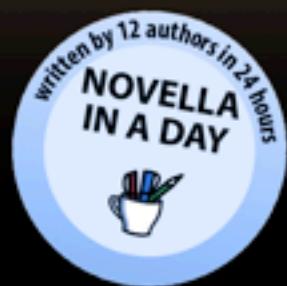




The District

Without power
...we are nothing



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

The District

written as a
Novel-in-a-Day



THE DISTRICT

Originally published: 2020

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for Montréal
*a wonderful person
lost far too soon
we miss you*

Time is no substitute for talent

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

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

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

Tim

April 4, 2020

The District

chapter one

Kimberlee Gerstmann

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

rubber.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is wrong with me?

Second thoughts?

Yes. Second thoughts.

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

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

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

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

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

“No. I have another informant.”

“Did she get off to school?”

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

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

“Not yet,” Lucy admitted.

“Do you want me to get your pills?”

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

“If that’s all it takes...”

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

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

“The tv is acting up,” she stated after swallowing, wincing

for a moment as the pills went down.

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

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

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

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

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

“You too,” she said.

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

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

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

breathing room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Andrew sighed, surprising Jeffrey.

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

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

“What?” Jeffrey questioned.

“Nothing. Forget it.”

Jeffrey, not being one to pry, forgot it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Can you explain?" Clarke asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The campaign speechwriter?”

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

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

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

chapter two

Heather Lovelace-Gilpin

THE SMELL OF TROPICAL fruit. Not exactly a scent one would expect in the basement of the White House. Andrew glanced to his left to see one of John's men tuck a roll of antacids back into his front pocket. He didn't blink, chewing quietly, eyes forward. Andrew almost laughed, but combed his fingers through his hair instead. Curing his heartburn should be the least of his concerns.

John rested beside him, he spoke quickly, and now they're hustling him towards an elevator at the end of a corridor.

“Lucy and Elizabeth?”

“Safe, Sir.”

“Thank you, John.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. President.”

The knot in his stomach loosened a little, stepping into an elevator. John punched in a series of numbers, rested his palm over a pad, the doors shutting, the smell of tropical fruit stronger.

No one spoke. Andrew studied the faces of his Secret Service. They’re good at keeping a straight face, but there’s no

denying what they're all feeling. Discomfort, uneasiness, doom.

No reason to walk down that path, he thought. We are not there yet.

But they are. He was just de-briefed and lord knows he's thinking the same thing everyone else in the SIT room is.

The United States is under attack.

Question is, by whom?

Andrew followed the men into the subterranean hallway once the elevator doors opened. They walked the tile floor, the tap tap of dress shoes echoing through the small enclosure. Andrew spied the pipes hanging from the ceiling, wondering if he's ever noticed them before.

A large set of steel doors greeted them. John stepped forward to enter a series of codes, resting his hand on the sensor to read the vein in his palm.

Ka-chunk.

Doors slammed shut behind them, heavy-duty locks engaging, a hiss as the seal sucked themselves together to form an airtight seal.

One could almost feel claustrophobic down here.

The PEOC is a bunker buried underneath the East Wing of the White House. Rumors has it can withstand anything. A nuclear attack even.

Let's hope we don't have to test the theory.

The thought weighed heavily on Andrew shoulders. Some are calling it a coincidence. The Northern Lights in DC, the strange shit going on with cell phones shocking people, losing contact with ISS, and US Communications satellite going down.

How the fuck can anyone think it's a coincidence?

We are under attack. We just don't know who.

Ka-chunk.

Another set of reinforced steel doors, more locks engaging, the air feels thicker, harder to suck into his lungs. This wasn't what he was expecting. Not after announcing his re-election. He might have the electoral votes, but rest assure if this becomes a national disaster and if he doesn't handle this right, he's finished. Stick a fork in him, he is toast.

More security systems, another set of numbers, which how the hell does John remember all those codes because based on what Andrew's seen, they aren't the same series, an infrared red beam to scan his palm, the final door opened. This is shit that would have appealed to him back when he was a kid. The best biometric security systems money can buy.

The PEOC is filled with noise, voices trying to be heard over each other, someone is trying to get control of the situation, televisions are up and running, each one showing a different news channel. Andrew took a moment to stare at them, catching bits and pieces of what the reporters are saying and it's not good. Not good at all.

Breathe, Andrew thought, don't let them know you're just as freaked out as the rest of them. Time for you to shine, my friend.

He straightened his suit, strolling confidently into the room.

"The President will be here any moment. Let's all calm down and head to our seats."

John cleared his throat, conversations stopped abruptly, and everyone stood to their feet. Andrew waved at them to sit, William offering a forced smile, but the red flush on his bald head tells Andrew he is moments away from freaking the fuck out.

"How are you holding up?" William asked quietly, leaning towards him.

“I don’t know yet.” Andrew answered honestly. “Ask me when we know what we’re dealing with. Better yet, when this is all over with.”

Andrew took a seat, waiting for those to follow suit. He can feel John hovering close, he can smell tropical fruit which means the young man with the chronic indigestion isn’t far.

“What do we know?” He asked, knowing the loaded question is about to give him nightmares.

The discussion lasted close to two hours. The only reasonable explanation is the United States is under attack. Someone breached security, took over ISS, knocked down our satellites, and are moments away from issuing a nuclear attack. The whole thing is absurd, causing Andrew to stare at members of his cabinet as if they have lost their minds. David Clarke brought up there has been no threats made against the United States, discussions has been peaceful even.

“I would rather not cause a panic.” Andrew stated when conversations turned to alerting the public. “And I do not want the media to hear we are considering this to be a nuclear threat either. Fact is, we don’t know what we’re dealing with.”

“It would be in our best interest to keep the people in the loop.”

“By creating hysteria? Do I need to remind everyone in this room what happened during 9/11?”

The room went silent for a moment. Someone had to go and bring that up.

Andrew ran his fingers through his hair. Wasn’t it just yesterday, he was staring at himself in the mirror, wondering if he’s aged as badly as the presidents before him? When he first took office, he had brown hair. Now it’s more gray than it is brown. Lucy pressed her lips to his shoulder, laughing, telling him he looks distinguished.

He took that as old.

Which he didn't appreciate, chasing after his beautiful wife of 31 years, who hasn't aged a day, tossing her onto the large bed, and having his way with her. He can still hear her whisper "yes, Mr. President" in his ear.

"Andrew?"

He snapped back, clearing his throat and instead of just smelling tropical fruit, he can hear the sound of the antacid being crushed between molars.

He opened his mouth, but before he could pitch in his two cents, like perhaps we should hold off until whatever the threat is identifies themselves, lights flickered, heads shot towards the fluorescents above, a snap sounded, the room went dark.

Seriously? The fuck?

"Mr. President?" John called out.

"I'm here, John."

"Stay where you are, Sir."

Andrew fought back the urge to sigh. His hand scrambled for his cell in front of him. He found it, hesitated for a moment since he received one hell of a shock earlier, but tapped the screen to light it up.

Nothing.

He found the power button on the side, pressed it, still nothing.

"Anyone else's phone not responding?" Jeffrey asked.

"Mine's not working."

"Mine either."

"The emergency lighting system should be up and running shortly. Everyone remain seated." Another voice called out from the darkness.

He barely finished the sentence when the lights flickered

on, televisions blasted white noise, one of the assistants scrambling for the remotes to turn them off. Andrew blinked, bringing up his hand rub his eyes.

“There isn’t much we can do. I propose we reconvene until we know what we’re dealing with.”

Andrew stood to his feet, John moving in close.

“Where are you going?”

Andrew dropped his eyes to William.

“I’m going to check on my family.”

“Hold on, Mr. President.”

Andrew sighed.

“What is it, John?”

“I’ve lost all outside communication.” He moved towards his men scattered throughout the room. He spoke softly, they shook their heads, and just as he’s getting ready to speak, lights flickered overhead a second time.

“Ah, come on.” Andrew muttered, knowing how it sounds, but enough already.

There’s a soft hum, a snap, pitching the room into darkness a second time.

“Sir?”

“Right here.” Andrew answered, collapsing back into his chair. “We have a third emergency system?”

“No, Sir.”

Andrew mumbled under his breath and figured it’s best if he acts like an adult and not like Elizabeth when she’s not getting her way. The moment he shows fear, they’re all screwed.

“It’s a power outage. We’ve been through them before.” He ran his hand along the top of the table. “John?”

“Sir?”

“Can we search for some flashlights?”

“Yes, Sir.”

There’s shuffling of feet, drawers opening, slamming shut, mumbling when someone knocked into something. Andrew heard one of the assistants say they should be in the cabinet behind the Vice President. Someone knocked into Andrew’s chair, the young man tossing back antacids like they’re candy based on the fruity smell, followed by a series of curse words.

“What now?” David demanded.

“The flashlights aren’t working.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I don’t know. Nothing’s happening.”

“So find another one.”

“The one I have isn’t working either.” Another voice stated.

The hairs on the back of Andrew’s neck stood straight up, followed by a shudder down his spine.

“They’re battery powered.”

“And I’m telling you they aren’t fucking working.”

Andrew pushed himself to his feet, keeping his hands on the table.

“Is there a way to bypass the security features to open the doors?”

Silence filled the large room. Andrew waited, rather impatiently, getting ready to demand an answer when he heard John’s voice.

“No, Mr. President.”

Andrew’s heart raced in his chest.

“You’re telling me there is no way to open these god-damn doors without power?”

More silence.

“That’s correct, Sir.”

Andrew closed his eyes, forcing the frustration to the pit

of his stomach. Not to mention panic. And he's not the only one.

“We’re fucking screwed then.”

chapter three

Marc Cooper

JOHN COLE WAS SITTING alone in the East Wing of the White House, drinking coffee, and waiting for his boss, the President of the United States. Outside the window, the shrubs and lawns and topiary in the Jacqueline Kennedy Garden thrived, beautifully tended and lovingly fed and watered, although the remnants of colour would soon turn and sag as summer morphed into autumn.

He liked to spend time here, with his earpiece out. The slow-moving serenity of the garden contrasted strikingly with his day job: shuffling the President and his family from place to place, ever watchful for the madmen and the maniacs.

Funny to think of his boss, buried underground in the PEOC – almost directly beneath him – surrounded by his most senior advisers and their minions – all of them stressing and planning, collating and cogitating – while the head of his security detail was at his most peaceful.

