

Rich Pliskin
Washington, DC
richpliskin@gmail.com
richpliskin.com
202-549-1453

THANK GOD FOR THAT

By Rich Pliskin

OUR BRAND IS OUR BUTTER

Denny Dash worked fast. He ripped the pencil drawer from his office desk and poured the debris of a once-glittering marketing career into a Felcher Communications Corp. travel tote: one leaky tube of *3-2-1 BlistOff* lip balm, some loose change from no-count countries, a sample baggy of Quendle's CheeseChumps, and a handful of *Horvath for President* buttons: "I Think Not," "Thank God for That," "Enough With the Slogans Already!" and the emotive core of the campaign: "In Your Heart, You Know He's Wrong. But So What?"

And the crumpled envelope with the key in it. The one thing he was looking for.

It had been a week since CEO Harold Felcher, Denny's ostensible boss, had thrust the key on him. Denny had been fingering through restive correspondence from the New York State Family Court when Harold padded in, waving the envelope over his head like Chamberlain bringing home the Munich Agreement. Had Chamberlain been a hundred pounds heavier, wheezed often and been unable to keep his shirttail tucked in, the resemblance would have been uncanny. Goering was a closer match.

Harold had correctly judged that Denny Dash, FC2's erstwhile creative engine, had hurtled off the rails and plunged into a very deep, weed-choked mental gully that nothing less than an open-ended tropical sabbatical could hoist him out of. Thus, the key. He tossed the envelope onto Denny's desk. Denny read the address: SoftHarbor at Pu'ukan®. Of course. Part of Harold Felcher's nocturnal emission of transforming his Madison Avenue branding agency into a global conglomerate of unrelated businesses, including a luxury golf resort on a remote West Pacific island. He was offering Denny free use of the best bungalow on the property.

Exile.

"Not interested," Denny replied. Denny said he didn't play golf and who the hell ever heard of the *West Pacific*? He tossed the envelope back without looking up and returned to sorting through subpoenas when Harold, suddenly beside him, hip checked Denny out of his chair, jammed the envelope into the desk, and then hustled off before Denny could regroup and punch him in the throat.

That was last week. Denny still had no interest in golf. But given the shit show that he was about to ignite, he now he had an urgent need for escape, and Pu'ukan was suddenly a great place to go.

He stuffed the key into his pants pocket and texted Jay Buckman at CNN the five-minute warning. He flung the tote onto his shoulder and flew out the door. Within twenty-four hours, Denny would be plotting his next move from SoftHarbor at Harold's expense, while Harold would be on the balls of his ass, an odd idiom that Harold used often but was never able to adequately explain. "Very common expression" is all he would say.

Right now, Harold Felcher was in his own office a floor above, tearing the vacuum seal off a fresh tube of sour cream and chive DipChips and bathing in the mélange of scent, sound and sensation borne along the crack, whoosh and rip of the lid. He savored the aroma of factory-fresh snackness for a pregnant moment before lifting a single, wispy chip off the top of the stack and placing it gently onto his tongue like the Eucharist. That first tube of the morning was heaven. He allowed his eyes to close while he let the DipChip trigger a rush of digestive saliva.

When he made the mistake of opening his eyes, Harold saw Roni Bartels, FC2's high-strung COO, barreling toward him like the Grim Reaper on steroids, her bulbous yellow earrings slapping against the sides of her neck. She slammed the printout of an article from *MarketingMensch.com* onto Harold's desk.

"Did we know about this?" Roni demanded. "Because I did *not* know about this. I *should* have known about this, but I did *not* because I was not *informed*."

Harold reclosed his eyes to expel Roni from his consciousness as he been taught in FC2's corporate mindfulness class. *All is impermanence. All that arises, dissipates.* He opened his eyes. Roni was still there. The Buddha trick never worked.

"Well? Are you going to *read* it?" Roni demanded.

Harold looked at the printout. The headline made him choke on his DipChip:

*Is Denny Dash Losing It? 6 Park Ave. Shrinks Say 'Yes.'
If They're Right, Whither FC2?*

In the desperate aspiration that followed, Harold could taste his own death. It tasted of sour cream and chive. From the rest of the article, he learned that Denny, against Harold's explicit orders, had spent FC2 money to produce six hundred sample baggies of his beloved CheeseChumps, deep-fried cheese plugs swathed in sodium. Potentially a

big hit in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, but even Harold Felcher could see that it would be a transfat too far for the greater U.S. snack-food market. It was not a product he wanted to get stuck doing a campaign for.

“A La Brea cheese pit,” Harold called it. “No one’s gonna buy something called a ‘chump.’ No one even knows what a ‘chump’ is. I’d be a chump to sign off on the chump.” He chuckled at his word play. “That’s not bad: ‘I’d be a chump to sign off on the chump.’” He wrote it down on a sticky note before passing final judgment.

“Kill the curds.”

Instead of killing the curds, Denny sent a hundred sample baggies of the CheeseChumps to *American Snacker* magazine. But instead of the breakout review Denny had expected, the *Snacker* ran a smarmy brief on its “News & Chews” page. The *Mensch* picked it up and wrote the article that Roni just slapped on Harold’s desk—a think piece that predicted declining fortunes for FC2 now that its creative brain had collapsed in on itself.

“He’s pulling us down, Harold,” Roni said.

Harold knew she was right. He knew he had been too patient as Denny’s ideas began taking a very whackward turn. “SemperFiber,” Denny’s brainwave to leverage the synergies between The Great Northern Cereal Corporation and the United States Marine Corps (“We keep the Marines moving!”) fell flat with the Corps. Similarly, his concept to rebrand Sunday given its correlation with spikes in suicide rates died for lack of a client. He should have fired Denny then and there.

And yet. ...

And yet Harold had hesitated. Denny was the reason most clients came to FC2. He was lean, lithe, handsome, charming on demand, incessantly creative and had great metabolism. He could rope a prospect by presenting a fully formed creative campaign that he had dreamed up on the spot, right there in the pitch meeting a split second before his lips moved. He moved swiftly, talked quickly and dressed so colorfully that the FC2 interns called him “Roy” for “Roy G. Biv,” the hues of the rainbow.

True, Denny’s personal life was a wreck. His ex-wife was crushing him in divorce court, and his daughter, whose tuition Denny hadn’t paid in several semesters, was about to be barred from completing her coursework as a helicopter traffic pilot. He could be impulsive and erratic with clients and he was routinely abusive to colleagues.

On the other hand, he was dating a panty model with epic tits. She was filming a lingerie commercial in FC2’s basement studio at that very moment. A guy that lucky you keep around.

So instead of firing Denny, Harold had reassigned him to the easiest job at FC2: producing public service announcements, including apologies for corporate clients whose plea agreements required public atonement. How much damage could he do there? Not even the clients cared how those ads turned out.

But Denny was not grateful for the opportunity to decompress. He grew irritable, then hostile, then belligerent. There were rumors that he had a list of in-house enemies. When Grace Dawes, Denny’s meek and worrisome secretary, asked Harold about the list, Harold assured Grace that it was a ridiculous rumor and that even if there were a list, he was *sure* that Grace wasn’t on it.

“Oh, OK. I guess. Thank you, Mr. Felcher.”

“Grace?”

“Yes, Mr. Felcher?”

“In those rumors, did anyone say he has a gun?”

Judging from the *Mensch* clip, the offer of an extended, all-expenses-paid vacation at SoftHarbor hadn’t worked any better than the PSA reassignment. In fact, it may have backfired.

“Dump him,” Roni said. “Now. *Before* the Board meeting. Even you can see that he has officially snapped and enjoys *no* prospect of psychological, let alone professional, recovery. He’s ruining *our* brand, Harold.”

“Our brand?” Harold, trying to recover his voice from the mis-swallowed DipChip, asked.

“Our brand is our butter, Harold. I don’t have to explain this to you, do I? We *are* in the brand-building business. But if you need a lecture—”

Harold shook his head until his throat had more or less cleared. In a scratchy voice he assured Roni that he’d take care of it but that he had a few things on his plate at the moment. The only things Roni saw on Harold’s plate were a half-eaten everything bagel slathered with half an inch of creamed animal fat and an open tube of those sickening processed potato-food items that he consumed by the hectare.

“Oh for the love of Christ, I’ll do it myself,” Roni said. She picked up Harold’s phone, expecting to get his secretary. Grace Dawes answered instead.

“Grace?” Roni asked, surprised. “What are you doing out there?”

“I—I wanted to see Mr. Felcher. On a matter.”

Roni paused just long enough to convey impatience. “And?”

“And, well, I heard the phone ring. So I picked it up. Marie isn’t here. Is why.”

“Mr. Felcher isn’t available right now, Grace. He’s—” She looked at Harold, who was using a finger to excavate a slag of bolus from between his teeth and gums—
“chewing over an important matter. So why don’t you get me Lou Dimitriov in Security in the meantime.”

“Lou Dimitriov?”

“That’s right, Lou Dimitriov. Is there an echo out there, Grace?”

When Grace reached Lou Dimitriov, Lou asked Grace if she were crying.

“No.” *Sniff, sniff.* “Roni wants to speak with you.” *Sniff, sniff.* “Hold on.”

“Grace, wait!”

Too late. She had already put Lou through to Roni.

“Lou? Roni Bartels here. ... Oh? What’s so good about it. ... Lou, I’m in Harold’s office. He—Yes, Lou. Harold Felcher, our CEO. He wants Denny Dash cleared out by noon. Verstehen?”

Lou said that it was already after nine and that a Termination and Removal Process would take a day at least and that he’d need written authorization from Workforce & Talent Management for an emergency TARP.

“Lou, are we really having this conversation? Harold wants Dash out of the building mach schnell. CEO trumps W&TM, unless you think otherwise. Do you think otherwise, Lou?”

“No, but—”

“Then wheels up, ass out.”

Roni understood the unspoken message of Lou's silence. She held the phone out to Harold.

"Isn't that right, Harold?" Roni said, loud enough for Lou to hear. Harold reluctantly nodded. "He can't see you, Harold. He's on the *tell-ee*-phone. You have to *say* something."

"Yes that's right, Lou," Harold said loud enough for Lou to hear. "Wheels up, ass out."

Roni put the phone back to her ear. "Results, Lou," she said and hung up. "I'll let you know when it's done," she said to Harold, and left his office, purple earrings bobbing.

Harold tipped a dozen DipChips onto his desk and finished reading the *Mensch* piece. He hoped to God that they didn't read the *Mensch* at the White House. If they did, Roni would be back with an emergency TARP for Harold.

Grace had returned to her own work station in time to see Denny fly out of his office, a purple blur spilling desk junk from a cheap corporate tote sliding off his shoulder: paper clips and staples and packs of sticky pads. All those bright colors Denny wore stabbed at her sensitive eyes and gave her headaches. Denny put a finger to his lips as he swept by Grace and two young copywriters he had recruited before being exiled to the PSA beat.

"Our secret, Grace." He winked at the young copywriters—they loved office drama—and hustled off.

"But—Mr. Dash?" Grace said.

“Turn on Jay Buckman,” Denny called back. He headed for the north elevators, just steps ahead of Roni, Lou and Lou’s two-man security posse, leaving Grace to stare into the empty space Denny had passed through.

“What’s going to happen to me, Mr. Dash?” Grace said to the empty space.

Grace waited a moment then drew a breath and rose from her chair to peer into Denny’s abandoned office. She knew she shouldn’t look. She knew she should pack up her own FC2 travel tote and leave this Bedlam forever. Grace dreamed of leaving. She talked of leaving. She cried about leaving. Her husband begged her to leave. Her dermatologist advised her to leave. Her gastroenterologist ordered her to leave. Her therapist took no firm position.

So she stayed.

Poor Grace. The mess Denny left in his office spun her stomach. Again. She dipped her head to the side and clutched her gut. A slight moan seeped from her soul.

The two copywriters stepped up behind her.

“What up with Roy, Grace?” one said.

Grace had no idea what “what up” meant or who Roy was.

“Dude’s breaking bad,” the other said.

“So’s Grace. Maybe we should call the nurse.”

“We have a nurse? Like, a company nurse? That is so decent!”

Grace felt as if she were about to land on the balls of her ass.

SHUCK THIS

After five years as president of the United States, Viktor Karl Horvath had learned two things above all else. The first was that none of the immensely wealthy favor seekers who tramped through the Oval Office each day deserved a fraction of their riches. The second was that if those jamokes could milk the system until their bellies were full, then he wasn't sucking nearly hard enough.

“In my life, Ray—*in my life*—I am yet to see a single one of those silver spoons lift a bale of cotton, tote a barge of hay, shuck a—shuck a—What the hell do you shuck?”

“I believe one shucks an ear of corn, Mr. President,” Chief of Staff Raymond Jarecki replied. As this was not a new line of thought for Viktor Horvath, Ray Jarecki didn't bother to lift his eyes from the legal pad on his lap. He was working on a new poem and needed a rhyme for *denude*.

“An ear of corn?” the president asked. “Why would an individual citizen shuck a corn? Isn't that what Big Ag is for?”

Ray shrugged. “Who knows.”

The president mulled the term. “Shuck an ear of corn. I don’t get a lot of these idioms. They sound stupid.”

“Our rural heritage.”

“Hayseed shit.”

Hopelessly crude, Ray wrote on his pad.

“The point I’m making, Ray, is that most of these guys were born on third base. Pell Barnish, Tommy Crandall, Harold Felcher—do any of them look like they’ve ever worked a day in their life? At a real job?”

“Not a one.”

“That’s all I’m saying.”

Viktor Horvath glanced at his fingernails. They were clean and polished. But they were nothing like what he had seen in the private sector. A man could go blind looking at Thompson Crandall’s thumbnail.

Pissy attitude?

“Still,” Ray said, putting his pen down, “none of them can ignite a thermonuclear firestorm leading to the annihilation of life on earth with but a telephone call to NORAD.”

“True.”

“So you see, Mr. President, the scales balance: They got the money, you got the power.”

The president was delighted. “Raymond, when you’re right, you’re right.” He lifted the receiver of the red phone. “Let’s make the call now.”

“That’ll show ’em.”

They laughed. The president set the receiver back. “Still, I’d like the money, too.”

“I don’t blame you. In the end, everyone wants the money.”

“And the girl.”

“The money gets the girl.”

“All right, let’s cut the crap and get back to business. Whadda we got today?”

Ray set aside his verse and handed the president the daily schedule. Ray wondered how someone this resentful had twice won the Electoral College, if not the popular vote. Then again, history proved time and again that lack of depth packaged as common sense was a winner with the public. “Enough With the Slogans Already” had kept Viktor Horvath in the White House. It made Ray consider whether, in retirement, he should devote himself to electoral reform.

The absurdity of the thought made him laugh out loud.

Viktor Horvath’s own retirement plans were more firmly fixed. They didn’t include signing off on a ghostwritten memoir, knocking around the lecture circuit, serving on corporate boards or advancing any interest other than his own interest in playing as much golf as possible between his first day out of office and his last breath on earth.

He lit a cigarette and returned to the daily schedule. On the radio in the background, Cole Charleston maundered on in yet another of his sermons on the natural partnership between free will and free markets.

Now *there’s* a survivor, Ray thought. Guy plots arson from the very spot where Ray himself now sat; goes to jail for numerous crimes against the public; finds Christ on the prison chow line; fashions a clerical collar out of a prison bed sheet; and returns from solitary confinement to tell everyone else how to live. As if Jesus Christ himself had

nothing better to do than to materialize in the federal prison camp in Duluth, Minnesota, and recruit convicted felon Cole Charleston to the cause. Viktor Horvath had it right, Ray thought: “Cole Charleston was fucking nuts then, and he’s fucking nuts now.”

A coil of cigarette smoke drifted into the president’s eye. He squinted as he read the schedule. The major event of the day would be a Senate hearing on his nominee for chairman of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, Senator Willburr “Pitch” Farnum. Senators never opposed one of their own, particularly one as likeable and accommodating as Pitch Farnum, so the vote was a lock. Unless, of course, Farnum, a child at heart and very often in public as well, sank himself in the process. He turned to page two of the schedule.

Ray turned to the series of satellite photos hanging on the wall across the office purporting to show progress on the development of a golf resort on the West Pacific island of Pu’ukan. SoftHarbor at Pu’ukan®, it was called. No Club Med this. It was to be lap of luxury. A tropical treasure. “The Jewel of the Pu’ukans,” as Harold Felcher’s marketing brochures put it. “Where nothing matters but the here, the now, the greens, the grill. ... And the you.”

“SoftHarbor” made no linguistic sense to Ray. Was there a “HardHarbor” somewhere? On the other hand, Viktor Horvath had wanted to auction off the naming rights of the resort to raise money for the project. He was dissuaded only when Ray pointed out that “Valvoline Island” might create the wrong image for a golf and beach retreat for the well-heeled.

In any event, FC2 now owned the property and was building the resort, so Harold Felcher got to name it. Whatever they called it, the prospect sounded pretty good to Ray,

especially the part about living on a tropical microdot far, far from Washington, D.C.—a place where he could devote the last full measure of his energies to his poetry. And it made sense to Viktor Horvath, who planned on spending his post-presidential years playing golf on thirty-six holes of a Pruno DiPietro.

And so Ray and the president bought in as silent, though by no means quiet, partners of Harold Felcher and Felcher Communications Corp. The silent part was a strategic necessity: If word got out that the president of the United States and his chief of staff were investors in a hotel being built on government property recently sold to a private developer for the price of a coin, they'd all end up in Duluth nodding off to Cole Charleston sermons on wealth.

Ray took a cigarette from the open pack on the president's desk. The resort seemed like a good investment. Not that a Madison Avenue marketing agency would know anything about the hospitality industry. Marketing people were among the most inhospitable people on earth. But Harold Felcher had parlayed FC2's profits into acquiring a gaggle of businesses whose main function was to serve as in-house clients for FC2's marketing and public relations services. Unlike having to suck up to real clients and their narcissistic whims and short tempers, there would be no complaints from wholly owned subsidiaries, no trying to squeeze Harold on markups, no foot-dragging on paying their fees, no venomous personal insults offered in reply to such simple statements as "Good morning."

Thus, FC2 now held interests in everything from swimwear and auto parts to sheet-metal fabrication, medical supplies and LGBTQIA online dating. And a West Pacific golf resort. FC2 might not know anything about resort management, but it was hugely

profitable. And what this public relations firm lacked in resort-industry expertise, it made up in lack of public transparency, a very big plus for the president and his chief of staff. If FC2 could sell Viktor Horvath to the American electorate with those weird slogans that Denny Dash had cooked up, then how hard could it be to sell tropical golf vacations, which had actual intrinsic appeal?

“Just keep that fast-talking guy with the funny shirts happy,” Ray had said to Harold. “He’s the key.”

Viktor Horvath issued some dyspeptic emissions and turned to page three of the daily schedule. Ray lit his cigarette and reviewed the satellite photos on The Great Wall of Pu’ukan, as he called it. The first one, on the far left, was taken at the outset of the project. It had been a gift from Felcher, the equivalent of a bronzed shovel. Pu’ukan Island had been used by the Army Air Force during World War II, after which it had fallen into desuetude. The photo showed a swath of jungle and the overgrown airfield, which FC2 would fix up and use for shuttling duffers in and out on island hoppers. The other photos in the series were taken at quarterly intervals and were intended to show the progress of development.

Ray was fascinated by the time-lapse nature of the series. It was like witnessing the wonder of a seed as it pushed through the earth and bloomed into a flower, only in this case a high-end golf retreat on a spit of sand in the middle of the ocean that would make him revoltingly rich. But it was the architect’s scale model of the resort that enthralled Viktor Horvath. Harold had brought the model, along with the first satellite photo, to the Oval Office when he was pitching the investment to the president. Ray remembered the meeting.

“Lookit this, Mr. President,” Harold had said, lifting his caboose from his chair and pressing a pudgy finger onto the model, the brilliance of his fingernail manicure

momentarily distracting Viktor Horvath. “That’s the mixed grill, right here. Pruno DiPietro designed it himself. He does *everything* personally: bunkers, hazards, greens, clubhouse, grill—the whole show. Kitten caboodle. And let me tell you, Mr. President, you won’t get a better quick bite than at that mixed grill right there.” He pounded his finger onto the board like it was a bombing target.

“DiPietro, huh?” In his mind’s eye, Viktor Horvath saw himself coming in at the turn between world-class front nine and world-class back nine for a world-class club sandwich and a world-class iced tea.

“Not too heavy, though, right?” he asked.

“What’s that, Mr. President?” Harold dabbed a hanky at his perspiring forehead.

“The club sandwiches. He doesn’t make them too heavy if you wanna go back out and finish a round. DiPietro knows that, right? Turkey has that—” He turned to Ray.

“What’s that chemical in turkey that makes you sleepy?”

“Tryptophan,” Ray said.

“Tripped a fan! I don’t want that. Throws off your whole game.”

“Of course he knows! He’s Pruno!” Harold turned to Ray. “He’s Pruno. He knows.”

The investment pitch had taken a lot out of Harold. It was physical labor. Halfway through, Ray detected a wheeze in Harold’s breathing. He worried that Harold might drop dead right there, in the Oval Office. That would not be good. There would be questions about what the CEO of FC2 was doing in the OO with a scale model of an underfinanced golf resort being built on former U.S. government property sold to the president’s media firm for a coin. Ray wanted to finish the meeting and hustle Harold out while he was still breathing.

But the president lingered, his eyes drifting dreamily over the model. Ray had seen it before: The president was in his golf trance. “Pruno DiPietro,” he murmured. To an obsessed duffer like Viktor Horvath, the name was incantatory, and Harold knew he had clinched the deal. Everyone in the world knew what a golf nut Viktor Horvath was. He’d postpone a war to squeeze in nine holes. He’d start a war to squeeze in nine holes.

“Pruno DiPietro,” he repeated.

“The one and the only, Mr. President. It’s his course. Front nine, back nine, middle nine. You name the nine and Pruno D. is on it. Yes sir.”

“Middle nine?” the president asked. “I’ve never heard of a middle nine. You play?”

“Oh sure, sure. All the time. Ya’ gotta play golf!” He turned to Ray. “Ya’ gotta play golf.” Harold’s wheezing thickened. He had never played a round of golf in his life. Not even a hole. Too hot, too much counter-radial hip and shoulder movement, and golf clothes made him look like an overdecorated Christmas cookie.

“All right, we’re in,” the president said. “Ray’ll make it happen. Ray’s in, too. You’re in too, Ray.”

When the meeting was over, Harold wanted to take the model with him, but the president insisted on keeping it.

“You don’t want this, Mr. President. It’s just clutter.” Harold grabbed an edge of the model to pull it away, but the president pulled at the other side.

“I like clutter. We’ll keep it here. It’ll keep me focused.”

Shit, Harold thought. That thing cost three grand to build and he only had the one.

Worse, there was no guarantee that the final product would look anything like the model. In fact, there was a guarantee that it would look nothing like the model. Reality

never matched the models. Models were strictly sales pieces. And Harold did *not* want Viktor Horvath and Ray Jarecki shoving the model in his face after the fact and demanding to know what had happened to this and to that and to the other thing that they had been promised.

“I’ll get you a better one,” Harold said, giving his end another tug.

“The model stays. But you can go.” The president turned to Ray.

“The model stays, Harold,” Ray said. “But you can go.”

For an instant, Harold expected to be garroted by a Secret Service agent. *Viktor Horvath says it’s time to go.* He looked over his shoulder.

He left the model with the president.

That was more than two years ago. On the first day of every fiscal quarter since then, Harold was required to produce a new photo to illustrate progress. Thus had Harold Felcher turned to FC2 Design Services every ninety days for creative assistance with phony images purporting to be satellite photos purporting to illustrate faster progress at SoftHarbor at Pu’ukan® than was actually case.

The president made his way through the rest of the daily schedule with mounting disinterest. Ray flicked a crook of cigarette ash into a glass ashtray cut into the shape of North Carolina, a gift to the president from the state’s governor, Buddy Larber. The price tag on the bottom showed that it was acquired from the souvenir shop in the basement of the capitol building in Raleigh. Ten years ago, five years ago, *six months ago* this would have amused Ray. Now it just depressed him. Oh, this world, this dim, vast vale of tears was drowning his poet’s soul! He needed the Pu’ukan project so that he could leave it all behind forever.

But it was taking forever to finish. What the hell was taking so goddamn long!

Oh I'm in a very bad mood, he wrote on his verse pad.

Bored, the president tossed the daily schedule onto his desk and picked up a book he had been reading. It was a biography of Gary Player, the legendary South African golf champion from the 1960s and '70s who went on to design world-class golf courses.

"I liked what Harold said last week about leveraging partnerships and co-branding," he said, turning to the photos in the middle of the book: Gary at Augusta, Gary at St. Andrew's, Gary at Pebble Beach. "I don't know what the fuck that means, but it resonates, you know?"

"Mm hm." Ray knocked an elbow of ash onto Greensboro.

"Look at this," Viktor Horvath said. He showed Ray a photo. "This is Gary in 1959 at Muirfield. Twenty-three years old! Can you believe that? The guy was a prodigy."

"How about that," Ray said. He crossed out *I'm* and replaced it with *I am*.

"Just incredible. You know what they called him? They called him 'The International Ambassador of Golf.' What a great job that would be: International Ambassador of Golf. We should get one."

Ray said that given the great sums of State Department money they were funneling to SoftHarbor at Pu'ukan, they already had an embassy. "Might as well get an ambassador to go along with it."

Just then the door flew open and Acting Secretary of the Treasury Roger Swing swept in, the president's secretary, Dina LaFollette, on his heels in a panic.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. President, but he just—stormed right in," Dina LaFollette said.

The notion of Roger Swing “storming in” anywhere was as implausible as his sudden, uninvited appearance in the Oval Office. Impulsive vigor was not a known trait of the buttoned-up, deferential wunderkind economist whom Viktor Horvath had appointed as interim Secretary of the Treasury until an older-looking, full-time occupant could be found. It had been more than two years since the interim appointment.

“What the hell, Roger!” Ray said. He took a vast drag on his cigarette and exhaled a poison cloud in Roger’s direction.

“Ray, I’ve done everything I can,” Roger Swing began, but stopped short and fell back on his heels upon colliding with the curtain of smoke. Only a choke came when he tried to speak. Ray and the president waited for him to recover. Dina LaFollette asked if he would like a glass of water.

“No,” Roger eked. “Trache tube be nice, though.” He touched a fingertip to his Adam’s apple, which was pressed tightly against his crisp shirt collar and the hard knot of his tie. He was convinced that nodules were developing at the back of his throat from his meetings at the White House.

“I’m *so* sorry, Mr. President,” Dina LaFollette said. “He just—”

“It’s all right, Dina,” President Horvath assured her. “The Secret Service should have blown his head off before he reached the door. You’re not to blame. Perhaps Acting Secretary Swing has some urgent news bearing on the fate of peoples, nations and markets. Either that or he’s gone bananas and nuts all at once.”

“It’s the pressure of the office,” Ray said.

“It’s the smoke,” Roger squeaked.

“Swing, you used to be so organized and put-together,” the president said. “Engaged, you know? On the ball. Wasn’t Swing always on the ball, Ray?”

“Very much so.”

“Mr. President—” Roger said.

“But lately you seem so ... so ...” He turned to Ray.

“Disaffected,” Ray said.

“That’s it! Disinfected! You seem so disinfected, Roger. Like you don’t believe in the cause anymore. That pains me.”

“Turn on the T.V. news, Ray,” Roger said, working at the back of his throat for a stubborn lode of mucus. “CNN.” He turned to Dina LaFollette. “May I have that glass of water after all?”

The smile vanished from Viktor Horvath’s face at the mention of “news.” The president hated news. No news was ever good news. Good news wasn’t even good news. In fact, good news was the worst news since it compounded the impact of the inevitable bad news to come. He ordered Ray not to touch the T.V.

Too late. Ray had already turned it on. Jay Buckman, CNN’s marketing reporter, was in the middle of a segment. Viktor Horvath grew sullen as he watched.

Dina LaFollette returned with a glass of ice water for Roger Swing but almost dropped it on the floor when she saw what Jay Buckman was reporting.

“Oh, my,” she said. Roger took the glass from her and bathed the back of his throat with a hearty quaff.

“Ray?” the president said, pointing his cigarette at the image on the T.V. screen. “Is that, or is that not, my Fed nominee?”

“That’s your Fed nominee, Mr. President.”

“What the hell’s happening?”

Ray sighed. He took the daily schedule off of the president’s desk and tore it up.

“I think you’re being shucked.”

A CAN OF SCHLITZ

While Viktor Horvath winched his jaw off the floor of the Oval Office, in New York Lou Dimitriov and his security team hustled to keep up with Roni Bartels on their way to Denny Dash's fortieth-floor office.

Roni was all chop-chop. She was anxious to personally hand Denny his official TARP form and watch Lou's security goons escort him from FC2 Tower. Ideally, this would provoke a physical altercation that would end with Denny being soaked in pepper spray, dragged into the elevator, and hurled into Madison Avenue traffic.

She was too late. Denny was gone by the time they got there. Lou was relieved. He had given Denny an illegal heads-up after Roni's phone call ordering a TARP. Lou had always liked Denny. Denny was a guy who did what he wanted and how he wanted and he didn't give a rat's ass what anyone else said or thought. Lou wished he could still be like that. He sometimes wished he had never left the police department.

Grace was in Denny's office, picking items off the floor and putting them into a box: a bundle of brochures for a West Pacific golf resort; the current issue of *Extremely*

Wealthy Traveler magazine; a family photo of Denny, Jenny and their baby girl, Penny, inside of a shattered frame; half a dozen unopened subpoenas and child-support orders; a CheeseChump paperweight composed of a single fried curd floating in a block of Lucite, like an insect in amber. It was a lugubrious task, like washing away blood and flesh and bone matter after a murder.

Grace lingered over the family photo. She wondered where that cute little baby girl was now, so many years later. She knew Penny had dropped her father's last name and legally taken her mother's, Pollock. She couldn't have finished college since Denny had stopped paying her tuition in violation of a court order. What was she doing instead of school?

Roni took a wide-angle view of the wreckage. The whole chaotic, pathetic panorama disgusted her. The loser office of a loser copywriter with his loser secretary picking up her loser boss's loser stuff.

"Where is he," Roni demanded. She was already riffling through Denny's files for evidence of anything—heroin, cocaine, Russian brides paid for with corporate credit. Instead, she found a handwritten note Denny left for her: "Great view, long fall." She crumpled it up and tossed it aside.

"Grace, did you hear me?" Roni repeated. "Where is he?"

Grace didn't even notice Roni was there until Roni reached into the box of Denny's stuff Grace was cradling and withdrew one of the brochures. "SoftHarbor at Pu'ukan®. An FC2 Resort," she read. Roni had never heard of it. Which meant that Denny—which meant that Harold Felcher—had been going around her back on a major corporate initiative. And she the chief operations officer. *Oh that burned.*

Lou, meanwhile, had slipped behind Denny's desk and was looking out the window to the street forty stories below. There was a man dashing to a cab at the curb. That's him, Lou thought. That's Denny. He could tell by the blur of color. You could spot Denny's shirts from the International Space Station.

Roni stepped to Lou at the window.

"Couldn't even wait till he got fired," she said. "Coward."

Roni gave Lou a suspicious look, then spun around on her high heel and barked orders like Ahab on the deck of the Pequod.

"All right, I want this office secured and scoured. Papers, documents, invoices, client files, billing sheets, vouchers—I want it all. Make copies of everything before we turn it over to Legal. But *I* see everything first. Lou, is that clear?"

Lou nodded.

Roni turned to Grace. "You, burn the rest. Then fumigate the place. It stinks of Cheese Doodles in here."

Grace didn't react.

"What's the matter with you, Grace? You look like your dog just died. I thought you hated the guy."

"I guess I did."

"So why the hell are you in mourning? He's gone. You should celebrate. I know I will."

"I guess I should."

Roni shook her head. "Whatever. You can keep the box of tchotchkes if you like, but I get that carton of brochures. You," she said, snapping her fingers at the taller of the

security goons, otherwise indistinguishable in their ill-fitting blue blazers, gray slacks and Rockports. “Bring those files back to my office. Let’s move it. Go, go, go!”

Lou was still looking out the window. He was talking quietly on his cell phone. Roni heard Lou’s side of whatever meaningless conversation he was having—a disjointed series of “Yeahs,” “OKs,” “Got its” and “Sure things.” It confirmed her impression that Lou had an IQ equivalent to a can of Schlitz.

“Lou? We can arrange for you to go off into the sunset with Dash. Would you like that?”

“Oh uh, no, no. Sorry, Ron. Roni.” He ended the call, and crossed the office to turn on the T.V.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s Jay Buckman,” Lou said. “He—we should watch it.”

“Who said we should watch it?”

Lou pretended not to hear the question.

It was two minutes to ten a.m. Time for “MarketingMinute With Jay Buckman” on CNN. Roni hated the segment. It was Denny Dash’s idea for FC2 and CNN to cobrand a daily marketing report. FC2 paid for the air time, in return for which it got publicity for itself and its clients under the patina of the world’s most trusted news network. Jay Buckman hosted the segment, but Denny wrote most of the copy. The whole operation sickened Roni, especially because it had become must-see T.V. in the marketing world. She had no alternative but to discredit it.

“Turn that shit off,” she ordered.

“Hey, isn’t that Pitch Farnum?” Lou said. “He was downstairs doing a PSA a few days ago.”

“Farnum?” Roni asked, suddenly interested. She ordered Lou to turn up the volume.

“He’s a senator, isn’t he?” Lou asked.

“Fed nominee now,” Roni said.

Roni watched the segment with a mix of emotions. What a coup for Dash and FC2—your client becoming chairman of the Board of Governors of the United States Federal Reserve, the most powerful banker in the world, possessing the ability to print money and command the attention of corporate marketing departments the world over. The retainer alone would be worth millions. Too bad Denny couldn’t enjoy any of it now that he was gone.

How Denny Dash could piss that all away on some cheesy potato-chip delusion was beyond Roni Bartels’s ability to comprehend. Hadn’t someone already invented Cheese Doodles, cheese crackers, cheese puffs, cheese balls, Cheezits, CheezWhiz and cheese logs? Could the market bear yet one more vile cheese-flavored snack? And what was Dash doing inventing snackfoods anyway?

“We don’t *make* the crap,” Roni had to remind Harold when she learned about the CheeseChumps. “We just help sell it to the slobs who eat it.” Harold had assured her that he had dumped the Chump. Wrong again, she thought.

“What the hell is Pitch Farnum doing on ‘MarketingMinute’?” Ray Jarecki asked to no one in particular as he stared at the T.V. in the Oval Office.

“I spent weeks preparing him for his confirmation hearing,” Roger Swing said.

“And now this.”

Viktor Horvath remarked that he had just read the daily schedule very closely and had seen nothing about CNN broadcasting a video of his Fed nominee cavorting with strippers on global T.V.

That was a lie, Ray thought: The president had not read the schedule very closely. The rest of it was pretty accurate, although the strippers were actually Veronica’s Story panty models.

The president lit a fresh cigarette. He now had two burning, one in his mouth and one on Asheville. “Strippers on cable T.V. in the morning, Senate Finance in the afternoon. This is great, Ray. Just great. I know I don’t have to run for re-election, but I had hoped not to get impeached over someone *else’s* sex scandal.”

“Technically,” Ray said, “they seem to be models rather than strippers.”

“What’s the difference?”

“About a square inch of rayon over the areola and another small patch over the genitalia. Plus they’re selling swimwear and undergarments as opposed to fantasy pussy.” Dina LaFollette slipped out of the office. They were now three men aghast.

“Well they’re damn near naked and their tits are damn near hanging out their tops and they’re definitely grinding their hips against my Fed nominee’s shoulder and leg and running their hands through his hair. As for pussy, take that square inch of fabric away and your panty models are big-titted pole dancers at a clip joint.”

“That’s an important piece of fabric then,” Ray said.

On the T.V., a breast whose circumference compared favorably to that of a honeydew melon was pressed into the crook of Senator Farnum's neck while long fingers dangled orange-colored cheese plugs, greasy and glistening, over his gaping gullet like a mother bird feeding a chick.

Roger Swing had gone from dudgeon to despair. "He was supposed to be doing a public service announcement for the Financial Education Board. I didn't realize the board was partnering with *Jugs* magazine."

Jay Buckman was having a wonderful time narrating the video that had fallen into his lap earlier that morning, just as Denny Dash had promised. He had played it half a dozen times already.

"That's right. United States Senator Willburr Farnum, the president's nominee for the Federal Reserve, demonstrates his negotiating style with three dynamos from the retail sector," Jay said. "I'm telling you, folks, those CheeseChump things are gonna go through the *roof* with this kind of branding! Though I'm guessing Farnum's finished, and Felcher's right behind." As Jay pointed out, the copyright information imprinted on the bottom of the video screen indicated that it was produced by FC2. Denny had seen to that.

Within minutes, Harold Felcher's phone rang. It was Dina LaFollette calling on behalf of President Horvath.

"*The* president?" Harold asked.

"Yes," Dina LaFollette said.

"Of ... the United States?"

"Of America, yes." She said President Horvath would like Mr. Felcher to turn on

CNN.

“CNN?”

“Yes, CNN. The cable news channel?” She pulled the receiver from her ear and looked at it in disbelief.

Harold was nonplussed. Why would the president of the United States want him to watch CNN? No one watched CNN.

When he turned on the television, Harold saw what the president wanted him to see: Pitch Farnum romping with strippers for the favor of a cheese curd. When he saw the copyright, his brain lobes melted into one another. There seemed to be a breast in Farum’s face. That’s a huge tit, Harold thought. That’s like a honeydew. Then he heard the senator call out to someone off-screen.

“Hey guy!” Senator Farnum could be heard saying. “Turn that purple shirt off and come on in!”

Harold’s jaw dropped, and a DipChip fell from his fingers. Sour cream and onion. In Denny Dash’s office, Grace Dawes dropped the paperweight on her foot.

#

Denny Dash’s cab sprinted up Third Avenue. He imagined the scene at FC2 Tower: Roni Bartels sweeping blissfully into his office to measure the windows for black drapes. Harold at his desk, weeping and masticating like a melancholy cow. Grace being wheeled out on a gurney.

The cab approached the Midtown Tunnel. Denny texted Lou Dimitriov to say that he wouldn’t forget the favor.

“Do *me* a favor,” Lou replied. “Forget.”

Denny laughed.

ALL CHEESE, ALL THE TIME

For an entire news cycle, nothing mattered but “the Pitch Farnum cheese tape.” Not a tornado that swept through a suburb of Norman, Oklahoma, leaving one dead and twenty-seven bewildered; not another outbreak of E. coli on a Mediterranean cruise ship; not the Supreme Court’s rescission of the First, Fourth, Sixth and Eighth amendments and its decision to hear a challenge to the Thirteenth, which abolished slavery. Only a home video of a pet raccoon in top hat and tails came close. Otherwise, it was all cheese, all the time. FOX News, which broke the raccoon story, ran the Farnum cheese tape and the Zapruder film side by side and asked viewers to vote by text on which they enjoyed more.

Farnum killed.

By lunchtime, you could buy Pitch Farnum CheeseChump T-shirts, caps, pennants, bumper stickers, mugs and cheddar-flavored panties. It proved yet again that in a democracy, nothing so satisfies the electorate as the humiliation of the person they had voted into office.

Pitch Farnum was dead meat. And Viktor Horvath wasn't smelling so sweet either given that it was his idea to install Farnum, three-time winner of the Congressional Staff Association's "Empty Suit Award," in charge of the Federal Reserve.

What was Horvath thinking? Pitch Farnum? For Fed?

Poor Pitch. He was an undeserving victim of his own good and guileless nature. What Pitch Farnum wanted most in life was to be liked. And almost everyone who knew him liked him. He was so easy to like! He was easygoing, highly accommodating, and he never took offense despite endless opportunities. He was like an insurance commercial: You felt he really did care about you. Unlike an insurance company, he really did care about you.

But no one thought he was remotely fit for the Fed. Any fool could fake his way through two terms in the United States Senate. Many were doing so at that moment. But the United States Federal Reserve? Finance simply wasn't Pitch's thing. And no amount of coaching by Acting Treasury Secretary Roger Swing was going to teach him the difference between M1 the money supply and A1 the steak sauce.

Pitch Farnum? For Fed Chairman?

Preposterous!

Ludicrous!

Ridiculous!

Beyond business as usual! Well beyond!

Farnum?

For Fed?

Inconceivable!

What was Horvath thinking?

Fed chair was such a powerful position. Presidents answered to the press. Popes answered to plaintiffs' lawyers. Congress answered to Big Pharma. And Big Insurance. And Big Energy. And Big Cable. And Big Bank. And Big Church. And Big Gun. And ... But the chair of the Federal Reserve answered to no one. He did what he wanted when he wanted and no one could do a thing about it. If the Fed head wanted to raise interest rates, then interest rates would be raised. If she wanted to cut interest rates, then interest rates would be cut. Did he wish to inject money into the economy? Be it so injected. Did she wish for there to be less money in the economy? So let it be removed. Simple as that. She could raise rates at breakfast, lower them at lunch, and raise them again by supper. Only the director of the FBI was more powerful. And even the FBI director's adjustable-rate mortgage was at the mercy of the Fed's Open Market Committee. Which the chair chaired.

It was an unelected, unaccountable barrier against the perils of the plebiscite. The Senate might be the saucer that cooled the hot tea of the House. But even the Senate had its fair share of hotheads. Many times, the Fed had proven its value by saving democracy from itself. Each chair stood on the wingtips of the giant who served before. And they were giants: Barrington Croger, Birdmore Squallings, Ditmore Reese, the inscrutable Whitman Wittman, the scrappy and disarmingly erudite Giovanni Bobanelli Buonnicone. And every president came into office with the same understanding: Don't fuck with the Fed.

Then Viktor Horvath fucked with the Fed by nominating Willburr "Pitch" Farnum.

Farnum?

For Fed?

Preposterous!

Inconceivable!

What was he thinking?

“Ray, I’m thinking it’s time we had a tool at the Fed.”

“But ... Pitch Farnum, Mr. President? For Fed?” Not even Ray Jarecki was that cavalier with the national interest.

But Viktor Horvath was. “He’s our man, Ray.”

The responsible press was with Ray. “Surely, the republic could produce a more capable candidate,” *The Times* opined. “This nomination strikes us as the single most reckless executive appointment of the past two centuries of American democracy. And that is saying much.”

“Do we really wish to entrust global financial stability to a man who insists on being called ‘Pitch’?” asked *The Washington Post*. “Will he wear a backwards baseball cap to the office?”

“We are delighted by this sound, fitting and altogether felicitous appointment,” said *The Wall Street Journal*.

Not that *The Journal* had a point. But for all his misadventures, Pitch Farnum had never truly crossed the line. He was unaware that there was a line, but he instinctively never crossed it. Not once had he knowingly sold his vote, lied to the public or betrayed his beloved wife, Elizabeth “Lady” Farnum. Notwithstanding occasional public appearances to the contrary, he had never even been tempted to commit an indiscretion.

Everyone knew Pitch loved Lady to the bone. To the marrow. And by acclamation theirs was the best marriage in Washington. It was so written. Literally. In her lavish power couple profile in *The Post Styles* section, Pammy St. Pierre characterized the Farnums as “the happiest 🧡s in NW.”

“Pitch Farnum is that most extraordinary of men—the one whom other men root for when he gets into the kind of frat-boy fracas they wished *they* could get into,” Pammy wrote. “Oh to be silly, feckless and fun and to get away with it! He’s the good bad boy. To forgive Pitch Farnum is to feel good about oneself.”

Lady certainly never blamed Pitch for the trouble that always found him. “How could I?” Pammy quoted her. “I might as well blame a little boy for not putting away his toys.” Pammy made that quote up, but Lady didn’t complain.

But oh, he could be trying. Very often on video. With girls involved. Like the time before Pitch and Lady officially met. Farnum, the junior senator from New Jersey, had been glad-handing undergraduates on the campus of Garden State State College. It was a warm October afternoon along fraternity row, and the Sigma Pi’s were out on the porch enjoying the sun and beer when Pitch, in shirtsleeves and trailed by a campus news crew, stopped by to stump.

“Yo fellas!” he called out, one hand on his hip and the other in high salute.

“Whazzup?”

“Pitch Farnum, man!” “Yo, Senate man!” “Duuuuude!”

“Who wants to register to vote?” Pitch asked.

“Fuckin’ eh!” “Yeah! Fuckin’ vote, man! I’ll fuckin’ vote for *you*, P.F!” “Oooh, oooh, oooh, oooh!”

Pitch was smiling. His aide Holly Fanning wasn’t. Holly suggested/insisted they move on. But before she could pull Pitch from the gathering peril, an unopened can of beer flew toward him from the porch. Holly experienced it as a cinematic moment: the can tumbled through the air in a slow-motion arc, backlit by the golden halo of an autumn sun. Sound stopped for a timeless moment, followed by the sudden slap of the beer can against Pitch’s palms and the familiar crack of a pull top, followed by raucous cheers as Pitch slugged the beer back in a gulp, forgetting that he wasn’t a drinker and would become drunk on contact and unaware that the news crew was rolling video the whole time.

A co-ed, drunk, laughing, bare naked and swinging her bra overhead, bounded out the front door of the frat house and made a lusty beeline for the good-looking older dude out front. She lassooed Pitch with the bra and pulled him in for a beery smooch and sloppy hip grind.

Technically, Pitch hadn’t done anything wrong other than enjoy himself at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong girl in front of the wrong video crew.

“All I did was drink a beer,” he later protested, hurt and confused at being pilloried. “What politician doesn’t drink beer with voters? That beer was brewed by a local company. What did I do wrong? She came up to me before I could even react.”

He had a point. Slow-motion and stop-action reviews of the video showed no hip movement on Pitch’s part. But it hardly mattered.

At first, Lady Farnum—she was Lady Gramm at the time, widow of the late-

Senator Graham Gramm of Tennessee—didn't give Pitch Farnum's public impalement more than a chortle when she saw it on CNN that evening. Lady's husband had died in office, and Lady was appointed to finish his term. She had seen Farnum on the Senate floor and in committee rooms, but they had never interacted. To Lady, he was mostly just another suit in the Senate crowd. Watching the beer tape on CNN that evening, she was mostly disappointed that she forgot the raisins for her postprandial bowl of yogurt and muesli. She didn't feel like getting up and going back to the kitchen, and Wepner, her boxer, didn't have thumbs. So she sat and watched the story.

Lady disliked the reporter narrating the piece, Jay Buckman. She shared a widely held view of him as a has-been who never had been and never would be. Buckman's specialty was expressing amused contempt for the people on whom he made his living. He was playing the frat-house clip and highlighting individual frames like a football commentator using a telestrator to examine every step of a play.

"Now here comes the girl," Jay said, drawing a circle around the naked co-ed on the telestrator and marking out her path to Pitch. "Watch Farnum's eyes literally pop out of his head when he gets a load of her."

" 'Literally pop out of his head,' " Lady mimicked. She made a mental note to examine Pitch Farnum's eye sockets the next time she saw him to determine if his eyes had literally popped out of his head.

"Farnum may not be the moving party here," Jay Buckman said. "But he ain't opposing the motion either. Check it out."

"Oh, my," Lady said, a spoonful of yogurt and muesli sans raisins poised halfway between bowl and mouth. She allowed herself a laugh. She couldn't help it. True, the

man's life was unraveling on national television for the sake of local sport. But it *was* amusing. And it made you glad you weren't in that kind of trouble.

“Oh that's just brilliant,” Jay exulted. “Let's run that one again, Freddy.”

Three weeks later, Pitch was reelected on the strength of the college vote, and Jay Buckman was denounced in *The Columbia Journalism Review* for bringing discredit to political reporting. Jay couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe it even more a few years later when President Viktor Horvath nominated Farnum for the Fed.

Farnum? For the Fed?

Preposterous!

Ludicrous!

Ridiculous!

What was he thinking?

It's gonna be great!

A NAKED LUNCH

What's she thinking?

That was the question asked throughout political society some months later when Lady Gramm and Pitch Farnum became an item. Lady herself had asked it many times. Why was the polished and poised daughter of fundraising legend Polk Twetten and widow of the late-Senator Graham Gramm, hooking up with a nudnik like Willburr Farnum?

Isn't love funny that way?

Lady Gramm had zero interest in political office. But when her senator-husband had died with a year left in his term, Lady was appointed to finish it out. She didn't ask for the job and she had no interest in running for a full term on her own. To Lady, there was cosmic meaning in the fact that Dodge City and the District of Columbia shared an abbreviation. But as long as she was there, she took her responsibility seriously.

The morning of her first day on the job, she told her staff she would work her butt off on behalf of her late-husband's agenda.

By noon she'd had enough.

"*This* is what he spent his time on?" she asked Rudy Almond, her husband's chief of staff. "Reinsurance deregulation? That's not only venal. It's achingly dull."

"The senator felt very strongly about it," Rudy Almond said. "He believed everyone was entitled to representation."

"But, insurance companies are *already* represented," Lady pointed out. "It's everyone *else* who needs a voice *against* them."

Rudy shrugged, as if to say, "Tell me about it."

Lady told Rudy that from now on, he was to keep a meticulous log of the issues her constituents were calling and writing to her about, what they wanted done, and whether she could reasonably accommodate their requests. "If we can get their names, great. If not, so be it. It'd be nice to follow up, but we're not the Office of Global Listening and Eavesdropping, so don't press it."

A week later, she asked for a report. Rudy opened his folder and ticked off the names of eight large corporations, none of which even did business in her state. Lady told Rudy to skip ahead to the people on the list. "Tell me about real people. Individuals."

Rudy shut his folder.

"You mean that's it? That's all we've gotten?"

"It's a free country, senator. The people are free not to care about their own interests."

"Boy. I guess they really don't."

"Less work for us."

Lady then asked about press calls and was told that the only reporter who had contacted the office in the last month was a Ted Randall from something called *The Exonumist*. Lady looked puzzled. She said “Exonumist” sounded like something of or pertaining to demonic possession. “I’m not on that committee, am I?”

“It’s a trade publication for numismatists,” Rudy explained. “Coin geeks. Very pocket-protectors. Would you like to know what he called about?”

Lady demurred. Some issues were simply too dispiriting.

Rudy agreed. “You’ll notice that we have high staff turnover.” She said she couldn’t wait to contribute. The world’s most deliberative body was turning out to be the world’s most somnolent corpse. Rudy pointed out that corpses are, by definition, somnolent.

Rudy liked “Senator Lady,” as he called her. She was so much more sentient than her dead husband even when he was alive. Rudy was going to miss her when her term ended. He pleaded with her to run for election when the term was up so that he could respect at least one member of Congress. But as she had promised upon taking office, she chose not to run for the seat. She would hardly be missed. On her last day in office, only one person came to say goodbye.

And it was a complete surprise.

“Really?” Lady asked when Rudy Almond called from out front to tell her that Senator Willburr Farnum was there to see her. “Does he have an appointment?”

“No.”

“What does he want?”

“He said he wants to say goodbye.”

“He wants to say goodbye?”

“That’s what he said: ‘I’d like to say goodbye.’ ”

“Hmm. What do you make of it?”

“I think he wants to say goodbye.”

Senator Farnum was looking at the photos on the wall in the reception room with genuine interest, the only visitor ever to do so. They were of the late-Senator Gramm with various foreign and domestic dignitaries and captains of insurance.

“Hey, that’s me!” Pitched said when he spotted himself in one of them.

Rudy cupped the phone to speak to Lady without Pitch overhearing. “He seems like a very nice man,” he whispered. “Boyish, but in a distinguished sort of way, you know? I think you’ll like him.”

“OK, matchmaker, I’ll come up front and we’ll do the farewell thing out there. No need to alert the media.”

Rudy was just about to hang up when Lady abruptly changed her mind and told him to send Farnum back to her office instead. What the hell. Might as well give him the courtesy of an invitation to the sanctum sanctorum, seeing as he had gone out of his way to come by, even if his office was just down the hall from hers.

She glanced around the office. With all the boxes and debris, it reminded her of the last day of summer camp minus the tear-stained pizza boxes. Then she chided herself for wearing jeans, a casual turtleneck and old flats to the office. True, it was her last day, and those jeans cost two-hundred dollars and the turtleneck was cashmere and cost even more. But around here, if you didn’t look the part, you were held apart.

Then again, that's one reason why she was leaving: she just never fit in. And it was one reason why she wore this very outfit today. Besides, she *liked* the way she looked. And frankly, so did just about everyone else in and around the Capitol. At 51, Lady Gramm, trim and sanguine, had never looked sexier. Her thick brown hair was cut short around her ears, exposing a smooth and graceful neck beneath soft, pink earlobes. She must be doing something right: No less than four committee chairs as well as the Senate chaplain and the minority whip, Lucille Smoot, had made passes at her over the past few months. Lucille's was the only remotely tempting offer, the whip's helmet hairdo notwithstanding.

It occurred to Lady that despite his strained relationship with decorum, Farnum, who was tall, ruddy and very handsome, had never made a pass at her. She knew he was a bachelor and that he wasn't gay. What, she wasn't good enough for this lout to hit on? She was in Lucille Smoot's league but not Willburr "Pitch" Farnum's? Please.

