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AN EAGLE UNCHAINED

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An Eagle Unchained

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*To every American who loves this country
and wants to see our freedoms reclaimed
from a voracious government
that is stealing our heritage.*

ONE

THEODORE WINSTON HALE, HANDS clasped behind his back, stared out the window at the small lake on the Alliance Product's property. A pair a swans glided on the mirror like surface with only the barest hint of a wake to mark their passage. Behind him he could hear the six people he had invited to this meeting settling in the board room chairs.

When he turned to face the five men and one woman they each wore varying expressions of curiosity. None of them had any idea why they had been asked to join this gathering, but they had all willingly surrendered a portion of their weekend to attend. Every person in the room was crucial to the success of his plan, but he fully expected them to believe he was crazy.

On the far end of the large oaken table, Dave Herbertson was seated in his motorized wheelchair, struggling to hold his coffee steady. Dave suffered from cerebral palsy and spent his days trapped in a twisted body that only painfully responded to his commands. However, there was nothing wrong with his mind. He was a genius in his field of research and development, and Dave's technological achievements had been instrumental in establishing Alliance Products as the foremost giant in the computer software industry.

Seated beside Dave was John Stuart, his long legs stretched out in front of his chair. At six feet two he was an inch or so taller than Ted, but his frame was carrying at least thirty excess pounds, the result of spending twelve hours a day in front of a computer. As head of Alliance Product's marketing division his creativity and innovative thinking had been essential in making the company a global power.

Bill Essex had chosen the chair opposite John, which was conveniently situated closest to the refreshment table. Bill was so thin that at first glance most people would have thought him anorexic, but he was actually blessed with a metabolism that burned calories as fast as he consumed them. With his rimless spectacles and unkempt hair, he looked like the stereotypical bookkeeper. Although he did not have a degree in accounting, he was a genius with numbers, and his handling of Alliance's finances had been a major factor in the success of the company.

Frank Lofton fidgeted in the seat beside Bill, nervously tapping a pen on the table. He always looked like he was in a hurry to be somewhere else. Frank had begun his career as a reporter for the Chicago Tribune, and had worked his way into an editorial position before Ted hired him to be editor-in-chief of the Alliance Newspaper Group. Now he was in charge of seventeen daily newspapers located in major markets from coast to coast.

Across from Frank was one of the most beautiful women Ted had ever seen, and the only person in the room he had never met. Nicole Riley had an extensive background as a reporter, having worked at one time or another for The New York Times, the Associated Press, and United Press International. With Ted's approval, Frank had enticed her away from UPI with an offer she couldn't refuse. For the last year she had been the premier political reporter for the Alliance Newspapers, writing a syndicated column that was read by millions and frequently picked up by the wire services.

George Dugan occupied the chair closest to the head of the table. Even on a Saturday afternoon he was immaculately dressed, looking more like a movie personality than a business executive. During the past four years, Ted had quietly acquired ownership or a controlling interest in twenty-seven television stations, scattered around the country, in both large and small markets. When he had looked for someone to run the TV network, George had been the first name on a very short list of media people dedicated to presenting the news accurately and honestly. For the last two years George had been President of the Hale network, responsible for editorial content, programming, and advertising.

“I want to thank everyone for giving up your Saturday afternoon to attend this meeting,” Ted said, his voice a deep, pleasant baritone. “I suspect you’d planned more pleasant ways to spend your weekend, so I’ll get right to the point. I’m about to embark on the biggest adventure of my life, and I hope you’ll all volunteer the support I need.”

“That sounds ominous,” John Stuart said, setting his coffee mug on the table. “You know I’m always willing to help as long as it doesn’t require physical labor.”

“I can promise it won’t require muscles, John, but I suspect you’ll need to exercise your creative genius.” Ted held up his hand to forestall any further comments. “First, let me give you some background. I realize those of you who’ve been working with me since the beginning of Alliance Products have thought I must be getting senile when I began purchasing newspapers and TV stations four years ago. Bill in particular, questioned the wisdom of spending millions to acquire media outlets that were barely paying their own way.”

“Well, it’s my job to watch the finances and advise you when I think the company isn’t getting a proper return on our investments,” Bill Essex said. “I figured you were fulfilling some childhood dream,

since none of those businesses had any direct connection to the software industry and certainly weren't wise financial decisions."

"Not a childhood dream, but something I've been planning for a long, long time," Ted said. "I assure you there has been method to my madness. Acquiring the newspapers and television stations is an important part of the plan, which I'll explain in a moment."

"You're making this sound more mysterious every minute," Dave Herbertson said, pausing between words to allow his twisted body to catch up with his sharp mind.

"Whatever your plan is, I assume it has something to do with some sort of technological innovation," Frank Lofton said. "Since George, Nicole, and I aren't employees of your software company, I don't understand why we've been invited to this meeting."

"I have to agree," George Dugan said. "Of course I'm willing to support you in any way possible, but I don't see where television fits into the equation, unless you're planning some big advertising campaign."

"I'm even more confused than George and Frank," Nicole Riley said. "Everyone else in this room is some sort of corporate big shot. I'm just a simple reporter."

Ted smiled at Nicole. "Hardly a simple reporter. Your syndicated political columns have made you more of a household name than any of us." Ted took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and included the entire group in his gaze.

"You all know I've been invited to be the keynote speaker at the East Coast Media dinner next week. I intend to use the opportunity to announce my candidacy for the President of the United States."

"You're going to do what?" Dave asked incredulously.

"I'm going to run for President and my campaign will begin next week," Ted said, making a conscious effort to project confidence.

Bill shook his head in disbelief. "I thought that's what I'd heard. I'm probably speaking for all of us when I say you've lost your mind. Why you of all people?"

Ted had expected them to be skeptical. Perhaps no one here could understand his profound patriotism and his deep sadness because the values that had made America great were being destroyed for selfish political reasons.

“This country is going to hell in a hand basket, and someone has to do something,” Ted finally said. “Why not me?”

“You aren’t a politician,” Bill argued. “You don’t even belong to a political party.”

“This is about patriotism, not politics,” Ted asserted, beginning to pace back and forth with hands clasped behind his back. “It’s precisely because I’m not a politician that I’m the perfect candidate. As far as political affiliations are concerned, I’m pretty certain neither the Democrats nor Republicans would consider endorsing my agenda. I intend to establish the American Party and run on that ticket.”

“I won’t ask whether you’ve thought this out,” John said. “You never do anything on the spur of the moment, but don’t you think starting a third party and running for President will be an effort in futility?”

“Twenty years ago a lot of people thought it was Hale’s Folly when I started a new computer business,” Ted said. “I think we’ve proven them wrong, don’t you?”

“That was completely different,” Bill protested. “You had the idea for the Omega chip and knew a hell of a lot about computer technology. You don’t know a damned thing about politics.”

“Ted, I’ve seen you do some crazy things over the years,” Dave said, shaking his head, “but this has to top the list. What makes you think anyone would seriously consider you a Presidential candidate? What’s your agenda, or political platform, or whatever you call it?”

“Before I answer that, let me ask a question. What do you think the average American wants more than anything else?”

“You mean besides great sex and more vacation time?” Frank joked.

“I’m serious. What do Americans honestly need and want?”

“How about a good job, lots of money, and a secure future?” Nicole suggested.

“I couldn’t have said it any better. That’s my platform in a nutshell.”

“Okay, Ted, I’ll vote for you, but you’re talking about pipe dreams,” George said. “It’s easy to promise people jobs and money and a secure future — politicians do it all the time — but how would you pull it off? The economy is in a shambles and getting worse every year.”

“The economy is exactly why the timing is perfect. Why do you suppose the country is on the verge of an economic disaster?”

“There are plenty of complicated reasons for that,” Bill said, sounding like an accountant. “I could spend the next couple of hours giving chapter and verse, but I doubt whether you want a lecture on economics.”

“Maybe I’ll need a lecture before the campaign is over, but the problem is more basic than economics. Government has gotten out of hand. The career politicians and bureaucrats running this country are strangling us under an avalanche of laws and regulations. Businesses, large and small, are being forced into bankruptcy, putting hundreds of thousands of people on the streets. The great American middle-class is sinking into poverty. Pretty soon we’ll only have two classes of people in this country—those existing on government handouts and those being bled dry to pay for the social programs.”

“Okay, I agree government is creating an unendurable burden on the American people, but one man isn’t going to be able to do anything about it,” Frank argued. “Even the President doesn’t have the power to change a system that’s out of control. You’ll spend a ton of money on your campaign, and even if you win — which is

highly unlikely — you'll end up just like all the other politicians; with a bunch of unfulfilled promises.”

“I disagree,” Ted protested. “The President is the only person in the country who has the visibility to be an effective leader. It's taken natural disasters, scandals, exorbitant tax rates, and lost jobs, but the average man on the street is finally fed up. He realizes if changes aren't made the country is headed for a catastrophic economic failure. He'll vote for a candidate who's willing to take on the big guns, and make the necessary changes.”

“That's only if the average citizen agrees your agenda will make a difference,” George argued. “I don't think people believe half of what politicians say. Every person running for political office promises changes he or she thinks the people want to hear and nothing positive ever happens.”

“You have a hell of a lot more faith in the average American than I do,” Frank Lofton said. “Since the Great Society programs of the late sixties, hell, since Roosevelt's New Deal in the thirties, most people have accepted the idea that government can, and will, take care of all their basic needs through welfare, subsidized food programs, public housing, and free medical care. The great government giveaway has ruined the country, but the majority of the people are so used to being spoon fed, the idea of knocking out their supports will scare the hell out of them. No one is going to vote for a candidate who promises to eliminate the free ride. It just won't happen.”

“You're wrong, Frank. The majority of Americans are frightened and confused. They're overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems and no longer believe they have any control over their lives. They know the career politicians can't offer valid solutions because politicians caused the situation, and their avalanche of laws and regulations are compounding the problems. All those people who've lost their jobs, their homes, and any hope for the future are

ripe to follow a leader with the courage to challenge the system. If I can reach the people with my message, I can make it happen.”

“That’s the problem,” John complained. “You don’t have the infrastructure to reach the people.”

“Not yet,” Ted agreed. “But I have definite ideas on how to spread the word. We have a year and a half before the election, which should give us plenty of time. President MacDonald is completing his second term, so I won’t be running against an incumbent. All the candidates will be on an equal footing.”

“Hardly an equal footing,” George Dugan said. “You’re talking about a third party candidacy, and no third party has ever been able to overcome the obstacles they face, not the least of which is the reluctance of a liberal media to cover political campaigns other than the Republicans and Democrats.”

“That’s precisely why I’ve accumulated my own news outlets, George. The large media conglomerates won’t be able to completely ignore my campaign if our TV stations and newspapers are presenting my side of the issues. That’s also why the East Coast Media dinner is the perfect place to announce my candidacy. The liberal press has been castrating President MacDonald for the last three years, laying the blame for all the nation’s woes at his doorstep. I intend to put the blame where it belongs, squarely on big government and the career politicians. Initially even the liberal press will jump on the big brother issue because they’re always looking for an excuse to bash the establishment. By the time they realize what’s happening, I’ll have gotten a lot of exposure.”

“Even if you get media coverage and every voter in America wanted to elect you, that’s only part of the problem,” John argued. “It’s nearly impossible to get listed on every State ballot. I took a couple of political science courses in college, and as I understand the process, each State has its own ballot access laws, enacted by the established political parties to ensure re-election of their own candidates. Most States requires a petition signed by a zillion voters.

Where are you going to find enough volunteers willing to go door-to-door gathering signatures from a public that'll be skeptical of you and your motives?"

"Corporate money props up the two established parties and win or lose, it costs a ton of money to run a campaign," Bill said. "It isn't likely the major corporations will contribute to a candidate who doesn't have a prayer of winning."

Ted held up his hands in a gesture for order. "Okay. Okay. I know all the problems. I didn't say it would be easy. Only a handful of years ago, we were all struggling to survive and Alliance Products was just another software company. Then we developed the Omega chip, the first major step toward giving computers artificial intelligence, and built our chip into a global empire. Working together we've created a marketplace for all the other innovations that have made us multi-millionaires. If someone had prophesied our fantastic success ten years ago we would've thought he was crazy."

"Alliance became successful because we offered something of value to the consumer," Dave suggested. "There aren't many people who'll consider a political candidate valuable enough to bet their future on."

"You're right, Dave. That's why we have to convince the public I'm offering something of value, like jobs and money and a secure future. If four guys can make a struggling company into a powerhouse, why can't we use those same talents to reach enough voters with my message?"

"You don't have to convince me," John said, standing up and pouring a fresh cup of coffee from the carafe sitting on the refreshment table. "You and Alliance Products made it possible for me to have a ton of money, a beautiful wife, a job I love, and a future I never dreamed possible. If you think there's any chance of pulling off a Presidential campaign, I'd be the last to argue with you. Who knows, maybe I'll enjoy the challenge."

“Thanks,” Ted said, feeling a sense of relief. “I hope all of you will join in making this campaign successful. Even if we don’t win the election, we can stir up enough people to force some of our agenda to be enacted, and the next election we won’t be total unknowns. We have cutting edge technology at our disposal that we can use to our advantage, but I need all of you to make it work.

“John, you mentioned the difficulty of getting on the ballots in all fifty States. I need you to find the best expert on political law and pick his brain on exactly what we need to do to register a new political party and get on all of those state’s ballots. Then, with Dave’s help, I plan to take a page from John F. Kennedy and build an organized volunteer base at the same time. Kennedy got students excited and they took his message to the voters.”

“How the hell do you plan to use technology to build a volunteer base?” Dave questioned. “Even if we gave every volunteer a computer, they’d just use them to play video games.”

“We’ve been experimenting with secure two-way Internet communication and that’s the technology we’ll use to create dedicated volunteers. Who’s your best communication technician, Dave?”

“That’d be Andy Stevens,” Dave said without a moment’s hesitation.

“I intend to establish campaign headquarters in every city throughout the country,” Ted said. “I want you and Andy to do whatever is necessary to connect each of those headquarters into a network that’ll allow me to address them via live video, and then enable them to give me verbal feedback. Can you do that?”

“I don’t see why not,” Dave agreed, the wheels already spinning in his head. “That’s a lot more ambitious than anything we’ve done so far, but it shouldn’t be a huge step from two stations to a network of hundreds. Andy can work out the technological bugs, and he’s been chomping at the bit to expand his research.”

“That’s a great idea,” John acknowledged. “But I still don’t understand how you’re going to find those volunteers.”

“That’s where you come in,” Ted said. “There are thousands of idealistic college students who are looking for a way to change the world. I intend to tap into that idealism. Graduation is coming up and there are still universities that need commencement speakers. If I take my message to the college campuses we should be able to recruit an army of enthusiastic volunteers to obtain all the necessary petition signatures.

“John, scheduling speeches, setting up campaign headquarters and providing campaign literature is a marketing job, which is your area of expertise. Use your creative ability to book speeches on as many campuses as possible, and then use some of that brain power to design effective campaign literature. If you need more staff to get the job done, you have my approval to hire whomever you need.”

John shrugged. “I knew I wasn’t going to like my end. Promoting a political candidate may be the most difficult marketing campaign I’ve ever undertaken, but I’ve always enjoyed an impossible challenge. How soon do you want to schedule speeches?”

“As soon as you can arrange them after the Media Dinner. For the next several months we need to concentrate on creating an army of volunteers. When we have those workers, we can begin shaking up the establishment.”

“I feel sort of left out,” Bill complained. “I suspect I wouldn’t be at this meeting if you didn’t have something in mind for the financial department. I don’t know if it’s legal to use Alliance Product’s money to finance a political campaign.”

“I don’t intend to use any of our corporate money, Bill. I’m committed to putting every dime I own into this campaign if necessary. However, corporate contributions prop up the established parties and we need to change the direction of that money flow. It’ll be your job to get businesses involved in supporting the American Party because every dollar they contribute to us is one less dollar going to the opposition. We need market-driven businesses behind us because they’ll create the jobs and wealth I’m going to promise

the American people. If we can convince them we're serious, no one understands better than struggling corporations how all those onerous laws and regulations are killing this country."

"I'm not a financial wizard, but I do know most of the really big corporations have political commitments," Frank argued. "Their CEOs and administrators suck up to the politicians so they can influence legislation and regulations that protect them from competition. They won't be happy to lose that leverage and they're the ones who contribute millions of dollars to political campaigns."

"I agree we won't be able to stop the money flow completely, but I have confidence in our ability to redirect enough so the major parties will be hurting for contributions. Most of the political corporations are either stagnant or declining because of the economy. They aren't going to have the big bucks to throw around like they have in the past."

"Mr. Hale, I understand why you need everyone else," Nicole Riley said, speaking for the first time. "What I don't understand is what you want from me. Of course, I can write articles in support, but I would probably do that any way."

"Please call me Ted. Mr. Hale is too formal. Nicole, I believe you're the perfect person to be my publicity and public relations director. You have a great way with words, and have multiple contacts in the media."

Nicole shook her head. "I don't know, Mr...uh...Ted. It's taken me a long time to build up my readership and I don't know if I can give up everything I've worked so hard for to join your campaign."

"No matter what happens, I don't believe you'll have to give up your syndicated column. You'll have to take a leave of absence from the rest of your duties, but you certainly don't have to worry about losing your job. Remember, I own the Alliance Newspaper Group."

"I can't make a decision like this on the spur of the moment," Nicole said. "I'm going to have to think about it."

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. I want you and Frank and George to attend the dinner and listen to my speech. It’ll give a summary of my platform and you can make your decision based on whether you can honestly support me.”

“I’d love to listen to your speech, but it isn’t that easy to attend the dinner,” Nicole protested. “I don’t know about Frank and George, but I don’t have an invitation.”

“You do now. I’ve made arrangements for all of you to be there, and George will be able to have a crew to film the event.”

“I still think you’re crazy, but it sounds like this may shake up the establishment, and I’m looking forward to the excitement.” John stood to shake hands.

“When you first mentioned your candidacy, I thought you were crazy,” Bill said. “Now I’m getting excited. Five will get you ten, we can pull this off.”



Ted stood in the front window and watched until the last member of his new team had driven out of sight. He had thought the most difficult part of beginning his campaign would be gaining the support of the six people he needed most. Five of them were at least marginally behind him, and he was certain he would be able to convince Nicole Riley to join the team. With all of them working together, he knew they could accomplish miracles.

He walked through the connecting door to his small office and flopped onto his desk chair. As he had since his plan evolved, he wondered if he wasn’t making a huge mistake. Then he pushed the negative thoughts from his mind. Whether he failed or succeeded, this was something he had to do. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he simply sat back and watched the country he loved being destroyed.

He reached out to touch the framed family picture sitting on the credenza behind his desk. In the photo Ann was sitting on the deck chair at their mountain cabin, with her arm around Sally. Sammy,

as usual, was hamming it up for the camera. Even though Sally was frowning at her mother as if she didn't want to have her picture taken, it was his favorite photograph. Somehow it made them seem more human, as if they were still alive.

I wish you were here to support me, he thought. We did so much together and this would have been our greatest adventure. God, I miss you all so much.

TWO

THE MAIN BALLROOM OF the Johnston Towers, Manhattan's newest and largest hotel, occupied the entire tenth floor and appeared large enough to accommodate a couple of simultaneous basketball games. Every inch of space was needed with tables crammed together, leaving little room for the staff to maneuver. The room buzzed with after dinner conversation as bus-boys cleared away stacks of dirty dishes and waitresses hustled to supply carafes of fresh coffee.

For the moment, Henry Philips, publisher of the prestigious Washington Monitor, who was seated to his right, and Mrs. Alice Bromley, wife of John Bromley, CEO of NBC, who was seated to his left, were both engaged in other conversations, leaving Ted Hale momentarily free of distractions. He leaned back in his chair at the speaker's table and sipped lukewarm coffee as his gaze swept the room.

Well-known and powerful TV news personalities, who had gained the same celebrity status as movie stars, were scattered throughout the crowd. Seated with them were men and women the average person would never recognize, but who were the real powers

that determined whether a story would be tossed in the trash or headlined on the daily news reports.

Speaking to such an august gathering of opinion shapers should have awed Ted, but for the most part he had little respect for the purveyors of public opinion. Since the Watergate scandal during the Nixon administration, when the media had discovered the power to topple a President, many of these celebrity news people had lost their objectivity. They had begun twisting the news to serve their own agendas, slanting stories to support their prejudiced views. Both the liberal and conservative media seemed more focused on creating the news, rather than reporting it.

He agreed completely with the pundit who had suggested the slogan “all the news that is fit to print” should have read, “all the news that fits our agenda”.

“It’s time to get the show on the road,” Henry Philips said, leaning over to alert Ted.

The noise in the room quieted as Philips stood at the podium and tapped his fork against a glass. The tinkling sound, picked up by the microphone, echoed through the strategically located speakers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it’s a pleasure to see your smiling faces here this evening,” he said, beginning his introductory remarks. “Business must be good if so many of you can shell out \$500 a plate for prime rib...”

As Philips droned on, Ted scanned the audience, attempting to locate George Dugan, Frank Lofton, and Nicole Riley. He had just about given up when he spotted them seated together at a table toward the back of the room.

When he saw Nicole, he sat up straighter. Although he remembered her as a beautiful woman, she had been wearing casual clothing and very little makeup the last time he had seen her. In an evening dress, with her honey blond hair beautifully styled, she was absolutely stunning. She must have sensed his attention, because

she looked directly at him and smiled. Ted was so flustered he almost missed his introduction.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, I give you Time’s Man of the Year, founder and CEO of Alliance Products, Mr. Theodore Winston Hale.”

Ted stood in response to the smattering of polite applause, shook hands with Philips and moved to the speaker’s podium.

“Thank you for that stirring introduction, Henry. If my Mother were here, I’m sure she would have believed every word of it.”

Ted continued without waiting for the polite laughter to settle.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it’s an honor to address such a distinguished group. The people in this room have done more to shape public opinion than any similar gathering in history. You have your fingers on the pulse of America and know better than anyone the disastrous economic trends developing in this country.

“Only this morning I read a feature article in The Wall Street Journal detailing the epidemic of catastrophic failures among large and small corporations. Many thousands of people, who believed they had a secure future, have suddenly found themselves unemployed in an economy where there are very few jobs. According to the Journal, the number of jobless, taken as a percentage of the total workforce, has exceeded unemployment during the Great Depression of 1929.

“Anyone who reads the newspapers or watches television knows something must be done to heal the failing economy or this nation faces the greatest financial disaster in history.

“Both the liberal and conservative media have presented countless interviews with supposed experts who offer solutions ranging from massive government programs to personal and corporate tax breaks. All of these experts, in one-way or another, believe government can, and will, solve our collective miseries.

“I’m here to tell you that government can never untangle our economic dilemma because government **is** the problem.”

His statement was greeted by a smattering of polite applause.

“In 1776 the colonies were rebelling against a strong monarchy with almost unlimited power. The leaders of the Revolution faced a formidable task. It was their responsibility to establish a new form of government to guide an emerging nation. These were intelligent, politically astute men, students of history, who knew every historical democracy, including the first democracy in ancient Greece, contained the seeds of its own destruction. Consequently, contrary to what the politicians would have us believe, this nation was not established as a Democracy, but rather as a democratic Republic — a confederation of independent States ruled by law. Because they were painfully aware of the abuses inherent in an overly strong central authority, they purposely created a weak federal government with limited powers.

“The Constitution presented to the thirteen colonies for approval was, and is, one of the most remarkable documents ever conceived by man. With the system of checks and balances embedded in the Constitution, the founding fathers believed they had eliminated the evils of a monarchy and the faults of a democracy in creating a Republic that would endure forever.

“There was, however, a fatal flaw in their logic. They didn’t realize even a little power was equivalent to a swallow of water for a thirsty man. A tiny sip would never be enough to quench the thirst.

“For a hundred years, largely unhindered by government interference, the original thirteen States grew and prospered. More States joined the Union until this nation had expanded from sea to sea. Businesses prospered as individuals built commercial empires by the sweat of their brows and the inventive genius of a free people. In the shortest period in human history, the United States became an industrial power such as the world had never seen.

“Slowly at first, but accelerating rapidly, the Federal Government became a cancer, with tentacles reaching into every aspect of our

lives, choking and killing the principles upon which this country was established.

“During our lifetimes we have seen the Federal Government increase its land holdings by tens of millions of acres, and go into business, as a substitute for, or in competition with private industry, to the extent that in many fields it is now the largest, most *inefficient* producer of goods and services in the nation. We have seen it control agriculture until the once vaunted independence of our farmers is now a vanished dream. Thanks to government interference in public education, this country has slipped from first place to twenty-fifth among the industrialized nations of the world.

“We have seen both the Executive and Legislative Branches override and destroy the clearly established rights of the States and State governments, until the Federal Government has very nearly destroyed the protections so carefully established in the Constitution. Can you imagine what the Founding Fathers would have thought of the Federal Government telling *any* State that it had no control over abuses of welfare handouts within its own borders?

“We have seen an utterly unbelievable increase in government by appointive officials and bureaucratic agencies — a development entirely contrary to the very concept of government expounded by our Constitution.

“This has all been accomplished because you, the media, and a lazy citizenry have allowed it to happen. Our constitutional Republic is being destroyed because for the last one hundred years vested interests have been selling the American people on the idea this country is a democracy, dependent on the will of the majority.

“It is time that we reaffirm Thomas Jefferson’s dictate that man has certain unalienable rights, that among them are, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, which do not, and cannot derive from government. And those unalienable and divine rights cannot be abrogated by the vote of a majority any more than they can by the decree of a dictator. The idea that the vote of a people, no matter

how nearly unanimous, makes or creates or determines what is right or just, becomes as absurd and unacceptable as the idea that right and justice are simply whatever a king or central government says they are.

“Where are those unalienable rights when government confiscates homes and entire neighborhoods to build a shopping mall? Is a man’s home his castle only at the whim of government?”

“Where are those unalienable rights when government, as Cicero suggested, curries favor with the people by giving them other men’s property. Is not charity the valid function of charitable institutions and the churches, rather than the government?”

“Our Constitution guarantees the Freedom *of* Religion, not the Freedom *from* Religion. Where are those unalienable rights when government denies our right to pray or to display symbols of our Judeo-Christian heritage — such as the Ten Commandments — in public places?”

“Perhaps the more appropriate question is, where was the media, the self-proclaimed watchdogs of our liberties, when these abuses of power were instituted? Why have the voices of concerned citizens not been heard?”

“I say it’s because you and I have shirked our duty. The axiom, ‘all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing’, has never been more meaningful than it is today.

“It is time for everyone who loves this country and embraces the Republic that was once a shining beacon of hope for the entire world to stand up and be counted.

“I for one, intend to step forward and use my fortune to do whatever is possible to re-establish this nation as a Republic where man’s unalienable rights are respected and protected.

“Tonight, I am making the formal declaration that I am a candidate for the office of President of the United States.”

Ted paused to sip from the water glass on the podium. He had not expected a standing ovation at his announcement, and wasn’t

disappointed. A few people applauded politely, but most had curious expressions, as if they were awaiting the punch line to a joke.

“My basic platform is a belief each individual is solely responsible for guiding his or her own life without the coercion and limitations imposed by the Federal Government,” he continued.

“In order to accomplish the return of freedom to the American people, there are three basic planks to my platform.

“My first priority will be to reduce the size and power of the Federal Government. If the United States is ever to reclaim its rightful position among the nations of the world, the Federal Government must be brought under control. I ask you, whether we really need hundreds of new laws and regulations every year?

“I do not intend to merely reduce government; I intend to perform major surgery.

“When government employees and welfare recipients exceed the number of value producers who are supporting them, the situation is desperate. Yet that has been the case for nearly fifty years. Is it any wonder the nation is experiencing an economic decline.

“Any good businessperson will tell you that if a corporation is to be successful income must exceed expenses. A business earns profits by providing a valuable product or service to the consumer.

“Government, on the other hand, does not provide anything of value, yet it consumes the values produced by our hard working citizens. Profit is an unknown word in the halls of government.

“As the insatiable monster has grown larger it has become even less concerned about the bottom line. If there isn’t enough money to pay for exorbitant promises, they simply raise taxes or print more money and thereby increase the already astronomical national debt. Neither of these solutions is acceptable. Apparently career politicians are incapable of fiscal restraint.

“The citizens of this country are not stupid. They’ve simply been misguided by career politicians who’ve created the illusion government can improve public prosperity and well-being through

regulatory programs ‘for the social good’. Even Franklin Roosevelt, who began our welfare state during the Great Depression, realized programs for the social good must be limited in duration and scope. In his 1935 State of the Union Address, he said, ‘Continued dependence upon welfare induces a spiritual disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out welfare in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit.’

“Along with the economic disaster we face, no one can question that we are experiencing what Roosevelt described as a spiritual disintegration. The unique spirit that drove this nation forward has nearly been destroyed. And it is our fault because we allowed it to happen.

“It’s your job as a responsible media to report the facts. You have the duty to educate the voters so they realize big government has created the economic problems that are destroying our nation. Quite frankly, most of you haven’t met your responsibility.

“It’s my duty as a successful businessman to do whatever possible to lead the nation to prosperity through the free market system. Until tonight I’ve shirked that responsibility.

“However, as a Presidential candidate I intend to reach out to the people and convince them it isn’t too late to take control of their lives and insist on the necessary reforms. I ask for your support as concerned and responsible citizens. Together we can write a new and better future. If we don’t act now it is questionable whether there will be a future for our nation.”

Ted paused to sip from the water glass. There was not a sound in the room, as most of the audience had become silently hostile. As he had expected the media moguls did not appreciate being assigned even a minor portion of the blame.

“My second priority as President will be to demand a Constitutional Amendment limiting the terms for both Senators and Representatives,” he continued. “With the best of intentions, the

Founding Fathers believed members of Congress would be public servants dedicating a limited number of years for the good of the country before returning to productive and value producing careers in civilian life. They never visualized elected representatives becoming parasites who would make politics their career. Career politicians do not serve the interests of the people, but rather are committed to their first priority of being re-elected, which generally involves promising more and bigger giveaways.

“Civilization succeeds to the extent hard-working people generate wealth and values for society. Politicians irresponsibly consume our wealth buying votes for re-election. Their taxes, legislation, and resulting regulations stifle growth and destroy jobs, thereby promoting crime and welfare. Our government has created a monstrous class of people dependent on entitlements. The number of parasites, who are living off the sweat of the working class, is growing larger every day. If the politicians are not stopped, they will eventually consume all our wealth and deplete all our energy.

“G. Gordon Liddy once said, ‘A Congressman is someone who feels a great debt to his fellow man, which debt he proposes to pay off with your money’.

“Every person in this room knows there is no such thing as government money. Every penny Congress irresponsibly spends for the supposed public good has been coerced from the industrious, value-creating people of this country — and that includes you and me.

“Term limits would free Congressmen and Senators from focusing on their own re-elections. They would no longer need to court special interest groups and lobbyists for campaign contributions. They could concentrate on representing the people who elected them and reduce or eliminate the laws and regulations that are crushing the American spirit. They would no longer block industry from investing or putting effort into vital research because it’s too cost prohibitive and risky. Creativity and progress

have nearly halted because business fears new regulations or laws or interpretations of existing ones.

“Perhaps what this country needs is more unemployed politicians, and that is exactly what term limits would accomplish.

“And finally, as President I’ll demand a Constitutional Amendment giving the Chief Executive the line item veto. Currently nearly every piece of legislation Congress sends the President is burdened with non-germane appropriations attached as riders. Under the present system the President must either accept or veto the entire piece of legislation. I ask you whether we need to accept self-serving projects embedded in vital legislation, such as \$430 millions of dollars for a bridge serving fifteen thousand people or \$500 millions to finance an airport serving twenty thousand people with only two commercial flights a day?

“The President does not have the power to raise or lower taxes or to eliminate the plethora of laws and regulations suffocating our nation and our economy. Only Congress has that power. However, a President can lead the people in taking charge of their lives and futures.

“When all the various labels are stripped away, we’re left with the birthright of being Americans. If we all put aside liberal and conservative philosophies and work together to solve the problems, we cannot fail. If we don’t resolve our differences and untangle the difficulties facing this nation, we’ll not only fail, but the greatest nation on earth will die.

“I would like to conclude my remarks with a brief prayer.

“Please, God, forgive us for sinning against Your Commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Forgive us for allowing false prophets to subvert our spiritual equilibrium and dilute our values.

“We have ridiculed the beliefs of our forefathers, removing religion from our homes, our workplaces, and our government, and have called it enlightenment.

“We have exploited our neighbors by rewarding indolence, making them slaves to charity and have called it welfare.

“We have neglected to teach our children discipline and responsibility and have called it building self-esteem.

“We have selfishly killed our unborn and have called it freedom of choice.

“We have polluted the world You gave us with profanity and pornography and have called it freedom of expression.

“We have coveted our neighbor’s possessions and have called it ambition.

“We have abused power and squandered our resources and have called it politics.

“We have created divisions among the people, turning brother against brother and have called it affirmative action.

“Please God, we beg You to forgive us our sins against You and our neighbors. Give us the wisdom to recognize our faults so we may have the strength to rebuild this nation, indivisible, under God.

“Amen.”

For a moment when Ted finished and gathered his notes, there was total silence in the ballroom. Then there was a smattering of vigorous applause and a larger wave of polite acknowledgement.

Henry Philips shook Ted’s hand and slapped him on the shoulder. “Great speech,” he said. “I think you hit the nail on the head, but I don’t have much hope for your successful candidacy. You’ll never get the liberals and conservatives to work together.”

Ted smiled. “You’re wrong, Henry. The majority of Americans are neither liberals nor conservatives. They are simply hard working citizens who want the good life their grandparents enjoyed. They will support me, and I will be the next President.”

THREE

THE HOTEL STAFF HAD temporarily halted their attempts to clear tables as the gathering began breaking up. Many guests were moving toward the hallway where groups were awaiting space on one of the arriving elevators. Others stood in the ballroom's traffic aisles visiting with their peers.

Although Ted was eager to talk with Nicole Riley before she left, he waited at the speaker's table for the crowd to thin. Just as he had decided he'd be able to push his way through the aisles, Patrick Delbert stepped up.

"Great speech, Ted," Delbert said, enthusiastically shaking hands. He was host of *The Evening Hour*, arguably the most popular conservative talk show on television. Over the years he had garnered some prestigious awards, including two Emmys. "You said some things that touched a nerve or two. I saw Henry Walton of the *Washington Monitor* squirming in his chair, which gave me untold pleasure. He makes a living by crawling in bed with some of those important career politicians you mentioned."

Ted smiled. "I don't imagine I'll be able to institute the changes I mentioned without making a few people nervous."

“And rightfully so,” Delbert agreed. “I don’t go along with everything you said, but most of your remarks were right in line with what I’ve been preaching for years. Less government means more prosperity. How would you like to be a guest on my program to discuss some of the points you brought up?”

“Thank you, Patrick. I love your show and welcome the opportunity even though you ask tough questions, and I’ve seen you make more than one guest sweat bullets.” Ted handed him a business card. “If someone on your staff will contact my appointment secretary she’ll have my schedule available and can make the necessary arrangements.”

“Tell her to expect a call first thing Monday. Your speech will generate some controversy, and we need to schedule you while you’re still a hot topic.”

“Let’s hope I’ll be a hot topic all the way up to the election,” Ted joked. “Please excuse me. I have to catch my media people before they leave.”

As he attempted to squeeze his way past the crowded tables, several others stopped him to make comments, but no one else suggested an interview. It was noteworthy that the publishers and network executives from the major outlets studiously avoided him.

When he reached the table where Frank, George, and Nicole had been seated, Frank was talking on his cell phone and Nicole was busily scribbling notes in a purse size spiral notebook.

“I know it’s too late to put the entire speech in our Sunday editions, but I’m going to have George Dugan of the Hale Networks forward a video,” Frank said into his phone. “I want it transcribed word for word and the transcript run, in its entirety, in all the Monday editions. I’m going to have Nicole Riley call in a few minutes so someone can take down her impressions, which I want to be the feature article on the front page, with a banner headline reading something like, Theodore Winston Hale announces run for the Presidency.”

When Frank disconnected he appeared to notice Ted for the first time. "That was a great speech, Ted. Give me a minute, please, and I'll give you my impressions." He leaned over the table and addressed Nicole. "Call Betty at my office and she'll take your dictation. We're going to run your byline on the front page of every Sunday paper in the group."

"Thanks," Nicole said dialing a number and beginning to mentally compose an article, even before her call was answered.

"Okay Frank, what did you think?" Ted asked, moving to a closer chair so their conversation would not distract Nicole. "Did I get their attention?"

"I loved the speech," he responded enthusiastically. "It was harder hitting than I had expected, and I'd say you got everyone's attention, but I doubt whether many of the information brokers agreed with you."

"I didn't expect the liberal press to jump on the bandwagon, but what about you? Do you agree?"

"I'm not sure blasting all politicians as a group is a great strategy, but I'm behind you all the way. We've been holding the presses so we could get your announcement in the Sunday editions. It won't be a problem for the west coast papers, but the east coast editions will be a bit late hitting the streets. I think we might be scooping the bigger papers that had no idea you would be tossing your hat in the political ring."

"Great!" Ted said, firmly gripping Frank's shoulder. "I knew I could count on you. Where's George? Did he leave already?"

"I don't think so," Frank said, half rising to see around the room. "There he is, up near the speaker's table. He was going to grab his camera man and see about getting the film fed into the network. He was mumbling that it was too late for the evening news, but he'd have it on the early shows, and was making arrangements to broadcast the entire speech on a special tomorrow night."

The majority of the guests had left the ballroom and the hotel staff was noisily clearing the empty tables. They were obviously eager for everyone to be gone so they could finish up for the night.

“My wife has already headed back to our room, and if you don’t mind, I’ll join her,” Frank said. “I’ve got a couple more hours of work before I can call it a day.”

“I don’t mind,” Ted responded. “I know I can count on you to give my announcement the widest possible coverage. I got the impression there won’t be a lot of attention given by the other media sources.”

Ted shook hands with Frank as he left, leaving him alone at the table with Nicole. She was still on the phone, so he looked around, trying to spot George. The Hale Network TV cameras were already gone, and he suspected George had left with the crew.

He poured himself some luke-warm coffee from the carafe, and waited patiently for Nicole to finish her call. As he watched her, Ted felt a thrill go through his entire body. She was nearly as tall as him, her slim figure full in all the right places. Her long blond hair was beautifully arranged with every strand perfectly in place. Her form fitting green dress highlighted hazel eyes that sparkled above her smile.

In some ways she reminded him of Ann; in the way she moved her head in animated talk, the little dimple that appeared in her cheek when she smiled, and the way she tapped her fingers absent mindedly on the table. He realized he was attracted to her, and it made him feel guilty. He had not dated or even shown an interest in a woman since Ann had died, and although he knew it was foolish, he felt as though he were being disloyal.

“I enjoyed your speech,” Nicole said when she disconnected her call. “You brought up some interesting points this evening, some of which I agree with, and some I’m not so certain about.”

Ted laughed softly. "At least you're honest. I hope there were more points of agreement than disagreement. But in general, what do you think of my announcement?"

"As long as you appreciate honesty, I have to admit it was a great speech, but you stepped on some very important toes when you laid some of the blame on the media. Making enemies of the movers and shakers won't help your campaign."

"Then you don't agree the media is shirking its duty by spouting party lines and allowing the politicians to control America?"

"I don't know whether I agree a hundred percent with that assessment, but I do know you've made some powerful enemies here tonight. To a large extent the American public is going to vote for the politicians the media backs, because they believe whatever they're told. I realize you have your own TV network and newspaper group, but without the support of the major media outlets, I don't think you have any chance of winning. Even someone with all your money won't be able to beat the establishment."

"You're right, of course. I do need all the media coverage I can get and my strategy includes making the major media pay attention."

"How do you plan to accomplish that?" Nicole asked. Although her tone was neutral, she was obviously skeptical.

"I was hoping I could convince you to help me create headlines," Ted suggested. "It won't be easy, but don't you agree it'll be an exciting run?"

"It would be even more exciting if I could believe you're really serious about running for President. In the back of my mind I have a nagging thought the whole thing is some sort of publicity stunt."

Ted laughed. "I'm sure a lot of people here tonight have the same doubt, but I assure you I'm very serious. This is a whole lot more than some half baked scheme to get national attention for me or Alliance Products. Frankly I'm not looking forward to being in the limelight. I'm going to put all my resources into this run for

the Presidency, and it may be hard for you to accept right now, but I intend to win.”

Nicole smiled as if she were humoring a child who didn't have a clue how the real world operated. “I wish you luck.”

“I take it from your attitude that you aren't ready to be my publicity director and campaign press agent.”

“No, I'm not,” she said firmly. “Look, I'll be covering your campaign for the papers, so I don't see why it's important for me to be actively involved.”

“Because I need someone with your qualities of integrity, intelligence and professionalism,” Ted insisted. “I intend to run the most honest campaign this country has ever seen. I will tell the truth as I see it, even if it hurts some vested interests. I have no doubt that I'll be smeared and ridiculed when the opposition realizes I'm serious.”

Nicole nodded without responding.

“We both know the American people are accustomed to being lied to by every politician who runs for office. What's the old joke, how do you know when a politician is lying—his lips are moving? I need someone the public trusts to help convince them I will deliver on my promises. You have the reputation for objectivity and honesty that will open a lot of doors and help me gain converts.”

“That's my problem,” Nicole said. “I don't have a great deal of trust in politicians, and no matter what label you put on it, as soon as you entered the race, you became a politician. It took a long time to build my reputation and I'm not sure I want to be involved in a political campaign that's bound to fail.”

Ted nodded. “That's understandable. May I make a suggestion?”

“Of course.”

“Would you agree that the wealthiest man in America running for President would be considered a news item?”

Nicole nodded. “I think you could say that.”

“What if I offer you the opportunity for an exclusive, in-depth interview at my offices in Wisconsin?”

“That would be great,” Nicole agreed. “But I’d have to believe you had at least some chance of winning the election, and I doubt whether an interview will change my mind.”

Ted smiled. “I didn’t expect you to jump at the chance to be my campaign Press Agent, but you’re an important test case. If I can’t bring you over to my side, maybe you’re right and I won’t be able to reach the voters. You have to at least give me a chance. I figured scheduling an interview would give you time to consider the job offer. I firmly believe you’ll be impressed when you have the opportunity to interact with some of the other people involved in the campaign.”

“I wouldn’t be a very good reporter if I turned down an exclusive interview. I’ll have to check my schedule, but I think I can be in Wisconsin on Wednesday. Would you be available then?”

“I’m sure I can arrange the time,” Ted said. “But there will be one condition to the interview.”

“And what’s that?” Nicole sounded cautiously skeptical.

“You have to allow me to take you to dinner, whether or not you decide to join my team.”

“I never refuse dinner invitations from handsome men,” Nicole said, flashing a brilliant smile. “Just remember I haven’t agreed to work with your campaign.”

“Understood and noted,” Ted said.

“Good. I’ll call you Monday morning to firm up the time.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

Ted watched Nicole move away through the crowd and again felt the stirring in the pit of his stomach. She was without a doubt the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

FOUR

ALLIANCE PRODUCT'S FOUR-STORY building was situated on forty manicured acres of rolling hills and large old trees. About a quarter mile from the county road, the long asphalt driveway skirted a small lake where a half dozen men and women enjoyed the beautiful spring weather, lunching at picnic tables strategically placed around the perimeter. The driveway widened into a generous visitor's parking area where Nicole pulled her rental car into a space conveniently located near the front entrance.

She was half an hour early for her appointment, and rather than cool her heels in a corporate waiting room she decided to spend the time reviewing the background information she had gathered in preparation for her interview. She lowered the car windows to admit the soft breeze and opened her briefcase, selecting the tattered Time magazine with Ted Hale's photo prominently displayed on the cover. It was an excellent likeness, showing a ruggedly handsome man standing in front of his headquarters. He looked like a person who smiled often, with fine wrinkles spreading from the corners of striking blue eyes. Even at fifty-two, there was no

slouch to his six foot frame and he had the slender build of a much younger man.

Thumbing through the cover article, she scanned the highlighted passages to refresh her memory. As owner and CEO of the Alliance Newspaper Group Ted was technically her employer, but she had known very little about him prior to beginning her research. His rags to riches story fascinated her.

Theodore Winston Hale had been born into a middle class family in Hinton, Wisconsin, a small town not far from his current location. His father had been a tool and die maker in a local factory and his mother had worked as a bookkeeper in the same plant. When Ted was thirteen, his father had been killed in an industrial accident. Although he had been a better than average student, there apparently hadn't been a scholarship or enough money for college because he joined the Marine Corps directly out of high school. As a Marine rifleman, he had served in the Middle East where he had been awarded the Silver Star for braving a gauntlet of machinegun fire to rescue two wounded comrades. After his four-year tour of duty, he had attended trade school where he found his niche in computer technology. He married Ann Robbins, his high school sweetheart, and they had two children, a boy, Samuel and a girl, Sally.

Using borrowed capital, he had founded Alliance Products. The development of the Omega chip and some innovative marketing had catapulted Alliance to the forefront of the industry. It was now a Fortune 500 company and Ted Hale was debatably the wealthiest man in America.

Four years ago, while traveling to join Ted at a business conference in San Diego, his wife and two children had been killed when their private jet had crashed in the mountains near Denver. He had not remarried and appeared to devote his time to business since none of her research even hinted at romantic entanglements.

Nicole glanced at her watch and saw it was nearly time for her appointment. She stuffed the magazine into the briefcase, locked her car and walked into the Alliance Products lobby.

“Good afternoon, Miss Riley,” the young man at the desk said, pressing a button on the desktop keyboard and handing her a name tag with VISITOR prominently displayed. “Mr. Hale is expecting you. Your escort will be here shortly.”

“Thank you, but I don’t need an escort,” she replied, clipping the tag to her jacket lapel. “Just point me in the right direction and I’ll find my way.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Riley, but that isn’t allowed. Visitors aren’t permitted beyond the lobby without an escort.”

Nicole was going to protest before deciding an escort would give her an opportunity to talk with an employee. Workers at the bottom of the food chain frequently had the best insights into a business and the management structure.

A young woman wearing a security uniform approached the desk. “My name is Sarah,” she announced. “Would you please come with me, Miss Riley?”

Sarah was a pretty, light skinned African-American with a dazzling smile. She seemed very young, and Nicole guessed she must be a college student serving an internship.

As they waited for the elevator, Nicole smiled. “Have you been working here long?”

Sarah smiled back. “I’ve only been with the company for two months. This is my second day as an escort.”

“Do you like working for Alliance Products?”

“Very much so,” Sarah said enthusiastically. “The pay is great and everyone is friendly and helpful.” The elevator arrived and the two women stepped inside. Sarah continued talking as she pushed the button for the top floor. “The thing I like best is spending a month or more in every department. It gives me a chance to decide what type of work I’d enjoy most.”

“Have you found your niche in the company?” Nicole asked, wondering if job-hopping was company policy or a benefit for interns.

“I’m not sure yet. My original goal was a position in marketing, but after finishing a month in research and development, I may have changed my mind. All the technicians have so much freedom to investigate new ideas that I think research would be exciting and challenging. But I’m withholding judgment until next month when I’m scheduled for an assignment in marketing.” The elevator stopped and the automatic doors glided open. “Here we are.”

Sarah led down a short corridor and held open an unmarked door for Nicole. “I hope you enjoy your visit at Alliance Products, Miss Riley,” Sarah said. “Mrs. Hettrick will take care of you from here.”

Agnes Hettrick, who appeared to be in her mid to late thirties, wore a modest white blouse and gray skirt. She smiled warmly as she stood and came around the desk, extending her hand.

“Good afternoon, Miss Riley. Dave Herbertson is meeting with Ted, but I have instructions to show you in as soon as you arrive.”

Agnes rapped lightly on the only other door in the small reception area, and without waiting for a reply, ushered Nicole into Ted Hale’s office.

Nicole had expected the CEO of such a large corporation to have an overwhelming office with expensive furniture, thick carpets and enough room to hold a high school dance. Ted Hale’s office was nothing like that. There was a couch, coffee table, and two easy chairs on the right side of the room. A large desk occupied most of the left wall, leaving barely enough empty space to walk around.

When Nicole entered, Ted stood, smiling as if he were genuinely happy to see her. He was dressed casually in a knit shirt and jeans.

“Thank you, Agnes. Would you please ask someone to bring fresh coffee?” Ted offered his hand to Nicole. “Miss Riley, it’s so good to see you again. I believe you met my associate, Dave Herbertson, at our weekend meeting.”

With the soft whir of a motor, Dave spun his electric wheelchair and extended a claw-like hand. “Good to see you again, Nicole,” he said with an engaging smile.

Nicole smiled as she gripped Dave’s cold hand. “It’s good to see you also, Mr. Herbertson.”

“Call me Dave. We’re not much on formality around here.”

“Dave and I were just discussing a new software idea,” Ted said. “He’s Alliance’s genius in research and development.”

“Actually, we’ve finished our discussion. When Ted told me you were coming, I insisted on hanging around to say hi. Having done so, I’ll leave you alone with Ted, and get back to researching and developing. It’s my fondest hope that you’ll agree to be the press agent. I read your article about Ted’s speech, and there’s no doubt you’d do a hell of a job handling campaign publicity.” Dave adroitly worked the wheelchair’s controls and glided toward the doorway. “See you later.”

Before the door closed behind Dave, Agnes reappeared carrying a small plastic tray with two mugs and a carafe. She set the tray on the table, poured two cups of coffee, took milk and sugar instructions, and quietly left the room.

“Please have a seat, Nicole, and we can get started,” Ted said, indicating one of the easy chairs as he sprawled in the other one.

Nicole settled onto her comfortable chair and smiled, sipping the hot brew. “This is excellent coffee.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to tell Agnes you liked it. She takes a great deal of pride in her coffee.”

Nicole indicated the room. “I’m surprised to find you in such humble quarters. Considering your position and wealth, I would’ve expected something much more elaborate and luxurious.”

Ted laughed. “When we first constructed the building, I had an office about four times this size, filled with expensive furniture and perfectly decorated. To tell the truth, I felt lost and uncomfortable

in that room. After a month, I moved in here and my previous office now houses the accounting department.”

Nicole set her coffee mug on the end table and pulled a small digital recorder from her purse. “Do you mind if I tape our interview? I find it less distracting than taking notes and it eliminates misquotes.”

“Feel free to do whatever works best for you. However, I find it difficult to believe you’d ever misquote anyone. I’ve read most of the articles you’ve published for the last year or so, and found you fair and honest. That’s a rare trait in your profession.”

There was a warmth and sincerity in Ted’s smile that Nicole found attractive. “I’m impressed you took the trouble to read my work,” she said.

“Actually I did a fair amount of research.” Ted ticked off points as he spoke. “You attended the University of Virginia Journalism School, married while still in college, had no children, and have been divorced for the last five years. You worked on several newspapers and earned your reputation through hard work, dedication, and talent. Actually your resume and reputation are both impressive.”

“Do you always have your staff research the people who interview you?”

“I did the research myself. As a Presidential candidate I need to know something about the people I’m dealing with.”

“I still find it hard to believe you’re really serious about running for President.”

“I’m absolutely serious about becoming President and turning this country around.”

“Somehow that doesn’t seem completely honest,” Nicole said, sounding extremely skeptical. “Since you’re supremely successful in the computer industry and don’t need the hassles of political life, my suspicious nature presumes some ulterior motive.”

“You’re right,” Ted agreed. “If you promise not to laugh, I’ll tell you my deep, dark secret. I’ve always loved my country, but after

-serving in the Marines I became a thoroughly brainwashed patriot. I still get a tingly feeling when I see the flag because I know the sacrifices brave Americans made to keep it flying. Year after year I've seen everything the flag represents being destroyed and decided something has to be done before it's too late."

Nicole thought Ted sounded sincere, but she had met a lot of successful people who could make you believe black was white.

"Why you?" she asked. "Why are you exposing yourself to the rigors and mud slinging of a political campaign?"

"Someone has to do it, and at the risk of sounding egotistical, I believe I'm the perfect candidate at the right time. I'm financially secure, don't need the job to make a living, and have achieved my business goals. Considering the direction this country is headed, it's becoming less and less possible for anyone else to fulfill his or her ambitions. There are a great many sharp minds in America who need the opportunity to become the entrepreneurs of tomorrow. I want our young people to have the freedom and independence they were meant to have." Ted blushed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to hop on my soapbox."

Ted Hale certainly was charismatic and if Nicole weren't so skeptical it would have been easy to be swayed by his apparently open and honest demeanor. Maybe he had missed his calling by not becoming a professional politician earlier in his career. He obviously could put up the proper façade.

"And you actually believe you can go up against the establishment, the entire Federal Government, and win?" Nicole asked.

"Yes I do." Ted sipped his coffee for a moment. "I wouldn't be attempting this if I weren't convinced the American people are ready to stand up and be counted. You live in the big city, constantly exposed to rich and powerful politicians and king makers who've lost touch with the average American, the backbone of this nation. Trust me, the people living in the smaller cities and towns are ready for a change. Most of them are neither conservative nor liberal.

They're simply trying to live the good life and provide for their families. I believe when they understand it's possible to reclaim their birthright, they'll back me with their votes."

Nicole raised a skeptical eyebrow. "That sounds too idealistic. You're one of the rich and powerful people you say has lost touch with the common folks. What makes you think you understand the average American any better than the politicians and king makers?"

"I haven't always been rich," Ted said, cocking his head to one side, as if uncomfortable talking about his earlier years. "I've worked on the assembly line in factories, pumped gas for the big trucks, and was even a short order cook for a time. It's only been the last ten years or so that I've had more money than I can count. But I still live in Middle America and actually enjoy working with average people more than the pompous asses who think a few bucks make them better than common folks. I believe I do know how they feel and what they think."

Ted glanced at his watch. "But enough of that before I begin to sound like some sort of sob sister. If it fits into your agenda, I thought a tour of the building might give you some background for your article."

"That would be great," Nicole agreed.

On the way out of the office, Ted stopped at Agnes' desk. "We're going to take a quick tour of the building, and then we'll be going to dinner at the Country Inn. Why don't you leave early today and check on Jimmy. I hope he's feeling better."

"Oh, I think he'll be fine," Agnes said with soft laugh that made her eyes sparkle. "Unless I miss my guess he just didn't want to go to school today. But thank you, Ted, I think I'll take you up on your offer."

Nicole could see that Agnes adored Ted, not romantically, but as an understanding boss. That was impressive because she obviously had the closest day-to-day contact with him and would be aware

of his moods and flaws. A few minutes of girl talk with Ted's personal secretary might be more revealing than an all day session with Ted.

"Perhaps Agnes could show me the Lady's Room before we begin the tour," Nicole suggested.

"Of course," Agnes said, opening the bottom drawer of her desk and removing her purse. "I need to powder my nose anyway."

"Have you been Mr. Hale's secretary very long?" Nicole asked when they were alone in the powder room.

Agnes laughed. "It seems like forever, but I guess it's only been about five years. I started in the accounting department, but jumped at the chance to work directly with Ted."

"Is he a good boss?"