And then the lights went out.

John calmly reached for his earpiece, found the wire, slid it between his fingers and, in a well-practiced manoeuvre,

wedged the rubbery lump into his ear. The was nothing. Nothing at all.

The lights flickered once and then came on.

“No air con,” he said aloud, from which he knew that the emergency power supply had kicked in. Not a problem. Everyone knew the drill.

He took out the earpiece, tapped it a few times, blew into it, and then noticed the red-green power LED was showing neither red nor green. Odd, when it was fully charged when he picked it up first thing this morning. He took out his spare from the carefully constructed pocket in his jacket. It was dead too. He dug out his phone. Lifeless.

People were moving about in the corridors. More of them than usual. He sensed their uncertainty. Just a feeling.

One of his colleagues, Lily Carr, strode into the room, and said, “John, there you are. We’ve lost comms. All of us. Everyone I’ve spoken to. Phones seem to be kaput too. The White House is on backup power. I’ve sent Alfie on to the streets to see what he can find out. It doesn’t look good.”

“Is anything working?”

“Anything?” she said. Then, looking up, “The lights,” pointing at them.

“What about computers? I’m thinking maybe only mains powered devices are working.”

The lights went out again.

There was a fire alarm fitted next to the door with *In emergency break glass* written across it in stark, white capitals. Cole covered his fist with his sleeve and thumped it hard. The glass shattered, but nothing happened. He pressed the button a few more times fruitlessly.

“Okay, listen,” he said. “I’m going to get Lucy and Elizabeth from the residence. I want you to gather as many of

the detail as you can and go to the PEOC elevator. Grab the maintenance folk too, and anyone else familiar with electrical devices and electronics. I'll meet you there.”

“At least the President's safe,” said Lily, with a fixed smile.

Cole raised his eyebrows.

As he headed for the residence, Cole bumped into Johnson, the head of White House security (exterior); a lifetime military man with a military demeanour.

“Any idea what's going on?” said Johnson.

“Not yet. Everything electrical seems to have been knocked out.”

“Yeah, I gathered that, professor”

“Is the perimeter secure?”

Johnson looked aghast, as if someone had mistaken him for a civilian. “The perimeter is always secure.”

“What I meant was... ah never mind.”

“You do your job, and I'll do mine,” said Johnson. Then, looking around, “Where *is* the President?”

“PEOC. We're working on it.”

Cole rang the residence's doorbell, and then pounded on the door, over and over until Lucy, the First Lady – a title she loathed – answered it, mildly flustered.

“John?”

“I need you and Elizabeth to come with me.”

“What's going on? The electric's off, my phone's dead, and the iPad, even the little battery clock in the kitchen's stopped working.”

“We're working on it, Lucy. Now, if you'll fetch Elizabeth and come with me.”

“Where's Andrew?”

“In the PEOC.”

“Are we being attacked?”

“That’s an option, but there’s nothing to indicate one. No shooting. No violence at all. But without comms, I need to keep you close. Johnson has the perimeter covered, so no need to worry. This is just precautionary.”

Elizabeth, the President’s fourteen-year-old daughter, stormed into the hallway, slamming the door behind her, and stood with her hands on her hips in a full on indignant teenager pose.

“Why’s my phone stopped working? And the TV. Nothing working. I was messaging with my friends... doing homework and now it’s all ruined.”

“Doing homework?” said Lucy, raising her eyebrows. “And how many times have I told the First Child not to take her phone into her room and close the door? Hmm? Well, now it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh! So you did this on purpose? You broke my phone! And don’t call me that!”

“Don’t be so ridiculous, young lady. Now calm down and put on your shoes. We have to go with Mr Cole to see your father.”

“I don’t want to. I want to... do my homework.”

“You do? That’s a first. Now, do as you’re told.” Then, turning to Cole, “I don’t know where she gets it from.”

From both of you, Cole thought; but there were limits to his familiarity.

With Lucy and Elizabeth under his wing, Cole returned to the East Wing and the PEOC’s elevator. Waiting there were four of his detail, including Lily and Alfie, and two of the maintenance team, all crowded around the elevator door; tools scattered over the floor and heads being scratched.

“Cole,” said Lily, more formal now the two of them weren’t alone, “you need to hear what Alfie has to say.”

Cole pulled Alfie into a side room, bringing along Lucy and Elizabeth to keep them away from whatever progress – or lack of it – was being made with the elevator.

Alfie was the youngest on Cole's detail, barely out of college, frighteningly quick on the uptake, as soft as a feather down, and as calm as Putin on election day. The ruthlessness recorded in his stats told another story, and Cole slept easier at night knowing them.

“Alfie,” said Cole. No one used his surname.

Alfie avoided eye contact unless advantageous or unavoidable, as now, and so turned his head upwards and sideways to meet Cole's eyes.

“Yes,” said Alfie.

“Lily tells me you went beyond the wall.”

Alfie snorted at Cole's lame attempt at contemporary humour. He sided with the Night King all along, and cheered on Daenerys Stormborn's destruction of King's Landing with such fervour that his neighbours called the police; although not for his passionate shouts of ‘Burn them! Burn them all!’ but for the astringent cries he made from his balcony into the night's blackness ‘Exterminate. Exterminate all the brutes!’. The police sided with Alfie, of course. They had no choice.

“It's fucked up out there, man,” said Alfie. “All the cars are fucked. The traffic lights are fucked. Everything's fucked.”

Cole flushed at Alfie's language before the First Lady, even more so Elizabeth; but Lucy seemed unmoved, and Elizabeth was eying Alfie with such yearning he almost felt obliged to inform her of his preferences to dissuade her. She had certainly forgotten her homework.

“So nothing's working?”

“Not a fucking thing, man. Nothing electrical. Nothing electronic. It's all fucked.”

“What about power sources?”

Alfie looked at Cole with a kind of quizzical respect and grinned.

“Righteous, man. There are cars smashed to fuck out there. Upside down. On their sides. There’s even a huge bus turned over. Not much blood. Just a little, here and there. So I grabbed some wires and shorted them across a couple of batteries... Hey, man, have you ever noticed how folk out west, like California and such, say couple things or couple batteries? You noticed that? Like they have no idea about prepositions. Kindergarten stuff. It’s a virus, man, I’m telling you. Spreading all over. And maybe that’s what this is. A fucking virus, man. It starts with prepositions and ends in the Apocalypse. Butterflies’ wings, man. You hear me?”

Cole blinked and reset.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, but what happened when you shorted the wires?”

“Sparks, man. Plenty sparks. You see what I did there? Don’t ever go to California, man. Even Woodstock was in upstate New York. No need. No need.”

“So it’s the circuits that’ve been fried?”

“That’s clear... and kind of obvious, if you don’t mind me saying”

“And do you have any idea what might have caused this to happen?”

“Not a clue, man, other than the obvious electromagnetic blast furnace: an EMP, you know. Could be a weapon. Could be natural. A gamma-ray burst from the gods of the universe. Shit happens, man. Shit happens. Betelgeuse’s fiery finger. Antares annihilating arrow. They’re all out there, man, just waiting for us. Boom!”

Cole strolled back through to the PEOC elevator and all

the folk working on it.

“Any luck?” he said.

He already knew the answer.

chapter four

Angie Titus

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

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

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

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

“I have to be to work in twenty minutes,” she continued. Alec shrugged. “I didn't do anything.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What?”

“The cars.”

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

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

Noise from the main room caught her attention.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don't know.”

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

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

“Excuse me.”

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

“Do you know what's going on?”

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

She frowned. “That's not an answer.”

“It's the only answer I've got.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And they were going to go bad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was going to die.

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

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

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

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

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

And now he had to protect her.

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

“Go get my gun.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

chapter five

Nate Kennedy

“JUST REMEMBER, YOU’RE NEXT.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I thought you might be coming, gentleman.”

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

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

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

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

“Okay, I’m ready. Andy, let’s go.”

“Sorry, Madam Speaker. Just you.”

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

“Just you. Let’s go.”

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

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

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

“When do we want it?”

“NOW!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who's in charge?"

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

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

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

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

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

She resigned herself to this new reality.

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

When her temporary new office was ready Speaker Miguel

called the White House Press Secretary in.

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

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

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

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

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

“Thomas Owen, you mean?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She loved Shakespeare.

chapter six

Chelsea Fuchs

ROBERTA HAD NEVER BEEN more thankful for her security detail than she was right now. No power, no lights, no phones. No easy communication for more than a couple of days. It was her job, her responsibility and her authority to bring order to not only the Capital region, but the nation. She needed to figure out what was going on and quell the rumours as soon as she could. It was bad business for people to be going around and declaring that the president was dead. And that upstart Thomas Owen. He'd have everyone thinking that he was in charge now. Ha!

Having an escort home to get the few things she needed to take back to the office was a lot less intimidating. How they'd managed to commandeer one of those bike rickshaws, she wasn't going to ask. She knew her role right now. It was to keep the peace, just as the police were doing. She was the face of the government until the Situation Room was resolved. She'd settled in for the night, but was restless. The walk home had meant to be calming. But now she was regretting her decision. They would be worried about her when they realized

that Roberta wasn't in her office. And if the young fellow in front of her would just let her go, it wouldn't be an issue.

"Listen here, I don't care who you are. The Mayor has issued a curfew and you are in violation of that curfew."

The young officer just wouldn't listen to reason.

"You don't understand." Roberta put her hands on her hips. "I am the Madam Speaker of the House. I must get to the Capital Building."

"I don't care if you are the Tooth Fairy," the officer said as he looked her over again. "If you are the speaker of the house, where is your security?"

Roberta huffed as she tossed her hair over her shoulder. She didn't have time for this. Someone needed to step up and lead the nation until things got sorted out at the White House. She had made a vow to protect the constitution and the people of the republic. It was her life's work. And she wasn't about to let some squirt straight out of the academy distract her from her purpose.

"Look here," she squinted at his name tag. "Officer Rodriguez. I appreciate that you are trying to keep the peace and keep people from looting and carrying on. But I need to make sure that this country doesn't crumble to its knees. Now if you really want to be helpful, you would give me a lift on that bike of yours. I need to go to my office and then make the trek down the National Mall to the White House." *And avoid Mayor Owen*, she thought to herself. Never had she seen such a complete grab for power.

