BETWEEN THE WALLS OF TIME

Between the Walls of Time $\label{eq:ANOVEL} A \ NOVEL$

Michael Stafford

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113,796 words

"The main qualification of the political class is they know the system."

Cyrus Kohler

Foreword

Lt. Colonel Frederick Spaulding, Ret.

Michael Stafford, a friend and sometimes golfing partner of mine, has written a book that I would recommend everyone read. It not only tells the story of Ripcord and the underlying political turmoil that surrounded the Vietnam War but more importantly plots a way forward for the political stalemate our two party system enforces daily. The Front occupies the middle. I am honored to write this foreword.

The main character in the book is an Army Ranger. His name is Cyrus Kohler. He is heavily involved with me, then a Captain, in the fight for Fire Support Base Ripcord, America's last major battle in Vietnam. The battle for FSB Ripcord took place on Hill 935, which overlooked the A Shau Valley in Vietnam. It also blocked the activity constantly moving along the Ho Chi Minh Trail that ran through the A Shau Valley.

The battle for Ripcord started on March 12, 1970 and officially ended on July 23, 1970, when the Firebase was evacuated. The battle, according to 101_{st} Airborne Division records was 4½ months long. The 3_{rd} Brigade, 101_{st} Airborne Division, was the main unit that fought against the NVA(North Vietnamese Army). Within the 3_{rd} Brigade was the 2_{nd} Battalion, 506_{th} PIR. This is the same unit in WWII that was known as The Band of Brothers. This is where Lt. Cyrus Kohler, Sgt. Tripper John Calhoun, and Sgt.Tommy Black Lance Wanderone made their army home. They were indeed Curahees, which means 'Stand Alone'.

The 3_{rd} Brigade entered the battle at approximately 35% strength, which equated to around 1925 troops. The units that made up the 3_{rd} Brigade were the $2/506_{th}$ PIR; HQ's A, B, C, and E Companies of $1/506_{th}$ PIR which had been attached to the 1_{st} Brigade for their incursion onto Cambodia months earlier. FSB Ripcord had to be taken by the NVA as it blocked their route to the south and Saigon, now known as Ho Chi Minh City.

A rifle company is authorized 176 officers and enlisted men. When Company C 2/506th attacked Hill 1000 on July 8th, 1970, they did so with 30 soldiers. Company B 2/506th which occupied the FB was the only company in better shape. The number of enemy personnel attacking the FB was approximately 44,000. The breakdown of the NVA units are as follows:

The 304B Division, who took out the French at Dien Bien Phu, had 4 Regiments: the 9th Infantry Regt, 24th Regt, 66th Regt, and 68th Artillery Regt. The 324B had 4 Regiments: the 29th Infantry Regt, 803rd Infantry Regt, 812th Infantry Regt, and 6th Infantry Regiment, Regional Force (OPCOM). The 308 Division had 3 Regiments: 36th Infantry Regt, 88th Infantry Regt, and 102nd Infantry Regiment. The 325 Division had 3 Regiments: 18th Infantry Regt, 95th Infantry Regt, and 101st Infantry Regt. Quite a lineup.

The casualty rate for the 3rd Brigade would have been much higher had it not been for the 'Dustoff' Pilots and Crews. During the 4½ month long battle for Ripcord, 559 American soldiers were killed outright and another 200+ died from their wounds days and weeks later. The name 'Dustoff' evolved from Med Evac Aircraft and in 1963 were allocated their call sign, 'Dustoff', which stuck for the rest of the war. Statistics showed that 'Dustoff' aircraft suffered 3.3 times more losses to hostile fire than all other types of helicopters. Air ambulance work was often lethal. It was also very rewarding. Some 390,000 soldiers were evacuated by helicopter during the war. Without the skill, devotion to duty, and bravery of the 'Dustoff' pilots and personnel the final number of American dead would have been significantly higher. By the end of the war, 88 'Dustoff' crews had been killed and approximately 380 wounded with their crew chiefs and medics suffering accordingly.

During the battle of Ripcord there were three Medals of Honor awarded, along with six Distinguished Service Crosses, 800 plus Distinguished Flying Crosses, 800+ Silver Stars, and sadly, 2848 Purple Hearts.

The 3_{rd} Brigade never at any time had more than 600 men in the field. Every one of them had 2, 3, or more, Purple Hearts. In the face of all this madness they refused to leave their posts. Captain David Rich, Commanding Officer B Battery, 2/319th Field Artillery was wounded eleven times but fought on.

They were, as you can clearly see, truly a 'Band of Brothers.'

I hope you enjoy reading my friend Michael Stafford's novel 'Between the Walls of Time.' It is the story of a man, forged in the fire of war, who one day fought to save his nation.

Fred Spaulding

LTC, USA-Ret

Authors Note:

LTC Fred Spaulding is one of the most decorated Army Rangers of my lifetime, and perhaps any lifetime. I am not capable of listing all of his acheivements but here are just a few.

Sergeant Spaulding served with Colonel Hal Moore and CSM Basil Plumlee in the Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam in 1965. Many of you have seen 'When We Were Soldiers Once..and Young'written by Harold (Hal) Moore and Joseph Galloway. That was him at the end of the line on the left when they went out to look for the

Lieutenant. LTC Fred Spaulding is in several military Halls of Fame including 'United States Army Ranger' in 2013, 'Infantry Officers Candidate School' in 2007, 'Legion of Valor' in 2012, and 'Distinguished Member of the Regiment' (DMOR) 506th PIR, 101st Airborne Division in 2009 and Indiana military veterans hall of fame, class number 1 in 2014. He has been awarded The Distinguished Service Cross, The Distinguished Flying Cross, The Silver Star with V, The Bronze Star, Purple Heart, and nearly every other major honor the US Army has to bestow.

Book 1

The Giant Killer

When Cyrus left the badlands he was barely alive. His future as a giant killer hung in the balance.

Chapter 1

A giant fireball lit up Firebase Ripcord, blowing fragments of the terrain and everything on it into an ever darkening sky. The smell alone was beyond erasure. 1st Lieutenant Cyrus Kohler saw or heard none of it. He was shot to hell and unconscious as the Huey, and Captain Fred Spaulding who was holding him, went airborne, just before the lights went out for the 304b, elite regulars in the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) who had taken out the French at Dien Bien Phu. It was a miracle that he and the remnants of Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry Brigade, 101st Airborne Division had managed to escape a tragedy in the making. By the time Cyrus reached the MASH unit holding down the fort at HQ, his hold on life was tenous at best. One of the nurses where he had been taken had no explanation for how he had made it this far. The man had enough shrapnel in his body to fill a small jar. His right leg was ripped open and his left arm dangled loosely from who knows how many severed tendons. There was blood all over him. He had several puncture wounds that were bleeding. It took three hours to close him up enough to control the bleeding. It must have been a helluva fight, she thought, wondering but not really invested in what the other side looked like. Her grandpa, like this man,

was a Ranger who had scaled the cliffs at Normandy. She knew from experience they generally gave more than they took.

Marcy Schenck, a young Jewish girl from the Bronx, knew her military history. This young Navy Ensign was attached to the Medevac unit where Cyrus landed. She knew all about the 2/506, a descendent of the original Band of Brothers. Marcy went all the way to division with Cyrus, keeping him still and sedated, tending his wounds, and then on to Saigon. There was no question in anyone's mind that without Marcy, Cyrus might have been shipped home, in a body bag.

As it was, three days into his recovery, the medical team in charge decided the situation was so severe that they took a calculated step borne from too many casualties and put Cyrus into an induced coma that would facilitate the stillness which his internal injuries would require to heal. It was evident that, even then, in those darkest of moments, this Lieutenant Kohler was putting up a fight. He twitched at times, almost to the point of harming himself by moving. But he did not. Move, that is. However, inside that head, the war was still in progress.

Lying in bed with Marcy close by, something akin to a grimace crossed Cyrus' face as his mind raced through the rain pouring over him. Wet, he was always wet, and more than a little discouraged. He couldn't stop running, either, or thinking about Lyndon. Lyndon Johnson, duped by Ho Chi Minh and General Giap into halting the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail in early 1968 as a prerequisite to peace talks that produced nothing, had withdrawn his name from reelection consideration rather than be further shamed. Moreover, he had lied to the American people. Soldiers died. Cyrus nearly joined the caravan. Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, had kept his pledge to withdraw from Vietnam. In I Corp, which comprised the north half of South Vietnam, the drawdown was frightening to those left behind. No savior was coming for them.

By the time he arrived, in 1970, three divisions, roughly 40,000 men, had left the field of battle. The remnants were a few hundred men of the 101st Airborne known as the Currahees, a Cherokee name which

means "stand alone." Their predecessors, the WWII Currahees, were well known as "The Band of Brothers." Now, these men faced off against two of the finest divisions in the NVA, the 304b and the 324b.

Cyrus' eyelids fluttered. Marcy laid her head on his chest and held his wrists tight. Something beyond her comprehension was going on in there. It was a good sign though. His brain was engaged. She couldn't know but Cyrus was reliving Ripcord, it was his latest memory. This is what he saw.

Chapter 2

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself, soldier, and get your ass over here," came the unmistakable voice of his CO, Captain Fred Spaulding.

Cyrus knew from experience that meant now. Crouching, nearly on all fours, he moved his 6'3" frame the required 20 meters.

"LT, you and I are going to do the job of ten. Are you up for it?" Spaulding asked, his head on a swivel, never making eye contact or being expected to. It wasn't a question, it just sounded like one.

"Yeah," Cyrus said, sprawled out on his belly, grimacing, as AK rounds and an occasional mortar destroyed the chemistry of everything they contacted.

"Let's get it done."

This was the time for questioning. The boys left behind, abandoned in the field, were the walking dead. Over here, you were where you were, until they, meaning "Them" were where you were. Then you weren't.

"Stay as low as possible," said Spaulding, setting off across what was formerly a tree-covered piece of hilly terrain, now devastated by shelling and reduced to stumps and pockmarks, a land that had no boundaries between life and death.

"This isn't duck country is it, LT?" Spaulding yelled, as they crawled and twisted toward the perimeter of Fire Base Henderson that early May morning in 1970.

"Not exactly, sir," said Cyrus, as enemy marksmen and .51 caliber machine guns hammered incessantly, sending their love his way.

FSB Henderson, located in the northwest part of South Vietnam, north of the A Shau Valley, due east of Khe Sanh, had been overrun by NVA sappers the night before with catastrophic results for the inhabitants. Of the 120 American soldiers who had started the day doing their time, 40 remained, and most of them were wounded. The moment Cyrus jumped off the chopper, which was under so much incoming it couldn't land, he was stunned at the carnage.

"It was gross negligence, son," the captain said just before the UH1D Huey had dropped them on the firebase, or what was left of it.

"They were just worn out," Cyrus said, as they both started hauling and tugging at bodies unwilling to give up their final resting spots easily. The mud was caked with their remains, spilled out in those last violent moments. *No amount of training*, thought Cyrus, *could get a man ready for this*. He looked off over the rugged mountainous terrain that made this part of the world so deadly to those unlucky enough to be walking.

"Worn out or not," said Spaulding, "Charlie blew the ammo dump, which was stored in plain sight. The captain in charge of FSB Henderson's security was not prepared for an attack that was sure to come sooner or later."

"His process was flawed," said Cyrus, crawling past a severed arm with a jagged bone protruding from the burnt flesh of a young man alive only a few hours earlier.

"Flawed, hell," said Spaulding, "the son of a bitch was broken."

"Yep," said Cyrus, "when you leave your ammo unguarded, in plain view, it presents a mighty tempting target."

"Roger that. There wasn't any way they were going to stop those sappers," Spaulding said, motioning to the large expanse of open terrain.

"With no wire up, no established NDP, no claymores, nada," he snorted.

"Maybe they were prepping for a soiree," said Cyrus, realizing that his statement, once uttered, did a disservice to the dead all around him. They had not been in command.

In his unconscious state, Cyrus could see the living lying around him. The dead were invisible. He felt his hands on bodies as he and the Captain triaged and bandaged every type of wound imaginable until their supplies were exhausted. Talking and crawling, dodging rounds that tore up the ground around them, they moved forward, or so it seemed.

"Looks like the A/501 recon all bought it," said Cyrus, crawling over what had once been a defensive position, now manned by twisted, lifeless bodies.

"HQ told me before we jumped off that one of their scouts made it out," said Spaulding.

"I think he was a sergeant, Wanderone, you know him?"

"I think, maybe," said Cyrus, firing at three figures jammed behind the remnants of a tree trunk too small for one American. Marcy watched his finger twitch. One of the men shrieked as a round tore through his neck and knocked him backward across the stump that lay behind the trunk.

The other two men stopped firing and went invisible in the dirt. Maybe he'd gotten them too, he thought, watching Spaulding reload his service revolver with one hand, slap a fresh clip in his M16 with the other, while silmultaneously wiping his nose with the back of his hand.

The Captain was saying something about Wanderone but he couldn't make it out. The man was a shadow, something like that.

He saw himself pulling the wounded, somewhere, returning fire until his barrel smoked. Pulling, more pulling, trying desperately not to lose their standing on this earth. By the time every living or dead soldier was accounted for, late afternoon had crept in. They were close to the edge, he could feel it.

"We've got to get these men out now. A little more darkness and none of us will see tomorrow," Spaulding said, voicing Cyrus' thoughts.

"Let's get out like we got in," said Cyrus. Crawling into a burned-out forward observation bunker, Spaulding screamed into his radio, "Send me Tac air and turn loose every piece of artillery you've got."

"Negative," came the reply, "your perimeter is undefined."

"Put up a bird," replied Spaulding, "we'll fix that."

"Affirmative, bird up," came the reply from the Ops monitoring Spaulding's radio frequency.

"Kohler," Spaulding commanded, "get out the panels, put out four of 'em. Do the east and south, I'll do the north and west."

After checking his ammo belts and grenade straps, Cyrus started crawling., working his way back to a destroyed supply shack where iridescent, orange-coated panels lay scattered among the debris. The panels were Teflon-coated, cardboard rectangles, 8" x 3" diameter. Lightweight but awkward to carry,

they made firing difficult but not impossible. He struggled with the load, moving as quickly and efficiently as incoming mortar rounds and rifle fire would permit,. Somehow he managed to get his four panels in place and get himself back to the bunker with only a slight flesh wound.

"Part of your ear's gone," said Spaulding, pointing to the blood running freely down Cyrus's neck.

"Now that you've mentioned it, Captain, it hurts like hell."

Spaulding reached into his rucksack and pulled out a syringe and needle. Attaching the two he stuck the needle tip into Cyrus's ear.

"That hurts worse than the wound, god damn it," Cyrus yelled.

"Not for long," said Spaulding, familiar by that point in his career with morphine and its timeline.

"Never leave home without it," Cyrus exhaled, as the pain subsided.

"Roger that," said the captain.

As artillery from surrounding firebases started coming in, Cyrus and Captain Spaulding moved across and around the firebase, which was about the size of two football fields side by side, checking and rechecking the living who were nearly all appeared to be in some state of shock. These men must have been feeling totally abandoned, thought Cyrus, while waiting for an end that was inevitable, before their rescuers showed up unannounced. Cyrus, unrelated to Lyndon and his kind, was never going to let that happen, not as long as he still breathed.

The captain called for more fire support, and Cobra gunships, AH1Gs, rotated into view firing their 7.62 cal. miniguns at 7600 rounds per minute. Their rocket pods lit up the sky as each gunship fired its 54 rockets. There was no shortage of targets.

"I guess they could see those panels," said Spaulding, slapping Cyrus on the back.

"Good job, LT. Now let's get these boys out of here."

Flat on the ground, the two men moved completely through and around the LZ where they hoped the choppers would be able to land, pulling the wounded into position for rapid evacuation, saving the dead for last.

"Always the final cargo, LT," the captain said when the final body had been retrieved. "Their fight is over."

He turned away then so Cyrus could not see his face. One thing was clear, all these dead boys did not sit well with Captain Fred Spaulding, Airborne Ranger, 2/506th, Currahees.