Suddenly she wished she had told Rudy to tell Senator Empty Suit that she wasn't here. Instead, she turned up the volume on her office sound system to antagonize Farnum with gritty old blues music, a taste for which she developed while living in Tennessee. No one around here had enough cultural sense to like the blues. She played "Big Boss Man," the original Jimmy Reed version:

Oh you ain't so big

You just tall, that's just about all.

A couple of minutes passed, and still no sign of Farnum. Lady called Rudy up front.

"Where is he?"

“Who?”

“Farnum! He’s not here yet. Did he get lost or something?”

“How would I know?”

Just then, her door nudged open a few inches and Pitch Farnum’s disembodied head poked inside, nearly scaring Lady out of her flats.

“Is this the right one?” Pitch asked.

“Never mind,” Lady whispered into the phone to Rudy Almond. “The Eaglet has landed. ... Eaglet. Instead of Eagle. ... No, it’s a reference—oh forget it. Go back to Facebook, Rudy.” She hung up and shook her head.

Lady came over to greet her guest. She had seen Willburr Farnum countless times—on the Senate floor, in hearing rooms and hallways, on the Capitol subway, in the Senate dining room, and of course debasing himself on television. But they had never collaborated on anything, including a conversation. So why the last-day drive by?

They shook hands and sat down in the wing chairs opposite Lady’s desk. Farnum was well- and crisply attired as usual and seemed freshly washed even this late in the day. Trim and healthy, Lady thought. He had an open face and a sense of happy wonder in his eyes that seemed out of place in a grownup. A few locks from a thick head of hair dangled over his forehead like a cowlick, underscoring his boyishness. He seemed very approachable. Even better—and more unexpected—was his blessed lack of cologne. There were times when you couldn’t spend five minutes on the Senate floor without your eyes burning from the fumes rising off members’ bodies. You could detect the Middle States delegation on its way from the Dirksen Building. “Memo to Capitol HazMat Team,” Pammy St. Pierre had once written. “That’s not a chlorine leak in the Cloak Room. That’s a

Senate quorum.”

Farnum seemed like a little boy in a big-boy suit. Charming yet vulnerable. Lady didn't realize she was staring.

“What. Is there bean soup on my tie?” Pitch asked, looking down his shirt.

She caught herself. “Oh, no,” she said, touching Pitch's arm reassuringly.

“Crazy day, that's all.”

Pitch looked around. Half the office was boxed up; the other half was spilled across the carpet waiting to be boxed. “Looks like the last day of summer camp,” he said.

Lady almost fell off her wing chair. “Except I bet you're not going to miss any of us.”

She smiled.

“We thought you got lost,” she said.

“I think I did,” Pitch replied. “Your chief of staff even drew me a map.” He held up a slip of paper with a sketch of the map. “Guess it didn't help. I usually need a GPS to get out of my driveway.”

Isn't your office identical to this one?” Lady asked, amused.

“Well I suppose if you—” Pitch rotated the map to orient it to the office. “If you turn it this way or—or if you go—Oh whatever,” he finally said, crumpling up the map and jamming it in his pants pocket. “I got here somehow. But I *will* need help getting out.”

She laughed and reached for a paper clip from her desk to occupy her hands. She was nervous! They made small talk about legislation to keep the government afloat until the next crisis, their plans for the holidays, and what Lady would miss most about public office.

“Nothing!” she said.

“Nothing? I don’t believe it.”

“Not a thing.”

“The collegiality?”

“Nope.”

“The thinly veiled hostility?”

“That’s the same thing.”

“The inability to make a difference in a suffering world?”

“Uh uh.”

“The smell of the Middle States delegation?”

“Definitely not that!” She couldn’t *believe* he said that!

They laughed some more.

Lady was glad Pitch hadn’t raised the dead Graham Gramm, even in passing. The way people would work him into conversations always seemed aimed at reminding Lady of how she had gotten to the Senate—on the back of her husband’s corpse. It happened in almost every debate: The minute she gained ground on a point, an antagonist would resurrect “the memory of your late-husband” to shut her up. As if any one of them had gotten here on merit.

Pitch’s cologne quip reminded him of an anecdote. In his first month here, he had developed an itchy rash on the left side of his face and neck every time he attended a hearing of the Tropical Air-Transport Subcommittee.

“It was the strangest thing. The second I sat down—the very *second*—my neck and cheek would just flame up. Just the one side, though. I thought I had that flesh-eating disease.” He scratched at his neck in memory of the horror. “It was embarrassing! And so

uncomfortable.”

Lady finally understood why people took an easy liking to Pitch Farnum: He was easy to like. He was sincere and innocent and a little needy. He wanted you to like him. She could also see how his need to be liked could get him into trouble on the Hill and with the White House since he tended to oversubscribe his franchise to make friends. It made him the hardest vote to count since you never knew how many conflicting promises he had made.

“And then one day I finally realized that it was Lucille Smoot’s perfume that was giving me hives. She always sat to my left!”

“No!”

“I kid you not!” He held up two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

“You weren’t a Boy Scout! ... Were you?”

“Well, no, I wasn’t. But if I *had* been—”

“Oh stop!”

“I don’t know how to stop. That’s my problem. Don’t you watch the news?” They laughed. Lady said she had her own Lucille Smoot story.

“Is it about Lucille propositioning you?” Lady’s jaw dropped. “Because we’ve all heard it. Lucille tells it all the time.”

“Really?”

“Mm hm.”

“I can’t believe it!”

“How else would I know?”

“But I didn’t tell anyone!”

“Boy, you really *don’t* belong here.”

“I take *that* as a compliment.”

“That’s how I meant it.”

This whole conversation was rattling Lady’s confidence in her ability to judge character. “Can I tell you something?”

“Oh please do!”

“You don’t look at all like a ‘Willburr.’ I mean, when you hear ‘Willburr,’ you think *Charlotte’s Web*. It sounds like—”

“A yokel in overalls and knee-deep in pigshit?”

“Yes! And yet you’re not even wearing overalls.”

“But I could be a yokel in pigshit.”

“We *are* in Washington, Senator.”

“Agreed!”

Pitch explained that “Willburr” was his countercultural parents’ idea of an inside joke—a literary reference by which they had hoped, not very seriously, to imbue their first and only child with the beatnik spirit, “Willburr” being a contraction of “William Burroughs.”

“William Burroughs—Will Burr. Get it?” he said. “Pretentious, I know. And evidently not very effective given how unliterary I turned out.”

“So they weren’t yokels?”

“Drew and Lena? Good God, no. They wouldn’t have known an udder from an otter if you had shown them pictures and pointed them out.”

“Speaking of bohemian, I sometimes feel like we’re living *Naked Lunch* around here,” Lady said. “It can be a very seedy place.”

Pitch liked the idea of a naked lunch with Lady Gramm. Or dinner, breakfast or late-night snacks, naked or fully clothed. She had such a unique manner and style, and she seemed to enjoy their conversation. But he didn’t see where nude meals fit into the conversation.

She noticed his confusion. “*Naked Lunch*?” she said. “The novel? By Burroughs?”

“Oh right. Him! The guy we’re talking about! Will Burr.” Pitch confessed that he had never read anything by William Burroughs.

“The funny thing about Drew and Lena?” he said. “They started out as hippie-freak-beatnik types, bound for the ashram and share-the-land and whathaveyou. But they were always such searching types, and they ended up doing a complete philosophical three-sixty.”

“Wouldn’t that have brought them back full circle?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” She asked how his parents had changed so dramatically.

“They became born again.”

“Really!”

“Yep. Found the Lord. Did it when I was in middle school.”

“That’s fascinating that they would undergo such a turnabout.”

“I guess. But when you’re in eighth-grade and mostly interested in girls and social survival, the fascination value of having nut-job parents can be elusive. I always wished they had stayed hippies. It would’ve made high school *so* much easier.” He paused. “Of course, I’m still interested in girls, but apparently not so interested in social survival.”

“The press can be pitiless,” Lady said.

Pitch shrugged.

Lady asked a few more questions about his parents. Did they make him go to church every Sunday? Did he have to pray every day? Did any of it rub off on him? Did they proselytize?

“Oh no, not at all,” he said. “They were born again, but they were too well-bred for cramming it down everyone else’s throats. Is it ‘everyone else’s *throat*’ or ‘everyone else’s *throats*’?”

“I’d say ‘throat’ since each person only has one.”

“Right. But cows have four stomachs. Isn’t that interesting? Anyway, it was mostly a personal thing for them. They read the Bible constantly, but they never pressured me to get with the program. I think they just hoped that if they read it aloud around me often enough—”

“Aloud?”

Pitch nodded and finished his thought. “Then some of it would sink in.”

“Did it?”

“I think we both know the answer to *that* question. Deep down, I’m very shallow. But I can still quote tons of passages by heart.”

“Let’s hear.”

Pitch leveled a firm but caring gaze at Lady. “‘Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.’ Leviticus 19:18.”

“I’m impressed! Although I’m not sure anyone around here subscribes to that view.”

“It’s not a very Christian place, is it. Except on Election Day: ‘Please, God. Let me win just one more term and I swear I’ll work for the public weal!’ Honestly, sometimes this place seems more like a revival meeting than a legislative chamber.”

Lady said that she had heard a lot of political gossip over the years, but nothing about this aspect of Pitch’s background. Pitch said he rarely spoke about it because people would assume that Drew and Lena were right-wing nuts and that he was homeschooled and, thus, an uneducated idiot. “Which isn’t true at all: I was never homeschooled.”

“Oh stop it,” Lady threw the paper clip at him. It hit Pitch on the tip of the nose.

“Hey! I come to say goodbye and you assault me with an alloy projectile? Those things are manufactured in my state, by the way.”

Lady said she didn’t like it when people bad-mouthed themselves unless they deserved it.

“Thanks for the compliment,” Pitch said. “It is a compliment, right?”

Lady asked Pitch where his parents were now. Pitch said they were Members of the Assembly of God.

“That’s in Arlington?”

“That’s six feet under.”

“Oh Jesus, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be, unless it was your fault. Which I doubt since they died in a car wreck on Route 1 in East Brunswick, New Jersey, many years ago.”

“What happened?”

“They were heading to a retreat when a dump truck tipped over and fell onto their car. Crushed ’em like bugs.”

“Oh that’s just awful!”

Pitch brushed it off. “People get so uptight about death. But we’re all going sooner or later, right? Ashes to ashes and blah to blah and blah blah blah.”

True enough, Lady thought, but she’d rather go almost any other way than getting crushed to death under a garbage truck. In New Jersey.

Lady had always thought that in men, self-deprecation was a contrivance and, usually, a reverse indicator of character: the more self-deprecating, the bigger the id; the bigger the id, the bigger the idiot. But Pitch Farnum struck her as sincerely unimpressed with himself. Maybe when your church-crazy parents get flattened by solid waste on the way to a Jesus retreat, there’s not much to be haughty about. Or maybe Willburr Farnum was the one case of a politician who really was getting an unfair rap from the press.

It was an hour before they realized how long they had been talking. It was late afternoon in December and the windows were already dark outside, but it was bright, warm and cozy in here. It was the most pleasant hour Lady Gramm had spent in this unpleasant job.

“So what do you think of magpies?” Pitch asked.

“Pardon?”

Pitch checked his watch. “I’m due at a Birds Without Borders rubber-chicken dinner in a few minutes, although I doubt they’ll actually serve chicken. I’m guest of honor, no less.”

“The avian-rights group?”

“Tonight we’re honoring the kakerori of the Cook Islands. Spectacular plumage.”

“You’re leaving *now*?” Lady was incredulous, not that Pitch was leaving in the middle of a wonderful conversation—although that, too—but that he was going to a fundraiser for birds that were not native to his home state just as the Senate was about to consider a funding bill to keep the government operating for the next month, and the vote was expected to be close. Every member of Congress had been whipped and rewhipped. More importantly, camera crews were crammed in front of the briefing room podium, which members would troop up to for their soundbites.

“You’re going to miss out on all that,” Lady said. “Even I’m going to be there. And I stopped caring three weeks ago.”

“No biggy,” Pitch said. “I’m overexposed anyway. Besides, I hate all that budget stuff. I just don’t have a head for numbers.”

“I got that impression when you said your parents did a three-sixty instead of a one-eighty,” Lady said.

“I guess I’ll never be Fed chairman. Exactly what I do have a head for ...” he trailed off.

Lady reached for the stapler. “Don’t make me do it!”

Pitch threw his hands up in defense. “OK! OK! I withdraw the comment!”

They stopped talking for a moment, and it was quiet but for the music playing in the background. It was Buddy Guy, singing “My Time After a While.”

“That’s a funny song,” Pitch said. “He sounds very angry. Like someone done him wrong. Is it *done* him wrong, or *did* him wrong?”

Lady smiled. She asked if he liked the blues. Not particularly, he said. It was lonely music, and he didn’t care to be reminded about that aspect of the human condition.

“Well, we certainly don’t want you to be lonely.” She got up to turn off the music player.

“Khabubbala’s becoming big fan of the blues. Or so Senator Horvath says,” Pitch said. “Isn’t that odd? Although I suppose there’s plenty to be blue about in a place like Chechibennigan. Such poverty.”

Lady was having trouble with the music player. “For something that’s supposed to be so simple to use, it can be pretty difficult to use. Where’s the damn on/off button?”

“Just pull the plug out. That’s what I always do.”

“I won’t get electrocuted?”

“Not if you’re wearing rubber-soled shoes.”

“Fat chance!” Lady grabbed the cord, shut her eyes, looked away, and yanked the plug out of the wall.

She survived, but the music was still playing. They looked at each other and simultaneously said: “Batteries!”

She pulled out the batteries and sat back down, but with a bewildered look on her face. “I meant to ask you something. About something you said a minute ago. But I can’t for the life of me remember what it was. What were we just talking about?”

“I think you suggested that we get naked and have lunch. I felt very uncomfortable.”

“Oh I’ll bet. My God, what’s that noise?” Lady said. “Is that you?”

“Oops,” Pitch said, placing a hand over his stomach. “I think so.”

“Didn’t you have lunch? Clothed or naked?”

Pitch looked discomfited. “I sometimes forget.”

“You forget to eat? You must be famished!”

“I am a little lightheaded. That happens when I don’t eat. It also happens when I *do* eat,” he joked.

Lady reached into the mini-fridge she kept next to her desk and handed Pitch an oat bar, an apple and a bottle of water. “Here, take these. They’ll get you through your bird bash.” Pitch grimaced at the pun.

“You’re sure you can’t come?” he said. “I bet the kakerori would like you just as much as I do.”

“Oh no, I—really, I can’t. The budget vote and the packing and all. But thank you.” She had no idea why she said no when she wanted to say yes.

They walked to the door and shook hands. “Thank you so much for coming by, Senator,” Lady said, immediately realizing that this was the kind of pablum you’d say to hustle out a constituent.

Pitch closed his eyes and lifted his chin, as if searching for a thought. Having found it, he opened his eyes and looked squarely into Lady's.

“ ‘I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem: but I will return again unto you, if God will.’ Acts 18:21,” he said, and finished with a bow.

“That's a beautiful quote. And a lovely sentiment.”

“See? It's in there someplace.” He put a finger to his temple. “Just takes some jostling to get to it.” He said he could find his way out. “I hope!”

Lady stood in the doorway and watched Willburr Farnum step down the corridor. He had such an easy gait. He was so comfortable in his own skin. What a gift, she thought.

“I'm not really going to Jerusalem!” he called out over his shoulder. “It's just a quote!”

“I know! You're going to the bird show! Save the kak!”

“Save the kak!” He turned right at the end of the hallway.

“Left!” Lady corrected. “Left!”

Lady loved to wander over that memory, particularly now, when the world was being so unfair to Pitch, one of the sweetest souls on earth. And being set up in a phony sex scandal involving panty models but no sex qualified as unfair.

“Oh, Pitch,” she said as she watched the cheese tape. “Oh dear, sweet, good Pitch. Screwed again.”

Pitch had overcome the frat-house episode. But this was going to be a steeper climb. Not only did it seem part of a pattern of behavior, but this time he wasn't a garden-variety politician pressing the flesh a little too conspicuously. This time he was the

president's nominee to head the Federal Reserve, a global position of public trust that required dignity, decorum, character, composure and pants. It was nothing like Congress.

Jay Buckman also knew that it would be different. He knew it the second the cheese tape fell into his lap inside a clasp envelope, courtesy of his absconded friend Denny Dash of Felcher Communications Corp.

Even *The Journal*, which so recently had been so high on Pitch Farnum, turned on him. The editorial page lowered Pitch's political credit from Triple A to Triple D—"approximately the cup size that figured so prominently in Messr Farnum's recent spectacle of vulgarity."

DARKNESS BEFORE AND AFTER NOON

Viktor Horvath would deal with the collapse of his Fed nominee in due time. At the moment, he had a more urgent priority: Something didn't look right on the new satphoto on the Great Wall of Pu'ukan.

"There's all this new development in this middle part," he said, setting a ruler along the glass of the frame, "but this backhoe on four hasn't moved an inch in two fiscal quarters. And I don't mean an actual inch on the photo. I mean a scale inch. It's been in the same spot for six months. Lookit." He moved in for a closer look, nearly pressing his nose against the glass of the new photo, then doing the same on the previous quarter's photo.

"See that, Ray? You see? No change."

Ray glanced from one to the other. He said there was a simple explanation. "I'm sure Harold Felcher's been stealing our money and sending us doctored photos." He lit a cigarette from a pack on the president's desk and set North Carolina onto his lap.

“The thought crossed my mind,” Viktor Horvath said. He pulled the two photos off the Great Wall and set them on his desk, where he intensified the comparative analysis. “By the way, this volcano in the middle of the island? Should I be worried about lava flowing down my fairways?”

“Already been filled in and flattened out. Confirmed by the Army Corps of Engineers. It’s a very nice scenic overlook now,” Ray said.

The lack of progress on the resort was weighing on both men. Twice, opening day had to be postponed given the slow pace of work. The new date was just two weeks away. But with construction equipment still onsite and money running out again, they’d either have to postpone for a third time, or open anyway and advise guests to play around the backhoe on four. The president didn’t like that idea at all.

“You land next to the tread on that thing and you’ve got a helluva lie, Ray. A helluva lie.”

He took a cigarette from the pack. Ray leaned over to give him a light and noticed a little bump on the president’s upper lip. It was a good thing there were no public appearances today. Any time a reporter notices so much as a paper cut on the chief executive’s corpus, demands for full-scale medical briefings follow. And who knew *what* they’d find.

“I spoke with Felcher yesterday,” Ray said. He blew a few smoke rings.

“Oh yeah? What’d he have to say for himself?” The president tried to blow a smoke ring, too, but produced a shapeless cloud. It was an ongoing irritation that he hadn’t been able to learn the trick.

“He got all wheezy and defensive and said there’s not enough local labor willing to show up on time every day and how is he supposed to get the job done and that he’s got a million and a half other projects to keep track of on sixteen continents now that FC2 is a conglomerate and blah blah blah-beh-dee blah.”

“Who do we have out there? Fifth Fleet? Sixth? Let’s get the Navy to rustle up a few dozen natives from the outer islands and bring ’em in. Coupla weeks oughta do it. We can put ’em up in the bungalows and charge ’em rent. We’ll end up making money on it.”

Ray said it would be ironic if the United States Navy were to bring people *to* Pu’ukan from the outer islands sixty years after it had forcibly exiled them all *from* Pu’ukan.

The president released a long sigh that resolved into a hacking fit. He quit smoking yesterday but had fallen off the tobacco wagon this morning and was making up for lost time.

That little bump on his lip worried Ray. So did the president’s declining mood. If it sank any deeper, the nation was in for a very dark period.

“Fucking problems never end,” Viktor Horvath said. “Never.”

Darkness had descended, and it wasn’t even noon yet.

Viktor Horvath stubbed out his cigarette and told Ray to follow up with Harold Felcher in person to find out how much money he needs. “Don’t bring him down here. You go there, to his office. That’ll send him the message that you know where he works.”

“How much do I need?” Harold Felcher repeated the question Ray Jarecki had just put to him. He paused a moment, as uncomfortable with the situation as he was in his own excess skin. He felt like an overstuffed blini, or how he imagined an overstuffed blini would feel if it were sentient and in a meeting with Ray Jarecki of the White House. The thought of a blini reminded Harold of lunch, which was still several hours away. He glanced at the pallet of DipChips on the floor by his desk. There were still plenty left. Thank God for that.

Harold Felcher had so miscalculated the financing of SoftHarbor at Pu’ukan® that FC2 was now approximately four million dollars short on a one hundred and seventeen-million-dollar project. With guests, golfers and travel bloggers soon arriving, they’d be stumbling over construction cones, staring at unpainted sheetrock in their rooms, and riding rental tandem bikes on roads that dead-ended into tree stumps. The next satellite photo was due to the White House a week from Tuesday. He’d have to tell the graphics department to stop all other work and phony up some satellite photos.

Harold could account for some of the four million dollars—the shortage of local labor was a real problem. You just can’t find enough able-bodied people on a remote, miniscule, underpopulated West Pacific island who have the skills to operate heavy equipment, do finishing work, set concrete, or wire a guest room for cable and Internet and care enough about a paycheck to show up for work. That meant paying twice as much to induce the skilled few to work longer hours when they did show up. It also meant numerous reworks to fix things done poorly the first time. Most vexing of all was that because federal money was involved, he had to comply with U.S. labor laws. The diversity rules were a menace. It all chewed up time and money.

Chewed up. Harold’s stomach growled. What a funny word to describe a stomach.

Growl.

Then there was the cost that Harold would not disclose to Ray under any circumstances—namely, that Denny Dash’s last act before leaving this very building, after destroying the president’s nominee for the Federal Reserve in a burst of spite, was to plunder FC2’s special Oval Office account, the one they used for the Pu’ukan project.

Sometimes it felt like he had a million balls in the air.

“Harold? Are you with me?”

“Whuzza?”

“I’m meeting with the president tomorrow morning on this,” Ray said. “What shall I report?”

Harold pulled open his desk drawer, peered inside as if hoping to find an answer there. Finding none, he pushed the drawer closed.

“How much do I need?” he repeated Ray’s question yet again.

“Right. Question hasn’t changed in the past eight seconds. I’m assuming you didn’t find it in your pencil drawer.”

Harold leaned across his desk, adopting a let’s-talk-turkey posture. “How much *money* do I need. *That’s* the question, Ray.” Talk turkey. Food again. Should’ve gone with “get down to brass tacks.” Another weird phrase. “How much money do we need. To finish the job.”

Ray looked around the room. “Is there an echo in here? Because you keep repeating my question.”

Harold thought that Ray and Roni Bartels would make a good couple. They'd fight over who got to eat the other's head after mating. He wished he could focus.

“Yes, how much *muhh-nee* do you need to *fih-nish* the *job*? *MUHH-nee*, *MUHHnee*, *MUHH-nee*. The shit that makes the world go round.”

“Hm.” Harold reached for the drawer again. This time Ray leaned across the desk and impaled Harold's wrist against the desk before he could open the drawer. Harold raised his other hand to ward off the expected blows.

“It's not in the fucking desk, Harold. It's in that empty fucking space between your ears.” He cuffed Harold on the side of the head.

“Ow! OK, OK!”

“How much!”

“Lots!”

“How much is 'lots'?”

Harold glanced at his wrist. Ray let go. Harold rubbed his wrist. “That hurt.”

“How much, Harold?”

Harold said that based on his calculations, they needed—he spread his hands about six inches apart, then slowly drew them further apart, and then he swept them as far apart as he could without dislocating his shoulders.

“This much.”

In an instant, Ray's face was an inch from Harold's nose and his hands wrapped around both of Harold's wrists.

“Listen to me, you fat fuck. I work for Viktor Karl Horvath. That's 'Karl' with a

‘K,’ as in German and ruthless. Do you know what that means? Do you know who he is? He’s the fucking president of the United Fucking States of America, which right now I’m also spelling with a ‘k.’ And *you* work for *me*. Which means *you* work for Viktor Karl With a German K Horvath. Ponder the implications of what I’m saying, Harold. This an individual who controls seven hundred and fifty thousand men, women and gays in arms, including a Marine expeditionary force and a nuclear-powered naval battle group which at this very moment is steaming toward the West Pacific just in case *this* meeting doesn’t go well.”

Harold was stunned. “The president would bomb his own golf resort?”

“In his world, that’s called ‘sending a message.’ ”

Harold felt his arteries twist. His stomach growled louder. Stick a *widelec* in me because I’m a cooked blini.

He told Ray the resort fund was short three million dollars. He thought three million would be more palatable than the more accurate four million or the five that he had considered citing, for cushion.

Ray had gotten the information he had come for. He stopped at the door on his way out. “I suppose that if we kill you, it would leave a trail.”

“Ha ha,” said Harold.

“Ha ha,” said Ray. “Don’t leave town.”

#

After a few minutes of staring out his window and wondering how much it would hurt to smash against the pavement from a fall this high up, Harold saw Ray slip into a limo.

“ ‘Don’t leave town.’ Where could I even go?” They could track him down anywhere in the world. They have satellites and spaceships and drones and secret prisons and bugs on everyone’s phone and email and on their pens and pencils and inside their heads for all he knew. The Office of Global Listening and Eavesdropping knew what was inside your head better than you did. For all he knew, OGLE could be listening to these very thoughts right now.

Harold knew he would never survive waterboarding. He couldn’t even swim. He should never have gotten involved with the government. Or the hotel business. What did he know about hospitality? He ran a marketing agency, and he barely knew that business. But the NYSE wanted FC2 to be more like IBM. If they only knew what Harold knew: that FC2 was looking more SOL every day.

SIX DEAD BIRDS, ONE BRILLIANT IDEA

“Four million? On top of what we’ve already pissed away?” Viktor Horvath was incredulous. “What the hell is going on?”

Ray shrugged. “He says it’s three million, but I happen to know it’s four.”

“Jee-ZUSS. Another four mill? With a month to opening day?”

“Two weeks,” Ray corrected.

“Where’re we gonna get that kinda coin?” He waited for a reply from his stone-faced chief of staff. “That’s not a rhetorical question.”

“That’s exactly the answer,” Ray at last replied.

The president said he must have missed the question because he didn’t understand the answer.

“ ‘They cannot touch me for coining, for I am the King himself.’ ”

“One of yours?”

“Shakespeare. Lear six six. But thanks.”

“Shakespeare. Wonderful. Never read ’im. You gonna tell me what it means and how it applies to our Pu’ukan project?” “We need coin. Then let us press coin.”

“I’m listening,” he said.

Among the reasons Viktor Horvath had hired Ray Jarecki was that Ray’s knowledge of public finance was peerless. His gifts lay in raising revenue; spending revenue according to the mandates of statute, regulation and case law; and, when necessary and appropriate, obscuring the link between the raising and the spending sufficient to confuse forensic accountants. Less valuable was his tendency to unfurl his ideas as if he were Homer confabulating tales of fiscal folklore for the ages. You just hoped you were awake by the time he got to the reveal.

Viktor Horvath lined up half a dozen fresh cigarettes and settled in for a yarn. Ray spent the next fourteen minutes walking the president through Pu’ukan’s little-known place in World War II history, with an emphasis on the activities of one Chessler Charles Boresby. During the war, he noted, Crazy Charlie Boresby had wandered the waters of the South Central West Pacific in search of ideal storage sites for Fat Man and Little Boy, the atom bombs that the Army Air Forces dropped on Japan to end the war.

“And do you know what place he came up with for said storage site?” Ray asked.

The president lit his second cigarette. “Tinian. That’s where the bombers took off from.”

Ray was delighted. He shook his head. “Negative! That’s the story that came down through history, but it is fictive.”

“Fictive.”

“That was the original idea. We threw the Japs off of Tinian and built an airbase there to use for the A-bomb raids. At some point in the middle of all this, we picked up half a dozen Russian spies dressed up as natives trying to come ashore in dugout canoes. Evidently, they had gotten wind of our plans. Again, these are all little-known facts that you won’t find in any book. And don’t ask how I know because I won’t tell you.”

“I’m grateful.”

“Thanks to the seized Russians, we needed a new place for the bombs PDQ since Tinian had been compromised. And that’s where the loosely hinged C.C. Boresby came through with the Pu’ukan. It was the perfect place. No one knew about it. And even if they had known about it, which they didn’t, they wouldn’t have suspected it since it was a spec in the ocean, just big enough to hold a couple of B-29s and within range of the Japanese home islands. Boresby was a nut, but he was our nut and he came up with the perfect place from which to launch the end the war. And it worked. Saved thousands of lives.”

“Tell it to a quarter-million dead Japs.”

“It was a perilous time, Mr. President. Difficult decisions had to be made. Look at Coventry.”

“So what you’re saying is that the Enola Gay and Bockscar—”

“Had nothing to do with it. Cover story. Potemkin. A Hollywood fabrication, just like the moon landing and 9/11. The real bombers took off from the Pu’ukan.”

“Uh huh. And what were their names?”

“Cover Story and Potemkin.”

“I see. Anyhoo, back to reality.”

“You’re skeptical.”

“Yes, but more to the point, I simply don’t care. I want to finish my own life’s work before my time dribbles away.”

“The resort.”

“The resort, yes.”

Ray explained that no adequate memorial had ever been erected in Boresby’s name, no funds appropriated, let alone allocated, to honor his towering contributions to the cause of freedom. For obvious reasons. For to acknowledge him, Ray said, would be to reveal our own duplicity.

“And yet to the intelligence community, overlooking Boresby was not just a historical oversight, but an enduring slap in its collective keister *even though that was the whole point! To dissemble, distract and divert!*”

“So we’ll give Whatshiscrazy a posthumous medal. Ray! Please! What does this have to do with my golf course?”

“Not a medal, Mr. President. A commemorative coin. Pressed by the United States Mint and marketed to the public in exchange for hard cash. By law, proceeds from the sale of commemorative coins must be used for memorials to fallen service members. We mint a coin honoring Boresby, nail a plaque to him somewhere in the middle of the Pu’ukan jungle and use the proceeds to finish the resort.”

The president said he thought that was the reason they had opened up a little embassy shop out there—to funnel State Department money to the project. “Now we have to build a memorial? And pay for a plaque?”

“Technically, it’s more of an American presence than an embassy,” Ray said. “Very small shop. In any event, if we run any more money through that office, it’ll get noticed. We need alternative financing.” A commemorative coin, Ray said, could generate decent money. “Nothing spectacular, but you don’t want a blockbuster that’ll draw attention. Just a nice little chunk of change. We get cash, Boresby gets credit, and you make peace with REANAL for finally giving their hero his recognition.”

“REANAL.” The president groaned. It was a reflexive response any time the Retired Espionage and National Assets League came up. “That was years ago and yet they’re still up my ass.”

“Chechibennigan. They still blame you.”

“That was a military fuckup, Ray. Plain and simple.”

“True.” Ray knew this was not true.

“It had nothing to do with politics.”

“True again.” As far from the truth as they were from Pu’ukan Island at that very moment.

“Go ask Fish Rommel why his great armada got turned back by a nomad with a squirt gun.”

“Ancient history. Bottom line, Mr. President: REANAL wants your head. Give

'em tails, too. This will be like killing four, five, even *six* birds with one coin.” Ray celebrated the brilliance of his concept with six perfectly shaped smoke rings, one for each dead bird.

The president thought it over, then pronounced his decision. “Stupid idea. What else you got?”

“Nothing. Let’s hear yours. Or don’t you want to retire.”

“I’ve changed my mind. Brilliant idea. Let’s get started.”

LATHER, RINSE, REPEAT

Pu'ukan.

An inconsequential dot in the empty waters between Micronesia and Macrominia. A spit of sand that hadn't appeared on an atlas in centuries and, barring extraordinary developments, would continue not to appear. Not even *The CIA World Fact Book*, a compendium of galactic trivia, could muster more than a sentence on the entire Pu'ukan Archipelago: "Given its location—in the middle of nowhere—the Dependent Territory of Pu'ukan is a gateway to nothing."

The perfect place in which to disappear. Just as Harold Felcher had said when he practically rammed the key to Bungalow No. 1 down Denny's throat.

At Rarotonga, the transport hub of the region, Denny boarded a clattering island hopper for the final leg of a twenty-four hour, three-flight odyssey. When land emerged outside his window an hour after takeoff, it was a vision rising from the pellucid Sea of

Pu'ukan like a liquid oasis—lush, exotic, candescent, “an ingot wrapped in a ribbon of sand inside a jewel of turquoise stillness,” which was how one of Harold Felcher’s brochures described it.

Screwed into the dead center of the ingot loomed Mount Tangaroa, a long dormant volcano whose blow hole had been filled in, flattened out and paved over. Spread out on the other side of the peak was the business end of the island, with the FC2 resort, the beach, the boat harbor, the newly built downtown, and the undisputed gem of the Pu'ukans: the twenty-seven emerald greens of a Pruno DiPietro.

“Harold Felcher’s wet dream,” Denny thought and pulled the window shade down as the plane bounced onto the single runway of Boresby Airfield, an impressive name for a landing strip no longer than the straightaway on a high school track. Denny stepped off the plane and into a stupefying heat.

Pu'ukan.

For Denny Dash, those first few days on the island were like having the top half of his skull unlatched and his brain lifted out by gentle fingers, washed in warm suds, rinsed clean, gently patted with a plush cloth, and set out to dry in the fresh air and sunshine while the inside of his empty cranium was dusted and buffed and equipped with shiny new latches and fittings.

It was his first real rest in years and it was delicious. Maybe Harold had been right, Denny thought as he lay in the crisp new bedding of the crisp new bungalow that came with the key that Harold had foisted on Denny against Denny’s will. It was one of half a dozen luxury units built into HarborHill above HarborVillage overlooking

SoftHarbor. It was clean, minimally furnished and painted in wispy pastels. The plumbing was first rate: excellent pressure in the shower and a good, strong flush in the can.

Denny assumed Harold must have figured out by now where he had gone and what he had taken with him—namely, a million dollars in FC2 money. But knowing what happened didn't mean Harold knew what to do about it. What *could* he do? Denny imagined Harold weighing one wretched option against another. He could come clean and disclose the theft to the FC2 Board. This would unleash a cascade of immensely unpalatable events that would end in Harold's indictment based on the prosecutor's reasonable presumption that Harold and his embezzling partner were too close for there not to have been collusion. Alternatively, he could hide behind his index finger and pretend to be invisible while the FBI ransacked his office and seized everything from client files to DipChips.

The longer Harold failed to alert the authorities to what had happened, the firmer would be the impression of conspiracy. Denny could write that cross-examination himself:

Politically Ambitious, Devastatingly Handsome Federal Prosecutor: All right, Mr. Felcher. Now, according to the timeline to which you have stipulated and which you see here on these oversized foam boards arrayed in the jury's line of sight, you learned on a Monday that a confidential corporate account had been looted of several millions of dollars. Is that correct?

Accused Corporate Criminal Felcher, sweating in the dock. He is forced to stand, in the manner of the Crown Prosecution Service: Yes, that's correct.

Handsome Federal Prosecutor: *And after becoming aware of this looting—this embezzlement, this rank theft—on that Monday, did you alert anyone either inside or outside of the publicly held company?*

Sweating Felcher: *Not on Monday, no.*

Handsome Federal Prosecutor: *Not on Monday. How about on Tuesday? Did you alert anyone on the following day, Tuesday, that your best friend and FC2 protégé, Dennis Dash, had stolen corporate funds for which you held a fiduciary responsibility?*

Sweating Felcher: *(Thinking.) On that Tuesday?*

Handsome Federal Prosecutor: *On that Tuesday, yes.*

Sweating Felcher: *No, not on that Tuesday. (Clears throat.)*

Handsome Federal Prosecutor: *On any Tuesday?*

Sweating Felcher: *Um (thinking). No.*

Handsome Federal Prosecutor: *What about on a Wednesday?*

Sweating Felcher: *Any Wednesday?*

Handsome Federal Prosecutor: *Any Wednesday.*

Sweating Felcher: *No.*

Handsome Federal Prosecutor: *Any Thursday?*

Sweating Felcher: *I don't believe so, no. (Turns to judge.) Can I get a glass of water, your honor? And a defibrillator?*

Handsome Federal Prosecutor: *Move that the jury will regard that as a "No" as to any Thursday, Friday, Saturday or Sunday in addition to Monday through Wednesday.*

Sweating Felcher: Interesting thing about Sundays: Did you know that the incidence of suicide is eight times higher on Sundays than on any other day of the week?

Harold, thus, would make no disclosure.

His remaining option, Denny figured, was to try to claw back the stolen money through the calibrated application of steadily intensifying threats, then return the funds before anyone noticed they were missing. The legal terms for this plan were “blackmail,” “coverup,” “co-conspirator” and “Hail Mary pass.”

Harold’s threats could, thus, be ignored.

Denny glanced at the clock on the night table: almost noon. Too early to get out of bed, too late to go back to sleep. Time to idle. He listened, he breathed, he picked at the crust in the corners of his eyes and he planned his day: get out of bed at some point; maybe shower, maybe not; check for panicked e-mail from Harold; tighten the pressure on Harold by not replying; swing by the hotel pool for some lazing about; come back home; nap; eat; sleep; lather; rinse; repeat tomorrow. Just like yesterday and the day before. It was a highly pleasant way to waste a day.

Another week of it and he’d be dead from boredom.

Yet one more week was all Denny figured he’d need to make a deal with Harold before leaving Pu’ukan behind. Maybe head to maybe to the Maldives, maybe Brazil, maybe Bangkok. Funny name, “Bangkok.” What’d they consider first, Slapdick? Punchcunt? He chuckled at his joke. He’d have to give his next move deeper thought than dick jokes. The first priority, though, was to show Harold that their interests were entwined: Denny would keep the money, and Harold would keep his yap shut or end up

in jail, where he would be repeatedly gang raped by a three-hundred-pound cell mate named “Tiny.”

Denny sloughed himself out of bed, slipped into a pair of shorts, T-shirt and flipflops and rolled a fag from a pouch of Bali Shag. Nothing concentrated the lungs so wonderfully as a home-rolled smoke first thing upon rising. It was another beautiful day in the archipelago, bright and hot but with enough breeze to keep from drowning in your own juices. It was good to smoke on such a day. He lit up and strolled down HarborHill and through the empty HarborVillage on the way to the pool at SoftHarbor at Pu’ukan®.

The pool deck overlooked the beach and sea, the Sea of Pu’ukan. If this place ever opened, right here would be the perfect spot to linger and people watch. Until then, the only people to watch were Harry August, the malcontented pool manager Harold had imported from Long Island City; whichever pool boy Harry August was browbeating at the moment; and, when they made an unwanted appearance, Harry’s fourteen-year-old twin boys, jackals named Brno and Harry Junior.

Harry August didn’t look much like a “Harry.” “Harry” was an old man’s name. This Harry was a thirty-nine-year-old fireplug whose polo shirts ran a size too small, a poor choice for the tropics but a good one for showing off oversized lats, delts, pecs and traps. In demeanor if not in name, he was all Harry. He had a crabby old man’s irritation with the world and everything in it, and he ended most of his observations with one of two codas, depending on the circumstance: “Christ, I hate that guy” or “This is bullshit. This is just such bullshit.”

The locals whom Harry August hired to clean the pool came and went based on their tolerance for his abuse. Most were gone by lunch. Keep that up, Denny thought, and the natives would rise up and burn this place to the ground, all because the pool manager had shitty people skills. He only hoped he would be here to see it, maybe even nudge it along. *That* would put Harold on edge.

Denny took his usual seat at a patio table on the pool deck and leafed through a few resort brochures that he had picked up in the hotel lobby. He figured Harry August already must have chased off today's pool help since he was alone and dragging a ten-foot aluminum skimmer pole through the deep end to clear out the pods and bugs whose habitats Harold Felcher was razing to make room for a golf course. After five minutes, Harry gave up and fell into a chair next to Denny, breathing hard and pouring sweat.

"This is such bullshit." He grabbed a clump of cocktail napkins from a plastic holder and wiped his forehead. "I like warm weather just as much as the next asshole, but my balls are swimming." He lifted a thigh and adjusted his crotch.

"It is hot!" Denny agreed with feigned enthusiasm, more to the brochure he was glancing at than to Harry. "It is definitely hot."

Harry stared back blankly. "It is hot" was not the most shattering insight concerning tropical weather. Harry August considered himself a people person, and at first he was glad for Denny's company. The only other company he had were Brno and Junior, whom he disliked. But Denny's taciturnity was a disappointment that had become an annoyance. Whenever Harry tried to engage him in conversation, Denny was evasive,

from which Harry concluded that “Denny Dash” was a *nom de Harold* and that whatever this guy’s real name, he was an FC2 agent whom Harold had sent to spy on him.

It was typical of this whole Pu’ukan escapade, which Harry August’s wife, the former Linda Felcher, had talked him into. Linda’s brother’s multinational somethingorother was building a hotel on a Pacific island and Linda had pushed Harold to give Harry a job managing the golf course or something.

“How great would that be—to sit back in Aruba and get paid for it,” she had said to Harry.

“I thought it was Tahiti.”

“Aruba, Tahiti—what’s the diff?”

There was no way Harold Felcher was going to put his brother-in-law in charge of a Pruno DiPietro. He’d end up with windmills and underground tunnels on the back nine and a Mister Softee for the mixed grill. But Linda pestered until Harold relented. Instead of the golf course, he offered Harry management of the pool, with plans to replace him immediately after opening day. Harold was taken aback when Ray Jarecki later told him that, as the pool office had been made the official address of the new United States presence on Pu’ukan, the pool manager was to sign the invoices for architectural and construction services and all manner of resort supplies, from bedding, kitchenware and china, to rental bicycles, boogie boards and half a ton of fireworks to celebrate the resort’s opening. In effect, Harry August had become the United States ambassador to the Dependent Territory of Pu’ukan. Harold decided not to disclose to Ray that the new ambassador was his dyslexic brother-in-law.

Harry August's hopes for a rewarding career in Pacific recreation and diplomacy were short-lived. Three days after they arrived, Linda announced that she needed to return home immediately to forestall the death of her skin. The sun and heat were killing her, she said. She scratched at her arms and neck to make the point.

"I'll get you some Calamine Lotion," Harry said.

"I looked. They don't have any."

"Buy some on eBay, then."

"I'm not bidding on medical treatment," Linda said. She zipped her suitcase and pulled up the travel handle. That's when Harry noticed that she had packed only her own bag. The twins' bags were still stacked in the closet, empty.

"What the hell is this?" he said. But Linda was already out the door.

Harry concluded that she had planned the whole thing, starting from pushing Harold to hire Harry, so that she could dump the kids on him and go live on her own somewhere without the mess of contested litigation. Maybe in the real Aruba. If that was the case, she had beaten him to it: Harry's bag was only half-packed. And now Brno and Junior were all his. It was the worst of all possible outcomes.

Life, Harry August concluded, was bullshit. Such bullshit.

Harry got out of his chair to get a bucket of ice and a bottle of club soda from the pool bar. He was halfway there when Brno and Junior rose from behind the bar like assassins in wait and pelted him with a gust of cocktail condiments before escaping down the beach. Harry gave chase. With his fireplug thighs and one hand cupped over his burning eye in which a fleck of a martini onion had lodged, he moved like a penguin

holding onto a bowel movement. The twins, underweight waifs, outran him easily. They cut left at the end of the beach and disappeared into a band of foliage that separated the beach from the third tee of the Blue course.

Denny enjoyed the show. If there were to be an uprising here, those two little vipers might just beat the locals to it.

Harry thumped back, chuffing and huffing and leaking yet more sweat from head to heel.

“You see? You see?”

He fell back into his chair and wiped his forehead with another handful of cocktail napkins. “This is just so much bullshit I can’t count it all.” His eye was red and teary from the onion fleck.

“Christ, I hate this place.”

PENULTIMATUM

Harold hoped that Denny would respond quickly to his ultimatum—return the money or face the strong arm of the law. But he knew better. When it came to wreaking havoc with other people’s lives, Denny Dash had no peer. It was as effortless as it was thoughtless.

Still, he would relent eventually. He had to. He had embezzled corporate money. He had committed a felony. A felony! And since he took it out of the state—out of the country—that made it federal. He would return the money out of self-interest. He’d just wait to the last minute to do it.

And yet the last minute had come and gone. So had two subsequent last minutes. And still there was no submission to the facts, no pledge to make good on his crimes against the company, no acknowledgement of the untenable position in which he had put Harold, his mentor, partner and closest friend in marketing communications. His *only* friend in marketing communications.

Visions of doom disrupted Harold's lunch. He was in a state of constant anxiety. It was unendurable. He could hardly finish his tuna sub. He pushed the last uneaten corner of the sandwich to the edge of his paper plate. Having thus demonstrated the seriousness of the matter, he grabbed the last bite and washed it down with a gulp of flat Fresca. Then, as after every meal, he lamented having eaten so much so quickly. Why couldn't he be one of those people who lost their appetite when their world was cratering? Instead, Harold ate. He overate. And having overeaten, he felt exponentially more miserable about himself and the world.

He loosened his belt and tried not to worry. He reminded himself that although Denny had the money, Harold had the leverage. Denny was the criminal, the fugitive getting by on limited resources, and thus in greater peril. It was a blessing that Denny didn't know that the money he had stolen belonged to President Horvath; for all Denny knew, it was just company money. Thank God for that.

And yet ...

And yet no matter how hard Harold tried to look on the bright side, he kept seeing the outlines of his own fate. And it looked remarkably like a steel clamp closing onto the balls of his ass.

It was time for another ultimatum. Fourth time's a charm. Inspired by fear, Harold banged out a new email. By God, if Denny Dash was going to play hardball, then Harold Felcher had a few hardballs up his own sleeve. Was that the expression? Not important. The point was that he, too, had cards to play. He reminded Denny that the New York State Family Court, responsible for collecting alimony and child support, would love to know where the defendant in *Pollock v. Dash* could be reached. And garnished.

Harold's fingers danced over the keyboard. A fleck of tuna fish flew off his fingertip and lodged between the "i" and "o" keys, but he worked around them unperturbed. Nthng was gng t slw dwn Harld Felcher. Nt nw, by Gd.

Harold seasoned this new threat with fabricated updates on the losses Denny was sustaining in office rivalries. "We gave Roni Bartels your job. And your office," he wrote. "She's in there right now pulling up the carpet and deep-sixing your cheese-turd campaign. You know how it is, kid. Just thought you'd want to know. Oh, and Lou Dimitriov says hi. Through his lawyer."

It had been a long week, but this was a good, strong email and Harold was finally enjoying the game. He looked around his desk for the rest of the tuna hero. Gone. Damn! Pickle? That pickle was always a little gift at the end of a meal. Harold liked to play a game in which he pretended not to notice that a pickle came with the sandwich so that he could "discover" it when the sandwich was done. He lifted the plate to look for it.

No pickle.

No worries. There was still the promise of DipChip remainders in a near-empty tube hard by his lunch plate. He tilted his head back and tipped the open tube into his mouth and savored that crazy burst of synthetic barbeque flavor and the clumps of seasoned salt that had settled at the bottom of the slender barrel. His glands exploded on contact. Dopamine washed through his brain. DipChips were a stellar Salt Delivery Vehicle.

Harold brushed his palms and returned to the keyboard. Time to get back to the new ultimatum. Having prepared the battlefield, he moved in for the *coup de* win-win

proposition. It was a simple tradeoff: Denny returns the money and leaves Pu'ukan before opening day, and none of this ever happened.

“But you can't stay. Nonnegotiable,” Harold wrote. “If you leave now, I have maybe one chance in a thousand of convincing Wynn Gobler and corporate counsel not to go to the U.S. attorney. *Maybe* one in a thousand. There's a board meeting next week and WG wants an update on the project, which means an update on the financial picture. Bottom line: I expect an answer in 12 hours. No more extensions.” He deleted “12” and replaced it with “24.”

He read the note over, the tip of his tongue probing the corner of his mouth for an errant salt crystal. He couldn't resist closing with a flourish: “That's marcomm, kid.”

Now *that's* an e-mail. Direct, tough, very street, yet charitable in its offer of a highly appealing face-saving option. He hit the “send” key and fell back in his chair, immensely pleased with how he had handled a business problem. *That's* how you run a negotiation. *That's* how you get to Yes. Straight from the gut. Fuck you, Jack Welch.

He undid the waist of his trousers and sucked in a deep, healing breath just the way they talked about in mindfulness. He unzipped his fly an inch for a bit more room for healing breathing. Maybe he shouldn't have hired Harry August to run the pool. Harold's brother-in-law was a loose, malcontented cannon with a knot of muscle for a brain. He was too tightly wound even for managing a pool. “Go fuck yourself!” rarely works in the hospitality business. Only Comcast gets away with that. And Harry's insane twins, airtight evidence for a genetic basis for personality disorders, added to the peril. Harold

hated those kids. Their parents hated those kids. If those kids had any self-awareness, they'd hate themselves.

Jesus, Harold thought. Why did I let him bring his kids there?

He reread the e-mail he had just sent to Denny. This ran counter to the advice Denny had once given Harold: never reread *anything* once you've sent it. Don't even read it *before* you send it. A new wave of worry coalesced inside Harold's chest. He scanned the empty paper plate. Nothing but crumbs and lime-green stains where the pickle had once been. He could tear off that bit of paper plate and chew it for the residue. He wanted to. But what if Roni Bartels burst in and saw him sitting at his desk with his pants undone and eating his paper plate? That would be hard to explain.

Healing breathing was yielding to hyperventilation. That last bite of tuna fish was expanding in his stomach. It was as if the fish were fighting against his intestines. My god, it was so stuffy in this office! Who turned off the air? He loosened his tie, eased himself out of his chair and settled himself onto his back on the floor next to the pallet of DipChips. He did his best to breathe enough to remain alive.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. He could see it all now. Once it was discovered what had happened, he would face an endless and overlapping series of interrogations, inquiries, probes and investigations conducted by layers of state and federal prosecutors, regulators, legislative committees, subcommittees, special select subcommittees, independent commissions, special counsels, runaway grand juries and the lowlifes in the marketing press. The reporters would kill with drollery, especially that loser Jay Buckman. And everyone would want to know about the president's involvement. Careers are made killing the king.

Holy mother of hell. He had gotten himself entangled with the president of the United States of America in activity that was highly, *highly* questionable fiduciarily. Harold ran the thread out in his mind. His checking, savings, investment and retirement accounts would be frozen at the outset to keep him from following Denny into the wind, and of course to make it impossible for him to hire a lawyer.

That's how the government operates: they seize your assets so that you can't defend yourself when they come for you. So much for the Fifth and Sixth amendments. Not that anyone ever has better than a one-in-a-million shot at beating the Department of Justice, which could more or less print money to finance a case if that's what it took to win. And if that wasn't enough, then they'd hack into your email, load kiddie porn onto your laptop and tell your wife where to find it.

The financial impact on FC2 would be crippling. Within a week, Felcher Communications Corp. would be dead, its ignominious collapse laid at the flat feet of Harold Felcher. His family would be disgraced. He'd gain a hundred pounds between indictment and trial but be too broke to buy new clothes for opening arguments. And indictment was certain. They could indict a ham sandwich if they wanted to. He would never be able to enjoy a ham sandwich again.

What had he done? Oh what had he done!

If life were to end at this very moment, it would be a blessing. And you couldn't even enjoy that.

Because you'd be dead.

He breathed in—expansive healing breaths replaced by shallow, erratic wheezes that hit an impasse at the lump in his throat, followed by pathetic little moans. He spied a shard of ranch-flavored DipChip on the floor, and he ate it. There was chive in it. It was good.

“Mr. Felcher? Are you ... OK?”

It was Grace. Harold had brought Grace to the CEO’s suite after Denny’s departure so that she could finally work in a calm, businesslike setting. She couldn’t help noticing that Harold was lying on the floor with his belt undone and his zipper open. And that there was a bite-shaped tear missing from the paper plate on his desk.

Grace was worried. “Should I get a doctor, Mr. Felcher?”

“Only if his name is Kevorkian.”

“Oh. OK. ... Should I look him up? Is that with a ‘K’ or a ‘C’?”

“Grace?”

“Yes, Mr. Felcher?”

“Do you own a pistol?”

“No. My husband might, though. Shall I ask him?”

“Probably not.”

“OK.”

“Grace?”

“Yes, Mr. Felcher?” Grace was holding back tears now. A lump was forming in her throat.

“Can you close the door behind you, please, Grace? I—I just need to rest a bit. I think it was the tuna fish.”

“It’s the pepper. They use too much for a sandwich. I’ve told them before.” Why was her new boss lying on the floor with his pants undone? She became emotional and her voice cracked. “We’ve all told them about the pepper before. Last week I said—”

“Thank you, Grace.”

Harold lay still. His eyeballs tracked across the ceiling to confirm for himself that he was still alive. This was probably what it was like to have locked-in syndrome, like in that movie. That was a strange movie. Maybe that’s what hitting bottom was like: being paralyzed from the neck down. He wondered: Is anyone ever paralyzed from the neck up? His eyes moved from the ceiling to his torso. He noticed his fly was open. He scanned his thighs, calves, feet. Huh. He never imagined he’d be wearing wool slacks when the end came. He was tempted to take them off, but was concerned about how that would look if Grace came back in. Grace was very fragile. Seeing her boss lying on the floor with his pants around his ankles was the second-to-last thing she needed. Seeing her boss dead on the floor with his pants around his ankles was the very last. He wanted to lever off each shoe with the opposite foot, but he couldn’t rally the synaptic dexterity. He opened his eyes as wide as he could and looked around the office without moving his head, searching for a bright, white light to walk toward and a long-gone relative reaching out to welcome him. He found the light directly overhead. It was a flickering fluorescent bulb. No relatives were there to greet him. That was a relief. “Pains in the asses, every one of ’em,” he said aloud.