Agnes cocked an eyebrow. "Off the record?"

"Off the record," Nicole agreed.

"I can't imagine a better boss," Agnes said. "I know this'll sound like I'm painting a rosy picture for a reporter, but it's true. Ted is the kindest, most thoughtful man I've ever met. Giving me the rest of the day off because my son stayed home from school is so typical that everyone in the company almost expects it. If you get a chance to talk with some of the other employees, you'll get the same story. I guarantee you that when he's elected President, he'll be the best President this country ever had."

"Wow, that's quite an endorsement." Nicole hadn't expected such fierce loyalty although she didn't imagine Agnes would be completely honest to a perfect stranger. "But no boss is perfect. He must have his moods."

"Sometimes when he's thinking about his family, he gets depressed, but it never affects his relationship with the employees. For the most part he's always upbeat. You know when most people meet you and ask, 'How are you?', they don't even hear the answer. When Ted asks, he really listens because he cares. There aren't many people in the world like that."

When the ladies returned to the office, Ted was sitting in a waiting area chair thumbing through a magazine. “Are you ready for the tour?” he asked.

“Lead the way,” Nicole responded.

“Let’s start on the first floor and work our way up,” Ted suggested, pushing the elevator’s first floor button.

“You’re the guide,” Nicole said.

“Then we’ll start in the mailroom.”

Ted led her toward the back of the building where they pushed open the double doors into the mailroom. A stocky man with the full face and slightly slanted eyes of the mentally challenged, turned from putting mail into individual slots above a big table. His face lit with a huge grin when he saw Ted.

“Hi’ya, Teddy,” he greeted. “How ya doin’?”

“Doing great, Johnny.” Ted and the man did a little fake sparing dance. “Are you staying out of mischief?”

“Sure am, Teddy. You know I don’t never get into any trouble.”

“Johnny, I want you to meet Nicole Riley. Nicole is a reporter and she’s going to write a story about me.”

“Hi’ya, Nicole,” Johnny said, looking solemn as he stuck out his pudgy hand. “You sure are pretty.”

Nicole shook the offered hand. “Thank you, Johnny.”

“You gonna write ‘bout Teddy being President of the world?”

“I’m going to write about Ted, but we don’t know yet if he’ll be President.”

“Aw sure he will,” Johnny stated positively. “Everyone will vote for him.”

“The mailroom is Johnny’s kingdom,” Ted said, changing the subject. “We wouldn’t be able to run the company without him.”

Johnny’s face nearly split open with a huge grin. “You betcha. I don’t never screw up the mail.”

“Johnny and I have been working together for years,” Ted explained to Nicole. “I couldn’t get along without him. We were

neighbors when we were kids and used to play softball in the vacant lot next door.”

“Teddy and Johnny. Johnny and Teddy,” the young man chanted. “We always been frens.”

“Well, you get back to work now, Johnny.” Ted playfully cuffed him on the shoulder. “I’ve gotta show Nicole the rest of the building.”

Johnny stuck out his hand for another shake. “Nice to meet pretty lady, Nicole,” he said.

Nicole was tempted to comment on having a mentally challenged man in charge of the mailroom, but decided to wait until a more appropriate time.

Although the rest of the tour was interesting, most of it was technical and probably more understandable to a science reporter. What fascinated Nicole was the reaction of the employees whenever Ted stepped into their areas. He addressed everyone by name and everyone called him Ted. There was none of the strained atmosphere she had seen in other corporations when the boss entered the room. Unless this was some elaborate charade, they all seemed to be genuinely fond of him.

“Well, now you’ve seen everything,” Ted said. “We have production and shipping facilities in several other locations, but this is the corporate offices and the center of research and development.”

“It’s very impressive,” Nicole acknowledged. “And a bit overwhelming.”

Ted glanced at his watch. “It’s time to head out for dinner. How would you like to finish your interview over some fantastic food?”

“That sounds great. I’m starved.”

They silently rode the elevator to the basement garage where the employees parked their cars. The parking attendant, a young man who looked like he could barely be out of High School, hurried from his little office.

“Hi, Ted, I’ll get your car right away. I had to park it in the back this morning.”

“Sounds good, Willy. Have you finished your term paper yet?”

“It’s almost done. One thing about my shift in the parking lot, I have plenty of time to work on it.”

As the young man trotted off, deeper into the parking garage, Ted smiled at Nicole. “This has been the best interview I’ve ever had. Topping it off with dinner will make a perfect day.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Nicole said, realizing she genuinely meant it. If nothing else, seeing the way he related to his employees, almost convinced her Ted’s candidacy might actually accomplish something.

FIVE

THE COUNTRY INN WAS a converted two-story frame house perched on the crest of a hill overlooking the Wolf River. Lilac bushes flanked the large porch, the purple flowers already perfuming the Spring air. The inside was bright and airy with numerous windows admitting the late afternoon light. If patrons looked closely they could see patches in the gleaming hardwood floors where interior walls had been removed creating one large, spacious room. Dining tables, each with four comfortable captain's chairs, were covered with sparkling white cloths and spaced far enough apart to give a sense of privacy. A vase of fresh wild flowers and a tall red candle in the center of each table added an intimate touch.

Ted and Nicole had barely entered the foyer when a burly man hustled toward them carrying two large menus.

"Good evening, Mr. Hale," he said, bowing slightly. "Your table is ready."

"Thanks, Tom. I hope you've reserved one overlooking the river."

"Of course," Tom said, grinning broadly. "Now that you're a Presidential candidate, we have to give you the best table in the

house. With your permission, maybe we'll even put up a discreet sign saying, 'President Hale Ate Here'."

Ted laughed. "That might be a bit premature. Maybe it would be a good idea to wait until after the election."

As Tom led them through the dining area he continued talking. "You may be right. In a way I hope you lose. If you're President, you won't want to eat in my humble establishment."

"Come on, Tom, where else am I going to find such good food," Ted teased. "Actually I've been thinking about stealing your chef and moving him into the White House."

Tom laughed. "You've been threatening to hire George for years. You should know by now he'll never leave my kitchen. I only allowed him to marry my sister so he would never quit."

Tom held the chair for Nicole as Ted took a seat across from her. "Ruth will be over to take your drink order in a moment." He lit the tall candle and placed a menu in front of each of his guests. "I recommend the prime rib tonight. Enjoy your dinner."

The sun had already disappeared below the horizon, but through the large picture window Nicole could still see the low clouds glowing crimson and gold, the display of color sparkling off the wide river.

"What a gorgeous view," she said.

"That's one of the pleasures of eating here," Ted agreed. "Every season has its own charm, but Spring sunsets have always been my favorite. I suppose in the big city you don't often get a chance to see the sunset without smog and light pollution."

"I admit it's been a long time since I've seen a sunset to equal this one," Nicole agreed. "Do you mind if we continue the interview before we're served? I do have a few questions."

"That was our deal," Ted said with a smile. "Ask whatever you want to know. My life's an open book."

"Actually my questions have to do with some of my observations at Alliance. I couldn't help noticing you have at least two severely

handicapped employees in key positions; Dave Herbertson in charge of research and development, and Johnny supervising the mailroom. Don't you think it would add credibility to your campaign if people knew you hired the handicapped?"

"Alliance Products isn't a charity workshop." For the first time Nicole sensed sternness in his tone, as if the question had touched a nerve. "I don't hire handicapped people. I hire qualified individuals regardless of irrelevant disabilities. I would prefer not having Dave's or Johnny's handicaps mentioned in your article. Dave's trapped in a body that doesn't respond, but his mind is one of the sharpest I've ever known. Alliance Products wouldn't be where it is today if it weren't for his genius. What good would it do to focus on his handicap when the real story is how well he performs his job?"

"Johnny's a little different, but the principal is the same. No one in the company tries harder or makes fewer mistakes. Without a doubt I could hire someone who would be faster, but it's not likely I'd ever find anyone who took more pride in his work. Being in charge gives Johnny a sense of well-deserved accomplishment and it would embarrass him if he were singled out. He knows he's different from other people, but different doesn't necessarily mean he's not a valuable asset."

"I didn't mean to upset you," Nicole apologized. "I was simply curious and never intended to mention the handicaps in the article."

"I'm sorry. I guess I overreacted. It's just that so many employers see disadvantaged people and immediately decide they can't do the job. Being handicapped is a state of mind. I've know a lot of people who appear perfectly normal that handicap themselves with limited horizons or debilitating prejudices."

"You're right. I shouldn't have mentioned it." She wondered what it was in his background that caused such a vehement reaction.

"I'm spending a lot of time apologizing, but you touched on a pet peeve. Actually, if you wanted a great human-interest story, you

might consider an article about Johnny. He's the least selfish person I've ever known. In Bishop, Wisconsin, there's a school for mentally retarded children and adults. After his mother died, Johnny lived in that home for several years. Christmas was a pretty bleak holiday because Santa frequently forgot them. When Johnny came to work for me, he decided to do something about it. I believe he thinks those residents are his family. At any rate, he doesn't handle money very well, so he asked me to keep back a portion of his wages so he can dress up like Santa on Christmas and deliver gifts to those forgotten people. In my way of thinking, that puts Johnny way above most of us. He gets more satisfaction from sharing the little he has, than I've ever gotten from all my money."

"I liked both Johnny and Dave," Nicole said, "and didn't mean to get off on a tangent."

"Sorry about jumping on my soapbox again," Ted said. "I have a tendency to do that. Maybe I really am a politician."

"Okay, no apology needed. And now my next question. I noticed all your employees call you Ted. Isn't being on a first name basis a little unusual, particularly in a corporation that is a world leader in its field?"

Ted laughed. "It's probably unusual, but not unique. I've heard that Sam Walton, who founded Wal-Mart, was on a first name basis with his employees, and he had a hell of a lot more people working for him. Mostly I believe Alliance has become a reflection of my attitude because I enjoy working in a relaxed atmosphere. Over the years I've learned that people take pride in their work if they feel they're important as individuals and are a valuable part of the company. That's also why everyone at Alliance, including the executives, spends some time working each job in the company. Being familiar with other people's responsibilities provides a better appreciation for what's needed to get the job done. I hope it gives them a sense of being a member of the team, something more than a little cog in a big machine."

Nicole nodded. "That makes sense." Informality seemed like a great company philosophy, and it certainly appeared to work at Alliance. She recalled Sarah mentioning something about the advantages of working different jobs before finding her place in the structure.

"One last question, then the interview will be finished. When you picked up your car you were talking with Willy about a term paper. Is it company policy to allow employees to do personal business on company time?"

Ted shrugged. "Of course, we can't let it get out of hand, but I don't see why an employee can't work on self improvement as long as it doesn't interfere with his job. The parking attendant has a lot of free time, and Willy is making good use of it. He's attending night school, which Alliance pays for, and hopefully his studies will make him a more valuable employee. Who knows, if he follows through with his education, he might even end up running one of our departments or a satellite operation. We have several people working part-time while attending school."

Nicole switched off the recorder and placed it in her handbag. She already knew it would be difficult to write an objective article. She had approached the interview with a skeptical attitude, but everything she had heard and seen was inexorably drawing her to Ted's side. His charisma was overwhelming. It was refreshing to meet a rich, powerful man who honestly considered himself one of the boys. Maybe this guy really did understand what the American people wanted.

"The interview is over?" Ted asked.

"That's it," Nicole said. "Now we can enjoy our meal."

"You haven't asked anything about my political platform," Ted complained. "Did my soapbox rhetoric turn you off?"

"You covered your political agenda pretty well at the Media Dinner, and I suspect I'll hear a lot more during the campaign. Today I wanted to observe the man behind the candidate."

“Have you learned anything worth printing?” Ted asked. “For the most part I’m a pretty dull guy.”

“You’re being too modest,” Nicole said. “Those American people you’re constantly mentioning should find you interesting.”

“I was hoping you’d promote my platform in your article. As I’ve said, when people understand what I’m trying to do, I’m confident they’ll vote for me. But it won’t be easy reaching them with my message. No slam against your profession, but there are a lot of liberals in the media committed to either the Democrats or Republicans, and I doubt whether they’ll give me much coverage.”

“There are also a bunch of conservatives and middle of the road reporters who will listen and report what they hear. What you need to do is call a press conference and let the reporters grill you about your agenda. The media likes nothing better than giving a candidate the third degree.”

“Do you think anyone would actually come to a press conference for a third party candidate?”

“There would be a few, maybe even some who have large audiences.”

“Would you help me? My campaign really needs someone who knows their way around the media. Have you given any thought to joining my campaign staff?”

“Frankly, Ted, I’ve been impressed with what I’ve seen today, but to be perfectly honest, a snowball in hell would stand a better chance of surviving than you have of pulling off a successful campaign. I like my job and don’t see myself giving it up for something as nebulous as your political future.”

“I understand your concern isn’t about money, although the pay would be better than what you’re making at the newspaper. But don’t you think it would give you a sense of satisfaction to know you’re doing something positive to help your country. With some of the media behind me, maybe we could convince enough people

to side with the underdog so we can win this thing. I would love to have you on my team.”

“You can be very persuasive, but the idea of joining your campaign is a bit premature.” Nicole could feel herself wavering, and wasn’t certain she was comfortable with that sensation. Ted Hale certainly had a way of convincing people to agree with him. “I don’t know enough about you or your agenda to be confident in backing you.”

“I can understand, and wouldn’t want you to join if you weren’t a hundred percent behind our effort. What do I need to do to convince you?”

Nicole thought for a moment. “Two things. First, as I understand your strategy, a big part of your campaign will depend upon recruiting an army of young people to support you on a local basis.”

Ted nodded. “Certainly young workers will be a major factor in getting out the vote.”

“When you arrange a commencement address, I would like to see how well those college kids respond to your message. If you can get them excited, it would go a long way toward convincing me you’ll at least be able to give the professional politicians a run for their money.”

“Whether or not you’re my press agent, I’d want you to at least cover my first commencement address. It’s not likely there’ll be other media in attendance, and I need all the exposure I can get. I’ll arrange with Frank for you to be there so you can see how well the kids accept my message. But you said there were two things that needed to happen before you’d agree to join the team.”

“I’ll have to see how well you handle a hostile media,” Nicole said. “I’ll go out on the limb far enough to set up a press conference. I can convince some of the major players to be there so you’ll have an opportunity to reach a lot of people. If you can convince me

you're able to handle the media, and that your agenda is practical, then I'll consider becoming your press agent."

"I couldn't ask for more than that. Somehow I think we would make a great team."

It was nearly nine when Ted drove Nicole back to the Alliance headquarters so she could pick up her car. They said a cordial goodbye, with the promise that Ted would contact her when he had arranged a commencement address.

On the drive back to her hotel, Nicole felt as if a powerful personality had overwhelmed her. Certainly Theodore Winston Hale had an abundance of charm, and she wanted to believe in what he was trying to do. It was her practical nature that made her skeptical. During her years as a reporter she had heard plenty of idealistic rhetoric by politicians who didn't believe a word they said.

Deep in her heart she found herself wanting to have faith in Ted and what he was attempting to accomplish. Although she had reluctantly agreed to set up the press conference, she was suddenly excited about it. She would start brow beating some of her contacts as soon as she got back to New York. Surprisingly she realized she wanted Ted to convince her he was really sincere and honest. She had to admit the man fascinated her, and working with him might be the most exciting adventure in her life.

SIX

WILLIAM 'WILD BILL' STANLEY'S footsteps echoed in the marble lined hallway as he walked briskly toward his office. The Russell Senate Office Building was never entirely deserted, but at six in the morning it had an empty, hollow feeling. Very few staff members had arrived yet, and it would be at least two more hours before any other Senators put in an appearance. As a senior member of the Senate, no one would have questioned him if he wandered in late, but he was nearly always the first legislator in the building. This was his favorite time of day, when he was able to ease into his routine without the noise and confusion of a busy office.

Although there was a private entrance to his chambers, he entered through the deserted reception area, purposely leaving his office door slightly ajar in order to hear staff members arriving.

He poured a drink at the private bar, and eased his bulk behind the massive desk. He was a big man at about two hundred fifty pounds, but it was weight that had collected on a frame designed to support around two hundred. As he sipped the first of many daily drinks, he reflected that perhaps he should cut back on the alcohol and get more exercise, but knew he would do neither.

On the wall behind the desk, hanging among photos of him shaking hands with Presidents and foreign dignitaries, was a picture in his football uniform. He looked impossibly young, crouched in a linebacker's stance, a fierce scowl on his face. Because of an aggressive playing style throughout his college career he had been given the nickname that had followed him during his political career. The image 'Wild Bill' conjured in the minds of his constituents and opponents had always been good for gaining votes.

As he swiveled the chair to face his desk, he frowned when his eye caught the photo of Mildred he kept for window-dressing. The ten-year-old picture was a studio portrait, judiciously touched up by the photographer, showing an attractive woman with an engaging smile. She was a bit heavier now, looking more like a grandmother, but still handsome. It was a great image for the voters, but she no longer excited him sexually.

The primary reason he arrived so early every morning was to get away from home before Mildred woke and bombarded him with her constant, inane chatter. In truth he was bored with his wife and had been for several years. He had considered, and rejected, the idea of divorce, because of the impact it might have on his political future. It wasn't likely voters would care whether he was divorced, but the impression of a happy domestic life was important to his public image, and public image was the dominant focus of his life.

Although Mildred was undoubtedly aware of his many discreet affairs, she had adjusted to their more or less platonic relationship. He suspected she enjoyed the perks and prestige of being a Senator's wife too much to jeopardize her position by raising a fuss.

He had skimmed most of the Washington Monitor when he heard Sylvia, his personal secretary, moving in the outer office. He set the paper aside and buzzed her on the intercom.

"Good morning, Senator," she said, stepping into his chamber. As usual she was immaculately dressed in a snug skirt that didn't quite cover her knees. Tall, blond, with eyes the color of morning

glories, she looked great in a sweater that was a trifle too tight across her impressive breasts.

“Good morning, Sylvia,” Wild Bill said, smiling to expose perfectly capped teeth. “Would you please bring me coffee and a couple of Danish if they’re fresh?”

Damn, she’s got a great ass, he thought as she moved away, her hips swaying provocatively. He had not slept with her yet, but the thought had frequently crossed his mind. Maybe he would tell Mildred he had meetings this weekend, and invite Sylvia for a cruise on his yacht. It wouldn’t be the first time he had made a conquest aboard the luxurious boat.

When Sylvia placed the silver tray with the coffee and Danish on the credenza behind his desk, he had an almost overpowering urge to pat her butt, but restrained himself. The time would come soon, but not today.

Taking a bite from an apricot Danish he was reminded of his daily promise to cut back on the pastries. Certainly the expanding waistline wasn’t helping his high blood pressure.

Oh well, he thought, as he always did when dieting crossed his mind, *no one expects a Senator to be skin and bones. The girls will be with bones long enough when they’re dead. Now they want an armful.*

Carrying a cup of coffee, he walked to the window overlooking Delaware Avenue. The traffic was always heavy at this time of the morning as all the little people hurried to their boring, meaningless government jobs. He couldn’t begin to imagine how tedious those insignificant people’s lives must be, and he didn’t try. He had made his mark in life, and if the trivial people in the world had to endure dull, mundane existences, that was their problem.

He was in his fifth Senate term, and except for a brief three years after graduation from Harvard Law School, when he had practiced corporate law with his father’s New York firm, he had been a politician all his adult life.

When the long-time Democratic Assemblyman in the New York State legislature had announced his retirement, Wild Bill had made the life changing decision to run for the vacant seat. During that first campaign he had discovered voters were a bunch of stupid sheep. They were only interested in promises of governmental largesse, no matter how unrealistic.

In those days he still had the build of the second team All American linebacker he had been in college. His booming voice, and the ability to sound sincere, had enabled him to easily beat the Republican opponent in his strongly Democratic district.

That first term in the State Assembly convinced him he had found his niche in life. Being a politician was a dream come true. He was his own boss, and the prestige of the position gave him a sense of power. People recognized him on the street, and assumed he was an authority on almost any subject.

During his second term he discovered women were attracted to successful politicians. Mildred had still been young and vibrant, but the excitement of new conquests had begun the long established pattern of marital infidelity.

As his political base broadened, he realized being an Assemblyman was small potatoes. The real power and prestige lay in Washington, not Albany. When the Democratic incumbent in the United States House of Representatives was killed in an auto accident, Bill jumped at the opportunity to move up the political ladder.

He found he loved Washington. There was an electricity in the air that made him feel alive. An active social life and invitations to a multitude of political functions made for twenty-four hours a day excitement. The first time he had been interviewed by a prominent reporter and saw his words in the Washington Monitor, he thought he had died and gone to heaven.

For three terms he labored in the House, learning the ins and outs of Washington politics. Being a Congressman was far more

exciting than State politics, but running for re-election every two years was a major inconvenience. One campaign was barely over before he had to begin another. He hated the fundraisers, shaking hands with common people, and constantly smiling at their insipid chatter. Obviously the real power brokers were in the Senate where they only had to run for re-election every six years.

The gods must have been on his side because the senior Senator from New York had decided to retire, and after some low key arm twisting had endorsed Wild Bill as his replacement. Wild Bill had conducted a vigorous campaign, knowing if he attained the Senate seat, he would be set for life. Although he won his first Senatorial campaign by the slimmest of margins, he had since been able to consolidate his position until he was never again seriously challenged.

He was good at politics, quickly learning when he had to scratch someone's back, and how to negotiate the deals that solidified his power. There was only one more goal to be achieved, which he was convinced would be accomplished within the next two years. When Senator Crabtree stepped down, Wild Bill was certain he had enough votes to be elected Senate Majority Leader.

If a Republican won the next Presidential election, as Senate Majority Leader Wild Bill would be chief spokesman for the Democratic Party and control the Senate agenda, scheduling debates and votes. He would become, in fact, the Democratic kingmaker, having a major voice in determining who would be the party's Presidential candidate. It was power without the burden.

He had no personal ambitions for the Presidency. The man in the White House was limited to two terms, and then, for all intents and purposes, his political life was over. Although politics had made him a millionaire, Wild Bill had no interest in returning to civilian life where he would be expected to produce results in order to maintain his lifestyle. Politics were so much easier, when he only had to convince ignorant voters he was working for their best interests.

He glanced at his Rolex and saw it was nearly eight. His chief aide, Wallace Compton, was half an hour late for their Thursday morning strategy session. Although Wally was listed on the payroll as a senatorial aide, his job was more in the nature of an advisor and private investigator.

Nothing irritated Wild Bill more than having subordinates waste his time. He was about to buzz Sylvia and have her track down Wally when there was a soft rapping on his private office door and Wally entered without waiting for an acknowledgement.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said. “There was an accident on the beltway and traffic was backed up for miles.”

Wallace Compton looked like a thug, probably because of the scar tissue around his eyes and the flattened, often broken nose acquired during his years as a prizefighter. He had been a promising light heavyweight contender until a concussion ended his boxing career.

Although Wally didn’t have the suave, professional appearance of most Senatorial aides, his rough exterior certainly helped when he had to browbeat people Wild Bill wanted to intimidate. The ex-prizefighter had also cultivated numerous shady connections that had proven useful to the Senator on several occasions. Best of all, Wally had few, if any, moral scruples to prevent him from accomplishing whatever task was given him.

Wild Bill scowled. “There are always accidents on the beltway. If you had any brains you’d plan on leaving earlier. I’ve got better things to do than wait for you to make an appearance.”

“It won’t happen again,” Wally said, not sounding remorseful as he flopped onto one of the chairs in front of the desk. He was obviously accustomed to the Senator’s grumpy moods. “Did you see the Monitor this morning? That prissy reporter — what’s his name — uh, Simon Jacobs, had an article about Ted Hale’s run for the Presidency.”

“I scanned the article, but didn’t see where it was important. Another splinter party won’t make any difference one way or the other.”

Wally shook his head. “I don’t know. Hale’s a well known figure, and seems to be zeroing in on making life miserable for career politicians.”

“So what?” Wild Bill snarled. “He’s a fucking business man, not a politician. He doesn’t have the foggiest idea how life works in the political arena.”

“Could be, but the economy is going down the tubes and the people are looking for a scapegoat. According to Jacobs, Hale has picked the perfect target.”

“Hale is a nothing, a nobody — a rich businessman with too much time on his hands. He’s never held a political office and doesn’t have the first clue on how to run a successful campaign. Besides which we’ve convinced the public the economy is going downhill because of greedy businessmen like Hale. The average, stupid voter isn’t going to believe a word he says. He’ll make some noise for a few months, but no one in the media will give him any attention.”

“Simon Jacobs gave him front page attention,” Wally insisted.

Wild Bill snorted in disgust. “It must have been a slow news day. There never has been, and never will be, a new political party that mounted a serious threat.”

“What about Abraham Lincoln and the newly formed Republican Party?” Wally asked. “He wasn’t only a threat, he won the damned election.”

Wally wasn’t noted for his intelligence, so it always amazed Wild Bill when he came up with some tidbit of political history, even if his facts weren’t completely accurate.

“My God, that’s ancient history and the Republican Party wasn’t new,” Wild Bill grumbled. “The Republicans had run Fremont for President in the previous election. Even so, Lincoln wouldn’t have

stood a chance except for the split in the Democratic Party. With the northern and southern factions each running a candidate, the Republicans were a shoe-in with their popular anti-slavery platform. Hale's new party — what does he call it, the American Party — won't have a prayer running against solid Republican and Democratic candidates. There's no way he'll do more than cause a ripple here or there. By the time of the Party conventions, he'll be long forgotten."

"It might be a big mistake to count him out," Wally argued. "I heard him at the Media Dinner, and he's got charisma. Reminded me a lot of JFK when he ran. He's going to look good on TV, and you know a handsome widower will appeal to the female voters."

"You're making too much of this," Wild Bill insisted. "I've been around long enough to know you can't buck the system."

"There are plenty of people on the street already agreeing with his basic philosophy, and he hasn't gotten his campaign underway yet. I think we should be looking ahead and doing what we can to counter his appeal."

"I suppose it won't do any harm to keep an eye on him just in case he's more of a nuisance than I expect. Assign someone to keep tabs on him, maybe even join his campaign as a worker or something. Get some of the staff busy digging up whatever dirt is in Hale's background from his birth until yesterday. Even if he was kept after school in the third grade, I want to know about it. If he's still around after the first of the year, I want the necessary dirt to discredit him."

"I saw the article in Time magazine when he was Person of the Year, and it sure read like Hale is the All American boy. Could be there isn't any scandal in his background."

Wild Bill snorted contemptuously. "Everyone has skeletons in the closet. I pay you good money to find them, so do it and don't come back with any excuses."

“Yes, sir. I’ll get my best people on it right away. If Theodore Winston Hale shoplifted a pack of chewing gum when he was a kid, I’ll find out about it.”

“Just get it done. We’ve wasted enough time on Hale. Do you have the background check I wanted on Senator Pierce?”

Wally handed over a thin folder. “I didn’t find anything the Republicans will be able to use against him.”

“Are you certain he won’t be connected in any way with the scandals going through the Senate right now? We don’t want to back Pierce for President and then find out he’s vulnerable.”

“There isn’t anything at all. His books are squeaky clean. If he’s been dipping into campaign funds, he’s done a great job hiding it. But do you really think it’s a good idea to back a Senator for this election? There’s going to be a bad taste in the public’s mouth after the scandals, even if Pierce isn’t involved. And with Hale out there lambasting career politicians, a Governor might be a better choice.”

“No. Pierce has the good looks and charm to win votes. I can control Pierce, and nothing Hale can say or do will affect the election. The average voter has the brains of a flea and the memory of a stone. Pierce will be the next President, or I’ll know the reason why.”

“If you say so,” Wally agreed, although he looked skeptical.

“Now get out of here and do something constructive,” Wild Bill ordered. “I’ve got a party caucus in half an hour.”

When Wally left, Wild Bill went over to the bar and mixed another drink. He was debating whether he should call Sylvia in and see if she was interested in going boating over the weekend. Sylvia wasn’t the brightest bulb in the package, but she had been around long enough to understand what was expected if she accepted the invitation.

SEVEN

TED'S FIRST OFFICIAL PRESS conference was held in the Rosemont II room of the Sheraton Gateway Suites at Chicago's O'Hare Airport because it was an easy drive from his Wisconsin headquarters and convenient for the out of town media people. Of course the Alliance Newspaper Group and the Hale Network were well represented, but Nicole had also managed to interest some the larger papers and networks. To entice political reporters she had played on the fact that Ted was the only announced candidate this early in the race and was advocating some radical solutions to the economic woes facing the country. Also there was a great deal of curiosity whether one of the world's richest men was really serious or whether his candidacy was a passing whim.

Ted smiled nervously as he and Nicole paused in the hallway outside the Rosemont II room. "Do you have any last minute suggestions?"

"Just relax and be honest," Nicole said. "Most of the people who promised to be here don't have any particular political axe to grind, so they probably won't give you a hard time. However, Jeff Novak of the Washington Monitor might try to embarrass you. He's a dyed

in the wool liberal who's in bed with most of the major Democratic politicians. Just don't let him bully you."

Ted touched Nicole's hand. "No matter how my first campaign press conference turns out, I appreciate your efforts."

Nicole looked embarrassed. "You'll do just fine. It's time to get the show on the road. The President can keep the press waiting, but a mere candidate needs to be on time."

The Sheraton staff had arranged several rows of padded folding chairs facing the lectern at the front of the room. At the back, a long table, covered with a white cloth, was well stocked with refreshments — coffee, juice, bottled water, donuts, and Danish.

When Ted and Nicole entered there were about twenty media people talking to each other around the refreshment table.

"You wait at the doorway until I introduce you," Nicole whispered as she made her way to the lectern. "Ladies and gentlemen," she called out. "Are you ready to begin?" She waited patiently until the press had taken seats.

"Thank you for coming to Chicago this morning," Nicole said. "You aren't here to listen to me, so, without preamble; I present the American Party candidate for President of the United States, Theodore Winston Hale."

Ted quickly walked to the lectern, feeling as if he were going to his own execution. He had never been so nervous.

"Good morning." His throat was so dry he had to sip some water before continuing. "Following Miss Riley's suggestion, I'll only make a brief statement before opening the floor to your questions. Most of you are wondering, 'What does this guy hope to accomplish by running for President?' Frankly, that thought has crossed my mind a time or two. Hopefully we'll find out this morning.

"A concerned citizen once asked a reporter why headline news always concentrated on disasters or scandals? Why didn't the media feature human-interest stories and positive news? The reporter

explained that warm and fuzzy didn't sell papers, but sordid crimes and the frailty of human nature did.

"I promise you my campaign will be newsworthy because I intend to address the greatest crime in history, the theft of America's heritage.

"This nation was once the land of opportunity, where everyone had an equal chance to realize his or her dreams. While many nations built fences to keep their citizens contained, America had millions of immigrants lined up for the opportunity to partake of our precious freedoms.

"People no longer dream of coming to America. Our economy is failing and opportunities for a better life no longer exist. The burden of oppressive laws and regulations has forged a chain that binds the American eagle so tightly that it can no longer soar to the heights where eagles need to fly. I intend to break those chains and free that eagle."

Ted sipped from the glass on the podium; feeling intimidated because his audience was not showing any reaction; neither smiles nor frowns.

"I'm not a politician," he continued. "As a businessman I have spent my life providing solutions and offering value to consumers. It has broken my heart to watch our economy disintegrate, not because it has affected my bottom line, but because it has eroded the very fabric of our nation. It doesn't take a genius to understand what absolutely must be done so that this country may once again grow and prosper.

"Even the average citizen on the street realizes the answer is not, can not be, larger and more intrusive government because big government is the problem.

"Market driven business has always been the only legitimate source of jobs, values, and technology. Today, because restrictive laws and regulations are smothering business, jobs are being outsourced to third world countries. Even entire industries have moved

their facilities abroad where they can operate without government interference and confiscatory taxation.

“Unfortunately it isn’t just the large corporations who are reducing their American work forces. Perhaps we could survive that. The tragedy is that small businesses, which have traditionally provided the majority of jobs in this country, are being forced to close their doors. Stroll down the main street of any town in America and see the empty storefronts that are stark testimony to the death of the American dream. Because of those failed businesses and lost jobs, America’s middle class is slipping into poverty.

“The average middle class breadwinner earns between thirty and fifty thousand a year, has a wife and a couple of children, a large mortgage on his home, and is making payments on one or more automobiles. When that breadwinner suddenly loses his job because of downsizing, or a company closing its doors, or outsourcing work to foreign countries, it’s as tragic as any natural disaster. With few new positions being created, and thousands of jobs disappearing, the unemployed breadwinner cannot find work that will support his modest life style. Forced to take a low paying, minimum wage job just to keep food on the table, he can no longer maintain the mortgage and the car payments. His family is forced to accept public assistance as he slips from the affluent middle class to poverty, virtually overnight. As the middle class disappears, there are fewer and fewer taxpayers to support the parasites living off entitlements.

“We are facing a disaster greater than the stock market crash of ‘29. Recovery from the Great Depression required mobilization for a World War to provide jobs and create innovative technology in new market driven industries. Even a major war will not save us this time. We’re on the verge of a catastrophe from which there will be no recovery.

“The only viable solution to our failing economy is for market driven business, unfettered by government regulations and excessive

taxation, to create wealth, jobs, and opportunity. If we free the creative genius of American technology, market driven business will generate thousands of new jobs, lower costs, and make America great again.

“So the question must be; how can we emancipate business? The answer is simple. We absolutely must eliminate career politicians and return control to the American people. If this nation is to survive, we must reduce Federal Government by abolishing the multitude of alphabet agencies whose regulations stifle the development of new technologies.

“Grant me four years and I promise to restore America’s freedom, increase everyone’s wealth and make it possible for the average man to have the life he deserves.

“Thank you for your patience. Now, I’ll do my best to answer your questions.”

A reporter in the front row stood. “Bill Thompson, of UPI. I’m more than a little skeptical of your claim that eliminating the alphabet agencies can solve our economic problems. Three essential agencies that immediately come to mind are the IRS, the FDA, and the DEA. Surely you wouldn’t suggest eliminating any of them.”

“Yes I do,” Ted said. “I cannot think of a single alphabet agency that does not in some way infringe upon the freedom of the American people. Along with a multitude of unnecessary laws, their regulations stifle creativity and needlessly consume the nation’s resources. Billions of tax dollars, which would benefit the overall economy if left in the hands of the people who earned those dollars, are required to support the bureaucracies. Politics, religion, and business are fundamental structures of civilization, and currently only the immoral political monster is thriving. Without the moral guidance of religion and the freedom to keep the bread we earn from our labors there can be no true prosperity.

“Of the three agencies you mentioned, only the Internal Revenue Service would survive my cuts, since even a reduced government

must have money to operate, and will need a collection and auditing service. However, there will be a new IRS, a much friendlier version, without the enforcement powers of the Criminal Investigation Division.

“Allow me to digress a moment and give you an example of the injustice and short sightedness of the present system — an example that is neither isolated nor unusual. A young man in Wisconsin started an entrepreneurial business providing a valuable product, which consumers both needed and wanted. This young man worked long hours to build a company that employed nearly fifty people. However he fell behind in paying his Federal taxes since every penny of profit needed to be plowed back into the business in order to expand and meet consumer demand. He was willing to work with the IRS concerning payment of the back taxes, but the Criminal Investigation Division was not interested. It didn’t make any difference that the fifty employees were paying more in annual income taxes than the company owed. Armed CID agents raided the business, seizing records and property, ignoring constitutional rights without any accountability or recourse. Today that young man’s company no longer exists and those fifty employees are unemployed. Because the IRS was not willing to work out an equitable solution, they not only lost the money owed by the business, they lost the revenue from the employee’s income taxes.

“When the enforcement branch of the IRS can confiscate property and destroy businesses, is it any different than what the fascist storm troopers of Nazi Germany did before and during World War II?”

For a moment there was complete silence in the room. Obviously these media people had expected a political candidate to spout platitudes rather than raise issues that were generally avoided.

“If the IRS doesn’t have the power to enforce the tax laws, pretty soon no one will pay taxes,” Thompson argued. “How will a friendly IRS be able to do its job?”

“That’s a great question,” Ted agreed. “For the most part, I believe Americans are honest and reasonable. When government is limited to its legitimate duty of defending the people from aggression both at home and abroad, people will voluntarily pay for that protection. Although the media and the government would have us believe this nation could not survive without a graduated income tax, let me remind you that except for brief periods of national emergency, such as the Civil War, this country not only survived, but prospered without an income tax. It is only during approximately the last hundred years, as government became the greedy, clutching, insatiable monster it is, that a permanent, personal income tax was required. With a reduced Federal bureaucracy no longer draining our resources by frivolously spending billions on programs that are not the purview of government, it will no longer be necessary to coerce money from the hard working citizens.”

Another reporter stood. “Stan Friedman, CNN. I believe you’re naïve about people voluntarily paying taxes, but I’d like to leave that issue for a moment. You speak of government protecting the people from enemies, foreign and domestic. Certainly the FDA and DEA are necessary protective agencies. Would you advocate eliminating them?”

“Yes I would. Both the Federal Drug Administration and Drug Enforcement Agency are illusions created by career politicians in order to win re-election and justify their positions of authority over the people.

“The FDA has grown less and less valuable over the last fifty years. Their regulations limit research into new cures and add millions of dollars to the cost of every beneficial drug on the market. If the FDA had been around when aspirin was introduced, mandatory testing would have driven up the price until we’d be paying a dollar a tablet today. FDA regulations have made prescription medicines unaffordable for the majority of our citizens, which in turn gives

the government an excuse to step in and offer solutions to the problems they've created.

“Why must our citizens buy prescription medications from Canada? Why did we have to buy effective vaccines from Europe during the recent flu pandemic that killed many thousands of Americans? Obviously it's because government regulations have prevented American drug companies from developing reasonably priced, effective medications. This nation has always had a surplus of creative researchers, who, without FDA red tape would soon develop cures for cancer, AIDS, and even aging. Most advanced countries in the world not only survive, but flourish without an FDA equivalent, and they have moved ahead of us in the medical field. We will not resume our position of dominance as long as the FDA stymies our progress.”

A reporter in the back of the room stood and waved for attention. “Henry Walton, the Washington Monitor. There are plenty of people who'd agree with you, but a lot more people who would be frightened to death at the prospect of unapproved new drugs being introduced to the market. How would you deal with that?”

“Again, it's an illusion that only government can protect us with a flood of regulations and laws. The medical profession and the free market system in most of the world effectively regulate the pharmaceutical industry. There was no FDA when smallpox, tuberculosis, yellow fever, whopping cough, and a multitude of other diseases were conquered. The medical field needs freedom to discover, not regulations to stifle.

“Let me ask two rhetorical questions. First, how can we expect objectivity from an agency largely funded by the industry it is supposed to regulate? Second, if the FDA is so essential for protecting our health and well being, how do you explain the multitude of FDA approved drugs that have since been removed from the market because of dangerous and even lethal side effects?”

A man in the front row stood. “J. Robert Franks, the New York Times. For the moment, I’ll concede there’s an argument for your position concerning the FDA. But surely you can’t be serious about eliminating the Drug Enforcement Agency. Drugs and drug related crimes are a major and serious problem in this country and throughout the world.”

Ted nodded. “I agree drugs and drug induced crimes are major problems that must be addressed. However, the solution isn’t government spending or government regulations, which you’ll agree have not done anything to diminish the flow of drugs or curtail drug related crime. As long as the dealers can reap billions of dollars in profit from illegal drugs, it isn’t likely regulations or laws will make any difference. So what’s the answer? Eliminate the profit motive and the drug problems will disappear almost overnight. If drugs are decriminalized, there’ll be no incentive for pushers to entice young people into using addictive substances. If drugs, that are now illegal, are available at a reasonable cost in pharmacies, it won’t be necessary for addicts to commit crimes to support their habits.

“As an adjunct, I will not abandon those who are already in the clutches of addiction. I firmly believe private industry will provide programs to assist addicts in returning to productive lives. However, if that does not happen, I’d consider some rehabilitation program an appropriate area for government assistance, but for a limited duration only.”

“Sam Brown, the Chicago Tribune. Since you’re obviously against government throwing money at problems, how would you address the welfare situation? In Chicago, as in most of the country, we have fifth and sixth generation welfare recipients. I think you’d agree the situation has gotten out of hand.”

“The situation is not only out of hand, it is a serious blight on the fabric of society,” Ted agreed. “First, I’d differentiate between those receiving entitlements who are unable to work, and those who are unwilling to work. Americans have always been generous

in giving a hand up to those down on their luck. The problem is that government has created a welfare culture where generation after generation is trapped by the illusion they are being helped, when in fact they exist in a state of virtual slavery to their poverty. Government taking on the role of provider has caused a spiritual disintegration, making entitlements a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit. I challenge you to point out a single instance where government has effectively introduced a program that eliminated or alleviated the root causes of poverty.

“The answer is to take the federal government out of the equation and make people responsible for their own lives. Market driven businesses, freed to grow and prosper, will provide jobs for everyone able to work. As the standard of living improves, the necessity for long-term welfare will be eliminated. It may sound harsh, but those unwilling to work will simply have to suffer the consequences. Churches and charitable organizations will once again be expected to assume the role of providing temporary assistance.”

“Jeff Novak, the Washington Monitor. Aren’t you oversimplifying a complicated series of problems? Many of the alphabet agencies you disparage were established during the Great Depression, and were instrumental in pulling the country out of an economic hole. If they were helpful then, how can you cavalierly suggest they aren’t beneficial today?”

“First, I don’t agree Roosevelt’s agencies pulled us out of the depression,” Ted answered. “As a temporary measure, some of them, such as the WPA, provided work for people who desperately needed it. However, until the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the nation had made very little progress toward recovery. It was the mobilization for war, the freeing of industry to advance technology and create jobs that lifted the country out of the recession. I suppose it didn’t hurt that we sent millions of unemployed young men into the military and temporarily relieved the pressure on the economy. However, the staggering growth of business during the war enabled

us to integrate those young people into the work force when they returned.

“I personally cannot think of a single governmental agency that solved the problem for which it was created, and was then disbanded. Once a bureaucracy is established, it takes on a life of its own and assumes a perpetual existence. Many of the alphabet agencies have outlived their usefulness or their purpose. It’s time for them to be dissolved. Business cannot survive maintaining outmoded practices, and government cannot service the nation by sustaining superfluous bureaucracies.

“I promised to keep this meeting to around an hour, and time is getting away from me. I can answer one more question.”

“Bill Thompson, UPI. You’ve made some radical proposals this morning that will require drastic reductions in the Federal Government and result in further unemployment, with thousands of government employees being laid off. Don’t you think you would be more likely to accomplish your goals if you worked with the bureaucrats and politicians rather than create the chaos of eliminating so many jobs?”

“Bill, I’d love to work with the entrenched bureaucrats and career politicians, but cooperation has never worked in the past and I seriously doubt if it would work in the future. For years there has been a ground swell of popular opinion demanding reform and nothing has happened. The politicians have lost touch with the people. Their main focus is to retain their cushy jobs by whatever means possible, which generally translates into focusing on the demands of lobbyists and special interest groups rather than the people who elected them.

“Politicians and bureaucrats control this country and they’ll never voluntarily relinquish that power. There are solutions to the problems we face, but the politicians will never consider them because it would interfere with their selfish interests.

“Thank you for your attention. I hope I’ve answered your questions satisfactorily and convinced some of you that more government is not the answer to the economic catastrophe facing this nation. God Bless you and God Bless America.”

Ted quickly made his way from the room without pausing to talk to any of the individual reporters. He returned to the 72 West Lounge where Nicole joined him about ten minutes later.

“Well, how did I do?” he asked.

“I thought you were fantastic for your first press conference,” Nicole acknowledged. “I particularly like your image of breaking the chains that restrain the American eagle.”

“Actually I owe that concept to John Stuart. He wants to do posters showing a chained eagle or an eagle breaking free of its bonds. He thinks it should be the symbol of the American party.”

“I think he’s right,” Nicole said. “I know the image impresses me.”

“With your approval, we may just develop that idea.”

“But getting back to your conference. You did a fantastic job, but I hope you realize it’ll get more difficult as the campaign moves along and the press pins you down to specifics. As always, the proof of your proposals will be in whatever sympathetic coverage you generate.”

“You’re a nationally respected journalist. What is your overall opinion of what I’m attempting to accomplish?”

Ted attempted to appear nonchalant, but could barely control his anxiety. Not since Ann’s death had he been so attracted to a woman. He desperately wanted Nicole to approve of his plans and join his campaign team.

“Let me put it this way,” Nicole said. “I sure hope I’m not making a big mistake, but I agree with most of what you said and how you said it. If you’re still looking for a press agent, I’m applying for the job.”

Ted reached across the table and took her hand. “Welcome aboard, Nicole Riley. It might be a lot of hard work, all uphill, but I can promise you one hell of a ride.”

“Then it’s a done deal, except for one thing. If you can’t convince the young people to support you at your first commencement address, I’m going to back off.”

“You can determine that for yourself. I’m booked for the graduation speech Friday afternoon at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and we’ll both find out whether the young people are willing to put their backs to the wheel.”

“If I can make the flight arrangements, I’ll be there.”

“Instead of trying to get flights, why don’t I charter a plane for use during the campaign? I’m going to have to charter something for most of my bookings anyway, and I don’t see why you can’t take advantage of the convenience.”

“Wow, a charter flight,” Nicole said, looking sufficiently impressed. “It pays to work for a candidate with deep pockets.”

“Nothing is too good for the American Party press agent. If you call Agnes when you get back to New York, she’ll set up everything.”

Nicole smiled. “Maybe this campaign is going to be one hell of a ride, but at least we’ll be traveling first class.”

EIGHT

TED INHALED SLOWLY AND deeply, attempting to relax his jittery nerves as Dr. Henry Jorgensen, University of Wisconsin Chancellor, finished his brief opening remarks by introducing the class valedictorian. As Amanda Kim stepped to the podium Ted had an almost overwhelming urge to glance at his watch.

He did not normally suffer from stage fright, but this was an exception. He was about to deliver the most important speech of his life; the first address to the young people he so desperately needed to support his cause. The success or failure of his entire campaign might very well hinge on eliciting the cooperation of this audience. Now he was beginning to have second thoughts whether the speech he had devoted so much time to writing would hit a responsive chord.

Many in the audience were not going to appreciate what he had to say. It was too late to change the theme even if he wanted. If his words alienated a large portion of the audience he could only hope that a few would understand and appreciate what he would tell them.

In an effort to quell the butterflies in his stomach he allowed his gaze to sweep over the gathering in the Kohl Center, the University's basket arena. Rows of chairs had been arranged on the basketball court for the small graduating class of approximately four hundred seniors, looking young and eager in traditional caps and gowns. The tiers of spectator seats, which normally accommodated seventeen thousand fans, were only partially filled with friends and relatives.

As Miss Kim enthusiastically spoke of the opportunities awaiting the graduates, Ted anxiously scanned the tiers of spectators, looking for Nicole. Her chartered flight from New York had been delayed by thunderstorms over Ohio and Bill Essex had agreed to wait at the airport so he could drive her to the Kohl Center as soon as she arrived.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Nicole, Bill, and John on the upper tier of the arena, making their way to empty seats. It was important for her to be there to hear and support him, not only because she was the campaign's publicity director, but because he wanted her to agree and believe in what he was doing.

All too quickly Miss Kim resumed her seat amid polite applause. President Jorgensen rose and approached the podium.

"Thank you Miss Kim. That was an inspiring oration. I'm sure your words will mean a great deal to this year's graduates as they leave the sheltered world of academia.

"Now it is my great privilege to introduce today's guest speaker. He is the epitome of the American dream. His list of accomplishments is truly impressive, not the least of which was the development of the Omega chip. Starting from a humble background, he single-handedly created one of the world's foremost corporations. You may have seen his picture on the cover of Time magazine when he was honored as Person of The Year. Only a few days ago he announced his intention to be the American Party's candidate for President

of the United States. Without further delay, I give you Wisconsin's favorite son, Mr. Theodore Winston Hale."

Ted approached the podium and waited for the enthusiastic burst of applause to subside.

"Dr. Jorgensen, distinguished faculty, honored graduates, friends and relatives, ladies and gentlemen," Ted said, reeling off the prescribed litany. "It's a great honor to speak to such a vibrant group of intellectuals. Never having had the opportunity to attend college, this is the closest I've ever been to a graduating class."

There was a ripple of polite laughter.

"As I look out over this gathering, I see the future of America. Your dreams of success and happiness, so evident on your smiling faces, make me feel humble and a little sad. You deserve every accolade for exhibiting the courage and fortitude in completing the long, difficult journey to earn your degrees.

"Unfortunately you deserve better than you'll receive when you leave academia to seek your fortune in the business world. Your struggles for future success are just beginning. Many of you will discover the next several years to be a time of disappointment and frustration.

"Society tells us education is the path to success. I wholeheartedly agree that education is the strongest foundation you can achieve. Unfortunately knowledge is not a guarantee of success. In today's economic climate most of you will not be able to find employment in your chosen field. I realize that isn't the prophecy you want to hear, but many of you already know it's true.

"This Spring, when corporate recruiters came on campus to interview the top students in your class, only a select few were offered positions. There were fewer recruiters this year than last, and there will be even fewer next year. Businesses are dying all over America, putting hundreds of qualified professionals onto the street. Consequently corporations are able to hire experienced people at low salaries. You'll not only be competing in the job market with

graduates from every other university in the country, you're up against displaced professionals who are desperate for work.

"The truth is the American dream has been stolen from you. American corporations no longer have positions available for the majority of graduates seeking security after college. That is an unparalleled tragedy. Wasting brilliant minds and shattering the ambitions of so many young people is the crime of the century. Now, more than ever, this nation needs new dreams and unfettered imaginations to create the values and technologies that should ensure an unlimited, prosperous future.

"You have been the victims of an illusion foisted on you by career politicians; the illusion that government can and will solve all of society's problems. Career politicians have sold you and your parents on the idea that confiscating your money to fund programs for 'the social good' will somehow make the hurt go away. You've been lied to as your heritage was purloined.

"With smoke and mirrors, the politicians have convinced us altruism is a noble goal. Altruism is based on the premise that man lives for the sake of others, that man's life and property are available for sacrifice to some nebulous higher causes, such as the common good, society, the needy, or the environment. I'm here to tell you the false doctrine of altruism is destroying this country.

"It is not now, nor will it ever be, the purpose of a free people to sacrifice their ambitions for a vague concept such as 'social good'. Each and every one of us must be responsible for our individual lives. We must have the freedom to succeed or fail without government interference. When government, through programs for the 'social good', removes the threat of failure, it also removes the promise of success. The only social good that matters is the freedom for each of us to grow and create as individuals.

"Government has done nothing to make this country great. Government does not create. It consumes. It was individuals, working to achieve a better life, who created the small businesses and large

corporations and developed the innovative technologies that once made America the envy of the world.

“Our government has stolen from you, through laws and regulations, the opportunity to succeed. It’s those restrictions that force businesses to close their doors or outsource your potential jobs to third world countries where the corporations are free to operate without excessive taxation and burdensome regulations.

“I’ve been told this is the smallest graduating class in the history of the University of Wisconsin. Your parents and I know the reason for declining enrollment. Spiraling inflation, caused by irresponsible government spending, has made higher education so expensive fewer and fewer families can afford to send their children to college.

“Perhaps you believe I’m painting an excessively dismal picture of your future possibilities. I assure you, I’m telling the truth. As a businessman I’ve seen the disastrous results of our economic situation. Young people with degrees are forced to manage fast food restaurants or clerk in a department store. I know you have higher expectations. I want you to enjoy the future you’ve earned.

“It is no consolation to realize you individually are not responsible for this nation’s economic disaster. However, you represent the future of America, and it is your responsibility, no, your duty, to change the course of history. Together, you and I can accomplish miracles.

“I am not here to preach a doctrine of doom and gloom, nor am I here to speak platitudes about an unrealistic future. Rather, I’m here to tell you it isn’t too late to take control of your lives and recapture the rainbows you’ve chased throughout school. There **is** a solution that will allow you to have that dream job, earn the wealth you deserve, and enjoy the happiness to which everyone is entitled.

“It won’t be easy. It’ll require hard work and dedication. But wouldn’t it be worth the effort if you could fulfill your dreams

and accomplish the objectives that motivated you to earn your degrees?

“Doctor Jorgenson told you I’m a candidate for President of the United States, which is true. However, I am not a politician seeking higher office for fame or glory or some other self-centered goal. I’ve chosen to enter the political arena because each of us must stand for what we believe. I refuse to allow the American dream to be stolen and destroyed by irresponsible politicians who are ruining your future for their own selfish agendas. Your hard work and sacrifices must not go unrewarded.

“As President, my goal is to rid the nation of career politicians and unnecessary bureaucrats, thereby eliminating the oppressive rules and regulations that have limited your opportunity for future fulfillment. When your creative genius, and that of the thousands of others like you, is free to soar you’ll drive the economy forward toward the future you deserve.

“It is time to break the chains that bind the American eagle.

“Market driven business, and only market driven business, can create jobs, opportunity, wealth, and raise the standard of living for everyone in this nation. The technology created by minds freed from limiting regulations can reclaim America’s greatness.

“Despite the illusions and deceptions of career politicians, government has never, and will never create wealth. Government consumes your resources, your freedom and your future. Promises of programs for the ‘social good’ are smoke and mirrors used to win your votes so the politicians will maintain their positions of power.

“I understand your frustration at feeling helpless to control the course of events destroying your options. You’ve been the unfortunate victims of this political chicanery, but it doesn’t have to continue.

“Before my first term is completed, there’ll be massive, beneficial changes in this country. I will not simply reduce the size of the Federal Government. I will perform major surgery. I need your

votes to make this happen, but even more than your votes, I require your help. It is not enough to cast a ballot and then sit back and allow things to continue as they always have. The future belongs to you, but only if you are willing to stand behind your beliefs and insist that you be allowed to control your own destiny. You deserve prosperity and happiness, but you have to roll up your sleeves and do the work necessary to earn them.

“I’m offering this generation of young people the opportunity to take control of your lives and become the person you always dreamed of becoming, the person you were meant to be.

“Deep in your hearts you know we have two choices—and two choices only. We can continue as we are now and watch this country crumble into catastrophic economic failure, or we can do what is necessary to change the system and the world.

“For the first time in a hundred years, you have the very real opportunity to make a genuine and permanent difference. The question is whether you have the strength, courage and stamina to make that difference.

“It’s your choice. You can face a dismal future without employment in the occupation of your choice, or you can take charge of your life and create a new and better America. You can take America back from the politicians and reap the rewards of wealth and happiness.

“I have confidence you’ll make the right decision. Your future happiness has been taken from you. Take it back and begin to live the life you deserve.”

For the longest moment in Ted’s life there was absolute silence in the arena, as if everyone were either stunned or disappointed. Then a single person in the tier of spectators began to clap. Suddenly the entire audience erupted into applause, slowly rising to their feet until Ted was being awarded a standing ovation. These young people and their families recognized the truth in his words and were responding even more enthusiastically than he’d hoped.

Before he could leave the speaker's platform, he was surrounded by a mob of gowned graduates.

