

# SEPARATION OF STATE

*A Novel By:*

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

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For my beautiful wife, Michelle. Thank you for all that you do, day in and day out, for our family. Not a word on these pages would have been written if not for your unending love and support.

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## **Table of Contents**

|                               |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Prologue : Present Day .....  | 3   |
| Chapter 1 : Driven.....       | 5   |
| Chapter 2 : Depth .....       | 40  |
| Chapter 3 : Temptation .....  | 77  |
| Chapter 4 : Separation .....  | 103 |
| Chapter 5 : Condolences ..... | 141 |
| Chapter 6 : Forward .....     | 163 |
| Chapter 7 : Reordered.....    | 195 |
| Chapter 8 : Vows .....        | 226 |
| Chapter 9 : Plans.....        | 259 |
| Chapter 10 : Exodus .....     | 294 |
| Epilogue : Present Day.....   | 340 |



## **Prologue : Present Day**

**T**he democratic experiment in self-rule of the United States is over. The oldest government in the world, held by one of the world's youngest countries, has ended. Currently, there are two countries where there once was one: The Republic of New Liberty and The People's Social Republic of America. Citizens of the once great United States of America were promised five years to decide which of the two countries they would ultimately declare their citizenship to. The last President of the United States however, accelerated that timeline down to a year.

During the lead up to Declaration Day, the final day citizens were able to freely declare which country they would join, police departments and most federal and state law enforcement entities were defunded or laid off. This led to right wing militia groups and security from the consolidated union group Big Blue to fill the 'peacekeeping' role in society. Riots and turmoil rocked most of the former United States major cities. Small and rural towns were not spared in the chaos. Roving protest mobs moved throughout the suburban and rural countryside, demanding fairness and equality as they set businesses and homes ablaze. The largely unprepared majority of former United States citizens retreated to the more remote and isolated areas of the Midwest and Appalachians.

However, the vast amount of people that lived in the suburbs chose, or were forced, to accept the new reality of their governments, as they tried to survive in ‘the new normal.’

The United States was split upon the stereotypical Conservative vs. Progressive divisions that plagued the nation for years. Unlike the previous attempt at secession by the Confederacy during the Civil War, this split has no champions for continued unity.

The “Great Separation,” as it has become known, changes the life of every former United States citizen. The Saury and Brenton families were affected more than most. This is their story.



## Chapter 1 : Driven

*18 months ago*

### Saury House

Thomas Saury smiled. This was his first smile in as long as he could remember. Thomas just finished a phone call with his old work friend, who he considered more family than colleague, Caleb Brenton.

“Susan, have you seen my fishing tackle? Caleb wants to meet us up at the lake tomorrow.”

Thomas could see the muscles in the back of her neck tighten as he said Caleb’s name, as was Susan’s custom when she’s watching television and didn’t want to deal with anything outside of her bubble. Her long fingers instinctively wrapped around the remote before speaking.

“I’m watching the news,” Susan rhythmically announced in as monotone a voice as she could muster.

*“Three years after the death of Supreme Court Justice William Teagus the United States Senate remains unable to confirm a nominee to fill his seat. This marks the longest time the High Court has been without its full complement of nine members. Justice Teagus was famously the swing vote on over ninety percent of the decisions that faced the philosophically divided*

*court. The Supreme Court has been unable to issue any clear decisions in the past three years, instead issuing a series of non-binding, non-precedent Rules for Continuations until such a time that the Court can reach a majority opinion.”*

Visibly frustrated, Susan pressed pause on the remote, slowly looked over to Thomas with a look that could only be described as equal parts contempt and condescension. “Now, what did you say?”

“My fishing tackle, have you seen it?” Thomas asked, as he tried to select just the right words that would prevent the inevitable bickering that seemed to follow every encounter.

“You know I’ll never understand why we have to go running every time you need your boyfriend time with him. Let me guess, it’s another whole family deal?” Susan fired back at him with a teed-up response, not once acknowledging his original question. “Michelle going?”

“Probably.”

“Ugh.” Any attempts on Susan’s part at hiding her disdain for the Brenton family were utterly abandoned. “Well what about Rebecca, is she at least coming?”

“I think she’s still away at school.”

“Shit, she’s the only one I can stand talking to.” Susan’s voice lowered, with a tone soaked in disapproval. “Matty?”

“Probably, Susan, he’s home too.” Thomas fought the urge to let the conversation he was currently having in his mind creep past his lips.

“Great, so while Kat is up Matty’s ass, I get to talk to Michelle. I wonder what interesting things are happening in the world of peach preserves production.”

“And Derek will be there too,” Thomas mentioned.

“I don’t count him,” Susan said dismissively.

“Okay, I’m not even sure what that’s supposed to mean. You want me to let them know you won’t be coming?” Thomas shot back, frustrated that he once again failed to select the right verbiage to avoid detonating Susan’s attitude.

“No, the last thing I need is Kat and Matty left unsupervised at the lake. Plus, I’d rather not have you and Kat shit-talking me when I’m not there.”

Thomas lightly gulped before asking his wife of twenty years what he knew would be a pointless question, “So, have you seen my fishing tackle?”

Susan assumed that picking up the remote and pressing play was answer enough.

*“In other political news, longtime conservative Florida lawmaker Wilson Clay has announced he will retire after this term, setting the stage for a fiercely contested race next November for the Central Florida seat. In a statement, Mr. Clay*

D.F. Brent Sr.

*cited the desire to spend more time with his family as his driving motivation, though some in the media are pointing to his recent allegations of transphobic and trans-racist behavior as the likely reasons he is stepping down.”*

Before retreating back into the garage, Thomas looked past the living room, down the hallway and saw his pride and joy, Kat. Her auburn locks slowly poked past her door frame. As she leaned back from her project desk, Thomas could only see a few locks of hair, then her whole face came into view. Thomas locked onto his daughter’s soft brown eyes. He gave her an inconspicuous OK signal. The smile that dawned across Kat’s face became his victory badge for the day, not quite enough to erase Susan’s daily verbal scarring, but enough to make it worthwhile.

Susan called out from the couch, never altering her gaze from the large talking heads she was staring into, “Close your door Kat, your welding stinks. I don’t know why you have to do that in the house.”

“It’s solder Mom, and you can’t do this outside,” Kat sighed as she recited the same sentence she had told her mother countless times.



### Brenton House

“All right Tommy, I’ll see you this weekend then Bud. I’ll bring the RV in case it gets too hot out there. All right sounds good.

Yep. Okay take care.” Caleb held the phone at near arm’s length to see the red phone icon due to his aged eyesight. As he stared at his phone the screensaver soon replaced the call screen, a picture of his youngest son Derek giving his super exaggerated smile. A warm rush came over Caleb every time he saw that picture.

“Hun, we’ve gotta get the RV ready, we’re gonna head to the lake this weekend,” Caleb bellowed until he saw Michelle standing about 15 feet from him.

“LAKE! LAKE! LAKE! LAKE!” Derek said excitedly.

“That’s right Derek, we’re going to the lake, and we’re gonna see Uncle Tommy and Aunt Susan and—” Michelle caught herself looking over to Caleb with a quizzical look. As Caleb looked down at Derek he wiped a bit of peach preserves from his cheek and couldn’t help but smile again. Caleb then looked to Michelle and nodded with permission for her to proceed.

“And Kat will be there too little buddy.” Michelle tried to keep her excitement down as she finished the last sentence.

“KAT! KAT! KAT!”

Caleb coughed a little as he tried to keep from laughing. Derek’s Downs Syndrome was likely the result of what the doctors referred to as Michelle’s high risk age group; she gave birth to Derek when she was 42. This handicap caused Derek to have difficulty connecting with other people. Kat, however, was his angel. Every time Derek saw her, he lit up with an

explosive joy at the simple mention of her name. Caleb and Michelle would be hearing “KAT! KAT! KAT!” non-stop for the next few days.

The stairs thundered as the Brenton’s large bodied, eldest son Matty came barreling down. “Hey Pop, so we on then?” Matty asked his father.

“Yep, now go get the RV cleaned up. You don’t want Madame Buzzkill to be uncomfortable.”

Matty, mumbling under his breath, “Could fill the freakin thing with feathers and that bit . . .”

“Maaaatttttyyyy,” Caleb drew his son’s name out, half smiling, as he cut him off. “Remember, Susan is God’s way of testing our resolve to love thy neighbor.”

“More like love thy enemy,” Michelle mumbled sarcastically.

“Huuuun,” Caleb said to Michelle wryly.

“Thanks Dad, I haven’t seen K-A-T, since like three months.” Matty silently recounted the days in his head.

“I know boy, that’s the life of a rigger though. Thirty on, thirty off, don’t worry though Son, it makes good relationships stronger and exposes the cracks in the foundations of weak ones. Ya’ll get the hang of it. She still emailing you every day?”

“Yeah but speaking of which, you might get a call from Spark tomorrow. He’s kinda got some HR & IT issue he needs to discuss with you.”

“Now what’s ol’ Spark gonna call me about Matthew?” Caleb asked, as he used Matty’s full name to acknowledge that this was likely not gonna be an attaboy call about his son.

“Well, remember how I said that FaceTime was blocked on the rig, something about too many people using up too much bandwidth or whatever?”

Caleb already sensed where this is going. “Yeah, I do.”

“Well the thing is—” Matty started as though he was pleading a case.

Caleb crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair to listen to what he has come to refer to as the latest episode of Matt & Kat’s budding romance.

“Michelle, come on in here Hun, you’re probably gonna want to hear this.”

As Michelle entered the room, she took up station beside Caleb’s chair. A sheepish grin crossed Matty’s face.

“Please continue Apprentice Rigger Matthew, why exactly will Spark be calling us tomorrow?” Caleb waved to Matty like a conductor calling his philharmonic to attention.

“Okay, so one more time, remember when I told you they were blocking FaceTime out on the rig?”

“Yes, apparently some people were using it too much, correct?” Michelle asked.

“Yeah, well Kat didn’t like that very much, so she sorta found a way around it.”

“A way around it?” Michelle asked, slowly squeezing Caleb’s shoulder as she spoke, more to prevent herself from laughing than from any actual anger.

“Yeah, and it woulda been fine, but I forgot to run the VPN she installed on my phone, so they sorta were able to figure out it was me. And so, the platform chief took my phone and gave it to Spark when we reported onshore.”

“So lemme get this straight, Sport,” Caleb started, “Your girlfriend didn’t like the rules that her boyfriend’s job put on him...a job that her boyfriend’s father had to pull strings for him to get in the first place...so she decided to hack the rig so she could FaceTime you...and your shoreside supervisor, my former rig mate Spark, got a ration of shit from the platform chief?” Caleb tried not to laugh as he summed up his son’s story.

“Yeah pretty much, but like I said. If I woulda used the VPN Kat put on there, it woulda been fine.”

“Not really the point here son,” Michelle interjected with an expression that could only be summed up as the idiot look.

“Haha, yeah I know, I shoulda done what Kat told me to do.”

“Oh goodness Matty, you’re hopeless!” An exasperated Michelle exclaimed as she walked back into the kitchen.



As Derek raced around the kitchen table one more time, Caleb scooped him up and placed him on his lap and tapped at his youngest's head. "You know Derek, some people in this house aren't very bright."

"KAT! KAT! KAT!"

"That's right buddy, Kat, Kat, Kat!"

"Get out there and clean up the RV, Matty. You big dummy." Caleb smiled and shook his head at Matthew as he spoke.

From the window over the kitchen sink, Michelle watched Matty test out the RV's generator. She called back to Caleb, "Papa, you ever tell Matty about all the times you covered for Spark back in the day?"

Caleb's look turned serious as he bounced Derek on his knee, "Never, and we ought to keep it that way."



### Brenton House: Two Days Later

A chorus of roosters announced the sun's arrival to the Brenton household. Caleb, as always, was the first to greet the day, as he slowly stepped out of his two-story farmhouse perched behind a small lake that was fed from a branch off the Hiawasse River. His look of contentment over his modest estate was identical nearly every morning for the past 15 years since he built his home. The Brenton Estate was a far cry from the one-bedroom apartment he and Michelle started in, and

as much as he loved his new home, he would never change those early years of their marriage. Those years of raising Rebecca in a crib in the bedroom that could barely accommodate a queen bed, yet somehow had a bedroom set, a crib, changing table, and unboxed china from Michelle's mother. Caleb shook his head thinking of how little room they had.

Those early year accommodations were all a matter of choice for Caleb and Michelle as they started out their life together. Caleb had a great job as an Operator out on the oil rigs, had just passed his offshore crane operator certification and landed a contract with an oil rig operating off the coast of Equatorial Guinea. At the time, Michelle hated that Caleb would leave for thirty days at a time but loved having him home for the thirty-day off cycle. The pay for an offshore crane operator off the African coast was about 40 percent higher than a similar job in the Gulf of Mexico. Caleb wasn't exactly a fan of the location either, due to the constant threat of piracy peeling down from the Nigerian Coast. However, the earning potential was too attractive to young Caleb at that time. Especially considering his wife and a yet unborn Rebecca.

Caleb set his coffee down on a cable spool table next to the chicken pen. Caleb had more of these cable spools than he cared to dwell on, but this one in particular had become known as his coffee spool. Its sole purpose in this life was to

hold his coffee for about 15 minutes while he fed the chickens. The entirety of this cable spool's existence revolved around having a 5-gallon bucket perched upon it, waiting to exchange the bucket for a cup of coffee, every day without fail. As Caleb made his daily trade with the table, he could hear Derek faintly cry upstairs. With that cry, steady as clockwork, his bedroom window illuminated, signaling that Michelle heard her call to action. Derek, for all the joy he brought to Caleb and Michelle, certainly presented his share of challenges. The doctors warned Caleb and Michelle that there was a high-risk Derek would have Down's Syndrome and brought up the issue of options at every visit. Right up until Caleb informed them that the next person to mention options, termination, or taking care of the unfortunate situation would get their damn ultrasound wand shoved so far up their ass they'd get an image of their lunch. As Caleb spread the seed for the chickens, he still chuckled at himself for threatening Michelle's attending nurse with an ultrasound.

"Hun, you got him okay?" a voice called out from the lawn with the same morning greeting Michelle received from her husband each day for the past several years. To which Michelle completed this call and response ritual with her husband, "Yeah Cay, just a little pee."

Derek, the ever-joyful automaton in the morning poked his head out the window, "DADA, DADA, DADA, CHICK, CHICK, CHICK!"

“That’s right Derek, Daddy’s feeding the chickens. Now help Mommy get cleaned up.”

Derek’s enthusiasm for Daddy’s morning chore had become the official start of the day in the Brenton household.

After a few moments, Caleb noticed the kitchen drapes pulled back. The simple window above the sink had as many conversations through it as Caleb’s cell phone. Caleb’s days off were normally spent with a fair amount of time outside, and that kitchen window was the quickest way for him to talk to his wife of over 30 years. In the morning as he looked in, he could just make out the greyish streaks creeping through her once ruby red hair.

“Hun, I’m gonna start loading up the RV, we’ve gotta be on the road before nine if we wanna get there before Tommy,” Caleb announced as his freshly fed chickens looked upon him quizzically. “No, you guys had enough, quit complaining,” Caleb jokingly instructed his chickens as he unhooked the well hose from the RV’s freshwater tanks. As Michelle made it down to the kitchen from her morning Derek duties, Caleb said, “Have Matty load up a few cases of the Pretty in Peach. We’ll drop it off at Thurston’s on the way out of town.”

Michelle nodded with a smile. She often got lost staring out that kitchen window in the mornings, lost in admiration and gratefulness for her husband’s morning consistency. In her mind’s eye, each time she watched him she still saw the black haired, olive skinned, young man she married. Nearly every

morning as he fed the chickens, she would think back to watching him struggle with building their first chicken coop and how it looked like the chicken wire fencing was going to swallow him whole as he would wrestle it into place. As Michelle fondly reminisced about the young man she married, who now occupied a much more filled-out and seasoned frame, her mind turned to her eldest son Matty, who aside from inheriting her curls, was the spitting image of his father at that age. “You got that Matty?”

“Yeah Mom, I’ll grab them after I’m done,” replied Matty through a mouthful of hastily stuffed eggs and bacon.

Derek mocked him immediately. “Grem-Dem-Fum-Dum, HAHAHA.”

Derek loved Matty, and when Derek teased Matty, those were his happiest moments with his older brother.

Swallowing the rest of his breakfast with an exaggerated gulp to prompt another Derek laugh, Matty questioned his mom, “Hey Ma, you still hang the peach pit thingies on each jar?”

Young Matty was referring to the washed peach pits Michelle would remove from each peach before making preserves. Peach pits that were normally slated for the trash in any other canning operation. Michelle’s peach pits were meticulously sanded down smooth on one side and engraved with a bible verse.

“They’re called Peach Pittance of Principles and that’s trademarked, so don’t go stealing it. And yes of course I do.

Hopefully, someone might read them and make their day a little better.” Michelle winked and pointed at Matty.

“All right Ma, when you’re done with your pittance, lemme know and I’ll take ‘em out front,” Matty voiced as he ran back up the stairs.



### Saury SUV

*“Welcome Patriots to Today’s...”*

“Nope,” Susan protested while hunting through the Sirius stations to find news she found more legitimate. “I don’t know why anyone would poison their brain with that rah-rah flag waving crap. There, this is for people that can breathe through their noses.”

*“Thank you, Cheri, for that report on Kale Colonics. And this next hour’s programing is bought to us by The Yellow Dragon Foundation. The Yellow Dragon, preparing tomorrow’s leaders to thrive in an ever-changing global landscape. From college campuses to board rooms, The Yellow Dragon Foundation is providing the tools and resources to the future. Joining us this next hour during our pledge drive, perhaps the most popular member of the House of Representatives, Karston Shilling. But first...do you enjoy the high-quality prog—”*

Susan smiled at the mention of Karston Shilling as she turned down the radio to avoid having to listen to the same sales pitch

that is repeated ad nauseum during these publicly supported radio campaigns.

“You like that one, huh?” asked Thomas.

“Whatever the *it* factor is, that guy has it in spades. I met him at the Teacher’s Union Leadership Conference.” With that accidental declaration, Susan shot a look at Thomas warning him not to say another word. Susan’s attendance at the Leadership Conference had led to endless arguments within their marriage over the past two years. Although nothing was ever admitted to, Thomas was convinced she was with someone else while attending. Dozens of counselling sessions had done nothing to chip away at Susan’s emotional wall. Although Thomas had no proof, that suspicion had grown and taken on a life of its own over time. Thomas felt the emotional sting of every argument from the past two years building up. He silently repeated the breathing exercises he learned to himself, “In one, two, three, hold. Out three, two, one...”

In an attempt to change the conversation, Susan turned to Kat in the backseat who was sitting silently with her headphones on reading through random raspberry pi user projects online, “Given any more thought to applying for the Progressives Women in Tech internship Kat? You know I had to pull a lot of strings to get you considered for that due to your age.”

“I don—” Kat started to say before Susan’s cellphone intruded.

Susan held up a hand to Kat, cutting her off, “Hold on. Hello? Yes, this is she. Sure, go ahead. Uhm huh. Yes, I understand. Thank you, I’ll look for your email. No, no, thank you, this is amazing! Okay, you have a great day and thanks again.”

“...two, three, hold. Out, three, two...”

“YEEEEEEAAAAHHH!” Susan shrieked loudly, breaking Thomas’s self-imposed mini therapy session.

“Shit Hun, you’re gonna make me wreck! What is it?” Thomas reflexively shot back in response to Susan’s exclamation.

Susan, having waved off Thomas’s protestation, stared straight ahead. Her mind was racing, heart pounding out of her chest, feelings of both satisfaction and exuberance filled her to her core. “It’s all finally paying off,” she thought silently to herself.

Susan felt victorious. The very position she asked for in Karston’s hotel room two years earlier had just been achieved. All while her husband sat there stewing in his own jealousy.

Without acknowledging anyone in the car, Susan proclaimed to herself and the universe, “I have just been named, by the Delegate Assembly of the Florida Education Assembly, as the incoming President.”

“Whoa, I didn’t know you were running for it,” a confused Thomas admitted.



“Congrats Mom,” Kat said dryly from the backseat while the car exited the interstate and rumbled down a dirt road.

“Thank you, Kat, somebody in this family needs to work towards bettering our situation.” Susan’s deadpan sarcasm was a direct challenge to Thomas, conveying a simple message; you are not enough.

Having just received the biggest news of Susan’s career she frantically tried to get a signal on her cell phone to share the news. Looking around she saw nothing but endless pine trees unfolding out in front of the car.

“Where in the good hell are we?” she quipped.

“Just gotta swing by Spark’s to pick up Matty’s cell phone. It won’t take long, he just lives a bit farther down here,” Thomas answered. At this point his best-case scenario was that Susan would remain self-absorbed with her news and wouldn’t throw any more verbal daggers his way.

“Woulda been nice to know that ahead of time. What if they had tried to call while we are out here in the middle of Bum fucked Egypt? Is Matty’s phone really as important as my call?

“Sue, you didn’t even know you were gonna get the call, how am I supposed to?” Thomas asked, anxiously hoping that would be the end of it.

“That’s not the point,” Susan shot back, “never mind, just worry about yourself.”

Unable to ignore her parents bickering any further, Kat piped up from the backseat, “I asked Daddy if we could pick it up for Matty on the way here, he got it taken aw—”

“Never mind Kathryn, I don’t really care,” Susan said as she cut off her daughter again.

“We don’t actually have to go in to get it do we? I can’t imagine anyone that lives out here would live very well.”

“Spark’s a good guy, Sue, just gimme a minute and I’ll run in and get it. Hold on,” Thomas said as he strained his eyes to look up ahead.

Just as the SUV slowed a young man waved to the Saury’s and dismounted his Grizzly 4-Wheeler, placing his water bottle down in the cup holder, he slowly walked over to the SUV. Susan reflexively tightened up.

“Thomas, what the actual fuck?” Susan spat out through gritted teeth.

“Relax Sue, that’s Ty.”

“What up cracker!” Ty hollered out as he got close to the Saury’s SUV.

“Ty you swamp rat, what’s happening?”

“Nada damn thing Tommy. Spark has my ass out here trying to find one of his goats. That thing’s been missing for four days now. Told that old cracker already, but he won’t listen to me, Sarge done ate that goat.”

As unsettling as this entire encounter had been for Susan, she felt the need to interject, “Hi, I’m Susan and you are?”

“Oh, I’m sorry Ma’am, I’m Ty, I live with Spark.” Ty beamed at her with a smile that showed every tooth the Good Lord saw fit to give him.

“Nice to meet you Ty, did Spark give you a phone for us?” Susan hurriedly got to the point of their meeting.

“Oh uh, yes Ma’am, one sec I’ll grab it for you,” Ty awkwardly responded. It was obvious this was not a woman that wanted to spend one more second down this dirt road than was absolutely necessary.

Ty unhooked the bungee straps that were holding down his shotgun case and unzipped it to retrieve Matty’s phone. Just seeing the shotgun made Susan nervous.

“Does he really think that’s safe?” Susan asked aloud, not necessarily inviting an answer.

“Safer than being without it out here.” Thomas responded calmly.

“Typical country trash,” Sue sounded off just loud enough to be heard in the SUV, but not past the doors.

“Sue, give it a rest. Ty’s a good kid,” said Thomas, defending the young man.

Thomas always liked Ty. He first met him when Ty was maybe eight or nine years old, nothing but ears and a smile. Spark always said he just took him in because he didn’t have

anywhere else to go. That was around the same time Spark switched full time to shore-side support. No more thirty on thirty off for him. As Ty walked back towards the SUV, Thomas took note at just how athletic he had become.

“You’re getting pretty ripped up nowadays Ty, Spark running you hard or what?”

“Man Tommy, you don’t even wanna know. That crazy ol’ cracker has a list a mile long of stuff we have to get done. Man, since he moved to part-time, he’s been a right pain in my ass,” Ty said before quickly cutting himself off as he noticed Kat in the backseat peeking out from behind her iPad. “Hi there, Miss, you must be the famous Kat.”

“Yeah that’s me, nice to meet you, Ty.” Kat gave a quick head nod from behind her screen.

“Haha, the famous hacker Kat. You must be the one that Spark says Matty won’t shut up about! It’s nice to have a face to put with a name.” Ty brimmed ear to ear with his signature smile as he greeted Kat.

Susan, having lost her ability to feign politeness, while simultaneously wanting to quash any idea of Matthew and Kathryn coupling, quickly interrupted. “Thank you, Ty, we really need to get going now, we’re going to be late.”

Thomas reached for the phone from Ty, apologizing with just his eyebrows as he did. Ty nodded and backed away from the car.

“Okay you guys have a good weekend. And don’t stop if you see Sarge out there, he’s a right ornery old bastard,” Ty said as he waved to the departing SUV. “Damn, Spark was right. Ms. Saury is fine as hell, but damn that stick up her ass gots to be givin her splinters,” he thought as he made his way off the dirt road and past the palmetto bushes that largely obscured Spark’s driveway.

“You drop off the phone?” Spark hollered out.

“Yeah man, you weren’t joking, for someone so hot, ain’t nothin’ but ice coming off Tommy’s wife,” Ty quipped back.

“Yeah, she wasn’t always that way. I mean she always been able to stop a room with her looks, but damn that attitude of hers. She’s about as mean as a snake to ol’ Tommy. Been putting that boy through the ringer for years.”

Spark continued, “Honestly man, I can’t stand to be around the woman. I swear I’ve seen her come on to, or at least flirt heavily, with about five different dudes in the time I’ve known her. Tommy won’t leave her though. Oh well, that’s his lot. Today young buck, our lot is chores.”

“There’s a shocker,” Ty jokingly rolled his eyes as he dismounted the 4-wheeler.

“So, what fun we got planned today?”

“Well Ty, whatcha know about gardening?” Spark queried his ward as he threw his arm over his shoulder.

“Shit man, less than I’ll know in a few hours I guess.” Ty repeated his favorite line when Spark would hit him with something that he knew Ty didn’t have a clue about.



“Dad, is Ty related to Spark?” Kat asked her Dad as he navigated the SUV back onto the interstate.

“Well Kat, no one is really sure. Only thing we know is that Ty showed up one day and Spark put in for a transfer to shore. Said he’s gotta watch over someone.”

“I mean, Spark is about as white as they come. Dude turns red as a lobster if left out in the sun more than ten minutes, and well Ty ain’t all that fair.” Thomas strained to pick the right words, as he didn’t want to give Susan any ammunition for an impromptu racial sensitivity lecture. A lecture disconnected from the fact that she was just about to crawl out of her skin at the thought of having an actual conversation with a young black man.

“He’s black, Dad, it’s okay you can say it.” Kat reassured him.

“Yeah but, there’s things about him. I don’t know maybe his eyes, or just a few of his mannerisms, but I swear I could see bits of Spark in him,” Thomas pondered aloud.

“Well Dad, it’s possible—” was all Kat could get out before her mother stepped in,

“How much longer till we get to the lake?”

“Another hour or so,” Thomas answered before staring back at the unending interstate straightaway. Sue let out an annoyed sigh before turning the radio back up.

*“Congressman Shilling, thank you so much for joining us today.”*

*“It’s my pleasure Carole, may I call you Carole?”*

*“Oh! Of course, Congressman.”*

*“Please call me Karston and thank you again for inviting me here today. I’ve long been a supporter of Public Radio. We really are the last line of sanity against the hyperbolic extremists that are constantly trying to strip away funding.”*

*“Oh Congressman, excuse me, Karston, yes we do try our best to keep the lights on.”*

Sue squinted as she turned the radio back down and half looked in the direction of the backseat. “Kathryn were we talking about something before our backwoods detour? Oh, never mind, it must not have been important, I can’t remember.” Sue cut herself off to turn the radio back up, leaned back, and closed her eyes.

Thomas looked into the rear-view mirror to make eye contact with Kat and apologized in their unspoken language they had mastered over the years. Kat’s eyes respond back with an unspoken “Meh, what can we do?”

“No Mom, nothing important,” Kat said as she dropped her eyes back to her iPad.

*“Now Congressman, let’s go through this latest proposal you have in front of the Committee.”*

*“Certainly Carole, this proposal, what I call the Unified Governmental Employees Union Act, would help to streamline the countless public sector unions throughout our entire fifty states into a more streamlined, fair, and equitable union for all government employees. From municipalities all the way up to federal government.”*

*“Also, I understand that police unions are exempt from this bill, as they have been exempted from the B7 conference starting later tonight?”*

*“Yes, Carole, and thank you for bringing this up. There has certainly been confusion about it as the term Blue 7, I guess for some people, it makes them associate the radical right-wing Back the Blue movement, but no. As of this time, neither B7 nor the UGEUA has police membership. However, and I think it is important to point out, we have offered membership and inclusion to the various police and law enforcement unions, so long as they work to institute some of the common sense, progressive changes to the way they do business. And if police unions are willing to make those changes, they can take part in the benefits of both UGEUA and B7, which is currently working on consolidating the collective bargaining strength of all the members to work towards equality of benefits with their governmental union brothers, sisters, and non-binary counterparts. Speaking for the B7 Conference, we are working*



*to represent the marginalized, the discriminated against, and the underrepresented. I think police have all the representation they need. So really, if the police want to move forward with us, that is up to them."*

"In one, two, three, hold. Out, three, two, one..."



### Brenton RV

"There you go Mr. Thurston, two cases of Pretty in Peach," Matty proudly exclaimed as he handed the cases over to his mother's favorite customer.

"Thank you Matty. Your mom and dad in the RV?" Bill Thurston asked as he sat the cases down behind the counter.

"Yes sir, we're heading up to the lake to meet up with the Saurys," Matty said with his usual youthful enthusiasm. "Come out and say hi, they've gotta stay in with Derek, it's just easier than him watching Mommy or Daddy leave the RV and getting upset."

"Totally understandable. How's your sister doing anyways? She still up at school?" Bill asked as he slapped Matty on the back, nearly causing him to lose his balance.

"She's uhm, well, I suppose. She's being a college student, I guess. To be honest, I don't really know what she's talking about most of the time."

“Oh, that’s just cause you’re a workin man, nothin’ wrong with that Matty. I’m sure if you started talking about the rig, she’d be just as confused.”

“I suppose you’re right, Mr. Thurston,” Matty said with a smile and a shrug. As the two exited the shop Matty waved to his parents in the front seat, “Got somebody that wanted to say hi!”

Mr. Thurston headed over to the passenger window to lean in and give Michelle a kiss on the cheek.

“Hey Bill, how are yah?” Michelle asked in a softened voice reserved just for Mr. Thurston.

“Oh, I’m gettin by. Say what’re ya’ll doin’ next weekend? I’m thinkin’ bout havin’ a pig roast.”

“Well Bill, I’ll be outta town for some consulting, but if you don’t mind the Mrs. and Derek coming by—”

Michelle gently placed her hand atop Mr. Thurston’s on the door. “Bill we’d love to come by, I’ll call the store the Wednesday before and see what I can bring.”

Mr. Thurston reached in a little to whisper to his favorite and only preserves supplier, “Michelle, you know I only ever invite your no-good husband, is so I get to see you.”

Michelle blushed as she shooed him away, “Oh stop it you ol’ dog.”

“Derek! Did you hear that? Your mommy called me a dog!”

“WOOF! WOOF! WOOF!” Derek excitedly proclaimed back to Mr. Thurston.

“That’s right Derek, Woof-Woof partner. All right Brentons, see yah in two weeks.”

The Brenton RV slowly pulled out of Thurston’s Country Store, the familiar sound of gravel under the tires sent Michelle into a nostalgic state of mind. Thurston’s was the first place that Michelle ever sold her Peach Preserves in the county. It was the first job for Matty and Rebecca when they moved out to the country where Michelle grew up. Mr. Thurston always held a special place in Michelle’s heart.

“God, I love that old man,” Michelle exhaled as she spoke. As though it was always a relief to see him in good health and spirits. “Matty, I ever tell you about the time Mr. Thurston saved me from bullies?”

Caleb gave a confused look to Michelle, “Hun, I don’t think I’ve ever heard this one.”

“Oh yeah, I was maybe twelve, I think? Yep twelve-years-old in Mrs. Jenkins 6th grade class. Anyway, I was riding my bike home from school. We used to do that back in the old days. Shoot, we had kids that would drive their parents’ tractors up to school.

“Anyway, I was biking home as fast as I could. You see I had just got my first period in school and I was scared, upset, and embarrassed, basically every emotion you can imagine all at

once. I was a crying mess. Picture it, yellow sundress, crazy curly flaming red hair, not as much grey in it as today mind you. And some boys, I think it was the Pritchard punk and them Klingham boys if I remember right, were riding behind me. Now they would always pass me up every day and say stupid stuff to get under my skin. I prayed and prayed they would just say whatever and keep going. But today, unfortunately, when they pulled up beside me, they slowed down seeing how upset I was. I guess they were trying to figure out why I was in such a state. And then Jeremiah, yep Jeremiah Pritchard, saw blood tricking down my leg. And he started in with ‘Michelle’s peein’ blood! Michelle’s peein’ blood!’”

“Aw damn honey, that’s horrible. I’m sorry.”

Michelle jokingly dismissed Caleb’s apology, “Oh I don’t need any sympathy, wait till I finish the story. So, I was finally able to ride past them a little and got up to Thurston’s and he happened to be outside loading someone’s groceries. When he heard what those boys were saying, he must’ve turned three shades redder than I was. He somehow snatched up Jeremiah and both the Klingham boys off their bikes in no time flat and threw their bikes into a heap.”

“Dang, I woulda liked to have seen that, that man is built like a linebacker now and he’s gotta be every bit of 80 or so,” Matty said with a wide-eyed look.

“Yeah he was a mountain to us back then. Anyway, the Klingham’s boys’ father lived close by, so Mr. Thurston got on

the phone to him and told him what happened. And Mr. Klingham, well he was an upstanding member of the church at that time, like a deacon or something,” Michelle intoned in a matter-of-fact style. “If I remember right I think I heard him over the phone say something to the extent of “You tell them boys I’m coming down there to hide their asses, and you can get ’em warmed up for me if you feel like it Bill.”

Michelle paused to take a sip of her sweet tea. “Now, Mr. Thurston never laid a hand on those boys, but oh the look on them. And Jeremiah, well as you know, Jeremiah Pritchard was always a bit of troublemaker. I think Mr. Thurston actually felt bad calling his pa, ’cause when he showed up, Jeremiah wasn’t so much upset as he was terrified. Mr. Pritchard pulled up in an old pick-up truck, didn’t speak to anyone, just grabbed Jeremiah and dragged him back to the truck. I was only twelve, but I’ll never forget the way that smell of cheap whiskey and cigarettes followed Mr. Pritchard by a few steps as he walked by. Jeremiah didn’t come to school for a week after that. When he did, he still had a black eye. I still remember the way he looked at me out the window of that truck as they pulled away. I was upset, but I knew Jeremiah was about to face something I didn’t wish on my worst enemy. And that day lemme tell yah, he was my worst enemy. Well, he and the period of course.”

“Damn Mom, that got serious,” an exhausted Matty exclaimed from behind her seat in the RV.

“Well yeah, it was a serious day. But there is a happy ending.”

“Thank God,” Caleb let slip as he realized he had been holding his breath during most of Michelle’s story.

“Yeah, so anyway, Mr. Thurston brought me in the store and called his wife, Janice, to come over. This was maybe 10 years or so before the stroke took her. Back then they lived right behind the store where the gas station part is now. Anyway Mrs. Thurston came over, helped me get cleaned up, tried to comb my mess of hair, and brought me some clothes she had that mostly fit. And I stayed with her until Mom and Dad came to get me after work.”

Michelle let a slight pause float in the air, before saying what she considered the highlight of the story. “Before they got there however, Mrs. Janice Thurston taught me the secret of how she canned her peach preserves, which she happened to be doing that day. So needless to say, when my parents found out what happened that day, and how well the Thurston’s took care of their little girl. Well, the Thurston’s never waited in line at Colonial Bank where my mom worked, they got every loan approved once Momma was off the teller line, and certainly never got any speeding tickets or had any trouble with the law, Big Daddy was one of only three cops in town back then.”

“Haha, no wonder Grandpa always parked up against the side of the store and said it was his spot. I didn’t realize it was his

police cruiser spot!” Matty exclaimed as though he had just solved a deep mystery.

“You know the sign with their slogan out front, Don’t Speed Past Thurston’s? That wasn’t just a saying to come in and shop. Every teenager in town knew that my dad would park there to keep an eye on the place when he had the night shift.”

“Oh, so you’re the reason I got my first ticket there.” Matty jokingly poked his mother in the arm.

Right on cue, Caleb chimed in, “No, you’re an idiot with a lead foot, that’s the reason you got your first ticket there. What was it 70 in a 35 if I remember right?”

“Only ’cause I had already slowed down,” Matty said with grin.

“Actually, son, it was my Peach Preserves that your father bought from me at the county fair that led to our first date. So, I think causing your first ticket is a small price to pay for you know, your entire existence.”

Caleb let out a laugh at Michelle’s summation of the story. Yes, he thought, it was her peach preserves that she was selling at the County Fair when he approached her to ask her out. “Truth be told your mother could’ve been selling cow patties and I woulda bought out her stock just to keep talking to her,” Caleb recalled aloud.

Michelle looked back to check on Derek, as she did every few minutes out of habit. Derek locked eyes with her and held up a stuffed Paw Patrol plush toy he had in the RV.

“WOOF! WOOF! WOOF!”

“That’s right Derek woof-woof,” Michelle said with a smile.

After a relatively quiet hour on the road Caleb called out from the front seat, “Hey Matty.”

“Yeah Pa?”

“Get Derek’s hard hat that has the ear covers and get him to wear it, looks like we’ve got protesters.”

“Damn, all the way up here? We’re a fair bit away from Atlanta.”

“Don’t any of them have anything better to do with their days than try to stop traffic?” asked Michelle, shaking her head with annoyance.

“The more that the corporations and politicians bend a knee to them, the more they are gonna keep pushing. All right Matty, you got Derek squared away back there?”

“Almost Dad. You want me to get the Glocks out?” Matty asked as he tried to coax Derek into wearing his helmet.

“Yeah, doesn’t hurt to be ready,” Caleb responded.

“Matty, get his dump truck plush toy out, he can’t wear his hard hat without having construction toys. Here, I’ll find it,” Michelle said as she crawled from the front seat to join her two



sons.

Caleb squinted as he passed some of the protesters on the street. “Looks like they’re still on defunding police. Oh, this one is new though, Michelle. What’s that sign say?”

“Looks like something about demanding equal representation on the Fire Department for non-binary people of color?” Michelle’s voice rose to a question as she studied the protesters sign.

“I’ve got the funny suspicion that if your house is burning down, you really don’t care all that much about who puts it out, but whatever. Okay get ready guys, looks like they’re doing their Donate or Delay thing here. Hope they like our donation.”

The Brenton RV made it to the front of the protesters traffic-controlled access lane, more commonly referred to as the reparations drive-thru by the news. The protesters figured out that by stopping drivers one at a time, they could extort money, or as they called it, collect mandatory donations. If a driver refused to pay this unauthorized toll, the results could range anywhere from a spray-painted tag on the car to confiscating the car, and in a few cases, the driver getting pulled from the car and beaten as their car became the donation.

As the protesters started to swarm around the Brenton’s 4X4 custom RV, Caleb called back one more time to Matty, “We good Matty?”

“Yeah Pa, all set,” Matty responded as he played with Derek’s dump trunk.

A masked protester approached with a debit card reader in one hand, and a can of red spray paint in the other. Once the masked collector was within about five feet, Caleb smiled and reached towards the newly installed toggle switch on the dash, labeled Libtard Repellant. With a flip of the switch, the RV engaged it’s protester countermeasures system as Michelle preferred to call it. Brass foghorns appeared on top of RV’s roof, pointing downwards at each corner of the vehicle. Caleb smiled at the protester as he covered his ears. The four 149-decibel-level foghorns screamed out in unison. One decibel more and the painful blast from the maritime foghorns would cause ear drum rupture. At the level Caleb installed them at, it was *only* debilitatingly painful.

The protesters screamed and covered their ears as their collective fight or flight instinct engaged. The swarm of black clad protesters tried in vain to take cover from the Brenton RV’s donation. As Caleb pulled forward away from the blockade, he couldn’t help but smile at the sight of protesters screaming and crying.

“Oh, look at that, looks like the other cars are getting through now too. Good job everyone.”

“You really enjoy that, don’t you?” Michelle asked as she climbed back into the front seat.

“To be honest, yeah, one hundred percent. But, I think this is

gonna be the last lake trip for us. At least until this nonsense stops. We shouldn't have to feel like we're going through a warzone every time you travel near a major city." Caleb zoomed out the GPS monitor on the dashboard, "Looks like we should be good the rest of the way down. No major cities within 50 miles of our route."

"Yeah, we can take the country roads on the way back later. Rioters may be criminals, but they aren't dumb enough to venture out into our areas. Not yet anyway," Michelle said as she stared at the digital map.

"I have a feeling it's just a matter of time before they come knocking on our door, let's hope we can be ready." Caleb glanced up at the rearview mirror to see Matty putting the guns away and Derek still playing with his dump truck. "Regular folks need to take our country back. This is getting insane."

"Try not to focus on it too much, honey. Let's just enjoy today and we'll deal with whatever comes next together." Michelle patted Caleb's arm.

## **Chapter 2 : Depth**

### Gold Head Branch State Park

**T**he sun was about an hour from its daily peak. Caleb found an isolated spot to park the RV. It's not that Caleb didn't like being around other people but having Derek in tow required quite a bit more space than was previously acceptable for he and Michelle's lifestyle. Matty was the first to jump out of the back of the RV. Instinctively, he went to work inspecting the areas of the concrete pad for any potential problems, roots busting through, cracks or soft spots on the concrete.

"Gimme about a foot forward, Dad," Matty hollered to his father as the RV slowly lurched forward. "At'll do!"

Caleb acknowledged with a nod and spun around in his Captain's Chair to engage the leveling jacks. Matty and his father have done this dance so many times with each other, that any outside onlooker would be convinced they were a choreographed team. First, Matty put down the pads they kept in storage, aligning each one beneath the awaiting hydraulic pump system. Next, Caleb checked the bubble level in the cab, to ensure it was within specs. Then Caleb engaged the jacks, after checking the bubble level once more, he called out to Matty, "Ready for the slide outs?"

“Run ’em out, Dad!” Matty hollered back to his father.

Finally, Caleb extended the slide outs to open up the living area. Once complete, Matty did one more check to ensure solid contact and gave a thumbs up. Now it was time to hook up power.

The ease of the operation was not lost on Caleb. Although Caleb, Michelle, and Derek sometimes took the RV out when Matty was offshore, not having to hoist himself back and forth after checking each jack or having to keep one ear and eye out for Michelle as she tended to Derek, made a huge difference.

Before switching over to the campsite’s power, Caleb checked his rearview window one more time and saw Matty with a huge grin and a thumbs up.

Michelle, who had been dutifully tending to Derek, asked Caleb, “All set?”

“Yeah Matty’s moving like someone lit a fire under that boy’s ass out there. I’m guessin he’s pretty excited to see Ms. Kat.”

Caleb immediately closed his eyes with a grimace as Michelle gave him the “Thanks a lot” look.

“KAT! KAT! KAT!” Derek screeched out in his excitement.

“Hold on Derek, Kat isn’t here yet, it’ll be a little bit longer, then you’ll get to see her.”

Instinctively Caleb lifted up Derek to distract him,

“Derek, can you help Daddy find the Air Conditioning

button?”

About a year earlier Caleb borrowed some glittery fingernail polish from Rebecca’s room and painted certain buttons in the house and RV that were safe for Derek to push. Haze Grey primer was used for all the off-limits buttons and sparkly pinkish red were used for Derek’s buttons. For the time being it seemed as though Derek was adequately distracted.



### Campsite

“Jesus, could they have parked any farther away from everyone? Oh, and balloons, how quaint,” Susan quipped as the Brenton RV came into view. Matty was inflating and tying up balloons in a perimeter around the campsite near the lake. This proved to be one of the best ways to keep Derek in a semi-confined area without putting up a makeshift fence, so long as no other campers also had balloons.

“They put ’em up for Derek Mom. He likes them, it keeps him from wandering,” Kat explained with an exhausted tone.

“I’ll never understand why they decided to keep him. Seems more like a life-sentence if you ask me.” Susan remarked with a tone devoid of any recognition of Derek’s humanity.

“Jesus Christ, Sue. Give it a rest already. You know Cay & Michelle.” Thomas shot back in a rare moment of standing his ground. He pushed his arm out the window to wave to Caleb.

Just as the SUV pulled in beside the RV, Susan, not one to let the chance to have the last word go wasted, mumbled as she waved with her standard political smile, “Sure am glad I only kept the one.”

Kat, who was busy gathering her gadgets and giving herself a quick once over in her phone’s front facing camera to make sure she looked okay, felt a sense of anguish towards her mother. Kat’s discomfited thoughts immediately shifted to Derek. Derek adored her, and Kat poured just as much energy into him whenever she got the chance to be around him. Kat, by nature or nurture was relatively cynical, but not when it came to Derek. Around Derek, Kat’s defensive walls lowered, she allowed herself to feel his innocent joy and reveled in making him smile.

“Nice one Mom, I’ll be sure to mention that to my future therapist,” Kat mumbled back to her mother.

Derek looked up from one of the helium filled Mylar balloons that speckled the campsite and stared at the incoming SUV. Just as his little mind put together who the back-seat passenger was, Caleb reflexively grabbed ahold of his shoulder to prevent him from charging off.

“One second little man, let ’em get parked.”

“KAT! KAT! KAT!”

As soon as Caleb saw the back door open, he released Derek, who ran over in his toddling fashion and buried himself into Kat’s waiting arms.

“Good drive?” Michelle asked Susan and Tommy as they exited their SUV.

“Not too ba—” Thomas started before Susan jumped in.

“Oh my Gaaawwdd! We had to go on this insane detour out to the middle of Deliverance country to pick up Matthew’s phone apparently. Still not sure why it was out there,” Susan exclaimed dramatically.

“Oh yeah ol’ Spark is a bit off the beaten path,” Caleb said as he walked up to greet Tommy and Susan.

“Did you guys get to see Sarge? Spark said he’s been causing problems out there.”

Susan lifted her hands to either side in an exaggerated expression as though she was talking to a large group of people. “Okay, who the hell is this Sarge I keep hearing about? What is he a homeless person or something?”

Caleb chuckled as he spoke, “No Sue, Sarge is about a 13-foot-long nasty ol’ gator that’s been fighting Spark for territory out there for as long as I can remember.”

“Oh! So, I could’ve died out there, that’s what you’re saying?” Susan asked as she looked at Thomas with pseudo-outrage.

“At least you all didn’t have to deal with the donate or delay degenerates, I swear those people,” Michelle said as she welcomed Tommy with a hug.

“Well they do have a right to protest, and I’m sure it wasn’t



that big of an inconvenience for you all, probably not as much as they have suffered.” Susan’s response came across as defensive, despite not knowing what the protest was all about.

Tommy released Michelle from his embrace and glanced back at Susan with a look that screamed, enough.

Caleb shot out his hand to greet Thomas, who summarily rejected it in favor of hugging his old friend.

“Damn, old man, it’s sure good to see you again. How’s consulting life treating you?” Tommy asked, feeling relief at finally being out of the SUV with Susan, and a chance, however brief, to have a few hours of human genuineness.

“Oh, it’s good, all in all. Basically, getting’ paid to go out and remind everyone of the stuff they were already supposed to be trained on. Honestly the best part is, is not having to hold my tongue if someone is jacking somethin’ up. If I piss off the higher ups too much with my after-action report, they just don’t hire me again. There’s still enough people up in corporate risk department that insist on only me coming out for inspections, so I’ve got enough work to stay as busy as I like,” said Caleb, summarizing his new career for his long-time colleague.

“Shit man, don’t tell me the corporate shore-siders are finally on team Brenton?” Tommy was surprised that he could ask that question. For the 10 plus years Tommy worked with Caleb out on the rigs, Caleb was always in a constant tug-of-

war with the corporate bean-counters, or shore-siders, as he referred to them. Caleb was infamous for his Cover Your Ass or CYA memos that he would send to legal every time sub-standard safety gear or what he deemed inferior parts were sent out to the rig.

“Well you save enough people’s asses out there on the rigs, sooner or later those operations chiefs make their way up to corporate. And they know that they’ll get straight talk from me. There’s a lot of guys doing what I’m doing that just write the reports that the accountants and pencil pushers wanna see,” Caleb explained to Tommy as the two slowly walked over towards the cooler sitting under the RV’s canopy to share a beer as they caught up with each other.