He noticed that Grace was still there. He could see the edges of her shoes by the door. She had never left the room.

“Mr. Felcher?”

“Please, call me ‘Harold.’ ”

“Harold?”

“Yes, Grace?”

“Raymond Jarecki of the White House called. From Washington, D.C.? He’d like you to come to Washington tomorrow morning, early, for a meeting. ... At the White House.”

Harold closed his eyes and sighed pitifully. He didn’t mean to. It just came out.

Grace’s voice grew softer. “Mr. Fel— Harold?”

Harold struggled to lift his arm an inch off the floor, then let it drop. It thudded to the floor like a knish.

“I’ll book you on the Acela,” Grace said.

“Thank you. That’ll be all.”

Grace backed out and quietly closed the door behind her. She stood at her desk. She chewed her lip and choked back a sob. The human condition, Grace finally understood, was unendurably sad. Especially hers. She sat down and wept. After a few moments, she composed herself enough to return to the functions of life and work. She began by searching the Manhattan listings for a “Doctor Cavorkian.” She hoped he could put Mr. Felcher at ease.

Alone, immobile, Harold focused on the taste in his mouth. Tuna fish and artificial barbeque with a hint of artificial ranch and dill pickle. And for some reason cardboard. It would be on his breath when he died. Did paramedics notice things like that?

An unknown length of time later, Harold heard the death-knell ping of an incoming e-mail. With great effort and no hope, he lifted himself off the floor and pulled himself back into his chair to read the message.

“Greetings from SoftHarbor, Jewel of the Pu’ukans!” It was Denny. “You were right about Pu’ukan, HF: I love it here. I may never leave!”

Harold wondered if Grace had any luck finding Doctor Kevorkian.

A BRAINIAC AMONG THE JAMOKES

Home late from the bank, Acting Secretary of the Treasury Roger Swing set his attaché in its regular place by the front door and stepped to the kitchen, where Tish Pelham-Swing stood over the counter enjoying a glass of Malbec and the food section of the *Post*. Tish hated cooking but she loved recipes, which she collected in the hope of one day developing a taste for meal making.

For now, however, dinner was warming in the oven inside the large paper grocery bag in which it had been delivered—beef and broccoli, tofu with steamed vegetables, a quart of chow fun, two spring rolls, a quart of brown rice, a couple fortune cookies and a handful of hot mustard and soy sauce packets. The steamed vegetables and tofu was for the acting Treasury secretary, the beef and broccoli for the chief trial lawyer of the Environmental Protection Agency's Division of Medium Waste. The rest was for sharing.

If Roger Swing had doubts about his Treasury job, Tish could not have been happier at EPA "MidWaste," where the focus was on slurry, a waste whose consistency was not unlike a carton of beef and broccoli swimming in brown sauce: neither fully liquid

nor fully solid, but an in-between state of matter that neither EPA Solid Waste nor Liquid Waste could rightfully claim. If it oozed, clogged, jelled or congealed, Tish was on it.

Roger kissed his wife hello.

“Yecch. You stink,” she said.

Ironic, Roger thought, to be told by the Queen of Sludge that you smell bad. But it was true. Tish worked in sewage, but Roger worked for Viktor Horvath, which meant that on days in which he met with the president, Roger was the one who came home cloaked in rank.

“Three minutes in the Oval Office and it’s like you’ve been in a pub all night,” he said.

“Still smoking, is he?” Tish asked, tearing out a recipe for glazed chicken with chutney and lemon grass.

“That, my dear, is an understatement.”

Roger opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of seltzer and a small dish of precut lime wedges in Saran wrap, which he had prepared before leaving for the office in the morning.

“The president of the United States has done everything but install a hookah pipe at the seat of power.” He slid a lime wedge into a glass and poured himself a tall cold one. “But I suppose chain smoking helps him keep the weight off, so there is a value to it.”

“Ah! Smoking for weight control,” Tish said. “That approach worked so well for my father. The diseased left lung they scraped from his chest cavity must have weighed at least a quarter of a pound. What’s your position on glazed chicken and chutney?”

“Agnostic.”

An endorsement. Tish set the recipe aside for filing.

“I wish he’d return to manic overeating,” Roger said. “His diet is killing me. Literally. I think I’m coming down with throat cancer from second-hand smoke.” He pressed a fingertip to his Adam’s apple and cleared his throat.

Tish detested Viktor Horvath and his effluviant character, but she kept her contempt in check around her husband. It was OK for Roger to complain about Viktor Horvath because Roger worked for the man. But he didn’t react well when others, especially family, criticized the president. Tish viewed this as highly irrational thinking for an economist, but everyone was entitled to some illogic in their lives.

“Vegetarian paella?” she asked.

“Love it.”

She tore it out.

“The cussing’s getting worse, too, if you can believe it,” Roger said. “Foregoing high-sodium snack foods and processed sugars agitates him to no end, and he takes it out on the world.”

“Not a good thing for a world leader.”

“Now everyone’s a ‘fat fuck’ or a ‘piece of fat shit’ or a ‘shit fat’ or a ‘fat piece of shit fuck.’ ”

Roger took a sip of clean seltzer and suppressed a belch. “Where he gets these phrases and what they connote I’ll never know. Ray Jarecki’s the same. The other day he referred to someone as being ‘on the balls of his ass.’ ” Tish laughed.

“What does that even mean?” Roger asked. “To be on the ‘balls of one’s ass’?”

“For the record, I am unaware of the existence of balls on *your* ass.”

“I’m relieved.”

Tish took the dinner bag from the oven and placed it on the counter. It was nice and warm.

“The mind reels with the knowledge that domestic tranquility and world order are influenced by what Viktor Horvath had for lunch,” Roger said. “Believe it or not, I worry about things like that.”

Tish said she believed it. “Maybe it’s time you got out.”

Oooh! She instantly wished she hadn’t said that. It was an impulse comment, and she winced. One glass of wine and there I go. She unpacked the brown bag as loudly as possible and said something about table settings to redirect Roger’s attention from her faux pas, and braced for the remonstrance. She was shocked when Roger agreed with her instead.

“Maybe you’re right. Because of the swearing and the smoking, children on White House field trips are now barred from meeting their president. Can you believe that?”

“Is that true?”

“By order of the Secretary of Education.”

Good for the Secretary of Education, Tish thought.

Roger went upstairs to shower and change, a post-work ritual he enjoyed for the opportunity to be with his thoughts. Tish was probably right. After five years of helping to administer the largest economy in human history, Roger Swing could write his own

ticket on Wall Street. The only hitch was that he hadn't the slightest interest in Wall Street. Making money held no appeal to him. What he wanted most of all was to return to Wharton as a pedagogue and teach finance. *Public* finance.

At Wharton, Roger would probably be mistaken for a student. He was forty-three but looked twenty-three. An inch or two on the tall side, a few pounds on the lean side and a shade or three on the pale side, Roger Swing looked like a buttoned-up undergrad looking forward to turning fifty. He had served as chairman of Viktor Horvath's Council of Economic Advisors and was elevated to Acting Secretary of the Treasury halfway through the first term on the departure of Dale Morocco, who had resigned unexpectedly to die of brain cancer, until he could find a more elderly-looking full-timer. But as with many other things in the second term, Viktor Horvath lost interest, and Roger remained in the acting position, feeling a little more humiliated each day by the inference that he wasn't qualified for the full-time job.

And to think that he had begun with such promise! At the start of the first term, Pammy St. Pierre had profiled Roger as "an ascendant brainiac who would bring intellectual vim to monetary policy—a breath of postdoc purpose in an administration unencumbered by cognitive depth." If only she had stopped there instead of adding that "Roger Swing, Ph.D., exudes seriousness leavened with a dollop of social discomfiture. A people person he ain't."

Roger sighed at the memory as he folded his dirty socks and set them in the laundry basket, then showered, dried off, and slipped into fresh chinos, tucked in his polo shirt and belted up. Just another Friday night at the Swings.

Maybe Tish was right. Maybe it was time to slip into a fresh job, too. *Acting* secretary. What awful nomenclature. Roger wasn't at all vain, but titles mattered in the real world. Who listens to an *acting* secretary? No one. And to not even rank in the Horvath administration? That hurt. He cleaned and straightened out his sink area and did the same for Tish's, and draped the wet towel over the towel rack. Tish spent ten hours of every day cleaning up other people's muck; she shouldn't have to do it at home, too.

Bathroom tidied and body washed, Roger sat on the edge bed and wiggled his clean, pink toes on the carpet. Thank God for clean, pink toes and soft carpet. Twenty minutes ago, these very toes were suffocating inside elastic nylon wrapping and encased in hard leather shells. That was civilization? That was what capital formation and responsibly leveraged investment produced? Sweaty feet? Is this how God meant for feet to be? Could we even know the mind of God, at least insofar as human footwear was concerned? Did God have a position on shoes and socks? He slid his pink, washed wonders of creation into a pair of slippers.

"Now *this* is how the Almighty meant for feet to be!"

"You OK there, big feller?"

Roger had been so engrossed in his clean pink toes that he hadn't noticed that Tish had come into the bedroom.

"You're not going all gospely on me now, are you?" Tish was unbuttoning her blouse as part of her own pre-prandial toilet. "Because then we'd have a problem."

"Oh good God, no. At least I don't think I am."

Tish paused and gave her husband a dead-serious look.

“That’s a joke,” Roger said. “I’m droll.”

“Well, thank God for that.”

Tish tossed her blouse onto the bed. Bra followed, but missed the bed and landed on the floor. As punctilious as Roger was, Tish’s embrace of disorder aroused him. Mixed marriages *could* work.

At dinner, Tish returned to her anti-Horvath exegesis. What the hell, she figured. Roger hadn’t gotten defensive about it earlier. Might as well see how far she could push it. She could always blame it on the wine. She washed down a spoonful of beef and brown sauce with a quaff just in case.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never cared for the man. And Ray Jarecki is exactly what the press says he is: ‘a conniving political rat who’d sell his country down the retention basin for three extra points in a tracking poll.’ That’s what the *Post* called him.”

“True, but Ray Jarecki would argue—persuasively, I think—that three percentage points wins you the presidency.”

Tish shrugged. Is that all that matters? Winning elections?

Roger cut a steamed broccoli floret from a stalk and nudged it onto his fork with his knife.

“Anyway, the economy’s good, we’re not at war, taxes are low by historical standards certainly, the money supply is very much under control thank you”—he gave himself a congratulatory nod—“interest rates are reasonably attractive for capital formation if not for savings, and I think we’ve finally got a real shot at lowering capital gains with this new—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get the point,” Tish interrupted. “We’re all fat ’n rollin’ in the dough.” She refilled her wine glass to drive the subliminal message home. “Only you’re not in it for the dough and you don’t belong with those venal fiends, especially not with the fiend-in-chief.”

Tish knew very well that she, too, worked for the fiend-in-chief, given that her beloved Environmental Protection Agency was part of the executive branch. But she didn’t let it stop her. “You know where you belong? You belong on the Georgetown faculty. That’s where you’d be happiest. Try the beef and broccoli. It’s wonderful.”

She was right, about the faculty if not the beef and broccoli, which looked too limp and smelled too heavy for Roger’s delicate villi.

“Wharton at least,” he said.

“Philadelphia? Ick. The chow fun’s also phenomenal. Where’s this from?”

“Sun-Yat Scallop. I mean, the way they make decisions is irrational. How in the world did Pitch Farnum even come even to be considered, let alone nominated, for a job like chairman of the United States Federal Reserve?” Roger and Tish knew and liked Senator Farnum and his wife, Lady, the brains of the couple, but this was a matter of the health of the republic.

Tish shook her head. “I know you’re friendly with the Farnums, but that’s a lot of power to put in the hands of the village idiot.”

“It was almost as if they set out to find the most ill-equipped prospect in the land—and picked Pitch Farnum *for that very reason*. And I say that as someone with great admiration for the Farnums.”

“They’ve been very kind to us.”

“But do you have any idea how much time I spent preparing him for his confirmation hearings? And now it’s all waste. No offense.”

“None taken.” She plopped a helping of brown rice onto a pile of beef sauce and stirred up the sludge.

“There’s really nothing they can do about it now,” Roger continued. “Farnum sank himself with that prurient antic with the stripper girls. What on earth was he thinking?”

“Blow job probably.” Tish winked.

Roger gave this notion due consideration over a sip of seltzer with lime wedge. “It can’t be ruled out. But I don’t think so.”

“Me, neither. That’s not him.”

Stuffed, Tish brought her plate and glass to the sink. “Rest assured,” she said, “the thoughts and prayers of MidWaste are with you.”

“Very encouraging.”

While Tish rinsed, Roger masticated and mused. He forked a flank of bok choy and used it to scoop up a lonely cube of tofu. He gave the last full measure of his meal careful examination.

“Maybe I will quit.” He gave himself an inner atta-boy, and plunged the laden fork into his mouth. It tasted of vindication. And white sauce.

“Now you’re talkin’!” Tish tossed her dishtowel into the sink and sidled up to her husband. “You my rider,” she said, rubbing her flank against him. “I find this to-hell-with-it-all insouciance of yours incredibly hot.”

“I’m getting that impression.”

“I say we go upstairs and pee on each other.”

“Really?”

“It was good enough for Hitler and Eva Braun.”

“Well, we do need a new mattress.”

“We will in an hour, for shit sure.”

They went upstairs, flossed, brushed, and peeled off their clothes. They didn’t pee on each other, but they did go at it with relish. And a dab of Chinese mustard. And they did break the bed.

VERY, VERY DEEP, DEEP SHIT

Afterward, they talked about Roger's next steps, including when to give notice to the president. He said he would probably wait until after the Senate confirmed Farnum's replacement as Fed nominee, whoever it turned out to be. In the meantime, he'd reach out to Rollie Bing, the chairman of the Georgetown University Public Finance Department.

What he didn't mention was that he had a lunch date in Reston tomorrow with his brother. Roger hated to lie, and he rarely did so outside of government business. But in this case, the cost-benefit analysis weighed heavily toward concealment. Besides, what his brother wanted to discuss had nothing to do with Roger's job search.

At least that would be his story if and when Tish found out.

The prospect of luncheon with Bundy Swing was not a happy thought for Roger. With Bundy, you never knew how much you wanted to know. But you were pretty sure that less was more. Or at least better.

Secret agent! How many people could say that about their brother?

“I’ll tell you this,” their father said the day Bundy had signed on as a contract pilot with the Office of Global Listening & Eavesdropping a decade ago. “He’s either found the one thing in life he’s fit for, which is raising hell for hire, or he’s going to get himself and this country into some deep shit. Some very, very deep, deep shit.”

The odds favored the latter. And they paid off handsomely: Bundy Swing and the country did indeed land in very, very deep, deep shit. To be fair, Bundy was more cog than cause of the national calamity that came to be known as “the Chechibennigan Affair.” But to many, including Tish, it was a distinction without a difference. Which was why she would have throttled Roger had she known he was planning to meet with his crazy, cashiered-ex-spy brother for lunch. Or dinner. Or breakfast, brunch, a drink, supper, snacks, an exchange of glances from opposite sides of a wide boulevard or a purely accidental encounter anywhere within the Milky Way. But Bundy Swing was family. To Roger, that meant it was important to be available for each other at least once every seven and a half years.

As problematic as it was to have Bundy for a big brother—Roger would not even enter the meeting on his office planner—it didn’t exactly hurt with a certain cast of politician who viewed extreme lunacy in the defense of American exceptionalism more virtue than vice. Roger learned this during an appearance before the Senate Finance Committee on an unrelated money supply issue early in the first term, when Senator Whitey Tribble of one of the Dakotas asked Roger if he were related in any way to Bundy Swing.

“Yes, sir, Senator Tribble,” Roger mumbled. “Bundy Swing is my”—*cough*,
cough—“brother.”

“Well you give him my best. Will you do that for me, son? The next time you see him?”

“Yes, senator, I will.” *Just as soon as I confirm the authenticity of his parole certificate.* “I’ll certainly do that, Senator Tribble. Although we’re not close,” he added, for the benefit of the record.

The reality was that Roger felt he had no choice but to meet Bundy. When you get a call from a former intelligence asset who had been at the vortex of a national political scandal that led directly to the collapse of one presidential administration and to the installation of another—i.e., the one you’re working in—and he says he wants to discuss the fate of the nation with you, you really can’t not go.

But there’s no law that says you have to tell your wife about it.

Chechibennigan.

It was a fuckjob from harebrained concept to fiasco finish. If you went according to the laws enacted by Congress, it should never have happened given the plain and emphatic language of the “Horvath Rider.” Written by then-Senator Viktor K. Horvath, the Horvath Rider was in response to “the Russia Mess” that President Martin Oliver had sunk the nation into. In the wake of the Russia Mess, “No more Russias” had become an anti-battle cry on Capitol Hill, a plea for a quiet period between disastrous foreign entanglements. And Senator Viktor Horvath was the loudest voice screaming for quiet.

Ostensibly aimed at preventing another Russia Mess from ever occurring, Horvath's rider prohibited the United States from supporting, financing, backing, buttressing, encouraging, winking, nodding, secret-handshaking, under-the-chin finger wagging or otherwise providing direct, indirect or tangential assistance, covert or overt or in between, to anyone anywhere on Planet Earth without specific congressional supermajority authorization.

Of course, President Garth Houseman, Martin Oliver's successor, had no intention of allowing his foreign policy to be dictated by Viktor Horvath. Thus Horvath's "No more Russias" prompted Houseman's "We'll see about *that*," urging, in effect, some more Russias. America, President Houseman felt, had become too delicate, or too queasy, thanks to the Russia-mess backlash, and needed to restore its self-confidence through some low-risk foreign ass-kicking. As Houseman put it, "We need to break some china, just not actually in China." It was President Houseman's domestic policy adviser, Cole Charleston, who came up with the place.

Chechibennigan.

As a target, it had much to recommend. Small, feudal, defenseless as far as could be determined, and blessed with a broad, deep harbor that opened onto an ocean patrolled by Admiral Vaughn Rommel's Fourth Fleet. A flotilla of attack ships could wreak easy havoc while bombers from the Mother Ship flew endless sorties until the day was won. And it wouldn't take more than a day.

Politically, the place was in flux, having just elected, in its first stab at representative democracy, one Zubarb Khabubbala, an ostensibly illiterate, American-

educated minor-domo and faux nomad who renounced his family's reinsurance business and to become his country's leading nationalist.

Why is it that when you give people the right to vote, they always vote wrong?

No question about it: Zubarb Khabubbala was all wrong vis-à-vis U.S. interests. Exactly how and why he was all wrong, Cole Charleston said, was a detail that would be developed in the branding campaign. For that job, Charleston brought in a rising communications shop from New York, Felcher Communications Corp., which called itself FC2.

For Chechibennigan, Charleston worked directly with FC2's top people—an oddball team consisting of the CEO, a slob whose shirtfront invariably told a tale of lunch, and a livewire named Denny Dash, who dressed like a rainbow lollipop and couldn't sit still. The livewire brought the ideas; the fat guy brought the hamentashen and the retainer agreement.

In their first brainstorming session, Denny Dash instantly came up with the tagline for the Chechibennigan campaign: "Oh you'll pay for that! For *sure!*"

"Pay for what?" Charleston asked.

Denny shrugged and reached for a ruggulach. "Tactical detail," he said. He talked with his mouth full. "You work backwards in this business. You know where you want to end up. We fill in the pre-steps based on that."

"The pre-steps."

"Term of art. Look, you want a war, right?" Denny said.

“Don’t answer that, sir,” Charleston’s aide, Wilson Menzies, interjected. But Charleston brushed him aside.

“Let’s say I do,” Charleston said.

Denny plucked a prune hamentashen from the platter and inspected a lightly browned corner. “Then burn down our embassy.”

“Burn down the *U.S.* embassy.”

“Right. Burn it to the fucking ground. And blame the other guy, Zootsuit Kerfluffanutter or whateverthefuck.” He popped the pastry into his mouth whole.

“Zubarb Khabubbala,” Charleston corrected.

“Sir we don’t have an embassy in the Chech,” Wilson Menzies pointed out. “It’s a fairly new country.”

“How soon can we get one?” Denny asked.

“We can fast-track it,” Charleston assured him. “That’s not a problem.”

“But sir—”

“I’ll speak with the State Department. Let’s hear the rest of your concept, Mr. Dash.”

At that, Denny was off and running, pacing the room as he unspooled a highly developed branding plan that in fact he was creating in real time. Harold Felcher knew his own role by heart: record the cascade of verbiage on his cell phone, toss Denny pastries to keep up his carbs, and make sure there was cold water to wash them down whenever Denny walked past Harold’s chair. He didn’t want Denny choking mid-concept.

“We open it with fanfare and comity,” Denny said. “‘Uncle Sam’s really trying to go the extra mile here. We wanna make friends. We don’t want conflict. We love peace, free markets, co-existence, blah-beh-dee-blah.’ Then we send things south with a few fabricated pretexts, escalate the rhetoric, raise the stakes, torch the bitch and throw the empty gas can on Ish Kabibble’s front porch.”

Harold tossed Denny an apricot hamentashen. “Of course he denies it up and down the Plain of Arabia because he’s a lying Third World *sac de la douche*, but we’ve got the proof from—from—” He turned to Charleston. “From what? Help me out here.”

“OGLE satellite images,” Charleston offered.

“That’s right! The Office of Global Listening & Eavesdropping! Thank God for them. Images from outer space. Irrefutable shit.” Denny turned to Harold. Harold said FC2’s graphics department could design them. Denny stopped pacing directly behind Charleston’s pusillanimous Wilson Menzies and put his hands on his shoulders.

“And what Kabbalah has done is bad, Wilson. Very bad. This fire that he started killed a dozen locals, crippled some kids and orphaned a bunch of others. We can get some kid actors for that. Is Malala available?”

Harold, who had been calculating the retainer, put his pen down and waited for the kicker that he knew was coming.

“And *then*,” Denny announced, “the president goes on T.V. for an Oval Office address to the nation, looking sorrowful but steady and determined and says ...”

Cole Charleston finished the thought: “‘Oh you’ll pay for that.’ ”

“BAM!” Denny slapped the sides of Wilson Menzie’s head. “There’s your tag line for the launch: ‘Oh, you’ll pay for that. For *shit* sure.’ And we hit ’em with the Fifth Navy.”

“Fourth Fleet,” Cole corrected.

“Third, fourth, fifth—we throw it all at ’im. Because we *have* to. It’s an *existential* thing. A matter not of national security, but of national *survival*. We go in on land, air and sea.”

“We could do space as well,” Charleston suggested. But Denny shook his head. “Too high-tech. We need it to look like a fair fight.”

“Of course, we’ll need to work out some of the expenses and the, uh, divisions of labor and materiel,” Harold interjected. “And such.”

“Harold is saying the ordnance comes out of your end, not creative’s,” Denny explained. “But we’ll light the fuse and record the whole thing. In fact, I’ll personally be on the ground with a handheld. I’m dying to direct.”

It was a great idea on paper. It was a day of calamity in real life. And in the end, the *machers* and shakers got assburned but bad, among them Garth Houseman, Cole Charleston, Vaughn Rommel and a dozen supernumeraries. That young contract pilot, Bundy Swing, got shot down over the Bay of Kuushtaarrgg in the opening minutes of the operation and lost a leg. It was a total fog-of-war shit show that would have made Clausewitz proud: Apparently no one had briefed pilot Swing on Khabubbala’s junkyard air defenses. And when he went down, the rest of the mission followed. By sundown, it was all over but the ululating.

Chechibennigan had changed Bundy Swing's life forever. Losing a leg will do that. But outside of REANAL, there was zero sympathy for a mercenary pilot who signed on for danger and limped off on a set of crutches when danger found him. He spent the next eighteen months in a federal cage. Charleston drew three months and a revelation that would change *his* life. Garth Houseman died of a stroke during the impeachment trial.

Senator Viktor Horvath had led the Senate inquiry that led to the articles of impeachment and the criminal prosecutions, glories that led him all the way to the White House. To many observers, and to all his targets, Senator Horvath had seemed a bit overzealous in his determination to embarrass his own country simply because that's where the facts led.

"Viktor fucking Horvath." Bundy Swing's cellmate, a hedge-fund manager, swore those were the only words Bundy uttered in the eighteen months they spent together in the federal prison camp in Duluth. "Viktor fucking Horvath." It wasn't even a full sentence.

SILENCE OF THE LIMB

Roger Swing stepped into the Reston, Virginia, McSwaney's and made an effort to go unnoticed. It wasn't hard. Between lunch and dinner, the place was empty but for the amputee on a stool halfway down the long bar. Roger took a deep why-am-I-doing-this breath and walked over, self-conscious of his ability to ambulate on two legs.

Seven years hadn't changed Bundy much: same close-cropped hair, same black pocket T-shirt tucked into the same faded jeans with the right pant leg rolled up and pinned—not cut and sewn—above the knee. Same old-school wooden crutches leaning against the bar beside him.

Hard to miss a guy like that.

Bundy was examining a silver dollar with a coin collector's magnifying loupe. He didn't look up when Roger slid onto a stool next to him and glanced warily around the restaurant.

“Don’t worry,” Bundy said. “I cased the place. No one’ll know you’ve met with a convicted felon.”

“No, I—”

“It’s all right, Rog,” Bundy said, greeting his brother with a pat on the shoulder.

“The knives are always out in your world. I get that.”

Roger unbuttoned his suit jacket and pretended to relax. “Yours, too, I guess.

Speaking of which, Senator Tribble sends his regards.”

“Right back at ’im. Good man, that Tribble.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“Do you know he calls me ‘son’ even though I’m three years older than he is?”

Bundy laughed.

“Whaddaya got there?” Roger asked.

“Numismatic loupe.”

“Aha! Interesting.”

“Not really.” Bundy dropped the loupe and coin onto the bar and pushed them aside. “What people see in this coin crap is beyond me. What’s the point in collecting money if you’re not gonna spend it?”

“A lot of people spend their lives doing just that. Lemme see.” Roger picked up the coin.

The bartender came up to take their orders. Her name was Jessie and she looked to be about twenty-two. Bundy lifted his oversized menu and gave it a quick scan. He asked Jessie if the Riverboat Gambler came with fried zucchini strips.

“Oh fer sure,” Jessie said. “House specialty! You can double down with a block of onion rings. Go for the Big Block. It’s a better deal.”

“I’ll pass on the O rings but deal me in on the River Gambler, li’l Lady.” He slapped the menu onto the bar.

“*Riverboat* Gambler,” she corrected.

“I’ll take that one, too!” Jessie asked if he wanted something to drink. She recommended the peppermint-kiwi hard slush.

“Good lord! That sounds awful!”

“It’s fantastic! You can’t even taste the vodka! Not that I would know.”

“I’ll bet.”

“C’mon! Try it!”

“How’s about a tall mug ’a sarsaparilla instead? You got one a them?”

“Negative on the sass, Mister, but I can do root ‘n rum.”

Bundy said he’d play it safe and stick with a club soda. He lifted his empty pant leg for Jessie to see. “It’s hard enough to drive as is. Rum won’t make it any easier.”

Jessie leaned over the bar to get a better look at Bundy’s missing leg. “Neat! Where’d you get it?”

“In the war.”

“Then you’re in luck ’cause it’s half price for vets this week. Sure you don’t want those onion rings? It’ll cost, like, nothing now.” Bundy said no thanks.

Jessie turned to Roger. “And what about for Mr. Silent Partner here?”

Roger had retreated into the balky, eight-page menu once Bundy started chatting it up with the waitress. He was on page nine. He pretended to be surprised by the question.

“Oh, uhh, let’s see.”

“Plowman’s Reward’s real good,” Jessie suggested. “It’s a pot pie. It’ll hold ya’ till supper easy.”

“I think I’ll have the ... uhh ... I’ll just have the same. What he’s having.” Roger set his menu down.

“Something to drink? Mango-melon margarita maybe?” “No, thanks. Just a club soda also. With a wedge of lime, please.”

“You a vet, too?” Jessie leaned over the bar to look at Roger’s legs.

“Nope. Just an accountant.”

“Too bad. Full fare for you, fella.” Jessie tucked her order pad into her back pocket. “Back in a jiff with your club sodas,” she said and stepped away.

“Standing Liberty,” Roger said. “The coin,” he clarified, pointing to the silver dollar Bundy had been fiddling with earlier. “There’s almost always a story behind them—either about people, or history, or culture. Lots of folklore, too. That’s what makes numismatics so interesting.”

“Hey that’s great. You’re into coins, then?”

“This one, for instance.” Roger picked up the coin. “See the girl on the front?”

They call the front of a coin the ‘obverse,’ by the way. The woman who modeled for this obverse was about nineteen years old at the time. Her name was, uhh, Andrea Mason.

No—Audrey Munson.”

Roger said Audrey Munson was known as “American Venus,” and that the New York City boarding house in which Audrey and her mother lived was owned by a doctor who ended up murdering his wife to be with Audrey.

“Lemme see that,” Bundy said, suddenly interested.

Roger handed him the coin. “The doctor’s name was Walter Wilkins.”

Bundy looked more closely at the coin. “Nice titties anyway.”

“If you like that one, then check out the Walking Liberty half dollar,” Roger said.

“The 1916 strike, *before* they covered up her right breast.”

“Why the hell’d they do that?”

Roger shrugged. “Public morals. Anyway, the doctor was sentenced to the electric chair, but he hanged himself before they could execute him.”

“What happened to the girl?”

Roger sipped at his drink. He was disappointed: Jessie had left out the lime wedge. “She had nothing to do with it. Just an innocent bystander. But of course she was scandalized and her modeling career was ruined. She ended up in an insane asylum.”

“Public morals.” Bundy shook his head and downed half his club soda in a gulp.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“Hey Rog, who gives a shit, right? I’d do it all over again. In a heartbeat.”

Roger was tempted to glance at Bundy's empty pant leg. In a heartbeat? Really? Knowing the outcome? But he let it go. It was always so hard not to say the wrong thing around Bundy. He asked Bundy how long he had been interested in numismatics.

"About three days now," Bundy replied. "Ever since a buddy sent this to me in the mail." He reached into a back pocket for a folded-up magazine article. He snapped it open, set it down on the bar, and flattened it out with the heel of his hand.

"What's this?"

"This," Bundy said, "is an article about the 'Freedom Thru Intelligence' commemorative coin. Which presumably you're fully familiar with seeing as it comes out of your department of government and you're such a geek about coins."

Roger tried not to look surprised. It didn't work.

"You do still run the Treasury Department, don't you? I know you're only the *acting* secretary and all but—"

"Yes, but I—well, technically, commemorative coins are the bailiwick of the Mint."

"Uh huh. Well, technically it won't be introduced to the public for another"—he glanced at his empty wrist—"two hours. But *The Exonumist* gets all the good coin scoops. Which is where this clip comes from."

Roger scanned the article. It included an illustration of the coin Bundy referred to. He wasn't sure where Bundy was going with this information. Nor did he believe its accuracy. Apparently even the numismatic press practiced yellow journalism.

“We do have a couple of commemoratives in the pipeline,” Roger said. One will honor the national highway system; the other, NASA, the shuttered space agency. “And I can assure you that neither looks like that. ‘Freedom T-h-r-u Intelligence’?” he read. “Maybe whoever designed this one should use spell check next time.” He handed the article back to Bundy.

“Maybe there’s a third in the pipeline.”

Roger shook his head. “There’s a statutory limit on how many commemoratives can be issued in a year, and we’ve hit the two-coin limit already. I don’t see another one coming out for some time.”

“Funny,” Bundy said, “because the public schedule for the White House shows an announcement this afternoon to introduce the new coin to the world.”

“Not possible,” Roger declared definitively. Jesus, he thought, this is what happens when you’re the *acting* secretary: They tell you nothing. Even the Mint ignores you.

“Buddy of mine from the company—”

“For Chrissake, Bundy!” Roger did not like that term, “the company.” He looked around quickly. The place was still empty. “I don’t need to know the details of how you know anything about anything, OK? Including whatever it is we’re talking about. I’m taking a great risk just by being here.”

“Gotcha,” Bundy said. “Need-to-know basis only. But I meant the company that’s distributing the coin.”

He had done it again: said the wrong thing to Bundy. Roger felt terrible. Bundy was his brother. Estranged, odd, a public menace to be sure. But family.

“*Friend of mine* says it’s coming out this afternoon,” Bundy continued. “I thought you’d want to know about it. Here, read this part.” He handed the article back to Roger. “It says it’s to honor the contributions to freedom, liberty and national defense of one Chessler Boresby. And that it’s part of your—of the Mint’s—‘Defense of Liberty’ series. This one, as you can see, shows Crazy Chess Boresby scouting the Pu’ukan Archipelago for bomb pits for Fat Man and Little Boy. That’s on the front of the coin. What they call the ‘obverse.’ On the reverse side—they call that the ‘reverse side’—it shows a big cargo plane.” The inscription on the coin reads “Freedom Thru Intelligence.”

Roger gave the photos another perfunctory glance but noticed nothing. He looked down the bar and then at his watch. “Where is she with the food already? I have an appointment.”

You do now, Bundy thought: At the Mint, to find out who dicked you on the coin project, and at the White House this afternoon for the unveiling.

Roger couldn’t believe what he was learning. Conversely, he completely believed what he was learning. Why would anyone tell him what was happening in his own department? After all, he was just the *acting* secretary. And what numbskull would put an intelligence asset on a commemorative coin for the world to see? Isn’t the whole point of secrecy to keep things secret?

Clearly Roger was out of the loop, Bundy realized. That was a good thing: He’d go back to the office nice and pissed off and hopefully more willing to help. Push Roger

hard enough and he'll eventually sort of maybe kind of show some spark. Bundy moved in to close the deal, but Roger cut him off. The spark had been lit too soon.

“What are we doing here, Bundy? You called me—for the first time in seven years—to chat about a five-dollar coin? What happened to the future of the republic?”

“Some of us gave up a lot for what's on that coin, Rog.” Bundy lifted his empty thigh off the barstool. “Look at the obverse again in that photo. You see the teensy little rendering of that weensy little cargo plane?”

“The Enola Gay,” Roger said. “I see it.”

“That ain't the Enola Gay, brother. That's a C-17.”

“OK, it's a C-17. So?”

“So when's the last time you heard of a cargo plane dropping an A-bomb? Hell, the first C-17 didn't even roll off the assembly line till 1991. September 15, 1991. We dropped the A-bombs on the Japs in August 1945.”

Roger looked more closely at the photo. He knew nothing about aircraft and wouldn't know a C-17 cargo plane if he were sitting in one right now. Planes were planes. They had wings, engines and/or propellers and made lots of noise. Presumably, neither Mint Director Tammy Claire Bennett nor the grammatically challenged brilliant Tammy Claire had hired to design the Freedom T-H-R-U Liberty coin knew anything about planes either since they ended up with an anachronism as well as an illegal commemorative coin.

“You know who flew a C-17 on a black-bag run?”

Roger said he that he didn't want to know who flew a C-17 on a black-bag run inasmuch as he had no need to know and where was the girl with the sandwiches already? He looked down the bar for Jessie.

“Me, Rog. I flew a C-17 on a black-bag run. Over the Bay of Kuushtaarrgg. And if you look hard enough at that coin—at the obverse,” he said, punching his finger on the magazine clipping, “you can see me right there, inside that C-17 getting shot at from anti-aircraft emplacements that weren't supposed to be there. And if you look really hard, you can see shards of my right femur spraying around the cockpit.”

Oh, *mama mía!* Roger thought.

“That was a real shit show, lemme tell you.”

“Look, Bundy, I know you got a raw deal. But you signed on for that when you signed up with those crazies. And you said yourself you'd do it again 'in a heartbeat.' Now here it is, being memorialized forever on a collector's coin. So what's the problem? You want your name on the thing, too? Fine. I'll mention it to the director of the Mint. Technically she reports to me.”

Bundy chewed on an ice cube. “It stinks, that's all.”

“Hey, if you guys don't want the food—” Jessie was back with their meals.

Roger waved her off. “No, no. Food'll be great, I'm sure. You're great. Thanks.”

He flashed a wide, plastic smile.

She set their platters down. “Whatever. I'll be down at the other end of the bar if you need anything else.”

“Thank you, Jessica,” Roger said.

“You’re right, Rog,” Bundy said after Jessie was out of earshot. “I got what I signed on for, but I don’t think I got what I deserved. I don’t think I deserved to go to jail so that the real criminals—the real criminal—could escape judgment and go on to bigger and better things. Like the White House.”

“Whoa whoa whoa! Now we’re getting very far afield.” Bundy had just set off Roger’s panic button.

“Just listen to me for a minute.” With effort, Bundy scooted his stool closer to speak confidentially. They both looked around the restaurant. Jessie was far off by the cash register, counting money.

“I know what the whole special process is for getting commemorative coins made and sold, and that this one is being done way outside process,” Bundy said. “And I know that you’re such a stick-in-the-ass for standard operating procedure that going outside of channels gives you the cooties. I also know it’s your job to account for the government’s money—where it comes from, who touches it, where it ends up.”

“OK, I gotta go.” Roger rose to leave. Bundy pressed his hand onto Roger’s shoulder and pushed his brother back onto his stool. It was incredible how much strength was in that hand. Arm strength must be a compensating capability for a leg amputee, Roger thought.

Bundy continued. “Don’t you find it just a little bit odd that you’re the secretary of the Treasury and you don’t even know that your own office is pressing commemorative coins that require majority votes from both chambers of Congress? And

that it's being announced in two hours and yet you didn't even know about it until two minutes ago? Until a convicted felon told you?"

"That's *acting* secretary," Roger corrected, working out a concept for an eventual legal defense based on plausible deniability and lack of respect among colleagues.

"There's only so much I'm aware of."

"Not for long, based on what I hear."

" 'Not for long' what?"

Bundy ignored the question. He lifted his sandwich instead. It turned out that Riverboat Gambler was McSwaney's name for an oversized Reuben. When he bit into it, a splodge of sauerkraut and cole slaw oozed out the back end and plopped onto his plate. Whatever they called it, it was a helluva sandwich.

"This is very good," Bundy said, his mouth full. Roger still hadn't touched his sandwich. He was making a mental note to ream out Tammy Claire Bennett when he got back to the office. On what authority did the director of the Mint presume to circumvent the Treasury secretary and the will of the Congress?

"And I still don't see why anyone other than coin collectors would care about any of this," Roger said. "There's no real money involved in commemorative coins. The face value of the thing is only five dollars. At best—*at best*—that's a million in profit for the government after costs. It's hardly worth the expense."

"That's exactly it," Bundy said. He pinched a clod of sauerkraut and cole slaw off his plate, brought it halfway to his mouth and held it there. "If there's no real money involved, why bother?"

“Meaning?” Roger couldn’t take his eyes off that clump between Bundy’s fingers. Juice was dripping down Bundy’s finger.

“Meaning why put A-bombs and coup plots on a commemorative coin, go out of process to make the thing, and then announce it at a White House press conference if it’s not even going to produce serious money? I mean, I understand the need to stroke constituents with favors, but how many coin geeks can there be outside of Kansas? Ten? Twenty-five? Fifty-seven?”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning maybe it’s not the money that matters.”

“You’re spinning a lot of interesting threads that don’t add up to a tapestry,” Roger said. “And please eat that sauerkraut already before I fall ill.”

Sometimes Bundy wondered whether he was born into the wrong family. How could Roger not put two and two together and see a rat? And who says things like “interesting threads that don’t add up to a tapestry”? Smart people could be so stupid and weird.

Bundy ate the clump and licked his fingers, mostly to annoy Roger. In case that didn’t work, he said he was thinking of writing an article about the new coin, and include all the shenanigans surrounding it, for *The Exonumist*.

“You’re what?!” An article written by his disgraced brother raising myriad ill-defined conspiracy theories involving mis-, mal- and/or nonfeasance in the executive branch just when Roger’s own career was in flux did not presage a happy outcome.

“Stir things up. Bring the rats out of their holes.” He took a more delicate bite of sandwich so that his delicate brother would not “fall ill.”

“There’s nothing to write about!”

“Sure there is. Former OGLE contract pilot pens a first-person account of what it’s like to be featured on a five-dollar, Treasury-funded tchotchke after getting shot down in an illegal overseas military action for which he went to prison thanks to an act of treason committed by the current president. Sounds like a blockbuster to me. I bet I end up with a radio talk show, like that guy Cole Charleston.” He took another bite of his sandwich.

“Treason?!” Roger all but bellowed, then looked around the restaurant in a panic. Still empty. Thank God for that. “Bundy, that simply cannot happen. I won’t permit it.” There was despair rather than anger in his voice.

“Well,” Bundy mused. “I could be persuaded to hold off.” He scooped up a pile of cole slaw with a fried zucchini strip.

Roger took a deep centering breath through his nose. “And your price would be ...?”

“It’s not my price. It’s the group’s.”

“The group. What ‘group’?”

“Don’t ask a lot of questions and you won’t know a lot of answers,” Bundy advised. “Hey, Jess? Love?” he called out. “Can I get another club soda?” He turned to Roger. “This Reuben’s excellent but it’s goddamn salty. Reminds me of those CheesyChumpy things. Ever have one of those things?”

Roger shook his head.

“Dry ya’ right out.” Bundy wiped his mouth with his napkin. “So. Thoughts? I could use some help.”

“Bundy, you know I can’t—”

“I know you’re going to go back to your office today and apply your usual insane level of fiduciary diligence to finding out what this coin is all about, and why you were cut out of the loop even though it’s your department that makes and sells the things. Your biggest problem will be making inquiries without giving the accurate impression that you have no control over your own shop. I can save you from all of that work. *And* help you keep a low profile.”

How could someone this crazy be so smart, Roger thought. “Whatever you’re about to ask of me, Bundy, it’s too much. I’m sorry, but I simply can’t accommodate you.” The smell and sight of the Riverboat Gambler wallowing on his plate like a boiler in the grass, and the wreckage of food splattered on Bundy’s, was turning Roger’s stomach. “It’s just too much.”

Bundy tossed his napkin onto the bar to announce the end of the meeting. He swung his stump from under the bar and hopped onto his one foot.

“What’s too much, Rog?” he said, holding onto the back of his stool. “What do you think you’ll lose by ‘accommodating’ me? A body part? I don’t think so, brother. Not much triple-A over Pennsylvania Avenue, like they had over the Bay of K.” He bumped into his stool and knocked his crutches to the floor.

Roger sighed. Victims have it all over you. Victims and veterans. And Nebraskans. And a victimized veteran from Nebraska? Forget it. You could get elected king of the world with those credentials. Roger reached down for Bundy's crutches, but Bundy waved him off.

"I got 'em. Been doing this for seven years."

"Bundy."

"Just think about it, Roger. Promise me at least that. I've done most of the spadework already. You just need to fill in a few holes, that's all."

Roger's eyes fell on Bundy's missing leg. "I've never understood why you don't just get a prosthetic. They've made great strides with the technology. Titanium and carbon fiber. I have a friend at the VA who can help."

"What, and lose this icebreaker? Anyway, Rog, I don't think the VA's going to pay for treating injuries sustained by a mercenary in an undeclared combat operation of dubious legality that resulted in a felony conviction. They won't even let me vote."

"I can help with that," Roger said, eager, if not desperate, to help his brother short of doing what Bundy really wanted his help with. "I can speak with the secretary of defense. I see him at Cabinet meetings."

"Just help me out with the coin thing."

"You haven't told me what you want me to do."

Bundy grabbed a fat clasp envelope from the empty stool next to his and gave it to Roger. "Buddy 'a mine gave me this," he said.

"I suppose he's REANAL, too."

“Don’t worry. He’s a gentleman farmer these days. Reads this stuff for shits and giggles. And for leads on bits of public pork to wet his whistle. You wouldn’t believe the tax breaks they give away. Keep the clip, too.”

Shits and giggles. Buddy ’a mine. Wet his whistle. Keep the clip. Their father spoke like that, too. Such cop talk. Sometimes Roger wondered whether he was born into the wrong family.

Roger took the envelope from Bundy. It must have weighed twelve pounds. Bundy made his way to the exit. He pulled the door back with his hand, held it open with a crutch and slipped out. Through the window, Roger watched his brother hobble off, not complaining but not hiding the effort it took just to walk. Step, thump. Step, thump. Step, thump. He should move to Nebraska.

Jessie came over with Bundy’s club soda. “Your friend’s gone? He gets dessert, you know.”

“Just the check when you get a chance, please.”

Jessie cleared away the plates—one a mess, the other untouched. She offered to box up Roger’s Gambler and sides, but he said no thanks.

Roger glanced at the magazine clipping. He noticed the name of the publication in small print in the footer: *The Exonumist*. Every department in government was covered by a handful of niche outlets that it had to keep track of. Tish subscribed to *What a Waste*. *The Exonumist* must be a sweet read at the Mint. He turned the clip over. On the other side was a photograph of an old woolly buffalo named Black Pearl, reputed to be the

model for the famous 1913 Buffalo Nickel. It was Black Pearl's anniversary. He read the article. "At the end of his life," it said, "Black Pearl was sold to a downtown butcher, who turned him into 700 lbs. of buffalo cutlets."

"What a terribly sad meal," Roger said, just as Jessie returned with the check.

"Boy, you guys are real pistols, you know that?"

"Oh, no no," Roger protested, mortified, but then gave up. He put forty dollars in cash on the bar and left.

A CATASTROPHE OF TASTE

“I can think of no more fitting recognition than this new ten-dollar—What’s that? Five?—than this new *five*-dollar commemorative coin. It is a measure of our gratitude for the selfless courage and the patriotic commitment displayed by the men and women of our intelligence services, in whose honor we are mass producing this limited-edition piece for retail sale. They are good Americans and great friends and defenders of liberty. Really, really great friends.”

Bundy was right: President Horvath was now unveiling a new commemorative coin—the third this year despite the statutory limit of two per annum—at a ceremony in the White House. It was enough to make you trust the word of a convicted felon. Even if he was your brother.

Roger stood off to the side of the executive rostrum among a retinue of other administration officials and White House staff. They constituted the Observation Group, the official minyan required at every presidential event. Unlike the direct participants on the altar behind the president, the ObGroup clumped off-camera. Its job was to laugh

when the president said something putatively risible, cast their eyes down when he said something putatively poignant, and furrow their brows when he said something putatively gritty and determined.

It was a fraught fifteen minutes for Roger. Did the others in the ObGroup know that he didn't know about the coin ahead of time? Had they found out how he had found out? What else would be announced or discussed? We don't know what we don't know, a great man once said. Would he be called on to provide detail about what he didn't know? What if a reporter asked if the image scratched onto the back of the coin was Roger's scandalized brother?

And how on earth did Bundy know about the unveiling? Moles, that's how. They were everywhere in government. People willing to flap their jaws for the pleasure of being heard. But at the Mint? Who even cares what the Mint does?

Lost in thought, Roger noticed the minyan in mid-chuckle. The president must have told a joke. Suddenly it all seemed so revolting, the extreme unction of the ObGroup's brown-nosing. Why should he have to chuckle if the joke wasn't funny? He hadn't even heard the joke. And he barely had a sense of humor. He glanced at the group: Finch, Golding, Dwight, Breslow and, next to Roger, Ray Jarecki—the whole squad was there, davening at whatever fatuity had just effluviated from the president's orifice.

There was a new player in the ritual today: Up on the altar, alongside the president, was Tammy Claire Bennett, the director of the Mint, who Roger doubted could spell “commemorative” let alone design, produce, distribute and market one. She couldn't even keep still, she was so excited to be there, up on stage next to the president. This was

Tammy Claire's day as much as it was the intelligence community's. More so since, as Bundy had made clear, this plug nickel was the last thing on earth the gumshoes wanted done in their name.

The coin, illustrated on two oversized foam boards set on easels next to the president, was exactly as Bundy had shown him at lunch. It was a catastrophe of taste. The obverse featured the crouching likeness of Chessler Boresby peering through a curtain of jungle fronds, the legendary gumshoe's throat and neck swaddled in his signature black turtleneck despite the tropical setting. He seemed to be waiting for just the right moment to ... what? Spring a bribe on some unsuspecting native chieftain in trade for a discreet bit of ground in which to store a couple of atom bombs for a few days?

But it was the reverse of the coin that most unsettled Roger. Etched into the narrow space just inside its ridged cladding was the stubby likeness of a cargo plane. It looked like a guppy giving birth: Little specks floated down from its open bay doors. But instead of baby guppies, they were crates tethered to tiny parachutes—supplies for Chech partisans. At the bottom of the coin was an inscription: "Freedom Thru Intelligence." It was, the president said, the first in the "Defense of Liberty" series of commemoratives coins that the U.S. Mint would be issuing.

It featured none of the icons of classic numismatic design. Where was Winged Mercury? Where was Thomas Jefferson? Where was Lady Liberty with her pert breasts and bundled chaffs of wheat? No olive branches, no arrows, no fasces of straw, no diaphanous nightie billowing in the breeze. Good Lord, this thing didn't even have an

eagle on it! And was it too much to have the inscription proofread? The word “Chechibennigan” was nowhere on the coin, of course. But to anyone who knew the backstory, “the Chech” was all over it.

What an abomination, Roger thought: commemorating atomic fire bombs and failed coup plots and illegal invasions, and then attempting to buy the loyalty of disaffected spies with a cheap coin they didn’t ask for, didn’t want and would get nothing out of. It would have been more honest if the coin showed a bunch of them being thrown under a government bus. Oh, the cheese of it all! Roger could barely breathe. Had a man ever felt so alienated from men?

“This ‘series opener,’ as I like to call it,” the president smiled at his improvised sports pun, “is not only a great way to honor some great Americans. It’s also a great way to spark the interest of a whole new generation of young nusim—numumsm—numatic—ahem—Nu-MIZ-muh-tits. And a great addition to our numin—our coin catalog.” He looked up from his notes. “Whew! That’s a hard one. More of a fellatioilist myself.” The minyan scratched its neck; Tammy Claire swooned; Roger turned to inspect the wall he behind him. Undaunted, the president plowed on.

“‘Freedom Thru Intelligence’ reminds us that liberty is our nation’s most precious coinage. And intelligence, too.”

“Here comes the lift,” Ray Jarecki whispered to Roger, using the term that Golding, the speechwriter, used for the inspiring coda to a presidential speech.

“...freedom is a coinage worth its weight in gold. Or in this case, silver-nickel alloy. Ha, ha!”

Golding's heart sank. Couldn't he have just shut up at "weight in gold"?

His remarks concluded, Viktor Horvath invited questions from reporters. He looked over the raised hands, seeking out the yokels from the hobby-craft press whom Ray had brought in to pitch softballs. He found the most Kansas-looking face in the crowd.

"Thank you, Mr. President. Ted Randall of *The Exonumist*."

"The Whatamist?" the president quipped.

"The *Exonumist*, Mr. President."

"Got it. Shoot." Guy Rapp, the head of the president's Secret Service detail, cringed.

"Mr. President," he said, "do you think it's appropriate that currency issued by the government of the United States of America should, for all intents and purposes, celebrate the extralegal antics of rogue operatives who brought this nation's foreign policy to the brink of ruin, as seems to be the case with this commemorative?"

Ted Randall pointed to what he described as "the unmistakable likeness" of Bundy Swing's cargo plane on the foam board. "I mean, you yourself led the Chechibennigan investigation in the Senate. And now you're honoring the scandal with a coin? It just seems like you're politicizing the concept of the commemorative and disrespecting the individual collector."

Viktor Horvath glowered.

"I mean, it's a cool coin and all, Mr. President. But without even an eagle..." He shook his head. "My readers just aren't gonna get that. At all."

The president pretended to jot a few notes and shot Ray Jarecki a nasty glance out of the corner of his eye. Suddenly he began to doubt the wisdom of trying to purchase REANAL's good will with a crappy coin. And now he badly wanted a cigarette. He ran a finger across his lip instead. That little bump was throbbing. And it wasn't so little anymore.

“Let me tell you something, friend,” he finally replied. “America's intelligence agents are among the finest individuals this country has ever produced. And C.C. Boresby was among the finest of intelligence agents. That makes him one of the finest individuals of all time. A simple syllogism that I'm sure your readers will 'get.' Boresby and his ilk are defenders of liberty who fulfill their commitment to the call of conscience. They are—”

“—co-conspirators in the illegal military attack on the democratically elected government of Chechibennigan,' according to page one of the *Horvath Commission Report on Matters Relating to Events Leading Up to, Through, and After the Unauthorized Military Action Against the Republic of Chechibennigan Authorized by President Garth Houseman,*” Ted Randall interjected.

“Who'd you say you're from?”

“*The Exonumist*, Mr. President.”