The fire support and gunships had driven the NVA 29th regiment approximately 300 meters down the hill from the top of Henderson. It seemed like hours had passed, but the effort had taken only a fraction of that, long enough for Huey's to drop in and pick up their cargo. The 29th's mission was to finish what the 7th Sapper Battalion had started, and that attack was happening as night closed in. The reaper was so close Cyrus could feel his breath as a mortar round slammed into a vacant foxhole only 15 meters distant. Cyrus reeled from the concussive blast, losing his balance for a moment and falling awkwardly on his side in the bloody mud. Spaulding reached down and pulled him to his feet. The captain stood upright with all kinds of deadly shit flying through the air, impervious to it all. The man leads *a charmed life*, thought Cyrus, who knew that the captain, once an enlisted man, had been in Vietnam for three tours and was still somehow sucking air.

"Let's go, Kohler," the captain said, as the last evac readied to leave, "we'll come back tomorrow in case we missed someone."

Cyrus nodded. Anyone still on this godforsaken hill was sleeping his last sleep on planet earth.

"I'll have to come back myself, Captain," said Cyrus, "if Mitchell isn't here." Cyrus had met Lieutenant Ed Mitchell in OCS.

"He was a good kid," said Cyrus, "played football at Iowa, a safety like me. I met his parents the day we got our bars. Nice folks, farmers, I think."

The captain said nothing.

The ride back was bumpy. When they landed and exited the chopper, Cyrus and the captain looked at each other keenly. The captain nodded. Cyrus saluted. Captain Fred Spaulding was one brave son of a bitch who knew his shit. That and Cyrus's rifle work had kept them alive. Between them, they had dragged 40 wounded soldiers from sure death to a possible future, including one Lt. Edward Mitchell, so covered in mud and his own blood as to be unrecognizable.

Spaulding, all 6'2", 180 pounds of him, was a professional soldier. Fearless, educated, and motivated, as the Rangers liked to say, Spaulding led by example. Some of the people he had served with, like Sergeant Major Basil Plumlee and Lieutenant Colonel Harold Moore, had become famous for their actions in Ia Drang Valley in 1965. Those years had flown and Spaulding had contributed a lifetime of service to his country in the meantime. For his effort at Henderson, Spaulding would be nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor. What Congress had to do with it, Cyrus could only wonder.

"Bullets have no conscience," Spaulding had said more than once.

Cyrus learned a lot from the old man. It was also during this time that Cyrus met Tripper John Calhoun.

Wiry, with powerful hands and instinct, Sergeant John Calhoun, 2/506th, was respected by his troops and officers. He was a difference maker. A graduate of the University of South Carolina, he loved his Gamecocks. A cocky dude, Tripper had an established reputation and several noticeable habits. He smoked Marlboros whenever possible and was known to favor Vietnamese Gold. That would be reefer.

"Maybe it takes the edge off," Cyrus had said to Captain Spaulding.

"Leave that shit alone Lieutenant," the captain had said.

"It will get you killed, that's what it will do."

Cyrus had seen plenty of his guys light up, but he was still a pot virgin until he met Tripper.

Tripper preferred his real name, John Calhoun. All persons in close proximity needed to exercise caution, just being around the man evoked a sense of death. He had earned every inch of his considerable reputation. The man was a serious killer not noted for taking prisoners or granting clemency. When the roll was called and Tripper went home in September 1970, he had survived 19 forced recon missions. Of the 34,852 Americans killed by the end of 1970, he was not one of them. Constantly supported by Lieutenant Cyrus Kohler and Captain Fred Spaulding, Tripper lived to smoke another day.

Chapter 3

The sky grimaced, the palette of its wet, gray, monsoon overwhelmed by so many ascending souls. Only the living rejoiced, and Cyrus was thrilled to be one of them. Sitting on one of FSB Ripcord's blown out bunkers, he and Tripper were having what could loosely be described as a conversation. Tripper, always an angry soul on the surface, was complaining about something. His audio wasn't tuned to listening, although most people never quite got their minds around that one. In Tripper's world, only one opinion mattered. He talked, you listened. You talked, he didn't. On this particular cloudy, overcast day, with Cyrus back from Henderson and Tripper up from the valley floor, both were stoned on Fatty Gold.

"What ya think, Lieutenant?" Tripper offered up.

"Bitchin' man," said Cyrus in his best stoner vocabulary, "far out."

"Cool," said Tripper and laid back over an I-beam that had once held reinforced concrete before taking several direct hits from 120mm howitzer rounds.

"I've been reading every paper on the base," he said, moving to his subject of interest. The man kept up on world events.

"Johnson just went public on the record, sort of, about the reasoning behind his bombing halt.

The man put the freeze on because Ho Chi told him it was time for peace," he said, taking a big hit.

"Talks, you know, peace talks," he added, somewhat lost in the middle of whatever sentence he was constructing.

"We probably wouldn't be here if Lyndon hadn't buckled, you think?" Tripper gazed off into space, mumbling to himself, having forgotten there was an audience.

Regardless, this time Tripper was, unknown to either of them, in lockstep with history.

"If the VC had spent six more months without ammo, food, or fresh bodies, we would have either won the war or left with our honor intact, but no," he said sarcastically, "Lyndon gave the mother fuckers a vacation, a get out of jail free card, and the fine citizens of North Vietnam opened the road for business."

"The earth was bubbling with bullets when Lyndon decided to be humane and love his fellow man, which he had never done before, except when politically expedient. My eardrums vibrate thinking about it."

At that point, he nearly fell off the bunker.

"That must give you lower ball heat, coming down on your boy like that," Cyrus responded.

Cyrus and Tripper John looked out over the A Shau Valley floor and fell into their own reveries. As it turned out, they each had many more unspent clips in their futures. Their year in the Limberlost was headed for a grand finale. No amount of time, burdened as it might become, would ever erase these memories.

"This place," said Tripper, pulling himself up into a walking position, looking completely sober, "reminds me of hunting squirrels back home in South Carolina."

"I'm not grasping the metaphor," said Cyrus.

"You know, they're there," said Tripper, "you can hear them moving around, you just can't always see 'em."

"You got that from me," said Cyrus in an offended tone.

"Like hell I did," Tripper replied, "it's one of my originals."

Cyrus gave up the fight. He didn't care about debates. He was filthy dirty inside and out from all the killing. They all were. The smell of death surrounded them. Powder residue permeated the air. Smoke, explosions, dead bodies, or parts of them, lay strewn everywhere. You'd see them in unexpected places, especially on patrols. A last breath on Earth had come without warning.

Cyrus was already thinking, without knowing, about the philosophical implications of this struggle.

He felt that if you are going to ask your sons to die in battle, the enemy better be coming for the shores of San Francisco or have done something horribly wrong, like bomb Pearl Harbor. Time had a way of laying bare the grand concepts of manifest destiny and domino theories.

Chapter 4

As the morning dawned, gray and weary, Cyrus and Tripper rousted B Company and went back on patrol. Leaving Ripcord very early the small platoon moved carefully through the jungle mist coming up from the forest canopy covering the valley floor.

"There, LT, right down there," Tripper hissed emphatically.

"Look lower, tilt your goddamn head LT, lower." He frantically motioned with his left hand toward what appeared to be a small drainage ditch running under a brush pile that hung lifeless in the space above it, a suspended thicket minus the thorns.

"That's a porta-shitter if I ever saw one," he muttered, grinning ear to ear.

"Right," said Cyrus, unamused. Just because you were at the gates of Hell with bullets flying and shells exploding didn't mean nature could be avoided. Cyrus had to go, now.

Easing himself over the ditch ledge, Cyrus dropped to a sitting position. To accomplish this feat required considerable rearranging of both his ammo belts and grenades. He accomplished this mission and was preparing to take care of business when he saw the enemy butts of five NVA soldiers no more than 8 feet away, their backs turned to Cyrus. The men were apparently in the comatose state which often preceded a proper expulsion, otherwise, they most likely would have heard the five-man patrol.

Cyrus raised his left hand and held up one finger which he pointed in the direction of the squatters.

Tripper nodded, signaled the platoon, and eased his way back along the rear edge of the brush pile.

The next thing Cyrus saw was Tripper jumping nimbly into the ditch 2 feet in front of the startled NVA soldiers. Everyone froze. It was a moment. Tripper didn't say a word or make even the slightest noise. The 324b patch on the soldiers' right arms confirmed their suspicions that the elite division was close by and patrolling, maybe hoping to take a prisoner or two for interrogation or torture. Cyrus's idea was to try to back these guys out of there and get them up the hill. Live participants could be invaluable.

Cyrus struggled to get his pants on and his fly zipped before climbing back up the ditch wall and working his way around the thicket. Tripper hadn't pushed the hold button. He hadn't said a word but had motioned for the NVA to put their hands behind their heads. Once that happened he pushed one man at a time to the ground, face down, and slit his throat. Blood spurted from the vicious wounds as Tripper held each man in place. Why no one fought back astounded Cyrus. Maybe they were tired of fighting like him.

"You fucking idiot," Cyrus whispered, glaring at Tripper.

"We might have some serious intel bleeding out there."

Tripper didn't reply, he just stared off at some unknown object orbiting his universe.

"You just murdered five men in cold blood, shit."

Maybe he'd blown a load, thought Cyrus, looking at the expression on the man's face. Tripper just liked killing. It got him off.

"I couldn't shoot them, LT," he said, gesturing helplessly as his senses reengaged.

"Fuck," was all Cyrus could muster. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." He had never witnessed an execution, not even here in this god forsaken place.

"Let's move back, very slowly and quietly," said Cyrus to his squad.

"They aren't alone, we just don't know exactly where their buddies are, yet."

Everyone understood. Silently the Currahees slipped back into the fog, some hoping, others praying, that they had not been flanked. One hour later the dirty, stinking lot of them exited from the canopy onto a high-speed trail that led up from the floor to Ripcord.

"Recognize this, Sergeant?" Cyrus asked Calhoun.

"Oh yeah," Tripper muttered, "we had an event back down into the A Shau just off this route a couple of weeks back, lost seven men."

"Ambush?" asked Cyrus.

"Yeah, night time too. Some of the boys were stoned, which didn't help," Tripper replied.

Cyrus could only imagine that fear, on that night, in the rain, in that condition.

As they finally stumbled into camp, exhausted, wet, and hungry as hell, Tripper said, "LT, you gonna have anything to say about my intervention?"

Cyrus just shook his head. There was no reason to borrow trouble, enough of that here already.

"Kohler." The voice came from somewhere inside HQ, causing Cyrus to refocus.

"Lieutenant," came the voice of what turned out to be a certain Major Plankton, "after you get squared away, we need you and your platoon to recon your patrol area south of your last contact point."

"We've just been near there, sir," replied Cyrus tiredly, "and we don't need to go back, for any reason."

Cyrus observed a rather short, stubby figure moving in his direction through the dim lighting.

"I'm not asking you, Lieutenant," the major replied, "this is not a request."

"Negative, Sir," Cyrus replied.

"What do you mean, negative, Lieutenant?" the major responded loudly.

"Sir," said Cyrus, "there is a little ridgeline, maybe 100 meters south of the stream bed we entered this morning. It is sparsely populated with foliage and small trees that run into forest canopy another 50 meters east of our exit position. We've drawn heavy fire from that location for more than a month. Despite airstrikes and heavy artillery, we have not been able to alter that equation. We don't need to go looking for them, sir, in broad daylight. They are there. Part of the 324b is there, the patch we brought back proves it," Cyrus said. He handed the major a patch Tripper had cut off one of the dead NVA.

"This good enough for you?" he asked.

The patch was a solid, as the troops liked to say, no getting one of those at the canteen.

"I want eyes on them," said the Major, scowling, "and I won't have my authority challenged.

You need to get across that ridgeline before nightfall," he continued.

"Set up an NDP when you get there and keep us advised of your situation."

Cyrus thought for a moment. He knew damn well an executable plan did not exist that could get them to that ridgeline in broad daylight without dealing with the forest dwellers who, by now, had found their buddies with the slit throats and were probably plenty pissed off about it. In Cyrus's opinion, if you absolutely had to go to the ridgeline, then it had to be done in the dark, and three men would be better than a platoon. The less noise the better.

"That would be good, Major," Cyrus said, "you knowing my position so as not to drop any F-4 Phantom or Cobra gunship shit on my ass, cause that's exactly what's going to be coming if we set up on that ridge in broad daylight. Not to mention a significant number of the 324b who are dug in on the other side."

"You don't know that," the major retorted, "so get your ass down there and find out."

It was still two hours until dark. B Company had been out all day, constantly taking and returning fire. Everyone was edgy, and that was without full disclosure.

Major Kenneth Plankton, who'd been in country for almost a year, had drawn his first real combat assignment after more than a decade of service to his country. Formerly a combat engineer, he had been reassigned to the 501 before it got shot up at Henderson. Cyrus could see the man was capable of being the fool who had left the bundled ammo in plain sight but knew there was another who had acted on his behalf.

The major suspected enemy troops were close by from the steady rate of US casualties, as well as incoming artillery from howitzers and big mortars. His was an apocryphal request coming as it did from a man whose main qualification was that he knew the system. His career had reached apogee, his ambition had not.

All around Cyrus, now, a fusillade of water pulverized the ground, which seemed unable to contain it.

He wanted desperately to contact Captain Spaulding, who was somewhere in I Corp, probably near

Quang Tri with the 101st. The captain would shut this guy down, even if he were a major.

That just wasn't an option right now, so Cyrus said, "No, Major Plankton, Sir, there won't be any of my boys crossing that field and climbing that ridgeline until it is fully dark. We'll recon it for you tonight. Calhoun and I will take our radioman and go."

"That's not a request, LT, that's an order," the major shot back, furiously wiping the rain from his eyes, squinting to see Cyrus two feet away. The major was five inches shorter than Cyrus, which would have made the major's attempt to initiate his command somewhat comical if it hadn't been so goddamned serious.

Cyrus turned and walked a few feet away to a portable shelter that served as a movable ops center.

"I've seen one execution today, major. There's not going to be another one if I can help it."

The major looked crestfallen. He hadn't expected resistance, especially not from Kohler, who was highly regarded by HQ and his men.

The less than faint demurral continued when Cyrus said, "Let's understand each other, major. You have been here less than two weeks, managed to get the other company you were a part of all shot up. Kiss my goddamned ass if you think I am going to take any of my men, including myself, who have been fighting for months to stay alive, on a scenic ridgeline hike. You want to march yourself out there and take fire on open ground, be my guest, but it will not be with any of B Company, 2/506th. Do I make myself clear, sir?"

"You will be court-martialed for this insubordination!" screamed Plankton, keeping his distance. Sergeant Calhoun, having heard the ruckus, started to edge closer.

"Who do you think you are, soldier, talking to me like that?" the major asked incredulously.

"I think I'm Cyrus Kohler, Sir, son of Russell and Sara Kohler from Alto Pass, Illinois, 1st Lieutenant, B Co, 2/506th, Currahees, and, last but not least, a US Army Ranger. Don't expect me to be one of the boys you and people like you get dead, Sir," Cyrus said with a venomous look in his eye.

B Company and the seven Rangers in it were now highly attentive. They had a leader they trusted.

Hell was on earth and they were in it. If the major, whom they considered to be a fool, wanted to cross the Styx, they intended to watch, not row.

A few days later, Major Plankton initiated formal charges that resulted in Cyrus, now under the watchful eye and direct supervision of Captain Fred Spaulding, Ranger, S3 of 2/506th, being properly arraigned. Brigadier General Sidney Berry, Lieutenant Colonel Andre Lucas, and Colonel Ben Harrison, all officers of the 101st Airborne, made up the disciplinary board.

"So, is it accurate to say, Lieutenant Kohler, that you refused a direct order from a superior, violating the chain of command?" asked Berry sternly.

"It is not, Sir," Cyrus said firmly, with no emotion whatsoever. "Major Plankton had just arrived here fresh from Henderson. He's not in my chain of command, Sir. I've been in the A Shau several times," he continued. "That little ridge he wanted us to mount was very active, and Charlie had and has it dialed in. There was a better plan, General. I presented it, the major rejected it. We're still here with our boots on, General, which we would no longer be wearing had we run headlong into the NVA, who, as it turned out, were on the other side of that ridge near the valley floor. We saw them and their patrols as we went along the tree line that night."