“Oh yeah, I know. I still have to meet with the other inspection firms when I come in from rotation. You know their big sales pitch is that they have a 95 percent deficiency-free inspection record. They still haven’t quite figured out that to an old salt like me, it just means they’re shitty inspectors,” Tommy said as he cracked open two cans of beer. “Wait, who was it? Oh yeah, Diamond Safety. Corporate Insurance called me up to interview this pencil-neck from there. This jackass said he could do a virtual safety inspection without having to come out to the rig, so corporate wanted me to talk to them because it would save the day rates of having civilians out there.”

“Oh yeah I know that firm, I’ve lost more than a couple contracts to those guys,” Caleb said as he rubbed his salt and

peppered hair on the back of his head.

“Yeah so, I get on this video call. It was me, Bulldog from Ops Night Crew, Corporate Insurance, and the, oh what was his title. Oh yeah, Chief Technology Inspector. First question Bulldog spits out...hahahah.”

Tommy could barely get the story out picturing Bulldog’s jowls shaking as he pointed his sausage-like fingers at the screen.

“He said...hahahah...‘HEY ERKLE! YOU EVER EVEN BEEN OUT ON A RIG? HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE HELL TO LOOK FOR?’

“To which Erkle, we’ll call him, explains that the list of items for inspection are thoroughly vetted and using aerial drones along with a proprietary inspection AI algorithm. . .” Tommy straightened his back as he spoke, mocking Diamonds Chief Technology Inspector. “And just then Bulldog tells Corporate Insurance that he would turn in his resignation before letting their—and this is Bulldog’s phrase—‘flying little whirli-shit’ around his rig.”

“Ha! Yeah that sounds like Bulldog. Where’s he at these days anyway?” Caleb asked with a smile as he recalled Bulldog’s gruff and straightforward nature.

“Oh, he ended up retiring out in the Philippines. Said he needed to go somewhere that wasn’t fully castrated yet. But

honestly, I think he just wanted to open up that dive shop he was always going on about,” Tommy recalled.

“Lemme guess, he left right after the election?”

“Yeah he wasn’t too happy with the results. Something about, they’re all a bunch of pussies, panderers, and politically correct pissants these days, if I remember right. Bulldog never did care much for the PC crowd that’s for sure.” Just as Tommy finished speaking, he looked around to scan the area.

“Oh, don’t worry Tom, Rebecca’s still at school,” Caleb reassured him.

“Oh, oh yeah, I forgot she’s gone crazy too. No man, I was looking for Susan. I tell yah man she’s gone uber insane over anything politics related since the election.” Tommy felt relief that the two old friends were safely out of earshot of his wife.

“You sure it’s just since the election, Tommy?” Caleb asked as he cocked an eyebrow. Caleb had comforted and counselled Tommy on more than one occasion out on the rig because of Susan’s non-wifely actions and demeanor, as Tommy put it.

“All right, fair point,” Tommy conceded.

“Well let’s try to forget about all that for now, we’ve got steaks, beer, snacks, and a couple young kiddos all goo-goo over each other,” Caleb said not wanting to revisit any of those late-night impromptu counselling sessions.

“Oh yeah speaking of which,” Tommy reached into his pocket

and handed over Matty's phone to Caleb. "Spark had me grab this for yah. What the hell did he have it for anyway?"

"Oh, Kat didn't tell you? You may want to ask her about that," Caleb said with a smile.

A puzzled look came over Tommy's face.

"You know that girl of yours is smarter than the rest of us put together, Tom. I've already told Matty about a dozen times, if he lets her get away, he's gonna have to find new parents."

"Ha! Well I appreciate that, Cay. Shit, that would be awesome if they do end up together. I try to play it cool 'cause you know how parents can screw things up if kids feel pressured."

"Yeah, I know, I'm just too damn old to care Tommy. I want some dang grandkids. But anyway, and listen man, don't take this the wrong way."

"What's up Cay?"

"You know we love Kat, and of course we love Matty, him being our son and all."

"Yeah."

"But, look, I gotta know, isn't Kat gonna get bored with him? I mean the girl finished her Bachelor's in Computer Science and Physics the same year Matty finished High School, and mind you, it wasn't exactly a foregone conclusion he was even gonna finish on time."

"Ha!" Tommy blurted out as he projected beer mist in front of

the two old friends. “Yeah, I’m still not sure it was the greatest idea letting her blast through her studies like we did, but she was some kinda bored with regular school. So, when we started letting her test out, she finished quicker than we thought was possible. She gets her love of gadgets from me, but it’s Susan that she gets her brains from.” Tommy looked over at his daughter with pride in his eyes.

“I didn’t realize Susan was that bright.” Caleb pointed his beer to bring Tommy’s attention to Susan, who was struggling, and losing, in her attempt at setting up a lawn chair.

“Well not in anything hands on, obviously, but the woman is very determined and analytical. Don’t forget now, Susan was the one that sued her own damn law school when they wouldn’t let her finish early. And she actually won that case. Can’t tell me that doesn’t take some brains.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that, but yeah that does sound like Susan,” Caleb said, shaking his head.

“She may have got her smarts from Susan, but Tommy, she got most of her personality from you, so I think you did just fine with her. I don’t think she’s gonna be too much like her mother as she gets older.”

“Oh man, I don’t think we have to worry about that, those two are like gas and fire,” Tommy said as he took another sip of beer.

“Seriously though, back to Kat. That girl could be the next

Steve Jobs or Elon Musk. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love my Matty, but that boy's intellectual capacity is strained trying to figure out baseball stats," Caleb said, attempting to steer the conversation back to his original question.

"In all fairness Cay, the new advanced analytic stats aren't the easiest of concepts to grasp."

Caleb gave Tommy a look to let him know to stop dodging his question.

"Okay, okay, okay," Tommy put up his hands in a sign of peace so as not to offend his former colleague, "not to be a dick, I asked Kat about it. I said 'honey, do you think you would rather be with a scientist or doctor or something?' She said Matty was, and I quote, 'the calmness in her storm.' Something about when she's with him her flood of thoughts slows down and she gets to enjoy the now, whatever that means. And then she said, and I'll never forget this, 'he reminds me of you Dad, he's genuine.' Damn Cay, I tell yah, it was about all I could do not to cry. Anyway, enough about that, I don't wanna get all choked up out here. So, you want grandkids, I get that. What about Rebecca? She's older than Matty anyway." Tommy said, as he wiped his watering eyes before they could form a tear.

"Man are you fuckin kidding me?" Caleb motioned with both hands to get-outta-here with that idea. "Last guy she was dating that she brought home? I'm pretty sure his balls hadn't dropped yet, or if they had, they were being squeezed so tight

by his skinny jeans that procreation was pretty far off the table. Not really what I would consider the fatherin' type."

"Okay man, so Matty and Kat it is then." Tommy raised his beer to toast the thought.

"Hey, You," Matty let out, barely above a whisper, as he walked up to the picnic table where Derek dragged Kat.

Kat looked up at Matty's curly black hair, the highlights at the tips that he got from his mother seemed to bounce without him moving a muscle.

"Hey, boyfriend," Kat whispered back in barely audible tones.

"LOON! LOON! LOON!" Derek said as he showed off the shiny Buzz Lightyear balloon to Kat and Matty.

"Very good Derek, can you show me another balloon?"

Derek raced over to his left about 15 feet to present another 'loon to Kat as per her request.

"So, sailor, how long you in port for?" Kat, in a mockingly flirtatious way, joked with Matty.

"Oh, you know, just until I get bored with the scene, then off the next port," Matty attempted to joke-flirt back with his beloved Kat, which prompted a quick sharp left-hand jab to the ribs.

"Boy I will wreck you if you even think like that," Kat lovingly seethed at Matty, prompting him to put both hands up in a surrendering gesture.



“How was your drive up here with the ’rents?” Matty asked as he rubbed the side of his ribs where Kat delivered her jab.

“Oh Matty, they are killing me, it’s like please just get a damn divorce already. They are so damn toxic, it’s like their entire marriage just sucks the energy right out of the room.”

“Well they look happy now at least,” Matty said, attempting to bring his optimistic nature to the situation.

“Yeah well, see my dad over there?” Kat pointed, almost undiscernibly.

“Yeah.”

“This is the first time he’s talked to someone other than me or Mom in the past two weeks. He doesn’t really do anything anymore when he’s on shore rotation. More like he just wants to hurry up and get back to the rig.”

“Aw man, yeah that sucks. I see that with some of the old timers out there. They all like to say that they are happy to get back, but you can tell they’d rather be on the rig than in their normal life.”

Kat pointed a stern finger at Matty, “That’s NOT happening to us, understand?”

Matty, despite being freshly admonished, felt his chest swell with elation. “Oh, so we’re in this for the long haul then?”

Feigning embarrassment, Kat refused to back down. “I wouldn’t be talking to you if we weren’t, idiot. Anyway, see my

D.F. Brent Sr.

mom over there?”

“Yeah she looks pretty happy, just looking at her phone.”

“If we were on a closed network and I did a Wireshark scan right now, I can guarantee you that she’s on one of those meet & bang apps.”

“A what scan?”

“It’s software that looks at network data traffic destinations and a way I can tell what she’s doing. Not down to seeing her screen, but I can tell what sites she’s on.”

“So, you think she’s cheating on your dad?”

“I don’t have proof, and honestly don’t want proof, but she has a lot of late-night dinner meetings when Dad is off-shore. And not too many when he’s home. I hate it for him, but I really don’t want to stir up a reason for another one of their fights. Mom has a tendency to want to pin blame on me whenever she gets the chance.”

“Sounds like you’d hardly be the reason for a fight, but I get what you’re saying.”



Susan, casually flipped through the local talent on her phone as she settled into her lawn chair to tan and listen to the rest of the Weekend Report, with Carole Tomsczanski.

*“Now switching to National Politics correspondent Amir Muhammed. Amir, reporting from the groundbreaking Blue 7*

or B7 conference, can you fill us in on what you're hearing there?"

"Thank you so much Carole, and fitting that I would be coming on right after your excellent interview with Congressman Shilling. Karston Shilling is the name on nearly everyone's mouth here at B7. This conference was the fulfillment of a campaign promise by the young Congressman as he began his ascent to power. And If I may, an ascent that is obviously just starting."

"Yes, Amir, speak more about that please. The buzz all around Washington is that he could actually replace Vice President Johnson on the Democratic ticket in the next election as his popularity could help solidify, what some are calling, lagging support for the President."

"Yes, Carole, that is a consistent theme at this weekend's convention. Members from the Council on American Islamic Relations, The recently renamed Freedom Center, formerly Black Lives Matter and Priorities USA, Service Employee International Union, National Education Association, The Silicon Valley based Democratic Volunteer Center, LGBTQ+ advocacy group Family Equality Council, and of course, Congressman Shilling's own group Forward March, which came to the national spotlight after his ascension to the leadership of the former Forward Together and their successful merger with Move On. Oh my, that's a mouthful, anyway all these groups have all descended on this Hollywood Hills Estate

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

*to host the first of what is promised to be multiple coordinated strategy sessions.”*

*“And who are some of the more notable names you’re seeing out there, Amir?”*

*“Well Carole, this truly is the hottest ticket in the free world right now, some calling it the Liberal Davos 2.0 Party, you really can’t go two steps without bumping into a Hollywood celebrity, or Silicon Valley CEO, but again, the real star they are all here to discuss is Karston Shilling.”*

*“Well it sounds like—”*

“Hey pretty lady, what’s new in your world?” Michelle announced as she walked over to Susan who was already tanning herself on a lawn chair. Michelle felt obligated to engage with Susan, primarily to give Tommy a break from her, but also because the two actually have known each other the longest, having attended the same community college together in their youth. Despite their shared history, their interactions always felt forced, or rather shallow to Michelle.

“Oh, one sec, Oh, Michelle, uhm, hi,” Susan responded as she hastily put her phone away, removed her earbuds, and scanned the area. “Did Thomas not tell you?”

“Tommy and Cay have been enjoying their guy time since they saw each other, I haven’t really spoken to him yet.”

“Of course, he didn’t mention it. On the way up here, I got a call that I am to be the incoming President for the Florida

Educators Association,” Susan proclaimed aloud. “God that feels good every time I say it!”

“Well, congratulations Susan, I’m sure that’s a big responsibility,” Michelle said with a full serving of her southern grace.

“I CAN do it.” Susan’s defensive reaction harkened back to the time Michelle had previously challenged her. Back when Michelle was a school guidance counselor, she stood up for a principal that had fired a teacher Susan represented in her duties as Teacher’s Union Counsel. Though the teacher did get to keep his job, he was later arrested for lewd and lascivious acts with a child. Susan never forgave this perceived act of betrayal by Michelle.

“Oh, of course, I have no doubt, I didn’t mean any offense by it.”

“Apology accepted. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go powder my nose.”

“You are more than welcome to use the RV bathroom,” Michelle offered.

“No thank you, I’m good. I could use a walk after the long drive up here.” Susan could barely contain her disgust at the thought of cramming herself into an RV facility.

“Okay then, and congrats once again, you must be very proud,” Michelle said with a sincerity that any true southern belle would have seen through. Susan, however, was unable to

pick up on Michelle's graceful undertones.

"Oh, I am, but yes, thank you." Susan excused herself in what seemed to be an unnecessary rush.

Michelle observed Susan walk past their SUV with her head down typing away on her phone. The Brenton family matriarch thought to herself, "Damn, I don't know how Tommy does it. That is one exhausting woman to be around."

Susan, without looking up, walked by the picnic table occupied by Kat, Matty, and Derek. "Tell your father I had to go the bathroom," Susan blurted out not even noticing her daughter and young Matthew holding hands under the table.

"Will do," Kat answered. She gazed back at Matty. "See I told you, she doesn't notice anything that isn't her own reflection."

"I'm sorry Kat, I don't know wha—MOM!"

Matty quickly snatched his hand away from Kat, albeit too late for concealment. Michelle had surprised the young couple on her way over to the picnic table to check on the group. Michelle gently sat down on the table as she looked upon the young couple with a knowing smile.

"Relax you two. You're not nearly as sneaky as you'd like to think you are."

"Yes, Mrs. Brenton," offered a sheepish Kat.

"I take it your parents don't know about this, whatever this is?" Michelle questioned the two young lovebirds as she

pointed back and forth between them.

“No, I uh, don’t really think Mom would approve.” Kat’s voice conveyed the tone of exhausted disappointment.

“Well I won’t say anything, let me know if I can help though, okay?” Michelle offered as a way of letting them know she was on their side.

“Love you Ma.” Matty’s tense cheeks returned to their normal happy-go-lucky softness.

“Just don’t be stupid you two, you know what I mean.” Michelle looked Matty directly in the eye, her tone was crystal clear to the young couple. “Anyway, just outta curiosity, how long has this been going on?”

“Just sorta, I don’t know, always been I suppose?” Matty said, shrugging his shoulders.

Michelle dismissed her son’s less-than-descriptive narrative for what she hoped would be a much clearer explanation from Kat.

“Childhood crush, first kiss at 15, and he writes me every day he’s offshore,” Kat recounted with a computational clarity.

“Thank you Kat, Matty, don’t screw this up. You big dummy.” Michelle turned to Derek, “How about you little man, how are you doing?”

“KAT! KAT! KAT!”

“It would seem Ms. Kat, that both of my boys are quite smitten

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

with you.”

“You raised young men with good taste Mrs. Brenton,” Kat proclaimed with a forced confidence.

“PEE! PEE! PEE!”

“Okay Derek, we’ll go pee-pee,” Michelle said as she grabbed Derek’s hand to go back to the RV.

“NO! KAT! KAT! KAT!”

“I’ll take him Mrs. Brenton, I don’t mind. C’mon Derek, let’s go potty,” Kat called out to her young admirer.

“Oh Mom, I think there’s something going on with the blackwater pump, its barely draining. Kat you’ll probably wanna use the facilities over yonder.” Matty pointed to the direction of the park’s general washroom building.

“Thank you dear, don’t worry about your mom, she’ll come around. You won over me and Caleb a very long time ago, and I’m pretty sure little man approves. Now, Derek can you give me 10 minutes to go get your bag ready?”

“KAT! KAT! KAT!”

“Okay Derek, I’ll hurry. Give me a sec to get his bag together, Kat. I’ll be right back.”

“Of course, Mrs. Brenton, and thank you.” Kat felt relieved she no longer had to hide something from someone she so admired.



“Cool, that was pretty easy.” Matty beamed at Kat with an easy grin.

Matty and Kat sat and talked as the pair waited for Michelle to return with Derek’s diaper bag.

As Michelle walked towards the RV, Caleb asked, “How’s our best chance for grandkids doing over there, Hun?”

“Give ’em space Cay. They’re still young.”

“Haha! Thank you, Michelle. I think Caleb’s ready to perform the ceremony right here and now,” Tommy joked.

After a short time, Michelle returned with Derek’s diaper bag.

“Seriously sweetie, don’t stress, I don’t think anyone will mind,” Michelle said as she handed Kat Derek’s essentials.

“Thanks again, Mrs. Brenton, for real. C’mon little man, let’s go for a walk,” Kat said as she grabbed Derek’s hand and headed toward the bathroom.

“C’mon Romeo, help me get lunch ready.” Michelle led Matty back to the RV holding onto his arm.

As Kat and Derek walked to the facilities, Kat observed how light she felt. She didn’t mind at all the extra time it took walking with Derek. His Downs Syndrome made the quarter mile walk take about four times longer than normal. But for Kat it was just that much longer she got to enjoy the peace she felt around Matty’s family. Kat never really worried about Matty’s mom and dad finding out. She always knew they were

fond of her from when she would help babysit Derek, which were coincidentally, when she first developed her lifelong crush on Matty. Everything felt just perfect for Kat in those moments after talking to Mrs. Brenton. Kat felt a lightness, a small glimmer of serenity that she usually didn't let herself indulge in for too long. But today, she thought she'd just enjoy the moment.

After Kat helped Derek go potty, Derek motioned up to the diaper bag.

“POP! POP! POP!”

Kat looked in the impossibly deep satchel and found a baggie with lollipops in it. “Okay” she thought to herself, “I’m guessing this is the bribe to keep him using the toilet. That works.”

“Which one do you want little man?” Kat asked as she held up an assortment of colored lollipops. Derek, pointing to the cherry-red colored pop, held out his eager hand palm open. “Here you go Derek!”

“POP! POP! POP!”

As they started their near quarter mile walk back to the campsite, they were almost hit in the face when a neighboring RV’s door slung open.

“Mom!”

“What the fuck Kat, what are you doing here?”

“Taking Derek to the bathroom, who’s RV is this?”

Kat looked around her mother to the inside of the RV and viewed what could only be described as a frat-boy party bus. Complete with University of Florida flags, Monster energy drinks, and empty Jägermeister bottles strewn about.

“Nice Mom,” Kat sneered at her mother.

“Oh, grow up Kat, I’ve got needs.”

“Hey there, who are you,” a voice rang out from the RV, “you next?”

Kat looked at her mother with equal parts disgust and disappointment. “Sorry boys, you’ll have to settle for the outdated version today.”

“Oh, fuck you, Kat,” Susan snapped back, unaware or unconcerned of young Derek’s presence.

“No Mother. As if you even deserve that title,” Kat said defiantly as she locked on to Susan’s eyes. “I won’t say anything to Dad, because it would break him. But you don’t get to say shit to me, understand?”

“Your father is already broken, Kat,” Susan admitted.

“Hey, close the door and get outta here, you had your turn. Plus, you’re letting the A/C out. Hey was that thing on?” one of the random frat boys could be heard asking from the front of the RV.

Susan reached back in to grab her towel that was previously draped around her waist.

“God, go get cleaned up. The Brenton’s are about to prepare lunch,” Kat spit out at her mother before turning her attention to Derek, who looked utterly confused by the entire ordeal.

“Let’s go find Mommy, Derek” Kat said as she gave her mother a final cut of her eyes.

Susan walked gingerly to the bathroom to do as instructed, knowing that she had just made another adversary in the family. Maybe it was the rush of hormones her body was experiencing from the college boys, or the line of coke and Adderall she snorted in the RV, or the shame of being caught, or the high of her new professional accomplishment, whatever she was feeling she liked it. “I feel alive and I’ll be damned if my snotty little holier-than-thou child is going to ruin my day.” Susan looked in the mirror and thought back to what her old law professor used to say, “Making yourself presentable starts with mentally preparing yourself for your next confrontation.” Susan then thought to herself, “You are a woman and you have needs. You deserve to be happy. The Universe wants you to succeed. Never apologize for fully realizing your potential. You DO NOT need anyone.”



“Hey Kat, how do you want your steak?” Matty called out from behind the charcoal grill that was set up at the campsite.

“Not now Matty, I can’t eat just yet.”

“Cool, all right just lemme know. Hey, Everything okay?” Matty asked as he stopped bouncing to a random song playing from his phone. Matty could sense something was different with Kat but knew better than to push her. “She’ll tell me when she’s ready, she always does,” he thought as he went back to his grilling duties.

At that moment Kat wanted to rush over to Matty and kiss him and tell him how much she loved him. She’s known Matty for almost her entire life and the guys she just saw her mother with, might as well have been another species. “No, now’s not the time for that,” Kat thought.

“How ’bout you Mrs. Saury?” Matty hollered.

Kat swung her head around; half surprised her mother was so close behind her.

“Oh, rare for me thank you Matty. I like it juicy,” Susan answered back loud enough to make sure Kat heard her.

Kat tried not to stare daggers into her mother, choosing instead to focused on Derek. As she spoke to Derek, she couldn’t shake the thoughts that raced in her mind, “Could she really not control herself for one day? Was this all just some sort of sick game to her? Dammit, I hate her so much.”

“Hey Sue, so Tommy tells me you just got a big new job, congrats,” Caleb proclaimed as Susan settled into her side of the table opposite Kat, never breaking eye-contact with her

until Caleb finished his toast. “Hoorah for Susan, love having somethin’ to celebrate,” Caleb declared to the group.

“Here! Here! Good job, Honey,” Thomas said as he lifted his beer to her.

“Congrats Mrs. Saury, that’s great,” Matty declared, unaware of the situation that transpired just minutes earlier with Kat.

“You’ll do wonderful, I’m sure, bless your heart,” Michelle joins in the chorus of praise, albeit a tad backhanded.

Susan, nodded to each, as though she had just accepted an award at a banquet, and then immediately fixed her gaze back on Kat, waiting for her to join the congratulatory ranks.

The praise and adulation proved to be just too much for Kat. Her instincts were telling her to get out of there. It felt like an episode of the Twilight Zone. Despite her instincts, Kat chose not to retreat inside of herself, she chose confrontation. Kat calmly took two steps back to where Matty was and instead of offering up fake praise to the vile creature, Kat triumphantly announced “We have an announcement as well, Matty and I are dating and in love with each other.”

This declaration caused a noticeable gasp in the air. Matty preceded to cough out the soda he had been drinking all over Mrs. Saury’s steak that was currently on the grill.

Caleb smiled as he put his arm around Tommy, “I think that’s great. Ya’ll are a great match for each other.”

“That’s awesome Kat, me and Caleb were just talking about that. Just don’t be stupid you two,” Tommy playfully warned.

As the group celebrated, Kat and Susan maintained a nearly deadly eye-lock with one another.

“Yes, congrats you too, let’s hope everything works out for the best,” was Susan’s filtered version of what was going through her mind. The unedited version went something like, “Just can’t stand to have the moment not be about you. If dating a piece of shit loser like your father is how you want to try to get back at me, fine. We both know you’re only doing this to try to hurt me.”

In truth, Susan really didn’t dislike Matty, he was always pleasant enough, but she viewed Kat’s dating of Matty as a repetition of the same mistake she felt she made when she settled for Thomas.

“Well all right everyone, it’s been real,” Caleb announced after everyone had finished their plates. “But we’ve gotta get going back otherwise Derek’s schedule will be all over the place.”

Michelle silently waived goodbye to everyone from inside the RV. Derek was already down for his afternoon nap.

“I’ll unhook from power, Dad,” Matty called out as he cleared off the table and stowed the grill. Kat excused herself to sneak an extra moment with Matty on the back side of the RV as he was unhooking the power. She really did love him, but she was nervous at the thought of the hell that her mother might try to

cause them with their now public relationship.

“Love you Kat,” Matty said as Kat wrapped her arms around him.

“Love you too, Matty, and thank you.”

“For what? It was just steaks,” Matty remarked with his usual adorable cluelessness.

“Just because you’re you Matty, you big dummy.” Kat buried her head into Matty’s chest. As the two emerged from the back of the RV, Kat blurted out with a sudden spur of the moment decision, “Dad, I’m riding home with the Brenton’s, Matty’ll drive me back later.” Kat couldn’t conceive of being stuck in a car with her mom and dad for the two and a half-hour drive back home.

“Nonsense, we’ll put you up in the guest room, Matty can drive you back in the morning if your parents are okay with that.” Caleb offered up, knowing that it will already be dark by the time they get back to the house.

“I’m good with it,” Tommy blurted out, in probably too approving of a statement. A look of concern grew across his face as he realized he had just broke one of Susan’s innumerable unwritten rules by agreeing before getting her approval.

“Fine, doesn’t matter,” Susan squinted her eyes at Kat as she grabbed her bag out of the backseat.

As Kat closed the door to the SUV, she locked eyes with her



mother one last time.

“Be careful Kathryn,” her mother, ever the combatant, warned her daughter.

“Whatever,” Kat mumbled as she walked past her. Unable to shake the feeling that from today forward, everything was going to be very different.

As Susan and Thomas started back home, Thomas briefly turned the radio down and looked sincerely at his wife of almost twenty years. “She’s still as beautiful as when I married her. Maybe more days like today and we can start getting back to a better place,” Thomas hoped to himself as their SUV exited the park.

“So, that’s pretty exciting about Kat and Matty, huh?” Thomas cautiously slipped out the words, hoping not to set off anything inside of Susan.

“It’s whatever, she’ll grow out of it. I’m gonna listen to my headphones for a bit,” Susan declared, too tired from today’s events to want to have any conversation with her husband.

*“And we’re joined live from the Hollywood Hills B7 conference where it was just announced a short while ago, that the B7 is now going to be called the B6.”*

*“Amir, what’s the story out there, the conference literally just started a few hours ago?”*

*“Hello again, Carole. Yes, a very exciting start to the conference. Now this renaming of the conference should not be construed as*

D.F. Brent Sr.

*anyone being excluded from the convention, rather this convention is solely focused on inclusivity, and how to best utilize their combined resources to affect lasting and permanent change, as the kickoff speech from Congressman Shilling so charismatically put it. And in keeping with that theme, the Education Association and the Service Employee International Union have just announced they will be consolidating into one organization. The name I keep hearing is the National Employee Union. I must say Carole, this is a major development, and likely not the last one from this historic convention.”*

*“Thank you Amir, and to piggyback on that report, we have just received word that American Federation of Teachers, or AFT, just released a statement from their governing board that they will hold a vote tonight to discuss, as they put it in their release, a new way forward. It would appear that the two largest U.S. based unions merging has prompted other unions to reflect on why they were not invited to the B7, B6 now, excuse me.”*

Susan pressed pause on her earbuds to think quietly to herself; she could hear in the background that Thomas was listening to his tired classic rock station. “No, don’t waste mental energy thinking about Thomas. What does this mean for me? Why am I sitting at the lake when all of this Union consolidation is going down? Why was the Florida Educators Union vote called so hastily? Does Karston even remember me? God, I hope he does. Is Kat going to cause me any problems? No, stop

it Susan. That doesn't matter right now. Besides Thomas wouldn't believe her anyway, he knows better than to question me. Thomas will have to be let go at some point. I'm starting to ascend, and I can't have him anchoring me down. I'll call Shelly next week to start the divorce paperwork when he's on rotation. This should be easy to prove abandonment as he's gone 30 days at a time. I'll figure out how much I can get for alimony later. That's a tomorrow question. Okay, what is the next play? Screw it, I've gotta get some rest, those lines of cokerall those boys had were strong. That reminds me, I need to get my prescriptions filled."

To ensure that Thomas doesn't cause her anymore stress today, Susan gently patted her husband's hand, "I'm gonna get some sleep, today was a busy day."

"Of course, Sue. Is the radio too loud?" Thomas asked, elated at Susan's tone and demeanor.

Susan didn't bother answering and proceeded to nod off.

"She may be a handful, but she's my handful," Thomas naively thought to himself as he settled in for the rest of the drive.



### Executive Suite, Hollywood Hills

"Congressman Shilling, Sh'Tan Torquelson is here, they haven't left the waiting room despite my making numerous offers to take down his, um their, information for a call back."

"Thank you, Marie," Congressman Karston Shilling

acknowledged his newest college campus acquisition, Mary Steinbold. Congressman Shilling seldom got the names right of executive assistants, and truly felt no reason to learn. Though Mary didn't know it yet, Congressman Shilling was already thinking of replacing her with someone of a more ethnic persuasion. "The blondes are fun" he thought, "and they do try so hard, but they're just so monotonous and interchangeable."

Karston looked over to his Senior Advisor, Diego Assantino, at least that's how he was introduced to Karston. Diego Assantino was not technically on any payroll and no one in the Congressman's D.C., San Francisco office, nor the offices of Forward Together had any idea who he was. All the members of Congressman Shilling's sphere only knew that his was the only call that Karston would take without hesitation.

"Diego, who the hell is, what did you say? Sh'Tan?" Karston asked the meticulous, well-dressed, aristocratic man who sat on the opposite side of the office.

Diego's eyes peeked over top of his laptop and small rectangular reading glasses, and with an exaggerated attempt to hide his Eastern European accent, "He iz the man from the IRS...the man who iz now a woman," Diego methodically explained to the blonde-haired Congressman.

"Oh him, her, them, Okay whatever. From a PR standpoint what's..." Karston abruptly stopped when he saw Diego's normally thin slit eyes widen.

“Marissa, give us a moment, will you love?” Karston motioned to his latest toy.

Mary showed no sign of offense to Congressman Shilling’s getting her name completely wrong once again. Just his acknowledgement of her presence made her pulses jump. Mary was beyond enamored with Karston. She, like so many before her, had convinced herself that “so long as I continue to serve him, he would come to rely on me, then come to need me, then he would want me, then we could be together.”

“Of course, Sir.” Mary cheerfully offered up, unable to hide her obvious infatuation.

“You need be more careful, Karston” Diego said the moment the door was closed. “The young lady may share your bed, but that does not make her privileged.”

“Oh Diego, that one hasn’t earned a place all the way to the bed, best she gets is the back of the limo, or maybe an office desk, you can’t let them get comfortable, otherwise they try to nest,” Karston explained with a lack of emotion that was less than human. “Now as I was saying from a PR point of view...”

Diego interrupted and finished the congressman’s query, “Shawn, or now Sh’Tan is only a marginal consideration. There may be a few bad stories if she was to disappear, but nothing that would move the needle on your coverage.”

Karston looked up at the ceiling for a moment then declared, “Well I was hoping for perfect coverage during the conference,

but hell, Sh'Tan was more than a few news cycles ago, no one is even going to remember him, her, them, whatever."

"I've already made the arrangementz Karzton, it doez not require any more debate." Diego informed the golden-haired legislator.

"Marie, can you come back in here please," Karston recited in his well-rehearsed campaign voice.

"Please tell Sh'Tan that my Senior Advisor will be out with him momentarily to escort him to the motorcade. He will need to go through security first if he's going to join me at the..."

Karston's eyes glanced upwards back and forth, quickly searching for an impressive noun that will finish his lie.

"The Hollywood Bowl Congrezzman," Diego jumped in sensing the young Congressman had once again started talking before identifying the destination of his thought.

"Yes, the Hollywood Bowl, I'll be receiving an award tonight, and you tell Sh'Tan he'll be joining me on the way over," Karston told his temporary mistress, so enraptured in her own adoration, she willingly believed the quite obvious lie.

Diego pushed his glasses back into position and logged back onto his private server. Diego's Fix It System, as Karston called it, was elegantly simplistic in its operation. Diego opened up a command line interface terminal session:

```
{Cmd: Erase -all, name = Shaun + Torquelson, name = Sh'Tan  
+ Torquelson, Time = present}
```

With the press of the Enter key, he sent messages automatically to a series of operatives. Diego's System, though quick and simple on his front-end interface, was a logistical work of art on the back end. Within seconds of the execution of his command, a message popped up to select workers at varying locations, some on social media, some in government records, some with major search engines. The recipients of each of these messages had their own reasons to acquiescence to the message; for some it was blackmail, others were true believers, other were looking for favor in what they believed would be a new opportunity out of their current job. With automated precision, responses immediately started filtering back to Diego.

```
{socialMedia = true}
```

```
{searchEngines = true}
```

```
{recordsSearch = true}
```

```
{employScrub = true}
```

Diego closed his laptop and stood erect, revealing that \$10,000 suits do not apparently wrinkle on a frame as thin as his. Diego slowly spoke as he methodically put on his black leather gloves and donned his designer glasses "Azzetz zeem to be currently engaged Karzton, I will be dealing with theze looze endz myzelf. I will zee you on the plane later thiz evening."

"Okay, can you go ahead and take Mary as well? I'm kinda bored with her. I think there is an Indian girl I saw at ticketing

I want to try,” Karston nonchalantly asked his Advisor.

“I hope your appetite doez not prove to be a zource of distraction,” Diego warned Karston as he opened up his smartphone from its wallet case, and with surprisingly quick and accurate execution, typed:

{Cmd: Erase -all, name = Mary Steinbold, Time = present}

“Mizz Steinbold, the Congrezzman informed me, that you will be ridng along as well. Pleaze call down to Aahna, she is the Indian girl at the ticketing table. She will be manning the desk the rest of the evening. Thank you, pleaze join me at the motorcade when you are finished.”

Mary Steinbold could barely contain her happiness as the strange little man spoke. Her mind swam with thoughts of Karston as she made her way down the hall to the elevator. Her hands shook as she pressed the garage floor button. “Did Mr. Shilling think of me the way I thought of him?” Mary met up with Sh’Tan and noticed an equally excited look in his/her eyes. “Stay calm Mary, the Congressman just wants to thank you for all your hard work,” the bubbly blonde from Arizona State University kept telling herself. Mary and Sh’Tan were both lost in thought and celebrity worship as they waited for Karston to appear from the heavily guarded executive elevator. The two barely noticed as the fentanyl loaded syringes were plunged into their necks.



## **Chapter 3 : Temptation**

### Rebecca Brenton's Dorm Room, University of Florida

“Oh, my Goddess, Aunt Sue that is so great. Seriously, I can't wait to see you again. You've always been such an inspiration. Okay I'll text you my email, this is such a great opportunity, thank you so much for letting me be involved!”

“Who was that love?” Cinna groggily asked her half-dressed lover. As much as Cinna hated mornings, seeing Rebecca's long red hair spilling down her thin back and tickling the top of her sweatpants made her enjoy them all the more.

Rebecca, slowly lowered her phone and turned to Cinna with an uncontainable smile, quickly jumped back into bed, like a spring-loaded children's toy, and landed atop Cinna like a cowboy jumping onto a waiting stallion.

“Okay, Okay, Okay, calm down. Breath,” Cinna giggled as Rebecca silently, but excitedly clapped her hands. Rebecca's full green eyes, still cloudy from last night's party, were the size of silver dollars. At this point Cinna really didn't care what the news was, she just loved seeing Rebecca glow with so much enthusiasm.

“Okay,” Rebecca started off, putting forth considerable effort

into slowing her speech. “Remember my Aunt Sue I told you about?”

“Yeah, she’s the family friend right, not your real Aunt?”

“Yeah, but she’s totally more family than my real family, she’s the only adult growing up that ever encouraged me to be myself. Anyway, that’s not the point.”

Rebecca leaned over a little more, her long curls cast a tent of red hair over Cinna’s face. “Aunt Sue just got named the National Outreach Coordinator for Big Blue.”

“And that’s good, right?” Cinna asked.

Rebecca straightened her mounted posture and had to remind herself for a moment that Cinna was a fine arts major, and not overly absorbed in political activism like she was. Rebecca looked at Cinna for a moment and lovingly said, “Yes, Cinna, that’s freakin huge!”

“Well Okay, so how’s that gonna affect my little Ruby Red Rosebud?” Cinna asked as she placed her hands around Rebecca’s waist.

“Well first off, Aunt Sue wants me to meet with some of her people to organize a campus protest.”

“What’s the protest for?”

“Student safety or something...” Rebecca quickly stated before going into her exasperated outrage mode. “Did you know that our college has a gun club?”

“A what?” Cinna asked, still groggy.

“Yeah, they call it skeet and trap, which I can only assume has some sort of sexist connotation. But, yeah, isn’t that outrageous?”

“Yeah sure, I suppose? I think skeet and trap is just target practice though.”

“Fine, well let me ask you this then. What, or better yet who, are they practicing to target? Hmm?” Rebecca asked with a crooked look to Cinna.

“Rebecca, don’t I always do your protests my dear?” Cinna responded back, with a look that said, “c’mon cut me some slack.”

“Yeah, sorry I was just workshoppping some things on you, anyway, if I may continue.” Rebecca leaned back over Cinna; her long curly red hair swallowed Cinna’s recently dyed purplish blue bob cut. “So, Aunt Sue said that if the protest goes well, she’ll see about getting me on at Big Blue’s Headquarters for a summer internship!”

“Wow Rebecca, that’s so good for you. I’ll miss you of course, but that’s amazing.”

“I knew you’d be happy for me,” Rebecca declared confidently. “That’s not all though. She also wants me to volunteer for the Big Blue fundraiser down in Orlando this weekend.”

“So, it’s a no to the art exhibit this weekend then?” Cinna asked.

“Cinna” Rebecca lowered her eyes, as she looked down onto Cinna’s obviously hurt face. “We’ll go next weekend. I promised you we’d go. We’ll just delay it a week.”

Cinna smiled and agreed, for as much as she had her heart set on going to the Reborn Renaissance with Rebecca, she could see how important this was to her. The two were lovers, but Cinna always felt a little outside and below Rebecca’s world of important political issues and social justice. Plus, Cinna thought, “She’s taught me so much about sexism, feminism, and all the other isms, I really owe it to her to support her. If it wasn’t for her, I’d still be making patriarchally-inspired art. She’s really opened my eyes so much.”

“I’ve gotta go, I’ve got so much to do before I meet with Aunt Sue’s people,” Rebecca said as she hurriedly dismounted Cinna.

Cinna propped herself up on her elbows behind her back as she watched her red-haired fire breathing social justice warrior go through a whirlwind of motions to get ready.

Before Cinna had even finished stretching, Rebecca bounced over to her, and gave her a big light-hearted kiss. “Make me something beautiful today Cinna. Today’s an awesome day.”

“Have fun changing the world, Rosebud,” Cinna calmly said back as Rebecca bolted out the door in her favorite Che shirt and blue bandana.



## Brenton House

Kat stared intently at the computer screen, “Okay, If Else true, declare the variable, recompile, and done. Voila! Let’s see if this works,” Kat mumbled to herself as she lifted the circuit board out of her 3D printed case she had made earlier in the day. Kat’s latest project was an eight-inch ruggedized handheld screen, powered by a raspberry pi. Kat designed her latest project as a teaching tablet for Derek. The program it ran started with easy identification lessons, then progressed to more complex conceptual relationships. For example, Lesson 1 was simple identification lessons, like who is Daddy?, where is the chicken?, etcetera. Then progressed to more complex identifications such as, who is the stranger? and who helps put out fires? This latest project, which Kat labeled the Digital Electronic Recognition Enhancement Kit (D.E.R.E.K.) served as both Kat’s final project for the KidX competition, currently taking place within the Online Hobbyist community, as well as a thank you to the Brenton family for the past few months of hospitality.

Four months had passed since the Saury and Brenton families met up at the lake. But that day was always near the front of young Kat’s mind. The Brenton family enjoyed Kat’s time at the house, as she stayed there nearly full time when Matty was off rotation, and always came up one weekend a month when he was on rotation to help Mrs. Brenton around the house. The impact on Derek has been noticeable as well, his potty

accidents decreased, and he was generally more relaxed throughout the day.

“Okay Derek, which one is Daddy?” Kat slowly held up the D.E.R.E.K. board to its namesake.

“Daddy,” said Derek as he very heavily poked the screen. Kat was thankful she opted for maximum vibration and mechanical hardening for her latest build.

The screen lit up and responded, “Hey there Derek, you got it right. Good job.”

Derek’s face lit up with a rapturous joy when he heard his dad’s voice come over the internal speaker. He grabbed the prototype out of Kat’s hands and rushed to his father in the living room,

“DADDY! DADDY! KAT MADE!”

Caleb was nearly speechless as he looked at Kat. “Kat, God love yah girl, did you hear that?” Caleb asked with a tone of amazement as he paused the Brave’s game, he and Matty had been watching.

“Yeah he’s pretty excited,” Kat responded back as she blew her hair back that had fallen on her face.

“No, Kat, that’s not it. That was the first time Derek hasn’t triplicated his words since he began talking.”

Kat sensed that she still didn’t grasp the enormity of the situation. “Really? Oh, that’s cool.” Kat awkwardly slid her

hands in the pockets of her project overalls, distracted by a pocket full of balled up solder wire and pieces of 3D printing debris. As Kat turned around, she could see Michelle wiping a tear away. “Oh Mrs. Brenton, I’m sorry,” Kat offered to Derek’s mother.

“Shut up Kat and give me a hug,” an emotional Michelle forced out. “And take these goofy things off.” Michelle reached up and removed Kat’s jeweler’s inspection glasses perched atop her head, allowing her auburn locks to fall down over her cheeks. Kat had forgotten they were still up there from her soldering earlier in the day. Soldering that Kat remembered thinking “not a soul in the house complained about.”

Caleb looked across the living room to Matty, and nodded over towards Kat, who was still being smothered by Michelle. The Brenton family patriarch held up and wiggled his ring finger towards his son. This was Caleb’s less-than-subtle way of letting Matty know exactly where he wanted this relationship to end up. Matty silently nodded and smiled back, “Yeah, can’t really go wrong with that idea,” Matty thought.



### Saury House

“Are you coming to bed or not?” Susan bellowed from the bedroom.

This was as close to sweet talk as Thomas had gotten in years, he knew of course what it meant. Susan was horny. It wasn't love; it was barely sex. For as smoking hot as Susan was, this would be more of a mechanical session, and was no cause for arousal for Thomas. He had hoped he could avoid tonight's summoning by staying in the garage drinking by himself. He took one last look at his tiny little corner in the garage; a recliner, with a mini-fridge next to it, empty beer bottles, and a 27 inch flat screen TV Kat had wired to a pressure sensor in his chair, so that as soon as he sat, it would automatically descend to vertical from its horizontal station against the ceiling. "Yeah gimme a sec," Thomas hollered back, conceding tonight's fate. "Take a shower first, I'm sure you stink," Susan's anti-romantic overture filled the air.

"Ok babe." The words seemed like a foreign language to Thomas as they passed over his lips.

"Right, whatever, just hurry up," Susan looked back, confused by the intimacy of a pet name.

Thomas, acting as little more than flesh and blood automaton, finished scrubbing the scent of loneliness and alcohol off himself and emerged from the bathroom.

Susan was laying on her back as she watched the TV. She then lifted her leg to open an entrance to underneath the sheets. Thomas was well trained enough by now to know that this means tonight would be a strictly one-sided endeavor, which he honestly was fine with. As he crawled under the sheets to



assume his position, he heard his once lover call to him, “God, did you not shave? Just be careful, I don’t want bumps down there.”

Thomas didn’t respond, as there really wasn’t any point to it anymore. Susan fixed the comforter as Thomas settled into position; shifting a few final times to ensure she could still see the TV.

*“And joining us for an exclusive interview tonight..”*

“Begin,” Susan ordered.

*“Karston Shilling.”*

“Keep going,” Susan delivered a second order, as she felt Thomas slightly pull away at hearing Karston’s name. “I’ll tell you when you’re done,” Susan declared to her husband as she forced his head down.

*“Congressman, I’d like to get started by first congratulating you on the passage of the Unified Employees Union Act, the UEUA as it is known.”*

*“I know it’s an awful acronym, such a mouthful.”*

*“Well the word around Washington is that, due to its size and scope, this effectively transfers the Department of Labor’s controls to outside of the Presidency and makes the Union Chief, or Union Chief Administrator, as the title suggests, one of the most powerful men in the country?”*

*“Well that might be a little exaggerated, and don’t forget, it*

*could be a woman in charge. That will be up to the voting union delegates after all. The Dept. of Labor will still of course exist, however we in the Congress are going to make sure at every turn that they follow the guidance of the Unified Union. Here, let me tell you what it will do for the working people of this great country.”*

“Keep going, right there, no don’t change it up, what you were doing before,” Susan commanded her provider under the sheets as she stared into Karston’s bluish hazel eyes. She wanted to be right next to him in D.C.. She wanted to be able to reach out and feel him. She thought of the quick moment they had on the tarmac as she met him before the Florida leg of his fundraising yesterday. She reached her hand to her own back trying to imitate when Karston put his hand on her and told Diego Assantino, his Senior Advisor, “Make this woman the head of Big Blue for Florida.” She almost climaxed thinking about that moment, but alas she couldn’t. Not with Thomas in the room.

Susan reached for the remote and pressed pause. “Just stop, it’s not happening tonight,” Susan disappointedly informed Thomas.

“Well okay, should I try someth—” Thomas started to offer before being cut off.

“No, just go. I’m not in the mood anymore.” Susan instructed him, hoping that if she was curt enough, he wouldn’t be tempted to talk and take her out of her fantasy.

Thomas grabbed his robe and walked out, he was as lifeless and limp as a human being could be. Thomas made his way back to the garage, sat on his recliner and looked towards the ceiling as the pressure switch engaged the TV. As he reached for the remote atop his mini fridge, he could hear the familiar sound of Susan's battery-operated boyfriend start to hum to life, followed by an even louder playing of the TV.

As Thomas sat in the garage, with two walls separating husband and wife, he stared distantly at the blank wall of his garage, not focusing, not angry, not jealous, just numb.

*"Now Congressman, I'd like to talk to you about something perhaps a little more controversial."*

*Karston leaned towards the interviewer with his Scandinavian deep-set eyes, chiseled square jaw, and wispy blonde hair.*

*"There are some news outlets reporting, not ours of course, we would never cover such uncorroborated stories, but there are some, saying that the recent violent riots are corresponding to the districts of members that didn't support the UEUA."*

*"Thank you for the question, I've been wanting to address this for some time. Two points on this, if I may; one, the protests have largely been peaceful and are indicative of the real stress out there in America. The stress of people having to choose between rent and medical bills, the stress of parents unable to afford new school clothes. Any violence or rioting reports you're hearing about are either completely fabricated or the work of*

*right-wing extremist groups looking to sully the groups that make up Big Blue Coalition.”*

“Get it Kar! YES!” Thomas heard his wife scream over the TV. The realization that she doesn’t even care if he heard her, further numbed Thomas into a state of oblivion.

“Hey baby girl, your daddy misses you. Give me a call tomorrow if you’re free. I’d love to spend the day with you,” Thomas typed out a text to Kat, before erasing it all and putting his phone back down. “No. She got out. She’s better off at Cay and Michelle’s,” Thomas thought as he settled into his recliner and stared at the nondescript garage wall.

Karston’s eyes steeled over, perfectly portraying a man both in control, and full of righteous fury.

*“And two, the problems that these cities are having existed long before I came to Congress and long before the UEUA was ever drafted. So, I think any suggestion that the good people of Big Blue have behaved in any way other than patriotically, is a cowardly accusation made out of desperation by members that know they are siding with the wrong side of history.”*

“YES, YES, YES,” Susan screamed out in ecstasy, marking the end of her delusional date. The TV went quiet. The nightstand drawer shut. Silence at last. Thomas felt the garage window unit chill his face. He hadn’t even noticed he had been crying.



Sen. Jacoby Elders' Office, (Utah-R) Washington D.C.:

“Yes, I understand General. No these are especially trying times. Do what you can to keep the sites secure, I will bring this up in Armed Services tomorrow, you have my word.”

Senator Elders hung up the phone, rubbed his temples, and thrust himself backwards into his high back leather chair. His eyes instinctively shot over to the left, where they were met with an original pencil sketch from one of his favorite artists, an autistic man that drove by the Lincoln Memorial and sketched it from memory. It was breathtaking.

“Well Abe? Got any advice or are you just gonna sit there silently judging us?” the senator asked as he looked at the thin savior of the republic. “Ah, you’re no help.”

Senator Elders’ eyes then shot to the right, to a gold inlay Christ Pantocrator icon, a gift from the Greek Orthodox Church in Utah. “Well I know you are judging us, but that other guy isn’t supposed to!” The Senator’s eyes closed once more to try to make sense of the world. “It was never this confusing before,” he thought as he rubbed the top of his now balding head.

