



# The District

Without power  
...we are nothing



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



# The District

written as a  
Novel-in-a-Day



# THE DISTRICT

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Francesca Baker, Nic Dracas, Annette Pateman  
Tim Edwards-Hart, Ian E. Hart, Elina Dow  
Morlock, K. Matt, S.B.  
Alex Brantham, J. Tynan Burke, Em Starlight  
Story by: Tim Rogers

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

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

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

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

**Tim**

April 4, 2020





# The District



## chapter one

*Francesca Baker*

PRESIDENT ANDREW GRAY'S MOBILE phone buzzed. He looked down at the flashing screen, and swiped up to see who had text him just now. Bandicot. Some people might have thought it was overdoing it to have his fourteen year old daughter Elizabeth saved as a code name in his phone, but as the leader of arguably (and he would vehemently argue this, no matter who challenged him) the most powerful country in the world, he just could not be too careful.

“You have egg on your tie,” it read.

“Well, thanks, Elizabeth,” he thought. She could have told him earlier, before they had left breakfast. They had had a special breakfast, all together on this Friday morning, for what could be the last time in a while. Him, Elizabeth, and his wife Lucy (codename: Bobcat) to mark the fact that they were all back together. President Gray would have to be on the road for money months now, visiting states across the United States of America on his political campaign. Indianapolis yesterday had been a resounding success, with voters coming out in their hoards to welcome him and hear his speeches.

Breakfast had been an array of pastries and fruit and pancakes and bacon. He had chosen his favourite – a couple of very runny poached eggs with thin salty slices of smoked salmon on a toasted English muffin with Hollandaise sauce. Eggs Benedict they called it. He just thought it was delicious. And apparently had been in such a hurry to eat it that he had dropped some down his tie. He went to the bathroom to check he didn't have any other debris from breakfast.

He stood and looked in the mirror, sad at the way his hair, once brown, was now speckled with grey. He laughed at himself, "Who knew being President of the USA could be so stressful as to turn you grey?" He turned to the side, and sucked his stomach in, to give him a more slender appearance. He was still handsome enough. He could still captivate the housewives of America. He smiled.

Back in the President's Office, sat high up in the White House, he looked out over the skyline of Washington. The sky was rufescent with splendour, the Northern Lights sending glimmering colours of yellow, pink, and orange across the vast expanse. It was a glorious sight. Sirens rang out, as they always did in this somewhat dangerous of cities. He was lucky he had police and army escorts at all times, just in case. He picked up his phone again to text Elizabeth back.

"Thank you my love. Daddy x."

He felt a jolt of static, but paid no heed to it, thinking it was just a quirk of technology. He had always been a rather analogue kind of man, preferring pen and paper to electronics. He pulled out his leather notebook and fountain pen and started to write a list for the day.

"Meeting with core team. Discus priorities for campaign. Lunch with Flyer. Afternoon briefing with Carl Evans, Director of CIA. Dinner with family."

It would be busy enough.

He switched on his computer, which seemed to fizz, with a flash of light zipping across the screen. He put it down to this new system.

Across the White House the same thing was happening. Mobile phones, computers, laptops, pagers, they were all flashing and flickering with jolts of static going through them to the user. The technology systems in the White House were state of the art, and shouldn't be shutting down just yet.

Every time Vice President William Campbell picked up the phone he got a shock that surprised him, even at the fifteenth time. At least he didn't send his hair into disarray, up on end; he didn't have any. His premature balding was a constant source of sadness to him. But right now he did not have time to worry about that. The activity of running the country was pretty relentless, it seemed. And as Vice President he did more than the President, although he would never say this to Andrew himself. William was an Arizona Senator before running for the Republican party nomination for President. He dropped out after Super Tuesday when Gray had what he viewed as an insurmountable lead. He was still bitter.

The phone rang. David Clarke III, National Security Advisor was on the other end. William didn't like David. He had a perma tan and the physique of someone who spent a lot of time in the gym. William would never admit he was jealous, but deep down he knew he was.

“We need to get to the Situation Room. And sharpish.”

“What has happened?”

“We have a call from NASA. They're dialling in in five minutes.”

William called the President. “Sit Room. We've been called.”

The Situation Room, officially known as the John F. Kennedy Conference Room, was a 5,525-square-foot conference room and intelligence management center in the basement of the West Wing of the White House. Equipped with secure, advanced communications equipment for the president to maintain command and control of U.S. forces around the world, it was always an alarming situation when they had to go there.

On arrival they were joined by David Clarke, General Matthew Williams, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff , Carl Evans, Director of the CIA, and Jeffrey Palmer, White House Chief of Staff.

The phone rang, and screens sparked up, static simmering around the room again. It was the representative from NASA.

“Good morning, President and staff. It’s 10.43am, and we have something to inform you of. We have an emergency. These are difficult times, and a challenge is upon us.”

“Please get on with it,” said Carl, running his hand through his blond hair. He always had a strong presence, and was very authoritative in any situation.

“I have received a brief from NASA. It reads: ‘Alert. We have a red alert. NASA is sorry to inform you that we have lost communication with the International Space Station. This means we are unable to send communications at this time, and people are in danger.’”

“What do you recommend we do?”

“This is an unprecedented challenge, but we have systems in place.”

“It is due to equipment failure, leaving the orbiting laboratory dependent on ground stations for communications with Earth.”

“Yes, go on.”

The communications loss occurred at 9:45 aam as flight controllers at NASA's Mission Control at the Johnson Space Center in Houston were sending a software update to the space station. "The astronauts are in good health. We are not concerned."

"That's good news, said President Gray.

"There is a risk"

"We think the systems may have been hacked. We don't know what will happen next. In normal times we could predict the trajectory of the station, but these do not appear to be normal times."

"So what do you recommend asked David?"

"Well, I think the best thing to do would be...." At that moment there was a spark and the screen monitors crashed. The phone line was still live.

"What has happened? Are you still there?" asked Jeffrey.

"I think one of communications satellites have gone offline. This is now a state of emergency."

President Gray panicked. He had not been in this situation before. He started to worry. An eggy tie now seemed the least of his concerns.

He looked at his watch. It was 11am. How long until they would get contact again?

"We must move to the The Presidential Emergency Operations Center. Immediately. Jeffrey, get the team there right now. Call in the CIA. This is an emergency."

The PEOC was a bunker underneath the East Wing of the White House that served as a secure shelter and communications center for the President of the United States and other protectees in case of an emergency including when the White House itself is at risk of attack. President Gray did not know if they were at risk of an attack, but it was possible,

and he did not like that feeling.

The heavily reinforced walls and doors with electronic surveillance and solid locks made him feel safe, even when he did not really know what to do. He could never admit he was unsure though. He was the President.

They started their walk down the corridors to the PEOC. President Gray needed the toilet, and wondered if he should stop off in his private bathroom, which was somewhat nicer than the one in the bunker. He was glad he had had a good breakfast, as he could be in here for the long haul.

On the way he text Elizabeth. “We’re going into the PEOC. I don’t know when we will be out. Don’t wait for me at dinner. Love Bearclaw.” It always made him smile when he signed himself off with his code name.

At 11.11am they arrived at the PEOC. Each member of the team pulled up a chair, and settled down for the foreseeable. This was going to be a long morning.



## chapter two

*Nic Dracas*

“BEARCLAW IS EN ROUTE.”

President Andrew Gray heard the secret service speak into his communication device as they hurried down the long corridor from the situation briefing room and it did nothing to calm his nerves.

He was surrounded by the top men in security, the best advisors a president could have and here he was being escorted in a real situation down to the Presidential Emergency Operations Center.

They'd practiced this before, of course, so that they all knew the route and speed at which they'd have to move in such a situation that was necessary, but he'd never expected to have to actually do it in his term. He'd considered it as one of those things he would have to know, but never to actually *do*.

It was possible that they were under attack and the most confusing thing about all of this was that there'd been no chatter on this. No info or prior warnings from anyone. It had been quiet. No intelligence from anywhere. What the hell was going on?

And if they were under attack, where were Lucy and Elizabeth? Were they safe? Had they already been secured?

Outside the PEOC, Andrew laid his hand down upon the scanner and tried not to feel impatient as it scanned his palm print. He then entered his security code into the keypad and the heavy doors slid open.

Inside, military personnel and non-commissioned officers were already present, working on computers and staring at their screens. They stood and saluted as he breezed in, his security and advisors swelling around him like a cloud.

“What do we have? Are my wife and child secure?”

“We’ve not yet received reports yet, sir.”

He had to assume that the second his own security was threatened, that the security people looking after his family would have jumped into action, too.

“We must have some intel about what’s happening? Carl?”

The Director of the Central Intelligence Agency shook his head. “This is an unprecedented situation, sir.”

“We must know something! David, what do you know?”

The National Security Advisor had the decency to look glum. “We’ve effectively been blinded, sir. With the satellite down, we’ve lost a chunk of communications and NASA are still confirming nothing from the ISS.”

The president leaned forward on the desk in front of him. “Are we under attack?”

“It’s a very strong possibility, sir. We think there’s been a nuclear detonation in space.”

“From whom?”

The blank faces in front of him were more scary than what was going on around him. All these people! All this technology! And they knew *nothing*?

“Someone knows. Let’s go through this. Could it be China?”

Russia? Give me *something* people.”

The Vice President, Will Campbell shrugged. “Even if we knew which country it was, how does that explain the Northern Lights?”

Andrew frowned. That was the anomaly. “The Northern Lights are usually something seen predominantly over high-latitude regions like the Arctic, correct?” he remembered learning about them in high school. He’d even seen them once, in Iceland.

“Yes, sir.”

“And they’re magnetic?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If there has been a nuclear attack in space, could this have triggered a magnetic force somehow altering the position of the lights and cutting us off from the ISS?”

The National Security Advisor shook his head. “No sir. The force required to alter the trajectory of the lights would mean radically altering the magnetic forces of the entire planet and would not occur from a simple orbital detonation.”

“So why are we seeing the lights? Why are they interfering with electronics?”

“We don’t know, sir.”

The silence in the room was deafening.

“Is this an attack from unknown forces?” he didn’t want to say *alien*. That sounded ridiculous, even to his ears, but he just couldn’t think of what they were dealing with here.

“We don’t know.”

“I’m hearing that phrase a little too often, people.” Andrew prided himself on remaining calm throughout his presidency. It had become important to him to show the American people that he was a man in control, unflappable and measured. He refused to lose it now. More than ever, everyone was relying on

him to remain that figurehead they all needed. “What are we doing to protect our people?”

“A broadcast has been sent out telling them to remain calm and in their homes.”

“That’s it?”

“We’ve told them to be patient.”

Wow. All the knowledge and technology in the world at their fingertips and none of them knew what was happening and all they could advise the people not protected in the PEOC was to remain calm and in their homes. He felt sure they were all really reassured by that. It was almost pathetic and he hated feeling so useless.

“I need to do a broadcast. They need to see that we’re all still here and there’s a functioning government.”

“We’ve got a script being prepared right now, sir.”

“Good.” At least *something* was being done. He leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers and closing his eyes, as he thought for a moment, trying to run through all the possible scenarios. Around him, he could hear people beavering away, fingers tapping on keyboards, officers talking low into headphones communicating with the outside world and then ...

There was a sudden quiet and then voices began to rise.

Andrew opened his eyes and realized the room had gone dark. He stood quickly. The power was out! The room black, the vague sense of people gathering around him, before the room bloomed back into light again as the emergency power kicked in and screens flickered back into life.

He looked around him at his security and watched them relax once again.

“What just happened?”

“We lost power.”

“I know that, but how?”

“We’re not sure, sir.”

“What about outside? Did everyone else lose power?”

“We’re getting reports in, now, sir!”

“Good, I want—”

The power groaned out again and this time, the darkness seemed even more severe. His Secret Service gathered around him like a protective shield and he heard guns being drawn from holsters as the military personnel manning the computers voiced concern that everything had gone down.

“We’ve lost emergency power!”

“Is there another generator? A back-up for the back-up?”

“Nothing’s working, sir.”

“Nothing at all? What about radios?”

“It’s all dead. Nothing coming in or out.”

“Have we been attacked again?”

“We don’t know.”

Andrew clenched his fists in frustration. He hated being in the dark, both metaphorically and literally.

There was a mass of voices and conversations going on around him and he couldn’t hear any of them clearly. “Quiet!” he waited for the voices to fall silent. “There are lights on phones, why aren’t you using those?”

“The phones aren’t working, sir.”

“It’s all out?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s our next steps, then?”

A voice, that sounded like Will, the Vice President’s, said close to his ear. “We’re stuck here.”

“We can’t get out?”

“The doors operate on electronics, sir and we don’t have electricity.”

“Please tell me that there is a contingency plan for this?”

There was a silence before Will spoke again. “There is. We wait until the power comes back on.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes, sir.”

He muttered a curse word, before settling back down into his seat. “I suppose we don’t have any candles down here?”

The lack of any forthcoming answers, told him everything he needed to know. The leader of the free world was stuck beneath the White House without even a candle to light his way. They would have to get used to being in the dark.

“Are we safe?” He knew the answer of course, before anyone spoke. When he’d taken office and they’d performed the training run-throughs, he’d been given the stats on this place. At least a hundred and twenty feet below ground, designed to withstand all but direct nuclear blasts.

But this was an unknown attack. No-one knew what they were facing. Or what was even happening.

They were blinded. Cut off.

With nothing to do but wait.

“How much oxygen do we have down here?”

“Enough.”

He frowned. “But it’s piped in by air conditioning, which isn’t working right now, is it? Do we have other supplies? Food? Water?”

“Yes, sir.”

“For how long?”

“We have enough emergency rations to keep us going for a couple of weeks if necessary.”

“And after that?”

Again, silence was his answer.

Andrew loosened his tie and undid the top button of his

shirt, before settling back down into his seat. He hoped and prayed that this was just some sort of glitch. Some short of short-circuit the way they'd seen everyone else's electronics affected.

*Let it be a blip. Let it be something other than a nationwide or even global attack. Because what the hell could cut off a space station, take out a satellite and move the goddamned Northern Lights?*

Andrew closed his eyes and tried to relax among the clamoring voices around him. They all had something to say that they thought was more important than the person next to them, but each voice that he could pick out sounded uncertain and unsure, working on supposition and imagination. No-one had any real answers, no-one had any real proof. And even if they had, what could they do about it here?

Down here in the dark?

## chapter three

*Annette Pateman*

The time was 13.07pm

The emergency generators made for such a time as this, turn on and the lights sputter and flicker back on in the White House. One by one the computers, printers and fax machines beep and buzz as they switch back on. There is an audible sigh of relief. People smile and look pleased with themselves, but this is a short lived reprieve. Within seconds the White House is plunged back into darkness again. Staffers stumble from their now dark offices and cubicles into the White House corridors. Finding their way by touch and memory as they cling to walls and bump into chairs, fixtures and fittings in the now pitch dark White House.