“Well let me ask the *Exorcist* a question. Were mistakes made? You bet. It's all in the report. Were some of those mistakes quite stupendous in nature? Maybe. I'm not judging. The Senate convening as a committee of the whole did that. Sixty-three to four, twenty abstentions, thirteen no-shows, if I recall. That's on the public record and you can

confirm it if facts even matter to the liberal media anymore. Tax and spend, tax and spend. That's all we ever hear from that side.

“Let me tell you the other side of the nickel, as it were. And that's that the time has come for this great nation to move on, to get past the past, and to finally honor those great servants of liberty who toil in the shadows and risk all for love of country. They'd give an arm or a leg if asked. I think a coin is a small price to pay in return. And I urge every American, every patriotic citizen who cherishes his or her own freedom, to buy a few. I'm sure Director Bennett can furnish you with the Internet address.”

“Oh, yes!” Tammy called out. “It's www dot ...”

Roger was elated. Suddenly it felt very good not to have had anything to do with this disaster, including foreknowledge. And thank God, by the way, for the hobby-craft press. And for Bundy. Bundy obviously had prebriefed this Ted Randall fellow, who had opened a door through which even the rubes of the White House press club could walk on their way to digging up whatever squalid story was behind this coin.

By the end of the day, they'd all be experts on numismatics, Ted Randall would be sifting through offers to join Club Rube, and Tammy Claire Bennett would be tossed out of the Mint on her cute little keister. Having been demonstrably out of the loop, Roger's own prospects would be revived. He felt bad that he had walked out on Bundy at lunch, but at least he had picked up the check.

At the end of the day, Bundy wasn't such a bad guy after all.

LITTLE MISS TRAILER TRASH

As relieved as Roger was not to have been part of the decision making, he knew he could be called on to answer why his department had illegally issued a third commemorative without the approval of Congress. His first step was to find out why in the world the president had gone out of process for the sake of a crummy coin. He followed Ray Jarecki to the chief of staff's West Wing office after the unveiling.

“There’s a reason for standard operating procedure, Ray.”

“Mm hm.” Ray didn’t share Roger’s urgency. He was dividing his attention unequally between Roger’s dudgeon and an elegant tercet he was composing on his computer. *The Poet’s Thesaurus* lay open on his desk.

“Do you know what it takes to retool the machinery? Just the physical machinery?” Roger complained. “To say nothing of the marketing juggernaut that is the lifeblood of commemorative coinage? Ray? Do you know?”

“Not really. But feel free not to tell me.”

“Well let me tell you: sixteen months. That’s how long.” Roger made this up. He had no idea if it was true.

Ray had no idea either, but he assumed Roger made it up. It hardly mattered because not even Congress cared about the Mint, and it cared even less about commemorative coins. “That’s a lotta months.”

“You’re darn right it’s a lot of months.”

On Ray’s desk, congealed butter had formed a hard-shell sheen on a sliced bagel. Powdered creamer solidified into chunks in a cup of cold coffee. Now Ray lit a cigarette. Good God, Roger thought, MidWaste could get a court order to shut down this man’s oral cavity.

Ray blew a jet of smoke out the corner of his mouth and hunkered closer to his computer screen. Roger stood his ground. He would not be deterred by second-hand smoke or by this very plain show of disregard. It was a test of wills. Ray reached for the bagel. Roger shuddered but held fast as Ray made a show of chewing with his mouth open between drags on his cigarette.

“Ray, you can’t unilaterally issue commemorative coinage in contravention of the will of Congress. It’s simply that ... simple. Do you even know what you’re going to do with the seigniorage?”

Ray looked up. “The what?”

“The seigniorage. It means—oh for Pete’s sake, what’s the use.”

Ray turned back to his computer but paused over the keyboard. “Seigniorage,” he said aloud, rolling the word over his polluted tongue. “Sounds Latin. Hot-blooded. Yet

abstruse. Like a woman. ... I like it!" He searched for a place for "seigniorage" in his new piece of verse.

"Listen, Ray," Roger continued. "The Mint has issued two commemorative coins already this year: One in honor of intra-coastal waterways and the other promoting traditional suburban values. Statutorily, that's it. You're not allowed any more. That's not the viewpoint of Acting Treasury Secretary Roger Swing. That's the will of Congress as per the Commemorative Coin Reform Act of 1996, Public Law 104 dash—"

"Got it."

"Are you even remotely familiar with the CCRA?"

"Of course. Who isn't." Then again, *seigniorage* was going to be hard to rhyme. And spell. Ray reached for the thesaurus. *Forage?*

"Then you know that among other minor details, the CCRA establishes annual mintage limits. To wit: not more than seven hundred and fifty thousand clad halves, five hundred thousand silvers, and one hundred thousand gold fivers and tenners. That's it." Roger chopped the air with his hand. "No more." He kept to himself the fact that the limits could be waived by the secretary of the Treasury, although the statute was silent as to *acting* secretaries of the Treasury.

"And I don't even want to get into Title 31, Subtitle IV, Chapter 51, Subchapter III, Section 5134: the Numismatic Public Enterprise Fund."

"Yeah, but can't those limits be waived by the secretary of the Treasury? Even acting secretaries, notwithstanding the statute's silence thereof?" Ray asked.

“Well, uhh, perhaps. Technically. I’d need to review the language.” How did he know these things? Ray Jarecki truly was indomitable on public funding.

“Mm hm.” *Storage?*

“The point is, you went directly to the Mint, bypassing the Office of the Secretary.”

“Oh, *that’s* the point. So you’re not personally offended at the perceived undercutting of your authority. It’s the dignity of the office that concerns you. Good to know.”

Roger said there was no precedent for what Ray had done, and that the president had all but forced the Congress to hold hearings.

“Hearings? On the Mint? I don’t think so.” Ray chuckled. Roger Swing’s defective political antennae was one reason that Viktor Horvath was never going to appoint him to the Treasury job full-time. Smart guys like Roger Swing could be so stupid. Ray hit the save button and swiveled his chair to face the beleaguered economist.

“Look, Roger. Here’s the poop. The president’s been very anxious to do something positive for REANAL. Christ, it sounds like a urology practice, doesn’t it? Anyway, his feeling is that they’ve been kicked in the kidneys over the years, and that some modest rehabilitation would be good for national security. Keep-the-spoons-on-the-team kind of thing.”

Roger asked why Viktor Horvath, of all people, would want to do REANAL any favors, and why REANAL would accept any offers from him. They were enemies.

Ray drew a cloud of smoke into his lungs and held it there for a couple of seconds before popping it out as if he were bursting a balloon. “Nixon goes to China, Reagan raises taxes, Bush Junior reads a book. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Ray—”

“Symbols are very important to people, Roger. The president made that clear at the unveiling. A coin honoring American heroes and an impressive, moving public monument built with the proceeds—people just eat that shit up. Go figure.” He took another bite of bagel and washed it down with a slug of filmy, clotty coffee.

“A public monument paid for with the proceeds?” Roger was flabbergasted. “That’s an entirely separate funding process.”

No question about it, Roger thought. He was going to get sucked into this mess no matter how ignorant he had been. Goodbye Wharton, hello Fairfax Community College.

“No one mentioned anything about a public monument.”

“Tell me about it.”

Depleted, Roger fell into a chair. Up until two days ago, Roger Swing had used the term “commemorative coin” perhaps four times in his life. Now it was coming up six times in every conversation. His fight was all but gone, as were his arguments. The best he could come up with was to complain that the new coin would put him in a very difficult position with the Citizens Coinage Advisory Commission.

“The Citizens Coinage Advisory Commission?” Ray leaned back and smiled. He licked his fingers. “Jesus, Roger.” He shook his head. “Jesus.”

“Don’t be so dismissive. Some of these hyper-narrow interest groups are extremely tenacious. The numismatists can be rabid.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“And I assume Tammy Claire Bennett—”

“—knows all about it. T.C.’s fully on board,” Ray said.

“T.C.” he called her. They must be good friends. The nation was in greater peril than Roger had realized. He took it as confirmation that Tammy Claire Bennett would be nominated for Treasury secretary, a position in which she would put her online associate’s degree in public administration to excellent use destroying America’s financial scaffolding.

“Roger, let’s talk,” Ray said. “The president thinks very highly of you. Very highly. And I’d like to report to him that you, too, are on board with this rather inconsequential project—this coin and statue silliness. And, uhh, moreover, he—the president—regards the sweep of your knowledge of policy and procedure as unrivaled in government. Unrivaled.”

Roger was in a daze. He could barely pay attention.

“You know there’s an opening at the Fed now that Farnum’s toast.”

Oh good God in heaven! It was worse than he thought. They were going to make Tammy Claire Bennett Fed Chair! The nation was not just in peril; calamity loomed. Roger’s heart beat irregularly and his vision clouded. It must have been apparent.

“You OK?” Ray asked. “You look a little peaked.” He sucked at his teeth.

“Not peaked. Fine. Fine,” Roger said, unable to articulate complete thoughts. He shifted in his seat, as if to convey that he was soldiering through some routine cramping.

“Continue. Please.”

“Well good,” Ray said, “because the president wants to nominate you for Fed chair and dump Tammy Claire Trailer Park into the dead pool of Treasury. You OK with that?”

ODE ON A FISCAL URN

“Fed chair?”

“That’s right,” Ray said. “Fed chair. As in chairman of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve Bank of the United States. It’s a bank. Well-known in its industry. But if you’re not up to it—”

“No I’m—just a little taken aback, that’s all.”

“Actually, Swing, I think you just literally recoiled.”

Ray stared at Roger. Roger didn’t notice. This must be every accountant’s wet dream, Ray thought. He picked up one of the “Freedom Thru Intelligence” coins on his desk. Tammy Claire had the Mint strike a few prototypes for Ray and the president. Ray turned the coin over in his fingers. He enjoyed the solid, heavy feel of the cladding; the beveling of the reeded edge; the frosted relief of the images set against the polished, mirror-like background; the sharp ridges of the incuse.

“A good coin is like poetry,” he mused, shifting the coin on its axis to catch the shafts of sunlight coming through the window. “A small, polished thing of weight and value. Expressive. Subtle and intricate, extending beyond time though very much of its time.” He flipped the coin to Roger. “When can we get this junk on QVC?”

In the space of four minutes, Roger Swing had hurtled through three stages of denial, one of bargaining, two of anger, none of hope, and had landed on cable marketing. The invisible hand was moving in very mysterious ways today.

“I guess almost immediately,” he answered. “Once we sign the contracts.”

“So what happens when people buy the thing but we don’t have them ready to ship? You said it would take sixteen months to spit ’em out. That gonna be a problem?”

“We could take orders in the meantime. In fact,” Roger said, his powers of speech and his presence of mind returning, “we could use that to our advantage—you know, say that we’re taking prestrike orders given the breadth of interest. Generate high demand against a naturally low supply. Basic economics. And maybe we can speed up the process a bit anyway.”

“Act now or get fucked.”

“More or less.”

“Excellent!”

The Fed, Roger thought. Incredible the way life unfolds. To make sure it continued to unfold propitiously, he wanted to confirm that the president really, truly, actually would submit his Fed nomination to the Senate. Unfortunately, this meant

making a direct verbal appeal to Ray, whom he had just accused of breaking the law. He didn't realize he was staring at Ray.

“We're good then?” Ray asked.

“Yes, yes of course.” He stood up to leave.

“Good.” Ray returned to his keyboard, where an unfinished stanza to the Mercury dime waited, expectantly, for completion.

“So the, what's then—be—would the schedule—simply put, as far as *expectations*—”

“I'll have Breslow set up everything with the Senate,” Ray said. “Classified until then, of course. That includes spouses.”

“Of course.”

“Swing!” Roger was halfway out the door when Ray called to him.

“Yes, Ray?”

“What rhymes with ‘mercury’?”

#

In his office at the Treasury Department, Roger attempted to absorb the whirlwind developments, from professional death to resurrection and beatification.

What a ride! It was worth unbuttoning his suit jacket. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that government needed people like Ray Jarecki—albeit not too many lest the whole shaky edifice collapse of its own ill will. But a dollop of highly focused, highly functional bureaucratic sociopathy here and there could be a good thing given that your average psychopath lacked the empathy that could stand in the way of

getting things done. Ray even dabbled in verse. A psychopath with a poetic soul. It was impressive!

Roger wasn't much for poetry. Tish loved the stuff, and there was plenty of it in the house. She often said that after a hard day sloshing through the MidWaste mosh pit, there was nothing like a leaf of grass to balm the soul. Roger assumed she was talking about smoking marijuana cigarettes. As far as Roger was concerned, those poets must have written all their poems while high on the stuff since the writing was so opaque and kaleidoscopic that you couldn't figure out what was going on from line to line. It made no sense: How could you have an impact on people's lives if no one understood what you're talking about? It was the same with philosophy: The worst writing on the most important topic—life.

Tish had tried to open Roger's soul to poetry. When he was named head of the Council of Economic Advisors, she gave him a massive anthology of English literature. She said he could make heads turn if he tossed in a bit of pentameter at some bone-dry finance forum. Roger dutifully opened to a random page and read aloud the first stanza he came upon:

This bond is forfeit, and lawfully by this the Jew may claim a pound of flesh to be cut off nearest the merchant's heart. Be merciful: Take thrice the money and bid me tear the bond.

“Good Lord, Tish,” he exclaimed, slamming the book shut. “They'd have my head on a pike for that! And rightly so. Who says such things?”

Tish threw her hands up. “*Merchant of Venice* he picks!”

“That’s not even good banking practice,” Roger complained. “He was offered a 300 percent return on his investment—and turned it down?”

That was the last time he opened the book. He picked it up and flipped through the reed-thin pages. What the heck, he thought. If nothing else, maybe a little poetry would give him something to bond with Ray over. Keats, Byron, Coleridge, Shelley. Every one of them a fop and a dope fiend. He stopped randomly on a middle page and read:

“One fool makes many”; and it hath been poetically observed—

“[That] fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

Hm. A bit turgid, and it didn’t rhyme. But not a bad expression of market psychology: the herd stampeding off a cliff. All the more need for a steady hand at the federal tiller. He turned a few more pages and stopped in on “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Everyone knew that one:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Odd punctuation, to be sure. And still a bit off on the rhyming scheme. But that could be the headline on the news story about his nomination: “Fed Pick Sees Truth, Beauty in Low Rates and Steady Growth.” Now *that* makes sense.

He turned the pages, daydreaming more than reading. Maybe Tammy Claire wasn’t so bad, either. Their backgrounds weren’t all that dissimilar if you took regional origin out of the equation. She and Roger were both from modest backgrounds—Roger the son of a suburban New Jersey cop who rose to detective, and Tammy Claire the only

child of a single-mother barkeep in rural Georgia. If nothing else, at least Tammy Claire had passion and energy. Not so Ladylike, perhaps, but who said you had to be a Lady to get the public's work done? The public was no Lady.

Lady! Roger had forgotten all about Lady Farnum, whose husband he was about to replace as Fed nominee. There would be hell to pay unless he had her blessing.

LUCRE HEAPED LIKE DUNG

Lady Farnum might be forgiving to a fault with her beloved husband, but Roger knew that she was a grudge-holder of renown who would forget an insult only after she had gotten more than even in as public a manner as possible.

It was bad enough that Roger would be seen as profiting from Pitch's loss. Worse was that Pitch and Lady had been so welcoming when Tish and Roger came to Washington five years ago to join the Horvath administration. Pitch was Roger's homestate senator, so it was only natural that he and Lady would be the Welcome Wagon, which took the form of an intimate dinner party at Plumage Oaks, the Farnums' homestead between Wisconsin Avenue and Reno Road. Now Roger was after her husband's job?

He decided he'd stop by Plumage Oaks on his way to work tomorrow morning. Better she hear it directly from him than on the news. Better for him, at least. Candor was always the best way. Too bad he had to keep another secret from Tish.

Roger set the anthology down, next to the mammoth clasp envelope that Bundy had given him at lunch. Roger had willfully forgotten about it. He didn't know what was in it, but he could safely assume he didn't want anything to do with it, especially knowledge of its contents. Frankly, now that he had a Senate confirmation looming, keeping his distance from Bundy was essential.

Then again, Bundy had been dead-on about the coin.

Suddenly it had become a very complicated day. Whatever was in that envelope was busting at the seams. The clasp was already bent. “ ‘Buddy ’a mine gave me this,’ ” Bundy had said. Hm.

Oh what the hell. For all Roger knew, whatever was in there would bear on his confirmation to the Fed. Better to know the worst now than to learn about it later. He pulled up the clasp and dipped the envelope to pour out the contents, half-expecting to see black and white surveillance photos of a rare-coins thief paperclipped to an Interpol dossier. When nothing poured out, he had to scoop it out, like an afterbirth. When he saw what it was, the description fit: Inside the envelope was a copy of what Roger Swing and other well-meaning students of government justly regarded as an afterbirth of representative democracy, an abomination of the legislative process codified as Public Law 112-313 (H.R.7142 and S.3766) and titled “An Act Pertaining to Farm Security, Rural Investment & Regional Prosperity.”

The Farm Bill.

It was a truth of governing: The more opaque the language, the bigger the theft. And The Farm Bill was legislative obscurantism on steroids—a putrescent pile of pork viscera three thousand five hundred and thirty-seven pages in length and nine inches

thick; a tome whose table of contents alone consumed twenty-two leaves of processed pulp purchased at the price of dwindling Indonesian woodland; a cross-referential behemoth of giveaways, grants, easements, exceptions, exemptions, tax breaks, tariffs, earmarks, toothmarks, nosemarks, skidmarks, unnecessary price supports and the basest, most unabashed corporate welfare ever conceived by human cupidity, including but not limited to pre-forgiven loans and outright gifts and handouts, both implicit and explicit, to global conglomerates and local interests and every entity in between that could demonstrate the thinnest of associations with agricultural activity broadly defined, if defined at all. If your regional sales manager's secretary's neighbor's friend grew tulip bulbs in his or her outer office at home—i.e., in his or her living room—then your subsidiary's global distribution center's accountancy office in Overland, Kansas, was entitled to suck at the teat known as The Farm Bill. Which meant that you could pay off the construction loan you took out to build the global distribution center even though there were no goods to distribute and no means of transport with which to distribute them. The Farm Bill was an exemplar of the legislative obscenities of which Congress was capable. The trick was to get your paws on a few of those obscenities in service of the home district. Private gain, public loss. For Congress, that was the most appropriate distribution of moral hazard.

As a serious policy professional with a passion for rational public budgeting, Roger Swing was pained to be in the same room with this perversion of process and contempt for the common weal, this boil on the body politic. He would sooner be caught on film swooning in the arms of a panty model and eating CheeseChumps while his Fed nomination spun down the crapper.

The Farm Bill's heft alone discouraged anyone from actually attempting to read the thing, let alone examine its innards for wastage of the national treasury. To attempt to lift it would be to risk pulling a muscle. Anyone who wanted to reform government spending eventually drowned in this special-interest heap of lucre and dung. Lawyers and puzzle masters could occupy themselves for hours on the extra-linguistic gems buried in its bowels, such as this black pearl entombed in Title I, Subtitle A, Section 1101, Paragraph 14, "TREATMENT OF MULTIPLE PLANTING OR PREVENTED PLANTING," to wit:

For the purpose of determining under paragraph (1)(A) the acreage on a farm that producers planted or were prevented from planting during the 1998 through 2001 crop years to covered commodities, if the acreage that was planted or prevented from being planted was devoted to another covered commodity in the same crop year (other than a covered commodity produced under an established practice of double cropping), the owner may elect the commodity to be used for that crop year in determining the 4-year average, but may not include both the initial commodity and the subsequent commodity.

Riiiggghhhttt.

In the storied history of The Farm Bill, there was no recorded instance in which a legislator had sat down and read the thing cover to cover, or even title to title or section to section, save to confirm that, buried somewhere within its many lobes, there lay his or her own morsel, further concealed by a miasma of verbiage. The Farm Bill gave something to everyone, which is why it was taken up only every fifth year, and why it passed every

fifth year by a unanimous, unrecorded voice vote immediately upon introduction, as it had passed just three days ago.

And now this muck was on Roger's desk, staring back at him. His proximity to it repulsed and mortified him. Brother Bundy had outdone himself in mystery this time. What was Roger supposed to do with The Farm Bill? Revile it? Burn it? Coldcock an assailant with it? He was about to slip the thing back into its corrupt womb when he noticed the edge of a fluorescent yellow sticky note peeking out from its midsection.

He took a look.

It took another twenty-two minutes of cross-referencing, but Roger found what Bundy wanted him to find. It made him realize how dumb smart people like him can sometimes be.

When he picked up the phone and called Lady Farnum to ask if he could stop by in the morning, she didn't sound surprised. She didn't even ask why.

He didn't take it as a good sign.

JOVIAL RELATIONS AMONG MEN WHO DESPISE EACH OTHER

“Oh shit.”

A screwdriver slipped from Lady Farnum’s fingers and dive-bombed from her perch atop a ten-foot ladder that Roger Swing was holding steady. The point of the tool pierced the back of Roger’s hand and bounced onto the hardwood foyer of Plumage Oaks. The commotion chased the pusillanimous Wepner through Roger’s legs and into the kitchen.

Roger let go of the ladder—he had been spotting Lady as she tightened a loose screw on a chandelier plate—and dabbed a tissue at the pinpoint of blood on his hand. Throughout, he kept a clutch of file folders and a large clasp envelope pressed against his side.

In a crisp navy suit, crisp yellow tie and crisp white shirt, the buttoned-up bureaucrat was a counterpoint to the graceful, lithe Lady Farnum up there in her soft leather house flats, exceedingly well-fitting jeans and equally well-fitting crème brûlée angora V-neck sweater. She wore her clothes so nicely, Roger thought, even jeans and a

sweater. Especially jeans and a sweater. He made a mental note to get Tish a pair of jeans just like them, then realized she would hate being told what to wear.

“Roger, can you grab that for me, please? I think it skittered off to your left.”

“I’m fine, but thank you for asking,” Roger deadpanned.

“I’m sorry, Roger. But I’m at risk of death now that you’ve stopped holding the ladder because of a boo-boo.”

She had a point.

Roger retrieved the screwdriver and handed it up to Lady, in the process forgetting all about the files under his arm, which ended up spread across the floor.

Wepner poked his head out of the kitchen door behind the foyer. Roger scared him off with a dirty look.

Lady returned to her work on the chandelier plate. She stretched on her tippy toes and reached as high as she could. The bottom edge of her sweater hiked a few inches up her waistline. Roger distracted himself by looking around the foyer while he held the ladder. It was a beautiful foyer. It was a beautiful house: six bedrooms, two studies—one upstairs, one downstairs—sitting rooms flanking the foyer on either side; dining room; large eat-in kitchen; housekeeper’s quarters; a forest of wood flooring; and two flights of stairs rising from the foyer to the second floor. Pitch referred to them as the eastern and western spurs. Lady loved that house. It was perfect for dinner parties.

She finally managed to screw in the plate. “What a pain in the patooty!”

Roger looked around the foyer to avoid looking at Lady stepping down backward off the ladder. His head was turned away when she reached the bottom rung.

“Ahem. May I?”

Roger quickly stepped aside. When it came to the ladies, the Swing brothers more or less phumphered.

“I see you’ve dropped a few files, Mr. Secretary,” Lady said, pointing to the paperwork scattered across the floor. “And please don’t bully Wepner. He’s very sensitive.”

“You know you can hire people to do home-repair work,” Roger said, scooping up his files before following Lady into the kitchen.

“I’ve decided that I need to do more good works in life. Idle hands and all.”

“Lady, I seriously believe you’ve got your catechism all twisted up. The concept of busy hands and good works tends to apply to efforts *outside* the home, not to home decorating.” He set his files on the kitchen table and took a chair.

“Perhaps if I went to church more often, I’d know these things.” She took a set of three-by-five cards, wrapped in a rubber band, from a drawer. “What do you think, Roger? Should I go to church more often?”

“Lady Farnum at church?” Roger laughed. “I don’t think so.”

“Seriously,” she agreed.

Even the way she slipped into a chair across from him—as seamless as a breeze—impressed Roger.

She pulled the rubber band off the index cards. “Maybe I should take up the Gospels. You know, spread the good news and all? If nothing else, it might help with my karma, especially with the way things have been going lately.”

Roger watched as Lady organized the index cards into groups of four or six. Each card was marked with one or two names so that there were eight names in each group. He figured she was planning a dinner party. Lady Farnum's dinner parties were world renown. Literally. Plumage Oaks had often served as a venue for diplomats, department heads, CEOs, labor leaders and committee chairs to confer in confidence. Roger thought that planning a dinner party under the present circumstances was devilishly insouciant. He admired that about her. Tish would appreciate it. He tried to read the cards upside down.

"Don't worry," she said. "I've got you and Tish right" She held the Swing card aloft while scanning the arrangement on the table in search of its place. "... here!"

"Oh I wasn't, uh," Roger stammered.

"I know you wasn't. But I was. And I get to decide where you sit."

"Well we'd love to come, wherever you choose to place us. And whenever it is."

"It's this Friday."

"This week?" Lady would be conducting a veritable public event while Pitch's mortification would still be fresh. That was beyond insouciant. Roger couldn't resist smiling at her temerity.

"Pushing the envelope lead-time-wise, I know," she said. "But I thought, 'What the hell. It's a great time for a party.' Tells the world we're above it all."

Roger tilted his head for a better look at the seating arrangement. Lady said she had an opening next to Chief Justice Armand Fripworthy and wife. Roger crinkled his

nose at the thought of spending an evening next to Armand Fripworthy, no matter how much power he had.

“I don’t blame you,” Lady said. “That spot may never get filled unless Christ himself shows up. Such a lech. Fripworthy, not Christ. *As far as I know.*” She scanned the table. “Or I could put you next to Armand Delgado.”

Armand Delgado, aka “Armand of the House” to distinguish him from Armand of the Court, was the Speaker of the House of Representatives. He, too, was powerful, but also a bad fit for the Swings. Too bluff and brash. Worse, he was rabidly pro-industrial sludge, which would guarantee a food fight with Tish, who when aroused could hurl a mushroom cap like Nolan Ryan.

“What about over there?” Roger asked, pointing to an empty area in the middle of the muddle.

“I’m putting Diana Swerdlow and Plus One there,” Lady said. “Diana’s quite attractive and quite separated at the moment, so you can’t be anywhere near her. I’ll have to keep her far, far away from Fripworthy as well.”

She pondered the cards and sighed. “The more I think about it, the more this looks like the people Gatsby left off his guest list.”

Lady’s housekeeper, Rula, brought over two cups of coffee. Roger stirred two packets of sweetener into his and took a gentle sip. Such a reserved, cautious individual, Lady thought. Armand of the House would eat him alive. So would Diana Swerdlow.

Finally, Roger was ready to talk turkey. Lady had been extremely courteous so far, but that could all change. He asked how Pitch was doing.

“I’m sorry, dear. How is who doing?”

“Pitch Farnum? Your husband? Good-looking guy, about so high?”

“Oh! You must mean the CheeseTurd King! Or as I like to call him, The Prince of Panties.”

“I’m sorry about all this. I truly am.”

“Don’t be. I love the dumb lug no matter what he does. And I know he doesn’t ‘do’ anything when he does things. Things just seem to swirl around and ... *happen* to him. The hardest part is that I have a gnawing sense that he’s unwittingly playing a role in some seedy Viktor Horvath ploy.”

“Oh?”

“My husband had no business being nominated for that position. Pitch Farnum can’t balance a checkbook let alone the current account. It wouldn’t even interest him.”

Lady’s theory, she explained, was that the president had nominated Pitch to the Fed as a sop to Langmann Longmann, the Senate majority leader, since Pitch and Longmann were close friends, and having a close friend at the Fed would give Langmann a virtual vote on the Fed Board, which he could put to use on behalf of his banking industry constituents who financed his campaigns and, according to belief and representation, his lavish lifestyle. All along, though, Lady’s theory went, the president assumed that Pitch would implode long before he was confirmed, after which Viktor Horvath could say to Langmann, “Hey, I tried,” and then put in his own choice.

“That’s awfully diabolical,” Roger said. “Do you really think there’s something to it?”

“Perhaps,” Lady said, swapping the Fripworthies with the Delgados. “I wouldn’t put anything past that troglodyte.”

“That would be the president?”

“The President of the United States, yes. My leader, your boss.”

“Don’t blame me. I’m just the Treasury secretary. The *acting* secretary.”

“I blame the mother,” Lady said. “And his satrap sidekick. That would be Raymond Jarecki, dear,” she said. “Anyway, I shouldn’t be surprised. After a few months in the Senate and a lifetime of living with and among these creatures, I should be used to it by now. There really is no friendship in a place like this.”

“John Hay described politics as the ‘intimate, jovial relations that exist between men that hate and despise each other,’ ” Roger said.

“That is the real skill of it,” Lady agreed.

“Where is Pitch?” Roger asked, glancing around the kitchen, as if Pitch might pop out of the junk drawer at any moment.

“I’m not sure I can answer that question, though in times of crisis he usually bunks down at the Jefferson.” Roger shook his head sympathetically. “Oh don’t feel bad. It’s a wonderful hotel. And I make sure that Ricard, the manager, takes very good care of him.”

Roger mulled and Lady worked on her seating chart. Talking turkey hadn’t gotten them down to brass tacks. It was a quiet moment, with only talk radio playing quietly on the box on the counter.

“You’re a fan?” Roger asked.

“Hm?”

“Cole Charleston,” Roger said, pointing to the radio. “I didn’t know you were a fan.”

“Oh! Him? No. Or yes. Maybe once.”

Roger gave Lady a puzzled look. Then it occurred to him: she had been serious about going to church. Why else would anyone listen to Cole Charleston’s “The Hour Is Now” thirty-minute evangelical-newsmaker interview program? He turned an ear to the radio. Cole Charleston finished off every program with one of his blistering “Cole Fired” sixty-second sermonettes in which he excoriated whatever bit of heresy had gotten into his craw that day. Today he was livid over the point spread on long-term interest rates.

“Maybe he’s putting in for Fed chairman. Everyone else is,” Lady said, giving Roger a little wink that he pretended not to notice. She got up and switched the radio to a music station and turned up the volume. The most unusual, knotted, guttural voice Roger had ever heard was singing something about barnyard animals:

*If you see my little red rooster, please drag him home/
If you see my little red rooster, please drag him home/
There ain’t no peace in the barnyard/
Since the little red rooster been gone.*

Lady gave her moneymaker a bluesy shake on her way back to the table. Roger blushed. “Howlin’ Wolf,” she said. “Have you ever heard such a voice? All twisted up like that?”

“It sounds like it hurts. Like he’s swallowed a bag of gravel.

“How about you, Roger?”

“Oh, I’m afraid that I don’t sing very well.”

“No, dear. I meant that you’d make a good Fed chairman.”

“Oh!” He laughed at himself. “Welllll, now that you mention it, there *is* something I wanted to speak with you about.”

“Roger, I’m so glad you stopped by to tell me yourself.” She laid her hand on his arm. “Pitch had his shot and he blew it. Let’s get someone in there who actually knows a thing or two about money.”

This was a remarkable woman. Roger wondered what in the world she was doing in Washington, D.C. “Lady, everything they say about you is true.”

“Oh God, I certainly hope not.”

They laughed. Lady sipped at her coffee and worked on her cards.

“There is one other thing,” Roger said after a moment.

“Oh?”

He told Lady about an unusual item buried deep within the Farm Bill—he brought the big clasp envelope forward—regarding allocation of the seigniorage from a newly minted commemorative coin.

“Seigniorage? Roger, are you getting your numismatic geek on?”

“Sorry. The profits from the sale of the coins. Do you know why Pitch inserted that into the Farm Bill?”

“My Pitch?” She was surprised.

“As far as I can tell, yes,” Roger said. “It just seems so odd. Not that there isn’t an abundance of items utterly unrelated to agriculture in the Farm Bill. Three-quarters of the

expenditures in there have nothing whatever to do with farming. It's just that, of all the interests a senator from New Jersey could get behind, why this? Is he a coin enthusiast?"

"Only when it comes to enthusiastically spending them." Lady speculated that it was part of some political horse-trading.

"That would make sense," Roger agreed. "But trading what, and with and for whom?"

"How much money was involved?"

"One hundred and seventeen million dollars."

"That's a lot of money for a coin. Maybe I should start collecting."

"That's what I thought. Not about collecting. The conflicts of interest abound. About it being a lot of money."

Lady asked what the seigniorage was allocated for.

"Development and upkeep of a war memorial. That's the case with the profits in all the 'Freedom Thru Intelligence' commemoratives. This one's in the West Pacific."

"The West Pacific? I didn't even know there was such a thing as a West Pacific."

"Was Pitch ever in the service?"

"Pitch Farnum? In fatigues? Oh, Roger, you're a dear."

"That's a no?"

"Yes, that's a 'no.' "

The doorbell rang and Wepner erupted. It was the caterer coming to discuss party plans. Lady said she would need to spend some time with her.

“Of course.” Roger rose and buttoned his suit jacket. “Meanwhile, the Chinese continue to hoard our securities. I had better return to the vault before we’re cleaned out.”

“Never a dull moment!” Wepner dashed out the kitchen to the front door.

Lady thanked Roger for coming. She said he had his full support on the Fed nomination and that she would follow up on the coin business. Roger took his folders and followed her.

At the front door, he paused, unsure whether to shake her hand, air-peck her cheek, or offer a courtly bow. She was a Lady, after all. And where should his free hand go? On her shoulder? Hip? Elbow? Hang loosely at his own side? In his pants pocket? Or would that look like he was trying to conceal an erection that he didn’t have? The protocol was fraught. If only he had a legal pad.

Lady settled the matter. “Goodbye, Roger,” she said, planting her hands on his arms and lightly brushing her cheek against his. She opened the door and Roger and Michaela Amundson, the caterer, stepped out of each other’s way.

As Roger drove off, a TeamTech computer-service van pulls up the gravel drive and parks behind Michaela’s red Audi. It was a busy morning at the Farnums.

Lady led Michaela back to the kitchen. Lady always liked meeting with Michaela. She was young, cute, spry and unabashed and had a business-owner’s sense of client management. She had a humanizing little snaggletooth that Lady found adorable. And she knew her way around a pastry shell like nobody’s business.

“Who’s the prim dish?” Michaela asked.

“Always with the food with you.”

“It’s a living,” Michaela said, spreading her portfolio on the kitchen table but taking care not to disturb the index cards.

“Michaela, sweetie, do you mind if I make a quick call before we get started?”

“Of course, Mrs. Farnum.”

“Call me Lady.”

“Sorry, but ‘Lady’ is just too weird a name for me. Sounds like a Renaissance fair or something. Next thing you know, we’ll be hoisting steins of grog in the publick house and feeling up the wenches.”

Lady laughed. “Then how about you call me ‘dearie’ and I call you ‘sweetie’?”

“OK, hon.”

“Back in a jiff.”

“I’ll be here!” Michaela called back, watching Lady’s perfectly baked buns disappear around the corner. “Mm. What I wouldn’t do ...”

Upstairs, Lady closed the door and sat on the edge of her bed by the nightstand. She had two calls to make. She wasted no time getting to the first.

WHY WE MARRY

“Lady? Is that you?” Pitch asked when he picked up the phone in his hotel room. It was a few minutes to ten o’clock.

“Yes, dear. Good morning. Were you expecting someone else?”

Lady had booked a room at the Jefferson immediately after seeing the CheeseChump video. A comfortable room at the Jefferson was Pitch’s port in an emotional storm, and as Lady anticipated, he was in the midst of a typhoon now.

Lady had instructed Ricard Borell, the Jefferson’s head of Patron Privacy, that no newspapers or magazines were to be delivered to Pitch’s room and that no radio, television, cable, cell phone, WiFi or Internet service was to be available. There would be no bleating, blogging, ringing, pinging, dinging, donging, tweeting or twatting. Especially no twatting. Senator Farnum was to have no visitors but room service and no callers but Lady. And there should be a large bag of peanut M&Ms on the nightstand when he arrived.

“It’s good to hear your voice,” she said to Pitch.

“It’s good to be heard.” Pitch’s voice was a wan croak. He smoothed his hair with an unsteady palm.

“Pitch, dear, if you hear a knock at the door, it’s just room service. I placed an order half an hour ago, so it should be there any minute. Make sure you eat. You don’t want to get lightheaded.”

“OK.”

“Start with the coffee.” He nodded.

“And have the waiter pour you a glass of ice water, too. It’s important to stay hydrated.”

“K. Hold on. I’m thirsty right now.”

That was the Wellbutrin talking. Good.

He returned from the bathroom with a glass of water and used the Gideon’s for a coaster. Lady was a bear about water rings on furniture. Seeing the Bible reminded Pitch of a quote from *Acts*: “It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.” So true.

“Hi. I’m back. I’m using a coaster.” He heard Lady smile. He smiled back.

They ran through the preliminaries: How much they missed each other; how Lady wished Pitch would come home but that she understood he needed semi-seclusion with room service; that he, too, wanted to come home but was ashamed at having embarrassed Lady. Lady said she was a big girl and would take care of her own self-esteem.

“Still,” she said, “we’ll need to work on your impulse control.”

“OK.” Pitch paused. Lady could hear him take in a deep, fortifying breath.

“I—you know nothing happened with those people—women. I swear it.”

“I’m sure of it.” Suspicion that Pitch had strayed from his vows was the furthest thing from Lady’s mind. Pitch was weak in the self-control department, but not about faithfulness. In a million years, she knew, Pitch would never cheat on her. He wouldn’t cheat on anyone or in anything. Greed, lust, lechery, envy, wrath, pride—Pitch Farnum was immune to the vices of ordinary people and deeply loyal to those he loved. He was convivial to a fault and chronically tardy. But mostly, he wanted to have fun, to be liked, and to make friends. He could not bear to injure.

“Maybe I should just quit the Senate and go back home to New Jers—”

“Let’s not be rash, dear,” Lady cut in. She had a plan. Moving to Piscataway was not part of it.

“I don’t even know why he nominated me for this job. I don’t know anything about money supply or interest rates.”

“I think that’s precisely why he nominated you.”

“To control me?”

“That’s right. Because a four-bazillion-dollar budget isn’t enough for Viktor Horvath. He also wants to control the comptrollers and the M1.”

“Isn’t that a rifle?”

“It’s a category of money supply, dear.”

“M1, M16, M&Ms—why don’t they just call it ‘the money supply’ if that’s what they mean?” He looked at the open bag of candy on the nightstand. “I just want out.”

“No, Pitch,” she said. “That’s what people expect—that you’ll quit and make life easy for everyone else. But you’re *not* what people expect. And we’re going to prove it.”

“Meaning?”

“Pitch, dear, you remember that the Farm Bill came up recently, right?” Pitch nodded.

“Do you recall putting in some language that proceeds from a commemorative coin were to be used to pay for a war memorial on a Pacific island somewhere? The West Pacific? Does that sound familiar?”

There was a knock at the door. Room service. Pitch’s stomach soured at the thought of food other than peanut M&Ms. He thought he might puke. It was a helpful mnemonic.

“Pu’ukan,” he said.

“Are you feeling nauseous?”

“No, Pu’ukan is an island in the Pacific somewhere.”

Lady had never heard of it.

“Hold on a sec. I have to get the door.”

Good old Ricard, Lady thought.

The waiter set up the table and left with a substantial tip, which Lady had already taken care of. Pitch pulled the service table up to the edge of the bed. Lady told him to lift the lid on each tray to make sure they brought him the right items—small bowl of plain oatmeal, one slice of wheat toast with just a sheen of butter, one poached egg, weak coffee, ice water. There should be no juice. Too acidic.

It was all there, he said.

She returned to the Farm Bill. “Who asked you to put that language in? Do you recall?”

“Sure. Ray Jarecki.” He took a small bite of the toast. “Why?”

“Pitch, dear, finish your breakfast, then shower and pack up. I’ll be by at eleven thirty. Is that enough time?”

He looked at the clock next to the bed. “Plenty,” he said, chewing on his toast.

“You’re eating the toast?”

“Mm hm.”

“It’s wheat?”

“Mm hm.”

“I’d like to hear about your discussion with Ray Jarecki later, so try to remember.”

“OK.”

Lady hung up. First call down.

That was the easy one. The second call would not be so easy. She folded her hands in her lap and sat quietly. She let her eyes fall onto a thread of carpet glinting in a blade of sunlight coming through a slat in the blinds. This call would be either a stroke of genius, or a colossal blunder.

Oh, well. No point in playing it safe in unsafe times. She lifted the phone from the cradle and dialed. It rang. She waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

“Jesus Christ,” she said out loud. “Pick up the—”

“Yes?” the voice on the other end answered.

“—goddamn phone already.”

Not the best way to greet a cleric.

EYES ON THE PIES

It is not always easy to unpack the mystery of the Lord's will, or as Cole Charleston liked to put it, "to divine the Divine."

But sometimes it's a freakin' snap.

When the rotary phone rang in Cole Charleston's basement office in Manassas, Virginia—a damp grotto with carpet and paneling installed in the Carter administration—he jumped like a fish in a basket of loaves. For twenty minutes Cole had been drawing a blank for next week's "Cole Fired" commentary, and the blank page of yellow legal pad had been staring at him in rebuke. And mockery. And a sneer of contempt if he looked at it just right. As was his wont, Cole Charleston would stare right back at that goddamned motherfucking piece of Asian-milled crapass pulp until the lines melted and a theme for a commentary lit up his mind like a lump of burning coal.

Then the goddamned motherfucking phone rang and threw off the whole cunt-sucking enterprise before he could put pen to piss-yellow paper.

Cole pursed his fat lips and stabbed a glance at the water-stained ceiling, on the other side of which Lenore Charleston was clattering about upstairs with the ancient Hoover that she had refurbished once and repaired four times since buying it used eighteen years ago. The phone was *never* supposed to ring while Cole was working. He looked at his Timex. A few minutes after ten a.m. Lenore must have forgotten to switch off the ringer. Again. It was the second time in the past six months. In pique, Cole picked up the receiver and delivered as icy a greeting as man has ever dispensed over regulated wires.

“Yes,” he said.

“—goddamn phone already.”

“Excuse me?”

“Cole?”

“Yes, this is Cole Charleston.”

“It’s Lady, Cole.”

In the silence that followed, Cole Charleston forgot to breathe while his heart thumped inside his chest like a kettle drum.

“Cole?” Lady repeated. “Are you there? Hello?”

Cole pressed a palm over the receiver, drew a breath, and cleared his throat. He was hoping this little bit of activity would unfreeze his brain sufficient to answer the simple question put to him: “Is this Cole Charleston?”

“Yes. Yes, this is Cole Charleston.”

“It’s Lady, Cole,” she repeated.

It's Lady, Cole.

Just three words, but they carried a quarter-century of longing and regret that had been redirected ... elsewhere. It was the first time in twenty-five years that Cole Charleston had heard that voice. A quarter of a century since Cole Charleston and Elizabeth "Lady" Twetten had met, fallen in love, and crashed and burned on the campaign trail. Lady had gotten over it. Cole hadn't. Which made it a good thing that Lenore hadn't picked up the goddamn phone.

#

Lady's father, Polk Twetten, name partner at Haverford's Twetten Farnsworth Capital Management and national finance chairman of the Gil Hammon for President campaign, liked to invite rising collegiates to mix with the grownups at his backyard fundraisers. He always had his beautiful and excessively competent college-age daughter nearby. Not only could Lady brighten a gathering just by being there. Ever since her mother died, Lady made sure that her colorblind father's socks matched. She was performing that task on a glorious late-September afternoon as guests filled up the patio and pool area on the other side of the kitchen slider.

"What about these?" he asked, pulling up the cuffs of his weekend khakis to display a pair of argyle socks.

"Well, the colors match—all seventeen of them," she said. "But you really should think about moving to the center sartorially."

"After the election. I promise!" He flung open the slider and plunged into the crowd.

Lady scanned the congregation before diving in herself. Politics wasn't her thing. At all. If she needed a reminder, all she had to do was look to the far end of the pool to a clutch of next-generation one-percenters—the rising juniors whom her father had invited today. In all those blue blazers and polished loafers, they looked like the student council at Hogwarts. Ick. She wondered why twenty-year-olds were in such a hurry to be fifty-year-olds. She recognized a few from campus, including the one who sat behind her in her German film class. He wasn't especially handsome, and she could see the nylon sheen of his blazer from across the pool. But what he lacked in dash and style, he made up in self-confidence. She knew he was on a full-ride scholarship, and she admired his drive. She watched him sweep the group with his empty glass to see if anyone needed refills before he stepped to the bar at Lady's end of the patio.

“Coca-Cola,” young Cole Charleston instructed the bartender. Cole paid no attention when Lady slid up next to him as quiet as a breeze through a wheat field. He was anxious to get back to the conversation, especially since he noticed that Polk Twetten had just stopped by the group.

“Don't look now,” Lady said confidentially, “but I think I see Max Schreck by the Young Equity Club.”

He turned. “Pardon?”

“Max Schreck. You know, Count Orlok?”

Cole looked around the crowd. “There's a count here?”

“That’s a German Cinema joke, silly.” She poked his arm. “You know, ‘Nosferatu’? Graf Orlok? The shadow descending over Weimar?” She made bug eyes and waggled her fingers in creep show fashion.

Cole dropped a quarter into the tip glass and glanced over at Polk Twetten, who seemed to be introducing himself to everyone but him. “How do I know you?” he asked, torn between two orbs.

Lady turned her back to Cole and lifted a handful of hair to show the nape of her neck. “Look familiar?” she said over her shoulder.

“Ah! You’re the back of the skull that sits in front of me in that ridiculous film class. I recognize the birth mark. You usually wear your hair up.”

Lady spun back around and thrust out her hand. “Lady Twetten,” she said. “Damn glad to meet you.”

“Twetten? Of Twetten Farnsworth Capital Management?”

“Yes, but you can call me Ellen Harker. Come,” she said. “I’ll introduce you.”

She did, after which she and Cole spent the rest of the evening together. Even better, thanks to a good word from Polk Twetten, Cole spent the next two months working on the Hammon campaign as part of a “special duties team,” which involved such sensitive assignments as having thousands of dollars’ worth of halal meat delivered to the opposition’s campaign offices, and then tipping off local reporters to the food order.

Cole ate it up—not the halal, but the political work. A romance with Polk Twetten’s daughter was the cherry on top. Gil Hammon would win the election, and Cole

would get a White House job. By the end of the first term, he'd quit to join Twetten Farnsworth, and then marry Lady.

And all thanks to a glass of Coca-Cola and some German vampire flicks.

Unfortunately, Gil Hammon didn't get the memo. Or the votes. He got creamed at the polls. Cole took Hammon's loss harder than Gil Hammon did. He spent most of the next month staring at the wall opposite the couch in his apartment. Lady tried to console him, but he wasn't about to let some overprivileged bystander intrude on his paralyzing bummer. Her efforts to console—or at least reach—him only aroused his resentment until he all but chased her away with the scowl that would later become famous.

Lady called the next day and left a message. When Cole got around to returning the call—two weeks later—it was too late. Lady didn't pick up, so he left a message of his own. It would be twenty-five years before Lady would return the call.

Cole Charleston packed a lot of bottom-feeding into those two and a half decades. He went into political work full-time and made it to the White House as President Garth Houseman's domestic policy adviser, then flamed out in the *whoosh* of Chechibennigan. It was a *whoosh* mostly of Cole's own making since he was the one who had brought in Fat and Skinny from FC2, whose reelection strategy was to pick a fight with a Fourth World outhouse, beat the crap out of it, and coast to victory. Houseman endorsed the plan—"I like this!!!" he wrote on Cole's memo. Unfortunately, it didn't work out as planned.

Chechibennigan.

It should've been a cakewalk. An OGLE contract pilot on loan to Bird Rommel was to loft in from one of Fish's carriers, drop supplies for the anti-Khabubbala partisans, and head back to sea. The partisan brigade would get things going from the inside out. The rest would be a milk run. A slam dunk. Only no one had counted on Zubarb Khabubbala's slapdash air defense system getting a lucky hit on that contract pilot's plane as he came in low over the Bay of K, throwing off the whole operation at the outset and ripping off the pilot's leg in the process.

Cole ended up at the Federal Prison Camp in Duluth. It was a dreary, cold place. The one bright spot was the pot pie, which was served for eight out of every ten meals including breakfast. It was hot, salty, fatty and filling and could be eaten with a spoon—a simple pleasure in a gloomy Minnesota winter.

But it wasn't enough to nourish Cole Charleston's soul, which was a revelation given that Cole Charleston had been unaware that he even had a soul. His spiritual awakening almost knocked him off his feet. Standing on the chow line one frigid February morning, Cole stared at his laceless sneakers and tried to come up with five positive contributions he had made to the common weal in an adulthood ostensibly given to public service. The only one he could come up with was serving as an example of how not to live a life.

No question about it: Cole Charleston was a waste. A burr. A pricker in the garden of man.

A loser.

Not even worth a return call from his girlfriend.

“My God, Lady had me pegged twenty-five years ago. ... Jesus ... H. ... Christ.”

A hard shove on the back pushed him forward on the chow line.

“Hey Jesus H. Christ, you wanna move up so we can eat this slop in time to crap it out by lunch?” Prison had not yet exposed the undernourished soul of Henry J. Petraski, a former hospital executive convicted in a Medicaid swindle. Cole straightened himself up and shuffled ahead.

“There ya’ go,” Henry Petraski said, giving Cole another shove. “Eyes on the pies, asshole. Eyes on the pies.”

Cole reached the food server. Wet, heavy, dun-colored dollops of pot pie and broken pieces of pie crust were slopped onto his tin plate. Cole’s wrists were too limp from the discovery of his inner emptiness to hang on to his tray, and he dropped it. He stepped off the chow line without permission and told the nearest screw to put him in solitary confinement.

“Hole me,” he said.

In his Solitary Enforcement Cube, he didn’t eat, he didn’t read, he didn’t talk to himself, he didn’t pace and he didn’t count the ridges in the cinder-block walls. He didn’t even bother to turn on the lights or the T.V. or log on to the PC bolted into the steel SEC desk. He merely stood, or sat, or kneeled, or squatted, and confronted his empty vessel. By the end of the day, he had come to the only rational conclusion: he had been born empty for a purpose, which purpose was that his vessel should be filled with cargo for Christ, christened, and sent forth to unload the Word upon the world.

He was standing right there, in the doorway of his SEC, trim and erect, when it opened the next morning and light from the corridor splashed onto his pasty face.

“I am ready,” he told the screw.

“Ready for what, shitwad?” The screw butted Cole in the pelvis with a nightstick.

“And step the fuck back from the door or I’ll brain you, you fuck.”

“I understand. And I forgive you.” He made the sign of the cross on the screw.

“Oh look at this. Another one goes to Jesus after just one night in the hole. Halfa you shitwads come to Christ in the hole. The other half end up eating their own jizz. After one day!” He poked his head into the cube for a quick look around. But it was immaculate inside. No jizz anywhere. No feces smeared across the wall. Even the computer looked untouched.

A month later, Cole was out on parole. And that’s when the reformed Cole Charleston became an even greater public nuisance than when he worked in the White House.

Reformation of the fallen powerful became Cole Charleston’s cause. Those three long months in Duluth had seemed like three years. My God, some men actually get that much time! No man, Cole believed, should have to suffer the indignities of three *weeks* in prison, let alone three months or three years. The language alone was dehumanizing” “Hole,” “SEC,” “slop,” “screw,” “shitwad,” “jizz”—it was the lexicon of humiliation.

Cole hated the idioms, but he insisted on using them until the entire “corrections” system—he always spoke it with air quotes—was itself corrected and focused not on subjugation, but on grace. If he could bring back the fallen and despised servants of the

people—the public officials who had violated their oaths of office and fleeced and fucked the public—it would be like rehabilitating the Fallen Angel himself.

On the day of his release, Cole stood on the free side of the prison gate, a tattered canvas bag at his feet, to conduct a press conference announcing the formation of his vehicle for working God's will: Bring Them Back Ministries. BiTBiM for short.

“These shitwads are the discarded men, disregarded and forgotten,” he proclaimed. His face and frame were thin, but his voice was strong and steady and as slashing as ever. “They are the friendless, the reviled, the hollow men who are held in greater contempt than even the Capitol Hill escort. The escort, after all, can at least sell her story to the blogs. Who wants to read the story of a shitwad?”

“It is,” he concluded, “nothing but a big motherfucking assburn. But as of this day, the shitwads come under the embrace of BiTBiM. That is all. No questions.”

No one knew exactly what he was talking about. Of the three local media who showed up at the gate, two—a reporter and a photographer—were there for a feature story on the prison handball team, which had just made it to the finals of the Upper Midwest Corrections League. None had a hand raised to ask a question.

Cole built BiTBiM from scratch. He recruited from the endless stream of convicted public officials from all levels of government—local, school district, county, state, regional, federal, and independent and semiautonomous regulatory authorities. They were managers, supervisors, executives and rank and file. When it came to shitwads, Cole plucked low-hanging fruit in a land of plenty of low-hanging fruit.

Within two years, BiTBiM was *the* place to be in public corruption. As-yet unimpugned public officials viewed their BiTBiM donations as insurance premiums, just in case. Versions of Cole's beat-up old canvass bag, affectionately rechristened "Cole sack," became ubiquitous. On the street, in the airport, at the bus station, in congressional hallways and capitol buildings across the country, you could tell someone was in or for BiTBiM by the Cole sack they carried. It was a killer brand.