"Mr. Hale," a young lady called. "I'm one of those grads who didn't get offered a job. What can I do to help you?"

"You can join my campaign and take charge of your life," Ted announced, reaching out to shake the sea of hands reaching toward him.

At that moment Ted knew for certain he would win the election. With an army of young, ambitious, and eager people behind him, he could not lose.

NINE

WILD BILL STANLEY, RELAXING in his shirt-sleeves, sipped a Manhattan, enjoying the quiet in the big, old house. Mildred had already retired for the evening and was probably reading one of the mindless, trashy novels she preferred. As long as she didn't pester him with her constant chatter, he didn't give a damn if she read all night, which she sometimes did. They no longer slept in the same room and had not done so for several years.

He finished his drink and debated whether he should pour another while he was waiting for Wally Compton. Just last week his personal physician had cautioned him that he was drinking too much. The damned doctor always found something to complain about. If it wasn't his drinking, it was his weight, his lack of exercise, or his high blood pressure. He had already prescribed a dozen different medications, which Wild Bill suspected didn't do one damned bit of good. Sleeping pills certainly had not alleviated his persistent insomnia. Experience had taught him only a sufficient number of drinks allowed him a fitful night's sleep.

Beginning to feel drowsy, he wondered where the hell Wally Compton was. On the phone he had claimed to have urgent

information and Wild Bill had reluctantly agreed to see him that evening. Now he regretted the decision, convinced whatever Wally had to say could undoubtedly have waited until morning.

When the soft tones of the door chimes echoed from the front hall, he glanced at the tall grandfather clock across from his desk. It was nearly eleven. He hoped this wouldn't take long. He had a busy day scheduled, beginning with an important morning caucus at nine.

"That'll be all for tonight, Madge," Wild Bill said when his housekeeper showed Wally into the study. "I'll let Mr. Compton out when we're finished."

"Thank you, sir. Good night, sir."

Madge pulled the door closed as Wally seated himself in an easy chair beside the massive oak desk. He eyed the Manhattan Wild Bill was holding, and licked his lips.

"What's so damned important it couldn't wait until office hours?" Wild Bill grumbled, not offering Wally a drink.

"I figured you'd want to see this before it's in tomorrow's Monitor," Wally replied, handing a sheet across the desk.

Wild Bill glanced at it and nearly tossed the paper aside before deciding it required closer scrutiny. The sheet was a photocopy of a Presidential poll taken by the Washington Monitor. In bold type across the top was the question; If the Presidential elections were held tomorrow, which candidate would you be likely to vote for?

The first Presidential poll of a campaign season was generally worthless. In a couple of months, when the field narrowed, a sampling of voters would have more meaning. Of the announced Democratic hopefuls, he figured John Kearney would drop out before the primaries, leaving Senator Samuel Pierce and Roger Hopwood in the running. At this date there were only two Republican candidates, Governor Richard Jessup and Congressman Gary Knowles, both of whom would likely stick it out until their party convention. The third party candidates, Theodore Winston Hale

of the American Party, John King on the Libertarian ticket, and George Winslow of the Green Party, were not likely to be factors.

As expected, the poll indicated his candidate, Senator Pierce, was leading the field. What interested him was the positioning of the other candidates.

It wasn't surprising that the leading Republican, Maine Governor Jessup was a distant third. Voter disgust with President MacDonald would obviously hurt all the Republican candidates. After eight years of an inept administration, it wasn't likely any Republican would pose a serious challenge to Senator Pierce.

The shocker was that Ted Hale placed second on the list, only two percentage points behind Pierce.

"Where did you get this?" Wild Bill said, carefully laying the paper on his desk.

"Jeff Novak of the Washington Monitor owes me a few favors and thought we'd like to know about the poll before everyone in Washington sees it."

"He was right." Stanley moved to the bar along the wall and refreshed his drink, still not offering refreshments to Wally. "This damned Hale may be more of a problem than I anticipated."

"It's still early," Wally suggested. "Hale's had the field to himself since the beginning of summer. He appeals to voters because he sounds sincere, but it can't last. His ideas are too radical for the majority of the country. I figure he'd have dropped out by now if he didn't have a ton of money behind him."

"Of course he's got money behind him, you idiot. He's one of the richest men in the world." Wild Bill sipped his drink as he felt the familiar throbbing at the back of his head, the precursor of a tension headache. "We're going to have to do something about Hale. It may be early, but with the support this poll gives him, he obviously isn't going to disappear any time soon."

Wally shrugged. "You're the political expert, but I still think he's too radical to maintain voter support."

“I haven’t gotten where I am by underestimating the enemy,” Wild Bill said. “I may have underrated Hale so far, but not any longer. He’s been getting a hell of a lot more press coverage than I thought possible for a third party candidate. I would have expected the newspapers and TV stations he owns to give him extensive coverage, but even the major media has been quoting him.”

“That reminds me,” Wally said digging into his briefcase. He handed a DVD across the desk. “You’ll find this interesting.”

“What the hell is it?” Wild Bill snarled, taking the disk and looking at both unlabeled sides.

“You asked me to get someone involved with Hale’s campaign so we could keep track of his activities,” Wally explained. “It wasn’t very difficult. Hale’s been speaking on college campuses and has thousands of kids setting up campaign headquarters all over the country. His technicians have installed computers and DVD burners in each headquarters so Hale can have interactive meetings with his volunteers on a regular basis. Every week he gives a little speech and then answers questions. My contact tells me those kids really love the sessions. It makes them feel like they know Hale personally and are an active part of his campaign.”

“Are you going to chatter forever, or are you going to tell me what’s on this DVD?”

“I was getting to that. The Washington campaign headquarters burns a copy of each session so it’s available for any volunteers who missed the live meeting. Our inside contact borrowed this DVD. It’s last week’s message.”

Wild Bill handed the disk back to Wally. “Put the damned thing in the player and let’s see what it’s like.”

The large screen TV suddenly came to life with a rendition of America The Beautiful. The background picture was an image of a crying eagle chained to a tree limb against the background of an American Flag. The slogan “Break the Chains That Bind the Eagle” scrolled across the screen. As the music faded, the picture dissolved

to Ted Hale seated in an easy chair, wearing a knit shirt and blue jeans, smiling into the camera.

Who's he trying to kid, Wild Bill thought. If the bastard had a hotdog and a bottle of beer, he'd look like a good old boy.

“Good morning,” Ted greeted his watchers. “Today I’d like to mention a specific example of the shoddy job the career politicians in Washington are doing in representing the people who elected them. The Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act of 2005 is an example of legislation being passed without debate and in the interests of the credit industry rather than the consumer it is supposed to protect. This bill was drafted by the credit industry and was designed with their welfare in mind.

“You may ask why Congress would even consider such legislation. It was primarily because the credit industry has poured millions into campaign funds which benefit the Senators and Representatives. Remember that I have mentioned in the past that re-election is more important to the career politicians than properly representing the people they are elected to serve.

“There is too much information regarding this poorly written legislation to cover in this session, so my staff will be faxing a detailed report to each of your locations. You may duplicate the report and give it to anyone who would be interested in the facts.

“Remember, we’re partners in this Presidential campaign as we work to reclaim our American birthright. I can’t do it without you.

“Unfortunately we’ll have a brief session this morning because I’m leaving shortly for a speech in Omaha. While in Nebraska, I intend to visit our Omaha campaign headquarters and have an opportunity to personally meet each of my volunteers. However, I can answer questions or listen to your comments for about half an hour.”

There was a brief pause with Ted smiling at the camera. Then the voice of an obviously young woman could be heard in the back-

ground. “Mr. Hale, this is Jane Bishop, Fort Worth, Texas. I have a question concerning prayer in public schools. Do you intend to. . .”

“Shut that damned thing off,” Wild Bill ordered. “Can you believe that sonofabitch is actually asking advice from a bunch of snotty nosed kids?”

“You have to give the devil his due,” Wally said. “It’s a great gimmick and he’s taking full advantage of his company’s technology. Those kids really believe they have input into policy decisions and they’re chomping at the bit to work for him. I stopped by his Washington headquarters yesterday and believe me those volunteers love Hale. They’ve bought into his message a hundred percent.”

“Maybe it’s time for us to expose the chinks in his armor.” Wild Bill looked at his nearly empty glass and considered pouring another drink. His thinking was already a little fuzzy around the edges, and he decided he needed a clear mind if he were going to deal with Hale. “What sort of dirt have you dug up that we can use against him?”

Wally made a gesture of frustration. “Nothing, not one damned thing.”

“What do you mean, nothing? You don’t build a Fortune 500 company and become one of the richest men in the world without stepping on toes or sticking it to someone.”

“Normally I’d agree with you, but this guy is so squeaky clean there isn’t even a mark on his driving record. A few of his competitors are pissed off because of his success, but I couldn’t find anything illegal, immoral, or even shady in any of his business dealings.”

“Well, dig deeper. What about his personal life? The voters apparently don’t give a shit about a candidate’s sex life, ala Bill Clinton, but a sex scandal is better than nothing. Does he drink too much, cheat on his wife, like little boys?”

“He doesn’t drink at all, and he isn’t married. His wife and two kids were killed when their private jet went down in the mountains.

Since then he's lived like a monk. As far as I can tell, he doesn't have a girlfriend, doesn't seduce little boys, and hasn't ever taken advantage of call girls. Hell, there might not even be any prostitutes where he lives in the wilds of Wisconsin." Wally shrugged. "Believe me, I've checked everything and he's never been involved in scandal of any kind."

"There has to be something," Wild Bill insisted. "Sexual discrimination in his hiring and firing practices. Not employing his quota of minorities, especially blacks. Are there any minorities in management positions in his company? If we get the civil rights bleeding hearts on his case, it would cost a ton of votes."

"I'm way ahead of you," Wally boasted. "I even sent a man to Wisconsin to see if Alliance Products ever contested an unemployment claim. Then my man tracked down former employees to see what they had to say about working for Hale. There were the usual bitches and gripes, but nothing you could hang your hat on. The Better Business Bureau had only a handful of complaints about Alliance Products, but nothing serious and nothing unresolved."

Wally rubbed his hands together and thought for a moment. "You know, there might be something in following up on the minority issue. Except for a few Indians, there aren't a lot of minorities in his part of Wisconsin. I'll bet most of his employees are lily white. Actually, suggestions of discrimination don't need any basis in fact. Even rumors are enough to generate bad press and get the bleeding heart liberals on their soapboxes."

"I'm surprised you haven't already looked into that," Wild Bill complained. "I want to discredit the bastard, even if we have to muddy the waters with gossip. Get Jeff Novak of the Monitor to write something about the racial issue. It won't take much to get the activists and liberals stirred up. While you're at it, drop a hint or two about campaign financing. The way he's spending money, there might even be truth to it. If we can keep Hale on the defensive, we'll destroy his credibility."

“Okay, boss, I’ll figure out something.”

“Just make sure you keep the Democrats out of it,” Wild Bill warned. “I don’t want anyone to suspect we’re engaged in a smear campaign.”

It was nearly midnight when Wally left, and Wild Bill knew there would be little sleep this night. He poured a fresh drink. Perhaps if he consumed enough alcohol he would be able to doze for a few hours.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. The headache had blossomed into a steady throbbing in his temples. Not even in his worst nightmares had he believed Ted Hale would prove to be such a nuisance. A man with no political expertise shouldn’t be able to gather the support he already had.

Maybe he was overreacting to Hale’s early showing. For his entire political life he had depended upon the gullibility and timidity of the American voter, and they had never let him down. Hale was a dynamic speaker promoting radical solutions that appealed to frightened people and their initial response was not unreasonable. As it got closer to Election Day, the voters always reacted true to form. The average citizen would be afraid of taking a chance on something new and different. Wild Bill was willing to bet his pension that when it came to actually casting their ballots, the public wouldn’t have the stomach for Hale’s agenda. Eliminating career politicians might sound good initially, but people were always slow to accept any sort of radical changes.

No, despite his early showing, Hale didn’t stand a chance of actually winning the election. Wild Bill was confident his original predictions were accurate. By the time the Democrats and Republicans nominated their candidates, Hale would be a long forgotten footnote.

However, there was no sense in taking chances. There were a lot of legislators, both Republican and Democrat, on Capitol Hill who felt just as threatened as he did. Beginning tomorrow he would start

feeling them out. If they all got together to saturate their districts with negative information, it would go a long way toward confusing the mass of ignorant voters. Hell, just their fear of losing all the government handouts should convince the majority that Hale was some sort of radical zealot.

As usual, the politician who sounded the most sincere in making extravagant promises of solving economic problems with an ever greater infusion of government money, would win. If Wild Bill had anything to say about it, and he certainly did, than Senator Samuel Pierce would be the next President.

As he was climbing the long stairway to his bedroom he made a decision. If a smear campaign didn't eliminate Hale as a contender, there were other, less subtle ways to rid the world of a nuisance. He intended to remain a Senator for the rest of his life, and no upstart businessman was going to threaten his political position with promises of Congressional term limits.

TEN

“GOOD MORNING, AGNES,” NICOLE said, bursting into Ted’s Alliance Products office as if she were a woman on a mission. Ted preferred to keep his campaign business separate from Alliance and held political meetings off premises, but Nicole felt she needed to address this problem immediately. “Do you know whether Ted has seen the front page editorial in the Washington Monitor?”

“Good morning, Nicole.” Agnes looked and sounded as if she had problems of her own. “I’m sure he has.”

“Does he have time to see me?” Nicole asked. “It’s important I speak to him immediately. We have to do something to nip these accusations in the bud.”

“He may not be in a good mood right now,” Agnes suggested. “He got another one of those letters this morning.”

“What letters?” Judging from Agnes’ expression, Nicole figured the correspondence was something more than routine.

“Death threats,” Agnes said, nearly on the verge of tears. “He’s been getting an average of two threats a week. He tries to act like they’re not important, but I know they frighten him.”

“Death threats?” Nicole was stunned. She knew there were plenty of crazy people who sent threats to public figures, but two death threats a week seemed excessive, even for a Presidential candidate. “Why haven’t I been told about this?”

“I shouldn’t have mentioned them,” Agnes said, looking embarrassed. “I’ve been instructed to keep quiet, but they scare me. I don’t know if running for President is worth Ted risking his life?”

“Telling me was the right thing, Agnes,” Nicole said in a soothing voice. “Maybe it’s time to do something about the letters. Is he in his office? Can I go in?”

“He has a conference in an hour, but I’m certain he’d want to see you.” Agnes pushed a button and spoke into the intercom. “Miss Riley is here.”

Ted’s voice came through the speaker. “Thank you, Agnes, send her in.”

Ted, who had been standing at the window, looking out over the small lake, turned toward Nicole and smiled. “Hello. What a pleasant surprise. You look great this morning.”

“Save the flattery,” Nicole said angrily. “Agnes just informed me you’ve been getting death threats. Why haven’t I been told about them?”

Ted looked embarrassed. “I couldn’t see any point in making a fuss over some cranks spouting off.”

“Death threats are always serious,” Nicole insisted. She felt like shaking Ted until he acknowledged the importance. “Agnes said you’ve received several letters. You can’t just assume they’re harmless.”

“Agnes worries too much,” Ted argued. “Sometimes she acts like she’s my mother.”

“Maybe you need someone to worry about you. Let me see the latest letter.”

“It isn’t important.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Nicole said, holding out her hand. “Let me see it.”

Ted reluctantly opened his top right desk drawer and took out a business-sized envelope, which he handed to Nicole.

The inexpensive self-seal envelope, which could have been purchased anywhere, had a Detroit postmark. There was no return address, and it had been hand addressed in ballpoint pen using awkward block letters as if a right-handed person had written with his left hand. The unsigned message had apparently been printed on a sheet of plain copy paper using an ink jet printer.

“I am not going to let you ruin this country with your radical, fascist ideology. If you don’t withdraw from the Presidential race, what happens will be your own fault. Dead men cannot be President.”

“What’ve you done about this?” Nicole demanded, feeling shocked and angered. “Have you notified the police?”

“The police won’t be able to do anything.” Ted shrugged, but there was a hint of concern in his eyes. “I’m pretty certain there isn’t any law against threatening letters.”

“Well, there should be.” She waved the letter at Ted. “People like this shouldn’t be allowed to walk the streets.”

“Let it go, Nicole. I don’t want to give the writer the satisfaction of taking the threat seriously.”

“I won’t let it go. Are all the letters from the same person?”

“I don’t think so. You can look at them if you’d like.” Ted reached into the drawer and handed over a small bundle.

Nicole took her time scanning the letters. Some of the envelopes had been addressed with a computer printer and some handwritten. All the postmarks were from different cities. Two of the letters had been hand printed with a ballpoint pen and the others had been composed on a computer using a variety of fonts. However, the

messages were essentially the same. If Ted didn't withdraw from the Presidential race, he would be killed.

"You can't just ignore these," Nicole insisted. "You have to do something. I agree the handwriting looks different and the postmarks are from all over the country, but what if the same person wrote all these letters? At least turn them over to the police for handwriting analysis."

"You can keep the letters and do whatever you decide best," Ted agreed. "I think you're making too much out of an innocuous situation. If the writers really wanted to harm me, I doubt whether they'd advertise their intentions."

"Ted, sometimes you're too damned naive. You're a public figure and your campaign promises are going to piss off a lot of people. What if one or more of these bastards are serious? If the cops can't do anything, then you should consider hiring bodyguards."

"Come on, Nicole, don't you think bodyguards would be a little ostentatious?"

"No I don't. Agnes isn't the only one worried about you. If you don't hire someone to protect you, I'll quit your campaign. I don't have any intention of being around when some crazy blasts you with a shotgun."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Damned right I am."

"Okay, I'll look into hiring a bodyguard," Ted conceded.

"Don't just look into it. Do it. And not just one bodyguard. You need a team that can watch you twenty-four hours a day."

Ted looked like a little boy caught stealing from the cookie jar. "Between you and Agnes, I don't stand a chance. All right, I'll hire some bodyguards." Ted sat in an easy chair and gestured for Nicole to sit in the other. "How about changing the subject? I assume you didn't come here to harangue me about threatening letters."

“No, I didn’t,” Nicole agreed. “Did you see the front page editorial about your financial misdeeds in today’s Washington Monitor? Is there any truth to the allegations?”

“Yes, I saw the article and no, there’s no truth to it. It’s like the article on Friday questioning my minority hiring practices. We’ve known all along the opposition would eventually begin slinging mud. There isn’t much I can do about newspaper editorials. If I refute the allegations, it’ll focus attention and give them credibility. People are going to believe I’m protesting too much, because where there’s smoke there’s fire.”

“If I’m going to be your Press Agent, you’ll have to consider my advice concerning the media.”

Ted raised his hands in a gesture of submission. “I always consider your advice. What do you suggest I do about the editorials?”

“The latest polls show you neck and neck with Senator Pierce, but when a candidate is proposing radical changes, he scares people. These damned editorials are making it worse by planting doubt in people’s minds. You can’t simply ignore them.”

“So, what should I do?” Ted asked.

“First, I need to issue a press release denying the allegations. If I’m going to refute the slander, you’ll have to give me facts I can work with. Then we should schedule another press conference so the media can grill you. You have to let the world know you don’t have anything to hide.”

“You’re the expert,” Ted acknowledged. “If you think I should go public with denials, I’ll give it serious consideration.” Ted glanced at his watch. “I have the weekly conference with my campaign workers in about five minutes. I had intended to talk about term limits, but I’ll scrap that and discuss the editorials. You can listen in and see whether it gives you enough information for your press release.”

“That’s a great place to start,” Nicole agreed.



The weekly session was broadcast from Alliance's R&D lab. Nicole was vaguely disappointed; having expected to see examples of tomorrow's technology in experimental stages, but the media room was simple, with a small video camera pointed at an easy chair. There were several TV monitors on a table where a young African-American technician sat adjusting a panel of buttons and dials.

"Are we ready yet, Andy?" Ted asked the technician.

"Just about, Ted. All the locations except Detroit have checked in. If they don't signal in the next minute, I suggest you go ahead anyway." A red light flashed momentarily on the panel. "No problem. Detroit just signed in. On the count of five, you can begin."

Ted sat in the easy chair and smiled at the camera as Andy counted. "Five, four, three, two, one, go."

"Good morning," Ted said, sounding completely relaxed. "Thank you for joining me today.

"I had intended to discuss a campaign issue, but Nicole Riley, my Press Agent, insisted I talk about allegations in the Washington Monitor's editorials. If you haven't yet heard the slander, at least you'll be prepared when it spreads to your location.

"Basically the editorials suggest I discriminate against minorities, and that I've been dipping into campaign funds for personal use.

"My first inclination was to ignore the charges so I wouldn't give them credibility. Protesting is generally a no win situation. If I ignore the charges, people will assume I can't deny them because they're true. If I go public with a denial, people will think I'm objecting too vigorously and there must be some truth behind the accusations. Such is life in politics. Tell whatever lies are necessary to destroy voter confidence in the candidate. However, it does seem a bit far-fetched to accuse me of financial misdealing.

"If my opponents want to engage in mud slinging, I can't prevent it, although I promise to always discuss the facts with you. Contrary to what the majority of politicians seem to think, American voters aren't stupid. They know their future is on the line in this election,

and aren't going to let a smear campaign divert them from doing what's best for themselves and their families.

"First I'd like to address the allegations about mismanagement of my campaign finances, because any intelligent person would realize the charge is ridiculous.

"I've never illegally siphoned money from Alliance Products, from the corporation's pension funds, or accepted illegal contributions. Although most of the money spent during this campaign has come from my personal bank account, more and more people are contributing time and money to our cause. I assure you every single dollar is accounted for and within the financing laws. My books are open at any time to legitimate inquires. Since I've got more money than I can ever spend, it seems a little asinine for the opposition to accuse me of stealing?

"The second charge is not so easily dismissed because it's an emotional issue, and contains a germ of truth. Basically the allegation is that I discriminate in my hiring practices. I'll tell you up front I'm not an advocate of affirmative action. I consider it an injustice to hire someone simply because he or she is a minority, or to deny employment to someone for the same reason. Affirmative action is another example of government trying to force business to hire based on irrelevant criteria.

"Hiring employees in order to meet some arbitrary quota based on race, color, or creed, is an abomination. I discriminate against unqualified individuals regardless of their heritage. Employment at Alliance Products is based on the ability to do the job, not on such nebulous criteria as race or color.

"There are approximately ninety employees in my corporate offices. Of these, twelve are African-American, five are Hispanic, eight are of Oriental descent, and we even have one Native American. If it's important to you, do the math and determine for yourselves whether the percentage of each minority falls within accepted guidelines.

“Some of my minority employees have attained supervisory status because they have earned their positions. I never have, and never will, promote, or deny promotion to anyone because of his or her minority status. This country became great because we took people from diverse cultures and assimilated them into American society. That’s the way I run Alliance Products. If a black man is more qualified than a white man, I’ll promote him to a place of authority, but I won’t promote him simply because of race or skin color. I leave you to decide if that’s discrimination.

“Unfortunately this session has gone on longer than normal, and I don’t have time to answer your questions today. However, it’s important for me to know how these smears are affecting your support for my campaign. Do you believe them? Are they causing you to have doubts? All of you are on the front lines and you’ll face the slurs and mud slinging on a daily basis. I value your opinions. Please let me know what you think.

“Thank you and God bless you.”

Ted took a deep breath when Andy signaled that the feed was cut off. “Thanks Andy.”

“No problem. I’ll be interested to hear what the volunteers have to say.”

“What’s your opinion, Andy?” Ted asked. “Should I make a statement or not?”

Andy rubbed his chin, obviously weighing his answer. “You’re right about being in a no win situation. Whether or not you answer the accusations there will always be people who want to believe you’re guilty. But so far during the campaign you’ve been honest and open, which is why so many people trust you. If I had to make the decision, I’d definitely advise you to go on your TV network and tell the people essentially what you’ve told your volunteers. Your supporters deserve to hear the truth in your own words.”

Ted nodded. “Thanks Andy. That sounds like good advice, and you’re probably right.”

When Nicole and Ted had returned to his office, she looked at him quizzically. “Are you going to give me the green light on the press release and the press conference?”

“We can hold off for a few hours, can’t we? If I know my volunteers I’m going to get plenty of feedback and I want to know what their consensus is. When you get right down to it, those volunteers are what will get me elected. They’re doing all the hard work on the streets, gathering signatures to get us on all those ballots, and they have to meet the voters face to face. I think they’ll have a better feel for the temper of the people than I do.”

“You know, Ted, you never cease to amaze me,” Nicole said. “I’ll bet there’s never been a political candidate who kept such close contact with his campaign workers or listened to input from the common people.”

“There’s no such thing as common people,” Ted protested. “Everyone is unique and important.”

“Well, your strategy seems to be working,” Nicole agreed.

“How long are you planning to stay in Wisconsin this trip?” Ted asked.

“Thought I’d catch a flight this afternoon.”

“Do you have to go back to New York today?”

“Not really,” Nicole conceded. Actually she would prefer to spend some quality time with Ted.

“Then how would you like to have dinner with me? You can either take the charter back to New York later tonight, or you can stay in the area and fly back tomorrow.”

“I’d love to have dinner,” Nicole agreed. “It’ll give me a chance to talk some sense to you about those threatening letters.”

“Then it’s a deal. I’m sure Agnes can find a desk for you to work at so you can do your press agent thing today.”

“I think the volunteers will want you to go public, so I’ll spend the afternoon working on a press release. I’ll also contact George Dugan and see about arranging a TV special.”

When Nicole settled at an empty desk in the accounting department, she found it difficult to concentrate. She felt the same nervousness she'd experienced in high school each time she'd dated a boy for the first time. But this wasn't a date. It was a business meeting and she'd had dinner with men from the media plenty of times without feeling butterflies in her stomach.

What's wrong with me, she thought. *Ted is my boss, not my newest boyfriend.*

Even as she mentally disavowed her feelings, she realized she didn't believe the denial. Perhaps she really did want to be romantically involved. Sharing some of Ted Hale's life was a pleasant thought.

ELEVEN

HIRING BODYGUARDS PROVED TO be more difficult than Ted had anticipated. Although there were a large number of security services throughout the country, only a handful of firms provided personal protection. The first two companies he contacted specialized in furnishing bodyguards for celebrities, and weren't interested in working for a political candidate who had received death threats. Henderson Security, a Denver based firm, and Wilson Protective Services of Los Angeles, agreed to submit proposals based on a crew of four men, providing twenty-four/seven security.

Their bids made Bill Essex flinch when he saw the bottom lines. Henderson Security's proposal was lowest at a thousand dollars a day, plus expenses, with an upfront retainer of twenty thousand.

"This is exorbitant," Bill complained. "Our Alliance Products' security costs less than seven grand a week. I'll bet if we did the research, we could hire competent personnel on our own for a hell of a lot less."

"I doubt it," Ted said. "We don't know anything about the qualifications for bodyguards or personal protection. Because of the death threats and a political candidate's public exposure we need

experienced people licensed to carry guns. Both of these services claim their personnel are ex-military or former cops, who're trained for this type of work."

"I know you're right, it's just that it seems like a lot of money," Bill agreed. "What expenses do you think we'd be responsible for?"

Ted shrugged. "Transportation, lodging, meals, that sort of thing. It's not like I can't afford the cost. Besides, the funds will be coming out of my personal account, and I'm sure it's tax deductible."

"Well, it's only for a couple of months," Bill conceded. "Ninety days before the election the Secret Service should provide security at taxpayer's expense."

"Good. Then you agree we should go with Henderson Security?"

"My first choice would be for you to give up this campaign, but since you're not going to do that, then I'll concede that you need the protection. I'll contact Henderson and make the final arrangements."



The first out of town junket with his new security detail was a trip to Washington D.C. for the press conference Nicole had arranged. Although the guards were friendly and for the most part stayed in the background, Ted felt as if he had given up some measure of independence. It would be a difficult adjustment having guards watching his every move, going ahead to open doors, and checking areas to make certain there were no visible threats.

Henderson Security wasn't happy about furnishing protection in a high crime area like Washington, but it was the ideal location for a press conference. There was always a permanent press corps in Washington, but during the campaign season the number of media people had grown to include representatives from every electronic and print news source in the world. Fortunately Nicole had arranged the conference at the Willard Hotel on Pennsylvania

Avenue, only seven miles from Reagan National airport, so public exposure would be limited.

When Ted and his security reached their fifth floor rooms at the Willard, he waited in the hallway while Chuck Cranston and Josh Williams did a quick survey of his suite to make certain no intruders were hiding under the bed. Jerry Feldman and Hank Bishop roamed the corridors checking the locations of stairways and fire exits.

“All clear, Mr. Hale,” Chuck announced. “Josh will be on duty in the hallway. What’s your itinerary for this afternoon?”

“I’m going to shower, shave, change clothes, and then meet Nicole Riley in the Round Robin Bar. We’ll go directly from there to the conference in the Franklin Pierce Room. Now that we’re safely in the hotel, you and your men can take the rest of the evening off.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Hale, we can’t do that. Josh and I will stick close to you all evening while Jerry and Hank check out the conference room and cocktail lounge. Don’t worry, we’ll be discreet and stay out of your way. If we do our job properly, you won’t even know we’re there.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to having guards around,” Ted complained. “I know you’re doing the job you were hired for, but I’m accustomed to having a little more privacy.”

When Ted was shaved and refreshed Chuck and Josh rode the elevator with him to the lobby. Jerry and Hank had preceded them and were mixing with the crowd in the Round Robin. Although the cocktail lounge was crowded, Ted quickly located Nicole sitting on a tall stool at the bar, talking with a short, skinny man.

“Hi, Ted,” Nicole called when she saw him weaving his way through the crowd. “I’d like you to meet Stanley Segal of Associated Press.”

“Pleased to meet you in person, Mr. Hale,” Stanley said, smiling brightly and offering his hand. “I was just trying to wheedle campaign secrets from the sexiest press agent in Washington.”

“Would you care to join us,” Ted offered, hoping the reporter would refuse. “Nicole and I were going to find a table and have a drink before the conference.”

“Thanks for the invitation, but I’m with a group. Just wanted to say hi to my favorite press agent.” Stanley took his drink and began walking away. “See you at the inquisition.”

There was an empty table in the corner of the lounge and Nicole hooked onto Ted’s arm as they squeezed past the other guests and settled in the comfortable chairs.

“Did you see the latest Washington Monitor poll?” Nicole asked when they were seated.

“I saw the one this morning, if that’s the latest,” Ted replied.

“You don’t seem very excited about moving ahead of the other candidates.”

Ted shrugged. “I’ve never been much of a believer in polls. The public changes its mind too often, and it doesn’t seem possible to interview a couple thousand people and predict voter opinions all over the country.”

“Whether you take polls seriously or not, I hope you realize no third party candidate has ever led this late into a Presidential campaign,” Nicole said. “I think that’s pretty impressive.”

“I suspect it’s probably due to the hard work of my volunteers and the skill of my press agent.” Ted toasted Nicole with his glass.

“You may be right about the skill of your press agent,” Nicole said, flashing perfect teeth in an exaggerated smile. “I think it’s more likely there are a lot of voters who agree with what you’re trying to do.”

Ted glanced at his watch. “Isn’t it time to head for the conference?”

“We’ve got a couple of minutes.” Nicole leaned closer. “Have you noticed those two big men who’ve been watching us ever since you came into the Round Robin?”

Ted turned and surveyed the crowd until he located Jerry and Hank leaning against the wall near the bar. “Those are my bodyguards,” he explained. “Between you and Agnes, I finally broke down and hired some. They’re probably watching to make sure you don’t attack me.”

“I’m glad to see you’re finally taking the threats seriously.”

“I still think the letters are from crackpots. I’ve really hired the bodyguards to protect me from all my adoring fans.”

“Then they probably aren’t going to be very busy,” Nicole teased, checking her wristwatch. “It’s time for Daniel to enter the lion’s den.”

The Franklin Pierce Room was crowded with reporters milling around or taking advantage of the refreshments provided along the near wall. Ted was pleasantly surprised so many media people were present. Attendance might be due to his position in the polls, but he suspected Nicole’s persuasiveness had something to do with it.

Following Nicole, he made his way to the podium, shaking hands with the few reporters he knew personally.

Nicole thumped one of the microphones to make certain it was live. “May I have your attention, please? If you’ll find seats, we can begin the conference.”

As the reporters moved to the folding chairs, Ted replaced Nicole at the lectern.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today. Recently there have been numerous articles and editorials alleging various types of misconduct during my campaign and in my business practices. My initial reaction was to ignore the slander, but my advisors insist I address the allegations and allow the media an opportunity to give me the third degree.”

Polite laughter rippled through the room.

“In a moment I’ll let you have your shot, but first I want to set the record straight. Most of you are veterans in covering political campaigns and know politicians have a tendency to cloud issues with innuendos and outright lies. Just this once, I’ll take the advice of my supporters and make a brief statement, but I have no intention of wasting time answering unfounded allegations on a daily basis.

“From this date forward I’m going to keep my mouth shut and not give rumors more credibility than they deserve. I’m going to depend on the responsible members of the press corps to check their sources and avoid becoming party to any sort of smear campaign.

“First there’s the question of discrimination against minorities. I frankly admit I’m prejudiced and do discriminate, but not based on a person’s race, color, or creed. I discriminate against people who lack the motivation to get off their backsides, take control of their lives, and work hard. It has never mattered to me whether someone is blond haired and blue eyed, or has dark skin, or talks with an accent, or worships in a synagogue. However, I have never, and will never, tolerate anyone hiding behind his or her heritage as an excuse for a lack of ambition. Ultimately what matters is whether a person is willing to create values for themselves and their families. I have minorities working at Alliance Products, not because they’re minorities, but because they’re intelligent, capable employees.

“I’ve also been accused of mishandling corporate and campaign funds. Anyone who knows my financial situation must realize it’s ridiculous to believe I’d ever be desperate enough to steal money for whatever reason. Most of this campaign has been financed from my personal bank account, and I’m not sure it’s possible to steal my own money.”

Another ripple of polite laughter swept the room.

“Now that I’ve explained where I stand, I open the floor to your questions. You may ask anything you want, but I sincerely hope

you'll focus on the important issues of the campaign and not on personal slander."

"Henry Walton, *Washington Monitor*. I can understand why someone as wealthy as you wouldn't need to steal from your company, but are you saying you've never taken money that didn't belong to you?"

Ted did an exaggerated grimace. "I was hoping I could avoid revealing my sordid past, but obviously I'll have to make a complete confession. When I was a youngster working as stock boy in the local supermarket, I found a five dollar bill in the parking lot, and put it into my pocket."

"I've done that myself," Walton agreed. "However, as one of the world's richest men, what would you do if you found that five dollar bill today?"

"I'd probably put it in my pocket again. Old habits die hard."

Once again, polite laughter rippled through the room. Ted felt encouraged that at least for the moment none of the reporters seemed antagonistic.

"Sam Brown, the *Chicago Tribune*. I've been covering politicians for more years than I care to remember, and it's been my experience candidates say what they believe people want to hear. I'm not suggesting you're intentionally misleading the voters, but you're asking us to accept your word concerning the allegations. Would you be willing to have your personal finances and your corporate employment records examined in order to prove your claims of innocence?"

"Believe me, Sam, the IRS has looked over my finances very carefully more than once. I agree they weren't looking at where the money came from, but were more interested in how much they were going to receive in tax revenue. Although there's nothing to hide, I certainly don't intend to have everyone and his brother going through my finances. However, if one of your media organizations would hire a competent accounting firm to check my

records, and if their findings were shared among all of you, I'd have no objection.

“Opening my corporate employment records might be a violation of employee privacy. However, again, representatives of the media are welcome to contact my personnel department and grill the manager. She knows more about what she can divulge than I do.”

“Stan Friedman, CNN. In your campaign, you've been promising a higher standard of living, plentiful jobs, and lots of money for everyone. That sounds good, but where is this affluence coming from? Not out of your own pocket, I'm sure.”

“I've got a lot of money, but not enough to make everyone wealthy. As I've said more than once, when businesses are freed from the limitations of unnecessary laws and regulations, the creative geniuses in this country will create new technologies that will improve standards of living and drive down costs, just as computer technology has driven down the cost of computers.

“If you had told me twenty years ago that the federal budget would exceed one trillion dollars, I'd have laughed in your face. I didn't know there was that much money in the world. If eliminating frivolous spending would cut that inflated budget in half, there'd be half a trillion dollars not taxed away from the American people. I don't know about you, but I think five hundred billion dollars would go a long way toward invigorating the economy. Additional consumer spending will fuel businesses to create jobs and provide a higher standard of living for everyone. As businesses prosper and costs are slashed, each of those dollars rescued from the coffers of big government would buy more and thereby create additional wealth. As it is now, government consumes our resources. Reduced government spending will create a spiral of prosperity that would feed upon itself and constantly generate more abundance for everyone.”

“Bill Thompson, UPI. Changing the subject...”

“Thank God,” Ted joked.

Thompson waited for the polite laughter to subside. “I have a problem with your plan to decriminalize drugs. I agree that without a profit motive, there would be less incentive for drug dealers to push their products. However with inexpensive addictive drugs available on the open market, don’t you believe people will become addicted even without drug dealers enticing them?”

“First of all, there are already easily obtained legal addictive substances on the market. Alcohol is legal, and although most of us use it responsibly, alcoholism is certainly a fact of life. Tobacco is legal, and there are plenty of people addicted to nicotine in spite of the health hazards. Human nature being what it is, some people, even supposedly intelligent people, will make poor decisions in regard to drugs just as poor choices are made today in regard to alcohol and tobacco. However, I firmly believe it should be a basic right for free people to make decisions that affect their lives. Unfortunately some will make poor decisions. I do not believe it is a function of government to protect us from ourselves.

“The majority of addicted people turned to alcohol and drugs in order to escape the stress of poverty, the pressures of everyday life, and the fears engendered by the failing economy. When a renewed economy provides people with a high standard of living and enough money to enjoy life without unnecessary stresses, there’ll be less incentive to escape reality by using addictive substances. Even my most severe critics will admit our current war against drugs hasn’t worked.

“I have time for one more question.”

“Jeff Novak, Washington Monitor. So far a major focus of your campaign has been term limits for Senators and Congressmen. That may sound good, but you have to realize it’s impractical. Even you have to agree this country needs the experience and expertise of men and women who have worked long and hard to understand

the issues. Constantly putting inexperienced people in Washington would create massive confusion.”

Ted shook his head. “You’ve touched on the heart of my campaign and I totally disagree with your assessment. There are several very good reasons why we need fresh blood in the halls of Congress; men and women who truly represent the people of this country.

“First, career politicians’ one major focus is being re-elected. They are only interested in what works to gain votes, not on what is right or wrong. When Congress is in session, at every opportunity legislators leave the Capitol grounds to take care of the urgent business of raising money for their re-elections. On average it costs over \$2 million to win a House seat and more than \$10 million to get elected to the Senate—price tags that have turned members into fund-raisers with precious little time for legislating.

“As to the experience and expertise you credit to the career politicians, it simply doesn’t exist in the majority of cases. Rather than studying the issues, Congressmen and Senators assemble to ratify decisions made by other people, such as party leadership or lobbyists or members of their staffs. Bills are often drafted by special interests and then passed with no hearings or serious debate.

“We’d be here all day if I began to itemize the billions of dollars in pork-barrel spending on projects that are slipped into legislation—projects that waste taxpayer money and are virtually never weighed against the nation’s real priorities.

“Because Congressmen and Senators are primarily focused on self interest and fund raising, the legislature is firmly divided along partisan lines which make it nearly impossible to compromise on important issues. Is it any wonder that critical issues don’t have a prayer of being resolved, or even seriously considered?

“No, we need representatives in Congress who are focused on the work of the people, not on re-election.

“I appreciate all of your insightful questions,” Ted concluded, gathering his notes. “Thank you for coming today and listening to what I have to say.”

He shook a few hands on his way through the crowd of reporters, but avoided answering any more questions. Chuck and Josh stepped behind him and blocked the reporters who were attempting to follow into the lobby.

“Can I buy you dinner?” Ted asked, taking Nicole by the arm. “I’ve been told the Willard Room has great food.”

“How can I refuse such a gallant request? I’m starving.”

The maitre d’ seated them at a back table. Ted’s bodyguards assumed discreet positions where they could observe the entrances to the restaurant. Ted ordered the turf ‘n surf while Nicole selected the baked halibut. When they had finished, they both refused dessert as they sat back and sipped the excellent coffee.

“That was a wonderful meal,” Ted said. “If I keep eating all this fancy food, I’m going to gain a hundred pounds. You know, sometimes I wish I could just grab a bite at a fast food place. Even a pizza would be a change. I suppose those days will be gone until this whole thing is over.”

“I’m sure if the President wants a hamburger or a pizza they’ll either make them in the White House kitchen or send out,” Nicole suggested.

“I’ll let you know if that’s true once I’m in the Oval Office.”

“You know, I think I could relax with a quiet after dinner drink,” Nicole said. “But I’m not up to facing a horde of noisy people. All the reporters will be gathered in the Round Robin, and I doubt if there’s a quiet cocktail lounge around here.”

“I don’t know my way around Washington,” Ted said. “Where would you recommend?”

“Maybe we could go to your room and order from room service,” Nicole suggested. “Besides, I’d like to see what accommodations a Presidential candidate rates.”

Ted laughed. “Well, it certainly isn’t the Presidential Suite. And I think you’ll be safe enough with my bodyguards on duty.”

“Are you telling me those guys stay in the same room?”

“They have the adjoining room, but if you scream, they’ll come running. No doubt they’d welcome the opportunity to rescue a damsel in distress.”

“Well, as long as I’ll be safe, I would like that drink.”

Ted left a generous tip, paid the bill with a credit card, and moved toward the elevators. They rode to the fifth floor in silence because all four members of the security detail were in the elevator with them. Then he and Nicole waited in the hallway while Chuck quickly checked the room for intruders.

“All clear,” Chuck said, holding the door for them. “Jerry will be on duty in the hallway. Have a pleasant evening.”

“Thanks,” Ted acknowledged, closing the door and slipping on the security chain. “I’ll call room service,” he said. “What did you want?”

“Maybe the drink can wait until later.” Nicole reached for his hand and lifted it to her breast. Rising on tiptoes, she kissed a startled Ted on the lips.

“What about the bodyguards?” Ted said, passionately returning the kiss, feeling himself becoming aroused.

“Let them find their own girls.” Nicole reached up and switched off the light.

TWELVE

THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF Ted's candidacy was fast approaching and the hard summer push aimed at the November election was beginning. He was exhausted from the never ending round of speeches and public appearances that had melded into a blur. It seemed he had been constantly on the go, maintaining a pace that would have killed a less vigorous man. He had spent more time in his chartered jets than he did at home, sometimes being scheduled for two or three appearances in a single day.

Even though he sustained his weekly schedule of closed circuit chats with his supporters, he had also managed to visit the majority of his campaign headquarters, shaking hands with thousands of volunteers. It had always given him a much needed lift to experience the enthusiasm these young people exhibited.

The Presidential race had changed drastically since that first speech at the Media Dinner. The Republican and Democratic state primaries had whittled the field of a dozen candidates down to three Democrats and two Republican challengers, who were still seeking the nomination at their party conventions.

Senators and Congressmen running for re-election crisscrossed their districts working hard to discredit Ted's agenda, particularly opposing term limits for congressmen. So far their efforts apparently had little impact on the vast majority of disgruntled voters. Although the various polls shifted on an almost daily basis, Ted was generally either leading or only slightly behind the favored Democratic candidate, Senator Samuel Pierce.

Not only was he receiving tremendous voter support, but his campaign also began attracting people who wanted to jump on the bandwagon and run for political office under the American Party banner. Candidates for State legislatures sprang up in nearly every State, in addition to a dozen men and four women who wanted to run for the United States Congress on his ticket. Suddenly the American Party was no longer a one-candidate organization. He should have realized his ideals, embodied in the American Party, would take on a life of their own, but the support of dedicated people completely overwhelmed him.

Although he felt obligated to give whatever assistance he could to those who rallied to his flag, it did add to his burden. He took time from his own busy schedule to meet individually with each of the American Party candidates. It was important that he only give financial and moral support to those candidates who were committed to his goal of eliminating unnecessary government. His organization of volunteers would go a long way toward gathering votes for those people, and the last thing he needed was candidates looking to make politics their career.

The burden of monitoring the day to day business of a national political campaign had quickly become more than he could handle. Since none of his associates wanted the responsibility, he had asked John to hire someone to act as American Party Chairman and coordinate activities of the burgeoning organization. After going through a field of possible choices, John hired Ralph Watson who had worked with both political parties most of his adult life and had

previously been one of the chief forces behind President MacDonald's two successful campaigns.

Even with the strain of keeping a finger on the American Party's daily operations off his shoulders, it had become impossible to meet his political obligations and also devote adequate time to running Alliance Products. In the back of his mind he had always known he would one day have to relinquish control, but it was still a gut wrenching decision. Watching Alliance grow from the early days until it was an international corporation, had been like raising a child.

However, when it became obvious he could not continue, he promoted Bill Essex to Chief Executive Officer, with John Stuart and Dave Herbertson assuming the offices of President and Vice President respectively. As majority stockholder, he maintained his position as Chairman of the Board.

Ted was beginning to feel the strain of constantly being on the road, sleeping in a succession of hotel rooms, or catching naps on chartered planes, eating poorly prepared banquet meals, or living on sandwiches and coffee. When he began showing the effects of sleep deprivation, Nicole insisted he take a week off to recuperate.

Nicole had become the most important person in his life. Whenever fatigue or unfair criticism began to make him question whether he had the stamina to continue she was there to give the encouragement he needed. She frequently traveled with him and their relationship had blossomed. Although Ann would always occupy a special place in his heart, he cherished the closeness he and Nicole shared. At first he had felt guilty, as if he were somehow being unfaithful to Ann, but he knew Ann would have understood his need for a woman in his life and have approved of his choice.

On the Saturday morning before the Democratic convention, he met at his home with Nicole, Ralph Watson, and John Stuart, who still handled campaign promotions.

“Damn it, Ted, you look like you’ve been running marathons,” John said. “I’ll bet you’ve lost twenty pounds since you began this campaign.”

“More like ten pounds,” Ted admitted. “For a guy who likes to go fishing on weekends, and stay out of the spotlight, this campaign has been a long, hard road.”

“But you’ve been doing a hell of a job,” Ralph said. “With the election just a bit more than four months away, you’re still either first or second in every poll I’ve seen.”

“We can give Nicole credit for that,” Ted said. “She’s done a great job with the media. And the three of you have been fantastic getting the volunteers charged up. I wouldn’t be where I am right now without your hard work. But this final push will demand our best effort.”

“We’ve planned on that,” John said. The others nodded their agreement.

“I haven’t been giving enough attention to the details,” Ted acknowledged. “How are we doing about getting on the ballots in all the States?”

“Your strategy of having the students circulate petitions has really worked,” Ralph said. “Our computer hook-ups and your weekly talks have kept their enthusiasm at a high level. At the latest count, you’ll be on the ballot in forty-five states. So far we lack Hawaii, Alaska, Oregon, Utah, South Carolina and the District of Columbia.”

“We may have to forego Alaska, Hawaii, and DC,” Ted suggested. “DC is owned by the politicians and I don’t think we stand a chance of winning there. With time at a premium, Alaska and Hawaii are just too far away for personal campaigning.”

“It would be a mistake to dismiss Alaska and Hawaii,” Ralph said. “We have volunteers in both States, and already have nearly enough signatures to get on their ballots. The same goes for Oregon, Utah, and South Carolina. I’m not an expert, but I don’t believe any third party candidate has ever been on the ballots in all fifty States.”

“A point of interest,” Nicole injected. “Because of budget woes only ten States held primaries this year and voter turnout was the lowest in history.”

“That is interesting,” Ted agreed. “Do you think voter turnout will have any impact on the November elections?”

“Could be,” Nicole said. “The general consensus is that people are fed up with the economic situation and feel helpless. They stayed away from the polls because they no longer trust career politicians and don’t believe their votes will change anything.”

“It could also mean there are fewer voters committed to either the Democrats or Republicans,” Ralph suggested. “If there’s a large turnout in November, it might mean people are waiting to vote for you.”

“That’s certainly a positive thought,” Ted agreed. “Let’s hope you’re right.”

“Assuming the volunteers get you on all the ballots,” Nicole asked, “what’s your strategy for converting that into electoral votes?”

Ted shrugged. “I suppose I’ll keep doing what’s been working and stump the States where the polls indicate we have the best chance,” Ted said.

“I don’t think that’s good enough,” Ralph argued. “Less than half the States — the twenty-one with double-digit electoral votes — account for three hundred fifty-two votes. We can’t afford to lose very many of them. We can probably concede California to the Democrats because such a large percentage of the population is on the public dole and they’re going to be looking for more government handouts.”

“Do you have a suggestion?” Ted asked.

“We need to determine which of the big States we’re apt to lose and concentrate on winning enough smaller States to replace the lost votes,” Nicole said. “Remember, it’s all a number’s game.”

“I don’t think we should underestimate the efforts of the volunteers,” Ralph said. “If you keep them pumped up with your weekly

conferences, I really believe they're going to make it possible for us to carry some States you're ready to write off."

Ted leaned back in his chair and yawned. "Nicole and I have already discussed the next point on the agenda. We both agree that in order to be considered a viable and serious contender we have to do whatever is necessary to be included in the Presidential Debates."

"I hadn't even thought about the Debates, but you're right. It would be great exposure, if we can make it happen," John agreed. "But I didn't think the Commission allowed third party candidates to participate."

"Having a third party candidate in the Debates isn't unprecedented," Ralph said. "Back in the ninety's Ross Periot managed it, and didn't have anywhere near the support you have."

"The major parties allowed Periot to participate because they didn't think he was a serious challenger," Nicole argued. "They won't feel that way about Ted, but we have to try. I know some people with influence on the Commission. If they don't welcome us aboard, we should be able to stir enough media pressure to force them to accept you."

"There's one more item on the agenda," Ted said. "Judging from the primary results, Senator Pierce will be a shoe-in for the Democratic nomination, and Governor Jessup will be the Republican candidate. The major item at the Democratic Convention in Atlanta next week, and the Republican Convention in San Francisco in three weeks, will be the announcement of the respective Vice Presidential candidates.

"It's time for me to choose a running mate so I can make my announcement before the conventions are history. I need your input. We have to have a strong Vice Presidential candidate, who believes in my platform and can contribute to the campaign."

“Do you know anyone named Hardy?” John asked, selecting a chocolate chip cookie from the plate on the table, eating half of it in one bite.

Ted frowned for a minute. “Not that I can think of. Why do you ask?”

“I just thought it would be great if your running mate was a person named Hardy. Then you could have a slogan like ‘Make America Hale and Hardy’.”

“That would be just wonderful, John,” Nicole said, jabbing her elbow into his ribs. “I’m sure that slogan would put us over the top.”

“Vice Presidential candidates don’t usually excite very many voters,” Ralph suggested. “I doubt whether anyone we select will have a substantial impact on the election results, but I agree we need a candidate who’ll be an asset to the ticket.”

“Have you considered a conservative politician?” Nicole suggested. “Maybe there’s someone from one of the States with lots of electoral votes who’s had national exposure and is willing to support your platform. I agree the VP candidate isn’t going to garner a lot of votes, but since you were virtually unknown before the campaign, it won’t help to have a running mate no one has ever heard of.”

“That’s tempting,” Ted agreed, “but a politician would have mixed loyalties. He’d back my platform as long as I’m around to control him, but if he becomes President, he might bow to political pressure and revert to his old party line.”

“If your criterion is someone who’ll stick to your agenda even if you aren’t there to enforce it, I’d say you’re going to be limited to a businessperson who’s willing to set their business aside for four years,” Ralph said. “That doesn’t leave a very big field to choose from. A lot of the really well-known businessmen are in bed with the politicians and depend on government regulations to obtain favorable treatment. You might get one of them to agree to run, but I don’t think you could count on him to stick with the program.”

“You’d need someone who’s a first generation entrepreneur and has built a thriving business in spite of government interference,” John suggested.

“Does your running mate have to be a man?” Nicole asked.

“Not necessarily,” Ted said. “I don’t have a problem with a female Vice President.”

“Okay then, what about someone like Ruth Maier?” Nicole suggested. “She certainly meets the criteria of a first generation entrepreneur who’s built her cosmetic business from the ground floor and currently has about thirty percent of the market. She would appeal to a lot of women voters.”

“Ruth would be a great choice, except for two things,” Ralph said. “Most people don’t vote for a Presidential ticket because of the VP candidate, but they just might withhold their vote if something about the second spot on the ticket worries them. Even with women’s lib I don’t know if the country is ready for the possibility of a woman President. Eight years ago Henderson was considered the favorite to win the election until he chose that female senator from New York as his running mate. MacDonald buried him under a Republican landslide during the election, and a lot of experts think having a woman VP killed the Democrats.”

“Ruth is also Jewish, and too many people are prejudiced,” John said. “As a third party candidate with a radical platform, it won’t help your chances to select a Jewish female as a running mate.”

“Okay,” Nicole said, holding up her hands in defeat. “It was just a thought. But I hear a lot of negative input here. Don’t you think we should start looking for positives? If a female is a poor choice, do any of you have a better suggestion?”

“I’ve given this a lot of thought,” Ted said. “If he’s willing to accept the position, I thought Henry Abbot would be a good choice.”

“You may have something there,” John agreed.

Henry had been one of the founding members of Alliance Products and had contributed to their success until he decided to

move out on his own. Henry had always been focused on computer hardware and wanted to develop his own line of machines. Ted hadn't considered Henry's venture a conflict of interests, and had even helped finance the beginnings of Abbot Computers. Ted still held a large block of stock in Abbot's corporation.

Henry had taken the Omega chip a step further in the evolution of hardware, and when he had developed the first wireless monitor his business had grown astronomically. Twenty-five percent of the homes in America owned an Abbot computer.

"Have you talked with him?" John asked.

"Not yet. I wanted to get your input first."

"I've never met the man," Nicole said. "If you all like him as a VP choice, I'll go along with you."

"Does anyone have a problem with Henry?" Ted asked.

John raised his hand.

"I only have one problem," he said. "We're almost out of cookies."

THIRTEEN

THE ABBOT COMPUTERS CORPORATE headquarters was nestled in the foothills of the Los Pinos Mountains about fifty miles south of Albuquerque, New Mexico. From the air it was obvious the complex was isolated, with no other buildings for several miles in any direction. The mountain slopes were forested in pines, but the lowlands consisted mostly of the scrub brush common to arid climates. There was a rugged beauty to the landscape and it was easy to understand why Henry had chosen this location in the shadow of the majestic mountains.

When Ted's chartered jet touched down on the private landing strip scraped from the brush only a couple hundred yards from the red tile roofed headquarters buildings, a small bus took him and his bodyguards to the reception area. Henry Abbot was waiting near the front desk and greeted Ted with an enthusiastic bear hug.

"Well, it's about time you condescended to visit me out here in the boondocks," Henry said. He was a big man, taller than Ted by several inches, and carrying about thirty pounds more weight. Dressed in cowboy boots, jeans, a western cut shirt, and a belt with a huge buckle, he looked more like a rodeo cowboy than a computer geek.