John Cole, the head of the president's Secret Service detail runs his hands through his brown hair. His eyes are fast adjusting to the gloom and dark in his office. He moves quickly to the large office window. Grateful now that when he was given the chance to choose this space over another he had chosen the office that had the larger picture window.



Although it did mean having a smaller office space. John feels for the cord that opens the drapes and pulls it. This enables diffuse light from the northern lights to cast sufficient light for him to stumble to the phone on his desk. John picks up the phone and attempts to place a call to National Security Adviser, David Clarke III. The phone does not ring and there is no ring tone or anything to suggest that the phone is in fact working. John is puzzled and takes his personal cell phone from the charging dock on his desk. He touches the screen. The phone does not come on as it would usually. He knows his cell phone is fully charged. John realizes that the power is out in the White House and probably in the city also. A further glance out the window shows that DC is in darkness. He had been distracted by the northern lights when he had first looked out the window and had not noticed that the city was in darkness.

There are footsteps and John sees a shape move toward the area of the window in his office.

It is the Director of National Intelligence, Alice Gardner. He can hear her breathing which sounds slightly breathless and ragged as though she has run a long way. Her office is about 600 meters from his on the same floor.

“What’s going on?” John asks,

Alice answers in a voice pitched higher than usual,

“The power is out across the city and in the White House. The president has already been evacuated to the PEOC. He is there with wife Lucy, daughter Elizabeth, the vice president, the National Security Adviser, Director of the CIA and the White House Chief of Staff. There are some other advisers in there also”

“Ok” says John. His mind racing. Five mins have gone

by but it feels more like an hour.

He clears his throat and runs his hand across his forehead. In the dark and gloom Alice cannot see the gesture. He says,

“ We may have a serious situation. If there is no power here in the White House then it is possible that that the president could be trapped in PEOC. Unable to communicate with us his staff, but more importantly, unable to communicate with the country. Unable to communicate with the world”

Alice appears to move a hand towards him. He feels rather than sees the movement.

Alice says,

“ Yes, I thought something like this as I dashed along the corridor. I think I caught my knee on my desk as I exited my office”

John says,

“ We need to get down to the Situation Room. From there we can try to make contact with the president. Protocols will mean that this is where people will gather and we can decide how to handle this situation and also to communicate with the president”

John says,

“ I will make my way over to you. Take my arm. Is your knee ok?”

Alice says,

“ Yes, my knee is ok. It’s just throbbing a bit from where I caught it on the desk. But I’m fine”

The two move quickly, but not as quickly as John would like to the stairs.

The lifts are not working. John checks but the button light indicating that the lift is coming is not even on. No point

trying to call a lift. There is no power.

They pass many people but don't stop to talk.

It is very dark. They take the stairs down to the situation room.

The situation room is full of people. Lots of people all talking at once.

The secretary of Homeland Security is trying to garner attention. Standing by one of the situation room solar lights. The secretary of energy, Iain Thomson, has had the sense to gather up some of the solar lights that decorate the White House gardens and also some of the Christmas lights that are kept in the basement. So the situation room is lit up like Santa's grotto, but at least people can see each other.

Alice releases John's arm. Her knee has swollen quite a bit he notices. She slips into a chair at the back and side of the room. John moves to the front of the room. Now dubbed 'Santa's grotto' by one young staffer. He positions himself at the centre of the room. His six foot 4 inch lean frame commands the attention he is looking for.

John claps his hands for attention and stands very still. The chatter slows down and then stops.

John looks at the secretary of energy, Iain Thomson.

"What is the situation regarding energy and when will the power come back on?"

Iain answers,

"The electric grid has gone down and I cannot say when it will be up and running. As a result I can confirm that the whole city has no power other than that generated by emergency oil powered generators. Amelia Khan, The secretary of health and human services has briefed me that hospitals have emergency generators. They have enough to

power some computers and to keep the lights on. There may not be enough capacity to power intensive care units for more than a few days in most hospitals, unless they receive deliveries of oil to power the generators. Perhaps the secretary of transportation, Ellen Scott can ensure that transport of vital supplies, such as oil for generators can be maintained.

John then turned to the secretary of homeland security, Alex Wilson,

“Have you anything further to add Alex?”

Alex moves to the centre of the room to stand beside John and says,

“The president and Vice President are in the PEOC and as that is powered by the electric grid and there is no power; there is a lock in situation there. The president is unable to communicate with us and we are unable to communicate with the president”

People in the situation room look at each other and start to talk at the same time.

Some look worried. Some look afraid.

Maria Duran, Administrator of the Environment Protection Agency moves quietly towards John, Iain and Alex. She leans toward them both and says in a quiet but firm voice,

“My office has had a communication from the Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the NOAA. There has been a heavy solar storm. The strongest reported in decades.

This has resulted in the rarely seen northern lights phenomena we have observed in DC. It has also affected the electric grid, computers and electronics”

John, Alex and Iain look at each other and there is an understanding of the gravity of the situation. The power is out and could be out for the foreseeable future.

John clears his throat and thanks Maria for bringing this

information to their attention.

He communicates this important information to the people in the room.

There is more talking and fast fire questions and queries.

John raises his hand for quiet. He says,

“ We need to find a way to communicate with the president. He is our commander in chief and we need him in his role. The country needs him and outside of that the world needs him”

John stands stiffly. He remembers that he has a citizen band radio. In fact he has two that he keeps in his office. They were his favourite toy growing up when he had dreams of being a spy and working for the secret service, He isn't a spy but he does work for the secret service.

His reminiscences are cut short when he realizes that CB radio could offer a way to communicate with the president and his staff inside the PEOC bunker.

John signals to Alice Gardner. He catches her eye and she gets up heavily and walks towards him. John says,

“Alice, you are the director of national intelligence. Do you know whether the PEOC has CB radio, so we can communicate with the president inside the PEOC now that the power is out?”

Alice eyes at once light up and she says,

“ Yes, the former director of National Intelligence liked to do things old school and keep hold of things. The national security adviser David Clarke was good friends with the former director of national so he will be aware of the citizen band radios in the PEOC. In fact I caught them once playing with them in the directors office.”

Alice smiles and rubs her knee almost absentmindedly.

It doesn't take long for John Cole, head of the presidents security detail to retrieve both his vintage and more modern citizen band radios. His radio is battery operated. He hopes that the radios in the president's bunker have this option. He will soon find out.

It seems like an age since the lights went out in the White House. It is in fact a relatively short time. John gathers a team of people and they head towards the PEOC bunker where the president must have started to feel incarcerated. All the while John is speaking on the CB radio channels. Trying the different channels to see whether anyone is broadcasting from inside the president's bunker.

Once they reach the PEOC, they notice that the automatic doors and sensors are dark. There is absolutely no power to the door displays or the surveillance cameras. The entrance security panels have no power. There is no answer from inside the PEOC on the citizen band radios.

They are locked out of the President's bunker and the president is shut inside unable to communicate with them or with the outside world.

John Cole realizes that he might be head of the presidents personal security detail, but he is powerless in this situation. The president and the Vice President are stuck in the bunker for as long as the power is out.

## chapter four

*Tim Edwards-Hart*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Occasionally, someone would flick a cigarette lighter and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

she had no idea what time it was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

there were yells and screams.

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

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

Inside and out, all was dark.

## chapter five

*Ian E. Hart*

SOMEONE WAS KNOCKING AT the door.

It was late afternoon and Roberta Miguel was sitting up in bed, a satin pillow supporting her naked back, an untidy sheaf of official papers spread out on the counterpane before her. “The devious bastard,” she smiled to herself as she scrubbed a yellow highlighter across Section 111.3.18 of *Alaska Grizzly Bear Conservancy Emergency Federal Support Bill*. “He thought he’d sneak that past me.”

The counterpane stirred beside her and a spiky head emerged blinking sleepily like a hedgehog rudely woken from hibernation.

“What’s the time?” he yawned.

“Five forty five,” Roberta changed to a a different colour to highlight another section of the bill.

The man groped for his mobile phone and checked his diary. “Plenty of time. POTUS’s cocktails at seven thirty.” He nuzzled her shoulder, then looked startled, “What are you reading?”

“It’s your devious scheme to divert the oil pipeline through

Grizzly National Park. I'm going to kill it."

"You went through my briefcase!"

"What did you expect?"

Someone knocked again, louder and more insistently. The man in the bed was fully awake now and feeling angry.

"What's the racket? Why doesn't he push the damn bell?"

The knocking increased in volume, accompanied by muffled shouting. Roberta shook her head in irritation and swung her legs out of bed. The man, reached out and grabbed her wrist.

"Let the maid get it. Tell me what you're up to. "

"I gave her the afternoon off."

Roberta caught sight of herself in the wardrobe mirror: nice tan, all the right curves, no obvious sagging. "Not too bad for 47," she thought and slipped a silk bathrobe around her and stepped towards the bedroom door. The pounding outside continued.

"That sounds serious" he said, "Do you have a gun?"

"Don't worry," Roberta kissed him on the nose. "It's probably just Uber Eats with the post-coital feast I ordered."

There was a splintering crash as a pneumatic door opener smashed open the triple lock and the sound of shouting and pounding feet could be heard in the hallway. Roberta froze, but the man reached under his pillow and produced a Glock G19 pistol just as the bedroom door burst open revealing a SWAT soldier pointing a submachine gun.

"Drop your weapon! On the floor!" he screamed.

"Now just a minute," replied the man calmly "Do you know who I am?"

A short burst from the 9mm Heckler & Koch tore into the man's body, plastering blood and brains on the bedroom wall. Roberta dropped to the carpet and held up the pillow between

herself and the SWAT soldier as though she believed it might deflect bullets.

Another man stepped around the door frame and into the room and helped Roberta to her feet.

“I must apologise Madame Speaker,” he said and used his pocket handkerchief to dab a spot of blood from Roberta’s cheek. She recognised the Deputy Director of the CIA.

She pulled herself together and tightened the belt on her gown. “Jesus Gordon, did you have to shoot him?” she asked.

“Our intelligence was that you were being held hostage. Take no prisoners, remember?” he grinned.

They had been comrades. Twenty years ago, Roberta Gleeman (as she was then) and Gordon Nodrog (as he called himself) had both served in the secret US army that hunted down the *Tupemaros* and the *Tres Raices* in the jungles of Venezuela. Neither side gave quarters nor took prisoners. In the following years, Gordon had remained in the shadows, unobtrusively working his way up through the ranks of the secret service, while Roberta married the software billionaire Carlos Miguel and diverted his money and her killing instincts into politics, first as a Democratic congresswoman for Maryland, now as Speaker of the House of Representatives, the third most powerful post in the USA government. The road behind her was strewn with the political bodies of her rivals.

Gordon nodded to the soldier, who turned the body onto its back. He whistled, “Iain Tomson, Secretary for Energy. We didn’t have him in our sights.”

Roberta glanced at the bleeding body in her bed and then back at the Deputy CIA Director, “What’s going on Gordon? If you’re looking for drugs, I’ll save you the trouble. There’s half a dozen Mollys in the Ming vase on the mantelpiece.”

“Nothing of the sort, Ma’am. Secretary Thomson was in the wrong place at the wrong time. We’re here to escort you to the White House.”

“Why? Has POTUS agreed to sign the Appropriations Bill?”

“Not to my knowledge,” he paused. “They tell me you’re going to be in charge.”

“Give me five minutes to get dressed.”

They walked down the fire stairs because the lifts were not working and out into the street, where no cars were moving. It was early evening, but neither the festive lights in Meridian Hill Park nor the street lights had come on. In fact there were no lights to be seen anywhere. Washington DC was dark.

“Haven’t you heard?” asked Gordon. “No, I guess you were busy. There’s no electricity of any kind. The entire grid is down along with every kind of battery. I’ll explain it as we walk.”

“Walk? Where’s your car?”

“The entire Tesla fleet is dead, and even petrol-driven cars use electric batteries.”

“You should have told me before I got dressed,” she said. “I’m not going to walk a mile in high heels.”

“Excuse me, Ma’am, Sir,” said the SWAT soldier, pointing to a bicycle rack outside the University hall of residence. “If you wouldn’t mind riding...” He removed a bolt-cutter from his equipment belt and chomped through the cable locks on half a dozen expensive-looking mountain bikes.

They were joined by several CIA operatives and the rest of the SWAT team as they cycled in battle formation along 16<sup>th</sup> Street, past the National Geographic Museum, through the Downtown District and on to Lafayette Square and the



White House. Roberta hadn't ridden a bicycle since she was a schoolgirl, but with beefy soldiers in front and behind and her old comrade tight beside her, she quickly regained her confidence. As they rode, Gordon briefed her on what had happened since the blackout.

"The President, the VPeeep, my boss, and most of the top brass were hunkered down in the PEOC when it happened."

"What the fuck is the PEOC?"

"The Presidential Emergency Operations Centre. It's a sealed bunker underneath the East Wing designed for a national emergency. It's airtight, earthquake proof, radiation proof. The POTUS and his staff could run the world from down there... if they had electricity."

"What in hell were they doing down there? Are we under attack?"

"No-one knows what they were doing, but now they're trapped in the bunker."

"Doesn't somebody have the combination?"

"All the locks are electric, all the comms as well. Batteries are dead, generators don't generate. We have no idea what's going on down there. We're not even sure they're alive."

"Why the hurry to get me there?"

"The constitution says that if the POTUS and VPOTUS are killed, the Speaker of the House is next in charge."

"But we don't know they're dead."

"They may as well be. They can't speak to us; we can't speak to them. I guess the Founding Fathers didn't consider that possibility. My orders are to get you to the White House in one piece and hand you over to a room full of constitutional lawyers."

"If your boss is locked in with POTUS and the gang, who's running the CIA?"

“I guess it’s me.”

“Gordon, it’s going to be just like old times in the jungle.”  
Roberta and Gordon touched fists.

The gates of the White House were also electric, but a platoon of army engineers had rigged up ladders and ropes to scale the fence. The soldiers escorted Roberta and Gordon up the drive and through the front door.

As Speaker of the House, Roberta had visited the White House many times, normally to cross swords with the President over some bill or other. She wasn’t intimidated by the building’s impressive portal, the marine guards in white gloves and gleaming weapons on either side of the door, or the cabinet ministers, lackeys and hangers-on who surrounded and sucked up to Andrew Gray like leeches. She knew Gray enough to understand that he despised sycophants and toadies as much as she did. They were both political animals, he a Republican, she a Democrat, expected by their constituencies to disagree on everything under the sun. But when the doors were closed and the microphones turned off, the President and the Speaker had a surprisingly warm relationship.