"What do you have to say about this, Captain?" Berry asked Spaulding.

"We don't play politics at our level, Sir," said Spaulding. "We execute. As the S3 of 2/506th and Kohler's immediate CO, let me say for the record he was 100 percent correct. Send the major to the Finance Corp where a bad decision won't cost lives," he added dryly, staring at the major with complete contempt.

The three senior officers admonished Cyrus but convicted him of nothing more than using good judgment. Under the command of Captain Fred Spaulding, Cyrus would be constantly in battle until his time was up, for better or for worse.

Not a word was ever said or reported about Tripper's executions, after all, it was a war.

Not long after the charges against Cyrus were found to be "without cause," Captain Spaulding, looking a little rumpled and sounding grumpy, called all officers and NCO's into the command bunker.

"Let me set the scene for you boys. We are on a mountaintop overlooking a forested canopy absolutely chock full of the 324b, whose sole mission is to destroy Ripcord. Since we are down to about 450 men, from our previous high of 600, and we estimate enemy troop strength to be at or near 40,000 troops, our contingency plans are operative, I repeat, operative."

The men looked at each other and some took deep breaths, hoping evac was close at hand, but, knowing the army as they did, expecting the worst. All were relieved to hear their time on the mountain was coming to a close and knew if HQ didn't move fast the NVA would finalize their schedule today, tomorrow, or sometime very soon.

"Recon says we got the Dien Bien Phu guys here too," Spaulding said, frowning, referring to the division that was famous for taking out the French.

"That's some serious backup," said Cyrus.

Spaulding, starting to become preoccupied with his field maps, intel, and recon reports, dismissed the group. Only a few more days until resolution suited Cyrus just fine.

The 324b were seasoned fighters who had fought much longer than the ragtag recruits populating the duty rosters of the 101st Airborne. In 1975, when the last American lifted off the roof of the Saigon Hilton, America had sent 2.15 million soldiers to Vietnam. Only 25 percent of them were drafted. That statistic was 75% in 1970. Most of the early soldiers were draftees who came from poor, inner city, working-class families. These kids could not buy their way out of the draft.

The captain was on target, as usual. The 324b were bad boys under the command of Major General Chu Phuong Doi, and there wasn't much they hadn't seen.

"They must feel like this is a mop up to them," Cyrus said to Tripper as they darted between dug in positions on Ripcord's south slope. Incoming artillery fire was intermittent but steady enough to keep a man focused.

"Yeah, well, maybe," Tripper said, once they reached their command bunker. "The 304b, LT, the backups, tells me how serious this really is for us."

We are completely sighted in," he added, running his hand through his already thinning hairline.

"Seeing as how they're artillery kings," he said grimly, "our A-4s can slow them down but we'll never keep them off this mountain."

"No, we won't, we can't, not if they want it bad enough," said Cyrus, opening a c-ration of pork and beans. What he would give for a hot meal, another one, just one more, then two.

Fielding this type of information revealed Tripper's treasure trove of pertinent statistics. "From 1945 to 1954," he said, "the Vietnamese fought the French and their Legionnaires. It all ended at 'The Chamber Pot,' Dien Bien Phu. The Viet Minh, that's what they called themselves then, you know, Ho Chi Minh, Viet Minh, they developed this blueprint. They used it again at Khe Sanh during Tet. Unfortunately for the NVA, our Air Force blew up their shit. Blew it off the fucking continent," Tripper said gleefully, running his hand over the butt end of his M16.

"How'd they kick the French like that?" Cyrus asked, interested now in this piece of history that was sounding more and more familiar.

"Arrogance, if you ask me, was the fatal flaw of General Navarre, the French commander," said Tripper, now fully engaged.

"He voluntarily became the quarry, begging the Viet Minh to attack his tactically inferior position," Tripper went on, becoming animated as he set the table.

"He put the meat in the pot and they cooked him, well done, absolutely well done." Both men were laughing. Tripper could tell a story. Cyrus just hoped history would not repeat itself.

"There were a couple of Frenchies came to Ft. Benning when I was in Ranger school," said Cyrus shortly after, as he and Tripper made their way around the south end of their defensive position, alternately crawling and running.

"Advisors, I suppose," said the sergeant, picking up his field glasses and looking out over the aforementioned ridgeline where, ever so often, his keen vision detected human movement.

"You bet," said Cyrus. "It's what people do when they're out of a job."

Tripper snorted. "Sure those aren't lobbyists?"

"I don't know much about that," said Cyrus, "but I don't think you're far off."

"No doubt," said Tripper, sliding back into the wet, muddy hole in the ground that was safer than being above it.

Cyrus heard the whine in the air.

"Get down," he yelled to everyone within earshot just as three mortar rounds, fired in sequence 15 seconds apart, screamed into their line. One of the shells exploded in the wire, blowing fragments in all directions, hitting two soldiers sandbagging an artillery bunker. They didn't move fast enough. One lived, one died. It was life in a microcosm, a statistic of war.

Cyrus and Tripper scrambled out of their hole to retrieve their men. Cyrus called a medic for the wounded man while Tripper dragged the dead soldier back toward what was passing as a field hospital.

Tripper looked at Cyrus," They'll have a little more trouble with us LT because unlike the Frenchie's, we occupy the high ground."

"I'm not feeling fuzzy about that," Cyrus stated flatly, staring straight at Tripper. "They're dug in on two of these hills around us and we haven't been able to blow them off."

"Well, at least they won't be dragging 27,000 pounds of food, ammo, 105mm howitzers, and .51 cal machine guns up this slope until after I'm long since departed."

"Hopefully alive," said Cyrus.

"Hopefully, my ass," said Tripper, resting his hand on the butt of his fixed blade, Gerber Mark II.

"You still haven't told me how they finished Frenchie," said Cyrus, feeling totally miserable as it started to rain again.

"Right, I have not. After dragging all that shit up those big hills, the 304b camouflaged the whole fucking mess. That and the unrelenting fog that became a part of everyday life gave them cover from the French aircraft that could manage to lift off. Once they got their shit in place, they came down out of the hills and started to dig. At night each man dug one meter. Every night they dug their allotment and by doing that they inched closer to the French. When they got close enough, Giap called out a mass assault."

"Holy shit, you mean they just charged straight into the fucking furnace?" Cyrus asked in disbelief.

"Just like that," replied Tripper, water dripping from his helmet and poncho liner as the rain began to pound down in sheets, accompanied by intermittent mortar and machine gun fire.

"The 304b overran two firebases thought to be impenetrable. Gabrielle and Beatrice, they were called."

"Nice names."

"Fuck you, LT, this was serious shit," said Tripper, taking a big hit off a fatty he had managed to keep dry for a special occasion, which was no mean feat.

"That little charge against the French garrison in a shithole place called Dien Bien Phu cost them bags of men, 10,000 is history's number, but they had a lot more to throw at the garrison. It lets you know where they stand right here and now, doesn't it, LT?"

"That battle started in early March of '54 and ended with General DeCastrie's surrender on May 7th to General Giap and Ho Chi Minh. The score for the French was almost 2,500 dead, more than twice that wounded, and about 12,000 taken prisoner."

"The timing sounds a bit familiar."

Cyrus took a big hit while he added up the days.

"Not cool dude," said Tripper, doing the math as well.

"You think," he asked, with an apparently serious tone, "that after over 50 days of warming up their prey, they'd just say, fuck it, let's eat."

Cyrus couldn't help laughing. But Tripper's logic was right on. Patiently, the NVA had waited, and when the time was right, they came like Genghis Khan storming the steppes. Twenty-to-one, thirty-to-one, those were not favorable odds. A lot could go wrong if you were a chess piece in that game.

Overtime didn't exist for those players.

If they couldn't get out, and a land escape was sure slaughter, and for some reason the Air Force couldn't get them out in time, they were fucked.

"This is going to get real serious," said Cyrus. "Fuckin' A tweet," said Tripper.

Cyrus jerked back to reality when he heard that unmistakable voice yell, "Get your ass out there, Lieutenant, and reposition your lines back 20 meters."

This would move them back just far enough to throw off mortar tubes that were dialing for dollars with more and more regularity.

"That means now," Spaulding barked as Cyrus scurried to make it happen.

Everything was busted and broken. Trees lay at odd angles, their burned-out stumps ravaged by explosions and shellfire. Everything living was dead, except the Currahees, who still numbered 437 living, fighting souls, not yet ascending to the Rapture.

Chapter 5

The battle for Ripcord would prove to be the last major engagement fought by the US Army in Vietnam. Although the US did not fully vacate until 1975, there was a discernable shift in the fighting to the ARVN. From this point onward, the US preferred to act as field advisors and trainers. Professional soldiers like Captain Fred Spaulding and his superior, Colonel Ben Harrison, found their strategies hindered or completely rebuked by politics and poor management. These officers' devotion to their men, hampered by General Sid Berry and others like him whose main objective was to climb the chain of command, was, however, enough to save some of the Currahees. Cyrus observed the warring factions with the same eyes that would one day test America's leadership like no one before had ever done.

"Cyrus, listen close," said Spaulding, "Harrison wants us out, but Berry wants us to leave in a blaze of glory."

"What's he smoking?" Cyrus said in total disbelief. "Get him to Tripper so we can all feel better about it."

What Lyndon Johnson had started Nixon wanted to finish. Cyrus reasoned it would be different if it were one of their kids on that hill. But that's life as it ought to be, not life as it is.

"We are about to take on one of the most highly trained and motivated field armies in the world here, Captain," Cyrus said calmly. "Three of us went out last night and the whole goddamn NVA army is walking in and out of the ground 4 miles from here. We couldn't get close enough to hand out invitations. Captain, we need to leave now while our evacs can still get in. Landing them later will be impossible."

"We're going to be here for a while, Lieutenant" said Spaulding, "until we can't."

Cyrus never forgot those words, as Bravo Co., 2/506th, the Currahees, was about to take on an army that numbered somewhere in the vicinity of 35,000, seeing as they had killed a few already.

The next day brought that reality. Dodging a steady stream of .51 cal machine gun fire sweeping over the southern flank of Ripcord, Cyrus rolled and dove into what could have passed for a big, slit-trench latrine, now home to a .50 cal machine gun and Sergeant Tripper John Calhoun, who looked very alert and aware of the situation.

"Our left flank is down to 50 men," said Cyrus, flopping onto his back as a succession of incoming mortar rounds worked their way toward the Currahees.

"Let's get our butts out from down here before we get probed and flanked."

Motioning to his radioman, Cyrus said, "Pass the word to our rifle platoon leaders that we're falling back up the hill, do it now, 200 meters up the hill, Sergeant."

"We've got holes there already," he said.

"Get everything that's not tied down in hand and move. That will put us 100 meters below the 75th artillery."

Tripper nodded. Being just below the artillery line would expose firing angles as tracer rounds came in from enemy positions. Bravo Company, 2/506th would also be the first line of defense for a mass assault that was sure to come.

"How long we been here in Eden, LT?" asked Tripper, returning from his trip up and down the lines, talking as he crawled into view.

Before Cyrus could respond, Tripper John decided to relieve himself, the smell of fresh urine reminding Cyrus of his early days on the farm back in Southern Illinois.

"How long?" Tripper repeated, turning his head while continuing to emit a mighty stream.

"Too long," said Cyrus, raising his head slightly while trying not to become a target, "Too fucking long."

Tripper housed his unit and proceeded to produce a fatty, light it, and take a hit that consumed nearly a third of the joint.

"How do you do that?" Cyrus marveled, staring at the visible consumption.

"Practice, sir, the constant manipulation of exotic fibers requires due diligence over a long period of time, sir."

Cyrus could only hope that Tripper's time would be extended. In the face of what was going to come up that hill, that conclusion was somewhat dubious.

"I'm getting short," said Tripper, not referring to his height or the length of the nearly consumed joint, while adjusting his ammo belt.

"How short?"

"Sixty-two days and a wake-up, how 'bout you, LT?" he asked. Before Cyrus could answer, Tripper's mind vacated the premises, destination unknown.

"Eighty-four days left on my tour then 6 months somewhere, probably Benning training troops," Cyrus replied, hoping that would really happen.

Tripper was now completely comatose although he looked normal and had proven many times that reefer had no effect on his ability to soldier on. Cyrus, having never witnessed such a transformation, made Tripper John Calhoun the meritorious winner of the FUBAR measuring stick.

Cyrus had a mission. He had become a Ranger because some things that had to be done required extreme physical and mental training and the ability to endure, without misgivings. He was sure that men who joined the SEALs or Special Forces felt the same way. Sleep deprivation, isolation from friends and family, muscle and mental fatigue, even fear, are all part of the game. Conscience goes away in those moments. There are no strict rules worth mentioning, no TV dramas invented to sway popular opinion against the war or the men who fought it. The possibility of dying was always there, but it's not like you've had to play chess with Death every day. The worst part was putting up with the disapproval of those who don't want to fight and make you the enemy. Putting your life on the line in battle and then getting vilified at home was hard to swallow. Of course, there were always those who didn't have the balls to fight, and fled, or thought they had the right to do what they damned well pleased, and fled. Easy humping for the critics, Cyrus reasoned.

The two of them sat there in their hollowed-out dirt hole on the side of some godforsaken fucking hill overlooking a god damned jungle teeming with death and for just a moment, retreated inside themselves.

Cyrus looked down at his wristwatch, which Jax had given him before he went off to Nam. The watch was a silver Seiko that cost her \$60.00, a lot of money she really didn't have. If they found him somewhere in these mucked up fields of glory, all used up and decaying, the watch would be the only thing left. Not much to show for a life, huh?

From their hole, which served as B Company's command bunker, Cyrus and Tripper witnessed the fireworks display that was systematically destroying their old digs, the ones that had been home 15 minutes ago but were now exploding under every manner of heavy ordinance available to the 324b.

Cyrus could barely make out through the smoke and haze the remains of a dense thicket, somehow not napalmed or burned, that ran parallel along the face of the hill. Just behind this brushy area, a dry riverbed wrapped itself around Ripcord for 300 meters. Directly in front of B Company, running east to west and visible for 100 meters, the riverbed gradually curved and vanished into an increasingly dense jungle canopy which ran into a bamboo forest and obscured the terrain on the north behind the dry wash.

Before moving up the mountain, B Company had run steady recon missions along this part of the perimeter. Like the Currahees of old, they knew from experience this position was the most logical point of attack. Their job would be to deflect the initial assault, which would begin with 105mm howitzers, followed by machine gun fire and RPGs as the NVA drew closer.

"Captain," Cyrus said on his radio, "as soon as dusk falls, I want a Chinook up at altitude dropping flares, a lot of 'em. We need visibility for at least 100 meters. We've got to see them before they reach the wire."

"Roger that, Kohler." Spaulding's voice crackled over the wireless.

"I'm one step ahead of you, already turned in the order."

"They'll be coming out of the ground like flies," said Cyrus.

"Pissed you blew up two of their supply tunnels yesterday," Spaulding replied.

"Affirmative on that one," said Cyrus, smiling to himself, remembering the huge dust cloud that boiled out of the tunnels' three openings.

"Whatever or whoever was down there had a serious headache or worse, a lack of O2," he said.

"There were two companies of NVA patrolling near there," Spaulding said. "No sign of them since. They were down there, son."

"That's a few hundred that won't be coming then," said Cyrus.

"Affirmative, watch your right flank," Spaulding directed, "and watch the dry riverbed that fronts the heavy canopy, they'll be coming through there. Before they do, put Calhoun on your right flank. Tell him to hold that line. Don't let anybody through. If they get inside, we'll have trouble."

As dusk fell, the shelling coming into Ripcord intensified but still seemed to be focused more on the first 300 meters of the hill.

Our old positions would have been tombs, thought Cyrus grimly.

As night crept in, no one except Tripper John had much luck sleeping and those that did sleep did so in fits and starts.

Cyrus had his rifle company, all 65 of them, spread across their perimeter, but not in a straight line. Their formation resembled an "L," the letter inverted, with the apex, the crook, facing outward with a slight separation in the middle. Cyrus's plan was to funnel the attack toward the middle of their line by positioning his two .50 cal machine gun platoons outside the apex, driving the human wave toward the funnel mouth. It was a dangerous strategy which exposed his right flank but offered maximum triangulation and a killing radius a seasoned rifle company like the 2/506th could cover thoroughly. Everything depended on those .50s being operative and protected at all costs, something that was possible, but unlikely. They would be the designated targets for VC RPG and mortar crews.