This moment of self-awareness regarding his own aging led him to look down at the figure occupying his desk, “How the hell did I get so fat? I was an athlete once,” he thought. Jacoby Elders tended to over exaggerate his own past athletic prowess. Technically, he was a paid professional as he liked to tell his

grandchildren. In truth, he played one season for an unaffiliated independent league Midwestern team where he saw a total eighteen at-bats for the season and spent most of his time as the backup bullpen catcher. It was after this less-than-stellar performance that Jacoby Elders decided to dedicate himself to law and politics.

“Knock knock, Senator,” the raspy old southern voice echoed into his office.

“Gabe come on in here, I could use someone to have a scotch with,” Jacoby said with a smile at the sight of his longtime counterpart.

Senator Gabriel J. Moran (North Carolina – D) served in the US Senate just as long as Senator Elders. Though Moran wasn't privy to the same unquestioned, above reproach, reputation as Senator Elders, owing to some youthful indiscretions when he was serving in the House with a particularly attractive staffer. The two Senators had formed an unbreakable bond of friendship through the decades. Though often times on opposing sides of issues, both parties would generally back each of these men's compromises to keep the machinery of government moving. When seen together, the two would often birth a clichéd comparison to Laurel and Hardy, Jacoby, shorter, rounder, and a signature affable smile hanging below his button nose; and Gabriel with his 6'4" long and still quite lean frame and a face that seemed to defy physics with its overabundance of angles. Gabriel was known

as the Hawk to his fellow Democrats, and the Vulture to Republicans, neither moniker was attributable to policy stances, rather his deep-set eyes, and nose that had an obvious beakish quality to it.

“Highlands or Lowlands for you today Senator Moran?”

“Oh, I think I’ll join you in the peat bogs tonight, hit me with something from Islay,” Gabriel said as he looked over Jacoby’s impressive collection.

“Lagavulin it is then, old friend.”

Gabriel motioned to Jacoby to keep going as he poured a glass, then held up one long skeletal like figure to indicate a single piece of ice.

“There you go, Senator,” Jacoby said as he handed Gabriel the tumbler of spirits.

“Thank you, Senator, Cheers.” Gabriel took the glass and settled into the chair in front of the Senior Senator from Utah’s desk.

“Jacoby,” Gabriel said, dropping their pseudo-formality they have adopted over the years whenever they see each other, “we have solved some of the most pressing issues of our time right here in this very office, however it has occurred to me, my good friend, we have never tackled the most pressing issue before us.”

“And what might that be, Gabriel?” Jacoby said with a

knowing smile that his friend was about to hit him with something far less than serious.

“Senator, the question that stands before us now, is how many farts do you think these office chairs have been subject to over the course of their long lives serving in our office?”

“What? No, you damn psycho,” Jacoby laughed as he protested his friend’s juvenile comment.

“No, no, now let’s work through this Jake, just based on the average number of asses that come in here per day,” Gabriel explained, “No seriously, think about it, Jake.”

“I’d quite honestly rather not,” Jacoby shot back.

“Okay fine,” Gabriel said, with no intention of letting the line of conversation die. “So, let’s say none, let’s say everyone that comes to see us on a daily basis, the lobbyist, the reporters, the other lobbyists, the constituents, the staffers, let’s say they all hold their gas.”

“Okay, no one ever farts in our office but us, I’ll play along, you damn weirdo.” Jacoby surrendered to Gabriel’s thought experiment.

“Now, if they’re all holding it, think of how often the average person waits in our waiting room.”

“You’re disgusting Gabe,” Jacoby laughed out, knowing where his line of thinking would end up.

Senator Moran put both his hands in the air, one holding his



glass of scotch, “All I’m saying is we should give our office staff, especially our gatekeepers, a raise. Because if people are too shy to let one rip in our office, imagine the amount of gas that gets let loose out there.” Gabriel pointed to the waiting area outside of Jacoby’s office.

“Please tell me that we are capable of solving some non-flatulence related issues tonight?” Jacoby asked through a smile.

“Doubtful, but it’s more productive than waiting for portraits to talk back to you.” Gabriel pointed to either side of Jacoby’s office towards Honest Abe and Christ.

“Okay, fine, you got me there.”

“Did you really just go through all that childness just to poke fun at me for talking to my pictures?”

“As always Jake, you have provided an accurate assessment,” Gabriel said as he raised his glass to toast his old friend.

“God, I’m gonna miss you someday.”

“I know, Jake.”

“So, Gabe, on a serious note, what are we going to do about these riots? I just got off the phone with the General Touey, from Utah National Guard. He’s putting up fencing to keep rioters out. In Utah! Gabe, we don’t riot in Utah! And the strikes. We have got every major union employee on strike and they won’t even give us a list of demands, there’s no logic

anymore.”

“Jacoby listen here,” Gabriel leaned forward and pointed to his old friend with his hand still holding the drink, “shit’s different now, chief. I don’t mean, the time’s they are a-changin’ bullshit. I mean we have had a damn swamp monster move under our feet for a while now, and we’re just now starting to notice—” Gabriel dropped his senatorial dialect as he spoke. He found his polished southern gentleman demeanor was good for the campaign trail and the cameras, but only in front of Jacoby and his wife did he ever let his country-boy vernacular out.

Jacoby motioned to Gabriel to hold for a moment while he lifted himself off the corner of his large executive desk to close the door and give the pair privacy. Gabriel noticed the very spot Jacoby was just sitting, the wood had lost its varnish, same as where he kept his left hand to steady himself.

“Damnit we’ve been here too long, I remember when that desk was delivered,” Gabriel thought. “Anyway, as I was saying,” Gabriel continued in hushed tones, “we didn’t see what was happening. Maybe we’re too old, but I don’t think that’s it, this is somethin’ different,” Gabriel continued, each word measured and precise. “I got arm-wrestled into voting for that damn union bill, and you know by whom?”

“Your whip, I’d assume?” an intent Senator Elders responded.

“Nope not him, didn’t even get the chance to talk to him. By

the damn textile industry, Jake!”

“They stand to take it on the chin worse than anyone with this bill, don’t they?” Jacoby stated the obvious ramifications of the bill.

“I agree, so you ask yourself Honorable Senator Elders, from the great State of Utah, why would people I’ve dealt with for literal decades, so quickly and so voraciously jump to the wrong side of a loser idea?”

“Because they’re scared,” Senator Elders stated the ominous proposition aloud for the first time. He could now sense that there was more happening than he previously had suspected.

“Fucking Bingo, Compadre. And you know what, maybe they’re right to be scared,” Gabriel said as he leaned back into the chair. “Look at the cities that are burning right now. There’s basically two types. One, you’ve got cities run by the old guard democrats, title was basically passed down like a hereditary birthright, and by and large they’ve jacked up their own cities, and their lock on the ballot boxes, well maybe riots are the only way those cities are getting some new faces,” Gabriel explained.

“Yeah there are plenty of examples on that, I’m following you,” Senator Elders listened more intently than before. For as much as Senator Elders was respected for his virtuous reputation on the Hill, Senator Moran was, without a doubt, known as one of the most astute political minds ever to occupy

an office in Capital Hill. Jacoby Elders made it a point to take Gabriel Moran's political observations as though they were gospel.

"And two, you've got the Purple Principles, as I like to call you all. All you guys from Purple states that vote your conscience then peel off just enough of the vote from the independents to stick around," Gabriel finished his summation of the targeted locations.

"Hey now, Utah was only purple this past year 'cause the left was so charged up with the prospect of, oh what are they calling him now? Oh yeah, The Commander-In-Tweet being outa the White House," Jacoby remarked using the mainstream news media's pejorative nickname for the previous White House occupant.

"Is that what you think? Okay Jake, compared to eight years ago, look at your delegation, look at your state offices, hell look at the Salt Lake City Mayoral race," Jacoby counted out the examples on his long-crooked fingers.

"Yeah, I see it, we're trending, but it's hard for me to believe. I know Utah, I know the people of Utah."

"Jake, c'mon, are you telling me you really think elections are about votes anymore? I saw a study that graphed positive and negative news mentions, along with positive and negative impressions on social media, compared to exit polls for the past three election cycles. Guess what the conclusion was?"

“No idea, Gabe.”

“The exit polls aren’t correlating anymore Jake. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” Jacoby shot his hands in the air in an exaggerated expression, which caused his drink to slosh just enough for a few droplets of the smokey scotch to fly out.

“Why do you think that news outlets are able to call races before the polls close now, the people aren’t voting Jake, the system is voting.”

“My God Gabriel, what should we do?”

“About that study?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not gonna do a damn thing about it, and I suggest you don’t either. I’ll tell you why. You know who came down from on high to show me this poll? Huh? VP Johnson that’s who.” Gabriel motioned out the window towards the White House, even though he knew that wasn’t the VP’s residence.

“Oh, she’s gonna be fine, she just has a bit of turmoil to deal with right now.”

“Jacoby, they’re protesting in the streets right now to remove her.” Gabriel jumped up from his seat without thinking, a habit of the North Carolinian that had been mocked by the political cartoonists of Washington D.C. countless times throughout his career.

“She’s the first ever African-American female to win a

National Election, and they're calling for her head! And for what? Cause she spoke at and donated money to a freakin' orphanage? These sickos have twisted that into accusing her of being anti-choice. And you watch, if that doesn't stick, they'll throw something else at her." Senator Moran, seeing the look of terror welling up in his old friend continued to step on the gas, "and when did this all start for her?"

Senator Elders finished the thought of his old friend, "When she asked the Department of Labor Inspector General to look into the legality of the Union Consolidations that was occurring, well before Shilling's UEUUA or whatever he's calling it."

"And now what's the chatter with the pundit class?" Gabriel quizzed his longtime bipartisan ally.

"You know I don't pay attention to that stuff." Jacoby dismissed the notion with the wave of his hand at the television on the wall.

"Look, I don't blame you, they're idiots, but for right now, they're the only window we have as to what the plan actually is. Every washed-up campaign advisor this side of the Mississippi is on 24-hour cable news talking about how easily Shilling would be approved if Johnson resigns. For donating to a freakin' orphanage, Jake. The guy has won a total of one, count 'em one, election in his life. He unseated Her Royal Highness of San Fran when the tech companies decided to fund this guy's campaign. Now he's gonna be one heartbeat

away from the presidency. A presidency pretty damn ripe for the 25th Amendment I might add. Our glorious leader can't tell you what year it is, much less what day."

Senator Elders had become visibly shaken; his round face filled with a rush of red. Had this diatribe come from literally any other person on the Hill, he would dismiss it as tin-foil hat wearing insanity. But not from Gabriel Moran. Gabe was known to indulge in wine, women, and song, in his youth, but he has never been one for conspiracy theories or fanciful thinking.

"Look Jake, I don't know, maybe it's all a series of creepy-ass coincidences, but you and I have been around long enough to know that it's most likely not. So, Senator from Utah, what's the remedy?"

"Damn Gabe," Jacoby sighed before resuming his thought, "the remedy to a popular charismatic upstart, funded by multi-billion-dollar corporations. I think we both know there's no easy remedy."

"Well, just in case you get a wild hair up your ass to ready your subpoena pen, think on this," again, Gabriel pointed to Jacoby, this time with an empty glass, to issue his warning, "Who was the Chairman of the House Oversight and Reform Standing Committee, you know the freaking untouchables over there?"

"Oh no," Jacoby shook his head as he exhaled the words.

“That’s right Wilson Clay, retiring early because he accidentally called a man, a man. And hey, I’m a Dem, right? All good with the LGBTQABCDEFGH whatever. Jake, this particular person came out as trans AFTER testifying before his committee. Then they freakin’ come out as black. Jake that dude was a white IRS nobody, hell even CSPAN wasn’t covering the hearing it was so damn milquetoast. Clay asked his questions, got his answers, and said thank you Sir, and that was it. And, according to the Nations Most Trusted News Source,” Gabriel mockingly air quoted as he finished up, “Mr. Nobody IRS administrator felt attacked, because he knew in his heart at the time that he was black woman. Boom! Clay is gone, replaced with one of Shilling’s Big Blue neophytes. Don’t sleep on this one Elders. Every fiber in this old southern cracker’s ass is tellin’ me that all us old dinosaurs are about to get steamrolled.” Gabriel took a deep inhale after his long-winded spiel. “Damn those tirades used to be easier,” he thought.

“All right Gabriel, I believe you,” Jacoby admitted as he turned to look out his Senate Office window.

“Hot damn really? I didn’t even practice that soap-box session. Either I’ve still got it, or you’re gettin’ soft.” Gabriel leaned back momentarily, having successfully lightened the mood. A look of self-satisfaction grew over the old legislator’s angular face.

Jacoby Elders looked over to Abraham Lincoln, silently



staring back at the two long serving senators. “Sorry Abe, I think you might be out of your depth on this one.” Jacoby then looked over to the shimmering gold Christ Icon. “It’s your turn at the plate JC, got any advice on stopping this insanity?”

Gabriel placed the long-emptied scotch glass on the drink caddy, looked back at his friend and said, “We need time Jacoby, and even that will likely require a sacrifice of some sort. I’m open to suggestions, but we’re about 50 laps down in a 60 lap race, so we’ve gotta think bigger than we’ve ever done before. And it’ll likely be the end of both of our careers in the Senate.”

As the two Senators were leaving and locking up Senator Elders’ office, Gabriel silently stopped just in the doorway and looked back with a sophomoric smile, “Add one more to the tally,” he said as he raised up his left hip.

Senator Elders, known for his composure under pressure, bellowed out in a voice loud enough to be heard in the President’s Oval Office, “You are one sick old vulture, you know that?”

“You’ll get over it, old man, c’mon let’s get a ride to your townhouse, I’m crashing there tonight, I’ve already sent the wife back to North Carolina and told her to head to the country home. I can’t sleep when the house is empty,” Gabriel rudely informed his colleague in such a manner that was only acceptable for friends of multiple decades such as these two.

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

“Fine, but I’m calling for an armistice on biological warfare in the house,” Jacoby shot back with a stern eye, relieved that his friend will be staying with him, given tonight’s revelations.

## Chapter 4 : Separation

### Thurston's Country Store, mid-morning

Bill Thurston only had two customers since opening at 6 am. Several people stopped and filled up on gas, but few people actually wandered inside the store now that everyone paid with their phones or debit cards at the pump. This was just as well to Bill Thurston, as he sat back on his stool flipping through television stations, he was used to days where barely a soul would actually enter his store.

*“...continues to spread throughout country, seeing many suburban areas succumb to,”*

Bill changed the set of images of masked looters destroying stores for another channel,

*“Thank you again Senator Moran, and our prayers are with you and the people of the State of North Carolina, you heard it here first folks, a bipartisan effort is currently underway in the United States Senate to allow for military installations to work collaboratively with local law enforcement to provide material support without eng...”*

“That has always been one weird looking dude, seems okay enough though I suppose, for a democrat,” Bill internally narrated as he continued to flip channels.

D.F. Brent Sr.

*“Look, I know the market seems scary right now...”*

“Oh, this friggan guy,” Bill thought as he clicked to the 24-hour business network.

*“I’m looking at security stocks, I’m looking at cameras, I’m looking at drones.....”*

“Try gold asshole,” Bill mumbled his displeasure at the commentator’s remarks as he slipped from internal to external monologue.

“Are you selling gold now too, Bill?” A familiar voice asked from underneath a worn-out Atlanta Braves hat.

“My apologies Michelle, lemme come around there and give you a hug,” Bill said with a look that transitioned from surprise to serenity as he watched Michelle and Kat walk through the front entrance of his store. He moved out from the end of the counter and wrapped up Michelle in his big grizzly bear like frame in a familial embrace. It had been almost forty years since he first comforted the scared little redheaded girl from bullies, yet Bill still made Michelle feel as safe and secure as she could ever imagine. He motioned towards Kat. “And you, I’ve seen you in here a few times, you with her?”

“Hi Bill, yes this is Kathryn Saury, Matty’s girlfriend,” Michelle said as a smile lit up Bill’s eyes.

“So those Brenton Boys have stolen another looker away,” Bill proclaimed as he released Michelle from his bear hug.

Kat, slightly uncomfortable with the familiarity, stuck out her hand to offer it as a greeting, “You can just call me Kaaaa—” She was unable to finish the sentence as Bill completely ignored her hand and picked her five-foot three-inch, hundred and ten-pound frame up off her feet with amazing ease.

“Kat it is then, well I’m Bill.” He gently set Kat back on her feet. “You’re just a light little thing, aren’t you?”

Kat’s face blushed immediately, as she recalled all of the times her mother told her she was overweight.

“I, uh, I dunno?” Kat stumbled out a response, still getting used to the country intimacy that was so foreign to her compared to the sterile community where she was raised. She was starting to understand why her father had always wanted to move out this way. “Everyone out there has a certain genuineness,” she remembered him saying with frequency.

“So, ladies, coffee? Can you stay for a bit?”

“Sure Bill, we’re not in a rush,” Michelle answered for the pair.

Kat was amused at the simplicity of the entire scene. The idea of showing up at a corner store that she had popped in to get gas and a soda, now she was going to sit for a coffee with an old man.

“Where’s little Derek at today Michelle? I don’t see you without him very often,” Bill inquired.

“Yes, that’s true, Bill. Actually, our little genius here made him an electronic game that he can play with. So Matty is taking Derek duty while we come into town. Maybe we’ll head down to the spa and get manicures.”

Kat looked down at her nails. The ones that weren’t chewed to nubs, still had 3D print filament fibers buried in them. She normally just trimmed them with flush cutter pliers when they got in her way. “I uh, didn’t think—” Kat said as she examined her hobbyist hands.

“Ha-ha, don’t worry Kat, nearest place to get a manicure is too far for us, I’m just teasing,” Michelle joked. “No, we just needed to get outta the house, and I wanted to show Kat some of the places around town. We won’t be gone too long. Matty’s fine for short spurts with Derek, but I try to never make it more than 2 hours.”

“Gotcha, gotcha,” Bill nodded in agreement. “So, Miss Kat, you made like a Nintendo or something for Derek? How cool is that,” Bill said as he shifted his attention to his young auburn-haired patron.

“Yeah, well it’s really more of a—” Kat started, before quickly catching herself. She didn’t want to come off as rude by over explaining her invention to Bill, as he was many times her senior. “Yeah kind of a Nintendo, made just for special needs kids,” Kat said, satisfied that her answer clarified without sounding snobbish.

“Well that’s all right. Sounds like you’ve got a pretty big brain hiding behind that pretty little face.” Bill laughed a little when he saw that Kat wasn’t quite sure how to take the compliment. What Bill didn’t realize was that aside from the Brenton’s and her father, she could probably count the compliments she had received concerning her looks from people on one hand. Though she wasn’t as societally beautiful or polished as her mother was, one would have had to look very hard to find any flaws with her physical appearance. Kat was far more used to compliments for being a child prodigy in engineering and mathematics. Anything that came across as a feminine compliment tended to erase the stoic scientist and reveal the young girl she still was.

After a brief moment of silence, Bill busted out, “Anything you two specifically need? I don’t know if Caleb told you, but I’m thinking of selling the old shop, so you best get your orders in now.”

Michelle was visibly startled by the news, “No, my God, Bill, I had no idea. I mean I just sorta thought you would have this forever. Which, saying it aloud, does sound rather silly.”

“Oh, Michelle, fret not my dear, it’s a reason to celebrate. I’ve had this old shack long enough, plus when I got the fuel tanks put in 15 years ago, apparently it made the property value skyrocket. Ol’ Thurston’s Country Store is the only permitted fuel station for quite a ways on either end of the interstate, so I figure I probably better sell it now, before I get too old to

enjoy retirement. Besides my baby brother has a lot of land out west, I've always wanted to retire on a ranch, so that's bound to keep me busy."

"Mind if I look around some, Mr. Thurston?" Kat asked, feeling like she should give Michelle a little space with this recent news.

"Go ahead kiddo, we've got an eclectic mix of stuff in here," Bill said as Kat dismounted her stool at the end of the service counter.

"Bill, I don't think I've ever heard you talk about your brother before," Michelle realized, wondering why it had never come up.

"Oh yeah, li'l Jonah, he's a good kid. Well, for a 70-year-old he's a good kid, I suppose. I used to go out there and visit for a week every couple of years when Janice was still with us," Bill said as he subconsciously rubbed the worn-down wedding band he never removed. "So, who knows, maybe I'll start up a feed store or something. Lord knows I'd go crazy if it means me just sitting around watching the news."

"It's really getting bad out there these days, Bill. We had to scare off some of the protesters blocking traffic with the fog horns Caleb had you order," Michelle said with a serious tone.

"Well, I'm glad they worked okay for ya'll. But damn, I hate to think of those hooligans messin' with my people."



“You would have enjoyed watching the aftermath those horns caused. But I don’t think we’re going to take our chances too many more times.”

“Yeah, I think this area will probably stay good for a while, but I don’t know what the future is gonna look like. I went to pick up a shipment from the distribution center last week and I had this young punk-ass kid get in my face, spitting, and raising hell. He was calling me racist, bigot, all sorts of stuff.”

“Bill, I’m so sorry you had to deal with that, what set him off?” Michelle asked as she raised her hand to cover her heart.

“From what I could gather, I reckon it was either my American flag bumper sticker, or that little Jesus fish thingy I’ve got back there. Either way, that boy was right steamin’ mad.”

“I’m glad you didn’t get hurt,” Michelle said with a tone of sincere relief.

“I ain’t worried about that, I coulda snapped that kid no problem,” Bill said as he flexed his excessively large arms.

“Bill you gotta be careful, these protesters are not even getting prosecuted for hurting people. Even when they have them on tape, it’s been getting dismissed as a collateral damage to lawful protests,” Michelle informed her old protector.

“That’s straight chaos right there, Michelle,” Bill remarked, who was obviously quite surprised by this revelation, “anyway, you remember Terrence that used to work here?”

“Yeah, he was with you for a long time. Tall guy, right?”

“Yeah, former all-state first team shooting guard, probably could have gone pro, but blew his knee out in a freak accident. Anyway, so about seven years ago, he and his brother came to me with a business idea to set up a distribution point for smaller country stores. I make more from that deal every week than I make here. So anyway, Terrence came out when he saw this punk giving me a hard time and chased him off. I guess because Terrence is black, that little punk listened to him. Terrence felt awful for what that kid was saying, but it wasn’t his fault. He said he’s having to put in extra security. Caught some of those kids trying to break in last month. I wouldn’t be surprised if he packs up soon, it’s just not worth it to take chances with these kids.”

Michelle nodded as the pair of old friends looked over towards Kat, who was fully engrossed with the country store’s offerings.

“That one seems like a good egg though,” Bill said before taking a sip of his coffee.

“Oh Bill, she’s like no one I’ve ever even met before. I’d adopt her in a second if I could, that girl is a walking miracle machine. And honestly, she’s done more for Derek in the past few months, than Caleb and I put together in the past year. The two of them really click.”

“Well, you let Matty know that I said he best get to it. That’s

what I'd say to him every time I caught him watching Brave's games instead of workin'."

"Well, I'm sure he heard that a lot then," Michelle said as she raised her coffee cup in agreement.

"Eclectic is an understatement," Kat thought as she mouthed some of the random, non-traditional convenience store finds. "Snake venom extractor, taxidermy prep chemicals, spent ammunition brass, fishing tackle, camping supplies, pickling and canning materials. Dang, I really shoulda checked this place out more when I stopped in before. This is crazy," Kat surmised before stumbling upon what she considered a goldmine. "HAM RADIO EQUIPMENT!" Kat accidentally said aloud.

"I think your girl found something to take home," Bill quietly said to Michelle as he looked over her way.

"Sorry, just slipped out," Kat called over the aisles back to the service counter.

"Grab a cart kiddo, take whatever you want, on the house."

"Oh Bill, we can't do that, let us pay you for it," Michelle insisted.

"Not a chance lady, besides the realtor listing the place already told me I need to get rid of it, so she's just saving me a trip to the dump."

"Damn, this is a Collins. He's got really, really good gear here,"

Kat whispered under her breath.

“Seriously take it all, cutie, the faster I’ve got everything cleared out the quicker I can let this old girl go,” Mr. Thurston said to a very excited Kat as he patted the countertop with his enormous hand.

“Oh, that reminds me Michelle, I was going to call him, but can you let Caleb know I’ve got his load ready out back.”

“Load?” Michelle asked without wanting to give away that she didn’t know what Bill was talking about.

“Yeah, when I told Bill I was closing down, he dropped off a big ol’ manifest of materials for me to get together, I had most of it, but had to get a few things from my network of suppliers.”

“Sure Bill, can I see the manifest, I just want to make sure Caleb got everything we talked about.” Michelle let slip the tiniest of white lies so as to uncover what her husband had been up to.

“Sure thing, here you go Michelle. Tell him the some of the anti-radiation pills and hazmat suits were a little tough to find, but they are on their way too.”

Michelle tried to control herself as she read over the list. “First aid supplies, antibiotics, low profile wind turbines, a 500 gallon plastic tank, heirloom seed supply...thank you, Bill, I’m sure this covers everything.”

“No worries Michelle. Here, lemme get your keys from you

and I'll load up your young engineers' picker-finds into the back while you finish up your coffee."

Michelle handed the keys over to Bill, without removing her eyes from the list. She wasn't upset with Caleb for this order, if anything, she was a little relieved that he had been prepping. She had already been canning and preserving extra food since the news started turning south. "Why hadn't he mentioned this to me? This just seems outta character for Cay," Michelle thought as she placed the list on her lap. "Thanks again Bill, I love you," Michelle said as she placed the now empty coffee mug on the counter. "It's not gonna be the same around here without you."

"I know little ladybug." Bill used the same moniker for her that he used when they first met all those years ago.

"You tryin' to make me cry?"

"No, just know that you and your crew are really special to me. So long you two," Bill said as he waved to Michelle and Kat exiting his shop.

Michelle stopped to look and soak in the memories of Thurston's Country Store one more time before hoisting herself back up into the truck.

"All right, good, less crap to take to the dump, now if I can just get rid of this stuff." Bill gestured to a mound of novelty squirrel taxidermy projects.



## Saury House

Susan sighed as she saw the airport shuttle pull up the driveway. “Oh great, depression-boy is back.” She watched her husband struggle to get his tools and duffle bag out of the back.

“Thanks guys. See you in a month.” Thomas waved as the van pulled away, the smile on his face quickly vanished as he turned towards his home. “Goddamn. Another turn in the prison,” Thomas thought as he saw the back of Susan’s head from the front window. Instantly he felt the weight of coming home crushing down on him. Each step up the front walkway felt heavier than normal. The sunlight was uncomfortably blinding as he walked towards the front door, his eyes rolled as he read the Welcome sign on the door. “Hardly,” he thought.

“Just put your stuff in Kat’s old room. She’s basically cleared out all of her gadgetry shit anyway,” Susan said as soon as Thomas made his way through the door.

“Nice to see you too, Sue,” Thomas’s attempt at sarcasm landed flat.

“I’m heading down for the Fundraiser Friday night and if everything goes right there, then I’m in D.C. next week to discuss how the Florida Education Association will fit into the new National Union. I’m leaving Thursday morning, so how about we just remain civil until I’m gone? Think you can

manage that?” Susan retorted with a cadence and speed to her voice that indicated it was a rehearsed dialogue.

Thomas acquiesced to his wife. The relief he felt knowing she would be gone for the next few days was payment enough for his silence. He slowly opened the door to Kat’s room. It felt empty without her soldering station, 3D printer, and workbench. As he moved his luggage into her room, Thomas accidentally bumped into her dresser. The pictures on top shook and tumbled, but managed to stay.

“Maybe try not to trash her room?” Susan hollered from the living room, over the sound of the talking heads on the television.

“She’s bound to get bored of her white trash vacation sooner or later.” Susan continued at a volume not meant for anyone but herself. “God, I can’t wait for those divorce papers to be done, him being here is soul-suckingly draining.”

Thomas caught the words of a comeback forming in his throat before they were released. “No, better to ignore her,” he thought. Thomas finished moving his luggage in and shut the door. As he reached over to put her pictures back, he teared up. “Her first Lego competition win,” he said to himself as he steadied the photo. The sense of loss Thomas felt was overwhelming. The feeling of missing his baby girl, his little builder, the one that he always felt had his back, in this home that had become a psychological battlefield over the past few years.

Thomas sat on the corner of the bed staring at the mostly abandoned room and pulled out his phone to call his pride and joy. “Hey Kat, yeah baby I just wanted to let you know I am home. Yeah maybe this weekend. Your mom is gonna be leaving soon, so maybe let’s have a couple of days of Daddy Daughter time? Great, sounds good.” Thomas wasn’t even sure what they’ll do, but was damn happy they would be doing it together.



### Spark’s Compound

“Ty you finished your write up about Hoffer yet?” Spark bellowed out of his shop.

“Yeah one sec, Spark. I’m gonna grab the mail real quick,” Ty hollered back.

“Good, that’ll give me a chance to rinse off a bit,” Spark thought. “All right then, just meet me in the house,” Spark hollered as he wiped his face with one of the few clean rags in his shop.

Spark, covered in sawdust after his latest project, wanted to go over Ty’s assignment, as the news coming over the radio was still fresh on his mind. Relating the philosopher Eric Hoffer’s thesis to the day’s current events seemed like a valuable way to educate Ty in the real world. Ty never attended any public schools, as Spark was convinced, they only served to ruin young children’s minds. Had Ty attended, his age would put



him in probably 11th or 12th grade, possibly even college, Spark guessed, though he couldn't know for sure.

When his mother dropped him off, she didn't have any documentation concerning Ty's age to give Spark. "All lost in Katrina," Ty's birth mother told Spark. Whatever Ty's real age was, Spark was glad he was able to pass for someone in his late 20's. Ty's physical maturity allowed him to make runs for beer and cigarettes for Spark without worrying about being carded.

As Spark finished cleaning himself up, he turned down his radio. His mind still drifted back to that day when Anita showed up on the pier to meet him after a rotation. Her message about the boy was short but overflowing with emotion. Years after Spark had taken Ty in, he couldn't imagine how difficult it was for her to pass that baton. But the scabs on her face, the state of her teeth, her jittery behavior, and her sunken in eyes told him everything he needed to know about what she was going through. Anita was from a period in Spark's life that he was happy to have distanced himself from. And if Ty was the outcome of that otherwise hedonistic chapter of his youth, Spark felt that was a trade he could live with.

"Here you go Spark," Ty said as he handed Spark the collection of mail.

"Just set it to the side for now, Ty. Tell me, what did you think of True Believer?"

“Well, I mean it was written a long time ago, but the pattern is definitely there,” Ty thoughtfully replied.

“Explain?” Spark asked.

“Well the guys that maybe were like the figureheads, or the front men, of their movements. They never get to see where the show ends up. But once the chaos starts, then all of a sudden you see someone rise up and step in, and it’s like the soil is just ready for them.”

“That’s pretty much on the money.”

“So, this Hoffer guy, he was like what?” Ty looked at Spark, expecting to hear an answer akin to Secretary of State, Presidential Historian, or some other prestigious title.

“Eric Hoffer was a longshoreman all his life. He worked the docks and wrote in his spare time.”

“No shit?” Ty gave a surprised look.

“No shit man, not even a tiny one.”

“Damn. I was expecting him to be like Mr. Academic Godhead or something, I dunno.”

“Actually Ty, if there was any group of people that hated Eric Hoffer’s writing, it was the academics. You see, for them, something is only true if one of their Ivory Towers produce it, for truth to come from a workman, it can’t be really true.”

“Ha, shoot man, that’s like the Pharisees and Jesus,” Ty exclaimed. His big toothy smile beamed with confidence.

Spark, a little dumbfounded that he had never made that connection before, “Yeah Ty, that’s a good one. I hadn’t thought of it like that, but you’re right. That’s the thing about Truth, Ty, people tend to get caught up on the messenger. Listen to the message, to the heart of what is being said. Ignore the flowery coatings of intentions and uncover the real meaning. That’s where you’ll find something real. So, what does this tell you about where we are at in this country right now?”

“Well—” Ty paused as his eyes shot upwards at the fan rotating above the dining room table. A room that had become his de facto schoolhouse at Spark’s compound. “Well, I think we’re still waiting.”

“Continue,” Spark directed.

“So, we’re in the hemorrhaging stage right now, we’ve got a bunch of true believers out there, but no one has really stepped in to consolidate power. But I’m not totally sure if that’s right. You see, I’m not sure what the protesters and rioters are even pushing for. Like Lenin, right? His message was clear. Stupid, but clear. And he was the True Believer, and Stalin came in and became, well, he became Stalin.”

“So, does that make this movement more or less likely to be taken advantage of?” Spark continued to probe.

“Shit I guess more likely, as soon as these jackasses find someone to rally behind, there won’t even need to be a Stalin

seizing power. These guys are so hungry for a direction, they'll willingly follow whoever rises up."

"Yep," Spark agreed with his young pupil.

"So whatcha think Spark? This leader gonna come from one of the autonomous zones? Or what?"

"No Ty, I think of them as mini-True Believers, even the ones that don't really believe in anything, ironically. No, I think we're going to see a major player step up soon. The power behind that person is where the real mystery lies."

"Whoahhhh, that's deep ol' Man," Ty jabbed at Spark, poking fun at his dramatic declaration. You don't think this is a natural phenomenon then?"

"Whatchu drivin' at, Ty?"

"Well, remember when we were studying the Marxist Theory of History?"

"Yep."

"So, history was broken down into," Ty paused and smiled at Spark, "this part is extra-credit just so you know."

"My ass. This Cracker doesn't give extra credit, but please continue," Spark laughed at Ty as he motioned him to proceed.

"Ha! Okay so history, according to Marx, was broken down into the ancient society, the feudal society, and the capitalist society."

“Yeah?”

“And moving from one stage to the other was inevitable, leading to the determinist theory that we would ultimately end up with the fourth epoch of socialism.”

“And what, according to Marx, was going to be the catalyst to cause this jump?”

“Oh, the conflict of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, right?”

“Yeah that’s right, that’s Marx’s theory. But I’m not sure if that’s what we’re going through right now,” Spark leaned back and scratched his beard. “Don’t get me wrong, I’ve been thinking the same thing, but there’s a few things that don’t totally add up,” Spark commented as he transitioned from teacher to prognosticator. “The rioters are burning places to the ground, not because they are rebelling over living conditions or anything. Hell most of the people rioting and looting are spoiled beyond belief, historically speaking.”

“Yeah, well spoiled kids make shitty adults, as you always say,” Ty pointed out.

“Yeah, but these people just don’t realize just how amazing they have it. Think about it, just how many of those people live without power and water? Sure, they might get it cut off for a short time, but after the Compassionate Utility Act was put into place a couple of years ago, all that gets automatically paid. Just gotta call with your Social Security Number and violá, you’re good for the month. By virtue of that alone,

citizens of the US, and non-citizens too, are in the top one percent of the world. Now what do you think is the percentage of people out there rioting, looting, and carrying on that have smart phones? Appliances in their home? Hell, a home in general?"

"Pretty high, I'm sure," Ty answered back.

"You're damn right it's pretty high, so they're not experiencing large scale suffering. That's what gives me pause thinking this is some sort of natural or organic workers' revolt. Hell, it would be better if it was a workers' revolt. Then there might actually be people willing to work. No Ty, this is something different, this is deeper somehow, psychologically. A violent lashing out by hundreds of thousands of kids that are having a value crisis."

"Is this a Spark Original theory?" Ty queried his long-time instructor.

"Hm, I'm sure someone smarter than me has already formulated this down better than I. I'm just sorta just thinking out loud. But I can't escape a few simple trends. The reduction in faith or belief in God is down about fifteen percent from a decade ago, and that was down some percentage the decade before that. I can't help but hypothesize a connection that if you don't believe in a higher power, or equally important, an absolute truth, the only other option is a relativistic truth, which honestly doesn't mean anything."

“Oh, you mean like when the Eat, Pray, Love gals get on TV and how they talk about, oh, how do they put it...speak your own truth.”

“Yeah exactly, they’ve convinced themselves that everyone is entitled to their own version of truth, and really all that does is neuter the word truth. But if you think truth is something that exists regardless of your feelings about it, regardless of your specific perceptions or experiences, then it is something to strive for, acting like a filter by which to see the world.”

“You sayin that these people need some Jesus in their lives.”

“Well that’s just it, Ty, I’ve been in overly religious communities in the past, and let me tell you, they got their own problems in those places. Gossipin’-judgemental-asses. Hell they don’t like to admit it, but they tend to do more to push people away from Christ than bring them towards Him.”

“But you’re a Christian Spark, so how do you solve that?”

“It really comes down to personal accountability, from the religious standpoint, I think. The challenge is convincing people to let go of the control over their own decisions and to live by a code. In our case that code is Christianity, but these kids have no philosophically coherent code from what I can tell.”

“Yeah that ain’t exactly an easy sell.”

“Well it was a lot easier when people were scared of damnation. Proof of Hell, Ty. That’s what would solve it.”

“Well aren’t we sorta seeing Hell play out before us?” Ty asked as he motioned to the TV, which had been on mute during their conversation. “Look, it’s nothing but hellfire, people crying, frustration, and in some places, you’ve got weird sexual perversions playing out on the street, along with celebrations of abortions. I mean, I didn’t get to that chapter in Dante’s *Inferno*. but it’s hard not to see that as Hell.”

“Good point. We have been rather effective in turning away from Christianity and inviting Hell on Earth. Shoot, maybe that’s how we should interpret the Bible. Not just a guide to the afterlife. That’s always felt a bit ethereal and far off anyway. Maybe if we look at it as a guide for right here, right now. Create your own Heaven here as much as you can by keeping the Truth,” Spark said trying to conclude his musings.

“So, this is all about a lack of faith for the true-believers then?” Ty asked, hoping to sum up the random threads of consciousness that had been coming from Spark.

“I think that’s part of it. But I think there’s something more. There’s that feeling everything’s a bit too scripted, you know. We all know the media is slanted, but now it’s more than slanted, they’ve lost all respect for the viewer to be able to discern when they’re being lied to. Hell, each network uses the exact same phrases and shares the same viewpoints. And I don’t mean sorta close, I mean word-for-damn-word.”

“So, who benefits?” Ty asked.

“What?” Spark queried back, slightly caught off guard.



“Who benefits? You always say that most things in life can be boiled down to the basic fundamentals of economics, right? Who benefits, and what’s the incentive. If there is a hand pulling the strings here, what hand benefits the most? We already know the incentive, in a way. That’s gonna be power in whatever society looks like after this. I’ll tell you what I think.”

“What’s that Ty?” Spark asked, his curiosity in his apprentice’s theory piqued.

“Watch Big Blue, see how they have been amassing membership? Those guys were a small-time liberal technocrat firm a short time ago. Now look at them. They’re basically in charge of every union in the US, from governmental to commercial. And their golden-boy, or what did I hear them call him the other day, The Golden Dragon, yeah that was it. Karston, what’s his name, Karston Shilling, that’s it! Man, the media slobbers all over him every time he even gets near a camera.”

“Yeah Ty, that’s as good as any idea I’ve had.”

“You let me know if you have any other questions Spark, I’m always here,” Ty jokingly shot back at him.

“You’re a little shit you know that?” Spark said with a smile, unable to hide the pride he felt when he and Ty’s lessons turned into deep-dive conversations.

“Hey so since we’re done with class for the day,” Ty made air

quotes as he asked, “Can we get some target practice in? I wanna try that new semi-auto shotgun you got.”

“One sec Ty,” Spark laid the mail down on the table, and stared at the return to sender, recipient deceased stamp on top of a bundle of letters wound together with a rubber band. “Grab a couple of beers and let’s talk about your mother first,” Spark sighed as he began a conversation that he has rehearsed a thousand times in his head.



### Big Blue Fundraiser

“Rebecca, so glad you could make it. Come sit at our table up front,” Susan called out as she got a wide-eyed Rebecca’s attention from across the room.

Rebecca grabbed Cinna’s hand and pulled her past the ornately decorated tables. “Ooh don’t look, but over there is the head of the Florida Pride Chapter, and with them Florida’s Islamic Outreach Coordinator for Big Blue,” Rebecca excitedly whispered to Cinna as they zig-zagged their way through the tables to the front of the banquet hall.

“Oh Rebecca, I’m sorry this is so embarrassing. You didn’t ask for a plus one tonight? I’m sorry dear, we can try to get you a seat in the back if that’s okay,” Susan, dressed in a low-cut sequined evening gown, informed the pair.

Cinna, embarrassed, both feeling underdressed and at being the only person there with blue/purple hair, looked at

Rebecca. “Please don’t worry about me, I’m a bit outta place here anyway. I’m gonna sneak out the back in a bit,” Cinna said as she kissed a noticeably uncomfortable Rebecca on the cheek. This prompted a knowing smirk from Susan.

“K, bye, I guess,” Rebecca said awkwardly.

“I take it Mommy and Daddy Brenton don’t know about this?” Susan asked, motioning to her.

“No, not really. You know how they are.”

“All too well,” Susan retorted.

Any feelings of sadness Rebecca felt for Cinna having to leave, quickly diminished as Susan introduced her around the table.

As she walked away, Cinna looked back to see if her lover was watching her. “Shit I wish I’d known, I would’ve stayed in Gainesville and gone to the art exhibit. But she looks happy, this is her element,” Cinna thought at she found an empty chair near a side exit to a hallway.

“Okay, so this well-dressed man is Diego Assantino, Senior Advisor to the man of the hour tonight, Congressman Karston Shilling.”

Rebecca’s eyes first met Mr. Assantino, who neither offered a handshake nor even uncrossed his hands folded in front of him, rather he just nodded from behind his ridiculously small framed rectangular glasses. Seated to his immediate left, looking down at his phone was the famous Congressman. As

he glanced up, his eyes drew wide on Rebecca's form fitted little black evening dress. Her fiery red hair stood out in an otherwise sea of mediocre greys and blacks.

"And who is this charming creature you've brought for me tonight, Susan?"

Susan, uneasy and jealous at the pleasure Rebecca's appearance obviously created for the Congressman, steadied herself before continuing. "This is my longtime family friend, Rebecca Brenton. She helped to organize our anti-gun protest at the University of Florida last month and is quite the little go-getter. I can see her doing very well for Big Blue moving forward."

"Yes, I can see that," Karston let slip while looking over Rebecca's athletic build. Rebecca was used to being lusted after, as a prominent figure on a college campus. It rather went with the territory, but this was different. This was a man that could set her career in motion, not just a frazzled hippy soy boy that just read his first Howard Zinn book.

"A pleasure to meet you, Congressman," Rebecca confidently shot her hand to Mr. Shilling. "I've been a big fan for a long time, anything at all I can do for you or Big Blue, I'm ready."

"Oh, I'm sure we'll put you to good use, Ms. Brenton," Karston gently voiced as his hands wrapped around Rebecca's in what was less of a handshake and more of an act of intimacy known only to the two participants despite their crowded setting.

Rebecca gave the same feeling gesture back to him while holding eye contact.

Susan quickly interrupted to break the unspoken flirting that was taking place. “Oh look, it’s time to get started, here sit.” Susan abruptly pulled Rebecca to her left, placing herself between Karston and the young redhead.

“You know Rebecca, we’ll be having some openings at Big Blue in Florida coming up, I do hope you’ll consider applying?” Karston suggested.

Rebecca’s eyes grew wide, “You can count on it, I’m your gal,” she said as her attempt to hide her country accent betrayed her.

“Oh, a country girl, heh?” Karston responded with one eyebrow slightly cocked.

“Oh yes, her family is from Hicksville,” Susan interjected herself into the conversation that was taking place over and around her.

“Well then,” Karston lifting his water glass in Rebecca’s direction, “Ride ’em, Cowgirl.”

“YeeHaw,” Rebecca said, lifting her glass back to the Congressman, not breaking eye contact.

Susan could feel her face contort at the uncomfortable position she had found herself.

“Keep it together Susan,” she said to herself, “it’s harmless. Karston wouldn’t have had you sit at the table with him if he wasn’t interested. Rebecca’s cute, but that’s it. You and Karston have history. Jealousy is a turn off and if you are going to have the Congressman tonight, turnoffs are not going to happen.”

“Mizz Zaury, is everything all right?” Diego broke his stoic demeanor to ask.

“Oh yes, Mr. Assantino. I’m just going through my speech in my head is all.”

“Of course, Mizz Zaury. When you are done with your zpeech, can come to the Congrezzman’s hotel room? We have many questionz for you.”

“Certainly Mr. Assantino, it would be my pleasure,” Susan politely responded. “There,” a recomposed Susan thought as she started to feel more like herself, “Back on track.”



Having delivered her speech and introduced the Congressman to the audience, Susan made her way down the hallway past the empty chair that once held Rebecca’s plus one. “Wonder where she went?” Susan whispered, despite not really caring.

Susan stopped outside of Congressman Shilling’s suite, reapplied her lipstick, and knocked on the door. She assumed that Mr. Assantino would let her in and either excuse himself or hang around for a bit. Susan found herself amused and

aroused at the myriad of ways tonight might go. “Diego seems like he’s a watcher, which hey, that’s fine. Whatever gets you where you’re going,” Susan thought.

“Here Mizz Zaury,” Diego hissed from the next door down.

“That door iz to the bedroom, Mizz Zaury. We will be meeting in the zuite’s main room.”

“Oh, of course Diego, may I call you Diego?” Susan flirtatiously giggled as she spoke.

“Miztah Assantino will zuffice, Mizz Zaury. Please zit down and we may begin,” Diego responded with no indication of returning her flirtations.

What occurred over the next 30 minutes was a far cry from the erotic escapades Susan had imagined. Rather, it was an endless stream of probing and personal interrogations about Susan Saury’s beliefs, her family, her child, her past affiliations, overseas travel.

“Now you zay you and your huzband, a Thomaz Zaury, are not on good termz? Does he have any information about you that could be damaging in any way?”

“No, like I said, I’m already getting the divorce papers drafted, I just haven’t delivered them yet and he’s not really relevant in anyway.” Susan exhaustedly replied, as she felt as though she had already covered this topic at least three times.

“And you zaid he is rather deprezzed no?” Diego flipped back

over his notes, “Yezz, here it iz, ‘a broken man, with one foot in the grave.’ Thank you,” Diego said, apparently answering his own query before Susan could even speak up. “You will hold off on delivering divorce paperz, Mizz Zaury, divorceez do not trend as well as other typez of women.”

Susan struggled to hold in her surprise, this is the first time in the exhaustingly long interview that she was given a direction, as opposed to just answering questions. “Whatever best serves the cause and Congressman Shilling, Mr. Assantino. But yes, honestly, he’s a broken man. He’s not like Karston. Speaking of Karston, will be he joining us after his speech.”

“Hiz zpeech ended 15 minutes ago Mizz Zaury, he will come in if and when he feelz like it.” Diego was fully aware of Susan Saury’s desire for the evening, though unable to pretend to care. His job for the evening was the vetting of a potential administrator, he didn’t have time for, what he considered, frivolous interests of the flesh. “Mizz Zaury, I hope you are intelligent enough to underztand that Congrezzman Shilling and I need people that are above all elze, completely loyal.”

“Yes, of course, Mr. Assantino.”

“And that loyalty comes before any childish crush one may, or may not, have on the Congrezzman.”

Susan Saury clearly got the message and nodded subserviently.

“And we will need zomeone willing to move immediately to Washington D.C. with no delay.”



“I’m honored to even be thought of for this, but I will need to go home, of course, to pack.”

“We can have zomeone bring your thingz to you Mizz Zaury. Our plane leaves in two hourz, if you want this opportunity you can have it, but it will not be here in the morning. Do you underztand what I mean about loyalty Mizz Zaury?”

“Clearly Mr. Assantino.”

“Thank You Mizz Zaury, I will zee you at the front dezlk in one hour. If I do not, you will enjoy Florida for the rest of your career, do we have an agreement, Mizz Zaury?”

“I’ll be there, Mr. Assantino. You can count on me.” Susan stood from the table and pulled down on the ends of her dress to reform it to her body. As Susan straightened herself, she looked the strange interrogator in the eyes. “Thank you again, Mr. Assantino,” she said as she shot her hand out to the man that was offering this chance. A chance at a life she had barely let herself even dream of up to this point. Now, more than ever she wanted the monotonous existence she had back at home with Thomas to come to an end.

“59 minutes, Mizz Zaury,” Diego calmly said as he looked at Susan’s hand without a hint of offering his own. Diego’s hands busily typed away on his smartphone.

```
{Cmd: Suicide, name = Thomas + Saury, Time =  
midnight_to_sunrise, Method = Gun_if_owner,  
fantanyl_if_not, Note to follow on confirmation}
```

As Susan left the doorway to the Congressman's suite, she had come to terms with not being with Karston physically tonight. "Tonight, is about my career, not my ass. He must really respect the work I'm doing. I'm not totally sure what the job is, but it's going to be in D.C. and that's a win by any measure."