Marine guards led Roberta and Gordon through the marble corridors hung with paintings, busts, flags and other memorabilia of the nation’s glorious past. (Roberta had always been tempted to ask where they kept George Washington’s wooden teeth—perhaps now was her chance.) The guard halted at a door labeled “John F. Kennedy Conference Room” and saluted. The door was opened from inside, revealing a room so large it was difficult to make out the other side, particularly as the room was now lit by several hundred candles. One wall was lined with huge television screens, now blank, and rows of desks with computer monitors, also blank. It was

commonly known as The Situation Room, the intelligence management hub for the USA and the whole world. Now a useless pile of junk by the look of it. About 100 people were standing about in groups engaged in heated discussion. She knew many of them as fierce political opponents, but when they turned towards her, their expressions were anxious. One man detached himself from a group and hurried towards her.

“Thank god you’re safe and well, Roberta... I’m sorry, Thank god you’re safe and well Madame Speaker.”

“Cut the crap, Tom. How’s Ann and the baby?”

“Sitting at home around a candle, eating cold soup from a can. Other than that...”

Thomas Owen, the Mayor of Washington DC, was a Democrat like Roberta and just as ruthless and ambitious. She whispered in his ear, “What the fuck is going on here?”

“You know that old song: ‘Oh, dear, what can the matter be? / Three old ladies locked in the lavatory...’ Well it’s rather like that.”

“Do we know if they’re...”

“Dead or alive? No we don’t. The PEOC air conditioning is modus cactus of course, like all the electrical systems, but a few boffins got together with their calculators and worked out that there’s probably enough trapped air to keep them alive for a couple of days.”

Roberta turned to the assembled crowd, “Where is the Chief Scientist?”

A nervous young man with wild hair and thick glasses stammered, “P-Profesor S-Squint appears to be l-locked in a l-lift in the University F-Physics Building.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m P-Professor Roger Pigfender. Har-harvard university.”

“Can you explain what the hell happened?”

As he launched into his subject, Professor Pigfender lost his stammer. “At exactly 13:07 today, electricity appears to have ceased as a force. Einstein’s theories have collapsed completely into a black hole of chaos. Generators spin, but nothing is generated, solar cells no longer operate, batteries are dead, storms produce rain, but no lightning, even static electricity no longer crackles.”

“What caused it, do you think?”

“Some speculate a solar flare was responsible, sucking all the loose electrons put into space.”

Another voice interrupted, “The Scientologists are preaching that a race of superior beings have saturated the earth with Dianetic energy...”

“Non-sense!” came a deep voice from the middle of the crowd. “Be calm my people, this has all been Prophesied in Revelations, Book 9 Vers 22.”

The crowd parted, like the Red Sea before Moses and Karl Bailey, the White House Press Secretary stepped forth. Bailey had no experience as either a journalist or bureaucrat, he was a lay preacher from a fundamentalist evangelical church, considered a key voice in pulling in the Southern Republican vote at the next election. The previous Press Secretary had been fired after what was commonly known as “The Putin Fiasco”. The cynics said that Karl was appointed to the job because he was so off the planet, nobody would blame the administration for anything he said.

“Madame Speaker,” he began in a portentous tone. “In these uncertain times, the Lord has chosen you to lead our suffering nation out of the wilderness and back to the paths of glory. Yea though you bear the crosses of divorce and wantonness, though you carry on your shoulders the sins of vanity and flirtatiousness, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to

me in a vision and announced that he is willing to reach forth his hand and redeem you. But..." He looked around the assembled politicians, advisers and bureaucrats "But on the condition that you agree to do his will. Friends, let us pray that our beloved sister Roberta has the strength and moral rectitude to lead us from temptation..."

Roberta held up her hand. "Amen, Brother Bailey. Consider it done." She turned to one of the Marine guards, "Take this idiot away. Lock him up if you have to. Is the Chief Justice here somewhere?"

"Present, Madame Speaker." Chief Justice Nancy Bombast stepped forward.

"I believe you have to swear me in."

"Under normal circumstances, it would be my pleasure, but we are not cognisant of the constitutional position. It appears the President and Vice President may still be alive, in which case you remain third in charge. I am waiting for my fellow High Court justices to arrive so we can consider the evidence."

"The country needs leadership, now."

"That argument will no doubt be put to the court, but our duty is to the Constitution."

"So why the hell did you bring me here?"

"For your protection, Madame Speaker. If you are called upon to lead, we need to make sure you are safe."

"That's nonsense. In 24 hours there'll be rioting all over the country. Somebody has to stand up and be counted."

The Chief Justice shook her head and a murmur rippled through the crowd, "No... she's right... must be safe... wait till we are certain.."

Roberta pulled the Mayor of DC aside. "Tom, we need to get out of here and tell the country what's going on."

"I agree, but there's no television, no internet, not even any

radio. Communication is now limited by the range of the human voice.”

“We’re back to soap boxes?”

“We need a Paule Revere. People trust you Roberta. You have to call the nation together, from the back of a horse if necessary.”

“People will accuse me of pulling a coup.”

“This country began with a coup.”

“Where do we start?”

“Start here, in DC. I’ll stand beside you.” He walked away and returned with a chair. “Couldn’t find a soap box.” He helped her onto the chair and let forth an ear-piercing whistle. The murmuring died down.

Roberta took a deep breath, “Fuck you all,” she said quietly, but her trained voice reached the back of the crowd. “I love my country and I’m not going to see it sink into anarchy. I’m hereby assuming leadership of the USA until the elected President reappears. The Constitution be damned! I’m going outside into the streets right now to let the nation know what is going on. Follow me or else stay here and argue yourselves into irrelevance.”

She stepped down from the chair. With the Mayor of DC on one side and the Acting Director of the CIA on the other, she walked resolutely back towards the door of the Situation Room. A squad of Marine guards fell in beside them, but when they reached the corridor, two guards each took one of Roberta’s elbows and turned right; the other guards marched Tom and Gordon off to the left. Roberta’s guards propelled her through the maze of corridors until they reached the Oval Office. They pushed her inside and closed the door. She heard a key turn in the lock.

Roberta looked around the oval office, now illuminated by

a small candelabra on the coffee table. It was a room she had been in many times for meetings and photo opportunities, a room that did not hold good memories for her. There were the photos of Andrew Grey's family, the presidential dog and yacht. The bowl of fruit on the oval table—so perfect that she had always presumed it to be wax—turned out to be real. She chose a banana and an apple and did something she had wanted to do ever since her first visit: sit behind the desk named 'Resolute'. She leaned back in the President's leather chair and put her feet up on the blotter..

The elaborately carved President's desk had been crafted from the timbers of the British ship HMS Resolute in 1880 and presented to the USA by Queen Victoria. Since the days of President Kennedy, it had been a permanent fixture in the Oval Office. Roberta suspected it was more a stage prop than practical office furniture, but sitting behind it gave her a thrill of power. She took a deep breath and imagines she could smell the power of the person behind that desk. As well as the warm smell of leather she detected another, familiar aroma. The smell of pot, marijuana. She giggled—what if the upright Andrew Gray was a secret dope fiend?

"Play your cards right, my girl," she thought, "And all this could be yours." Weather this emergency and she would be a shoo-in at the next presidential election. The only person who could challenge her was Tom Owen. He was popular and had national credibility, particularly after the way he handled the pandemic emergency. Would he be satisfied with an offer of Vice President? She took another bite of banana and was startled by the sound of a sneeze.

"Who's there?" she called. "Come on out or I'll call in the guards."

Another sneeze. It seemed to come from inside the desk.

She pulled open the drawers and peered into the various recesses, but she couldn't see anyone. She wouldn't put it past those devious Republicans to lock her in the Ovan Office and assassinate her, so someone else would get the job—probably that sanctimonious Justice Bombast. She spotted the presidential letter opener carefully lined up beside the spotless blotter. It was a miniature Indonesian *keris*, which looked a lot more lethal than it really was. She stood up carefully and walked around to the front of the desk where the central panel depicted the US coat of arms. The central panel that FDR, President Roosevelt, had ordered to conceal his polio-affected legs. She remembered a photo of the Kennedy children playing hide and seek. She eased the *keris* into the almost invisible crack and levered the door open... The smell of marijuana was overpowering.

“Come on out, I’ve got you covered,” said Roberta calmly.

A leg appeared, then an arm, followed by a blonde head and the rest of the body of a teenage girl. She was very thin, dressed in designer-torn jeans and a too-large basketball sweatshirt. Her face was pale and her eyes were made to look deep-sunk by a rim of kohl. It was the President’s 14 year old daughter, Elizabeth Gray, looking more shaky and wild-eyed than usual. Roberta led her to the couch and poured a glass of water.

“Elizabeth. What were you doing under the desk?”

“It’s my special place, Mum,” said the waif. “It’s the only place in this damn building you can toke a joint in peace.” She looked around, suddenly astonished at the candlelight and the strange woman who wasn’t her mother. “Who are you?”

“I’m Roberta Miguel, the Speaker of the House. You probably don’t remember me. I’ve met you a few times before.”



“I hate the name Elizabeth, it makes me sound like the queen. My CIA code name is ‘Bandicoot’ I like that better.”

“I’ll try to remember it,” said Roberta.

“I was hiding under the desk last week when you came to try and bully dad about solar energy subsidies.”

“Really? I thought it was only Nixon who recorded conversations.”

“Dad says you are the most dangerous woman in Washington. He told my mother you’ve slept with half his cabinet and now he can’t trust them. Mister Campbell calls you *La grande horizontale*, but you’re not French, you’re Mexican. Aren’t you?”

“Actually, I was born in Annapolis, not far from here. You mustn’t believe all you hear. In politics, people tell lies.”

“I hope that’s not a lie. I’d love to be like you. It’s my ambition to sleep with all the boys in Grade 8.”

“Roberta couldn’t help smiling, How far have you got with this ambition?”

“I haven’t started yet, but I’m reading up on it. Do you know ‘The Adventures of Fanny Hill?’”

“No, I haven’t read that one.”

“Fanny’s got all the moves. I’ve got my eye on Billy Marshall, but I think he might be gay.”

“You know what Eliz... Bandicoot? I think you should hold back for a few years.” Roberta surprised herself at this swelling of motherly protective instinct.

“What were you doing, sitting at Dad’s desk? Come to think of it, where is Dad? Has he gone on another world tour or something?”

“You haven’t heard?”

“What haven’t I heard?”

“Your father and most of his cabinet are trapped in the

PEOC room. All the electricity has gone down and they can't open the doors."

"Cool! Hey, let's share a spliff before he gets back."

"Some other time, Bandicoot. It is urgent that I get out of here."

"No problem. Walk out that door, turn left then right and you're in the lobby."

"The door is locked and there are guards outside."

Elizabeth brightened up "Well, that calls for my secret escape route. There are secret panels and hidden corridors all over this building like you wouldn't believe."

"How do you know that?"

"How do you think I go to parties? Not in Dad's limo. I know three or four ways out of here. There's the Rose Garden, but that's a bit obvious. There's a secret entrance in the press kitchen, but reporters hang out there. The most exciting one is the hidden panel in the Mister Palmer's office."

"The Chief of Staff? You sneak into his office?" Roberta remembered an occasion when she and Jeffrey Palmer had used his desk for strictly non-clerical activities.

"Could you get me outside without anyone seeing?"

"See above the fireplace? Push that knob with the flower on it."

Roberta pushed the knob and the false brick rear wall of the fireplace swung back with a well-oiled click.

"Follow me!" said Elizabeth and ducked under the mantelpiece into the hole. She turned back and whispered, "Better take the candles. My torch doesn't seem to be working."

The narrow passageway led along the rear wall of the White House, past the study, several adviser's offices and ended in a similar fireplace in the Chief of Staff's office.

Elizabeth poked her head out and looked around, “All clear!” she whispered and stepped into the room.

“Help me with the desk.” Elizabeth pulled a concealed lever and the desk swung away, revealing a square hole with a set of steps leading down into darkness. Roberta went first, holding the candelabra. Elizabeth followed and pulled another lever which swung the desk back. She pointed into the darkness, “That’ll take us under the South Lawn. From there we can get to the South Gate.”

They set off, Bandicoot in the lead. “This girl is going to be a great leader,” thought Roberta. “Maybe I should recruit her for my team right now.”

After what Roberta judged to be about 100 yards, they reached a ladder that led up to a manhole. They climbed out and found themselves in what seemed to be a dark forest.

“This is President’s Park,” whispered Elizabeth. “We have to sneak through the trees to reach the fence. There’s a way under it, but you have to crawl on your belly. Can you do that?”

“Just watch me,” Roberta said. “This is more fun that I’ve had in years.”

The hole under the fence was a tight squeeze for Elizabeth, let alone a grown woman like Roberta. Half way through she was convinced she wouldn’t make it when her hips were pinched tight and she couldn’t move either forward or back. Then she felt her wrist gripped by a hand and she was pulled through and up into the fresh air. She brushed the dirt off her genuine Coco Chanel skirt—now ruined— and sat down beside Elizabeth.

“Wow, that was a tight squeeze,” Roberta gasped. “I wouldn’t have thought you were so strong.”

“It wasn’t me,” said Roberta. “It was Mister

Nodrog,” pointing to a pair of shoes behind her.

“Gordon!” Roberta gasped, “How the hell did you get here?”

“We’re the CIA, part of our job is to look after presidential delinquent daughters, isn’t it Miss Bandicoot?”

“Is Nodrog really your name? It spells Gordon backwards.”

“My parents didn’t have much imagination,” replied Gordon. “Will you be all right from here?”

“Sure, it’s five minutes walk to Billy’s place. Won’t he be surprised to see me!” She shook Roberta’s hand, “When I grow up, can I ask you for a job?” And then she was gone.

“I don’t think I can walk very far,” said Roberta. “My tights are torn and I lost a shoe in that damned hole.”

Gordon handed her a parcel, “I brought you some sneakers. It’s a long hike to Tom’s office.”

## chapter six

*Elina Dow*

THE CITY WAS ALREADY beginning to darken. Without the artificial background buzz of light and noise, the early afternoon sky felt oppressive and heavy. The fountain at Dupont Circle, once a proud meeting point for friends, held only a few puddles of murky water, making it look somehow much smaller than before.

The boat carrying female figure – meant to represent the sea – wore her standard stony expression. Amid the air of human emotion emanating from DC residents, even she managed to appear gloomier than usual. A splattering of deep red sprayed across her thighs as the unmistakable crack of fist against bone caused a middle-aged man's nose to boomerang grotesquely to the right. As he fell to the ground, blood pouring down his chin and onto the pavement beneath him, two police officers grappled with his combatant, kicking behind his knees and forcing him downwards. Before long, the blooded man would be waiting alongside countless others at United Medical Centre, vying for the attention of overworked, under-rested medical staff. He would be quite forgotten by

those who had witnessed the attack – just another minor incident within the chaos of a city gone mad.

Patrolling police officers circled the area in twos and threes. Vultures waiting to dive. A teenage boy began to climb the fountain, unnoticed. He placed his left foot on the hand of the lone male statue and reached for the upper basin. His foot slipped but he managed to maintain his grasp and righted himself once more. The boy swung the whole of his body outward, holding on with just one hand, and began shouting wildly.

