles, before slowly making his way back to the generator, shooting one last glance at the painting. He was a history maker. An ally to economic progress.

But just like Pocahontas, Roberta wouldn't live to see it.