"You're looking good," Ted said. "All this easy western living must agree with you. You've put on a few extra pounds, haven't you?"

"Just a few." Henry laughed. "On the other hand, you look like you've lost some weight. It's like Gina says, bachelors never eat right."

"How are Gina and the kids?" Ted asked. Henry's wife was a Wisconsin girl who had met Henry when they both worked at Alliance Products.

"Gina's as beautiful as ever and the kids are growing like weeds. We're expecting you to stay for dinner this evening and won't accept any excuses." Henry took Ted by the arm and propelled him toward the bank of elevators. "Let's go up to my office where we can kick back and tell each other lies about how well we're doing."

Henry's office was a large, airy room decorated in western fashion, complete with a large Frederick Remington print and an impressive set of polished steer horns. The sofa and easy chairs were done in cowhide. The large picture windows opened onto a magnificent view of the mountains.

"That's a pretty impressive scene," Ted said. "Maybe I made a mistake keeping my operation in Wisconsin."

"Not too late to move down here to God's country." Henry settled onto one of the easy chairs. "After all these years, I don't imagine you came here to admire our scenery. Couldn't be a campaign contribution since Bill Essex already hit me up for a sizable donation. So, what's on your mind?"

Ted walked to the window and gazed at the mountains for several moments. "What do you think of my decision to run for President?"

"Interesting, to say the least," Henry said. "We've been friends a long time and I know you've never been interested in politics, so my first thought was that you'd lost your ever lovin' mind. You're not the type to throw away money making a fool of yourself, but I didn't think you had a chance in hell of winning. Now I'm not so

sure. The latest polls indicate you're doing better than any of the major candidates. You might even have a chance of pulling it off."

"So you don't think it's completely crazy any more?"

Henry shrugged, but didn't answer.

"Do you agree the Federal Government has to be radically downsized if we're ever going to recover from this economic slide?" Ted asked.

"Of course. New Mexico is a small state, and without a strong economy, everyone out here is going to suffer." Henry stood and began pacing. "If you're looking for my vote, you've got it. But somehow I don't think you came here for that."

"You're right. Henry, I want you to be my running mate on the American Party ticket."

Henry halted in mid-stride and looked at Ted as if he had just proposed robbing a bank. "You've gotta be kidding. Not only do I have a business to run, I don't know a damned thing about politics, or what a Vice President is supposed to do."

Ted laughed. "You remember the old joke about the woman who had two sons. One went to sea and the other became Vice President. Neither was ever heard from again. As far as I know, the Vice President's only job is to be there if something happens to the President. Henry, I need you because I know you'd be able to fill my shoes."

"Damn, I need a drink." Henry walked over to the bar and poured himself a brandy. "Do you want something?"

"Not right now."

Henry sipped the drink and looked out at the mountains for several minutes. "Ted, I owe you big time," he finally said. "If you hadn't financed me when I started this business, I would've folded during that first year. But getting involved in politics is way out of my league. Besides being a fish out of water, if I agreed to be on the ticket and by some strange twist of fate we won, it'd mean being

away from my business for at least four years. I don't know whether I could afford that."

"Just look around, Henry. You know the career politicians are destroying this country. It won't be long before they get their claws in the computer industry, and it'll affect both of our businesses. Even if they don't bury us under regulations, with the way the economy is being torn apart, pretty soon people won't have enough money to buy our products. Something needs to be done before it's too late. I've gone out on a limb to start the ball rolling. Now I need you to join my team."

"Why me?" Henry argued. "There must be plenty of others who'd be more valuable to your ticket. I mean, how many electoral votes does New Mexico have? Five? What would I do about Abbot Computers? If I walk away, it'll fold up and then my family wouldn't have anything."

"You know Ed Anderson could run things while you're gone. You agree something has to be done to turn the economy around. If we can make it happen, you'll come back to a company that's stronger than ever."

"I don't know, Ted." Henry began pacing nervously. "You're asking a hell of a lot. I need time to think about it and I'll have to talk it over with Gina and the kids. Give me a couple of days."

"We don't have a lot of time," Ted said. "I want to announce my running mate before the Democratic and Republican Conventions."

"No one's ever asked me to run for political office before," Henry said, shaking his head as if to clear his thoughts. "If Gina and the kids don't want me to get involved, who else do you have in mind?"

"If you turn me down, it's back to the drawing board. Right now you're my first and only choice."

"Damn, I was afraid of that." Henry put down his empty glass. "Why don't we head over to the house? We can discuss this during

dinner and you can make your pitch to Gina. Maybe she'd like to live in Washington for a few years."

"It's only fair to mention that being my running mate could cause a lot a personal grief for you and your family."

"What sort of grief are you talking about?"

"There are a lot of very powerful people, particularly Senators and Congressmen who don't want me elected. Since I've begun my campaign, I had the IRS come in twice and audit both my personal and business accounts. I mean they went over everything with a fine tooth comb. Then people from the Federal Employment Practices have been going over my employment records and grilling my employees. I have no idea what may happen next, but I suspect that as the race gets closer to the election, those interests that don't want me in the White House will come up with some other harassment tactics. The same thing could happen to you."

"I'll be damned," Henry said, shaking his head. "I know you're proposing some pretty radical things, but I never thought our government would be using Gestapo tactics."

"No one may attempt to harass you," Ted suggested. "They may figure that I'm the one they need to drive off, but I thought you should be aware of what you may face."

"That really pisses me off. I was seriously thinking about turning you down, but I'll be damned if I'll let a bunch of politicians scare me off. Gina's going to feel the same way. You can give us all the sordid details over dinner, but right now I think you've gotten yourself a Vice Presidential candidate."

FOURTEEN

SENATOR WILD BILL STANLEY swallowed two aspirins, leaned back in his desk chair, closed his eyes, and wished the nagging headache would go away. This was a day spawned in Hell. Nothing was going right.

It had started early in the morning when he backed out of the garage and discovered his right front tire was flat. He had to wait nearly an hour for AAA's service vehicle to change the tire, which had caused him to miss the caucus he'd scheduled with the Democratic Senators from Arkansas and Texas.

Because he missed the caucus and wasn't able to twist arms the way he'd intended, both Senators had switched their votes and the bill to raise gasoline taxes two cents a gallon had been defeated. He didn't give a damn about the gas tax, but he had promised the lobbyist for the New York contractors union that he would push through an amendment authorizing a ten million dollar appropriation for a new rest stop on the Interstate between Syracuse and Utica. That damned flat tire was going to cost him nearly a hundred thousand dollars unless he could get the amendment attached to the bill authorizing an extension of veteran's benefits.

The last straw had been seeing the New York Times and Washington Monitor Presidential polls. Even with the congressional candidates from both parties doing everything possible to muddy the waters the Presidential race was going to Hell in a hand basket. With the election only two months away, Theodore Winston Hale was still leading Senator Pierce by five percentage points. That damned upstart had become an itch Wild Bill couldn't scratch. Not only was Hale leading in every poll, but the Republican candidate was beginning to echo some of the same radical ideas. Wild Bill knew Governor Jessup was desperate for anything that would improve his position and salvage the election. With so many voters listening to Hale's rhetoric, Jessup had undoubtedly decided there was nothing to lose by agreeing to downsize government.

Actually, the more the thought about it, the more Wild Bill agreed with Jessup's strategy. If he had been so far behind, he would have done the same thing. Just because he promised less government and more financial restraint, didn't mean Jessup was serious about radical reform. The Governor was a long time politician and must have realized voters were too stupid to remember campaign promises. Hell, Jessup's promises might even pick up some votes at the last moment — from voters leery of casting their ballots for a third party candidate. It wouldn't be enough to put the Republican in the White House, but any votes Jessup gained would be votes taken away from Hale, which definitely benefited the Democratic candidate.

According to the polls, the election would be between the Democrats, who were advocating a massive influx of federal money to salvage the faltering economy, and Hale, who was preaching that once the federal bureaucracy was reduced and emasculated, market driven business would solve the nation's problems. It had been a long time since the public could choose between candidates with such divergent philosophies.

The aspirins were beginning to do their job and his headache had subsided to a faint throbbing. He walked over to the bar and poured a snifter of straight bourbon.

As he allowed a sip of the smooth liquor to trickle down his throat, he decided the problem was academic. With Hale leading Pierce thirty-nine percent to thirty-four, and Jessup trailing at twenty-seven percent, it was unlikely any of the candidates were going to garner the necessary 270 electoral votes. If the election was thrown into the House of Representatives, Hale's campaign for term limits wasn't expected to win the hearts and votes of many congressmen. Since the Democrats owned the House, Pierce would almost certainly be elected.

Even though he knew his calculations were correct, in the back of his mind Wild Bill felt a tinge of anxiety. Voters were so damned fickle he wasn't completely comfortable trusting them to decide such an important election. There were too many what ifs. What if there was a record turnout by people who hadn't voted in Presidential elections for years, but were attracted by Hale's radical ideas? What if, by some quirk, Hale won the necessary two hundred seventy electoral votes? What if, as President, Hale had enough support to convene a Constitutional Convention?

Wild Bill rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the headache returning, more painful than before. He poured another bourbon and flopped in his desk chair.

Only a year ago, he had believed his Senate seat untouchable and he could die in office if that were his decision. Now nothing was certain, and it was all Hale's fault. A privately commissioned poll among his own constituents had found his popularity at an all time low. In his last two elections, there had been no meaningful competition, but according to the survey, if he were up for re-election this year, regardless of the opponent, the race would be too close for comfort.

The thought of losing his Senate seat frightened Wild Bill. It wasn't a question of money, or finding a job in this hopeless economy. He had stashed away millions, and his monthly government pension would be more than most people earned in an entire year. However, he knew it would be impossible to endure the loss of power and prestige. Influential people seeking his advice on matters of national and international importance were the elixir that made life exciting. Even ordinary citizens on the street gave him a respect that verged on awe. Life wouldn't be worth living if he suddenly became just another ex-Senator.

I'll be damned if I'll let that sonofabitch dictate my career, Wild Bill thought, reaching over and buzzing Sylvia.

When she came into his office, he immediately felt better. Watching her hip-swinging walk, thinking of the firm young body under her tight skirt and sweater, always aroused him. Normally Wild Bill quickly tired of his conquests, but he had been enjoying his affair with Sylvia for over five months, and still found her exciting. There were times when it was almost impossible to keep his hands off her.

He was well aware that she granted sexual favors for her own purposes, and they had nothing to do with love. The thought didn't bother him. Hell, he was using her to gratify his own lusts, and he had enough money to afford a few trinkets.

As usual, when she came around the desk and stood beside his chair, he put his hand on her buttocks and gently squeezed.

"I'm going to be taking the yacht out again this weekend," he said. "If you bring along something sexy, maybe we'll cruise over to Virginia Beach for shopping."

"You know I love your boat," Sylvia said, rubbing provocatively against him. "Will you buy me the necklace we saw last time?"

"Of course. You know when you're good to me, I'm good to you." He squeezed her buttock again before drawing away. "But

right now I have to tend to business. Is Wally Compton in the office this morning?"

"He went down to the cafeteria about half an hour ago," she said, sounding professional. Although Sylvia wasn't the swiftest runner in the race, she did know how to keep business and pleasure separate.

"Send someone to get him," he growled. "I want him in this office within the next ten minutes."

Five minutes later Wally entered, waving a sheet of paper and breathing hard, as if he had jogged up the stairs. Wild Bill loved it when his summons brought people running.

"You have to see this," Wally said, handing the sheet to the Senator. "It just came over the wire."

Wild Bill glanced at the press release from the Commission on Presidential Debates. He had no interest whatsoever in the Commission's announcement that, because of low voter turnout in the Primaries, there would only be one debate this year at the University of Miami Convocation Center. What attracted his attention was the statement that Theodore Winston Hale had been invited to participate with Senator Samuel Pierce and Governor Richard Jessup.

He slammed the release onto his desk. "Damn it, damn it, damn it. How the hell did this happen?"

"The Commission is nonpartisan," Wally said. "We don't have any control over what they do."

"Don't you think I know that," Wild Bill growled. "Someone should have put pressure on them anyway. The last thing we need is Hale getting this kind of national publicity just before the election."

"It's too late to do anything about it now," Wally explained. "They won't withdraw the invitation after announcing it to all the wire services."

Wild Bill didn't say a word, just sitting with his elbows on the desk and his face buried in his hands. He felt like a man who had just been told his most dreaded fear had been realized.

"Maybe it's a good thing," Wally suggested. "Hale isn't a politician and both Pierce and Jessup are veterans. There's a good chance they'll make him look like a country bumpkin just off the turnip truck."

Wild Bill looked up, having regained his composure. "Wally, you're an idiot. Have you heard Hale speak, or have you seen one of his press conferences? The man can think on his feet, and has the same type of charisma that made Kennedy so damned popular. He attracts voters, and if he's allowed to debate Pierce and Jessup, he'll win a lot of supporters."

Wally shrugged. "Pierce and Jessup are both accomplished debaters. I doubt whether Hale can match them in a face-to-face appearance."

"With his good looks and sincere attitude, Hale comes across like the boy next door. Both Pierce and Jessup look like what they are, professional politicians. If Hale shows up for the debates he might win enough votes to keep the election out of the House of Representatives."

"Of course he'll show up," Wally said. "Even all his money can't buy the sort of publicity the Debates will give him for free."

"Publicity won't do him any good if he's out of the picture before the Debates," Wild Bill said, an idea crystallizing in his mind.

"Out of the picture?" Wally shook his head. "I don't like the way that sounds. You're going to have to spell out exactly what you mean."

"I mean it's time to get rid of Hale permanently," Wild Bill growled.

"Hold on," Wally protested. "I've done a lot of underhanded stuff in my day, but I draw the line at killing someone. You'll have to get another boy for that kind of work."

Wild Bill gave Wally a hard stare. "You'll do whatever I want you to do. If Hale is elected, we'll both be out of work. I have plenty of money to live in luxury the rest of my life. Do you?"

"I can get another job," Wally said. "Anything would be better than living with a murder on my conscience."

"Would it really? Do you think you'll be able to get a job with a prison record?" Wild Bill's face twisted into an evil smile. He suspected Wally had a pathological fear of being confined and had frequently used that phobia as leverage. It never ceased to amaze him how easily some people could be controlled and manipulated. "What would your tender conscience think if someone dropped a hint to the FBI about certain matters that occurred in South Carolina a few years ago?"

Wally's shoulders slumped in defeat. "You promised to never use that information."

"And I never will, as long as you do as you're told." Wild Bill adjusted his tone to sound sympathetic. "I don't expect you to pull the trigger yourself. You have underworld connections who would gladly do the job for the right price."

"If I can find someone, it would cost plenty," Wally suggested. "Wasting a Presidential candidate is nearly as bad as assassinating the President. They still have TV documentaries about Bob Kennedy's assassination and the guy who iced him."

"That's irrelevant. The only reason Kennedy's murder is such a big deal is because his brother was killed while in office," Wild Bill said. "No one is going to mourn Hale. He should be an easy target with only a few rent-a-cops protecting him."

"What about the Secret Service?" Wally argued. "They protect Presidential candidates, and they certainly aren't rent-a-cops."

"The Secret Service isn't involved yet," Wild Bill promised. "They're authorized to protect major Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates within a hundred twenty days of a Presidential election, but because Hale's a third party candidate, Secretary

Harris has been dragging his feet about assigning agents. After the Debates, Hale will certainly be considered a major candidate and Harris won't have any choice except to offer protection. If we're going to eliminate Hale, now is the best time."

Wally shook his head. "This whole thing is a bad idea. If Hale gets iced the FBI will conduct a major investigation. They'll know it's a political hit and we could be in serious trouble."

For a moment Wild Bill leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. Then his face brightened and he reached for the press release on his desk.

"Not if it looks like a gangland hit," he said, excitement in his voice. "The Debate is being held at the University of Miami Convocation Center in Coral Gables. That's absolutely perfect."

"What are you driving at?" Wally asked, looking confused.

"South Florida is the drug capital of the country," Wild Bill said, trying to remain patient with Wally's stupidity. "The area is crawling with Columbians and every other type of drug dealing scum. Hale's been making a big issue out of decriminalizing drugs. The cartels must realize if he's elected and follows through on his promises, they'll lose their number one source of revenue."

Wally's glum countenance began to brighten. "I think I see where this is heading. If we let the cartels know where Hale will be staying, and point them in the right direction, they'll take care of the problem for us."

"Exactly," Wild Bill said triumphantly. "Can you arrange that? Do you have contacts in the cartels?"

Wally rubbed his chin in thought. "I've never dealt drugs, but I know some people who have connections. It might take a little prodding, but yeah, I can make it happen."

"Then get someone on Hale's itinerary so we know where he'll be staying and when he'll arrive in Florida. Just make certain none of this can be traced back to me."

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it,” Wally said, a devious look in his eyes. “But there’ll be a price.”

Wild Bill waved a hand, as if to dismiss the matter. “Money isn’t a problem. I’ll pay whatever they want.”

“It isn’t about money this time. Since it’s in their best interests, I figure the cartels will be happy to do the job for nothing.” Wally looked like he had just won the lottery. “I have a personal price for arranging the hit.”

“Are you trying to pressure me?” Wild Bill’s eyes narrowed and he looked sinister.

Wally smiled. “Not at all. I’m just making a bargain. If I go out on a limb to arrange this, I should get something in return. When this Hale business is finished, I want every bit of the evidence you’re holding concerning that scam in South Carolina.”

Wild Bill felt so relieved, he nearly laughed out loud. Giving Wally the papers he wanted was a cheap price to pay for getting rid of Hale. “You do this for me and I’ll not only give you those papers,” he promised, “I’ll do better than that. I’ll make certain any other evidence disappears forever.”

“Then we have a deal,” Wally said. “As of this minute you can consider Hale a footnote in the history books.”

“Just make damned certain it’s done right. I don’t want any repercussions coming back to haunt me.”

“Trust me,” Wally said, standing to leave. “Ted Hale will be the victim of a drug related crime.”

When Wally left, Wild Bill leaned back in his chair and smiled. Maybe this wasn’t such a bad day after all. His physical headache was gone, and in the very near future his political headache would be history.

He poured another drink and silently toasted the success of his plan.

Perhaps now he could concentrate on important things, like spending the weekend with Sylvia.

FIFTEEN

TED PUSHED HIS PLATE aside and took a cautious sip of steaming coffee.

“Is something wrong with the steak?” Nicole asked. “You’ve hardly eaten anything.”

“The steak is delicious,” Ted said. “I suppose I don’t have much of an appetite tonight.”

“Are your nerves getting the better of you?” Nicole asked, picking at her own food.

Ted stood and walked to the suite’s window where he could look down on a small group gathered in front of the hotel. Several carried signs, one of which was a poster of the chained eagle.

Since Ted and Nicole had arrived at the Omni Colonnade in Coral Gables, everywhere they went small groups of enthusiastic supporters swarmed around them. The hotel staff did an admirable job of keeping the lobby clear and Ted’s bodyguards held the well-wishers at a distance, but outside their room it was like being on exhibition. Since relaxed dining in a restaurant was out of the question, they avoided the crowds by taking advantage of room service.

“Yeah, I guess I’m a little nervous,” Ted replied. “I haven’t been involved in a debate since High School, and I’m pretty certain this will be considerably different.”

“Just think of it as a group press conference,” Nicole suggested. “You’ve certainly had enough of those during this campaign. You’ve become very good at handling questions.”

“Pierce and Jessup are career politicians and have been in the spotlight for years. As the new guy on the block I’m worried that I’ll come across like a stupid country bumpkin and ruin everything we’ve accomplished.”

“You’ll do just fine.” Nicole joined Ted at the window and he slipped his arm around her waist.

“I’ll be glad when this is behind me,” he said. “At least there’s only one Debate so I won’t have to go through it again.”

“Even if Pierce and Jessup are professional debaters, I’d say they’re the ones in the pressure cooker.” Nicole leaned her head on his shoulder. “If they’re not letter perfect, with convincing arguments, they’ll lose more ground. Under that sort of strain, even career politicians are apt to make mistakes. If you relax and go with the flow, you’ll do just fine.”

“That’s easier said than done.” Ted glanced at his watch for the hundredth time in the last hour. “We should probably get started. The Commission suggested I arrive an hour early and I’m not sure how long it’ll take to drive to the Convocation Center. I’d rather be early than late.”

“Let me powder my nose one last time and I’ll be ready.”

“I’ll ring Chuck’s room and tell him we’ll be leaving,” Ted said, reaching for the phone.

“That reminds me,” Nicole said. “When are you going to get Secret Service protection? Pierce and Jessup already have details assigned to them. I thought the major candidates were supposed to be protected during the three months before an election.”

“John has been trying to get action from the Treasury Department for a couple of weeks, but they keep putting us off. No sense in worrying about it now. If Pierce and Jessup have protection, there’ll be enough Secret Service people at the Convocation Center to keep an eye on me.”

As a concession to Chuck Cranston, head of his security guard, Ted agreed to ride down in the service elevator, but refused to sneak through the kitchen to the rear of the hotel.

“Chuck, I’m in the middle of a campaign and a lot of supporters are waiting to shake hands,” Ted argued. “One of the functions of a candidate is to be visible to the voters.”

“Mr. Hale, you hired us to protect you,” Chuck said. “Exposing yourself to a crowd here in Miami is an unnecessary risk. There are plenty of scumbags in this part of Florida who aren’t happy with your drug policy. Could be some of those people waiting out front aren’t your friends.”

“That might be, but I don’t intend to hide for the rest of the campaign,” Ted argued. “My supporters came to see me, and I won’t disappoint them.”

“It’s against my advice, Mr. Hale, but if you insist, at least do it my way.”

“Whatever you suggest, as long as we go out the front entrance,” Ted stated firmly.

Chuck thought about it for a minute. “We’ll wait in the lobby until Josh brings the car around. Jerry will go first to open the limo doors while I walk at your side. Hank will stay beside Miss Riley. When we step out of the front door, don’t dawdle. You can touch hands with people in the crowd as we move across the sidewalk, but don’t stop to chat with anyone. I want you safely in the car with a minimum delay. Okay?”

“Don’t you think that’s a little melodramatic?” Ted suspected he was being unreasonable, but the whole security rigmarole went against his nature. It would get worse if he was elected. Maybe

it would be best to simply accept the necessary precautions he couldn't control.

"No, sir, I don't. It's always better to be safe than sorry."

"You're right," Ted agreed. "I'm just a little edgy tonight."

When Josh pulled the rented limousine up to the curb Chuck waved to one of the Coral Gables cops, signaling that Ted was coming out. The dozen officers began pushing the spectators back, opening a ten-foot wide path from the doorway to the street.

Jerry moved quickly to the sedan and opened the back door as he scanned the crowd and the area around the front of the hotel. Shouting people pushed against the restraining police, reaching out toward Ted.

He had just touched right hands with a jubilant young man, and was waving left handed to people further back in the crowd, when Chuck suddenly pushed him from behind.

"Go! Go! Go!"

Without ceremony, Chuck sent Ted sprawling face down into the back seat of the car. A moment later Nicole landed on top of him.

"Damn it, Chuck, what the hell are you doing?" Ted shouted, trying to squirm from under Nicole.

As Josh floored the accelerator and peeled rubber away from the curb the open back door slammed against Ted's foot, smashing his ankle against the door frame, sending a sharp pain shooting up his leg.

The rear and side windows dissolved in a spray of shattered glass. The sound, like ripping fabric, was not one any combat hardened ex-Marine was likely to ever forget. One or more automatic weapons were rocking the limo with a hail of impacting bullets. Ted tried to roll so he could shield Nicole with his body, but it was nearly impossible to move.

Before the limo had barely gotten underway the gunfire shredded both front tires, sending the vehicle into a skid. Nicole

and Ted were thrown against the front seat as the sedan jumped the curb and smashed into a light pole.

Ted untangled from Nicole and pulled himself up until he could glance over the front seat. Josh was slumped against the steering wheel, the back of his head a mass of blood and gore. Ted reached across the seat and grabbed the pistol from Josh's shoulder holster.

"Keep down," he shouted at Nicole as he pushed open the rear door and crouched by the back deck of the limo, using it as a pistol rest. The gunfire had stopped and there were not any visible hostile targets. He took a deep breath to steady himself and began trembling as the adrenaline rush subsided.

When he tried to stand, his left leg buckled and he nearly groaned from the pain in his ankle. Chuck and Hank were running toward the wrecked car, their guns drawn. Less than half a block away panicked spectators were screaming, stumbling over each other as they sought the safety of the hotel lobby.

Supporting himself against the car, he helped Nicole from the back seat. She looked dazed and he could feel her trembling. "Are you hurt?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her. "It's okay now. It's over."

Nicole was regaining her composure. "I was frightened half to death. I've never been shot at before."

As they moved away from the car she apparently noticed Ted favoring his left leg. "Were you hurt?"

"I twisted my ankle," he said, "but I don't think it's serious."

"What about Josh?" she asked, turning toward the front of the car.

"Don't look," Ted cautioned, moving her away. "He's dead."

"Are either of you injured?" Chuck asked breathlessly.

"We're okay," Ted said. "Josh didn't make it."

Before Chuck could respond, two police cars screeched to a halt in the middle of the street, followed moments later by an ambulance.

A plain clothed detective trotted over. "Mr. Hale, are you all right? Can you tell me what happened?"

"I don't have any idea." Ted felt the familiar overall weakness that had always followed a life threatening situation. Rather than answering questions, he really wanted to sit down. "I was face down on the back seat with bullets flying all over the place. I didn't see a damned thing."

The detective held out his hand for the pistol Ted was still gripping tightly. "You won't need a weapon any longer."

Ted ejected the clip, pulled back the slide, clearing the chamber and left the slide locked back as he handed Josh's pistol to the detective.

The detective slipped the automatic and clip into his pocket. "Who the hell are you?" he asked, turning to confront Chuck, whose pistol had already disappeared into his shoulder holster.

"Chuck is head of my security," Ted explained.

"Since you're head of security, maybe you can tell me what happened."

"When we came out of the hotel, there were three gunmen waiting for us." Chuck pointed down the street. "One was directly across from the hotel, one was off to the side there, and the other was on the sidewalk behind the crowd. Jerry, my point man, must have seen them pull weapons because he shouted a warning. I pushed Mr. Hale and Miss Riley into the car and returned fire. The assailants had automatic weapons — my guess would be Uzi's — and were spraying lead everywhere. I don't know who killed the shooters. It could have been me, or one of my men, or one of the Coral Gables cops. Anyway, before the bastards could reload, we dropped all three. I think there were casualties in the crowd."

The detective nodded. "I have more ambulances on the way. It's going to be a few minutes before we know the extent of the damage." He held out his hand to Chuck. "I'll need your weapon for a ballistics check."

Chuck cleared his pistol and handed it to the officer.

"Do you have any idea who might have wanted to kill Mr. Hale?"

Chuck shrugged. "The gunmen looked Hispanic. The way they were spraying bullets, they obviously weren't concerned about collateral damage. My guess would be that they were members of some drug cartel. Mr. Hale has gotten death threats and I don't think the cartels are happy about his plan to decriminalize drugs. Maybe they wanted to make certain he isn't elected."

"Sounds reasonable," the detective agreed. "We'll know more after we ID the shooters."

Two paramedics pulled open the driver's door and quickly examined Josh. They lifted the body from the car and placed it on a gurney. Another paramedic approached Ted and began picking small bits of glass from the cuts on his face.

"Don't put any tinted antiseptic on those cuts," Nicole warned. "Mr. Hale has to be on TV later this evening."

The paramedic nodded. "I've got something here that won't show."

"I may have a broken ankle," Ted complained. "It hurts like hell."

A gurney appeared and Ted sat on it as the paramedic checked the ankle. "We won't know for sure without x-rays, but it looks like a bad sprain. You're going to have one hell of a bruise. We'll take you to the hospital and have a doctor look at it."

Chuck turned to the detective. "Look, Detective...uh..."

"Harris. Sergeant Harris."

“Sergeant Harris, Mr. Hale is scheduled to be at the Presidential Debates. Could you give him a ride? It doesn’t look like our car is going anywhere.”

“There’ve been people injured here,” Ted complained. “Those gunmen were trying to get me. I’m not going to a damned Debate and just leave everything this way.”

“You have to go,” Nicole insisted. “We’ve worked too hard to miss this opportunity. You know damned well they won’t postpone the Debate just because you aren’t there.”

“I can’t leave,” Ted protested. “Maybe I can help in some way.”

“The police have everything under control,” Chuck said. “You’d just be in the way. You can do these people and everyone else a lot more good by winning the election.”

“You really should go to emergency and have that ankle examined,” the paramedic suggested.

Ted made a quick decision. “Can you tape the ankle for now if I promise to stop at the hospital after the Debate?”

“If you insist,” the paramedic conceded, “but stay off that leg as much as possible. You’re welcome to use the cane I have in the ambulance.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. Please take Miss Riley to the emergency ward and have her thoroughly checked.”

“Not on your life,” Nicole said. “I’m not hurt, and the only way you could keep me away from this Debate is to lock me up somewhere.”

“If you don’t mind Mr. Hale, I’d like to stay and check on my men,” Chuck said. “Josh is dead, but Jerry was hit and I don’t know how seriously. You should be safe with the police driving you. I’ll catch up as soon as I’m done here.”

“Damn it, I feel responsible for all this. Make sure everyone gets the best medical treatment possible.” Ted turned to the police officer. “Sergeant Harris, can you provide that ride to the Convocation Center?”

“Just make certain you’ll be available in case I have questions.” Harris turned to a uniformed officer. “Wilson, please drive Mr. Hale wherever he wants to go.”

Ted and Nicole settled in the back of a police unit. As the cop began weaving through the evening traffic a report on the shootings came through the radio. Jerry Feldman had been hit twice and was in critical condition. Two of the Coral Gables police officers had been injured, but not seriously. One of the bystanders had been killed, and seven had been wounded in the hail of gunfire. All three of the gunmen were dead.

Ted slapped his hand on his knee. “Damnit, I’m responsible for those dead people. If I’d listened to Chuck and gone out the service entrance, none of this would have happened.”

“Don’t take it personally, Mr. Hale,” the police officer said over his shoulder. “From what I saw it looked like someone was very serious about killing you. If that was the case, they probably also had people waiting behind the hotel.”

“Look at this.” Nicole held out her hand. “I’m trembling like a leaf. I was so frightened. I’ve never been shot at before.”

“You should have gone to the hospital to be examined,” Ted said.

“I’m okay,” Nicole insisted. “It’ll just take a while for my nerves to settle.”

Sergeant Harris must have radioed ahead because a squad of Coral Gables officers was on duty at the rear entrance, keeping the reporters away from the vehicle when Ted arrived. Klieg lights glared as TV cameras focused and questions were shouted.

Leaning heavily on the cane, with additional support from Nicole, Ted pushed past the media and entered the Convocation Center. The back stage area was buzzing with excitement as he was assisted to a dressing room where he could wash. The TV station covering the Debate had broadcast a bulletin about the assassi-

nation attempt and a technician had put the announcement on the speakers so everyone in the auditorium knew what had happened.

Mr. Sturtevant, the Commission representative, hurried up, wringing his hands. "How terrible, Mr. Hale. I hope you're not injured. We'd understand if you decided not to contribute to the program this evening."

"I'm not injured," Ted said. "I fully intend to participate. Whoever tried to kill me isn't going to win."

"It's still half an hour before the Debate begins," Sturtevant said, appearing genuinely distressed, hovering like a mother hen over her chicks as he led Ted and Nicole to a dressing room. "If you would like, we can provide a chair for you to sit on during the evening."

"Are Senator Pierce and Governor Jessup going to be sitting?" Ted asked.

"They'll be standing at their podiums," Sturtevant acknowledged.

"In that case, I'll get along without a chair."

There was a soft knock on the dressing room door. The man who entered flashed his Secret Service identification.

"Mr. Hale, my name is Wayne Billings, head of Senator Pierce's security detail. After what's happened tonight, the Secret Service will be providing protection for you. Your personal detail should be here before the Debate is over."

"Where the hell were you when the bullets were flying," Nicole demanded.

"It wasn't his fault," Ted soothed. "Sorry about that, Agent Billings. Miss Riley is a bit distraught at the moment."

Billings nodded, like he was used to being held responsible. "No offense. I understand."

"Mr. Hale, I have to see to the other participants," Sturtevant said, looking even more nervous. "If there's anything I can get you, please don't hesitate to call."

While Ted was using the lavatory to wash the blood from his face and straighten his clothes, he called out to Nicole. “I’m really glad the Secret Service is going to take over my protection. This may very well have been a drug cartel hit, but I have a feeling there’s more to it than that.”

“What do you mean?” Nicole asked.

“I don’t know,” Ted said. “It’s just a gut reaction. The drug cartels may have provided the gunmen, but what if the hit were politically motivated?”

“I think you’re being paranoid,” Nicole said. “You’ve made a lot of political enemies, but I doubt whether any of them would resort to violence.”

“You’re probably right,” Ted conceded. “I’m just afraid if this wasn’t a drug cartel protecting their empire, it may only be the beginning.”

SIXTEEN

“DAMN,” TED COMPLAINED. “Whether I use the cane or a wheelchair, I’m going to look like a cripple.”

During the short walk from the dressing room to the stage, he had attempted to walk without the cane, but when he put his full weight on the ankle, the pain was excruciating.

“Don’t worry about it,” Nicole counseled. “Everyone in the TV audience knows about the assassination attempt. An obvious limp and those scratches on your forehead are going to win a lot of sympathy.”

Ted nodded. “In my one and only national appearance, I’d have preferred not to look like an invalid.”

Senator Pierce and Governor Jessup, who were already standing in the wings, shook his hand and expressed concerns, but neither sounded sincere. Obviously they both realized the lingering evidence of the assassination attempt gave Ted a decided advantage in influencing the audience.

William Alistair, host of a PBS weekly news program, who was moderating the Debate, was already on stage, a makeup assistant carefully applying powder to Alistair’s shiny nose. The TV director

began counting off the seconds to live coverage as the assistant hurried off stage.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” Alistair intoned at the director’s signal. “Welcome to the University of Miami Convocation Center in beautiful Coral Gables, Florida, where we welcome you to this year’s Presidential Debate. The Commission on Presidential Debates, a nonprofit, nonpartisan corporation, sponsors this annual event so you, the voters, may have an opportunity to evaluate the candidates based on their responses to important campaign issues.

“Tonight’s questions were submitted by a panel of political commentators from the major TV networks.

“Since we have three participants this evening the normal format will be altered slightly so that we don’t overrun our time period. Each candidate will be limited to a seven-minute response and there will be no rebuttal period. A green light will warn when there are thirty seconds remaining to complete the answer, a yellow light indicates fifteen seconds remaining, and a red light will announce five seconds remaining. The flashing red light will signal the end of the allotted time. If a candidate continues talking, a buzzer will sound to remind him he must relinquish the floor.

“The live audience here in the hall will remain absolutely silent during the Debate, except for now, when they join me in welcoming Senator Samuel Pierce, the Democratic nominee.”

Pierce stepped briskly across the stage, waving to the crowd, and assuming a stance behind the lectern on the far side of the platform.

Alistair allowed a brief moment for polite applause, and then extended his hand toward the wings. “Give a warm welcome to the Republican nominee, Governor Richard Jessup of Maine.”

As Jessup moved to his lectern, he waved both arms like a prizefighter entering the ring.

“And finally, please welcome the American Party candidate, Theodore Winston Hale.”

“Good luck,” Nicole whispered. “Don’t forget to grimace as you limp out.”

Ted hobbled the few steps to his lectern, the audience erupting in thunderous applause that required several seconds for Alistair to quiet.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Alistair said when the ovation finally subsided. “Before we commence, on behalf of the Commission and millions of TV viewers, I extend our appreciation to Mr. Hale for having the courage to appear tonight after the tragedy of an assassination attempt. We’re all grateful you weren’t seriously injured.”

Although the attention embarrassed him, Ted acknowledged the enthusiastic applause, which became a standing ovation. Senator Pierce and Governor Jessup smiled broadly and also applauded, but with considerably less enthusiasm than the audience.

After allowing the tribute to continue for a minute, Alistair signaled for quiet and continued his monologue. “We have a lot of ground to cover this evening, so we’ll begin immediately. As determined by a coin toss, the first question goes to Senator Pierce. You have seven minutes for your response, Senator.

“Do you attribute the rising costs of health care to the medical profession itself, or do you think the problem lies elsewhere? And what specific proposals do you have to tackle this problem?”

Pierce nodded toward the moderator. “Thank you, Mr. Alistair. All across America more people have talked to me about their health care problems than anything else. So let me try to answer you in this way. We spend thirty percent more of our income on health care than any nation on earth, and yet we insure fewer people. We have at least sixty-five million Americans without any insurance at all; people who’ve lost their jobs, or have been forced to close their businesses. Every month, for the last four years, a hundred thousand Americans have lost their insurance coverage. That’s unacceptable.

“So if you analyze the situation, you come up with the following conclusions. Number one, in my judgment, we need to drastically simplify the basic health insurance practices in this country. In order for health insurance to be comprehensive for everybody, employers must cover the premiums for their employees and government must cover costs for the unemployed.

“Number two, I think we have to specifically require the insurance companies to make some significant changes in the way they rate people in the big community pools. We have to tell the pharmaceutical companies they can’t keep raising drug prices at three times the rate of inflation. I believe we have to take on medical fraud in order to lower insurance premiums.

“The Federal Government must make health care a number one priority by funding a system of primary and preventive clinics in our inner cities and rural areas so all people can have access to affordable health care.

“The key is to control the cost and maintain the quality. To do that we need a system of managed competition where everyone is covered in big groups and can choose doctors and hospitals, while maintaining an incentive to control costs. And I think there has to be a national commission of health care providers and health care consumers that set ceilings to keep costs in line with inflation and population growth.

“This is very important. It’s a big human problem and a devastating economic problem for America. Within the first one hundred days of my administration I’m going to send Congress a comprehensive plan that will accomplish these goals without raising taxes on our already overburdened citizens.”

Alistair pushed the buzzer. “Sorry to interrupt you Senator, but your time is up. Governor Jessup, your thoughts on health care reform.”

“Thank you,” Jessup said. “Part of the question is whether the health care profession was to blame, and I don’t believe that’s true.

However, malpractice lawsuits are breaking the system. Litigation costs between \$20-25 billion a year and I want to see those outrageous claims capped. Sometimes Doctors don't dare deliver babies because they're afraid somebody's going to sue them. People are afraid to help accident victims along the highway because of the fear some lawyer is going to come along and start a big lawsuit. So you can't blame the practitioners for the health problem.

"My program is to keep the government as far out of it as possible, make insurance available to the poorest of the poor through vouchers. For the higher income brackets, we must offer tax credits, and get on about the business of pooling insurance. The large corporations can buy insurance cheaper than Mom and Pop stores on the corner, but if those Mom and Pop stores all pooled their resources, they can bring the cost of their insurance down.

"We must maintain the quality of health care. That means keep government out of it. I don't like Senator Pierce's idea of a national commission because it sounds to me like you're going to have some governmental agency setting prices. I want competition and I want to pool the insurance and take care of it that way.

"I also think medical care should go with the person. If you leave a business, I think your insurance should be portable so that if you're working for the Jones Company and you go to the Smith Company, your insurance goes with you. You shouldn't be worrying if you get a new job as to whether you'll be able to have health insurance without a lengthy waiting period. I think my administration could provide a good program and I'm really excited about getting it done."

"Thank you, Governor," Alistair said. "Mr. Hale, what are your thoughts on this subject?"

Ted cleared his throat. He should have accepted Sturtevant's offer of a chair. The longer he stood at the lectern, the worse his ankle hurt.

“America has the most expensive health care system in the world,” he began. “More than fifteen percent of our gross national product goes to health care. Our industrial competitors spend less and have better care. For example, Japan spends a little over six percent of its gross national product, and Germany only about eight percent.

“I agree with Governor Jessup that litigation is an important factor in the cost of health care in this country. Frivolous lawsuits drive up malpractice insurance premiums until some doctors are forced to stop practicing because they can no longer afford the coverage. However, litigation is only possible because of government laws and regulations.

“The FDA is a case in point. Their regulations have made the cost of prescription drugs unaffordable for many people. During the recent influenza epidemic, we were forced to go overseas, to countries without drug enforcement agencies, for supplies of vaccines because American drug companies, required to do massive testing and unnecessary research, could not profitably produce the needed vaccines. Consequently, in just that one example, government cost the lives of thousands of American citizens.

“Health care cost will go down and the quality of health care will go up once government interference is removed. You don’t have to take my word for it. Every other industrial country in the world has less government regulation and consequently has better and less expensive health care.

“You, the citizens, have to reassert your ownership of this nation by voting to completely reform our Federal Government. Once government begins listening to you, rather than the special interest groups and lobbyists, the overwhelming bureaucracy will be eliminated. Then America will have the best health care in the world at the lowest price.

“American ingenuity will develop the technologies and the advances in medical science to not only solve, but eliminate the

health care problems we now face. Government regulation is not the solution, it is the problem.”

“Thank you,” Alistair said. “In agreement with the established rules, we’ll rotate the order of our answers. Therefore the next question is for Governor Jessup. Please state your position on term limits for members of Congress, and, if you’re in favor of them, how will you get them enacted?”

“I strongly support term limits for members of the US Congress.” Jessup said. “I agree with Mr. Hale that limits would make government more responsive to the people. The President is restricted to two terms, for a total of eight years. What’s wrong with limiting Congressional terms to eight or ten years? For thirty-eight years one party has controlled the House of Representatives, and the result has been a congress that is not responsive to the will of the people. I think Representatives and Senators get a certain arrogance, a bureaucratic arrogance, if they remain in office too long. So I strongly favor term limits.

“And how to get them passed? I think the American people want term limits and I believe they’ll elect people who’ll pass the necessary legislation. Every place I go I talk about it, and I think they want it done. Actually, there would have to be an amendment to the Constitution, but I believe when the voters are given the option, they’ll provide the necessary support.”

“Thank you,” Alistair acknowledged. “Mr. Hale, your position on the question, please.”

“My stand on term limits has been a central focus of my campaign,” Ted said. “I agree with Governor Jessup that term limits will be a major step in returning government to the people. As I’ve stated time and again, career politicians are ruining this country. In order to be re-elected, Senators and Congressman must raise thousands of dollars a week to finance their re-election campaigns. Where do they get this money? From lobbyists and special interest groups. Since these special interest groups are making it possible

for legislators to retain positions of power and influence, it's easy to see why the politicians address the agendas of people contributing to their campaigns rather than the interests of the people who elected them.

“As it stands now our Federal legislators spend more time raising money than they do on the job for which they're paid. Term limits will eliminate the need for campaign financing and election to Congress will no longer be a lifetime career opportunity. Good people will serve and then go back to their homes and begin producing values in market driven businesses.

“Unfortunately, Congress will never initiate a Constitutional Convention because it isn't in their perceived best interests. The only practical way to enact term limits is to have the legislatures of two-thirds of the States call a Constitutional Convention for proposing an amendment. Therefore, it will be the responsibility of the citizens of the United States to express their desires by demanding that their State legislators step forward and vote for a Convention.”

“Thank you,” Alistair said. “Senator Pierce, may we have your position on term limits.”

“I know term limits are popular,” Senator Pierce stated, “but I'm against them, and not because I'm currently a United States Senator. No, it's because I have served in the Congress that I can see the disadvantages of not allowing knowledgeable and veteran politicians to use their expertise in congress. In the House of Representatives, for example, you could have a complete turnover every two years, which would create chaos. I believe it would pose a real problem for a lot of smaller States who have enough trouble making sure their interests are heard.

“Frequently when a new Senator or Representative is elected, the same office staff is retained. I think term limits would increase the influence of staff members in the Congress, who were never elected, but have lots of expertise and too much influence already.

“Let me tell you what I favor instead. I favor strict controls on how much you can spend running for Congress, strict limits on political action committees, requirements that people running for Congress appear in open public debates like we’re doing now. If you did that you could take away the incumbent’s advantage and the voters could make up their own minds without the newcomers being subjected to an unfair fight.

“I think if we had the right kind of campaign reform, we’d get the changes the people want without the disadvantages of term limits.”

Alistair hurriedly shuffled papers as if he had misplaced the next question.

“Thank you, Senator. Mr. Hale, you’ll have the first opportunity to address the last question. Define in specific dollar goals how much you would reduce the deficit in each of the four years of your administration and how you would get the budget under control.”

Ted smiled, even though it was an act of sheer will power to avoid moaning from the pain in his ankle. The entire leg was throbbing and it was impossible to shift positions to relieve the discomfort.

“This nation is over \$10 trillion in debt,” Ted stated. “We’re going into debt a little more than an additional \$1 billion every day of the year. During the short time of this debate, the debt will increase by \$50 million. The latest figures I’ve seen indicate the interest on our national debt is over \$500 billion each fiscal year. A national debt of this magnitude is totally unacceptable. Yet rather than exercising fiscal restraint when spending approaches the legal debt ceiling, Congress simply raises the ceiling.

“By far the largest component of the national debt is money we’ve borrowed from the Federal Reserve, which is not a government agency, but a private banking group. First I suggest we negotiate with the Federal Reserve to lower the interest rate on the debt. Then, with bureaucracies shut down, as we reduce the size of the

Federal Government, we could sell off Federal properties no longer needed, and use that money to eliminate the debt completely.

“Many people do not realize a portion of the national debt is money the government owes to Social Security. Currently there are more contributions coming into Social Security than monies being paid out to beneficiaries. What’s left over is routinely being spent as if it were general budget revenue, although it’s supposed to be held in a trust fund for payment of future benefits. Government agencies that use this money promise to pay it back in the form of IOUs. Consequently the money, supposedly in the Social Security trust fund, has been spent and is part of the National Debt. So, with the Federal Government handling Social Security it’s become a very large tax collection tool, which explains why the program is not solvent. But that’s a separate issue. However we could eliminate Social Security as part of the National Debt by making it impossible for Congress to spend the money in the trust fund.

“Once term limits eliminate career politicians forever, there absolutely must be a Constitutional Amendment to enforce a balanced Federal budget. Polls have shown that two out of three voters support a balanced budget amendment.”

The green light had come on, giving Ted thirty seconds to finish his remarks.

“And finally, I want a line item veto so the President can veto pork barrel spending. Last year alone spending for special interest projects inserted into critical legislation accounted for \$27.6 billion of Federal revenues. That is approximately \$350 coerced from every family in this country.”

“Thank you” Alistair said just as the red light came on announcing five seconds remaining. “Senator Pierce, may we please have your position on reducing the budget deficit.”

“Although the deficit has been building for more than fifty years, I’ll tell you exactly what I think can be done,” Pierce said. “I think we can bring it down by fifty percent in four years while still

growing the economy. In theory I could get rid of it entirely in four years, but to do so I'd have to raise taxes to an unacceptable level and cut benefits to people who need them. That remedy would definitely worsen the economy.

"So, in my view you have to increase investment, grow the economy and reduce the deficit by controlling health care costs, prudent reductions in defense, cuts in domestic programs, and asking the wealthiest Americans to pay their fair share of taxes. If you don't grow the economy you can't get it done.

"I do not agree that a balanced budget amendment is the answer at all. Government needs the freedom to borrow money in the case of emergencies, such as natural disasters or wars. I do agree with Mr. Hale, as much as it pains me, that giving the President the line item veto would go a long way toward keeping spending within reasonable limits. Currently forty-three States grant this privilege to their Governors and it has helped make State legislatures fiscally responsible. It would do the same for the President of the United States."

"Thank you. And finally, Governor Jessup, will you give us your thoughts on this very important question."

"Well, I'm a little confused here," Jessup said, "because I don't see how you can reduce the deficit by raising people's taxes. History has proven that the more money government has, the more it spends. You see, I don't think the American people are taxed too little. I think they're taxed too much. Senator Pierce's program wants to tax more and spend more — \$150 billion in new taxes while spending another \$220 billion. I don't believe that's the way to do it.

"Here's something that'll help. Give us a balanced budget amendment. I think it would discipline not only the Congress, which needs it, but also the Executive Branch.

"I agree with both Mr. Hale and Senator Pierce that as President I'd like to have what forty-three governors have — the line item

veto, so if we've got a reckless spending Congress, the President would be able to wipe out pork barrel waste.

"I've got another proposal for reducing the deficit that some sophisticates think may be a little gimmicky. When taxpayers are completing their Federal Tax Form, they could check off a box that would require Congress to apply ten percent of their tax payment to lowering the deficit.

"I believe we need to control the increase in mandatory spending, which is the main growth item in the budget. We've got to relate spending to inflation and population increase, but not raise taxes on the American people. I just don't believe that would stimulate any kind of recovery at all."

"Thank you, gentlemen," Alistair said. "I believe this debate, with your forthright answers and proposals, has accomplished the Commission on Presidential Debate's goal of educating the American people. Good luck to each of you in the coming election."

When Ted limped off stage, Nicole met him in the wings, nearly jumping into his arms as she gave him an enthusiastic hug.

"You were great," she said.

Ted laughed as he returned her hug. "Watch out for the ankle. It hurts like hell."

"Sorry," Nicole apologized as she stepped back. "But you were absolutely wonderful. I'd say you won by a huge margin."

"Even as we speak, the network talking heads are discussing every word spoken and are telling their audiences who gave the best answers. I doubt whether many of them are on my side."

"No matter what the commentators say, you were the big winner," Nicole insisted. "Did you hear the ovation when you went on stage?"

Ted laughed. "What did you expect when the wounded hero stepped into the spotlight? In a couple more weeks the voters will let us know who won the Debate when they cast their ballots."

“We won’t have to wait that long,” Nicole boasted. “The next Presidential poll will show that you’ve left Pierce and Jessup in the dust.”

SEVENTEEN

“I NEED TO GET MY ankle checked.” Following the Debate, Ted and Nicole had returned to the backstage dressing room where he had collapsed into an easy chair. He pulled up his trouser leg and examined the paramedic’s bandage. The ankle was swollen up to the calf, puffy flesh protruding around the wrapping. “It feels like it’s broken.”

“It doesn’t look good,” Nicole agreed. “Do you want me to call an ambulance?”

“Either that or a taxi. Our car is probably in the junk yard or the police impound by now.” Ted was ashamed to admit he was afraid of leaving the Convocation Center without security guards. Whoever was responsible for the attempt earlier this evening might be determined to try again.

“What about security?” Nicole asked, echoing his thoughts. “Chuck hasn’t shown up yet. That Secret Service agent said there would be a detail here before the Debate was over, but I haven’t seen anyone.”

There was a soft rapping on the dressing room door.

“Could be the Secret Service has arrived to rescue us,” Ted joked, “or Sturtevant wants us to vacate the premises so they can lock up for the evening.”

Nicole cautiously opened the door. A tall, stocky man with short brown hair and piercing hazel eyes stepped into the room, his gaze constantly shifting as he took in every detail of his surroundings.

“Mr. Hale, my name is Bruce Hempstead,” he introduced himself, showing his Secret Service ID. “I’ve been assigned as head of your security detail. The Miami office was a little short on staff today, but I have two other agents with me.”

“Welcome to the frying pan,” Ted said, extending his hand. “Forgive me for not standing. My ankle is killing me.”

Hempstead’s grip was firm, but not aggressive as he shook hands. “No need to stand.”

“This young lady is my press agent, Nicole Riley,” Ted explained, nodding toward Nicole.

“Pleased to meet you,” Hempstead said, shaking her hand. “Mr. Hale, I understand you have a private security detail.” Obviously even a beautiful woman was not going to distract him from business.

“Not much of one anymore,” Ted acknowledged. “One was killed and one was seriously injured in the assassination attempt. I’m not sure where the other two are, but I suspect they’ve gone to the hospital with their wounded companion.”

“You’ll have to dismiss them,” Hempstead said. “Now that the Secret Service is responsible for your protection we can’t have private operatives getting in the way. Our priority at the moment is to escort you safely to your hotel.”

“Ted needs to go to the hospital first,” Nicole explained. “There wasn’t time before the Debate to have his ankle properly treated. It may be broken.”

Hempstead thought about it for a minute. “Okay, we can do that. The nearest emergency room would be at Larkin Community

Hospital in South Miami. I'll have our car brought around and we can leave immediately."

"Is that where the dead and injured were taken?" Ted asked.

Hempstead shrugged. "I don't know, but it would have been the logical facility."

"Good. Then that's where we need to go. I want to personally check on everyone who was hurt."

"That isn't a very good idea, Mr. Hale," Hempstead warned. "After what's happened tonight, the wisest course would be to have your ankle tended to, and then get you to a secure location. If the assassination attempt was ordered by one of the drug cartels, there's a good chance they'll try again."

"I appreciate your concern, but those people were injured because of me. I can't go into hiding without making certain they're being properly treated."

"The hospital is a high risk location," Hempstead protested. "It'll be difficult to adequately protect you with the short crew available. The less time we're there, the better it'll be."

"I don't want to complicate your job, but I have to check on those people. We'll be at the hospital anyway, and it'll only take a few minutes. If you need additional manpower, maybe you can ask the Coral Gables police for help."

"It's against my advice," Hempstead said, obviously accustomed to dealing with uncooperative people. "But you're the boss."

Ted leaned on Nicole as he hobbled toward the back entrance. Hempstead was intercepted by one of his team and they talked for a few moments before he reported to Ted.

"Mr. Hale, there's a mob of reporters waiting at the back entrance," he said. "It would be dangerous to stand around being interviewed."

"You're right," Ted agreed. "I don't have the time or patience to face reporters right now. Nicole, would you please handle them?"

“I’d rather go to the hospital with you,” Nicole reluctantly agreed, “but dealing with the media is a press agent’s job.”

He turned to Hempstead. “Is there some way out of here where we can avoid the press?”

“We can use the west side entrance,” Hempstead said. “Give me a couple of minutes and I’ll have one of my men bring around our cars.”

Ted hugged Nicole and kissed her cheek. “I hate to ask you to face those reporters alone.”

“Don’t worry about it. After I get rid of them, I’ll catch a cab and meet you at the hospital.”

“I don’t know how long I’ll be there and we could miss each other in the confusion,” Ted suggested. “Why don’t you head back to the hotel and I’ll join you as soon as possible.”

Nicole didn’t appear happy being left behind, but smiled as she tenderly stroked Ted’s cheek. “You be careful.”

The emergency room at Larkin Community Hospital was extremely busy. The volume of noise was staggering as patients and personnel scurried in every direction. No one paid any attention to Ted until Hempstead shouldered his way to the reception desk and flashed his badge. The flustered nurse flagged down a harried looking young doctor.

“You’re going to have to wait your turn,” the doctor grumbled, obviously tired and overwhelmed with the stress of the evening.

Hempstead flashed his badge again. “This is Theodore Winston Hale. Unless you want more trouble than you can handle, you’ll make him your first priority.”

“That isn’t necessary,” Ted said. “I can take my turn in line.”

“Not likely,” Hempstead insisted. “We can’t expose you by sitting around a waiting room all night. I’m sure the doctor appreciates the urgency of the situation and will gladly see you immediately. Isn’t that right doctor?”