“Ask yourselves what aren’t they telling us. Where the hell is Gray? Why hasn’t he been seen or heard of for days?”

As officers approached the fountain from all sides, the boy released his grip and jumped to the ground. Immediately, he made off down Connecticut Avenue, blending into the throngs of looters. Only two of the officers bothered with pursuit and it wasn’t long before they had lost all sight of him and admitted defeat.

As quickly as the boy had commanded the attention of those nearby, most had lost interest. He had been just another conspiratorialist desperate to make his own voice heard. A short distance away, perched on the edge of a black iron bench, two young women sat close together, foreheads touching and talking in whispers.

“Do you think it’s true? Can he really be dead?”

The cracked lips of one of the women parted briefly before they both caught sight of a police officer a few feet away and jumped, guiltily, apart. As the officer approached, the women shrunk back into the curves of the bench. Though slight in build, the officer loomed over them imposingly.

“You girls should probably head home. It’ll be dark soon

and there're all kinds of crazies out here.”

The woman with the cracked lips flinched. She bowed her head, her unwashed mousy hair sliding across her face. The other fixed her fierce green eyes upon the officer. “We can take care of ourselves”, she spat.

The officer’s attention was demanded by the sound of smashing glass. On the opposite side of Dupont Circle, his colleagues gathered from neighbouring streets to create a barricade across the front of an already dilapidated-looking 7-Eleven. Hordes of people, at least ten deep, pushed against the row of officers.

He sprinted towards the uniformed barrier, his shouts lost to those of the rioters, and forced his way to the front where he found his partner tossing tins and packets to those in the crowd who were quick enough to catch. As more people began to notice what was happening, the crowd grew beyond the officers’ control. Soon riot shields were raised and truncheons began to rain down heavy blows until only a few broken, yet determined, souls remained.

With the looters dissipated, the officer stepped over the shards of broken glass and joined his partner inside. A tin of sweetcorn flew through the air and the officer caught it one-handed.

“If you can’t beat ‘em, may as well join ‘em”, his partner smirked, and the two of them walked the near-empty aisles, claiming as much as they could carry.

Afterwards, as they made their way back across Dupont Circle, the two women were still sitting on the same bench. With the bulk of the crowd having moved on to other parts of the city, this time the women’s conversation was easier to follow.

“I heard it’s some of kind of nuclear attack. Enemies of

the West trying to start all-out war.” The woman with cracked lips spoke quickly.

“War against the whole of the West, or just America?”

“No idea. No way of finding out now, either, is there. Guess that was all part of the plan.”

The two officers approached. Either the women didn’t notice or they simply no longer cared.

“Here”, the first officer placed a few of his stolen supplies at the far end of the bench.

“If you won’t go home, you might want to do yourselves a favour and head to Lincoln Memorial. Mayor Owen and the House Speaker are there now. They might be able to help you get your facts straight.”

One and a half miles away, at Lincoln Memorial, the Mayor and Roberta Miguel both stood atop the marble staircase. They were placed one each side of the great statue; though it was impossible to tell, as the giant Lincoln was hidden by the darkness, tucked safely away inside his cave. As the gatherers grew, they crept ever closer to the two representatives, jostling with police and official security. Mayor Owen rested his hands atop his slightly bulging belly. Behind him stood a team of volunteers. Behind them, piled high beside the marble Lincoln, were several grey cardboard packages.

The Mayor spoke in a low voice to an armed man in a well-fitting black suit, “make sure your team keeps them quiet and orderly whilst I announce the plan”. Before he could address the waiting audience, however, Roberta stepped forward, taking centre-stage. With her usual calm and grace, her voice trickled from the front row outwards. The crowd ceased pushing, their full attention on Roberta.

“Fellow citizens”, she began.



“Above all, we must remain calm. Very little is certain at present but what we are sure of is that the only way through this is if we work together. The full impact of the situation is yet to be seen but we must remember that it affects every one of us. Our main priority at the moment is the welfare of the citizens of Washington DC.”

A low murmur began to rise but Roberta persevered. “We are not your enemy. The police are not your enemy. We must work together for the good of everyone.”

She concluded with a wide, albeit rather ingenuine, smile. Amongst the shouts of the throng, odd words could be detected.

“President”

“Dead”

“Nuclear attack”

“War”

The crowds began shoving even more forcefully than before. Indistinct cries could be heard from distressed mothers and their children. The crowd rose one step higher and then another, as the police gradually lost their hold – their manpower shrinking to a small portion of the horde’s.

Roberta glanced at Mayor Owen, whose own anxious eyes slid towards the packages behind him. As Roberta took a step, she was knocked roughly backwards. Someone had broken through the security and Roberta had not even had time to tell if it was man, woman or child before the gunshot echoed around the memorial’s interior. Two of the private security guards held onto each of her arms, helping to steady her, as the limp body was dragged away, never to be seen again.

The shooting had restored order once more, though how long this would last was anybody’s guess. For now, the jostling had ceased and the Chief of Police released one more bullet,

into the air above him. The warning had achieved its purpose; soon the only sound to be heard was the stifled, frightened, tears of the new widow in the front row.

Mayor Owen stepped forward. His voice boomed even louder than Roberta's had.

"I know you are all afraid. I promise you; I am here to help; the Speaker of the House is here to help." Mayor Owen gestured with one hand towards Roberta, who smiled tightly, her face unnaturally pale.

"Neither of us wishes for more disorder, more violence, more fear. Behind me is food, medicine, basic supplies. Nothing would give me more pleasure right now than telling you there is plenty for us all, but I'm afraid that simply isn't the truth." Mayor Owen ignored the disgruntled whispers and raised his voice just marginally. It was enough to have the desired impact.

"These supplies are limited and distributions have been carefully apportioned for each individual living in the city. All I ask is that each of you acts calmly and rationally so that my team and I may dispense these supplies to you all, one-by-one. Please work with us to keep the line moving and to help yourselves and your fellow residents."

Mayor Owen took a step backwards and, with the slightest movement of his hand, the team of volunteers began retrieving packages from beside Lincoln's gargantuan right foot.

The Mayor raised his left arm straight ahead of his torso. "I would ask that you form ten orderly queues on the right-hand side of the stairs. Each queue will be headed with a security officer, who will tell you when it is your turn to step forward. Once you have your package in hand you must leave the vicinity using the left-hand side of the stairs. Children will

be allowed to accompany one parent but all adults must step forward individually and you mustn't block the stairway waiting for other members of your household."

Watching the crowd obediently shuffling into lines, Mayor Owen turned and smiled at Roberta. "The Speaker and I will be distributing packages with the rest of the volunteers."

Roberta's once pale face now flushed. To her left, her assistant sidled up close.

"Tell them about the President", he advised. "It's the only way to win back control." The word control lingered in his mouth as his eyes met the Mayor's.

"Now isn't the time. Otherwise, the only losers are them." Roberta nodded towards the waiting public. As she hissed her final words on the matter, Mayor Owen handed her one of the packages.

## chapter seven

*Morlock*

ROBERTA ALLOWED THE SILENCE to envelop every molecule of her being. She loved standing among the crops as the sun peeked over the roof of the Capitol building. She squinted as the new day stretched out in front of her and pride welled in her chest as she admired the corn stalks which glistened like gold bars in the early morning light. There was not a breath of air moving and it would be a few more minutes before the diesel generators would be kicked into life to irrigate the massive city farm she had helped create. Her mind drifted back, back to a time when all you could hear was traffic and people. It had been a different world where speed and noise were how you got through life. In her darker moments she craved the hustle and bustle she once enjoyed but when she was alone, at dawn in this place, she knew she was doing what she had been put on this earth to do.

“Ms. Miguel.” The voice from behind dragged her back to the moment. She turned to see Brett walking towards her. The young man was dressed in a dirty black Tricorne hat, a freshly washed puffy white shirt and faded blue trousers with white

stockings covering them up to the knees. His shoes were freshly polished black leather with a shiny gold buckle which only made the rest of the outfit look more weathered and worn. Roberta allowed herself a small smile as he reminded her of the many tour guides dressed in various historical getups that used to bring tourists around the National Mall, beguiling them with historical facts and more than a few tall tales.

“Good morning Brett and it’s Roberta, ok?” she replied.

“Yes, of course, Ms Miguel, Ms Roberta. Sorry, Roberta” Brett spluttered as he removed his hat and twisted it nervously in his hands. Roberta smiled again, she enjoyed how she could turn this normally intelligent young man into a gibbering idiot so easily.

“It’s going to be another beautiful day, Brett. We should be able to get the western field next to the Monument ploughed and ready before we get any rain. Nothing on the horizon, our luck seems to be holding out.”

“Yes Ms Roberta. I’ve already sent the morning crew over to get started. Will be joining them myself soon but I just wanted to talk to you about Michael.” Brett said, his head down, avoiding eye contact.

“The Richardson boy?” she asked and he nodded in reply. “What’s he done now?”

“Not so much what he’s done, more what he hasn’t done. He was down for breakfast duty this morning, after all his complaints about working the field I have him something a bit easier but he never appeared this morning and I found him still asleep in his bunk. The others covered his work but there are a lot of them complaining.”

Roberta sighed. So much of what had been achieved was only made possible through compliance to the rules. As long

as everyone had a fair share of work to do they just got on with it but as soon as one person began to slack off the rest began to look at all aspects of their situation. When people had a common complaint they began to dig and find more problems they shared. One slacker could easily cause the rest to rebel and Roberta had no tolerance for laziness.

“His father was the same, over-privileged and thought the world owed him a living. How many warnings has he had?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“This is the fourth time this month. Some of the others are already talking, they say because you knew his father and his father being in the old government and all, that he is getting special treatment. I know it’s not true but people only hear what they want to hear sometimes.” Brett said. He looked up at Roberta as if to reassure her he was fully on her side.

“Ok, no rations for him today and make sure everyone else knows he is not getting any. Tell him if he goes out with the ploughing crew today he can eat tomorrow otherwise he gets nothing tomorrow too.”

“Yes, Ms Roberta, Roberta.” Brett took his orders and walked back from the direction he had come.

Roberta took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders. The noises of the day had started, the splutter of the diesel generators, far off voices coordinating work and the sound of metal clad cart wheels crunching on the asphalt of the old city.

Roberta sat on her bunk. Every muscle screamed out for rest and she conjured up an image of her sinking into a deep, hot, bubble bath. The thought did not help with the pain. It has been a long hot day getting the western field ploughed and seeding had begun. The pain was real but her sense of accomplishment outweighed it. She removed her boots and massaged her blistered feet. Michael had not turned up for his

shift and Roberta stepped in and also stayed on for another shift to make sure the job was done correctly.

The people of the settlement were not farmers. Many had adapted well to their new situation but others had been products of a softer, easier time when sitting all day was considered work. The thought of hunger and being out in the wilds on their own mostly kept them in check but it was hard to punish people who tried their best, even if their best fell short of what was required. Roberta knew this world was not for everyone but those who chose to stay here wanted to make it work, they wanted a community and they wanted to contribute. In her old life she represented her district as best she could, she wanted to help people and went to Washington to make sure she could help as many people as possible. As her career progressed she climbed the political ladder quickly and soon she felt she was helping the whole country. Then the world she knew ended and everything she had worked for turned to dust in moments. When the lights went out, so did her power and influence. She went from the most powerful woman in the world's most powerful country to just another mouth to feed in a world falling apart. Her basic instincts would not allow that to continue so she began to organize others and the fruits of her labour were now causing knots in every muscle in her body. She lay back and sleep washed over her leaving all other thoughts adrift in an ocean of unconsciousness.

Roberta stood on the dais giving her speaker's acceptance speech. She spoke of the hope of a nation, the voices of the poor of America, the duty of the congress. As she finished all around her stood cheering, clapping and stamping. She focused on the thud, thud, thud of the multitude of feet. The thudding got louder and louder. She sat up with a start, her

brow drenched with sweat. The room was still pitch black and she looked to the source of the banging. Someone was knocking urgently on the door to her room. Her senses returned and she quietly cleared her throat.

“Come in, it’s not locked” she said. The knocking stopped and the door opened slowly. Brett stood in the doorway dressed in his nightshirt and holding a battery powered lamp.

“Ms Roberta, we need you down in the kitchens.” He said trying not to look directly at her, his face reddening. She looked down to see she was only in her underwear. She covered herself with the sheet.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It’s Michael, he’s been caught in the pantry by the night watch” he replied his face still burning brighter than the light he held.

“Ah Christ. Okay. I’ll be down in a minute.” She said dismissing him while she quickly dressed and splashed some water on her face. She walked out into the corridor and took the stairs down the two flights to the kitchens. She entered to see two of the night watch standing behind a chair in which Michael sat slumped. He was holding the side of his face with his hand. Brett was standing to the side and noticed where she was looking.

“He put up a fight when he got caught. Got a punch for his trouble.” Brett explained.

Roberta looked at the two guards with a hint of disapproval for the use of force.

“What was he doing?” she asked the guards.

“We were doing our rounds, heard a noise in here. We checked the larder and lazyboy here was feasting on the pies for tomorrow’s dinner.”

Roberta looked at Michael and pulled a chair to sit in front



of him.

“Why?” she asked him.

“Why do you think? You stopped them feeding me so I got it myself.” He spat out his reply still holding his cheek.

“Things are simple here, you work, you get fed. Everyone works, everyone gets fed. What makes you think you are special?” she asked.

“You have this place running like a dictatorship, you make everyone work like we’re all your slaves. Why should we kill ourselves so you can feel like you are still in charge?”

“I work too, no one gets out of work.” She said keeping her voice calm and even.

“What does it matter anyway. This is a waste of time, all this work will be for nothing, why bother when the 1307s get here they’ll just take it all and kill anyone who tries to stop them.” A smile spread across Michael’s face and he looked Roberta directly in the eye. The flicker of the lamp sharpened his features and gave the hatred in his voice an evil visage.

“1307s? What are you talking about?” she asked looking to the guards and Brett to see if they had any idea. They just responded with shrugged shoulders.

“You’ll know soon enough and when they do come here I’ll be the first to laugh when they tear you limb from limb.” He said slowly.

“He’s talking bull.” One of the guards said with a noticeable tremor in his voice.

Roberta thought for a moment. Perhaps it was just bluster, just bravado because he took a beating. He would say anything at this point and she was well aware of the type of person his father had been. If there had ever been a true sociopath in government, and she was sure there had been many, then Michael’s father was the most likely candidate.

*Like father, like son* she thought.

“You know the punishment for this, you’re out of here.” She said as she stood and turned to Brett. “Give him a pack with three day’s rations and drop him off on the freeway. Also, tell everyone that anyone seen to help him from now on will receive the same punishment.” She turned back to Michael who just stared and smiled at her. “Get him out of my sight.” She shouted and the guard pulled Michael from his seat and dragged him out of the kitchen.