"We have four sniper trained soldiers in B Company," Cyrus said to Spaulding as night fell and the Chinooks' flares lit up the sky.

"I'm moving them 50 meters above the L covering our line. Their orders are, no matter what target is available, to take out RPG crews only."

"Affirmative," said Spaulding, "that could work. If it does then our artillery and riflemen, with air support, can possibly hold their positions."

"We can't shrink our perimeter as we lose men," said Cyrus, "so we are going to have to be very efficient. You need to have all the birds ready to go at 3 a.m."

"They'll come early," said Spaulding, remembering Henderson and the Ia Drang valley five years earlier.

"When they do motivate," said Cyrus, "we'll need lots of flares. Make it the 4th of July." Spaulding clicked out.

At about 3:45 a.m. on July 16, Cyrus noticed the incoming rising significantly. Explosions from big mortars and howitzers filled the air.

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"They must be after the colonel," said Tripper, noticing the explosions were directed more at the mountaintop than at the line of defense stretching through its middle.

"Cut off the head of the snake," said Cyrus, to no one in particular, keeping a tight rein on his visibility.

"Goddamn," said his radioman from 4 feet behind him, "look at that."

The ground 400 meters out from the base of the hill had become a sea of bodies in motion.

Cyrus sent word down the line, "Hold your fire until they reach the wire."

About that time the four snipers started firing as they acquired RPG targets. It was absolute mayhem, but B Company hunkered and remained hidden and silent until the first of 2,000 NVA started losing body parts as the outer claymore clusters did their business.

"Fire at will, fire for effect," Cyrus's command went out across the line.

"LT," yelled the radioman, "we got two open holes in the wire."

"Close them with bodies," Cyrus commanded his two .50 cals.

They had no problem filling the order.

Cyrus's M16 streamed fire as two NVA, who had come screaming through the inner claymore cluster and managed to reach the second 5-foot high concertina wall, were blown sideways into the fencing, impaled by the sharp edges but feeling nothing as their time had passed.

Everyone in B Company was fighting the war, by themselves, with their comrades, any way they could. It all happened so fast that time melted, suspending them all between living and dying. In this place, at Ripcord, 65 men affected a strategy that held off 2,000 battle-tested enemy soldiers. Cyrus, Tripper, and 44 of their 65 men, along with Captain Fred Spaulding, lived to tell about it.

Every M16 had targets, lots of targets. Cyrus's four snipers took out 23 RPG crews in the first ten minutes when assaults are often won or lost. Unable to penetrate the inner perimeter by blowing open the wire, the enemy headed for the point of least resistance.

As the NVA entered the funnel, the big machine guns stacked their bodies like cordwood. The Curahees were taking casualties though. One of their .50 caliber machine guns took a direct RPG hit before a sniper round, fired from nearly one-quarter mile away eliminated the shooter, disintegrating the NVA soldier's head like paper mâché. Cyrus radioed his snipers constantly to make sure they were still acquiring targets. Once a well-trained sniper determined elevation, distance, and wind speed, the enemy was in a world of hurt.

In twenty minutes the first battle for Ripcord was nearly over. The NVA left the hill as quickly as they came, dragging the wounded and leaving the rest behind. To the Currahees still living, the blur of battle seemed like an eternity. Cyrus scrambled down the line from his position at the short end of the L. Everyone was wounded, some worse than others. Cyrus directed both of his medics to bandage and triage those who needed it most. As he worked his way among the dead and wounded, he saw John Calhoun sitting behind a .50 caliber machine gun propped up against four partially destroyed sandbags, its barrel still smoking from the heat of expended rounds.

A smoldering joint hung from Tripper's lips. How he got it lit was anyone's guess because the man had been shot through his left shoulder and had a five-inch gash on his forehead where an AK-47

round had struck a glancing blow to his helmet and been redirected. Cyrus could see three other wounds, but the means for delivering those wounds lay all around the front and sides of the bunker. At least two dozen enemy soldiers had fallen within 15 yards of Calhoun. The NVA's finest were groaning for burial while Tripper nonchalantly smoked dope as he tried to bandage his shoulder and simultaneously dab at his open head wound. This day, smug indifference aside, he had done his job. Cyrus's radioman came running across the hill, dodging bodies and destruction.

"LT," he said, handing the radio to Cyrus.

"Captain," Cyrus put the phone to his ear.

"Kohler," came Spaulding's familiar voice, "get your men up here ASAP, they'll be back. Be here in thirty."

He was gone.

Going up that hill, in those conditions, no one had any way of knowing if their next step would even occur, caught up in this unimaginable melodrama of terror and violence. Most were fully aware that not returning home was a reality. Many would be interred in this hellish place, their bodies too fragmented for retrieval. While most of the wounded were able to walk, Cyrus found his own going a little difficult because he had shrapnel shards covering his backside.

"I guess this is how you fight 35,000," said Tripper, being helped along by a medic who had stopped the blood flowing from his head wound.

"How's that?" said Cyrus, supporting a corporal with part of his arm missing, a horrible jagged bone sticking out of his flesh. He'd also been shot in the leg, so walking was a bitch.

"Two thousand at a time," responded Tripper, hobbling forward and upward. But it wasn't going to be that. They couldn't stand up under another attack and the 324b had 10 battalions left.

As he climbed the hill, Cyrus pulled out his field glasses from time to time so that he could see any movement around the dry creek bed. The NVA were regrouping.

"Take a look," he told Captain Spaulding, finally making it to Ripcord's blown up summit.

"Yep," said Spaulding, "I've got a Cracker Jack box for Charlie, it's gonna open any moment now," he said looking at his watch. "Any minute now," the captain repeated, "and I'll slow down these motherfuckers."

Just about then, the three F-4 Phantoms banked around the west side of Ripcord. The three fighters approached from different vectors and slowed. Elevating their nose sections and dropping their pods, they unleashed torrents of rocket and machine-gun fire.

"Anyone in that ballpark just got smoked," said Tripper to no one in particular.

"Keep moving boys," urged Spaulding as he watched men too wounded to save themselves being helped into choppers. Hovering in place, all the birds were taking massive fire. Cyrus saw two Huey's explode, killing all on board.

The choppers were gone as quickly as they came. Pulling out his field glasses, Cyrus saw no movement where once the terrain resembled anthills but the 324b would be back, that was a certainty.

The American population on Ripcord continued to decline throughout the day. Just before 3 p.m., the shelling started up with fresh intensity. The NVA had decided to return sooner rather than later. The realities of abandonment were obvious. With decreasing manpower, the dam would break. What had started on March 12, 1970, when Ripcord was opened to support an ARVN push against Cochmun

Mountain, a huge hollowed out storage and supply facility for the NVA, escalated to hell-on-earth. The tacticians in Hanoi had ordered Ripcord to be destroyed at any cost, and the final chapter was about to be written.

Chapter 7

Less than 100 Currahees now occupied what was left of FSB Ripcord, the rest of the living and the dead having left forever. Cyrus limped from one man to the next checking everything possible. He had 42 men left in his company who could pull a trigger.

"Even if we could fill the sandbags, too much effort would be needed," said Cyrus.

"Everyone still here is wounded and barely holding on."

"You don't look too fine yourself, son," said Spaulding, watching Cyrus grimace. The shrapnel was digging its way in and would have to come out very soon, or it could hit an artery, and that would be the hit that ended the ball game.

"I'm staying," said Cyrus. "When you go, I'll go with you," he said, knowing the captain would be the last man off.

"Well, that's that then," said the captain.

"Affirmative," Cyrus replied, and moved off to reposition the 82mm mortars that were crucial to any sustained defense of Hill 935. His intention was to move them into the ranks of his men where they would be harder to spot. Should they have to cut and run, the mortars could provide covering fire; although running was less of an option than it would have been yesterday.

"Do you think the big boys have spotted something, LT?" Sergeant First Class Wilbert McCauley asked, pointing to a rapidly approaching Cobra gunship.

"Maybe it's a social call," said Cyrus.

"Could be a pep talk," responded the sergeant, moving off down the line to perform his neverending duties. The sergeant had a compression bandage wound tightly around his upper left shoulder.

The NVA had left him a token of their appreciation, an AK-47 round lodged so deeply it would require serious medical attention. Just not now.

Cyrus made the rounds, talking to his boys, letting them know he cared and was doing his best to get them out alive. Everyone was scared. If you weren't then you needed a shrink. The remaining members of the 2/506th, Curahees, ringed Hill 935, Ripcord, and no matter how you cut it, their only way off the mountain, dead or wounded, was airborne.

At 4:30 the next morning, the NVA generals 'let slip the dogs of war' upon Hill 935. Remnants of three rifle companies encircled the hill, facing an oncoming division. But they weren't just sitting ducks waiting for the hunters to arrive and bag them. Scouts were in the air, probing, looking for troop movement, providing recon.

"We've gotta get them congregated," said Spaulding. "When we see that happening, we can set up an Arc Light program. We'll see how the bastards respond to high level B-52 500-pound saturation bombing."

"The brass can thank Jesus, or someone more available, for that guy," said Cyrus to the men around him who were thankful to have Captain Spaulding attached to their umbilical cord.

"They'll be coming soon though," Cyrus added, lying on his side, barely visible to the outside world, his field glasses scanning through the near darkness for any sign of movement. Dense fog had

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receded, exposing the mountain base. Through that translucent curtain, the NVA barrage unfolded.

Currahees were taking casualties, a few at a time. Sooner or later their attrition rate would render them

incapable of defense. Cyrus saw movement and radioed in the coordinates. Artillery fire from the big

howitzers cut loose, obliterating the precise target Cyrus had set.

"There aren't many of us," volunteered Tripper, "but they're probably reorganizing. They'll

take us down at first light."

"That's how I see it," said Cyrus, hoping command wasn't too caught up in what had become

a killing exercise, a battle they could not win. There was no way to defend Ripcord with fragments of

three rifle companies. Air support could only delay the inevitable. There was a way, Cyrus thought to

himself, that they could bait the trap so succulently that Charlie would have to bite. With that thought

in mind, he dialed up the captain.

"That's my plan, Captain," said Cyrus, back on his radio, sharing his idea with Spaulding.

"I like it," said Spaulding. "I'll take it upstairs, out."

Chapter 7

Lieutenant Colonel Andre Lucas, commander of the 2/506th, was not the reincarnation of Harold Moore. Spaulding had fought with Moore and Basil Plumlee in the Ia Drang Valley and knew Lucas was more concerned with his career than any man should be. The man never seemed to be where he belonged, fighting with his men who were here because of people like him.

"So, your idea of killing off the 324b is to leave, am I correct, Captain?" asked Lucas as he and Spaulding discussed Cyrus's proposal in Ripcord's command bunker.

"Absolutely," said Spaulding, not giving an inch. "When you start to take out our 105s and quad 50s, Charlie will take that as a sign from above. It is what we do Sir, when we exit stage left."

"Funny," said Lucas, not looking at all amused. "Well, thanks for the input, but we are here to win this battle and leaving is not an option," he said with finality.

"You're not going to be here, Colonel, when the 324b comes up this hill. The men that are here are wounded, need medical attention, and won't be able to stand up under a prolonged assault. They have ten battalions, we have part of Bravo Company, 2/506th. Do we look like goddamn superheroes, Sir?" said Spaulding, wincing from the force of his delivery.

The colonel was taken aback and said, "That's it for today, gentlemen. We've got air support on ready alert 15 minutes out. No one is coming up that mountain." And, for some unknown reason, that day no one did.

The next day an OH6A Huey landed, and Brigadier General Sid Berry scurried toward the command bunker as an NVA mortar round landed 10 feet from the LZ, blasting away a 10-foot section of the pad and sending chunks of concrete flying like slugs in all directions. Cyrus saw the round land. An artillery lieutenant standing near one of the 105s jerked violently backward as a stone tore a huge hole

in his aorta. He bled out, a desperate, faraway look in his blue eyes that clouded over as life fled.

When the medic finally reached him, the soldier was lying in a giant puddle of blood, with a gaping hole in his chest, a grotesquely ghoulish mouth smiling at anyone who had the nerve to look.

"Who's on that chopper, LT?" asked Tripper, coming into view, trying to see through the dust and smoke surrounding the LZ.

"Berry."

"Maybe Lucas has been demoted," said Tripper sarcastically.

"Fat chance of that happening," said Cyrus, still trying to view the proceedings without any success.

"We've been here for 22 days, maybe Charlie is giving up," Tripper said, adjusting his arm sling.

"Maybe Charlie's had enough," said the private whose foxhole they were currently visiting.

"I know I have."

The chopper that had landed, discharged its cargo, and taken off immediately, had not been able to avoid the .51 cal rounds that pummeled its tail section, coming close to tearing apart the rear rotor. Cyrus had seen the passenger, Brigadier General Sid Berry, assistant commander of the 101st Airborne, as he ran for the command bunker. He'd been sent by Major General John Hennessy, Commander of the 101st, to brief Colonel Ben Harrison, Spaulding's boss.

"Here's the drill men," said Berry, as he looked directly at Harrison, "All our surveillance points to another attack, and soon."

"A suicide mission?" asked Harrison.

"I wouldn't call it that," said Berry testily.

"What would you call it, Sir?" asked Spaulding, whose presence Harrison relied on at every briefing, "considering it's probably the same guys out there who walked over from Dien Bien Phu."

The general bristled. "Are you saying we've got the 304b?" he asked in a high voice.

"You tell us," said Harrison.

"We've seen enough," said Spaulding, looking directly at Berry.

"There are two divisions out there, Sir, and the only way out, for my men, is to fly off the top of that mountain."

"I'm backing that up, General," Harrison said," our intel has confirmed both divisions in the area here, around FSB O'Reilly and south of the Bo River." he said emphatically. "They aren't here for a box lunch. The first attack was just a probe that nearly killed us all. If they were paying attention, they know our strength."

General Berry said nothing, so Harrison continued. "Let's assume for argument's sake they are both here, one to fight and one to supply. They probe us constantly with their sapper battalion. Our attrition is constant. I am asking you, General, to report back to General Hennessy that the mission is untenable, at least give us more artillery."

General Berry was visibly upset with Harrison's remarks.

"Colonel, you cannot have more artillery regardless of the strength of force you're facing. Do I make myself clear? It cost \$105 a round for each of the 155 shells you fired this morning."

"It costs more than one howitzer round, General, to medevac a wounded or dead Currahee," replied Harrison, not flinching from the confrontation.

Cyrus was dumbfounded. In the middle of a fight many of them would not survive, a man more concerned with cost and career than human lives was upset with the truth. The intersection of money and power had found its way to their little spot on the map.

Years later Cyrus would find that very same trait had permeated the very fabric of America's political tribes.

Harrison and Berry were clearly two very different men, one cared, one didn't.

"I'll tell you one thing, Lieutenant, Harrison is the finest battlefield commander I have ever served with," said Spaulding.

After the briefing with General Berry concluded, a raggedy three-man patrol was spotted, somehow making its way onto Hill 935. It was an amazing sight, witnessed by most of Bravo Company, to see the three men who had slipped through two NVA divisions well versed at dark ops.

Harrison and Spaulding were present as Cyrus hustled Sergeant Tommy Black Lance Wanderone, a full-blooded Cherokee, from the 2/501st, into the command bunker.

"Sergeant," asked Harrison, "what'd you see out there?"

"Bad news for us, Colonel," replied Wanderone calmly, his hand resting on a large bonehandled knife dangling from his waist belt.

"It's the 324b, all of them, I think," he said.

"That'd be 10 battalions, Sir," said Spaulding, "more or less." Harrison looked grim.

"We saw infantry, artillery, supply, mortar, and machine gun companies," said the sergeant.

"They have another division supporting them over by the Bo around Firebase O'Reilly, but we didn't get close enough to them to see patches or anything."

"The 304b," said Cyrus.

"More than likely," replied Spaulding.