"Ma'am, I must insist that you turn around and return to Maryland. Washington, D.C. is closed for the night."

Roberta threw up her hands in frustration. "Fine. I'll make sure I'm here bright and early then."

She turned around and walked back over the Frederick

Douglass Memorial Bridge. She'd try again tomorrow. She had to. Or all hell would break loose.

Bright and early Roberta walked back to bridge and crossed back into Washington D.C. Whatever had it the grid had taken out the power for as far as she could tell. Not even the ham radios were working at this point. How were they supposed to communicate with the outside world? How were they supposed to assure the American people that the DC area was safe and sound and would be pushing to get life restored to normal as soon as possible?

No coffee. No hot water to take a hot shower. This was worse than camping. Camping. Her memory flashed back to the last trip Carlos had taken her on. It would be fun, he'd said. It would be romantic, he'd said. She shuddered as the thoughts of the mosquitoes, and those other nasty little bugs that had eaten her alive. She'd never liked camping as a child and going deep into the woods of West Virginia so they could get back to nature and "find the love they'd once shared." What a shame.

The hair on the nap of her neck began to stick to the damp skin. Summers in DC were hot and sticky. It didn't matter what time of day it was. She lifted her hair off her neck and fanned herself as she looked up at the sun. It wasn't that late in the day yet. She'd get to the office, see who had heard what, reach out to her contacts at the different departments. Everyone knew the COOP procedures. Those who couldn't be contacted would be tracked down on foot. She felt for the interns that would be handling that job. As her thoughts drifted here and there, she heard someone calling her name.

Oh, crap. She thought to herself as Roberto found the

security detail she hadn't intended on loosing last night.

"Where have you been? We've been looking for you everywhere. It's bad enough everyone thinks the White House was wiped out. You just had to go and add to all the outlandish rumors. Mayor Owen's is requesting a meeting with you."

"When?" Roberto asked as she climbed onto the tandem bike the officer was riding.

"As soon as you can. Things are starting to get out of control. Owen needs to be put in his place, before he walks himself into the White House and changes the constitution himself."

Roberta rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I was just going for a walk and found myself on the wrong side of the DC line and they wouldn't let me back in."

"How could you go out by yourself? Don't you know that they're saying that there was a nuclear attack. EMP. That's why we don't have any power and nothing works. And you had to go off and get yourself lost."

"I don't need this right now. Let's just get back to the office. We need to get food and water to the people as soon as possible. That will help keep the calm for a while. I'll get changed and then go meet with Owen."

"If he's not waiting for you first."

Roberto rolled her eyes again. Tandem bikes were harder work then she thought. The police officer on the front was peddling like his life depended on it and Roberto had no choice but to go at his speed. Keep up or get off. And she was tired of walking.

The view from the Capital never ceased to make her breath catch. Today, in the bright sunlight, the white marble didn't

disappoint. She held her head high. She'd worked her whole life to have the privilege to serve the American people. Some would say that being a career politician was worse than mud, but she did what she did because of the people she served. Even if some of them were worse than mud. She had to get Carlos out of her head. And now. She needed her full attention to battle *Mayor* Owen.

She quickly changed into a power suit and was briefed on current plans and activities. There were plans for everything, contingency plans on top of those plans. And it was time to start putting those plans into place. She authorized emergency matters while she pulled out the box she'd hoped to never use from her desk drawer. Unfolding the paper that had been waiting for her that morning, she went to work breaking the code. A ghost of a smile pulled at the corners of her lips.

She quietly made her way by rickshaw down the long mall. It, along with the city was, wildly quiet. The carousel, standing still, without a sole in site rattled her to her core.

Owens was waiting for her outside. "Madam Miguel."

A total power move on his part. She had to walk *up* the stairs to be on level ground with him.

"*Mayor* Owens." She crossed her arms. "Want to tell me what the curfew is about?"

"I just want to make sure the people of DC are safe." "My concern are the people of the United States. I don't think you cutting law makers off in such a critical time is really smart."

"What do I care about law makers? What have you done to help people today? All I see is that you are using people as your personal transportation. Is that really a good use of the tax payers money?"

“Look Owens,” Roberto rose to her full height. “You and I don’t have to see eye to eye on this. We don’t even have to get along. But while you’re positioning for power, there are more productive things I could be doing. Now if you will excuse me, I am going to go help pass out food so that at least the basic needs of the people in closest proximity to me have their needs met.”

Roberta marched down the stairs and towards the food distribution center. There were people to be taken care of. She threw herself into the process, handing out food to those who came by.

chapter seven

Beth Cutter

ROBERTA WOKE UP ALONE in her double bed. Not a king, not even a queen, just a double. Steve had griped about that so often. Barely enough room for one man, he'd say, spreading his arms and legs wide, heedless of the way he was elbowing her or kicking poor Danny right off the bed.

The bed felt plenty roomy now.

It was four months since Steve had finally made up his mind to leave. Twice that since Danny had been put down. *Shot*, her inner critic corrected sternly, in the mental voice that was part of the legacy her father, Marine Master Sergeant Roberto Alvena had left her. Euphemisms were for candy-asses, he'd always said. No child of mine is going to be a candy-ass. *Sorry, Master Sergeant*, she thought, *but you were wrong about that*. Euphemisms are as essential a tool for politicians as M16s had been for the soldiers you trained.

And she had wielded them well. The journey from town selectman in an unremarkable town in Maryland less than a year out of college to Speaker of the United States House of Representatives when she'd barely turned forty testified to

that. She had made her way swiftly and surely, maneuvering deftly through the clashing tides of political blocs, ceding skirmishes gracefully here sometimes because it enabled her winning battles there more often.

She'd been well thought of, she knew. The party elders had looked at her with thoughtful approval. Perhaps it was time to shake things up. Perhaps a relatively young woman with the vigor to battle for the goals the Democratic party had been pursuing for years was just what the populace had been waiting to have sold to them. Hispanic, yes, but that was nowhere near as big a handicap as it would have been even ten years ago. She was smart, healthy, attractive in a handsome rather than pretty way, Christian. She had been married for a decade to a good looking guy with a successful career of his own in the respectable field of biomechanical engineering, and then amicably divorced three years ago. For the last year or so before The Day she'd been keeping company with Steve, a solid local business man. Not the ideal, but less than twenty percent of all congressmen were on their first marriages and only the most old-fashioned caviled at that.

Her only real drawback was that she wasn't a mother. There were still a lot of men and women who viewed childless women with lingering suspicion. Still, she had a lot of nieces and nephews, that could be played up...

And then the world had changed in a moment.

Roberta rolled out of bed, and automatically straightened the covers behind her, tucking the hand-pieced bedspread tautly into place just as the Master Sergeant had trained her to. It only took seconds. The covers weren't very disturbed; she slept peacefully these days. She had been one of the power players in Washington, D.C., with a not entirely unrealistic chance of become a major factor on the world stage. Endless

meetings, endless demands to juggle while trying to keep everyone more or less happy -- or at least not angered to the point of doing something about it. Now she served as the unelected but accepted Administrator of the smallish town Washington had become. In truth, a role not much more exalted than the Selectman she had started out as.

The ground had rolled beneath her feet, but she'd kept her balance. Millions of people had struggled, even broken from the loss of what had been. Roberta had taken a deep breath and gotten on with dealing with what now was. *A marine eats what is set before him.* That had been another of the Master Sergeant's favorites.

She dressed quickly. The days of considering which of her suits or dresses would convey just the right level of seriousness for the day's appointments were over. Without electricity dry cleaning vanished, and ironing was too cumbersome to bother with. The most valued fabrics were those that were sturdy, easily washed, and long lasting. Roberta had always had a few pairs of denim jeans she'd allowed herself to indulge in wearing in the privacy of her own house or on the rare vacation stays in remote locations. Now they were her daily garb, paired with the sweaters she had always loved and collected or the sweatshirts and t-shirts that could still be found in abundance at stores that had catered to tourists. Today's sweatshirt proclaimed "I <heart> DC." A sentiment that was at least true, though she would have preferred not to have it written across her chest in red sequins.

Her eyes caught for a moment on the shelf full of scottish terrier figurines. Black ones. Presents given to her in honor of Danny, who had been her faithful companion on every campaign tour. She had always joked that he had probably been the source of her winning edge in every election.

In truth, even though Danny had been gone longer than Steve, it was Danny whose absense she still really felt. It had had to be done. Last spring the food situation had been so precarious that they'd had to forbid pets. The only animals allowed to remain in the District would be those that worked, such as pulling plows or wagons, or were raised to be eaten. The rest, especially dogs and cats, would have to be driven out of the city to fend for themselves, or put down. Thousands of residents had chosen to leave rather than lose their pets. Even many of those who had lived in the city their whole lives, with no previous home or relatives elsewhere to seek out, chose exile.

The only way that the others would possibly accept the decree was to show that it applied to everyone. And so had come that awful day, when the remnants of the old government, the remaining Cabinet officers, and Supreme Court Judges, and all the remaining members of Congress had come to the Mall with their beloved dogs and cats and watched as the Capitol Police had dispatched them with bullets to the head.

She had had nightmares about it for months.

There just hadn't been enough drugs to put them down humanely. What drugs there were had to be kept to possibly save human lives, doled out grudgingly and sparingly, because there were unlikely to be new supplies ever again. Nor were there enough willing vets to have handled the job alone.

Somehow there never was a shortage of bullets. Or people willing to fire them.

It was nearly November, but the cloudless sky promised warmth and ample sunshine. A recycled glass jar held beans that had soaked overnight. She drained the water off them,

careful to not let any beans escape, then poured them into the small dutch over. She chopped a small onion and three jalepeno peppers and stirred that in, added a bay leaf and some sprigs of thyme, and just enough water to barely cover the beans.

Her top floor apartment included a patio. It has offered the luxury of a pleasant setting for evening drinks and conversation. Now it served as her main kitchen. Near the railing was the small grill that subbed for the electric stove that had morphed into just a storage cubical topped with some counter space.

In the center of the space was the solar oven she had assembled from a wooden crate topped with a pane of window glass, surrounded by piled bags of potting soil that served for insulation. There were four mirrors she had scavenged from abandonned apartments that surrounded it on each side, propped so as to concentrate the sun's rays down through the glass onto the contents of the crate. On a bright summer day a pot of water would boil in less than twenty minutes. It would take longer with the lower sun of autumn, but it would still get the job done.