For a moment the doctor hesitated, obviously deciding whether he should tell the Federal agent to go to hell. With a visible slump to his shoulders, he turned to the receptionist.

“Is there a treatment room available?”

She consulted a chart. “Number four is clear,” she said.

“Alright, come with me.” He reluctantly led Ted and Hempstead into the empty treatment room. The other two agents took stations outside the doorway. “Okay, what’s your problem?” he asked as Ted sat on the examining table and stretched out his left leg.

“It’s my ankle. The paramedic at the scene wrapped it. He thought it was a sprain, but it hurts like hell.”

The doctor cut away the bandage, twisted the foot, flexed the ankle and probed the area. He seemed to take satisfaction when Ted winced during the examination..

“The paramedic was probably right, but we’ll have to take x-rays to make certain,” the doctor said. “You wait here while I arrange for the technician.”

“Before you go, Doc, can you tell me anything about the people who were injured at the Omni Colonnade shooting this evening?” Ted asked.

“You may have noticed we’re just a little busy around here tonight,” the doctor said, sounding exasperated. “I’m trying to fix broken people. I don’t have the time or energy to remember everyone who goes through the emergency room.”

“Take it easy, Doc,” Hempstead soothed. “You make arrangements for the x-rays and I’ll find out about the shooting victims.”

“Thank you for your consideration,” the doctor said sarcastically as he swept from the room.

Hempstead spoke to one of the agents waiting outside the room. “Bill, would you please check at reception to see what information there is on the Omni shooting victims?”

“Could you also find out if Chuck Cranston and Hank Bishop are in the building, and if so, would you ask them to come here?” Ted called.

The doctor returned almost immediately with a wheelchair. He pushed Ted down the hallway to the laboratory, had x-rays taken, and returned him to the treatment room while awaiting the pictures. They had been back only a minute when Chuck Cranston stepped into the room.

“Mr. Hale, I’m sorry I didn’t get over to the Convocation Center, but Jerry Feldman was in surgery. Hank and I were waiting to see whether he would pull through.”

“Is he going to be all right?” Ted asked.

“The doctor said it was touch and go for a while, but the surgery was successful and he should have a full recovery.”

“Damn, that’s a relief.”

“If you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to get back to the recovery room. It’d mean a lot to Jerry if Hank and I were there when he woke up.”

“Now that I have Secret Service protection, I won’t need you tonight. I imagine Jerry would prefer to recuperate in a hospital closer to home. Make whatever arrangements are necessary to transfer him when his condition is stable, and send the bill to me.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.”

When Chuck left, the Secret Service agent returned with the information he’d gathered on the other victims. He consulted a handwritten list as he reported his findings.

“One of the cops, an Officer Kramer, is still in surgery having a bullet removed from his chest,” he said. “The other wounded cop has gunshot wounds to his left thigh and right knee. As far as I know he’s in post op. Civilians Roger Westfield and Henry Allen are still scheduled for surgery with wounds that don’t appear serious. Another civilian, Mary Swenson, is in critical condition with a head wound. A neurologist has been called to operate, but hasn’t arrived

yet. The other four civilian victims — Nancy Hernandez, Jesus Ortega, Ralph Black and his wife Karen — were stabilized here before being transferred to Coral Gables Hospital at their request. None of them were seriously injured, but you'll have to contact Coral Gables Hospital for detailed information."

Hearing the extent of the injuries suffered in the shooting brought Ted's feelings of guilt into focus.

"I understand there were two fatalities. Do you know where the bodies have been taken?"

"Josh Williams and Allen Merkel's bodies are both in the hospital morgue awaiting a mandatory autopsy," the agent explained.

The doctor burst into the room, interrupting the report.

"Your ankle isn't broken," he announced. "I'll wrap it for support and give you something for the pain, but you'll need to see your personal physician as soon as possible. And try to stay off that leg."

"Thank you, Doctor," Ted said as his ankle was wrapped and the doctor gave him a small vial of pills. "I appreciate your help."

"There's nothing more you can do here tonight, Mr. Hale," Hempstead said. "It's time we headed back to the hotel."

"Good idea," Ted agreed. "I'm exhausted."

It was well after one in the morning when Ted let himself into his room. The TV, with the sound turned very low, was on an all news channel and Nicole had fallen asleep on the sofa. He switched off the TV, knelt beside her and gently kissed her forehead. She stirred and put her arms around his neck.

"What did the doctor say about your ankle?" she asked.

"It's only a bad sprain and should be fine in a few days," Ted assured her. "What did you do after getting rid of the reporters?"

"Came back to the hotel and watched all the news programs," she replied. "As you would suspect, the headline story was the assassination attempt. Between that and the Debate the talking heads don't seem to have anything else to report."

“One of the local TV stations got the entire shooting on film and they must have run it a dozen times.” Nicole kissed him on the cheek. “You looked very heroic when you burst out of the wrecked limo and took up a shooting stance across the rear deck. If you turn on the TV I’m sure they’ll show it again in a few minutes.”

“No thanks, I’ll pass on watching. Did they have any information on the guys with the machine guns?”

“The police and media believe the drug cartels were responsible. The three dead gunmen have been identified as known enforcers for the Columbian Cartel.”

“And the police are investigating, but all evidence indicates the gunmen were acting on their own,” Ted said sarcastically.

“You sound skeptical. Do you know something the police don’t?”

“Not really. I just have a gut feeling the assassination attempt was more political than criminal.”

“Are you suggesting the opposition hired gunmen to get rid of you?”

“I don’t know,” Ted said. “I may be paranoid, but I have a hard time believing the cartels actually think drugs will ever be decriminalized. They’ve heard political rhetoric before and there’s no reason for them to believe a third party candidate is a threat to them or their profits.”

“I think you’re looking for conspiracies where there aren’t any. When all’s said and done the police and FBI will decide it was the cartels, and they’ll be right.”

“I hope so,” Ted said. “But let’s talk about something more pleasant. What was the feedback on the Debate?”

“It was all very positive in your favor.” Nicole sounded enthusiastic. “A quick poll of the Convocation audience suggested most of them thought you had won. Of course, the liberal media is saying the public’s perception was influenced by the assassination attempt.”

“Which may very well be true.”

“Even the liberal media was talking about your courage in appearing at the Debate after the attack. Several commented that you appeared in complete control when it would have been perfectly normal for you to be flustered.”

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Ted said. “I was pretty shaken up. I’m glad we got good publicity out of it, but the price was too high.”

EIGHTEEN

WALLY COMPTON WAS FURIOUS at the dead Columbians for bungling so badly. He cursed himself for not realizing the murderous scum couldn't be trusted with a delicate mission. He should have known their idea of killing was to spray bullets all over the place, not only missing their target, but killing and wounding innocent civilians. The only advantage to using Columbians was that the police and FBI would write off the attack as drug related and not look for a conspiracy.

In spite of the botched attempt Wally was relieved the assassination had failed. He had done a lot of shady and underhanded things over the years, but this was the first time he had contracted to have someone murdered. He actually sensed relief when he learned Hale had survived. True, two citizens had died, but those deaths didn't weigh any more on his conscience than if they had been killed in an automobile accident.

On the other hand, because the Columbians had botched their assignment, Wild Bill wasn't likely to honor his end of the bargain and return the evidence about the South Carolina affair. Hopefully, in another year, when the statute of limitations expired, Wild Bill would give up the material, figuring it had lost its value. The Senator

thought he was so damned smart, using the fear of prison to keep him in line. If he had used his brains, he would have realized Wally didn't give a damn about the legal consequences. It was the powerful people he had scammed, who weren't bound by any statute of limitations that made the blackmail so powerful. If they learned Wally had been involved, they would fit him with cement overshoes and take him for a swim in the Atlantic.

By the time Senator Stanley summoned him, Wally was reconciled to facing one of Wild Bill's famous temper tantrums. As he did whenever the Senator went off the deep end, he would weather the tirade and bide his time.

"I don't know what the problem is, but the Senator's in a very bad mood this afternoon," Sylvia said when Wally arrived.

"Thanks for the warning." He smiled warmly. Sylvia was one of those women who exuded sexuality, and he frequently fantasized about sleeping with her. It was absolutely criminal that a fat old man like Wild Bill was enjoying her sexual favors while she barely noticed him. *Power has its perks*, he thought.

Wild Bill was pouring himself a drink when he entered the office and carefully closed the door. From the hazy look in the Senator's eyes, Wally surmised it wasn't his first drink.

"I can't believe you fucked up the assignment," Wild Bill said, his voice soft and controlled. The Senator could rant and rave when it suited his purposes, but when he spoke in that tone, there was trouble ahead for someone.

"It wasn't my fault," Wally protested. "Abrego assured me he could take care of the matter. He sent three men who'd done that sort of thing before and . . ."

"Shut up," Wild Bill hissed, drawing out each word. "I don't want to hear any of your goddamned excuses. You fucked up and you know it. You should have insisted on Abrego sending a professional. Three punks with automatic weapons, standing in the road blasting

away like drunken cowboys, was the stupidest thing I've ever heard of. They killed everyone except Hale."

Wally didn't respond. Wild Bill never listened to reason when he was in one of his moods, and it was better to just keep his mouth shut.

"Now it's too damned late." The Senator tossed down his drink, began making another, speaking as if he were talking to himself. "After all the publicity, Treasury had no choice except to assign agents. The Secret Service is going to be more alert than a bunch of rent-a-cops." He turned on Wally. "Because of your incompetence the situation is getting more complicated by the day."

"It wasn't my fault," Wally insisted. "You're the one who suggested we have the Columbians take care of the hit."

"Damn it, why can't I find people who do things right for a change?" Wild Bill ranted, completely ignoring Wally's comments. "The election is less than a month away and the sonofabitch is ten points ahead of Pierce in the polls. Not only did he make Pierce and Jessup look like fools in the Debate, he's got half the voters in America feeling sorry for him. That video showing him ready to fight the bad guys single handed when he jumped out of the wrecked car with a pistol in his hand, won more votes than all the money in the world."

"What did you expect? After all he's a decorated Marine combat veteran."

"I expected him to be dead, not coming across as a damned hero and jumping fifteen points in the polls."

"No matter what the polls say, there's no way Hale can win the election," Wally said. "Another couple of weeks and he'll be history."

"That's what I thought before you screwed the pooch. Now everything's changed. We can't depend on a bunch of ignorant voters to realize Hale's a loose cannon. We have to plan for every eventuality.

I didn't get where I am today by sitting on my ass and waiting for the good fairy to wave her magic wand.

"No one in this Congress wants Hale to win, so it shouldn't be a problem enlisting every Senator and Representative to hit their districts hard between now and the election. They should be able to put the fear of God in the voters by concentrating on some of Hale's radical ideas, such as eliminating the FDA."

Wally wasn't sure whether he should respond to the rambling tirade. At least Wild Bill didn't sound like he was crazy enough to consider another hit just before the election. That would really put the fat in the fire.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

The question caught Wild Bill by surprise, as if he had forgotten Wally was in the room. Setting his fresh drink on the desk, he flopped onto his chair and glared. For a moment Wally thought he saw a glint of insanity in the wild eyes before it was replaced by a look of cunning.

"I don't believe for a minute Hale can win the election, but what if he does?" The Senator focused on Wally. "What do we know about Henry Abbot, the American Party Vice Presidential candidate?"

Wally shrugged. "Not a lot. He's a businessman, without any political experience. He owns Abbot Computers and has nearly as much money as Hale. They've been friends for a long time."

"Damn it, I know that shit," Wild Bill growled. "What about the man himself? Is he committed to all of this American Party crap, or is he just along for the ride? Does he have the personality and force of character to carry through Hale's agenda?"

"Without a political history, that's hard to answer," Wally said. "As a very successful businessman who built Abbot Computers from nothing to a major force in the industry, I'd say he has the drive to make things happen if he believes in them. I've never met the man, although I did hear him talk last week in Salt Lake City. He doesn't

have Hale's charisma, but he's a good speaker. Who knows how he'd react under pressure."

Wild Bill swiveled in his chair and stared out the window, watching the fluffy white clouds drift across the sky. The Senator's reflective moods always made Wally uncomfortable because he never knew whether he should speak or leave the room. In this case he was pretty certain leaving the room would be a mistake. He waited patiently.

"We aren't going to be able to do anything about Hale before the election," Wild Bill finally said, swiveling back to face Wally. "No matter how many people vote for him, he'll lose if he can't garner enough electoral votes to keep the election out of the House. Nonetheless, we have to be prepared if, by some unbelievable fluke, he wins the damned election."

"Prepared?" Wally asked. Wild Bill was beginning to sound calmer and that scared him more than the ranting and raving. "What do you mean by prepared?"

"Wally, I want you to find a good man who can keep his mouth shut. Possibly someone with a military background who knows how to operate covert missions." Wild Bill was smiling now, an expression that was almost evil. "That's it, an ex-soldier with a grudge against the country. Preferably a man with something in his background we can use for leverage."

"Where the hell am I going to find someone like that?" Wally protested.

"How the hell should I know? That's your job. You're supposed to have contacts. Read the classifieds in *Soldier of Fortune* for all I care."

"Okay, supposing I find a man with those qualifications, why do you want him?"

"Don't be so dense. I want to be ready if Hale does the impossible and gets elected. Americans love to see the underdog win, which means he'll be popular enough to get his damned Constitutional

Convention, and we can't let that happen. One way or another we have to get rid of him. This time we'll use a professional instead of a bunch of blood thirsty Columbians."

"Whoa, hold on there," Wally protested, nearly jumping out of his chair. "Wasting a candidate is one thing, but you're talking about assassinating a President. That's way too heavy for me. Count me out."

"No, Wally, you're in this all the way. You know what a word to the right people will mean for you."

"You wouldn't do that. You promised to give me the evidence and forget the whole thing if I arranged the hit in Miami."

"The Miami hit failed. You're still on the hook until Hale is taken care of. If he loses the election, I'll give you the evidence. If he wins, you won't get it as long as Hale's around to stir up trouble."

"I don't care if you publish the evidence on the front page of the Washington Monitor," Wally insisted. "Assassinating the President is heavy duty action, and no one has ever gotten away with it. There's no way I'm going to get involved in something like that."

"I thought you had more backbone," Wild Bill sneered. "Of course people have gotten away with assassinating the President. Do you really believe the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations were the work of lone gunmen? If it's carefully planned, the only one who'll take the fall is the man actually pulling the trigger."

Wally frowned. "Are you saying Booth and Oswald were purposely killed before they could implicate anyone else?"

"Precisely."

"In other words, this guy I'm supposed to find, who'll actually pull the trigger, is expendable?"

"Exactly," Wild Bill gloated. "If Hale wins the election and we have to go ahead with the plan, there aren't going to be any loose ends. No one will ever be able to tie the assassination to us."

“So you want me to find the assassin, and then find someone to waste the assassin?” Wally asked. He had the feeling this was getting too complicated.

“That won’t be necessary,” Wild Bill said, trying to sound reassuring. “Unless I miss my guess, the assassin will be killed while resisting arrest. If not, I have connections who will make certain he doesn’t talk.”

“I don’t know, this is way over my head,” Wally said. “It’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard, and I don’t want any part of it.”

He had done some dumb things in his life, but he wasn’t stupid. If he didn’t go along with the plan, Wild Bill would release the blackmail material and he would be dead within a week. If he agreed to help with the assassination attempt, most likely Wild Bill would consider him a loose end and he just might end up dead even sooner.

“I don’t see where you have any choice,” Wild Bill said. “But I’ll sweeten the pot. Not only will the incident in South Carolina be forgotten forever, I’ll see that you get a nice bonus. Does a million dollars sound like a worthwhile incentive?”

Wally knew he was trapped. Even the thought of earning a million dollars didn’t make him feel better because he was pretty certain Wild Bill would never part with that kind of money. “Okay, I’ll see if I can find a trigger man. Let’s pray Hale loses and this whole thing turns out to be a bad idea.”

“I knew I could count on you,” Wild Bill said, downing the last of his drink in one swallow. “Now get busy. I’ve got work to do.”

As he left the office, Wally didn’t even leer at Sylvia. He had some very serious thinking to do.

It wouldn’t be easy to find an ex-military man who would fit Wild Bill’s criteria, but he was confident the man he needed was out there somewhere. The thought of the shooter being sacrificed didn’t bother him. If the soldier couldn’t look out for himself, that was his problem.

Wally's concern was to make certain he wasn't left dangling in the cold. He didn't trust Wild Bill any further than he could throw a bull elephant. There was no doubt he would be sacrificed if it suited the Senator's purposes. Wally intended to develop some plan to cover his own ass. Maybe the gunman would be stupid enough to be the patsy in this deal, but Wally Compton fully expected to survive.

NINETEEN

TED WOULD HAVE PREFERRED remaining home on election night and watching the coverage unfold in the comfort of his living room. However he realized his volunteers had worked harder and done more for him than any campaign workers in history. He owed it to them to be present and visible at the climax of all their efforts.

Because Milwaukee was conveniently located, the American Party had reserved the Pfister Hotel and Towers ballroom for Election Night festivities. Celebrations had also been arranged at the majority of cities where he had campaign headquarters and his technicians had arranged computer hookups so that it was like one nationwide party.

When he and Nicole, together with Henry and Gina Abbot, made an eight o'clock appearance, the party was in full swing. They were greeted with wildly enthusiastic cheers as the band struck up *God Bless America*. Someone in the front of the room began singing. All the supporters locked arms and joined in.

The local television station, which was covering the party for the networks, fed the crowd scene to the large screen TVs situated around the room. As soon as the young people saw their images,

they began waving banners and campaign posters. Suddenly the air was filled with red, white and blue confetti. The noise was overwhelming.

Henry flashed the victory sign and the crowd began chanting, 'Ted Hale, Ted Hale, Ted Hale'.

"Did everyone get enough to eat?" Ted shouted over the speaker system.

The volunteers screamed an affirmative, waving their banners.

"Are you having fun?"

More applause and shouts filled the room, drowning out further attempts to speak. He allowed the volunteers to celebrate for a minute before quieting them by shouting over the speakers.

"I'm almost sorry the campaign is over," he yelled. "It was a lot of hard work, but I've had the opportunity to meet a bunch of wonderful people. Working together we've touched the heart of America and it's renewed my faith in the strength of this nation. No matter how the election turns out, I want to thank each and every one of you for your hard work and dedication. You're what America is all about, and I'm proud to have shared the adventure with you during the hectic months of our campaign. We're going to win this election and I couldn't have done it without you."

Cheering and applause rocked the room. It was nearly five minutes before Ted could continue.

"We've fought an uphill battle that has shaken the establishment. Because of you this country will never be the same again. You've begun a revolution every bit as important as the original struggle in 1776. You've spread the word that less government means more jobs, more wealth and more freedom. And the voters have heard you."

Someone began beating a drum and suddenly everyone was singing *God Bless America* again. It took another five minutes for the bedlam to settle.

“We could not have reached Election Night without your support. Now we only need the American voters to give us the keys that will unlock the chains binding the American eagle. In the months ahead we will see what happens when an eagle is unchained and free to soar. However, even after the voters have given me a mandate and I’m in the White House, the fight must continue. Perhaps the hardest journey is yet to come and we cannot, and will not, relax our efforts. You and I both must rededicate ourselves to the difficult struggle facing us. I will need your help even more in the future and I know I can depend on you just as I have in the past. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

The band struck up a new tune and the campaign workers began shouting, singing and dancing. Secret Service agents acted as a shield, protecting them from the enthusiastic crowd as Ted and Henry waved, shook hands and slowly made their way from the ballroom.

“That’s quite a party,” Henry said when they were all safely in the elevator.

“They deserve it,” Ted said, pushing the button for the twentieth floor of the Pfister Tower. “It’s costing me a fortune, but every one of our campaign headquarters is having a banquet and party tonight. Makes you feel good to realize so many young people are willing to sacrifice to save the country, doesn’t it?”

“It sure does,” Henry agreed. “I can see why some people get hooked on all the political hoopla. The last few weeks have been one hell of a ride.”

When the elevator stopped, they walked around the curving corridor to Ted’s suite where most of the campaign principals had gathered.

In mid summer John Stuart had reserved the ballroom and all the suites on the twentieth floor in anticipation of election night. Even so, there was barely enough room for everyone.

In addition to Ted and Nicole, accommodations were needed for John, Dave, and Bill, who were accompanied by their wives. Of course, Henry Abbot and his wife, Gina, had flown in from New Mexico. Adding the Secret Service agents who were assigned to protect both Ted and Henry, there were no empty suites remaining on the twentieth floor. The technical staff from Alliance Products had been forced to accept rooms on the fourth floor, and was lucky to get them.

In Ted's suite, the large screen TV, with muted sound, was showing a bunch of people wearing party hats and waving Senator Pierce posters.

"They just broadcast your speech," Bill explained. "Now they're jumping around the country to the Democratic and Republican headquarters."

"I suppose they have to fill time before returns start coming in," Dave suggested. The whir of his wheelchair motor hummed as he rolled over to the hors-d'oeuvre table where he helped himself to some nibble food.

"Nothing's been happening on TV except for the insipid commentary and the jumping to each election night party, so we turned the volume off," John said. "Mostly they've been discussing Pierce and Jessup. I don't think the media is giving you much of a chance."

"Let's listen for a minute and see if there are any returns," Henry suggested.

Bill released the mute button and the room was suddenly filled with the commentator's voices.

"Returns are beginning to come in as some of the East Coast precincts are reporting." The talking head listened on his headset for a moment and then took a sheet of paper handed him from off stage. "On the early returns from Vermont we have Hale leading Pierce by fifteen hundred votes, with Jessup trailing badly." He turned to

his partner. "Hale leading in the first returns is a bit of a surprise, don't you think Ralph?"

"Not really, Dan," Ralph said. "Vermont and New Hampshire have always had a reputation for being hard headed, independent Yankees. It wouldn't surprise me if Hale had a very good showing in both States. The real test will come when we start getting returns from liberal and cosmopolitan areas. Dan, I think the more surprising aspect of this election is the reports we've been receiving from polling places around the country. It appears there'll be a record turnout this year."

"I agree," Dan said. "In the last three Presidential elections we've only had about half the eligible voters cast ballots. Projections based on our poll watchers, suggest we may have as many as seventy percent this year. In your opinion, Ralph, why do you believe there's so much interest in this election? Which candidate will benefit most from the increased turnout?"

"I don't think there's a simple answer to those questions," Ralph said. "The controversy Hale has added to this election may be partially responsible. Between the three major candidates there definitely is a clear-cut choice because of their totally different political philosophies. A lot of people who didn't think their vote counted in previous elections may be going to the polls to say they want less government. Of course, it's just as likely people, who are afraid of the radical changes Hale promises, are casting votes against him. Or, it could be Hale is benefiting from voter sympathy after the assassination attempt in Miami. In the long run, because of dissatisfaction with the current Republican administration, I believe the Democrats will receive the major advantage from an increased turnout."

Dan listened intently to his headset. "Hold on a minute, Ralph. We've getting our first computer prediction for the evening. Isn't it ironic that Ted Hale's Omega chip is making it possible to give earlier and more accurate projections?"

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Ralph said. “We have a real surprise early on election night. Our computers project that Vermont and its three electoral votes will go to Theodore Winston Hale.”

Nicole jumped up shrieking, and hugged Ted. “Oh Ted, I’m so excited.”

“It’s a bit early to get excited. There’s a long way to go.” Ted reached over and punched the mute button on the remote control. “I’m not going to sit here and listen to that inane chatter all evening. I’m starved. Why don’t we eat dinner and get back to the election when more returns are in.”

“I don’t know if I can eat anything,” Gina Abbot said. “I’m too excited.”

“I agree with Ted,” John said. “I could use a big juicy steak to celebrate our first victory.”

“Why don’t we have room service send up something to eat?” Nicole suggested.

“That’s a good idea,” Ted agreed. “John, would you order a filet mignon, medium, for me. I’m going to rest until dinner gets here. Nicole, would you join me? I have a few things to discuss.”

For privacy they went into the bedroom and shut the door. Nicole came into his arms and gave him a passionate kiss.

“Ted, I’m so proud of you I could burst. I just know you’re going to win this election.” Nicole paced to the window overlooking the lakefront. “I’m so nervous I can’t sit still.”

“Win or lose, when this is over you’re going back to New York and your old job,” Ted suggested. “We won’t be seeing each other, and I don’t want that to happen.”

He put his finger against Nicole’s lips when she began to comment. “Don’t say anything. Let me finish. If I win this election, would you like to be First Lady?” Ted pulled a small box from his pocket and flipped the lid, exposing a large diamond. “Nicole, will you marry me?”

“Yes, oh yes,” Nicole cried, throwing herself into Ted’s embrace.

“I never thought I’d fall in love again,” Ted confessed, slipping the ring on her finger. “But I love you with my whole heart and want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“You’ll have to spend your life with me, because I’ll never let you get away.” Nicole snuggled against him. “I love you more than words can say. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“We could be married right after the election, or we could wait and be married in the White House. There hasn’t been a wedding there since Tricia Nixon and Edward Cox got hitched during Richard Nixon’s administration. The only President ever married while in office was Grover Cleveland in 1886. We’d be making history.”

“Whenever we set the date, we’ll make our own history.”

“Our engagement isn’t a secret,” Ted cautioned, “but it would probably be best not to say anything tonight. All our friends are focused on the election and I want the announcement to be the highlight of the day. They can wait until tomorrow to meet the future Mrs. Theodore Winston Hale.”



It was nearly ten o’clock when Ted suggested they check the election progress and Dave switched on the TV, turning up the sound. A map of the United States was briefly on the screen, with several States displayed in color. A dialogue box at the bottom of the picture explained the States that had gone to the Republicans were red, with blue for Democrats, and green for the American Party. The majority of the colored States appeared to be green.

“This is absolutely amazing, Dan,” Ralph said, sounding as if he were feeling the effects of a long night. “The computer has just predicted that Tennessee, with eleven electoral votes, will go to Hale. As you can see on the map, the computer has given Senator Pierce the forty-six electoral votes from New York and New Jersey. Only the seven electoral votes from Maine and the District of Columbia have gone to Governor Jessup. Theodore Winston Hale has the eighty-two electoral votes from Vermont, New Hampshire,

Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Both North and South Carolina are still too close to call, but Hale is leading the popular vote in both states. If they go to Hale, their twenty-eight electoral votes would give him a total of a hundred and ten.”

“What I find almost too amazing to believe is the popular vote we have so far,” Dan said. “Even in the States he’s projected to lose, Hale has made a respectable showing. With only about twenty percent of the national precincts reporting, Hale is leading Pierce by over a million votes. Do you think we have an upset in the making?”

“Anything is possible, Dan, but there’s a long way to go. In order to win, one of these candidates needs to accumulate two hundred and seventy electoral votes. According to the experts, Illinois, California, Florida, and Ohio were Democratic in the last two elections, and are expected to go that way again. That’ll considerably tighten the race. However, with the vote being split three ways, it’s a definite possibility none of the candidates will gain the required majority.”

“Then, for the first time in modern history, the Presidential election will be thrown into the House of Representatives,” Dan agreed. “If that happens we may not know who’ll be our next President for several days, even several weeks.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Ralph said. “To learn more about the process if the election goes to the House of Representatives, we have our expert, Princeton University Law Professor, Elliot Swanson, nationally recognized authority on Constitutional law, waiting in our New York studios. Professor Swanson, did you hear what Ralph and I were discussing?”

The screen split, with the right hand side showing a scholarly looking man in a tweed jacket listening intently to the voices in his earphone. “Yes, I did,” Swanson said, after a brief delay, “and it’s an interesting question.”

“Before you comment on the possibility of the election going to the House of Representatives,” Dan said, “perhaps you would be so

kind as to clarify for our viewers what the Electoral College is and how the number of votes are determined.”

“I’ll do my best,” Professor Swanson agreed. “The founding fathers were concerned about the possibility of democracy running wild, so they put in checks and balances to prevent abuse of the system. Our style of government was intentionally instituted as a Republic; a confederation of States ruled by law. Contrary to accepted belief, the President and Vice President are not selected by the popular vote throughout the country. The founding fathers designed the system so the States elect the President through the instrument of the Electoral College. Actually we have fifty separate elections, with the popular vote in each State dictating who that State will cast ballots for in the College. Because of this unique system, it’s possible for a President to be elected without receiving a majority of the national vote. It’s happened several times throughout history, most notably Abraham Lincoln, who was elected twice, even though he never achieved a majority.”

“So you’re saying election by the States, rather than the popular vote, is provided for in the Constitution?” Ralph asked.

“That’s absolutely correct,” Professor Swanson said. “Our election process is mandated in Article II, Section One of the Constitution. Each State is permitted electoral votes equal to the total number of Senators and Representatives allocated to that State. On Election Day, voters are actually choosing Electoral College members who are committed to voting for the candidates of their respective political parties. Even though the States are all allowed to determine how their Electoral votes will be distributed, in all but two States the party with the greatest number of popular votes receives all the electoral votes from that State, even if no candidate gets a majority. Nebraska and Maine allow their electoral votes to be split among candidates, but this has not actually happened in modern times. In order to win, a party must receive two hundred and seventy votes, one more than half of the total of five hundred

thirty-eight. If no party receives the necessary two hundred seventy votes, then the Constitution requires the House of Representatives to decide the election.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Dan said. “I’m sure your explanation has made this process clear to our viewers. In your opinion, what would happen if this Presidential election were thrown into the House of Representatives? Which of the candidates would benefit most from that possibility?”

Professor Swanson frowned. “The only time that happened was in 1800 when Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr were tied and the election was thrown into the House. So, in reality we have no precedent to consider and my opinion would be speculation.”

“I’m sure our viewers would welcome your opinion,” Ralph suggested.

Professor Swanson nodded to the voice in his earphone. “There’s no provision in the Constitution to mandate how the Representatives must vote, which means they could go along party lines no matter what the popular vote dictates. That would be a disaster for Hale, since he has no party members in Congress. The Democrats have a majority in the House and most likely would elect Senator Pierce. Even if the Representatives vote the will of their respective states, it isn’t likely Hale would get many votes, so the final selection would probably be between the Democrat, Senator Pierce, and the Republican, Governor Jessup. From the election returns so far tonight, Senator Pierce will benefit either way.”

Ted hit the mute button. “We already know if the election goes to the House we’ll lose. No need to listen to some pseudo expert’s opinion. Why don’t we hold off watching for a couple more hours until the vote is getting down to the wire?”

“You folks can play cards or something if you want, but I’m too excited,” Henry said. “Boring as it may be, Gina and I’ll go back to our room and watch.”

“If anything interesting happens, you be sure to let us know,” Dave suggested.

It was nearly one thirty in the morning, when Henry Abbot burst into the room. “You have to watch this,” he shouted, turning on Ted’s TV set. “I think they’re about to declare a winner.”

When the picture cleared, the background map showed the majority of the projected States colored green. Conversations in the suite abruptly stopped and everyone turned to watch the TV screen.

“Dan, it’s been a long night, but our computer is finally projecting a winner,” Ralph said. He looked as if he needed sleep badly. “With thirty percent of the precincts reporting, it’s projected that Texas, with thirty-four electoral votes will go to Hale. Added to the total he’s already received, Texas will send him over the top with two hundred and seventy-three electoral votes.

“We are declaring that Theodore Winston Hale will be the next President of the United States of America.”

The room erupted into screams and cheers. They were all on their feet, hugging each other and dancing with joy.

Bill Essex reached out and vigorously shook Ted’s hand. “Let me be the first to congratulate you, Mr. President.”



There was a light coating of snow on the ground when Ted visited Evergreen Hills the day after the election. He was not aware of the icy wind sweeping across the cemetery as he stood with bowed head at the graves of his wife and two children.

“Well we won the election, and in a couple more months I’m going to President of the United States,” he said aloud. “Isn’t that a blast? I know you all would have enjoyed the excitement of living in the White House. We’ve shared so much. I wish you were here to enjoy it with me.

“Ann, I want you to understand about Nicole.” In his heart he felt guilt, as if he were betraying Ann in some way. “It’s been so long

since the accident, and I've been so very, very lonely. I love Nicole very much, but it doesn't mean I don't still love you. I will always love you and the children, but I have to get on with my life. There is room in my heart to hold all of you and Nicole, too."

Even as he spoke a sense of peace washed over him and he knew Ann was letting him know she understood and approved.

"I'm going to be living in Washington for the next four years and won't be able to come here as often. Just remember that you're still a part of my life and I'll be thinking about you every day."

There was nothing more to say. Ted knelt and touched each marker, whispering the names. He still felt the sadness and pain of his loss even though the future looked so much different than anything he had ever anticipated.

After a time, with the cold wind penetrating his jacket, he stood and walked away toward a new and different life.

TWENTY

JANUARY HAD BEEN COLD and dismal in Washington, D.C., and Inauguration Day, January 20th, was no exception. Heavy, dark clouds, hanging over the city like a smothering blanket, forced early morning traffic to navigate with headlights. Small crystalline snowflakes swirled in the sharp wind that was blowing snaky white streamers across intersections and creating tiny drifts at every crack or obstruction on the street. Lacy patterns of frost had formed along the edges of the window where frigid air seeped around the insulation.

There was an icy lump in Ted's stomach as he let the heavy drape fall back into place. A major case of nerves had kept him awake during most of the night, and he felt as if he had not slept at all.

"How's the weather?" Nicole murmured, her head still buried under the covers.

"Just about like yesterday. Cloudy and cold."

He slipped back under the blankets where Nicole's body heat had created a warm spot. He snuggled against her and she gave a little shriek.

"Damn, Teddy, your hands are cold."

“You and Mom are the only people in the world with nerve enough to call me Teddy. I hope you don’t ever do it in public. We wouldn’t want the country to have an image of their President as a great big Teddy Bear.”

“Well, you’re my Teddy Bear.” Nicole kissed him on the chest. “A Teddy Bear with very cold hands.”

“I thought a wife’s job was to warm her husband’s hands and feet on winter mornings.”

“No way, Jose. We marry rich husbands so they’ll take us to warm climates where no one ever has cold hands.”

“That’s what I did,” Ted teased, trying to sound offended. “Didn’t we just return from a beautiful Caribbean island where you basked on the golden sands enjoying the eternal sunshine?”

“Sure, you taunt me with a few days of warmth before dragging me off to Washington to endure the world’s most miserable weather.”

“I’m sorry about the honeymoon.” Ted kissed Nicole on top of the head. “I should’ve known we wouldn’t have much privacy after the election.”

“I don’t have a single regret,” Nicole said, snuggling into the crook of his arm. “It was an idyllic honeymoon, everything a bride fantasizes about.”

“It’s hard to believe any woman dreams about dozens of Secret Service agents following her around the island, watching every move.” He softly stroked her back, delighting in the silky smoothness of her skin. “If they hadn’t been with us all the time, we could have gone skinny dipping in that little lagoon. I’ll bet you’ve never skinny dipped in your entire life.”

Nicole giggled. “Little do you know, big boy.”

“Ah ha, your deep dark secrets are finally coming out. I suppose I’ll be reading about your wicked childhood in the tabloids.” He kissed Nicole on the neck, delighting in the scent of her long hair. “I’m sorry my protection didn’t give us the privacy we deserved.”

“They weren’t watching us in the honeymoon cottage,” Nicole suggested, sounding very sexy.

“True, and a good thing, too,” Ted said. “I can see the tabloid headlines now, ‘Presidential Love Nest Exposed’. The pictures and descriptions would have titillated the vast American wasteland.”

They lay quietly for a long time, enjoying the warmth and nearness. Finally Nicole rolled over until she was nearly on top of him.

“Teddy, I’ve said this before, but I want you to know how happy and proud I am to be your wife.”

“I love you, Nicole Riley Hale,” Ted said, feeling himself becoming aroused. “If it were possible, I’d spend every minute of every day with you.”

“What about the nights?”

“Especially the nights. Except for the honeymoon we didn’t get to spend much time together during the last two months. Even then we weren’t exactly alone.”

Ted closed his eyes, his thoughts momentarily drifting to the hectic days between election and inauguration.

Preparations for assuming his duties as President had nearly overwhelmed him. He had been naïve in thinking the transition would be simple; never realizing how much time and effort would be required. It had made the long, hard campaign seem like a picnic.

There had been a multitude of meetings with President MacDonald, as he was briefed on the national and international situation. Surprisingly, although Gerald MacDonald was a career politician, Ted had discovered he liked the man. MacDonald had turned out to be kind, thoughtful, and considerably more intelligent than the media portrayed him. During eight years in the White House, under the pressure of declining popularity and the massively faltering economy, MacDonald had grown old and tired.

He had seemed almost eager to relinquish the reins of government and get as far from Washington as possible.

After the loneliness of occupying the most powerful office in the world, MacDonald had obviously learned partisan politics had severe limits and wasn't shy about sharing the lessons.

"You see the world differently from the Oval Office," he had said at one of their meetings. "You begin to realize politics aren't the beginning and end of everything. Once you sit in this chair, you honestly want to do what's best for the country, no matter how it affects your political life. The problem is that politicians spend all their time courting popularity, so it hurts when your approval ratings go down. I envy you because you're free to follow your heart without answering to a political party. Even so, you'll have your share of disagreements with the Democrats and Republicans because they hate you for what you're trying to do and Congress has become so partisan and polarized it's almost impossible to accomplish anything. Although I disagree with some of your agenda, I believe you're on the right track, and I'll support you one hundred percent.

"I love this country, and want to see it grow and become great again. You have a nearly impossible task ahead of you, but I agree that chopping government down to size is the place to start. Now that it's too late, I wish I could've done more along that line. Maybe the legacy of my administration would be very different if I had followed my gut instincts and not played so much at politics. Perhaps I had too many favors to pay back. I don't know. The freedom of not being obliged to answer to a party hierarchy is an extremely valuable tool. With the mandate you received in the election, maybe you'll be able to achieve your goals. I never had the support necessary to make it happen during my administration, but you can depend on me for any assistance I can offer."

There had been no doubt MacDonald was sincere, and Ted had appreciated the encouragement. The transition would have been infinitely more difficult if MacDonald had been antagonistic.

When an administration changes hands there are hundreds of positions, from postmasters to Ambassadors to Cabinet members, who are appointed by the President. Traditionally those jobs are political plums given to party faithful or benefactors who had contributed generously toward the campaign. Since Ted did not have a party obligation, or an established organization from which to draw appointees, he had to investigate other alternatives. He discussed the plan of keeping at least a few of MacDonald's appointees in office, only making changes as circumstances dictated.

"I think that's a great idea," MacDonald had said. "Most of my appointees are good people, although they're dedicated Republicans with definite political agendas. You can afford to be bipartisan, so you might want to appoint a few Democrats to keep those people happy, or perhaps even some people without strong political ties. Working with career bureaucrats may be difficult for you since many of them are committed to partisan politics. However there are a few people in my administration you might want to replace. I was pretty much stuck with them even though they weren't doing their jobs as well as I would have liked. If you want, I'll put together a list of my appointees who've been occupying space without accomplishing anything."

"I'd appreciate that," Ted had agreed.

Cabinet appointments had been Ted's most serious concern because department heads were intended to be the main Presidential advisors. Since many of the agency Secretaries were career politicians, Ted suspected they would have severe reservations concerning his plans to downsize government. He intended to reduce the bureaucracy and possibly even eliminate some Cabinet positions entirely. Ted presumed it would be easier to abolish departments without the resistance of entrenched bureaucrats.

Traditionally Cabinet level officers submitted their resignations when administrations changed. Ted had believed it was critical to keep a few key people in office so he could take advantage of their

expertise. He had met individually with the Secretaries of State, Defense, Treasury, and Justice, asking them to remain at their posts during the transition. They had all agreed to stay. Then Ted let it be known he would accept all the other resignations.

Ted would have loved to reward John, Dave, and Bill with high level positions because they had worked extremely hard during his campaign and would be assets in his Administration. However, he could not afford to strip Alliance Products of the management team. When Ted left the Oval Office after his term, he needed to return to a functioning business.

He had no intention of appointing career bureaucrats, who were as jealous of their power as any politician, to replace departing department heads. The government he visualized would have to be run like a business, and who better to accomplish that than business leaders. Consequently he had turned to men and women he knew personally, or by reputation, to fill the expected vacancies. His biggest problem was convincing corporate executives it was in their best interests to donate a few years to public service. He had to travel around the country, meeting potential appointees face to face. Some had turned him down, but most were excited by the challenge of reforming the government.

Nicole nudged him, bringing his thoughts back to the present. “Hey, Mr. President-elect, have you fallen asleep?”

He glanced at the bedside clock and felt a moment of panic as he rolled to a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

“Get up sleepy head,” he said, reaching back and playfully swatting Nicole on the hip. “We can’t lounge around in bed all morning. There’s a busy day ahead of us.”

“Do you think it’s going to be cold?” Nicole asked, still snuggled under the blankets. “Am I going to have to dig out my long johns?”

Ted moved to the window again and peeked through the drapes. It looked exactly like the last time he had checked.

“Long underwear might not be a bed idea,” he joked. “It’s cold and windy, but not much snow.”

“Are we going to be outside a great deal?”

“Long enough to freeze to death. We go from here to St. John’s Episcopal Church for a private worship service at nine.”

“I’ve never been inside an Episcopal Church,” Nicole said.

“Me either. It’s more tradition than anything else. Seems the majority of Presidents have attended a service at St. John’s on Inauguration Day. One advantage is that the church is within walking distance of the White House, which is our next stop.”

“Do you mean we’re going to walk from the church to the White House?”

“I doubt whether the Secret Service would let us do that even if we wanted to,” Ted said. “We’ll travel in style in a limo. At the White House we’ll meet briefly with Gerald and Helen MacDonald so we can be introduced to the staff and learn about whatever plumbing problems we’ll have. From there we’ll go to the Capitol for the Inauguration.”

“I wish there wasn’t so much ceremony involved,” Nicole complained. “I’ll worry the whole time about slipping on the ice or doing something else to make a fool of myself.”

“I could have insisted some of the traditional pomp was eliminated, but the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies is responsible for the planning, and I’m going to have enough problems with Congress without beginning the relationship by interfering with the Inauguration.”

“After the swearing in, there’s the luncheon in Statuary Hall,” Nicole said, counting off the events on her fingers. “Then we lead the procession down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House, where we freeze to death on the wind swept reviewing stand so we can watch the parade. To top it all off, there’ll be a zillion Inaugural Balls to attend.”

“That’s about it,” Ted agreed. “Then somewhere in the wee hours of the morning we’ll be able to collapse onto the Presidential bed and sleep for a couple of hours.”

“I’d better get ready if I’m going to look beautiful for the photographers.” Nicole rolled out of bed and wrapped her arms around Ted’s shoulders. “Are you nervous?”

“I’m not really nervous.” Ted laughed. “I’m scared to death. No one ever remembers campaign speeches, but inaugural addresses are recorded in history books. With the TV cameras focused on me, every time I stumble over some word, the glitch will be saved for posterity. Guys like Abe Lincoln had it made. No cameras to capture their mistakes.”

“You’ll do perfectly, and you know it,” Nicole said. “Your speech is the best inaugural address I’ve ever heard. Future generations of school kids will be memorizing it, just like the Gettysburg Address.”

“That makes me feel better, knowing teachers will be grading my effort.” He softly kissed Nicole on the lips, and then he swatted her on the butt. “You’d better get a move on if you’re going to be coming along.”

“I’ve been trying to put that off as long as possible,” Nicole murmured. “After today we’ll be living a different life style. I’m not sure I’m up to being First Lady and handling all the pomp and splendor of the White House.”

“As First Lady of the land, you’ll have a staff to help you with the protocol. All you’ll be required to do is give speeches and dedicate parks and all sorts of fun things.”

“I know. I just hope I won’t become an embarrassment to you.”

“I can’t imagine you ever being an embarrassment. You’re going to be the most beautiful and gracious First Lady this country ever had.” He kissed her cheek before sitting beside the phone. “Why don’t you hit the shower first while I order up some breakfast?”

“Don’t get anything for me. I’m too nervous to eat. The last thing I need is to get sick on the Capitol steps.”

“You’re probably right. How about coffee, toast and juice?”

“I might be able to keep down coffee,” Nicole agreed. She shuffled toward the bathroom, stopped in the doorway and turned toward Ted.

“There isn’t going to be a lot of time today to say this,” she said. “No wife has ever been prouder of her husband than I am.”

“And no President ever had a more beautiful First Lady.” Ted smiled. “Maybe history will remember us as a classic first family, like the Kennedys.”

TWENTY-ONE

THE LONG PROCESSION OF government limousines speeding down Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House included Ted, Nicole, Henry Abbot, his wife Gina, President MacDonald, his wife Helen, the outgoing Vice President and his wife, along with their Secret Service details, and members of the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies.

President MacDonald's term of office officially ended at noon, and it was beginning to appear as if the country would be without a new President for at least a few minutes. Embarking and debarking everyone from the limousines, then getting them all into elevators for the lift to the Capitol Rotunda, took over half an hour. It was eleven forty-five when the entire party was lined up at the West Front of the building for the grand entrance.

When Ted and Nicole led the procession into the blast of icy wind, the Marine Corps band struck up *Hail To The Chief*.

The steps and veranda of the Capitol were packed with dignitaries and media, including most of the members from the House and Senate, along with other city and federal officials. The crowd of two or three thousand on the lawn and roadway in front of the Capitol, cheered wildly.

As soon as the Presidential parties and committee members were seated in reserved chairs, the Honorable Kevin Upchurch, United States Senator from Wisconsin, called the Inauguration Ceremony to order and made a few brief welcoming remarks.

If the temperature had warmed, it was not noticeable with the strengthening northerly wind that swirled around the West Front of the Capitol Building. The flurries had increased in intensity and snow was beginning to accumulate on the shoulders and hats of the crowd.

Ted shivered in the icy blast even though the Kevlar vest under his overcoat blocked some of the wind. The cold must have been miserable for Nicole and the other ladies, who were dressed in skirts and coats that left lower legs exposed.

The Reverend Jason Black delivered the Invocation, which dragged on until Ted was certain even God was tired of listening.

Finally Reverend Black yielded the podium to Miranda Bosco of the New York Metropolitan Opera, who attempted to warm the crowd with a rendition of *God Bless America*.

Miss Bosco was beginning the third verse when a Secret Service agent knelt in the aisle and spoke over Ted. "Mrs. Hale, would you like a blanket for your legs?"

"Thank you," Nicole said, accepting the woolen covering. "That was very thoughtful."

Whispers passed along the rows, and within minutes all the ladies in the VIP party had blankets draped over their laps.

The musical selection ended to scattered applause. Immediately the Honorable Daniel Kroll, Speaker of the House of Representatives, stepped to the podium and called Henry Abbot forward to administer the Vice Presidential oath of office. Henry placed his left hand on the Bible, raised his right hand, and repeated the same oath administered to Senators, Representatives, and other government officials.

“I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: so help me God.”

When Country singer, Justin Allen stepped to the podium and began a rendition of the National Anthem, Ted began to believe he would freeze to death before his swearing in. As he stood, his feet felt like blocks of ice, and he could think of nothing he wanted more at that moment than warming them in a hot shower.

Finally Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Charles Bedford, rose from his seat and motioned for Ted to join him at the podium. The murmur of the crowd quieted. When Ted placed his left hand on an ornate Bible and raised his right hand, it was almost as if an electric shock went through him. Suddenly he realized this was real; that he was about to be sworn-in as President of the United States. It was humbling and more than a little frightening. Although his knees were quaking, his voice sounded surprisingly strong and clear as he repeated the oath of office.

“I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.”

Bedford shook Ted’s hand, and several dignitaries who had seats close by rose and offered their congratulations. The huge crowd was yelling and cheering as Ted approached the podium and raised both arms in a victory sign. He waited patiently for the volume of noise to subside before adjusting the microphones and beginning.

“Fellow Americans,” he said, speaking loudly into the wind so his words would carry to the far reaches of the crowd. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That

to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.’

“So reads the Declaration of Independence, succinctly stating the basic premise upon which this Republic was founded. Across the river from where we stand is Arlington Cemetery, just as there are final resting places in every city and hamlet of this nation, where lie brave men and women who shed their blood to secure and preserve those lofty ideals.

“We honor their sacrifices, as well we should, yet somewhere along the way we have lost touch with the principles for which they suffered and died. We have allowed the Government, instituted by the founding fathers, to usurp those unalienable rights, endowed upon us by our Creator. We have forgotten that the only legitimate function of government is to protect all citizens from enemies both foreign and domestic. Every other duty the government has assumed is an unwarranted seizure of power that diminishes our freedoms and desecrates the memory of the fallen. In tribute to those honored dead, and to generations yet unborn, we have an obligation to unfurl the banner of freedom and once more raise it to a place of pride and honor.

“Excessive and intrusive government is not unique to this nation, or even this century. In 1764, Voltaire wrote, ‘In general, the art of government consists of taking as much money as possible from one party of the citizens to give to the other.’ During the last century, George Bernard Shaw wrote, ‘A government which robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend on the support of Paul.’

“Rather than protecting our citizens from foreign and domestic enemies, our government has evolved into a redistribution system. Government seizes the wealth we have created and honestly earned, only to bestow it on parasites who are content to live off the fruits of our labors. It has never been a valid function of government to provide security and wealth to those who have not, or will not, earn their way. No society can grow and prosper when it penalizes

those who create value and supports those who consume unearned wealth.

“The blame for this nation’s deviation from the principles stated in The Declaration of Independence, the principles for which our heroes died, has rightfully been laid at the feet of career politicians who threaten our lives, our liberties, and our pursuit of happiness with a smothering burden of unnecessary laws and regulations. Certainly they are responsible for creating the massive and invasive bureaucracies that reach into and interfere with every aspect of our lives. Their laws and regulations have stolen our wealth, stifled our technology, and imperiled our future.

“But in a larger sense career politicians are not ultimately at fault. Each of us is accountable for the representatives we have elected. We are responsible for allowing them to pass the laws and create the bureaucracies. We have done nothing to curtail the excesses. We have failed to tend our fields, and must share the blame for the weeds that are choking out the harvest of freedom.

“Along the way we have accepted the illusion that big government could somehow solve the nation’s problems by squandering our wealth with programs for the social good.

“We gave our tacit consent to the evolution of this monster because we were lazy. We were willing to allow someone else to address the issues of health, education, welfare, and the economy. We embraced the deception that government could provide for us more efficiently than we could provide for ourselves.

“There can be no abdication of responsibility without a consequent cost. The price we paid was to give away our freedoms piece by piece until we are at the mercy of career politicians and bureaucrats.

“Thomas Jefferson described this paradox when he wrote, ‘a government big enough to give you everything you want, is strong enough to take everything you have.’

“Government, by its nature, is a voracious beast who’s appetite can never be satisfied. The beast feeds on every bit of wealth and power you give it. Eternal vigilance is the sacrifice we must make to keep the beast under control. We have not been vigilant because it was easier to close our eyes and allow the beast to feast on our rights.

“It is not too late to curb the monster’s appetite and reclaim our freedom.

“The first duty of every citizen in a free nation is to accept responsibility for his or her own life. By allowing government to make choices for us, we are betraying those men and women who fought and died to preserve our heritage of individual choice.

“The mandate you gave me in this Presidential election, tells the world you’re ready and willing to reestablish control over your own lives. You have told me it’s time to reclaim your freedom and your future.

“The voice of the people has declared you are no longer willing to sacrifice your future happiness to the insatiable monster. Government will no longer usurp your happiness for some nebulous short-term goal. Today marks the beginning of a new revolution that will ensure a happy and prosperous future for you, your children, and your grandchildren.

“However, the election does not end your obligation. It is only the beginning, because you must participate in the battle if we are to win. We no longer have the luxury of allowing someone else to control our lives.

“As Thomas Jefferson said, ‘Government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed’.

“Your President, no matter how strong his resolve, does not have the power to make effective and lasting changes without your support. Your representatives in Congress pass the laws and spend your money. Only you have the power to influence and control the lawmakers. You are under an obligation to maintain vigilance

so politicians and bureaucrats do not squander your money. You must demand that your Senators and Representatives listen to your voices and legislate the will of the people.

“You have the power to free the technology that will create the jobs and prosperity we so desperately need. You have the power to control government.

“In November your votes began the process. Over the next four years, working together, we must make it happen.

”Honor the sacrifices of those who shed their blood to secure our freedom. Honor your children and grandchildren by doing your duty in reestablishing and rebuilding the greatest nation in history.

“Let the world know that a new generation of Americans is taking action to reclaim our heritage.

“Look into your hearts for the strength and courage to do what is right for this nation, as God gives you the wisdom to see the right. Working together, we cannot fail to create a prosperous and happy future for generations to come.

“The American eagle has been bound with the chains forged by oppressive laws and regulations—by our lack of vigilance. Together we can break those bonds and once again have an eagle unchained.

“God Bless you. God Bless America.”

Ted stood at the podium for several minutes, waving to the cheering crowd. Nicole moved to his side and he hugged her, to the approval of the spectators.

“You were wonderful,” Nicole shouted above the noise.

Henry and Gina Abbot stood and joined them at the podium. “The fat’s in the fire,” Henry said, barely loud enough for Ted to hear. “God help us. For better or worse, destiny is in our hands.”

The Marine Corps band again struck up the National Anthem and the audience stood to join in a salute to the nation. There was a passion in the voices that foretold the beginning of a new world.

“They sound enthusiastic now,” Henry said. “I just wonder how long it’ll last.”

“Until the job is done,” Ted proclaimed, knowing in his heart the American people would not let him down. He voiced a silent prayer that he would not let them down.

It was at that moment he realized the significance of officially being President of the United States. He could already feel the burden on his shoulders. For at least the next four years, his every word and action would be scrutinized by the world. He wondered if he was going to be strong enough to withstand the pressure and fulfill the promises he had made.

TWENTY-TWO

IT WAS NEARLY TWO o'clock when Ted and Nicole tumbled into bed, thoroughly exhausted. They had put in brief appearances at ten Inaugural balls, accepting rounds of congratulations, and participating in at least one dance before moving on. They could have partied away the night at several more celebrations, but the day's activities had taken their toll. Ted exercised his Presidential prerogative and left the celebrating to those who were more accustomed to Washington's social life.

He was deep into an unsettling dream about climbing an endless stairway while carrying an immense weight on his back, when a soft tapping on the bedroom door woke him. The rapping became more insistent as he pulled the blanket over his head, hoping whoever was disturbing his sleep would go away.

Cussing under his breath, he finally gave up, rolling to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. "What is it?" he called.

"You asked to be awakened at seven, Mr. President."

"Thank you." Ted tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. His body protested leaving the comfort of a warm bed, but there were things he needed to accomplish on his first day in office.

“It’s Dwight Ryan,” the voice called through the door. “I’m here with your morning briefing, sir.”

For a moment, Ted couldn’t remember why someone named Ryan would be waiting to see him so early. Then his memory clicked in. Dwight Ryan, White House Chief of Staff, was a holdover from MacDonald’s administration, and had agreed to stay with the new President until they decided whether the relationship would be compatible.

“Okay, I’ll be out in a minute.”

He slipped on a robe, went into the bathroom, splashed water on his face, and hurriedly ran a comb through his hair.