Susan had barely finished the thought when she looked to her right and saw Congressman Shilling with Rebecca in tow, fumbling to get into his room.

"Hey Susan, great choice with this one. You gonna be on the plane?" the Congressman asked.

Susan, feeling the foreign sensation of rejection, was frozen. As she stood in the hallway, the feeling of jealousy welled up in her as she watched Karston touch Rebecca with a romantic familiarity that she desired.

Rebecca felt the tension and spoke up to break the silence, albeit without looking Susan in the eye, "Crazy night huh, Aunt Sue?"

Susan tried to hide her contempt for Rebecca, by answering innocently through gritted teeth "Of course, Congressman, I'll see you there."

"K," he quickly answered as he opened the door and he and Rebecca started to disappear into the Congressman's quarters.

"See ya," the Congressman said turning his attention to his latest acquisition. "Now you come here you little hellcat. Yeah right here, no, no time for the bed—"

The Congressman's door closed. Susan felt a rollercoaster of emotions, she was going to D.C. but not how she wanted. She was moving up but felt alone.

"57 minutes Mizz Zaury," Diego hissed as he walked by with his leather briefcase in hand.

Susan walked back to the banquet hall that was starting to thin out. She saw Cinna asking around for Rebecca with no success.

"Ms. Saury, have you seen Rebecca? She's my ride back home." The flustered young artist hurriedly asked.

With great satisfaction at knowing Rebecca's dalliance would come at a cost, "Yes, Cinna, if you wait outside room 112 down that hall, you should hear her."

A look of confusion descended upon Cinna as Susan confidently kept walking, barely slowing down to deliver her cryptic message.

"15 minutes to spare," Susan thought as she waited in the lobby.

"Good to see you Mizz Zaury," Mr. Assantino said as he calmly approached.

"FUCK ALL OF YOU, YOU PEOPLE ARE SICK! YOU'RE ALL EVIL!" a hysterical Cinna screamed towards Susan and Diego as security led her away.

"Hmm, poor girl. Probably a conservative," Susan quipped to Mr. Assantino.

D.F. Brent Sr.

“Doubtful Mizz Zaury, this does not make her incorrect though. You will last longer in D.C. the sooner you underztand this,” Diego said as he looked down at his phone.

{wetOps = true, Method = fentanyl, Notes = awaiting text for handwritten note}

“If you will excuse me Mizz Zaury, I have a letter to write, an aide will zee you to the plane.”



Washington D.C., Senate Chambers. 8PM

“Okay Jake, you ready?” Gabriel Moran asked his old friend as he looked at his watch and patted him on his leg.

“We both called in a ton of favors just to get these old goats to show up at Primetime, you’ve got CSPAN and every cable news network waiting on pins and needles, I think it’s time.”

“I’m scared Gabe,” the venerable Senior Senator from Utah confided to his southern friend.

“We all are Jake, that’s why you gotta do this,” Gabriel offered one last ounce of encouragement. “All right then get going.” Gabriel winked at his old friend as he turned to walk deliberately towards the lectern.



Worldwide Locations, Various News Channels

*“And we’re breaking from today’s protest coverage and the ongoing calls for VP Johnson to resign to look in live on the US*

*Senate, where apparently over 90 Senators have made their way to the floor to listen in on a speech from Jacoby Elders, the Senior Senator from Utah. Let's listen in."*

"Thank you, Madame President, my fellow Senators, my heart is bursting seeing you all make your way from your offices, from your fundraisers, from in front of the cable news cameras, to listen in to my remarks.

"My fellow Senators, our nation is sick. One half of our nation watches the news and sees uncontrolled riots. The other half watches different news and swells with pride that people are standing up for principles.

"Churches have burnt in the name of racial justice, private schools reduced to rubble for not teaching a particular curriculum, and for what? A better nation?

"Whereas, I was once resolute in my belief that these protests or riots, whatever you like, should be stopped, using military might if necessary. I now see that time has passed. We call ourselves the United States of America, but let us be honest with ourselves. Where exactly are we united? There is no aspect of life anymore that does not feel this gash, this schism of politics. Whereas, once we rallied around common beliefs of patriotism, justice, community; sadly, the very definitions of those principles can no longer be agreed upon.

"So, I ask you, I beg you, my fellow Senators, for you all know me, many of you have served with me my entire career, what

can be done? Day after day we come into this chamber and make empty speeches to an empty chamber. We make empty promises to empty chairs. Senators, I fear I misspoke earlier, our nation is not sick, our nation is broken in two.

“As a nation broken in two, how then can we hope to move forward? Senators look around, the reason we are all so familiar with each other is because we don’t even lose elections anymore. The last two election cycles we have a total of three seats switch parties, out of a hundred. It is even worse in the House. Due to perfectly orchestrated and algorithmically designed and gerrymandered districts, there had not been any seats change party hands in four years.

“Now, if we turned on the news and saw nothing but prosperity, if we saw a booming economy, if we saw racial harmony, I would call this Democratic Republic experiment a success. Sadly, I think we can all agree that it is not.

“Further, I think one thing we can agree on, is that we all think we could do better if only it wasn’t for the other political party.

“Senators, it breaks my heart to say this, but the beautiful country we inherited, the country that helped defeat the Nazis, the country that ushered in the exploration of Space, the Industrial Revolution, the Digital Revolution, the Information Age, all of these things and more, this country has failed. So, we must ask ourselves, Senators, can there be something better? Can we hope to leave our children and grandchildren a country where they can pursue their dreams?

“As I wrote these words, I had to resist the temptation of hope, the lethargic promise that things will work themselves out. The simple fact, Senators, when we cannot agree to definitions of what were once seemingly simple concepts of life, man & woman, freedom, health care, even the definition of history, has been called into question. When we can no longer agree to basic concepts, we cannot have shared visions, we cannot have shared values, we cannot have a shared future.

“So, Senators, my friends, upon completion of my time I will be asking the Republican leadership to establish a standing committee to explore...excuse me I’m sorry, you’ll forgive an old man for getting emotional. Senators I will be asking the leadership to establish a standing committee to explore an equitable and workable separation of our once great nation.

“I can see you all have questions. We all should labor to explore these questions to find workable solutions to each. Perhaps as co-equal nations, we can help to restore the promise of opportunity we have all taken for granted. From the ashes of this experiment, perhaps we can all rise to a better stronger tomorrow. Thank you Madame President, I yield back my time.”

*“Wow, big news out of the Senate tonight Jerry,”*

*“Yes Bob, and if you look, you can see the Senators, all except Senator Moran, Senator Elders’ longtime confidant, staring at their phones awaiting the results of their insta-polling.”*

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

*“Yes, Senator Moran has been clapping for his friend since he finished up and look at that.”*

*“Yes, as is evident from the Senators reaction, this speech is being widely praised, both from the Liberty Caucus Conservatives and the Big Blue Progressives.”*

*“Jerry, we haven’t seen both sides offer standing applause in as long as I can remember.”*

*“Shockwaves Bob, that’s all I can think, we are witnessing shockwaves.”*

*“Thank you for joining us this evening. To recap, Senator Jacoby Elders from Utah, perhaps the most respected voice in that hallowed chamber, has just called for a standing committee to split the United States of America into two separate and as he called it, co-equal nations. Let’s go back to Capitol Hill for reaction.*



## Chapter 5 : Condolences

### Brenton House

Three months passed since Thomas's funeral, though not a day for Kat. The hours passed, the sun rose and set, but for all intents and purposes Kat was still stuck in the moment after she received word that her father was found dead in his garage seat with a suicide note atop his mini-fridge, and enough fentanyl in his veins to kill a quartet of men.

The senselessness of it all confused her. She knew her father was depressed. She watched her entire life as he endured the sniping comments, the emasculating remarks, the chipping away at his self-esteem until there was little left of the heroic figure that would spend his days off building Lego fortresses with her. The man that would stay up at night teaching her the color bands on resistors, the inner workings of relay switches, and a million other tech disciplines that she had since mastered.

"No, that man was no drug addict," She thought. And then there was the note, she only saw it once, but was sent a photocopy of it from the police. Kat couldn't shake the feeling that they were not her daddy's words. The tone of the letter, the way he was apologizing to Susan for jealousy of her career,

“that was not Daddy.” She knew it to her core.

“Hey baby,” Matty said as he stuck his head into what was once his sister’s room to check on Kat. “You wanna try to have some breakfast today?”

“No, but I’ll come down there. Sit with me Matty.” Kat stared blankly as she lay on her side.

As Matty approached, he saw the image of her father’s suicide note was still on her phone’s screen. “Kat, re-reading that might not be helping.”

“I know Matty. Hey, take me somewhere today.”

Kat surprised Matty with the request. “Okay, wherever you wanna go.”

“I don’t want to choose, just take me and Derek into town, I need to see something other than these four walls.”

“Let’s get some breakfast first.”

“I’m not really hungry, but I’ll try to eat something. Clothes aren’t really fitting too well anymore.” Kat looked over at the pile of dirty laundry on the floor as she spoke.

“Hey, can you tell your mom I need to do some laundry?” Kat asked, barely able to raise her voice above a whisper.

“Don’t worry, Mom will take care of it.”

Kat lifted herself up to sit on the edge of the bed with Matty. “I love you all, Matty. I don’t know why you guys put up with

me, I've turned into the specter that haunts this house."

"Kat, one, we all love you, and two, the folks think of you as their daughter already. Hell we both know they like you more than me," Matty quipped as he tried in vain to lighten the mood.

"Well just tell them I'm sorry."

"You've got nothing to be sorry for, they're all hurting. Well except Derek, he doesn't really get what's happening. But this was a loss for everyone, you're just getting the worst of it."

"He's the lucky one."

"Yeah, probably, he's got you and Mom looking out for him. So, I'd say he's pretty lucky," Matty said as he gently rubbed Kat's back.

As the two young lovers sat on the bed, Kat laid her head on Matty's shoulder, "Promise me you'll never die Matty."

"That's a pretty tall order, Kat," Matt stammered out.

"Just do it."

"Okay, I promise, I'll live right up until after you."

"Good boy. Now get out of here so I can get dressed and play human."

"Okay, but you're coming down, right?"

"Yeah, just gimme a couple of minutes my love."

Matty noticed the saltiness of the dried tears on her cheek when he kissed her. “It’s gonna get better baby, I promise.”

As Kat slowly looked around the floor for something that might be moderately clean, she could hear that Matty just informed Derek that Kat would be joining them for breakfast.

“KAT! KAT! PLAY ME!” Kat heard Derek’s celebratory exclamation from the kitchen, up the stairs and into her bedroom. A hint of a smile traced her lips. Although faint, it was as big as she had been capable of since her father died.

“There, Pearl Jam Alive Guy shirt, that’s fitting for today,” She thought to herself as she shook it out in an effort to restore its freshness.



“Caleb, Hun, stay there for a sec, I gotta ask you something,” Michelle called out from the kitchen window. “Matty set the table will yah? I want to check something with your father.”

“Okay Mom, yeah sure.”

Caleb traded his chicken-feed bucket for his coffee cup and sat atop his coffee spool. “Whatcha got babe?”

“Hey, I meant to ask you about this months ago, but once Tommy died, I just forgot or didn’t care or something. Anyway, what’s going on Cay?” Michelle, too tired from recent events to be upset with her husband, handed Caleb a copy of the order list from Thurston’s.

“Oh yeah, well this is sorta a—” Caleb was taken by surprise, but quickly steadied himself. “So, Hon, this is a Me & Spark project we’ve had going for, well, a really long time.”

“Spark? Cay, what does Spark have to do with hazmat suites and military rations?”

“Ha-ha, well you’re probably gonna shit when you find out, but don’t worry it ain’t bad. Spark is coming up here tomorrow with Ty and we’ll go over all of it with you and the love birds then.”

Michelle looked at Caleb a bit sideways, “I’m intrigued, but still haven’t decided if it’s something I should be annoyed about yet. But all right, tomorrow then.”

“Seriously, Honey,” Caleb grabbed his wife by her hips and pulled her close. “It’s pretty damn cool, just gimme another day for Spark to get up here, He wants it to be a surprise for Ty, too.”

“You guys are weird.” Michelle, relieved she finally mentioned it to her husband, playfully pushed her husband’s head away with her pointer finger. “Finish feeding your children out here and get inside, Kat said she’s gonna come down for breakfast.”

“Oh good, that girl’s getting a bit skinny since *it* happened. Not that I can blame her,” Caleb said as he traded his coffee cup for the bucket of chicken feed.

“You know Matty said she thinks it was foul-play, or something. She said her dad would have never written that

note.”

“Hell, I thought the same thing Michelle. I just didn’t want to put any thoughts like that in her head. But shit, that girl’s smart enough to see through whatever that was. I’m not gonna encourage that line of thinking, not right now anyway. My feeling is that that line will end up at Susan’s doorstep, and that’s the last thing that girl needs,” Caleb explained.

“Well you always said that woman would be the death of him,” Michelle said double checking to make sure they were still alone with the chickens.

“Yeah, we’ve got enough to worry about than to cross paths with that succubus. She seems to be leaving Kat alone, that’s about all I want from that...woman.” Caleb caught himself before invoking too crude of a word in front of his wife.

“Good catch there Cay, but yeah I’ll say it, she’s a cunt,” Michelle said before peeling away to go back inside the house.

“Love yah, honey,” Caleb called out as Michelle walked back into the house. Maybe it was Michelle’s kind demeanor, or her maternal aura she gave off, but Caleb loved nothing more than when she swore, it made him laugh every time.



Congressman Shilling’s Office, Washington D.C.

“Hi, Um Mister Assantino Sir, the Congressman said he didn’t want to be disturbed,” A flustered young secretary blurted out

as Diego Assantino strode though the waiting room to the Congressman's chambers. Chamber's that were normally reserved for members with seniority, not someone as junior as Karston Shilling. However, his prowess in raising campaign contributions for Big Blue and for other members in his party had secured him one of the nicer accommodations in the House of Representatives.

Diego Assantino paid the cookie cutter blonde at the desk no mind as he pushed open the Congressman's door to find him pleasantly leaning back in his high back chair.

"What are you doing Diego?" Karston blurted out when he noticed Diego's presence.

"Shut up," Diego demanded back as Karston's shoulders slouched and his head lowered in obedience. "We have work to do. Have you even zeen the newz thiz morning?"

"No, I've uh been uh working on—" Karston stammered out, still visibly uncomfortable at the intrusion.

"I do not care," Diego said as he grabbed the remote for the TV mounted to the right of Karston's desk. Karston could see Diego was annoyed, though to any other observer it was his normal air of mystery and fear.

*"... Anne, absolutely historic. We haven't had the resignation of a sitting Vice President since Spiro Agnew during the Nixon administration. As of yet we don't have official word from the White House, however highly placed sources have assured us*

D.F. Brent Sr.

*that it will be forthcoming. Anne, can you give us some indication as to what we can expect here moving forward?”*

*“Certainly Bob, Section 2 of the 25th Amendment to the Constitution clearly outlines what will happen if there is a vacancy in the Office of the Vice President. First, the President will meet with prospective candidates, and then make his decision as to who will be nominated. This would likely result in a nominee spending about a week on Capitol Hill lobbying members of both the House and the Senate for support. If the nominee passes both the House and the Senate, they will be, in all likelihood, quickly sworn in.”*

*“Thank you, Anne, and this begs the question, how does this affect, if at all, the work being done by Senators Elders and Moran leading the charge on what some have been calling The Great Separation or more informally The United States of Divorce?”*

*“That’s a great point Bob. We know that Veep Johnson was outspokenly opposed to the notion of dividing the United States into two ideologically governed co-equal nations; leading some to speculate that it was her pro-US position that ultimately got her pushed out. And to date, the White House still has made no public position on the proposal, though sources have assured me that President Beardon is opposed to the separation. To be clear though, we don’t know if the President asked for her resignation, or if it was simply public pressure. As you know, her resignation has been a rallying point for many of the*



*feminist groups that joined in the racial and social justice protests that have gripped the nation this year.”*

*“Yes, the perception that she was supporting Pro-Life organizations was certainly detrimental to her popularity amongst her base.”*

*“And rightfully so Bob, she was put on the ticket to shore up female support and this was seen by many as a betrayal.”*

Diego muted the television and placed the remote and a sheet of paper on the Congressman’s desk. “Here iz your itinerary for the day, Karzton”

“Would it kill you to call me Congres—” Karston meekly mumbled as he reached for the paper.

“And you may exit yourself from under the desk Mizz Zaury. Here iz a copy of your acceptance zpeech you will deliver tonight after the vote for Union Chief Administrator.”

Susan unfolded herself from under Karston’s desk and wiped her mouth as she ascended.

“And do try to remember you are ztill the grieving widow,” Diego hissed without breaking his gaze from the disheveled Congressman.

As Susan took the paper, her previous embarrassment gave way to a tinge of anger. “You don’t have to be a dick about it, Diego.”

Diego slowly turned his head and widened his eyes as he addressed the sore-knee'd brunette beauty whose real age continued to defy her looks.

"You will addrezz me as Miztah Azzantino, and the zooner you realize that your place iz not acting like a College-aged meat zack, the better. If you choose to be an incorrect choice," Diego stopped himself and took a step towards Susan. His proximity gave her chills and a knot in her stomach. "we will replace you and you will be joining your dearly departed. The time for playtime iz over. Are we clear Mizz Zaury?"

Susan instinctively looked over to Karston, hoping that he would stand up for her to Diego. "He works for him after all," she thought as Karston passively dropped his head to avoid any perception of taking a side against Diego.

"Mizz Zaury, are we clear?" Diego enunciated each word as he continued to look down at Susan through his rectangle framed glasses.

"Ye...Ye...Yes," Susan stuttered as the power dynamic in the room came into focus.

"Ye...Ye...Yes...What?" Diego mockingly shot back at her to further drive home the point that he was not only in charge, but not to be questioned.

"Yes, Mister Assantino, I understand," Susan looked down at her rumpled grey dress she wore to visit the man, who only minutes earlier, she was infatuated with.

“Good, thiz will be the last converzation we have in thiz office, Mizz Zaury. I will contact you when you are needed,” Diego said as he turned his attention back to today’s itinerary with the Congressman. “Good Day Mizz Zaury, you would be wize to not dizzappoint me again.”

The message to Susan was clear, stay away from the Congressman unless Diego authorized it, and above all stay out of Diego’s way.

As Susan straightened herself and walked out of the office, she looked back to see Diego was already at Congressman Shilling’s side instructing him on the days upcoming schedule.

“Piece of shit could have at least looked back,” Susan instinctively thought in a reflexive scorn she had reserved for Thomas when he was alive. Diego’s mention of Thomas’s death did not cause any sadness or grief to the hyper-sexualized widow, though it did anger her. “Fuck Diego, trying to take credit for Thomas’s death. Thomas couldn’t handle my success, that’s why he pussied out.” Susan silently seethed to herself, unable to face the obvious reality of the situation. She walked down the corridor, shaking her head as a way to physically rattle loose the thoughts that crept into her mind. As she looked down to select her ride-share app from her phone, Susan stopped to think “Okay, so what says sexy, grieving, and powerful all at once? Hm, I need to go try something on.”



Senator Moran's Office, Washington D.C.

"Well, there you have it, another one bites the dust," Senator Gabriel Moran said as he walked into his office.

"Sam dear, be a doll and see if you can get a message to your boyfriend that works in the Veep's office," Gabriel said as he tilted his head over his shoulder to point his words towards his assistant's desk.

"I'm sorry Senator, but he was let go before work this morning. He was permitted to enter the Veep's Office this morning to clear out his desk, then he had to turn his badge and phone in."

"Oh Samantha, I'm sorry about that dear, he seemed like a good kid, I'm sure he'll find something."

"Oh, Big Blue has already reached out to him," Samantha Croker, Senator Moran's long serving executive assistant cheerily offered back.

Gabriel thought, "Shit, I'm gonna have to watch what I say around that kid now. Fuckin Big Blue. An activist group that collects other activist groups. Those fuckers are putting some of the biggest lobbying firms out of business." Gabriel clenched his teeth. "Ride the Big Blue Wave or Get Left Out. Fuckin assholes," he recounted the group's slogan. He addressed his assistant again. "Okay then Sam, do me a favor and at least order some flowers to be sent to Cassandra's home, I think she was from Oakland right?"

“Fresno Senator, but you had the right state,” Samantha always found a way to hide a compliment or word of encouragement every time she had to correct the Senator, likely a carryover from her previous career as an elementary school teacher.

“And one more thing Sam, am I meeting with Senator Elders today?”

“He’s on his way here right now Senator, excellent memory!”

Gabriel was just about to inform her that her pleasantries weren’t necessary when the thought crossed his mind “Shit Gabriel, courtesy and kindness are in short supply these days, just enjoy it.” As he leaned back in his chair to look out his office window, he could see smoke rising on the horizon. In his mind he was trying to place where this latest protest, turned riot, turned arson, was occurring. “Damn, that looks like it’s near the Montessori school,” Gabriel considered, recalling back over 40 years earlier, taking his wife there to check it out when they were looking at possibly schooling their children in D.C.

“Good morning Samantha, I must say you are looking lovely as ever.” Gabriel heard the ever-affable Jacoby Elders greet his assistant. “Is that lavender I smell?”

Samantha pointed to the potpourri burner on the guest table next to the waiting chairs, “We’ve had lots of guests today, tends to get a bit stale in here.”

Senator Elders let a chuckle slip out as he nodded. "Yes, your boss has informed me of his theories concerning too many people transiting the waiting area. Good to see you as always, dear."

"Jake come on in here and stop trying to steal the help," Gabriel hollered out to his old friend as Jacoby smiled one last time at Samantha. "So, you hear about Cassandra?"

"Yeah Gabe, you called it."

"Shoot man wish I had been wrong. The same creeps celebrating her departure were singing her praises just two years ago."

"Two years can be a lifetime in this business my friend."

"So, what's this mean for the Great Divorce Jake?"

"Hm, you know Gabe, I was still holding out hope that our little speech would be a wakeup call to get people to try to get along. I know, I know, I'm a romantic," Jacoby said in acknowledgment of the smirk on Gabriel's face.

"Wasn't *our* speech, old man, didn't you hear the news? They are calling it the establishment of the Elders Doctrine? My skinny country butt wasn't up there giving that speech," Gabriel reminded the Senior Senator from Utah.

"Oh, enough of you Moran. You wrote just as much of that speech as I did."

"Yeah, but that ain't what's bein' reported, so it ain't true!"

“Whatever, you’re still co-chairing the standing committee.”

“Oh, you know what they’re calling that now?” Gabriel motioned up to the television, “The Elders Council, sounds very JRR Tolkien-esque if you ask me.”

“Well I never thought I’d be famous for dismantling the United States, but I guess you need to have something interesting for the tombstone,” Jacoby joked in his signature fatalistic fashion.

“Jesus, Jake, don’t talk like that, shoot not nowadays. This invisible cancer or whatever it is, just took down a Veep, takin one of us out wouldn’t even cause it to break a sweat”

“Okay Gabe, fair enough. Let’s take a look at where we’re at today before Committee.”

“Let’s see, we’ve got a few interesting issues; State Governors of course want to keep the borders where they are, but even they are starting to see the light on the unworkability of that. Here’s a couple of maps. The first one is based on straight congressional districts. This would also make for a nightmare due to the gerrymandered districts. Next one here is a breakdown of urban vs. rural classification. Now, this one I think is a good starting point, with some exceptions of course. Jacksonville down south, some of South Carolina’s metro areas. You’ve got a good numbers guy, right?” Gabriel asked as he recounted through his notes.

“Yeah, shoot, what’s his name? I’ll think of it later. Anyway, yeah it was the young guy that helped me map out my last campaign based on religious turnout,” Jacoby recalled a much simpler time, when his biggest concern was winning reelection as opposed to the equitable distribution of the World’s once most powerful country.

“Sounds great, let’s get that kid in the working group. I’ve got a couple of people from the polling firms that had some good input. So far, the highest correlation value seems to be belief in God, but I don’t think we want to frame it that way, next thing you know this ideological split becomes a Religious Schism,” Gabriel pointed out.

“Good point, the talking heads are already claiming that the more conservative areas are going to be ripe for a theocracy. Okay, so that’s geography for us, how about mineral and water rights?” Jacoby said as he looked up to the turned off television hanging on Gabriel’s wall.

“Well we aren’t the ones hell bent on telling everyone what to think, but whatever,” Gabriel mumbled as he kept going through his committee paperwork. “We’ve got members of the delegations from Nevada, Colorado, Mississippi, and Louisiana heading that up. That’s likely going to be a source of contention, but let’s give them a couple of more weeks before we finalize that,” Gabriel continued on as he flipped through his notes.



“Now then, the biggie; the military. How about we let them vote and winner takes all?” Jacoby joked, knowing that would leave the liberal faction without military support.

“Yeah old man, don’t forget, I still need to sell this to my people. Let’s just stick to asset allocation for now. I’ve got the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs coming into committee today to brief him on the plan we’ll need, but I’m told they’re already drafting a rough proposal. But they are intent on their own 5-year plan and acting as a regional protector during the transition. Honestly it’s probably the best possible scenario,” Gabriel informed his friend as Jacoby put an X next to that item on his list.

“The next big thing is the business community, Chamber of Commerce crowd. What are your thoughts? Because honestly, I haven’t had the bandwidth to deal with it the past few days, despite my office being flooded with business reps.”

“The few groups that have reached out have made it clear that they want to be in the Conservative realm for legislation, but don’t want to lose out on the big liberal markets. Which isn’t exactly a surprise.”

“Where’s the common ground on this one Gabe? Business Autonomous Zones? Free Trade between countries? I mean hell if we don’t iron out some kind of Trade Agreement before we get started, the farming lobby is going to put up a helluva fight. We’re gonna need their support in the long run. And

don't forget about data services, won't they take a massive hit? This means a trade agreement will have to cover utilities, data, all sorts of things I'm probably not even thinking of right now."

"Yeah, the farming lobby has reached out multiple times, they really don't want to lose their subsidies, but that's just a tough pill they're going to have to swallow. As far as data services, some of the bigger data service providers already have their server farms in the Midwest for security reasons, so I'm confident that we can come to an agreement on that," Jacoby said as he looked over his briefing that his staff prepared for him covering the separations impact on tech.

"Do you remember who the Trade Rep from Ohio was last term? Sarzak? No, that's not right." Gabriel tapped his pointed chin with the end of his pen before bellowing into his front office. "Sam, who was the trade rep that went to China last year?"

"That was Martin Foster, Senator. He's at Big Blue now," replied a cheerful Samantha Croker.

"Thanks, Sam," Gabriel hollered back as his assistant was refreshing her plate of potpourri.

"Well he's out," Jacoby quipped.

"Unfortunately, Jake, we're gonna have to involve them. They own too much of this town to be passed over. Which brings me to another point."

“What’s that Gabe?”

“The Media,” Gabriel tipped his head towards the dark screen of his television.

“Do we have to?” Jacoby asked as he slunk down into his chair.

“If we don’t throw them a bone, they could scuttle the whole damn thing. So, in my humble opinion Senator, we need to bring in at least a couple to talk about how good things are going. We really need to shape the Best of Both Worlds and the Win-Win narrative without letting it turn into a fight.”

“Got anyone in mind?” Jacoby inquired.

“Not yet. I was talking to Kitty about it last night and she brought up a good point. She said who gives a heck about which journalist it is. Ya’ll are thinking that the world is the same as it was 15-20 years ago. This is why you guys are in this pickle as it is. Bring in the Social Media Content Directors for all the big boys in Silicon Valley. That’s who decides what’s gonna get read. Nobody gives a hoot what the by-line on articles say except you old codgers. If it ain’t trending, it don’t matter, and if it don’t matter, it may as well not even have happened.”

“She’s not wrong you know, now I see why you put her in charge of your campaign

last cycle,” Jacoby admitted, slightly embarrassed that he had not realized Gabriel’s wife was as politically astute as her husband.

“So, what’s the plan? Get the big tech giants to come in and speak to the committee? We’ll hear their concerns and then we’ll have some off the record meetings with them afterwards?”

“Hopefully that will work. I’ll let you reach out to them though; I don’t think I have too many fans amongst that crowd after I grilled them on shadow-banning conservatives earlier this year,” Jacoby recounted as his thoughts drifted back to his exchanges that became viral video sensations throughout the conservative media.

“Sure, I’ll take that one, good call. This is exhausting Jake,” Gabriel said as he slouched back in his chair and tossed his pen and notes onto the table. “No matter how many issues we try to resolve in a day, ten more seem to grow on top of them.”

Jacoby sensed that Gabriel had reached the end of his wick for the day, “Let’s take a break and walk over to the cafeteria for a bite?”

“Music to my ears Jake-O, I don’t have the energy reserves I used to pull these late-night sessions.”

“Carving up a country does take a bit of energy,” Jacoby quipped as the two men stood from their seats.

“Well, thankfully this really should be the last time our old asses have to do it,” Gabriel remarked as he looked over the stacks of reports on his desk.

“Hey what’s on fire today?” Jacoby asked as he looked out the window past Gabriel.

“Oh, I think that’s the old Montessori Academy, or somewhere near it anyway. The heat is getting closer and closer these days my friend. Did you see the National Police have been trying to clear out the National Archives? Apparently, that’s next on the protester’s list. Something about burning the White Supremacist Patriarchy that the country was founded on. Or some other such garbage,” Gabriel sighed as he folded his notes into his briefcase.

“Where the hell did it all go so wrong, Gabe?” Jacoby asked, as tears welled up in his eyes.

“Oh, a million different places, Jake. Unfortunately, we’re just now paying for every mistake, every concession to the PC Police, every tiny little compromise of principles and common sense to have people get along. This is the bill coming due for not making hard choices, for looking the other way when they took prayer out of school, for appeasing the crowd when they demanded statues come down, for creating ghettos in once great cities. There were a million bad decisions that we made for the greater good that led us here. But really, when the Constitution and the very idea of liberty become politicized, that’s when it became apparent. That’s when I knew we were on a crash course with destiny.”

“Well Gabe, I guess it’s up to us to try to save as many as we can then,” Jacoby said as he collected himself from his somber

a moment. With a forced smile he threw his arm around Gabriel's shoulder. "Don't worry though, I won't tell your caucus that you are pro-school-prayer."

"Shoot, yeah I miss those days when you could talk about God, without feeling like a rebel," Gabriel lamented.

"You need me for anything else today, Sir?" Samantha called back to her Senator.

"No Sam, we're good."

"Oh, Sir one more thing, Congressman Shilling's Office called earlier. They'd like to schedule a meeting with you and Senator Elders at your earliest possible time."

"That's odd," Jacoby remarked as he finished shuffling his papers back into their leather-bound home. "What do you think that's about?"

"You're kidding me Jake, the next Veep and probably President wants to come bigfoot us."

"No, you don't really think they'll nominate him, do you? He's only been in the House for like ten minutes."

"Fifty spot says they do."

"You're on."

"You're a sucker Jacoby. I guess your momma never warned you about gambling with hillbillies."

## Chapter 6 : Forward

### Live Media Broadcast: Worldwide

*“This is really unprecedented Anne. Never in our Nation’s history have we seen a turnout quite so large, for what is really a formality. This looks more like a celebratory Presidential inauguration. Here at the newsroom our eyes are on the VIP section set up in front. Some of, no not some of, the biggest names in Hollywood, music, professional athletes, tech company CEO’s, and politics are all gathered here awaiting the man of the hour, Karston Shilling to take the stage. What’s the mood on the ground there?”*

*“Unprecedented is right Bob, we have not seen this type of fanfare since the famous election of 2008 that saw our nation’s highest office’s color ceiling shattered. And though the feeling then was a feeling of Hope and Change, the feeling this time is different, in so much that it’s not just centered on feelings, but rather an acknowledgement that the unfinished business of that presidency will now come to a conclusion. And you can see that from the signs and images all over this inauguration.”*

*“Excuse me, man, may I show your sign to our viewers.”*

*“Yes of course, Karston for President!”*

*“Well they are certainly excited there on the ground, Anne.”*

*“Very much so Bob, so here’s a sign we’re seeing a lot of, you see it’s the famous former President’s O symbol with the field and horizon in the center leading to the K for Karston. The message here is that President O set out the path that has led to Karston.”*

*“Ah, I see Anne, I was going to ask about the use of the OK hand gesture you see so many members of Big Blue making, as it was explained to me, this is how Big Blue is reclaiming the symbols and messages from the right. So, we can all thankfully retire the racist connotation that was once attributed to that signal, as it is now a symbol of progressive social equality. And Bob, I think we’re all OK, with that.”* Anne wrapped up her on the ground reporting with an exaggerated OK hand symbol.

*“I like that a lot Anne, and I can see that really taking off. Well OK to you to Anne!”* Bob signaled back to the camera as the split screen ends and the camera positioned itself to show his panel of guests.

*“Hassam, first to you. What does the ascension of this relative newcomer to politics mean to the Progressive National Baptist Conference, and to African Americans more importantly?”*

*“Thank you, Bob, this is a historic date for the Black Community and Karston Shilling, though he may suffer from an overall lack of melanin.”*

*“Haha, yes, that Scandinavian blood line is pretty strong in him,”* Bob jokingly quips back.



*“It’s true, it’s true!” Hassam Richards pats Bobs arm as he laughs. “In all seriousness though Bob, Karston has been an ally and fierce fighter for the Black Equality Movement, as he has been for all the members of his Big Blue organization. I’m happy to see that Karston is carrying on the great work that President O’s Administration started. As Karston once told me, ‘I may be white by birth, but just like me,’ and he pointed to my heart, ‘I’m Blue where it counts.’”*

*“Well I can’t think of a better unifying message than that, really a post-racial message we can all rally behind. Sandra we’re all familiar with your work in the #MeToo movement, and your latest book, No, You Make Me a Sandwich. How do you feel Karston’s ascension will affect the Women’s movement?”*

*“Bob, we couldn’t be happier about this nomination. Karston has shown, just earlier this morning as a matter of fact, his support for the great Susan Saury, who if I’m not mistaken, is seated just in the second row behind some of the Chinese delegation. Can we get a shot of that? Yes, looking stunning as ever. As I was saying, Karston tweeted out just this morning his endorsement and support for Ms. Saury, who despite being recently widowed, has stepped up as the Chief Union Administrator for the Unified Governmental Employees Union.”*

*“Yes, she made quite a bit of news herself last week during her acceptance speech. She announced the consolidation of the UGEU with Big Blue in what was called...yes here it is, The*

D.F. Brent Sr.

*marriage of social justice and worker's rights, to form, and I quote, 'a new progressive family, unencumbered by familial blood bonds, or social stigmas, that once kept us in the shadows and in the corners of our own lives, we say no more.'*"

*"Strong message from a strong woman there, Sandra."*

*"Absolutely, Bob."*

*"And when we return, the swearing in of Karston Shilling as our Nation's newest, and perhaps most popular, Vice President."*



### Spark's Compound

"Spark tell me something," Ty requested as he turned the TV off and laid the remote on the 1970's era side table.

"What's up, man?" Spark answered back from the kitchen.

"You think they know how ridiculous they sound? I mean I get it right, journalism is dead and all that, hell we've known that for years, but the level of idol worship here is nauseating."

"You're too young to remember Ty, but when we went to war with Iraq, one of the big catchphrases to explain that debacle was group-think."

"Oh yeah, you had me read something about that in the business journal, right?"

"That's right. So, the business world has been clued into that concept for a very long time. The idea that just because you

get a lot of people together to discuss something, human nature still takes over and crushes minority opinions.”

“Basically, no one wants to be *that guy*,” Ty said as he air-quoted.

“Exactly, so in business, *that guy* still has an opportunity, and that’s where a lot of entrepreneurial start-ups begin. Someone has an idea, they bring it forward to the group, and usually the older voices in the room, the ones with the most experience, tend to shoot down new ideas, because they weren’t what got them to their positions of leadership. So, that guy goes and starts his own business and sometimes eats his old company for lunch. Not always, but it does happen,” Spark said, as he took a seat with Ty on the couch.

“Anyway, back to the original point,” Spark realized he was on the precipice of one of his meandering streams of consciousness. “I think the news media, the anchors specifically, have that same sort of group think. Especially the panel guests that they bring in. They know that when they toe a perceived line, they get invited back, they get more airtime, and not inconsequentially, they keep getting appearance fees. But if they break out, push forward some original ideas, they run the risk of falling victim to their worst fear.”

“What’s these guys worst fear, Spark?” Ty asked as he looked over at Spark about to dig to into his sandwich.

“Irrelevance,” Spark said through a mouthful of hot ham and cheese.

“Ahh gotcha. That makes sense.” Ty gave Spark the OK symbol to poke fun and lighten the mood.

“Boy, you best put that symbol away or you gonna have some broken fingers,” Spark joked back at his son, knowing that his athletic and physical abilities made any such threat laughable.

“Hey man, we’re heading up to the Brenton’s today, right?” Ty asked.

“Yeah, do a me a favor and grab the manifest list off my desk in the office. We’ve got a shit ton to off load there and I wanna check everything first. We’ve only got the Big Rig for this week and I’d rather just make one trip up there, if at all possible.”

“Gotcha. Hey I wonder if Mrs. Brenton is gonna have some of them Peach Preserves? That stuff is amazing.”

“Oh, I’m sure she will. Now come on, move yah ass and meet me at the truck,” Spark said as he scarfed down the remainder of his sandwich.

As Spark walked out to the truck, he passed some of Ty’s old baseball equipment, his basketball goal, and some of their cans they would set up and plink with pellet guns together sitting on the porch. Spark never saw himself as much of a father-figure. He didn’t grow into it organically, he just inherited the job, but he did his best, thinking he wanted Ty’s road to be easier. Spark looked up at the Big Rig parked out front, with a packed out 40-foot trailer, and thought, “Hell, no one’s road is gonna be easy for a while.”

“Here you go, man. So how we gonna inventory this?”

“You get to practice your pallet climbing, Ty.”

Ty rolled his eyes and proceeded to bend down to lace up his work boots tighter.

“You know, Ty, you don’t know how lucky you have it.”

“Oh really, how’s that?”

“Well, most boys your age are busy just playing video games or chasing skirts, they never get to know the joys of inventory,” Spark said with an overabundance of sarcasm.

“Man, gee, that sure sounds awful. Those poor kids. Here, help me lower this platform so I can crawl my ass back there,” Ty gave a quick retort of equal sarcasm.

“The four pallets in the back should all be the same size, bottom half of the pallets should be fifteen Solar Panels,” Spark raised his voice so Ty could hear him as he did his best Spider-man impression going from stack to stack.

“Shit, hey man toss me a light. Shoulda thought of that before I got back here.”

Spark grabbed a heavy-duty Maglite from the truck’s cab and took off his shirt to wrap it around and tossed it towards Ty.

“Got it!” Ty hollered back as he engaged the light and started counting the panels from the bottom.

“Yeah, they’re all here. Lemme call out these boxes and you find them on your list, that’s easier than you just reading off your list and me trying to find everything.”

“Yep, go ahead.”

“On top of these pallets, looks like I’ve got three cases of twenty-five Microinverters, a system controller, a new power distribution panel, a whole bunch of breakers, and a box labeled transfer switch.”

Spark flipped through his pages on the manifest, putting an x next to everything that Ty called out.

“Okay, got ’em.”

“That’s it for those four in the back. The rest is a bit of a hodge-podge so it may take a while. Hey, I’ve got an idea.”

“What’s that?”

“Hold up, lemme crawl back out there and get my cell phone, I’ll just snap pics of everything and then we’ll cross reference.”

“Good idea, but no-can-do, we’re keeping all of this as off-the-grid as we can.”

“Oooh, sounds mysterious. What’s up?”

“Orders from Caleb, I’ve got a manifest stating it’s all going to some made up address for household goods movement and he made damn clear that is was to be as untraceable as possible.”

“All right then, lemme grab some water before I go back, it’s brutal in there.”

“Sounds good, man.”

Spark and Ty worked for the next hour and a half, checking off everything on the list; LED lighting, Saline bags, charcoal and HEPPA filters, UVC lights, insulation, wind turbine motors, grow room kits, and Water Purification Systems. As they made their way through to the end of the list, Ty looked up at Spark, “So we’ve got a doomsday bunker load out, huh?”

Spark, shocked, but not surprised that Ty’s mind put all the pieces together, “Yeah well you know Mr. Brenton, he’s not a man that likes to be surprised.”

“Yeah, that guy has his shit together. How long you been friends with him anyway?” Ty asked.

“Shoot man, twenty-five to thirty years about. Me, him, and Tommy all sorta started out on the rigs at the same time. Caleb was just the best of us. Tommy was always having to deal with one crisis or another that his bitch ass wife would cause.”

“That don’t surprise me, that woman seems to be a handful.” Ty remarked solemnly, out of deference for Spark’s late friend.

“Yeah, well she can go be someone in D.C.’s handful. Sounds shitty to say it, but they both sorta got what they wanted. Susan’s up in D.C. with all the power people and Tommy can finally rest. Anyway, Susan would get to messing around with someone from the alternate crew, and well, you don’t get

picked for promotion when your wife is causing those kinda HR problems. And me, well you know how I was livin. I just blew every penny I made for about those first 10 years or so on booze and drugs when I was off rotation, so I was hardly what you'd call a model employee or citizen."

"Damn man, it's hard to picture that. Glad I didn't know you till after that."

"Shit Ty, me too, man," Spark said as he sat down on the bench on his front porch.

"You know, I woulda probably stayed like that and more than likely ended up just like your mom, if it weren't for Caleb."

"No shit?" Ty looked at the trailer full of supplies.

"No shit, man. So, Caleb always sorta had a good head on his shoulders. He was a family man, so he was hyper focused on his work when he was out there. One day, he could tell I was high when we got on the boat to bring us to shore. I think it may have been me wanting to swing from the personnel carrier basket on the way down from the rig. He didn't say a word to me on the boat ride to the pier, but when we got all our bags, we were walking out to his truck. BAM! He literally knocked my ass out right there in the parking lot, and I mean unconscious, one shot." Spark points to an implanted tooth. "Knocked this sumbitch clear out."

"Damn, now that's really hard to picture Mr. Brenton doin' that."



“Yeah, he dragged my white trash ass to his truck, zip tied my hands and legs together, and drove me out to the middle of damn nowhere. We lived in his RV for the entire 30 days of our off-rotation.”

“No one else?” Ty leaned forward, as he realized that this story would likely answer a lot of questions as to why Spark’s loyalty was so absolute to Caleb and his family.

“Well Michelle, God bless her, she’d load up the car with Rebecca and Matty, Derek wasn’t even thought of yet, and they’d come by every couple of days to drop off food and drinks, no booze of course, we was in full decon detox mode as Caleb used to say.”

“So, what, you guys would just sit out there in the RV while you cleaned up?” Ty asked, enraptured at Spark’s tale.

“Shit, how I wish. Caleb worked my ass harder than a rented mule. Every single day it was something. Surveying his property, digging out a septic drain field, drilling a damn well, clearing brush, man he didn’t let me rest until sundown. Then we’d get cleaned up and it was study time. We went over the Book of Job, Matthew, oh and Caleb’s personal favorite Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.”

“No offense man, but that don’t sound too bad, sounds almost like my life.”

“Hardly, you ever been so addicted to meth that you start thinking about killing someone to get free?”

“Shit man, it was that bad?” Ty shuddered at the image of Spark ever wishing ill on Mr. Brenton.

“Ty, I kid you not, it was a no-shit descent into madness. The first two and half weeks or so were absolute hell. Then it started to get easier and it got to the point that Caleb didn’t have to sleep with a rope tied to the door. By the last week, I was starting to feel really good again.”

“So, did that fix you up then?”

“Not entirely. When we got back to the rig, Caleb had my roommate at the time, one of my drug buddies, kicked off the platform for bringing illicit contraband out there. Then he moved in, and he watched me like a hawk. I couldn’t take a shit without him knocking on the door. It got old, but it’s what I needed.”

“So, that property where you guys were doing the work, is that where his house is now?”

“Yeppers. But, and you’ll see why when we get out there, I kept spending my off-rotations there. I ended up moving into his RV, and during one of his visits to check on me, I ran an idea by him. That’s what we’re going to do up there.”

“So, this is gonna be a bit on the badass side then?” Ty asked, as he grew with excitement.

“Yeah,” Spark, unable to hide what was in store, “It friggan rocks. Now go pack-up for a couple of days. I’ve got a feeling

we'll be up there for at least three or four days unloading and getting some of this stuff put together."

"You got it, Spark." Ty jumped up with a childish excitement.

"Damn, that's a good kid," Spark thought as he watched him dart into the house.



Senator Jacoby Elders' Home, Washington D.C.

"Hey Jake, you here?" Gabriel Moran hollered into Senator Elder's oversized home.

"Yeah Gabe, in the study," Jacoby bellowed back to his newfound roommate. "You get your townhouse on the market yet."

"Ha, yeah for all of five minutes." Gabriel responded. "I tell you Jacoby, it was the weirdest thing. I called the Realtor from my office, or rather I had Sam call, and her boyfriend happened to be there for a visit. As soon as he heard that my house is going up, he said to hold on one moment, makes a call, and informs me that Big Blue will buy it."

"You're kidding?"

"No kidding, Jake. Not a word about price or anything, whoever he was on the phone with said to just fax them over a sales contract with a closing date."

"That's a bit odd," Jacoby said with a Midwesterner's naivety.

“Oh, hell Jake-O, that’s the old soft bribery game. Hiding cash payments in real estate transactions. Not exactly original, but whatever.” Gabriel remarked.

“So, what are you gonna do?”

“Oh, I’m taking those fools to the cleaners, the way I figure it. I’m not really worth bribing as I’m not going to be around too much longer. They just think they can get a sympathetic ear on the Elders Council. But hey, speaking of money, I believe someone owes me a Ulysses S. Grant. Ha! You didn’t think they’d nominate the golden boy, Karston.”

“Oh, for goodness sake. And would you stop calling it the Elders Council,” Jacoby reminded his friend for at least the sixth time as he handed him a fresh \$50 bill from his wallet.

“Sorry Jake-O, that’s its name. I saw it on the news. So, what about you? You gonna sell this place? You’ll get a fortune for this house. What do you have like 4,500 square feet?”

“5,300 last time we checked. Yeah, this place was always too big. No, I think you’re looking at the future New Liberty Ambassador’s residence. Maybe? I don’t know. Alice wants me to sell it. She says they’ll likely burn it to the ground after the Separation.”

“New Liberty, huh? I like that one. Who came up with that?”

“Oh, it was the Freedom Caucus from the House. You know they are all excited about the split. I don’t think they fully realize just how hard this will be on their constituents.”

“Well, good for them for being excited, better than what I’m hearing from the old timer’s in the House. The Big Blue Caucus seems to be all for it, but they’re pretty much waiting to announce an opinion on it until after they meet with the Veep.”

“Big Blue Caucus? I hadn’t realized they had their own Caucus now?”

“Yeah, it’s basically all the members that Karston raised money for with his Super PAC last cycle. They aren’t really inviting me to their meetings, which I’m totally okay with. Only so much Karston ass kissing I can handle at a time.”

“They are quite taken with him,” Jacoby observed.

“After today’s coronation, I needed a break.”

“I see you got your OK lapel pin. Are you getting the tattoo next?” Jacoby said, making a rare sarcastic remark.

“Jacoby Elders, are you finally becoming a smartass after all these years? You know, my wife always told me to give up on lost causes.”

“No, you’re right, I’m sorry. But seriously let me see that for a moment, that’s nice, and damn is it ever big. More of a broach than a lapel pin,” Jacoby said as he reached across his desk.

“Here you go, they were handing them out to all of us important types in the VIP. Check out the back.”

“Hmmm, what is that? Or rather, what was it?” Jacoby inspected the dime sized cavity in the back of the large pin.

“That was this,” Gabriel said as he held up his water bottle. “Notice anything weird?” The Senior Senator from North Carolina asked as he shook it slightly.

“Oh, my Gabe,” Jacoby remarked as his eyes narrowed in on the small electronic device at the bottom of his friends OK branded water bottle.

“I took it to an old spook friend of mine on the way over. Chinese made microphone, short wave transmitter, small coin battery, made to last about 3 days. They couldn’t tell me much on account of it being a little wetter than the design specs could handle.”

“Chinese made?”

“Yeah well look at the OK symbol on the front. Notice anything?” Gabriel positioned his finger at the top of the pin.

“Oh, now that’s a bit brazen I’d say,” Jacoby remarked as he looked at the single five-pointed star above the branded OK logo.

“Jake, they’re mocking us at this point. I don’t have any proof but remember a while back I said someone was pulling the strings? My money is on the ChiComs at this point.”

“Oh man, well, something to keep in mind going forward. We need to get this over to whoever we can trust at DIA. I

wouldn't trust the CIA at all with this. We would just be asking for it to be leaked if we do that," Jacoby said as he continued to study the large lapel pin.