Roberta set the dutch oven into the crate, and gave the beans another stir just because. It was a pity she hadn't had any sausage to add to the pot. It was also a pity that it was butter beans and not good black beans or pintos or even kidney beans. But that was what the Distribution had provided this time, and Roberta prided herself on taking nothing more than what was offered to every townsperson. She put the lid on the dutch oven, and set the glass back atop the crate. It would still make a satisfying meal. Especially if she splurged with a little of her dwindling supply of Cholula Original Hot Sauce.

Now there was no reason for her to delay getting to work any longer. She wasn't looking forward to the day's tasks, but that was no excuse for procrastinating. The Master Sergeant had a saying for that, too. *"The only difference between success and failure is the ability to take action."*

Roberta walked along the street, nodding as smiling at people she passed. There were so many fewer now, it felt like she knew every single face. D.C. had dwindled into a small town. The vast majority had dispersed nearly at once. They had looked around at the stores, so quickly emptied of items as useless as sparkly jewelry and vital as food and fastest of all of luxuries like tobacco and alcohol. People had seen the scarcity, and gone in search of more. More food. More land to grow it on.

And later there had come the exodus of pet lovers.

Another factor was the dying off of those whose lives had been dependent on the never enough appreciated miracle of a functioning medical system. The ones whose hearts depended on pace makers died the first days, but they were few in number. The relatively huge number of diabetics followed. Insulin wasn't optional, and didn't last long unrefrigerated. And then those whose kidneys had failed. You couldn't hand pump dialysis machines. The people who relied on drugs to control their blood pressure died more slowly, stroke by stroke, heart attack by heart attack.

The bulk of that was past now, but the population was still dropping. People continued to walk away, in ones or twos. They tired of the grind of daily life, and wondered if there wasn't some place better to be found. Well, that was nothing new for America. It was the same drive that had pushed people from Plymouth Rock all the way to the Pacific. And

that was before the vast network of lovely, smooth, paved highways had been created, before the rivers had all been bridged. The highway system, too, would gradually wear away now that the machines and resources to maintain it were lost, but for at least a while it would linger as a legacy from before The Day.

Roberta heard the clopping of shod hooves hitting pavement. A couple of blocks away she saw a UHaul trailer being drawn down Pennsylvania Avenue by a pair of horses. One was a palomino that had probably led a pampered life as some rich girl's darling until last year, the other a dull brown plodder who wouldn't have drawn a second glance pulling a farm wagon in any previous century. A scattering of people seemed to be following, including one rangy man hurrying in that direction. "Soong! Do you know what they're carrying?"

"Carol said potatoes, down from up north," he replied, not breaking stride.

"Wonderful!" Roberta knew few foods provided as many calories and stored as well as potatoes. People would trade for them eagerly, but it was essential that most end up in the community store house. "Drive a good deal for us!" she called after him.

He flashed a wolfish grin back at her. "Count on it."

Yes, she knew she could. Eighteen months ago he had handled trades that involved millions of tons of goods and tens of millions of dollars. Now it would be, what, maybe a couple of tons of potatoes for how many barrels of salted fish? Still, dealing was dealing, and he was a master of the art.

A house a bit further down the street displayed a sign saying just "Plumber." Roberta smiled. Her father had often argued the value of training in a trade versus more intellectual professions, and in at least the case of plumbers he'd been

proved right. Pipes still leaked, drains still clogged, and the work of a plumber had probably changed the least of any job. There might eventually no more buildings whose pipes could be salvaged and reused, but that might be a century away.

On the other hand, electrician's work has vanish in a nanosecond.

In front of a nearby house a man was riveting leather straps cut from who knows what to soles cut from old automobile tires to create new sandals. He won't soon run out of supplies, she thought. Nor of customers. She glanced down at her feet. This pair of Adidas were in good shape, and back in her closet were several more pairs of sneakers she had managed to trade for before their preciousness had become widely apparent. But in a world without telephones and radios and the Internet, communication was person to person, mouth to ear, and that meant constant walking from one place to the next. She had no real idea of how many miles she walked every day, but the old days of carefully monitoring her eating and putting in the time on a treadmill to maintain her proper weight were a fading memory.

Now she worried instead about wearing out her shoes.

“Ms. Miguel!” Roberta looked over. A woman in her fifties had stepped out onto the stoop of a house. Painted on the door behind her was a large image of a swaddled baby. “Ms. Miguel, I just have to get those supplies. I used up the last of my cotton wadding in yesterday's delivey, and I've got three more women ripe to drop any day now. I know there's no pain killers to be had, but I've *got* to get some disinfectant or we're going to start losing women to simple infections.”

“I understand, Magda. I'm working on it.” Cotton? Surely there were still fields of it Down South, but how to lay hands on it? “Can you use alcohol for the disinfectant? Like drinking

alcohol?”

“Sure, if it’s high enough proof.” Magda shrugged. “Rather a good pain killer, too.”

Roberta knew there were quite a few people using their grain allotments to brew beer instead of porridge. Surely there were others producing more potent versions. The laws against moonshining were still on the books, but who had the time, will, or manpower to spend enforcing them now? Who did she know who was likely to know who was at it? Or, if nobody actually was, who would know how to set up a still themselves? Hmm. “I have some ideas... Look, come and talk to me tomorrow, no, better make it the day after, okay?”

“It can’t wait--”

“I know, Magda, I really do. Those babies and their mothers are vital to this town, we’ll take care of them, I promise. But I’ve got other urgent matters to handle today.”

“All right.”

Magda continued to stand there, looking at her, so Roberta gave her one of her best ‘I’ve got your back’ smiles and continued down the street. It was true. There were a lot of births happening. It was only to be expected. The towns condom supply had been exhausted long ago, birth control pills couldn’t be found no matter what you offered in trade, and with no Internet, television, movies, even radio...well, what else were people going to do to with all the extra time?

And it was essential to keep replenishing the population anyway. It had been predominantly the young and healthy who had the guts to set out to walk to Florida or Iowa or the open ranges of Wyoming. The people left behind tended to skew older. And yet almost every task now required more brute physical labor than before...

The simple truth was that everyone needed to contribute if

their society was to survive. They didn't have the surplus capacity to carry much dead weight. Which looped back to today's main task.

One of her necessary jobs was encouraging those who weren't being as productive as they could be, out of laziness or because they'd rather cheat and leach off others, to mend their ways. Most of them could be reasoned with. They saw how tight things were, and would understand if the situation was explained to them properly.

But some others needed to be leaned on. And unfortunately the range of options she had at hand were not as great as in the past. Fining people meant nothing. Money had no value any longer. Bank records had died with the electricity. Had you squirreled away hundreds of thousands of dollars in your 401k? Was your house mortgaged to the hilt and every credit card you carried maxed out? Either way, it simply didn't matter any more. The money was gone, the debts were gone, and if you wanted her guess, most of the paper money itself had gone, finding its final useful role as toilet paper.

Jail sentences weren't an option. All that did was turn someone from an underproductive asset to a complete liability. Work gangs? You couldn't force someone to work unless you had another person standing guard over him to force him to keep at it -- and then you lose the guard's production elsewhere. Not to mention it smacked too clearly of slavery.

Public shaming was sometimes useful. Pass the word about that Joe Blow was a lazy SOB, taking food out of the mouths of those who were working. People didn't like being embarrassed in front of others. Some day they might actually build some stocks on the Mall for the worst offenders.

After that there was only the nuclear option.

Roberta snorted at herself for the hyperbole. At least that was one threat they no longer faced. Without electronics to detonate them and rocket engines and navigation computers to get them somewhere, the nuclear threat no longer existed. Well, some maniac could steal some plutonium and grind it into dust and sprinkle it about, maybe, but that was too far fetched to compete with all the other worries she had. Amusing to think, though, that the phrase could linger on for years even though the source of it has vanished.

Here she was. Roberta double checked the street number then walked up to the door and knocked on it vigorously. She paid no visible attention to the curious looks from some neighbors who were chatting on the sidewalk nearby or the people who looked over as they passed down the street going about their business. A touch of public embarrassment was a fine opening move.

Finally. The last name on her list for the day. On the whole, she was satisfied with the reactions from the people she had visited so far. She thought she'd managed to inspire them to buckle down and work harder. Well, at least for a while. *Once a goldbricker, always a goldbricker.* No doubt she'd be visiting them again some day.

She thumped on the door. Nobody answered it, though she could hear voices somewhere upstairs. She knocked again. Again no answer. Well, there were other laws that weren't being enforced either. She opened the door and walked in.

Her first impression was of overwhelming clutter and dust. The entry room was crowded with tables and bookcases, and every inch of them was crammed full of knickknacks. Silver picture frames, ornately worked but covered with grime. Vases and bowls and ornamental figures of what looked like cut

glass, but any sparkle was hidden beneath layers of dust. From where she stood she could see into the living room, and if anything it was worse there. The chairs and sofa had deep piles of ... clothing? ... heaped on them. Plus a dozen or more statues shoved into the corners. And over it all, almost overpowering the smell of dust and dirt, was another distinctive scent.

The voices could be heard more clearly now. It sounded like a couple of men, arguing mildly about something, with every now and then a woman's voice added in.

"Hello?" she called out loudly. The voices broke off as soon as she spoke. "It's Roberta Miguel. I'm here because your team leader reports you aren't coming to work any more."

A man stomped down the staircase, glaring at her. "What the fuck are you doing in my house?" He was young, maybe middle twenties, with long greasy hair and a patchy multicolored beard that gave the impression it has been feasted on by moths. He was wearing leather boots that looked brand new, and a black leather jacket gussied up with more zippers and flaps than three normal jackets should have but was clearly at least a size or two larger than it should be.

She met his gaze directly. "Michael Goodwin, I presume? As I said, I am here to find out why you are failing to do your assigned work shifts."

"Because I don't fucking want to, that's why."

"But it's critically important, to you and the whole community," she said, keeping her voice reasonable. And launched into all the reasons and figures and arguments she had already gone through six other times that day. Michael stared at her throughout, a sneer on his face. He barely spoke, little more than a scattering of 'So what?' and 'I don't care' and 'That's *your* problem not mine.'

So she stepped it up. “It *is* your problem. If you don’t do a fair share of work, you can’t expect to share in what others have done. Those who don’t produce, don’t get to consume.”