“Good morning, Mr. President,” Dwight smelled faintly of after-shave, looking fresh and alert as he handed Ted a stack of papers. “These are the summaries of your daily intelligence briefings. President MacDonald always read them while he ate breakfast.”

“I’d prefer you to call me Ted in the privacy of my quarters. Mr. President sounds so damned official.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Who prepares the intelligence reports?” Ted asked, thumbing through the dozen or so pages. “Is this a normal morning’s summary?”

“No sir,” Dwight said. “Some mornings there are twice as many pages, and some days there are only three or four sheets. Generally the reports are from the CIA, FBI, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, detailing the current intelligence situation domestically and abroad. My staff prepares the summary.”

“Did MacDonald meet with the agency heads on a daily basis?”

“No sir. He would call them if he had questions concerning their reports, but only met with them Friday mornings if his schedule permitted. However, if there were crisis situations anywhere in the world he sometimes called an emergency session.”

“Are there any crisis situations this morning?”

“No sir.”

“Okay, I’ll read these as soon as possible.” Ted laid the papers on the coffee table. “Is there anything else on my schedule today?”

“No sir. Normally your appointment secretary, Jennifer Henderson, will prepare your weekly schedule, which is delivered with Monday morning’s intelligence reports. President MacDonald would approve the schedule and return it to Jennifer when he went to the Oval Office.”

“Please have Jennifer draw up my itinerary for the remainder of the week. After that we’ll follow MacDonald’s routine for the time being. I’d like to set up a meeting in the Oval Office with some of the Congressional leaders for the earliest possible time. This afternoon, if it can be arranged.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Dwight said. “Which leaders do you have in mind?”

Ted rubbed his chin as he thought about it. “Do you think the Senate Majority Leader, the Senate Minority Leader, the Speaker of the House, and the House Minority Leader would cover the congressmen who control the legislature?”

“Yes sir, those are the people you’ll work most closely with. However Senator Page, the Majority Leader, is in the hospital and Senator William Stanley is temporarily acting as Majority Leader.”

“Is Senator Page’s condition serious?” Ted asked. “Should I send flowers or something?”

Dwight nodded. “Flowers would be nice, but the last word is that Senator Page was suffering chest pains and is in the hospital for rest, tests, and observation. I can arrange to send flowers if you’d like.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“No problem. I’ll contact the people you mentioned and schedule the meeting for two o’clock this afternoon if that would be convenient.”

“That’d be fine. Maybe we should also include representatives from the American Party since we now have a three party system.

I believe there's only one American Party Senator, Kenneth Nicholson. Invite him. There are three Congressmen. Contact all three and have them select a representative before the meeting."

"Yes sir," Ryan said, making notes as Ted spoke. "Will that be all?"

"Just a couple more items. I've never met any of the Democrats or Republicans personally, and I don't think nametags would be appropriate. Would it be possible to obtain photos of each, with a brief biography? If I could have them this morning, hopefully I'll be able to put names to the faces during our meeting."

"Yes sir. I'll have photos and bios on your desk in an hour."

"I also want to call a Cabinet meeting for Thursday, including all the Cabinet members and the other cabinet level officers. Can you arrange that?"

"Yes, sir. President MacDonald generally met with the Cabinet on Wednesdays."

"We'll hold my first session Thursday. I'll decide on regular meetings at that time."

"Very good, sir."

"And finally, how do I get breakfast around here?"

"If you pick up your phone, the White House operator will connect you with the kitchen. You can order whatever you'd like."

"Thanks, Dwight. I'll meet with you again later this morning."

When Ryan left, Ted returned to the bedroom. Nicole was awake, sitting up against a stack of pillows. He leaned over and gave a brief kiss.

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

"Sleepyhead?" Nicole grumbled. "It's only seven-thirty, which means we had about five hours sleep. I don't think I'm going to enjoy this Presidential routine."

"Why don't you snooze while I shower and shave?" Ted suggested. "Then I'll order breakfast and we can start the day over a leisurely cup of coffee."

Nicole rolled to the side and pulled the covers over her head. “Good idea, Mr. President.



At precisely two o’clock, the Congressional leaders were ushered into the Oval Office. Ted shook hands, greeting each by name. They settled onto easy chairs placed in a semi-circle around the room, with Ted choosing a straight-backed chair. Business meetings were generally more productive if the participants weren’t talking across a desk.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” Ted began. “As you can imagine, I’m still trying to get organized. The first item on my schedule is to become acquainted with the leadership on the Hill because it’s my sincere wish the Legislative and Executive branches work together amicably.

“Within the next few weeks I hope to meet with each of you individually so we can become better acquainted. However, I do have three items on this morning’s agenda, which hopefully will give me a feeling for where we stand on basic issues.

“I assume you’re all familiar with the commitments I made to the American people during my campaign. Much of what I promised will require legislative changes and the cooperation of Congress. I suspect some of you will be adamantly opposed to the initiatives I’ll discuss today, although I hope both houses of Congress will put aside partisan politics and work with me. I believe it’s in everyone’s best interests if the relationship between the Hill and the White House is not adversarial.”

Although the American Party representatives would be supportive for their first meeting with the President, Ted could sense some degree of hostility from each of the career politicians. There was an almost palpable aura of hate emanating from William Stanley, the acting Senate Majority Leader. He had never met the Senator, and wondered if Stanley felt instant personal dislike, or

if the Senator considered any politician from a different political party his enemy.

“The first item I’d like to discuss is granting the President the line item veto. Please speak freely. There can’t be a meeting of the minds if we don’t say exactly what we’re thinking.”

“Mr. President, I’m not in favor of the line item veto for a number of reasons,” Senator William Stanley said. “But even so, the matter is a mute point. Since your focus has been business, rather than the political arena, you may not realize Congress passed legislation in 1996 giving the line item veto to President Clinton. However, in June 1998, the Supreme Court struck down the law as being unconstitutional, proclaiming it violated the separation between the Legislative and Executive branches. It was their opinion the law gave the President unwarranted legislative powers. I firmly agree with the Court’s decision.”

“Thank you for your honest opinion, Senator,” Ted replied. “I don’t believe the Supreme Court’s ‘98 ruling makes the line item veto a mute point. The decision was not unanimous, which means a new Court might issue a different opinion. However, even if there are continued doubts regarding the Constitutionality because of separation of Legislative and Executive branches, the problem can be solved by a Constitutional Amendment. Perhaps I should have phrased the question differently. Would you be agreeable to a Constitutional Convention considering the issue and allowing the States to decide?”

“There was almost no public outcry in ‘98 when the Court made its decision,” Democratic Congressman Daniel Kroll announced. “The public’s memories are short and I personally believe it would be virtually impossible to obtain the necessary State support for an Amendment.”

Kroll, as Speaker of the House, was next in line for Presidential succession after the Vice President, and had substantial power to control the business of the House. In addition, as the presiding

officer, he controlled the order in which members spoke and was instrumental in choosing the chairmen of standing committees and determining which committees considered bills. It was his duty to appoint most of the members of the Rules Committee and all members of conference committees.

“Obtaining the necessary State support will be my problem, Congressman Kroll,” Ted stated. “I was more interested in the temper of Congress. I gather you’re not only opposed to the prospect of a Constitutional Convention, but also are not in favor of the line item veto.”

“I thought I made my position very clear, Mr. President,” Kroll growled.

“Yes, you did,” Ted agreed. “Now I’d like to hear a Republican opinion. Senator Upchurch, what are your thoughts?”

As Minority Leader, Kevin Upchurch was his party’s chief Senate spokesperson, and had a great deal to say about how Republican Senators voted.

“I’m not opposed in theory to granting the line item veto,” Upchurch said. “Thirty-four State Governors have that power, and use it to great advantage. However, any Constitutional Amendment is a very serious matter. Before I could lend my support, I would need to study the wording of the Amendment.”

That’s political dancing at its best, Ted thought. “Thank you, Senator. The wording of the Amendment would, of course, be determined by the sponsors.” Ted turned to Douglas Pittman. “Congressman Pittman, I would be interested in your opinion.”

As House Republican Minority Leader, Douglas Pittman was a strong influence on how Republican Congressmen voted.

“I believe the people in my State want the President to have the line item veto, and it’s my obligation to vote the wishes of my constituents,” Pittman said. “I’d be open to co-sponsoring legislation proposing a Constitutional Convention.”

“Thank you, Congressman. I welcome your support.” Ted said, turning to the American Party Senator. “Now, Senator Nicholson, I realize you’re new to the Senate and like me, are still getting your feet under you, but I’d like your opinion.”

“My campaign closely followed the principals of your campaign, Mr. President,” he said. “I’d be denying the voters who elected me if I didn’t support you in both the Convention and the line item veto.”

“Thank you, Senator. And now, last, but not least, your opinion, Congresswoman Gentry.”

Charlotte Gentry was one of three congressional delegates who had been elected under the American Party banner. Ted had met her during the campaign, and found the African-American woman to be extremely intelligent.

“I agree with Senator Nicholson,” she said. “My duty to the voters in Minnesota requires me to support both measures. I would be honored to join Congressman Pittman as a co-sponsor of the legislation.”

“Thank you, Charlotte.” Ted glanced at his notes. “I have two more items on the agenda, which would also require Constitutional Amendments — a balanced budget and Congressional term limits. Would I be mistaken in assuming each of you have the same positions regarding these amendments as you have on the line item veto?”

“Mr. President,” Senator Stanley said. “I believe I can speak for all the Democrats in Congress when I say you are misinformed concerning what this country needs. Constitutional Amendments require serious consideration and you seem to be proposing them as if they were party invitations. Every member of both the Senate and the House is committed to reducing the deficit and curtailing spending, but a balanced budget amendment would constrain Congress from meeting emergency spending, such as in the event of war.”

“Provisions for an emergency could be included in an amendment,” Ted argued.

Stanley ignored the response and continued. “Term limits would hamper the continuity and effectiveness of Congress. The House particularly could be virtually destroyed since it’s possible an entirely new House could be elected every two years. Senator Pierce, during his Presidential campaign, proposed controls on election spending. That’s the direction the Senate will take in considering legislation. I respectfully suggest you look after the Executive Branch and keep your fingers out of the Legislative Branch.”

“I wish I could do that, Senator,” Ted said. “The voters have demanded that all branches of government be reformed, and the three items we’ve been discussing are vital to that reformation. You can depend on major cuts being made in the Executive Branch; beginning with a Cabinet meeting I’ll be holding later this week. If Congress will not cooperate in proposing a Constitutional Convention, I’ll go directly to the States and the American people.”

“I assure you, Mr. President, that as long as I have any influence in the Senate there will be no Constitutional Convention and the Senate will fight you every step of the way,” Wild Bill said angrily. “You’ll never get the necessary State Legislatures to request a Convention. I suggest you put your unrealistic agenda in the wastebasket and concentrate on the business of the Executive Branch.”

“Congressman Kroll, is it your opinion that the House will take a similar stand?” Ted asked.

Kroll shrugged. “I don’t know. The Democrats don’t have as large a majority in the House as they do in the Senate and a few swing votes could shift the balance. Congressman Pittman has already agreed to co-sponsor legislation. However, it’s my opinion that no matter what the House does, nothing will happen if the Senate is unwilling to cooperate.”

“Thank you for your frank opinions,” Ted stated. “It’s not my intention to alienate Congress, but you should all understand I’ll

do whatever is within my power to limit the irresponsible spending that has caused the economic crisis in this country. Perhaps you're right and we don't need all three amendments. However, that's a choice the States must have the opportunity to decide through the mechanism established in the Constitution. At this moment, I have the ear of the people and I intend to make considerable use of that advantage. Perhaps you'll reconsider your positions when you begin hearing from your constituents."

"Are you threatening us, Mr. President?" Senator Stanley roared.

"It isn't a threat," Ted answered calmly. "It's a promise. I had hoped to have an amicable relationship with all three parties in Congress. If that's not to be, I have no qualms about calling on the American people to force their wishes on their representatives."

"You're making a serious mistake, Mr. President," Senator Stanley said. "Without the support of the Democrats in Congress, you won't be able to accomplish anything."

"I believe in diversity of opinion," Ted said. "It allows us to see a different viewpoint and perhaps, with new information, even change our positions. It seems I have the tentative support of the Republican and American Party leadership. I realize you're a very powerful and influential man, Senator Stanley, and I would welcome your support. However, I don't believe every Democratic Senator or Congressman will vote in a bloc. With or without your support, Senator, the wishes of the people will be honored."

Ted stood to signal an end to the meeting. "Thank you for coming this afternoon. As I mentioned earlier, I intend to meet with each of you individually. Perhaps in one-on-one discussions we'll be able to make compromises to the country's benefit. At least I have a better feeling for where each of you stand."

As the legislators left the Oval Office, Senator Stanley refused to shake Ted's hand. Ted could see hatred in the Senator's eyes, and wondered what could possibly have happened to make the man

dislike him so intensely. He had the impression Stanley would be an implacable foe and nothing Ted could do would change the man's attitude.

TWENTY-THREE

“**D**AMNIT, I’M NOT GOING to get the support I need from the Hill,” Ted complained when he and Nicole were alone in their private quarters. “The Democrats will oppose anything I suggest. Congressman Pittman agreed to co-sponsor legislation, but didn’t sound enthusiastic about my bills passing in the Democratic controlled House. The American Party doesn’t have enough votes to be a factor.”

“I know you’re disappointed,” Nicole said. “But you expected Congressional opposition, didn’t you?”

“I was hoping Congress would put aside their partisan politics and rally behind my programs after the election. After all, I did have a solid majority of the popular vote.”

“Well, you have to admit that so far they have put aside their partisan politics. They’ve united against anything you propose. But give it time. Maybe they’ll change their attitude.”

“Not likely. The acting Senate Majority Leader, Wild Bill Stanley, was openly hostile and I have to assume he reflects Senator Page’s position. Together they have the power to tie up legislation forever. Wild Bill made it perfectly clear he’d do just that. If you hear any rumbling, it’s probably Thomas Jefferson and the framers of the

Constitution turning over in their graves. They never suspected so many politicians would be more concerned with their own financial gains than with the welfare of their constituents.”

“If Congress doesn’t come around, will it stymie your plans?” Nicole asked.

“I hope not,” Ted replied, pacing back and forth. “It’ll just make everything more difficult. As I interpret the Constitution, if two-thirds of both Houses propose an amendment, it can go directly to the State legislatures for ratification and completely skip the rigmorale of a convention. Otherwise two-thirds of the States have to pass legislation calling for a convention, which would then frame and propose the amendments.”

“The State route sounds like a slow process,” Nicole said. “I know you wanted to get going as soon as possible. Can you reverse the economic slump without the amendments?”

“Not likely. And you’re right that going the State route will be a slow process I’d rather avoid. On the other hand, I approve of the system. Since the Constitution can’t be changed without the consent of the States, the process validates this nation as a Republic. It’s just that we may get old and gray waiting for thirty-four State legislatures to call for a convention. Then, if the delegates can agree on amendments, we have to wait for thirty-eight States to ratify them. It could take years.”

“What are the chances of getting so many States to act?” Nicole asked.

“Not good. Senator Stanley doesn’t believe it will ever happen. But if we can put pressure on the State legislators, we might prove him wrong. We’ll just have to get the people behind us.”

“Don’t be too impatient,” Nicole counseled. “You can’t expect to change a couple hundred years of government growth in a few weeks.”

Ted stopped pacing and wrapped his arms around her. “You’re right. Patience isn’t one of my virtues, particularly when every day’s

delay is just hurting the nation's economy all the more. If I can push through only one amendment, it'll have a tremendous impact on Congress. It'll make those career politicians sit up and take notice. Just the line item veto would make a huge difference in controlling rampant congressional spending. I'll have to start twisting arms and find out if the President has the necessary influence."

"With all your scheduling commitments, you're not going to have time to stump the States." She sat on the divan with legs curled under her, sipping a cup of coffee.

"You're right," he agreed. "It'll be months before I get this job organized well enough so I can travel to every State legislature. I'm hoping this can be accomplished without leaving the White House. In my Inaugural Address, I told the American people they'd have to pitch in and help if we're going to achieve anything. Now it's time to see whether all those campaign volunteers heard the message and are willing to continue the fight."

"I don't think you'll have a problem with them," Nicole agreed. "They loved working for you. After the big election victory, they should still be fired up."

"We'll find out soon enough. All the Party headquarters are still in operation, and I intend to take advantage of that. Andy Stevens is coming over tomorrow morning to set up the equipment for an Internet conference. Franklin Roosevelt did wonders with his fireside chats during the Great Depression and World War II. There isn't any reason I can't do the same thing."

"That's a great idea, but what about going on TV and reaching all the voters directly?"

"I may very well do that, but only as a secondary option. If I use the TV networks the media rules say the opposition must have equal time. With the talking heads analyzing every word I say, and the Democrats and Republicans both expressing contrary opinions, there'll just be mass confusion. This way I'll be able to talk directly

to the volunteers and they can ask real time questions or make comments.”

“I’ll bet there’s never been a time in history when so many people could talk to the President, almost as if it were face to face.” Nicole was excited. “Why don’t you have Andy set up right here so you can be in front of the fireplace? It’d be just like a cozy living room visit.”

“Exactly what I had in mind. Maybe we’ll even schedule weekly sessions.”

“I love the idea of talking directly to the people,” Nicole agreed. “Somehow I believe that would meet with the founding father’s approval.”

“Maybe I should try harder to reach some sort of compromise with Congress, but President MacDonald was never able to achieve anything that way and he was a hell of a lot better at the political game than I am.”

“I have confidence in your judgment, and I agree talks with your supporters will accomplish more than trying to appease Congress.”

Ted leaned over and kissed her. “Since I don’t have anything else on my agenda this evening, do you think a one-on-one session would be appropriate for the President and the First Lady?”

Nicole stood and snuggled in Ted’s arms. “Not only would it be appropriate, but it might be a good idea to schedule one-on-ones for every evening.”



Ted sat in a wing backed straight chair, wearing a sweater with his collar open. A large log was burning in the fireplace to his right. On the other side of the fireplace, Nicole sat in a matching chair, wearing dark slacks, with a white blouse and a light blue sweater. Andy Stevens had set up a camera with a zoom lens so he could capture both Nicole and Ted in the opening sequence.

Andy gave the signal at precisely eight o'clock eastern time. Ted smiled and began speaking.

"Both the First Lady and I welcome you to the White House. For those who've never had the privilege of meeting her, I'd like to introduce the First Lady, Nicole. She insisted on taking time from her busy schedule to greet our loyal supporters."

Nicole smiled into the camera. "Since you all worked so hard to elect Ted, I wanted to personally thank you for everything you've done. Tonight Ted has an important agenda, so I'll stay out of the way. However, I made him promise that at one of the future sessions he'd allow me to give you a tour of the Presidential quarters in the White House. We appreciate being able to keep in touch via the miracle of technology, and welcome you into our home. We love each and every one of you." Nicole blew a kiss toward the camera before Andy switched the focus to Ted.

"Thank you, Nicole." Ted smiled warmly. "One of the difficulties of being President is all the security that isolates me from the people. In order to do my job, I really need to be able to hear what you're thinking and feeling.

"Now that I'm getting somewhat settled in Washington, I want to keep in touch by holding these video chats on a regular basis. I originally scheduled them for Saturday evenings, but Nicole reminded me that was date night and many of you would have better things to do. We decided Sunday evening at eight, Eastern Time, would work best for everyone. So, every Sunday, my schedule permitting, I'd welcome the opportunity to discuss the issues with you.

"With that taken care of, I need your help to begin making the changes we committed to during my campaign. Voters may be accustomed to hearing political promises that are quickly forgotten after the election, but I firmly believe if a person gives his word, then there's an obligation to keep the promises. I intend to honor every commitment I made during the campaign.

“As I mentioned in my Inaugural Address, even the President doesn’t have the power to make significant changes without the support of the American people. On my first day in office I met with the Congressional leaders and found most of them are not receptive to the changes we need for this nation to recover from the economic crisis affecting every one of us.

“My advisors tell me we’ll require at least three Constitutional Amendments in order to accomplish our immediate goals. If Congress would frame amendments and send them to the State legislatures, we could avoid the time consuming process of a convention. Since that isn’t going to happen, I need your help. We must have thirty-four States propose a convention. I’m sitting in the White House today only because you believed in me and convinced millions of others to vote for our programs. Now I need your support in forcing your State legislators to call for a convention. I know you can do it if you believe in our goals.

“Let me briefly explain which amendments we need, and the significance of each.

“In 1996 Congress passed legislation giving the line item veto to President Clinton, who used it to good purpose. However, in 1998 the Supreme Court ruled the law unconstitutional because it violated the separation between the Executive and Legislative branches of Government. In order to bypass the objections of the Supreme Court, it’s necessary to amend the Constitution.

“The line item veto allows the President to eliminate specific sections of a bill without vetoing the entire legislation. This is a privilege eighty-three percent of the governors already enjoy. Just this one tool would give the President the ability to save billions in unnecessary appropriations.

“The Federal Government spends over \$30 billion annually on special interest pork projects such as grants to study the effects of alcohol on the common housefly.

“In the short time I’ve been in office, I’ve seen non-germane riders attached to important bills that appropriate millions for an unnecessary rest area on the New York Interstate. Another provides millions to build an airport serving ten thousand people.

“Washington spends tens of billions of dollars on failed and outdated programs such as The Rural Utilities Service, U.S. Geological Survey and Economic Development Association.

“I could go on and on, but I think that gives you a good sense of why this amendment is so essential to every American.

“I believe with the line item veto, the President could save the American taxpayers well over \$100 billion each year.

“The second Constitutional Amendment would establish term limits for the members of Congress. In 1951, at the urging of President Truman, the Twenty-Second Amendment limited the President to two terms. The four consecutive terms of Franklin Roosevelt created the fear that any President in office that long would acquire too much power.

“If that’s true for the President, how much more so for the members of Congress. As it stands now, it isn’t unusual for a Representative or Senator to make Congress a lifetime career. I know of several current Senators who have been in office for more than thirty years.

“Each time these men and women are re-elected, they gain more power in their legislative branch. As you know, every politician’s first priority is to be re-elected. In order to accomplish this, they promise the voters ever increasing amounts of federal money in the form of unnecessary projects, and two thirds of their time is spent raising campaign funds.

“By limiting Congressional terms, we will automatically reduce the time and money wasted on re-election campaigns. This will curtail the abuses of career politicians and create a Congress more receptive to the wishes of the people.

“The third essential Constitutional Amendment would require the Government to operate under a balanced budget. Every year for decades the Government has spent billion of dollars more than they have collected in revenue. This irresponsible spending not only fuels inflation, making your dollars worth less, but increases the portion of the federal budget that must be devoted to paying interest on the national debt.

“The Government Accounting office reviewed a sample of the federal budget that identified \$90 billion — that’s billion spelled with a ‘B’ — spent on programs deemed ineffectual, marginally adequate, or operating under a flawed purpose or design.

“The federal government cannot account for \$30 billion spent in the last fiscal year. I would assume most of you must account for every penny you spend. Shouldn’t the Government have to do the same?

“Wasteful duplication of services funded by the federal government include 342 economic development programs; 130 programs serving the disabled; 130 programs serving at-risk youth; 90 early childhood development programs; 75 programs funding international education, cultural, and training exchange activities; and 72 federal programs dedicated to assuring safe water.

“Don’t you think consolidating or eliminating these programs would go a long way toward balancing the budget?

“The Conservation Reserve program pays farmers \$2 billion annually to not farm their land. I worked on a farm one summer and know from first hand experience it’s a demanding, labor intensive profession, but I believe even the farmers would agree being paid not to grow crops is a waste of resources.

“I hope I’ve convinced you these three amendments are essential as a first step in reducing the size and intrusiveness of Government. I need your help to make them a reality.

“We must have a minimum of thirty-four States call for a Constitutional Convention in order to propose the amendments. After

the Convention drafts the amendments, at least thirty-eight States must ratify them. It's a long and laborious process, which will only happen if each of you makes it happen.

"If you agree with me, talk to your friends and neighbors. Have them join you in writing or phoning your State and federal representatives. Demand that your elected officials support legislation for a Constitutional Convention. Let them know you expect action, and if they don't respect your wishes, you'll express your disapproval in the voting booth.

"Remember, it's your country and your responsibility to control its destiny.

"This session has taken longer than I had anticipated, so I'll only be able to answer a couple of questions. I promise you that next week there'll be time for more feedback."

A young woman's voice came over the speaker. "Mr. President. This is Linda Albright in Omaha. Would it help to have as many people as possible sign petitions to forward to the legislature?"

"That's an excellent suggestion," Ted agreed. "I'll have my staff write a petition and fax it to each of your locations. Individual correspondence is the most effective way to influence legislators, but petitions can create a great deal of pressure. Many folks who won't take the time to write a letter will sign a petition. If possible, have people do both. The important thing is to let the legislators know there are a lot of concerned voters demanding action."

A man's voice replaced Linda. "Mr. President. This is Rafael Jones, Waco, Texas. During your campaign you promised immediate changes in government. Getting thirty-four States to call for a Convention will take a long time. Are you saying we'll have to wait until these amendments are ratified before anything positive happens?"

"I'm glad you brought that up, Rafael," Ted replied. "I don't intend to wait for the amendments before I begin cutting bureaucracies. I'm meeting with my cabinet tomorrow and will initiate

an overhaul of the Executive Branch by reducing redundant and ineffective departments. That'll immediately eliminate a lot of bureaucracy and save billions of dollars.

“However, the President cannot make changes in the Legislative Branch. That’s why we need the Constitutional Amendments. You’re right about the amendment process taking a long time. However you can be assured noticeable changes will begin within days or weeks.

“Unfortunately, I’ve run out of time. I’ll be talking with you next week, bringing you up to date with our progress. I’ll look forward to hearing reports about what’s happening in America. Remember, this is your country and you’re responsible for holding your elected officials — including me — to their promises.

“Good night and God bless you.”

Ted took a deep breath and settled back in his chair. If he didn’t have confidence in the American people backing him, he would never have run for President. Now he would learn whether that confidence was justified.

TWENTY-FOUR

“**M**R. PRESIDENT.” DWIGHT RYAN had knocked softly on the door to the Oval Office and entered at Ted’s summons. “You asked to be notified when all the Cabinet members had arrived.”

Ted looked up from the Farm Subsidy Bill Congress had sent over early in the morning. “Thanks Dwight. I’ll be with them in a minute or two. Will you be joining us?” As White House Chief of Staff, Dwight and his Deputy Chief of Staff, Leon Webster, Cabinet-level administrative officers, were permitted to attend Cabinet meetings.

“Yes, sir. I’m looking forward to it.” Dwight had a sketchy idea of what would be covered in the meeting, and looked as if he were eager to watch the Cabinet’s reaction. “Should be some interesting fireworks.”

“Let’s hope not.” Ted pointed at the paperwork on his desk. “I’ll be about ten more minutes on this. Keep everyone happy until I get there.”

When Dwight left, Ted decided he wasn’t going to make a decision on the Farm Subsidy bill this morning. He had ten days before the legislation would become law without his signature, and

he hadn't decided whether he would return it to Congress unsigned, with his objections noted. The problem wasn't the bill itself, but the attached appropriation authorizing ten million for repairs to a bridge in Ohio. Even though the Farm Subsidy was important, and his veto would delay passage, he was tempted to send it back as a signal that he was going to fight pork barrel spending.

Instead, he turned his attention to the photos and biographies arranged on his desk. Once more he was grateful for his ability to quickly memorize pertinent information. He was going to upset enough people this morning without forgetting their names.

At the moment, of the fifteen Cabinet level Departments, five Secretaries had been retained from MacDonal'd's Administration, and ten Deputy Secretaries were acting as temporary Department heads. In addition there would be thirteen Cabinet-level administrative offices represented. Ted was well acquainted with Dwight, Leon, and Vice President Henry Abbot, but he had not yet met most of the others.

Although the Cabinet was still an important organ of bureaucratic management, it had generally declined in relevance as a policy making body since Franklin Roosevelt's administration. The trend had been for Presidents to act through the Executive Office of the President or the National Security Council rather than through the Cabinet. Because of this, non-Cabinet officials, such as the White House Chief of Staff, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and the National Security Advisor had as much, or more power than some Cabinet officials.

After once more matching bios with photos, Ted stacked the papers neatly on the edge of his desk, took a deep breath and headed for the Cabinet Room. He was not looking forward to this confrontation. Career bureaucrats were nearly as bad as career politicians in jealously guarding their fiefdoms. For the Administration to function efficiently, it was important they work well together, but

Ted realized none of them would be happy with the results of their first meeting.

The Cabinet Room was large, dominated by a huge oval table occupying the center of the room. United States and Presidential flags stood behind the padded leather seat reserved for the President. There were empty chairs against all four walls where aides and other agency assistants normally sat. Ted had specifically requested that no staff be present for this first Cabinet session.

When he entered the room everyone stood. "Please be seated," Ted said as he strode purposefully to his chair. There was a sudden, heavy silence in the room, as if everyone was afraid to breathe.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," Ted began. "I've never attended a Cabinet meeting, so most of you will have the advantage of me. However, I've chaired more than one Board of Director's meeting and will proceed under the assumption Cabinet sessions should be conducted in a similar fashion. This will be informal, but please withhold questions until I've finished my remarks."

Ted glanced briefly at each face around the table. These were men and women accustomed to wielding a great deal of power, and he was about to tell them their authority would soon be curtailed.

"Many of you are probably wondering why I haven't appointed Secretaries to the vacant chairs temporarily held by Deputies. I suspect a few of the temporary department heads are even harboring ambitions of being promoted."

There was nervous laughter from several of the people gathered around the table.

"We'll discuss that possibility in a moment. However, first, a little background so you'll better appreciate what I'm about to propose.

"You may know, George Washington's first Cabinet contained only four departments; State, Treasury, War, and the Attorney General. Although a Presidential Cabinet is not mentioned in the Constitution, Article II, Section 2, does suggest the principal officer

in each of the executive departments may advise the President on any subject relating to the duties of their respective offices.

“In this complicated modern world the President certainly needs qualified advice from trusted sources. However, it’s my belief many of the Executive departments have grown into bloated bureaucracies. I don’t claim to be a student of political history, but I do know government feeds, but never diets. Once an Executive department is established, it apparently exists in perpetuity, even if its purpose and function is no longer necessary.

“Because my background is business, not politics, I believe government should be run on the same basic principles as a corporation, where the expenditure of every dollar must be justified and every department must have a unique and substantial purpose. Beginning today, I intend to cut the fat from the Executive branch and bring the exploding bureaucracy under control.

“The reason I haven’t appointed permanent Secretaries to ten of the executive departments is because some of those agencies may very well be eliminated.”

There was a sudden buzz of talk around the table and several members were signaling they wished to speak. Ted held his hands out in a gesture for quiet.

“Please hold your questions until I’m finished.

“Since the purpose of a Cabinet is to advise the President, it’s my responsibility to decide which areas require that advice. At the present time I consider State, Treasury, Defense, Interior, and Justice as essential to the conduct of my administration. The Office of Management and Budget, the National Security Advisor, the CIA, and the White House Chief of Staff are Cabinet-level offices that perform valuable functions and, at least for the present, will most likely survive.

“The other Cabinet positions and the remaining Cabinet-level administrative offices are subject to review. Every single executive department, even those that are essential, has grown into

bureaucracies needlessly consuming this nation's resources. Over the years the Executive branch has lost control of the departments it's created. If we examined the structure under a magnifying glass we'd discover bureaus within bureaus whose functions are obsolete or redundant. I intend to use that magnifying glass, and be absolutely ruthless in evaluating which portions of the bureaucracy will be eliminated.

"In business, where each dollar must be accounted for, and success is profit driven, spending frequently gets out of control. It's much easier for government, spending other people's money and not regulated by a bottom line, to begin growing exponentially. Without strict oversight, the tendency is for department heads to delegate, delegate, delegate, until staff has grown beyond any reasonable or manageable size. In government, as in business, it's necessary to occasionally sit back and take a hard look at whether the purpose of a particular position is still relevant to the overall goal.

"Therefore, I'm charging each of you to provide me with the information needed to make informed decisions on where cuts should be made. I assure you there will be cuts. Some of you may not agree with my decisions, but I promised the voters major surgery, and they have a right to expect nothing less.

"I want detailed descriptions of your agency's responsibilities, a list of every bureau under your control and their specific functions. I want a justification for every dime of your budgets. If the budget includes an amount for office coffee, I want to know how much, how many are drinking that coffee, and how much you pay for the coffee.

"Although I'm new to Washington, I'm not the country bumpkin the opposition likes to portray. For example I know that if a department has budget money left at the end of the fiscal year, the policy is to spend that money on virtually anything, just to spend it. In the past, if funds were left at the end of the year it meant

a reduced budget the next year. That thinking will cease immediately. Under this administration, a department that comes in under budget will be rewarded, not penalized.

“When I have your recommendations, I’ll work closely with the Office of Management and Budget and the General Services Administration to evaluate the effectiveness of each and every Bureau.

“I expect your reports on my desk one month from today. I won’t accept excuses for delays. If you’ve been monitoring your departments as you should, you already have easy access to the information I’m requesting. I suspect some of you don’t have a clue concerning the scope of the bureaucracy under your control.”

Ted looked around the table, seeing stunned looks on most of the faces. Whatever they had expected from the first Cabinet meeting, it wasn’t this.

“Are there any questions?” he asked. He nodded toward Rachael King, Secretary of State, who was signaling a desire to speak.

“Mr. President,” she said. “I don’t have a problem with providing the information you’ve requested. I believe the President should possess a concrete knowledge of the departments under the Executive branch. However, don’t you think department heads would be in a better position to know where and when cuts should be made?”

“You’re absolutely correct,” Ted agreed. “Please include any suggestions in your reports, on which bureaus are essential and which are redundant or unnecessary. However, with or without suggestions, I intend to eliminate the fat from the Executive branch by cutting budgets and abolishing bureaus under each of your departments. Depending upon the information I receive, I’ll either eliminate or combine Cabinet and Cabinet-level agencies. At the end of this year, I expect to have no fewer than five, and no more than ten Cabinet positions. Cabinet-level administrative offices will likely be reduced by half or more.

“Does that answer your question, Secretary King?”

“Yes it does.” Although State was one of the Departments Ted had agreed was essential, Rachael King obviously wasn’t happy with the paperwork or the possibility of her department being down-sized. “Thank you, Mr. President.”

“Are there any other questions?” Several hands were raised, and Ted nodded toward Ed Quinn, Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services. “Mr. Quinn.”

“Mr. President,” Quinn said. “You’re asking for a great deal of information. Considering the size of my department, I don’t know whether a month will be sufficient time to gather and correlate everything you’ve requested.”

Several people were nodding their heads in agreement. Obviously none of them were accustomed to working under the pressure of a deadline.

“I can appreciate your concern, Mr. Quinn, but I don’t intend to give you or anyone else slack on this assignment. If your department were organized and run like a business, where you were responsible for profitability, the information I’m requesting would be available in a few hours at most. If you don’t know what your agency is responsible for, or where the money goes, then don’t you think it’s time you found out? My deadline is one month from today, and I expect each executive department to meet it.

“Any other questions?” Ted nodded toward Donald Slocum, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, who appeared to have an urgent question. “Mr. Slocum.”

“Mr. President,” Slocum said. “During your campaign you promised the American people jobs and prosperity. If you make cuts of the magnitude you’re suggesting, it’ll put tens of thousands of people out of work. Government may not be run like a business, but the workers need their paychecks just like everyone else.”

“Loss of jobs will be an unfortunate consequence of cutting fat,” Ted agreed. “However, federal employees do not create the wealth I promised the American people. They consume this nation’s

resources, which is a contributing factor to putting hundreds of thousands of productive Americans on the streets. I'm not so hard hearted I don't realize there'll be stress on people who're trying to provide for their families and I'll do everything within my power to minimize the impact of my cuts.

"However I don't see any way we can avoid a transition period during which innocent people will suffer for a short time. As bureaucratic regulations are reduced and the extra money is returned to the people in the form of tax reductions, the economy will recover rapidly. New positions will be created and jobless government workers will find profitable employment.

"Unfortunately, the cuts have to begin in the Executive branch because I have direct control. However, I assure you there'll be equal reform of the Legislative branch as my other initiatives are enacted. Within four years or less this country will have more productive and creative jobs than there will be workers to fill them. The billions of dollars saved in the Executive branch alone will stimulate growth and free technology to create enough employment to absorb the displaced government workers.

"It may sound cruel, but government employees cannot, and should not, be immune to the economic crisis affecting so many other Americans."

Bureaucrats are politicians who were appointed, not elected, Ted thought. They see themselves becoming unemployed and every one of these people is worried about covering their own ass.

"Are there any other questions?" he asked. He nodded toward Ronald Corwin, Secretary of the Treasury. "Mr. Corwin."

"Mr. President, aren't you concerned that putting so many people out of work will create a recession?" Corwin asked, wearing a smug expression, as if he were bringing up a point this amateur President had not considered.

Ted nodded. "Don't you agree that with the economy in a precipitous decline we are already in a recession? Secretary Corwin, you

of all people must realize bloated government has caused a steady inflationary spiral, which has consistently devalued the dollar. Right now in this country we are experiencing a simultaneous recession and inflation. I promise you that with government spending controlled, inflation will no longer be a factor and the dollar will increase in value. I define a recession as too many workers and not enough jobs. You can mark your calendar that in four years the jobs will be there, Mr. Secretary, and this nation will experience prosperity, not recession.”

No one else had the courage to speak out, or they were content to seethe in silence. It didn't take a psychic to see none of them were happy.

“If there are no more questions, I suggest you all get busy on the reports I requested. This meeting is adjourned. Vice President Abbot, would you please remain for a few minutes?”

The Cabinet and cabinet-level people quickly cleared the room without lingering for the usual after meeting chatter. Ted had no doubt there would be a great deal of grumbling when they were back in their offices delegating the job he had given them.

“Well, what do you think, Henry?” Ted asked.

Henry shook his head. “Wow, you've got some pissed off people. I don't believe any of them were pleased with what you had to say.”

“I didn't expect a bunch of happy campers,” Ted said. “Most of those people are drawing big salaries and depending on their little fiefdoms to support them. Unless I miss my guess, they're worried about being forced to work for a living. What about you? What do you think?”

“You know I'm behind you a hundred percent. Changes have to be made. What's the old saying, you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs? The problem is that you're in Washington, D.C., and everyone in this town is either in politics or living off the government. In other words, the enemy surrounds you. If I were you I'd be watching my back and keeping my head down.”

“Maybe I should fire the whole bunch, but until I know where cuts need to be made, I have to keep these people around.” Ted leaned back in his chair and tried to relax. “Henry, I know the VP traditionally remains in the background, but I want you to work closely with me so you’re just as familiar with my job as I am. We’re going to go over the reports together and make mutual decisions. In the event the enemy gets to me before we’ve reorganized the Executive branch, I want you to complete the cuts without missing a beat. One of us is going to have to follow through or everything we’re trying to accomplish will be wasted effort.”

“You sound as if you really think someone is going to take a shot at you. Have you been getting more threats?” Henry asked.

“Every President gets threats,” Ted replied. “The Secret Service and FBI investigate each lunatic who rants about hating the President. I’m not worried about the nut cases who write or verbalize their anger. People, who really want to see me dead, don’t expose themselves by making ridiculous threats. I’m convinced it was the opposition that tried to get me in Miami during the campaign, and if I begin accomplishing anything important, there’s no doubt in my mind they’ll try again.”

“Hey, I don’t have any desire to be President,” Henry said. “Particularly if it’s over your dead body. You keep your eyes open and your head down.”

“Don’t worry. Nicole makes sure I don’t take any chances.” Ted stood and stretched to ease a kink in his back. “But enough of this social chatter. I’ve got bills to veto and enemies to create.”

TWENTY-FIVE

“**T**HAT SONOFABITCH HALE IS causing more trouble than any bastard who ever sat in the Oval Office,” Wild Bill ranted. “He’s such a pompous ass, sitting high and mighty in the White House like he belonged there. Can you believe he actually threatened Congress when he called us over for that damned meeting?”

Wally Compton nodded without speaking, realizing the question was strictly rhetorical. Over the years he had learned that interrupting one of these tirades only excited more anger, which usually ended up being directed at him. The only consolation was the hope that one day Wild Bill’s high blood pressure would trigger a massive stroke. Then he would be free from the Senator’s blackmail.

“He uses that damned computer hookup to brainwash those stupid volunteers into agreeing with his every whim, like sheep being led to the slaughter. What he’s done is organize his own private army to fight his battles for him. And what’s he using for ammunition? Letters and petitions, that’s what. Every State legislator in the country is being buried under an avalanche of demands. With that kind of pressure he’ll get his damned Constitutional Convention before summer.” Wild Bill’s face was red and he had

worked himself into a rage. “To top it off, I’ve gotten thousands of letters demanding I support those asinine amendments. Can you believe that? Hell, I don’t get more than a few hundred letters and emails when Congress is considering a tax increase. Half the fucking letters are threatening to vote me out of office if I don’t promote Hale’s agenda.”

The Senator held up his glass. “Damnit, don’t just sit there, fix me another drink.”

Wally took the glass and walked over to the bar. He figured Wild Bill had already consumed more alcohol than he needed, but when the Senator was in an ugly mood there was no reasoning with him.

“Over the years I’ve had more political enemies than I can remember, but Hale is in a class by himself,” Wild Bill growled, taking the drink and downing half of it in one swallow. “I’ve always squashed my enemies, like stepping on bugs. They learned not to mess with Wild Bill Stanley. Because Hale is President, he may believe he can get away with threatening me, but he’s going to learn the bitter truth.”

The Senator stood and began pacing back and forth behind his desk. He was beginning to calm as the majority of his rage had been worked off. If he followed precedent, his tantrum would end quickly and he might get around to the reason he had summoned Wally. A little patience went a long way toward saving unnecessary grief.

“I made a serious mistake letting Hale get as far as he has,” Wild Bill grumbled, conveniently forgetting the failed Miami attempt. “He isn’t the incompetent bastard I thought he’d be. He may not know a damned thing about politics, but he knows how to manipulate people so he’s actually beginning to accomplish something. If he thinks he’s going to destroy everything I’ve gained over the years, he’ll find he’s sadly mistaken.”

This had been a more intense venting than normal, but Wally recognized the signs of the tirade winding down. He could almost

see the blood pressure dropping as the Senator paced. Some of the redness had left his face and he was breathing easier.

Finally Wild Bill flopped down in his desk chair and looked at Wally as if it were the first time he realized his aide was in the room.

“Have you found a man yet?” Wild Bill asked calmly as if his display of anger had never occurred.

The mood changed so abruptly Wally was caught unprepared. It took a moment before he realized which man the Senator was asking about.

“It wasn’t easy,” he said, “but I believe I’ve found a guy who’ll suit your requirements perfectly.”

“Excellent.” Wild Bill rubbed his hands together. “I knew I could count on you. Is he ex-military?”

Wally nodded. “His name is Frank Sawyer. He was a sergeant in Special Forces until he suffered a head wound during a covert mission in Iran. According to his service record the military psychiatrists decided there had been sufficient brain damage to render him unfit for active duty. He thinks the Army gave him a raw deal by forcing him to accept a medical discharge and disability pension.”

“Brain damage?” Wild Bill hissed. “What the hell does that mean? Can he be trusted?”

Wally shrugged. “I wouldn’t have recruited him if I didn’t believe he was reliable. He suffers from migraine headaches and sometimes his thinking is a little foggy, but a man has to be a little unbalanced to even consider what you have in mind. Sawyer has all the credentials you wanted. He was decorated twice for valor, is an expert rifle shot, and has been cross-trained in demolitions. According to his fitness reports, he was an exemplary soldier before the accident.”

“Accident?” Wild Bill’s voice went up an octave and for a moment Wally was afraid he might begin another tirade. “What the hell accident are you talking about? I thought you said he was wounded on a covert mission.”

“Don’t get excited. During the mission a demolition charge went off prematurely and he was hit in the head with flying debris.”

“You said he was trained in demolitions.”

“He is. Another man, who was killed in the explosion, placed the charge. If it hadn’t happened, Sawyer wouldn’t be available now. Where else are you going to find an expert rifleman and covert specialist who has a pathological hatred of the establishment?”

“I just want to be certain we can have confidence in him. This business will be dangerous enough without entrusting the mission to a lunatic who might go off the deep end. Have you told him why he’s being hired?”

“Not exactly. Sawyer knows he might be required to waste some high government official, but he doesn’t have any idea who. I don’t think he cares. He didn’t even blink an eye at the idea of killing someone. But his services won’t come cheaply. He wants a million dollars for the job.”

“A million dollars!” Wild Bill roared, leaning forward, a flush of red in his cheeks. “The bastard must either be crazy or he has some idea of the target. A normal hit couldn’t possibly be worth a million.”

“Sawyer doesn’t care who the target is,” Wally assured him. “But he places a high value on his skills. You didn’t expect an expert assassin to work for peanuts, did you? I imagine Sawyer thinks the price depends on what the traffic will bear. If you want to save money, you could hire some thug off the street for a couple thousand.”

Wild Bill shook his head. “No, we need a professional. Maybe the bastard is just testing the waters. See if you can cut his price to a couple hundred thousand.”

“Won’t work,” Wally stated firmly. “I’ve already tried negotiating, and he won’t budge. He doesn’t care whether he gets hired or not, but if we want him, and want the job done right, we have to pay his price. I think he’ll be worth every penny. The man moves like a cat, and his eyes have the look of a killer.”

Wild Bill settled back in his chair. "I suppose you're right. It's just that it might take me a while to put together a million dollars. It's not like I can write a check or charge it to my credit card."

"Sawyer wants a half million, placed in an off shore bank account, when the target is revealed," Wally explained. "Believe me, he won't make a move until the money is there. He wants the other five hundred thousand placed in the same account upon completion of the assignment."

"So all I really need to come up with is the initial amount," Wild Bill said, looking as if he were hatching a scheme. "We both know Sawyer won't live to collect the other half."

Wally shrugged. "It's your money, but if it were up to me, I'd be prepared to pay the entire amount. Sawyer promised that if the money isn't in the bank twenty-four hours after the hit, he'd come after us. The way he said it scared the hell out of me. He had a look in his eyes that almost made me wet my pants then and there."

"Us? What did he mean by us? He doesn't know I'm behind this, does he?" Wild Bill looked a little frightened. "You never mentioned my name, did you?"

"I didn't need to. Sawyer may be crazy, but he isn't stupid. He knows I don't have that kind of money. It wouldn't take a genius to figure out who I work for."

Wild Bill looked like he was deep in thought. "In the long run it doesn't make any difference if he suspects me of paying the bill," he said. "No matter how good this Sawyer is, no one can assassinate the President and survive. In fact, it might be worthwhile to make certain he doesn't survive. We don't want any loose ends."

Wally didn't respond. He suddenly realized he would be a loose end and a liability after the hit. If Sawyer were killed, which was likely, Wally would be the only living person who could connect Wild Bill to the assassination. If he expected to live to a ripe old age, he would have to make certain he had very powerful insurance. A

cautious man always covered his own ass and Wally intended to be extremely cautious.

“Since Sawyer’s no longer in the military, what does he do for a living?” Wild Bill asked, swiveling his chair and staring out the office window.

“He has a disability pension that barely covers his bills. To make ends meet, he works ten hours a day for a construction company out of Arlington.”

“That won’t do,” Wild Bill mused. “Sawyer has to be available twenty-four hours a day. We don’t want him out somewhere on a construction project when we need him. Have him quit his job. If he doesn’t already have a Washington apartment where we can reach him on short notice, insist that he get one.”

Wally shook his head. “I don’t know if Sawyer will go for that. An apartment is expensive. If he quits his job he won’t be able to afford to sit around twiddling his thumbs.”

“If we give Sawyer a hundred thousand for expenses—in addition to the money for the hit—do you think he’d disappear with the cash?”

Wally shrugged. “I don’t think so. He’s got some sort of honor code that wouldn’t let him take money without delivering the service.”

“Good, then we’ll do it that way.” Wild Bill rose and went to the wall safe behind the office bar. “I think I have that much cash on hand.”

The Senator pulled a stack of bills from the safe and counted them before handing the bundle to Wally. “I only have forty thousand here, but unless the man spends like a drunken sailor that should tide him over. Tell Sawyer we’ll put the balance of the half million in his account when we have a date and plan.”

“Okay, I think he’ll agree to that. Do you have any idea when you’re going to need his services?”

“Not at the moment, but it’ll have to be soon — within the next few weeks. We can’t allow Hale to have his damned Constitutional Convention. I have a contact in the White House who’ll keep me updated on his itinerary. As soon as he’s scheduled at a vulnerable location I’ll have you start the ball rolling.”

“Sawyer’s going to want to reconnoiter and plan the hit. I know he won’t accept the assignment unless he has time to properly prepare.”

“Don’t worry,” Wild Bill said. “I’ll let you know in plenty of time. We all want this done right.”



When Wally left the office, Wild Bill leaned back in his chair and smiled. Now that he had a qualified man and they were simply waiting for the right opportunity, it was like a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He felt a strength and power he’d never experienced before. But then, he had never planned a Presidential assassination before. It was an adrenaline rush knowing he was going to end Hale’s threat forever. He almost wished he could pull the trigger himself.

Of course, Hale wouldn’t be the finish of it. After the assassination Wally would become a liability and there could not be any loose ends. What if Wally had been careless? Someone may have been seen him with Sawyer, or perhaps he had left some incriminating evidence with the shooter. Wild Bill couldn’t take a chance on Wally being arrested and cracking under pressure.

He almost hated the thought of losing his primary aide. Wally was willing to do anything as long as Wild Bill held the materials to blackmail him. During his years in the Senate, he had never had a more pliable subordinate. But when it came to self-preservation, Wild Bill had no qualms about protecting his own interests.

He stared out the window, deep in thought. Although he had accepted Wally’s murder as a necessity, he still had to decide how to have him eliminated without creating any new loose ends. The

last thing Wild Bill needed was a row of falling dominoes that would eventually reach him.

There was only one person he knew who could silence Wally without leaving a trail. Salvatore Bono would be the perfect choice, and the hit would cost a whole lot less than a million dollars. The mobster might even handle the job for free — in return for a favor or two. If Salvatore agreed, Wild Bill was confident the murder would be properly handled. Bono had plenty of hoodlums on his payroll who wouldn't think twice about wasting a nobody like Wally Compton.

However, before he contacted Salvatore, his plans must be definite and complete. At the very least, timing would be crucial. He needed Wally until after the assassination in the event Sawyer had to be contacted at the last minute. However, if there was evidence tying Wally to the shooter, he would have to be silenced before the authorities arrested him.

Wild Bill went to the bar and poured a fresh drink. There was no hurry. He didn't need to work out the details until a time and place had been determined, and that would depend upon Hale's schedule.

Everything was falling into place and Wild Bill felt so good he considered taking the afternoon off and meeting Sylvia in their little love nest. A few hours with his mistress would be the perfect ending to the day.

He reached over and punched the intercom button on his telephone. "Sylvia, how would you like to take the afternoon off?"

TWENTY-SIX

DURING HIS FIRST FIVE weeks in the Oval Office Ted had learned there were no days off. The daily intelligence briefings couldn't be put on hold for weekends, and there seemed to be an hourly crisis only the Chief Executive could handle.

Harry Truman had hit the nail squarely on the head when he placed a sign on his desk that read, 'The Buck Stops Here'.

Ted had quickly discovered the President had less control over his time and schedule than a corporate executive. At Alliance Products he had met with key people once a week and then trusted them to accomplish their assigned jobs. In the White House no one wanted to take the initiative, as if the bureaucrats were afraid of accidentally exceeding their authority. Every time he turned around someone needed to discuss an urgent matter that could just as easily have been handled by the individual. If he didn't find some way to control the constant interruptions, it would be impossible to maintain a productive work level.

As this thought went through his mind, there was a soft knock on the door and Jennifer Henderson entered without waiting for his acknowledgement. She stood quietly in front of the desk until he looked up from the paperwork he was studying.

“Mr. President, the office of the German Chancellor, Conrad Wilhelm, called a moment ago,” she announced. As White House appointment secretary she controlled his daily and weekly schedules. No one except Dwight Ryan, White House Chief of Staff, and Nicole could reach the Oval Office without going through her. “The Chancellor would like to schedule a state visit for some time late next week if that’s possible.”

“I haven’t seen next week’s schedule,” Ted replied. “I don’t have the foggiest notion what’s involved in a State visit. How long would the Chancellor remain in Washington? Will he stay in the White House? How much of my time will I devote to the visit? Come on, Jennifer, you’ll have to give me some help here.”

“The protocol for a state visit depends upon the ranking of the visitor,” Jennifer replied patiently. “Conrad Wilhelm is Germany’s Chief Executive, so he would rate more time than say, an ambassador. Traditionally he would arrive on a Friday and spend the weekend. It would be proper for him and his wife to stay in the White House guest quarters. However, President MacDonald usually took a head of State like the Chancellor to Camp David. How much time you spend with him is pretty much up to you, although the formal meetings generally last a couple of hours, and there should be a state dinner.”

Ted rubbed the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger to relieve a beginning sinus headache. “I’ve never been much for ceremony, but I guess it’s part of the job. Is the time open at the end of next week?”

“There’s nothing that can’t be rescheduled,” Jennifer said.

“Did Wilhelm say what he wanted?”

“I didn’t speak with the Chancellor, but his secretary suggested he is concerned about your policy regarding several of the trade agreements we have with Germany. Personally I believe he wants to meet the new President who’s causing such a furor in the American establishment. He’s having plenty of his own problems with the

German economy, and probably wants to see if your ideas are working.”

“I don’t suppose I can refuse to receive his visit, can I?” Ted asked. He wasn’t particularly interested in foreign relations at the moment. His domestic agenda was going to occupy his time for several months.

“You can, sir, but it won’t help our standing in the international community if you refuse a visit from one of our most staunch European allies.”

“You’re undoubtedly right, but I don’t know a damned thing about entertaining a dignitary. I suppose there’s rigid protocol to be observed.”

“Dwight and his staff will make all the arrangements and brief you on the proper decorum. Will you agree to see the Chancellor? I’m expected to return the call and either confirm a date, or make an excuse.”

“How about if we schedule the visit for next Friday? Then we could go to Camp David and have private meetings away from this bustle. If the Chancellor isn’t one of those stuffy politicians, maybe it’d be fun to get away from Washington for a few days.”

“That would work, sir, but it might be better if the Chancellor and his wife arrived on Thursday evening. I’d recommend formal meetings on Friday, with the State dinner Friday evening. With the required ceremonials out of the way you’d have more relaxed talks at Camp David before the Chancellor and his wife fly back to Germany on Sunday.”

“You know better than I do how these things work,” Ted agreed. “Schedule it for Thursday. If he turns out to be a bore, I suppose I can always claim an emergency. Does the Chancellor speak English, or will we need an interpreter? I know some German, but not enough to carry on a diplomatic conversation.”

“I believe the Chancellor and his wife both speak excellent English.”

“Okay, then make an appointment with Dwight this afternoon so I can begin learning the proper protocol. Who handles the guest list and menus for the state dinner?”

“Generally Leon handles the details, with the approval of the First Lady.”