The room lit up with blue electric light and was quickly followed by the boom of a thunderclap. The wind began to pick up as the first rain drops beat against the window. She looked at Brett in the low light.

“Seems our luck has run out.”

## chapter eight

*K. Matt*

THE ONCE-GREEN LEAVES were now brilliant hues of gold and red. Even with everything that had changed in The District, the seasons were just the same as ever. The past year and change without any sorts of electronics had been quite the adjustment, of course. There was a greater emphasis on agriculture and community in general, even after so many had fled.

The morning had been a peaceful one, all things considered. Children were on their way to their classes, as not even an apocalyptic event could halt the importance of education. A few artists had been painting a mural on the side of one building, a pair of musicians were playing a song about The Event, about pining for the days of old and wondering where President Gray had been since that fateful day.

A scream cut through the air, peace turning to fear in an instant. One of the musicians' guitar strings snapped, his companion dropping her flute and rushing to the source of the sound. He followed. Two of the kids had turned around and ran to see what the commotion was, the artists following.

What they eventually saw was a destroyed cart, its cargo scattered across the ground. The horse had run off, the driver was somewhat banged-up but alive. But what truly garnered everyone's concern was the woman on the ground, her shoulder-length brown hair splayed around her head, her breaths ragged. The cart's rear axle was no longer where it should have been, having broken free of the cart entirely and lodged itself in the woman's torso.

They all knew who she was. Her name was Roberta Miguel. Before The Event, she was a well-known congresswoman. Even made it to the rank of Speaker. But after it had happened, and after so many had fled, she chose to stay in The District. She refused to abandon those that remained. This in and of itself commanded a great deal of respect amongst the residents.

And now she was in this predicament.

"Ms. Miguel?" one of the artists asked, her voice shaking. "Wh-what happened?"

The former Speaker began to form a word or two, but was cut off by a groan of pain.

One of the musicians had run off to fetch a doctor, everyone else staying by Roberta's side to provide some level of comfort. They all knew that if they didn't get her medical attention as soon as possible, this injury would kill her.

"What happened?" the second musician asked, his eyes ticking toward the cart driver.

Holding his arm, the driver began to go into it. "The horse got spooked and got away from me. Everything was kind of a blur after that, and...oh, God...I-I'm so sorry, Ms. Miguel!"

It felt like an eternity before the musician returned, two men in tow. One was a tall, lanky guy with glasses, the other a bit shorter and more muscular, his long red hair tied back in a

ponytail. The redhead carried a bag of medical supplies.

The group gave them some space, as the tall one took a knee beside his patient. She was still definitely breathing, but those breaths were not at all steady. He knew he didn't have a lot of time to act.

He took a look at the injury.

“Good news is, from this angle, the damage to any vital organs is minimal,” the doctor said. “A centimeter or so in either direction, however...”

“So, can we just rip it out?” asked one of the children.

The redhead shook his head. “Not a great idea, kid. That'll just make the blood and other fluids come gushing out, and pretty sure none of us want that.

“I-I-I'd prefer that not happen,” said Roberta.

The doctor smiled. “Okay, so, we're alert. That's always a good sign. So, Ms. Miguel, my friend and I are going to get that taken care of. What's your blood type?”

She tried to answer, but let out a pained gasp.

“O-okay, so, in the event that you need a transfusion, I'll get you some of my friend's blood. His type is O-.”

One of the musicians stepped forward. “No, take some of my blood.”

“No, mine!” the other called.

The doctor appreciated that. He'd have to get blood from someone around there, anyway. It was sort of a requirement nowadays, since there was no longer any refrigeration and therefore no blood banks.

“It's alright,” said the redhead. “Happy to give some of mine for her.”

The doctor set right to work, his companion pitching in. They'd started with cutting off her shirt, before getting the axel down to a more manageable size with the saw contained

in the doctor's bag. Once that was done, the wound was temporarily packed with gauze as the redhead helped her into a somewhat upright position.

Blood had soaked the back of her shirt, requiring the duo to carefully peel it from her skin. Once that was done, the doctor looked to his companion.

"Okay...Trav, if you could jimmy it out just a tad...not all the way, just enough so I can clean and stitch this part of the wound..." he said.

"Got it," the redhead replied, before looking Roberta in the eye. "Alright...this is probably gonna hurt a little."

She managed a slight chuckle. If things just suddenly stopped hurting right now, she'd be much more concerned.

Roberta let out a small cry as the intrusive piece of metal was pulled ever so slightly forward. The doctor immediately set to disinfecting the wound, apologizing profusely for any additional pain. The sutures came next, as he stitched that particular part of the wound. He placed a large square of gauze over it, taping it in place before turning his attention to her front.

"Okay, we're getting to the hard part now," the doctor told her. "My friend will be by your side. And I'm pretty sure everyone here is pulling for you to recover."

Glancing around, though her vision was blurred somewhat by tears, Roberta could see those two musicians, the trio of artists, the small group of schoolchildren, and the extremely apologetic cart driver standing around, watching and ready to jump in and help should it be required in any way.

She couldn't help but smile at the support shown by her community, even if it was just a small chunk right now. The smile became more of a grimace as the doctor and his companion began to carefully work on removing the metal

from her torso.

“Before I proceed any further...we do have some of the local anesthesia, right?” the doctor asked.

“Lemmie check...” the redhead replied, digging about in the bag.

He pulled out a sterile needle, syringe, and a small jar of something that'd ease the pain for a bit. It took a moment for him to get the syringe properly prepared, but it was something he was getting better at doing. He injected it near the wound.

“Let me know when the numbness sets in, please,” the doctor said, pushing up his glasses.

Roberta gave a nod once it had, and that was when the surgery began. She decided it would be best not to watch them do this, as the sight of blood was never a pleasant one. The woman instead focused on those there to support her.

They all continued to watch, offering their moral support to the woman. They would continue to be there for her as long as she needed.

This was a definite reason for her continuing to stay in the area when everything had gone to hell. The people needed someone they could trust, someone they could believe in wholeheartedly. This was why her judgement was sought on so many community affairs. And if she didn't make it through this surgery, that would leave a massive hole in their lives.

Eventually, she looked back to the doctor, seeing him stitching the wound. There was quite a bit of blood on him, and she felt a bit woozy...though she wasn't sure if it was the loss of blood or the sight of it that caused that.

“Alright, so, you're gonna need about a pint of blood, but that could've been so much worse,” the doctor told her. “Trust me, you're gonna be just fine.”

The transfusion went fairly smoothly. The blood, as

promised, had come from his companion. The redhead would need a little time to recover, but it was done.

“You’ll still feel a little out of sorts for a bit,” the doctor told Roberta, “but I promise you’re going to live.”

He pulled a spare shirt from his bag and handed it over to her. “I hope this fits well enough,” he said. “I usually try to have a spare just in case.”

She accepted the shirt, carefully pulling it on. It took a little time, as her movements were not currently the most coordinated. But once it was on, she was ready to go home.

“Thank you,” she told the doctor and his assistant, gesturing for them to come closer for a hug.

They did so, making sure not to jar anything. That was the last thing she needed right now. What she needed was bedrest. She would figure out some way to properly repay them for their services later.

The two musicians had decided that they would escort her to her home, as the kids reluctantly headed to school. While they would have preferred to spend time with Ms. Miguel to aid in her recovery, she insisted that they go. The artists would accompany the children there.

Bedrest wasn’t really the first thing Roberta wanted to do. She preferred to be up and about in her community. Participation was why she’d gone into politics in the first place. But it was for the good of the people that she recover as effectively as possible. They needed every one of their citizens to be in top form in order to properly function as a society.



## chapter nine

*S.B.*

THE TENT SLOUCHED AT the base of the Infinity Sculpture, looking like a drunk after a long night. It was a civil war era canvas hospital, scavenged from the Smithsonian's deeps, with more than enough space for a makeshift café. Farmhands lounged out front, scraping eggs off chipped tin plates and trading tall tales of the dead world.

Roberta Miguel trudged past, heading for the front flap. The farmhands paused their conversation long enough to give a respectful nod.

"Christ, I'm not the damn pope," she mumbled.

One of the men popped up and gave an elaborate bow, covering his heart with his tin plate and slowly fluttering his eyes closed in mock reference.

Roberta shook her head, smiling. "Finish your breakfasts, you damned reprobates."

They laughed and nodded as she turned to head into the tent.

Inside, canvas turned the hard morning light buttery and soft. The middle of the tent was a rough kitchen, with camp

stoves and trunks bursting with supplies. A dozen cast iron pans sizzled with delicious smells: omelets and griddlecakes and even a slab of bacon. The man at the center of the culinary web wore a Union kepi and sharpshooter's shell coat.

“Good morning, Benny,” Roberta said. “What’s on the menu?”

“Madam Speaker!” Benny replied, ignoring Roberta’s immediate frown. His weathered face stretched into a grin. He was freakishly thin—like an old TV antenna with teeth. “Got some fresh eggs from the Air and Space chickens.”

“The ones living in the old Soyuz?” she asked with skepticism.

Benny nodded knowingly. “Right. What am I thinking, serving Russian eggs to our esteemed Congresswoman? How about some fresh Johnnycakes instead?”

Roberta sat on one of the picnic benches arrayed around Benny’s kitchen and slowly dropped her head into her hands. She sighed. “Perhaps we could try a little less enthusiasm, okay? I’m not the Speaker of the House anymore. I’m not mayor or God or anything else. I’m just a tired woman who is really, really hungry.”

His smile faltered a bit. “Sorry, Ms. Miguel.”

“Roberta. It’s just Roberta.”

“Rough night?”

“We lost half the squash in the frost. Planted too late in the season.”

Benny shrugged. “Well, that’s what happens when a bunch of lawyers and janitors have to turn farmer in a hurry. How about some nice, fresh, coffee?”

Roberta gave him a narrow stare. “Don’t toy with me, Benny.”

He looked offended. “Do I look like a man who toys with

people?”

She gave his ridiculous outfit a pointed once over. “You have actual, made-from-ground-beans coffee?”

Instead of answering, one of Benny’s spindly arms grabbed a battered moka pot from the far camp stove. He produced a porcelain cup and mismatched saucer and set them in front of her with a flourish. Then he poured.

The rich, black liquid looked like coffee.

It even smelled like coffee.

Roberta’s mouth began watering. Old, caffeine-deprived nerves sparked with anticipation. She raised the cup and took a long, slow sip. Then she slowly set it down.

“Benny? That’s not coffee,” she said evenly.

His face fell. “Damn. I thought sure you wouldn’t be able to tell.”

“What is it?” Roberta said.

“Chicory. It’s close though, right?”

Roberta’s eyes narrowed. “No.”

“Sorry.”

She sighed. “It’s fine. I appreciate the effort.” She leaned forward over the cup. The steam was comforting, at least. “I need some food. We’ve been up all night trying to salvage what we could, but I suspect that whole crop might be a write-off.”

“We gonna have problems?” Benny asked, fixing up a plate.

“I’m not sure yet. We’re still trying to do a full census so I don’t know how many mouths we have to feed. It’s hard to know who’s left in the District.”

“I thought we finished that last year?” He set a plate of griddlecakes down in front of her.

“People keep drifting away. And new ones keep wandering

in from the suburbs, looking for food.” She snorted. “Or if their dumb, the government.”

Benny shook his head. “The mythical President Gray. You’d think word would have gotten around by now that he left town.”

“How? I’m pretty sure all my constituents got their news from Facebook, God help us. There isn’t even radio at the moment.”

“Or cars or fancy video games or refrigeration,” Benny said, cracking eggs into a bowl and mixing them with flour. “We make do.”

“It’s getting harder though. People are starting to figure out that none of it’s coming back. Maybe not ever.”

“About time,” Benny whispered.

“Why do I think you prefer life this way?” Roberta said. She gestured at the hat and shell coat. “What’s with the outfit, anyway?”

“For the tourists!” He straightened the coat and set the hat at a jaunty angle. “What do you think?”

She shook her head and laughed. “The tourists. That’s good.”

“I thought you’d enjoy it. I found this stuff hiding in deep storage. They may look silly, but they’re warm.”

A shout went up outside. Then another. Distantly, Roberta noticed a background murmur of disjointed conversations, overlapping, coming closer.

One of the farmhands stuck his head through the flap. “Ms. Miguel? Somebody’s looking for you.”

“Who?”

“Don’t know. Stranger.” He ducked away, leaving the tent flap swinging.

“See?” Benny said. He straightened his coat and cocked his

hat at a jaunty angle. "I knew this outfit would work."

"You're an odd man, you know that?" Roberta said.

"Proudly, madam. Proudly."

Roberta grinned. She took a long pull of coffee and shoveled some food into her mouth. One of the johnnycakes went into a pocket for later. She never seemed to have time to eat a proper meal these days.

Outside, a crowd was gathering north and east, near the old National Gallery of Art and across the fields of cabbage and okra that had taken the place of the bare National Mall.

"Can someone point me toward President Gray? Vice President Campbell? Or perhaps the Secretary of Energy, Mr. Thomson?"

The voice was fussy, as was the man. He was lean, not quite sickly, carrying a walking stick and a small pack. His hair and clothing were neat to the point of fastidious. A handful of assistants followed him, each hauling carts loaded with heavy scientific equipment.

His eyes flickered with recognition when he spotted Roberta. "Ah! Madam Speaker! Not who I was expecting, but at last, someone with some authority!"

"It's just Ms. Miguel now. And you are?"

The man frowned. "Kelly. Oliver Kelly. My team and I were hoping to link up with the government here and get to work restoring power."

The District crowd was surprised into silence. For a moment, anyway. Then someone began to jeer. Pretty soon the farmhands and residents were laughing, throwing insults. These became gradually darker and more ugly. Kelly reddened, shocked surprise simmering into fury. His team, however, looked tired and scared, adrift in a sea of hostile strangers.

"Quiet down!" Roberta thundered, abruptly seizing the

crowd's attention. "What's the matter with all of you?"

"But he said—"

"I don't care what he said! I do care that we lost half a crop last night and you're standing around like that isn't your problem! It is! It's a problem for all of us, remember? We work, or we don't have food!" She paused. Many of the farmhands and workers bowed their heads, shamed. "So maybe we should get to something useful!"

Slowly, the crowd broke, people trickling off in twos and threes, until all that remained was Kelly and his team, and Roberta.

"You're going to have to forgive them," Roberta said.

"I'm not even sure I understand what just happened," Kelly replied.

Roberta sighed. It wasn't worth trying to explain. "Were you serious?"

"About what?"

"You said you wanted to try and get the power back. Were you serious?"

"Of course," Kelly replied. "We didn't haul five hundred pounds of electrical equipment across the Potomac for our health." He straightened his tie and cleared his throat. "I need to find the person in charge."

"No one's in charge," Roberta replied.