Michael laughed in her face. “But I do produce. I just don’t waste my time grubbing around in the dirt for turnips like some, some demented prairie dog.”

“There is nothing more important than producing food now--”

“Look around you,” he said, waving a hand at the heaps of clutter. “See all this stuff? And there’s lots more. All of it I got in trade for what I grow.” He mimed smoking. “There will always be those hungry for what I have to trade. So go right ahead, cut me off the Distribution. I’ll have all I would have gotten from that and much, much more, in no time. And I won’t even have to leave the house.”

Roberta stared at him. In a way he was right. No doubt he had grown and sold weed even before the power was out. There’s been a government that cared and worked to enforce the laws then, and they hadn’t managed to stop him. What chance did she have, with so few helpers, and an overwhelming number of other problems to handle?

But he was also wrong. It was not just the laws he chose to flout that no longer had a real effect. She pivoted on her heel and left the house.

Osrik smiled at her. He and his partner Davis had just arrived at her office. “We got the word from Gonzales you wanted to see us ASAP.”

Roberta nodded. “Yes. Michael Godwin. 855 17th Street. I want you to collect him now, straight away.”

“Fine. Shall we bring him here?”

She shook her head. “No. To the Speaking Platform at the

Mall.” She hesitated. “He’s a dealer. He’s got a whole lot stuff he’s taken in trade. That might include some weapons.”

“Not a problem,” Davis patted the heavy handgun he wore. “The punk may have a gun, but I doubt he’s had the training guys like us have had.”

She stared at him thoughtfully. These two hadn’t been Capitol police officers before The Day. The police force had been as hit by the population loss as any group, and she’d had to recruit others with approximately the right training to build what was now known as the Guardians back up to at least a minimum number. Davis had been an MP, then worked for a private military outfit. Osrik’s background was even murkier. He, too, had a military background, but not in any U.S. force, and after that he had worked in the security force for one of the many multinational companies that maintained a presence in D.C. Doing exactly what had never been clearly stated, and of course all of his records were just as inaccessible as all the rest. Some men became police because they want to help uphold the law. Others just wanted an excuse to push people around. In this particular case, the latter motive was more important.

“You said he has a whole lot of stuff. If he resists, some of it might get damaged while subduing him,” Osrik suggested.

She shrugged. “Just bring him. In whatever he’s wearing. He should be able to walk and talk and look okay,” she said.

“No visible wounds, check,” Davis said.

As always, the Mall was one of the busiest places in town. In patched together-booths, on folding tables, and on spread blankets goods were on display. The food from community fields and gardens was collectively held and distributed by the

community, but it seemed everyone had a small patch of ground, around, behind, in front of or on top of the roof of their house, and put it to the best use they could. Everything from hen's eggs to fat rabbits to herbs of all sorts could be found here, along with whatever could be salvaged or scavenged from the hundreds of abandonned houses of the town and its closer in suburbs. Deal were made constantly, all day, swaps of good for goods or goods for services of all sorts.

Roberta entered the Mall at the west end, and walked slowly to the permanently installed Speaker's Platform located near the east end. Her slow progress drew eyes to her, and then curiosity about what the Administrator was doing drew them along to gather in front of the Platform. By the time she arrived, Osrik and Davis were already waiting there, with Michael Goodwin between them, half standing, half supported by their hard grasp on his arms. His hair was even messier than before, and he looked rather dazed, but not so much as a bruise appeared on his face nor a drop of blood marred his clothes. Off to the side Jessica was perched on a step, her pad supported on her knees, sketching quickly.

As she passed the girl Roberta glanced at the pad; to her eye, the portrait of Goodwin was nearly complete. Jessica looked up from her drawing and met her eyes. Roberta raised an eyebrow, and Jessica said, "I've got what I need." Roberta walked over to the side of the platform and looked down at Goodwin for a few moments, then gestured for the Guardians to bring him up. She walked to the front of the Platform and looked out at the gathered citizens. The murmured conversations died away into silence.

"As everyone here knows, our lives were changed forever a little over a year ago. We lost not just the use of electricity, but

virtually the whole pattern of how our lives would be lived. Most of our jobs vanished, or at least changed so drastically we had to discover new ways to do everything as if we were newborn babes. We cannot talk instantly with friends and family wherever they live. No longer could we travel from one side of the globe to the other, as the whim struck us. Indeed, the strongest and healthiest of us can only travel to a neighboring state by the expenditure of hour upon hour of foot travel. Reaching another continent? Impossible for all practical purposes.

“One aspect that changed affects every one of us, not just every day, but several times every day. I mean, of course, what food we have available to eat. We lived with the bounty of the entire world waiting for us on the shelves of our grocery stores. Every fruit and vegetable, every grain and meat produced any where in the world lay there for the taking. Thanks to refrigerated shipping, and the speed of planes, and trains, and cargo ships a lamb raised and butchered in New Zealand could be served fresh and wholesome on the dinner table of a family here in Washington D.C.

“But every step step of that journey, that epic, swift journey, depended on electricity.

“And there is no more electricity.”

Roberta gestured to encompass the crowd. “You and I remember how it was. We will for the rest of our lives. But we are the last generation that will do so. All our children, those born this past year and those who will be born for decades to come, will live lifes impoverished by this change. So many changes, so many losses, we can barely comprehend it. To put it in the simplest terms, none of these children will ever eat a banana.

“We cannot mourn forever what was lost, but we must do

all we can to insure that life will go on. And that requires food.

“That inescapable necessity has driven our actions since The Day. We work together as one community, one family, tirelessly to insure that every member has the food they need to sustain them. We share the bounty we produce as one, and we share the work to produce that bounty as one. That is our way. That is how it must be.

“But not everyone is an honest, giving, contributing member of our community.”

Roberta turned partway, and pointed at Goodwin. “This man is Michael Goodwin. He has lived among us. He has eaten the food we toil to produce. Happily taken all we have to offer.

“And he gives nothing back.”

The crowded muttered unhappily.

“Not only doesn’t he work, he mocks us for doing so! He calls us demented prairie dogs’, calls our work ‘grubbing around in the dirt for turnips.’ Work that he thinks he is too good to help with! Even though he is happy enough to eat those turnips once someone else has done all the labor!

“This cannot be allowed. It will not be. Someone with an attitude like that is like a rotten apple. If you leave a rotten apple in the barrel, what happens?”

“They all rot!” someone shouted from the crowd.

“Yes, exactly. When you find a rotten apple you remove it, get it far away from the other apples so it cannot spread its corruption to them. And so this is what we will do with Michael: he will be taken to the outskirts of our town, and sent away from it. Just as he is, just as he stands there. He will not take one thing more from our community. If he needs food, he must produce it. If he needs new clothes, he must produce them. No more leeching off the rest of us. Work for

what you need or die.

“If you won’t be a proper member of a community, you must live or die on your own.”

The crowd shouted in agreement.

Roberta pointed at Michael’s chest. “Do not ever return to trouble our community again.” She turned towards the Guardians. “Take him beyond the edge of the town. Send him away.”

They marched away, Michael stumbling awkwardly between them.

chapter eight

E. Kinna

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

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

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

“Did you hear me?”

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

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

Adam searched for the right words as he noticed the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What on earth is that,” Lacy whispered.

“That,” Adam said, “would be Eli.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Car shopping?” Lacy raised a brow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, that’s nonsense,” Lacy said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No idea.” Adam whispered back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I need to see Lacy. Please."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you,” he said, “and please...hurry.”

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

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

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

Lacy? I want to see her, please?”

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

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

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

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

chapter nine

L.P. Masters

ROBERTA MIGUEL STOOD UP and dusted the dirt from the knees of her pants. She watched the small team of people make their way into the district. The team was small, but the carts they brought with them were heavily loaded with equipment. What anyone would need equipment for these days, Miguel could only imagine.

She sighed heavily and headed back to her office. Someone would probably be looking for her soon. There weren't many newcomers lately, but it made sense that they'd Cooke to her.

As she got to the building, she wrenched the front door open. It had been sticking lately, but there was no one around to oil it. She'd get around to it sometime, but she was so busy lately she never had the chance. If it wasn't co-ordinating various community events, it was keeping her patch of crops from dying or the people from killing each other. Sometimes the community events were just as stressful.

She walked up the first flight of stairs to her "office", which was literally the whole second story. When eighty percent of the population left DC, there was plenty of room to

set up a spacious office. She had to think of the good things.

Today she picked the executive suite; expansive desk, nice leather chair, a corner office with two big windows. The windows were getting dirty. She actually had taken the time to wipe them down with a clean rag the other day, from the inside. The problem didn't exist on the inside though, it was outdoors that was filthy.

She clasped her hands together on the desk in front of her and then noticed her farmer's manicure; black French tipped nails. She grabbed the nail file from her drawer and started digging the soil out. She only got one hand done before Ellen Scott appeared in the doorway, a tall Caucasian man standing next to her.

"Roberta," Ellen said. "This is Oliver Kelly. He's looking for someone who's in charge."

"Well I guess that's me," Miguel got to her feet and walked around the large desk, offering a handshake, happy she'd at least gotten done with her right hand nails. She clenched her left hand in a fist to keep her nails from showing. She liked to keep herself as clean as she could, which could be a challenge these days, but Kelly looked impeccable.

He looked to be about her own age, which was mid forties, and he was thin, but without the leanness that comes from exercise. His dark hair was as neat as his clean clothes. They almost looked pressed. Miguel doubted they actually were, there was just an air about him that made him look sharp.

His grip was firm as he returned the handshake, and his voice deep as he said, "Thank you for seeing me."

"Of course," she said. She returned to her chair and Kelly took a seat as well. "What can I help you with?"

"Well," he paused and looked out the window. Miguel hoped he was looking at the autumn sky and not the grimy

surface of the glass.

"I think I know what caused the power failure."

Miguel leaned forward. "Is that so?"

"Yes. And I want to work toward getting it restored."

"That's good," Miguel said, keeping her tone measured. One thing she'd learned as a politician was to not show too much emotion, although the idea of getting the power restored sent thrills of excitement through her. "What do you need from me?"

"Well," said Kelly, and he rubbed his clean shaven chin. "I'm going to need about 100 people, all good with their hands, for about a week."

"Good with their hands?"