Cole became a pillar of the Political/Clerical Complex. It wasn't long before he got his own radio program. His "Cole Fired" commentaries were like Christian fatwas, declamatory gems delivered with such passion, certainty and precision that even the looniest of notions—like blessing the money supply as it left the Mint—sounded like good ideas. Cole often said that Duluth was the best thing that ever happened to him. It put him in the SEC, and shat him out cleansed, fit and fired up. "Thank God for that," he often said. "Prison freed me. The SEC was the most liberating motherfucking assburn of my life. And it could do the same for so many others."

It could have done the same for Garth Houseman. But Senator Viktor Horvath's Chechibennigan investigation, which sent Cole to prison, killed Houseman before Cole could flip him. How sweet it would be to finally bring a president into BiTBiM.

A BELLYRUB FOR WEPNER

“Cole?” the voice on the phone repeated. “It’s Lady.”

“Lady Tw—Farnum?”

“Now Cole, how many ‘Ladys’ do you know?”

Good question. Not many. He glanced at the yellow pad. It was as astonished as he was. And as speechless.

Twenty-five years! Jesus Mary non-fucking mother of Christ.

“Hello, Lady,” Cole finally replied in his affectless phone voice. “How are you.”

“I’m fine, Cole! Fine! How are you? How—have you *been*? I believe I still owe you a callback.”

Cole suppressed a wince. “I put my faith in the Lord, and He takes care of the rest.”

Lady rolled her eyes. “So I gather! I’ve been listening to your commentaries. They’re—enrapturing. I never *realized* that interest rates were so closely tied to the

Gospels! I find that *very* reassuring.” How odd a thing to have had sex with a future cleric. She couldn’t help but wonder if she had had anything to do with his change of heart.

“You shouldn’t mock the Lord, Lady.”

“This is true. This is true.” She expected him to start in with the cuss words any second: ram this, piss that, shitwad the other. She was right.

“How are you, Lady? I know you must be going through some shitass bad times right now given everything that’s been happening. That’s a big motherfucking assburn you’ve been branded with.”

“Oh, this shit, too, shall pass, I suppose.”

“That’s true,” Cole said. “Even assburns heal with the right salve.”

“All part of the dance of life.”

“A bit existential for my tastes, but thoughtful nonetheless.” The image flashed through his head: I have fornicated with this woman. His molars pulsed. That hadn’t happened in twenty-five years.

Lenore Charleston swept into Cole’s office, a look of panic on her face. She realized she had forgotten to turn off the telephone ringer, and had compounded her error by not intercepting the call when it came in. She twisted her face into a craven apology. Cole fixed his eyes on Lenore but continued talking to Lady on the phone. It was a cruel habit. Dispirited, Lenore shuffled out of the office and quietly shut the door.

“You’re lucky to have found such a sense of spirituality,” Lady said.

“Luck is a secularist construct, a superstition, a crutch.”

“True dat, too,” she said. “Um, anyway, Cole, that’s kind of what I’m calling about—the, uh, motherfucking assburn business.” It was such a distasteful term. What did it even mean? Something bad, of course. “I thought—I was hoping—that you could help us. Could help Pitch. He’s hurting, Cole. A great deal. And he’s in need of guidance. From the, uh, ahem, Lord. Can you help?”

She wants me to help her deadbeat, shallow, idiot pagan lustful slothful gluttonous brainless fornicating husband who has shamed himself, his wife and his constituents and exposed this doomed nation’s pretension of self-rule as an abnegation of God’s grace and shown it to be a lousy way to govern.

What an opportunity!

“He’s been treated very shabbily by the president,” Cole affirmed, “but I suppose that’s SOP over there with that shitwad-in-waiting farting on the seat of power.”

“Well put! I knew you’d understand.” The hard part was over. “He’s been rammed, Cole. Assburned.” Lady glanced at the door. Thank God it was closed and no one could hear. They’d think she was moonlighting on a sex line. “If anyone could help in a scrap with Viktor Horvath—”

“Of course I’ll help.”

“God bless you, Cole.”

Cole asked what Lady had in mind. They traded some thoughts and arranged to speak later, then hung up. Cole stared at the wall for a long moment—another old habit.

“Prospect?” Lenore had poked her head back in. “Shall I enter it into the system?” She was anxious to make amends.

“No. No that’s fine. I’ll take care of this one.” He jotted a name down on the notepad: “Fish Rommel.”

At Plumage Oaks, Lady felt an ungodly sense of relief. No question about it: Beneath that faux clerical collar and across the passage of time, Cole Charleston still had a stiffy for her. Thank God for that.

She called Pitch. “Pitch, dear. Do you remember when we first met? In my office my last day in the Senate?”

“Like it was yesterday. Remember ‘Batteries!’?”

Lady chuckled. “I thought I was going to get electrocuted.”

“Me, too.”

“*Now* you tell me!” Wepner scratched at the carpet by her feet. He was bored. “I went to turn the music off because you didn’t like it.”

“How could anyone enjoy something called ‘the blues’? Who wants to be depressed?”

“Remember you said that someone else was a big fan of the blues, or becoming a big fan of the blues? For some reason I’m thinking about that. Do you remember who it was?”

“Zubarb Khabubbala,” Pitch said, without losing a beat.

“Zubarb Khabubbala? The ‘Tinpot Despot’? Are you sure?”

“I told you: I remember that day like it was yesterday. Everything about it.” She smiled. Wepner rolled over for a belly rub. She scratched him with a foot.

“How did you know that? About Zubarb Khabubbala?”

“Viktor Horvath mentioned it in the cloakroom one day when he was still in the Senate. Before Houseman invaded, or tried to invade.” Pitch slid the poached egg onto a slice of toast and bit into it. He held another piece of toast under his chin to catch any yolky runoff. “And not just music. He said Khabubbala liked lots of American stuff. Popcorn, Calvin King, sushi, litigation—the works.”

“Viktor Horvath? That’s odd. How would he know that about Zubarb Khabubbala? Who had even heard of him yet?”

“Intelligence reports, I assume.”

She heard coffee pour, and more toast scraping and grew concerned. “How much toast did they give you?”

THE ROMEO FIRM KING

Tish Swing threw herself onto the mattress in the Bed Boys showroom and fanned her arms and legs as if she were making a snow angel.

“Now *this* is a mattress!” She stretched her arms out to Roger and bid him have her, right there in a retail setting. “Come hither and take me, you hot, hunky economist.”

Instead of her lover coming hither, a part of the Farm Bill came hurtling at Tish like a bureaucratic cannonball. It bounced off the bony point of her hip.

“Ow!”

“Take a look,” Roger said.

“Take a look at my bruise,” Tish said, pushing her jeans down an inch to examine the injury. “I don’t think a domestic abuse rap is gonna help your career.”

“Neither would a public indecency charge,” he said, pointing to Tish’s exposed flesh. “It’s the Farm Bill. Tell me what you think.”

“I think you need to leave your work at home for once. We’re shopping for lumbar lifts, not price supports.”

Roger grinned. “That’s not bad,” he said, wagging an impressed finger.

“No, but you are, throwing legislation at me like that.”

Roger did not have the shopping gene—a curious flaw for the steward of the world’s largest consumer economy—and shopping made him antsy. Tish did like to shop, but as Roger knew, she loved official documentation even better and couldn’t resist a good bureaucratic whodunit. Throw an appendix her way and she was off and reading.

“Go to Title Six, Subtitle A et seq. The fluorescent orange sticky note.”

“Title Six, Subtitle A,” Tish repeated, searching for the place. “Ah! Orange sticky. Here we go.”

She opened to the page and pressed the binding flat. “I see two sentences. It appears that one of them is a page long.” She appealed for relief but was denied.

“Read,” Roger said. “Please. Aloud.”

She took a deep, preparatory breath ... and read aloud:

Section 603(d)(2) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act (9 U.S.C. 2112(a)(1)) is amended by inserting after the first sentence the following: “The Secretary may also make or insure loans to communities that have been designated as rural empowerment zones or rural enterprise communities pursuant to part IV of subchapter T of chapter 2 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, or as rural enterprise communities pursuant to section 675 of the Agriculture, Rural

Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1999 (Public Law 105–277; 112 Stat. 2681, 2681–37), to provide for the installation or improvement of essential community facilities including necessary related equipment, and to furnish financial assistance or other aid in planning projects for such purposes.

Done, Tish gulped for air. “Now I’m dizzy.”

“So whaddaya think?”

The Swings swung their heads. It was bedding salesman Doug Vijarian, according to his name badge, come to check on how this rising D.C. power couple was digging the Romeo Firm king mattress and box spring with the Watson double-overtuck frame flange. “It’s quite popular with young couples.” He winked at Tish.

Ick.

“We’re still looking, but thanks,” Roger said. “We’ll let you know.”

“Roger that,” Doug Vijarian said. “Take your time. Any questions, the name’s Doug,” he said, pointing to the name badge on his chest.

“What an idiot,” Tish said when Doug was out of range. “I’m surprised he can even read his name tag.”

“Roger that.”

Tish returned to the Farm Bill. “So where was I?”

“You left out one sentence, and it’s an important one. Here,” Roger said, pointing to the page.

Tish read aloud again: “See Section 612(a)(2)(c.3).’ Well that certainly puts the whole caboodle into context.” She went in search of Section 612.

“Yellow sticky.”

“Got it.” Tish read:

As per Section 603(d)(2) herein, the Secretary of Agriculture shall consult with the Secretary of the Treasury as to the identification of essential community facilities suitable for installation or improvement insofar as said facilities are situated as defined elsewhere in this Act. See Section 7133(b)(4)(e.2).

She looked up and raised one eyebrow interrogatively. It was a skill.

“Neon green sticky,” Roger said. Tish found the marker and read: “See 36 USC Chapter 21, Sections—”

Roger plopped his briefcase on the bed and withdrew a new document, 36 USC Chapter 21—no slouch at 30 pages, but a relative wafer vis à vis the Farm Bill. He handed it to Tish. He reached over and turned the bedside lamp on, then climbed onto the mattress beside his wife.

“I’m getting the impression from this that somebody doesn’t want someone to know something,” Tish said.

“I’m inclined to agree.”

Tish took up 36 USC Chapter 21 – American Battle Monuments Commission. Title 36 – Patriotic and National Observances, Ceremonies, Organizations and Facilities, and its references, citations, antecedents and progeny as instructed. Over the next four minutes, she learned that Congress had authorized that, upon the consent of the Secretary

of Veterans Affairs, the Battle Monuments Commission may design, build, finance and maintain works of architecture and art in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific; that Section 2104 of USC 21 herein expanded the scope of Section 2107 in re: National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific to include a location at or between Latitude 19.04 South and Longitude 169.55 West; and that Section 2114 substituted the Secretary of Veterans Affairs with the Director of the United States Mint insofar as Section 2104 is concerned and that the Director of the United States Mint shall stand in place of the Secretary of Agriculture insofar as this provision is concerned; and that the provision(s) herein shall be implemented under the authority of the Director of the United States Mint, and that this Section shall be funded initially and progressively through Section 603(d)(2) of 9 USC 2112(a)(1)), as necessary as determined by the Director of the United States Mint.

“Where is this Latitude 19.04 South and Longitude 169.55 West?” she asked.

“Haven’t a clue, but I can tell you where our warehouse is.” It was Doug Vijarian, checking in again. “Close enough to here so that we can get this creampuff out there to your place by COB Friday.”

“COB?” Roger asked.

“Close of business,” Doug said. “Business term.”

“You’ll have to forgive my husband,” Tish said. “Knows nothing about the retail economy.”

“No prob!” Doug said. “Retail is a world unto itself, lemme tell you. *Lots* of different factors can affect consumer behavior.”

All Doug wanted to do, he said, was to put people together with the bedding products that best suited their needs and budgets, even if the margin was razor thin, as with the Romeo king. “Bed Boys is like that. It’s about the customer, not the cash.”

Roger occupied himself inside his briefcase. He knew Tish was going to take Doug down, and he didn’t want to be part of it, not even as a witness.

“Do you have, like, a private room where couples can test out the play on these things?” Tish asked Doug Vivarian, shimmying and bouncing her butt against the mattress. “You know,” she said, arching her eyebrows and making a circle with the thumb and forefinger of one hand and sliding two fingers of the other in and out, “to see if it works for us?” She winked.

“Hoa!” Doug ejaculated. “That’s a good idea! But not even Bed Boys has gone *that* far yet!”

Tish looked disappointed. She said they’d take this one anyway. Doug said that was great and hustled off to write up the ticket and, no doubt, tell the gang in the breakroom what had just happened with the couple over on the Romeo Firm. Roger emerged from his briefcase with a world atlas and handed it to Tish.

“I think you’ve just made Bed Boys history,” he said.

Tish took the atlas. A neon pink sticky marked a page in the middle, and another marked a spot on the page next to Latitude 19.04 South and Longitude 169.55 West.

“Puh-oo-h-can,” she said, over-pronouncing the unfamiliar name. “What’s a Puhoo-h-can’? Sounds like one of Don’s Johns.”

“Dependent Territory of Pu’ukan. Home island of the, uh, Pu’ukan Archipelago,

in the West Pacific.”

“There’s a *West* Pacific?”

“Go figure.”

“I’ve never heard of—the Pu’ukan Archipelago?”

He reached over and put his finger on a speck near the crease of the atlas. “It’s right there, by the Macrominia Water Shelf.”

“What’s a Water Shelf?”

“By way of background,” Roger explained, “the Battlefield Monument Commission is charged with designing, building and maintaining military cemeteries and such, both here and abroad. There happens to be one on Pu’ukan.”

“Yeah, but—”

“The commission is funded from the proceeds of commemorative-coin sales. JFK, Susan B. Anthony, Sacajawea. And now Crazy Chess Boresby.” He pointed to the brochure.

“I thought it was ‘Crazy Checkers.’ ”

“No. It’s Chess. Checkers was Churchill’s country estate. And Nixon’s dog.”

“Didn’t he steal the dog?”

“It was a gift.”

“Right.” Tish scanned the brochure. Nice colors, lousy writing, boring topic, obvious sales job. She handed it back. “So why do you want to honor this guy with a coin?”

“I don’t.”

“But you did.”

“*I* did not.”

“*Somebody* did.” She tossed the brochure aside and stepped off the mattress.

“Where are you going?”

“I want to check some of these other beds.”

“I thought we told Doug to wrap this one up.” He scooped up the Farm Bill, the atlas and the brochure and placed them back into his briefcase and followed, carrying the open attaché from the bottom like a serving platter.

“I just I want to see about the Remington. To make sure.”

“The what?”

“The Remington,” she called out.

Tish fell onto the Remington and rolled back and forth, like a dog scratching its back. Roger sat on the edge of the Remington, briefcase open on his lap.

“That’s just the thing,” he said. “I can’t figure out who wants to honor Chessler Boresby. And aren’t spies supposed to work in the shadows? Who would want to put a spy on public currency?”

“I guess the spies would,” Tish said, still luxuriating in her back scratching.

“Actually they don’t. I asked Bundy and he said that—”

Tish froze mid-scratch on the word “Bundy,” then sat bolt upright and slammed Roger’s briefcase shut.

“You asked whom?”

Oops. “Oh! Didn’t I tell you I met with Bundy?” He reopened his briefcase and pretended to look inside for something.

“Lemme think. I’m done thinking. No, you didn’t tell me. When was this?”

“We had lunch the other day. I told you, didn’t I?”

“Uh, no.”

“He called a few days ago. For lunch. So we met. For lunch. That’s all. Now this Pu’ukan—”

She stared at him, incredulous. “God, Roger. God!”

“He’s my brother, Tish! He’s—family.”

“I won’t even dignify that with an insult, although even your father says he’s a walking shit sandwich. Where did you meet? Not in the District, I hope.”

“Nooo. Do you think I’d be that indiscreet?” Tish

said nothing. Which said plenty.

“Reston,” he finally said. “At one of those suburban franchise places. McFriday’s or MacSwinton’s or something.”

“McSwaney’s.”

“McSwaney’s. Right. You should see the enormity of their sandwiches.”

“I hope you didn’t eat the food. We’re suing them. Go on.”

Roger reported the highlights of the lunch—the coin, REANAL, the offer of a prosthesis, Bundy’s foreknowledge of the president’s press conference.

“So that’s where you learned about the Farm Bill.” Roger nodded. “How did

Bundy know about the coin before you did?”

“He’s a spy. It’s what they do.”

“That’s hardly an explanation. And the Mint is in *your* org chart. Besides, he’s a *former* spy, and he was terrible at it.”

Roger sighed. Tish sighed. Roger folded back an inside page of the coin brochure and handed it back to Tish. He told her to look closely at the illustration of the new coin.

“You see that plane?”

“I see a misspelling of ‘Through,’ but other than that, I don’t know what I’m supposed to be looking at.” She thrust the brochure back at Roger. “This is all a little too cloak and dagg—” She cut herself off, then yanked the brochure back.

“Gimme that thing.” She studied it another moment until Roger could tell, by the way her jaw dropped, that Tish understood.

“No way!”

“Way. Very much way.”

“This is Bundy?”

Roger nodded.

Tish studied the illustration for a few more seconds. What she saw was her husband getting swept into a cascading pool of sludge featuring two of the planet’s most reckless creatures: her brother-in-law and the president of the United States.

“The mind reels,” she said.

“Indeed.”

Across the showroom, Doug Vijarian was preparing the invoice for the Romeo

Firm king, shaking his head in wonder. “What a crazy business we’re in,” he thought.

Back on the sales floor, Tish focused on the facts. “OK, then, how much public money has been appropriated, allocated or otherwise made available in the current fiscal year for said improvements to the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, situated at Latitude 19.04 South and Longitude 169.55 West?”

“One hundred and seventeen million dollars.”

“A hundred and seventeen million dollars? That must be some boneyard way out in the middle of nowhere. Now, when you discussed the coin with Ray Jarecki, what did he say?”

“He wanted to know where I got my sickly green pallor and if it were contagious.”

“And what did you say?”

“I said that it was probably from the Riverboat Gambler I had eaten for lunch. That pleased him.”

“You ate the food there. Unbelievable.” She shook her head. “Why would your indigestion please Ray Jarecki, other than the fact that sociopaths enjoy the suffering of others?”

“Because a little indigestion as opposed to, say, fast-moving pancreatic cancer wouldn’t complicate my being nominated chairman of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors.”

“Get the *fuck* out of here.”

“It’s true,” Roger replied.

“How the hell about that,” she said. “My husband: Son of a New Jersey cop, and now chairman of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors of the United States of America.”

“Top banker in the world. Right here in a Bed Boys showroom.”

Tish flung her arms around Roger’s neck and pulled him onto the Remington.

“Doug?” she called out. “We’re gonna need a quart of Chinese mustard with that mattress!”

PLATTER UP!

“Sideboy!” Admiral Vaughn Rommel bellowed into the pitch and roll of the St. Pearl’s Church kitchen. For a fraction of a second, Fish Rommel was back in the wheelhouse of a nuclear-powered behemoth of the waves, where when you bellowed commands, seamen toed the line in short order. Only now, the cashiered former admiral was not on the deck of a battle cruiser bristling with satellite-guided ordnance, but at the short-order grill of a St. Pearl’s Sunday morning flapjack breakfast.

St. Pearl’s held pancake breakfasts and potluck suppers with such frequency that a hematologist in the congregation warned of rising cholesterol counts among the flock. Just two days ago, there was a Bring Your Own Bacon-and-Butter-Sandwich Lunch for the stay-at-home moms. But Fish Rommel was on board with whatever materiel the order of battle called for.

“More butter, boy! Double time! Or I’ll be the last sight you see on this earth.”

Rommel was a good man to have in a fight, but he could be a bit intense in the kitchen. He didn’t cook breakfast so much as pound the crap out of it. Now, with his

prized cast iron spatula, custom forged at Vladivostok on a port call a dozen years ago, he pressed the life out of a flotilla of pork patties, spraying sizzling grease pellets in all directions. The delinquent sideboy finally came portside with a tub of butter and stepped right into a burst of greasy grapeshot.

“Ow!” he cried, and dropped the butter tub onto the floor.

“Dammit it to hell, boy! I’ll give you something to ‘ow’ about!” Rommel taunted the youth, poking him in the shoulder with the working edge of his cooking tool. “Now pick up that butter and run this chow plate out to the mess deck,” he said, pointing to a platter of flapjacks.

The boy stayed put. He rubbed his shoulder with one hand and the burn wounds on his neck with the other, a hurt look on his face. He hated church. Fish poked him in the shoulder again, and again and again.

“I can do this all day,” he said. The boy stifled a snuffle and reached, glumly, for the groaning chow platter. Fish poked him once more in the back to hurry him along.

Cole Charleston watched from a few feet away. He shook his head. He just hated to see fathers treat their sons so roughly.

So did Fish’s wife. “I’ll take that,” Crickett Rommel said, relieving her son of the heavy plate. She gave her husband the stink eye. “Come, Nelson. Your father’s refighting the last war again. And he’s going to lose again, too.”

“He’s just standing there!”

“Stop cooking bacon with butter!” Crickett, the hematologist, shot back. “You’re killing off the congregation!” She turned to Cole. “Tell him, father. Tell him he’s killing off the congregation. You’re killing off the congregation!”

Ordinarily, Cole would have intervened. But there was no easy way with these two. If you sided with Fish, Crickett would slug you. She had done it once before, and it hurt like a cocksucker from hell. If you took Crickett’s side, Fish would tap your phone, read your e-mail and ruin your life. The director of the Office of Global Listening and Eavesdropping could do that. He was supposed to do that.

But the real reason Cole treaded lightly was that Vaughn Rommel could be a very big fish for BiTBiM. Fish hadn’t yet bought in to the whole Jesus program, and Charleston knew that the wrong tack now could sink his prospects. If the cost of reeling Rommel in was a bit of low-level domestic abuse, then young Nelson Rommel would have to take one for the team. Hadn’t Jesus taken one for His team?

Still, getting Rommel on board with BiTBiM was going to be rough seas. A prospect, Cole knew, had to be at least minimally motivated to take the vow. Even if the avowal was transparently insincere and self-interested, which was often the case with recruits, at least the willingness to deceive said, “I care enough to lie.”

But Cole wasn’t sure Fish Rommel cared enough about anything to lie about it. He had lost interest in many things after that desperate day over the Bay of Kuushtaarrgg, which destroyed his military career in one of the most improbable engagements in naval history.

After his release from prison, Rommel lubbered about on dry land for a while, ruminating over the defeat and that young pilot's lost leg. That missing leg haunted him. For months, it followed him wherever he went. It limped in front of him, it shuffled behind him, it hopped alongside him like some disembodied circus-freak nightmare. What in hell had happened out there over the Bay of K? Bundy Swing was supposed to loft in from one of Fish's floating airfields beyond the harbor, make his drop, bank out, and head back to the tub from which he had come.

But Khabubbala was waiting for him. How did he know exactly when and where Swing would be? How did he *know*?

Someone must have leaked details of the battle plan. But who? The plan was known only to President Houseman, the Joint Chiefs and Rommel—and oh yes, Senator Viktor Karl Horvath, chairman of the Permanent Select Committee on Off-the-Books Foreign Campaigns and Black Bag Operations. If Bundy Swing's blown-off leg followed Fish everywhere, so, too, did the suspicion that Viktor Horvath had tipped off the enemy and betrayed his nation. The impression grew stronger after Horvath rode his subsequent Chechibennigan investigation all the way to the White House.

Where do you draw the line between politics and treason?

It could have gone worse for Fish Rommel. In some quarters, he was seen as a victim of political duplicity and became a cause célèbre. He was offered a radio talk show, but turned it down. And then came the unthinkable: President-Elect Horvath tapped Rommel, the admiral he had allegedly stabbed in the back, to head the Office of

Global Listening & Eavesdropping. Ray Jarecki said that installing Fish Rommel to head OGLE was either a stroke of genius—Nixon goes to China—or a monumentally brainless thing to do. History would be the decider.

Cole poured himself a mug of tea from a kettle on the church stove. “You know, Vaughn, we run a pretty good couples workshop downstairs Tuesday nights. Maybe you and Crickett could stop by. Learn some conflict-management techniques. Awful fucking effective.”

“Deacon, that broad could freeze the balls off a brass monkey,” Rommel said, scraping hard at the griddle to clear lanes for the next fleet of flapjacks.

Funny, Cole thought, how Rommel could master the ranking systems of four branches of the United States military and yet be so lost when it came to clerical titles.

Fish dumped some cooked pork patties onto a platter already overloaded with pancakes and a ragged mountain of home fries. Cole shifted the conversation to a subject they had discussed earlier: Pitch Farnum’s fitness for BiTBiM.

“Any thoughts on that?” Cole sipped his tea.

“Beats the hell outta me, pastor. You have more faith in the man than I do, although I suppose you have to in your line of work. Platter up!” he bellowed. “Hardly seems worth the warm embrace of the ministry, though. Let alone the effort involved.”

“Pitch Farnum’s been through hell, Vaughn. Deeply assburned.”

“You should’ve been in the Navy with that mouth, vicar.”

“Occupational hazard of the SEC. But if it offends—”

“Oh Christ, no. I hear worse at home.” Fish leveled his mixing fork in Crickett’s direction. “Fucking potty mouth on that one. Platter up, I said! Platter up!”

Crickett swung by and swept up the loaded tray. “He’s killing off the congregation!” she hissed to Cole.

Cole waited for Crickett to leave before continuing. “All I’m saying, Vaughn, is that maybe Pitch Farnum deserves our help. Think about it.”

“The man couldn’t pour piss out of a boot if the instructions were written on the heel,” Fish said, mixing batter with a fork. “He’s an idiot.”

The sound of the fork scraping against the bowl was starting to grate on Cole. He was *this* close to telling Fish to use the goddamn wire whisk that was right fucking next to him.

“Why they picked him for Fed, I’ll never know,” Fish continued. “They operate in mysterious ways in the political world, Cole. Just look at the White House. I don’t understand the half of it. And I’m in it.”

“Now, admiral, that’s no way to talk about your commander-in-chief,” Cole said with a wry smile.

Fish didn’t want to think about this stuff today. He wanted to make his pancakes and pig patties, feed the crew out in the mess hall, and go home to watch football. But Cole knew how to stare at you in silence until you started flapping your jaw.

“You know as well as I do that *someone* had to have tipped off old Zubarb,” Rommel said after a moment. “Someone who wanted that mission to fail. Someone who could turn his country’s failure to his own benefit. Someone with access to the

intelligence. ... Now who could that be, reverend?"

It was a rhetorical question. Fish had been through it a thousand times in his mind, but it always turned out that if you walked a cat backward and then ran it up the flagpole, sometimes a cigar really wasn't a cigar worth saluting. And that if you walked *this* cat backward, the smoking ember at the end of the litter box was ...

"Viktor Karl Horvath," Rommel said, pronouncing each word like a curse. "And one day, cardinal, I'm going to prove it. And then I'm going to lay that boy's leg at his feet."

"One day I'm going to give you a chart of clerical nomenclature."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. The point is, Bring Them Back is all about disgrace, humility, restoration. If ever a man was disgraced, humbled and in need of restoration, it's Willburr Farnum. He's been fucked up the brown canal, Vaughn. By Viktor Horvath. We both know it."

Fish flattened a patty with his Vladivostok spatula. Bullets of grease popped into the flesh of his neck and forearms, but he didn't flinch. The aroma of breakfast meat hung between the two men like myrrh.

Rommel turned contemplative. "You know, Cole, I go to those White House meetings and I mostly just sit back and listen. Let someone else pipe up, object or make the decision. Or show off how fucking smart he is. I keep to myself. Silence adds to the mystique. But really it's because I don't have the heart for the game. I'm under no illusion that I'm in the OGLE job because Viktor Horvath thinks I'm the best man for it.

Hell, signals work bores the chum out of me. He put me in there to shut me up.”

Cole said nothing.

“But I read things and I hear things. We get stuff from all over. And not all of it from faraway countries. Some of it’s close to home. Real close to home.”

“Maybe you are in the right place, Vaughn,” Cole said, quietly. “You just haven’t realized it yet.”

“Probably not a good thing for the OGLE director to be chattering on about.”

“You’re familiar with the priest-penitent privilege?”

“Sure. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

“That’s a holy bond. Not even a federal court can pierce that veil. For someone with a heavy heart—or important information—it’s a safe harbor.”

Fish had been to the Oval Office a few times and had seen those satellite photos on the wall—the time-lapse shots of that shitass little island out there in the West Pacific. What was Viktor Horvath interested in out there? Griddle grease crackled, battered and bubbled, the rims of sizzling discs of Canadian bacon curled upward. That little spit of sand in WesPac could have been a good battle base if we had just kept it. Why did the government sell off the development rights to a bunch of corporate zombies? Something was rotten as hell in Pu’ukan.

“What do you read, Vaughn?” Cole asked. “What do you hear?”

Fish slid a dozen pork discs onto a serving platter and turned to Cole. “I’d like to go to confession, father.”

“I’m not a Catholic priest, Vaughn. I don’t do confession.”

“Work with me, vicar.”

Cole put his reverend hand on Fish’s shoulder and cleared his throat. “Ahem. I’ll hear your confession now. My son.”

“Jesus Christ, abbot, not here,” Fish said, looking around anxiously. “This is classified shit we’re talking about.”

AN INJUN AND A PESKY BROAD

Fish followed Cole down to the church basement and into a preschool classroom redolent of edible paste and finger paint. They squeezed their grownup kiesters into kiddie chairs. Fish picked up where they had left off.

“The sat-photos—satellite photos—are of a place called Pu’ukan.” He scratched flecks of dried pancake batter from the hairs on his knuckles and wrists.

“Poo-can? I’ve never heard of it.”

“You’re not alone. It’s in Nowheresville in the Nowheresville of the WesPac. Between Rarotonga and Tinian. And technically it’s pronounced Puh-OO-can.”

“Tinian,” Cole said. “That’s where they kept the A-bombs before we dropped them on the Japs.”

“That’s right. Sort of. Then you’ve heard of Chess Boresby?”

“Of course. Office of Strategic Services. CIA progenitor.”

“Give a spook five minutes and he’ll get around to Chessler Charles Boresby and how he’s the greatest thing since poison-tipped umbrellas. Especially the retirees. Your REANAL types and such. They love the legend. And of course, Pu’ukan is holy ground since Boresby spent so much time there in and after the war. They’d turn the whole place into a shrine if they could. Drives them nuts and a half that he’s never been ‘suitably honored.’ ”

“Didn’t they just put him on a coin? I remember seeing something about that on the news.”

“Mm hm.” Fish flicked a flake of crust batter across the floor. Cole pretended not to notice.

“That should make them happy—their hero on a coin.”

“Ha! That puts him right up there was Sacagawea and Susan B. Anthony,” Fish said. “An injun and a pesky broad.” He shook his head.

“They want more, then.”

“You ever go to a coin collectors’ convention, father? Buncha pocket protectors flashing each other the Star Trek sign.” Fish put the back of his hand under his chin and wiggled his fingers. “Beep, beep, beep! I am Thoron from Borax!” he said in a robotic voice. “Not exactly how they see themselves. I don’t blame them.”

“Oh?”

“Putting Chess Boresby on a coin’s an embarrassment. I mean, these are people who’d kill their own children if deep cover required it, and they’re supposed to be impressed by a wooden nickel that gets peddled on late-night cable? I don’t think so.”

“I see.”

“Plus, on the design of the thing, they conflated Boresby with Chechibennigan.”

Fish reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the newly minted Freedom Thru Intelligence commemoratives. He flipped it to Cole.

“Now you tell me what Crazy Chess Boresby had to do with Chechibennigan. I don’t remember seeing him in any of the planning meetings. Which isn’t surprising since he’d already been dead for, oh, fifty years.”

“I assume it’s the president’s way of elevating the effort by linking it with Boresby in the eyes of history,” Cole said.

“That may be his intent, but it looks more like adding insult to injury to tie Chess Boresby to a disaster that postdated him, all for the sake of smoothing some spy feathers.”

“Politics is a cesspool of corruption.”

“Tell it to REANAL. They’re twice as pissed now.”

The grease stains on Fish’s shirt reminded Cole of the pork pot pie they served in Duluth. That was a good pie.

“So what do they want?” Cole asked.

“At a minimum, something on the Mall. And not that artsy-fartsy antihero crap like the Vietnam thing. They want statuary. Lifelike representations. Heft.”

“A public monument to a secret spy? On the Washington Mall? That doesn’t seem very cloak and dagger.”

“Go figure.” Fish looked around the room, as if noticing it for the first time. “The local REANAL’s looking for a place for their Thursday evening meetups, by the way.”

“I’ll make it rain. Now, what about this Pu’ukan?”

“Huh?”

“It’s an expression. Never mind. Tell me about Pu’ukan.”

“Right. Pu’ukan. The place hasn’t been on a mass-produced map for sixty years. Literally. If you pick up an atlas—which by the way nobody ever does anymore since it’s all Google Earth this and WikiMaps that—Goddamn shame, too—but if you were to pick up an atlas, you wouldn’t find it there. Too small to count. But now it’s a hot property on the Oval Office walls, and General Services is busting balls to pump up the property values.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You don’t play golf, do you.”

“Of course not. A senseless waste of time.”

“Tell me about it. Last time I went out, I dug so deep into a sand trap I thought I’d reach Peking by lunch.”

“And?”

“Well, I never really got there. That’s just a saying. You know, digging to China?”

“Right. What about Pu’ukan? Why is it such a hot property now?”

“It’s not even ‘Pu’ukan’ anymore. Now they call it ‘SoftHarbor at Pu’ukan®.’ Some New York multinational bought the development rights to build a resort. The crown jewel of the place is a twenty-seven-hole Pruno DiPietro.”

“Petro di—?”

“Boy, you really don’t get out much, do you. Pruno DiPietro. Italian fella. Designs golf courses. Best in the world bar none. The man has a gift. There are people who swear that if God Himself came down to earth for a quick nine, he’d make a beeline for a Pruno DiPietro.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

“He’s a pretty religious guy, Pruno. We have a file on him. I’ll show you if you want.” Cole waved off the offer. “*Golf Digest* calls him ‘The DaVinci de la Links.’ And those fairways? Good Christ, lush as the fucking Garden of Eden.”

Fish stood up. The tiny chair stuck to his butt like a clamp and he had to shimmy out of it. He stepped behind the teacher’s desk and opened the tall metal storage closet. Inside he found a box of ginger snaps.

“Ahh! Treats. I knew there’d be something hiding in here.” The old Fish Rommel would’ve steered clear of empty carbs, Cole thought.

Cole summed up the discussion thus far. “So what we have is a president of venal character, a world-class golf resort in a remote place, and a revered OSS agent lost to history but rediscovered on a cheap coin intended to inoculate the president at the expense of the dead agent’s reputation.”

“About the size of it,” Fish said, squeezing back into his chair. “Though I suspect there’s still a few facts out there waiting to be uncovered.” He popped a ginger snap into his mouth. It was like a slug of hardtack with zing. He offered Cole the box.

“No thanks.”

Fish chuckled. “I love those REANAL guys, I really do. I’m an honorary member, did you know that?”

“That’s great, Vaughn. You should be proud.”

“But no one ever accused REANAL of letting the facts get in the way of a good lather.”

“Oh?”

“You ever read *Our Man in Melanomia*?” Cole shook his head. “The main character, Marcus Mobry Portage, is supposed to be Chessler Charles Boresby, but the book only gets it half right. In real life, the Navy ferried Boresby deep into WestPac on the U.S.S. Colorado, then launched him into unsecured territory in a pint-size PT boat made to look like a dugout canoe, and told him to find something useful for the Manhattan Project. And he did! He found Pu’ukan before Groves knew it even existed. It was the perfect place to keep the A-bombs before they moved them to Tinian.”

“Before Tinian?” Cole was surprised.

“Very few people know that. Now you’re among the elect. Boresby was a resourceful, brave guy, no question about it. He went out all alone, unarmed and ill-equipped, into no-man’s land. Or no-man’s water in this case, I guess. And yet he produced. He gave them exactly what they needed. Stuff like that wins wars, deacon.”

“I’m not a deacon, Vaughn. Just a minister.”

“Right.”

“So there were no Japs on Pu’ukan?”

“Not a one. It was Squidunk to them, too. That was Boresby’s genius.” Fish bit into another cookie and ran through the rest of Boresby’s story—how he fell in love with WestPac and stayed on after the war, drifting around the Carolines, the Marshalls and the Cooks in his motorized canoe before ending back on the Pu’ukan. He had seen them all, and the Pu’ukan was his favorite.

“He loved it there,” Fish said. “Wouldn’t leave. Never did.”

“He went native?”

“Yes and no. When he first drifted ashore, during the war, he was met by a fairly standoffish greeting party of local yokels. They had had an unhappy history with some conquistadors and a whack English missionary back in the day, and they weren’t keen on history repeating itself.”

“They had read their Santanyana,” Cole observed, impressed.

“Whuzzah?”

“Nothing. Go on.”

“Right. Well, so here comes C.C. Boresby all sunburned and disheveled and wearing a bigger smile on his mug than the Man in the Moon, and he persuades Big Chief Bow Wow that he’s a simple sailor gone AWOL from Big Boat and that all he wants is a place to hide out.”

“So they took him in.”

“Eh. More like gave him a conditional visa and a shit piece of land so long as he promised no preachy-preachy.”

Cole shook his head.

“Not everyone’s a believer, friar,” Fish said.

“Evidently. Go on.”

“In the book, Portage maps out the island and writes up big plans to turn it into a military base for the postwar slugfest with the Reds. It was flat enough and long enough in some places for the B-17s and the newer ’27s. The Joint Chiefs loved the idea at first, so they had State snooker Bow Wow into one of those five-hundred-year lease deals in which we got the island and the yokels got one-way rides to the lesser islands and a stack of tin sheeting for their new hovels.”

“Sad story,” Cole said, picking lint off the front of his shirt.

“I guess. Then again, you’re no one in this world without a diaspora. Anyway, the Chiefs—the Joint Chiefs, not the Pu’ukan chiefs—started to dredge a harbor and clear cut the jungle for runways. A couple of the planes are probably still there, like relics.” He peered into the box of ginger snaps. He was getting to the bottom. “They don’t give you much, do they.” He offered the box to Cole again. “Last chance.”

Cole shook his head. “And then?”

“And then the Chiefs lost interest. They already had the Philippines and of course all of Japan, so what the fuck did they need a Poop Can for? Thanks-but-no-thanks was their attitude.”

“Fuck it,” Cole said.

“That’s right, fuck it,” Fish agreed. He looked around the classroom and hoped there weren’t any kindergartners hiding out in cubby holes. “And then, of course, we got jammed up in that Korean bunghole, and everyone forgot about C.C. Boresby for good.”

“What happened to him after that?”

“Here’s where history gets a little furry. According to the book, Boresby—or Portage—stayed on in the Pu’ukan and lived the life of Reilly. He swam naked in the lagoons, ate fried guava fritters, made pokey-pokey with the natives, and married Bow Wow’s daughter.”

“How much of it’s true?”

“Some, but not all. What you won’t find in the novel is any discussion of Boresby’s true passion in life: golf.”

“Golf?”

“It wasn’t just ‘golf’ for Crazy Chess Boresby. It was GOLF!” Rommel threw his arms apart. “The guy couldn’t get enough of it. He’d grab his homemade bamboo-shaft clubs and his rubber balls and tool around the island in search of new spots. He’d drive balls off the cliffs and into coves. He wasn’t mapping the island for airfields. He was laying out his dream course on homemade palm-leaf paper. He was going to open up the most exclusive golf club in the world and restrict it to gumshoes. If you were Intel, you’d be welcome, no matter what side you were on: CIA, BND, MI5, KGB.”

“KGB?”

“Big golfers, those guys.”

“I had no idea.”

“The intercepts are full of that stuff. Makes for fun reading. Anyway, Chess was going to give every hole a cutesy, espionage name: Dog Leg of Danger, Quick Sands, Black Hole. The mixed grill would be called The Swiss Chalet since it would be neutral

ground. But he dies before he can make it happen. In the book, he gets dengue fever while on a reconnaissance mission to the interior.”

“Is that true?”

“Ha! The real Chess Boresby died of sunstroke. Paid for a triple bogey with his life. Still, the guy died doing what he loved best. Me? I’d die fucking my wife’s sister if I got the chance. Real piece of ass, that one.”

Cole recoiled. Fish said he was kidding. “Crickett’s an only child.” He winked. Cole laughed uncomfortably.

“And that, my friend,” Fish concluded, “is the true legacy of Chessler Charles ‘Crazy Chess’ Boresby, Man of Dubious Danger.”

“So the image of him on the coin, peering through the folds of jungle—”

“Another half truth: He peered through palm fronds all right, but mostly in search of—”

“Don’t say it.”

“—a good place for a par three.”

“I see.”

They sat wordlessly for a moment.

“When Boresby died,” Fish finally said, “he had a piece of palm-leaf paper in his hand with a drawing on it. Sketch of a par five he wanted for the front nine, with a water obstacle shaped like the coast of the North Sea running the length of the fairway. He was going to call that one The Haddock and dedicate it to MI5.” “The Haddock.” Cole repeated the word. “The Haddock.”

Fish looked closely at Cole. Strange guy, he thought.

“So that coin,” Fish said, “is just one more reason for REANAL et al. to feel dissed by Horvath. They feel the government should build a statue to their guy. Instead, all he gets is his mug on a piece of tin they’ll sell to paranoids worried about the money supply during the End Times. No offense, Cole, but I’ve heard the commercials on your radio show. It’s embarrassing. You need a new sponsor.”

“Noted. And yet Boresby’s vision evidently survived him: Pu’ukan Island or SoftHarbor or whathaveyou is a golf resort now after all.”

“Yep. Or soon to be. Due to open in a couple, three weeks. Allegedly. And that’s the injury to the insult. Or the insult to the injury. I can never keep that one straight.” He shrugged. “Not only is REANAL choked up that their guy ends up on a collectible. But they see the whole resort thing as the topper. To them, it’s like building a RadioShack in the rectory.”

“But that’s what Boresby wanted—a golf resort.”

“Right. Only the REANAL types don’t know that. For intelligence agents, they’re not too sharp with history. Kind of like yourself, if you don’t mind me saying. These guys are so engrossed in lies that they can’t tell factoid from fiction. What they don’t know, they make up, and then they believe their own lies. But I guess we all do that sometimes.”

“They believe the story line in the novel?”

“Hook, line and putter. Drives ’em nuts that there’s a golf course right next to Boresby Boulevard, *even though that’s exactly what he wanted!*”

Cole struggled with the disconnects. “Of course, none of this explains why Viktor

Horvath has satellite photos of Pu'ukan Island on the walls of the Oval Office.”

“Well, he is a big duffer.”

“True. Although that’s a long way to go for game of golf.”

“There’s no bridge too far when it comes to love, bishop. And remember: it’s a Pruno DiPietro. The State Department even sent a guy out there to run a diplomacy shop downtown—a mission-lite or something. Probably to schedule Viktor Horvath’s tee times and clear the course when he’s out whiffing.”

“They built it?”

“Negative. Get this: The address is the hotel pool manager’s office.”

Cole stroked the flesh under his chin and thought. Rommel picked at the dried batter on his arms.

“One would hope there’s no criminal activity being discussed in the signals traffic between Washington and that new mission.” He lifted an eyebrow almost imperceptibly.

Fish returned the clergyman’s gaze. “OGLE has always been very concerned about the national security implications of communications that reach the highest levels of the executive branch.”

Two little girls skidded into the classroom. On seeing grownups in kiddie chairs, they stopped, screamed, and ran away.

Fish wiggled out of his chair and put the empty cookie box back into the metal closet.

“Always hated the taste of ginger,” he said, brushing off his hands and making a little sheet of crumbs on the floor in front of the whiteboard. “You ever have those whaddayamacallits— DipChips?”

Cole shook his head.

“That’s a chip that stands up to a dip, lemme tell you.”

“I’ll have to try them.”

“Whaddaya say we get back to the grill and slice the main brace, eh monsignor?”

“You go, admiral. I’m going to stay here awhile and think.”

Fish said that whatever Cole decided about Pitch Farnum joining BiTBiM would be fine with him. “You’re the skipper, prelate. I’ll toe the line, no questions asked.” Cole thanked him, and Fish headed for the door.

“You’ll see, padre. The Fish will swim.” He winked and grinned meaningfully. Cole returned the smile, pretending he understood what that meant. Strange individual, he thought.

“Oh, admiral,” Cole called out. “Lady Farnum is having a party next Friday. I’d like you to come as my guest.”

“We’d make an odd couple, primate. Won’t the missus be jealous? Maybe think you’re queer?”

“Lenore’s not a party person. I’ll have her send over the details.”

The two girls came careening back down the hallway and almost ran into Rommel. The old sailor scowled at them. They shrieked and took off in the other direction.

Upstairs, Fish swung open the kitchen door and saw a serving platter next to the grill, locked and loaded with a heaving pile of pancakes strung round by a rope of sausage links. “Platter up!” he called out.

He grabbed his spatula and got back to work at the grill. Nelson Rommel came by for the filled platter. “Take that pile in, son,” Fish said, noticeably more gentle than before. The boy lifted the heavy plate off the counter and turned to head out, determined to make his father proud.

“Hang on a sec there, son,” Fish said. A flush of joy swept through Nelson at that little word: “son.” His knees weakened. Fish then slung a massive pile of home fries on top of the pancakes. The platter sank an inch from the new weight. Nelson treaded slowly out of the kitchen, peering over the mountain of food and feeling his way with his feet. Fish watched him make his way through the door.

In the basement, Cole reviewed his mental notes. Rommel had served up a lot of facts, and Cole could work with facts. If you let them, the facts would assemble themselves into a narrative. And if you listened with the right ears, they would speak to you. He had learned that in the SEC, where you had nothing but time and a slow Internet connection.

Cole had just started to listen to these new facts when he heard a great crash from upstairs. From the sound of it, it had come from the dining hall, right outside the kitchen door.

“Goddammit to hell and back, boy!” he heard Fish exclaim. “That was grub for twenty!”

THE COMFORT OF A PUBLIC HANGING

“You what?” Viktor Horvath was livid.

Ray Jarecki felt put upon. Here he was, working the shovel behind the circus elephant and getting grief for it.

“I had to shut him down,” Ray said. “He was calling us on process and regulation. You know what a tightass Swing is. If it’s not in the manual, it can’t happen. Offering him Fed just—kinda came out of my mouth.”

“That’s a pretty big thing to just kinda come out of your mouth. Fed was for Tammy Claire’s. I already promised it to her.”

“Give her Treasury.”

“I can’t. Langmann wants her for Fed. He sat right where you’re sitting and said that if he can’t have Farnum at Fed, then he needed it for Tammy Claire. Can you believe that? He ‘needed’ it for Tammy Claire Bennett. Just who the hell’s the president around here anyway? Don’t I get to be the decider?”

They smoked. Viktor Horvath eyed his chief of staff with concern. Ray had always had a gift for juggling multiple flaming balls. But lately he seemed to be the one igniting all those balls in the first place, then tossing them onto the president's lap. Nothing but problems. He pushed his chair away from his desk. Ray knew where he was headed: the Great Wall of Pu'ukan.

He was right. Viktor Horvath smoked and sighed and stared at the satellite photos. "When will it end, Ray? When will it end?"

"Soon, now that we've got some new money going in. I'm meeting with Harold Felcher tomorrow."

"Fix this Fed business with Swing. Give him Treasury full-time. That's what he's always wanted anyway. But T.C. gets Fed. And let's get this hotel opened up already."

The president settled back into his chair. He looked tired and spent. When he was tired and spent, Ray knew, he made sloppy decisions with far-reaching consequences. Ray would have to put the screws to Harold tomorrow. He needed to come back to the Oval with good news. If not, watch out, world. "Alert the allies," he wrote on his notepad.

Viktor Horvath reached into his desk and brought out an envelope. He tossed it to Ray. "Here," he said. "Lady Farnum's throwing one her famous Rock Creek soirees. You're invited."

Ray read the invitation. "She's inviting you, not me."

"I'd feel a little awkward about showing up, what with having just publicly shit-canned her husband and all."

“Then don’t go.” He tossed the envelope back. “Odd time for the Farnums to be throwing a party.”

“She’s like that. Always trying to show the world she’s above the Beltway bullshit. Can you believe that? Polk Twetten’s daughter? Former senator’s wife? Former *senator*? Above politics? That broad swims in Beltway bullshit. And she’s better at it than the rest of us.”

He tossed the envelope back to Ray. “But if I’m a no-show, I look bad. Like I can’t face up to some socialite and her crackpot husband. That’s why she’s throwing a party: to embarrass me whether I go or not. You go for me. I’m away. In China or New York or someplace hostile.”

Ray groaned. He hated parties. They put you out of context. Groups of people were fine so long as it was business: negotiations, confrontations, public hangings—events where the lines of authority were clear and you could be yourself. Parties were too phony. True, there was nothing in the world less real than politics. But at least in politics, there’s an understanding about the dishonesty. It’s built in. That’s the agreement. That’s what makes it work. But what were parties? Business? Pleasure? It was impossible to tell. Did he really have to go?

“Yes, you really have to go. Let’s move on to legislation. What’s new?”

Ray stamped out his cigarette. “Farm Bill’s passed. That puts us in good shape for the final push.”

“It’s got the language?”

“It’s got the language.”

“I guess he’s good for something. And the coin’s up and running?”

“Coin’s up and running,” Ray confirmed. “So once you approve the design for the memorial, we can start spending the coin money. One-half of one percent on the memorial, ninety-nine-and-a-half percent on the project.”

“Anyone at the Battlefield Monument Commission ever ask why we’re building a memorial that no one’ll ever see in a place where no American fighting man ever fought?”

“Trust me,” Ray said. “Those old timers can’t remember whether they fought at Iwo Jima or Indiana. You tell them Pu’ukan, where they never once stepped foot or fired a shot in anger or by accident, and they’ll remember it all like it was this morning. They’ll tell you grand stories about it.” He held up an imaginary machine gun and started spraying the room with bullets. “Then the Japs come at us! And we blasted ’em!” *Tat tat tat tat tat tat!* “Left ’em all dead on the ground.”

“Shhh!” the president said, laughing. “You’ll have the goddamn Secret Service smashing in here. That nut Rapp’ll come in blasting like one of your Japs.”

Ray gave one last *rat-tat-tat*.

They laughed.

“So what’s this thing gonna look like anyway?”

Ray reached into a portfolio and pulled out a set of illustrations of the battle memorial. The president studied the drawings.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“That’s a koi pond. Very tasteful.”

The president crossed it out. “I’m exercising my line-item veto. Let’s not get carried away with this thing. We do the bench, some flowers and one bag of root mulch and that’s it. Glorified smoke shack, like we discussed. We keep the costs low and visibility lower. The last thing we want is for people to actually go out and visit this place.”

Ray wasn’t about to disclose that the koi pond had already been built and was providing meditative succor and a place to light up for anyone lost enough to stumble on it in the Pu’ukan understory.

Ray loved the idea of the koi pond. He had sketched it out himself and personally handed it to Harold Felcher. Harold assured Ray that FC2’s Landscape Graphical Design Group, which didn’t exist, was the best in the business. Ray imagined hiking out to the pond in the late Pu’ukan afternoon and settling onto the bench to scratch out palliative pentameter. Verse for the soul. It was going to be a great retirement. No, the pond would have to stay. He just wouldn’t tell the president.

“It’s got a plaque or marker of some sort?” Viktor Horvath asked. “Not much of a memorial without that.”

“It’s in there,” Ray assured him.

The president handed back the blueprints. “We keep the memorial business close,” he said. “No fanfare and no notices to the vets. I don’t want a lot of the Greatest Generation trundling out to Poop Can trying to find this thing and dropping dead of heat stroke halfway there.”

“Right. No vets at the vets’ memorial. Check.”

“And don’t go offering anyone else the Fed job.”

“No more Fed offers. Double-check.”

“All right. Now leave me alone. I gotta go save world from people like me.”

NASTY, SHORT AND BRNO

For Harry August, this Pu'ukan Island job was turning out to be a hemorrhoid. Once again he had to skim dead lizards out of the pool because once again the pool kid walked off the job. It was exhausting to drag a ten-foot aluminum pole with a huge nylon net at the end through water. After three minutes, his back was burning and his arms felt like they were falling off his shoulders. Fuck that kid for quitting.

“I could wrap this pole around his pencil neck and kill him and no one would care,” he muttered to himself. “No one.”

“You could do that. Of course, then you'd have the problem of disposing the body.”

Startled, Harry August turned to see Denny Dash in his usual spot at a poolside table, stirring a drink with his finger.

Denny had been watching Junior and Brno rearrange the pool furniture on the second-story deck above them. Babyface Nelsons, Denny called them, budding

sociopaths who had stumbled onto the ultimate, unsupervised playground. They were short like their father, but where Harry Senior was built like a fireplug, the twins were waifs. They couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds each.

"That's always the problem, isn't it," Denny said. "What to do with the body." He shook the liquor off his finger.

Harry grew quiet at this observation. How would he know something like that? "Christ," he wanted to say, "I was just talking. I don't want to actually kill the kid." Instead, he kept his mouth shut and focused on the dead lizards swirling in the skimmer.