"Too many to count," said Wanderone in his soft voice. "We were there 2 days ago." "That's less than 10 miles NE of Ripcord," said Spaulding, pulling out his topo and ruler.

"That's less than one day's march," said Cyrus.

"Or night's," said Spaulding as he rolled up the map.

"OK," said Henderson, "let's call command, have every AH1G squadron on full alert. Be ready for full fire support, Fred."

"Yes sir," replied Spaulding.

"Lieutenant," Harrison said to Cyrus, "check all ordinance and supplies. Make sure we have a way up the hill if we need to move back."

"Yes sir," said Cyrus. "We have enough concertina laid between claymore clusters to encircle a small city."

"We'll need every bit of it, Lieutenant," said Harrison.

"It's a miracle, sergeant," Harrison said to Wanderone, "that you and your two men were able to pick your way through that death trap."

"It's the Cherokee night mother, Agitsi, who protected us through the great swampy place, Gategwa," said Wanderone with conviction. "At night we came back when no man travels and water talks. The blood taker, Gigadanegiski ... "He pulled out the gleaming 11" bone-handled blade. "... was busy." The sergeant, having said his piece, holstered the great knife and sat down, folded his legs, his eyes clear.

Cyrus looked at Captain Spaulding and Colonel Harrison as each let out a slow breath. Sergeant Tommy Black Lance Wanderone had just confirmed their worst suspicions. The 324b was poised at their doorstep and ready to eliminate Ripcord. Without a doubt, hell was descending on 935 and the Currahees.

It arrived at 6 a.m. the following morning, all devils present and accounted for, Sir!

Chapter 9

The jungle canopy, covered with a morning mist so dense that vision was impossible, emitted an artillery barrage, unlike the steady shelling that had gone on for two and a half weeks. The deep ravines, covered by ancient foliage, resonated with movement. The 324b, all 10 battalions, was moving to assault formation. Erupting from the forest floor, they surged forward up all four sides of Ripcord. On the mountain's south side, directly in their path, were Cyrus Kohler and Bravo Company, 2/506th, Currahees, all 45 of them.

Charlie had the whole hill dialed in and was ready to implement business plan 101A.

Each PAVN battalion had a platoon of six 82mm mortars.

Tripper heard the thump and yelled, "Everybody down," but they already were. Burrowing as deeply as possible into his 5' foxhole, he per hunkered down while one mortar round after another dropped inside B Company's perimeter and into the first row of comma wire. Huge holes opened in the wire only to be filled with bodies as the 324b ran headlong into claymore clusters and rifle fire from every living soldier. American 105mm howitzer crews, having no other alternative, lowered their barrels to ground level, firing directly into the oncoming enemy ranks.

Screams of wounded and dying men filled the air as Cyrus slammed his body into the ground. He rolled onto his back, reloaded his M16, and then faced forward chambering a round. Two sappers had somehow gotten 15 feet from his command post, each with satchel charges in both hands. He fired, point blank. One round hit the leading man in the throat, blowing through his jugular, covering Cyrus in warm blood. Bone fragments from the man's spine smacked Tripper's face 10 meters away. They stuck and stung. The second sapper was literally torn in half by a simultaneous fusillade of machine gun fire 20 meters left of Cyrus's position.

Cyrus rolled to his feet, continuing to fire at targets within a 50-foot radius, the shrapnel in his back reawakened with every blow. The air turned dark with powder residue and smoke. Bullets ripped into the bunker, hitting Cyrus's radioman in the chest, killing him instantly. Forty feet to his right a mortar shell blew out a vacant foxhole. Confusion reigned.

"Move back." The order came from Captain Spaulding, half a football field away, relayed by voice from company to company as most radios were no longer in service.

"Move, now!" Cyrus commanded, firing, running, crawling, dodging the stream of incoming that seemed to be everywhere. From nowhere, six AH1G gunships appeared like avenging angels, their rocket pods and Gatling guns spewing death. The wave halted as the 324b was caught in the open near the last row of concertina wire.

Just then an RPG exploded on Cyrus's left flank. Part of a femur cut into Cyrus's fatigue pants just above his right knee. He pulled out the bone and felt it disengage. The damn thing had stuck him good but had only hit meat. Cyrus tied off the wound with a field bandage and sank back into the mud, the result of three days of torrential rain.

"Lieutenant," Spaulding yelled from not more than 30 feet above him, "get your ass up the hill. Now!"

Cyrus moved but as he did he felt a searing pain shoot up his leg. He stumbled and nearly fell. The next thing he knew Spaulding was reaching down and dragging him. Everything went dark but he could feel himself being pulled along the ground.

"Where's he hit?" someone asked from the darkness.

"He's lost a lot of blood," someone answered.

"This guy is all shot up," someone said.

"The bone frag clipped his femoral artery," said a medic, working feverishly on Cyrus.

"He's lucky he's not dead," said Spaulding.

The combination of blood loss and shock had conspired to knock Cyrus out, momentarily. Two field IVs and 34 stitches later he was back on his feet. The metal frags would have to wait.

For the next four hours, the 2/506th fought for their lives. The 324b came in waves. Their strategy of rotating battalions, keeping their men fresh, was steadily reducing the 506th. Enemy losses were staggering as American air support and artillery pounded away relentlessly. As the battle continued, the overwhelming numbers eventually proved to be more than even General Berry and his superiors

could endure. On July 23, 1970, the evacuation of Ripcord began, but not before Captain Fred Spaulding had a moment with the general.

"That's absurd," Berry said, responding to Spaulding's request for 5 battalions to reinforce their position and do battle with the 324b.

"What's absurd about taking the offensive and driving the little bastards back to Hanoi!"

Spaulding said, his anger toward the general seething just beneath the surface.

"We've taken all these casualties, my boys are all shot up, and you think it's absurd to want to kill them? Have you forgotten what it's like to do it yourself, Sir?"

"That's enough, Fred," said Colonel Harrison, entering the fray.

"We're way over budget on artillery," General Berry said, his face wet with sweat, "and there are no reinforcements. The Currahees absolutely stand alone, I want them out. Tomorrow, tomorrow, let Charlie have his goddamn hill."

"Not so fast General," said Harrison. "We'd like to leave a small reminder of our appreciation for Charlie and all his kin if it's all right with you."

"Instead of tomorrow, Sir, let's go now," said Spaulding.

Chapter 10

It wasn't the first time Cyrus and Captain Spaulding had loaded men into choppers. They had done it at FSB Henderson and were doing it again.

"How many working LZs do we have captain?" asked Cyrus, peering through a smoky haze that had found its way up from the battle below and now covered the entire hilltop.

"Three," replied Spaulding, moving faster than Cyrus, whose running days were over for a while.

"Go on, Captain," Cyrus said through clenched teeth, "I'll catch up."

Hill 935 was flat on top and Spaulding intended to use it all. Eight men at a time were quickly loaded and evacuated and two hours later 240 of the original 600 had made it off the hill.

As Cyrus watched shells explode around the firebase, three choppers approached, all from different directions, and took their last passengers to safety, including Captain Fred Spaulding and 1st LT Cyrus Kohler.

Sheets of warm rain fell from unknown heights.

"You got us out just in time, Captain." said a sergeant using a med kit to bandage his wounded leg.

"In more ways than one, son," said Spaulding, sitting in the chopper's open doorway looking back on Hill 935, barely visible through the haze.

"Watch the hill men," he said, his field glasses scanning the horizon with no success.

"Turn us around," Spaulding said to Chief Warrant Officer Vincent O'Flynn, the Huey's pilot. The chopper banked, leveled off and, temporarily at least, found a seam in the cloud cover. A tidal wave of human ants moved up the steep slopes of Firebase Ripcord and its surrounds coating the mountain with bodies. NVA were everywhere. Suddenly the hill surface and the valley floor connecting it to the jungle exploded in a gigantic fireball, all lit up like the 4th of July at Soldier Field.

Huge thumps shook the air around them as streams of NVA troops clambering up the mountain joined their ancestors in some final mystical resting place. Everything for thousands of yards in all directions was engulfed in a tremendous firestorm.

"That's what happens," said Spaulding, "when an Arc Light team of B-52s strategically drops 500-pound bombs with the proper spacing."

The twenty B-52s of the 5th Army air wing, stationed in Guam, had been airborne for eight hours, each plane carrying twenty-six 500-pound bombs.

"The way the captain explained it to me," Cyrus related years later to Duster, Charlie, and that same Tommy Black Lance Wanderone, sitting on the dock at Lost Lake Marina, "was that the formation, used effectively, altered the course of everything above ground for three square miles. Those planes had a predetermined flight pattern that covered the entire Ripcord area. We'll never know how many NVA were killed that day, but General Doi told General Harrison in 2004 that he still had one battalion left."

"That would be 10,000 dead soldiers," said Duster, looking at Cyrus for confirmation.

"Correct."

Cyrus moaned and his toes moved in rhythm with his eyelashes and fingers.

"Come on boy," Marcy whispered, "You can do it, wake up, wake up."

Cyrus must have heard her because he opened his eyes for the first time in 11 days. He couldn't see her real clearly. His vision was blurry at best but he knew he had company.

When the United States Military pinned the Bronze Star on 1st Lt. Cyrus Kohler six months later for his determination in the face of an overwhelming number of enemy combatants at Ripcord, Ensign Marcy Schenk beamed proudly from the VIP entourage, the Navy Cross that

had been awarded to her earlier for exemplory devotion to duty, adorned her dress blues.

Cyrus locked eyes with her. They had forged a bond that would never be broken in this lifetime. Their paths would cross again.

After his war ended, Cyrus Kohler came home to a different world than most returning soldiers. When the Illinois Central began its long descent down the Alto Pass, deep in the Southern Illinois hills, Cyrus saw people standing near the rail line as it stretched through those solitary miles.

"Those people must have used a McGuire rig to get here," thought Cyrus, knowing that for some of them it had been a long walk. Cyrus waved, and all along the rail line, in sporadic clusters, wherever they might be, people waved back. The whole trip was surreal. These were his people and would be as long as he breathed. They were blue collar or no collar. The train rounded a sharp bend and approached the cemetery where his old friend Red Kerley was buried. This final resting place for a few hundred rural folks overlooked the rail line cut a couple of hundred feet below. A small limestone cliff ran at a 45-degree angle away from the tracks, sloping towards Route 51 which careened respectfully past its now silent guests.

Cyrus walked outside to stand on the caboose's back porch.

Saluting, he murmured, "Rest in peace, old friend. One day we'll all be with you, and that is a certainty. But you don't have to save my place just yet."

Cyrus saw no mass-produced flags as the train moved steadily southward, just arms in the air.

Standing on the small back platform of the caboose, Cyrus reflected on the politicians who had come before him. Unlike them, he had nothing to sell.

The train slowed as it prepared to stop in River City.

"Cyrus, Cyrus Kohler." He heard his name and turned to see a small, elderly lady in a white dress, from flapper days by the look of it. She must have been at least in her eighties. Their eyes met, and as they did, she raised two fingers over her head and gave him the peace sign.

"Peace back," Cyrus yelled over the engine noise, returning her greeting, his hand lifted to the sky. A small grove of pine trees came between them, and she was gone.

Time had decelerated on his big trip, as he liked to call it. Although his heart protested, Cyrus, like his people befire him, had done his duty. The war was a national disaster whose portrait was so skewed, the lie so great, it betrayed America. The Age of Violence that began in the 18th century escalated into the 19th and fairly exploded into the 20th, gained traction as it chugged along under a full head of steam, welcoming home, in close procession, drugs, weapons, and myriad other evils.

Cyrus thought back to the eulogy he had written for his fellow 1st Lieutenant Jim Wolfe, whom he had met in OCS. They called him "Coyote" because he was a taciturn, lonely sort of boy. Quiet. He had fallen in the house-to-house fighting around the Citadel in Hue.

Cyrus mouthed the words. "In our early years, with futures undecided, we traveled west. In that ancient land, we became friends for life. Now my friend is gone, passed on to the other side of that wide river which, living as it is, sets its course, leaving us behind, yearning for days now gone. Warriors, whose weapons are silent and will fire no more in this place, stand by the river and pay silent vigil to a soul who joins their gathering, swelling their ranks by one. May the angels greet this presence. We will meet again there, in that faraway place."

Cyrus had sent his thoughts to Coyote's widow, but she never responded. Maybe she hated him and the war. Perhaps the woman was tired of living. She must be tired of something. All that was past now, and he was home in one piece. It was time to find Susan Jackson.

Chapter 11

"Cyrus Kohler, you get your big butt over here and skate with me," were the first words out of the mouth of Susan Jackson that Cyrus could remember. They were freshmen in high school when they first laid eyes on each other at Puffy's Roller Rink.

"I'm gonna be a roller babe," she said as they held hands and skated around the crowded oval, careful to miss the two poles in the middle that appeared to support nothing.

Jax was all of 5' tall with long auburn hair that reached down to her waist. Her eyes were blue-green, always appearing to be wide open, except when they weren't. Cyrus was gangly, still growing into his 6'3" frame.

"I like tall guys, Cy," she had said early in the game.

"They're all that to you, Jax," he replied, almost instantly wishing he could take it back.

"Listen, you big shit," she said, becoming the first girl Cyrus ever knew to swear in public, "just because I like you a little doesn't mean you can be rude. You are a rude boy; I can see that."

In those years, most of Jax's small sermons were delivered with a big smile that made you wonder if she was serious or just having fun at your expense.

"Don't think you can say anything just because you're bigger or a man," she said, as forcefully as possible.

"Just because I like to make out with you, Cyrus, just because I give you a cop here and there, doesn't mean you can take anything for granted, get it?" He did.

"You're the one who's fooling everyone, Cy. No one's figuring you out, including me sometimes," she said, pulling him close and kissing him like she meant it. Jax loved to French kiss, and it got Cyrus hot.

She knew that and, in the last pew, almost out of sight in the big Methodist church they were sometimes forced to attend, Jax perfected her technique.

You know what, was bound to happen, and one night it did. Driving back to River City, they decided to visit the old trestle bridge hidden deep inside Massac State Park, on the banks of the Ohio River. The fort had a long history, but Cyrus and Jax were out to make their own. Parking their car at the trailhead, they walked the quarter mile back onto the trestle. No sooner than their blanket had hit the ground than Cyrus managed to get Jax semi-undressed. The next step was pretty obvious, even to the uninitiated.

Cyrus and Jax were good students, athletic enough to get scholarships, and in love from the start. Jax was a pianist and gymnast, Cyrus played football and basketball. Whatever they had going on worked and was thoroughly beta tested four years later when Cyrus graduated from college and was drafted into the Vietnam War.

Cyrus exited the train, shaking hands with people he had known his whole life, and began the five-block walk up River Street to Jax's house. Her house looked deserted. There was only one car outside, and Cyrus didn't recognize the black '57 Chevy sedan at the curb.

The year was 1972.

Just then, the door burst open, and noise erupted onto the street.

More people than Cyrus could imagine charged out the front door. Leading that stampede was his beautiful girl, the one he had hoped, in all those cold, wet, dark, terrifying hours, to see again.

Just like that, Jax flung herself into the air and executed a flying back dismount straight into the arms of her big Ranger. She kissed him hard on the lips, and he kissed her back. She must be somebody's

baby Cyrus thought, and, just like that, he transformed from a man who had just spent a year living in lice-ridden, rat-infested hooch's, into Easy Rider.

"Whoa soldier," Jax murmured in his ear, "your orders are to move forward with extreme caution, I repeat, extreme caution. What I feel happening down there is not caution, I repeat, not caution." Cy kissed her again and hugged her so tightly Jax gasped. "Big Dog," she whispered, reaching down to straighten her skirt, inadvertently rubbing her hand over an undiscovered country.

Cyrus took a deep breath and asked, "Got a room?"

"Oh yeah, dude," Jax said, "rented it for 24 hours."

After all the welcome home food and catching up, Cyrus and Jax headed straight for the Holiday Inn. They did not pass Go; they did not collect \$200. One day they'd be old hippies, but now they were in the moment, one that had teetered on permanent interruption for the past three years.

Cyrus kissed her from the lobby to the room, conveniently located on the first floor. They hit the bed together and began with a ferocity they would never again duplicate. Between bouts, they held each other tighter than possible. They cried together, ordered room service, and made love like there was no tomorrow. Then they did it again until they couldn't.