"But I thought... they all listened to you." He shook himself. "You were Speaker of the House. You'll have to do."

"I'll have to do... what?" Roberta asked.

"I'll need at least a hundred volunteers. People who are good with their hands. Not common laborers, but doctors or surgeons, butchers might work. Artists, perhaps. Manual dexterity is the key."

Roberta crossed her arms. "Really."

“Yes. The Carrington Event—”

“The what?”

“The solar storm that knocked out all the power,” Kelly sighed. “In 1859 a coronal mass ejection struck the Earth’s magnetic field, disrupting communications and electronics on a global scale. It was called a Carrington Event, after the astronomer who discovered the link between solar activity and electrical disruptions. Back then, we had little more than telegraph machines. The interruption was minimal. But that was distinctly not the case fourteen months ago. The leading edge hit the magnetosphere at almost 3000 kilometers per second, with a cavity of low electron density unrivaled in almost—”

“Hold on.” Roberta held up a hand and turned to the closest assistant. The man was actually harnessed into his cart. She pointed at Kelly. “Does he actually know what he’s talking about?”

The man nodded. “He does. He really does.”

Something clicked in Roberta’s brain, a flicker of life and hope that she hadn’t allowed herself to feel in more than a year. “He can get the power back?”

Kelly straightened. “I can.”

Behind him, the assistants were all nodding.

“Computers. Phones. Lights and hot showers and...” Roberta breathed a sigh.

“Yes. All of it. If I have the proper assistance.”

Roberta blinked. Then she broke into a grin. “How about some breakfast? There’s a little café over there that I think would perk all of you right up. They even have coffee! Sort of.”

Kelly’s assistants gratefully slumped in their traces and began disconnecting from the heavy carts.

“What about my manpower?” Kelly demanded.

“It’s the middle of the morning,” Roberta replied.

“So?”

“So we’re hand to mouth here. Daylight’s for working fields. After sundown, we can hold a District wide meeting and vote on getting you the help you need. If any of that’s even necessary.”

“Why wouldn’t it be necessary?” Kelly asked.

“Well, you’re going to have to convince me you’re not full of shit first.”

“I must say I did not expect the Speaker of the House to be so...”

“Vulgar?” Roberta grinned. “Politeness was a casualty of the apocalypse.”

“How exactly do I prove that I’m telling the truth?”

“Let’s start with a nice conversation, where you explain what all of this...” she gestured at the carts, "...is about. I might actually get a chance to finish breakfast, for once.”

She guided him across the field. Benny was already greeting Kelly’s assistants and plying them with chicory and deep fried biscuits. They fell on the food like shipwreck victims on a banquet.

It took Oliver Kelly almost four hours to convince Roberta Miguel that he was not, in fact, full of shit. And that night, it took Roberta Miguel exactly twelve minutes to convince the people of the District to volunteer for a chance to get the lights on.



## chapter ten

*Alex Brantham*

UNDER THE FLICKERING LIGHT from an antique oil lamp, Oliver examined the charts that Mike had just brought into their temporary HQ in what might once have been an impressive conference room.

Everything seemed to be under control, as far as Oliver could tell. Mike's teams of volunteers were working through the programme, and the main progress sheet was starting to fill up with ticks indicating that a task was complete. Rooms opened, burst light bulbs removed, and the remains of anything electrical disconnected from its sockets. Low-grade work that needed to be done if there weren't to be any nasty surprises if and when they actually managed to produce some power.

It all just seemed to be a bit ... slow. "What's keeping them? I thought we'd be twice as far down this list by now," asked Oliver.

"Fair question," said Mike. "Most of the folks are fine, just getting on with it. Not that it's always easy - some of the doors are locked tight, and it takes a while to break in. But there are a

few who, let's say, aren't on the same page."

Oliver wasn't happy. What was the point of going to all this trouble to try to get a generator going, if they weren't going to be able to connect it up to anything? There was much that was strange and disconcerting about this new world, but it did seem that the capacity for human beings to mess things up hadn't changed.

"Well fuck 'em," he said, leaning with his knuckles on the table, gazing at the papers. "Any that aren't pulling their weight, chuck them out and we'll get some new ones. I'm sure that woman can get some for us."

Oliver had known Mike for a long time - way back, even before the outage - and was expecting an immediate response, probably supportive. So the delay before one came, even though it might have been no more than a fraction of a second, was enough to alert him that something was wrong.

Additionally, an extra shadow was falling over the table, indicating the presence of another lamp and, by extension, another person holding said lamp.

He looked up. "Oh, hi, Roberta, didn't see you come in."

"Clearly not," she said, fixing him with an icy stare. "Was there something you wanted my help with?"

Oliver swung round to face her, not quite straight-on as that would be more confrontational than he intended right now, but still adopting a position which meant to convey confidence and strength.

"Well, since you mention it, yes there is. I've just been hearing from Mike here that some of the volunteers you sent us don't seem to be too keen. Perhaps you might like to take them back and send us people that actually want to be here?"

With barely a trace of a hesitation - though there definitely was one, Oliver was sure - Roberta smiled. A gentle smile, not

a grin, one that began with the mouth and only later spread to the eyes. A politician's smile.

Her head tilted fractionally to the side before she spoke. Movements she had no doubt practiced in front of the mirror for years, intended to convey honesty but in reality just confirming, in Oliver's mind, the shallowness of the response that was coming his way.

"I'd love to," she said, "if only I had control of such matters. But whatever you might think, I'm just one voice, and these are the people that the town have made available to help you." Then the tone hardened, just a touch. "So, really, I think you should make the best of what you have."

Oliver started to open his mouth to speak, but she wasn't finished. "And let's have a little more respect for these people, shall we?" she continued. "Now, why don't you let me know how your plans are progressing? When might we see the grand switch on?"

She turned her gaze to Mike, who looked back at Oliver.

He took a deep breath. "Well, we had hoped to be ready in a couple of days, but with the delays in clearing the rooms, that's not going to happen. Plus the generator team aren't finding things easy, either. But we might be ready to start turning on lights in the basement in three or four days."

Now Roberta's face really turned dark. "Basement? You've got to be kidding me, there's no way we can let something this important happen in a frigging basement!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Oliver said, now turning to a full face-on position. "I'll just get the guys to move the generator upstairs, shall I? Oh, just one thing, it weighs a couple of tons. Not to mention the LPG fuel next to it. And the cables - well, half them are fried and we're having to replace them. Not to mention the distribution boards which are all, without

exception, toast. So we're cabling as we go and the basement is where we have to start and so that's where the switch-on is going to happen."

Roberta might have been expected to take a step forward at this point but, to Oliver's consternation, she did the opposite. Half a step back, shoulders back, like a lioness getting ready to pounce.

"You really have no idea what's going on here, do you?"

"Getting some power back on? So we can have some lights? Maybe a bit of refrigeration?"

"Yes, yes," she said, bringing her hands into play. "Of course those things are happening but for heaven's sake can't you just lift your eyes off your grubby little project plan and see the bigger picture?"

Oliver wasn't impressed. No-one had called his plans "grubby" before.

"This is about hope," she said, the movement now spreading from her hands to her whole body. "Hope that we can get through this, hope that the future holds something worth working for, hope that the kids will have a world at least as good as the one we used to have."

At last she stood still, hands on hips. "So, we are not going to have the first electric light of the new era come on in some dingy basement, however inconvenient it might be. We're making a statement here, and it has to be a big one. I'm thinking that we fill the House of Representatives Chamber with local citizens-"

"Oh, OK, now I get it. This is about an ego trip for you, is it? Don't tell me, you'll be back in the Speaker's Chair, will you?"

"Okay, the Senate Chamber, then, I'm not fussy-"

"Completely out of the question." Oliver was on solid

ground now and was not going to give way. "We haven't even started tracing the supplies for the House and Senate wings, and frankly they're both much bigger jobs than we have time or resources for. Anything we do absolutely has to be in the central section--"

"All right, all right, how about the Old Senate Chamber?"

Oliver was thrown by that suggestion. It was in the central section, sure, but how easy would it be to light up? He threw a glance at Mike, inviting him to contribute.

Mike took the hint. "Well, that's an interesting idea," he said, "but I'm not sure we can make that one work. The lighting in there is pretty complex and we haven't surveyed the cabling routes yet."

A second of silence seemed like a lot longer, before Mike continued. "But here's an idea. How about the Rotunda? It's a big open area, we could throw up a few temporary lights. And I'm pretty sure we can find a cabling route from the generator. Would that be symbolic enough for you, Roberta?"

"Sounds great." She smiled and looked at each of them in turn. Oliver, if not exactly nodding with enthusiasm, wasn't dissenting and that was clearly good enough for her. "Thank you, gentlemen. Let me know when you'll be ready, and I'll assemble some guests for the party."

And, with that, she turned and left, taking the extra shadows with her.

Mike reached for the sheaf of papers on the table and stacked them into a neat pile. "Don't worry, Oliver," he said, "I'll get on to it. I'll redirect a couple of work teams, so we have a cabling route and some pretty lights for the lady's floor show."

Oliver's next destination was the basement or, rather, sub-basement, a dingy area never seen by the public where

unmentionable services took place. In this case, the surviving one of two emergency backup generators. Well, mostly surviving - the fact that it had been in pieces for maintenance when the Outage happened meant that some parts had escaped undamaged, and others were at least in principle repairable. This is where Tony came in.

Unlike Mike upstairs, Tony wasn't dependent on the unskilled labour offered by the town - he was using only men (and one or two women) that they knew and trusted. Things here were rather closer to schedule: they'd already assembled almost a complete working generator from the parts available, and the work to bypass the old distribution boards was nearly complete. All Oliver had to do was deliver the minor nuisance that they'd have to lay in an extra supply for the Rotunda light show, and they were done.

Just as Oliver was about to leave, the door burst open and an unfamiliar figure burst in. Oliver had to take a moment in the dim light to recognise him as one of Mike's volunteers.

"Quick," he gasped. "Upstairs. We need you, now."

Oliver grabbed his lamp and followed the man as he turned to lead the way upstairs.

"What's your name?" asked Oliver. He had no idea what he was heading into but if was going to be trouble, he'd at least like to know who he had alongside him.

"Ibrahim," said the figure, already halfway up the first flight of stairs.

"And what's the trouble?"

"Wait!"

Ibrahim had reached the doorway into the basement level corridor. He poked his head cautiously around the corner and then ducked back. "About twenty yards to the left. We were just clearing all the rooms, like you said."

"And?"

"There were these really tough doors, but a gang of us finally got in. We found an armoury - assault rifles, ammo, shields, the lot. Must have been an emergency stash for the guards."

Oliver shivered. This was not what he had signed up for. He was an engineer, not a soldier. "So what's happening now?"

"A couple of guys picked up the guns and started shooting. Told us all to get out, we weren't going to be wiring up anything."

Oliver eased past Ibrahim and gently poked his head around the corner. When it wasn't immediately blown off, he looked in the reverse direction and saw Mike, lying motionless in the middle of the corridor. A dark patch on the floor reflected what little light there was. Shit.

He turned to Ibrahim. "I'm going out there to get help. You stay here - shut this door and block it off. Try not to let those guys down here."

The man nodded. Behind a door probably felt a lot safer than being out in the corridor, but Oliver hadn't come all this way to be stopped by some lunatics, even if they did have M16s.

Oliver looked for one last time in the direction of the armoury - no movement, they must have moved on. Then he crouched and ran towards Mike, as the door slammed shut behind him.

On reaching Mike, he slid to the ground. His eyes were open and he was still breathing, but the breaths were shallow. There was no time for what he wanted to say. Just: "How many, and which way?"

"Two. And they went that way. I think they're clearing the building." Mike indicated the direction with his eyes,

determination mingling with resignation.

"Stay tight, buddy, I'll get help."

Oliver ran back to where the apparent armoury was. Sure enough, two sets of heavy doors had been battered down - a lot of effort had gone into that. Behind them, a room with lines of assorted rifles and god knows what else - with some conspicuously empty slots on the racks. He helped himself to whatever came to hand and took off, away from Mike to find another staircase up to the next level.

The next floor up, the Ground floor, was completely silent. Not just the corridor into which his head was now cautiously inserted, but beyond. The only noises were coming from upstairs, so he headed that way. He was now on the principal floor, where the Rotunda and the Senate Chamber and the rest of the main spaces were.

Now he could hear the occasional crack of rifle fire and eased himself towards it. Looking out of a window, he could see a stream of workers running away, down the steps and away from the building. No more casualties, at least.

Back into the corridor, he crept up to a position in a doorway where he could see the two men, each holding a rifle, standing at the top of one of the grand flight of steps that led from this level down to the grassed area beyond.

He checked his rifle. It was a while since he'd handled one of these, but it looked like it was ready to go. Safety off.

He had a clear sight of one to the left, but the other was partly behind a pillar. He might get one shot away, but there was no way he'd get them both before they reacted. Better to go for the easy shot first.

The man on the left was standing and shouting at the fleeing workers. "Git out of here! We don't want none of this techno shit no more!"



Oliver took careful aim and, after a crack that echoed around the empty corridor, the man on the left crumpled into a surprised heap. As expected, the other one disappeared behind his column before Oliver could track him, but at least Oliver knew where he was, and could now run to a better position.

The man who was down didn't seem to be moving, but Oliver took the precaution of aligning himself out of shot, just in case. His partner, however, was definitely still active, and Oliver had to take a sudden duck back behind his cover when a muzzle appeared next to the column, closely followed by whizz through the air and a pinging noise from the wall behind.

"What's your problem?" shouted Oliver. "What's all this about? We're just laying cables, for fuck's sake."

"No, you're not," came a voice. "You're taking us back to where things was. Life was shit for people like us then, and it's all right now. We can't go back and you can't make us."

"What, just the two of you? Or maybe just one?"

"There's plenty more on the way, don't you worry 'bout that. Now you git out of here while you can, hands up and weapon on the floor."

Oliver considered this generous offer and, on reflection, decided to decline. The fact that he had just downed this guy's partner was not favourable. But, looking around, he couldn't see a way out of this. Oliver was behind one column and, maybe twenty yards below, his opponent was behind another. If either of them made a move, they'd be an easy target.

And, if this nutter was right and there were more like him on the way, it wouldn't take long before the stalemate was broken, and Oliver would not be on the winning side.

Glancing towards the open space beyond, he could see two

distinct sets of movement. First, the last of the site workers fleeing the scene, their high-vis jackets highlighting their routes. Secondly, some darker figures coming towards him. He wasn't sure who they were but they didn't look friendly.

This was no time to be sitting tight. He moved to the left of his cover, quickly exposed his leg and then pulled it back just as the shot came. Then went to the right, this time going all the way out to take a shot himself.

It was a good theory but, like all good theories, not much good if your opponent is thinking the same way that you are. A bullet smashed into his weapon and knocked him backwards, a flash of pain searing up his right arm.