"Yeah, careful who you trust with it," Gabriel cautioned. "Maybe it's my old crazy country brain, but I'm starting to see connections everywhere now. Today's little ceremony was just the latest example. The front row was interspersed with the Chinese delegation. I mean they had some straight butchers sitting up there with leadership."

"Yeah I can't say I was too offended at not receiving an invite," Jacoby said as he handed the lapel pin back to Gabriel.

"Oh, trust me, you wouldn't have wanted to have any part of Big Blue-fest. Oh, I almost forgot to ask, you get your wife all moved back home?" Gabriel asked, embarrassed at the oversight of not asking when he first came in.

"As a matter of fact, yes. Alice just called a little while ago with the grandkids from the ranch. I'll sleep a lot better knowing they are far away from this place."

"I know what you mean, Jake. Hopefully we can navigate these waters and join them before too long." Gabriel looked up to Jacoby's family painting on the wall behind Senator Elders.

"Soon enough Gabe, don't you worry, it's going to be here before you know it."

"Well anyway, what's on our docket today?"

“D.C. is basically shut down, so no meetings on the Hill today. I’ve got a few meetings here though, care to join in?”

“Depends, who are you meeting with?”

“Health and Human Services and Department of Interior reps.” Jacoby read out the appointments from his calendar on his laptop.

“I tell you what,” Gabriel said, with a look that told Jacoby, he had no interest whatsoever of joining, “You start the meetings, and when I hear them getting out of control with excitement, I’ll jump in. In the meantime, I’m going upstairs to take a nap.”

“Fair enough, sleep well Gabe.”



### Rebecca Brenton’s Apartment, Gainesville Florida

“No Mom, I know, I’m really sorry, I’ve just got too much going on here. I can’t get away right now. I know, maybe it’s for the best, you know? Last thing any of us want is another repeat of last Thanksgiving. No Mom! It absolutely wasn’t my fault! I can’t believe you’d say that! Matty purposefully wore that Pro-Gun shirt to try to get under my skin. It was a textbook micro-aggression move on his part. I don’t care that they were a band back in the 90’s. Okay, okay, look I don’t want to fight about it over the phone. Give my love to everyone, especially Derek. How is he by the way? Oh. Oh, that’s really cool. Damn, I didn’t realize Kat was so handy with stuff like that. Dang, good job girly. Hey, do you think she’d



be interested in volunteering for the Big Blue Mentors program? We have a huge shortage of woman engineering mentors. Oh yeah, I forgot, no I guess she probably does need more time. Okay well, do me a favor and ask her anyway, maybe it would be good for her to get out of the house. No, that's okay, you just ask her when you think she's ready. Look Mom, I need to go, my stomach's been botherin' me, and I still have a huge amount of organizin' to do. Since Susan got promoted, I've been trying to get this office situated. Yeah, I guess she had her own system, which no one here seems to understand. I mean it's a great opportunity, but dang, she could have at least left some notes. Yeah, I know. But honestly, what can I do? Yeah, I saw her on TV today, she looks amazing. This sounds awful, but grieving widow works for her. Mom you still there? Oh okay, I didn't hear you say anything, thought we got cut off. Anyway, love you guys, sorry I'm missing out on Spark and Ty and the rest of the gang, but someone's gotta keep this Big Blue Wave from crashing. I know, I know, no more politics. It's tough though Mom, it is sorta my whole life. Well exactly, it's like me asking you not to talk about Derek. Okay fair enough, not exactly the same, but you get the idea. Okay, love you, bye."

Rebecca grimaced as she ended the call on her phone. Her stomach pain caused her to double over. "Oh, dagummit, what the heck, heartburn? I never get heartburn. And my jeans, shoot, don't tell me I'm gaining weight, probably too much stress."

Rebecca let out a big sigh after unbuttoning the top button on her jeans, “Goodness Gracious! That’s better. No, these things must have shrunk, screw it, I don’t have anyone coming in the office in the couple of days. I am hereby declaring it sweatpants week!”



### Brenton House

“Hey Mom, was that Becca? Lemme guess she’s not coming tonight.”

“Bingo, but let’s not let it ruin our night,” an exasperated Michelle said to Matthew. “It’s fine, we’ll have ourselves and Ty and Spark here, so it’ll be a great night.”

“That’s awesome, I haven’t seen Ty in years, bet he’s big as a house now. That boy had a huge growth spurt when he hit puberty.” Matty’s excitement at seeing his childhood friend was infectious.

“Hey, just got a text from Dad. He needs you to run down to the end of the drive to help with something, hurry on up now.”

Matty nodded, rushed out, and saw his dad had already taken the John Deere Gator. Matty would now have to make the quarter mile run down to the end of the Brenton’s long drive.

“Dang, oh well,” Matty said as he started his jog.

“Just hold it here for a sec, Spark,” Caleb called out to Spark who responded with a thumbs up out the window.

“All right Ty, you get on the other side, make sure he doesn’t go off the edge of the shoulder right there, or we’ll be in for a big mess,” Caleb directed Ty to the back end of the big rig on the driver’s side.

“Hey Matty, you ok?”

“Yeah, just need to catch my breath. Been a while since I’ve sprinted that far,” a slightly out of breath Matty explained.

“I want you up here to watch Spark’s front tire,” Caleb said to Matty. “Make sure he makes it past the drainage pipe, then have him swing out into the yard, then we’ll get it up to the house.” Caleb then called Spark out of the truck so he could explain what to do in meticulous step by step instructions.

“Cay, I’m just gonna go for ramming speed,” Spark joked with his old friend.

“Whatever, swamp rat. Just get back up in there Man, we ain’t gonna get her unloaded till morning, but I don’t wanna be standing out here when the sun goes down. Gonna be hard as hell to get you positioned then.”

“You the boss, Cay,” Spark said as he loaded himself back into the driver’s seat.

“Matty you good?”

“Good.”

“Ty you good?”

“Good Mr. Brenton.”

“All right Spark, let’s go.”

What followed next was a surgically precise evolution of Caleb calling out modified crane hand signals to Spark as he wedged the big rig and trailer through a fence gate that was not built to accept heavy machinery.

“All right Spark straighten her out and pull up around the back past the chicken coop on the right. C’mon boys jump in the gator, Michelle’s got food ready for everyone.”



“Mrs. Brenton, you know you’ve got a big rig pulling around back?” Kat asked as she and Derek joined Michelle in the kitchen.

“BIG TRUCK! BIG TRUCK!”

“That’s right baby boy, it is a very big truck,” Michelle said as she leaned down to kiss Derek on his head.

“So, that’s just normal then?” Kat pressed on.

“No dear, it’s not, but when it comes to Caleb and Spark, not too much is normal.”

“Oh, I think I met his son, or whatever, Ty, right?”

“Yep, looks like Ty is in the Gator with Matty and Caleb. My word he’s gotten big. He’s taller than Caleb now.”

“My mom would never admit it, but she was scared out of her mind when he pulled up with his shotgun to give us Matty’s phone.”

“Well in all fairness, your mom is able to stomach lots of scarier people than I would want to be in a room with, so we’ll give her a pass on Ty.”

“You’re very forgiving, Mrs. Brenton,” Kat said in a monotone voice.

“We should all try to be sweetie.” Michelle leaned back over to the window to watch the boys.

“Yeah, I’m not there yet,” Kat said, referring to the blame she placed on her mother for her father’s death. Seeing her on TV the past few days, being interviewed and constantly asked about her dad kept the anger Kat felt from subsiding.

“No one can blame you for that, love. He certainly doesn’t hold it against you.” Michelle motioned to Derek, who, having sensed Kat’s pain, was actively hugging her waist.

“Derek you’re the best buddy,” Kat said as she rubbed Derek’s hair.

“DEREK LOVES KAT KAT!”

“Oh my! That’s a breakthrough. That’s a sentence. Holy Crap he said a sentence.” Michelle was instantly overcome with joy as she opened the window and screamed out.

“CAY! CAY! DEREK SAID A SENTENCE!”

“Kat, you’re never allowed to leave this house. Like *ever*! Oh, come here big boy,” Michelle scooped Derek up into her arms.

Kat looked on approvingly, all the while she thought, “Maybe I won’t tell her that he’s been doing that the past three days, just only when it’s the two of us. Nah, let her have this, this is pretty cool.”

“Well, looks like we’ve got something to celebrate tonight. I love having a reason to celebrate,” Caleb joyfully exclaimed.

“Yeah Spark, remember I told you about my girlfriend?” Matty asked as the quartet pulled up to the house.

“Yeah the girl that hacked the rig?” Spark laughed as he feigned outrage.

“The one and only. So, she made a handheld learning tool for Derek. He’s been advancing pretty well, all things considered.”

“So what, you gonna marry the girl or what?”

“C’mon Spark, you sound like Mom and Dad,” Matty brushed off the question though it was certainly his intention, one day.

“I’ll take that as a compliment, so again you gonna marry that girl or is this just some young-idiot-doesn’t-know-what-he-has type relationship?” Spark said with his usual delicateness.

“When the time’s right, but no, I know what I’ve got there and I’m not gonna let her get away.” Matty subconsciously fingered his mother’s engagement ring he kept in his pocket the past two weeks, hoping for a right time.

“Have a good drive up, Spark?” Matty asked.

“Yeah it was easy, the weigh stations were all closed. Apparently, the rioters and protesters have been hitting them. For what reason I can only imagine.”

“Oh, I bet the drug runners are loving this chaos,” Caleb said.

“That’s probably it right there,” Spark nodded to Caleb.

“Mr. Brenton, we gonna see this bunker or what?” Ty blurted out, as he hadn’t stopped thinking about it since he was doing inventory on the truck. “Where’s it at anyway, I don’t see a mound or anything.”

“You told him about the bunker, Spark?”

“Nope, kid saw the manifest and put two and two together.”

“Very good Ty,” a satisfied Caleb declared to his young inquisitor. “You’re standing on top of it right now. Down where you and Spark are, you can’t really dig, but up here in the foothills of the Smokies, no such limits.”

“Oh damn, that’s awesome.”

“Yeah it’s cool, your dad, um Spark and I put in a lot of work.”

“Oh, it’s cool, Mr. Brenton. Spark told me all about my mom. So yeah technically he’s my dad, but after saying Spark my whole life, calling him dad would seem sorta fake.”

“Fair enough. Spark, you sure he’s your kid? He seems smarter and more down to earth than you ever were,” Caleb poked at his longtime friend.

“Yeah he’s mine, but he’s put together a whole lot better than I was at his age,” Spark admitted.

“All right boys, let’s get some dinner and then we’ll open her up for a quick look-see. Tomorrow we’ll do a full tour after we unload the truck. I want Kat down there tomorrow too. I’ve got a feeling she’s gonna help bring this whole thing to the next level,” Caleb said.

“Wash up boys, there’s goop in the mudroom you can use to degrease yourselves.” Michelle called out as the fathers and sons entered through the kitchen back door.

As everyone sat down for the meatloaf, baked chicken, twice baked potatoes, and fresh vegetable dinner, Caleb bowed his head to say grace. “Gracious Lord, thank you above all else for this opportunity for us to be together. Thank you for protecting Ty and Spark on the drive up. And thank you for bringing Kat into our lives, the blessings she brings us every day, and please help to heal her heart and return to her some of the light she has brought to us.”

Matty gently squeezes Kat’s hand as he heard her sniff away a tear.

Caleb continued, “Lord, your followers have seen hard times, they have seen violent times. I pray to you, Lord, that whatever lies ahead of us, let us be prepared and let us never lose sight of what is important. In Jesus’s name we pray all this and more. Amen.”



“Amen,” everyone around the table chorused together.

“So, speaking of the craziness in the world, I saw Thurston’s was closing. Never thought that would happen,” Spark chirped up.

“Yeah ol’ Bill finally threw in the towel. What is he now, 83? 84? Anyway, I think he’s moving out West. He seems at peace with it all to be honest,” Caleb answered.

“I’m not sure who I’m gonna sell my Peach Preserves to, he’s been my best customer for years,” Michelle wondered.

“Oh Mrs. Brenton, do you have any?” Ty excitedly asked.

“Yes Ty, of course, and you’ll have a case to take home as well.”

“I don’t know Michelle; I don’t feed him this well at home. He may not wanna leave after this meal, this is delicious,” Spark commented through a mouthful of meatloaf. He had a special place in his heart for Michelle’s cooking and told her, on more than one occasion, that if it wasn’t for the meals she brought him and Caleb during his detox, he wouldn’t have survived.

“I certainly hope you two enjoy it,” Michelle replied with her signature southern class.

“Now more importantly,” Spark swallowed what was in his mouth before continuing, “you there, Miss Kat,” he pointed his fork that still had a chunk of meatloaf dangling from it, “No more hacking the rigs out there.”

“Sorry Mr., uhm, Spark? I’m sorry, what is your real name anyway?”

“Doesn’t matter, call me Spark, dear.”

“Sorry, Spark. You may want to tell your IT department to not make it so easy.”

“Ha-ha, atta girl. Yeah, those boys aren’t really that great out there at real network security, sort of a collateral duty they’ve inherited,” Spark said as he laughed at Kat’s confidence.

“Hey, let me know if you need a network security or penetration report done, I’ve got time. And trust me, your Rigs are in a bad way, from a cyber standpoint,” Kat said, rubbing it in.

“Might just do that, Kat. Big wigs won’t like it, but it’s fun to watch them freak out when they realize they’re behind the 8-ball on security matters. Just make sure you frame the report in terms of lost production, that’ll get their attention,” Spark replied. “So how about you, Cay? Consulting keeping you busy?”

“It’s fair, but it’s a bit up in the air for the time being.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, the corporate headquarters aren’t sure what’s happening with the so-called Great Separation. So, it’s creating an uncertainty with upper management. Seeing a lot of the top dogs starting to put in for retirement. Seems like every after-action meeting I have, there’s two to three new faces in the room.”

“Yeah that’s not surprising,” Spark said, with a twitch of his eyebrow. “They’re trying to get me to go back out to the rigs to train some of the new operators. Even those guys are heading for the hills. I told ’em I’d do de-commissions, and one day in and outs for production overviews, but I’m not doing extended stays.”

“You can go out for longer. I can watch the house fine,” Ty reassured Spark.

“Oh, that’s not what I’m worried about Ty, I’m worried about going out there, and getting stuck ’cause the corporate offices are overrun. You know the looters or rioters, whatever you wanna call them, took down the refineries at the on shore receiving facility last week,” Spark said as he looked to Caleb.

“Don’t those little brats know that no oil means no power to charge their little electric cars and smartphones?” Caleb shook his head at his own rhetorical question.

As the meal continued, Kat couldn’t help but see why her father loved this group so much. The genuineness, the love they all seemed to have for each other. “Why did Mom hate everyone out here?” Kat thought to herself, “Sure, they’re not political movers and shakers, but they’re honest and they actually give a shit about each other.”

Michelle sensed Kat’s longing for her father’s company. “Kat dear, can you help me get the dessert ready?”

“Oops, not yet Michelle,” Caleb interjected, “I want all of you to see something first. We’ll have peach cobbler when we get done. Matty, go get the storm lights will you, it’s pretty dark down there.”

“Oh, is this the great unveiling?” Spark asked.

“The great what?” Kat whispered to Matty.

“Honey, as usual, I really have no idea what’s going on,” Matty confided back.

“All right everyone, follow me to the basement,” Caleb called out as the group pushed themselves away from the table.

“Caleb?” Michelle quizzically looked at her husband as he smiled back at her.

Caleb led the group down the stairs next to the kitchen into the basement. The hanging bulb swung back and forth, illuminating the groups faces, as well as the basic provisions the Brenton’s kept there.

“All right, so when Spark and I started clearing this land, must be over 15 years ago, we also were working a decom job for an older rig. The contract was to get everything to shore, then salvage would pick it up and take it to the dump for recycling. I didn’t want to see that happen, so I paid the salvage crew to drop it off here. They were a small business, so just the fact that they weren’t having to pay the dump to take it, they were happy.” Caleb then walked over to a section of the unfinished basement, and with the push and removal of a few otherwise

unseen dowels, the section of wall swung open, revealing the entrance to Caleb and Spark's secret project.

"Here you go guys, use your flashlights though, I don't exactly trust the wiring through here."

"Damn Dad! This is so cool." Matty was the first to speak up. "How far back does it go?"

"We've got seven interconnected 10 X 40 units, concrete is poured in between to enhance structural stability, and we've got water and septic. But like I said, I'm not one-hundred percent sold on the electrical, so Spark and I will work on that tomorrow. Whatcha think, Kat? Caleb asked, hoping for her approval, really above everyone else's.

"I'm going to have a *lair*!" Kat, unable to keep her stoic demeanor, screeched out as she finished the sentence.

"Well it's going to take a lot of work still, but I'd love to get your thoughts on what to do," Caleb admitted.

"Hold on, Mr. Brenton, I need to record this," Kat said as she moved past him. With her phone now set to video record, she began narrating. "Container 1, 10 X 40, main house entrance, east side. First branch fifteen feet starboard, Container 2, 10 X 40, former berthing area, leads to next container."

"KAT! KAT! WAIT!" Derek called out.

"Oh, don't worry buddy, she's coming back." Caleb said as he picked up Derek to his hip.

“I think she likes it,” Matty said to Ty, who was absolutely wide eyed taking it all in.

“Yeah man, this is just about the coolest thing ever.” Ty responded with the same expression he’d worn since Mr. Brenton moved the wall as though it was a simple door.

“Good job husband,” Michelle said as she leaned over and kissed Caleb on the cheek.

“I told you it was cool,” Caleb quickly answered back.

“I’m not talking about the bunker,” Michelle calmly whispered back in a hushed tone. “I’m talking about that.” Michelle pointed to the light dancing ahead from Kat’s phone as she continued her hurried video survey. “This is the first time we’ve seen her happy in three months. That means more than any of this goofy stuff you and Spark have been doing.”

## **Chapter 7 : Reordered**

### Brenton House

The day proved to be long and tiring for everyone at the Brenton house. The boys didn't finish unloading the truck till almost dark and Michelle and Kat had their hands full with Derek and the little bit of organizing Kat was able to do with the parts and supplies. Michelle put Derek to sleep while Matty and Ty cleaned up the dinner table from the pizza they ordered. Kat was busy going over her preliminary sketches of the bunker and possible layout with Caleb and Spark.

"Okay Mr. Brenton and Spark, here's where I need some guidance. Here's the rough layout as I was able to record last night." Kat pointed to the main entrance she had designated on her rough draft. "Where, in relation to this, is the septic field, and where do we have ground penetrations?"

"Septic field is over here, east of container 3, by about fifty-feet." Caleb grabbed the pen from Kat and marked on her sheet. "Over here and another fifty-feet west of container 7, that's where we've got our well." Caleb stood upright for a moment.

"As far as penetrations to topside...Hm? Spark, you remember which containers had the PVC pipes?"

“I think those were on the backside of 4, 5, and 6. We can check that tomorrow, I’m sure they’re covered up, but we should be able to track them down with a couple of shovels.”

“Good, we’ll want to have some way to pull in and exhaust air. Especially if we have machinery and comm equipment down there,” Kat suggested.

“Oh Kat, I hadn’t even thought of that, I was just thinking of a glorified panic room.”

“Mr. Brenton, whatever lies ahead of us will require a certain amount of self-sufficiency. I’m thinking prolonged hunkering down with as small of an outside world footprint as possible.”

Caleb tilted his head back, rubbed his chin, and thought about what Kat said.

“Please let me do this Mr. Brenton. Let me help keep our family safe, it’s all I have.”

As Caleb looked into Kat’s big brownish hazel eyes, he felt helpless not to give her whatever she asked for. “All right Kat, this is our bunker, you let us know what you think we need to do. Spark chimed in, “Kat, your father and I didn’t just decom rigs, we’ve helped to build some too. Caleb here spent more time on the important production process stuff, so my junior ass had to oversee all the berthing, galley, and rig-services sections. So, if you’re up for it, we can make this thing as bad ass as you can imagine.”



Kat was speechless, but the widening of her eyes and a tiny little jump she did showed her excitement.

“But tomorrow Kat,” Caleb announced, stretching his back side to side causing a noticeable popping sound, “We’ve got Michelle’s peach cobbler to eat, and then I need to pass out. Today sorta kicked my ass.”

“Okay, but if we can just go over—”

“Tomorrow, Engineer, we’ll look at it tomorrow,” Caleb cut her off, happy to see her excitement, but absolutely drained from the day. “Here, take your drawings, I need to talk to Spark alone for a sec.”

“Thank you, Mr. Brenton, I love you,” Kat said as she threw her arms around her new father figure.

Caleb waited for Kat to bounce out of the room before he asked, “Well Spark? Whatcha thinkin?”

“I’m thinking I don’t know how that little angel came outta Susan.”

“Well, you can see a lot of her father in her, I should say,” Caleb commented as he watched her from afar.

“He’d be proud of her. I still can’t believe what happened,” Spark noted.

“I *don’t* Spark, not for a second. I don’t mention it around Kat, but I can’t imagine a world where Tommy would leave her. She was everything to him.”

“I’ve always thought that, too. I’m sure her royal bitchness, Susan had something to do with it.”

“I agree, but let’s not go down that rabbit hole, let’s get back to the bunker, whatcha think about what Kat wants to do?”

“Well, firstly, we’ve gotta figure out just how extreme we’re gonna go, how many days without outside access, how many people, how much power? There’s still a good bit of design to do, but the foundation of what we have in place works. And lemme tell yah, if what happens with the Great Separation happens, me and Ty might be moving up here full time. Some of the proposed maps I’ve seen has my house right on the edge of Big Blue territory.”

“Yeah Spark, fuckin’ hell. That’s nuts, you know of course, that you two are always welcome here. Don’t even need to call ahead. Well, unless you got someone chasing you, then I can give you some cover fire.”

“Sounds good and thank you, I think I’ll take you up on that, but let’s all hope we’re not being chased by thugs with guns. Oh, one more thing, we’re gonna need a whole bunch of high-end batteries,” Spark said as he pointed to Kat’s drawing.

“Any ideas on that?”

“Actually yeah, I got a call on the way up here, Ace Drilling is decomming another platform. They’ve already got everything done, they just need salvage coordination, I’m gonna handle the shoreside scheduling of the boats. So, I’ll be setting the

manifest per haul. I've got all the weights for the gear, as long as I can get the right boats, we can get your girl pumps, galley equipment, washing machines, and some of those lithium ion emergency-run batteries."

"You don't think Diamond will want those?"

"No, they can't reuse them once they've been uninstalled, as long as I've got a salvage boat to take them, that's the last sign off they need."

"Wouldn't happen to have a boat captain in that rolodex of yours?" Caleb inquired.

"Even better, remember the shrimp boat captains that I used to call when the yellowfin tuna was running around the rigs?"

"Yeah, Adams, right?"

"Yep, well his son runs a salvage barge nowadays, so that really shouldn't be a problem."

"Sounds good Spark. Knowing Kat, that'll be like Christmas for her. Now let's go eat. Looks like Kat and Matty are already chowing down out on the front porch," Caleb nodded out the window to the young couple on the porch swing.



"And then I'm thinking we'll run an HF antenna up in that tree over there, that should give us clear cover all the way to the Smokies and possibly to the coast," Kat said in an accelerated pace through her plans for the bunker. "My

biggest concern though, is fresh air intake and power storage. I'm hoping the solar panels and wind turbines give us enough juice, but I really want to have a genny somewhere nearby to compliment and charge up the batteries if the renewables can't keep up."

"You're really committed, huh?" Matty asked in one of Kat's brief moments to catch air.

"Matty, this means so much to me. You all mean so much to me, especially these last couple of months. Your mom and dad have treated me like family, in a way I've never really experienced before. It's honestly a bit overwhelming, but I don't want it to stop."

"You don't want what to stop."

"Having a family," Kat admitted quietly.

"So, don't let it."

"I don't get it, how am I supposed to not let it," Kat said with a rare hint of confusion.

"Don't stop having a family," Matty dropped to a knee in front of Kat on the front porch. "Look I've been trying to find the right moment for months on end and I don't know if that moment will ever get here, but Kat, please, marry me and just don't ever leave."

As Kat looked down at the ring in Matty's hand, she almost passed out. For someone who prided herself in logically

engineering and predicting possible outcomes, this evening's events took her by total surprise. Crying she looked up at Matty, and offered a single word. "Yes."



Rebecca Brenton's Office, Big Blue HQ Gainesville, FL

Rebecca sat alone in her office, staring down at her purse. She could see the pregnancy test sitting atop her collection of purse accoutrements. As she reached in to look at the box to study what it said, she tried to imagine what impact on her life the possible outcome could be. She dared not even think of the potential baby's father. His stay in her life lasted all of an awards banquet dinner and about 20 minutes afterwards. A stay that cost her the adoration of someone she considered an actual person. The political bigshots, including Aunt Sue, didn't even seem real to her. Rebecca couldn't help but view herself as the help around them. She was allowed to see some of their lives from a distance, but never felt invited to join their lives.

"Get your shit together girl, no sense in dwelling on what happened. You've tried to apologize, that didn't work. You've tried to reach out to Aunt Sue, she won't return your texts. And you're way too far down on the totem pole to even know how to get in touch with the freaking Vice President. No, whatever the outcome of this test, it's on me. No one else. Besides, politically speaking, the VP knocking up a 22-year-old Junior Big Blue Outreach Coordinator doesn't exactly play

well, especially to someone who just did a ribbon cutting at the Big Blue Family Planning building.” Rebecca’s head swirled with the variables of her predicament.

“Ms. Brenton, hey we’ve got a package here from BBHQ. Wanna come take a look?” A young college volunteer with double nose piercings and a mohawk interrupted Rebecca’s introspection. “Actually Ms. Brenton, looks like it’s about 10 cases.”

“Sure Star, I could use a break actually,” Rebecca said as she quickly closed the top flaps on her purse so that her situation did not become new fodder for the gossip hungry college staffers who surrounded her.

“Here’s the letter that accompanied it.”

The letter Star handed to Rebecca was addressed to COFOO, which stood for Community Organizer for Outreach Opportunity. A title Rebecca had grown to despise as she saw her job as little more than convincing people, who had every opportunity in the world, that they were in fact victims of...well, that part was never made clear to her. “COFOO, that’s still me.”

“Oh, are you thinking of moving on Ms. Brenton? I’d love to be considered for the position if that’s the case. You know as the only Trans Other-Kin at this location, I really find it disturbing that th—”

“I’m not leaving, Star,” Rebecca cut off Star’s intended grievance airing. “We’re growing, but we’re not big enough to give every intersectional representative a leadership post. Not yet anyway.”

“I guess all Other-Kin Trans people will just have to wait until we’re important enough for our own Civil Rights Act then,” an obviously annoyed Star shot back.

“Star,” Rebecca chose to ignore the ridiculousness of Star’s self-indulgence, “just help me get these stacked over there and out of the doorway please.”

“Oh, I can’t, my therapist told me to avoid any activities that could cause Self-Rejectionism.”

“Self-what?”

“Self-Rejectionism, I would think the COFOO of the Gainesville branch would know what that is; anyway, let me give you some free education. Self-Rejectionism is when Other-Kin, like myself, has to engage in activities that are not true to my Other-Kin nature. Today for instance, I identify as a cat, so all I really want to do is climb on the box or sit inside of one.”

“Okay, okay, I got it, forget about it, I’ll take care of it.”

“You know, that’s not a very inclusive attitude.”

Rebecca ignored Star as she begins stacking the heavy boxes from the lobby into her office. As she moved the boxes, she

could feel her heartburn acting up again, and ran into the non-gendered bathroom. Rebecca tried not to think what this latest bout of upset stomach, heartburn, and moderate cramping likely meant.

“Fuckin Star used to hit on me all the time when I was with Cinna. Told him I was never going to date a jock. Now he’s decided he’s female, a lesbian, and today a fuckin’ cat.” Rebecca thought to herself as she wretched her breakfast into the toilet. “Took this friggan job to try to help the underserved. Now I’m babysitting future trust-funders as they get to play make-believe.” Rebecca wiped away at her mouth and splashed water on her face to gather herself. For a brief moment as she looked in the mirror, she remembered being in the same position, bent over the bathroom sink and seeing Karston’s blonde hair hovering behind her as she surrendered herself to him. The thought of that moment led to another vomit session.

“Dammit Rebecca,” she yelled at herself in her head, “What the hell are you doing? Who the fuck are these people? Whatever girl, you’ve got a job to do and as Daddy used to say, ‘buck up and find a way to finish. The sun doesn’t wait to set for anyone.’ Daddy, now there was a real man, not like that heaping pile in the lobby. Okay back to it.”

As Rebecca left the bathroom, Star looked up at her quizzically, “Meow?”

“I’m fine Star, thanks for asking.”



“Meow.”

“Can you hand me the letter.”

“Meow...hehehe.” Star playfully knocked the letter to the floor in Rebecca’s direction.

“Thanks a lot, Star,” Rebecca sarcastically mumbled out as she picked up the letter and headed back into her office.

“All right, what is this all about anyway,” Rebecca asked aloud as she opened up the letter.

*Great News Big Blue COFOO, Big Blue has secured a deal with a major telecom company that shares our social justice values and is rewarding us.*

*In the enclosed cases you will find the all new OK Smartphone. These new OKphones come preinstalled with the just released OK Suite; OKmail, OKchat, OKhookup, OKnews, OKsocial, OKwallet, OKgames, OKcheck-in, plus many more.*

*Please start using these phones immediately. Give them out to your most committed and loyal activists, and if you have left overs, give them to members of the community that you’d like to get more involved with Big Blue, professors, department chairs, CEO’s, bankers, local politicians, police, IT professionals, anyone that you think could help Big Blue, move forward. The best news of all, it’s free. No contract, no overages, no credit checks. And you get to keep your current number.*

*Always Remember, Big Blue is looking out for You.”*

“Okay,” Rebecca thought, “Free phones are good, but they want us to give them out to people that don’t need them. How many bankers and IT professionals don’t have phones? Whatever, let me check this out.”

Rebecca took one a phone out of one of the cases. They looked similar to the new Huawei phones that were released the previous year that were pulled from shelves for being security risks. Rebecca inspected the case, about fifty phones per case, blister pack, no accessories. “Well they are free, we can certainly spring for our own charging cables.”

As she opened up the free smartphone, she powered it up and saw the standard Big Blue Wave animation splash screen that slowly morphed into the blue OK symbol that had become Big Blue’s new salute. “Okay, enter name, social security number, date of birth, standard stuff. Look in camera and repeat the phrase, I (your name) approve of Big Blue.” Rebecca dutifully carried out the phone’s request. “Big Blue may do some good work, but they sure as hell take their self-promotion a little too seriously. Okay, next screen, enter in your current cell phone number. Weird, but okay, maybe it’s for call forwarding or something.”

A message flashed on the screen. “Your carrier has been notified of your intention to move over to Big Blue Net, Big Blue will cover all cancellation fees.”

“Whoa, what the hell? Well, okay, it’s free after all. I’ll call Mom later and tell her, so she doesn’t wonder why I’m not on the family plan anymore. That kind of sucks though.”

Another message, “Thank you and enjoy your phone.”

“Okay where is the app store?” Rebecca searched the icons on the screen, not sure where to find new apps. “Okay OKmail, let’s check you out.”

Another message, “Please enter your personal email account settings to import messages.”

“Okay so I can at least get my Gmail on here,” Rebecca thought. “Let’s check out these other ones. OKhookup, oh this must be their Tinder-knock off. Let’s check that out.”

An electronic voice emanated from the phone, “Hello Rebecca, OKhookup has auto generated your profile and enabled the AI engine to find your best matches. Please select the photos of people that best fit your tastes. This helps OKhookup to only make the best matches for you.”

Rebecca, still slightly distracted from the pregnancy test sitting in her purse, closed down the app. “That’s the last thing I need right now. I think I’m done with hookups for a while.” As she looked at her purse one more time, Star’s head popped in past her door.

“Meow-meow. Oh shit, are those phones for us?” Star asked, breaking the Other-Kin persona.

“Not yet Star, I uh gotta get them registered and scanned and stuff,” Rebecca lied, not wanting to reward Star’s lazy behavior earlier.

“Meeeeooooowwww,” Star, now dejected, turned around to leave for the day.

“Besides, I’d hate for you to have to self-freakin-reject so you could actually set it up. Idiot,” Rebecca mumbled as she heard the door close. Once she saw Star walk down the street from her office window, Rebecca got up to lock the front door and made her way into the bathroom.

“All right, it’s just me and you now.” Rebecca stared down at her purse. “Moment of truth time.” As Rebecca sat on the toilet, she read the instructions one more time, “Urinate into cup provided and place test stick into cup until tab is fully saturated, then wait 15 minutes. Positive results may arrive faster. Okay simple enough.”

Rebecca filled the cup to the marked line and positioned the stick into the cup. Before Rebecca had the chance to finish extinguishing her bladder, the positive cross sign had already formed. The oncoming wave of emotions was more than Rebecca had anticipated. The positive test fell to the floor, as she sat on the toilet, she felt tears roll down her face.

“SHIT SHIT SHIT SHIT! what am I gonna do? Who could I even talk to? I could get rid of it?” Even mentally suggesting it to herself made her sick to her stomach. Although she was

decidedly liberal, she never liked the idea of abortion. The Shout Your Abortion contingent of the feminist movement was always something she chose to ignore or look the other way on.

Rebecca remembered being there when Derek was born, the doctor handed Derek to Rebecca first, then she handed him to his mother. “So fragile and needy,” she thought as she relived that moment, “how could anyone harm such a precious thing.”

As she looked down at her stomach, she could picture the little fetus. Her parents had taken her to enough pro-life rallies in her youth that she knew exactly what stage of development the fetus was in. “Three to four inches long, fingernails, teeth, and a mouth is forming, chances of miscarriage drop significantly after first trimester.” Rebecca could picture the literature she had handed out so many times in her youth to young women walking into abortion clinics. She promised herself when she was young, she would never make that walk. “And I’m going to keep that promise,” she silently declared.



Senator Jacoby Elders’ Office, Washington D.C.

“All right Jonah, so where are we old friend?” Jacoby greeted his longtime political Super-Pac supporter as he sat down for their pre-scheduled meeting.

“Senator, thank you again for making time for me, I’m sure you’re a might busy these days.”

“Nonsense Jonah, you’ve spent enough money to keep me in this office, the very least I can do is let you enjoy it some. Which I must say, in over 20 years you’ve been supporting me, you’ve never visited me in D.C. Why now?”

“Senator, I—”

“Jonah please, call me Jacoby or Jake, I’ve known you too long for us to stand on titles and formalities.”

“Fine then, Jacoby. You’re right, I haven’t visited you here. I hate D.C. It’s a glaring roadside pile of shit on the path to hell as far as I’m concerned,” Jonah said, dropping any sense of formality, per the Senator’s request.

“Colorful, but I can’t say that I disagree with your assessment. When I saw you were on my schedule today, I cancelled all my afternoon meetings. I figured it must be something important. I’m sure Gabriel will stop by, but I’m yours the rest of the day,” Jacoby said as he started to pour a Scotch for himself and Jonah, while taking down a third glass for what will surely be used by Gabriel during his daily visit.

“Here you go.” Jacoby handed Jonah the scotch and leaned into his all too familiar spot on the corner of his desk. “Really, Jonah, what’s so important you’d leave that beautiful ranch of yours and come all this way to talk face to face?”

Jonah took a sip and nodded to the open door, signaling to Jacoby that they need privacy. He took the hint and closed the door. After which, Jonah took out a white noise generator from his jacket and placed it on Jacoby's desk. Jonah nodded to Jacoby to sit down next to him.

In hushed tones, well under the volume of the white noise generator, Jonah began, "Jacoby, you see these?" Jonah pulled aside his lapel to show military Special Operations pins hidden on the underside of his suit jacket. "The Trident and the Fairbairn-Sykes Dagger, very few people get to wear these, even fewer have both," Jonah emphasized before adding, "I am one of those few."

Jacoby lifted his eyebrows in acknowledgement as he recognized both immediately, the Trident, the all too familiar Navy Seal insignia, but the Dagger he had seen much less often, only in highly Top Secret briefings in Senate Intelligence hearings. "Delta Force. If you didn't have my full attention before, you certainly have it now."

"Good, because I really believe the future depends on what we coordinate from here on out."

"That's fairly ominous Jonah, but I'm tracking. Go on."

"You and I both know that the United States is always at war, all over the world, and in some instances, close to home. Well, we old operators still stay in touch, and keep each other in the loop when we can. Right now, there's a ton of chatter that

somebody, and I'm not sure who, is taking out terrorists full bore. I'm talking full air bombs over training camps. We're not talking surgical strikes Jacoby; I'm talking a massive wiping out and clearing of the field."

"I just got briefed earlier today on a massive explosion at one the Boko Haram training camps in Nigeria this morning," Jacoby confided in his longtime supporter.

"I hadn't heard of that one yet, but I'm not surprised," Jonah said as he wet his mouth on the 12-year-aged single malt. "Smokey, I like that."

"I'm not going to waste your campaign donations on the cheap stuff," Jacoby said, not missing a beat, "but to your point, this is a good thing, right? Terrorists meeting their end?" Jacoby asked.

"Any other time, I'd take the blessing of dead terrorists and move on. But something's off this time; the tactics, the hardware, the lack of comm chatter."

"You sure it's not us?"

"Positive." Jonah's response left no room for ambiguity.

"It would be out character for Beardon. He obviously doesn't seem like the pre-emptive strike type. Maybe an up and coming organization? Rival ideology or internal civil war happening?" Jacoby said as he ran through the list of usual suspects that took out terrorist camps.



“Nope, we would’ve heard about the gear on the black market. Or at a minimum we’d have chatter on these guys coordinating. It’s been straight radio silence.”

“So, you think, what? A state actor?” Jacoby asked, realizing that this must be a foreign government agency.

“State actor, or someone acting with state resources, and again, normally I wouldn’t care. But all signs are pointing to China. And any other time I’d be happy the ChiComs are finally doing something productive. But this is out of the ordinary for China. One, they tend not to go on the offensive like this, and two none of my assets in Beijing knew anything about this. And Jacoby, I’ve got some pretty highly placed assets.”

“You really think China?” Jacoby asked, already agreeing with the logical conclusion.

“They’re the only ones that could pull this off, and the little bit of intel I’ve gotten from people inspecting the sites points that way.”

“Okay, so why would they enter the game now? They’ve always just paid those guys to leave them alone in the past. Hell, they run concentration camps on Muslim Uyghurs up to this very day and the Middle East Muslims haven’t targeted them yet.”

“Exactly, it doesn’t add up, if you look at it from that point of view.”

“How else should I be looking at it, Jonah?”

“Well, first, remember all the international outcry when the Huawei factory was targeted about three years ago?”

“Yeah that scuttled my chance to get that company blacklisted by the State Department they were an obvious front for the communists over there, and we’ve found hundreds of backdoors in the kit they sell. The news was playing it like it was China’s 9/11, and I was called a racist for trying to block them. I think it was CNN that said I was no better than the bombers themselves.”

“Yeah and next thing you know, Huawei 5G towers are everywhere. Well it’s a loosely held secret in my profession that they planted those bombs, and that the bodies they pulled from the wreckage were all political prisoners.”

“My God,” Jacoby said with a look of horror.

“Yeah, so next thing you know, the US starts looking the other way as they’re outfitting all the big baddies in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia. They effectively built out the entire Jihadi comms network, then at the beginning of last month, silence.”

“So, let me make sure I’ve got this straight. They supply the bad guys with all the comm and networking gear they need. Then they silence them with the gear and take them out?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“I guess that’s better than the way we do it. We usually give the bad guys weapons then act surprised when they use them against our troops.”

“Trust me, I know, most of the people I’ve lost have been by bad actors using friendly weaponry that we gave them for one reason or another. Anyway, follow me on this, because this takes some imagination. I, and most of the people that are with me, think this is the most likely reason. Shit started changing around three months ago, right around the time you introduced the Great Separation idea, and Shilling began to ascend up the ranks.”

“Yes, this year has moved pretty fast politically speaking,” Jacoby admitted as he took a sip from his tumbler.

“There’s been a few too many major events all happening around the same time. I’ve heard the news call it political coincidences. Well, me and my people don’t really believe in coincidence.”

“Hell Jonah, I’m here in D.C. and it’s been hard for me to keep up with how fast things are moving. Moran and I have been working our tails off to try and figure out what’s been going on and hopefully buy us some time.”

“I know, and we do appreciate it. You and Moran are above board and on the right side of this. We’ve been watching you both pretty closely, just to be sure.”

“You’ve been spying on me, Jonah?” Jacoby asked, surprised that he had been surveilled without his knowledge. “And who is *we*?”

“Just verifying you’re the man we think you are. And as far as *we*, well just think of us as a loose collection of Special Operators, some still in the game, some in boardrooms, some in law enforcement. We’ve always just watched each other’s backs, but now we’re starting to get more organized.”

“I see. So did I pass this extra-governmental background check?”

“If you didn’t, we wouldn’t be talking, Senator. Shilling however is a different animal. We’ve just started looking into him, and so far, unfortunately, we’ve got almost nothing.”

“I’m surprised, it feels like he’s always in front of camera somewhere.”

“Yeah, he’s got a lot of exposure, but as best we can tell, he sorta just keeps failing upwards. He was a low-level, half-assed animal rights activist and sometime gigolo over in San Fran and then the next thing you know, he’s meeting with all the CEO’s of tech conglomerates. He’s starting Forward Together, he beats the old lady in a primary, consolidates all the country’s unions and social justice groups, and now he’s one very tenuous heartbeat away from the presidency?”

“I know, it’s been a pretty steep trajectory he’s been on; I didn’t know about the gigolo stuff though. Strange.” Jacoby contorted his face with a look of disgust.

“Thing is, he’s not actually our real concern, the only real dirt on him is that he’s a bit of a sex addict, but that hardly makes him noteworthy or unique in this city. Our primary concern is with his Senior Advisor, I believe he’s going by the name of Diego Assantino now.”

“Yeah, I’ve had the displeasure of meeting him. The guy really gives me the creeps.”

“The man you met has popped up on our radar and then disappeared every couple of years. Always a different name, but always right at the epicenter of power and change, every time.”

Jonah handed Jacoby a file of multiple different Persons of Interest reports, each with accompanying surveillance photos.

“Here he is dressed as a priest, remember when the last pope resigned from the sex abuse scandal? Here he is as Gialarmo Baroncelli, senior advisor to the Cardinal who then became pope. And this one here, meet Senior Advisor Pedro Santiago. He happened to be the chief negotiator for Argentina following their debt restructuring. It kept their country crippled for the next 20 years but worked out very well for the Hedge Funds that were secretly financing him.”

“Jonah, this guy is a shark. And he’s about to have the Oval office.”

“Yeah, as much as we’d all like to, we can’t touch him now, too high profile,” Jonah said with obvious disappointment.

“Anyone tipped the news about this guy?” Jacoby asked as he held the reports up.

“Yeah, we’ve sent to sources.” Jonah proceeded to point out to pictures from the back of the folder. Newspaper articles outlining the death of a journalist in California who was run off the road, and another in D.C. who overdosed on fentanyl. And another in Boston who committed suicide by jumping out of his high-rise apartment window. “No one wants to touch this, and I don’t really blame ’em.”

“So why are you telling me this, Jonah?”

“Two reasons: one, for you to be aware so you can be safe; and two, I can’t help but think this is all somehow interconnected.”

“What reasons would this Pedro or Gialarmo or Diego or whoever the hell he is, have to wipe out the terrorist problem?”

“We think he’s protecting his golden boy.”

“Ok, but I’m still not following,” Jacoby remarked.

“Terrorist attacks change things. Think of 9/11, the whole world changed. Well that was a variable no one counted on. We think that whoever pulled this off, didn’t want any surprise variables to screw with their plans,” Jonah said as he led Jacoby through his logic.

“Ok Jonah, so what are we going to do about this? Or rather, what do you think I should do?”

“For right now, nothing. But I want you to be clued in and to know that we’ve got you under our protection.”

“That’s actually pretty comforting,” Jacoby admitted. “What are you going to be doing, Jonah?”

“I’m heading back to the ranch. We’re in logistics consolidation mode right now.” Jonah said as he finished off his scotch.

“Do I want to know what that means, Jonah?”

“It means we’re gonna be ready for whatever comes next, but we need time.”

“Well, that depends on what happens with the Great Separation,” Jacoby said as he pointed to the folders on his desk.

“Has Shilling come out for it or against it yet?” Jonah inquired.

“He dodges every time someone asks him about it, apparently word on the street is that the media has already been told it is an off-limit topic.”

“Well, we’re making plans either way. Once he comes out one way or the other, that’ll set our strategy. I need to get going Senator, um sorry, Jacoby. We’ll be in touch, and here’s my private number if you need anything at all.”

“Can you watch out for Alice back home?” Jacoby asked as a personal favor.

“Already done Senator, your new neighbors to the right and across the street are mine.”

“Wow, thanks, Jonah.”

“We need you alive Jacoby. You might be our only chance to survive what’s coming.”

Senator Elders saw Jonah to the door and sat back in his chair, staring blankly at the empty glass of Scotch trying to absorb everything that Jonah had just laid on him.

Gabriel busted into his friend’s office in a flurry. “Jake, where the hell have you been? You didn’t hear the call to vote?”

“Huh, no Gabe, sorry, what’d I miss.”

“Only a complete damn rewrite of the Senate Rules.”

“What?”

“Mr. President of the Senate, Karston Shilling, just had the leadership call a voice vote on amending the rules of the Senate.”

“Okay then, what changed,” an exhausted Jacoby said as he placed Jonah’s glass back on the drink cart.

“Oh just a few things, let’s see, filibusters are limited to six hours before auto-expiration, passage of amendments and bills requires only a simple majority of Senators that happen



to be present. You know, he just basically neutered the United States Senate.”

“Here,” Jacoby said as he handed his friend an unusually tall glass of scotch.

“Hardly a time for celebration Jake-O. And what the hell is that static I’m hearing?” Gabriel asked as he looked around the office for the source of the static.

“That, my friend is a white noise generator, left by a constituent. It’s what you use when—”

“Oh hell, Jake, I know what they are used for. Wait was this constituent the big G.I. Joe looking fella in the cowboy hat that was walking down the hall?”

“That’s the one. Here, we’ve gotta talk,” Jacoby said as he handed Gabe the folder Jonah left him.

“Who the hell is he anyway, I sure wouldn’t want to get into a tussle with him.”

“No Gabe you wouldn’t, that’s Jonah Thurston, and he might just be our best friend in the world right now.”



### Vice President’s Office

“Yez, Yez, I underztand. No, there waz no indication that zuch a plan waz being formulated, thiz iz very uncharacteriztic of America. No, I agree, we can uze thiz to our advantage. Yez,

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

Yez, of courze, I will manage him. Yez, please zend it over. Very Good.”

Diego hung up and placed his phone back on the desk.

“Zteven take this USB drive and print the Zeparation file on the zecure printer please.”

“Right away Mr. Assantino, do you want it bound?”

“Yez, thank you Zteven, two copiezs please.”

“Of course, Mr. Assantino.”

“Ha! Well how about that shit, huh Diego?” Karston busted into the office, confidently amused with himself. “Senators can’t do shit to sideline any of my proposals now.”

“Very good Karzton, we have other more prezzing matterz to attend to.” Diego responded flatly, ensuring Karston knew he was not impressed by his moves in the Senate.

“C’mon Diego, what’s more impressive than rewriting the rules of the Senate, not too shabby for a mornings worth of work I’d say.” Karston confidently kicked his feet up on the desk in front of Diego before putting his hands behind his head.

“Mr. Assantino, here are your copies and your USB stick, Sir.” a nervous Steven Blackstone said as he stuck his head in the office. Steven was one of the few people that was more comfortable around Diego than Karston.

“Thank you Zteven, that will be all.”

“Yes sir, th-thank you Mr. Assantino.” Steven stammered before leaving the office.

“Th-th-thank you Mr. Assantino,” Karston mockingly copied his young staffer hoping to get a smile out of Diego.

“Get your fucking feet off thiz dezsk.” Diego used the bound copies from Steven to knock the Veep’s feet to the ground. “Were you any better when I found you? Broke, whoring yourself to the wealthy elitez of the Zan Franzizco Art zcene? You are here because we have put you here. The Zenate’s rules were changed because I, and my azzociates wanted them changed. You will not take zuch a familiar tone with me again or you will be the prettiezt corpze since Kennedy to have a ztate funeral, do you underztand?”

Karston, quickly jumped up in a rare act of defiance to Diego, “Hey fuck you Diego, I’m the Vice—”

Karston was unable to finish his sentence before Diego delivered a precision blow to his windpipe and grasped his testicles in his skeletal hands, “One more poorly chozen word, and I will zell your nutz on the black-market, do you underztand.”