"I'm done dude," Jax finally moaned. "One more of those and I'll give you a field boot."

"What about me, what about my mean mile," Cyrus replied, looking at her with more tiredness than lust in his eyes.

"You look like you're finished, soldier," Jax said, propping herself up with an elbow. "You want a bozo button?" she asked, laughing.

"Not me, Nudeen," Cyrus replied. He called her Nudeen whenever they were in the sack, or she was walking around naked, trying to stir up interest, which it usually did.

"Let's rent an apartment, get some jobs, get married and go to school," Cyrus said.

"We'll call it The Plan," said Jax, and from that moment forward it emerged. One day six years later, Cyrus Kohler became a doctor of philosophy with an emphasis in political science. Not long after, Susan Kohler became an associate teaching professor in the School of Music, teaching piano.

The two young professors eventually moved to Lost Lake and bought a two-story fixer-upper on a two-acre peninsula. Time flew, Robert and Sara were born. Thirty years passed. The Age of Violence continued to roll along on the rails of destiny. Cyrus kept busy teaching and writing. Twenty years in he began fleshing out what became a fledgling organization which he named 'The Front.'

Cyrus liked to think of The Front as an evolutionary experiment, until it wasn't. One certainty existed. He always intended for it to become a major third party.

Chapter 12

The small lecture room in Faner Hall began filling up as Cyrus' 20-student class took their seats. Philosophy 515 A-B, a two-semester five-hour graduate school course covering advanced concepts of philosophical movements throughout recorded history, emphasized Rationalism.

As far back as Parmenides and Plato in 427 BCE, continuing to Descartes and on to present times, the debate between those who preferred reason and logic over the experience raged unabated.

The class turnout was about what Cyrus had expected, what with all the campus talk about The Front.

As he looked around the classroom, there were a few recognizable faces. One of those was Reese Kerley, a tall, slim, gorgeous brunette with auburn hair falling in a cascade to just above her waist. All 5'8" of her athletic body attached to a piercing set of brown eyes. Reese could be combative, but had a reputation among her undergrad professors as an excellent student. She exhibited the same affinity for winning in the classroom as on the court. Reese was a shooting guard who had just finished her final varsity season with the Lady Salukis, winning the Missouri Valley Conference Championship for the third year in a row. Already in possession of her undergraduate degree in philosophy, with a minor in journalism, Reese was well on her way to completing a two-year philosophy master's program in a year-and-a-half.

Cyrus had big plans for Reese. He needed a journalist, social media type, to organize and manage the daily activities of The Front. He planned to offer Reese the website management job, one of The Front's most demanding tasks. The Front was a startup, no getting around it, and was turning out to be the most significant effort of Cyrus's civilian life. Without a national buy-in The Front would not succeed, but, that said, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Like most Americans, his students had varied interests. Some wanted a diploma, others a job, a family, a life. Those expectations were under fire, debated daily in the press, as America's social and political chasm widened.

In the political arena, self-preservation was altering its territorial equation as it reengineered job retention while simultaneously satisfying the demands of party and promises made to their PACs and lobbyists. As a result of decades of improving this model, the USA was swallowing its GDP and growing bloated from excessive pork. Cyrus had fought for his country and knew the value of training and loyalty. It stunned him to think of the pitifully low qualifications now needed to run for political office.

As Cyrus was beginning to realize, the primary qualification for our current political class was their knowledge of the system. Once selected by their tribe, obedience superseded rationality and common sense. It was difficult to miss our beloved government's complicity in the events that built their platform. The Deep State, as Cyrus liked to call it, was more than a matter for educational debate. The most powerful of the powerful would not surrender the throne easily. The battle to institute changes at this level would be fierce. If you've never fought, Cyrus knew better than most; you don't know what it's like to be in a fight, or when to quit. That would be a weakness he could exploit. Very few of the elected class ever served.

Instead, they raised money and supported the brilliant, amoral individuals who wrecked Wall Street. What other reason than money and power would induce individuals to spend their lives working long hours in a crowd of rude humanity, in a time continuum, where it is dark when they arise and return. Money. The political and financial power brokers destroyed all the rules. They did more than rob a 7-Eleven and did less if any, time. The Front would deal with them sooner or later. Coming out time was fast approaching.

Cyrus backchannelled those thoughts in deference to his biggest worry. At this stage, the self-centered, modernist kids he was looking at through his 65-year-old eyes, the twenty-somethings who had never sacrificed diddly-squat, never had to serve anything except occasionally their meals, were a question mark. They were a spoiled and pampered lot with unlimited minutes, and yet Cyrus knew they held a trump card that money and privilege could not buy. These Millennials seriously distrusted the government. They had occupied Wall Street because they could while simultaneously texting and tweeting their fingers off. Their aversion to confrontation was mitigated by the relative distance and anonymity of e-mail campaigns and petitions, but severe frustration at the system gave them energy.

To them, as well as Cyrus, who at this very point in time was The Front, Black Lives really did matter. America simply could not live in its old comfortable rut. Things had to change and he was determined to do his part. It was time to act. The Front was fiscally conservative and socially liberal. In Cyrus' opinion, the Millennials would eventually see that light clearly. They were already becoming powerful conduits for gun control and climate change, two of the lynchpins he would support. They might or might not be confrontational when the time came for that, but there was no mistaking direction. The Middle and the Millennials could theoretically give The Front a fighting chance.

Once The Front became known, the establishment would vilify them and spend millions of dollars selling their point of view on Duck Dynasty. The time to buckle up was at hand.

"All right guys, settle in, settle down and listen up," Cyrus said, looking over the classroom full of young faces. Everyone knew Dr. Cyrus Kohler. His classes were 10-minute sellouts; he was a rock star professor, a former Ranger lieutenant, warrior, writer, philosopher. The kids liked him, Dr. Kohler was straight up and didn't grade on the curve. Do the work, and get rewarded. The professor was someone you could trust.

"Your reason for being here is for me to find out," Cyrus said, laughing with everyone else. "Many of you will be going from here to other universities or maybe your first real job. I will be teaching one of your final classes. Cyrus smiled as he walked between the aisles.

"We're just doing penance," said someone.

"The slackers among you," he said, "must realize that comments reflecting on your professor will not get you a personal recommendation."

"Just joking," said another voice.

"Tell us about The Front," said another.

"The Front wants to gouge out the middle of America and bring the independents and moderates into a position of authority," said Cyrus, his vision sweeping the room.

"We need to rethink, folks," he said, "how candidates for high public office are selected.

"In this class, you will learn about the 'The Process,' 'The Age of Violence,' "The Doctrine of Limited Rights,' and 'Social Congruence.' These concepts ground the Front. You will be asked to think differently than ever before. You cannot be a Democrat or a Republican, a Conservative or a Liberal. You must resign yourself to common sense, reason, and a desire to do what is best for the country. You must consider the middle, entertain what is possible and refuse to accept what has not worked.

"A question I cannot answer myself," said Cyrus, stretching his lanky frame as he sat down on the front of his old oak desk, "is whether our society is willing to change. Being poorly evolved and self-centered is a high hurdle. However, grace and kindness still exist among the American people. Perhaps this emotion will carry the day. Some would say a man's word is his bond. Let's see if we can rebuild that engine."

"Take out two pieces of paper and spend the next 40 minutes telling me who you are, where you are from, how you got here, why you came, and what you had to do to stay. What do you plan to do when you leave? At the bottom of your essay give me an address where you can be reached, a phone number and e-mail address. When you are finished, deposit your paper by the lectern. Pick up the outlines on The Front I have left there."

It was quiet in the room. Cyrus could sense that their antennae were fully extended.

"I am going to walk around, as is my custom, while you are writing your essays, and take each person's picture with my phone," said Cyrus, pulling out his iPhone.

"I will keep your picture and attach it to your essay binders, which I create for all my students each semester. It helps me to refresh my aging memory should any of you call me for a referral as your future

unfolds. I do not refer below a B, so go to work. Convince me, start writing," Cyrus barked. "I'm taking pictures. Smile! This is your first job interview."

Chapter 4

By the time they next met, Cyrus had read each essay and matched pictures to students. "So how are you guys doing?" he said, walking into the room. "You all look a little tense."

"Everything and everybody ok here?"

"Not exactly," came a voice from the middle of the pack.

"Do we have a mutiny on Old Main?" Cyrus asked.

Reese Kerley stood up and said, "Most of you, Doc, the class, know me, but what you don't know is that my grandfather Red was a sharecropper down the road in Alto Pass."

Cyrus about shit! Was that his Red? The Red Kerley that stole his clothes on a cheat? She was tall like Red. It could be. Reese continued, "He didn't have a mean bone in his body," she said emphatically.

"Grandpa valued the truth and said it was in short supply. He made it through the seventh grade before he had to go to work to support his three brothers and two sisters. He got kicked and stomped by our big ole ornery bull, and it ruptured his spleen. He died in 1970." Cyrus nodded, that was his Red all right, gone while he was over there fighting.

"He told my mom once," Reese said, "his mission in life was to see her graduate college. That didn't happen, but I filled the gap. He always said life had a big enough stage to fit us all." She swept the room with her arm.

"Well, we're getting to know each other here in this place," she said. "We're drinking beer and hanging out, doing a little studying, reading a few books." A few classmates chuckled.

"It took a lot for some of us to get this far, and we are busy Professor, but not too busy to see that you, a man three times our age, older than most of our parents, want to change the world. What ya think, Doc," she said, looking directly at Cyrus and speaking to him for the first time.

"Is that you?"

Cyrus said nothing.

"My senses tell me that there's something about to happen here, right?" Her query engendered murmurs among the assembled students.

"Right here, right now, there's a big decision to be made, and we're the only ones that can make it," she said. "You can't pick us, Doc, so your little paper picture routine probably won't work, but we can pick you. It's our decision. We get it."

"Yeah," called another voice, and then another, affirming Reese's assertion.

"Some of us are about to graduate, so anything blocking that path is a serious impediment," she said, "but there was only one bridge in Selma. Look at the colors in this room. Us, all of us. It matters all right."

The classroom erupted into noise. When some semblance of quiet returned, Reese continued.

"We are the middle, just a bunch of kids who couldn't go to Harvard if their lives depended on it, but we're doing quite nicely, thank you, and you are giving us a bigger stage to walk on. We just have to step out. So, what if there is a slight postponement, we're not gonna get drafted for falling behind. Most of us have part-time jobs so we won't starve. We had a get to know you meeting after class last week that went quite well. Tell us more about what exactly you have in mind, and we'll see if we can work it out."

Cyrus was speechless. The girl was Red Kerley's granddaughter, had to be. The gates had begun to swing open, and Cyrus' face flushed with determination.

Reese wasn't finished.

"I shared with our group that you, on several occasions, saved the lives of your soldiers. That is something to know, something we all needed to know. What it says to me," she said, looking around the room with a look of fierce determination, "is you have earned my respect. You haven't suited up for awhile though." Cyrus felt the darkness within himself but said nothing.

"In many ways," Reese said, walking toward the front of the room, "you are everyman setting out to joust with the windmill, an almost ordinary guy setting out to do something extraordinary. You aren't a ninja assassin, and you didn't go to Harvard either. There aren't rock stars all around you. Nothing here resembles Hollywood on steroids. This is SIU, Southern Illinois. Where in the hell is that? It's way down out of the way, that's where it is. Ordinary pieces are found here, not treasure. We don't have an Indiana Jones or a Robert Langdon. Starting a third-party-in-America project doesn't come along every day, does it now? I mean, that's where you're going with all this, isn't it, Doc?"

"Educating Americans, any country for that matter is a huge undertaking. I've heard you say before that only 34 percent of all Americans have more than a high school education, and we certainly need more to deal with the complexity of today's world. So many are undereducated, it's not difficult to see why we are so

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easily led. Many of us in this room are disillusioned with our political leadership, but we can't do anything about it. Until now.

Reese looked around the room, raised her arms, and turned in a circle.

"Behold the pack," she said, "but I am not the Alpha." Reese's dark eyes were steel. "That would be Calvin. Just one more thing," Reese said, as she moved toward an empty seat on her left, "before I sit down, be advised, all of you, that I have cried my tears for the poor and oppressed and am more than ready to stand up and do my part. If you're going to join this party, you will need a full nut sack, like Calvin."

No one flinched.

Reese sat down. She was smoldering, her eyes misty but resolute.

"Calvin, it's your turn," she said.

Chapter 13

Calvin Barnes was a relatively short young man, barely standing 5'8", but, the package was well developed. Calvin had been and would always be a gymnast. His essay had spoken to an understanding of hard work and effort. As he stood up and began to talk, his taciturn gaze fixed on Cyrus.

"Well, Doc, she is one hell of a salesman."

Cyrus's voice was caught up in a smattering of snorts, grunts, and giggles.

"I drank the sauce, but there is no way any of us can be sure our best will be enough. We're going to have to learn as we go," he said.

"There is a serious benefit to being 'unbought,' as you like to say. We are mostly that. Plus, every one of the 20 students in this room has built a website, written algorithms, done system development, and functioned as his or her manager. Three of us here are computer programmers. We can handle most of this, maybe, I think, or at least go down trying. Here is our plan. It involves a division of labor."

"I like that concept," said Cyrus.

"Good," said Calvin.

"If we divide the country into ten quadrants or sectors and form two-person teams, there will be ten groups. We'll have a website up and running within two weeks. You can field-test it as we populate the model. Once we're up and running, we'll start to correspond with the colleges and universities in our territories.

"When your lectures begin, Calvin said, "our goal is to be ready to roll them out as instructed, much like the Vietnam War protests you described went out through the journalism departments and school newspapers back in '66 to '69. Same model. Fifty years on."

"Internally generated reports and numbers will fall out of our model. We'll give you more data than you want. The reports will funnel to Reese, who will handle the press releases, scheduling, and run the website. The Council of ten, ten sectors, will make sure everyone has access to content, as it occurs. The Front website will carry the information you give us as you give it to us. Each member will have a designated assignment action area. Divide and conquer."

The classroom was very quiet. Everyone was focused on Cyrus, who had this wry, somewhat quizzical expression on his face. Reese stood up and just as she did Calvin said, in a voice both calm and penetrating, possessing within itself the co-joined steel clarity of intent and purpose, "Gentleman and ladies, start your engines!"

As if on cue, the classroom emptied. Cyrus called out to Reese Kerley, who stepped back and waved Calvin on as though she was reading Cyrus's mind. Cyrus walked over to her slowly and, stopping inches away, put both of his hands out and as Reese responded in kind.

"I knew, all these years, Reese, that there were Kerleys scattered around this part of the country, but I was gone too long and didn't know any more of them, not really. It's a long way from Lost Lake to Alto Pass, far enough anyway."

"Yeah, Doc, it's a drive," she said, nostalgia in her voice.

"We all knew who you were though, all those years in between. Mom instructed me in no uncertain terms to be sure to look you up once I got here. Red had told her plenty about you over the years. He would have been so glad to see you back. He was worried sick you wouldn't make it, and then he didn't."

"Even though he hadn't seen me for six years," said Cyrus, "there he was at my graduation, you know, right before I got drafted. He looked great, still had that big ole shock of red hair, standing straight as an arrow, all 6'4" of him."

"Yep, Mom said he looked just the same the day his heart stopped. Out there in that same berry field you ran through naked," Reese said with a smile.

"Oh! You know about that, do you?" Cyrus queried.

"Absolutely. Mom said it was a part of her heritage that Grandpa passed on with orders to do the same. I think, Doc, from that time on you were a part of that field to him. Just to be clear, though, tell me your version of the story, and I'll tell you how it squares with ours."

"Right," said Cyrus. "Well, it all started late one afternoon in the early 50s. I was about six at the time. Red was so tall I had to tilt my head up to see his face," he said, laughing. Reese was smiling from ear to ear as Cyrus continued.

"The old redhead had just purchased the area's first TV, that I knew of anyway. It was a 16" console, black and white Motorola with a walnut chassis. It was a Friday, and he was getting ready to set it up outside, having run an extension cord from inside the house out to the box so we could watch Don Dunphy broadcast the Gillette Friday Night Fights from 9:00 p.m. to 10:45 p.m. on ABC. Your granddad called to me.