By the time he'd processed what had just happened, he was lying on the ground well behind the safety of his cover, with his rifle lying on the floor. It was beyond his reach, but that was irrelevant since he could see that it was damaged beyond use.

The air was still and silent, except for the sound of steps creeping up towards him. Oliver picked up his head, to see the man - another of the volunteers, one of the ones that Mike had been complaining about. No, he didn't know his name. Perhaps he should have done, but he didn't. And now it was too late, the man was grinning and raising his weapon, pointing it straight at Oliver's head.

And then there was the crack of a shot being fired.

But the lights didn't go out, and his head was not filled with pain. Oliver opened his eyes just in time to see the man fall to his knees, his eyes wide open with surprise at the bullet hole that had so recently been formed in his forehead.

He looked around to see a figure at a window on the floor above, her long brown hair fluttering in the breeze.

"Hey, pardner, thanks for flushing him out!" she said.

It was approaching six pm. There was sufficient light outside still for people to be able to come and go safely, but it was dark enough for the impending miracle to be properly appreciated by those privileged to witness it.

Oliver had no idea what selection process had taken place - that was not his department - but the Great Rotunda was, if not quite heaving, then certainly well populated with representatives of the local citizenry. Plus, of course, many of the team who'd got them this far. Roberta was mingling gracefully and, as the hour arrived, somehow procured a space around her.

Ideally, there would have been a big switch for her to throw to switch everything on. There wasn't any way that was going to work, and Oliver had been able to resist her requests to provide an entirely fake button to press.

So when the bells rang for six, Roberta didn't need to say anything, but merely smiled and nodded at Oliver. Who gave the thumbs-up to a volunteer standing by the door, who turned and passed the signal along a chain of her colleagues that stretched along the corridors and down the stairs until it would finally reach Tony in the basement. Who would press the button to start the generator which, hopefully, wouldn't explode in a ball of flame. Or, more likely, simply cough to itself and refuse to start.

Upstairs in the Rotunda, an expectant silence fell on the crowd. No-one had any idea how long this was going to take, but as one second followed another, and there was no sign of anything happening, glances began to be exchanged. Some nervous, some knowing, some condescending.

And then, deep from the bowels beneath them, a sensation that they'd all known and all forgotten. The gentle vibration of

a building coming to life. The lights glowed, dimly at first, and then with a sudden brightness.

There was a pop and a flash as a bulb, neglected for too long, was overcome by the sudden surge of current. But the rest were ready for action, and the great room was filled with light, not the dingy apology of smoky yellow from their candles and oil lamps but real bright light, the light of the sun brought inside, a miracle rediscovered. The huge paintings on the walls around them sprang into life for the first time in fourteen months, the historical characters portrayed on them looking surprised at their rude awakening.

The room filled with shouts and cheers, and Oliver found his back being slapped by friends and strangers alike. Then a gap in the throng opened up in front of him and there was Roberta, smiling, a proper smile this time, one that began with the eyes.

"Thank you," she said. "I hope you know how much this means."

## chapter eleven

*J. Tynan Burke*

THE SHADOW OF THE Washington Monument ended to Roberta Miguel's right, in a field of golden squash that stretched between Jefferson and Madison Drives. The two ribbons of asphalt cut the Mall into thirds; she was heading down the northern one towards the Capitol dome, with her horse loping along behind her on a lead. She hadn't needed to bring him, strictly speaking, but it was a bit of a schlep to and from her home, and she wasn't as young as she used to be.

It was Roberta's second trip to the dome in as many days. Ever since Oliver Kelly had restored its power, her history with the building had been popping into her head at the strangest times. One moment she'd be mediating a conflict over a deer fence, and the next thing she knew, she'd be flooded with nostalgia for even the most inane committee debate. She'd taken a trek to see the building from afar last night, and it had calmed her thoughts, but only temporarily. More memories had intruded today, hence her trip this afternoon. This time she was approaching from the rear, where she'd watched President Gray's inauguration in another

lifetime. The red, white, and blue banners that had flown during his speech would have clashed with the Mall's new palette horribly, with its lively greens and yellows.

She paused at the National Museum of Natural History. A high school field trip from Baltimore, too many decades earlier, had brought her there for the first time. She'd fallen in love with the mineral collection, as well as DC itself. *And the rest is history*, she jeered to herself. As if her accomplishments would mean anything in the long run. A year and change ago she'd been third in line to the presidency, and now look at her. Unofficial city manager of a goddamned cow town.

The sound of snuffling off to her left snapped her back to the present.

"Hey!" she demanded. The horse moved its head halfway up and showed her a half-lidded eye. "Don't eat the chard." She started walking again, tugging on the lead, the horse following reluctantly as he chewed a mouthful of wilted roughage.

*Unofficial city manager to a cowtown.* She huffed out a breath and strode down the overgrown street, hoping her surroundings might calm her down. From her path under the Mall's American elms, thick streaks of light cut through the autumn haze; the fields beyond were crowded with grazing animals and vegetables. Far, far behind the cornstalks squatted what had been the legislative seat of the world's only superpower.

None of her former glories mattered any more. Not one single law she'd passed or election she'd won. Life had changed. *And you've changed with it*, she reminded herself. *You're a humble public servant once again, emphasis on humble.*

An acid retort died before she had the energy to formulate it. She knew it was just the lights making her feel this way, that

tramp Oliver Kelly and his electricity.

She wasn't the only one who was acting a little off. Kelly had installed lights on the Capitol, not everywhere but enough to limn the outline of its contours. God only knew where he'd gotten the bulbs and wiring. But the sight seemed to have hypnotized damn near everybody. *Hero*, they were saying about Kelly; *savior*, about that weedy drifter. It made some sense. Like Roberta, the others who'd stayed in the District were the true believers, people once committed to truth or power or money or sacrifice. The sort who might be moved by the symbolism, the idea that the city might be important again. So many had been skipping work to gawk and party, to toast Kelly and give him gifts. And he was basking in it all like he'd been born for adulation. It was enough to make a woman suspicious.

*Why had he put up the lights?*

Roberta reached the end of the road. It stopped at the old reflecting pool, which was now nothing more than a scummy home to mosquito larvae. The horse's tail slapped across his back. Roberta smacked her own neck and came back with a smear of blood. *Fucker*. She turned right and jogged down Third, squinting against the glare from the low sun. At the end of the drive she turned into the Botanic Garden.

Most of the flowerbeds were growing lettuce and beans now, though some still held ornamentals, tended by volunteers. She tied her steed off at a hitching post out of reach of the produce, then headed for the conservatory, where she found a bench in some dappled shade. From her perspective, the conservatory's massive glass ziggurat dwarfed the Capitol dome. They'd taken to growing tomatoes and other hothouse plants inside; she liked to joke that at least one of the domes on the Mall was still doing something productive.

She pulled a battered old spy thriller out of her back pocket to kill time before sundown.

“Speaker Miguel?” somebody said after she’d been reading a while.

Roberta finished the paragraph she was reading, some ridiculous fight scene in a cruise ship galley, and set the book down over her thigh. A vaguely familiar woman sat on the next bench over, facing her and leaning forward. She was wearing a decent pair of coveralls, not the looted gift-store clothing typical of the District. One of the engineers Kelly had brought with him from... somewhere. Roberta really didn’t know anything about the man, did she?

“Jane Chu.” The woman stuck out her hand, a nervous smile on her face. “So sorry to interrupt, but I’m a huge fan.”

Could Roberta trust this woman? Was she just being paranoid? Not everybody who worked with Kelly would be in on his scheme, or even care. Traveling to DC to restore its power had obvious allure, after all.

“No trouble at all. It’s Roberta. Good to meet you.” She extended a cautious hand and they shook. The elation on the woman’s face was infectious, and Roberta smiled back; she hadn’t met a fan in ages. *You used to have fans everywhere*, she thought. *People flew around the world to see you*. Although ‘courtiers’ might have been a more accurate word, or ‘flatterers’. People who wanted something, back when she’d been able to offer things.

Perhaps Ms. Chu here wanted something too.

“You’re with Oliver Kelly, right?” Roberta said.

“Well, sort of.” Jane shifted her weight aimlessly, squeezed her thighs. “Oliver’s offering something to do. I... needed that. And helping out DC was irresistible.” She waved a hand at the Capitol dome. “It’s something, isn’t it?”



“You have no idea,” Roberta said. *Asshole move. Why?*

“Right.” The awkward pause hung in the heavy air.

*You used to be good at this sort of thing*, Roberta thought. *Be a politician again for a minute, won’t you?* “I was starting to think I’d never see it lit up again,” she said. *Much better.*

“Yeah. For real.” Jane nodded. “Really wild, seeing lights again, isn’t it?”

“Where did you get them, anyway?”

“Oh.” Jane fidgeted. “Salvage, mostly. There’s a deep basement in the power station that had a lot of intact bulbs and fixtures.”

Roberta had no doubt that there was a deep basement in the power station full of backup supplies; they had them all over town. That was why she knew Jane must be lying—no depth or amount of shielding had protected the electronics within. But light bulbs weren’t all that complicated to make, with the right tools and a little power. Roberta had taken enough science classes in undergrad to accidentally minor in geology, and had picked up just enough electrical engineering to know.

“Interesting,” Roberta said, one of her favorite words for situations like these. It could mean anything and sounded nice. “So, who did you used to be?” A standard small-talk question.

“Army Corps of Engineers,” Jane said with a rusty salute.

“Impressive.” Roberta quoted one of their unofficial slogans, “When you need it built, and it absolutely has to be built tomorrow...”

Jane laughed. “You got it.” She sighed; her leg twitched up and down. “Going from that to a wanderer who repairs things I wouldn’t have thought twice about before. What a demotion.”

Roberta laughed too. “You’re telling me.”

The pause was less awkward this time.

“Hey, treat you to a drink?” Jane said eventually. “I hear they’re offering Oliver’s crew free booze down the street. Haven’t checked it out myself—don’t party like I used to—but I’m not a nun, for crying out loud.”

*An opportunity to get you drunk and pick your brain? Roberta thought. Maybe figure out the truth about those lights? Too good to pass up.* Her heart beat faster as the thrill of manipulation returned, followed by immediate shame. But this was for the good of the District, right? Right.

“Sounds good to me,” Roberta said. “Lead on.”

The State Of The Union had been a shabby dive back before the Event, and had only deteriorated further. Just down the street from the Capitol, it was popular with congressional aides, though not with their bosses. Too discordant and loud for anybody over forty. Now its Edison bulbs had been replaced by candles and oil lamps; instead of boasting one hundred beers on tap, it served a half-dozen local varieties in bottles. The sawdust floor had remained.

The party which had started when the lights first came on was still going strong. Roberta and Jane had gone through a haze of tobacco and cannabis smoke on the way in. Jane took an offered toke as she passed; Roberta politely declined. She’d never developed a taste for the stuff, and anyway needed her wits about her.

“So I said, ‘Vice President Campbell, if you break the tie on Walker’s nomination, you will never see funding for your beloved strike ships again.’” Roberta had to half-shout to keep herself heard over the blues band playing in the back room. She took a sip of the passable red ale she’d ordered. “Well, he did, and that’s why there was a recession in Mobile.” She took

a bigger sip. “For all that matters.”

Jane took a deep breath and blew it out; she stared at her glass of bourbon. “You beat yourself up often? For doing stuff you thought was important before all this shit went down?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Roberta tried to keep the weight of the past from making her frown.

“Nah.” Jane knocked back the last half of her glass. “Well, yeah. I tried living the simple life. Focus on what matters, you know? Family, survival, rebuilding. But I was stranded where I was stationed—no family, no real connection to the place. I dunno. Barkeep!” She thrust up her arm and waved her finger around in a circle; *keep ‘em coming.*

Before she knew it, Roberta had a shot thrust in front of her. *Why the hell not*, she thought. *It’ll put her at ease, and it’ll only be my second drink. And yeah, alright, this is a fun chat.* She clinked glasses with Jane and downed the bourbon, easing it down her throat with a practiced flick of the tongue.

“It’s no way to live, though,” Roberta said.

“No it most certainly is not.” Jane traced a figure eight on the shellacked bar. “That’s why I volunteered right away when Oliver passed through town.”

It jolted Roberta back to full sobriety. The conversation had borne fruit; she’d need to step carefully now. “Oh yeah?” *Keep it simple.*

Jane nodded along to the band’s rendition of *One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer*. “The chance to fix up power stations all the way to DC? We’re turning the lights back on, Madam Speaker.”

“Why DC? Why lights?” The questions slipped out before Roberta could think about them. She managed to keep herself from clapping a shocked hand over her mouth. *You’re so out of*

*practice at this game. 'Madam Speaker' indeed.*

Jane just shrugged. "You'd have to ask Oliver about all that. Hey, can I tell you a secret?" She leaned in and said in a sloppy whisper, "I gave you the party line about the lightbulbs earlier. Truth is, we've been working on building our own gadgets when we get power stations back up and running. Tools to help us travel safely and fix up the next town we come to. Oliver's asked us to make a lot of bulbs, too. I dunno, I think he knows that people enjoy seeing the pretty lights."

Roberta must have made an expression of distaste, because Jane added, "Manipulative, right? Hey, I don't like the guy either. I'm just along for the ride."

Roberta took a moment to blink away her surprise. She'd gotten to the truth, just like that. *Rusty as hell, but I've still got it.* She tried to silence the twinge of guilt; she'd have time to feel bad about using Jane later. "So that's why the lights, but why DC? Why the Capitol?"

"For Oliver?" Jane leaned in even closer as her whisper dropped further. Roberta could feel Jane's breath on her ears, smell the whiskey and the acetaldehyde she knew it was metabolized into. "Your Capitol is another stepping stone. That building's got massive backup power infrastructure. The rest of town does, too." She wove her fingers together and held up the result. "Everything we fix gives us the capacity to fix something even bigger."

Roberta bit her lip, mind racing trying to come up with the endgame. Seemed like Kelly was planning something massive, but what? A takeover of the country? There was nothing to take over. Was he as dangerous as he seemed? Or as harmless as his workers?

"Why?" she simply asked.

Jane leaned back, disentangled her hands, and showed her

palms. “Madam Speaker, I would tell you if I knew. I’m sorry if this sounds bad, but I got nowhere else to be.”

Roberta put her hand on Jane’s shoulder. Not manipulation; genuine sympathy. “I know exactly what you mean. I’ve still got my old job too, in a way.”

They met each other’s eyes and nodded along with the music and the sentiment.

“Yeah,” Jane said at last. “Hard to do anything else once you’ve found your calling, even after the world’s ended.”

Roberta said farewell after one last beer. She turned to wave from the door and saw that Jane had already gravitated to a cluster of her fellow engineers. Hopefully she wouldn’t discuss too much of their conversation.