Karston nodded while holding his throat, gasping for air.

“Zay it. I have grown weary of your attitude.”

“Ucgh, I uuchg, I understand,” Karston barely choked out.

“I understand vat?”

“I understand, sir.”

“Better, now zit down. Az I zaid, we have much to dizcuss.”  
Diego tossed the folder to Karston.

“What is this?” Karston asked trying to keep the pages together and not drop the folder.

“That is the Big Blue endorzed Great Zeparation plan. You will prezent this to Zenator Elderz next week.”

“Jesus this thing is huge,” Karston spat out, still fighting to catch his breath from Diego’s earlier lesson in insubordination.

“Yez, it iz. You muzt read, prepare yourzelf, commit it to memory, thiz iz the plan going forward.”

“What are the different colors?”

“Those are the areaz we are willing to compromize on, in an effort to show good faith to the Zenator’s committee.”

“Why are we compromising on anything, that’s not your style.”

“Becauze, Karzton” Diego leaned over the desk and deliberately slowed his speech to ensure Karston had no room for misunderstanding, “It is ezzential that thiz zeparation happenz, and if you fuck thiz up in anyway, you vill be replaced, do you underztand absolutely everything I am zaying to you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, you will be reading then, no women until thiz iz done.”

“Yes, sir,” a dejected and scolded Karston acquiesced without protest.

“Thank you. Now I must leave, I have a meeting in the White House. Remember Karston, no women.” Diego calmly exited the Veep’s main office giving no indication to any of the staffers he had just assaulted and threatened the Vice President of the United States.

The enigmatic Senior Advisor, after grabbing his briefcase from his desk and his raincoat from the coatrack at the main entrance to the VP Office, stopped in the doorway, “Miztah Blackztone iz it?”

“Yes Sir, anything else I can help with Mr. Assantino.”

“No, thank you Zteven, I just wanted to zay, keep up the good work. You are truly an azzet.”

“Thank you, Mr. Assantino, I really appreciate it.”

“Of courze, Zteven. Have a good evening.”

## Chapter 8 : Vows

Six weeks passed since Kat and Matty promised themselves to one another. Michelle and Caleb worked all week, straightening up the property, cooking, and trying to make everything as picturesque as possible as they prepared to welcome their beloved Kat into the family.

“The Good Lord has seen fit to bless this marriage with a perfect day and thank you to all in attendance for coming to celebrate this union,” The preacher announced to the small gathering.

By all accounts, it was a traditional ceremony, with a few notable exceptions. Kat, looked beautiful as ever, having opted for a white sundress and combat boots over the more traditional bridal gown. Matty and the groom’s party opted for camouflage overalls. Officiating over the festivities was the over-sized, prior country store owner, Bill Thurston. And finally, young Derek stood with Kat, as opposed to sitting on the folding chair next to his mother, so he could hold Kat’s hand throughout the ceremony.



“Beautiful ceremony Bill, thank you so much for doing this,” a grateful Michelle said as she hugged the bear of a man.

“Of course, Michelle. I’m not sure it makes me a holy man, but I bet the Big Guy upstairs doesn’t mind too much.”

“No Bill, I’m sure he doesn’t. So how much longer are you around for?”

“Well the store is sold, and the house is empty, so I’ll probably head out west tomorrow.”

“Are you driving or flying?”

“Oh, I’m driving. I can’t let old Rufus go inside the belly of a plane and he’s too damn big to sit in the cabin with me.” Rufus, Bill’s long-in-the-tooth bloodhound, was as he described, “one of the best hunting dogs in all of Georgia.” The fact of the matter was, Rufus was always too lazy to hunt, preferring instead to sleep in the bed of the truck while his master would hunt.

“He’s still alive?” Michelle blurted out, immediately embarrassed that she may have sounded crass.

“Whatchu mean still alive? He’s a very young eighteen, I’ll have you know. Haha,” Bill let out a hearty laugh as Michelle shook her head.

“Yes, of course, what was I thinking. So, heading out west, you’re still going to stay with your family?”

“Oh yeah, my baby brother said he needs my help with some logistics and what not.”

“Oh, that’s good then, they say boredom is the killer in retirement.”

“Well my baby brother Jonah always has his fingers in something, so we’ll see.”

“Hey, isn’t that Rebecca’s Bug?” Michelle gently let go of Bill’s arm, “Be right back, Bill. Cay?”

“Yeah, I see it, Hun. When you didn’t get a response I sorta figured we weren’t going to be seeing her. Better late than never.”

“Hey Mom, is that Becca?”

“Yeah Matty, I’ll go see her,” Michelle walked past the other guests gathering in the shade in the party cabana Caleb rented for the day.

“I’ll come with you, Hun.”

“No Cay, I’ll go, I’ve got a feeling she needs me.”

As Michelle made the long walk over to where the cars are parked, she saw the classic 1973 Baby Powder Blue Bug that Matty restored for her as a going away to college gift.

“Becca sweetie? You okay?” Michelle called out as she got close.

Rebecca slowly lifted her head from between her arms still gripping the steering wheel.

“Mom, I gotta tell you something.”

Michelle, now standing beside the driver side door looking in through Rebecca’s rolled down window. “How far along are you?” Michelle spoke in calming voice.



“How could you tell?”

“I know my daughter’s face and I know what those tears mean. Don’t forget, I was once a guidance counselor before Derek came along.”

“Almost four months and change, right around twenty weeks.”

“All right, no problem, honey.”

“Don’t you want to know who the father is?” Rebecca spat out through tears.

“He’s not sitting in the car with you. If I ever meet him, he can tell me about himself. He’s not important now sweetheart, you are.”

Rebecca was slightly surprised by her mother’s answer, though she shouldn’t have been. It was easier to paint her parents in an overly conservative judgmental way in her mind these past few years, but even Rebecca knew that was never truly accurate.

“Okay honey, get out of the car, stand up, let’s have a look at you.” Michelle looked over Rebecca, almost like a seamstress would at a dress hanging on a model.

“You’re carrying well, not too obvious. Whatcha think about just keeping quiet about it for today? I assume you’d rather not tell your father?”

“No Mom, that’s why I’ve been crying.”

“That’s fine honey, I’m willing to bet good money the boys won’t notice. The only girls here are me and Kat, so that’s not a problem.”

“Wait, Aunt Sue didn’t show up?”

“No, I sent her an invitation despite Kat’s objection. I received a form letter from her office that read ‘Ms. Saury is committed to other plans on XXXXX date. Remember vote Big Blue’. Oh, and there was a \$1,000 check enclosed, which Kat immediately ripped up upon seeing.”

Rebecca felt lighter than she had in days at the news that Susan wasn’t going to be there. She honestly dreaded that far more than her own parents finding out. Rebecca knew Susan would know that she was carrying Karston’s baby and use that as some sort of political weapon. Although Rebecca wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about the baby growing in her belly, she knew it was safest far away from the crashing wave of Big Blue.

“Okay Mom, I think I’m ready. Did I already miss the ceremony?”

“Yes dear, but that’s okay, it was moved up two hours early at Kat’s request. She’s not really a fan of formalities and didn’t see the logic in making everyone wait. Thanks for coming, honey.” Michelle wrapped her arm around her daughter as they walked up the drive, “It was very brave of you.”

“Don’t compliment me Mom, it doesn’t feel right.”

“Fine, then I’ll just think it.”

“Fair enough. Aww, I just realized the whole set up out here looks just like you and Dad’s old wedding photos.”

“Yes, again that was Kat. She originally advocated for a Justice of the Peace wedding, but after some prodding, she relented. She said, “Very well, let’s see those wedding photos of you and Mr. Brenton...yep looks good, let’s do that.” I really think she was just trying to shut me up.”

“It’s nice being back here Mom, things just feel simpler.”

“We have our share of complications. Why last week, your father decided to move the chicken coop.” Michelle pointed to its new location, not disclosing the reason it was moved was at Kat’s direction as she didn’t want the chicken coop directly over one of her air intake ports. “You know you’re always welcome to come back home.”

“I know Mom, but I’m not ready to come home yet. I feel like I’d be giving up. I’m just feeling disillusioned with everything. Social work doesn’t really feel like it’s about helping people anymore. It’s just trying to convince people of all the reasons why they can’t help themselves. But I don’t want to get into politics today. Today’s about Matty and Kat.”

“I know dear, it’s okay. That’s the thing about family. When you’re ready to talk, we’ll be here.”

As soon as they arrived back at the cabana, Rebecca and Michelle parted so that all the required southern graces of

greetings could be observed. Rebecca floated from person to person with hugs and warm wishes, until she got to her brother.

Upon seeing his older sister, Matty gave her a hearty bear-hug, picking her up and swinging her around. “Hey Sissy! I knew you’d show up. How’s the Bug treating you?” he asked, setting Rebecca back on her feet.

“She leaks oil from time to time, but other than that it’s good,” Rebecca barely said, winded from her brother’s hug. Truthfully the Bug had a whole host of problems, the windows leaked when it rained, only one speaker worked, and the AC Matty rigged up was temperamental, at best. But Rebecca didn’t care about any of those things, right now she only cared that she didn’t throw up all over her brother.

“Good, if it’s leaking oil, it’s got oil in it. It’s when it stops leaking that the problems start with those things.”

“Lemme go talk to my new sister,” Rebecca said, patting her brother on his chest before walking to the outside of the tent flap to the cabana, where Kat was disassembling a camera from one of the drones she had mounted.

“Kat, you look beautiful sweetie. But what in God’s name are you doing?” Rebecca asked trying to make small talk. Her relationship with Kat was never a close one, due to Rebecca’s fondness for Susan, but the two were always on friendly terms.

“Thanks Becca, I set the drones up to take photos from different way-points around the property. I just had this clicker in my hand that told them when to go to their next stations. I didn’t want some rando here taking pictures, so I figured I’d set it up myself.” Kat, never one for small talk cut right to the meat of the issue. “So, talk to my bitch-ass mother lately?”

“No, she’s busy up in D.C. these days, I’m just a field coordinator.”

“You got one of those OKphones?” Kat blurted out, once again opting for efficiency in conversation over pleasantries.

“Yeah, how do you know about those?”

“User groups I’m a part of have been talking about them. Lemme see it.”

As soon as Rebecca handed her the phone, Kat reached into her backpack and pulls out an Electro Magnetic Safe Baggie.

“I had a feeling you might have one if you showed up.”

“What is that?”

“It’s an EM shielded bag. As long as you’re here, keep it in there. That’s not a phone as much as it is a tracking, surveillance, and Big Data collection device. I’d rather not have anyone listening in when they’re around me.”

Kat sealed up the OKphone and handed it back to Rebecca.

“All right, I’ll take your word for it.”

“They tell you that phone was free, didn’t they?”

“Yeah.”

“Someone’s paying for it, Becca, the question is who and why?”

“Okay, Okay! Fair enough, phone is retired for the afternoon,” Rebecca playfully puts her hands up to surrender to Kat’s request.

“So did my whore-ass mother tell you why she couldn’t make it?”

“No, I haven’t seen her since the fund raiser in Orlando a few months ago.”

“Right around the time she killed my dad,” Kat said with a stoic certainty Rebecca found shocking.

“No Kat, your mom was with me when that happened.”

“Listen Becca, I like you, but if you think that bitch didn’t have something to do with him dying, you’re delusional. I don’t think he killed himself, but even if he did, that fuckin’ witch drove him to it.”

Rebecca silently stood there at the edge of the cabana stunned.

“Where did the mop-top little girl that used to swap out her barbie’s arms for robot arms go?”

“Listen to me,” Kat pulled Rebecca in closely, “if you get pulled into her circle, or whatever she’s a part of, she’ll destroy you

too. You're pretty and smart, therefore you're a threat. Trust me on this. She will end you."

Rebecca tried to take a step back, but again Kat pulled closer. "And if she can't end you, she'll end anything close to you," Kat said as she grabbed Becca's hand and placed it just below her bellybutton.

Rebecca jerked away, with eyes as wide as saucers, she silently mouthed to Kat, "How did you know?"

Kat gave her standard "Oh Please" look. "Becca, boys are idiots, I'm not. Be careful, is all I'm saying. I know what those people are capable of. There's a trail of bodies that show up every time "Killston" has a get together," Kat said, using Karston's online message board nickname. You've got family here worth dying for, but that doesn't mean you should live in the line of fire, got it?"

Rebecca reached for Kat and gave her a hug. "I'll be careful and thank you."

"Thank you? For what?"

"For convincing me I don't have to worry about Matty or anyone else in the family as long as you're around."

"I'm going to take care of them," Kat said, as she watched Ty lift Matty's back legs up to perform a keg-stand.

"They're idiots, but they're my idiots from now on. Now go, have fun, but don't forget to keep the phone in the bag."

“BECKA, BECKA, KATMAT, KATMAT, BIG DAY!” Derek ran over yelling when he saw his older sister. Derek was the least familiar with Rebecca, as she had left to go to college when he first started recognizing family members.

“That’s right Derek, Big Day indeed.”

“BECKA COME DADDY”

“Okay, okay, little man, let’s go see Daddy.” Rebecca looked back over her shoulder to Kat. “Thanks again.” As she strolled over to her father, she thought to herself, “Matty doesn’t know just how lucky he is.”

“Baby Girl! Thanks for making the trip up here.”

“I wouldn’t miss Matty getting married, c’mon. Oh, okay bye Derek,” Rebecca said as Derek ran back to show Kat a balloon.

“That little boy loves his Kat. But seriously thank you, I know how demanding a job can be sometimes. Hell, I was off the coast of Luanda, Angola on an oil rig when Matty was born. Work can be a pain at times.”

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it. Honestly I’m not sure how much longer I’m gonna be there.” Rebecca admitted, without disclosing the real reason: “Once Susan finds out I’m carrying the Veep’s bastard child, there’s no telling what will happen, and I won’t have a say,” she thought.

“Oh really, well I’m sure you’ll find something better and if not, just come here and take some time off. That’s fine too.”



“Thanks, Daddy,” Rebecca said, as she allowed herself to briefly enjoy the simplicity of being back home. It gave her a perspective she had missed at the Big Blue Outreach Center.

After a full day of catching up with friends and family, Rebecca said her goodbyes and started walking out to her bug.

“Hey Red!”

Rebecca twirled around confused, she had many names among her family, but nobody called her Red.

“Hey, I’m Ty. I didn’t get a chance earlier to say hi.”

“I know who you are. Tyson Washington.”

“Huh?” Ty was caught by surprise. Not even Spark called him Tyson.

“We’ve met before, you probably don’t remember.”

“All right, Red, woulda thought I’d remembered seeing you, but okay, when did we meet before?” Ty playfully asked the red headed beauty.

“When Spark first got you, he and my parents lived near each other back then. Me and Mom would go over and help Spark out. Mom would teach him how to be a parent and I’d play with you to keep you company. I thought I was so much older than you though. You’ve certainly grown.”

“Yeah, but no one really knows how old I am. I looked like I was five when Spark got me, so that’s what he assumed, but he thinks maybe I was just malnourished, because after about 2

years, I looked like a ten-year-old. Anyway, no shit really? So, you were sorta like my babysitter then?”

“I guess so Ty, and yeah, totally true story.”

“Ha, that’s funny Red. Oh, I almost forgot, here, your mom didn’t want you to leave without this. Ty handed Rebecca a jar of peach preserves that had a peach pit dangling from the top of the mason jar lid.

“Ah yes, Mom’s famous Pretty in Peach preserves, with the required Peach Pittance of Principles. Let’s see what this one is shall we?” Rebecca playfully twisted the Peach Pit in her hand to see the verse. “Hmm...2TM2:22 is what I think is scratched in there. You know, as long as Mom has Kat here, I’m pretty sure she could rig her up something to make this more legible. Any idea what verse this is.”

“Yeah, I know. I think it has to do with this,” Ty said as he tapped Rebecca’s OKphone. “Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”

“I’ve gotta give her credit, she never gives up on her libtard daughter,” Rebecca said with a hint of self-deprecating humor.

“Oh, count your blessings Red, remember it’s good to have a mom that won’t give up. But basically, I think she’s just saying call her if you need her, in an overly cryptic way.”

“By the way, impressive scripture recall Ty; I didn’t realize Spark raised you religiously,” Rebecca said, surprised that the

stunning young man that was earlier holding up her brother's feet for a keg stand was so learned.

"Oh, Spark insisted that I learn the Bible, the Talmud, the Koran, Hindu and Confucian, and pretty much anything he could get his hands on. Your mom did a good job training him."

"I can see that. Well thank you Tyson and it's truly been a pleasure."

"You got it Red. Come back and visit. Me and Spark been spending a lot more time up here than before."

"I think I will, thank you again."

"K, see yah Red."

As Rebecca gave Ty a hug goodbye, she was taken at just how much of man he had become, he was strong, learned, confident without being cocky, and good natured. As she got in the car and pulled away, she was saddened to think of the life she had to return to. There were no young men like Ty coming into the Big Blue center, there were certainly no women like Kat there or anywhere else for that matter. Had circumstances been different she would have loved to stay home and spend hours with everyone in a sort of vacation of simplicity. "But alas," she thought as she stared down at her belly, "time to get back to real life."

Kat and Matty watched the blue bug as it sputtered down the dirt driveway from the comforts of the front porch swing

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

where they got engaged.

“Matty?”

“Yeah, Hun.”

“You need to get your sister and Ty together.”

“Oh Kat, that would never work.”

“Why?” Kat looked upon the fresh face of her husband with an expression that let him know he would be incorrect regardless of how he answered.

“Well Becca’s great, but she’s pretty liberal.”

“That’s exactly why it will work.”

“That was faster than usual, but you still lost me, Babe.”

Kat, took a deep breath that let Matty know he was about to be educated. “Look, Becca will need to be with someone that is confident in their own knowledge. Spark may not have been Dad of the year, but the education he gave that boy was enough to allow him to go toe-to-toe with any of the liberal academic bullshit she’s been taught. Plus, I guarantee you he’s probably manlier than anyone she’s been around at the university. Have you seen the dipshit-pussies that pass for men these days?”

“Hun?”

“Yeah Matty.”

“You’re pretty smart.”

“I know Matty. Now let’s go down and spend our first night as a married couple down in the doomsday bunker. My God, this is so awesome!”

“Damn Kat, you really are perfect,” Matty exclaimed, both excited and in a state of perpetual shock that he was somehow lucky enough to find a woman that thought spending her wedding night in a bunker is better than a romantic getaway.

“Yeah, Yeah, don’t forget it. Now let’s go.”

“Good night you two. See you in a couple of days,” Spark joked as Kat pulled Matty down to the bunker.

“We’ll text if we need anything,” Kat declared in her usual unphased manner. Matty on the other hand, quickly turned red from embarrassment.

As the door closed, Michelle called the group together. “Family meeting, no that’s you too, Ty. We’ll fill in Kat and Matty when they come up for air.”

“Haha, oh to be young and in love,” Spark said to the table.

“Yes, it’s all very sweet, but we have something serious to discuss.”

“What’s that Michelle?” Caleb, genuinely shocked at the serious turn Michelle was taking the evening.

“Our grandchild,” Michelle said with all due seriousness.

“Well, give ’em some time Hun, they just got married today,” Caleb joked.

“I’m talking about Rebecca.”

“What!” Caleb said, as the team huddled in to listen to Michelle.



Susan Saury’s Office, Big Blue Headquarters, Washington D.C.

Susan Saury walked back to her office after finishing another round of negotiations with the telecom reps. All Big Blue needed to do was get one small regional wireless carrier to offer free services in exchange for exclusivity in the Southeast to get Big Blue’s endorsement.

“Those fuckin’ idiots, they left it up to Big Blue’s strategic board to define the boundaries of what is Southeast. Fine, they can have all the exclusivity they want in Key West, that’s about as Southeast as they can get,” Susan thought as she walked past two armed guards stationed at the door to her office. As she took her seat at her imposing desk, she studied the silhouettes their bodies were casting on the glass on either side of her door. “They’re dressed like military, but those spaghetti arms aren’t scaring anyone. You’d think Diego could have outfitted his pathetic security force with a few stallions for me to play with.”

“Anti-Cap,” Susan mouthed aloud, “Your Defenders Against the Tyrannies of Capitalism. What a joke these guys are. The blue facemasks covering their faces, I don’t know, it’s kinda

kinky. But shit, lift some weights boys.” As the days passed under her new role, Susan grew more and more restless with her luxurious office. After having experienced such a meteoric rise, from Chief Council of the Florida Educator’s Association to the Chief Administrator of Big Blue, Susan was still left unfulfilled. Professionally, she was at the top of her game. All the major unions and some of the non-major unions had fallen in line. Dues are pouring in faster than she could process. Anti-Cap seems to be doing well, not that she knew what they do, but they’re always around.

“Ughh. Why am I still so bored?” she asked herself. Susan gave a look of “why not” to the mirrored screen on her desk. “I’ve got no one to answer to,” she said aloud as she pulled out a small box from the left side of her drawer. Inside the small ornamental diamond and sapphire encrusted powder box, she withdrew the golden scooping spoon from its holder, built into the top of the box. Susan scooped out a large bump of the light blue mix and with a quick inhale, a head tilt, let out a relieved “Ahhhh, that’s it. Cocaine and Adderall, why didn’t they have this when I was in college.”

“I believe the kidz refer to it as Cokerall, Mizz Zaury.”

“Oh shit, sorry Mr. Assantino, I didn’t know you would be calling.”

“That is quite obviouz, Mizz Zaury. I am zending down one of my azziztants to bring you the latezt draft of the Zeparation

Plan, with changez we need made. I trust you will be able to focuz?”

“Of course, Mr. Assantino, I will get this back to you as soon as possible.”

“Tomorrow morning is fine Mizz Zaury.”

“Yes sir.”

With that set of orders, Diego Assantino ended the drop-in video chat he had initiated with Susan’s video monitor that was built into her desk. Diego could drop-in any time. Susan could do likewise with her subordinates, but it never worked the other way around. The persistent reminder worked very well to keep young workers on task, but Susan felt annoyed that she was subject to the same surveillance as the underlings.

The adrenaline from Diego’s surprise Drop-in helped to kick start the effects of the Cokerall. Susan felt her heart start to race, then the hint of excited paranoia set in with the shallow breathing.

“Fuck I gotta calm down some, focus girl c’mon.” Just as Susan was starting to get her breathing under control, she heard a knock at the door.

“M-M-Ms. Saury, this is Steven, from Mr. Assantino’s office.”

“Enter,” Susan bellowed, ensuring her voice reached the door from her desk, a distance of at least a hundred and twenty feet.

As Steven walked in accompanied by Mr. Assantino’s private Anti-Cap guards, he was overwhelmed at the cathedral like



setting of Susan Saury's office. Twenty-foot-tall ceiling, portraits of famous members of past labor revolts, and a conference table. He had never seen anything so grand or that an office like this even existed.

"This is an amazing office Ms. S-S-Saury. M-Mr. Assantino wanted me to bring this to you personally," Steven stammered out. He normally did not have a problem stuttering; he was, however, prone to being star-struck by people he recognized from television.

Susan could pick up on the assistant's nervousness and decided to make her day more interesting. "Steven, is it? So glad to meet you," she said. Susan slowly stood up, walked around front and propped herself up to sit on the side of her desk. She then motioned the young man and the immense Anti-Cap security that accompanied him to take a seat.

As Steven walked over, he could feel his social anxiety start to build. First the lump in his throat, then the stomach tightening. His sense his anxiety and fear, along with the Cokerall rushing through her veins, was better than foreplay for Susan.

Having handed the folder to Susan and taking a seat as ordered, Steven shifted nervously as the Anti-Cap security stood to the side, refusing to take a seat. Susan played to the Steven's nervousness by ensuring her plunging neckline was directly in the young man's line of sight.

As she flipped the pages, not reading anything in particular, Susan enjoyed observing Steven out of the corner of her eye. He tried not to leer at her. Susan loved this little distraction to her day, first the bouncing crossed leg, accidentally letting her foot brush against Steven, then slowly sucking on the arm of her glasses as she pretended to read. Steven had begun to sweat profusely as he reached into his pocket to pull out his inhaler.

“I had better stop before I break this one. Now, Mr. Security on the other hand,” Susan thought as she dismounted the desk and walked over to the blue mask-clad Anti-Cap member. Susan gripped his bicep with her free hand as she tapped the folder on his large chest. “So, what’s your story hulk?”

“Ma’am?” the guard answered in a deep gruff voice.

“Ma’am? C’mon that sounds so formal. We’re all friends here. What’s your name Mr. Anti-Cap?”

“I’m Worker 4691, Ma’am.”

“Your real name, soldier.”

“Sorry Ma’am, my slave name was Mike.”

“Slave name? You don’t look like you have black heritage, Mike?”

“We were all slaves to capitalism, Ma’am.”

“Apologies Ms. Saury, before anyone can become one of the Inner Circle Security, they have to renounce their Slave Names as Mr. Assantino says.” Steven pointed to the Big Blue emblem

on Worker 4691's chest, noting the embroidered golden ring on the inside of the crashing wave.

"I see, well thank you, you two. Please see yourselves out." Susan quickly and abruptly ended their meeting and her flirtations upon hearing about the Inner Circle that she now realized she wasn't a part of.

Sitting back in her chair her mind began down a drug fueled spiral. "How the fuck can I be Chief Administrator of Big Blue and NOT be in the Inner Circle. Ugh, those two are keeping me out of the loop. This office isn't an upgrade, it's a glorified prison cell," Susan thoughts ran at a chemically enhanced speed that defied logic. Shit, how the hell did I end up on the outside? That meeting in Orlando, that was supposed to be an ascension, that's what that interrogation was all about. Rebecca," Susan thought, "everything was fine with me and Karston before Rebecca had to worm her way in."

Susan's drug fueled, paranoia-riddled brain proved quite adept at remembering her relationship with Karston as far more reciprocated than it actually was. "I've done my best to keep her buried and away from Washington. I bet that little red headed bitch is up here right now."

Susan leaned back in her chair, holding her Big Blue Tablet. She clicked on the OKoverwatch app, available only on supervisor's tablets. Susan noticed her fingers shaking as she begins to type. "Shit, too much coffee today."

“B...R...E...N...T...O...N...{tab}...R...” The tablet auto-suggested, Brenton, Rebecca.

“There you are you little whore. How many times have you been up here?”

{query: location, time=30 days}

“Hm...Florida, oh and one trip up to Georgia, when was that? Here we are, last Saturday. Something was going on then, what was it? Whatever, I can’t remember. Well Jesus, that’s the middle of nowhere, let’s take a look.” Susan zooms into the spot in Georgia, northeast of Atlanta. She sees a farmhouse set against rolling acres, butting up against State protected forests. “Oh, that’s probably where her redneck family is from. Yep, there’s their god-awful RV parked next to the house. Disgusting. Well at least Tommy was right when he said I wouldn’t like it very much up there, maybe he wasn’t a complete idiot.”

Susan spoke to herself, mocking her family’s Southern accent, “Okay Becca, let’s check your call logs and messages, shall we? Boring, boring, boring.” Susan scrolled past call after call Rebecca made during the course of her duties until seeing the distinctive icon of a small baby in the center of the Big Blue Wave next to a number. “Wait what’s this?”

Susan dialed the number to confirm her suspicion.

“Hello, Big Blue Family Planning Services.” A young receptionists voice echoed through her tablet. “What have we

here? Don't really need birth control if you're playing with the girlies." Susan thought as she hung up the phone without speaking.

Susan clicked back a few times to get out of the map feature of Rebecca's profile and back to the main screen. On the left of the screen past the thumbnail of Rebecca's flowing red curly hair Susan scrolled past, OKmail, OKhookup, OKchat... "Here it is OKhealth. What's been going on with you, you congressman-stealing tart."

Susan flipped through the pages of medical reports until she got to the page she had hoped to find; an ultrasound.

"Okay Ms. Brenton, got knocked up, did you? So how far along are we?" she looked at the date in the ultrasound, subtracted the estimated age of the fetus, and quickly reached for her daily planner. Susan had to confirm her suspicion of the possible fertilization day.

"NO FUCKING WAY!" Susan leaned back in her chair; her mind cluttered with what to do with this information. Images of Rebecca standing side by side with Karston at State functions, along with a little one tortured Susan. She frantically reached for her bejeweled snuff box for a top-off.

"Ahhh, good, now think." Susan let out a loud sigh as she reattached the scoop spoon to the lid. "This is gonna be Rebecca's ticket to Karston's precious Inner Circle. Right? Right," Susan reassured herself with her erroneous logic. "And

if she locks up the First Lady role, there's no way she'd let me near him, she's not gonna want to lose her meal ticket, right? Right," Susan again reaffirmed her thoughts.

"No way Diego or Karston even knew about this, otherwise she wouldn't be moving around freely, right? Right. This baby being born will keep me stuck in this mediocrity, right? Right," Susan said while looking around at her office that, by the standards of any rational person, could never be described as mediocre.

"I can't let this baby be born, right? Right." Susan declared, feeling triumphant that her logical progression has led to the only viable outcome.

"Say it again Susan, with conviction," Susan ordered herself, looking at her reflection in the blackened mirror of the video call screen. "That baby will not be born alive, I swear it." Susan's declaration gave her a renewed sense of purpose. She picked up the tablet again and began to flip through a few more pages on the OKhealth tab of Rebecca Brenton's profile. After a few moments Susan came across the upcoming appointments section of the screen.

"Good, that's enough time," she said to herself before she addressed the pitiful sentries beyond the door. "Guards come in here please."

"Ma'am?"

"What are your names?"

“I’m Spencer.”

“Riley, Ma’am.”

“I take it you’re not part of the Inner Circle Security group, squad, or whatever.”

“No Ma’am, there are some guys in our unit that are trying out for it, but we couldn’t pass the physical.”

“No kidding.”

“Ma’am?”

“Call your supervisor, I want all the people that are trying out for Inner Circle Security up here in two hours. Tell him the Chief Administrator wants to personally review them for a potential field assignment.”

“Yes Ma’am, right away, anything else, Ma’am?”

“Leave.”



### Various News Channels, Worldwide Locations

*“Good evening to all of our viewers. Tonight, the Nation’s eyes are all on Washington D.C., as it has been reported that the President has taken ill and is currently surrounded by his family in what may be his final moments. We turn now live to Rachelle Woosley outside the White House, Rachelle?”*

*“Yes Todd, I’m here outside the White House, and as you can see, I’m surrounded by press from all over the world. There’s*

D.F. Brent Sr.

*been a steady stream of rumors and innuendos concerning the President's diminishing mental capacity for the past several weeks. And though we cannot confirm any of those informal diagnosis, it certainly raises questions as to the validity of the White House's denials."*

*"Yes, Rachelle, it certainly does. Thank you for that report."*

*"Thank you, Todd. I'll be standing by should we receive any further word on the President's condition."*

*"Turning to our guest panel this evening, we have Political Correspondent Joshua Pinkett, along with Hassam Richards of the Progressive National Baptist Conference, and the Former Deputy Director of the Secret Service, Kiley Walker. Kiley, I'd like to start with you. During a time like this, what is happening inside the White House?"*

*"Thank you Todd. Well as you know, the last President to pass away in office was JFK, which was a bit before all of our time. I can't speak from direct experience, though I can tell you how we train for this situation. The first thing that is happening as Rachelle said, the President is being attended to by the White House physician, surrounded by family and most likely a religious leader. His comfort and safety are the key concerns for everyone in his chambers."*

*"Of course."*

*"Down in the situation room, the Vice President is likely being briefed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the President's Cabinet, and*



*Secret Service. In the room with him will also be leadership from both chambers of Congress, and of course, the Chief Justice for the possibility of a swearing in of the Vice President as President.”*

*“Fascinating, thank you, Kiley. Hassam, thank you for joining us.”*

*“My pleasure, Todd.”*

*“Hassam, you yourself have been the calming voice of assurance to many families during times like this. What would you like to say to the President’s followers in this difficult time?”*

*“Todd, great question. I would say to the supporters of the President, that though it may seem like the darkest hour, we all certainly grieve at the setting of the sun on this great President, what we cannot lose sight of is the promises of a better future this President left in our hands. The promise that this President made to all those that support BLM, PRIDE, CAIR, and all the groups within Big Blue, the Promise that no matter what happens, everything will be OK.”*

*“Thank you, Hassam, yes this President certainly helped to solidify many disparate groups with the naming of Karston Shilling as his Vice President just a few short months ago. And that’s a perfect segway to you Joshua. How do you see this playing out politically?”*

*“Thank you, Todd. Although politics are not at the forefront of anyone’s mind right now, the President’s health is; it is*

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

*impossible not to view the potential for transfer of power in the White House as a landmark event.”*

*“Yes, I’d like to remind our viewers that our thoughts and prayers are in fact with the President and his family.”*

*“Of course, Todd, like I said, an absolute landmark event, and of course what many people are seeing as the inevitable coronation of a very popular Karston Shilling. Now if you look on the screen, you can see the poll numbers for Karston have been relatively flat the past few weeks, as he has yet to announce his support for or against what is really the seminal question of our time.”*

*“You’re talking about the Great Separation?”*

*“Yes, and although Vice President Shilling has enjoyed a very cozy relationship with the press, if he is in fact sworn in as President, he will have to take a stand on some of these big questions facing the country.”*

*“Excuse me, Joshua. We’re going live right now to Vice President Karston Shilling as he addresses the Press. Let’s listen in.”*

*“Members of the Press, Members of the White House Staff, my fellow Americans, it is with a heavy heart that I come before you tonight. Moments ago, the Chief Justice swore me in as the next President of the United States. President Beardon fought hard, but ultimately it was his time to leave this Earth and move on. I can only hope to live up to the faith*

he had in me when he named me his Vice President and serve as admirably as he did. President Beardon will forever be in our hearts for the being the leader that helped to usher in a new progressive era in the United States. I would expect a deluge of commemorating eulogies in the coming days, so I will leave it up to the poets and speechwriters to put into words the pain we are all experiencing. We will, of course, be having a State funeral, in the following week, the details of which are yet to be finalized. I'll be happy to take a few questions, but please keep them respectful in light of the gravity of tonight's events. Go ahead Kip."

"Yes, President Shilling, the White House has been denying anything was wrong with the President for weeks now, are we to believe that this just came on today?"

"I thought I said respectful, no go ahead, that's right, take his credentials, get him out of here." President Shilling said as he directed Secret Service to remove the reporter.

"Sorry about that everyone, now is hardly the time for gotcha questions. Go ahead, Kelly."

"Thank you, President Shilling, were you with the President as he passed."

"Actually, yes, I was Kelly. As you know I've been in the situation room all day, being briefed as a just-in-case scenario when I received word the President wanted to see me. As I joined him by his bedside, he pulled me in close, barely able to make a sound, but he told me 'Karston, the Great Separation

must happen, I trust you to see it through.’ It was a very moving moment that I got to share with the President before his passing. Okay time for one more, go ahead Kyle.”

“Thank you, Mr. President. Now up until two weeks ago, President Beardon was largely seen as backing his previous Vice President’s position of maintaining the Union.”

“Let’s just stop you right there, Kyle. Yes, you two over there. Go on, no get his press pass as well, I’m not going to remind the press every other question to be respectful. During times like this, it’s a one strike and you’re out deal. You seem to already forget what I said about gotcha questions. Okay, thank you all and goodnight.”

*“Well there you have it folks, the peaceful transition of power, something that has made our great country stand out for centuries, carried on again tonight. Joshua, I’d like to go to you first, and all I can say is, Wow! What a Bombshell”*

*“Thank you, Todd, yes, I don’t know if the audience at home could see, but there were very few dry eyes in that Press Briefing Room when now-President Shilling was retelling that amazing story of the carrying out the President’s deathbed request.”*



Senator Jacoby Elders’ Home, Washington D.C.

“Well shit,” Senator Moran succinctly stated his mood.

“We knew it was just a matter of time, Gabe,” Jacoby calmly

reminded his old friend.

“Doesn’t make me feel any better that we’re forced to call that blonde son-of-a-bitch, Mr. President. Well the good news is that now the Great Separation has a flippin’ deathbed mandate. What a crock.”

“Yeah that seemed a bit too contrived for my tastes, the press seems to be eating it up though.”

“Oh, hell Jake, they’ll eat up anything that the Golden One offers to them. They aren’t exactly the most discerning group. Think we should call Senate leadership?”

“Gabe, it doesn’t matter. We know everything we need to know.”

“I’m sure we’ll have a ton more work to do now that Shilling has endorsed the Separation.”

Jacoby motioned to the folder laying on the coffee table in front of the couch the two men were sharing. “Everything we need to know is in there and I don’t much feel like reading it tonight.”

Gabriel picks up the folder and examines the title. “The Official Big Blue Great Separation Plan, Chief Administrator Susan Saury? When the hell did this show up, Jake?”

“About two hours ago, when you were upstairs. That Diego Assantino character brought it by, really don’t like him knowing where I live.”

“That guy is grade-A garbage. Did that little cockroach have anything to say when he dropped it off?”

“Yeah.” Jacoby was about to attempt an impersonation of Diego’s accent but decided against it. “You and Mr. Moran will be needing this for your committee.”

“Screw this Jake, I’m gonna go call the wife and tell her to get the kids out West. Your wife know any decent realtors out there?”

“Yeah, Alice can help you out. I’ll have her text Kitty. Actually no, just plan on stayin’ with us. I’ll just tell Alice to have the guest house ready.”

“Thanks Jake, but we can get a place.”

“Oh, I know Gabe. I’d rather give Jonah a call and tell him to get you set up.”

“Good idea. Tell Jonah thanks, it’s nice knowing he’s on our side. Goodnight Jake-O.”

“You can say that again,” Jacoby thought as he stared at the Big Blue Separation binder on his coffee table. “Goodnight Gabe.”

## **Chapter 9 : Plans**

### Brenton Estate

Caleb descended the stairs with his arms full of Kat's latest parts request. It had been four days since the wedding and the work on the bunker had progressed at a fevered pitch. Once he reached the bottom stair, Caleb looked back at the door frame, "Yeah this ain't gonna work, I've gotta build some sort of elevator," he thought before addressing his new daughter-in-law. "Kat honey, here you go."

"Thanks Mr. Brenton," Kat responded without looking up from her layout designs.

"It's Dad now, Kat."

"Uh, yeah sure thing, Mr. Brenton."

"Ha, okay Kat. Hey gimme your attention for a sec love." Caleb pulled the design layout away from Kat to ensure her attention.

"Oh, hey Dad, what's up?" Kat looked up with a hint of surprise, then switched gears from designer to daughter.

"Kat, honey, I need a better way to bring stuff down, like today."

“Gotcha covered Dad. I sent Matty up to start digging in this area right here,” Kat pointed to a section above container 6. “Ty’s got the plasma cutter set up underneath to cut open a 4’ X 4’ hole and I’ve got him looking for hardware to make a hinged hatch. But I still need to rig up something to evacuate the fumes from him cutting. Got any hardware we can use?”

“Damn girl, you really are good at this. Yeah, I’ve got all the parts he’ll need. Plus, I’m gonna have to grab material for a makeshift elevator. I’m guessing you’ll want this shaft hidden?”

Kat erected herself from over the plans, “Yeah, I haven’t really come up with a design for that yet. Let’s get everything down here first and then I’ll figure that out.”

“Okay, we’re still down a fair bit from ground level. We’ll need to shore up the sides of whatever Matty digs out, otherwise it’ll be ripe to collapse. I’ll go topside to help Matty shore it up. One more thing,” Caleb said, grabbing a piece of paper from his pocket to hand to Kat, “here’s the list of equipment Spark is bringing by tonight from the decommission job he just finished. Apparently, he got a deal on an old dump truck and he’s got everything loaded in it so you can add that to your list of assets.”

“Oh, shit that’s awesome,” Kat accidentally let slip out. Whoops, sorry about that.” Kat tried to watch her language around the family. The few times she slipped up were so rare, no-one really minded.



“Let’s just chalk it up to construction talk, Boss Lady. Now why don’t you take a break and get some fresh air? You’ve been down here for a while and you need to eat to keep up your strength. Let’s go see what Michelle prepared and then we can go over the plan of attack for the rest of the day.”

“Mr. Bren— Dad, an agricultural drone?” Kat pulled the inventory sheet of Spark’s salvage closer to her eyes to inspect.

“Yeah, apparently there was a company doing inspections using those things. Spark figured you would find something cool to do with it.”

“Oh wow, these things are awesome, increased payload, longer flight times; yeah I’ll definitely do something cool with this guy.”

“All right Kat, let’s go.” Caleb threw his arm around his young project manager. “Betcha never thought you’d spend your honeymoon designing a doomsday bunker, huh?”

“Correction,” Kat held a finger up in the air, “I never dreamed I would *get* to spend my honeymoon designing a doomsday bunker. Subtle difference Dad, but significant.”



“Derek! Derek!” Michelle called out from the front porch.

“Can’t find Derek?” Caleb asked while she scanned the property.

“No, with all the work going on today he’s been keeping himself busy with his tablet. I saw him just a few minutes ago, he couldn’t have gone too far.”

“I gotcha Mom.” Kat pulled a 3D printed peach pit necklace from under her vintage Nirvana tee shirt.

“Kat sweetie, what is that? I saw Derek had one on as well.”

“Oh, just something I’ve been fooling around with. It’s a simple two-way transmitter, like a walkie-talkie but only just beeps. I’ve been working with Derek to get him to press it if he needs help and it’ll beep me. If I press it, he knows to come find me.”

Michelle and Caleb looked at each other with an expression of being both impressed and dumbfounded. “Well, okay give it a try dear,” Michelle requested.

With two quick squeezes of the plastic peach pit, a simple beep was heard from around the back the house.

“KAT! ME HERE! KAT! ME HERE!”

“Thanks buddy, I couldn’t find you and I got worried.”

“KAT! ME HERE! ME HERE!”

“Hey Kat, wanna be Derek’s godmother?” Michelle asked, still in shock over her daughter-in-law’s latest invention. “Just so we’re clear, I’m not joking,” she clarified.

“Oh, Mom, that’s sweet. Of course, you know I’m gonna look out for my little buddy no matter what.”

“You never cease to amaze, Kathryn,” Caleb added. He looked down at Derek as he played with the Peach Pit around his neck.

“Hey now.” Kat looked back up at Caleb. “If you want me to call you Dad, then no calling me Kathryn. That’s what my mother called me. I’m Kat. Besides, it’s a far more efficient name.”

“Fair enough, *Kat*,” Caleb stressed her preferred name before shepherding the family back into the house.

As the Brentons and Ty sat down for lunch together, Kat studied the inventory list Caleb handed her earlier.

“Ok, good, power distribution panels, industrial generator, that’ll have to come down in sections, shouldn’t be a problem. Damn, that’s a lot of pumps, good, we’ll be able to have proper plumbing down there. I just need to double check power requirements, but maybe I can have the blackwater go to a holding tank, then discharge throughout the night, that’ll save on my power consumption through the day. Which reminds me—oh good, batteries. Damn, he got a lot, awesome. Okay, I’ll have to source a tester to make sure they can handle the load we’ll be placing on them.”

“Spark get you sorted out, Boss Lady?” Ty asked through a mouthful of macaroni salad.

“Yeah Ty, you and Matty are still going to be working pretty hard the next couple of days, but I think we can be habitable

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

by the weekend.”

“DEREK PLAY KAT”

“Oh, baby boy, we’ll go down there and play soon, we just need to finish cleaning it up. Remember what I said about putting your toys away? We have to put all of our toys away before its safe for you.”

“DEREK GOOD BOY CLEAN ROOM!”

“Kat honey, you’re so good. Yeah Derek, we just need to clean a little more,” Matty chirped.

“CREAN RITTLE MO,” Derek said, never missing an opportunity to tease Matty.

“Anyone heard from Rebecca?” Matty asked with the same smirk Derek’s teasing always produced.

“Yeah, she called last night when you all were busy in the bunker,” Michelle began to tell the group.

“Did you tell her to get a burner phone?” Kat interrupted, her paranoia concerning the Big Blue OKphones were well known to the group at this point.

“Yes Kat, she did, she said she got a small one so she could keep it hidden. Apparently, if a worker at Big Blue is seen using a non-authorized phone that person can be fired.”

“Good,” Caleb dryly commented, “the sooner she’s outta there the better I’ll sleep at night.”

“I know honey. Rebecca knows we’ll always be here when she needs us.”

“It still feels like she’s working for the enemy,” Caleb said.

“Well, she is, she just doesn’t realize it yet.” Kat commented.

“What’s her new number anyway? I wanna make sure she can get in touch with us if things go sideways.” Michelle held up her phone as Kat typed the number into her contacts. “Great got it.” Kat immediately forwarded the contact to Ty before Michelle set her phone back down.

“Oh, speaking of which, looks like our wayward daughter is calling me now, one sec.” Michelle excused herself from the table.

“Hey Honey, yeah, yeah. Oh my. Okay, as long as your safe. No, I’m in the other room. Uhm huh, uh huh, I understand. Okay Rebecca, I’ll let the family know. No honey, we’re just gonna be ready, that’s all. No, love you too.”

“Honey, what’s happening?” Caleb said with an increased sense of urgency.

After taking a moment to calm herself, Michelle looked to be silently saying prayer. “Okay here’s the situation. Rebecca said there’s something weird about the protests in Gainesville. She usually knows about them ahead of time, to set up safe spaces or whatever they’ll need them. Apparently, the protests are getting out of hand with lots of people she’s never seen before. She thinks they’re Big Blue, but not the group she’s used to

dealing with. Apparently, they're setting up some kind of Self-Governing Zone in downtown Gainesville. She also believes she's being followed."

"We've got to get her out of there," Matty and Ty said in near unison.

"I agree boys. She feels safe for now. They aren't bothering Big Blue HQ or their Health Clinics for the time being. She said she was using her burner phone in the bathroom and she thinks her assistant, Star saw her with it. So, she doesn't know how much longer she's gonna have it."

Caleb stood up at the head of the table and slammed both his fists on either side of his lunch plate. "Michelle, I know Rebecca thinks she knows how the world works, but she doesn't. I've had to get choppered out of some pretty hairy places. Protests that turn into riots, that turn into land grabs always end in a lot of bloodshed. Every time. And that's exactly what those Autonomous Zones are, a land grab. Rebecca hasn't seen the ugly realities of what people can do to each other and I don't want her to find out the hard way." Caleb finished his justification and mentally switched from father to rig chief mode. "Kat grab your asset list from the bunker, Matty you and Ty go out to the RV and get it prepped. Food, fresh water, fuel, the works. Oh, and put the all-terrain tires on it and double check the fluids. It's been a while since we've had her in four-wheel drive and I don't want any surprises," Caleb said with the calm clarity of a rig chief crisis manager.

“She may resent you if she’s not ready to come back home,” Michelle warned her husband.

“That’s a tomorrow problem, Michelle. Being a parent isn’t about being liked, it’s about keeping them safe and giving them the tools to take care of themselves. I’ve failed her enough already. She wasn’t prepared to handle the den of debauchery and the liberalism of college campuses these days. Just look where that has gotten her.”

“Matty, get the dirt bikes ready too,” Kat directed while looking down at her inventory sheet.

“Kat?”

“Here, Mr. Brenton, let’s go in your office, I’ve got an idea,” Kat said, gathering her papers to head to Caleb’s den, “but we are gonna need some time to prep.”

“I’d listen to her Cay.” Michelle stood from the table to pick up Derek. Although much of the conversation went over Derek’s head, he could sense the seriousness of his family and Michelle could see a sense of anxiety rise in him.

“That’s fine,” Caleb replied, “we’re gonna need tonight to get Spark’s dump truck offloaded anyway.”

“Good, because I think we’re gonna need the dump truck as well,” Kat suggested.

“BECCA NEED KAT!” Derek blurted out as he held out his peach pit necklace for Kat.

“Excellent Derek, yes, we will definitely use this,” Kat reassured her future godson.

“We’ll get her back, Michelle,” Caleb assured her, “I’ve seen these self-governing zones before. Nothing positive ever comes of them.”

“I know Cay, just be careful.”

“I will honey. Will you do me a favor and get some food together for us? This could take a couple of days depending on how nasty it is down there.”

“We’d be happy to. Wouldn’t we, Derek?”

“DEREK HELP BECCA!”

“That’s right baby boy, we’re all going to help Becca. Cay, you better get in there and see what the resident genius is cooking up.” Michelle gave Caleb a reassuring kiss on the cheek.

“Love you, and you too buddy,” Caleb kissed his culinary support team before joining Kat in his den.

“All right Kat, whatcha need.”

“Do you still have that large format printer plotter that you used for the rig architectural drawings?”

“Yeah I just need to set it up, but sure, gimme fifteen minutes.”

“Okay, while you do that, I need to finish flushing something out a bit more.”

“You lead, we follow.”