"Cyrus," he said, "sometimes I believe you are the slowest person I have ever seen, except when it comes to eatin."

I told him not to bother me; I was busy. I wasn't about to take my eyes from the TV. Red didn't go away, though, and he didn't let up either.

"I said slooooow, Cyrus, you are slow, slow on the tick, slow on the go."

"Noooooo, Red, I protested," turning from the TV and gathering energy, "I am fast, very fast! I can outrun you for sure."

"Oh, you think so, do you," said Red, smiling at your grandmother." You think so," he repeated, "well, let's see about that. I tell you what, Cyrus, I know you like food."

"Yes I do, Red," I said, a little distracted by the TV again.

"Tell you what," said Red, sounding sincere, "I'll race you around the house. You win, you get that half gallon of homemade vanilla ice cream I made yesterday. It's in the freezer. If you lose, I get your clothes. Clothes for ice cream, that's the deal. Take it or leave it."

"Deal," I said, jumping up to my feet, ready to run. And run we did, there in the near darkness of a hot summer night."

"I know the rest," said Reese, laughing so hard she doubled over.

"Yep, the big cheater beat me somehow, and I had to strip off my clothes and run home through the berry field. I'm still a little pissed. My mom saw me coming and called dad," said Cyrus.

"After all of them stopped laughing, my dad went down and fetched my clothes. He asked Red if he cheated, but he never told me how Red answered."

Chapter 14

It was winter in Southern Illinois. Cyrus, bundled up in his favorite L.L.Bean wool coat and scarf, had put on enough clothes to wander Antarctica. Never having been a skier or cold weather lover, Cyrus and winter had long since worn out their affection for each other, probably the result of Cyrus using up his cold tolerance allotment hunting ducks and geese in his youth. Some of his friends could not wait for winter break to head straight for Vail and Aspen. Not Cyrus, he was thinking Ft.Lauderdale, Islamorada, Sanibel Island. As he drove his old X5 Beamer toward the Ground Down coffee bar, Cyrus reflected on how time had changed both the campus and himself.

The university had become a haven for international students. New buildings sprouted up everywhere. It was incredible that in this area of Illinois, lacking resources and the capacity to generate income and jobs; its graduates would become such a bright ray of hope. Dr. Delyte Morris must have believed something extraordinary was possible, for he set in motion what became Southern Illinois University.

From a teachers college founded in 1839 with 74 students, to a major Division 1 university playing every sport imaginable, a large contingent of foreign undergraduate and graduate students, its own dental, medical, and law school, SIU had arrived on stage. It even had a Vietnamese chancellor, how diverse was that? From these ashes and dust came the rest of us, Cyrus mused.

Downtown Carbondale bustled with activity as Cyrus parked next to the coffee shop that had once been a thriving bar. Located in the old train station, it was a remnant of Carbondale's past. Calvin and Reese were waiting for him. Cyrus got a small coffee and sat down.

The old train station had a nostalgic ambiance. Erected during the glory days of the Illinois Central Railroad, the station had been constructed with bricks similar to the ones used to build Old Main. The old station house had seen industrial giants, politicians, and criminals come and go. Sometimes the players were interchangeable and difficult to distinguish. Cyrus often thought that these fine folk might have been crossbred.

Cyrus had read Calvin's two-page essay and could see why he was both a good gymnast and a good student. The article was unhurried. The thesis was gradually discovered, not forced upon the reader. Calvin had moments of excitement, but you had to wait for them. It was apparent that Mr. Calm and Ms. Energy, Calvin and Reese, lent credence to the popular theory that opposites attract.

The two met during their first year in college. They were both scholarship athletes who had pretty much been on their own for some time, although Calvin's support network was more substantial, more capable. They both tended to leave the field house at about the same time five days a week during the

offseason. Calvin and Reese lived in the student dorms, mandatory for freshmen, and soon became permanent varsity material. The two freshmen walked home together and went the distance from there. Five years later, here they were, an unlikely pairing on the outside, a well-oiled machine, purring, running smoothly, on the inside.

As Cyrus had discovered earlier, Reese was a country girl from Alto Pass and Red Kerley's granddaughter. A small, sleepy town in the heart of Little Egypt, Alto Pass was fruit headquarters. Peach and apple growers had orchards all up and down State Highway 127. In the summer the road hummed with activity. The Illinois Central siding ran right up to some of the big packing sheds. Mexican work crews made real money here. Unlike those in other parts of the country, where the migrants were poorly treated, the farms of Alto Pass and Cobden offered full-time daycare, on-call medical service, and small frame houses with kitchens, running water and a toilet. It was a relationship that had been built before, during, and after the Great Depression. The picking season lasted seven to eight weeks from June to August depending on how severe winter had been. Living in the holler, so to speak, promoted the development of close-knit relationships, bonds that proved nearly impossible to unravel. Children were born here every year.

Calvin was a city boy from Cicero, near Chicago. His dad was a union boss. Calvin's folks were liberal Democrats every day. His dad taught him never to give up any ground. That commodity was too hard to win in the first place. Surrendering without a fight was unacceptable. Being small in stature was not conducive to winning battles in Cicero, so Calvin decided to balance the scales as much as possible. He began by opening the door to the Police Athletic League gym on Rosalind Avenue, six blocks from his home.

He got beat around a few times learning how to box, but the stuff he learned could knock you out.

Calvin lifted weights, sparred, and started his gymnastics career. He became a powerful flyweight, without the help of biogenesis, Alex Rodriquez, or any steroids. Calvin eventually benched 325 pounds, and leg pressed 495. By the time he was a sophomore in high school he was the top-rated all-around gymnast in the

Chicagoland area and one hell of an amateur boxer who was improving daily. The Salukis came calling, and he signed on.

"Well guys," Cyrus began, "if you two are going to pilot The Front, publish the lectures, and so on, maybe I should lay out the plan for its first critical review. That is to say, what in the hell are we going to do, and how in the hell are we going to do it?"

Reese stood up, stretched her spandex and herself and declared for another round. "I love this stuff," she said as she returned, smiling with satisfaction as she handed Calvin another black coffee. "Alright professor, put the pedal down," she said, flipping her long brown hair over the back of her chair and getting comfortable. Calvin just nodded.

Cyrus took the lead. "Here's the condensed version of The Full Monty," he said. "One day I looked out my window and saw two parties that routinely featured no cooperation. They had just ended the infamous unfinished sequester. These elected representatives were also barely accessible to anyone outside their circle. If you weren't in the press or giving them money, you were not on their list. They talked to their voters and constituency when they had to, but their party leaders insisted they fundraise 30 hours a week, so it quickly became all about money and influence. Power and territory were in play daily. The decisions they made were not prefaced by 'Is it the right and best thing for America?' No, they were prefaced by political necessity more often than not. That would be their mantra. What serves them best? What did their tribe want in terms of an agenda? And why was that? The answer is simply that these people wanted to get elected and re-elected.

"By the time I became aware of the situation facing the country," Cyrus said, "these elected officials had turned their participation into a lifetime achievement award, not the brief interlude envisioned by our founders. At this point, I started to pay more attention to who they were, what their credentials were for getting there, what they had done to deserve my support. Their main qualification was that they knew the system. But that big word, 'process,' stood out. The process in place in America today rewards longevity, loyalty, and

commitment to the tribe. Meeting the country's needs is usually an afterthought, with just enough substance to warrant a rewrite. This is high stakes hold'em at its finest."

"Unfortunately," said Reese, "this game puts us all at risk."

Cyrus nodded and continued. "Most people regard the two major parties in America as opposites. The Democrats identify with liberalism, which implies being freer with money and programs. They champion the poor, the unions, and the working man,. While some are very rich, they downplay that trait. The Republicans mostly represent the wealthy and claim to be conservative. Their calling card is smaller government, less spending when it serves their purpose, states rights, religious fervor, and guns. However, both are huge spenders no longer interested in the budget. There is no balance."

Calvin interjected, "I think the tribe, your word, is in denial over their polarity."

"An excellent point," said Cyrus, leaning back in his chair, "what stands out to me though is they both want to stay as long as possible in these elected positions and receive the privileges the office accrues daily. Most are not particularly gifted individuals, but because they have served their party, worked their way up the political ladder and paid their dues, interminable tenure materializes like fairy dust. They develop the ability to raise money, lots of it, and they build networks of committees and lobbyists who have certain agendas that the politicians agree to support in return for money. The system worships and is enabled by money. Members continually need more and more of it but always remember, and underline the fact; it's not their money."

"These tribal members seldom have their financial skin in the game, so spending it is just a task. On measure, the social tribes have become unable and unwilling to deliver what the country needs. Even what appears to be simple issues are unachievable regardless of whether they understand the necessity. Getting sideways with the tribe is a powerful constraint few can allow. There is also the debt owed for the massive funding that carried them into office. Most come prepaid. There is no process to get the brightest and best

people in office without asking them to play by these flawed sets of rules acceptable to our political leaders of today and the people who support them.

I hope that this behavior will become unacceptable to millions and millions of people who feel unrepresented by anyone who cares. It is this middle, 70 million strong, that will populate The Front when we become a third major political party in America. They are you, the kids marching forward to change our trajectory. We're going to re-draw the roadmap."

"So term limits for reps and congressmen will be part of that roadmap?" Reese asked. "How on earth are you planning to make that happen? They'll stage a counter-revolution!"

Cyrus raised his hands and shrugged with an "I know" gesture.

"Insanity," he continued, "a familiar adage says, is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results. It defines the current process. If we break cover too early on or even show the slightest indication of success the tribes will attempt to stop us. That's how it works, this business of politics. Maybe, just maybe, by being science driven in the age of science we can sail under the radar long enough to achieve some critical mass before the all out warfare begins. The Front will bring a new set of rules to an old game. If we can make it to caucus stage then we have a chance to offer a serious alternative to the current process.

My first lecture will be a discussion of this Process with the goal being to educate Americans, to extinguish this crude, finger pointing dialogue we have going on. There is a reason behind the headlines, which, by the time you read them, are Events. Change the Process, change the Events. Subsequent lectures will spell out our 'Doctrine of Limited Rights' and the 'Principle of Social Congruence.'"

"Oh man," said Calvin, "the ACLU will come after you. They'll join forces with the enemy."

Cyrus laughed. "It's a risk I'll have to take. The philosophy of The Front is a step forward for rationalist thought as applied to politics. Our thinking, I hope, will be seen as a more reasoned approach to governance. When I was a student, some of the philosophy I studied was almost impossible to understand. I hope that people will realize our mission is to become the measuring stick for political processes. As a beginning organization, we will be so different from the socially populated political tribes that it will force an examination of relative strengths and weaknesses."

"Assuming, of course, that we survive against the ACLU and Tea Party," Reese said. "Just let me know when to order the bullet-proof vests and helmets."

"Where did this all start with you, professor?" asked Calvin.

"Back in the '90s," said Cyrus. I had met this man in Vietnam. He was a hell of a soldier with several life-altering habits. Tripper John was a ruthless killer who cut the throats of four enemy soldiers one day as casually as you or I would butter a piece of bread. He smoked dope and fought like a madman. After the war, we hooked up, got high together and debated politics whenever we could. Tripper John Calhoun was like no one I had ever met. He was a serious piece of work back then."

Calvin and Reese looked amused. "Details, Doc," Reese said. "Full disclosure," Calvin added.

"Tripper was always railing against the machine. This boy read papers, lots of 'em, while he puffed and snorted. Time after time, I wore myself out trying to get him to see that what he was so pissed off at was events. The events, unemployment, crime, welfare, war, guns, killing, recessions—continue to happen because both sides never addressed the root problem. One day I realized we had to change the Process or Events would remain constant. Bringing about Event change is our number one goal."

"You're gonna need a lawyer," Reese said.

"Probably," replied Cyrus," and I've got just the man if he'll join us, a constitutional lawyer no less.

"My dad told me once their union spent more on lawyers than they did on bribes," said Calvin.

"I don't think that's possible," said Reese.

"My dad is not known for exaggeration," Calvin replied.

"Lawyers are the main players in the social tribes; they are the rules setters and enforcers. The game is dirty because those are the rules," Cyrus said, "it takes lots of lawyers to keep the play dough from melting." So, let's dot the I's and cross the T's while we're complying with every damn federal election law on the books. In the beginning, we'll have a charter, a movement with a charter, an organization with a charter, not a platform. That would make us a party."

"I see your point," said Calvin, taking a sip of his cold coffee.

"I got it," said Reese, "if you like these rules, join the organization for \$1."

"A great idea," said Cyrus, "let's do that. \$1."

"Yeah, 1 simmolian," said Reece.

"One what?" said Calvin.

"Never mind, just make it so Scotty," said Reese.

Cyrus smiled and said, "One dollar is a totally different piece of money than anyone has ever offered. Our message is centered around value. Everyone wants to be valued, whether it's your family, your husband or wife, your place on the team or the circle you call friends. People in America feel devalued. When societies reach critical mass and revolutions occur, it is because devaluation has become too severe. People go out in the streets with cell phones and confront soldiers bearing automatic weapons. The black citizens in our country certainly are letting the power structure know how they feel right now. Devalued. Set upon.

The only time the current political class values us is when they want our vote, our support, our human resources. When that is over, we are not important enough to receive so much as a letter much less a personal phone call.

"We do not elect the current political class. The oversold idea of a public election is mystifying and misleading," said Cyrus. "Even the few who decipher this depth-defying logic are stymied. The chosen are cloistered by their internal power structure with which we have no frame of reference whatsoever—nothing in common. Most of them are rich and powerful or will be. Most of us are in the middle class or below. No wonder citizens fear the government. They have every right to be scared. I cannot tell you how defeated and sad I felt the day this guy, Jeff, a successful businessman, told me he would buy or pay off anyone. Jeff said he voted for the person that would help his business most. I said, 'How about the USA, Jeff?' He said, 'Fuck that dream.'

"There are lots of Jeffs, Professor," Calvin said, "but they were never going to be our foundation anyway."

"That's the mountain we're climbing," said Cyrus.

Reese put her arms around Calvin and gave him a big hug and a smooch on the cheek.

"This conversation reminds me of The Natural where Glen Close said to Roy Hobbs; we have two lives, the one we learn with and the one we live with after we learn. Let's be the learned."

The Ground Down was busy as customers sipped their favorite beverages. Cyrus watched an older woman tie her dog up near the side door and enter slowly. She was a slender little lady who walked upright, her head back, curly white hair bobbing.

"Who will represent her?" said Cyrus, looking at Reese, who was staring, fixated, at the small, slowly moving figure.

"No one," said Reese sadly. "She is scared, fragile, and closer to her God than she wants to be."

"Are you two old enough to remember Ayn Rand and her looters who tore a hole in the world by serving the common want? We still have their social agendas all across the board, depending on the day's hot topic. Some offer to prop up the little man and underachiever, the less well off, and the 'middle class.' Some focus on the wealthy, like themselves, while pretending to be outliers."

"Both of our current political parties have had great men," said Reese.

"Yeah, true enough," said Calvin, "but the days of their great men fade."

"Now they despise each other," said Cyrus, "while science has roared into the 21st century, social tribes are still worshipping at the altar of bygone days. We have given them a blind gimmee. We have permitted bad company to corrupt good character. I can tell you, kids; I've walked through better men than these to get to a fight."

It was going to be like that. People in Cyrus' new world texted, tweeted, e-mailed, Facebooked, Pinterested, UTubed, and Tumblred. They wore headphones to keep out the world that they enabled. Compression had only enhanced the process. Now, more angry, isolated, road-raged than their parents, citizens blamed, sued, and generally took their frustrations out on anyone in the crosshairs. These new citizens shared their personal lives with strangers as well as family. They had helped invent pornography, pedophilia, and The Age of Violence, and by god, they were going to get what was coming to them or take it. Lives crammed full were much too busy to keep tabs on political criminals or the changes going on without pause. People needed to get reacquainted with themselves. Cyrus realized that Calvin and Reese had stopped chatting and were staring at him.

"Did I go away for a moment?" he asked.

Calvin. "Yeah, that you did, more like many moments."