“At least I don’t have to worry about that,” Ted said. “Do you know whether Nicole is in her office?”

“I believe Mrs. Hale is upstairs in your quarters having lunch.”

“Is it that time already?” Ted glanced at his watch. “Is my schedule clear for the next hour or so?”

“Yes, sir. You don’t have anything until your one-thirty meeting with Attorney General Stevenson.”

“Excellent.” Ted stood and straightened his suit coat. “Then I’ll be in my quarters if you need me.”

Nicole was seated on the divan, legs curled under, reading a thick book and chewing on a sandwich. A tray, with the other half of the sandwich and a glass of milk, sat on the end table beside her.

“You’re knocking off early,” she said, using a finger to mark her place in the book.

“The only advantage to being head honcho around here is that I can leave the office between appointments,” Ted replied. “Thought I’d come up and have lunch with you.”

“You can have the rest of my turkey sandwich if you want,” Nicole suggested. “I’ve already had half and I’m watching my calories.” She patted her stomach. “The experts say women look ten pounds heavier on camera, and I need to stay trim for television.”

“You look great to me.” Ted picked up the thick sandwich and took a bite. “You have to admit the service and food here are great. When we leave Washington, we’re going to have a kitchen staff of our own. Perhaps we’ll hire the White House chef so we can enjoy his sandwiches every day.”

“Maybe I make good turkey sandwiches,” Nicole teased. “You’ve never had a chance to sample my cooking.”

“I’ll have to wait four years to find out. Our current chef wouldn’t let anyone, even the First Lady, mess around in his kitchen.” Ted finished the sandwich and washed it down with the milk from Nicole’s glass. “I’m going to have to head back for a one-thirty appointment with the Attorney General.”

“You can let him wait a few minutes. In fact, you should consider taking a vacation and letting everyone wait. You’ve been working ten to twelve hours a day, seven days a week since you’ve been President. I hardly ever see you.”

Ted walked across the room, leaned over the divan and kissed her. The kiss lingered longer than he had planned, but Nicole was so soft and warm he nearly forgot why he had come up.

“Can’t take a vacation after only five weeks,” he said. “What sort of example would that set? Besides, Interior sent over their departmental report and I’ll have to go through it with a fine toothcomb. After setting a deadline, I can’t very well let the information set on my desk. I’ll probably be late again tonight.”

“So, what else is new?” Nicole asked sarcastically.

“I came upstairs to tell you about a couple of new developments. First, I just got word this morning that Michigan passed legislation requesting a Constitutional Convention. That makes the seventeenth State to jump on the bandwagon. We’re halfway there.”

Nicole set her book on the coffee table, stood, and gave Ted a hearty hug. “That’s wonderful.”

“Yeah, the States are acting much more quickly than I’d anticipated. My weekly talks with the volunteers seem to be doing the trick. If all those letters and petitions weren’t forcing the legislators to get off their butts, we’d never have gotten action this soon.”

“I know this has been an anxious time for you, but everything is going to work out exactly like you want.”

“I think you’re right. The only thing that would make me happier is if it was four years down the road and we’d already accomplished everything we’d set out to do.”

“Four years will be over before you know it, and we’ll be free to live a normal life,” Nicole said. “Unless you decide to run for a second term.”

“Let’s hope that isn’t necessary,” Ted said. “I’m already eager to get out of this city.”

Nicole sat on the divan and patted the cushion, indicating Ted should sit beside her. “What was the other thing you wanted to tell me?”

“I’ve just been informed that the Chancellor of Germany is coming to Washington for a visit.” Ted flopped onto the sofa. “He’s probably heard how beautiful you are and wants to leer at you for a few days.”

“Don’t you think his wife might object?” Nicole asked. She pointed at the book she had been reading. “I’ve already heard about the Chancellor and his wife. I’ve been studying the proper protocol concerning a visit by the head of a foreign government. It’ll be our first state dinner and I want it to be perfect. Also, I’ll have to entertain his wife while you big shots are discussing ways to save the world.”

“How the hell did you hear about the visit? Jennifer just told me half an hour ago.”

Nicole tried to maintain a serious expression, but couldn’t keep from breaking into a giggle. “In the White House it’s impossible to keep secrets from the First Lady. I have a staff and a very effective spy system, you know. My secretary told me five minutes after Jennifer got the call. That’s why I’m up here reading.”

“It’ll be our first state function, entertaining the head of a foreign government. Do you think you can handle it? No, that isn’t what I mean. I know you can handle it.”

“I know what you mean. Yes, I’ll be just fine. Whether you know it or not, we have a chief of protocol who will instruct both of us in the proper procedures. However, my secretary says it’s no big deal. Most of the heads of foreign governments don’t expect the

barbaric Americans to handle diplomatic functions in the continental style.”

“That’s good to hear.” Ted stroked his chin as if in deep thought. “Does that mean I can wear jeans, a straw hat and be chewing on a blade of grass?” Ted asked in an exaggerated hillbilly accent. “More than likely I won’t be able to go barefoot.”

Nicole was laughing so hard her eyes began to water. “According to the protocol book the straw hat and jeans are okay, but no blade of grass. If you don’t wear shoes, your feet must be painted black and a necktie is absolutely essential.”

“I can handle that,” Ted agreed. “How about a red tie with a hand painted hula dancer on it?”

“Not the best choice, but adequate,” Nicole said.

Ted took her into his arms and gave her a big hug. “If I didn’t have to read that damn report, maybe you could teach me some bedroom protocol.”

“Bedroom protocol you handle just fine.” She gave him a passionate kiss. “However, it might be worthwhile to practice a little tonight.”

“Let’s consider that a date.” Ted glanced at his watch. “I really have to run now.”

“Can you wait for just one more minute?”

“Sure, what did you have on your mind?”

“I’ve been talking with Gina Abbot and she told me Henry is worried about all the enemies you’ve been creating.”

“We knew from the beginning I wasn’t going to make many friends in Washington,” Ted said. “We never expected the career politicians and bureaucrats to greet us with open arms.”

“But according to Gina, all the cabinet members are in near rebellion; with half of them worried to death they’ll lose their cushy jobs. It’s bad enough having every Senator and Representative on the Hill wanting your scalp, without the big shots in the Executive branch ready to slit your throat.”

“It isn’t that bad and you know it.”

“Yes it is,” Nicole insisted. “Henry hears things that are kept from the President. Some of your newly found enemies are dangerous. I don’t think they’re going to relinquish their power gracefully.”

“Well, I can’t worry about people who aren’t able to handle change. I’m sorry if they’re unhappy, but that’s the way the ball bounces. In a couple of months things will settle down. Right now I have a country to run and a government to bring under control.”

“Well, watch your back,” Nicole said, snuggling into his arms. “I don’t want to lose you, and I’m not sure cutting government is worth risking your life.”

“Getting this government under control is worth any risk,” Ted said, returning her hug. “Besides, I don’t believe I’m in serious danger. Even if I have a million bureaucrats thirsting for my blood, what we’re doing is more important than one man’s safety. If something isn’t worth dying for, it isn’t worth living for.”

“Oh, Teddy, I love you so much,” Nicole said. “I know you’re the only man in the world with the strength to do the job you’ve set for yourself. It’s just that sometimes I get frightened.”

“Want to know a secret,” Ted whispered in her ear. “There are times when I get a little scared too. But one way or another I’ll bring this government back to where it’s supposed to be.”

“I know you will.”

“Hey, I’ve gotta run. Why don’t you press my jeans and dust off my straw hat so I’ll be ready to meet the German Chancellor?”

TWENTY-SEVEN

WILD BILL STANLEY REALIZED he was being paranoid, but couldn't help himself. He had a nagging feeling that someone, somewhere was listening to his every word. On a rational level he knew there was no reason for anyone to be interested enough in his daily activities to bug his office. However, he was aware the FBI sometimes used electronic monitoring when they were investigating malfeasance in office. With the scandals that had rocked Capitol Hill during the last several years, it was entirely possible any Congressman or Senator could be under surveillance.

He had begun having his office swept daily for electronic bugs, but the security service had never found any. That didn't rule out science fiction like devices, such as voice-activated bugs that wouldn't give off a discernable signal, even when people were speaking. Then there were directional antennas that could eavesdrop on conversations inside a room by monitoring the vibrations of the window glass. It was scary to realize even a Senator had no way to be absolutely certain his discussions were private.

When Wally entered the office, Wild Bill closed the thick drapes over the windows and turned on the television to confuse any listening devices.

“What’s with the drapes and the TV?” Wally asked.

“Keep your voice down,” Wild Bill warned. “I don’t want anyone to overhear our conversation.”

Wally shrugged. “Whatever you say. You’re the boss.”

“Is your man ready?” Wild Bill asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“As ready as he can be without knowing the target,” Wally answered.

Wild Bill nodded. “If you’ve been reading the papers, you know Chancellor Wilhelm is arriving Thursday for three days of conferences. Security will be doubled and the President and the Chancellor will spend most of the weekend at Camp David, which would be too difficult to penetrate anyway. The schedule calls for the Chancellor to fly back to Germany on Sunday.”

“Are you saying you want Sawyer to make the hit before the Chancellor arrives?” Wally’s voice rose in protest. “He can’t possibly choose a time and place on such short notice.”

“Keep your voice down,” Wild Bill hissed. “I want Sawyer to make the hit immediately after the Chancellor’s visit when there’ll be a normal relaxation in Presidential security. Next Tuesday afternoon Hale will be visiting the Northrop Grumman Newport News shipyard to christen the new nuclear powered LHD-14. It’ll be the perfect opportunity for Sawyer to do his job.”

“That’s insane,” Wally protested, shaking his head. “Even if the President weren’t going to be there with his own security, both the Norfolk Naval Shipyard and Northrop Grumman are high security areas, nearly impossible to penetrate.”

“I thought you said Sawyer was a covert specialist,” Wild Bill grumbled. “If he’s as good as you claim, getting into the shipyards should be a snap.”

“What I’m saying is that taking a shot at the President is tough enough without complicating things by making the attempt in a high security area.”

“On the contrary, there won’t ever be a better occasion. Because it’s a secure location, no one will suspect an assassination attempt. The Secret Service will naturally be less vigilant.”

Wally shrugged. “We’ll have to see what Sawyer thinks. He’s the expert and should know whether he can pull it off. What time is Hale going to christen the ship on Tuesday, and what’s his route to the shipyard?”

“The ceremony is scheduled for noon. Hale will arrive by helicopter at approximately eleven fifty, drive the short distance to the dry dock in his limo, give a brief address, christen the ship, and leave immediately. All in all, he should be there between twenty minutes and half an hour. I’ve been at christenings before, and my suggestion would be for Sawyer to either strike when Hale exits the helicopter or during the speech.”

“That’ll be up to Sawyer,” Wally said. “Once he has the details, he’ll have to decide the best way to do his job.”

“He can’t screw this up,” Wild Bill said. “We’re only going to get one chance and it has to be good.”

“Oh, if it’s possible to take out Hale, Sawyer is the man to do it,” Wally promised. “But I can guarantee he won’t even reconnoiter the shipyard until the first half million is in his off shore account. You remember the deal. Half when the date and time are set and the remainder after the hit.”

“Tell him not to worry. The money will be transferred to his off-shore account before the weekend.”

Wally shook his head. “Sawyer isn’t a fool. He’ll get confirmation from his bank before he does anything. I’d suggest you transfer the funds immediately. The sooner he knows the money is there, the sooner he’ll check out the site and determine the best way to accomplish the assignment.”

Wild Bill would have preferred to delay transferring the money. He was certain Sawyer wouldn’t survive the assassination, and the idea of half a million dollars languishing unclaimed in an offshore

account went against his grain. However, if he wanted Hale eliminated, there was no option except to sacrifice the cash. After all, it was only money and could be quickly and easily replaced.

“All right, I’ll transfer the funds later today. Just make certain Sawyer doesn’t take the money and run.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll do his part,” Wally said. “Remember, he has an honor code. If he takes the job he’ll follow through.”

“Excellent,” Wild Bill gloated, rubbing his hands together. “Unless something comes up at the last minute, we won’t ever mention this subject again.” He glared at Wally. “Is that understood?”

“Of course.” Wally looked uncomfortable. “There’s just one more thing.”

“We’ve already settled the terms,” Wild Bill growled. “Sawyer can’t change the price just because he’ll be hitting the President. I won’t pay one penny more.”

“This doesn’t concern Sawyer. It’s personal.” Wally took a deep breath and settled back in his chair. He had the air of a man holding a winning poker hand. “Assassinating the President is heavy duty stuff. All sorts of conspiracy theories will pop up and there’ll be an intensive investigation, like the Warren Commission when Kennedy was killed. The FBI and every law enforcement agency will turn the country upside down until they’re convinced the gunman acted alone.”

“I’m not stupid,” Wild Bill fumed. “There aren’t going to be any connections between me and this assassination. That’s why we’ve been so careful with our arrangements. Sawyer may suspect where the money is coming from, but I’ll be transferring it through several cutouts so there won’t be any way to trace the cash.”

“I’m not worried about you being implicated,” Wally said. “It’s my own ass I’m concerned about. As middleman between you and Sawyer, I’ve been very careful. There’s absolutely nothing to connect me with the assassination. However, the thought has occurred that

you might consider me a liability after this is over. When Sawyer is dead, I'll be the only living person who can link you to the hit. Frankly, Senator, I don't trust you any more than you trust me. If you've been considering eliminating the only link between you and Sawyer, forget it. I want you to know I've taken steps to protect myself."

"What are you talking about?" Will Bill asked, pretending innocence. He had never thought Wally bright enough to think so far in advance. "We're in this together. If you go down, I go down, and I'm not about to let that happen."

"That's very reassuring," Wally replied, "but I want to make certain you don't decide it's in your best interests if neither Sawyer nor I survive." Wally reached into this pocket and removed a small tape recorder. "I've not only recorded all our discussions, but I've also written down everything, with specific names and dates."

"Are you threatening me?" Wild Bill felt a rage building. "Give me that damned recorder."

"Sure." Wally popped out the tape, slipped it into his jacket pocket and tossed the recorder across the desk. "All the notes and tapes are in a safe place. If anything happens to me, they'll be turned over to the FBI. Believe me, they'll make for interesting listening." He patted his jacket pocket. "When this one is added to the collection, I know your concern for my well being will prevent me from becoming the victim of an unfortunate accident."

"You bastard," Wild Bill roared, all thought of electronic surveillance gone. "Are you trying to blackmail me?"

"Oh no, nothing as crude as blackmail," Wally said, a smug expression on his face. "It's insurance. If nothing happens to me, no one will ever hear the tapes."

"Who do you think you are, you little shit? No one gets away with threatening me."

"I'm not threatening you, just explaining my insurance policy. After the investigations are completed, I'll give you the tapes and

documents in return for the Carolina stuff you've been holding over my head all these years."

"Get out of my office!" Wild Bill roared. "I don't ever want to see your ugly face around here again."

"You don't really mean that." Wally had a satisfied smile. "If you fire me, I won't contact Sawyer and he won't go after Hale. I'll still have the tapes and documents. Planning an assassination of the President is just as serious as making the attempt. Either way, I think we're going to have a new relationship. You might even consider giving me a bonus and a substantial pay raise when this is over."

"Get out!" Wild Bill roared.

"I'll go, but you'll call me before five o'clock today or I tell Sawyer to get lost." Wally stood and patted the pocket where he had placed the tape. "Have a nice day, Senator. I'll be expecting your call."

When Wally slipped from the room, Wild Bill was nearly insane with rage. He threw the recorder on the floor and stomped on it until it was smashed into tiny pieces. Then he sat down and took deep breaths until his temper was under control.

He had planned for Wally to have an accident after the assassination, but had never considered the little worm was smart enough to take precautions. However, the incriminating tapes and documents didn't change his plans. They simply complicated the situation. When Wild Bill gave Salvatore Bono the contract on Wally, he felt certain the mobster's people would be able to persuade Wally to reveal the location of the documents and tapes before his unfortunate demise.

He picked up the phone and dialed a number from memory. A male voice answered on the fourth ring with a noncommittal, "Hello."

"I wish to speak with Mr. Bono," Wild Bill said.

"Whom shall I say is calling?"

"Just tell Mr. Bono it's a good friend who's done a few favors for him and now needs one in return."

“Yes, sir. Please hold.”

After a minute a familiar voice came on the line. “This is Salvatore.”

“Are we speaking on a secure line?” Wild Bill asked.

“Ah, Senator Stanley, how good to hear from you,” Salvatore said, apparently recognizing Wild Bill’s voice. “Rest assured all my lines are secure. I do a great deal of confidential business on the phone and can’t afford to have the wrong people listening to my conversations. What can I do for you, Senator? Albert mentioned something about a favor.”

“Yes, I wish to request a sensitive service, but I can’t talk about it over the phone, even on a secure line. Can we meet somewhere safe and private?”

“Of course, Senator, I always look forward to seeing you. Name the time and place.”

“Could I see you tonight at my home?” Wild Bill suggested. “It’s very important.”

“That can be arranged.” Salvatore’s tone had shifted to include a threatening undercurrent. “Your favor had better be important. Generally when a man requests a service, he comes to me or we meet in a public place.”

“I appreciate that, Salvatore,” Wild Bill said, trying to sound humble. “Under normal circumstances I would gladly come to you. However, this is such a delicate matter it’s important we aren’t seen together. I’d consider it a special concession if you would honor my request.”

“It’s an inconvenience.” Salvatore paused a moment. “Because our previous business dealings have been mutually profitable, I’ll make an exception this one time. I’ll be at your home around ten this evening, if that’s suitable. It would not be in your best interests to waste my time on some trivial matter.” There was a subtle hint of menace in Salvatore’s voice.

“I promise it isn’t trivial and it’ll be worth your time.” Wild Bill hated sounding subservient to anyone, but he needed Bono. A little humble pie might taste bitter, but it wasn’t the first time he’d played a subservient role to achieve a greater goal. Dealing with a criminal was not substantially different than negotiating with a fellow politician.

“Then I’ll see you this evening.” The phone clicked and left the dial tone humming in Wild Bill’s ear.

When he replaced the receiver, he took a deep breath before walking over to the bar and fixing a drink. If Salvatore Bono agreed to do this favor, all the loose ends would be eliminated. No matter what the gangster wanted in return, it would be worth it.

TWENTY-EIGHT

THE BIG, OLD HOUSE was eerily quiet as Wild Bill watched from the living room window, anticipating Salvatore Bono's arrival. He had sent Madge home early and Mildred had retired to her room to read her sleazy novels. The fewer people who knew of Bono's visit, the better.

At precisely ten o'clock, a dark sedan swept into the circular drive and halted in front of the house. The chauffeur hurried around the car and held the passenger side, back door for Salvatore and then followed as Bono walked up the steps to the front entrance.

Wild Bill met the two men at the door, escorting them to his study. "Would you like a drink?" Wild Bill asked. "I have an excellent Scotch."

"Yes, please," Salvatore replied, seating himself in the easy chair near the fireplace.

The bodyguard leaned nonchalantly against the wall beside the study door where he had an unobstructed view of the room. He was an immense man, perhaps six feet six and at least three hundred pounds of hard muscle. His nose was slightly crooked from having been broken more than once, and there was a boxer's heavy scar tissue around his eyes. His arms, as thick as the average man's

thighs, were crossed over a massive chest. His eyes followed every move Wild Bill made.

Salvatore Bono, dressed in an expensively tailored suit with a silk shirt and tie, accepted a glass from Wild Bill and inhaled the liquor's aroma before taking a small sip. "This is very smooth," he said, exposing perfect teeth in a friendly smile that never quite reached the cold, hard eyes. Except for a faint scar on his right temple, Salvatore was a ruggedly handsome man, standing some six feet tall, slim, with silver hair. He always reminded Wild Bill of the movie star, Ricardo Montalban.

"I thought we had agreed to a private conversation," Wild Bill complained, nodding toward the bodyguard.

"I never go anywhere without Bruno," Salvatore replied. "He's my good luck charm. Isn't that right, Bruno?"

"Sure, boss." Bruno's voice rumbled from deep in his chest.

Wild Bill shrugged, poured himself a drink, and sat in the chair opposite the gangster. If Salvatore felt confident Bruno would keep his mouth shut about their discussion, then Wild Bill knew he could safely ignore the extra set of ears. His colleagues in the Senate might stab him in the back, but Salvatore Bono would never betray a confidence. It was ironic that a dedicated criminal was more dependable than an elected politician.

Although Wild Bill trusted Salvatore to honor some warped gangster code, he knew he was dealing with a violent and dangerous man. Bono had grown up on the streets of New York; committing petty crimes from the time he had stopped wearing diapers. He had killed his first man before he was out of his teens, and for a dozen years had been an enforcer for the DiAngelo family. When there had been an opening in the family's leadership, Salvatore had been promoted to lieutenant, and placed in charge of gambling operations in eastern Washington, D.C. Smarter and meaner than the average hoodlum, he had increasingly gained power and influence. He was suspected of more than a dozen murders, but

had never been indicted and had never served a single day in jail. Eventually, when Joseph DiAngelo had been eliminated in a car bombing—which some people thought was Bono's work—Salvatore had muscled his way to the top of the family, and had maintained that position for more than twenty years.

During his first term in the Senate, Wild Bill had been arrested when vice officers raided the high-class bordello he frequented. He had expected the story to appear on the front page of every New York newspaper and destroy his political career. Then, to his amazement, the incident had simply faded into obscurity. The police had released him without charges, and his name was never revealed to the press. Initially Wild Bill had believed his good fortune was due to the authorities being inclined to forgive a freshman Senator's indiscretion. Then, two days after the incident, Adam Grimaldi, Salvatore Bono's attorney, had visited his Senate office. Grimaldi left no doubt as to the identity of his benefactor.

"Mr. Bono is always pleased with the opportunity to do a favor for an important Senator," the attorney had explained. "However, Mr. Bono is old fashioned. He believes a favor places a person under an obligation that should be honored at the appropriate time."

Over the years Bono's requests had been few, and never involved anything illegal. Wild Bill had once been asked to arrange a Congressional internship for one of Salvatore's nephews. Another time he had provided a letter of recommendation to Princeton Law School for the same nephew. Occasionally, as Wild Bill became more influential, Salvatore had asked him to bury legislation that might be unfavorable to the gangster's interests.

"This is excellent Scotch," Salvatore said, holding up the crystal goblet so he could look through the amber liquid against the background of the fire.

"Thank you," Wild Bill said. "I have an exclusive connection in Scotland where I obtain the finest twelve-year-old blend in wholesale quantities. May I send you a case with my compliments?"

“That would be very kind,” Salvatore said. “However, I’m certain you didn’t ask me here to discuss fine whiskey, or to send me a case of this excellent Scotch.”

Wild Bill felt vaguely uncomfortable under the scrutiny of Bono’s eyes. He was reminded of a rabbit transfixed by a cobra’s hypnotic stare.

“Do you know my aide, Wally Compton?” Wild Bill asked, getting directly to the point.

Salvatore nodded. “We have met.”

“The sonofabitch is blackmailing me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Salvatore said. “Blackmail is a disgusting business, but what does this have to do with me?”

“I need to get back the materials he’s holding,” Wild Bill said. “Then I want to make it impossible for him to ever blackmail me again.”

Salvatore nodded. “Any reasonable man would want to recover incriminating materials. That I can understand. It isn’t clear exactly how you intend to prevent him from blackmailing you again?”

Wild Bill had no doubt Salvatore knew precisely what he meant, but apparently wanted the request in plain English. “I want him dead,” Wild Bill hissed. “But only after he’s divulged the hiding place of the blackmail material.”

“Ah, I’m beginning to understand why you wished to speak with me.” Salvatore sipped the Scotch for a moment. “In matters of this sort, it’s important there be no confusion. What exactly do you want from me?”

“A man in your position knows many people with the talents I require,” Wild Bill said, trying to frame his request without actually accusing Bono of employing killers. “Would it be possible for you to arrange for someone to convince Wally to give up the blackmail material, prior to having a fatal accident?”

“It’s possible,” Salvatore agreed. “However, what you ask is very serious. It would place a large obligation upon the recipient of such a favor.”

“I understand that if you grant this request, I’ll be in your debt forever,” Wild Bill said. Although he smiled at the mobster, it was irritating to practically beg.

“If this material is so important you’re willing to kill for it, aren’t you concerned I might keep the information and use it against you?”

Although Salvatore spoke casually, Wild Bill realized the mobster’s acceptance of the contract hinged on his reply. “Wally Compton is a worm, who doesn’t deserve to live,” he said after a moment’s reflection. “You are a man of honor, who’s word is more valuable than gold.”

“I will take care of this problem for you,” Salvatore agreed, a slight smile touching the corners of his lips.

“Thank you,” Wild Bill said, feeling a sense of relief. “There’s just one thing more. The timing of this favor is very important. It must be accomplished between noon and three next Tuesday afternoon.”

“I won’t ask why it must happen during those hours, but you should realize a schedule complicates the matter.” Salvatore held out his empty glass and waited for Wild Bill to refill it. “However, it’s possible. If my people agree to meet your requirements, I need some evidence of your good faith.”

“You know I never break my word,” Wild Bill protested as if his feelings had been hurt. “I’ve promised to be in your debt forever. What else can I do?”

“As an influential Senator you’re a powerful man. Nothing happens in the Senate without your approval.” Salvatore sipped the Scotch. “When it became obvious Theodore Hale would be elected President, I followed his campaign very closely. You may not believe this, but there are many things the man wants to accomplish

that I agree with. I approve of cutting back Government, which has grown so big it's become difficult for an honest businessman, such as myself, to make a living. However, his plan to legalize drugs concerns me. Such legislation would cause a serious decline in my profits. I can understand why the Columbians tried to eliminate him."

"I've been told Hale's staff is already drafting legislation that will decriminalize addictive drugs," Wild Bill agreed. "During the next couple of weeks an American Party Representative will introduce the bill into the House. At the same time, the American Party Senator will launch similar legislation in the Senate."

"I don't want that legislation to ever see the light of day," Salvatore said. "I believe you have the power to make certain it dies in some Senate committee."

Wild Bill smiled. He had caused bills to disappear in committee on more occasions than he could count. This time Wild Bill would be able to fulfill Bono's wishes without lifting a finger. Hale would be dead before the bills were even introduced. Vice President Abbot wouldn't have the popular support to force the measure through both houses. It was easy to promise something that would never happen.

"If that is your wish, consider it done," he vowed. "No bill legalizing drugs will ever reach the Senate floor for a vote."

"Good, then I believe we have a deal. Some extremely capable people will visit Wally between noon and three o'clock on Tuesday. Rest assured they'll convince Wally to return the materials you want. He'll be kept alive until after they have possession of the information."

"That would be perfect," Wild Bill said, rubbing his hands together. "I believe our agreement calls for another drink."

"What is the nature of the material?" Salvatore asked. "My people will have to know what they are looking for."

“I don’t know exactly,” Wild Bill admitted. “There should be some written evidence, perhaps a notebook, and one or more cassette tapes.”

“Obviously you’ve never seen them before,” Salvatore said. “How will you be certain Wally gives up everything?”

“I was hoping the men who will be talking with him, could determine that.”

“It’s possible,” Salvatore agreed. “Do you want the material destroyed, or returned to you?”

“I want it in my hands so I can destroy it myself. Can the people who obtain the material be trusted not to read the documents or listen to the tapes?”

“Are you questioning whether these men are trustworthy?” There was an edge to Salvatore’s voice.

“Of course not. I apologize if it sounded that way, but you can imagine how upset Wally has made me. I wasn’t thinking.”

Salvatore finished the Scotch, stood, and set his goblet on the fireplace mantel. “You may consider your favor granted. When the time comes, I’ll expect you to honor your promise about the legislation.”

“Thank you, Salvatore. I’ll honor my promise with my life.”

“Yes, you will.” Salvatore smiled, but there was a hint of menace in his eyes.

After he escorted the mobster and his bodyguard to the door, Wild Bill stood watching the car drive away. He felt like jumping up and down for joy. Everything was falling into place. Soon both Hale and Wally would be out of the way and he would be more powerful than ever. Life was good to those who reached out and grabbed what they wanted.

TWENTY-NINE

WITH SPRING JUST AROUND the corner, the weather remained cloudy and dismal. For the entire weekend there had only been a teasing moment or two when a warming sun had made an appearance. It was the exception on Sunday evening when the clouds broke briefly as the German Chancellor and his wife took their leave amid the traditional pomp and splendor.

The band was playing some lively march Ted didn't recognize as the Marine helicopter rose from the White House Lawn, hovered a moment and then turned toward Regan International. The cold wind, intensified by the down draft from the rotors, whipped at his and Nicole's coats as they waved goodbye to Conrad and Heidi Wilhelm.

"They can't see us anymore," Ted said, wrapping his arm around Nicole's shoulder and turning her toward the house. "Let's get inside out of this wind. I'm half frozen."

The state visit had lasted longer than anticipated, and the winter sun had already disappeared behind snow-laden clouds gathering in the western sky. The official party had been delayed at Camp David when Heidi Wilhelm dropped her wedding ring down the

guest cottage's bathroom drain. The original plan had included a farewell dinner at the White House, but it took the maintenance people so long to disassemble the plumbing and retrieve the ring, it was decided to have an informal dinner at Camp David.

"I'm glad that's over," Nicole said, hurrying into the warmth of the White House. "Hopefully we aren't going to have many state visits."

"I thought everything went very well," Ted said. "You were the perfect First Lady. The state dinner was fantastic. I don't believe I've ever had a more elegant meal."

"Leon and his staff can take credit for that. All I did was agree with their suggestions."

"Unless Jennifer made last minute changes to my schedule, we're free for the rest of the evening."

"I think we should light a fire in the living room fireplace, snuggle on the sofa and pretend we're a couple of teenagers."

"Why don't you go up, start the fire, and slip into something provocative," Ted suggested. "I have to stop by the office and see if Jennifer left this week's schedule on my desk."

"You can't desert me," Nicole said. "I've never started a real fire in my life."

"Don't tell me you were never a girl scout," Ted teased. "I thought Fire Starting 101 was basic training for all scouts."

"Boy scouts take fire building," Nicole protested. "Girl scouts are too delicate to camp in the woods and build smoky fires."

"In that case, I'm sure if you asked nicely, one of the Secret Service agents would be happy to start a fire for you."

"Good idea," Nicole said. "But don't be too long or I just might have to snuggle with the Secret Service guy. Besides, it's Sunday night and you can put your work away for a few hours."

"I'll only be ten minutes," Ted promised.

The weekly schedule was centered on his desk when he entered the Oval Office. Monday looked like a normal day, with an

appointment scheduled for Treasury Secretary Corwin at ten and another with Henry Abbot at two. Most of the day was open for him to catch up on his paperwork. Tuesday the major event was the christening of the new LHD-14 at Northrop Grumman Newport News.

Ted stopped at the Secret Service office where Bruce Hempstead was pulling weekend duty.

“Bruce, I’ve got a question,” Ted announced. “Tuesday I’m going to be christening that ship at noon, and was wondering what my itinerary will be. I figured you’d have that all worked out by now.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll be taking the chopper from here, leaving at approximately ten forty-five. The flight lasts just over an hour, and you’ll ride the limo the last three hundred yards from the landing pad to the speaker’s platform. You’ll be at the ceremony approximately thirty minutes and then back to the White House. You can expect to be in your office by around one thirty.”

“If the chopper can land three hundred yards from the speaker’s platform, can’t we just walk over? Is the limo really necessary?”

“Three hundred yards will be a long, cold hike, and you’d be exposed the entire way. It’s much more secure in the limo and a lot more comfortable.”

“Whatever you think best,” Ted agreed. “Just seems like a waste of resources when I’m perfectly capable of walking that far.”

“It’s the way we’ve worked out the best protection, Mr. President.”

“Then we’ll stick with your plan. Have a good evening, Bruce.”

Ted climbed the stairs to the second floor, rather than taking the elevator. He nodded to the Secret Service agent in the hallway, and walked into the living room. Nicole was curled on the sofa and a fire was crackling in the fireplace.

“I’m finished working for tonight,” Ted said, slipping off his tie and undoing his collar button. “This evening is just for us.”

Nicole patted the sofa beside her. "That sounds like a winner. I was beginning to think I wouldn't see you again until your term was up in three and a half years."

"I won't last three and a half years if we have many more of these state visits." Ted sat on the sofa and held out his arm so Nicole could snuggle next to him. "The Chancellor is a nice enough guy, but all that ceremony, business talk, and protocol is enough to drive me crazy. I guess I'm more of a backyard barbecue guy, where two men suck a couple of beers and solve all the world's problems over a bratwurst."

"I'll bet the Chancellor would have loved a bratwurst," Nicole said. "They're German sausages, aren't they?"

"Very German. That's why they're the staple cookout ingredient in Wisconsin. We had tons of Germans settle the area. In fact, English was taught as a second language in the Milwaukee schools until World War I."

"In spite of not having a cookout, did you accomplish much during your sessions with the Chancellor?"

"I don't know how much we were supposed to accomplish, but yeah, I think we had a meeting of the minds. Conrad is a pretty down to earth guy for a politician. Would have been nice if he'd visited during the summer because I think he'd have enjoyed going fishing."

"At least you had world affairs to discuss," Nicole complained. "Heidi is a really sweet person, but I didn't think we'd ever find a subject we both enjoyed. Neither one of us was particularly interested in talking politics, and after telling each other about our home towns, we almost ran out of topics. Generally when married women get together they discuss their kids. I certainly learned more than I wanted to know about the life histories of Heidi's son and two daughters. Since we don't have children, it didn't take long to exhaust the domestic subjects."

Ted chuckled. "Somehow, even if we had a dozen kids, I can't see you in a long, drawn out conversation on the subject. Did you finally find a topic of mutual interest?"

"Sort of. I accidentally mentioned that my grandmother loved to grow roses and took great pride in her garden. Turns out horticulture is Heidi's hot button. She's an avid gardener, with a yard full of prize-winning roses. Once she got started, I couldn't get a word in."

"That must have bored you to death," Ted said. "I'll bet you never intentionally grew a flower in your life."

"Shhh," Nicole said, beginning to giggle. "Don't say that out loud. Someone will hear and destroy my cover. The discussion was a bit on the boring side, but once Heidi got to talking about her flowers, all I had to do was nod wisely at what I hoped were the appropriate places. I'll bet you didn't know blue roses stand for new opportunities and possibilities."

"I didn't even realize there were such things as blue roses."

"For your information, roses come in dozens of tints and each color has a specific meaning."

Ted laughed. "That's very interesting, but way beyond what I want to know about flowers."

"Some day you'll be grateful for everything Heidi taught me, particularly when the President has to present a bouquet for some special occasion. I'll know the absolutely perfect color to give."

"How about forgetting Heidi and her roses and just relaxing for the evening," Ted suggested. "Tomorrow it'll be back to the grindstone and I've got to decide whether I'm going to sign the bill extending unemployment benefits. This is one of those times I'd really love to have the line item veto. There are two riders attached that'll cost millions. One is for a performing arts center in some little Iowa town with a population of about ten thousand. The other is for a grant to a Liberal Arts college in Utah so they can fund a study of ways to control jackrabbits. It isn't that a performing arts

center and controlling jackrabbits aren't worthwhile; it's just that I don't believe they should be Federal projects intended to win votes for the individual legislator. On the other hand I don't want to delay unemployment benefits to those people hurt most by this damned economic slump. I hate letting Congress get away with pork barrel spending."

"Maybe it would be a good time to test whether Congress has enough votes to override a veto," Nicole suggested.

"The problem is that Congress attaches those riders to bills that need urgent consideration and a veto just delays action. I probably should've vetoed the Farm Subsidy bill, which really didn't need to pass until spring."

"At some point you'll have to let those politicians know you won't allow them to continue spending as usual," Nicole said. "If nothing else, it'll test how much support you'll have from the Hill."

"That's pretty much what I've decided to do although I might wait until Congress sends over the Postal funding bill," Ted agreed. "There's bound to be pork attached to that one and I've got to draw the line somewhere."

Nicole snuggled against him and kissed his cheek.

"I have to spend Tuesday afternoon studying the reports I've been getting from the Cabinet," Ted continued. "I'd like to begin cutting the Executive branch before the end of the year. However, Tuesday morning I'll be going down to Newport News for the christening of the nuclear powered LHD-14. Would you like to come along? You might find the shipyard interesting."

"What is an LHD-14?"

"LHD stands for Landing Helicopter Dockship and the fourteen is the fourteenth in a series of ships. It will be the first nuclear powered LHD and will be the flagship for the Marine Expeditionary Units that are the primary response force in world trouble spots. It should be interesting."

“I’d love to go with you, but I’m already committed for Tuesday,” Nicole said.

“Don’t you think it’s still a bit cold to start your very own rose garden?” Ted teased.

“That’s a great idea. We could cut White House expenses if I grew all the flowers we need for state occasions. If I run into problems, I can always get on the phone to Heidi.”

“Seriously, what do you have planned?” Ted asked. “I was sort of looking forward to sharing the platform at an official function.”

“The Daughters of the American Revolution have asked me to speak at their luncheon banquet. It’s at one o’clock, so there’s no way I could get back from the shipyard in time. And of course, I have to look and dress perfectly, as is expected of the wife of the President of the United States.”

“We certainly can’t disappoint the DAR.” Ted kissed Nicole on top of the head and began unbuttoning her blouse. “However I hear the President likes his wife to wear as little as possible. Maybe we could have a preview now.”

“That might prove more interesting than starting a rose garden,” Nicole whispered, nibbling at Ted’s earlobe.

THIRTY

THERE WAS ONLY A soft ripple on the oily water as ex-Special Forces Sergeant Frank Sawyer eased to the surface. Huge mercury vapor lights illuminated most of the shipyard, but beside the bulk of an empty dry-dock, heavy shadows concealed his movements. For a full minute he remained suspended in the water, silently rotating a complete 360 degrees to make certain no one was lingering in the vicinity.

Satisfied he would not be observed, Sawyer slowly pulled himself from the harbor, the only sound being the quiet splatter of water dripping from his wet suit.

It has stopped snowing, but the icy wind was still swirling around the shipyard. About an inch of heavy March snow covered the dock and surrounding areas, but he wasn't concerned about leaving signs of his presence. Any footprints would simply mingle with the normal shipyard activities.

About a hundred yards further down the dock, the harbor's bright lights were concentrated around where a night shift was working on the LHD-14. Even at this distance, the sounds of hammering, welding, and equipment motors were loud enough to cover any slight noise he might make.

He slipped off his single air tank and laid it gently on the dock before reeling in the nylon rope that held the waterproof equipment bag. He shivered in the wind as he stripped off the wet suit and quickly dressed in the warm work clothing he had stowed in the bag. After removing a small parcel and the soft rifle case containing his weapon and ammunition, he stuffed the wet suit, swim fins, air tank, facemask, weight belt, and nylon rope into the bag and tied it shut.

It went against his thrifty nature to abandon the equipment that had cost a small fortune, but he had no further use for the gear, and carrying it would impede his movements. He eased the bag into the water, watching the stream of bubbles as it sank to the bottom of the harbor, knowing the chances of the items being discovered in the muck were slim. If they were ever found, the equipment was untraceable.

Slipping the smaller bag over his shoulder and carrying the rifle case in his left hand, he moved from shadow to shadow until he was as close to the work area as he considered safe. Because of the tight security around the shipyard, he had not been able to do a proper reconnaissance. He still had to determine where to set up his sniper position so he would be properly concealed and yet have a clear view of the target.

A large pre-fabricated platform, draped with red, white, and blue bunting, had been erected abutting the ship's hull. Obviously the target would be on the platform to address the gathering and christen the ship. It was an ideal setup. The President would be in the open, elevated above the spectators.

Although the dock around the work area was crowded with forklifts, crates, and a large crane that dangled over the ship's deck, the area was too open for his purposes. The closest buildings were about two hundred yards distant, but that was almost point blank range for him.

A couple of two story, flat roofed structures, which looked like warehouses, might give him the cover, elevation and field of fire he needed. At least they were worth investigating.

Taking a wide detour that kept him beyond the glare from the mercury vapor lights, he was a drifting shadow moving to the nearest building. He cursed softly when he found the side door padlocked. The old, rusty hasp could have easily been pried away from the doorframe, but a broken lock would immediately raise suspicions when the Secret Service checked the area.

Being careful to avoid leaving tracks in the patches of snow banked against the wall, he crept toward the back of the warehouse. He had nearly given up hope of finding an easy entrance when he discovered a casement window that had been left open a couple of inches. At first the window resisted his efforts, and then suddenly shot upward with a loud screech. He crouched in the heavy shadows for a minute, waiting to see if the noise had been heard. Satisfied no one had been alerted; he climbed through the open window and then carefully closed it behind him.

The warehouse stretched the length of a football field, the far corners nearly invisible in the gloom. The only lights in the building were red exit signs over scattered doorways. Rows of crates and boxes, stacked ten feet high on pallets, covered the warehouse floor.

There was barely enough illumination from the dock area, seeping through high, dirty windows, to enable him to make his way between the aisles toward the front of the building.

Windowless, twelve-foot-high overhead doors faced the harbor. About fifteen feet above the floor steel support girders stretched from front to back of the building. It was difficult to judge distances in the poor lighting, but it appeared as if the warehouse roof was about five feet above the girders. Along all four sides of the building were a series of narrow ventilation windows between the roof and the support beams.

He climbed the tallest stack of crates in the area and discovered the girders were still nearly five feet above his head. However, he had come prepared. Slipping the small bag off his shoulder, he undid the fastener and pulled out a miniature grappling hook attached to a length of nylon rope.

It required three attempts before the rope wrapped around the girder and the grappling hook caught. Then he put his full weight on the rope and pulled until he was certain the line was secure. After tying the free end of the rope to the gun case and the small bag, he climbed to the girder, swung his leg up and pulled himself on top of the foot wide steel beam.

The ceiling was closer to the girders than he had estimated, giving him a crawl space of less than four feet. He hauled up the bag and gun case, released the grappling hook, coiled the rope and replaced it in the bag. Then he duck walked to the ventilation windows along the front wall.

Inch thick planks had been laid from beam to beam; creating a three-foot wide platform, which he surmised, was some sort of maintenance walkway. Whatever the purpose, it was perfect for his needs.

The ventilation windows were all partially open, slanting outward from the bottom. The glass was filthy, but through the narrow opening he was able to see the well-lighted dry dock where the night crew worked on the ship. His perch was about two hundred yards from the christening platform with an unobstructed view of the speaker's podium.

He opened the gun case and carefully withdrew the Remington M40A1 rifle with attached Unerti 10x scope. The M40A1 was the Marine Corps' sniper rifle, a modification of the Remington 700DBL, with a maximum effective range of over 800 yards. It was the sweetest, most accurate rifle he had ever fired. There had been almost no recoil, and his grouping could have been covered with a silver dollar when he used five rounds to zero the scope at three

hundred yards. He would hate leaving the weapon behind, but his escape plans did not call for him to carry out a rifle.

By kneeling on the girder he was able to easily center the crosshairs on the Presidential podium. However, with the ventilation windows opened as they were, it was necessary to extend the rifle barrel beyond the window before the dirty glass no longer interfered with his sight picture.

Twisting the little hand crank beside the window, he opened it further, checked the scope, and then opened it two more inches until the rifle's muzzle did not have to extend into the open.

Concerned some alert security person might notice one ventilation window open further than the others, he moved along the maintenance planks, adjusting each of the windows until they were all at approximately the same angle.

Returning to his chosen spot, he groped inside the gun case until his fingers closed on the box magazine he had already loaded with five 7.62 NATO bullets. He snapped the magazine into the receiver and worked the bolt to chamber a round. Checking that the safety was engaged, he carefully laid the weapon on the platform next to the wall.

He glanced at his watch and was surprised to discover it was nearly two o'clock. While with the Special Forces, he had learned the trick of catching sleep whenever and wherever he could. His little sniper nest was as ready as it would ever be, so he decided to grab a nap before the Secret Service people arrived to check the area.

From the small bag he extracted a dark green nylon tarp. He stretched out on the maintenance walk, and carefully covered himself, knowing that from the warehouse floor he would look like a pile of equipment.

He must have dozed deeply because the sound of someone walking on the flat roof jolted him awake. That would be a Secret Service agent, using the warehouse as a vantage point with a view of

the entire shipyard. If security was doing its job, there would be one or more agents on every high point in the area.

His senses alert, he heard the faint sounds of someone undoing the padlock on the warehouse door moments before the sound of footsteps and clicking nails on the concrete floor announced the arrival of a Secret Service K-9 team. If he remained perfectly still, it wasn't likely the dog would scent him so high above the floor. Since there was no stairway or easy access to the girders, he didn't figure the security people would do more than visually inspect the area between the girders and the ceiling.

He took the chance of peeking under the edge of the tarp. A man was sweeping the area with a flashlight as he slowly made his way between the aisles of stacked boxes. His other hand tightly gripped a German Shepard's leash. The dog moved ahead, its nose to the ground, either searching for explosives or recent man scent. As Sawyer had suspected, the agent was satisfied to merely sweep the beam of his light along the girders and the maintenance walkway. The team was much more thorough on the ground, the canine partner sniffing every crevice and cranny for nearly half an hour.

When they exited the building, he heard the padlock snapped into place. He breathed a sigh of relief, knowing the security detail would consider the building clear and no one would check again before the President arrived.

It was only nine o'clock, but he was too nervous to sleep again. Instead, he mentally reviewed his escape plan.

He intended to fire at least three shots, and perhaps empty the magazine, confident he could get off all five rounds within ten seconds. After the first shot there would be a great deal of confusion on the speaker's platform and he would use the moment of chaos to begin his escape. Leaving the rifle, the tarp and the small bag on the maintenance walk, he would drop down onto the nearest pallet and make his way to the same window he had used to gain entry. Exiting the building and closing the window behind him, would

only take a few seconds. The panic and confusion at the ship would attract every person in the immediate vicinity. By running around the warehouse and mingling with the shipyard workers, he would simply become another bystander.

He figured the total time from the first shot until he was lost in the crowd would be somewhere around ninety seconds. The Secret Service agents would be looking for the assassin to be running away, or trying to conceal himself. They would never suspect the shooter of joining the curious spectators running toward the center of activity.

When he glanced at his watch again, it was only nine-thirty. In the military he had participated in plenty of ambushes where he had learned to discipline himself to endure waiting periods patiently, but the inactivity was not something he enjoyed. At least here in the warehouse it wasn't freezing cold, or boiling hot with flies and biting insects pestering him. Still, the time dragged, the hour hand on his watch seeming to stand still.

At ten-thirty workers began placing folding chairs on the platform. A couple of electricians installed a microphone on the podium and fiddled with the wires to the large speakers until the sound and volume satisfied them.

At eleven a team of Secret Service people, with their canine companions, performed a last check of the speaker's platform, making certain no one had placed explosives in the supports when they weren't looking. He smiled to himself. The Secret Service was being so thorough, but had missed him entirely. When the first shot was fired, he imagined they would be wondering what they had done wrong.

At eleven-thirty spectators and dignitaries, bundled in heavy coats against the sharp wind, began arriving. The sounds of work on the ship ceased as the security teams cordoned off the area and made their last precautionary sweeps.

At eleven forty-five, he heard the distinctive whop, whop of an approaching helicopter. From his vantage point he could not see the landing pad, but the increased alertness of the Secret Service agents, told him the President had arrived.

At eleven fifty-five a black limo drove up to the speaker's platform. The President, surrounded by agents, stepped out of the vehicle and waved to the crowd. From his vantage point, with the 10X scope, Sawyer could easily have put all five rounds in the man's head. He was tempted, but had previously decided to take his shot when the President was beginning his speech.

The few seconds before a kill were always the sweetest time, when he almost felt omnipotent, and he wanted to savor the moment. The instant the target had exited the car, Sawyer held the power of life and death in his hands. The thrill, the surge of adrenaline, was better than the best sex he had ever experienced.

He followed the action through the scope as President Hale mounted the five steps to the platform and shook hands with three men; two civilians and an Admiral. He must have made a funny comment because the people around him laughed politely. It would be the last humorous words the President ever spoke.

When one of the civilians moved to the podium, Hale sat down. In the chair, the President was partially hidden by the rostrum and the heads of the audience.

Sawyer waited patiently until the civilian finished speaking and Hale approached the podium, placing some papers on the stand.

Now was the moment. Sawyer snuggled his cheek against the stock and centered the scope's crosshairs on the bridge of the President's nose. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out as his finger began to tighten on the trigger.

THIRTY-ONE

WHEN THE ICY WATERS of the shipyard came into view Ted shivered as if a cold wind had touched his soul. Although he did not consider himself superstitious, Nicole's half-joking remark had struck a responsive chord.

"You be particularly careful today," she had said as he was leaving the White House.

"And what's special about today?" he had asked.

"I don't normally believe in premonitions," she had replied, "but I had a strange dream last night about Caesar and Brutus and all those Roman Senators. It might have been something I ate — bad salad or something — but today is March 15th, the Ides of March, and you know what that means."

Ted laughed, although he had a great deal of respect for Nicole's premonitions. "It doesn't mean a thing. First of all, I'm not Caesar. Second, according to Shakespeare, Caesar was assassinated on the steps of the Senate Building. I'll be a hundred miles away from the Capitol, so I don't think we need to worry about Senators stabbing me in the back. Last, but not least, old Julius didn't have the Secret Service looking out for his safety."

Nicole had laughed, but there had been a worried look in her eyes.

Now he found himself thinking about the Ides of March and Caesar's assassination. If he remembered the story correctly, Caesar's wife also had a prophetic dream, and had warned him not to attend the Senate that day. She had been concerned the Senators were plotting against him because they feared he was gaining too much influence that would erode their power. He had to admit there were certainly plenty of similarities between his and Caesar's situations. There were also a bunch of unhappy Senators in Washington who were worried about losing their power.

"Three minutes to touch down," Bruce Hempstead announced.
"Thanks Bruce."

Ted forced the gloomy thoughts to the back of his mind as he slipped into his overcoat and patted the inside pocket to make certain he hadn't forgotten his speech.

Marine One, a Lockheed Martin US-101 helicopter, settled gently onto the landing pad with a soft rocking motion. Two Secret Service agents immediately opened the door, extended the stairs, and hurried outside for a visual sweep of the area. Ted remained in his seat until the three GE CTZ-8E engines shut down and the rotors came to a halt.

The gusting wind sweeping down the river and swirling into the shipyard cut through Ted's overcoat during the short walk to the Presidential limo. He hoped the speaker's podium was sheltered from the icy blast. At any rate, his speech was short and he wouldn't have to endure the cold for long.

Even from the landing pad, the bulk of the LHD-14 rose into the sky like a massive building. As the limo moved closer, the size of the ship was overwhelming. Although he had served aboard the USS Wasp, the first of the LHD series, as a member of the Marine Expeditionary Unit, this ship seemed larger than he remembered.

Perhaps that was because of the nuclear power plant. At \$2.1 billion the price tag was a bargain considering the spiraling inflation.

The Defense Department budget was one area where he intended to make only minimal cuts. National defense was a legitimate function of the Federal Government, and although the failing economy was eroding America's position as the world's only super power, he intended to make certain the nation's military would remain the strongest on earth. He realized the other changes he would implement might make America seem vulnerable for a short period, but he had no intention of tempting some aggressive nation to take advantage of a perceived weakness.

The Navy band struck up *Hail To The Chief* as Ted stepped from the limo. Surrounded by a cordon of security men, he trotted up the five steps to the platform, waving for the benefit of the cameras and the gathered dignitaries.

Judging from the plethora of gold braid, the Navy was well represented among the thirty or so people seated on the platform. Ted assumed those in suits and overcoats were either congressmen or media.

Adam Fulbright, Secretary of the Navy, met him at the top of the stairway.

"Good morning, Mr. President," he said, vigorously shaking his hand. "Thank you for braving the cold weather to christen our newest ship. I'd like you to meet Admiral Hodgekiss, from the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

"It's an honor," Ted said. "I don't believe I've ever had the opportunity to shake an Admiral's hand."

"A pleasure, Mr. President." Hodgekiss was about Ted's age, but looked as if he could still wrestle Grizzly bears.

"I believe you already know Congressman Treadwell, Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee," Secretary Fulbright said.

"Yes I do," Ted acknowledged. "Good to see you again, Ray."

“If you don’t mind, Mr. President, perhaps we could start the ceremony immediately,” Fulbright suggested. “It’s damned cold out here.”

“I’d say it’s cold enough to freeze the balls on a brass monkey,” Ted agreed. There was polite laughter from those close enough to hear the remark. “We can begin whenever you’re ready, Adam.”

Ted sat on a metal folding chair beside the podium while Secretary Fulbright made introductory remarks concerning the history of the LHDs and their expanded role in the modern Navy.

The dry dock and the ship’s bulk blocked the majority of the wind, although an occasional gust swept the platform. The sun washed over the area, but did not create enough warmth to overcome the effects of the icy breeze.

As Fulbright droned on, Ted let his gaze roam over what he could see of the shipyard. Northrop Grumman Newport News was the largest privately owned shipyard in the country, and the only one with the facilities for constructing nuclear surface vessels and submarines.

In preparation for this afternoon, he had done some research, and knew that although the huge ship would be christened today, there was still a tremendous amount of work needed on the vessel’s interior before she would be ready to receive her crew and leave port on her maiden voyage. For the comfort of the 2500 members of the crew and the Marine Expeditionary Unit the ship had every amenity, from barbershops to recreational facilities to libraries to closed circuit TV and satellite hookups for personal computers. The 600 bed hospital, with six operating theaters, was stocked with the most modern medical equipment.

He made a mental note to exercise the Presidential prerogative and schedule a tour of the LHD once she was ready for sea. Maybe he would even arrange to accompany the ship on the shake down cruise.

“The USS Midway is the largest and most formidable ship ever commissioned to deliver and support a landing force at any hot spot in the world. This vessel will have the range to reach any point on the globe in record time, with the capability of delivering more destructive firepower than all the European bombing raids during World War II,” Fulbright said, winding down his speech.

“We’re honored and privileged to have our Commander in Chief here to christen this unique vessel. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the President of the United States, Theodore Winston Hale.”

The band struck up a lusty rendition of “*Stars and Stripes Forever*” amid a smattering of applause as Ted stepped to the podium. Placing his notes on the speaker’s stand and smiling at the TV cameras, he patiently waited for the music to stop.

“Thank you, Secretary Fulbright. Admiral Hodgekiss. Ladies and gentlemen. It is an honor and privilege to...Oops.”

Instinctively Ted reached to catch his notes as a gust of wind caught the top sheet and sent it sailing.

A lifetime of action was compressed into the next instant. There was a sharp stinging sensation at the top of his left ear. In the same moment he heard a distant pop and the loud ping of something striking the hull behind him.

“Get down!” The nearest Secret Service agent dove for Ted, seeming to move in slow motion.

Ted was bracing for the agent’s tackle when he received a powerful blow to his side, as if someone had struck him with a baseball bat. The impact drove him backward, and he was falling when another blow struck him in the arm. The Secret Service agent caught him, pulled him to the ground and shielded him with his body.

“Stay down, Mr. President,” the agent ordered. “Shots have been fired.”