“Finally, people are starting to get that,” Kat exclaimed. She had hoped to lighten the mood from what was a very emotional ending to lunch. Kat always found the more the atmosphere could be shifted away from emotion, the easier it was for her to design and execute her plans. Kat’s eyes darted back and forth as she mumbled ideas, “Okay, what are my variables? What are my if-then scenarios? Why wouldn’t Rebecca know about the increased presence? No, that’s too big, deal with that later. Where are the extraction points? Will time of day play a role?”

“Looks like Spark is still a few hours out,” Caleb interrupted Kat’s mental planning as he summed up a text from Spark.

“Great. As soon as he gets here, can you and the boys start unloading? Everything needs to be offloaded, so whatever can be easily lifted down into the bunker is good. Any of the big items, just put them in the garage and we’ll deal with it when we get back.”

“We may not be fully habitable by the weekend. Sorry about that Kat,” Caleb said recalling Kat’s excitement before lunch.

“Umm, don’t get me wrong Dad, a fully habitable doomsday bunker is really cool, but planning a search and rescue, and then extraction, c’mon on now. Not to make light of the situation, but this is really turning into a honeymoon to remember,” Kat reassured her father-in-law. “I’m doing exactly what I’m supposed to be doing, Dad.”



Presidential Oval Office, The White House

“Thank you General, I understand the situation is dire, but these people do have a right to protest. Besides, military bases are taxpayer funded, so I expect you to allow them access for their protest. Of course. Look, you can lock up anything that might be dangerous, but I want no incidents of protestors being harmed. No General, they are not rioters, they are simply expressing their first amendment rights. Isn’t that what you signed up to protect? Fine General, you know my position on this. No, I’m sorry. You’re not seeing the bigger picture here. I thought you were a patriot, I guess I was mistaken. Fine then I’ll accept your resignation. What do you mean I can’t fire you? I’m the President of the United States of America, for as long as that’s our name. Fine, I’ll call the Governor of Utah then. Congrats General, history will remember you as a coward and a trait— Hello? Hello? Oh, for fuck’s sake, that bastard hung up on me.” President Shilling slammed the phone down with a thunderous bang. “Diego, why the shit can’t I fire that guy?”

“Because Karzton, when the Utah Governor reactivated the Utah Ztate Defenze Forcez, your predecezzor authorized the exizting National Guard resourcez to be tranzferred to the ztates. A particularly troubling development that we were unable to forzee. Zenators Moran and Elderz were very effective in their manipulation of Prezident Beardon it would zeem. It iz not important right now, the likelihood that the

Ztate Defenze Forcez will be of concern iz very low,” Diego explained as he educated the President.

“Fine. Well what about this shit in Florida? Are we just going to let Gainesville burn?”

“Yez.”

“Yes?”

“We will do nothing. Florida iz a particularly troubling ztate. Extremely konzervative in the northern half and gets more supportive the farther zouth you go. The more troubled Gainezville iz now, the eazier it will be to have a foothold there after The Great Zeparation. Originally, we only wanted the I-4 corridor zouth. But if we can zecure Gainezville, we will zeverely cut into New Liberty’z influence in that region. If not, it iz not overly important to uz. That iz why we will not expend rezources there.”

“We’ve got a few offices down there I think, shouldn’t we at least get our people out?” President Shilling questioned, careful to not give a tone of authority over Diego.

“They are fine where they are, Mr. Prezident. In the grand zcheme of thingz, they are not important. I will continue to monitor it. Mizz Zaury haz been deploying Big Blue Zecurity down there at an increazed rate, zo perhapz she haz an affinity for the area. Her former home waz relatively near there I believe.”

“Ah yes, Susan Saury, that’s a wild one there.”

“Zertainly Karzton.”

“How’s she doing over at Big Blue anyway?”

“She is effective, now that her ambition iz, shall we zay, plateaued. Though her predilection for chemicalz may prove to be problematic. Like everyone, she iz being clozely watched.”

“Yeah, she always did enjoy the nose candy. Hey, did that video of her at the lake with those college boys ever leak? Maybe that’s why she wants to save Gainesville, if I remember right those were Florida Gator Frat boys we paid for that tape of her.”

“We ztill have the video, if we ever need to uze it.”

“Ha! Yeah, she really turned into a worn out skank. Glad I got to her before all that.”

“Yez, I’m zure she waz quite virginal when the two of you met.” Diego’s rare use of sarcasm let Karston know he was growing bored with the conversation.

“I’m sorry Diego, just wanted to give my mind a rest from all this other stuff going on,” Karston said, hoping he hadn’t overstepped his familiarity with Diego. “Very good then, what are today’s hot stove items?” Karston asked with an optimism that took Diego by surprise.

“You are zettling into your new role nizely then?” Diego inquired.

“Well, it’s really not a bad gig,” Karston said as he motioned his hands around the office.

“Yez, az far az gigz go, thiz iz quite adequate. Here iz the lizt of cities that we have already determined will be part of the People’s Social Republic of America, our propozed map waz very zimilar to the New Liberty map. There are, however, a few zities that will be problematic. Notably Atlanta, Auztin, Memphiz, Denver & Aurora. These izolated cities in otherwize red regionz are not our primary conzern though. We may want Atlanta, primarily for the airport, but our main conzern is zecuring az much of the zouthern border as pozzible.”

“That’s a whole lot of desert isn’t it?” Karston looked up from Diego’s map.

“The zouthern border is imperative, that is the gateway to the natural rezourzes of America.”

“I see.”

“No. No you don’t. But that iz not important now. I am only telling you thiz zo you do not make any foolish compromizes,” Diego corrected his President, without divulging too much information about larger plans at work.

“Is that why we’re getting an uptick in riots in these spots?” Karston asked, hoping for a shred of approval from his Senior Advisor. “Because they are contested? We want New Liberty to have to deal with them after the Separation?”

“That iz one of our thoughts going forward. Very good Karzton, the more chaoz that New Liberty iz dealing with in their citiez, the lezz they can worry about what we are doing.” Diego’s face slightly contorted as a smile of approval nearly appeared.

“Is there anything specific I need to be doing about this?” Karston pointed to the disputed areas.

“That iz my rezponzibility, Karzton. I will let you know when I need you to perform.” Diego packed up his map and left for his office.



“Zteven, can you have Mizz Zaury come to my office please? I believe she iz in her offize in the Big Blue Headquarterz building.”

“When would you like to see her, Mr. Assantino?” the eager assistant responded.

“Az zoon az pozzible Zteven, thank you.” Diego closed the door to his office.

“Yes, Ms. Saury, Y-y-yes this is Steven Blackstone, Mr. Assantino’s assistant,” Steven sputtered out the words, despite having practiced several times in his head. Steven felt the anxiety build as he spoke to the seductive Chief Administrator. “Yes Ma’am, Mr. Assantino has requested you c-c-come to his office. N-n-no Ma’am, right away. Y-y-yes Ma’am. Th-th-thank you Ma’am.” Steven felt lightheaded

after calling Susan Saury. Just talking to her on the phone, gave him more nervous anxiety than he was equipped to manage.

“Zteven,” Diego called from his office.

“Yes, Mr. Assantino.”

“Come here and zit down please.”

“Yes, Mr. Assantino.” Steven quickly complied.

“Mizz Zaury makez you nervouz?” Diego asked, with a slight tone of concern.

“A bit, Mr. Assantino.”

“Zteven, Mizz Zaury iz a drug-addicted whore that iz only in a poztion of power becauze I allow it.”

“Oh, I see Mr. Assantino.”

“Do not let her intimidate you Zteven, her only power iz her zexuality. Learn to ignore that, and you will not be bothered by her anymore, underztand?”

“Yes Mr. Assantino, thank you, sir.”

“Of course, Zteven, now please continue your dutiez.” Diego excused the young assistant from his office. As far as anyone could tell Steven Blackstone was the only human Diego carried on any type of informal communications with, and that made him an anomaly throughout the West Wing. An anomaly that spawned numerous rumors and speculations. A possible relationship? Embarrassing leverage by way of blackmail? Were the two related? The truth, however, was far

simpler and not nearly as interesting. Steven was the only person that didn't act scared around Diego, and Diego found it comforting.

Twenty minutes passed before the Chief Administrator finally arrived. "Hi Stevie, remember me?" Susan playfully stuck her head into the reception area outside of Diego Assantino's office.

"Yes, Ms. Saury, I will let Mr. Assantino know you are here," Steven responded as mechanically as he was capable.

"Everything okay Steven? You don't seem yourself." Susan was surprised at the cold reception from her plaything of just a few days ago.

"I'm fine Ms. Saury, thank you for your concern." Steven thought how this was becoming easier for him to deal with. He didn't even need his inhaler. "Please, this way Chief Administrator."

"Fine," Susan shot back, annoyed.

"Mizz Zaury, zit down please."

"Yes Sir Mr. Assantino, what can I do for you and our newly minted President?"

Diego chose to ignore Susan's empty pleasantries, instead cutting straight to the reason for the meeting. "Why are you azzigning Big Blue rezourzes to Gainzeville, Florida?"



“Well, in my role as Chief Administrator, I believe it is my job to assign Big Blue’s resources.”

“Mind your tone Mizz Zaury. I believe I have warned you of thiz zpoiled attitude before. Now try again Mizz Zaury. Why Gainzeville, in particular?”

“It’s a personal matter I need to attend to. It will be cleared up in a few days. I was going to head down there the day after tomorrow, once I made sure enough security was on hand for my arrival.”

“Very well, Mizz Zaury. I don’t really care about your perzonal matterz. But you will inform thiz offize, through Zteven, when you are traveling and when you reazzign Big Blue azzets.”

“I will.” Susan was relieved that the reason for her trip would remain a secret. As she tried to portray herself as a loyal ally to Diego, she thought to herself, “I can’t believe I’ve got to answer for every single thing I’m doing with this asshole.”

“I may require you to come back to D.C. short notize. Iz that going to be a problem during your trip?” Diego pressed the Chief Administrator. “We are planning the unveiling of the official White Houze Zeparation Plan, and we will need you to make the roundz on network newz programz. We do not have a zpezific time yet, but it will likely be in a few dayz. You were zelected for thiz role for your charm in front of the camera, Mizz Zaury. That iz not eazy to do from Gainzeville. I zuggest you keep your plane fueled while you are there.”

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

“I understand Mr. Assantino, I will leave as soon as I receive word.”

“Do not dizappoint me Mizz Zaury. I do not zhink you would like the way I deal with dizapointment.”

“I understand. If that will be all Diego, I will leave to attend to my business.”

“Go.” Diego curtly dismissed Susan. He could no longer hide his revulsion for Susan Saury as it materialized across his twisting lips.



Senator Elders' Office, Washington D.C.

“All right Jake-O, I think we’re done.” Gabriel Moran let out a sigh of relief as he placed the finished Separation Plan on Jacoby’s desk. “One complete Elders Council approved Great Separation Plan,” Gabriel said, hoping to get a reaction from Jacoby who had been staring out the window in silence for the last twenty minutes.

“Gabe, do you think they see us as quitters or cowards?” Jacoby’s heartfelt question emerged from his lips.

“Who? The voters? Hell, this plan is polling at like 89 percent approval. That’s unheard of in this day and age.”

“Not the voters Gabe. The voters can be fooled and manipulated; we’ve seen plenty of that in the past. No, that’s not who I’m talking about.”

“Who then?”

“Them, and them, and him.” Senator Elders nodded to the World War II memorial, then to the Vietnam Memorial, then over to his portrait of Abraham Lincoln.

“Well, we can ask them when we see them. Look, I don’t like it either Jake, but we talked about this. This is the only way we can buy enough time to figure out what to do. We know there is a bigger threat, but we’re still flying blind. Jacoby, we’ve been here how many years? Have you ever seen it so damn gridlocked? We haven’t passed an honest bill in over what, ten years? At least this way Karston and his puppet master, Diego won’t get to have all the country’s resources.”

“He’ll have plenty. It won’t be easy,” Jacoby said as he took his seat behind his desk. “I wonder what they’ll do with all these buildings and monuments?” Jacoby looked over his shoulder to the National Mall.

“You don’t think they’ll leave them alone?”

“I don’t think so Gabe. Hell, they’ve been pulling down statues in every major city they can get their hands on. And we’re giving them the most important ones of all right here. No, I think what they don’t destroy, they’ll move into and take over.”

“So what Jake, you think the Capitol will be turned into a glorified community center?”

“Maybe. Maybe they’ll make it a grievance center, where people can just come to complain all day.”

“Ha! So, no change at all then.” Gabe slapped the arm of his chair at the thought.

“Maybe you’re right Gabe, we’re still just trying to buy time against someone or something that has been planning this for a while. We’re behind and until we have a plan to reunite...until then, I’m afraid of what we might be unleashing on the world.”

“What do you mean, Jake?”

“Well, Karston and whatever the power behind Karston is, still has to operate within our system for now. As soon as the Separation happens, he’s not going to have any checks on him at all. Now the good thing about that is, we will finally see what his end game is. We’ll also get to see if China is actually pulling the strings. The bad thing about it is, we may not be prepared for those answers.”

“Well, have you talked to your buddy Jonah lately? How’s our State Defense Forces looking?” Gabriel inquired.

“All the friendly governors are on board, they’ve been moving what assets they can to safer locations, away from the future borders. And what they can’t move they are trying to dismantle.”

“What about our military assets?” Gabriel asked Jacoby. Jacoby’s position on the Senate Armed Services Committee for over 20 years gave him deep roots within the nation’s defense infrastructure.

“I’ve reached out to the ones I know I can trust. They can see what’s happening too, but they do have a different perspective than we do up here.”

“How so?”

“Well, they are more worried about having to take up arms in a Civil War. Hell, every command is going to be made up of people that call New Liberty, and People’s Republic home. They are going to try to adhere to the wishes of the Joint Military Council for the prescribed time.”

“Yeah, that plan is prime for abuses,” Gabriel remarked. “I think we’re looking at the armed forces being sympathetic to New Liberty, and the intelligence services being sympathetic to People’s Republic.”

“Yeah, Jonah assures me that the Defense Intelligence Agency can keep up, but I don’t know. Over the years we’ve both made sure NSA and CIA were pretty damn powerful.”

“We probably should have listened to the libertarians more, but too late now.” Gabriel rolled his eyes as he thought of all the times his libertarian-minded colleagues warned him of entrusting the intelligence agencies with expanded powers.

“Yeah, that’s true. Lord knows they’ve stood in opposition to me over the years as well. But, on a bright note, the intrastate migration has largely been going our way,” Jacoby offered a single bright spot of information to his beleaguered friend.

“Oh really? How so?” Senator Moran squinted his eyes, surprised at the information.

“Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you. Those runs on the banks we’ve been seeing. That wasn’t just fear of riots, as people thought. Apparently a large number of people are just cashing out and heading our way. Some of the more militaristic-minded ones are heading to West Virginia. They really look to be preparing for all-out war. But there are quite a number of families settling in Wyoming, Montana, and Southern Illinois. A lot of places that haven’t seen population increases in years are suddenly booming. And then there is a large Cuban community that is settling in Oklahoma, of all places.”

“Oklahoma, really?” Gabriel said with surprised amusement. “Well, I guess that’s one group that isn’t fooled by a charismatic leader. They still remember their history.” Gabriel lifted himself up out of his seat. “All right old friend, let’s go get some dinner before we’re not welcome in this town anymore.”

“Sounds good. We should do Cuban tonight. In honor of our newest frontiersmen.” Jacoby exclaimed.

“You think anyone told the Cubans about the Oklahoma winters yet?”

“One crisis at a time, Gabe.”



Susan Saury's Office, Big Blue Headquarters, Washington D.C.

Susan Saury charged into her office in a flurry. “All right, first things first,” she announced as she reached for her ornamental snuff box. “Shit, I’m low. Okay, reach out to Debbie in Orlando. She can meet me at the Gainesville airport for a restock. I can’t afford to have any distractions.”

With a large inhale of her scoop spoon’s bounty, Susan got right, as she was fond of saying.

“Okay, number next? C’mon Susan...Oh yeah, airport. Shit lemme write this down. Too many thoughts at once.” Susan grabbed a pen and paper, scribbling frantically to prompt the pen’s ink to flow.

“DAMMIT,” she screamed, throwing the pen across the room. “Fine, I guess nothing is easy then, goddammit.”

“Ms. Saury, can I get you anything?” Casey Spires, Susan’s newly appointed executive assistant nervously stuck her head into Susan’s large churchlike office.

“Wait outside Casey, I’ll call you in a second,” Susan shot back, visibly agitated. She frantically shuffled files around on her

desk until she found her tablet hiding underneath a copy of the Big Blue Separation Plan.

“Finally!” Susan quickly opened up the OKnotes application. “Okay, new note, labeled itinerary. . .Shit what was number one?” Her short-term recall had started to feel the effects of her light blue pick-me-up powder.

“Fucking Diego threw me off my game, I swear he does that shit intentionally,” Susan thought to herself, ignoring the obvious side effects that her addiction was causing.

“Right. Okay. One, restock more of the Blue, call Debbie to meet me at airport.” Susan tapped her fingernails instinctively on the desk with the force and speed of a courtroom stenographer. This realization briefly distracted her train of thought, sending her down a spiral thinking of how her mother was just a secretary. Susan hated her mother. She could feel her heart race as her thoughts drifted back to her childhood. Back to the fight she’d had with her mother when she left the house.

“Fuck, I can’t think of her right now. C’mon think, where was I...Oh, right, number 2,” Susan reminded herself. “Umm...number 2...Oh yeah call the airport, schedule a flight,” she said as she typed away on the tablet. “Okay I can have Casey do that.”

“Umm...number 3...Oh yeah,” Susan quickly hit the Home button to pull up OKoverwatch. “Damn that’s an ominous



sounding name, they really need to change that.”

Susan’s racing thoughts continued to work against her ability to stay on task. “OKnotes, new note, have them change name to something less intimidating, maybe OKguardian, or OKshephard. Yeah, that’s good thinking right there. Shit, what was I doing?”

Susan’s eyes darted back and forth as she tried in vain to focus her thoughts. “Oh yeah, OKoverwatch...Um...Fuck, what’s her name?” Susan’s willpower to stay on task was in a losing battle with the light blue powder coursing through her body.

“Okay, let’s try to calm it down.” Susan said, as she tried to center herself. “B...R...E...N...T...O...” the autofill feature quickly came up with Brenton, Rebecca as an option.

“There you are you little bitch. Try to unseat *me* from power, you picked the wrong pair of tits to tango with.” Susan frantically spat out the words with seething vengeance. The momentary calmness she called upon quickly exited for the more familiar feeling of vindictive anger.

Susan erratically scrolled through the tabs on the side of the screen. “There it is, OKhealth. Shit, that’s a lot of options.” Susan squinted to peruse the available options that, although she had just viewed the same exact screen a few days ago, felt foreign to her.

“Damn developers, always fucking changing everything around. Okay, there you are, Upcoming Appointments.

Friday, 2PM, Big Blue Family Planning.” Having confirmed Rebecca’s appointment, Susan sat the tablet back on the desk and leaned back in her chair to think.

“Okay get her checked in, then inform the attending provider that it will be an abortion. Shit is there gonna be any issues there? They do a hundred abortions a week down there. No, it really shouldn’t be a problem. Have them perform a post-fertilization contraception, yeah that’s better. I can’t force an abortion but required contraception for key members of Big Blue is standard policy, good.” Susan tried to struggle through the possible variables that could stand in the way of her plan.

“I might have to pull rank, but who is gonna argue with the Chief Administrator? No one that wants to keep their jobs, that’s who,” Susan thought confidently. “Best to send out an email to promote little Becca so there is no administrative bullshit to deal with. Shit, who gets that? Casey!” Susan bellowed to her assistant.

“Yes, Miss Saurey?” A nervous Casey rushed to the door.

“Send an email to HR or whoever, I need Rebecca Brenton in the Gainesville office promoted up to Deputy Administrator, or whatever classifies her as Key Personnel.”

“Yes, Miss Saury, I’ll do that right away. Anything else?”

Susan dismissively waved Casey back out of the office. “Okay, Friday at 2PM...Fuck what day is it today? How much time do I have?” Susan blurted out the series of questions to the

otherwise empty office. Haphazardly shuffling away files that were strewn all over her desk during her frantic search for her tablet, Susan accidentally knocked over her snuff box. Her baby blue concoction scattered over her desk, causing a slight blue haze to form, and then descend down onto her files.

Susan stopped to look at the mess, she clenched her jaw hard enough to make a loud pop emanate throughout the office. Susan felt the veins in her neck bulge as her heart went into overdrive with frustration.

“Not...Fucking...Today!” Susan grunted out through her teeth.

“Fine. Clean this up, salvage as much as possible, then, then, then...Fuck, what was I doing? Clean this up, Susan. You were looking at the calendar, why?” Susan tried to retrace her actions to get her brain back on course. “Rebecca’s appointment, Friday at 2. Check to see what day it is today.”

“Okay clean this up, step one,” Susan attempted to salvage the precious cargo of her now empty snuff box. Using the side of her hand she gathered the now baby blue dust covering her desk. Susan methodically wiped it onto the screen of her tablet. As she gathered her precious light blue get-right powder, she quietly coaxed the remnants with words of encouragement, “C’mon babies, there you go, back home to mommy. That’s right, back where you came from.”

Upon salvaging as much as possible, Susan gazed at her snuff box. There was a mere quarter of the amount it previously

contained. “Dammit, I don’t need this shit today. Okay, back on track, let’s get it together Susan. Okay, what day is today? Wednesday, at 4:30 PM, I get there tonight, I’ve got plenty of time to take care of Rebecca.”

Susan opened up the OKnotes to check her list, “1. Restock more of the Blue, call Debbie meet at airport. Yep, that one’s even more important now. Fuck, this isn’t enough to get me through tonight. 2. Call the airport, schedule a flight. 3...(blank). Shit, all that for just 2 items on the list?” Susan was bewildered at all the effort for such a short list.

“Casey!” Susan bellowed.

“Yes, Ms. Saury. Oh my, Ms. Saury, can I clean this up for you?” Casey looked over the flurry of papers strewn about the normally meticulous office.

“Mind your fucking manners, Casey. I need you to call the airport and get the Big Blue private jet ready to leave for Gainesville as soon as possible,” Susan barked.

“Yes, Ms. Saury, right away. I apologize for asking to clean for you, I really just—”

“Go!” Susan screamed, unable to bottle the cokerall fueled rage that was building inside.

Casey ran out of the office, shaking and on the verge of tears after the encounter. “Ms. Saury is so important to Big Blue, maybe this is just the stress getting to her,” Casey thought, as

she tried to calm herself enough to call the Big Blue hanger at the airport.

“This is Ms. Susan Saury’s assistant. Yes, I need to speak to someone to reserve the Big Blue private jet, please. Yes, I’ll hold. Thank you.” As Casey waited on hold, she looked over to the two security guards stationed outside of Susan’s door. Without speaking, they both lifted their eyes in a sympathetic look. Casey couldn’t believe how stressful working for Susan Saury had become in only her first week on the job.

“Yep, this Roger, with whom am I speaking please?”

“Oh, hi, this is Casey Spires, Chief Administrator Saury’s Executive Assistant. Ms. Saury has requested to take the private jet to Gainesville, Florida tonight.”

“Umm, yeah Casey is it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay first of all, my condolences. I wouldn’t wish that job on anyone.” The reality of Casey’s employment began to dawn on her. Her excitement a week prior stood in stark contrast to her current mood. “And second, you’ll have to tell Ms. Saury no-can-do on the jet until tomorrow at the very earliest. Gainesville airport is shut down, no flights in or out on account of the riots happening.”

“Well is there anywhere else close?” Casey frantically asked, dreading having to give Susan any bad news in her current state.

“She could go to Tallahassee, or maybe Sanford. Problem is, the jet is stuck on the tarmac in Gainesville from the last group of Big Blue Security she sent down there. I tried to tell her to fly them boys commercial, that the private jet was for executive use only. But after she screamed that she was gonna get me fired for insubordination, I went ahead and scheduled the flight.”

“Okay, thank you, I’ll tell her.” Casey hung up the phone, thinking she’d have to give her boss bad news sometime. It was all part of the job. She cautiously entered the oversized office to impart her news. “Ms. Saury?”

“Speak Casey,” An exhausted and emotional Susan ordered.

“Roger, at the airport, said the earliest the private jet could be available was tomorrow. And that’s only if the order to reopen the airport was lifted, due to the riots”

“Shit, fine! Where else can I fly into then?” Susan snapped at the frightened Big Blue employee.

“I’m sorry Ms. Saury, but the private jet is still in Gainesville from the group of security you previously sent down.”

“Watch your fucking tone with me little girl!” Susan stood up and slammed her fists down onto her desk as she screamed. “You know what, you little shit, you’re fired! You can’t handle a simple fucking task? God Almighty, Dammit, I don’t have time for this shit! Who the fuck are you anyway? You’re nobody and you’re telling me I have to wait? Guards, escort

this trash out of here, I can't deal with this now, take her pass or whatever you do. She no longer works here!"

"B-but Ms. Saury," Casey pleaded, but was cut off.

"Fucking leave, blondie, you're done! Got it?"

"Yes, Ms. Saury."

Casey busted out crying with her hands to her face as she walked back to her reception desk.

The Guard who escorted her out patted her arm. "Look, I'd give you a hug, but last time I did that she threatened to fire me as well."

"No, it's okay, I was warned she might be difficult. Here's my security badge. I don't have much here, just my purse really."

After being escorted out of the building and composing herself as much as possible, Casey pulled out her Big Blue phone and dialed a number she had hoped she wouldn't need.

"Yes, Mr. Assantino. Yes Sir, during my screening you told me to call you if I saw any erratic behavior from Ms. Saury?"

"Yez, Mizz Zpirez, I remember, do you have zomething to report?"

"Y-Y-Yes sir, sorry, I'm still shaken up."

"Take your time Mizz Zpirez, but not too much, I am a buzy man."

“Yes Sir, sorry...again...anyway, Ms. Saury just fired me after I told her she couldn’t take the private Big Blue jet to Gainesville, due to riots.”

“I zee Mizz Zpirez, and how waz her demeanor?”

“She’s very erratic, it looked like she was throwing files and things around her office, she wouldn’t even let me clean it for her.”

“I underztand Mizz Zpirez, thank you for the call.”

“Mr. Assantino, I really needed this job, is there anything else I can do for Big Blue.”

“No Mizz Zpirez, there is not. But I will have my azziztant Zteven reach out to you tomorrow. Perhapz there is something in the White Houze we can zet you up with. Thank you again Mizz Zpirez, please try to get zome rest. And thank you for thiz information.”



### Diego Assantino’s White House Office

“I think that Mizz Zuzan Zaury haz outlived her uzefulnezz. Perhapz it iz time to take her down a bit,” Diego thought as he hung up the phone and turned in his seat to unlock his personal high security filing cabinet.

“Aha, there it is, Saury\_Lake\_Frat\_Boys,” Diego fished a thumb drive out of a manila envelope containing Susan’s sloppily filmed escapades at the lake.



“Zteven, come in here please.”

“Yes, Mr. Assantino Sir.”

“Zteven I have a very different azzignment for you today, take thiz, and make about 10 copiezs of it.”

“Yes sir.”

“I want you to find a way to leak it to zeveral newz outletz, and perhapz online az well. But be mindful, nothing can come back to thiz office, do you underztand?”

“Yes, Mr. Assantino. Perhaps I can upload it from a few coffee shops? I’ll make sure I use a VPN as well.”

“Yezz, very good Zteven, and maybe zend it to a few of the right wing zites. I’m zure they will be very interezted to zee itz contentz az well.”

“Yes Sir, Mr. Assantino, I will take care of it.”

“Zhank you Zteven. Oh, and Zteven, zave a copy for yourzelf. Think of it az a reminder to never let yourzelf be intimidated by lezzers people.” Diego locked the file cabinet behind his desk.

“Yes, sir, thank you Mr. Assantino.”

## **Chapter 10 : Exodus**

### Margret Sanger Airport (Formerly Ronald Reagan)

**I**t had been at least five years since Susan Saury sat in the general boarding area of an airport. She noticed her hands shaking, both due to the withdrawal symptoms from her lack of coke, as well as her body experiencing alcohol withdrawals from last night's drinking binge. Susan's lack of baby blue powder required her to overmedicate with alcohol to get to sleep.

"Goddamn Diego somehow sent the Big Blue private jet out to fucking Seattle. How the hell did he even get clearance for it to leave Gainesville? Oh, I'm the puppet master, I can get anything done." Susan mocked the enigmatic Senior Advisor in her mind, "You will have to make your own arrangements Mizz Zaury. God, I hate that guy."

Susan's blood pressure rose as she stewed in her own anger. "Now I've got to sit here with all these mouth-breathing troglodytes waiting to get herded onto a flying friggin' school bus. Chief Administrator perks, my ass. Ugh, whatever. Shit, Debbie hasn't answered me back yet. That bitch better have my stash when I land. Oh, I don't want to be part of that life anymore, I've got kids now! Goddamn, grow a pair Debbie." Susan continued her internal monologue, recounting her

many perceived grievances as she repositioned her scarf to cover more of her face. “Flying incognito, this is humiliating. I’m going to make someone pay for this when I get back.”

*Passengers of Flight SouthWest Blue Airlines number 2036, we will begin boarding immediately. In our ongoing commitment to be a Socially Responsible airline, we’d like to invite all of our intersectionally aggrieved passengers to board first. You can check your boarding order in the upper left-hand side of the ticket that lists the groups you identify with. We will begin boarding passengers with 7 or more intersectional groups.*

“Shit, looks like I’m last,” Susan said aloud as she looks at the intersectional categorization block of her ticket.

{White, Female, Cis-Gendered = 0}

As she watched the plane board, she looked to her right where a young, college-aged and very athletic traveler had taken a seat to wait for his turn to board. As he was setting his bags down, he accidentally dropped his ticket and it landed on Susan’s feet.

“Oh here, let me get that for you, stud,” Susan said, as she shifted into flirtation mode, despite her body’s dilapidated state.

“Thanks Ma’am, but please don’t call me stud. If they think I’m cis-gendered, I’ll lose my boarding group.” The short haired jock asked in a hushed tone.

Susan quickly looked at his ticket before handing it back to him. “Really, Skippy? Non-Binary, Other-Kin, Transracial, Differently Abled?” Susan sarcastically sneered.

“Hey lady, we’ve all gotta do what we gotta do,” the young man said as he affixed a Hello, I identify as a Dalmatian today, please show respect for my identity sticker.

“And Transracial?”

“Yes, I reject the chains of my Eurocentric DNA and instead racially identify with the plight of the indigenous people of the United States. Think they’ll buy that?”

Susan passed the ticket back to her fellow traveler without a response. She made a mental note to self, oblivious to the irony of her situation, “Christ I’ve gotta fix that policy when I get back to the office. Need to have a Big Blue official exemption if they want to have the backing of the Union.” After all, it was her office that nearly bankrupted any airline that didn’t comply with Big Blue’s Intersectional Guidelines.

Susan felt a slight buzz in her pocket and looked at the incoming OKchat message: “Can’t get anything today but will pick you up and introduce you to Flash. He supplies. After this I’m out. -Debbie”

“Ok Debbie, thank you. If you don’t have any, don’t pick me up. I’ll get a rental car and head to your house –S.”

“K”

“That bitch really needs to grow a pair,” Susan accidentally said aloud, prompting multiple heads to turn her way with looks of disgust and horror.

“You all will be fine, give it a rest,” Susan declared to the freshly aggrieved passengers.

A few seconds later, Susan felt a tap on her shoulder. “I’m sorry ma’am, but that type of language is seen as not only offensive, but also as verbal violence. This is your first warning and you will now be required to board last. If there are any other outbursts, you will be removed from the plane. Furthermore, any outbursts once in the air, and the airline is authorized to require you wear a safety mask to protect our other passengers from any potentially damaging words. Do you understand?”

“Fine, whatever.”

“You have to verbally say, I understand. Otherwise you will be banned from this flight, and possibly future flights.”

“I understand,” Susan said, as she bottled a deluge of internal rage.

Susan’s flight went without further administrative incident. However, she was forced to sit directly adjacent to the onboard toilet facilities and was bombarded by a steady stream of foul looks and even fouler odors for the entirety of the flight to Orlando.

Upon landing, Susan received another text from Debbie: “Susan, Flash said he wants to meet you once I told him who you were. He will be at the Airport Hilton, room 374. Please lose my number.”

“Good.” Susan thought, “Finally some good news.” After Susan reserved her rental car, she made her way up to the room number Debbie provided at the airport’s hotel and knocked on the door.

“Yo! Who is it?” a falsetto-ghetto dialect rang out from the other side of the door.

“Susan Saury, open the door.”

Flash opened the door, surprised to see who it really was. “Oh Ms. Saury, I see you got the message.”

Susan stood before a twenty-something, emaciated, white wanna-be gangster. Basketball shorts drooped down to his knees, an oversized plain white sleeveless t-shirt, and a flat brimmed baseball cap completed his uninspired ensemble. “Yes, Flash is it?” Susan asked, studying the contrast between their respective wardrobe choices.

“Yes Ma’am.”

“May I come in, Flash?”

“Yes, of course Ma’am, sorry.”

As Susan entered, she looked for a clean spot to set her carryon luggage and purse. Flash moved away a wide assortment of baggies, scales, and multiple phones.

“So, why did you want to meet with me Flash?”

“Actually ma’am, I didn’t. My boss did. Well, my boss’s boss’s boss did. That’s Mr. Jonathan over there.”

Susan peaked around the corner of the hotel suite to see a professional looking gentleman donning a 3-piece suit, sitting at the work desk. “Okay, I’ll play along. Jonathan, why did *you* want to meet with me?”

“Flash, please excuse us. Ms. Saury and I have much to discuss.”

“Mr. Jonathan, I’ve got more people coming to pick up. I’ve got the Delta Blue flight about to land.”

“Then you will get what you need, and you will wait in the lobby. We are not to be disturbed, understood.”

Susan felt her heart quicken at the authority this Jonathan had over Flash.

“Yes, Sir.”

As Flash gathered his pre-portioned baggies of coke, meth, and assorted pill cylinders, Jonathan held out his hand, inviting Susan to take a seat.

“Finally,” she thought, “someone I can relate to. Men like this are in short supply.” In an attempt to evaluate the mysterious figure, Susan asked, “Is it Jonathan or Mr. Jonathan?”

“Just Jonathan for now. I apologize for my young associate Ms. Saury; he runs a very effective drop & stop business out of this

airport for me. His contacts with the hotel staff have proved most lucrative for this particular franchise location. But he is hardly schooled in the finer social graces.” Jonathan waved his hand at the collection of half empty Monster Energy cans and random flat brimmed hats strewn about the room.

“I didn’t presume that a man of your tastes resided here,” Susan said, reaching across the table to pat Jonathan’s hand. Seeing the crease of his smile, delighted Susan. “Yeah, I can get this one,” she confidently thought.

“No, Ms. Saury, I currently reside in Miami, but young Flash’s habits are not why I wanted to see you.”

“And why did you want to see me Jonathan?” Susan adopted a more seductive demeanor.

“First things first, here Ms. Saury, I believe this is for you.” Jonathan reached into the desk and produced a snuff box reminiscent of the one back at headquarters. The box was adorned with Chinese characters and two golden dragons with jade eyes, as opposed to her Victorian bejeweled container.

“Yes, thank you.” Susan gently placed the box to the side of the table, resisting every urge in her body to inhale its contents.

“Ms. Saury, when Flash called one of my employees to say he was meeting you, I flew from Miami right away. The organization I represent has been interested in increasing our foothold into Big Blue for quite some time.”



“Is that so?” Susan asked, unaware of what organization he referred to.

“Yes, very much.” Jonathan responded with a professional certainty to his voice.

“Well, it just so happens, I’ve been looking to dip my toes into some diversified waters. So perhaps, I could be your foothold?” Susan said, running her foot up Jonathan’s leg to no protestation.

Jonathan was aware of Susan’s reputation for seduction prior to this meeting. The speed at which she operated surprised him. “Perhaps, we should finish these negotiations in my suite, Ms. Saury? I’d like to see just how deep I can penetrate your organization,” Jonathan shot back with a masculine seductiveness Susan didn’t realize she had longed for.

“Of course, Jonathan. Perhaps, we have more than just business opportunities to explore.”

“I believe we do, Ms. Saury.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d just like to freshen up first.”

“Of course, Ms. Saury, I will wait for you in the hall.”

As soon as the door closed from Jonathan’s departure, Susan attacked the small dragon-clad, jade encrusted snuff box. With one large inhale, Susan once again felt right. “Ahhh finally, shit that’s good. And damn, that’s high quality,” Susan thought as the familiar rush of cokerall filled her senses. Susan

let the wave of sensation crash over her for a moment before gathering her things to freshen up.

Upon opening the door to Flash's well-lived in bathroom, Susan abruptly halted her entrance. "Well, this is a shithole," Susan proclaimed as she surveilled the area. "More empty energy drink cans, condom wrappers, grime, soap scum." Susan constructed a mental inventory of the reasons not to use Flash's facilities.

"On second thought, perhaps I could freshen up in your restroom, Jonathan?" Susan said as she exited Flash's room with her rolling carry-on bag.

"Yes, of course, Ms. Saury. I apologize, I should have warned you about Flash's hygienically challenged facilities. I assure you mine are not nearly as prone to random biological growth."

As the door to the elevator closed, Susan got within inches of Jonathan's face, reaching down, she squeezed his pants. "There is one growth I'm interested in seeing. But just fair warning, I do have to leave around 11AM tomorrow. So, we shouldn't waste time in our—" Susan extended up on her toes to finish her sentence with a nibble of Jonathan's ear, "negotiations."

Jonathan, who, at this point was visibly excited to get Susan back to his suite. "I believe twelve hours should suffice for our negotiations, Ms. Saury."

“I hope not less than that,” Susan said, enjoying the verbal foreplay with her newest conquest. “Quick negotiations can leave one feeling unfulfilled.”

“You will be more than satisfied, Ms. Saury. I assure you.” Jonathan grabbed Susan by the waist with a commanding grip. As he pulled Susan close, he could hear her breaths quicken. “Let’s bring some chaos to the world tonight, Susan.”

“Anything you want,” Susan gently said as the feeling of being controlled elevated her cokerall high to levels of excitement.

As the two exited the elevator, they approached two large bodyguards sitting outside of Jonathan’s suite. Jonathan used his native mandarin to instruct one of the guards to go to the lobby and inform Flash that he may now have his room back. “And we will not be disturbed, by any unnecessary distractions, whatsoever,” Jonathan said, switching back to English to drive the point home. “Please Ms. Saury after you.”

“Thank you, Jonathan.”

Although the two were heard, they were not seen again for the rest of the evening.



Six blocks north of the Gainesville Autonomous Youth Zone (GAYZ), Gainesville, Florida

“All right crew, we’re here. Matty get dressed, your mother wants a picture.” Caleb smiled as he put the RV into park and looked over to Matty in the passenger seat.

“Honey, you sure this is the best way?” Matty questioned his wife, who was engrossed in rewiring and testing the camera on the agricultural drone Spark delivered.

“Stick with the plan, Matty,” Kat shot back without looking up from her work.

“We good here Dad?”

“Yeah Kat, there’s a couple other RVs in the parking lot, no reason we would stick out.” Caleb looked out over the parking lot of the motel.

Caleb checked in with Spark as soon as they parked. The team had gone over Kat’s plan at least a dozen times last night and on the five and half hour drive down to Gainesville. “Hey Spark, you good brother?”

“Yeah man, one sec, Cay. Backing her in now. Okay, got it. Yeah, tell Kat she was spot on, just enough room at the clinic to drop off the bikes and head over to my waiting area. Oh yeah, one more thing, I scoped out the dump truck staging area. Shouldn’t have a problem finding a spot.”

“Good, you hear that, Kat?”

“Great, stick to the plan,” Kat responded without sacrificing attention to her work.

“I know, I know. Damn Cay, she’s a stickler. Okay Ty you’re up.”

“Heading back to unsecure the dirt bikes and get changed.”

“It’s not too late to switch jobs, Ty!” Matty called back while getting changed.

“Ha! No Matty, I think this is the perfect job for you.”

“How are you guys looking over there?” Spark inquired from his dump truck.

“I think we’re good, not a lot of traffic here so we should be able to get in and out easily,” Caleb recounted.

“Sounds good, ya’ll. I’ll check in when I get there,” Spark said.

“Matty, you doin okay back there?”

“Shut it, Dad! Becca owes me big time for this.”

“I’m sure your sister will be appreciative,” Caleb hollered back before turning on the local morning radio broadcast.

*“Welcome back to Gator Bait, your Florida Gator Country Morning Show. Bill Rand here, and as always, I’m joined with Bubba Longley.”*

“Ha! I love these guys, they’re hilarious.” Caleb nostalgically recalled the familiar pair.

*“Now, Bubba, big day here for the country, and for Gator Bait as well.”* Bill said in a stereotypical straight man radio news voice.

*“How you mean?”* Bubba said with his trademarked exaggerated twangy southern drawl.

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

*“Well Bubba, as I’m sure you’re aware, late this afternoon President Shilling will be unveiling the official Great Separation Plan at the White House.”*

*“Shoot, and I was plannin’ on goin’ to the bar and drinkin’ whiskey all night. Why’s he gotta go and plan somethin’ so fun on Friday night?”*

*“Oh, so you’re gonna stay home and watch it?”*

*“No, I’ll probably still go drinkin’. Just saying that’s more of a Tuesday afternoon or Wednesday story.”*

*“Bubba I thought you said Tuesday and Wednesday were your favorite weekdays to drink?”*

*“Well, that’s true too, along with Monday, Thursday, and Friday.”*

*“Okay, fair enough Bubba. But did you also know today is a big day for Gator Nation?”*

*“What, you mean besides another day of them stinky hippies ruinin’ my downtown?”*

*“Now Bubba, they’re just young college kids, exercising their right to protest.”*

*“What they protestin’ Bill? I saw one take a dump on a cop car yesterday, almost made me spit out my bean burrito.”*

*“Ha, well we wouldn’t want that now would we Bubba?”*

*“Hell no! Cost me a \$1.49.”*

*“No, anyway, as I was saying, today is also a big day for Gator Nation, as one of Central Florida’s own, Susan Saury, the Chief Administrator of Big Blue, the country’s largest collection of—”*

*“Booooooring. You’re losing me, Bill.”*

*“Sorry about that, just bear with me while we get all the way through her title.”*

Caleb turned in his seat to see if Kat heard the radio, only to see that she was already standing right behind his chair.

“You want me to turn it off Kat?” Caleb asked softly, not sure how to navigate the tumultuous waters of Kat and her mother’s relationship.

“No, turn it up. Any other day yes, but not today. I need as much intel as I can get,” Kat said with an intense glare in her eyes.

“Ok honey, whatever you say.”

“Kat, can you help me?” Matty called from the back of the RV.

“I’ll be there in a sec Matty, hold on.”

*“So anyway Bubba, the grand poobah, the head bitch in charge. . .”*

*“Wait a minute Bill, is she that fine lady that’s always talkin’ nonsense on the TeeVee?”*

*“Yes, Bubba, she’s the attractive Chief Administrator of the social justice and union collective Big Blue.”*

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

*“Well I don’t care too much for what she has to say, but Suuuueeeeyyy that’s a fine ass woman,” Bubba exclaimed with his signature pig call.*

*“Well Bubba, it would seem some of our local boys felt the same way about her.”*

*“Whatchu talkin ’bout Bill?”*

*“Well late last night a video was apparently leaked to multiple websites, which shows the normally distinguished and professional Susan Saury, in a, how can I say this delicately? Hm—”*

*“Spit it out Bill!”*

*“The video shows Susan Saury, we’ll say providing full service to multiple young Florida Gator Frat Boys at the same time.”*

*“Suuuuueeeeyyy, I knew I liked that girl. Good fer her fer helpin’ out Gator Nation.”*

*“Well Yes Bubba, now we don’t have verification that the video is real, but so far, Big Blue has only released the standard No Comment Line. And you know, in the interest of Gator Bait keeping our listeners as informed as possible, we’ve made several gifs that are up on our homepage.”*

*“Bill?”*

*“Yeah, Bubba?”*

*“What’s a gif?”*



*“That’s like a picture that moves.”*

*“Oh, like a video?”*

*“Well, yes, but it’s only a few seconds long.”*

*“I think I’m gonna need more than a few seconds to see that Bill.”*

*“Okay, and on that note, let’s cut to the weather. Shawna, what do you have for us today?”*

“I’m sorry Kat, I know that can’t be easy to hear. Look, it’s probably fake.” Caleb said as he stumbled through a possible explanation that wouldn’t be as horrible as the truth.

“No, it’s true, it happened the day we all went to the lake together. My birth mother is a whore, Dad. Hoping for anything else won’t change what she is, trust me.”

“Kat? You gonna help me?”

“Yeah Matty, I’ll be right there.



Inside the Gainesville Autonomous Youth Zone (GAYZ), 1:00 PM.

“The walk over here really sucked, by the way,” Matty whispered into his earpiece hidden under his ill-fitting wig.

“Awwww, Pooooooooor Maaaaattty,” Ty teased back on the group radio channel.

“Comm discipline boys, plenty of time to make fun of each other when we get back home,” Kat succinctly reminded the two young operators.

“Is Rebecca in the building?” Matty asked.

“The window is too reflective to see through with the drone,” Kat answered back as she studied her video monitor, “You’re gonna just have to go ahead and go in.”

“Screw it, okay.”

“Hello?”

“Meow.”

“Um Hi, I’m Mateo and I’m with the Southern Farming Transgendered Youth Program or So.F.T.Y. for short,” Matty ignored the restrained laughter in his ear coming from the rest of the team.

“Meeeeeeowwww,” Star slowly said as he/she/it looked Matty up and down dressed in an ill-fitting wig and Kat’s white wedding sundress.

“Um hi, Star, is it?” Matty said as he looked at the nameplate on the reception desk.

“Meow,” Star mewed in the affirmative.

“Sorry, I’ve always been allergic to cats.”

“Oh, well thank you for respecting my Other-Kin identity. You don’t look like a softy at all, by the way. How can I help

you?” Star was impressed that Matty was willing to indulge in he/she/it’s delusion.

“Oh yeah, I’m supposed to bring these peach preserves by for the Community Organizer for Outreach and Opportunity.”

“Well, it’s probably going to be me soon, ours—” Star lifted he/she/its hands to the side of his/hers/its mouth as to impart a secret, “ours is a bit of a breeder if you know what I mean. Plus, she got caught having an unauthorized phone, so I’m basically going to be in charge here.”

“Umm, yeah totally,” Matty agreed, not knowing at all what Star was talking about. “Yeah, these are supposed to go to a Rebecca Brenton,” Matty pretended to read off the sheet of paper with Kat’s instructions.

“Fine, go ahead on back.”

“Ms. Brenton?” Matty called out as he walked in the COFOO office.

“Ma—” Matty quickly held up his hand to signal Rebecca to be quiet.

“Say it again,” Ty whispered into the radio

“Uhhh, fine. Hi, I’m Mateo and I’m with the Southern Farming Transgendered Youth Program or ‘So.F.T.Y.’ for short.”

“HAHAHAHAHAAA!” Ty led a thunderous laugh through the radio channel.

“Come on guys, comm discipline. It *was* funny though, Matty,” Kat said as her authority silenced the channel’s participants.

Matty shook his head in embarrassment and acknowledgement that it really is quite funny. Rebecca stood tall in all her six-month pregnant glory and walked over to take a closer look at her brother. As she got within a few feet, she mouthed to her brother, “What the hell are you doing?”

Matty handed the instruction letter to Rebecca.

*R- Situation Dangerous. Bringing you home after checkup today. Unless you want to go now. Office likely monitored. Look for Ty & Matty (Mateo) after appt. Be prepared to leave quickly. Riots unsafe for baby. Wear Peach Pit necklace in box, squeeze twice if something bad happens.*

Six months earlier, Rebecca would have fought like a hellcat against the idea of going back home. However, since her pregnancy, her outlook was for the safety of her baby before all else. Rebecca nodded and put the note in the paper shredder.

“Great, Mateo was it? Love the dress by the way.”

Muffled laughter filled the team’s radio channel. “We’ll meet up after my doctor’s appointment. I’m really excited. I’m getting the lab results today for genetic abnormalities, otherwise I’d say let’s just start collaborating now on ways Big Blue can help to strengthen, SOFTY,” Rebecca stated, going

along with the rest of the team on the radio. She still had to fight to keep from laughing. “Damn, this is the funniest thing I’ve seen in a long ass time,” Rebecca thought as she smiled at her brother.

“Thank you again for reaching out Mateo, and please tell your entire organization I’m truly blessed to have their support.” Rebecca stuck her hand out to Matty to shake it goodbye, as she wasn’t sure if her office was currently surveilled or not.