"Yes," said Kelly. "People like the doctors, the butchers."

Miguel clasped her hands on the desk again then noticed her dirty nails on her left hand and put her hands in her lap instead. "You say you know what caused it. Tell me about that."

"It's called a Carrington event. It's a massive solar storm that creates magnetic disturbances large enough to fry anything with wiring."

"And you can fix that?" Miguel asked, raising an eyebrow.

"With the right help, I can. Which is why I came to you."

Miguel sighed, but she nodded her head slowly. "I'll do the best I can, but I'm not really in charge here. No one is. The best I can offer is to call a meeting and let you explain yourself. We'll put it to a vote."

Kelly got to his feet, "That's all I can ask. Thank you."

Kelly took a deep breath to settle his nerves. He'd presented his argument, done his best to convince them of the importance of his mission, now it was down to the vote.

He glanced over at Miguel. Around his own age, she was quite attractive, with her shoulder length brown hair and Hispanic features. It was hard to read her sometimes, what she thought of what he'd said. It didn't really matter what she thought. She'd organized this meeting, and that was all he needed.

"All in favor of supporting Oliver Kelly's project, raise your hand and keep them up while we tally the vote," Miguel said.

Kelly looked out over the crowd as the hands went in the air. He tried not to estimate how many were in the air as Miguel took the count.

"Thank you. Those not in favor of supporting Oliver Kelly's project raise your hand and keep them up."

Kelly closed his eyes. He didn't want to see how many were opposed to him. Miguel's quiet counting under her breath was unnerving. He tried not to think how long it was taking her to count.

At last she spoke up louder. "Well, it appears the vote is conclusive. I'll put Kelly in charge of setting up the team."

His eyes popped open.

He'd gotten his team! He tried not to holler in excitement. He had gotten his team.

chapter ten

J.D. Eckstrom

THE REWIRING WENT SMOOTHLY until the last day. Oliver had known it was too good to last. There were miles to cover and far too many people still huddled in the Capitol. Somebody was bound to disagree.

“Don’t think we can do it?” he asked. Even Roberta seemed sceptical of that, though she’d given them her blessing to try and set up the volunteers. This young volunteer flung her hands in the air.

“Oh, she has no opinion on *that!* The crazy lady just won’t let us touch the room!”

“Won’t let us...” Oliver frowned. He’d spent a good day teaching this army of volunteers how to find the wiring, how to make clean holes no bigger than necessary. He’d even instructed them to sweep up after themselves. “What room is it?”

“I don’t know, an old fusty one. Nobody’s using it but this crazy lady.”

“Is she living in it?” Oliver scratched at an ear. They weren’t supposed to, but that meant little these days. If

somebody had dug in a nest of their very own--

“Oh, no, that would dirty the place.”

“Dirty it?” Oliver stared at the volunteer. Keeping them out of her home, sure. People got territorial. But refusing the chance of electricity, of lights, of refrigeration, to keep the room clean? She might be legitimately crazy. “I’d better go have a look. Show me where.”

“It’s just my luck, you know?” The volunteer rubbed her short hair. She marched with a bit of a bounce, like she wanted to look adult but secretly thought skipping would be faster. “Before all this, when I was in high school? I wanted to take wood shop, right? I mean, my school still offered it, how cool is that? Around here, you know? I think auto shop was mostly how to break a car into parts as fast as possible. But, of course, the throw-backs who teach wood shop are entirely throwbacks, just absolute ass-hats, and he’s all, why don’t you take Spanish, then you can talk to your nanny. Which is, you know, not even a real sexist joke, it’s a class one, and boobs don’t make me rich, like hello, obviously.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So screw that guy, whatever, I don’t even know where he went. But when all this happened, right, I’m right back at work and now Dad doesn’t have a company so, you know, it’s him and me, and I’m damn good at carpentry, you know?”

“Your dad is a carpenter?” Oliver asked. She nodded. No wonder she still looked well-fed and bouncy. White collar workers had not fared half as well as the blue collar craftsmen.

“We’ve been doing lots of work over at the Arboretum, putting up fences for the animals and building chicken coops and shit like that, you know? Around town, too. Dad and me have got real good at taking windows out of the abandoned buildings and adding ‘em in to where people still live. Get in

more natural light, that kind of thing. People like that. So I'm a real legit carpenter, or as legit as anybody is at anything anymore, and I know a bit about electrics, working on houses, all that. I mean, not a lot, Dad only sort of touched on it normally but since then he's been going over all his books, you know? Just trying to make sense of it. So I didn't even need your whole lecture on how to rewire the place."

"Did you get the lecture on cleaning up?" Oliver asked. She moved surprisingly fast; he might have to consider a skip now and again to keep pace.

"I mean, yeah, obviously, Dad's real tidy, but that's not even the problem, if you're thinking that's what made the crazy lady crazy, I can't even get in the door so I don't know how I could have made a mess. My point is, though, she should let me in, you know? Because of all the volunteers here, I'm actually the least likely to make a mess of the place, right? And the most likely to know how to do this shit properly. I'm actually about the only one who's going to know how to fix all these holes we're putting in. I don't know about sourcing paint, we haven't bothered a whole lot with that, but new drywall, yeah."

"Really?" Oliver hadn't thought that far ahead. If the lights came on, he didn't care if there were holes in the wall. Especially if they didn't go all the way through.

"Yeah! Why, you want somebody to fix it up? I don't mind doing it, but it'll take me ages, you know, and I'll need to be fed." She spun about to walk backwards. Oliver shook his head.

"Don't look at me, I'm only working on this end of the project. Try Roberta afterwards."

"Sure, fair enough, it's not like I'm starving. Anyway, my whole point is, you know, it's just my luck. I mean, what is it about me? What makes me less trustworthy than any of these

other bozos? Am I too young? I kind of have a baby face, don't I? Is it because I'm a girl? Do I have too many boobs to be trusted to do anything right? Like, what's the issue?"

"I couldn't say." Maybe the crazy lady had heard her coming. There should be more space to spread out in the city now, but people still huddled together and then got annoyed when their shoulders rubbed. The girl halted at the next corner. Oliver swung to a stop. "What now?" he asked. With dramatic eye rolls and sweeping hand gestures, she indicated that the room in question was just around the corner. Along with, presumably, the crazy lady. Oliver nodded. Not a bad idea to stay behind if she'd already annoyed the woman. He'd try being calm and sober, see if that got on her better side. Oliver stepped around the corner.

As soon as he laid eyes on her, he gave up the hope of there being a better side. The crazy lady stood erect in front of the door at the end of the hall. The door was open, but a velvet rope stretched across it. She was in a dark blue dress suit, nipped in at the waist, with small pearl earrings and gold bangles on her wrist. But what really worried Oliver was the name tag clipped to her lapel. She was one of the deniers.

Nobody denied things had changed. Even the most stubborn admitted it. But some people denied the idea that it would last. Denied that it would last for the foreseeable future. There'd been more of them in the beginning. People who said it was only a glitch and the power would come back in a week. People who said they only had to wait for the people in another city to sort it out. In another country. People who claimed that President Gray went missing because he was working on a solution. Oliver could ignore that. Give it time and their ranks dwindled on their own.

The stubborn ones, though, entered a sort of holding

period. Just put everything on pause, they thought, and we can pick up right where we left off when things are fixed. They were the ones who didn't want to change their routines. Who protested at the new rules. Who insisted that their old job still applied. Name tags were never a good sign.

"And who are you?" the woman snapped. Her shoulders tensed. "I told that girl I wanted to speak to the person in charge before I'd let her run wild in my museum."

Museum. Christ.

"Oliver Kelly, ma'am. My team and I are working on restoring electricity to the building."

"You couldn't have picked another one? You don't even know that smashing all these holes in the walls will work."

"You're right, we can't be certain. However, the Capitol is an important hub. It's much better to have electricity working here than in some random person's house." He edged closer. What museum was she talking about? The little plaque above her right shoulder read 'Old Senate Chamber'. She saw him looking.

"This is one of the oldest parts of the Capitol Building," she informed him. "The United States Senate met here from 1810 to 1859. After they moved into larger quarters, the Supreme Court met here for seventy-five years until their new building was completed."

"Ma'am, the senate isn't using it now," Oliver said, as gently as he could.

"The senate wasn't using it last year, either! That doesn't mean I left it open for every hoodlum in the city to come carve their name in the desks!"

Oliver scratched his ear. Actually, she had a point. It'd been nearly two centuries since the senate used it. If she'd kept it safe all that time before, why should she stop now? Oliver

didn't see the point of it, but keeping it for two centuries wasn't much stupider than keeping it for one century.

"Did they renovate it?" the girl asked behind him. Oliver jumped. The woman--her name tag said Melinda--glared at her. "I mean, it looks old and all, with all those curtains and stuff, but it doesn't look *real* old, it looks made-up old. You know?"

"They restored it in 1975," Melinda said stiffly, "in order to preserve an important part of American history. This is where much of the debates around slavery were carried out, beginning with the passage of the 1820 Missouri Compromise and continuing--"

"Great!" the girl said. "Not about the Missouri Compromise or anything, but the restoration. If they did it that recently, it was to keep it looking nice, right? Not really functional."

"Functional?" Melinda bristled.

"Like, if you're using a room all the time, you just want to make it sturdy, so you get good strong windows and paint you can wipe clean and all of that. If you want to preserve a certain image, though, you make function secondary. Like, right there, that's a stove, right? Like one you put wood in and all. That's not to keep people actually warm when it's winter in DC. So probably they knew wiring might have to be done again and they didn't want to tear at the whole thing, so they might've put in more access points. Like, so I don't have to tear any holes if I can find them."

Melinda stared at her. Then at Oliver. Oliver shrugged. It sounded plausible.

"Look, how about this, how about you come with me and we look all around the room for all the access points we can find, and figure out where the wires are. Then if I have to

make any holes you can stand right there and watch, so long as you don't grab me because it's a lot easier to fix up a nice straight hole than a jagged one. You can even tell me about the Missouri Compromise if you want, though you better not try asking comprehension questions."

"I do not need to be patronized by a teenager," Melinda snapped.

"I think that's just how she talks," Oliver said. He got indignant looks from both of them. "It sounds like the best compromise we're going to get. And you've got a real carpenter in here instead of an eager volunteer. Let's give it a shot, okay? I'll come back around to check on you if you've got any more problems." Melinda sniffed. But she unclipped the velvet rope. The girl scooped up her tools and dashed in.