On the upper deck, Brno and Junior had piled a bunch of pool furniture against the railing. Denny glanced up and caught eyes with Brno, who put a finger to his lips. In case Denny didn't get the message, Junior dragged his finger across his throat. Denny turned back to Harry.

"You know where he is?" Denny asked.

"Who? The pool kid? Ahh, forget it. The kid's harmless. I gave him the day off." He snuck a sidelong glance at Denny.

Things were already not going Harry August's way, what with the heat, the job and the bugs, wife gone, kids still here. The prospect of being implicated in a murder—or bumped off to ensure his silence—did not help. He wanted to drop the pool pole and go home. He did the next best thing: He dropped the pole and stepped into a poolside cabana to call Harold Felcher to complain.

Harry had no idea what time it was in New York, but he knew Harold would be at the office. He was always at the office. What kind of a life was that?

He was right. It was the middle of the night in New York, but Harold picked up the phone. Harry unloaded. He'd had enough, he said. He complained that he had been misled. He was supposed to be managing a division of a hotel, but he was cleaning a fucking pool instead. A pool in which no guests even swam. Without help. But all Harold wanted to know was whether Harry August was signing the invoices for hotel deliveries as he had been instructed.

“Am I signing for deliveries? Yeah, I'm signing for deliveries. It's all I'm doing when I'm not killing myself skimming alligators outta the pool—signing a million receipts for all manner of shit that as far as I can tell has nothing to do with a pool. I haven't seen one Goddamn invoice for chlorine since I've been here, but I've seen maybe three dozen for sheets and pillows and neckrolls and other junk for hotel rooms.” It was almost like the pool was paying for the rest of the hotel, he said. “I don't know what a medallion sham is, Harold, but now you got eight boxes of them.”

Harold was relieved to hear this. As for skimming the pool, he told Harry August to hire some local kid who needed the money.

“I can't keep them!” Harry August said. “I hire them and they quit. It's the fucking pay. You don't let me pay them enough.”

“What do you mean they quit?”

“What do you mean what do I mean? They quit. You want it translated into Chinese? Fine, I'll go find a Chinaman. There must be one around here since they got every other kind—black, brown, tan, red, blue, green. Must be a yellow here somewhere,

too. And frankly, Harold, the guy you sent from New York? I'm starting to have serious concerns about him."

"What guy from New York? What are you talking about?"

"Dash, he calls himself. Real mystery man. He one of your spies or something?"

Harold's heart sank at news that his absconded protégé and his unreliable brother-in-law had been crossing paths for a week and that he didn't know a thing about it. He should have expected it, Pu'ukan being a tiny deserted island and all. Of course, they would find each other, and combine their resources to ruin him.

"I'll take care of him," Harold said, his voice weak and lugubrious. "Just keep signing for the deliveries. That's the important thing."

"So you know this guy, this Dash? There's something very weird about him, you know?"

A set of patio chairs and a chaise lounge fell from the sky and crashed onto the pool deck.

"What was that noise?" Harold asked.

"Hold on a second." Harry August dropped the phone and stepped out of the cabana. Another chair and then a chaise splashed into the pool. Junior and Brno were already flying down the stairs and heading for the beach, clinking pilfered liquor bottles as they went.

Harry came back on the line. "Harold, I gotta get outta here. My kids are killing me."

“What are they doing? Where’s Linda? Why can’t she watch them? Harry, I don’t understand. What’s happening?” Harold had assured Ray Jarecki they’d make opening day on time because he had his best people in Pu’ukan.

Harry said Linda went home three days ago.

“Why did she leave? Where did she go? She left your kids there? Don’t tell me she left your kids there.” Visions of a massive arson fire swept through Harold’s brain, followed by the prospect of crippling civil litigation on top of the certain criminal troubles. He would spend the rest of his life in depositions and courtrooms. The chaise sank to the bottom of the pool.

“Hey guy!” Harry called out to Denny. “Could you reach in and fish out that lounge over here? I’m on the phone with New York! The hotel company! My brother-in-law’s the CEO!”

“He’s there now?” Harold said. “You’re talking about me to him and he can hear you?”

“He can’t hear me talking to you. I’m in a cabana. With the door closed.” He slipped back into the cabana and closed the door.

“Now he knows we’re related?”

“Yeah? So?”

Poor Harold, Denny thought. How many times had he told Harold never to do business with family?

Harry August could have used the same lesson—and not just with regard to working for his brother-in-law: His kids were poison. Having them anywhere near his

place of work put the workplace in peril. If managing an empty pool was beyond his skill set, keeping a rein on Babyface Nelsons was out of the question. At this moment, they were running across the pool deck and behind the hotel, in the direction of the golf course, punching and shoving each other and slowing down every few yards to swig from one of the liquor bottles they had stolen from the pool bar, and staggering on increasingly shitfaced.

Denny pulled the chaise up the steps of the shallow end of the pool. He left it on the steps—half in, half out, like a sinking ship—and followed Harry’s kids from a distance. Past the far edge of the main hotel building, they disappeared into a stand of trees. Denny took the same route in and followed a few yards behind until the copse of trees opened onto a hillock overlooking an empty fairway. An abandoned backhoe sat at the bottom of the hill, at the lip of a sand trap next to a tranquil water hazard. Denny watched Junior and Brno grind the gears of the machine until they got bored and scampered across the fairway, clambered up the opposite hill. At the top, they plunged into another line of trees and disappeared into deeper woods.

Denny waited half a minute before following them across the fairway, up the opposite hill and into the deeper woods. It was more jungle than copse but with a worn foot trail. About fifty yards in, he pushed away a curtain of fronds that opened, unexpectedly, onto a clearing beneath a rotunda of palm and amboyna. He held open a slit of leaves just enough to scan the area without being seen. Directly across the clearing was a lean-to with a bench built into the back wall. It looked like prefab job shipped in from The Home Depot, or a flimsy corporate-campus smoke shack. There was also a fish pond wrung with chunks of pumice painted to look like river stones. In the middle of the

clearing, amid pilfered hotel booty, Brno and Junior were rolling on the duff, whaling sloppy punches on each other. They looked like drunken midgets locked in a dust ball.

Denny watched them go at each other until Brno grabbed a bottle from the ground and raised it over his head.

“Heads up, little Harry!” Denny called out. “He’s got a fifth in his hand!”

The boys peeled themselves off of each other and looked up.

“It’s th’ cocka,” Brno slurred.

“Cockahead cunt.” Junior grabbed at the earth to steady himself.

“Nice diction.” Denny stepped into the rotunda and looked around. It was an odd place to build a pond and a smoke shack.

“We’llkickyourasses!”

“Right,” Denny said.

Brno stumbled to his feet, ready to turn the bottle against Denny if he could manage the eye-hand movements. Junior tried to pull himself up by his brother’s leg, but he couldn’t make it and fell back. Brno, too, wavered, and fell on his ass.

Denny stepped over and took the bottle from Brno, cracked open the twist cap and took a swig. Peppermint Schnapps.

“Vulgar shit.” He put the cap back on and tossed the bottle onto Brno’s lap.

In the scrum for the bottle, the twins resumed smacking each other. Denny stepped over to the smoke shack. There was a cheap metal plaque nailed into the bottom of one of the outside walls. “Celebrating Freedom Thru Intelligence,” it read. “Property

of the United States Government, American Battle Monuments Commission.” He ran his finger along the lettering etched into the plate: “FC2 Graphic Services.”

Exhausted and too drunk to stand up, let alone land a punch, Junior and Brno paused to breathe. Denny took out his tin of pequeños. There was nothing like a smoke to help you think through a plan. And to enlist a couple of psychopaths to help with its execution.

“You boys smoke cigars?”

I DO NOT CARE

On a thousand acres of pasture land west of Washington, D.C., dairy cattle grazed on green grass and bales of hay dumped at intervals for their ease. Out on the highway, Americans who drove past this agrarian tableau took pride in the fact that just outside of the nation's capital, life shambled on much as it had in Jefferson's day. The only accommodation to modernity, if you could even call it that, was the Piper Cub sputtering overhead in the middle distance. It was nice to know that the milk you poured on your kids' cereal that morning may have come from a working farm just a few miles from the subdivision.

Of course, the intelligence agencies of other nations knew it was a Potemkin vision—that the cattle, though real, were a ruse, and that across and beneath at least half of those thousand acres, invisible to drivers speeding along the freeway, was a complex of sleek, low-slung glass pillboxes that housed the most sophisticated signals-interception service in the world, the United States Office of Global Listening & Eavesdropping, Fish

Rommel's OGLE. The only ones unaware of the reality, it seemed, were the citizens in whose name it existed.

OGLE's core capability was Interception & Diversion, or I&D, which entailed intercepting data hurtling through the cosmos and diverting it to OGLE's faux-agrarian HQ. Interception was accomplished by OGLE "pickups": microwave e-nets, fiberoptic snaggies, sea-cable data suckers, cellular strainers, WiFi filters and sundry sweepers, sappers, plowers, poopers, scoopers and counter-encrypters. Intercepted data was diverted for a national-security analysis, copied if potentially or even conceivably useful, tossed back into the data stream and sent on its way. Cell, landline, e-mail, tweet, text, vmail, fax, blog, vlog, Morse, semaphore, smoke signal or two Dixie cups connected by dental tape, waxed or plain—however people communicated, there was always a silent party to the conversation. OGLE was USG's Big Ear. And it heard everything. If OGLE ever wanted to go retail with its services, it could sell unhappy husbands and wives transcripts of their quarrels to settle disputes over who said what. For a premium, they could get voice recordings to capture tone and subtext.

"Soup to nuts and then some" was how Fish Rommel's OGLE briefer characterized it on Rommel's first day as OGLE Director.

"That's a lot of reading," Fish remarked.

"There's a lot of info out there, Admiral. That's for shit sure."

Whatever data that OGLE's grabbers and suckers latched onto was parceled out among the agency's Data Review Teams, or DRTs, two-person units that worked in sealed underground concrete work pods. Officially, these work enclosures were known as

Data Review Cubes. Unofficially, they were known as “psychopods.” By the time a DRT was bio-scanned into its psychopod at the start of a shift, the daily data catch had already been deposited into the psychopod’s capture basket.

DRTs were organized by global region. Its region was its “kill box.” Each team was responsible for reviewing every bit and byte that had entered into and been sucked from its kill box. On the wall of every psychopod was the DRT motto: “Think Inside the Box.”

Basement-level psychopod work was not glamorous. The only in-house job more deadening was in Internal Security Imaging Services, which monitored the closed-circuit feeds from the wall-mounted cameras installed in every psychopod. ISIS staff spent their shifts staring at two bored DRT members reading, yawning, stretching, scratching their throats, idly fingering their groins, occasionally grimacing, and shaking a leg three to five times an hour to stave off thrombosis, as recommended by the DRT operations manual. A good day in ISIS was when someone in a DRT forgot about the camera and picked his nose.

DRT work was dull but vital. All it took was for just one bored nosepicker locked inside a psychopod to miss just one fact on just one piece of paper for terrorists to blow the Mall of America to smithereens and send the American way of life into a death spiral. But given the mounds of data that OGLE sucked off each day, there was zero chance of effectively sorting through even a fraction of just the English-language material. It was, as Fish Rommel put it to Cole Charleston, “A goddamn, full-on U.S.G. Rube Goldberg.”

“Think about it,” Rommel explained. “You’re writing an email to me on Saturday afternoon telling me to come to the church breakfast an hour early on Sunday for some Godforsaken reason. My Region I Capture Group snags your note before it gets to me. Before it gets out of your neighborhood even. But you don’t know that it’s been intercepted. You just think your ISP sucks, which it probably does. You have Comcast?”

“No.”

“Good for you. So you call me two hours later, on a landline, to find out why I haven’t gotten back to you on your email. Think about how stupid that is: you call me on a telephone to find out if I got your email and to ask if I’ve replied yet. You needed to know an hour ago if I was coming tomorrow, and now you think that maybe I ought to go to church more often to confess my sin of disregard for others. I say, ‘What the fuck are you talking about? I didn’t get any email from you. Just send me a text.’ But just as I say it, it occurs to me that my DRT boys are probably freaking out because they realize they’re reading *my* email and listening to *my* phone calls. And if they’re Catholic, they’re wondering if they’re going to hell for reading the preacher’s email.”

“I’m not Catholic, admiral. I’m—”

“So you say, ‘What do you mean you didn’t get an email from me? I sent it three hours ago.’ You’re lying—you sent your email *two* hours ago, not three, and obviously I can prove it—but you wanted to make a stronger point, so you lie. And you remind yourself to go to church more often because you’ve just committed about eight sins. But since you’re already a pastor, there’s not much more churching you can do. Christ, you’re

there every day as it is. So then I check my in-box and say, 'Nope, not there.' Why don't you just tell me now since we're on the phone?"

"And you say, 'Well, it's classified and I don't want to say it on the telephone, someone might hear it.' Which I know is bullshit because you're not in government, so it can't be classified. And if it *is* classified, that means you've stolen classified information, which has to be one of the Seven Deadly Sins, and I have to turn you in, and what a scandal *that* would be: 'Bishop Steals, Sells U.S. Secrets to Intel Chief.'

"Now you stammer and sputter because you still have anger-management issues and you hate being called out for lying. But I say don't worry about it because even though we snag everything that comes or goes, we're so far behind on reading what we collect, let alone *analyzing* it, that just last week we picked up hints about a Jap plan to bomb Pearl Harbor. We're not sure, but we figure it's an eighty percent probability.

"You say, 'Then why do you bother to intercept communications if you can't keep up with it?' I shrug—you can't see that because we're on the phone at this point—and I say, 'Because Congress would crucify us if we don't.' Of course, they'll crucify us if we do, but whaddaya gonna do? It's a fuck job either way. Meanwhile, half the world suspects we're jamming up the global communications system and slowing everything down by reading everyone's email and tweets and texts and listening in to their phone calls and watching their webinars, while the other half suspects it's the terrorists who're jamming up the system even though the terrorists think technology is a tool of the infidel except when they use it to spread video of them lopping off hostages' heads. You ever see those YouTube videos?"

“No. Maybe. I don’t recall.”

“Hm. So you see why I say it’s a shit show out there? But we press on. Because this is the life we have chosen.”

“Does that mean you’re not coming to the breakfast an hour early on Sunday?”

Fish had promised Cole that he would check on the data traffic to and from Region IV, which encompassed the Pu’ukan. When Cole Charleston came by Fish Rommel’s office to discuss what the OGLE Director had discovered in his review of the Pu’ukan data, Rommel’s secretary, Daisy Lash, offered Charleston a pair of sunglasses. For good reason. Fish Rommel worked in the shadows but he embraced the sunlight, a fact revealed to Daisy Lash on Rommel’s first day on the job. When Daisy showed him his office, the first thing Rommel noticed was that the blinds were down and the curtains drawn on every inch of window. By lunchtime, he had ripped them all off and given himself an unobstructed view of OGLE’s three-acre asphalt parking lot on the side of the building opposite the cow pasture.

Daisy, who had worked for the previous OGLE Director, was aghast. Not only did the Kevlar and copper-threaded curtains provide an extra layer of signals security, but it was raining that day, and the view of a gray, wet parking lot was depressing. Fish replied that the wide-open vista reminded him of standing watch on the bridge of a ship, where you lived with the weather from moment to moment. A ship’s captain, he said, needed to see the world he commanded.

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it?” he said, enjoying the naked view. “Just like being at sea. The wind, the rain—”

“The wet cars and gray pavement,” Daisy said. “It’s God-awful gloomy, Admiral. And frankly, it’s countercultural since we do most of our work in darkness. You know, to *hide* from peering eyes?”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Thus, on sunny days Fish Rommel’s office was flooded with light, and on rainy days it was shrouded in gloom. Depending on the cloud cover outside, visitors left his office either tan and blind, or suicidally depressed. Daisy took to offering them sunglasses in pleasant weather, and a smile and a hug on rainy days.

“Take a pair, father,” she told Charleston, handing the cleric a pair of wraparound shades from the half-dozen she kept in her desk. “Sunny and clear today as far as the eye can see.”

“No thank you, Daisy,” Cole said. “A man should be able to look into my eyes and judge my character.” He pulled a baseball cap out of his Cole sack and pulled the bill down low over his forehead. “Then again, I’m nobody’s fool.” He winked at Daisy and went in.

Rommel was awash in sunshine behind his big steel desk bolted to the floor, mirror shades protecting his eyes from the glare bursting through his windows. Cole took a chair opposite and adjusted his cap against the light. If they ever figure out how to convert sunlight into energy, Cole was convinced it would happen right here in Vaughn Rommel’s OGLE office.

Fish hadn’t told Cole on the phone what he wanted to discuss. He waggled a pinky in his ear and backed into his point.

“Did I tell you I poked through our info on things out there?”

“Out where?”

“The Pu’ukan. That shit island, where *our friend* seems to have a peculiar interest.”

“Oh?” Cole tweezed a piece of lint off his slacks with thumb and forefinger and waited for Rommel to elaborate. He knew *our friend* meant Viktor Horvath. He suspected *things* meant the resort at SoftHarbor. He had no clue why they were talking in code. If the office of the Director of Global Listening & Eavesdropping wasn’t secure, then they were all in Crap Creek without a roll of toilet tissue.

Fish said that given the way the budget niggards in the State Department operated, he doubted State would have opened a brand-new office in Buttfuck, WesPac, on its own say-so.

“Meaning someone imposed upon them to do such and such,” Cole said.

“Affirmative. And there’s only one shop higher than State.”

Not exactly, Cole wanted to point out. Instead, he steepled his fingers and listened as Fish said that transcripts of intercepts indicated a growing local resentment of the U.S. over the resort. Not only was the hotel company sucking up all the choice real estate, but the local management was seriously alienating the island’s labor force. There was talk of violence. “They hate us that much.”

“Really?” Cole was taken aback. “I suppose it’s ... *possible*. They do hate us everywhere else.”

“Not there they don’t,” Fish said. “There’s no one there *to* hate us. Though I agree

that if there *were* anyone there, they *would* hate us.”

“You’re confusing me, admiral. The intercepts refer to resentment and hatred, but there’s no one there to be resentful or hateful?”

“Right. Here’s my point: It’s bullshit.”

Fish got out of his chair and looked through the expanse of glass onto the expanse of parking lot. He kept a pair of binoculars on the window sill. A crop duster sputtered in the sky out in the middle distance. Given the way that airborne jalopy was pitching and purling just yards away from where they were sitting, Cole figured it would plunge to the ground just in front of the building in eighteen seconds. Rommel paid no notice. His focus was on the parking lot. Amid the field of nondescript Hondas, Hyundais, Toyotas and VWs, a man and a woman were standing and chatting. Their hands were at their sides but their fingertips were just touching. Their lips were about to touch. Rommel shifted the binoculars a centimeter down and to the left.

“Write this down, will you?” he said. Cole grabbed a pen and paper from the desk. “Lot slots two four seven dash S and two four eight dash S. That’s ... Milhof, Clark; and Farr, Samantha, if I’m not mistaken. Married. But not to each other.”

Rommel set the binoculars back on the sill and returned to his chair. “Where was I?”

“You were noting that the world hates us.”

“Right. Do you disagree?”

“I do not. But I do not care.”

Fish reached into his desk and pulled out a thin file folder. He slid it across the desk. It was stamped “Classified.” Cole hesitated. The terms of his release from Duluth

were explicit and would remain in effect for years: commit another crime, and it's back to the SEC for twice the time. That would not be easy. Nietzsche had it wrong: Sometimes what does not kill you *will* kill you. Besides, hadn't Rommel himself just pointed out that Cole lacked classified clearance?

"Read it," Fish said.

Then again, there was a higher calling than one's personal freedom.

Inside were transcripts of emails between Harold Felcher and Denny and phone conversations between Harold and Harry August, heavily redacted but for references to restive, resentful Pu'ukan natives and the impact that an unfriendly disposition toward tourists could have on SoftHarbor at Pu'ukan[®]. Cole read without expression or indication that he recognized the names, then handed it back.

"Sounds like the Zimmermann Telegram," Cole said.

"Telegram!" Fish chuckled and shook his head. "We haven't used telegrams in over twenty years! These are phone and email intercepts."

"Right."

Fish locked the folder back in his desk drawer. "Can you believe this stuff?"

"No, I don't. It's preposterous. Do you?"

"I believe those are the legal names of the correspondents at the top of the pages, and that those are their email addresses and phone numbers. Pretty sure about the time stamps, too, although it gets a little hairy when you're crossing time zones and International Datelines. But as for the rest? I think this one guy jumped off the Paxil

Express and onto the rum line. According to my information, he's spent five of the last three weeks bathing in Bacardi and Coke, hold the Coke. No, there's no 'revolt' on Poopcan Island any more than there's a revolt at the Canyon Ranch. And there won't *be* a revolt unless and until they run out of club sandwiches at the mixed grill, in which case it'll be the guests revolting against their travel agents."

Cole nodded as if he understood what Fish had just said. Was this how they spoke at sea? No wonder we lost at Kuushtaarrg: No one could understand his orders.

Before Cole left, they agreed on three things: 1) Notwithstanding the obvious confabulation of political activity on Pu'ukan, the American public had a right to make its own judgments about the security of their nation's West Pacific postures; 2) Fish would call Jay Buckman to facilitate the public in animating this right to know by supplying him with the intelligence information. And C), Cole would interview Pitch Farnum on his radio show, "The Hour Is Now." This last part seemed like a non-sequitur to Rommel. But he had learned that Cole Charleston was not the most transparent of individuals. So he nodded approval.

LIE FOR THE LORD

On his way home from OGLE, Cole stopped at the Reston McSwaney's to chew over what he and Rommel had discussed.

For Cole Charleston, no thing on earth concentrated the mind more effectively than a steaming dish of pot pie. And McSwaney's was reputed to serve up a fair decent pan. He took a seat at a corner table toward the back, set his Cole sack on an empty chair, and tucked his tie into his button-down shirt. The soft splash of late-afternoon sunlight refracted through lace window sheers was a welcome change from the blaze of Rommel's office.

His first two tasks were clear: Cancel tomorrow's "The Hour Is Now" interview with economist Widener Shawcross—the "Deacon of the Dismal Science" had ruffled feathers with an essay on the link between long-term bond yields and the covenant of grace—and get Pitch Farnum in the studio instead. Could Farnum discuss grace half intelligently? Probably not. What could one expect from a grown man who called himself "Pitch"? But Cole could prepare a list of highly leading questions for which even

Willburr Farnum could supply an approximation of the right answer.

Of course, getting Farnum into his basement studio meant securing buy-in from Lady Farnum, the power behind the commode, as it were. She might balk at first—Lady Farnum balked at anything that could put Pitch in peril—but she had come to him for help. In for a penny, in for a pound. She'd have to consent.

“Wow! You sure look lost in thought!”

Cole looked up. The waitress was young, chirpy and wearing—if it could be called that—a tight white polo shirt that barely reached her navel. It sank Cole's heart to see young women market their flesh.

“I suppose I am,” Cole replied.

“Need more time?” she asked.

Cole hoisted the giant menu. He zeroed in on the pot pies in three seconds flat. “Not at all. I believe”—he squinted at the girl's nameplate affixed over the swell of her left breast, which she proudly thrust forward for Cole to read—“Jessica, that I will have the Plowman's Reward, if you don't mind.”

“It's ‘Jessie’ to you. I *don't* mind. And you're gonna *love* it.”

“That comes with the house salad, correct?”

“Correctomundo. And you can double down with a block of O-rings.” She added with a coy grin, “Wanna go for it?”

“Thank you, no. Just the pie and salad, please. And a pitcher of ice water.”

“All righty. Now, for dressing we got Italian, we got Russian, we got French, we got—”

“Just vinegar.”

“One house salad, oil and vinegar.”

“No oil, just vinegar.”

“That explains the jug of ice water!”

“Do you know the story of Christ on the Cross?”

“Oh, sure! That’s our brat and ’kraut plate. It’s awesome! Wanna try it?”

“No, thank you.”

Jessie flipped her order pad shut and tucked it into her back pocket. It barely fit.

“My Mom used to take her cottage cheese with just vinegar. Always made her mouth pucker, but that’s what she liked! Back in a flash!” Her pony tail swung behind her in syncopation with her hips.

Cole glanced around the restaurant. Faux polished-brass railings and fittings; faux mahogany wood beneath half an inch of acrylic; olde-timey popcorn machine for that faux old-timey feel. How could modern man not loathe the false environment he has created for himself? How could he not loathe himself for endorsing that creation by choosing to exist within it?

A few minutes later Jessie returned with the pot pie, salad, cruet of vinegar and pitcher of ice water.

“The pie’s awful hot so be *real* careful.”

Cole pondered the pie. Was it like this restaurant? Frozen and quick-thawed under a polyurethane sheen? He lifted his knife and cut a neat blow hole through the center of the crust. Jessie was right: the thing was fucking hot as a whore sucking cocks in hell.

Steam poured through the blow hole and fogged up Cole's glasses. With the flat of the knife, he tapped off a section of crust along the outer edge of the pan. The quality of the crust would tell much about the pie inside. To his surprise, a section broke off quick and clean and without excessive crumbling, a good leading indicator. He lifted the chunk of cooked dough between knife and fork, raised it halfway to his mouth, dipped his mouth the rest of the way to meet knife and fork, and pushed the section onto his waiting tongue.

Not too floury, not too light, not too dry, not too bad. Not too bad at all.

Jessie bounded up to check in. "How's the pie? Good?"

Cole quickly swallowed and dabbed his napkin at the corner of his mouth. "That's good motherfucking crust."

"Whoa! I'd say *that's* an endorsement!"

The real test would be the pie proper, he said. Jessie waited, captivated. What a weirdo! But cute!

Cole swapped knife and fork for a fat spoon like the one he had grown accustomed to in the joint, plunged the tool into the blow hole, rummaged beneath the crust like a surgeon searching for a bullet inside a chest cavity, and came up with a heaping, steaming spoonful of Plowman's viscera that he shoveled into his mouth heedless of the heat.

"Mm. ... Good fucking pie, too." He talked with his mouth full. "Tell the chef for me, please."

"You got it!"

Half the pie devoured, Cole returned to the list of questions for Pitch Farnum. When did you come to Christ? How has He changed your life? Do you have any thoughts on being publicly discarded by Viktor Karl Horvath? Have you ever considered missionary work on, say, a tropical island in the West Pacific?

He poured his house salad into the near-empty pie dish, drizzled on some vinegar, and stirred it around with the spoon. He polished off the salad and pie remainders in no time flat, scraped the empty pan for residue, and wiped his mouth with the napkin. He lifted the pitcher of ice water in both hands and drank straight from it, then turned to his cell phone and called Lady. He reviewed the situation in his head while the phone rang. Did Pitch Farnum deserve saving? Of course. Who didn't? Farnum was also an ideal BiTBiM prospect. He was attractive, well known and widely liked if not well regarded. He had fallen from a position of power in highly public circumstances, and he had sinned—unquestionably he had sinned. He met all the criteria for the warm embrace of BiTBiM. Even better, his sins were trivial rather than venal. There was no malice or greed in Pitch Farnum's heart. Everyone knew that. He had too big a heart for such small things. And too small a head. For sure he didn't belong in a position of public leadership, but perhaps he had been drawn in by the excitement of Washington and the false sense of purpose that leads so many to think so highly of themselves.

At least that's what Cole told himself. But what the hell? When you're saving souls and scourging enemies, sometimes you have to lie for the Lord, even if you're only lying to yourself.

Which is what Lady figured Cole was doing when Cole explained his plan to interview Pitch on his radio program.

“You’re sure that’s advisable?” she asked. Extemporaneous public speaking tended to backfire on Pitch. Extemporaneous living tended to backfire on Pitch. Couldn’t Cole just hurl some of that damnation hullabaloo at Viktor Horvath and throw in a few generous plugs for Pitch? Make him out more victim than rube? Or record the interview so they could edit it later?

Cole said he was sure Pitch would do just fine.

“Really? Why on earth would you think that?”

“It’s not earth I’m concerned about, Lady. It’s heaven.”

“Oh, right. I keep forgetting.”

“Trust me, Lady. Have faith. For when Christ calls—”

“—you pick up the phone, ’ ” she said, repeating the well-worn Cole-ism. “Got it.”

Lady finally agreed to the interview, but only on condition that Cole promise not to evangelize Pitch, on the air or off. “You know he’ll go along with whatever you say just to be friends, and I can’t have that. Stigmata do not match our décor.”

“Goddamn it to hell, Lady, you push a hard fucking bargain.”

“Goddamn right I do.”

They laughed. “When this is all over, I’ll treat you to a pot pie.”

“Pot pie. Delightful. I can’t wait.”

“It’s a good fucking meal. You should try it sometime.”

“Next time I’m in stir. I promise.”

THE CRACKER JACK CLERIC

Pitch was thrilled to have made it out of his hotel room.

In fact, he was thrilled to have made it out of bed and into the shower, let alone out the door, down the hall, into the elevator, through the lobby and into Lady's waiting car for the ride to Cole Charleston's house for the big interview.

He had gotten exactly what he needed from his time in the bubble: himself. Lady could see it on his face. They hugged, kissed, buckled up and drove off.

For a jury-rigged operation, Cole's basement studio wasn't half-bad. There were water stains on the ceiling tiles, but it had a glass partition separating the on-air and engineering sections, just like a real radio operation. And there was a real-life engineer at the console—a former county purchasing director named Arthur Wiggins who had learned radio broadcasting in prison and had signed up with BiTBiM after his release.

“That’s Wiggins,” Cole said. Pitch smiled and waved hello.

Before they got started, Lady pulled Pitch aside and counseled him to be agreeable, and to express remorse for his indiscretions when Cole brought them up but not to go overboard with the self-flagellation. Pitch was still unclear how he had sinned other than having embarrassed Lady with that silly panty video, which wasn’t supposed to be filmed and definitely was *not* supposed to have been broadcast. Someone had played a very dirty trick on him.

Lady said they’d deal with *that* viper once they found out who it was. But this came first. And she was insistent that Pitch not react when Cole started cussing.

“That’s his signature, so don’t get flustered,” she said. “And whatever you do, don’t you dare join in when it starts. Cole Charleston’s a cleric, so he can get away with anything. And it’s live, so they can’t edit anything out. They can only bleep over it, and you don’t want all those Pious Patties who listen to Cole’s show to think you have a potty mouth.”

“Shit no!”

“Pitch! Please! This is serious! And don’t forget to work in a Deuteronomy quote. He’s a big fan. And pay attention and stay focused. That’s the most important thing. No drifting, right?”

“Stay focused: check. Deuteronomy: check. No swearing: check. Be humble: Check, check, check.” He rested his hands on Lady’s shoulders. “You’re adorable when you’re advisory, do you know that?”

Lady grunted. She fixed Pitch's tie and brushed an eyelash from his cheekbone, a useless service since he was going on radio and not T.V. It occurred to her that she had done very much the same thing, albeit to her father's tie, the day she met Cole Charleston years ago.

"Relax. Have a little faith," Pitch said.

"You're sweet. I'd rather plan."

Cole summoned Pitch to his side of the glass so they could get started. Lady stayed with Wiggins but was too anxious to sit. It was a good perch from which to deter Cole from pulling any missionary *meshugas*. He had promised not to, but the man was a felon. And a cleric. Better to *proveryai* than *doveryai*.

Cole set out a couple of Bibles—one for him and one for Pitch. He handed Pitch a pair of balky earphones and adjusted the equally balky microphones in front of their faces. For all the interviews Pitch Farnum had done over the years, he had never learned a thing about the technology. It hardly mattered. He was a natural on the air, as smooth and comfortable as if he were chatting with a friend in his living room.

"It's a humbling experience, then, to go from a position of power to public disgrace," Cole said.

"It is, Cole. It definitely is."

"It shows how ephemeral Caesar's power is."

"Sure, I'll buy that."

Five minutes in and Pitch was on his game. If he could just skate through the next ten without catastrophe, Lady thought, she might possibly consider perhaps maybe at

least driving by a church on a Sunday. In the future. In the meantime, she kept witness through the glass, alternately pinching her lip and chewing the inside of her cheek.

“What, then, does the transience of Caesar’s authority teach us, Senator? What did it teach you?”

“Well now that’s an interesting question, Cole. Highly interesting.”

Cole took the hint: Pitch had no idea what Cole was after. “It teaches humility, doesn’t it,” Cole said. “Getting ass-fucked by Satan.”

Whoa! Pitch reeled, simultaneously amused and bemused. He looked at Lady through the glass. Her bug eyes and robust shaking of her head told him to ignore, ignore, ignore and just move on. Nothing here to react to.

“Cole that’s, uhh, that’s well put. It—ahem—teaches humility like you wouldn’t f—believe. One day you’ve got people ready to jump when all you’re doing is getting out of your chair, and the next there’s no jumping. There’s no chair even. Just the emptiness of a motel room.”

“A motel room?” Cole snuck a glance at Lady, who was wincing in lieu of clutching her head and freaking out.

“HO-tel,” Pitch corrected. “Ho. Not mo. Ho, ho, ho! Heh, heh.”

“A ho?” A longer glance at Lady, this time with raised eyebrow.

“What I mean is—that’s just where I—whenever a crisis—a personal crisis. Of *conscience*. That’s where I go, in such a situation.”

If Cole wanted to finish off Willburr Farnum and settle a personal score with

Lady, this was the moment. She never should have agreed to a live interview. Not with Cole Charleston, the Cracker Jack cleric. What was she thinking? This guy was a Devil, and he was about to destroy her husband. The lingering look Cole gave Lady seemed a harbinger. Fuck church, she thought. We're screwed.

Cole turned back to Pitch. He gazed at the clod before him. Good Lord, what easy prey this would be. His annihilation would be a public service.

“What I’m hearing you say, Senator”—

“Please, call me ‘Pitch.’ ”

“What I’m hearing you say, *Pitch*, is that you ... go to your quiet place for reflection. A hotel of the spirit, if you will.”

“That’s exactly it, Cole. Lotsa reflection. You have to! I don’t care what business you’re in. Everyone needs a safe harbor.”

Cole cast another meaningful glance at Lady. “I could have, but I didn’t,” it said. Lady let go of her lip and breathed. A good thing, since she was turning blue.

“There’s always a Bible there, too. In every room,” Pitch said.

“Gideon’s.”

“Right in that bedside-table drawer. Every hotel in America has one. And thank God for that. Believe me, I make good use of it. I’m a big fan.” Lady chuckled to herself. The only use Pitch ever made of a Bible was as a doily.

Cole mandered on. “It’s instructive, isn’t it, Senator, being at risk of losing everything. Reputation, stature, position, influence. All that manna.”

“Oh yeah. No question. Manna.”

“I’ve been there, Pitch. I did time, you know. Hard time. And I like the way you talk. You’re the real deal.”

“Thanks, padre, but it’s not me. It’s all right there, in the good book.” He patted his Bible.

“Go on, Pitch.”

“Just look at Deuteronomy.”

A TAG TEAM FOR YAHWEH

“Pitch Farnum wouldn’t know Deuteronomy if you shoved a King James Bible up his ass.”

Chief of Staff Raymond Jarecki’s observation on the catechistic ruminations of Senator Farnum, though well-intentioned, did little to arouse the listless affect of President Horvath, who only slouched deeper into himself and returned to the important work of pulling the filters off of low-tar cigarettes. Tobacco flakes littered his shirt front. Discarded filters piled up around his feet.

Ray was worried. The president’s mood, and thus the world’s prospects, had suffered a blow a few hours ago when the political media began picking up where Jay Buckman’s Pu’ukan piece left off the day before. Somehow Pu’ukan had crossed Jay Buckman’s radar.

“Last and definitely least,” Jay had closed out his weekly marketing report, “here’s an item for all you upper-bracket stiffs planning to retire to tropical paradise with

your Pings and Callaways. If you're thinking of retreating to the tiny West Pacific island of 'Poo Can,' you might wanna redo the itinerary. Evidently, there's anti-American agitation afoot on said sunny Squidunk. Rebellion? In paradise? Now where have I heard *that* one before? But don't worry. The only known casualties to date are a few hoity toity koi at a man-made mud puddle and a burned-out smoke shack built to honor America's war dead. ... You can't make this stuff up."

Two days ago, not a single reporter this side of the International Dateline had even heard of Pu'ukan. Now, every golf and travel writer in the world was filing stories about political turmoil there, and White House reporters had begun to take notice. Ray had done his best to soften the blow, telling the president that the publicity was free marketing for SoftHarbor. The president was in pungent disagreement.

"Reminds me of when people say it's good luck when a pigeon shits on your head. Pure rationalization of the fact that a pigeon just shit your head."

The presidential mood, always a fragile reed, was bending. One more bit of bad news, Ray knew, and Viktor Horvath would slip into a condition known among the West Wing staff as "the Fugue of State," in which his eyes took on a glazed-over gaze that settled into the far distance as he went into mental and emotional lockdown: no one gets in, no one gets out.

Ray worried that Cole Charleston's interview with Farnum could be that one last bit of bad news. And yet the president had refused to turn off the radio, so Ray needed to quickly discredit the resurrected felon.

“Cole Charleston,” he sneered. “Mr. Piety. Isn’t this the same guy who wanted to burn down the Capitol to send a message to the Finance Committee? Jesus, the hypocrisy of this crap’ll kill you.”

He crushed his cigarette in the ashtray on his lap and lit another. The Oval Office was beshrouded in smoke. “Ain’t it grand to be a Christian? Ain’t it just fucking grand?”

President Horvath took a deep, bleak pull on his cigarette. He tried to spit out a fleck of tobacco that clung to his tongue, but the bump on his lip got in the way. He pinched it off and flicked it into the air. It landed on legislation awaiting his signature. This was his most dynamic moment of the day. Ray had abandoned hope that the president would sign that or any other document. Dragging a pen across the page would require too much energy, legislation too much an expression of hope in the future.

On the radio, Pitch expounded on the Pentateuch.

“In Deuteronomy it says, ‘To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand.’ I’m not making that up!” he exclaimed. “That’s what it says!”

“Thirty-two thirty-five,” Cole confirmed. “That’s dead fucking on, Pitch.” He was impressed with Farnum’s easy grasp of holy text. “*Dead* fucking on.”

“The Deut’s got everything, Cole. Laws, rules, guidance: No idols. Teach your children. Slaughter the idolater.”

“Defenestration,” Cole added pointedly.

“Here’s another one that not many people know, but it fascinates me and really makes me uncomfortable at the same time. The Deut says that he whose testicles are

crushed or whose member is cut off *shall not enter the assembly of the Lord*. That's heaven they're talking about!"

"Twenty-three one. Stones and privy member. Although I'm not sure what that has to do with—"

"Incredible, isn't it? How this stuff still applies today? Just wild."

"It also says, 'Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.' No one builds it on his own."

"Eight eleven. Who can forget? And how about thirteen one through eighteen?"

" 'And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die,' " Cole quoted approvingly.

" 'So shalt thou put evil away from among you,' " Pitch added. " 'And all Israel shall hear—"

" '... and fear,' " Cole said. They were like a tag team for Yahweh.

" 'Stone him with stones'? What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?" Viktor Horvath said. "Is he talking about me? Is he seriously calling for me to be stoned to death, Ray? Is he making a terroristic threat on the life of the president?"

Ray said he would call in the Secret Service.

"Can you imagine if we did that now?" Pitch said. "A public stoning? Wow! That'd turn some heads. That'd *crush* some heads!"

Wiggins nodded in agreement. Lady tried not to react. Pitch wondered where you would get the stones. Would someone distribute them at the scene? Or were you expected to bring your own?

“Whom would *you* stone, Pitch?” Cole asked.

Lady gestured for Pitch not to answer, and Cole changed the subject before Pitch could dodge the question.

“Pitch, you’ve spent time in the highest councils of government.”

“That’s true, Cole. The highest councils.”

“Senate committees, leadership caucuses, *Oval Office conferences with the president.*”

“I’ve had a pew-side seat to what passes for power on this earth.”

“Well put.”

“Thanks.”

“And yet temporal power turns out to be no protection against evil.”

“Check.”

“There’s only one God on this earth and He’s all powerful.”

“Double check. There is no God but God.”

“So then maybe it’s time you signed on with BiTBiM, Pitch.”

Oh you sonofabitch, Lady thought. You two-faced, lying, soulless ex-con with forked tongue nudnik nuncio. I *told* you not to recruit and you *promised*. You *bastard!*

Pitch temporized.

“We can do this on the air, Pitch. Right now.”

Lady rapped on the glass and shook her head from side to side as far as her neck would allow. But Cole pressed on.

“There’s a mission for you, Pitch.”

“Well, the thing is—”

Cole grabbed Pitch’s arm. “You can do this, Willburr Farnum. You *must* do this. Look at those phone lines. They’re lit up like the Jew’s menorah!”

Pitch glanced at the phone deck. It really was lit up. Lady noticed that Wiggins was making it happen by repeatedly pressing a button on his console. She rapped Wiggins on the side of the head.

“Oh what the hell!” Pitch said. “Let’s do this thing, Cole. Let’s do it right now!”

“Fuck yes, Pitch Farnum! Fuck ... yes!”

“Fuck NO,” Lady screamed. But it was a silent scream, unheard on the other side of the glass. She grabbed Wiggins’s notepad and wrote in the tallest letters that would fit on the page, “FUCK NO!” and pressed it against the glass.

“We’re going to send you to someplace warm, Pitch.”

“Great!”

“You’ve heard of Pu’ukan Island? We’re opening up a new mission there. You’ll love it. It’s hot as hell. Good for the soul.”

Ray Jarecki’s cigarette fell from his lips and burned a hole in his slacks before he even felt a sting. Viktor Horvath opened up a fresh pack of low-tar cigarettes and began decapitating the filters.

In his office in New York, Harold Felcher whimpered and wondered: What happens when you land on the balls of your ass?

After the interview, Pitch and Cole seemed like old chums. Lady was steaming mad at Cole, but relieved that Pitch hadn't committed any major gaffes other than committing his soul to Cole Charleston's group of itinerant felons.

After everyone had left, Cole had to admit that he was impressed as hell at Pitch's command of Scripture, and by Lady's love for her husband. Must be nice. Must be very nice. He pushed the thought aside and got back to strategizing. On her way out, Lady had handed Cole a clasp envelope. He undid the clasp and pulled out a document.

"The fucking Farm Bill," he said. It wasn't the entire bill—that would have required a back-end loader—just a few pages from that Godless book of the dead. A handwritten note on the title page read, "Follow the stickies."

BAD JUJU GONE GOOD

“And then this one over here connects with—”

Bundy Swing stood at the whiteboard in the same St. Pearl’s basement classroom in which Cole Charleston and Fish Rommel had chatted over ginger-flavored hardtack a few days earlier. Leaning on his crutches, Bundy exerted himself to draw a straight line connecting a box in red outline at one end of the whiteboard with a box in green outline at the other. It was a long board, and Bundy had to shift and step on his crutches to draw the line. He did his best, but it ended up being a jagged, squiggly line.

It wasn’t easy being a uniped, but Bundy Swing never whined. And right now there was too much ground to cover to get hung up on a little thing like a missing leg. Why worry about something that’s not even there? At least he had two hands, one with which to balance himself while he used the other to draw a color-coded diagram for half a dozen of his REANAL District 12 colleagues, who were jammed into the preschool kiddie chairs. The boxes corresponded to sticky notes that marked key sections of the Farm Bill that Bundy had distributed to the group.

“—with this one over here,” he continued, finishing up the last segment of a line connecting the red and green boxes. “So that means you’ve got Title I, Subtitle A, Section 1101, Paragraph 14, parens 4 of—”

“Can we cut to the shootout, Swing? I’ve got a lunch date next year that I’d like to make.”

Johnny Feif was never one for subtlety—it was a liability in intelligence work that had hindered his rise—and he wasn’t displaying newfound depth this evening.

Bundy turned to respond, but the rubber heel of a crutch, worn smooth, slid on a patch of cookie crumbs, and he dropped the marker as he grabbed at the board to keep from falling.

Johnny Feif groaned.

Phil Caminiti was out of her chair the second the marker left Bundy’s fingers. “Really, Johnny,” she said. “Didn’t they teach you any manners at Princeton?”

“I didn’t go to Princeton.”

“That explains it.” Phil retrieved the fallen marker and handed it to Bundy. “You’re doing great, Bun. Johnny’s just jealous that you’re on to something. Plus he’s an asshole.”

“I heard that!”

“And?” Phil said, brushing Johnny back with the stink eye.

“The Girl’s right, Johnny,” said Mumford “Mum” Lewis. “We’re supposed to be here for one another. That’s what REANAL’s all about, right fellas?” There were nods of agreement from the others—Calvin Toyne, Tom Cruickshank and Mel Brill.

The “R” in REANAL stood for “Retired,” but technically speaking no member of the Retired Espionage and National Assets League was a government retiree because technically speaking none had ever been an official government employee in the first place. They were private “consultants” who were available when their country’s covert services needed them, and their names never appeared on public documents. Anywhere.

Bundy had aroused his REANAL colleagues’ interest when he said he wanted to devote the monthly meeting to a matter relating to Chess Boresby. Few living assets, whether active, retired or in the wind, had ever met Crazy Chess Boresby, who died before their time. But a piece of the Old Man lived in every NatSec gumshoe who ever perjured a spouse or member of Congress. Chess Boresby was the inspiration for people like Bundy Swing and Phil Caminiti and even petulant Johnny Feif to go into the profession. They all wanted to be like Mann Portage in *Our Man in Melanomia*. In a way, Bundy had come closest. Inside the community, it was no secret that the imprint of the cargo plane on the reverse of that moronic commemorative coin was Bundy’s cargo plane, the one that got hit over the Bay of K and cost him two feet of a leg.

If Viktor Horvath expected that a coin and a mud puddle in the middle of a WesPac sandbar would keep disaffected black baggers complacent while he went about the business of self-aggrandizement, he was wide of the mark. In fact, as Fish Rommel explained to Cole Charleston, the coin and the mud puddle only deepened their bitterness toward Viktor Horvath. So did the fact that the Old Man’s final resting place—the functional birthplace of postwar American intelligence; the place where Chessler Charles Boresby had served his country and to which he had delivered his corporeal vessel—was

being despoiled by a golf course, a despoliation made possible by the sale of the land to private developers.

If Chessler Boresby were alive, he'd drop dead from shame.

Bundy took the marker from Phil and stammered out a tongue-tied "thanks." He always got tongue tied around Philomena "Phil" Caminitti, aka "The Girl." Some "Girl," Bundy thought. Phil Caminitti was all Woman. His heart didn't skip just a beat whenever he saw her; it skipped a full measure. In seven/four time. And it nearly went into infarction when she drew this close to him.

Bundy shifted under his crutches. They were digging into his armpits.

"Why don't you sit down, Bun. Take a load off," Phil said, taking back the marker. "You tell me what lines to draw and what colors to use and I'll draw them. We'll team up."

"That'd be great, Phil. Thanks." Johnny groaned again.

"Johnny has no sense of romance," Mum Lewis whispered to Calvin Toyne. "I'd love to see Bundy get back on his feet—or, foot—and get together with Phil. They'd make such a nice couple, don't you think?" Calvin Toyne often wondered if Mum Lewis was a gay. But he did agree.

Bundy squeezed into a chair. It was a tight fit, but more comfortable than doing one-legged ballet at the whiteboard.

"OK, then," he said, picking up where he left off. "Nothing too fancy here, folks. Basically we just want to follow the dollar."

With Bundy directing, Phil drew lines connecting the boxes and matching them up with the Farm Bill sticky notes. Orange sticky: Title Six, Subtitle A et seq. Yellow sticky: §603(d)(2), 9 U.S.C. 2112(a)(1) [rural empowerment zones and installation and/or improvement of essential community facilities]. Blue sticky: §603(d)(2) [authorizing the Secretaries of Agriculture and Treasury to consult on facilities referenced in §7133(b)(4)(e2)]. Neon green sticky: 36 USC Chapter 21, the American Battle Monuments Commission.

In five minutes, the board looked like a rainbow-colored version of String Theory: You had to be either a genius or a nut to follow it.

“Which of course is the whole idea,” Bundy said. “We’re supposed to get lost in this maze.”

“And give up the search, right Bun?” Phil said. “Or think it’s too crazy to be real?”

“Exactly.”

“Looks like you’re missing a link there, Bun,” Mum Lewis noticed. He pointed to the lower-right corner of the whiteboard, where a black box was floating out on its own, unhitched.

“That,” Bundy said, “is this.” He pulled a thin document from an accordion folder that he had brought to church tucked under his shirt. “And this is the budget for the United States Battle Monuments Commission, including an internal Treasury Department budget analysis of said unlinked black box. The famous fish pond and accoutrements I told you about.”

Phil held the black marker aloft, ready to execute orders. “Shall I?”

“Not yet, Phil. Let’s take a quick look at the report first. If you’ll turn to Appendix D in your handout ...” Everyone turned to Appendix D, a classified Treasury analysis that showed a large imbalance between the cost estimate of the Pu’ukan battle memorial and the funding actually appropriated for it. The ledger showed an appropriation of one hundred and seventeen million dollars for a project estimated to cost seven thousand, four hundred twenty-three dollars and forty-seven cents, including shipping and handling.

Mel Brill whistled. Phil smiled. Calvin Toyne calculated. “That’s 15,761 times project cost, after rounding,” he said.

“Now, Bun?”

“Now, Phil.”

Phil connected the last of the boxes with a slow, clear, black line. A squeak heard round the room.

“Where’d you get this report?” Johnny Feif asked, challenge in his tone. “This is Treasury Internal Inspections. From what I know about Treasury IntIns, they’re closely held. Maybe even classified. Was it your brother?”

“That’s a red line you’re crossing, Johnny,” Mum Lewis said. “Sources and methods, tradecraft. You know that.”

Johnny pressed. “Because if it was your brother, he’s in deep shit. And probably you, too. And now all of us are in deep shit since you’ve just made us witnesses if not actual accomplices. This is whack, Swing. Very whack. It’s bad juju.”

“You don’t ask questions like that and you don’t talk trash about the team,” Phil shot back. “And just what the hell is ‘juju’?”

“The Girl’s right, Johnny,” Mum Lewis said. He turned to Calvin Toyne. “The Girl’s right.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bundy said. “We’re in a church, so privilege attaches. That means we’ve got priest-penitent protection. That’s a shield. Anything we say stays right here and can’t be used anywhere else.”

“You go, girl!” Mum Lewis said. “I mean Bundy go. Not you, Phil. You go, too, though, Phil. You know, if you’re going somewhere.”

Johnny Feif shook his head. What a crowd. He was happy he left the service when he did. Running an airborne security service for federal and corporate clients was much simpler.

Mel Brill was still perusing the paperwork. He was impressed. “So what’s our plan?”

“*Our* plan?” Johnny asked. “Oh I don’t know about *that*.”

“Our plan, for whoever’s with us,” Bundy said, “is the same as it’s always been: We do what we have to do, and we do it as a team.”

No one needed it explained.

Bundy stood up on his crutches. The tiny chair stood up with him. “If REANAL doesn’t get in this game soon, it’ll be over before we even dress up.” Mum Lewis reached over and plucked the chair from Bundy’s buttocks.

“Thanks, Mum.”

“Sure thing, Bun.”

“Now do I have authority to act on behalf of District 12? To do what needs to be done?” he asked. He scanned the faces. No one replied, not even Johnny Feif. They understood one another.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’ ”

The meeting broke up, and Phil and Bundy were alone in the classroom. Everyone had returned the handouts to Bundy, and he was packing them into his accordion folder to bring back home and burn. Phil surreptitiously popped a mint into her mouth as Bundy inserted the fat package beneath his shirt. It wasn’t easy to do while balancing on crutches.

“Here, let me help you with that,” Phil said.

Bundy’s heart shifted into eleven-four time as Phil’s fingers worked his shirt to fit over the folder. He smelled the peppermint on her breath. Clean and fresh. She always smelled washed and powdered. Bundy wished he had a peppermint.

“Thanks,” he said as Phil’s fingertips danced up his shirtfront. “The crutches and all ...”

“You really think there’s something to this?” she asked.

For a second, Bundy thought she meant between him and Phil. He flushed.

“I mean, half the federal budget must be stuff like this,” she said. “Earmarks, pet projects, hidden gifts for friends and fund-raisers. I guess a hundred and seventeen million dollars is a lot to you and me, but in that cesspool, it’s just floaters.”

She finished the top button and straightened his collar. “There! All done.” She ran the back of a finger against a patch of stubble on his chin. “You missed a spot.”

“I—I do,” Bundy said.

“You do what, Bun? Miss a lot of spots shaving?” She smiled. He was cute.

“No I mean—I do think there’s something new here.” He was six thoughts behind in the conversation but determined to catch up rather than look ridiculous. “Something different. Maybe it’s not a billion dollars, but that’s where it starts. And it’s where we start. We just follow the dollar, Phil.”