Her horse was at the hitching post in front of the bar where Roberta had left him, his muzzle dripping from a recent drink at the provided trough. The sun had set while she’d been inside, and the Capitol shone a block away like it was hanging in the sky. It was as transfixing as it had been the night before; more so, actually, after the afternoon she’d had. She’d dredged up so many memories of old glories, and too many old habits. Maybe it would have been good to stay away from the building, to ride home and center herself again in the world as it was, not the world as it had been. But surely she could be forgiven this burst of nostalgia. It wasn’t like anybody was watching, and it might be good to think over Jane’s revelations about Kelly in front of the building he’d just electrified.

Stepping carefully down the unlit street, Roberta neared the Capitol at last.

## chapter twelve

*Em Starlight*

A COOL BREEZE MOVED among the trees and buildings of the District, curling around corners and slipping along sidewalks. It promised the coming shift in seasons. The leaves throughout the city were glorious shades of sunset, oranges and yellows and reds bursting forth and falling with each sigh of the wind. The view from the top of the steps of the Capitol was, in truth, breathtaking.

What had been the National Mall ran east to west and the Capitol stood at the eastern end of it, a gleaming tower of marble. The sun was setting just to the left of the Lincoln Memorial as she stared out over the novel farmland; the Washington Monument cast a long shadow, its face glowing orange as the sun settled over the horizon. If she had turned around, she would have seen that same orange glow on the Capitol. She could not quite bring herself to look at it yet, though.

Before, this had always been Roberta's favourite time of year. She had loved the smells of woodsmoke, of cinnamon and clove, and the cosy feeling the season brought. Her time at

law school had often found her in a wool jumper and out on the Boston Common while she pressed the finer points of Constitutional Law into her mind. This season brought back happy memories — so long as she only thought about Before. Now, however, the thought of autumn made her stomach clench up.

Last year's autumn had been brutal in the wake of the outage; no one had had time to prepare and so there was no harvest to be had, nothing to subsist off of besides what they had to hand or could barter from nearby NoVa — Northern Virginia, across the Potomac, and home to some of the best farmland in the region. The chaos had been untenable. Even with non-perishables and an 80% reduction in population (by their best guesses), people had starved. Winter had been worse, of course, as food supplies ran low and morale even lower as folks started to realize that the power would not be returning any time soon. Spring was the worst, though; they had run through all their stocks and supplies and the first crop of food would not be ready until June. They had eaten a *lot* of pigeons.

So now they were facing their first real winter since the Outage. Things seemed better now; between the practical knowledge some folks brought — people who'd grown up on farms and, amusingly, a whole segment of Civil War and Mediaeval-era re-enactors — as well as access to the entirety of the Library of Congress, the District had managed to pull together into something resembling a functioning society.

Roberta couldn't help but feel pride in how everyone had pulled together in the wake of what seemed to be a worldwide catastrophe. They operated without need for money. Work was done as it was needed and with little complaint. Food was available to all, even those who could not do heavy lifting. She

was proud of her push to ensure that the disabled would not be left to die and even prouder of everyone for their reaction: that they were utterly appalled at the idea of leaving anyone behind. Someone's existence was contribution enough. Many of those who could not do physical work found themselves voracious readers and researchers in the Library of Congress, helping to gather the practical information that they would all need to keep on surviving. Others did practical crafts like spinning, weaving, and knitting. But even those who could not contribute materially were still valued and looked after. They were people.

When the apocalypse came, people looked out for each other and did the right thing. In a city that had been known for its disgust with morality, it was heartwarming to see those living in the District embrace each other. Of course, it hadn't hurt that the vast majority of the politicians and other itinerant hangers-on had departed. Many of those left behind were those who had been here all along — the true residents of D.C.

She shook her head against the chaos and reminded herself that her need was focus on the here and now. She turned her gaze up at the Capitol building as the last touch of the sun's glow slipped off the edge of the Rotunda. Under her hand-knit jumper, she wore a long-sleeved shirt featuring one of Frida Kahlo's self-portraits, which had come from the National Museum of Women in the Arts. The shirt was cotton and clung a bit uncomfortably, but the wool jumper kept her warm even when it got soaked through in the rain, so she wore it almost exclusively now.

Roberta leaned against the cool marble, back to the long expanse of the Mall, as dusk settled across the region as a blanket on a bed. For someone who had spent her whole life



working hard to end up in the Capitol, she was wholly uncomfortable being in the presence of this building. It wasn't just that it was now a strange relic of a lost time, a reminder of who she used to be, but the sight of an electric light glowing out of a couple of offices was strangely alien. It seemed *wrong*.

Bringing back electricity would change everything; she could feel it in her gut. People would no longer need each other nearly as much — while she doubted that smartphones or the internet would return any time soon, what kind of evils would electricity unlock again? They were just finally getting settled and facing a new society; why risk messing that up? Sure, refrigeration would be nice, but was it worth the trade-off? She had found herself happy for the first time in years. But maybe she was focusing too much on herself — electricity could save lives. She cast her mind back over all the people who had died this past year that might have been able to be saved in a modern hospital during the Before. This had not exactly been a utopian life. Electricity *could* make things better, if used responsibly. Maybe if they had rules they all agreed upon, they could manage it. If they could hold onto what they had learned, maybe it would be worth the risk.

“Quite the sight, isn't it?”

She was proud of herself for not jumping at the voice. She turned to look. Of *course* it was Kelly. She had seen him at the town hall, of course, where he had asked for help in his project to restore electricity. Roberta had disliked him immediately, although she could not have told you why. After so many years in politics, you didn't become Speaker of the House by not being able to read people, especially when you were a brown woman. She was good at it and something about Oliver Kelly made her *very* uncomfortable.

“It sure is something,” she said. She stood. Kelly was a good half-foot taller than her; she did not care to give him any more of a psychological advantage than he already had.

“Madame Speaker.” He nodded politely but did not offer his hand.

“I haven’t been that in fourteen months,” she replied. “‘Roberta’ is fine.”

“Roberta, then. I’ve actually been looking for you all afternoon.”

“Oh?” Roberta had long-since learned that letting others talk and keeping her part to a minimum could often draw out more information than prying questions ever could. She wondered if Oliver Kelly would take the bait.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m actually glad to have found you here. I wanted to show you the generator and talk to you about something.”

Roberta gathered up her backpack and flicked her hand towards the Capitol, indicating he should lead on.

“You see,” he said, leading her up the steps into the building, “I think you and I have a lot in common — more than you might think.” He held the door for her.

“Oh?” Roberta said again as she stepped into a small hallway. She knew where she was, of course — although her offices as Speaker of the House had actually been across Independence Avenue, she had spent years roaming these corridors.

“I know you must have lost a fortune when the computers went down,” Kelly said, casually flicking on a light switch as he led her past the pillars that supported the floor of the rotunda. The pillars were lit by dramatic base lights that cast moody shadows around the room. An uncomfortable whine pricked at the back of her mind. She wondered if she was imagining

the sounds or if they were actually emanating from the lights.

“Money means nothing when there’s no treasury or federal government to back it up,” she said, following Kelly into another, smaller room. The tell-tale hum of a generator thrummed through the floors and walls. The subtle vibrations reverberated through the soles of her shoes and up through her very bones. The building felt as if it were alive and hungry. She shook her head to dislodge the thought.

“Exactly,” he said and opened the door. The sound roared over them. There were a dozen people in the room, all bent over various parts of the generator or standing around tables, looking very serious. They looked up at their entrance but simply nodded at Kelly and returned to their work once they realized who it was. What did Kelly mean, ‘exactly’? Did he think he could somehow restore the country? One working generator does not an electrical grid make.

He led her down a couple of steps into the Old Supreme Court Chamber. The chambers had not been used for court purposes since 1860, of course, but the room was a good size. In the center of the room was a large generator. It was strange to see such a large piece of machinery in the room. So many important cases had been heard in these walls — but then, so had the Dred Scott decision. So maybe it wasn’t entirely inappropriate to sully it with the fumes of a generator.

“Guys, why don’t you head on home?” he said, raising his voice to be heard. “I’ll close up in here.”

The workers quickly finished up and left Roberta and Kelly alone. Kelly walked over to the generator and flipped a switch. It whirled down as it shut off and the silence was truly deafening and the darkness that came with the loss of power was absolute. A lighter flicked on and he lit a hurricane lamp on one of the tables. A dim glow filled the chamber as he

moved to light a second one. He passed the first lamp over to Roberta.

“This is the start of something great,” he finally said, looking at the generator with admiration. “If we can restore power to the grid, imagine what a beacon this city could become again. We may be the first ones to have power again in the whole world — how much would people pay to be able to return to Before.”

“No one should have to pay for it,” Roberta said slowly. “And there’s no money to be had, anyway.”

“Right,” Kelly said. “Except...” he trailed off.

“Except?”

“Except that as I’ve been working on this project, we’ve been able to restore some of the old Senate computers and retrieve data off them. The hard drives weren’t wiped in the event; it’s more like they’ve just been unplugged.”

Roberta did not particularly like the idea of folks having unimpeded access to the hard drives of Congress, but she knew it was all fairly irrelevant now. Still, there must be more that he wasn’t telling her. Of all the things to do with electricity, getting into Senate computers did not seem like it should be much of a priority at all.

“That’s surprising but good news, I suppose,” she allowed.

“It is. It means that the data for the banks may still be intact.”

“The banks?”

“Yes. Don’t you see?” He whirled to face her, eyes bright in the flickering wicks of the lamps. “If we can get access to the banks, we can get access to our money. I am — was — a very rich man, Roberta. I know you must have had money, too.”

“And if I did? It means nothing now.”

“I know,” he said, sounding far more bitter than she

suspected he realized. “But imagine if we brought electricity back to the world. Even for free,” he added, anticipating her response from earlier, “it would still make D.C. hugely important again. Maybe the banks could reopen and we could get access to our money. You could make a real impact with those funds.”

She knew he was trying to find an angle that would bring her on board with his plan.

“I don’t need money to make an impact,” she said. Over the past year, she had made a huge impact on the society of the District. She saw the effects of her leadership on individual people. No longer were they the faceless masses she had served for so long; they were real.

“That’s true,” Kelly allowed, although he sounded suspicious of this statement. “But just imagine for a minute that the United States were restored. You could help millions — possibly billions — of people and not just the hundred thousand or so left in the District.”

Roberta frowned. Billions?

“How?”

“How?” Kelly repeated, brows furrowed together. “Madame Speaker — sorry, Roberta — no one has seen or heard from President Gray or Vice-President Campbell since the event. By all rights, you are technically the current President of the United States.”

It took every bit of her political training not to laugh in Kelly’s face. The utter absurdity of his statement! There was no United States left to be President of. He might as well have said she was Queen of the Moon. Her mind ran through possibilities at light speed, testing and disregarding possible theories before she took another breath. He was so focused and earnest, if not exactly sincere. She decided to play along.

“Even if I were technically the President, that means so little right now.”

“But when we show the world that we have *power*,” his emphasis on the word left little doubt as to the intended double entendre, “being President of the re-United States would make you leader of the world. And you could do so much good for *everyone* if you were the President.”

She had barely been able to imagine the amount of suffering happening across the globe. While part of her could see the appeal of being able to put some real good into the world at large, she did not know if electricity was the solution.

“And what about you?” Roberta glanced at Kelly.

“I’d just be happy to have my money back,” he said. “I worked hard for it, earned it, and I don’t think I’m asking too much to get it back in exchange for bringing electricity back to the world.

“How much were you worth?” She was curious, she had to admit. He was one of the few people she’d seen around who wasn’t sporting clothing from the Smithsonian gift shops. He always looked put-together.

“Enough to be comfortable,” he replied with a tight smile.

Roberta knew enough multi-millionaires to know this man must have had a *lot* of money — perhaps close to a billion. “Comfortable” always meant ridiculously rich. She wondered how he’d made his fortune; was he old money? Had he invented something? Had he founded a business that exploited its workers? No matter what, no one needed that much money, even when people did need money.

“I don’t need to be President,” Roberta said, shrugging a little. “What is it, Mr. Kelly? You don’t like this return to an agrarian society? To the return of community? Do you have no skills to barter?”

“We fell back two hundred years in some ways,” Kelly said, “and seven thousand in others. Money was invented in 5000 B.C.E. Why would we discard that simply because electronic banking went down? Why not at least keep money with physical value like coins and the like? It doesn’t *need* to be paper.”

“We discarded money because it serves no purpose in our society,” Roberta said. “The U.S. Mint isn’t going to reopen tomorrow, Mr. Kelly, any more than Congress is. We are better and happier for it.”

Kelly stared at her. Roberta did not flinch under his gaze; she had stared down four Presidents in her time; she was not easily intimidated. She waited.

He looked away first.

“Fine,” he muttered. “Fine. I’ll do it without your help.” He raised his voice. “I had just hoped that you would see the benefits. I can see I was wrong. I can keep working. We’ll bring power back to the whole of the District, then the country, then the world. I don’t need you for that.” He took a step towards her.

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. They were all alone in this huge, marble building. No one would hear her scream.

“Stay back,” she said, holding the hurricane lamp in front of her.

“Or what?” He took another step towards her.

Roberta acted without thinking. She reared back her arm and threw the hurricane lamp, full of oil and fire, directly at her target.

“NO!” Oliver Kelly howled as the lamp broke against the generator. Oil splattered across the whole of the machinery, pouring down into every nook and crevice. The flames rapidly

spread.

Kelly dashed forward, set down his own hurricane lamp, and pulled off his coat. He desperately tried to use it to smother the flames. He did not see Roberta making her way around the room, gathering up another four of the dozen remaining hurricane lamps. She threw another at the generator. Glass shattered and Kelly looked up, a panicked beast, his eyes wild.

“What are you doing?” he shouted at her. The flames continued their invasion of the generator.

“Adding fuel to the fire,” she responded, throwing the next three in quick succession. Choking smoke, acrid and tinged with the stink of burning wool, began to fill the room. The flames rose and quickly engulfed the generator, which now stood between them. The room grew hot. Roberta grabbed another lamp and slowly backed up towards a little anteroom off to the side.

“You fucking *bitch*,” he roared at her. The sprinklers cut on, showering the room with water. This appeared to startle Kelly; Roberta took advantage of his surprise, turned, and hauled ass out of the room.

“I will *never* stop trying to rebuild this!” Kelly screamed after her, his voice echoing off the walls, his worlds chasing her as she fled into the next room, dodging a chair and catching her hip on the edge of a table as she frantically made her way out of the Capitol. She was grateful to know about this exit, bursting out of the door and practically leaping over the four steps down to the sidewalk. She still had a hurricane lamp in one hand but did not light it, not until she was more than two blocks away and satisfied that Kelly was not behind her. The Capitol was not in flames; she hoped this meant that the sprinklers had worked and managed to suppress the fire.



Neither water nor fire could be very good for an electrical system.

As her frantic heartbeat slowed to normal, she knew one thing: Oliver Kelly was telling the truth; he would never stop trying to rebuild that generator.