"Not so fast! You put those down right there--not on a desk, they're mahogany and they've just been polished!" Melinda hurried after her. Oliver waited a moment, but it didn't devolve into a screaming match so he turned away.

Now he had a bit of a worried feeling. There were hundreds of rooms in this place. His team could work diligently for two weeks and still miss a spot. To be honest, a volunteer could have strolled off with new wires and left the building entirely. Not that they'd have much success with just wires and Oliver would have heard if anything more important was stolen.

Maybe he'd just have a bit of a walk-through. See how far along they were. If there were any more museum guides lurking around the place. Oliver headed north.

He went room by room through the building, opening doors into storage closets and stairwells. Nearly every room was finished. He checked the hallways. The week had gone well. The volunteer workforce had sped things along

considerably. Nobody else seemed to have protested the invasion, or else they had been dealt with quicker than Melinda. Oliver paused now and again to explain that he couldn't give guarantees but yes, he thought this would work and yes, he knew what he was doing and no, he wasn't quite sure when they'd be trying it out. Probably soon. Possibly even tonight.

“Kelly!” Roberta called. Her voice bounced off the walls. Oliver turned around. She gestured him closer and lowered her voice. “I’ve got a lot of volunteers milling now. Are you almost done?”

“Nearly.”

“I’m not trying to rush you--take as much time as you need for this--but I have to admit I’d happily murder someone in order to have a working fridge. I never thought I’d miss it so much.”

“I’ve just got to go check again on the Old Senate Chamber.”

“The Old Senate Chamber?” Her forehead crinkled. “What’s so important about--oh. You found Melinda.”

“You know her?”

“It’s hard not to.” Roberta gestured him toward the right hallway. “She’s passionate. I should have guessed that she’d be uncomfortable having people work in there.” Oliver glanced toward the windows as they walked. It was getting dark already. It still threw him off how quickly it grew dark and how utterly dark it became. The astronomers at least should be happy. “Melinda!” Roberta said, with a politician’s practiced smile. “How are you doing in here?”

“She made a hole in the wall,” Melinda said, “but we hid it as best as we could behind the curtains and she’s promised to come back and patch it up.”

“Just one?” Oliver asked.

“I was right, they did have some access points.” The girl looked triumphantly at him. “I finished the room. That’s got to be nearly the last, right? People were saying they were just about done this morning and I wanted to take on one of the last ones so I wasn’t sitting around twiddling my thumbs but I don’t know that I wanted it to be *this* late. I nearly ran out of light.”

“Yeah,” Oliver said. The last room. His heart beat oddly. Nearly out of light. How had the other work gone? Had they done enough to try throwing the switch tonight? Oliver turned away without further comment. Roberta hurried after him, to the stairs and down them and through the dark underground hallways until they got to the generator room. Candles flickered on every wall. Little pools of wax marked the ground around the generator. Faces turned toward him.

“You want to do it, boss?”

“We’re ready?”

“We can’t think of anything else to try. Have we finished all the rooms?”

“Yeah.” Oliver stood in front of the generator. Candles clustered around him and made his hair fizz. He stared down at the power button. This had to work. It had to. He put his finger carefully on the button, closed his eyes, and pressed.

The rumble vibrated up his finger, through his arm and straight into his chest. Light poured over his eyelids and turned his vision red. People shouted around him. Shouted out in the hallways and somewhere overhead. Oliver smiled.

Power.

chapter eleven

Conrad Gempf

IT WAS A GOOD afternoon for a jog.

She remembered when jogging was a time to lose herself in thinking and planning. She remembered when there was such a thing as normal, when you could put little plastic things in your ears that replaced the sound of this world with the sound of Beethoven and Mozart.

Since the Event there was no ‘normal’ and there was no sonic barrier to the children crying or the people shouting. And she would never ever get used to the sight of boarded-up museums or people washing clothes in ornamental pools.

She ran on up Madison, past the Natural History Musem, toward work. People waved to her these days. Ironically, they never did then, but do now. Speaker of the House was a *much* more important role than Administrator, at least in theory. But now she was dealing with real people in real time. Before, she was part of a huge ship, powering through the ocean, and she was a hand on the rudder. Now, she was just swimming with everyone else, but at the front. And they were more likely to recognise her than the days when she sometimes appeared on

TV news. In those days she would have been behind or alongside President Gray. Nowadays, the spotlight was on her — even if nowadays the closest thing to a spotlight was a camping lantern.

She waved at members of Steve's collective as she passed their settlement at what was the National Gallery. But for the first time in weeks, no one waved to her first or even waved back at her. They were busy making something. There would probably be another gathering later this afternoon. Kelly's triumph at the Capitol building was affecting everyone. They'd be waving at *him* now. Their *new* hero. There was a new sense of hope in what was left of the nation's capital.

It was the engineers you might think would get the acclaim. But Roberta knew how fame and politics worked. It is the team leaders who become the team personified, and receive the acclaim. And the laurels rest on them even when the leaders try their best to turn the attention back on those who did the work. Oliver Kelly, however, had so far not shown himself as the kind of leader who would even try to deflect praise.

The Roberta of 2 years ago would have played the game with Kelly; would have worked the crowd and thanked the engineers first, their leader second, for carrying out what would be made to seem like *her* orders. The Roberta of 2 years ago was a career politician, and a good one. The Roberta of today....

Was tired. And worried for the people in her community. Because that's the thing — nowadays, they *were people* to be helped, whereas *then*, they had been polling information to be influenced and manipulated.

She was at the rally yesterday, of course. She had asked the

lead engineer to speak, shouting out over the water of the Capitol's own reflecting pool. Maybe most couldn't hear anyway, but the shortness of his speech and the clarity of his gesture spoke eloquently. He yielding the floor to the stage presence and booming voice of Kelly.

He received their applause (*and* Roberta's applause too... would she give it as enthusiastically today, she wondered?). He also received gifts. Some group, probably the Starbuckians themselves, had brought a sack of coffee beans to him — worth a king's ransom nowadays — before his speech was anywhere near over. He bowed deeply in thanks, then hoisted it aloft like a trophy, to the applause and acclaim of all.

That might have been a good moment for him to retire the field, she had thought, leaving that picture of him in people's minds. And, even the tired politician that she was, she was ready to rise from her feet applauding and re-take centre stage in his wake. But he did not stop or leave then, and when he did, it was deliberately to bring up another engineer, clap him on the back and ask him to explain something, which the poor man tried to do... at such length in such jargon that most of the audience wandered off and the meeting fizzled out.

Now she could see what Steve's gang were working on: they were painting a big sign for the rally. In bold black paint, it said "Everything's going to be" and then Kelly's initials. "Everything's going to be O.K."

Thinking about it, as she ran, her fingers almost physically ached for a keyboard in front of a search engine. Who was this "Oliver Kelly"? Where the hell did he come from?

There were rumours and theories she'd heard ... that he was part of Gray's administration dealing with energy, or that he'd been a lowly maintenance man in the Capitol building, or

even that he'd been a lobbyist for Big Oil. She knew they were all wrong.

"Everything's Going To Be O.K." went through her head over and over in time to the pounding of her feet as she circled round past the Capitol and back down towards her apartment. It sounded more and more like an election slogan. She realised she wasn't worried half as much about where he came from as she was about where he intended to go next. The Saviour of DC ... The Saviour of AC/DC. If he could restore power to the Capitol building, why not to the city, and if the city, was that a stepping stone toward the East Coast and the country? The lack of information about other parts of the country was really worrying. DC was not anyone's hub anymore, that was clear. But she had no idea whether the Capitol building was unique or whether Boston and New York and Philadelphia also had their own engineering teams restoring power.

It seemed possible, even likely — but the lack of any couriers or news was surprising and worrying. Sometimes over the past months she'd wondered if they were the only ones still alive.

Those worries were easier to dismiss than her growing suspicions about Kelly. The larger worries were remote — almost abstractions, such as the steersman of the big boat would dwell on. As a swimmer, Roberta now was most worried about the slippery jellyfish in her face.

She unlocked the door to her apartment, realising that the combination of his performance yesterday and her run today had made her deeply suspicious about Mr Oliver Kelly.

Roberta wandered back towards to the Mall, knowing she would be early for any gathering. That left her time to spend at

Orza's. Orza had run a street truck selling espresso and flat whites before the Event and had continued to ply a similar trade in the new order, although this time, he'd moved up to a café of sorts... some folding chairs he set up at sunrise every morning and an open fire with boiling water. His reserves still stretched to good filter coffee, but it would cost you. If you still had some pre-crisis coffee yourself, he'd make you a good deal, otherwise most people stuck with tea. He grew his own peppermint and Roberta had long ago weaned herself off of caffeine and on to that.

“Am I still good for it?” she asked Orza, “I brought some ...”

“Relax, Administor,” he said, in his Eastern European accent, “Still a couple of weeks at least.” He jerked his head to draw her attention to his little boy and little girl playing near the fire. Both were wearing “We, the People...” t-shirts she had picked out from the Capitol’s Gift Shop. She’d more sense of what the crisis could be like than her colleagues. They grabbed jewellery and gauzy designer Cherry Blossom Festival scarves, paying more attention to the price tags than the utility. She stockpiled Capitol Building souvenir chocolate bars and functional clothing. She had enough to barter with for weeks to come.

“By the way,” Orza said more quietly, pointing in the other direction. “One of *them* is over there.” He shook his head disapprovingly, “Asked for instant coffee!”

Roberta looked. It was the boring engineer speaker from yesterday’s meeting.

“Thank you,” she said, picking up her tea.

“Mind if I join you?” Roberta asked the engineer.

Startled, and then recognising her from the meeting, he

said “Yes. I mean please, do, Ms....” he realised he didn’t remember her name, “I’d be delighted,” he added hastily.

His body jerked, thinking of standing up for a lady, then realising he was too late because Roberta had seated herself quickly.

She, of course, was itching to ask about his “boss” and their plans but knew she would have to work up to it slowly. She went for the old standby: empathy.

“He really threw you in at the deep end yesterday!” she said with a smile that implied that they’d both been in such situations many times before... that implied, in fact, that they’d been there together.

“Yeah, I guess,” he said. “I’m Mitch, by the way.”