The idea of someone shooting at him seemed unreal. He had heard a couple of pops, but nothing like the sounds of the gunfire

in Miami. Yet his side and arm were numb and he was finding it difficult to take in air.

Ted tried to push the agent away, but suddenly felt too weak. There was no strength in his arms. "Get off," he moaned. "I can't breathe."

Even when the agent pushed up, Ted's lungs still seemed unable to function. There was a haze over everything. When he felt himself drifting he realized he must have been wounded. Nicole's premonition had come true.

There was pandemonium as the spectators tripped over a tangle of chairs, attempting to get off the stage. One Secret Service agent was shielding him while the other agents crouched, weapons drawn, searching for the source of gunshots. Their shouts seemed muted and lost in the fog that was settling over Ted's mind.

"Where the hell's the shooter?"

"I think the shots came from that warehouse."

"Get some people over there."

"Get the President out of here. Now!"

Bruce Hempstead appeared, kneeling beside Ted. "Are you hurt, Mr. President? Can you walk?"

"I can't breathe," Ted gasped. "I think I've been shot."

"You men give a hand," Hempstead ordered. Several agents appeared around the fallen President. "Grab hold," Hempstead said. "Help me carry him to the limo."

Hands grabbed and lifted. Ted felt as if he were floating on air. For a moment he could breathe easier, but the jostling made him cough and there was a copper taste in his mouth.

"He's coughing blood. Radio for a paramedic to meet us at Marine One. Let's go. Move people, move."

The agents tried to be gentle, but there was no way they could shove him into the safety of the limo without creating pain. He was laid on the back seat, his head cradled on someone's lap. The

heater was going full blast, but Ted felt as if he were freezing to death.

“I’m cold,” he moaned.

“Damn it, he’s losing blood and going into shock. Move this damn vehicle. The President isn’t going to die on my watch.”

Someone covered Ted with a blanket, but it didn’t help. The pain was beginning to radiate from his arm to his chest.

“Hang in there, Mr. President. We’ve got medical help on the way.”

It could only have been a few seconds before the limo skidded to a halt beside Marine One, but it seemed an eternity. God, the pain was becoming unbearable.

He groaned when he was half lifted, half dragged from the limo and laid on a gurney. A sailor in dress uniform leaned over him.

“Mr. President, I’m a corpsman. Can you hear me?”

Ted tried to speak, but instead began coughing up more blood.

“Get him into the chopper,” the corpsman shouted. “Then get his coat off. I have to see where he was hit.”

Ted almost screamed when strong hands began stripping away his overcoat. “I think I’ve been shot,” he mumbled. “Who’ll tell Nicole? She’ll be really pissed off.”

“Damn it, let’s go!” someone shouted. “Pedal to the metal. We’ve gotta get him to George Washington Memorial and we don’t have much time.”

Someone placed an oxygen mask over his face and it was easier to breathe, but it seemed as if his lungs weren’t working properly. There was buzzing in his head and he felt as if he were drifting into a bottomless abyss.

“Get on the horn to GW Memorial and tell them we’re inbound. Then get a surgeon on the radio so he can talk with the corpsman.”

“Someone has to tell Nicole,” Ted mumbled. He couldn’t hear his own voice and he wondered if he had actually spoken or if it had

merely been a thought. It was the last thing he remembered before the world went dark.

THIRTY-TWO

WALLY WEAVED THROUGH THE beltway traffic, tapping the steering wheel in time to the beat of a country song. He was beginning to wonder if Sawyer had botched the hit. It was nearly twelve-thirty when the breathless disc jockey broke into the musical selection. Wally reached over and turned up the volume.

“We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin. There has been an assassination attempt on the President of the United States. It has not been confirmed whether President Hale was injured, although several witnesses suggest one or more bullets may have struck the President.

“An undetermined number of shots were fired while President Hale was speaking during the christening of the nuclear powered amphibious ship, USS Midway, at the Northrop Grumman Newport News shipyard. There are no reports of bystanders being wounded, although several received minor injuries during the panic following the gunfire. I repeat, there’s been no confirmation of the President being injured.

“Early reports from witnesses suggest President Hale was alive when Secret Service agents rushed him from the speaker’s platform

into his armored limousine. The President was driven to Marine One and is presumably in route to Washington.

“The FBI has taken charge of the investigation, but has not yet released any details, nor have they said whether one individual was responsible or whether there may have been more than one shooter. The senior FBI agent at the scene has promised to meet with members of the media within the next few minutes to update the press and the country on the status of the President.

“Please stay tuned to this station for further details. We will interrupt programming with bulletins as we receive them.”

Damn, Wally thought. Sawyer did it. He actually assassinated the President.

Until he'd heard the announcement on the radio, he had always thought of the assassination as an abstract concept. Now it was an accomplished fact. Although the extent of the President's injuries had not yet been announced, Wally felt certain Ted Hale was dead. He could not imagine Sawyer missing his shot. He prayed that his planning had been as careful as he believed, and no loose ends would lead the FBI in his direction.

The radio hadn't mentioned anything about arresting suspects. Of course, it had only been the initial bulletin and the details were sketchy to say the least. Hell, maybe Sawyer had managed to escape. There was nothing Wally could do now except go home and remain glued to the TV, sweating out the manhunt. Sawyer didn't strike him as the type who would be taken alive and if Sawyer were killed, which Wally fully expected, then both he and Wild Bill would be free and clear.

With his concentration focused on the traffic and the bulletins that were constantly repeated on the radio, he failed to notice the dark blue sedan that followed him off the beltway.

It wasn't until he swung into his driveway and the sedan pulled in behind him that he realized he might have a problem. Many government agencies drove dark sedans, but unless Sawyer had left

a note declaring Wally his accomplice, it was unlikely the FBI would be suspicious of him yet. He decided to wait in his car, with the doors locked, until he found out who his visitors were, and what they wanted.

Two men, casually dressed, stepped out of the sedan and approached, one on each side of Wally's car. A tingle of anxiety started butterflies fluttering in his gut. If these guys were cops or FBI, they would have been wearing suits.

The man coming up on the driver's side was tall and thin, sporting a goatee and mustache that gave him a satanic appearance. His right hand was concealed inside his windbreaker, and Wally wondered if he was carrying a weapon in a shoulder holster.

The man approaching on the passenger side was as large as a professional football player, standing over six feet and weighing at least three hundred pounds. His ape-like hands were both visible and there was no telltale bulge under his jacket. He wouldn't need a weapon to break Wally in half with his bare hands.

"Mr. Compton, we need to talk." The thin man rapped on the car window and motioned for him to unlock the door. "Don't give us any trouble."

"What do you want?" Wally shouted through the closed window.

"We have some personal matters to discuss," the thin man said. "It would be more private in the house. I don't believe you want your neighbors to overhear our conversation."

"Look, I'm really busy right now," Wally whined, knowing he was in serious trouble. "Why don't you come back some time when it's more convenient?"

The thin man opened his windbreaker to expose a handgun. "Sorry, but we're on a tight schedule and need to talk right now. Just step out of the car nice and easy and there won't be any trouble."

Wally felt a rush of fear. There would be no reason for a couple of thugs to be hassling him unless Wild Bill had arranged the encounter. If that were the case, they would want the tapes, and

weren't likely to kill him until he turned them over. But, he doubted whether giving up the tapes would be the end of it. No, Wild Bill would want these hoodlums to eliminate the last loose end.

The thin man was getting impatient and Wally knew he had to do something quickly. Obviously the thugs were professionals. They had parked the dark sedan up against his bumper, preventing him from reversing down the driveway. There was no alternative except to try talking his way out of the situation.

Wally was trembling as he slid from the car. He had to hold onto the door for a moment to keep from falling. "Look, we can work something out," he stammered. "I've got money in the house. I can pay whatever you want."

The larger man had come around the car, and grabbed Wally around the bicep. The grip was like steel, and when the man squeezed a bit, Wally whined as the circulation was shut off.

"Sam, bring Mr. Compton along," the thin man said. "I think he would prefer discussing our problem in the comfort of his living room, wouldn't you, Mr. Compton?"

A hundred thoughts passed through Wally's mind, as he desperately tried to think of some way to escape these men. Even if he had been strong enough to pull loose, running or yelling wouldn't accomplish anything. It wasn't likely any of his neighbors would be home at this time of day.

Suddenly he remembered the expensive alarm system he'd installed in the house last year. If he didn't enter the proper code within sixty seconds of opening the front door, a signal automatically went to the monitoring service. Twice he had forgotten to deactivate the system, and each time a police car had been dispatched to investigate a possible break-in.

He was shaking so badly he had difficulty getting the key into the front door lock. Impatiently the thin man grabbed the keys, unlocked the door and stepped aside as the big man pushed Wally

forward. He tripped over the doormat and fell heavily onto the hallway's tile floor.

"Pick him up, Sam." The thin one pointed at the alarm panel. "Mr. Compton needs to enter the code. We don't want the security company to think there's a burglary in progress, do we?"

Wally was nearly in tears when Sam hauled him to his feet and pushed him toward the alarm panel. For a moment he considered entering the wrong code, which would also trigger the alarm.

"Mr. Compton, it wouldn't be in your best interest to enter the incorrect numbers," the thin man said politely. He pulled a large automatic from under his jacket. "I would suggest you take it slow and easy so you get it right the first time."

Wally didn't think these men would kill him before they secured the tapes, so he hesitated. If he stalled for only a few more seconds, the alarm would activate.

"I won't kill you if you don't enter the code," the thin man said, as if he were reading Wally's mind. "However, a bullet in the knee might convince you I'm serious."

"God, don't shoot," Wally screamed, his shoulder sagging in defeat, realizing he had lost his last chance to summon help. "I'll do it."

He quickly entered the proper four digits, deactivating the alarm system.

"Very good, Mr. Compton. Now, why don't we have seats in the living room where we'll be comfortable?"

Wally was sweating profusely as he was pushed onto an easy chair. His bladder was painfully full, and he was afraid he'd wet himself.

"It'll go easier if you cooperate," the thin man suggested. "All we want is the tapes and notebook. Give them to us, and you'll save yourself a great deal of pain. I promise that in the end, you'll be more than happy to accommodate us."

"What tapes and notebook?" Wally asked, trying to sound mystified. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The thin man shrugged and looked at his partner. "Sam," he said.

There was an explosion of lights in his head as the big man suddenly slapped Wally viciously across the face. Then a massive hand grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him to his feet as if he were a child. A fist smashed into his stomach, driving all the air from his lungs. Sam released his grip and Wally fell to the floor, curled into a fetal position, afraid he was going to be sick. His bladder released and the smell of warm urine filled the room.

"It's your choice," the thin man said, kicking him maliciously in the back. "You can make this easy or hard. It's okay with me either way, but Sam would prefer the hard way, wouldn't you Sam?"

"Yeah, boss, the hard way."

Wally wanted to speak, but there was not enough air in his lungs. He was certain a beating would only be the beginning of the persuasion, and he was not a brave man. He would avoid unnecessary pain if he told where the material was hidden. He also knew if he lied to gain time these thugs would make him regret the delay. Either way, they would kill him once they had the evidence.

"Pick him up and put him back in the chair, Sam. I'll ask him nicely one more time, and then you can use your knife. You'd like to use your blade, wouldn't you, Sam?"

"Yeah boss, I like the knife."

Wally felt a fear like nothing he had ever known. If he pleaded with these hoodlums and told them he had a second set of materials, they would torture him until he gave up both. Even if he were destined to die today, there was some satisfaction in knowing he would still be able to fry Wild Bill in his own juices. It was too bad he wouldn't be there to see the expression on the Senator's face when he learned he had been outmaneuvered.

"Now, let me explain this one more time," the thin man said. "If you don't tell me where you hid the material, I'll let Sam work on you with his knife. Show Mr. Compton the knife, Sam."

“Sure, boss.” Sam took a switchblade from his pocket, pushed a button, and the long, thin blade snapped into place.

“God, don’t cut me,” Wally pleaded. “I’ll give you anything you want, but I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

The thin man shrugged. “Sam.”

“No! Wait!” Wally screamed.

Sam grabbed Wally’s right hand and slammed it down on the coffee table. He forced the index finger out straight and placed the sharp edge of the blade against the second knuckle. Wally tried to pull away as Sam began slowly applying pressure, but the big man’s grip was like iron.

“Don’t cut off my finger!” Wally screamed. “I’ll tell you what you want to know. Just don’t cut me.”

“Hold it Sam,” the thin man said. “I believe Mr. Compton is willing to cooperate.”

Wally pulled his hand free and saw dark red blood welling from the slash on his knuckle. He pulled a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and wrapped it around the finger. Tears were running down his cheeks.

“If I have to let Sam use the knife again, he won’t stop until he cuts something off. Where is the material?”

“It’s in my bedroom safe,” Wally whimpered.

“Then I’d suggest we all go into the bedroom,” the thin man said. “Sam, would you please help Mr. Compton. He doesn’t seem to be walking very well.”

With Sam holding him under the arm and half dragging him, Wally stumbled to the bedroom. “The safe is in the floor under the nightstand,” Wally said.

Sam swept aside the small table and kicked away the throw rug that covered the safe.

Wally dropped to his knees and fumbled with the combination lock. On the first attempt he missed the proper stops and the door remained sealed.

“I don’t think Mr. Compton is trying hard enough to cooperate, Sam. Perhaps you could persuade him.”

“No, just give me a chance,” Wally screamed.

“I’m a reasonable man. You have one more opportunity before I let Sam convince you to tell me the combination so I can open the lock. In that case we won’t need you, will we?”

Wally took a deep breath and tried to control the trembling in his hands. This time he got the combination right and was able to pull open the door. He extracted a large manila envelope, which he pitched toward the thin man. It was a weak toss, and for a moment both hoodlums’ attention was diverted as the thin man attempted to catch the errant throw.

Taking advantage of the distraction to make a last desperate attempt to save his life, Wally quickly reached deeper into the safe and pulled out the pistol he always kept there.

If the safety had not been engaged, he might have pulled it off. He had pointed the weapon at the thin man before his assailants could react, but when he attempted to pull the trigger, nothing happened.

“That wasn’t very smart, Mr. Compton.”

Wally felt the tears coming as his last hope faded. His arm dropped to his side, no longer having the strength to hold up the pistol.

The explosion of the thin man’s weapon deafened him, as the impact of the bullet threw him backward against the wall. The world was beginning to dissolve into blackness as he saw the muzzle of the automatic pointed directly between his eyes.

The last thing Wally ever heard was his killer’s malicious laugh.

THIRTY-THREE

NICOLE NIBBLED AT THE prime rib, attempting to carry on simultaneous conversations with the women on either side of her, finding it difficult to talk, eat, and smile all at the same time. Her speech to the Daughters of the American Revolution wasn't scheduled until after the tables were cleared and she was anxious to be done with it. She didn't enjoy personal appearances, although she realized they would always be a major obligation of the First Lady. In addition to the attack of nerves that always preceded public speaking, she found most of these luncheons boring.

Bill Simpson, head of her security detail, leaned over from behind her chair. "Mrs. Hale, there's been an emergency and we have to leave," he said in a stage whisper.

"I can't just walk out," Nicole protested. "Won't this emergency wait for another hour?"

"No, ma'am." He took hold of her arm and half lifted her from the chair. "We must leave immediately."

"Damn it, Bill, you're pinching my arm," Nicole complained as she nearly tripped. "What the hell's wrong?"

Still speaking in a stage whisper, Bill pulled her toward where the rest of the security detail had already formed a protective cordon.

“The President was injured during an assassination attempt. I’ve been instructed to rush you to George Washington University Hospital.”

Nicole’s knees suddenly went weak and she was grateful for the support of Bill’s hand under her arm. Her heart began pounding and it was suddenly difficult to fill her lungs.

“My God,” she whimpered. “Is it serious? Is he alive?”

Bill kept pushing her toward the exit. “He’s alive. He was struck by at least one bullet, but there’s no information on how seriously he was wounded.”

Nicole stopped and shook off Bill’s hand. “What the hell happened? How could Ted be shot? Aren’t you guys supposed to protect him?”

“I don’t know what happened, Mrs. Hale. All I’ve been told is that you need to get to the hospital as soon as possible. I’m sure you’ll be briefed when you arrive.”

“Yes, of course.” She began running toward the exit, pushed her way outside and quickly slid into the back seat of the limo waiting at the side entrance. She was so preoccupied she didn’t even notice she had forgotten her coat.

Nicole was barely in the vehicle before the driver tromped on the accelerator and burned rubber away from the hotel. Two motorcycle cops led them through traffic, sirens blaring. What would normally have been a half hour’s drive was accomplished in ten minutes.

When Nicole reached the hospital uniformed police were on the scene keeping back the media and the crowd of curious onlookers that had already gathered around every entrance. As the Secret Service detail plowed through the mob, creating a path, dozens of flashbulbs exploded and reporters attempted to thrust microphones toward her while shouted questions came from every direction.

A short, balding man, with a hospital identification badge on his jacket, was waiting inside the emergency entrance.

“Mrs. Hale,” he said, sounding calm and in control. “I’m Donald Mitchell, chief administrator. Would you please come with me?”

“Are you taking me to the President?” Nicole asked.

“Marine One is still ten minutes out,” Mitchell explained, hurrying toward the service elevator at the end of the corridor. “When it arrives, President Hale will be taken directly to surgery. We’re going to the surgical floor where you’ll be able to wait without distractions.”

“Is Ted seriously injured?” Nicole asked, trying to match Mitchell’s calm demeanor although she had to make a supreme effort to suppress the panic she felt.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Hale, but I don’t know.”

“Well, damnit, tell me something,” she hissed, controlling the urge to scream. “All I’ve been told is that my husband’s been shot.”

“That’s pretty much all I know,” Mitchell said patiently. “Our chief of surgery has been on the radio with the paramedic aboard Marine One. We know President Hale is alive, suffering from shock and blood loss, but until a doctor can examine him, we won’t know how serious his wounds are.”

The elevator halted and the doors slid open. Secret Service agents stepped out first, assuming positions on both sides of the elevator. Mitchell ushered Nicole to a small waiting area furnished with typical hospital décor of stainless steel and Naugahyde.

“Please wait here, Mrs. Hale,” Mitchell said. “I’ll find out if Marine One has arrived.”

Before the administrator returned, two soft tones announced the arrival of an elevator further down the hall. When the doors opened, several white clad hospital personnel trotted out pushing a gurney. Two IV bags dripped fluids into the arm of a blanket-draped figure, his face hidden under an oxygen mask.

Nicole began to run toward them, but Bill Simpson stopped her. “Please wait here, Mrs. Hale. The doctors will give you a report as

soon as they know the President's condition. Right now they need to concentrate on taking care of him."

Nicole knew Bill was right, but she felt so helpless. She wanted to do something—anything rather than wait. If it were possible to make Ted well with sheer will power she would have done so. She slumped onto a chair, taking several deep breaths to keep from bursting into tears. She had never been so frightened in her life, but realized Ted would want her to be strong. The wife of the President couldn't behave like an hysterical female.

Moments later a doctor rushed toward the operating room, and Nicole intercepted him. "Are you the surgeon who'll be operating on President Hale?"

"Yes, ma'am," the doctor said, trying to pull away.

"How is he?" she demanded. "Is he seriously injured?"

"I won't know until I have a chance to examine him," the surgeon said brusquely. "I'm wasting time standing here—time we may not have."

Nicole released her grip on his arm. "You can't let him die. He's the President."

"I'll do everything I can," the doctor assured her as he hurried toward the operating room.

"It may be a while before we learn anything," Bill Simpson said. "Why don't you sit down and try to relax? Would you like some coffee?"

"Thank you, Bill," Nicole said, reconciled to waiting as patiently as possible. "Coffee would be nice, but I really need to walk a little. I'd go crazy just sitting."

As Nicole began nervously pacing, Secretary of State, Rachael King, arrived in the same elevator as Press Secretary William Schofield. Rachael went directly to Nicole and the two women hugged. When they broke apart, both were crying.

“I’m so sorry, Nicole,” Rachael said. “You and Ted have my prayers and the prayers of everyone in the country. Is there any news about his condition?”

“Nothing. Not a damned thing,” Nicole said, wiping away the tears. “He was taken into surgery a couple of minutes ago. Oh God, I’m so frightened.”

“We’re all frightened,” Rachael said, guiding her to a chair. “I’ll stay with you as long as you need me.”

“Thank you.” Nicole took several deep breaths, successfully controlling her emotions. “Do you know whether the Vice President has been notified?”

“Henry is in San Francisco, but I understand he’s been contacted and will be returning to Washington shortly aboard Air Force Two.” Rachael patted Nicole’s hand. “Don’t worry about any of that now. All the White House staff are veterans and they’ll make sure every needed action is handled.”

“Could we send word for Henry to contact me as soon as he arrives in Washington?” Nicole asked. She realized that until the extent of the crisis was determined the Vice President and the President wouldn’t be allowed in the same location, but she needed Henry and Gina’s support.

“Of course,” Rachael said. “I’ve instructed security to keep everyone else out of the surgical area. There are a bunch of government big shots who’ll want to be here, and frankly they’ll just create a lot of confusion.”

“Thank you, Rachael, I appreciate that.”

William Schofield, who had been nervously standing beside the women, finally spoke. “The media is demanding a statement, and I don’t know what to tell them.”

“It’s important to sound confident at a time like this,” Rachael said, assuming control. “I’d suggest you tell them the President is in surgery, but his condition is stable and the doctors are optimistic about a full and speedy recovery. We can’t have the country going

into a panic. Unless there's concrete information to the contrary, continue giving optimistic reports so the media won't be tempted to engage in ugly speculation. You know how they like to run with bad news."

"Is that the official word?" Schofield asked.

"Damn it, you're the Presidential Press Secretary," Rachael said impatiently. "Whatever you tell them is the official word."

"All right, I'll keep it upbeat," Schofield agreed, straightening his tie and moving toward the service elevator.

The Secret Service agent returned from the cafeteria, setting coffee and sandwiches on a magazine table.

"You should eat something," Rachael suggested. "It'll help keep up your strength. Whenever there was any kind of crisis at home, my mother always insisted on chicken soup. You know, it actually helped."

Nicole automatically took a sandwich, but after a single bite, felt nauseous. She settled for sipping the hot coffee, which helped calm her taunt nerves.

"Mrs. Hale, I'm Father Boyle, the hospital chaplain." A young man with sandy blond hair and a warm smile slipped onto the chair beside her. He was wearing a black suit with a Roman collar. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Thank you, Father," Nicole said. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm not Catholic."

"I don't believe that's important, do you?" Father Boyle took her hand. "I have it on good authority that God voted for your husband, and I know He'd want us to seek His guidance in our time of tribulation."

Nicole smiled for the first time since she had left the luncheon. "As long as He voted for Ted, maybe we should say a prayer or two."

After Nicole and Rachael prayed with Father Boyle, the priest remained in the waiting room, silently saying the rosary. His

presence had a calming influence, and the prayers had made Nicole feel more in control.

Time dragged, every minute seeming an eternity. After she had been waiting for over two hours without word from anyone, she couldn't stand the unknown a moment longer.

Personnel had been hurrying to and from the operating room. When a man who appeared to be a doctor came out of surgery, she grabbed his arm.

"We've been waiting here for hours. I have to know what's happening to the President," she demanded. "Give it to me straight. Is he going to live?"

The doctor looked exhausted. "We're doing everything we can, but it's too close to call. At this point I simply don't know whether the President will survive."

"That isn't good enough," Nicole insisted. "We're talking about the President of the United States, and I want to know exactly what his chances are."

With a sigh of resignation, the doctor sat in the chair beside her and took both of her hands into his. "He's in critical condition and very weak, but his vital signs have stabilized."

"Thank God," Nicole sobbed. "Can I see him?"

"Not right now," the doctor said. "He'll be in surgery for another hour or so. I know you want me to be completely honest, so I have to tell you his chances for survival are marginal. Fifty-fifty at best. It could go either way, but we'll know more when Dr. Epstein completes his portion of the surgery."

Nicole took a deep breath to quell a feeling of panic. "I appreciate your candor, doctor, and promise not to get hysterical, but I have to know the nature of the President's injuries."

"He lost a great deal of blood, and that has weakened him," the doctor said. "In my opinion if a naval corpsman hadn't been available at the shipyard, the President would have died before he reached the hospital. One bullet nicked his left ear and is hardly

more than a scratch. Another bullet went completely through his left forearm, but missed the bones and major blood vessels. He may have permanent weakness in the arm, but the wound is not life threatening. The third bullet is the one that caused the most damage. It struck the President in the left side, a millimeter beyond the edge of his Kevlar vest, glanced off a rib, and tumbled as it collapsed his left lung. The bullet is lodged in the chest cavity close to his heart. We've called in Dr. Saul Epstein, the best thoracic man in the country, to remove the bullet and repair the internal damage."

"You said he's in critical condition. What does that mean?"

The doctor shook his head. "It means exactly what I said before. His survival is touch and go. He couldn't have a better surgical team anywhere else in the world. Believe me, Dr. Epstein is good at what he does, and I have the utmost confidence in him. When the surgery is completed, the President's recovery may depend more upon Father Boyle than on medicine."

"You aren't telling me everything," Nicole insisted. "What are you holding back?"

"I realize this is very difficult for you, Mrs. Hale," the doctor said patiently. "I've told you everything I know. If we can avoid a serious infection, survival will depend upon how hard the President fights. A less physically fit man would probably have died before he even got to the operating table. I'm sorry I don't have better news. My personal opinion is that President Hale will live, but it might be wise to prepare yourself for the worst."

When the doctor left, Nicole broke down and sobbed uncontrollably, not certain whether it was from anxiety or relief. Both Rachael and Father Boyle comforted her to the best of their ability, but there was no way they could ease her fears.

It was nearly two more hours before Dr. Epstein came from the operating room, looking exhausted but triumphant. "Mrs. Hale, your husband is out of surgery and in recovery."

“Is he going to be alright?” Nicole asked, fear evident in her voice.

“I’m very optimistic,” Epstein said. “The bullet has been removed and the internal bleeding controlled. He’s extremely weak, and his vital signs are not what we would like. It’s going to be another twenty-four hours before we’ll know for certain if the surgery was completely successful. If there are no complications during that time, I’m confident he’ll live.”

“Thank you, doctor.” She squeezed his hand. “I know you’ve done all you could. Can I see him?”

Dr. Epstein smiled and nodded. “He’s still under sedation, but it might do him good if you’re there when he wakes up.”

Nicole followed a nurse down the hallway. One of the two Secret Service agents already in place flanking the recovery room doorway nodded at Nicole and held the door for her.

Beside the single bed a panel of monitors glowed green in the room’s reduced illumination, a steady beeping tone the only sound. A nurse was adjusting an IV bottle while another watched the electronic images and numbers flashing on the screens.

Nicole nearly burst into tears when she saw Ted. He looked lost and vulnerable connected to all the medical devices. An endotracheal tube protruded from his throat and a drain ran from the bandages in his side to a plastic bag hanging from the bed. Oxygen tubes were clipped into his nose. His skin was pale and when she touched his hand it felt clammy cold. He looked old and worn; not at all like the vital man she had seen just that morning.

A nurse placed a chair on the far side of the bed. “You can sit here, Mrs. Hale.”

Nicole sank onto the chair and bent forward with her cheek against Ted’s limp hand. *Please don’t die, she prayed. I need you. Life won’t be worth living without you.*

THIRTY-FOUR

A VISITOR TO THE RUSSELL Senate Office Building might have believed it was a Sunday morning. No one moved in the deserted corridors, and the cafeteria, which was always busy, was closed, with a metal grill across the entrance. Work in the capitol had nearly come to a standstill as most federal employees had been excused from work so they could follow the unfolding story of the assassination attempt on President Hale. Even sessions in the House and Senate were in temporary recess.

The deserted offices had a spooky atmosphere. Footsteps echoed off marble walls as Senator Wild Bill Stanley walked from the elevator to his office. He had been in the building before when it was nearly deserted, but this morning the eerie silence sent an unexplained chill down his spine. If he had been a superstitious man, he might have considered the sensation a portent of disaster. But he was not superstitious, and except for Hale still being alive, events were proceeding in his favor.

He had considered remaining home this morning to follow the news bulletins, but Mildred's carrying on had driven him from the house. Curled on the living room sofa in her robe, without having combed her hair or applied makeup, she was sobbing and blowing

her nose as she watched the local coverage. Her blubbering, as if she really cared whether the President lived or died, disgusted him. It was bad enough that all the reports predicted Hale's complete recovery.

That bastard leads a charmed life, he thought. But I'm not finished with him yet.

Sylvia was not at her desk and none of his staff had reported for work. At least he wouldn't have to listen to all the bleeding hearts commiserating about poor Ted Hale.

He went directly to his private bar and poured himself a stiff drink. Then he picked up the remote and switched on the television. A station break was just ending as he settled onto his desk chair. When Jane Spencer, the local anchorwoman, came on she looked tired, as if she had been broadcasting all night, which was probably the case.

"The FBI has identified the gunman killed in a hail of bullets as he attempted to escape from the Northrup Grumman Newport News shipyard," she announced. "The man the FBI believes responsible for the attempted assassination of President Hale yesterday afternoon, is reported to be Frank Sawyer, a former Special Forces sergeant, who was decorated for valor during combat in the Middle East. Sergeant Sawyer received a medical discharge from the Army as the result of suffering a severe head wound.

"Several people who were acquainted with Sergeant Sawyer have told FBI agents the former Green Beret felt bitter about perceived unfair treatment because of his disability status. Authorities believe complications from the head injury may have triggered the desire to seek revenge against the Government. We'll probably never know for certain what his motivation was for attempting to assassinate President Hale because the reasons died with him when security forces gunned down Sawyer as he endeavored to exit the Northrup Grumman shipyard.

“Just moments ago, during a press conference at FBI headquarters, a spokesperson declared all indications, so far, suggest Sergeant Sawyer was acting alone. There’s no evidence of a conspiracy, although the FBI will continue their investigation until all the facts are known.”

Jane cupped her hand over her right ear as if to hear something in her earphone.

“We take you now to George Washington University Hospital where Presidential Press Secretary William Schofield is addressing the media.”

Wild Bill’s attention focused on the television as the picture shifted to the hospital, where Schofield had already begun speaking into a bank of microphones.

“...have any detailed medical information, however President Hale is reported to have spent a comfortable night. At this time the President is not allowed visitors, other than Mrs. Hale, so I have not personally seen him. Later this morning, Dr. Saul Epstein, the thoracic surgeon who removed the bullet from the President’s chest, will answer your medical questions and provide details concerning the President’s injuries.”

“Can you give us any information about Dr. Epstein?” a reporter shouted.

Schofield consulted his notes for a moment. “Dr. Epstein is head of thoracic surgery at GW, and is one of the leading surgeons in his field. As I understand the situation, he was summoned yesterday afternoon because a bullet was lodged in President Hale’s chest cavity near his heart. It was a delicate procedure and the hospital wanted the best man in the country. I’m sure Dr. Epstein will answer your questions concerning the surgical details when he holds his news conference.”

“Mr. Schofield, what is the medical prognosis?” a different reporter shouted from the audience. “Will the President live?”

“As you know, President Hale was seriously injured, but the doctors are optimistic that he’ll have a complete recovery with absolutely no residual effects. However, I’m like you. All I know is what I’ve been told.”

“Mr. Schofield, is the President awake and aware of what happened?”

“As I said earlier, I haven’t personally seen the President, but I understand he’s awake and alert. I’m certain he’s been briefed on the details of the attempt.”

“I understand Vice President Abbot flew in from San Francisco last night,” a voice shouted. “Is he temporarily acting as President?”

“Yes, Vice President Abbot has returned to Washington, and I understand he met briefly with President Hale’s advisors earlier this morning. To the best of my knowledge he’s here as a purely precautionary measure. There are no plans for him to assume any Presidential duties.”

“Which advisors did Vice President Abbot meet with?” a TV reporter asked.

“I don’t have that information.”

“When will the President return to the Oval Office?” another reporter asked.

“I’m sorry, I can’t answer that question either. I’m sure Dr. Epstein will give you a better idea of the recovery time. I’ve been told that it may be another twenty-four hours before...”

Wild Bill pushed the power button on the remote, turning off the TV. Obviously there was no new information about Hale’s condition. He could only hope Hale was more seriously wounded than Schofield was letting on. Back in 1981, when John Hinckley shot President Reagan, the White House had released the same optimistic bulletins. In fact Reagan had been critical, nearly dying from the effects of a .22 caliber bullet.

Hopefully the more lethal ammunition Sawyer had used would have caused more extensive and fatal damage. Perhaps before

evening there would be an announcement that President Hale had died. He was looking forward to making an emotional speech in the Senate, proclaiming the nation's sorrow at losing an innovative and courageous leader.

If the early bulletins were correct and Hale did recover fully, it would be a bitter disappointment. All the planning and risk would have been a waste of time. The failed assassination would only increase Hale's popularity and almost certainly assure that a Constitutional Convention would take place.

There were simply too many incompetent people in the world. First the Columbians had botched the Miami attempt. Then, Sawyer, who was supposed to be an expert, had missed his shot.

Now he was wondering if perhaps he had been a bit hasty in having Wally eliminated. It would be difficult to find another aide he could manipulate so easily. If Hale survived this attempt, it would be nearly impossible to orchestrate another hit unless the Columbians might be induced to try again.

Maybe that line of reasoning was premature. He didn't know for certain that Wally was dead. There had been no announcement on TV, but the media was pre-occupied with the attempted Presidential assassination. The murder of an inconsequential congressional aide probably wouldn't make TV, and would be little more than a back page filler in the newspapers.

He nearly had a heart attack when the silence was broken by a voice calling from the outer office.

"Hello. Is anyone here this morning?"

Wild Bill pushed up from the desk and walked to the office door. A uniformed messenger stood beside Sylvia's unattended desk.

"What do you want?" the Senator asked grumpily.

"I have a package for Senator William Stanley," the messenger said.

Wild Bill signed the receipt and tipped the messenger ten bucks. His heart was beating with anticipation as he went back into his

office. There was no return address on the envelope, but it could only mean one thing. Salvatore's thugs had gotten the blackmail material from Wally. It also confirmed Wally's death, leaving Wild Bill totally free and clear.

He poured himself another drink before sitting on his chair and picking up the envelope. He tore open the flap and emptied the contents onto the desk. There were four cassette tapes, and several manuscript sheets, obviously done on a computer printer.

The first three tapes were labeled with dates that Wild Bill assumed were the days Wally had surreptitiously recorded their conversations. The fourth tape's label read, "Personal for Senator Stanley".

What the hell are you up to, Wally, Wild Bill thought.

If the tapes were destined for the authorities, why would Wally have included a recording for him? It didn't make any sense, but he never expected his aides to be overly endowed with brains.

He slipped the tape into his desktop unit and punched play.

"Hello, you back stabbing bastard," Wally's voice intoned from the tape. "If you are listening to this it means you had me killed and somehow got this package of materials. Well, Senator, you've been a sonofabitch all your life, and I've never trusted you further than I could throw an elephant. I know you planned to cover your own ass by eliminating both Frank Sawyer and me, so I prepared two packages of evidence. What you've done is cut your own throat. I wish I were there to see your expression.

"Depending upon how quickly your hired killers got the envelope to you, the FBI may already have a copy of everything except this tape, which is for your ears only. Yes, I duplicated all this material and left it with a trusted individual. Today, tomorrow, or the next day, the world is going to know you planned the assassination. You're so used to screwing everyone else, how does it feel to finally be on the receiving end?"

“My biggest regret is that I won’t be there to see you pulled down from your fucking pedestal and exposed as the two-faced sonofabitch you are. I’ll bet there’ll be plenty of cons in your cellblock who’ll enjoy gang raping a former United States Senator.

“Oh, I can see you now. Your devious mind is going a million miles a minute trying to devise some plan to scheme your way out of this one. Well, there isn’t any way out, you bastard. You may have murdered me, but I’m going to have the last laugh.

“Just think of all the people you’ve stepped on who’ll do everything within their power to make certain the courts give you exactly what you deserve. Enjoy your time in hell, Senator.”

Wild Bill sat staring at the wall across the room, letting the player continue with the hiss of blank tape. He had planned so carefully, and now everything was going to fall apart because of that worthless toad, Wally Compton. How he wished the bastard was still alive so he could strangle him with his bare hands.

Damnit, it wasn’t fair. He was Wild Bill Stanley, one of the most powerful men in the country. A worthless nonentity like Wally Compton couldn’t pull him down.

There had to be some way to salvage the situation. He had not achieved his position of power by easily accepting defeat. He would not go through the ordeal of an ignominious trial and spend the rest of his life in prison.

Maybe Wally’s body hadn’t been discovered and the evidence was not yet on the way to the FBI. He might have enough time to grab a flight to Brazil where he would be safe. Brazil didn’t have an extradition treaty with the U.S. and he could disappear on some country estate. He certainly had enough money stashed in his offshore bank accounts to live in luxury for the rest of his life.

Wild Bill buried his face in his hands, knowing he wouldn’t run. Living like a fugitive, without the power and prestige of his Senate office, would be worse than death. There would be no place in the world where he could hide from the shame and humiliation. His

reputation would be destroyed and he would be stripped of everything he had ever valued. In prison or in hiding, life would be a hollow shell.

Rising on unsteady legs he pushed aside the ornate frame of the original landscape painting that covered his wall safe. With trembling fingers he worked the combination, twice missing numbers. When he finally opened the vault, he reached inside and gripped the pistol he always kept there.

There was only one way to cheat the system and avoid the humiliation.

He placed the muzzle into his mouth, squeezed his eyes shut, and pulled the trigger.

THIRTY-FIVE

AT FIRST THERE WAS only darkness — a vast black void, a bottomless pit of swirling nothingness. Slowly, a thin, glowing light appeared, growing brighter, steadily gaining strength, spreading in a great circle and reaching down into the abyss with probing fingers. Then the glow began to ebb, the fingers withdrawing like a wave touching the shore and receding again into the ocean of blackness. Ted struggled toward the withdrawing light, desperately reaching for it, until he willed it to come back, stronger and brighter than before. His eyelids fluttered open, closed, and then opened again.

The world was stark white, the illumination so brilliant it hurt his eyes. His thoughts were confused and fuzzy with no sense of time or place. The exertion of lifting his head caused an intense pain in his left side and chest. An obstruction in his throat pressed against the vocal cords, preventing him from speaking.

He must have made a sound, perhaps a grunt, because a cooling, damp cloth was wiping his forehead and he heard a familiar voice. His eyes focused and he saw Nicole bending over him, looking like an angel.

“You’re awake,” she whispered. “God, Teddy, you had me scared to death. I love you so much.”

He tried to say he was sorry for scaring her, although he had no idea why she had been frightened. Even though he had no strength, he willed himself to squeeze her hand and felt a return pressure that comforted him to his inner being.

He wanted to ask Nicole where he was, why he was weak, but he felt so exhausted he had to rest his eyes for just a moment. As soon as the lids closed he fell into the bottomless pit. This time the darkness did not seem so empty, so frightening.

When he awoke his mind was clearer, but memories were still vague. His throat hurt when he swallowed and his chest felt as if it had been crushed. When he tried to speak he discovered the pressure was gone from his throat and he was able to form words.

Nicole was instantly leaning over him, cool hands caressing his forehead.

“Where am I?” he asked, his voice a whisper against the pain in his throat.

“You’re in George Washington University Hospital,” she said.

“I don’t remember coming to the hospital.” It was frustrating to have the place he kept memories completely empty.

“You’ve been very sick, Teddy.” There were tears streaming down Nicole’s cheeks and because of the sobs, he had difficulty understanding her. “An assassin shot you. Don’t you remember?”

Ted squeezed his eyes shut and tried to think. “I’m so tired,” he said. “I hurt everywhere.”

When he attempted to turn his head toward Nicole, there was a stabbing pain in his side and he groaned.

A nurse appeared in his field of vision on the left side of the bed. “Here’s something to help you feel better.”

There was no sensation when the needle jabbed his arm, but immediate warmth began spreading through his body, softening the pain.

"I'm going to take a nap before I get up," he mumbled as he felt himself drifting into the internal darkness.

This time when he awoke he felt feverish and weak. He had come out of a dream where he was floating above a crowd gathered at the christening. He saw himself standing at the podium, suddenly grabbing to catch windblown papers. Then he saw his image staggering backward as if some invisible force had smashed into him. He heard someone yelling, 'Stay down, Mr. President. Shots have been fired.'

"Someone was shooting at us," he mumbled.

"Yes, dear," Nicole said. She looked very tired, her eyes red rimmed and swollen.

That was when Ted realized the dream had been a memory and he was in a hospital. "Was I shot?" he mumbled, half question, half statement.

"You were seriously hurt," Nicole said. "But you're going to be all right."

"Was anyone else wounded?"

"No. Everyone else is fine."

"I'm glad," he said, feeling a sense of relief. "I couldn't live with another shooting like Coral Gables." It took a moment for him to gather his thoughts. "Did they catch the gunman?"

"Yes, Teddy. He was killed trying to escape."

"Why?" Ted asked. "Why did he want to shoot me?"

"We don't know," Nicole said softly. "The authorities believe he was insane."

The explanation somehow made him feel better. "Then I'm sorry for him. He didn't know what he was doing."

A nurse came into his field of vision and adjusted the IV on the stand beside the bed. "You need to rest, Mr. President. If you're going to be asking all sorts of questions, Mrs. Hale will have to leave the room."

"Don't chase her away. I'll be good."

When he next awoke, there was still intense pain centered in his left side and arm, but the fuzzy edge was gone from his thoughts. It was impossible to draw in a full breath even with the assistance of the oxygen tubes clipped into his nose. Sunlight was streaming in the window on his right, and when he looked in that direction he saw Nicole dozing in a chair.

She must have sensed his movements because she awakened and reached for his hand, taking it in both of hers.

“What day is it?” Ted asked. He had no sense of time, but did remember waking and dozing more than once.

“It’s Friday morning,” Nicole said. “Bright and sunny and cold.”

“Do you mean I’ve been out of it for three days?” Ted asked. Piece by piece memory was returning although it was impossible to discern real events from dreams.

“You had us all frightened half to death. We were afraid we were going to lose you.”

“You look tired,” Ted whispered. “Have you been here since Tuesday?”

“Good morning, Mr. President.” A tall, thin man, dressed in a crisp white lab coat, swept into the room before Nicole could answer. “How are you feeling this morning?”

Ted attempted a smile. “Like I’ve been ridden hard and put away wet.”

“You’re looking much better,” the doctor said, sounding entirely too jovial and animated. “I’m Saul Epstein, your friendly neighborhood surgeon. Let’s see how your incision is doing.”

Epstein carefully lifted Ted’s hospital gown and quickly pulled the dressing from his side. “It’s looking better than I had hoped. If there aren’t any complications, we’ll remove the drain tomorrow.” As he examined the wound, one of the nurses put a thermometer in his ear. She scribbled on the chart, which Epstein glanced at before making a series of his own notations.

“Look, Doc, I’ve been out of the loop here,” Ted complained. “I need straight answers. When I can get back to work?”

“You’re still running a fever, but it’s a lot better than yesterday,” Epstein said. “I believe you’re going to recover nicely. As far as work is concerned, there’s no need to rush things. After the trauma you’ve suffered, your body needs time to heal. We’ve got to run some lab tests and do a series of x-rays. I’m confident you’ll be back on your feet in a week or so.”

“I can’t lie around for a week,” Ted protested. “There’s too much work that needs to be done.”

“All in good time,” Epstein said in a soothing bedside voice. “I’ll discharge you when we’re certain there won’t be any complications.”

As they spoke a technician wheeled in a portable x-ray unit and while he was setting up, a nurse drew blood. When Ted was rolled slightly to allow cold x-ray plates to be inserted under him, he had to grit his teeth against the pain that was like a fire going through his body.

“It’s going to be a few minutes before the x-rays are developed and the lab runs tests,” Epstein said. “Why don’t you try to eat something while you’re waiting?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Doctor’s orders,” Epstein said with a smile. “You need solid food to build your strength. I’ve ordered breakfast, and expect you to eat every morsel.”

When the nurse carried in a tray with fresh orange juice, honeydew melon, two soft-boiled eggs, whole-wheat toast and decaffeinated coffee, the smell of the food nauseated him. The nurse cranked up the head of the bed until he was in a sitting position and placed the tray across his lap.

He sipped the juice, tried a bit of an egg, and then shook his head. “I can’t eat any more.”

“You have to eat,” Nicole insisted. “You can’t starve yourself if you ever expect to get out of the hospital.”

She was still trying to get Ted to finish at least one egg when Dr. Epstein returned. He didn't seem as upbeat as he had been earlier.

"We may have to do further surgery," he said. "You're running a fever of nearly 103, Mr. President, and your white blood count is up."

"What type of surgery, Doctor?" Nicole asked, sounding as if she might begin crying. "You said he was getting better."

"I'm not going to lie to either of you. Without a doubt you're doing much better, Mr. President, but you're not out of the woods yet. You suffered a serious wound that probably would have killed a weaker man. There are still two serious concerns. You've developed an infection that isn't responding to the current medications. I'll be putting you on stronger antibiotics and hopefully that'll clear up the problem.

"However, at this point I'm not as concerned about the infection as I am about your chest x-rays. They show cloudy areas along the bullet's track through the lung. Whenever the lungs are involved, there's the possibility of developing pneumonia, which could be extremely dangerous in your weakened condition. We'll insert a flexible fiber bronchoscopy snake down your throat to clear the left lung of blood particles. If that doesn't do the trick, I may have to go back in and remove the damaged lobes."

Ted squeezed Nicole's hand when Epstein left the room. "Don't worry, the lung will heal itself. I intend to be up and around next week."

Nicole leaned over the bed and kissed him. "You're just ornery enough to make it happen."

"Now it's time for you to be straight with me," Ted said. "I don't have any idea why the guy took a shot at me, or what's happened since."

"I was waiting until you were stronger," Nicole explained. "There was no need to upset you."

“Well, I’m stronger now, and I have to know.”

“The man who shot you was an ex-Special Forces Sergeant named Frank Sawyer. The Secret Service killed him as he tried to escape. At first we all thought he was insane because he had received a head wound while on a mission in the Middle East. Now we know he was hired by Senator William Stanley.”

“Wild Bill Stanley?” Ted protested. “My God, I don’t believe it. I knew Stanley didn’t like me, but I never thought he hated me enough to try to kill me.” He stared at the ceiling for a moment. “Why did he want me dead?”

“We may never know for certain,” Nicole explained. “We believe he was terrified of term limits and didn’t want to lose the power and prestige of his office. He apparently thought if you were eliminated before you forced a Constitutional Convention no one else would press the issue.”

“So he hired Sawyer to do his dirty work?”

“It gets a bit more complicated. Actually his aide, Wally Compton, hired the assassin. Compton apparently didn’t trust Stanley, so he recorded their conversations and arranged for the tapes to be given to the FBI in the event of his death.”

“Since you’re telling me all this, I have to assume Compton is dead and the FBI has the tapes.”

“Yes, Compton was murdered the same day as the assassination attempt. The evidence indicates Stanley had Compton silenced to eliminate any loose ends.”

“I understand the tapes would have linked Stanley to the attempt on me, but what connected him to Compton’s murder?”

“That’s where it gets complicated. A copy of the tapes was found in Stanley’s office even before Compton’s lawyer turned over the originals to the FBI.”

“You lost me somewhere,” Ted complained. “Why was the FBI searching Stanley’s office if they didn’t have the tapes yet?”

“On Wednesday morning Senate security discovered Stanley’s body in his office. Copies of the tapes were on his desk. Stanley had one original tape addressed to him, which explained the existence of a duplicate set. We suspect the only way he could have obtained the tapes is if Compton’s killers had given them to him.”

“So Stanley was murdered also?”

“No, he committed suicide. Apparently he couldn’t stand the thought of being exposed.”

“Then it’s over?”

“Yes. With Sawyer, Compton, and Stanley all dead, the FBI has announced their investigation is complete.”

“Damn, this whole thing seems like some sort of movie plot,” Ted said. “I feel sorry for everyone involved.”

“We should be grateful the plot didn’t succeed.”

“I hope none of the other career politicians feel so strongly about losing their cushy jobs.”

“I doubt whether anyone is going to try another assassination attempt,” Nicole said. “If they do, I’ll go after them myself.”

THIRTY-SIX

BY SUNDAY MORNING DR. Epstein was clearly more optimistic about his patient's condition. Ted's fever was nearly gone and his left lung was beginning to heal itself.

Although Ted still felt as weak as a newborn baby, Epstein allowed him out of bed for short periods, which mainly consisted of three or four assisted steps to a chair where he was able to sit for a few minutes longer on each trip.

On Monday Epstein relaxed his strictures on visitors, permitting Henry Abbot access for the first time. The Vice President hugged Nicole and placed a bouquet of fresh flowers in the bedside vase.

"Teddy, I'm going to take a little break while you and Henry visit," Nicole said. "Don't get yourself all excited." She leaned over the chair and kissed him on the forehead.

"I'll be good," Ted promised.

"Well, Henry, how are things going in the White House?" he asked when Nicole had left the room.

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you," Henry joked. "It might destroy your ego to realize the country is getting along just fine without your finger in every pot. Sorta makes a person think the President might not be as essential as everyone thought."

“You’re right,” Ted said, feigning hurt feelings. “It doesn’t help my recovery to realize I’m not even missed.”

“Oh, you’re missed all right, but maybe it’s a good thing people are forced to make decisions without your immediate involvement.”

“I hope they’re not making a mess I’ll have to clean up.”

“Don’t worry. The White House staff can obviously exercise good judgment when they don’t think you’re looking over their shoulders.”

“I’ll have to remember that when I get back.”

“Even Congress is cooperating,” Henry said. “I think they’re all embarrassed because a Senator was behind the assassination attempt. It would have warmed your heart to hear all the platitudes entered in the Congressional Record. They gave so many speeches extolling your virtues, they haven’t had time to pass a single piece of legislation since you’ve been in the hospital.”

“They’ll probably put a dozen bills on my desk the first day I’m back in the Oval Office,” Ted complained.

“That reminds me. All the cabinet agencies have turned in their reports, and your the staff is busy consolidating the information. When you’re back on your feet, the biggest job will be sorting through the thousands of cards and letters stacked all over the White House.”

“Damn, maybe I should stay here until Jennifer gets them sorted out and answered.”

“Don’t think you can take a permanent vacation. I’m not all that comfortable sitting in your chair. If you remember, I only agreed to be Vice President because I wasn’t expected to do anything.”

“Epstein doesn’t know it yet, but I’m going to be out of this place by the end of the week.”

“Just a bit of news to cheer you up,” Henry said. “There may be a good side to the assassination attempt. Four more States have passed resolutions requesting a Constitutional Convention. That

makes a total of thirty. With all the sympathy you've been getting, I wouldn't be surprised if we have enough States by this time next week."

"That's great news," Ted agreed. "You know, Senator Stanley tried to assassinate me to prevent a Convention, but he actually made it almost certain the States would back my proposals."

"You may be right about that." Henry glanced at his watch. "I've gotta run. Dr. Epstein threatened dire consequences if I stayed more than an hour. Take care and get well quickly."

When Henry left the room Nicole returned immediately, as if she had been waiting in the hall.

"I was talking with Dr. Epstein," she said. "He believes your lung has cleared up enough that he won't have to remove the lobe. In fact, he says if you swear on your Scout's honor that you'll take it reasonably easy, you might be released from the hospital in a week to ten days."

"I'm going to upset his time table," Ted promised. "I'll be back in the White House by this weekend."

"Only if the doctor agrees."

"We'll see about that," Ted said. "Did Epstein say when we'd be able to make mad, passionate love again?"

"He's going to leave that up to us once you're strong enough to return to the White House."

"Then I'll have to speed my recovery so we can find out if all these medications have affected my libido."

Ted was feeling stronger everyday, able to make an unaided circuit of the hospital room. He even ventured to walk down the corridor with a nurse on each side ready to support him if he stumbled. As his strength returned he became a bit of a nuisance as he pestered Epstein to allow him to attack some of the paperwork piling up in his absence.

Epstein relented by allowing him to spend a couple of hours each morning scanning neglected Presidential paperwork and

reading the dozens of sympathy letters from world leaders. However he refused permission for Andy Stevens to set up communication equipment in the hospital so Ted could talk with his volunteers. Because of pressure from the media, he also allowed Sam Aronson, the White House photographer, to take the first post-operation pictures for release to the press.

Dressed in a bathrobe, Ted stood in the hallway outside his room, smiling for the camera as he held Nicole's hand. He realized how weak he was when he had to rest after a half dozen photos.

Ted continued his own pressure on Dr. Epstein, and finally on Friday afternoon, eleven days after the assassination attempt, the surgeon agreed to discharge Ted.

"You keep in close touch with the White House physician," Epstein cautioned. "Being up and around will be good for you, but you'll still need plenty of rest. We don't want a relapse. I'll be stopping by every day for at least a week to check on your progress."

"I didn't think doctors made house call any more," Ted said.

Epstein laughed. "This is a special case, but don't worry, I'll include travel costs in my bill."

Ted reached out to shake his hand. "Whatever the charge, it'll be worth it. I wouldn't have made it without your skill. Thanks for everything."

"For the most part you were a good patient. However, I'd recommend you don't get shot again for at least a couple of months," Epstein said.

"Don't worry, Doc," Ted joked. "I intend to take some lessons on ducking. Next time I'll be quicker than a speeding bullet."

As soon as clean clothing was bought over from the White House, Nicole helped him dress. It was a painful struggle to get his left arm into the dress shirt and it was impossible for him to work the buttons, but it felt good to be wearing something other than pajamas.

“Do I look good enough to face my public?” he asked as Nicole adjusted his tie.

“You look like you’ve been malingering in the hospital,” she joked. “However I think your adoring supporters will forgive a slight pallor.”

“Then let’s get out of here into the sunlight.”

“There isn’t any sun today. It’s overcast and dreary.”

“Believe me, no matter what the weather, it’ll feel good to me.”

The hospital staff was gathered in the lobby, applauding as a nurse pushed Ted to the entrance in a wheelchair. He acknowledged their greetings with a wave and a smile.

Through the glass doors he could see reporters and a large crowd of people gathered on the walkway. He held up his hand, asking the nurse to halt.

“I’m going to walk from here,” he said.

“You can’t do that, Mr. President,” the young woman insisted. “Hospital rules state you have to stay in the wheelchair until you’re out of the building.”

“I think the hospital could bend the rules a bit for the President, don’t you?” Ted said with a smile. “I’m not going to let all those people see me looking like a cripple.”

He stood, gripped Nicole’s arm for support and stepped out into the barrage of flashbulbs and cheers.

As he stood in the doorway, waving to the crowd, the clouds parted and a beam of sunlight reached down to spotlight him and Nicole.

The fresh sunlight also touched upon a young man standing at the front of the crowd. He was holding a placard that showed an eagle, wings spread, soaring above the mountains. Emblazoned across the banner were the words, “God Bless you President Hale. Our eagle is free to fly again”.

Squeezing Nicole’s hand, President Theodore Winston Hale stepped forward into the dawning of a new era.