It was uncomfortable for Bundy to stand in one position too long. His discomfort reminded Phil, as if she needed one, that she had been the information officer on the Chechibennigan raid, and it had been her job to report on the air defenses Bundy would face. No one at the command level had expected any serious defense, so when Phil, in her usual insanely meticulous gathering of intelligence, discovered that Kabubbala had purchased surface-to-air missiles from the Venezuelan air force, she was dismissed as a Cassandra and her findings stove-piped, left standing there with her Lady dick in her hand, and her warning disappeared into the small intestines of the Office of Global Listening & Eavesdropping, where they would be reviewed in sixty years, right after OGLE completed its review of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction production programs.

“OK, Bun,” Phil said. “Yeah. I do. I really, absolutely do.”

“You—do what, Phil?”

“I wanna settle accounts. I want to make Viktor Fucking Horvath pay.”

Bundy’s ventricles skipped three stanzas and a bridge and galloped into the chorus. He leaned in to kiss the only woman he had ever loved. But the accordion file under his shirt pressed against Phil’s chest and blocked his path to her lips. They laughed.

“My luck!” Bundy said.

“That thing’s like a pregnancy! I don’t think you’re going to fool anyone.”

“Come with me,” Bundy said, hitching up his front load. “I want you to meet someone upstairs.”

On the landing between floors, Phil kissed Bundy on the cheek. A side approach was much easier. He said he was so weak in the knee that he didn’t know if he’d make it the rest of the way. She slipped her arm through his. “I’ll spot you,” she said.

“Bun, have you ever thought of maybe getting a prosthesis? They’re doing incredible things with titanium nowadays. I have a contact at the VA who can set you up and get it fully covered.”

“Yeah?” Bundy said, lifting himself over the last step.

“Sure. It’s a cinch.”

“I’d like that.”

“Good.” She squeezed his arm. “I’ll set it up.”

Cole Charleston was standing in front of his desk when Phil and Bundy reached the church director’s office on the second-floor, as if he had been waiting. “I see you brought a friend,” he said, not warmly.

“A friend of *ours*, padre.”

Cole shook Phil’s hand and introduced himself to Phil. “I’m not a Catholic priest, but I can’t seem to convince anyone.”

“Philomena Caminitti, father. Call me Phil.”

“If that’s what I think it is,” Cole said, pointing to Bundy’s paperwork pregnancy,

“I can dispose of it in the church incinerator.”

Bundy unburdened himself of the folder and heaved a sigh of relief, glad to be rid of the extra weight. Cole dumped it into his Cole sack and handed Bundy a letter-sized envelope in return.

“Roundtrip tickets,” he said, “although the return date is open. There’s some cash in there, too, for expenses,” he added, raising his chin confidentially.

On Phil and Bundy’s way out, Cole asked Phil if she were active in her congregation, hoping to find out which congregation she attended.

“Oh God no,” she said. “No offense, reverend, but it’s just not my thing. All that smoke and garlic and shit. More of a data gal myself.”

“Not your ‘thing,’ ” Cole said. “I see.”

“Phil doesn’t pull punches,” Bundy said.

“Well, it was very nice to meet you *anyway*, Ms. Caminitti.”

“Likewise, parson.”

“Take care of our friend Bundy here. He’s a valuable asset. And you be careful, Mr. Swing. We don’t need you losing any more limbs.”

“I’ll keep in touch, pastor,” Bundy said.

“Good God, please don’t!” Cole replied. They all laughed.

FOOD SÍ, GOLF NYET!

Harold Felcher pulled back the stiff, dun-colored curtain of his motel room just enough to peer through a grimy third-floor window. The view of LaGuardia Airport across six lanes of rain-soaked expressway hadn't changed since forty-seven seconds ago, the last time he had looked out. The world continued on its desolate way, heedless to the existence of Harold Felcher and the vastness of his suffering.

He let go of the curtain. In another forty-seven seconds, he would look out again.

News that the Pu'ukan smoke shack had been reduced to kindling and the fancy koi pond transformed into a mudpuddle had hit Harold Felcher like a week-old tuna fish sandwich, heavy on the MiracleWhip. It appeared first on *cnn.com/marketing/jaybuckmanreports/*, then spread like Ebola onto the travel and ad sites under snappy headlines—

“Pacific Paradise Undone by Un-Pacific Politics” (*extremeluxurytraveler.net/uk*)

“Hard Sailing for FC2's SoftHarbor” (*SoapSeller.com*)

“In Rebel Rising, Profits Decline” (*wsj.com*)

Even Harold Felcher knew there was no political tumult on Pu'ukan Island, no sizzling fuse of anti-American sentiment. My God, the money they were pouring into Pu'ukan could buy a new thatch hut for every man, woman and lizard out there. The only real problem on Pu'ukan was Denny Dash. And Denny's grievance wasn't political. It wasn't even business.

It was personal.

Harold pulled the curtain back and peered out onto the Grand Central Parkway once more. No change.

In a million years, Harold wouldn't understand why Denny had turned on him so meanly. In a million years, he wouldn't understand why his body-building brother-in-law didn't just beat Denny Dash to death and feed his corpse to a school of man-eating koi, as Harold had pleaded. In a million years, Harold wouldn't remember how he got from his office in Midtown Manhattan to the Crossways Motel in Queens. He remembered getting to the office early, before seven thirty, hoping to start his day with an email from Denny conceding that the game was up and that he was finally submitting to one or more of Harold's ultimata. But there was no email from Denny. No concession, no submission to Harold's authority. The silence spoke volumes.

"It's a shot across the bow is what it is."

"Pardon?"

Harold hadn't noticed Grace standing in the doorway of his office watching him, anxious as ever. Grace had sensed a new woe coalescing in and around her Islets of Langerhans.

“I don’t even know what a ‘bow’ is. What’s a ‘bow,’ Grace? Do you know?”

Nonplussed, Grace hesitated. She was rescued when Harold’s phone rang.

Thinking it might be Denny, Harold picked it up before looking at the caller ID screen, and instantly regretted being so eager. It wasn’t Denny, but Raymond Jarecki, the White House chief of staff. One of Hitler’s willing accomplices. Harold rubbed his upper arm. It felt numb. He envied it. He hoped it signaled an aneurysm. He wanted to ask Grace if arms go numb in a stroke. Or was that a heart attack? What goes numb in a stroke? Grace backed out and closed the door behind her.

Ray Jarecki had started his day early, too, and had called Harold to summon him to Washington for an update on the Pu’ukan project.

“Great, great,” Harold said. “I can do that.”

“Plus I’d like to know whatever you know about Denny Dash.”

“Denny Dash?”

“Uh huh.”

Harold pressed a thumb into his eyebrow. “How’s Tuesday?”

“How’s today.” There was no rising intonation in Ray’s voice signaling a question. “We’re leaving for Camp David at four, so get here by noon. We need to go over some things.”

Click.

Maybe he should just confess all—go to Washington and get it over with. Face the problem, accept the consequences. Really, how much of it was his fault anyway? He hadn’t done anything so atrocious. Someone else had. He could just tell the president,

“Look, this guy ran off with your money. He’s crazy. He ruined your Fed nominee, took your money, and ran off to Pu’ukan Island. And shat on your dreams. And put you at risk of impeachment and prison and crippling civil penalties and the scorn of history. It happens!” These guys all get elected on a promise to run the government like a business. Well, this is what happens in business.

Or he could contact the U.S. Attorney, take a plea, serve his time, and move on. Maybe sign up with some group of fallen CEOs who travel the country warning business students about the perils of lax oversight of lunatic underlings.

The next thing Harold remembered, he was checking into the Crossways Motel under the name of Dr. Alphonse Q. DeGuerin, MD. The medical honorific was a point-of-purchase impulse. His mother had always wanted him to be a doctor.

Another forty-seven seconds come and gone. He let the curtain drop.

“ ‘Food Sí. Golf Nyet?’ ” Jay Buckman said with wry amusement, reporting the next installment of his SoftHarbor series, which centered on a spate of DayGlo graffiti that suddenly appeared all over the Shoppes at HarborVillage. “ ‘A painful torment awaits those who feed on the flesh of the people?’ Who talks like that? Evidently the same gang that also says things like, ‘Kill! Kill! Kill! *Olé!*’ *That’ll* bring in the tourists!”

“One thing’s for sure,” Jay said, delivering the closing kicker to his latest “Marketing Minute” report. “Investors are gonna be dumping FC2 stock at today’s opening, courtesy of the ‘Tangaroa Rebel Movement.’ ”

Cole Charleston called Fish Rommel at OGLE after he saw the report.

“Then you’re sure there’s no such organization or movement,” Cole asked. “No

‘TRM.’ ”

“A ‘Tangaroa Rebel Movement’?” Fish chuckled. “If there is, it’s a guy with a can of spray paint and a bug up his bunghole about your asshole buddy Harold Felcher, pardon my French, and a third party who can’t wait to go home to Queens.” He picked up printouts of intercepted email between Harold and Denny and Harold and Harry August.

“And I know their names.”

A WORLD GONE TOPSY

The walk from the back door of the Oval Office to Marine One idling on the South Lawn had long been a symbol of presidential mojo, and on good days Viktor Horvath strode that lush lawn like the colossus of Pennsylvania Avenue. Today, it felt more like a perp walk.

The once-proud Horvath chin, “belligerent and confrontational” in Pammy St. Pierre’s classic prose portrait, slumped on the presidential sternum like a turkey wattle. And nothing said you were out of mojo like lighting up in public.

Ray grabbed the presidential wrist to keep butt from lip. That’s all they needed now. The Einsatzgruppen of the White House press corps would murder him. They were already shouting out unseemly questions from behind the rope line as Ray and the president walked past.

“Mr. President! Do you believe Pitch Farnum has truly found Jesus? And if so, is it righteous to dump him?”

“Mr. President! Do you think you deserve to be stoned to death? What about your testicles?”

“President Horvath, sir! What do you know about cost overruns on the Pu’ukan Island battle memorial and when did you know it?”

“Mr. President, what do you make of the intercepted chatter coming out of the Pu’ukan? Are we losing the Pu’ukan? And if so, to whom? And where is the Pu’ukan?”

“We need to do something about the First Amendment, Ray.” The armed Marine standing guard at the boarding ladder offered a solution. “Permission to shoot, sir!” he asked, raising the barrel of his rifle and pointing it toward the press pen.

“Granted.”

“Denied!” Ray snapped. He pushed the gun barrel down. That’s all they needed now—the president giving the order for a Marine sharpshooter to shoot up the press corps. “Abso-fucking-lutely *denied!*” He hustled the president up the boarding ladder. “And polish those boots, soldier. You’re a disgrace.”

Viktor Horvath dragged his heavy legs into the passenger cabin.

Ray and the president buckled into seats across from each other. Ray pulled his window shade down as the craft lifted off the lawn for the flight to Camp David. He tried to draw the president’s shade, too, but the president caught his wrist.

“There are crazies out there, Mr. President. You could get shot.”

“A boy can dream.”

“Don’t say that, Mr. President! Please.” That’s all they needed now, an assassination. Although it *would* solve a few problems. ...

“What’s this ‘intercepted chatter’ from the Pu’ukan they’re talking about?” Viktor Horvath asked.

“Pardon?”

“Do I know anything about intercepted chatter from the Pu’ukan? Because I don’t think I do.”

Ray dismissed the matter with a backhand wave. “It’s nothing. Under control. Rommel’s on it.”

“Oh, well, in *that* case I’m much relieved. Not to worry, because Fish Rommel’s on it. Ray, chances are Fish Rommel’s on it because he’s behind it. Whatever it is. And if Fish Rommel’s on it or behind it, then I’m about to fall in it.”

“It’s nothing, Mr. President. Really. OGLE listens in on everything. And 99 percent of it’s bullshit. They can’t even translate all the junk they get.”

“They speak English on Pu’ukan, Ray. Translation shouldn’t be a problem.”

“True, but it’s a pidgin English. Have you heard all those gerunds they use? ‘Ing’ this and ‘ing’ that. My God,” Ray chuckled insincerely, “who can follow it? Anyway, it’s all junk. Doesn’t even rise to the level of chatter. That’s a term of art now, by the way. Did you know that? ‘Chatter.’ Go figure!”

The president glowered until Ray was forced to disclose.

“It’s just some cable traffic to and from the State Department jamoke out there,” Ray said.

The president asked if that were the same jamoke whom they had entrusted with the single responsibility of signing for hotel deliveries and charging them to State Department and Battle Monument Commission accounts, and asking no questions about it.

“Wasn’t that why we put a jamoke out there? To do nothing but sign for deliveries?”

“And to clean the pool,” Ray said. “But yes. It may be that he’s deciding between abandoning his post or taking the job more seriously than we had anticipated. At least enough to talk about it in cable traffic, it seems.”

“Hm.” The president ran a finger over the bump on his lip and winced.

“Maybe you shouldn’t touch it so much,” Ray said. That’s all they needed now, a huge tumor on the president’s face. He handed President Horvath a tube of *3-2-1 BlistOff!*

“‘Taking the job more seriously than we anticipated.’ I see.”

“Rotten luck that.”

A smear of gloom painted the face of Viktor Horvath. He looked out his window. Outside his window, the landmarks of the government district receded in the distance below—the great obelisk of the Washington Monument, the stolid yet contemplative presence of the Lincoln Memorial, the glow of the Reflecting Pool, the sturdy glory of the White House and Capitol Dome, all growing smaller. This must be how Nixon felt when he was run out of town in this same craft.

“So I get the one guy in government who’s taking his work seriously?”

“Can we get a drink for the leader of the goddamn Free World over here? Please!”

Ray bellowed to the Marine One steward. “Can you believe this shit, Mr. President? Leader of the free world and you can’t get a goddamn drink in your own helicopter of state.”

“Forget about the drink, Ray. Tell me who else is on these intercepts and how they became public. I thought we only eavesdropped on Muslim terrorists.”

The steward came with two vodkas. “About fucking time.” Ray told him to stay close.

“Ray? Who else is on the intercepts?”

“Harold Felcher for one.” Ray sipped at his drink.

“Harold Felcher is a Muslim terrorist? I didn’t know that.” The president downed his drink in a gulp and held his glass out for seconds. The steward poured. “Who else?”

“Your slogans guy. Did the Chechibennigan campaign for Houseman awhile back, too. And of course, his recent masterpiece—the Farnum titties video.”

“He’s a Muslim terrorist now, too?”

“No, Dash is secular atheist. And quite insane.”

“So no one’s actually a Muslim terrorist then.”

“Oh sure. Plenty.”

“Are there any in our soap opera?”

“We can’t rule it out.”

“Ray?”

“Not that we know of, Mr. President. Our problem is restricted to crazy Americans.”

“It’s all becoming clear to me now.”

“Really?”

“No, Ray. Not really. I don’t know what the fuck any of this is all about other than that the Christians are fire breathers, the Jews are atheists, the Muslims are innocent bystanders, and I get creamed on the thirty-yard walk from my office to my helicopter for the global rabble to see.”

“It’s topsy, boss.”

“All I wanna do is play golf. Is that too much for a leader to ask of an ungrateful nation?”

“Not in the least.”

“Explain it to me.”

“OK,” Ray said. “Long story short. Starts with Dash. Very smart, very creative, evidently very loosely moored. One day he runs out of good ideas and snaps. Goes from soup to nuts, and your man Farnum crosses his path at just the wrong moment. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. No one seems to think he had any particular plan or target in mind, but here we are.”

“He just snapped.”

“It does happen.” Ray all but raised an eyebrow at the president.

“Go on.”

“So Dash snaps and pulls a Gaugin. Runs off to an island.”

“And he just happens to pick my island.”

“You can’t make this stuff up.”

“I don’t believe any of it.”

“Me neither. I think Dash is getting even with someone. My money’s on Felcher.

It’s probably in the intercepts.”

“Which means Rommel knows for sure.”

“Right. But asking Rommel for the intercepts is the kiss of death.”

“We’d lose all deniability.”

“Knowledge is peril.”

“Why don’t we just kill them both— and Felcher? Make it look like an accident.

Or heart attacks. Don’t we have an agency for that?”

“I’ve got people working on it. The killing’s easy. Disposing of the bodies—that’s the problem. Always is.”

“Oh.” The president chewed on a piece of ice. “I was just kidding.”

“Yeah. Me, too. Anyway, we’d still have Rommel to deal with, and he’s harder to kill without arousing suspicion.”

“And the renegade priest? Charleston? The fire breather? We’d have to kill him, too.”

“Right. Him, too. That’d be a public service. There’d be lots of suspects if *he* turned up dead. But also lots of avengers—the highly determined type, with access to weapons.”

“And the State Department guy. The—what’s the word you used?”

“The jamoke.”

“Right. The State Department jamoke. Who you assured me would be just the right guy for us. I guess we have to keep him alive no matter what at this point since we need the deliveries.”

“Obstacles at every turn, Mr. President. A true test of leadership.”

“Here’s an idea. Why don’t we just ask Harold Felcher what’s going on?” He leaned forward, intent, almost hopeful.

“Can we do that, Ray? Can we just ... ask him? That way we don’t have to kill anybody.” He leaned back into his chair in satisfaction. “After all, we’re the president of the United States of America. We can ask Harold Felcher what he knows!”

“Nope. Can’t.”

“Why ‘nope’? Why ‘can’t’? We’re not the president of the United States?”

“Oh we are! We are!”

“So?”

“Can’t find him.” Ray finished his drink but kept an ice cube in his mouth. It distorted his speech. “He was a no-show for our meeting today. And now no one knows where he is.”

“Maybe he killed himself and spared us the trouble.”

“Maybe. That would be ideal.” Ray spit out his ice cube. It clanked against the sides of his glass. “But I doubt it. It takes gumption to kill yourself.”

“Too bad.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I’m taking a nap now, Ray. With any luck, I won’t wake up. If it turns out that I am unfortunate enough to reawaken at some point, it would be wonderful to learn that everything’s been resolved more or less in our favor. Or that none of it ever really happened.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Viktor Horvath closed his eyes and leaned his head back. Ray Jarecki grabbed the bottle from the steward, but the Marine wouldn’t let it go, still angry over being scolded in front of his Commander-in-Chief.

LOCKED AND LOADED

Barricaded with the Commander-in-Chief at Camp David, the presidential hidey hole in the Maryland mountains, Ray Jarecki was thankful for small favors. Chief among them were that the Einsatzgruppen were now more focused on whether Viktor Horvath should be stoned to death “the old-fashioned way,” as Cole Charleston had suggested, than in why the president had skated off to Camp David on a Tuesday afternoon while Congress was in session, and why he had remained incommunicado for three days.

That was the good news. The bad news was that it was now eleven thirty-eight on a Friday morning and the leader of the G-147 was still in his bathrobe, unshowered, unshaven and staring catatonically into an unlit fireplace from the cocoon of a club chair in the drawing room of his cabin. A torn clasp envelope lay on the floor a few feet from his unwashed, unclad feet.

The worse news was that earlier in the week, Secretary of State Clark Hassett had issued a statement asserting, accurately, that he had “absolutely no idea in the *world*”

(emphasis in original) why the White House had ordered the State Department to open an American presence on remote Pu'ukan Island, which didn't even have a government; nor why it doubled as the office of the recreation manager of a luxury hotel that hadn't even opened yet; nor why the recreation manager had been deputized as the Chief of Presence, as had been reported on CNN's "Marketing Minute"; nor why the White House had ordered the State Department to appropriate one hundred and seventeen million dollars to equip the tiny office with bone china, Italian marble flooring, quilted duvets, Persian silk bed skirts, tasseled neck rolls, lattice coverlets, and medallion shams.

Secretary Hassett's statement quoted himself as saying that he had no idea what a medallion sham was, but that he pledged the State Department's full cooperation with the Inspector General's investigation into all matters relating to it.

The secretary's statement was a hard blow to Viktor Horvath. "There was a time when the nobles protected their king, Ray."

Tell it to Caesar, Ray thought.

"Now they crush our testicles under stones. Hassett's a liability. Take care of it."

Ray wondered if by "liability" and "take care of it," the president meant that Ray should have the secretary of state murdered, and if so, what the budget for a Cabinet hit was. Perhaps he could launder the cost through the Pu'ukan mission itself? He could bury it—the cost, not the secretary—in, say, an invoice for half a dozen new kayaks. How cheaply could a life be bought? How much did a new kayak cost?

Still, Ray doubted the wisdom of the directive. Shouldn't Pammy St. Pierre be killed first? Ray felt that Pammy had earned pride of place with her profile of Pitch

Farnum in today's *Post*, with its focus on Farnum's upcoming religious junket to Pu'ukan that had been arranged through the good offices of Cole Charleston's BiTBiM ministry. The photo collage that accompanied the article, in black and white for that hint of gravitas, sickened Ray: Senator Farnum working the grill alongside Fish Rommel at a St. Pearl's pancake breakfast; Pitch filing his application for missionary work on the Pu'ukan; Pitch kneeling in prayer before the extremely unctuous the Right Rev. Father Dr. Cole Charleston.

"If Christ ever comes back to settle scores, he's going to slap that sanctimonious sleazebag Cole Charleston upside the head," Ray said. "Crushed testicles, my ass."

The president said that if Christ returned, the Son of God might have bigger koi to fry than Cole Charleston, but that if the Second Coming were to be anything like his own second term, the Savior should do himself a favor and stay put.

Viktor Horvath had been shattered when news reached the White House that someone had set fire to the pro shop between the Blue and Gold courses at SoftHarbor, reducing it to a malodorous pile of melting and exploding golf balls.

"What they did to that pro shop," he said. "An abomination."

Ray contained his shock. It was an important qualification for the job. "Leave it to me, Mr. President. You've got other crises to focus on. Speaking of which, the Texas secession vote is coming up and we really need to get organized with a—"

"We've got a crisis out there because of this—this—" Viktor Horvath pointed an unwashed toe at a clasp envelope on the floor. Ray picked it up. Inside was a printout of

an intercept that OGLE had pulled from the galactic data stream—the same one Fish Rommel had shown Cole Charleston a few days earlier about a rebel rising on the Pu’ukan. It changed Ray’s thinking: St. Pierre could wait, he said; they had to take out Rommel and Charleston first.

“You’re missing the point, Ray. The TRM is using Pu’ukan as a test case. If we don’t stop them there, the whole Macrominian Archipelago will be up for grabs. Ditto my investment. I can’t let that happen.”

Ray was aghast. “You don’t believe any of this, do you? Tangaroa Rebel Movement? Puh-leaze. This is a joke, right?”

“I’m not laughing.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you can throw this thing in the fireplace along with Pammy St. Pierre’s canonization of Pitch Farnum and burn ’em both. We got nothin’ to worry about, Mr. President. Not a goddamn thing.”

The president dug a bent cigarette from a crushed pack in his bathrobe pocket. “Rommel’s with you. Says it’s bullshit. Says the intercept proves it’s just two guys—Dash and your asshole buddy Felcher—in a pissing contest over some personal shit. Plus the jamoke.”

“More than likely.”

“Except I don’t believe Rommel. I think he’s full of shit with a helper. I think he wrote that *alleged* intercept himself to make it *look* like it’s just two guys taking it out on each other. Why? To cover up the fact that there really *is* a rebellion out there. It’s a triple

fake, Ray. That's clear. He wants me to go down in flames the way he and Houseman did in the Check."

Things were spinning out of control. Ray needed to rein them in before the president did something truly appalling. He pulled a chair up to the president's.

"Mr. President, I think what's happening here is—"

The president shot out of his club chair like a Maxfli exploding off the head of a Big Bertha. "Ray, those Tongafonga Rebels are up to no damn good and we damn well better give 'em a big fat kick in the kisser before all hell breaks loose. *All hell.*"

"A kick in the kisser?"

"That's right. We go in with *everything* we've got. Air, sea, space, boots on the ground if we have to, cruise missiles, drones. The works."

"You wanna blast 'em?" Ray was incredulous. "Let's just kill Rommel! That's the way to go!"

"That'll backfire. Stalin was right: one death is a tragedy. But a thousand? A thousand's a statistic. We'll kill a thousand. No one'll care."

"There aren't a thousand people on the island! We deported them all seventy years ago. To build the base."

"Then we'll bring 'em back. And after we bring 'em back, we'll hit 'em all and we hit 'em hard! Finish 'em off. Because if we don't, Ray—if we don't finish 'em off once and for all, it'll be another month before we get to opening day. And we can't afford more delay. We just can't!"

He fell back in his chair, spent. “You know what this is? This is the Tongafongas trying to get even with me for selling the development rights to FC2 instead of selling it back to them. It’s native payback. I’m sure of it.”

“Now wait a second. Let’s—let’s just put this in perspective. We’re talking about repopulating an underpopulated island so that we can go to war against them to protect a golf course?”

Viktor Horvath loosened the knot on his bathrobe. “It’s not just a golf course. It’s a DiPietro. It’s an investment.”

“Come on now, Mr. President. That’s crazy talk. Let me have Manolo fix you one of his world-famous sandwiches. You haven’t had a proper meal in days. Manolo!” Ray called out. “A sandwich for the president!”

The president giggled.

“What’s funny?” Ray asked.

“ ‘Sandwich.’ It’s a funny word.”

“Manolo! Hut hut! Code fucking red!”

The president shot out of his chair again, and his bathrobe fell open. His nuts hung free.

“I don’t want a fucking sandwich, Ray! I want ordnance! High explosives! With steel and flames and concussive impact and clods of dirt bursting toward the sky and falling back to the ground with heavy thuds! Preferably on people’s heads. Shit like that.”

His scrotum shook when he spoke. “They think blowing up a pro shop is impressive? I’ll show them impressive. I’ll bury the goddamn island with a tactical nuclear missile! That’s impressive!”

“Nukes?”

“We have to destroy it to save it. Simple as that.”

Ray fell silent. He turned to the window that looked out onto the driveway, hoping to find in the gray mountain haze an argument to corral the president back to reality. Or at least persuade him to tie up his robe. Instead, Ray noticed the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff chatting outside with the Secret Service detail.

“Why is Gunnar Stackhouse here?” Ray asked.

“I will *not* be the first president of the United States of America to lose a Pruno DiPietro!”

“But you just said that Fish Rommel says it’s bullshit,” Ray pleaded. “That there’s no Tangaroa Rebel Movement.”

“You’re not thinking clearly, Ray. If Fish Rommel says it’s bullshit, then Fish Rommel’s talking bullshit. Fish Rommel wants me to *think* it’s bullshit because it’s *not* bullshit. Fish Rommel thinks he can sandbag me.”

“Sandbag you?”

“Sandbag. Railroad. Dupe. Double-cross. Pick your idiom. You’re the poet. He’s still steamed over Tushrag.”

“Kuushtaarrgg,” Ray corrected.

“He thinks I shanghaied him and he’s been trying to shanghai me back ever since.

I thought I could stovepipe him by bringing him inside the tent so that he could piss out. But Fish Rommel is a disloyal, devious sonofabitch who would rather be outside pissing in.”

Ray tried to continue the argument, but the president was already opening the door to his personal quarters. “I want the fleet on Code Red and Air Force One locked and loaded in thirty. The Pu’ukan goes down, Ray.” He stepped into his bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

Ray knocked on the door. Then he pounded on the door.

“Mr. President! What about Lady Farnum’s party? It’s tomorrow! You can’t start a war the day before a Lady Farnum dinner party! It’s just not done!”

“Locked and loaded, Ray! And tell my wife I love her!” the president said from behind the closed door.

“You’re divorced! And she hates your guts!”

It was too late. Ray knew it. There was nothing left to do but lean against the door and slump to the floor in defeat. That goddamn Fish Rommel. He’d sell out his own country for personal payback.

“Excuse me, Señor Jarecki, sir.” It was Manolo with a lunch plate for the president. He stepped over Ray and went into the president’s private quarters with his passkey.

BORROW MY BLAHNIKS

Tish and Roger Swing followed the glow of paper lanterns up the gravel drive of Plumage Oaks, Pitch and Lady Farnum's cozy eight thousand square-foot center-hall colonial. Before they were even halfway to the front door, Roger had looked over his shoulder three times.

“We being tailed?” Tish asked.

“Pardon?”

“If you look over your shoulder one more time, you're going to snap your neck.”

“I just wonder if there's enough security in case the president comes. It seems a little light, that's all.” He looked over his shoulder again.

“Maybe he's not coming,” Tish said. “Maybe something else came up. Global financial meltdown. World War III. A run on Marlboro Lights at the Camp David canteen.”

“Right. I just thought he'd be here.”

“I wonder if Pitch’ll be here,” Tish said. “What’s worse: Showing up at your own party after getting sacked, or not showing up at your own party after getting sacked?”

“Good one.”

“Interesting that they would throw a party under the circumstances. Such an odd community we live in. But so exciting sometimes!” she said, grabbing Roger’s arm.

“Pitch won’t be here.” Roger’s certainty—and the fact that he was two thoughts behind in the conversation—aroused Tish’s curiosity.

They walked a few more steps in silence, the gravel crunching under their shoes and that wonderful, huge house rising over them. As they drew closer, Tish caught sight of a lone figure, clad in black, standing in the window of a third-floor dormer looking down on them, his face aglow from a votive candle flickering on the sill. It was the only window with a candle.

“Don’t look now,” Tish said, “but we’re being watched by Damien Karras.”

“Damien who?”

“From *The Exorcist*. Eleven o’clock high.” She gave a discreet nod toward the window, now almost directly above them. Before Roger could sneak a peak, Tish’s heel slipped in the gravel just off the front stoop and she twisted her ankle.

“Ow!” she cried, grabbing Roger’s shoulder and almost pulling him down just as Lady Farnum opened the front door. “Fucking shitbags!”

“Well good evening, you two!” Lady said, welcoming the tumbling, cussing couple to Plumage Oaks. “The Wallendas are here, everyone!”

Lady helped the Swings straighten up. “I’ll have to ask you to refrain from daredeviltry while inside, please. I’ve put the safety net away for the season.” She winked at Tish.

“It’s these fricking shoes,” Tish said. “I think they were made by Himmler.”

“It’s that goddamn gravel driveway,” Lady replied. “I’ve been begging Pitch to pave it over. Maybe now that he’s finally got time on his hands, he’ll get it done. Well, come on in. Let’s get you an ice pack and a whisky.” She led Tish in by the elbow. Roger followed.

“I’m *so* glad you could make it. You look more beautiful than ever.” Lady looked squarely into Tish’s eyes. “I can see why your husband is so in love with you.”

In the foyer, the chandelier that Lady had been working on when Roger visited sparkled like sunlight on diamonds, showering beads of light onto everyone and everything below—and onto Cole Charleston, standing at the top of the western-spur. Dots of light mottled his black suit. Cole and Roger briefly caught each other’s eyes. Roger quickly turned back to Lady and Tish.

“Lady, the chandelier looks wonderful,” Roger said. “And that brass plate is a vision.”

Lady said she couldn’t have done it without Roger’s blood sacrifice. They all laughed. Tish had no idea what she was laughing at. It really was an odd community.

A waiter came by with a tray of drinks. Lady took a flute of champagne and handed it to Tish. “Bottoms up, dear. It’ll go right to the sprain and you’ll forget all about suing me.” She took another glass for Roger and one for herself and proposed a toast:

“Here’s to new beginnings in our old political cesspool.”

Lady was both beautiful and cute, Tish thought. Pert and energetic, yet sophisticated, contained and utterly at ease with herself and her world. Tish could almost forgive Roger for having a crush on Lady. She was starting to have a crush on Lady herself. And not only was she charming and sexy. She was also observant.

“That heel is about to snap,” she said.

“Oh, that’s OK,” Tish said. “If it does, I’ll just limp and bob. I’m caring less about it every second.” She held up her empty glass.

“There will be no limping and bobbing in my sector,” Lady said. “One of my guests goes home with an injury on Saturday and it’s in *The Post* on Sunday. We need to get you into a replacement pair stat. Something supportive but stylish. Do we like Blahniks?”

“Does Howdy Doody have wooden balls?” They laughed.

Lady found Michaela Amundson, the party planner, in the crowd and waved her over.

“Yes, Lady?” Michaela said, laying hand on the small of Lady’s back.

“In addition to being the Capitol’s reigning party architect, Michaela Amundson is also a style maven with a shoe fetish worse than mine by an order of magnitude.”

“It’s true,” Michaela said. “Although shoes always seem to look better on your feet, Lady.” And off of them, she wanted to say.

“Michaela, dear, could you help Tish Swing pick out a pair of Blahniks from upstairs?”

“I’d love to.”

Tish protested, but Lady pointed out that she wasn't giving the shoes away and that Tish damn well better bring them back on Monday, in person, or she'd slap her with a subpoena hard enough to leave a bruise.

Tish plucked a slab of miso-glazed smoked sable on rice cracker from a passing tray of hors d'oeuvre and followed Michaela up the eastern spur. On the turn at the landing, she paused to scan the stage below. It was a wonderful sight, lambent and warm, with the sounds and voices mixing into a pleasant hum of happiness.

"No one throws a party like Lady Farnum," Michaela said, admiring Tish admiring the scene. Tish turned to her escort but was almost blinded by the chandelier, which backlit Michaela's head like an enormous crystal wig.

"Come," Michaela said. "Let's get your dogs into some hot beds."

Yep, Tish thought. A crazy, wonderful community.

Downstairs, Lady led Roger into the large study off the foyer. The room was set up with rows of folding metal chairs, on each of which sat a little nylon-netted gift sack filled with foil-wrapped chocolate coins—cheap junk you'd get at the drug store.

At the front of the room, Mitch Kinsella, a field manager from TeamTech, the District's hot new mobile IT service, and his colleague Tim Diego were wiring up a communications network—two laptops, router, server and four fifty-two-inch flat-screen TVs, each perched on sturdy steel stands and arrayed in an arc facing the folding chairs. They were labeled Plasma I, Plasma II, Plasma III and Plasma IV. Ganglia of electrical cables connected the screens to the computer equipment.

"I'm worried," Lady confided to Roger. "I don't think he's coming."

Roger said he also had been wondering what to make of the absence of the overdone security presence that invariably accompanied the president, and whether it meant that Viktor Horvath wasn't planning on making an appearance.

"If he's not coming, what does that mean for tonight?" Roger asked.

"It means nothing for tonight," Lady said. "We proceed as planned. I wish he were coming. I wish he weren't such a coward. But that ship left the barn long ago." Besides, even if Viktor Horvath were a no-show, he'd get the news soon enough from the flap jaws among her guests who were sure to live blog, tweet, text, Instagram and Snapchat developments as they happened. "That's why I invited them."

She was only half-joking. Every branch of government was represented in her home: three cabinet secretaries (two full-time, one acting); nine members of the House of Representatives, including Speaker of the House Armand Delgado; five senators, among whom were two committee chairmen and the majority leader, Langmann Longmann, president pro tempore of the Senate; a smattering of regulatory chiefs; and several heavyweights from the federal judiciary, including the heaviest, the Honorable Chief Justice Armand Burns Frippworthy. The only absence of note was Vice President Fabian Muccigrossi, whose protocol was to avoid ever being in the vicinity of Viktor Horvath out of fear of being collateral damage in an attempt on the president's life, which he believed was overdue. The Fourth Estate, represented by Lady's good friend Pammy St. Pierre, was poking around the kitchen for behind-the-scenes color and crudités.

"It's a good crowd," said a grave male voice.

Lady and Roger turned. It was Cole Charleston.

“It’d be better if the guest of honor showed up,” Lady said.

Cole laid a healing paw on her shoulder. “You’ve done your typically exceptional job, Lady. Professional and comprehensive. Everything will work out.” He counseled her to tend to her guests and to let events take their course.

“How you are not be consumed with anxiety is beyond me,” she replied.

“That’s the awesome power of prayer. Now go,” Charleston said, shooing her off.

“Your world awaits.”

Stepping into the study in borrowed Blahniks, Tish crossed paths with Lady and sidled up to Roger. She thrust out a shoe—and a goodly portion of lower leg—to show it off.

“Sexy, huh?” Buzzed and giddy, she swung her foot behind Roger’s leg and ran it up and down the back of his calf.

“Tish, dear,” Roger said, “I’d like you to meet Cole Charleston.”

“So nice to meet—”

“The *Rev.* Cole Charleston,” Roger said. “Father, this is my wife, Patricia.” “Oh good God, I’m so sorry,” Tish said, quickly withdrawing her foot from Roger’s leg and her arm from around his waist. Just as she reached out to shake hands, she realized that this was the creepy Father Karras from the third-floor dormer.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Swing,” Cole said.

“Likewise, I’m sure.”

Lady rejoined the little group and asked to borrow Cole.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Cole said to Tish and Roger.

“Gonna see a man about a horse?” Tish called out as Cole and Lady stepped out. Roger tried to cover it with a loud stage cough.

“That’s what you get for calling me ‘Patricia.’ ”

“It’s your name.”

“Yeah, but you’re not my daddy.”

Before Roger could reply, a new guest joined their fluid clutch. “Methinks the abstemious faux shepherd would like to make our Lady his personal sheep, if you know what I mean,” said Pammy St. Pierre. She turned to Roger. “Nice to see you, Mr. Acting Secretary.”

The last meaningful interaction between Pammy St. Pierre and Roger was when she interviewed him five years ago for a Sunday profile on his appointment to head Viktor Horvath’s Council of Economic Advisors. In her piece, Pammy interpreted Roger’s quiet nature as “social discomfiture.” Not that it still rankled.

Roger returned the greeting. “Good evening, Ms. St. Pierre. I’d like you to meet my—” Pammy had already grabbed Tish’s hand and introduced herself.

“Pammy St. Pierre of *The Post*. Nice to meet you. Love what you’re doing with MidWaste. And I *really* dig those hooves. Blahniks?”

“Yes! Don’t you just *love* them?” With Cole gone, Tish was back to displaying her foot.

“Oh you lucky bitch,” Pammy said. “If you get really, *really* drunk and pass out on the floor, can I steal them?”

“I’d say ‘go for it’ but they’re not mine.”

“So Lady’s giving away her shoes again? She’s like Mother Teresa, that one: always with the feet. Did she tell you to bring them back next week?”

“Actually, yes she—”

“Well forget it. You put that right out of your mind. She’ll forget she ever gave them to you. Consider those puppies yours now.”

Pammy snagged two champagne flutes from a tray and handed them both to Tish. “Here, drink these.” To Roger, she said, “I assume you’re still a tea-totaler, so I won’t bother with you. Besides, I don’t care for your shoes.” She looked down at Roger’s wingtips. “Ick.”

“You wanna know something?” Tish said.

“Is this going to be a confession? Because I love confessions. It’s my job. Talk to me.”

“Be careful, Tish,” Roger said, “or you’ll be reading your private thoughts in tomorrow’s *Post*.”

“Oh that’s just such bullshit, Swing. Tomorrow’s Saturday. I’m writing for Sunday.”

Tish snorted a laugh, sending half a sip of champagne into her sinuses and the other half into her lungs, provoking a coughing fit.

“Oh now that’s pretty,” Pammy teased. “You two make quite the power couple: Mr. Temperance Tightass and Mrs. Pig Snort Loose Lungs. So what’s this big confession you were about to disclose before Top Secret over here kicked your shin? Your shop

making a move on the Middle States delegation? You should, because they stink.” She wafted the air and crinkled her nose.”

Sooner or later, Roger knew Pammy that would get bored with them and move on to another pod of partygoers. He was counting the seconds. Tish finished clearing her throat and blowing her nose, then dabbed at her teary eyes with the corner of a cocktail napkin. She gave Roger a quick look—half apology, half tough-shit-I’m-going-to-say-it-anyway-because-it’s-a-party—then disgorged a full sentence in a single, breathless word: “I-love-your-column-but-I-pretend-not-to-because-you’re-viewed-as-an-annoyance-among-the-leadership-classes. There! I’ve said it!” She threw back the contents of one of the two champagnes she was still holding.

Pammy replied with a blank stare.

“Am I awful for saying that?” Tish asked, stifling a belch.

“No, Tish dear, not for that. But your drinking manners are pretty horrid,” Pammy replied. “The fact is, you’re my bread-and-butter reader. And we have market research to prove it. It turns out that lots of people in Washington claim to hate my stuff and read it week after week. The difference is that they don’t admit it to my face, which makes you a hypocrite of another order entirely, which I respect the hell out of.”

“Really?”

“No, but I’ll say almost anything to get those shoes.”

“They’re not mine!”

“You listen to me, Tush,” Pammy said, shaking her pen at Tish. “Lady and I swap swag all the time. And I’ll be leaving here with those shoes over your cold, dead feet if I have to.”

A waiter accidentally bumped Pammy’s elbow and she dropped her pen. She bent down to pick it up. Roger, assuming she was going to yank the shoes off Tish’s feet, was flabbergasted. He reached down and grabbed Pammy’s arm, nearly pulling it out of the socket to preempt a spectacle.

“Ow! Goddammit, Swing!” Pammy cried. “What the hell are you doing!” Heads turned.

“Roger! My God!” Tish exclaimed.

“Mind if I pick up my pen, Mr. Acting Secretary?” Pammy said in a loud voice.

Roger was mortified when he realized his mistake. “I’m terribly sorry,” he said, awkwardly reaching out to touch, grab or rub—he wasn’t sure which to do—Pammy’s shoulder. He was feeling socially discomfited in the extreme.

“Crap,” Pammy said, massaging her rotator cuff. “I’m gonna need two drinks now: one for the pain and the other to throw in your face, even if it is a federal offense.”

“I’m so sorry,” Roger pleaded.

“This kind of thing happen a lot when you two go out?” Pammy asked Tish.

“It’s why we never go out,” Tish said.

“That’s not true,” Roger said defensively. “We go out.”

“Maybe you should stay in more,” Pammy said. “You’re a menace to civil society. And to Washington.” She took Tish’s full champagne flute and took a gulp.

Tish put her arms around Roger and kissed him on the cheek. “That’s not a bad idea. We should stay in more. We’re very much in love.” She batted her eyelids.

“Hm. Proves there’s someone for everyone.” Pammy finished off the rest of Tish’s champagne. “Anyway, Mr. *Acting* Secretary, now that I have some dirt on you, let’s talk about what’s going on here tonight, shall we? I promise not to whip out my notepad or, heaven forbid, drop my pen in your vicinity if you promise to be forthcoming and to refrain from further assaults against my person.”

Tish jumped on board. “Yeah, Roger. Just what the hell’s going on here?” She turned to Pammy. “Going on with what?”

“You two are a pair, you know that?” Pammy whipped out her notepad. “What’s going on with all *this* and all *them*.” She swept her hard-won pen across the room. “Call me conventional, but you don’t see two hundred yards of electrical tape, seventy-five folding chairs and thirty grand worth of computer equipment at most dinner parties unless they’re making high-def porn. Although I do notice that Justice Fripworthy is here. Will he be filling in for Ron Jeremy this evening, Swing? And by the way, ‘Swing’ sounds like a porn name.”

“You’re the reporter, Ms. St. Pierre. You tell us. And if you could please put that notepad away, I’d be enormously grateful.”

“‘E-nor-mous-ly grate-ful,’ ” Pammy said as she wrote in her notepad.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Roger lied. “I assumed it was just another quiet dinner party.”

“In my experience,” Pammy said, “when a public official says ‘honestly,’ it’s prima facie evidence of lying. It’s like an eye twitch. And you and our hostess were spied huddled in conversation not five minutes ago. So either you know what’s up, or you’ve been trying to make sexy with Lady Farnum under your wife’s nose.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Roger said. Tish glared at him. “It’s ridiculous,” he protested to Tish.

Pammy dabbed the point of her pen onto the tip of her tongue. “Sing, Swing.”

“Holy Jesus! Gah!”

Mitch Kinsella, the IT tech, ripped off his headphones and erupted from his chair, toppling it over. “He broke my eardrums! I can’t hear! I can’t hear!” He turned to Tim Diego. “Are they bleeding? My ears! Are they bleeding? What?!”

Tim Diego checked Mitch’s ears and assured him that they weren’t bleeding.

“You’re sure?!” Mitch opened and closed his mouth to pop his ears. “It feels like they’re bleeding!”

“Yup,” Pammy said. “Just another quiet dinner party.”

“What?!”

A POO-POO PLATTER

Mitch touched his ear again, then checked his finger: No blood. Thank God for that. He gingerly pulled his headphones back on—but not completely over—his ears and turned the volume down to a whisper.

“Tell him to watch the levels, will ya’, Tim?” Tim Diego had been managing the feed from Plasma III, which had sent an aural blast into Mitch’s eardrum. “And tell him to turn away from his mic if he’s gonna cough like that.”

“Sorry about that, Mitch. I’ll take care of it.” Tim suppressed a smile. Mitch was a gifted tech and a great boss, but he tended to get a little overwrought on big jobs and to work up his anxiety in the belief that it would inoculate him against disaster. It amused Tim.

Back among her guests, Lady greeted Ray Jarecki at the open bar across the foyer. She asked about the president.

“He’s very good, very good,” Ray replied with an assurance that Lady easily saw through. “Excellent, in fact. Though of course extremely busy. Which is why he can’t make it tonight.”

Lady brandished a serious brow and said she completely understood. “It sounds very ... presidential.”

“Oh, absolutely. This whole mess with the Chinese and the, uh ...” He waved his hand. “Et cetera and so forth.”

It was entirely possible that President Horvath was managing some new mess with the Chinese. But Ray doubted it. In fact, the last Ray had seen or communicated with Viktor Horvath was at Camp David a few days earlier, when the president had ordered Special Agent Guy Rapp, the head of his Secret Service detail, to forcibly remove Ray from the mountain. Agent Rapp disliked Ray, and he executed the order with what Ray viewed as excessive vim. Was it really necessary to unholster his pistol, drop into a firing crouch and warn Ray to back away from the bedroom door or he would be “blown to bloody fucking bits”? Ray briefly considered suicide by Homeland Security agent, but backed off because of the likelihood that Guy Rapp would kneecap instead of kill him. The pain of a shot kneecap was said to be unendurable.

“All right, Rappy, you win,” Ray had said. “I’m leaving. But you can tell the president,” he added, raising his voice for Viktor Horvath to hear through the closed door, “that he’s on his own! I’ve had it!”

“I’ll be sure to do that, sir.” Rapp reholstered his pistol and radioed in for a golf cart to take Ray down the mountain.

Ray spent the next two days vainly trying to contact the president. When that failed, he vainly tried to contact Vice President Muccigrossi. When that failed, he decided to attend Lady Farnum's party in the president's place, vainly hoping that no one would detect and read meaning into his high anxiety and low spirit.

"And how's Senator Farnum holding up?" It was an odd question for Ray to ask Lady given the circumstances. But Ray long ago had lost a sense of shame when it came to destroying people and then asking after their well-being.

"Pitch is very good, very good. Excellent, in fact," Lady said. "He's around here somewhere." She made a show of looking around the room for her husband. "I know I just saw him."

Technically, Lady was not lying through her teeth. She *had* just seen Pitch around there somewhere. Just not in person.

"Good, good," Ray said. "The president asked me to send his regards."

"I'm so pleased, Ray. And thank you for coming tonight. It means a lot to Pitch and me. And do please let the president know that I absolutely understand how busy he is and that we're both praying for a swift and favorable resolution of the Chinese mess. Talk about a poo-poo platter!"

"Right. The Chinese mess. They're a tough little people!"

Definitely a classy broad, Ray thought. Keeps her venom in check. That's a gift. Nice tits, too. "What Chinese mess?" he wanted to ask.

What a vile bug, Lady thought. She excused herself to mingle.

Ray stayed at the bar and listened to the music playing in the background:

Howlin' Wolf singing of plans to knock out all the windows and kick down all the doors while pitching a wang dang doodle. Ray ordered a vodka for the road. He came, he had been seen, now he could leave. He scanned the crowd over the edge of his glass. The regulars were here: Langmann Longman, Tammy Claire Bennett, Swing and wife, that vampiress Pammy St. Pierre. And Cole Charleston? What crypt had he crawled out from? Was there some ex-con former House chairman near death and in need of last rites here at Plumage Oaks? Fish Rommel was here, too. That was unexpected, and not entirely comforting. Even more discomfoting was that Rommel and Charleston were off in a corner whispering dark somethings to each other. What were those two up to? Ray's anxiety tightened a notch.

“Can I have everyone's attention, please?”

It was Lady Farnum, on the landing of the western spur overlooking the crowd in the foyer. The music stopped and heads turned her way. The guests quieted. Ray stepped to the edge of the foyer. Tim Diego, too, turned to get a peek at her. Lady was at least twenty years older than Tim, but there was something about her that drew his attention.

“Ladies? Gentlemen? ... Members of Congress?”

Good-natured chuckling. Everyone hated Congress. Even Congress hated Congress.

“I want to thank you all for coming. I usually like to give at least six weeks' notice before a party, but I had to settle for just six days this time. That's a record! How'd I do?”

Robust applause.

“Unfortunately, Pitch couldn't be here in person to enjoy this wonderful evening.

And for Pitch to miss a party—whew!”

More laughter, but not from Ray Jarecki. Hadn't Lady just told him that Pitch was here? Meanwhile, he couldn't get that creepy song out of his head.

We gonna knock out all the windows.

“Now as many of you know—Oh let's just cut to the crap. As you all know, Pitch has been drug through the mud the last couple of weeks. But that's not why he's not here. Or not here in person. Am I making the slightest bit of sense?”

Justice Fripworthy rose to her defense. “None at all, dear, but we love you anyway! Proceed!”

More applause, some “hear, hears,” an “O ye, o ye!” and an “Oy vey, oy vey!” from Ira Framkin, chief lobbyist for the Association of Associations.

Lady continued. “You may have noticed that we've turned the study—that's the room to your left—into a something of a home theater this evening so that we can share something with you.”

Attention turned to the study to the left, where Cole Charleston stood, grim and erect astride the floor saddle between the two rooms and looking very much like a funeral director about to usher mourners to the service. Ray noticed Charleston was alone now. He looked around for Rommel but couldn't find him. Where was Admiral Rommel? The world wonders.

We gonna kick down all the doors.

“So if you will all please make your way in, that would be wonderful.”

There was thrum and chatter as the guests filed into the study and took their seats. From above, Lady spotted Ray drifting toward the front door. Concerned that he might try to slip out amid the bustle, she called to him.

“You’ll stay for the show, Ray? I’d be *so* grateful.”

Before Ray could respond, Michaela was on his arm. What a prize that Michaela was! Lady would have to find her a good match after this was over. Michaela gave Lady a little wink as she led Ray to his seat. Of course Lady knew that the only match Michaela wanted was Lady.

His escape route cut off, Ray had no choice but to fall in with the mass of guests pouring into the living room for whatever artsy entertainment Lady Farnum had planned. Ray made the best of it by flirting with Michaela.

“Escort here often?” No sooner had he smirked at his own charm than Michaela handed Ray off to Cole Charleston at the threshold.

“Not as often as I’d like,” Cole answered. And before Ray knew it, he was tucked into the middle seat of the middle row.

Landlocked!

There was no discreet way out now. Worse, Ray knew that at any minute those last three vodkas would crash into his bloodstream and debilitate his eye-foot coordination; if he tried to leave now, he’d have to thread his way over all those wingtips and three-inch heels. He wouldn’t get more than two seats toward the door before falling onto someone’s lap. He looked to see who was two seats toward the door.

Armand of the House. Better sit still.

“God, I hope it’s not home movies,” Tish whispered to Pammy, seated on her right.

“Depends on what kind of home movie.” Pammy waggled an eyebrow. They giggled. To Tish’s left, Roger cleared his throat in reproof.

“I bet the acting Treasury secretary knows what kind of movie we’re in for,” Pammy said.

At the front of the room, Lady turned to Mitch Kinsella and got the geek’s OK to proceed. Once again, she called her guests to attention.

“So! Where was I?”

“On the landing of the stairs!” Chief Justice Fripworthy called out.

“The guests will disregard the quips of the jurist in the fourth row,” Lady replied. “Now, I know this is a bit heterodox for a dinner party, but I think you’re going to enjoy this presentation. And no, it’s not outtakes of Pitch’s public service announcement with the panty models, in case some of you were wondering. Or hoping.”

A release of pent-up laughter.

“Cole, dear, can you hit the lights please?”

FLIGHT OF THE PAYBACK

Plasma II switched on and Lady's guests saw an ancient B-29 Superfortress World War II-era bomber, a rattling, steel-skinned behemoth of the air, galumph over the blue-green Sea of Pu'ukan toward the western edge of Pu'ukan Island.

It was an historic flight. No B-29 had flown over Pu'ukan—or any other Macrominian atoll, island or archipelago—for more than seventy years, not since waves of the great winged beasts tore up the skies between Tinian and Tokyo in an airborne holocaust that climaxed in radiant flourishes over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the missions for which Chessler Charles Boresby had discovered the perfect place for the bomb pits that would win the war. Now, seven decades later, one of the farting pterodactyls, the word "PAYBACK" freshly stenciled on its sides, belched and wobbled over downtown Pu'ukan as if the pilot were struggling to keep it aloft. Which he was. Great bursts of dirty vapor shot out the backs of its four huge engines, painting the sky in thick, black contrails that hung in the humid air.

The island was so small that in less than a minute, the decrepit old bomber had thundered over Harbor Heights, barreled down Boresby Boulevard, cleared the resort grounds, passed over the eastern shore of the island, and clambered back up into the high sky for a long, wide arc back to the water west of the island, whence it had come.

The PAYBACK had the sky to herself, which was a good thing since the pilot needed all the space he could get.

“She’s a wobbly old bird. Over,” the pilot announced over the cockpit radio.