“Rebecca is *good*,” Kat said as she switched the audio from her headphones to the desk speaker.

“Okay Matty, you’ve got about two hours to kill. Go scope out the area around the clinic then check back in.”

“Thank you again, Ms. Rebecca. We look forward to a Big Blue-SOFTY alliance as well,” Matty said, this time solely to get a laugh from his team.

“Of course, Mateo,” Rebecca had to bite her tongue and look away to maintain her composure.

“Meeeeooooow,” Star purred as he/she/it was blocking the main door preventing Matty’s exit.

“Meeeeooooow,” Star let out again, this time with a look of feline agitation.

“You have to scratch Star’s head, if you want to leave,” Rebecca said, trying her best not to laugh at the image of her athletically

built, oil rigger brother, in a sun dress scratching Star's head like a cat.

"Oh, umm, okay," Matty said, while deciding how best to scratch Star's head. "Yeah, so um, good kitty-kitty."

"Okay Star, I think that's good, let's let Mateo be on her way."

"Hissssss," Star scowled at Rebecca as he/she/it crawled back to the reception desk.

"Good Lord, you guys, the freaks down here are something else." Matty whispered into the earpiece after leaving the Big Blue office to mingle among the locals.

"There's a heavy presence over here about two blocks east of Rebecca's office. Seems like two groups of security, about thirty-five in total, but about ten of 'em are tanks. I'm talking some real big ol' boys. They're giving the smaller, sloppier guards directions. Placing them at certain vantage points."

"Yeah Matty, I'm seeing that too from above," Kat announced into her microphone at the center of her RV command center. "Hold on, lemme check the map real-quick." Kat stared at the monitor that displayed the area of operations and the electronic tags for each team member.

"Ty, we still have a bit of time, can you make it to the roof? I think that might be a better vantage point for you."

"Yeah, next time gimme a janitor's uniform instead of a hobo, I'd walk right in there and take the stairs."

“Save it for the after-action report, Ty,” Kat dryly commented.

“Do you see a way up?”

“Yeah,” Ty said as he surveyed the Big Blue Health Clinic.

“Looks like there’s a fire escape around the back, that’ll get me to the top floor, but I think I can scale the rest.”

“All right, gimme a sec Ty, lemme get the drone over there so I can make sure the area’s clear.” Kat focused her view on the monitor with the live video feed.

“Okay Ty, after I check out the roof, I’m gonna bring the drone back here to check it out. We’ve still got a few hours and I wanna make sure it has a fresh battery when Rebecca goes to the clinic. You’ll have to be the eyes from above for a bit.”

“Gotcha Kat. Standing by for the all clear.”

As Kat flew the drone above the building, she called out everything she saw on the screen. “Okay, couple of big HVAC units, a roof access hatch, and judging from the debris over hatch, it hasn’t been opened in a while. Two cinder blocks are anchoring the Big Blue Wave banner to the front of the building. You don’t have much cover up there, so do your best not to be seen.”

“I’ve got a white undershirt, I’ll wear it like a balaclava. That’ll help me blend into the white of the building.”

“Good thinking. Looks like you’re clear up there, bringing the Eagle back to nest.”

“You know, I’ve got a white sundress I can let you borrow, if you’d rather have that.”

“Stick to the plan,” Spark, Ty, and Kat all voted down Matty’s suggestion in unison.



1:28 PM

Kat skillfully landed the drone atop the RV and was disconnecting the battery when she heard Ty come across the radio.

“Kat, come in, looks like we’ve got some activity.”

“Okay Ty, what are you seeing?”

“A lot of the movement with the security guys. They seem to be clearing a path through one of the nearby barricades.”

“Direction?”

“South, to the right of the building.”

“Okay, I’ll have the drone on station shortly.”

“Copy. Matty, confirm please.”

“Not too much movement outside of Big Blue. Not much security here. Looks like Rebecca is about to leave. Wait a minute, she’s going back in her office. Okay she’s putting on your necklace and now leaving the office. She’s beginning to move towards the clinic.”



“Copy,” Kat relayed into the microphone as she simultaneously sent the command to the drone’s blades to start spinning up. “All right, health clinic is waypoint three, got it,” Kat thought. She double-checked her map before launching the oversized drone.

“Kat, this is Spark. Seeing the same thing here. Security seems to be gathering at all the main choke points. Eight of them, spread out over three barricade points. Just the local guys though, not the big guys Matty reported earlier.” Immediately after his report, he had to call in a revision. “Cancel my last, looks like I’ve got few Big Blue guards loitering around HQ now. Okay they are following Rebecca at a distance.”

As the time for Rebecca’s appointment grew closer and closer, Caleb grew increasingly nervous. He turned to his source of strength to handle the stress. “Keep praying, Michelle” he texted his wife.

“Derek and I are already on it,” Michelle replied back.

With fatherly panic in his voice, Caleb declared, “Kat, we need to get her out now.”

“No can-do, Dad, she’s got three tails on her now and she’s walking past even more. I can’t get close enough to give her a message,” Matty reported before Kat had to make a decision.

“Maybe they’re just escorting her in case things get dangerous ’cause they’re all part of Big Blue?” Ty offered up an optimistic explanation.

“No, something’s different, they’re getting ready for someone,” Kat said as she studied the video feed from the drone. “No reason yet to think Rebecca’s the target, I don’t think she’d warrant this kind of security response,” Kat thought aloud over the team’s channel.



1:35 PM

“Rebecca has entered the building. Looks like the tails are mulling around the front door of the health clinic,” Matty spoke softly into his earpiece.

“She’ll get checked in then wait to be called.”

“Nope,” Kat replied, “I can see through the front window. Looks like they’re bringing her back there now. Pay attention, everyone. This should be a quick visit. It’s only a checkup and the results of her bloodwork. No reason to panic,” she reassured the team.

“I’ve got a car entering the barricade,” Spark reported. “It’s being escorted by one of the University rent-a-cops and a bunch of security walking around the side of the car. Somebody big is in there.”

Kat momentarily took off her headphones and said a quick prayer, “Lord, please don’t let it be her, don’t let it be her.”

“Kat, this is Ty, that car Spark saw is heading this way.”

“I see it Ty, doesn’t look familiar.”

“Shit,” Ty grunted into the microphone. “Susan Saury. Your mom is getting out, Kat.”

“Did she see you?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Good. All right, everyone, get ready to improvise. This was not a planned variable.”



1:42 PM

“Good afternoon Rebecca,” Susan said as she walked in unannounced to the exam room.

“Oh, hi Aunt Sue, what are you doing here?” a startled Rebecca said as she tried to blouse out her examination smock to hide her pregnancy.

“Aunt Sue, ha, that’s cute. Not really Aunt Sue anymore, after you stole my man, am I?” Susan sneered at her one-time neophyte.

“Aunt Sue, I—”

“Don’t...call me that you little bitch!” Susan screamed, failing in her attempts to remain calm as a fresh bump of cokerall made its way through her system.

“Ms. Saury, I didn’t steal anyone from you.”

“Don’t you fucking lie to me you little red headed bitch!” Spit flew into Rebecca’s face as Susan unloaded on her. “The time

for games is over, you hear me? You wanted to get involved in politics. To play with the power brokers. Well, batter up bitch, 'cause now you're in the game, you little shit."

"What are you talking about Ms. Saury," Rebecca said through her tears. She had never been spoken to this way before and was both shocked and hurt. Even through Rebecca's disillusionment with Big Blue, she still had respect for Susan in some small way.

"You want to play dumb? Fine, fine, fine. Do you think I'm an idiot? You think I don't know when you got pregnant."

Rebecca's face dropped; she now knew that Susan knew whose baby she was carrying.

"Yeah, I can read a calendar you little slut. So, what was the plan Becky? Huh? Get pregnant, get Karston to fall in love with your baby and you get a free ride. Huh? Answer me!"

"Excuse me, we can't have this kind of commotion here, we've got surgeries going on in the next room," a young nurse said as she stuck her head into the exam room.

Susan launched into a verbal tirade on the unsuspecting nurse. "I'm the Chief Administrator for ALL of Big Blue, young lady. Do you know what that means? You keep your fucking mouth shut and stay out." The shocked young woman retreated behind the closing door.

"Now Rebecca, guess what's going to happen?"

Rebecca stared down at her belly, now swollen with a baby she never wanted, but had grown to love. “Don’t say it, don’t say it, don’t say,” she whispered.

“That’s right bitch!” Susan snapped as she snatched Rebecca by her long curly red locks to bring her close. “Your surgery is next. What do you think your parents are going to say when they find out their precious little girl got a big bad scary abortion?”

Rebecca jumped back, one hand over her belly and the other outstretched keeping Susan at bay. “Don’t you fucking come near me, you psychotic bitch!” Rebecca screamed though her tears.

“Oh good, you wanna be rough about it, fine,” Susan said matter-of-factly. “Nurse, get me three of Big Blue’s security detail in here. Now.”

The nurses, not happy with the situation, obediently complied.

While Susan had her head out the door looking for security, Rebecca quickly grabbed her peach pit necklace from the table next to the exam stand and squeezed multiple times before security showed up.

“Boys grab a gurney from the hall and strap this whore down,” Susan ordered.



1:55 PM

“There’s the signal,” Kat said over the radio.

“Kat, we have to get her out of there now!” Caleb screamed.

“Kat, there’s a ton of security everywhere.” Matty called over the radio.

“Kat, I’ve got Big Blue checking the dump trucks one by one over here, they’ll get to me in less than ten minutes,” Spark notified the team coordinator.

“Same here Kat, they’ve got this place surrounded,” Ty chirped in.

“Everybody shut up. Lemme think!” Kat screamed out, losing her cool for the first time in a long time.

“C’mon give me something I can work with God,” Kat called out.

“Kat, we need more than a prayer,” Caleb called from the front seat. As Kat looked over to him, about to apologize for failing, she noticed the radio. Then it came to her.

“I’ve got it! Bird’s returning back to the RV. Caleb, get up there and the second it lands, shout for me.”

“Copy.”

“Ty, grab those cinder blocks on the roof and flip their position so it turns the banner backwards.”

“On it.”

“Matty, haul your ass here as fast as you can, and I mean double time it.”

“On my way.”

“Spark move out another eight blocks north. Get to the bus station and try to park behind where the busses pick up.”

“You got it, kid.”

Kat stuck her head out the RV, “Here, give this to Matty as soon as he gets here, tell him to get this speaker up on top of one of the lamp posts facing the crowd. And give him these firecrackers. I’ll tell him when to set them off.”

“Got it. The bird’s back, Kat,” Caleb said.

“Bring it to me quickly.”

“Here you go. I hope whatever you’re doing works Kat.”

“Hope is for wimps, Dad, it’s time for faith.”

Kat got to work on an impromptu field modification by adding a second battery and a small portable projector.

“Hey, okay I’m here,” Matty said, huffing hard from the sprint.

“Here son, Kat said get this up on a lamp post near the clinic facing the crowd.”

“Not much of a crowd, but okay.”

“And take these too.” Caleb handed the firecrackers to Matty.

“She said she’ll tell you when to set them off.”

“Got it.”

“Go son.”

As Matty took off, Caleb’s silent prayer for his daughter was interrupted by the ridiculous image of his son in a white sundress and work boots sprinting at full speed. “C’mon, give us something Lord, if just for the entertainment we’re giving you today.”



2:00 PM

Kat handed to drone to Caleb. “Here, take the bird and give it a clear take off point. I just have to join the projector to the network and we’ll be ready.” She finished wiring up a second battery to handle the load, strapping in and wiring the mini projector, and joining it to their private network that she had established. Now to see if her improvised plan would work.



“The doctor will be in soon,” Susan hissed to Rebecca. “Then I can leave this God forsaken shit hole.”

“Ms. Saury, I want it stated for the record that I’m very uncomfortable with performing an abortion on an unwilling subject.”

“Ok, a few things Doctor,” Susan calmly and sarcastically began, “One, and I can’t stress this enough, I really don’t give a shit about your feelings. Two, and maybe more importantly,



if you don't, you will never work for another clinic as long as you live. Do you know how many abortions are done outside of Big Blue Health since we absorbed Planned Parenthood? Hmmm? Do you? That's right, none, you stupid piece of shit. And finally, three, as far as the medical records will say, this is a post-fertilization contraception procedure. Which is fully within my power as Chief Administrator to order, so if her record says abortion, I'll fire you and this entire staff, do you understand me?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Now get in there and suck that thing out of her!" Susan ordered the doctor as she pointed to Rebecca's room.

"I'll have to bring her into a different room, this one isn't sterilized for the procedure."

"Fine, whatever you have to do, do it. It's not like it's a big deal, I've had seven of them."

Rebecca could hear the conversation on the other side of the door and was terrified. As she struggled in her restraints, the disillusioned and betrayed Big Blue organizer looked down at her belly and cried. "I'm so sorry baby boy, I didn't mean this for you. Mommy loves you."



2:05 PM

"Got the speaker up," Matty called out.

“The banner’s flipped,” Ty followed.

“Matty, you see that group of people on the other side of the street?” Kat asked while she studied the monitor. “Get over there and wait for my signal. When I give it, light the firecrackers and when they go off, point in the opposite direction and scream, ‘He’s got a gun.’ I need a crowd to rush towards the clinic.”

“Ty, get off the roof, and get ready to storm inside the clinic to find Rebecca. Do you have any weapons?” Kat asked, terrified at the prospect of Ty having to get violent.

“My hunting knife and a 9 mil.”

“Copy, let’s hope you don’t have to use them.”



2:08 PM

Caleb was on his knees between the forward captain’s chairs of the RV when Kat called out to him, “Mr. Brenton. Dad. DAD! Get the RV started. Pull out of the parking lot and get ready to head north, I’ll tell you when, but we can’t let too much distance get between us and the bird, got it?”

“Got it Kat.”

“Okay Ty, you down?”

“Yep, down now.”

“Matty, ready?”

“Ready.”

“Spark, get parked, get the ramps down and get ready. Listen everyone things are about to speed up, stay focused,” Kat warned the team.

“Matty go!”

As the first few fireworks went off, the crowd of hippies and protesters started panicking in all different directions.

“Over there, I saw someone with a gun, do something! Here Big Blue Security is over here, this way!” Matty’s performance, though rushed was good enough to get a large crowd in front of the Health Clinic.

Just as the crowd gathered, the drone positioned itself in front of the now flipped all white banner in front of the Health Clinic. Just as the projector came to life, the hastily made montage video Kat put together using clips taken from the Gator Bait website, started projecting up on the front of the building.

*“Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, and everything in between, I present to you, your Big Blue Chief Administrator! Here she is in all her glory. She loves Gators and guess what? She’s here for you all day, today, so let’s have fun with her!”*

Kat intermixed the original pornographic audio in with her recorded the message and set it to loop over the speakers to the crowd. It only took about five seconds for the crowd to

start pointing up at the hedonistic video broadcast onto the Health Clinic.

“What the hell is that?” Susan demanded from inside the clinic, as she saw the mob forming outside.

“Matty, start chanting ‘Bring Her Out!’ over and over again. See if you can whip up the crowd.”

“You got it Kat. Be careful babe, this is getting into some pretty dark territory here.”

“If it works, I’ll ask forgiveness later,” Kat responded dryly. Her mission was all that mattered now, and her mother’s reputation was hardly a concern at this point.

“Get out there and *do* something you apes!” Susan shouted to the security remaining in the building. Once outside, they too started staring up the screen and laughing at the 15-foot-tall video image of the Chief Administrator, entertaining the alumni.

“Ty go now, they’re all distracted.”

“You got it!”

Ty quickly moved in past the Big Blue Security, their attention now fully towards the video of Susan Saury’s group performance.

Ty ran in, briefly brushing past Susan. She didn’t recognize his large athletic build under the hobo outfit. Her full attention was now squarely on what was happening out in front of the clinic.

One nurse tried to stop Ty, but he easily moved her out of his path. Ty went room to room until he heard Rebecca's screaming.

"Ma'am you need to calm down, or you will get injured. This is just the pre-op examination, it's really no big deal. If you keep this up, I am going to have to sedate you and I'd rather not have to do that," The infanticide specialist warned Rebecca.

"Get away from me, you asshole!" Rebecca screamed.

"Heyya Red, you wanna go home?" Ty quipped when he opened the door.

"Ty!"

"Young man, I don't know who you are, but you can't be in here for this," the abortionist said from this seat in front of Rebecca's open legs.

"You can fuck right off!" Ty said before landing a right cross to the side of the doctor's head, sending him off the chair and crashing to the floor in an unconscious heap.

"Oh, thank you Ty, I thought they were gonna kill my baby."

"Hold up Red, we ain't outta the woods yet cutie. Here, get dressed and make it quick. Oh, and put your phone in this baggie, Kat's orders. She wants to examine it later," Ty instructed her as he used his hunting knife to cut her restraints.

“What the hell is going on out here goddammit?” Susan screamed as she bust through the doors to the clinic.

Every one of the Big Blue Security Guards was now staring up at the screen. Several of the more sexually liberated protesters in the crowd started to relieve their tension while they watched the performance.

“That voice, what is that voice, I know that voice!”

*“Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, and everything in between, I present to you, your Big Blue Chief Administrator! Here she is in all her glory. She loves Gators and guess what? She’s here for you all day, today, so let’s have fun with her!”*

As Susan spun around to find the source of the audio, she saw the video projection up on the wall. She had been so preoccupied with hunting down Rebecca, and securing her snuff connection, she had no idea that this video even existed, much less leaked.

“Nooooo!” Susan screamed as she started running from guard to guard. “Take it down! Take it down!”

“Ma’am we don’t even know where it’s coming from, but you sure look good up there.” One of the Big Blue Security Guards said as he looked the Chief Administrator up and down.

Amidst the chaos and mass of bodies moving, Ty and Rebecca were able to slip out the employees’ entrance on the side and meet up with Matty around the back of the clinic.

“Ready?”

“Let’s go boys, I wanna go home,” Rebecca said as she mounted up behind Matty.

“You two go first, I’ll follow,” Ty instructed as per Kat’s plan.

“We got her, Kat! We’re heading north now.”

Kat was slightly numbed watching her mother fight off the mob, “Oh yes, good.” She said as she snapped back to the present.

“Once you clear one more block, I’m recalling the bird and we’ll guide you to the bus station.”

“Matty Copies.”

“Ty Copies.”

“Spark Copies.”

Susan was overcome with shock and horror when she remembered about Rebecca. As she ran back towards the door she felt a hand come from the crowd, then another, then she felt her shirt being ripped, then her pants being pulled. The mob it seemed wanted a live action replay of what was projected overhead. As Susan fought off her would-be group of gang rapists, she heard the sound of dirt bikes, “No, No, Noooo!” she yelled looking past the mob and seeing Rebecca’s flaming red hair taking off on the back a dirt bike being driven by some freak in a dress.

Susan made her way back inside with a few of the Big Blue security that were more scared of Susan than ever before, with only a handful of them still helping her.

“Get me the police!” Susan demanded. “I’m the fucking head of Big Blue, they can’t let this shit happen!”

One of the nurses Susan had yelled at earlier put a hand up. “Yeah, about the police. So the Mayor sorta told them all to stand down since they weren’t allowed in this area, so I don’t think you’re gonna get very many.”

“Fuck!” Susan screamed.

“Rebecca isn’t smart enough to orchestrate this by herself. That was Kat, that stupid little bitch. She shoulda been number eight,” Susan seethed.



2:17 PM

“All right Caleb, birds on the move. Go ahead and start heading north,” Kat instructed, keeping a close eye on the distance between the RV and drone.

“All right Matty take the right up ahead and cut through the park you’ll see there. It’s empty so you shouldn’t have a problem.”

“Copy.”

“Anyone following us Kat?” Caleb asked.

“Not that I can see, but we’re gonna stick to the emergency plan. Spark you ready?”

“Ramps are down kiddo.”



“Okay Matty, you’ve got about three more blocks to go until you get to the bus station. Looks clear from my vantage point.”

Matty and Ty made it to the dump truck, rode the bikes up the ramps and dismounted. The pair secured their bikes to the eyebolts on the inside of the truck with ratchet straps.

“See you in a bit, crew,” Spark said as he hit the hydraulics to lift the back gate back into position.

“Here Red, sit here,” Ty suggested, pointing to the two mattresses that Kat thought to bring with them. “It’s a bit more comfortable. Don’t worry though, we’re meeting up with Kat and your dad in the RV, so you’ll have a smoother ride then.”

“Got the cargo in the back, heading to the meet up point.”

“Spark, the next bus that leaves should be heading south, when it does, you should be clear to go around and take the road north.

“Gotcha kiddo, good job.”



Rebecca, Ty, and Matty were in the back of the dump truck bouncing around for 2 hours before they got to their destination, a Waffle House near one of the back roads to Ty and Spark’s house.

Once they stopped, Rebecca gave Ty a long, tight, and meaningful hug. “Thank you so much Ty, you didn’t have to

risk this much for me.”

“Red, we family, you just don’t realize it yet. It’s just what we do. I’ll see you at the Brenton’s tomorrow or the next day.”

“That’s right little one, Spark said as he came in for a hug from the pregnant refugee. We just gotta finish grabbing stuff from here, then you’ll see us every day.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah Becca, ain’t gonna be safe over here too much longer. Too close to the border of Big Blue stuff.”

Rebecca stared at Matty in Kat’s sundress and began to laugh and cry at the same time. “Come here, baby brother. Thank you so much. You’ll never know how much you mean to me.”

“Hey, no sweat Becky.” Matty smiled as the words came out, knowing that Rebecca hated to be called Becky.

“Shut up Mateo,” Rebecca joked while still hugging her little brother.

“Hey here comes the brains of the group, that’s the one you need to say thanks to, Rebecca. Kat orchestrated it, we just following her lead,” Matty said.

“Kat?”

“Becca, you have no idea, just how on the ball that girl is,” Spark said as he headed back to the dump truck.

“I’m overwhelmed guys, thank you so much,” Rebecca said,

the adrenaline and the day's events having left her exhausted physically and emotionally.

As soon as the RV parked, Caleb jumped out and ran to his daughter. "Thank God your safe. How are you feeling? Did they hurt you? I was trying to call you on Matty's radio, but I couldn't hear anything but the rumble of the truck."

"I'm fine Dad, just exhausted. Can we go home now?"

"Yeah baby, let's go." Caleb soaked in a warm hug from his daughter.

"Hey Matty! Good job man, you're pretty good for a dude in a dress," Ty said, wanting to get in one last dig before they left.

Matty laughed as he attempted a curtsy to his breakout partner.

"Kat, thank you, the boys said you planned everything."

"Almost everything. We had to wing it on a few things. I'll tell you about it tomorrow. You should get some sleep, Becca," Kat said as she kissed Rebecca on the cheek.

As the Brenton family drove home, Matty and Rebecca passed out in the back of the RV. Kat tried to sleep in the front seat, but her mind was still racing about her plan. Something still wasn't adding up to the young strategist.

Caleb grabbed his cell and hit the speed dial to Michelle. "Hey babe. No honey, we got her. No, everyone is fine, just tired. Yeah, she's asleep in the back, we'll be home in a few hours.

No, Ty and Spark are heading to their house. Yeah, they want to pick up some last-minute supplies before heading back up. No, they'll be full time guests after today. I've got a feeling there is gonna be a hell of a storm ready to be released. No, I'll explain later. All right love you too, see you in a bit." Caleb hung up the call with Michelle and looked over to his pint-sized hero. What's on your mind, kiddo?"

"Something still doesn't add up. Why would Susan and Big Blue care so much about Rebecca's baby? I've gone through every possible scenario and I keep coming back to the same answer, and it's not a good one."

"What's that Kat?"

"I don't want to say, we'll talk about it tomorrow with Rebecca. But our lives may have just got a hell of lot more complicated."

"Whatever you say, kiddo. Hey, let's listen in on the news. Wasn't today supposed to be the big announcement of the Great Separation Plan?"

#### Worldwide News Broadcast.

*"Thank you for joining us here at America's number one news desk. This is Jason Powers, and I'll be your host this evening.*

*Let's get to the day's top stories. Excitement and anxiety gripped the markets today upon the White House's presentation of their Great Separation Plan, which, from what we are being told, is very close in substance to the Congressional led plan being*

*authored by the Senior Senator from Utah, Jacoby Elders. Let's go to Dmitri at our New York desk for more, Dmitri?"*

*"Thank you, Jason, yes there are in fact a few key differences, specifically formulated around monetary policy. As you know many of the more fiscally conservative political leaders will be joining what's called New Liberty and they have expressed concern that the People's Social Republic of America, led by the more liberal students of modern monetary policy, will over inflate the shared currency. Now as you heard President Karston say, he has brokered several deals in the past week with sovereign wealth funds and foreign countries that hold a significant amount of outstanding U.S. debt obligations. If they can get a large portion of U.S. debt forgiven or restructured, that might be a way the two sides can work together to keep a standard unified currency moving forward."*

*"Thanks for that Dmitri, now for our viewers at home and listeners over the air, what about the small and mid-cap companies, and even some of the larger businesses that might have thousands of people working in one country that don't want to want to leave if their businesses decide to move?"*

*"Great question Jason, and we have seen an uptick in manufacturing leaving the coastal areas and heading towards the Midwest. Several businesses have been started in the past few months offering breakdown and relocation services of heavy industrial equipment. Apparently, these businesses are required to give a sixty-day notice to employees and it then becomes a*

*very personal and individual business decision. Big Blue has announced today it will be offering displaced employee assistance programs at some of their offices for skilled workers, trades people, and manufacturing”*

*“Sounds great Dmitri, we’ll follow this closely as it’s going to mean a lot of changes in the coming months and years as the United States braces for this two-state solution. And as Dmitri brought up Big Blue, they also released a statement today announcing they are looking into the fraudulent video that was released earlier showing, what appeared to be Chief Administrator Susan Saury in a series of compromising sexual acts. We here at the Nation’s Number One news desk did not report on this when it was first leaked to us, and we condemn this attack as malicious propaganda. We have worked closely with Susan Saury over the years and it is this news outlet’s belief that to attack or smear not only one of our nation’s greatest social justice warriors, but also a recent widower, is simply despicable and we firmly hope the character assassins are caught and brought to justice. White House Senior Advisor Diego Assantino was asked about it, this afternoon after the Great Separation Plan announcement. Let’s roll the tape.”*

*“Yez, it iz mozt unfortunate that Mizz Zaury’z reputation iz coming under attack like thiz. She haz done nothing but good, honezt work for the Big Blue organization and we look forward to her rejoining our team az we move into the future. I will zay that we are looking into it, and zo far it zeemz to be the work of*

*zome radical konzervative groupz, which iz not zurprizing. Thank you, letz not have any more queztions about zuch a horrible inzident.”*

*“Ms. Saury could not be reached for comment, though we wish her the best dealing with this situation. And before we wrap things up here, let’s quickly recap the White House’s Plan.*

*“One, we will have two co-equal countries, New Liberty and the People’s Social Republic of America. Two, major Military and Federal Reserve actions will fall under the purview of a joint council for the term of 5 years, while working towards an equitable separation. And three, travel, trade, and business from one country to the next will be expected to proceed normally, with only limited bureaucratic delays. We’ll leave you tonight with this soundbite from President Karston”*

*“My fellow Americans, we have many stark choices to face, both individually and collectively. But I know in my heart that the choices we must make, really come down to one simple question: Do we want a libertarian-style wasteland, where only the rich and powerful prosper? The conservatives will promise you many things, freedom to succeed, freedom from government intrusion, freedom from regulation. Well, to that I say let us march down a different path, a path with Freedom from failure, Freedom from exclusion, Freedom from the mistakes that can derail our future. I think our future is brighter and I hope you’ll join us down that road.”*

*“And with that America, this is Jason Powers, and goodnight.”*

## **Epilogue : Present Day**

### Bunker Recreation Room, Brenton House

“Ty, you good with baby Moses down here for a sec? I gotta run upstairs for just a minute,” Kat said as she quickly darted out of the bunker where she had been setting up the satellite fail-over for internet connectivity.

“Girl, I’ve been watching over this little toe head since before he was born. Get going with whatever you need to do,” Ty responded with a smirk. Most of the time he’s referred to as Nanny Ty, for the amount of time and attention he spent with Baby Moses.

“Here Moe. This was your mommy on the back of a dirt bike, brbrbrbrbrrrr, and that was your Uncle Matty in a dress, and this one here,” Ty held up a Lego Thor that he painted brown, “was your superhero Daddy Ty. He came in and saved everyone,” Ty loved to replay the Great Exodus to Moses, albeit with a few minor modifications.



“Hey Mom, hey Becca, where’s Matty?” Kat asked as she ascended from the basement. Becca and her mother had been



getting dinner ready for the large group who now shared the home.

“Hey sweetheart, he’s out front with Derek. He and Spark are trying to get him to throw a baseball.”

“Oh, that’s not gonna work,” Kat proclaimed.

“Yeah, I’ve been watching them for a while. Every time he gets the ball, he just lays down on the ground with it,” Michelle explained.

“Yeah, that would be my doing.”

Rebecca looked quizzically at Kat, “Kat? What did you do?”

“Well, remember when Matty and I were having a, let’s call it a debate over whether or not Baseball should be declared the National Sport of New Liberty.”

“Yeah,” Michelle and Rebecca said in unison.

“Well, I may have reprogrammed the D.E.R.E.K. tablet to say that Baseball is boring and means it’s time to sleep.”

“Oooohh, Kat, you’re bad, you know Matty can’t go a day without following his Braves,” Michelle reminded her daughter-in-law.

“Haha! That’s good. I guess that’s like Ty and his UFC nonsense,” Rebecca joined in, “He put me to sleep last night explaining the psychological and philosophical differences between Tae Kwon Do and Jujitsu.”

“Well girls if that’s the worst you’ve got to deal with in your men, I think you’re doing okay,” Michelle reassured her two young women.

“Anyway, I almost forgot the reason I came up here. The camera alerted that someone came and dropped off a package down at the gate.”

“Hm, that’s weird. Packages haven’t been delivered for months. Caleb is down at the old Baptist church now getting his delivery of groceries and mail. Apparently, that’s the safest place for pickup; this month anyway,” Michelle said with a slight eye-roll.

“Stupid ass delivery companies. As soon as they declared for the People’s Republic, they stopped at-home deliveries in New Liberty,” Rebecca quipped.

“Yeah, thank my birth mother for that,” Kat remarked, now able to talk about Susan without clenching her fists; a marked improvement following the events of the Great Exodus.

“Oh, I hadn’t heard that.” Michelle still tread lightly anytime Susan was brought up.

“Yeah, the underground message boards were talking about it a few months ago. She strong armed them into joining Big Blue or as the boards said, get ready for riots to extend from the warehouses to the board members’ homes.”

“Yikes,” Rebecca said. She went back to kneading the dough for biscuits, unsure of how to respond to stories of someone

that so personally threatened her.

“Well anyway, Caleb is down there right now.” Michelle tried to steer the conversation away from the problematic Ms. Saury.

“I’m gonna take the gator to the gate and get that package,” Kat said as she grabbed the key from the rack hanging by the back door.

“All right, but you better bring Matty with you. I don’t want you going up there by yourself in your condition,” Michelle ordered.

“Mom, I’m ten weeks pregnant, not crippled,” Kat patted her tiny baby bump.

“Just do it to make your mother happy dear,” Michelle came back with her southern belle charm.

“Fiiiiiiiiinnnnnee,” Kat said with a smile. Kat loved to play the bratty daughter whenever Michelle would pull the mom card.

“Matty, c’mon hon, gotta go up to the gate.” Kat hollered out to her husband as he was trying to coax the ball from Derek. His little brother insisted on using it as a makeshift pillow.

“I honestly don’t understand why he isn’t getting it Kat. Seems simple enough. He knows to throw the ball back when it’s a basketball or a volleyball, but as soon as it’s a baseball he lays down?”

“Life’s full of mysteries my dear, here take me up to the front

gate. Looks like there was a package left up there.”

“That’s weird. All right, let’s have a look.”

When Kat and Matty returned from their trip to the front gate, the rest of the growing family, had started to shuffle in to sit around the dining table.

“What do you got there Kat?” Caleb asked.

Kat set the box down in front of her normal seat. “I have no idea.” She took out her Leatherman multi-tool to open it up.

“Hm, an electronics box of some sort, a note, and these?” Kat said in a state of confusion as she held up a collection of the decorative peach pits that would adorn her mother’s Pretty in Peach Preserves before she stopped making them.

“Lemme see that box. That looks familiar,” Spark chimed in examining the box while lost in thought.

“Peach Pittance of Principles,” Michelle started saying before Ty and Matty interrupted.

“That’s trademarked,” the boys chimed in.

“Ha, very funny boys, but why so many? What’s the note say Kat?” Michelle asked.

“Not much, just ‘Talk to you soon,’” Kat said holding up the note.

“KAT BEEP NECKLACE!” Derek shouted out holding up his latest iteration of Kat’s emergency call necklace she had made

for him.

“Not sure, buddy.” Kat said, studying the contents.

“Hell yeah, I know what this is.” Spark let out as he slapped the table. As he held up the box, Spark looked over to Caleb. “You remember when we were doing that work off the coast of Mozambique all those years ago.”

“Yeah, they finally pulled those rigs outta there because of the pirates coming down from the coast from Somalia.” Caleb recalled.

“Yeah, but before they did that, remember we figured out they were listening in on our radios from platform to platform?”

“Oh yeah, damn Spark, that’s going back twenty-five years,” Caleb recalled, still not one hundred percent sure of what that has to do with the equipment.

“Kat, this box right here, the reason you don’t recognize it, is because it’s been illegal in the US for as long as I can remember.” Kat’s eyes grew wide at Spark’s story. “This thing here is an inline radio encryption device. Look here, we had to get these from the black-market years ago so we could coordinate platform to platform out there in the oil patch. See here, there’s your input, here’s your output. Hell yeah, I loved these things.”

“I don’t remember anything like this Spark, I just remembered the pirates stopped coming around,” Caleb said with more than a hint of confusion.

“Haha! Of course, you don’t White Hat,” Spark laughed as he called Caleb by the derogatory term the operators gave to management on the rig, “that’s because we kept them hidden from you on account they was unauthorized electronic equipment.”

“Ha! Yeah, I’m sure there was lots of stuff I got left out of once I put on the management white hat,” Caleb embarrassingly admitted.

“You don’t know the half of it old man. Anyway Kat, look here. You just gotta plug in the encryption key code here and whatever frequency you guys are on, boom, you’re talking encrypted.” Spark said, as he leaned back in his chair quite pleased with his story and the rare privilege of being able to offer knowledge to Kat for once.

“That’s awesome, but why the pits?” Kat wondered aloud as the answer started to dawn on her. “Spark, what was the encryption key format?”

“Oh, it was just random numbers and letters.”

Michelle picked up on what Kat was thinking and held a peach pit up to Kat across the table. She pointed to the bible verse inscribed on the front.

“Yep, those are our codes,” Kat said triumphantly, feeling like the mystery was starting to resolve itself.

“Kat, what’s this on the back?” Ty asked, holding baby Moses on his knee. “Something else is scratched in here.”

“Lemme see that Ty, I never put anything on the back, they were hard enough to inscribe on the front,” Michelle pulled down her reading glasses to take a closer look. “52.2? Mean anything to you guys?” she asked the group.

“Yeah Mom, I think that’s our frequency. Oh man, I wanna try this out now. Which one do I try?” Kat asked aloud.

“Let me see them honey,” Michelle calmly asked, already knowing the one she was looking for.

Kat pushed the box over to her with 50 or so peach pits so Michelle could go through them.

“Which one you are looking for honey?” Caleb asked as his wife picked up each one and discarded.

“The best place to start is here. Try this one.” Michelle handed Kat one specific worn down peach pit. “JOHN1:1, that’s always a good starting point.”

“Kat try it as J-O-H-N-01-01, if I remember right, they ran 8 characters,” Spark remarked.

“All right, be right back,” Kat said as she flew down the stairs.

“Honey you want your dinner?” Matty called out as Kat fled to the bunker.

“Yeah, that’s great Matty, bring it down when you’re ready,” Kat called back. She worked at a lightning pace to fire up the radio, power up and install the encryption box, and enter in the frequency and verse code.

*D.F. Brent Sr.*

“Hello? Hello?”

“Ha!” a booming voice came over the speaker, “I knew it wouldn’t take you long you little genius. How are you doing Kat?”

“Is this Mr. Thurston?” Kat nervously said back into the microphone.

“Sure, is young one. Mr. and Mrs. Brenton down there with you?” the gregarious voice boomed through the speaker.

“No, but I can go them, one sec.”

“Yeah please do little one, we’ve got lots to discuss.”



Temporary New Liberty Headquarters, 10 miles outside of  
Park City Utah

“You see the news today Gabe?” Jacoby asked his one-time colleague as Gabriel entered the vast Elders family home library.

“No Jake, what’s up?” Gabriel asked.

“It’s Shilling. He’s nationalized Big Blue. They’re basically the civil service over there now. Lots of longtime feds are outta work or being re-allocated as they are describing it.”

“I bet the fence sitters are hating that today,” Gabriel remarked, referring to the moderates that felt their career in the federal government was reason enough to keep them safe



from too many changes. “Well, we did try to warn them Jake. It also means we’re going to see more people trying to head out this way,” Gabe said looking on map of the former United States of America. “Hope they don’t all try to make for West Virginia, the boys out there have made it clear they don’t want transients.”

“I’m sorry Gabe, I forgot to ask, how was your trip down to Dallas?” Jacoby asked.

Gabriel reached for the decanter of scotch and asked, “May I?”

“Gabriel, you don’t really need to ask.”

“I know, but listen here Jake-O, Kitty told me I need to show you proper respect as Head of State.”

“Ugh, cut it out Gabe.”

“Hey now, I just don’t want to piss off the first President of New Liberty.”

“Okay, okay, yes Gabe have some scotch. Now, how was Dallas?”

“Thank you, your presidentialness,” Gabe said to further poke at his old friend. “All in all, I’d say pretty productive. Reports from Amarillo are generally positive, I really think that’ll be a great spot for the Capital.”

“Yeah they did have the best proposal, and most secure location according to Jonah,” Jacoby tapped the folders of proposals he had on the side of his oversized desk.

Gabriel watched the single ice cube twirl around in his tumbler, then asked, “Did you do anything for Declaration Day?”

“Went to church, prayed for forgiveness, prayed for guidance, then mostly sat with Jonah at his ranch trying to gather intel on some of the caravans,” Jacoby recounted his day that the news media had taken to calling Declaration Day.

“So basically, the same thing you do every day.”

“Yeah, I don’t see it as a reason to celebrate. I know that New Liberty and the People’s Republic over there had a bunch of celebrations, but I still think that it should be marked with a somber tone.” Jacoby stared up at his map.

“Well after this year, maybe the people just need a reason to celebrate, Jake. Both sides see themselves as being free from tyranny, so let’s let them celebrate. It’s sorta odd celebrating an administrative cutoff date to declare citizenship, but hey, I like a reason to party as much as the next guy,” Gabriel said, lifting his scotch to the New Liberty flag hanging in Jacoby’s office. “All right then President Party Pooper, any news on the caravans?”

President Elders rolled his eyes at his Vice President before answering, “Well it’s getting harder and harder to weed out who truly wants to be here, and who Karston or rather Diego are trying to plant over here. Jonah has some people that came over from NSA and FBI that he trusts. They’re combing

through the arrivals to see if there are any red flags, but results haven't been great thus far."

"Well they will keep sending in troublemakers to riot every chance they get," Gabe noted as he stood up to look at the map. Have the regional governors got back to us yet on border security construction?"

"Yes, those reports are pretty dull, but here they are here if you want to look them over," Jacoby said as he tossed a binder over to the front of the desk.

"Hey, what was that message I saw a couple of days ago on LibertyNet?" Gabriel picked out his phone to scroll through his emails. "Here it is, what's the story on this? Scientists, engineers, and the sort, being rounded up at the Universities regardless of their allegiances?" Gabriel asked as he held the phone up showing the screen to Jacoby.

"I saw that. That's some WWII era stuff right there, Gabe," Jacoby remarked on the recent intel.

"Do we have a plan to help them out or what? Even if they aren't bible thumping cattle ranchers, I sure as hell don't want that snake Diego building up a brain trust of would-be weapons makers."

"I understand. I just got a message concerning that before you came in as a matter of fact. Hold on, let me pull it up," Jacoby's aged fingers slowly opened up his reading glasses to study his desktop screen. "Yes, here we go, from New Liberty Security

Director message reads, ‘Mr. President, laying groundwork for underground Liberty Trail, likely through North Georgia, so we can pick up defectors coming through Atlanta. Contact made through family connection. Will keep you updated, Respectfully, Jonah.’ There you go, so we’ll see how that turns out,” Jacoby remarked as he folded up his glasses.

“We still need to have someone reaching out to them, before they get rounded up,” Gabriel remarked.

“Good point, Gabe, I’ll make a note of that to ask Jonah tomorrow morning. You want to help me go through some of these trade proposals?” Jacoby asked, lifting both eyebrows in fake excitement while patting the pile of proposals on his desk.

“Not really” Gabriel noted dryly.

“You know as President, I could order you to help me,” Jacoby smirked as he poked back at his old friend.

“I tell you; I can’t believe I ended up becoming best friends with someone, that was so hell bent on bossing me around, he had to create his own country just so he could do it!”

“Here, start with this pile, we need to review these before we get to military issues.”

“New military issues, or the same ones as last week?”

“Nope new ones, apparently the special forces operators are proving to be a little too effective in recruiting commanders over to New Liberty.”

“Well, the top brass shouldn’t have believed all that garbage about keeping their retirement in People’s Social Republic,” Gabriel spit out, obviously angered by the promises President Shilling made in the lead up to Declaration Day.

“He did let them keep their retirement, he just reduced their retirement payments from fifty percent to five and it counts against their Universal Basic Income they’ve instituted. Needless to say, the vets that are still there are none too pleased.”

“Again, we did try to warn them,” Gabriel repeated, “Hey maybe that should be our new National Motto. New Liberty, We Tried to Warn You.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’d love that. Here, let’s get started.”

“This job has turned you into a workaholic, Jake.” Gabriel grabbed the folders off the temporary Presidential Desk in Jacoby Elders’ library.

“Quit complaining you old hillbilly, or I’ll name you New Liberty’s Ambassador to People’s Republic,” President Elders said as the two settled in for a long afternoon and evening of reviewing the minutia of trade deals and New Liberty’s intelligence reports.

“I’m not so sure I care for this new and improved smartass version of you,” Gabriel said with a smirk as he grabbed a pile of reports.



White House, Rose Garden

“Attention to the President,” a single order was given out by Big Blue Security as President Karston Shilling, joined with his Senior Advisor Diego Assantino and the Newly appointed Director of Religion and Faith, Hassam Richards walked to the podium. In a show of trained solidarity with their new leader, all the hand-picked members of the press corps held up an OK salute until it was returned by their leader.

“Thank you everyone, please be seated. You all will be provided a list of position postings and regulation changes at the end of today’s briefing. However, I want to make a special introduction today. You all know Hassam Richards, our new Director of Religion and Faith. Well, as we were looking over some of the problems we’ve been having in some of our more unevolved locations, we think we have come up with a solution. Hopefully, our new initiative will help to alleviate the interfaith squabbles that have recently seen an uptick. Hassam, would you care to begin?” President Shilling moved from the Podium to let the newly minted Director take the microphone.

“Thank you, Mr. President.” Hassam Richards fumbled out the words as he was having a difficult time getting his elaborate religious vestments to cooperate with his movements.

“He looks like a fucking clown,” Karston commented on the ridiculous papal and African themed outfit to his narrow-eyed Senior Advisor.

“Shhhh,” Diego responded, shutting down Karston’s whispered commentary.

“Yes, thank you all, my children of the Faith. At Big Blue we have made great strides in facilitating a voice for many different faiths. Today we’d like to bring that same spirit to The People’s Social Republic of America. Today we are announcing our official State Religion. Amir, Ezekiel, if you would please?” Director Richards pointed over to the side of the Rose Garden. Two members of director’s vast entourage wheeled out a large sculpture draped with a purple and gold sheet.

“Our Official State Religion, ChrIslam,” Director Richards said as he pulled the sheet from the sculpture, exposing the modified and modernized religious artwork. “Isn’t it beautiful? Let me walk you through it.” Hassam took small deliberate steps around the front of the podium, so as not to trip over his ornately gaudy robes. “See here, the traditional Christ figure on the cross, but it’s not a crucifix. The crucifix conjured up too many unhappy images for little children’s eyes. Also, we have replaced the crown of thorns with a traditional Muslim prayer cap, or a Taqiyeh.” Director Richards must have recently learned the word, given how impressed he was at himself for remembering it. “If you’ll

notice he is no longer nailed to the cross, we found that was also a bit over the top. Now he's simply standing on a nice pedestal with his arms out wide, like he's asking for a hug. But here is the key, his eyes are turned up to the Islamic Crescent Moon, implying that Christianity should look up to Islam for a fresh new take on religion for the Children of Abraham.

"Now I realize we don't have all the religions represented here, but there is room for additions. Perhaps we can add some of those Jew Stars somewhere or something." The director's dismissive attitude towards including Judaism into the discussion on inter-faith issues was obvious.

"And maybe we'll give Jesus some extra arms for our Hindu brothers, somebody write that down, that's good."

"Yez, thank you, Director," Diego said as he took the podium. "Pleaze feel free to ztay and dizcuss your new ztatuue, we muzt be going."

"Thank you, Mr. Assantino. Now let's talk about these nice religious vestments, shall we? You know I designed them myself?"

As Diego and Karston walked briskly down the outer corridor toward the Oval Office, the President leaned over to his Senior Advisor and said, "Thanks Diego, I can only take about thirty seconds of that guy before I want to jab a pencil into my ears."

"On thiz matter, I am in complete agreement, Karzton." As the two approached the side door, Diego noticed the door was



no longer manned by the Big Blue Secret Service guards. They had been replaced with two very large Chinese men, each watching the President and his Senior Advisor as they approach.

“Go in,” the large security guard on the right-hand side said to the two as they cautiously approached.

“Yeah, it’s my office, thanks Chang,” Karston’s racist tendencies exposed themselves as he spoke.

“Karzton, eazy, thiz iz zerious,” Diego said in barely a whisper.

“Damn right its serious!” Karston shouted as they entered his Oval Office. “And who the hell do you think you are?”

“Hello Architect, long time no see,” said a keenly dressed Jonathan Cui, turning in the President’s chair to face the two.

“Hello? Who the hell do you think you are to sit in my chair?”

“Would you like to tell him Architect, or shall I?” Jonathan asked Diego calmly.

“Many greetinz and apologiez for not contacting you zooner Mr. Cui.”

Jonathan Cui bowed his head acknowledging Diego’s apology.

“Mr. Prezident, this is Jonathan Cui, he is my, rather our, employer. And I highly zuggest you show him hiz due rezpect.” Diego’s demeanor and tone were like nothing Karston had ever seen before from his Senior Advisor.

“Huh, I’m confused Diego.”

“Which is precisely why we selected you Karston,” Jonathan said, standing up to walk over toward the men. “Now Diego, my people, most notably my father, have become very concerned with the delays in your plan.”

“I can azzure you everything will be ready az per design,” Diego answered quickly with a frightened tone Karston had never heard before.

“I know Diego, which is why I am leaving tonight to report this to my father.” Jonathan grabbed his suitcase. “I’m sure I don’t need to remind you the cost of failure, Architect. I do detest coming here, Diego, so I ask you, please do not force me to have to make another trip.”

“Of courze, Mr Cui.”

“To ensure that I don’t have to, I will be leaving a representative. Think of this person as a direct line to me. Someone I have grown to trust as she helped to build my opioid and sex trafficking business to record profits. I believe you are acquainted.”

“Hundun, come in my darling,” Jonathan called out to the front door.

“You know the meaning of the word Hundun, Architect?”

“That word has many meaningz Mr. Cui, I would not presume to know which you are referring,” Diego confessed. His stomach dropped at who he anticipated seeing.

“Well put, as always, Architect. It does not directly translate, but perhaps,” Jonathan positioned himself inches from Diego’s downward looking eyes and spoke just above a whisper, “just think of her as my personal agent of chaos.” Jonathan’s introduction put Diego and Karston on notice that there was indeed a powerful new hand in play that they will have to answer to. “I believe the two of you know my new representative, Susan Saury. In my absence, her word is my word, do we understand.”

“Thank you, Jonathan,” Susan said as she walked into the Oval Office in a form fitted black business dress with a circled yellow golden dragon brooch before kissing her very powerful lover.

“All right boys, who’s ready to have some fun?” Susan said as the President and Senior Advisor silently looked down in humble submission.

The End