“Mitch. Glad to meet you. I’m Roberta,” she said shaking hands, firmly like a buddy, not too firmly, like a rival. “People, though...” she shook her head, “As clearly as you explain the process, they’re only interested in the result. Until it all falls apart again, anyway.”

“Oh, yeah,” he agreed, sipping the tea he must have received when Orza refused the order of instant anything. “But that means when it breaks again, they still need to hire the repairmen,” he said, happy to have thought of a reply quickly enough.

Roberta laughed her most flattering laugh. “Mind you,” she said, “Understanding your explanation is one thing. Being able to pull it off is something quite different. How many buildings and communities have you guys brought power back to?”

He looked puzzled. “None,” he said, then corrected, “Only here. Or here first, anyway.”

“Just getting started, I guess?” she asked, “New team?”

“Oh no, we’ve....” he stopped abruptly and looked around, and started over, “We’ve been working together for a while.

The U.S. Capitol is our first ..." he stopped again and let that hang.

She just nodded, making clear that if there was something he wasn't supposed to say, she wasn't going to pry.

In the silence that followed, they both sipped their drinks and then, seemingly at leisure, she said, "Well, Mitch, our community here are mighty grateful and looking forward to what you and ... what's-his-name ..." she frowned.

"Mr. Kelly," Mitch said helpfully.

"Yes, what you and Mr. Kelly are going to do next. We've got a whole city that would love to start up again."

Mitch thought and seemed determined not to say too much, which itself said more to Roberta than he could have guessed.

Finally, he said, conspiratorially, "I don't think he's that interested in it being the nation's capital at all, you know. But the backup power supply here ... wow! It's like nowhere else I've ever seen."

Roberta nodded, as if she understood the implications perfectly, which she didn't. When he didn't continue as she'd hoped he would, she gently prodded, with her cup in front of her face, "And we know what *that* means..."

He nodded, smiling, a lonely man who has found a comrade at last, "Yup, we can make the stuff we *really* need, now!"

She nodded, and tried not to shiver visibly.

Just as she opened her mouth to coax him further, he said, "Oh... heh... Johnny. Hi!"

"Hey, Mitch; who's this?" said the new arrival.

"Oh this is"

"Roberta Miquel," she said, standing to go, "I just wanted to thank you both for the hope you're giving all of us here!"

Goodbye for now, Mitch. Johnny.”

Late in the evening, Roberta Miquel, an Administrator of New Washington, and former Speaker of the House, gathered up her conflicting emotions and theories and in the falling dark, made her way up to the one building with light: the Capitol.

chapter twelve

Waleed Ovase

ROBERTA HAD ALWAYS FELT that her short frame – bordering on stocky, but she never mentioned that to anyone – was an ill fit among the hallowed halls of the Capitol Building. On any given normal day, before the calamity, the halls would be teeming with men taller than her, women prettier than her, but all of them would look upon her for guidance and resolution. She was short, but she had risen into power. She pulled at the rough hewn jacket sleeves she now wore, a far cry from the tailored outfits of the past.

She had almost thought to wear one of them, as a gesture to the old life that the building occupied in her mind: a place for partisan professionalism, a place for decisions. She found herself perpetually walking towards the building, as if retracing her steps, retracing the muscle memory of her older life. And today, with the air nippier, the natural trees changing color while the digital trees were lost and forgotten, she found herself walking up those familiar Capitol steps, found herself winding her way into the marble Rotunda.

But, that life was over now, left behind amid the heaps of

electronic waste that could be piled to reach the moon. It would take millions of years for it to rot away, if ever. And these were the thoughts that racked her mind as she paced the halls that she once ruled. She remembered the conversations, the bickering, and the threats that happened at every corner, in every hallway. And now, none of it really seemed to matter. They were entrenched in a new life, perhaps a better life.

The butchers in town had paired with the farmers, and the farmers had paired with the community so that everyone would be fed. Money had nearly ceased to exist, and her skills as a negotiator were still utilized to calm the disputes in bartering trades. People seemed more at peace, while not necessarily happier. But was happiness the point?

The end of their reality, the end of the electronic age had pushed her thoughts into existentialism, and as soon as Oliver had arrived in town, she knew that her philosophical wanderings didn't necessarily want him there. Not that she didn't trust him. She knew she didn't trust him. Perhaps this change to a simpler life was somehow better for her, and better for the people around her.

Things were less complicated, in a way. Simpler. Her clothing was reused from ages past, she washed all her dishes by hand, and now she knew the names of every neighbor and every child. It was like the ticky tacky neighborhoods of the 1950s, without all the trouble of the "real" world. There was only today, and what we could all do to survive peacefully.

She had found herself in the generator room. Small streaks of light bled through the small windows in the room, and from the hallway. The Sun's light had become precious to all of them, and now Oliver's promise of electricity would be bringing that to an end. Perhaps people would adjust and always remember the modern dark age. Or perhaps

everything would just go back to the way it was.

“It’s a beautiful machine, really.” His soft voice seemed closer than it was, and it raised the hair on the back of Roberta’s neck. The Capitol’s architecture had a way of amplifying and stretching people’s voices, but his voice was distinctive and memorable. Each word began in a baritone, and then rasped ever so slightly at the end.

“Oliver,” she replied, turning around. His stature wasn’t intimating, although she felt that sometimes he tried to pull that kinda visual move to get his way. “Following me around typically doesn’t lead to happy endings.”

He raised his hands. “No, no Madame Speaker. While I was hoping to find you at some point, I was just wandering the halls, thinking of how beautiful the Capitol is when it’s lit. I was thinking of the future, you see.”

“Your future?” she asked. No one really knew much about him - no one had even heard of him before he marched in, making promises and fueling speculation. What his background was, why he was qualified to bring the modern world back, or even why he cared, was all up in the air.

“Perhaps our future,” he replied. He pushed back his dark hair, trying to keep his ever lengthening mane at bay, and strode further into the room. He placed his hands on the generator’s dark gray sheet metal. “This is our future. We have the power, we have the resources, we have the expertise to bring back the modern world. And all of its successes.”

She sighed. There was something boyishly, and idealistically, attractive about a man who thought only about the positives. But after decades in politics, she could tell when someone had a motive, dark or otherwise. Not all motives were bad, but Oliver had trekked a long way to make his purported dream a reality. “The world had its dark moments,

as well.”

“And we don’t need to bring those back. We,” his voice broke as he turned to face her. “You, Madame Speaker could bring the world back in a better way.”

She locked eyes, trying to see past the fervor. “Who are you Oliver?”

His stature slackened and he leaned against the stone wall. “I was a man, who had a lot of money. More money than some of the richest people the world had ever known.”

“I know of most of those people, Oliver. I’ve never heard of you.”

“No, Madame Speaker. That was the entire point. I had the kind of money you get by doing things your own way, and not wanting anyone to ever know that it had been done,” he said as he rubbed his hands over his face. “I was on top of my own world. And that world, Madame Speaker, is locked away in computers that are currently turned off.”

The reasonings and the fervor were becoming clear. “So you want your old life back,” she whispered. “This has very little to do with humanity and all that idealistic bullshit you told us earlier.”

“The money was the world,” he replied. “Money ruled this world. And it’s all still there. The very meaning of the fabric of our world is still there. It’s just in the memories of these machines. It’s all there, I know it is. Every bank has a failsafe. Every system had a backup!” He put his hands on the generator. “And we can bring it all back up and running. And then you can be President.”

“Excuse me?”

“You have the people’s ears, and their minds. Gray and Campbell are long gone - no one knows if they’re even still alive. And it wouldn’t matter. You can take credit for bringing

everyone back to the civilized age. You can take credit for bringing back society! And you can then bring it back to every other person across the world.”

“And you get what out of this?”

“I get to go back to my old life. A better life.”

“Which was?” she asked, pointedly.

“A better life,” he reiterated. “You were a powerful woman in those days. You must have had money and holdings. In fact, I’m sure you did.”

“And what if I like this life, now?”

“You can’t possibly!” he exclaimed. “This is the stone age. We live and die on nature’s whim, without modern medicine, without modern infrastructure.”

“And yet you’re doing this for the money,” she said, matter-of-factly. He was proposing something so devilishly simple: bring back electricity, restore society, and she could become President. Wasn’t that a goal of hers at some point? Hadn’t people been saying she should have run last time?

“Everyone needs a reason. And everyone needs support.”

“I see,” she replied, staring off into a corner, thinking of the consequences. The world would be different, and people like this would still reign, unbeknownst to so many. But, she reasoned, electricity had to eventually return, and whoever made that happen would be a world leader. And world leaders, she reminded herself, have the ability to enact far more change than those who sit on the sidelines. “And you just want your old life back,” she whispered.

“That, and so much more. Think about your future,” he replied.

But she couldn’t. She could only think about her present, and how living in the modern dark age had changed her and those she lived around. Everyone had pitched in. Everyone

had respect. It had its problems, and yet everyone believed in each other. But going back to a world full of backstabbing politicians, of purportedly world ending decision making, of people like Oliver Kelly who just wanted to accrue money and do nothing good for the world? The consequences of working to build this generator came crashing around her.

Yes, she reminded herself, if she helped him, then she could lead the world back to the society it came from. But she didn't really believe in that world anyway. This brave new world, this new world order, was better than Oliver Kelly's fervor.

She looked around the generator room, looking for anything heavy she could grab. She settled on a long piece of 2x4. She grabbed it and pointed it towards the generator.

“What are you doing?” Oliver exclaimed. “Wha-wha. Put that down.”

“No, Oliver. We cannot go back to the world that was,” she yelled and threw her body weight against the 2x4 as she slammed it into the generator’s control panel. The controls splintered and cracked, the internal PCB breaking into a thousand shards that sprayed across the concrete floor.

She swung again, and again, aiming for different pieces of the generator, trying to end Oliver’s dream. Finally, she put the plank down, her breath coming out in short spurts as she realized she was crying.

“Look what you’ve done,” Oliver whispered as he backed himself out of the room. “Look what you’ve done. The future, Roberta.”

“Your future,” she said as she collapsed onto the floor, her face in her hands. “Your future is gone.”

“No,” he replied, as he turned his back to her. “I will never stop trying to rebuild what we’ve all lost.”

He strode out of the room, leaving Roberta sprawled on the floor, thinking of what she had just done.