“You’re doing great, Bun,” co-pilot Phil Caminitti replied. “Just fantastic. Sooo proud of you.”

“Thanks, Phil. Over. . . . You really think so? Over.”

“Think so? Know so!”

Stunned by what she was watching and hearing on the T.V. screen, Tish turned to Roger.

“Is that—”

Roger nodded. “ ’fraid so.”

“Oh my.”

“Yep. Oh, my.”

Pammy St. Pierre leaned across Tish. “You know this guy, Swing?”

Roger nodded. “ ’fraid so.

“It’s his *brother*,” Tish said in a wide-eyed stage whisper.

Pammy recoiled, then shook her head and scribbled into her notepad as fast as her hand could move across the page.

“Say what you want, people, but Lady Farnum knows how to throw a kickass party,” Pammy said. “Spell his name for me, will you, Swing?”

“S-W-I —”

#

Over the Sea of Pu’ukan—not too high over it, since the PAYBACK’s refurbished engines, all but held together with glue and tape, risked imploding above a thousand feet—Bundy Swing smiled. His heart swelled. His leg trembled. His stump thumped. He hadn’t felt such all-consuming joy in—ever! After a lifetime of fits and starts and near-misses and direct hits on so many wrong targets, he was behind the wheel, if not necessarily in full control, of a machine that was more than a plane. The B-29 Superfortress was ninety-nine feet and one hundred and fifty-five thousand pounds of steel and fuel. In 1945, some twenty-four-year-old kid not a year out of flight school had sat in this very seat and had flown this very beast over the Jap mainland, muscling his way through sheets of Triple A as thick as shag carpeting. And now here Bundy was, in the same plane, in the same seat, over the same ocean if not the same city, on a mission that really would be worth losing a leg over. If the worst thing happened and the PAYBACK crashed in flames today, there was no one he’d rather go down with than Phil Caminitti.

What a way to go!

“What’s that, Bun?”

Oops. Must’ve said that one out loud. “Nothing, Phil. Just daydreaming. Over.”

What a character, Phil thought. Only Bundy Swing would a) daydream while piloting a long-range strategic bomber that hadn't left the ground since VJ Day, and b) admit it to his co-pilot in real time over open radio lines.

How could you not fall in love with a man like that?

“What's that, Phil? Over.”

Oops. Must've said that one out loud. “Nothing, Bun. Just daydreaming.”

Even with the repair work, the PAYBACK was bouncing in and out of its flight path and had shed a few dozen machine parts since takeoff. But all four nodes were firing, more or less, and she was airborne. In truth, that was more than Bundy had expected.

At Plumage Oaks, Mitch Kinsella, an index finger suspended over his keyboard in anticipation of his cue, gave Lady the nod to proceed.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Lady announced, her heart in her throat, “I give you”—one last beseeching look to Mitch, who nodded—“Pitch Farnum.”

Mitch's finger plunged onto the “enter” key like a divebomber, and Plasma III lit up on contact, drawing every head in the room eighteen inches to the right. There on the flat screen, bathed in the light of a Pu'ukan sunrise at a scenic overlook carved into the flattened top of Mount Tangaroa eight thousand miles, two continents and one ocean away, was a familiar figure looking just as relaxed and happy as if it were another ordinary day at home. A collective gasp drew the air from the room with a giant sucking sound, followed by a dead silence. Lady turned to Mitch, a blank expression on her face.

“He's all yours, ma'am,” Mitch said. “Say something to him.”

“Pitch?” She could see him standing next to a low stone wall on top of the mountain, staring into a tripod-mounted webcam that was transmitting his presence to Plumage Oaks, and its presence to the cell phone he held in his hand. He was wearing huge headphones.

“Lady?” Pitch replied. “Is that you? It’s me. Pitch!”

The living room erupted in riotous foot-stomping, palm-smacking applause. Whistles, howls and catcalls drew a smile from Lady so wide it nearly snapped her jaw. More than one stomping shoe knocked into Ray Jarecki’s body as he used the cover of the ruckus to slide off his chair to make a crawling break for the front door.

Mitch tightened the shot of Pitch, close enough for all to see the sticker with the TeamTech logo on Pitch’s headset.

“You see what I see?” he whispered to Tim Diego.

“I see a phenomenal bit of brand building,” Tim replied. “Good call on those stickers.”

The appearance of Pitch on Plasma III was a massive relief to Roger Swing. Now they could execute the plan.

“Game on,” he said.

“ ‘Game on?’ ” Tish asked. “What game is on?”

Cole Charleston quieted the crowd with a stern look. Lady dabbed a discreet fingertip at the corner of her eye and greeted her husband.

“We’re all here, Pitch. Can you see us?”

Mitch fed a wide-angle view of the living room onto Pitch’s cell phone.

“I can!” Pitch exclaimed. “Everyone’s there! I see the two Armands, Langmann, Michaela. Hi, Michaela! And I see the cardinal’s as glum as ever. Hello, glum cardinal!”

“I do believe something dramatic and important is unfolding here,” Chief Justice Fripworthy whispered in sidebar to Pammy St. Pierre. “Although I must say I haven’t a clue as to what.”

“I’ll make a note of that, Frip. Thanks.” The Chief Justice winked. Pammy rolled her eyes.

The pieces were falling into place. “Two minutes to go,” Lady muttered to herself. She scanned the crowd for Ray Jarecki. She didn’t see him.

#

Over the Sea of Pu’ukan, Bundy pulled back on the rudder and the big beast boomed, belched and bucked in the bright sky. A few more bolts and washers popped off the tail section as the PAYBACK continued its slow climb west of the island. But Bundy had it under control.

“That’s a good piece of flying, Bun,” Phil said. “Need another hand with those ailerons?”

“Rather have another foot,” he joked.

They laughed.

“Oh Bun,” Phil said, unaware that their radio line was still open. “We should’ve done this twenty years ago, before the Check ever happened.”

“Never would’ve worked out then, Phil. Woulda gotten all tangled up with each other. Over.”

“That’s not such a bad thought.” She pinched Bundy on a muffin top. He giggled.

“Let’s do this, Phil! Over!”

“Good God, I think they’re going to copulate,” Chief Justice Fripworthy said.

“You know, Bun, I’m right here. You don’t have to keep saying ‘Over.’ ”

Bundy gunned the outside engines hard and mashed in the rudder. “Here’s to Chechibennigan, Phil!”

“To Chechibennigan, Bun!”

Bundy pointed the nose of the bomber straight for the western shoreline and shimmied into his flight lane. The beast rumbled and farted. He couldn’t have been more than two hundred feet off the ground—so close to the earth that every creature, plant, joist and brick shook beneath those giant palpating nodes that hung from the wings like brontosaurus teats.

Fish Rommel, standing alone now in the far corner of the living room, was glued to Plasma II, the video feed from the PAYBACK. Years of humiliation and disgrace, for him and for so many others, were about to come crashing down on Viktor Horvath’s corrupt noodle. And there was no one—not Cole Charleston, not Pitch or Lady Farnum, not Roger Swing and not Fish Rommel himself—who deserved this moment more than that man, that patriot, flying that plane right there in Lady Farnum’s living room.

“Thank God for Bundy Swing,” Fish said quietly. “Let us be not unworthy of his sacrifice.”

Unused to all the thrust Bundy was driving through them, the bronto teats began to shake and bounce. The rattle ran up to the wings, through the fuselage and back down

again in a pulsating circuit. All parts were working beyond capacity. Rivets and bolts popped off and sections of fuselage peeled back like a molting snake. Plane parts rained to the ground as the PAYBACK neared downtown. A tremendous boom blew out the speakers on Plasma II. Sound and video went dead. On Plasma III, Pitch's image suddenly froze, then flickered, then disappeared into snow.

All was quiet but for the sizzling of electronics equipment and the thud of Mitch Kinsella's heart as it hit the floor.

As he so often had, Chief Justice Fripworthy spoke for the majority. "Oh, dear. This can't be good. This cannot be good at all."

KITTENS ON THE CROSS

The PAYBACK had lost an engine. It fell right off the wing. The bomber tipped sharply onto its heavy side, where two engines still hung. Bundy held the wheel in a death grip, determined to right the PAYBACK before it slammed into the nearest high object. One hundred and fifty-five thousand pounds of vibrating steel shook his arms and shoulders. If he clamped his jaws any tighter, he'd bite through his palate.

“For the love of Christ and kittens on the cross, climb you bastard! Climb!”

Whether he could right the plane and save their lives, or lose control, smash into the ground at three hundred miles an hour, explode in a fireball and fail once again, depended on the strength and dexterity of his two hands and one foot. He worked the controls as if Phil's life depended on it, which it did.

Phil! Where was Phil? Her seat was empty.

“Phil!” Bundy cried. “Phil! Over!”

Phil had knocked her head against the dash when the engine fell off and the bomber pitched onto its side, but she was already out of her seat and going through the

damage-inspection protocol. She looked out the port window and saw an empty space on the wing where an engine should be.

“Number Four’s gone!” she called out. “Snapped clean off the wing and hit the side of the mountain. Number One’s working but hanging by a bolt.”

Bundy heaved a sigh of relief. She’s alive. Thank God for that. He managed to level out the plane and regain functional control. Just.

Phil dashed across the aisle to check out the other window. “We’ve got some very rich exhaust starboard but otherwise fine. Two and Three are operational. At least there’s no fire.” She looked to the ground below. “Helluva fire on the mountain, though.”

Then she realized that Pitch Farnum was on top of the mountain. Oh, shit. Did he get hit? The last thing Bundy needed now, after the Chechibennigan fiasco, was to accidentally bomb a United States senator to death on a live-stream feed.

At the tennis facility across the island, Denny Dash had been kneeling at center court with a can of Day-Glo spray paint in each hand—pink in his left and yellow in his right—when he heard and even felt the boom when Number Four hit the ground and echo around the island. He figured Brno and Junior had broken into the cache of fireworks set aside for the grand opening. He was impressed.

“Damn! You get those boys going and they just don’t stop.”

He gave both paint cans a vigorous shake. “They’re good. They’re crazy as loons, but they are goddammed good at what they do.”

#

Lady was not reacting well to the disruption of the video links from Pu’ukan.

“Where’s the fucking picture! There’s no fucking picture!”

Mitch Kinsella felt the pressure. “There’s obviously been some sort of event that’s—”

“ ‘Event’? ‘Event’? My fucking husband’s out there somewhere in that ‘event!’ ”

Lady shoved Mitch off his chair. He fell to the floor, hard.

Tish’s jaw hung open. Roger’s head was buried in his hands. Pammy St. Pierre’s writing hand cramped up. Tim Diego was too engrossed in fixing the equipment to help Mitch Kinsella. Cole helped Mitch back into his chair and pulled Lady away before she pushed him down again.

“Let him do his work,” Cole said. “The battle against the Devil is a hard, bloody business.”

Lady turned an incredulous face to Cole. “The Devil? Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“Hush, woman!”

“And what’s *he* doing to help?” Lady said, pointing an accusing finger at Fish Rommel in the corner. “That phony admiral you plucked out of a jail cell! He hires a one-legged pilot and he’s surprised the plane crashes?”

“Woman! Patience! I’ll not have it!”

“Drop dead, abbot.”

“For once and for all, I am *not* a Catholic priest!” Cole bellowed.

He turned to the guests, and with raised arms and imploring hands, bore witness to the community: “I am not a Catholic priest! Does everyone *get* that?”

“I didn’t see a plane crash,” Chief Justice Fripworthy said to Pammy. “That’s assuming facts not in evidence.”

“Speculative,” Pammy concurred.

“Sustained. I do wish they’d fix that television screen, though.”

Roger lifted his head. The screens were still blank. He gave thought to following Ray Jarecki out the front door.

What was Ray Jarecki doing crawling out the front door?

“Stop that man!” Roger called out.

Ray got through the door and made a dash for the privet hedges alongside the gravel drive.

Duluth, Duluth. What rhymes with ‘Duluth’?”

He dove into the hedges—and against the chain-link fence they were planted against. He crumpled onto the ground.

Long cold nights

For a man to learn

The truth:

Duluth! Duluth!

The Pu’ukan Affairs Commission would later report that Ray had herniated a disc in his spine—between C1 and C2—and dislocated his shoulder when he unwittingly dove into the fence and not, as he would claim in a federal civil rights lawsuit, during his arrest by Secret Service agents.

#

“Got it!” Mitch Kinsella shouted as Pitch’s cell phone and headcam feeds returned to life. The same could not be said of Senator Farnum. The concussion from the blast had thrown Pitch to the ground and knocked the cell phone from his hand. It landed with the camera lens pointed toward, if not quite at, him. It had also knocked him senseless. When the video stream returned, it showed Pitch lying face down on the dust of the Tangaroa overlook. The headphones were no longer on his head, but around his neck.

“Pitch!” Lady yelled into her microphone, once again sending Mitch Kinsella into an aural conniption.

#

Every inch of Bundy’s body strained with the effort to steady the PAYBACK, which was missing not just the weight of one of its four big teats but also a quarter of its thrust. It threw the bomber’s alignment out of whack. Even after he had cut off the power to the counterpart engine on the other wing to balance out the thrust, Bundy had to constantly correct for pulls and dips. First he overcompensated, then undercompensated. Finally, he was able to anticipate when and where the bomber would slip or dip so that he could get ahead of it by a fraction of a second and keep it more or less steady. There was nothing he could do about the rain of machine parts the PAYBACK was shedding, and the exhaust trail was getting worse. But she was flying.

Bundy made a long, jagged arc that brought the PAYBACK ten miles off the western shore of the island so that he could get into position for another pass over the Pu’ukan.

“I could make a living on this route,” he said to Phil.

Phil was looking out the port window. With a powerful air-to-ground gun camera, she could see Pitch Farnum wobbling to his feet. She figured that the figure below must be Farnum. Bundy tried to reach him again.

“Biped One, Biped One. This is Peg Leg Eleven Fifty-Niner. Do you read, Biped One.”

“Him ya’ gotta say ‘Over’ to, Bun,” Phil said over the shriek of the engines.

“Right. ... Over.”

He repeated the radio query several more times.

Still nothing.

“All right, that’s it,” Bundy finally said. “We’re goin’ in for real this time.”

“Wait!” Phil cried. “I think he sees us!”

#

Viktor Horvath was not going to allow his own State Department and signals service to disgrace the Office of the President. Only the president could do that.

“And when the president does it, it’s not a disgrace,” he said.

“Sir?” Shane Redshaw, a communications aide, was loading the president’s speech into the Oval Office TelePrompTer.

“Huh? Oh. Redshaw.” The president hadn’t noticed him. “Nothing. Where’s Jarecki? He should be here by now.”

“They’re still looking, Mr. President. I’m sure he’ll turn up.”

“Turn up. Turn up. Turn up. ... Turnup. ... Turnup soup. ... Fell off the turnup truck. ...”

Shane Redshaw pretended not to hear the president mumble incoherencies to himself. Maybe it was just pre-speech verbal exercises. Still, combined with the hideous tuber that had sprouted on the president's lower lip, the "turnup" mumbling alarmed him. He hoped Ray Jarecki would turnup soon.

Dina LaFollette came in to tell the president that he had a phone call. She was caught short, though, by how misshapen his face looked. In the course of an hour, an unsightly bump had become a grotesquerie visible from across the room. He kept touching it with his finger.

"Mr. President, Jay Buckman is on the phone for you," Dina LaFollette said.

"Who?"

"Jay Buckman. The reporter. You said to put him through when he called."

Shane and Dina exchanged worried looks.

"Mr. President," Shane Redshaw said, "maybe this isn't the best time for—"

"Buckman. Right." He reached for the telephone receiver. "Where's Jarecki?" he asked Dina LaFollette.

"They're still looking, Mr. President."

"Still looking. Hm." He fingered his lip absently and winced. "Do you think he'll turnip?"

"Sir?"

"Trust no one."

"Yes, sir."

"Turnup, turnup, turnup. Turnup the heat on the turnip soup."

“I’ll finish loading this on,” Dina LaFollette whispered to Shane Redshaw. “You go find Ray. Stat.”

“Right.”

The plastic handcuffs were digging into Ray’s wrists. Blood trickled from a nostril, the result of a displaced septum Ray sustained when a Secret Service agent had punched him in the face after securing him in the back seat of the cruiser for the drive downtown, and which the agent would later assert Ray inflicted on himself by resisting arrest. On top of it all, the agent behind the wheel took every bump and curve at seventy miles per hour on dangerously overinflated tires. Ray spent half the car ride trying to climb off the floor of the backseat without the use of his hands.

Ray was worried, not just about his own prospects—he knew he was finished—but about the future of the Pu’ukan resort. What had the president meant when he said at Camp David the other day that “the Pu’ukan goes down”? Did he really want to postpone opening day? Again? Nothing says “failed resort” like postponing opening day. And nothing says “investors’ class-action lawsuit” like a failed resort.

“You guys are making a huge mistake,” Ray told the two agents in the front seat.

“You say something, shitbag?” the agent riding shotgun replied.

“The high and mighty always think the world’s gonna fall apart without them,” the driver said.

“Like shitbag here.” They laughed.

Ray ruminated on the phrase. “The Pu’ukan goes down. The Pu’ukan goes down.”

What did it mean?

The cruiser took the speed bump into the garage of the federal lockup in downtown D.C. at fifty, and Ray's stomach fell onto the chassis hump. When he realized what "the Pu'ukan goes down" meant, the rest of his body joined his stomach on the floor.

"Oh, Jesus," he moaned. "Oh sweet, sweet baby Jesus."

Ray wondered what rhymed with "national catastrophe."

#

Phil could see Pitch clamber back to his feet and jostle his headset.

"He's looking up, Bun! He's looking at us! You're in, Bun! Engage the Ground Rep!"

"Biped One, Biped One! This is Peg Leg Eleven Fifty-Niner! Do you read, Biped One! Over!"

On top of the Big T, Pitch spotted the bomber approaching the shoreline. He straightened out the headphones and tripod-mounted webcam and found his cell phone on the ground.

"That you, Swing?" he said into his equipment.

"Hey, hey! Biped One! Welcome to the world! Sorry about the fireball back there. Over."

"What the hell happened?" Pitch asked.

"Dropped an engine."

"Not a bomb, then?"

“Negative. Not authorized for live ordnance.”

“But you have the gelt?”

“Roger that. Got pallets of ’em. Shake a sack for ’im, wouldja, Phil?” Phil lifted a sack of coins from the floor and shook it.

“I hear it!” Pitch said.

“So here’s the skinny,” Bundy said, and proceeded to walk through the next steps with Pitch.

#

The president picked up the phone. “You ready to do this thing, Joe?”

“It’s Jay, Mr. Presi—”

“Jim, Jay, Joe. Are you *ready*. *That’s* the question before us.”

“Locked and loa—”

“Great. Let’s go.” He hung up the phone.

WHAT WILL HISTORY SAY?

Fewer than two percent of Americans had ever heard of Pu'ukan, the West Pacific island with the funny name and kooky punctuation. Fewer than twenty-five percent of this two percent could place it on a map. Only one-half of one percent of this twenty-five percent could either spell it or pronounce it. None could do both.

Yet within an hour of President Viktor Horvath's televised address to the nation declaring war on the Pu'ukan insurgency known as the Tongaroa Rebel Movement, eighty-four percent of Americans polled by Gallup reported that they "strongly favored" war, including eleven percent who said they "fiercely favored" war. Ten percent told Gallup they were opposed to war. Four percent were unaware that the United States was once again at war in a weird place far away from home. Two percent refused to respond.¹

¹ Editor's Note: Gallup's political polling results are subject to a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 47 percentage points.

In his speech, the president spelled out both the name of the island and the threat it posed to United States strategic interests in the West Pacific.

“Should Pu’ukan fall,” he warned, “so, too, would Tonga, Pitcairn, Rokovoko, and eventually Sandwich, the fat, golden domino that sits astride the gateway to the West Pacific.” He stifled a laugh at the word “Sandwich.”

“Now, I’ll grant you that it’s not as if the Nazis have invaded Altoona, but it’s awful goddamn close if you ask me. And I don’t need to spell out the implications of what something like *that* would be: Panzer divisions rolling into Amish country and reducing farming communities in detail. Ebensburg, Blairsville, *Latrobe*. I think most Americans—certainly most Central Pennsylvanians—would regard that as unacceptable. Same deal for the Pu’ukanians. Think of Pu’ukan as Pittsburgh. Maybe as its sister city. Showa hands: Who wants their sister city raped by insurgents? ... I didn’t think so.”

“As for the evidence,” the president continued, waving a conspicuously thin file folder over his head, “in this folder are intelligence intercepts plucked *straight* out of the cosmos by our Office of Global Listening and Eavesdropping. They show that Pu’ukan is infested with terrorists. Fifty-seven of them. Or two hundred and five. Hard to be precise in these matters.”

He took a drag on his cigarette, something no president had done publicly since Martin Oliver’s “Un-Lucky Strike,” and tucked it into corner of his mouth to free up his hands to open the folder. The movement jostled his sensitive lower lip and he grimaced from the pain.

“Lotta this stuff is classified, so I can’t share it without compromising sources and methods. But trust me: this shit’s important to our national security and our way of life. *Especially* our way of life. And so America must act without delay. Like, tonight. Although it’s really tomorrow morning over there where we’ll be acting, where I’ve ordered us to act. It may be yesterday. It’s hard to know if you’re coming or going in some of these crazy time zones. In any event, it’s evening here, or nighttime by now, really. Look, I’m no astrophysicist, but here’s the poop: We’re acting. And so I have ordered our military to commence an assault on the Dependent Territory of Pu’ukan. At this very moment, a squadron or flotilla or whathaveyou is on its way to blow that no-count stinkweed out of the ocean.”

He flung the folder onto his desk and crushed his cigarette on Raleigh-Durham. “There you have it. Be it so ordered.”

At Plumage Oaks, cell phones began to bleat. Pammy St. Pierre had just opened a text message from her editor when a phalanx of Washington staff aides with high purpose on their brows burst through the front door in search of their principals—Armand Delgado, Clark Hassett, Langmann Longmann. In seconds, the principals and their aides were hustling out the door, bumping into Chief Justice Fripworthy’s scruffy law clerk as he shuffled in, his head buried in an amicus brief.

Stunned, Lady belatedly followed them out to the stoop. In confusion, she watched her guests and their aides slide into their sedans and peel away for the ride to the Capitol, Foggy Bottom and elsewhere in the government district. She knew nothing about

the president's speech yet, but when the line of succession is hustled out of your living room, you have to figure that something important has happened.

But why was Armand Frippworthy's clerk here? The Chief Justice was far down the line of succession.

There could be only one reason: to swear in a new president.

Oh my God. Had something happened to the president?

She felt dizzy. Viktor Horvath had always been tightly wound and, let's face it, quite unstable. And now her petty, mean-spirited practical joke intended to embarrass the president had pushed him over the edge. He must have committed suicide rather than suffer the degradation and vilification. Lady was stricken at what she had caused. She could barely keep from collapsing. A hand fell on her shoulder.

"Are you OK?"

It was Michaela. Lady's mouth was so dry she could barely breathe. Michaela had never seen such fear.

"Lady, what is it?"

She turned to Michaela. "I think I just killed the president. What will history say? I need to turn myself in."

Michaela puffed up her cheeks and blew the air out. It was the best she could do.

"I know what history will say."

Lady and Michaela turned. It was Cole Charleston. He was standing behind them, a hand on each of their shoulders.

"It'll say, 'Thank God for that.'"

DOGS ON MY TAIL

Bundy pointed the nose of the beast eastward for one last pass over the Pu'ukan.

“This is it, Phil. We’re going in for real this time. Not that I know what the hell we’re even doing at this point.”

“Then let’s do it, Bun! For real!”

“In five ... four ... three ... two ...”

“Hornets at five, Bun!” Phil yelled. “Pull up! Pull up! Pull up!”

Bundy yanked the throttle and swung hard to port just as a winglet of U.S. Navy Superhornet jet fighters screamed by the PAYBACK. The swirling draft of the supersonic jets ripped thirty feet of skin off the back of the B-29 and knocked it off course again. Engine Number Three seized, and a loose sack of chocolate coins flew through the cabin.

In the Oval Office, President Horvath was nearing the end of his address to the nation when a series of insistent raps was heard on the other side of the door to the right of his desk. He had jammed a chair under the doorknob, but he knew it wouldn’t hold for long. He quickly finished up his remarks.

“God bless the U.S.A!”

The door burst open and the chair flew into the TelePrompTer, knocking it down. The video feed went dead but the audio continued, picking up the sounds of violent scuffling, confusion and belligerent cross-talk live from the Oval Office.

“Show’s over, Mr. President.” It was Special Agent Guy Rapp of the Secret Service.

“Get your hands off of me, Treasury ape!”

“Randall! Cut the goddamned sound cable!” Special Agent Rapp barked.

Renewed scuffling; hard and bitter words; clarification that the Secret Service was no longer in the Department of the Treasury but had moved into Homeland Security some years earlier.

“Sir, I’m authorized to shoot if you resist,” Special Agent Rapp said. “Randall, the pepper spray! Stat!”

“Stand down, Agent Rapp! I’m your president!”

“Juice him, Randall!”

The president’s eyeballs boiled under a stream of pepper spray. He screamed in pain, and the sound went dead.

#

“Whaddaya mean we lost the feed!”

“They cut the cables, Jay!” said Freddy McMahon, Jay Buckman’s producer in the CNN studio in New York, which had been broadcasting the Oval Office fracas.

“There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“They’re about to shoot the president of the United States *and* bomb a golf resort and I have no feed?”

“So far so good on the bomb link, but we lost the shooting.”

“I want that shooting!” Jay pounded his desk. “I *must* have that shooting!”

“Hold on a sec.” Freddy toggled his earpiece. “I’m getting something.”

“What! What is it, Freddy! Talk to me!”

“Shit! We just lost the bomb feed.”

#

What were half a dozen supersonic jet fighters doing out here? Didn’t Rommel clear the zone? Or had Fish Rommel screwed Bundy Swing twice in one lifetime?

“I’m running out of limbs for this guy, Phil,” Bundy said.

“Number Three’s hanging by a thread, Bun. We’re gonna lose her for sure.”

“I’m running out of engines for this guy, Phil.”

A second later, the Number Three fell off the wing and plunged into the hotel pool like an anvil in a cartoon, sending a plume of pool water, concrete and patio furniture skyward. The PAYBACK itself dropped a hundred feet with the loss of the engine, but with one node on each wing now, it was much easier to handle. Bundy pulled the bomber out of danger and banked back out to sea. Yet again. Phil kept watch out the window.

“What a day!” Bundy said.

“It ain’t over yet, Bun.”

“Now what?”

“Two dogs on our butt, coming in hard. And more behind them.”

Bundy checked his rearview mirror. Two of the Supherhornets were screaming in on them, at five and seven o'clock. There was no way the PAYBACK would survive the windstorm from their drafts, let alone air-to-air missiles. They braced for contact.

Pammy St. Pierre bounded out the front door past Lady, Michaela and Cole Charleston.

“Gotta dash, hon. Horvath’s declared war.”

“You mean—he’s alive?”

“ ’fraid so!” Pammy called out. She was already at the bottom of the driveway.

Lady hugged Michaela. “He’s alive! The sleazy, venal viper is alive! Oh thank *God* in heaven for that.”

Michaela hugged Lady back, hard. “Oh it’s wonderful, Lady! Just wonderful,” she said, hanging onto Lady a few seconds longer than appropriate.

Lady unclenched herself and rushed back into the living room to report the good news. Once there, she discovered new trouble unfolding on Plasma I: two fighter jets were about to blow the PAYBACK out of the sky. She was sure Pitch would end up as collateral damage.

Roger longed for a large plastic bag to pull over his head. “You work so hard to build a country and then, in an instant, pfft. Gone.”

“Yeah. And in an instant, your brother gets exploded in midair,” Tish said. She drew Roger’s attention to Plasma I.

It didn't take a political scientist to see the cascade of catastrophe about to unfold: The Navy jets would shoot down the PAYBACK; Senator Farnum would be killed on the ground from the debris, the explosion or both; and they'd all end up disgraced. The weakest—or the most decent—would commit suicide rather than force the government to spend millions on a prosecution that would wrench the nation and result in a long prison term anyway.

Fish Rommel began to prepare himself mentally for another stint in the can. Cole Charleston was more than happy to go back inside, where he could harvest recruits from the endless orchards of low-hanging shitwads. But he wasn't about to concede defeat just yet. He tore the headset off Mitch Kinsella's skull, placed it on his own head, and broke onto the PAYBACK's radio frequency on the attached mic.

Cole Charleston sensed an apocalyptic moment, and he was seizing it. He wanted the Superhornets to bomb the island.

“Commander Swing, this is Cole Charleston. Can you hear me?”

“Hey, Padre! Long time, no baksheesh!”

“Commander, I am speaking to you on the authority of the United States Government in Washington, D.C.”

Phil and Bundy exchanged skeptical looks. “Yeah, that's great, monsignor, but—”

“Do not interrupt me, son. Listen carefully, in silence, until I finish. And then you are to execute the assignment precisely as I will have instructed it to you. Indicate that you understand.”

Bundy flipped off the radio for a tête à tête with Phil. “I hate to be a Bitter

Brenda, here, but I get the distinct impression that the archbishop has gone rogue.”

“Fucking clerics,” Phil said. “Totally unreliable.”

Bundy got back on the line with Charleston. “Hey, vicar, do me a favor and put Rommel on, will ya’?”

Just then, the lead Hornet swooped up and pulled up with the PAYBACK—cockpit to cockpit—and stayed there long enough for the pilot to give Bundy a visual once-over, then blow past. Bundy, busy with Charleston, only half-noticed.

“Negative, Swing! You are to do precisely as I’ve instructed. I repeat: Indicate that you understand.”

“Yeah, I understand.”

“Good.”

“I understand why people think you’re a nut. It’s because you’re a nut. Adios, elder. Over.”

“Swing! Swing!” It was too late. The line was dead.

A second later, Lady was ripping the headset from Cole’s skull. Cole fought back, but in an instant found his arms pinioned behind his back.

“Easy there, archimandrite.” It was Fish Rommel. “You’re in civil society now. You play by our rules.”

Rommel jammed Charleston’s forearm half an inch higher up his back, but Cole kept up the struggle until he felt a fist slam into his kidney like a sledgehammer. He crumpled to the floor. For a moment, Tish, Fish and Lady stared in disbelief at Roger, who

stared in disbelief at his balled-up hand. The Secretary of the Treasury had just waylaid a cleric with a kidney punch. Cole looked up in pain.

“Et tu, Swing?” he croaked.

Lady grabbed Cole’s headset and told Mitch Kinsella to put her through to Pitch. He did.

“Pitch, dear,” Lady said, suppressing her panic. “We’ve got a situation.”

The line was staticky. “A train station?” Pitch replied.

“No, Pitch. A *‘situation!’*”

“I don’t see any train station! I see some planes, though! Sorry if I’m yelling! It’s as loud as all get-out here! I think it’s from those new planes overhead! Are those Rommel’s?”

The whoosh of the Superhornets filled the speakers. Lady wanted to know if Pitch had the contingency code.

“Maybe it’s time,” she said.

The line went dead again.

“Pitch! Pitch!”

DEATH ON A PUBLIC EASEMENT

Denny Dash worked fast. He poured the contents of his bungalow dresser drawer into his FC2 travel tote, scooped in some toiletries from the bathroom, and spread a sheen of *3-2-1 BlistOff* across his lips. No telling how long he'd be exposed to the elements, or where.

Denny hadn't planned on leaving Pu'ukan yet, but explosions and fighter jets breaking the sound barrier like the crack of doom were never good omens on Third World islands. He knew he had stirred up the pot; he just didn't anticipate it boiling over so robustly, or so soon. Now that it had, better to leave as soon as possible than to be killed or, worse, caught and extradited to the New York State family court for unpaid alimony and child support, and to criminal court for embezzlement.

He cut through the pool deck on his way to the harbor. The pool area was a mess. Debris was everywhere: busted concrete, broken glass, mutilated patio furniture, cabana walls blown out, Harry August's yellow golf cart lying on its side. The pool itself was a

garbage dump, with a huge turbine nesting in a muddy crater at what had been the deep end.

Harry August didn't look much better. He was in a daze. He hardly noticed when Denny tipped the golf cart back onto its wheels, started it up and headed for the marina. Denny didn't notice the little red helicopter stalking him from above.

#

Mitch Kinsella struggled to keep the audio feeds alive. He blamed the jets. "They're jamming everything in the air. I can't compete with the Pentagon."

Lady turned to Fish Rommel. "Don't you let Pitch get bombed on. Do *not* let that happen, do you hear me? Call them off." She grabbed him by the collar. "Now!"

"I can't. They're APC," Rommel said.

"What the hell is APC?"

"Air Praetorian Corp. Private security contractor. Closely held. The government's lousy with them."

"What are you saying?" Roger asked. "That the president of the United States has his own private air force?"

"More like an air wing that he shares with the security firm's corporate clients, but yes."

"I don't care who, whose or what they are," Lady said. "Just call them off!" She still had Rommel's collar in her fists.

"I can't. That's the point: APC isn't USG. They're not in the chain of command. They report directly to the client, which is the president. We'd have to get General

Services to renegotiate the contract. And that's impractical at best."

"That's ridiculous," Roger said.

A contract is a sacred bond, Swing," Rommel said. "You should know that."

"Then get the Goddamn CEO on the phone and be admirably with him!" Lady said.

"That's even worse," Rommel said. "The CEO's a guy named Johnny Feif. Real jerk and a half. Won't listen to anybody unless they're a signatory to the contract. Of course, that's what you pay a guy like that for: total contractual loyalty."

"What happens now?" Tish asked.

"What happens now," Rommel said, "is that in about ninety-seven seconds, that island and all its moveables will cease to exist."

In despair, Lady let go of her grip on Rommel's collar. In frustration, she kicked Cole in the ribs.

#

No sooner had Bundy righted the PAYBACK from the draft of the Hornets than Phil, looking out her window, spotted a new contingency.

"Hey, Bun? Anyone say anything about a little red chopper joining the party? Maybe as an observer?"

"Negative. I think."

"What about a yellow golf cart?"

#

Pitch, wobbly but standing, tried to call Lady on his headset. Bupkes. Ditto on the cell. Not even a busy signal. He pulled the headset off and slapped it against his thigh like a tambourine.

Still nothing.

From above came the familiar rumble from the PAYBACK, followed by the familiar hail of machine parts. Another five minutes and there'd be more plane on the ground than in the sky. Pitch put the headset back on for at least a sliver of protection on the treeless overlook. His timing was almost too good to believe: Not four seconds after he got the headset on, a three-inch bolt, nut and washer assembly smashed onto it. It knocked him back down, but not out.

And it fixed the equipment. Once again, voices crackled through the headset, including one he hadn't heard before.

#

Roger Swing scoffed at the notion that the president had a secret air phalanx at his disposal and that it was impervious to civilian authority.

"In our system, the military answers to the civilian authority, admiral," he said to Rommel. "Not the other way around. It's what makes us special." He grabbed the headset from Lady and told Mitch Kinsella to break into the lead pilot's radio line.

"You're wasting precious time, Swing," Rommel said. "I already told you: They're not military. They won't listen to you. They answer to the contract, not the office. Besides, who the hell would listen to the acting secretary of the Treasury?"

"Got 'im!" Mitch Kinsella said, buoyant that he finally got something done on the

first try.

“Captain, this is Roger Swing, the Secretary of the Treasury. Can you hear me?”

“I hear someone intruding on my radio line,” replied the commander of the squad of Hornets, Col. Ludovico Pinchuck, U.S.A.F., Retired, now a senior vice president with Air Praetorian.

“Captain, this is Treasury Secretary Roger Swing. I am the highest civilian authority on the ground here and—and you are to—” he turned to Rommel as if to ask how to call off a bombing mission—“to stand down.”

Rommel nodded.

“You are to stand down and return to your barracks.”

Rommel shook his head.

“Or to your battleship. Or your basecamp. Wherever you need to return to, Captain, you just—you go return there right now. Uh, with all deliberate speed.”

“First of all, I’m not a captain,” Colonel Pinchuck said. “Second of all, I’m with APC, so I answer to one man and you ain’t he. And third of all, aren’t you just the acting secretary?”

Tish grabbed the headset from Roger. “Now you look here, Major. I don’t know who you think you are, but you do *not* talk to my husband that way! Ever! Are we clear?”

Her answer came in an ear-splitting rip of jet engines.

“Ow! You fuckers!”

She tore off the headset and handed it back to Roger, wagging a pinky in her ear.

“Am I bleeding? I think I’m bleeding!”

“Right?” said Mitch Kinsella. “It’s crazy when that happens!”

Two of the jets screamed over Tangaroa. Three more criss-crossed the general vicinity of the PAYBACK. Colonel Pinchuck again pulled even with the PAYBACK and again peered into the cabin for a closer look at Bundy than before.

“I think he likes you, Bun,” Phil said. “Second time he’s done that.”

After blowing past the PAYBACK, Colonel Pinchuck radioed his wingman. “Hey, Doyle. Jump up here and give the wheel man of this jalopy a visual. Tell me if it’s who I think it is.”

Doyle screamed up to the PAYBACK, peered in on Bundy, blew past, and reported back.

“I’ll be Goddamned,” Doyle said. “Not sure who the broad is, but there’s no doubt about the pilot. That’s impressive as hell.”

#

Near the bottom of the Plumage Oaks driveway, a car struck Speaker Delgado as he was getting into his sedan. Seconds later, Pammy St. Pierre flew back through the front door to announce the new news like the town crier.

“Holy shit on a stick! Fripworthy’s law clerk just ran over Delgado! I think the Speaker of the House is dead!”

“Where exactly?” was all Lady wanted to know.

“On the street! Not five feet from the end of your driveway!”

Lady stared at Pammy dumbstruck, as if processing the information. Once processed, she sprang back to consciousness.

“Public right of way. Not my problem.” With tragedy unfolding globally, there was no time to care locally. She turned back to the monitors. Pammy ran back outside to record the crumbling of the republic in time for the Sunday *Style* section.

SAVE THE KAK!

Over the Sea of Pu'ukan east of the island, the air traffic took a perplexing turn. The winglet of Navy fighters that just a minute ago were preparing to vaporize the PAYBACK had rearranged themselves into an inverted V. Phil estimated the formation to be about ten miles behind the PAYBACK and closing in.

And yet ...

“Something’s weird,” she said. “Something’s very weird.”

The Hornets decelerated to the PAYBACK’s slow pace and held steady about half a mile behind it. There was only one circumstance in which this kind of thing happened.

“Take a look, Bun.”

Bundy looked out at his rearview mirror.

“Huh,” Bundy said.

“Yeah. Huh,” Phil said.

“Either we’re about to be force-flown to the bottom of the sea—”

“Or we’ve got an honor detail.”

“Did we just win a war or something?”

In a seamless piece of air art, the point of the V burst upward at a ninety-degree angle while the six remaining jets—three on each side and still in formation—pulled alongside of the bomber in escort-service position so that the PAYBACK was now flying point. The lead jet, Colonel Pinchuk’s, wheeled and danced overhead like a bat at night.

Phil could barely draw a breath as she watched.

“Slot of honor, Bun,” she croaked. “It’s for you. Missing Man Found.”

Colonel Pinchuck broke onto all radio lines—the PAYBACK’s, Pitch’s on the ground, and on Plumage Oaks’s lines.

“Pardon the intrusion, Fifty-Niner,” he said. “But it’s good to have you back. And to *have* your back. Be outta your sky in a sec.”

“No bother, brother,” was all Bundy could muster. “No bother at all.”

The sides of the V remained in place while Colonel Pinchuck crisscrossed the sky in giddy homage, then took a steady place beside the PAYBACK.

“It’s all yours from here, Mr. Swing,” he said. “Our best to REANAL. Over.”

He tipped a wing to the PAYBACK and peeled off. The six other jets in the squad peeled off, too, and headed for the horizon at mach three, tearing off another section of the PAYBACK’s fuselage in the backdraft.

“Looks like Rommel came through after all,” Phil said.

“Yeah.” Bundy pretended to focus on the cockpit controls, when all he wanted to do was swallow that big lump in his throat. “I guess the Fish did swim,” he said quietly.

“You OK, Bun?”

Bundy nodded. “Yeah, I’m OK.” He turned to his co-pilot. “What about you, Phil?”

“Never better, Bun. Never better.”

“Thank God for that,” Bundy said under his breath.

On Tangaroa, Pitch watched the jet fighters disappear into the Pu’ukan horizon. It occurred to him that early in his term he had voted for a supplemental military appropriation that continued funding for development of the next-generation of the Superhornets—the ones that had just slid into the golden crease of the earth.

“Thank God for that.”

Safe now from being shot down, Phil wasted no time. She hand-cranked the PAYBACK’s main bomb hatch to the open position. From the bomb bay, she called out to Bundy.

“Ready to drop, Bun!”

“Let ’er drop at will, Phil!”

Thus commenced the carpet bombing of the Jewel of the Pu’ukan Golf & Spa & Resort at SoftHarbor® with half a ton of Liberty Thru Intelligence foil-wrapped chocolate coins—from the graffiti-desecrated front gate and unattended security booth, to the main guest building, to the tennis pavilion, pool deck and pink-sand beach.

And into the back rotor blades of the little red helicopter Phil had seen buzzing the yellow golf cart. The copter had zipped into Phil’s field of vision the instant she released the coins. Coins shot back out of the rotors like shell casings from a machine gun. The

engine sputtered and stalled a hundred feet below the PAYBACK, and began to sink like a stone.

“OhshitohshitohshitohshitohSHIT!” Phil covered her eyes and turned away. She couldn’t bear to watch. It was the Goddamn fog of war—again! “Goddamn Clausewitz.”

“What’s that, Phil?” Bundy had been too involved with keeping their own craft afloat to notice the helicopter.

Phil stumbled back to the cockpit.

“I think I killed him, Bun.”

“Killed who, Phil?”

“The copter pilot.”

Bundy looked out his window. “I don’t think so.”

Confused, Phil looked out. Apparently the pilot somehow regained control of the chopper and was now executing one of the finest controlled-corkscrew descents Phil had ever seen. It landed on the tarmac of Boresby Airfield with a bit of a bounce, but not in a fireball.

Relief washed through Phil. She couldn’t believe it. Everything on this mission was going both wrong *and* right at the same time. The B-29 was falling apart, but flying. Half a dozen Navy Superhornets had come to kill them, but had congratulated them instead. A civilian helicopter had wandered directly into the drop zone and took at least three pounds of sweet Liberty in the tail, but had landed safely.

As for the coin drop itself, the Rain of Gelt was intense. The fudge splattered across windows and windshields and onto the sunbaked asphalt of the deserted

downtown, splotted the manicured greens of the Gold Course in brown, slathered the hotel roof, and added yet more debris to the pool.

Pitch Farnum made his own limping, disheveled descent from Mount Tangaroa and reached the edge of the airfield, where the helicopter pilot was scraping chocolate and picking tattered gold foil from the rotor housing with a mechanic's tool.

"Hiya!" Pitch called out.

The pilot looked up and squinted at Pitch, backlit by the bright sun, and returned to the rotors.

"Awesome landing!" He thrust his hand out and introduced himself. "Pitch Farnum. United States senator." She looked up again, and Pitch noticed she was a woman. "Hey! You're a lady pilot!"

She gave Pitch the once-over. His clothes were torn, his face and hands were scratched and streaked with dust and dried blood, and a huge headset that had seen more functional days sat askew on his head, dinged and dented from plane parts.

"Penny Pollock," she said and returned to her work, which at this point consisted of banging a screwdriver against the rotor cowling to dislodge a glob of gelt that she could see but couldn't reach. "You look pretty fucking weird, by the way."

"Huh? Oh! "Right!" He touched a finger to the headphones. " 'Klaatu barada nikto!' " he said robotically.

"I have no idea what that means."

"It's from a—"

“Whatever. Maybe when you get back to Washington, you can pass a law against ass hats dropping silver dollars onto unsuspecting civilian aircraft.”

“I can definitely speak with the chairwoman of the Tropical Air Transport Subcommittee. If I know Lucille Smoot—and I know Lucille Smoot—she’ll get right on top of it.”

Pitch asked where she learned to fly so well and what in the world she was doing here.

“In answer to the first question, Birds Without Borders,” Penny Pollock said.

“The avian-rights group? I’m a big fan!”

“Yep. They run a fast-track program for highly motivated bird lovers. We’re all about saving the”—she took a crumpled piece of paper from her pants pocket and snapped it open—“the kakerori.”

“Oh I love the kakerori! Spectacular plumage!” Retching sounds came from the cockpit.

“Hey if you’re gonna puke, get outta the cabin!” Penny Pollock called back. From the cabin came a plaintive moaning in reply. Penny slipped the tool into her back pocket, walked over to the passenger side of the copter and pulled the door open.

“Let’s go, slob.” She shook her passenger’s shoulder. “We’re there.”

“I don’t feel well.”

“You’d feel worse if I had dropped you in the drink, which is what I wanted to do. C’mon, let’s go.”

The man crawled out of the cockpit. He was a wreck. Pitch asked who he was.

“Felcher,” the man said, pressing a palm against his belly as if to keep his innards from spilling out. “Harold Felcher. I own this place.”

He swallowed hard, then belched. He wobbled on his wingtips, then fell back to his knees and dry-heaved.

Penny took a pair of binoculars from the cockpit and scanned the landscape until she spotted the golf cart that she had been buzzing. It was near the marina.

“I’m outta here,” she said. “Gotta go save the kakerori.”

She climbed back into the cockpit and restarted the engines. Melted chocolate and flecks of foil spat out of the rotors. A globule hit Harold in the neck, knocking him off his hands and knees and onto his back.

“If you hear screaming,” Penny said over the whirring blades of her helicopter, “you’ll know I’ve found him!”

“The kakerori?” Pitch asked.

“The kak I save. The guy in the golf cart I kill.”

Pitch was hopelessly confused. “Who are you talking about? Who is she talking about?” he asked Harold.

“Denny Dash,” Harold said through gurgles.

“Denny Dash?” Pitch asked. “Who’s that?”

“My father,” Penny said. “Biggest deadbeat this side of the Laccadive Ridge. Child support, tuition, alimony—you name it, he owes it.”

“Bring him back alive,” Harold moaned. “He owes me money! Oh God, I’m dying.”

Pitch stepped away and watched the copter lift straight up, hover thirty feet over the ground, and bolt off, shimmying from the bent rotors but no less airworthy than the PAYBACK.

“She really is an excellent pilot. And such a quirky sensibility,” Pitch said, shielding the sun from his eyes. “I’m very impressed.”

“Don’t be,” Harold said. “She’s nuts. Just like her father.”

“I guess we’re all a little bit crazy, Harold,” Pitch said, watching Penny take off after her father. “And thank God for that.”

A WEEKEND IN RARO

The near-disaster with the helicopter notwithstanding, the mission had gone beautifully. They had spread a layer of fudge from one end of the resort to the other. Now, from the empty blue sky above the shimmering Sea of Pu'ukan, Phil marveled at how well it went, and how lucky they had been, especially regarding that final scare with the red helicopter.

“Jeez, Bun, who flies like that? I could’ve killed her.”

“Looks like she’s someone else’s problem now,” Bundy said, pointing to the marina below. The helicopter was back aloft and menacing Denny, now riding a commandeered tandem bike along the dock by the boat slips. “Whoever it is, he sure has a bug up his butt about *that* guy.”

They watched Penny swoop low enough to knock Denny off his bike and send him tumbling into the water between two yachts, the Mercy Me and the The Hell With It, then try to bring the copter down on the narrow dock.

Denny tried to climb aboard the *The Hell With It*, but Harry August and his boys had beat him to it. Brno and Junior rushed to the stern and kicked Denny in the face and stepped on his fingers as he tried to claw his way aboard. Harry August threw open the engines and sped from the island. He hoped Denny had cleared the propellers, but he didn't waste time worrying about it.

#

Bundy felt good about what he and Phil had accomplished. They did what they came to do, on behalf of themselves and some very good people. Even the old B-29 made it, if just barely.

“Phil,” Bundy declared, “I believe our work here is done.”

Phil smacked her lips and tucked her tube of *3-2-1 Blist Off* back into her pocket.

“And a very good piece of work it was, Captain Swing.”

“What say we head to Raro for a long weekend? I know a Shaman of the Peace who owes me a favor.”

“Bundy Swing, is that a proposal for marriage?”

“It is, Phil. There's no denying it.”

“Then let's high tail it to Raro, Bun, because I do!”

“You do?”

“I do!”

“Thank *God* for that!”

“Let's get the hell outta Dodge!”

Bundy drove the throttle forward, and the PAYBACK spat out another dozen machine parts. They laughed and they kissed.

IT'S MORNING IN MACROMINIA

Jay Buckman stepped out of the marble atrium of Union Station in Washington, D.C., and drew deeply of the city's corrupt air.

“God, I love this town!”

It was a bright Tuesday morning and Jay was headed to the District of Columbia Jail for an interview with former president Viktor Karl Horvath.

Jay wanted to get Horvath on camera before the disgraced ex-president was transported to the federal penitentiary in Duluth, Minnesota, where he would serve a five-year prison term for sundry acts of mis-, mal- and nonfeasance. Jay already had Ray Jarecki on tape, and he wanted video of Horvath's responses to Ray's finger-pointing. Ray, it turned out, could not only write poetry; he could also sing, and he hit all the high notes for an audience of federal grand jurors hearing the evidence against Viktor Horvath. Jay wondered if Ray and Horvath would be cellies in Duluth.

Jay hurried out of the station. He had a busy schedule: First the Horvath interview at the jail, then over to the White House for a tête-à-tête with the new, interim commander-in-chief. Acting President Roger Swing was not looking forward to the interview. His view was that media interactions invariably carried more risk than reward. The best you can do in an interview is not say the wrong thing.

But such are the burdens of leadership, and Roger bore them for the sake of the nation. After all, he was president now, if only until the winner of last month's special election was inaugurated.

Roger Swing would not have chosen this outcome for himself. Two months ago he had stopped by Lady Farnum's house on the way to work with no bigger notion in mind than to put a good word in for himself for chairmanship of the Federal Reserve. But the presidency fell to—or on top of—Roger because in the line of succession, those preceding the Secretary of the Treasury had turned it down or been disqualified by disability, death or indictment.

Vice President Fabian Muccigrossi, first in line, was first to turn it down. “Look what happened to Ford. Nooo, thank you.”

Speaker of the House Armand Delgado—Armand of the House—disabled in the Flight of the Principals from Plumage Oaks and tethered to a morphine drip at George Washington University Medical Center, was in no condition to take the oath of office, let alone serve as president.

Next in line was Langmann Longman, the Senate Majority Leader, who was next to turn it down. “Look what happened to LBJ. Nooo, thank you.”

Fourth in line, Secretary of State Clinton Hasset, was hopelessly tarnished by having funneled State Department funds to the Pu'ukan resort. His newly hired criminal defense attorney had pledged the secretary's full cooperation with the various investigations.

That left the Acting Secretary of the Treasury, Roger Swing.

Roger accepted out of a sense of duty, but he didn't see why he had to do any press interviews in the meantime.

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, you have to," Tish said.

But he wouldn't have to for long. In a couple of weeks he could relinquish the post to the new president and take up his own new position as head of the Fed, as promised by a grateful president-elect.

"Roger, you were born to run the Federal Reserve," President-Elect Elizabeth "Lady" Farnum told him "And the Fed you shall have.

"I'll swear you in myself," added newly appointed Secretary of State Willburr "Pitch" Farnum.

#

As he had dreaded, Harold Felcher finally landed on the balls of his ass. But to his astonishment he found that it wasn't at all painful or traumatic. In fact, he had it pretty good. In Duluth, he slipped comfortably into his new role as a shitwad. At long last, after what seemed like a lifetime of stress and struggle, he was free—no more Wynn Goblers, no more Roni Bartels, no more Denny Dashes. Even the food wasn't half-bad.

“I never knew I liked pot pie so much,” he said to a chaplain he was lunching with. “This is the most relaxed I’ve been in years. You can’t imagine.”

“Actually, I think I *can* imagine,” replied the chaplain and fellow inmate, Cole Charleston, who had just come from Viktor Horvath’s bedside in the prison infirmary.

The former president was recovering from surgery to remove a tumor the size of a Maxfli from his lip. Unfortunately, the surgeons had to remove the lip to save the mouth, and Viktor Horvath had slipped into a deep depression over the inability to nest a cigarette there.

“Now, Harold,” Cole said, “let’s talk about your future.”

#

On Pu’ukan Island, the honorary First Guest of the resort stepped off the renovated pool deck and onto the soft pink sand to an isolated section of beach specially accoutered for her. There, she undid her sarong and handed it to a private valet.

Gently, almost disbelievingly, she settled herself onto a beach lounger, the only one within a hundred yards in any direction, just the way she dreamed it would be. She looked around in all directions for any sign of trouble. Down the beach, an old man swept the sand with a coin detector. Otherwise, nothing.

Finally, she let herself close her eyes.

Grace Dawes had never felt so relaxed in her life.

“Thank God for this,” she sighed, and slipped into a deep, delicious nap under the Pu’ukan sun.

#