"I was just thinking," said Cyrus, hunching his shoulders, "what it took to endure that fight over there for one year of my life. This is going to be all that. Myths identified accurately become fiction. Let's work to accomplish that mission."

Cyrus was quiet then. All around him, the Ground Down buzzed. Calvin was the first to speak, and he did so in an almost reverent tone.

"Cyrus, they're going to kill you."

Chapter 15

No good occurred when Cyrus paced. It took a lot to agitate him, but it was possible. He stood outside Faner Hall looking at the long since vacant plot of what had been Old Main. Faner Hall, a modern three-story steel, brick, and glass structure built in the 1980s, was home to the arts and his office. As he stood there, a piercing wind hustled through the oak and ash trees surrounding the quad that ran in front of his only window. Winter was in full regalia. Won't be long before the ash borers kill these big guys, Cyrus thought. They'll go down just like Old Main.

Cyrus stared through the whiteout enveloping that snow-covered plot once eloquently occupied by Southern Illinois University's most beautiful building. Made of native bricks fired and formed in kilns 20 miles away in Creal Springs, Old Main was the first significant building Normal College had put up. Somewhere around June 1869, the first students came inside for classes. By today's standards, Old Main was a modest structure, but back then it was elegance. Three stories tall with an elaborate front façade of ornate, milled woodwork, its gargoyles stood watch over the front entrance. They failed in their duty.

Turning up the fleece collar of his old windbreaker, Cyrus looked up as the call of wild geese filled the air. Summer and fall had passed, as the birds testified, following a timeworn trail through the sky down the Mississippi and Ohio River flyways.

Fifty years had gone by since the burning. Everyone had their theory about that. Charlie Mills, Cyrus' friend, was a long-time campus police detective whose snooping and general investigation work superseded the FBI and Illinois authorities at the IBI. Over the years, Cyrus and Charlie had discussed their theories and concurred on the likelihood that the building had been torched by members or affiliates of the Vietnam protest movement. It could have been campus radicals, the Black Panthers, any member of Chicago-based dissident groups like C.O.R.E or SNCC that had faculty sympathizers and were active around SIU at the time. Not surprisingly, the ROTC headquarters was housed there.

"I'm telling you, Cy," Charlie had said, "those Chicago boys brought an attitude here the old school had never seen. Country folks aren't so generally pissed off, much less so back then than today. Must be the human crush," he added.

"Compression," said Cyrus. "Just call it Compression, Charlie." "I guess I could call it that," Charlie said. "Maybe that'd be a good word for it."

"Yeah," said Cyrus, "Compression causes anger, stress, anxiety, road rage, all those asshole tighteners."

"Harried," said Charlie. "Good word," said Cyrus, smiling. "I can see your vocabulary is taking on an academic quality after all these years."

"Fuck you, Cyrus, you old dick," Charlie said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "You're a fine one to talk, what with all that philosophical bullshit you're constantly going on about."

"That's what I get paid to do, Charlie, but you ain't seen nothing yet," Cyrus said, failing to elaborate further.

"You know, Cyrus," said Charlie, "it would have been too cool to see the Old Lady standing here in the middle of 20,000 kids and all our new stuff. Gives you a connection to your past, your roots, where you came from."

Charlie, tall, thin man that he was, made this observation from 76" above the planet. Like many professional law enforcement men of his generation, Charlie, now 62 with 38 years of policing behind him, was ready to retire. He just needed some closure on the Old Main fire.

Cyrus, too, had long ago promised himself to discover the cause of the burning, but it hadn't happened yet. There was still time. Old Main wasn't a cold case to Cyrus, and he was known to swear to anyone who would listen, "Those sons of bitches. I probably went to class with them. Hell, I might even have known them."

Old Main had been burned down by the fuel of lies and the people who told them, politicians, who took America to Vietnam to stop the domino effect. Even some academics had joined the Domino crowd, and America had bought it for a while until all those body bags started showing up. Cyrus, being opposed to the war from the day he was drafted until the day he left, could only seeth over the carnage and the president that had sacrificed 58,000 American lives. He remembered the line from Sun Tzu in The Art of War—"All war is based on deception," and rued the still applicable axiom.

Now, as he stared at the snow-covered ground where the majestic lady had once stood, he tried to bleach the vision of blood from his mind by letting the snow whiteout the unsuccessful business enterprise that was Vietnam. Following on the heels of Engel v. Vitale, which officially ended prayer in the public schools, Vietnam continued America's descent into political darkness. It wasn't getting rid of prayer in schools that changed everything. The real issue was that it was the first time anyone had sued the public school system and

won. From that point on every lawyer with a bitch tore into the fabric of American society and its schools. Vietnam tried to keep pace. Madalyn Murray O'Hair got her shot in, but the damage was already done. The demons had all left hell and come here, bringing with them drugs, porn, pedophiles, homicides, broken families, pregnant teenagers, assault weapons, abortion rights, and lone wolf terrorists.

The snowy whiteout was working. Around Cyrus now stood a beautiful campus without which the people of Southern Illinois would have had no place to send their sons and daughters. New buildings and programs had sprung up to replace the ashes of Old Main.

(Picture)

Old Main was the centerpiece of SIUC's campus in Carbondale, Illinois, from 1887 until an arsonist set the fire that destroyed it in the summer of 1969. The perpetrator has never been apprehended.

"Hey Cyrus," someone called. Turning, Cyrus saw Kenton McFarland, Chairman of the Philosophy Department, striding in his direction. The man was moving at his top speed, given the conditions. Having reached all of 5'4" early in life, Kenton had put on the feedbag, an activity which brought him a top weight of 240 pounds by adulthood. Through sheer dedication, no diminishment had occurred. Kenton was holding fast. Although his height remained constant, his mind was another matter. A Rhodes Scholar with seven editions of various philosophical books in print, Kenton was a resource for the university. He had a voice, and when he spoke, people in high places listened.

"Cyrus," he croaked there in the cold and damp, "got a minute?"

He reached out his chubby hand in greeting. Cyrus shook it.

"Calvin Barnes just told me a remarkable story," Kenton said, "a story about a man whom I suspect fits your description. A man who is contemplating change," he added. "Am I close, yet?" Cyrus flipped his hand dismissively.

"Not exactly, Kenton," he said. "I'm just forming an organization."

"I'll be leaving on that one," said Charlie, taking his cue to exit. Kenton smiled dismissively as Charlie walked away.

"Oh," Kenton put on his best-surprised face, "is that it? Well, I also heard you're starting a foundation. Is that a myth as well?"

"No foundation," said Cyrus, "not at the moment anyway."

"Well, then," said Kenton, "what are you doing?"

"We're having a meeting this afternoon," said Cyrus.

"A meeting, you're having a meeting," said Kenton, his voice rising. "Who is coming to this meeting?" he fired off. "You could have invited us."

"Who is us?" asked Cyrus, "And why all the sudden interest?"

"Well, I was talking to the chancellor today," said Kenton.

"You were talking to Chancellor Pham," Cyrus said incredulously, getting more interested in a conversation that was growing legs.

"Yes, well," Kenton went on, "I was just talking to the chancellor."

"You never talk to the chancellor, Kenton," said Cyrus. "You avoid the chancellor like the plague and always have. You have no business with the chancellor; you're a philosophy professor."

"Cyrus, I talk to whomever I goddamn well please," said Kenton, adding, "you're not the only one of us with tenure. What if you go off halfcocked and ruffle some big feathers and our budget gets slammed? What then?" he asked.

"Uh huh," said Cyrus, seeing an emerging pattern.

"I get it, Kenton, you decided a preemptive strike was in order. Am I threatening your territory? The imperative surfaced, and you marched to defend your turf? It's always about the goddamned money, Kenton," Cyrus said, his voice edging up a decibel or two but still icy in tone. "You don't come up for air for just any reason, Kenton, hell, I haven't laid eyes on you for at least a year."

Kenton looked a little flushed out there in the elements.

"You probably see this as a renegade move by an old hippie Ranger," Cyrus went on, "and not an idea conjured up by a professor of philosophy. Funding could be denied, withheld, I get it."

"No, you don't get it," Kenton interjected, waving his stubby arms with vigor, "you don't get it at all. You are going to upset the status quo, which many of us think is just fine, thank you. "I do not want to be body slammed by the administration, the legislature, whatever. Look at who funds our school, pays our salaries, all our increases. Look who's in charge," he practically shrieked, "George McCreary and Ray Malencia, that's who."

McCreary was a four-term Chicago Democrat, a member of the US House of Representatives, and a very prominent part of SIU's funding equation. The man sat on or chaired nearly every education committee in the house. Malencia sat on SIU's Board of Directors. "McCreary will shit a brick," Kenton moaned, "if he thinks we are promoting a third party out of our philosophy department."

Well, he's about to have diarrhea then, thought Cyrus. There was always someone whose personal stake was paramount.

"A big idea has been known to change the world we live in," Cyrus said to Kenton. Think Plato, Socrates, Darwin. Just remember Shakespeare penned 'The evil that men do lives on, the good is often interred with their bones.' I have no intention of letting that happen here."

"So what's happening, Professor Kohler?" Kenton said in as uppity a voice as he could manage.

"You'll have to wait for the information like everyone else, Kenton. Don't load until you're ready to reload is an old axiom that has served me well," Cyrus said dryly. Trying to look Kenton in the eye but unable to hit that moving target.

Cyrus continued, "You'll know soon, Kenton, soon."

"Is that all you've got?" Kenton asked plaintively, glowing with redness but saying no more.

"Yep, afraid so," Cyrus replied. "I do feel poorly about your potential preemptive strike. Oh, I forgot to tell you. I will be starting a series of lectures soon. Stay tuned."

Chapter 16

"Okay you two," Cyrus said, his voice slightly animated, "let's go over the plan. How is the Council of Ten coming along?"

Calvin replied, "Well, they have divided the 50 states into ten quadrants, each of which has roughly the same number of colleges and universities. The physical size of some quadrants is larger due to lack of schools, but we evened it out. There are three quadrants west of the Mississippi River and seven to the east."

"Density of population and schools determines the division," Reese said, walking in a little circle in front of the blackboard and gesturing with her long slim fingers at unseen, apparently airborne objects. Calvin was studying his presentation binder.

Reese continued, "We have identified 1,034 colleges and universities that are candidates to receive your lecture series. We will be talking to all of them in the coming weeks to seek compliance for full content print, which means they will print the entire lecture in their campus papers, word for word. My team is setting up The Front website: 'TheFront.com.' As you asked, we'll roll out your lectures just as the Vietnam War protests rolled into the history books through the schools of journalism and campus newspapers."

Reese continued walking around the room, occasionally looking at Calvin for support. "I'm just crossing my fingers that when the response to the lectures starts coming back to us, our website and social media teams will be up to the task.

"It will be each member of the Council of Ten's job to answer questions that surface from various groups or individuals about our new organization. We will post your blogs weekly. You will also have to respond to media in different parts of the country.

"Fellows," Reese said firmly, "all content comes to me and then to Doc and back to me. That is the cycle. Everyone clear on that? All complaints come to me. I will personally clear any problems that may arise with you, Doc."

Reese looked at her notes, clutched tightly in her left, shooting hand, and continued. "It's possible that groups within each quadrant will separate into state groups which will organize within their state and in so doing begin to be a grassroots, state-level presence. Since these groups will likely be within the university structure, we will encourage them to register as student organizations or RSOs. One day we will have one or more of these in every supporting university. The RSOs will be the grassroots of The Front, growing our resistance every single day. If we do our work, the grass will grow and our efforts will be rewarded with the

formation of a caucus within each state, and eventually, perhaps, something larger. Along the way, if we gain support, if reason still has an American home, other opportunities may surface. One step at a time, baby steps," she said, flashing her big smile.

Cyrus stood by the office's only window looking at something lost in time, the Old Main fire remnant. A ghostly visage seemed to stare back intently. Calvin was seated at an old school desk in one corner of Cyrus's office. This particular desk was from the old Logan Elementary School, which Cyrus had attended. He had bought it at their final auction. The beautiful old building that had been Logan Elementary was still standing. Barely. Nature was reclaiming its own. The one story building out on highway 161had not suffered the demolition fate of so many like itself. Rather, it became a museum of antiques and had grown, over the years, to become popular among those wanting something old from a kinder, gentler time, something with substance, maybe handmade. That was all over now. It was only a matter of time until the razing crew came.

"We've been working hard to get everything ready for the public to interact with you, Doc," Calvin said.

"Get it ready," said Cyrus.

"He's always ready, Doc, you can be sure of that," Reese said. Cyrus caught Calvin's little smile of acceptance. There was something subliminal at work here, call it validation, for lack of a better term. Cyrus nodded, smiling at his team, adjusted his favorite blue sweater vest, longed for the Arturo Fuente 858 cigar in his right pocket, and walked out of the room.

Chapter 17

"You remember that scruffy bunch of drug dogs, they thought of themselves as minstrels, out in sunny California during the 60s," Cyrus said to Jax later that evening while they stood in the kitchen, washing dishes, watching flocks of Canada geese descend onto Lost Lake for their evening respite.

"Yeah," Jax replied, "of course I do. I also remember you thought, for a while at least, that they were role models."

Cyrus winced at the reminder of that painful part of his past, when he tried, unsuccessfully, to submerge himself in someone else's reality. "As you so well remember, they called themselves the 'Merry Pranksters.' They traveled up and down the coastline in Ken Kesey's psychedelically painted school bus named 'Further' visiting various places, playing music, doing lots of illegal substances. There was only one rule among the Pranksters. It governed their lives, their daily existence. You were either on the bus or off the bus. It was a simple rule, but it worked. You were, or you weren't. Your choice. To me, Jax, that is The Front. We either throw away all that old garbage, or we keep it."

"It's not going to be that simple, Cyrus. Some things are complex, like all those times you pushed my envelope, big boy," she said rather grimly.

"Yeah, I get it," Cyrus acknowledged, walking over and putting his arms around her buck 10.

"You'd stroll off to the woods when things got shitty, higher than a kite I'm sure, probably heading for Colleen. I don't know what you'd have done without her. I do know she stopped the madness of Tripper John. How she did that I can only guess," said Jax.

"She brought down Myoconda," said Cyrus.

"Tripper, wasted as usual, about crapped himself. Colleen vowed to never speak to me again if I kept on keeping on. She told Tripper a vision of hers with him in it. He just picked up and left. Never came back."

"Don't expect easy here Cyrus, just because you've got it figured out."

"We'll see, won't we dear?" Cyrus said, wrapping her up in his arms and pulling her close.

"Yes, we will," said Jax, nodding in agreement.

"Maybe I'll be like Dean," Cyrus said. "Dean was one of Jack Kerouac's characters, a certified looney in his novel On The Road. On one of their trips, Dean offered up the most enlightened of insights when he pointed out, 'If you know what it is, you know everything.' Kerouac had met Beatrice Kozera on a bus from San Francisco to LA. Unfortunately, she was married and running away from her husband, a truck driver named Alfred Franco. Their affair inspired him to use her as his character, 'Terry the Mexican Girl.' Kerouac's fictional alter ego, Sal Paradise, knew her for only 15 days."

"That might not work for you," Jax offered up.

"Probably not," said Cyrus, "No more than my Tripper John experiment worked for me. No matter how much I tried, Jax, I could never get the man to lighten up—he just ranted on hour after hour, analyzing corruption and unconscionable deeds everywhere. Not once, though, did he ever propose a solution."

"Ah," said Jax quietly, "there is that. He wore on me too, Cy. He made it very difficult for us."

Chapter 18

Sitting behind his old teacher's desk the next day, Cyrus listened intently to the conversations among his kids as they performed their tasks. Feedback seemed satisfactory. Body language was positive.

"Reese, have you and Wilson touched base?" Cyrus inquired, referring to his old friend and constitutional attorney and scholar, Wilson Hahn.

"All over it," Reese said, not slowing down her keystrokes one iota. "He gave me a 30-minute briefing yesterday and went over some of the legal issues, the LLC filing, website content. He gave me a questionnaire to put online—the one-dollar letter, he called it."

Cyrus laughed. Wilson had a dark side filled with the driest of humor. The one-dollar letter, imagine that.

"That website of yours Reese is going to be our reality. Maybe you'll get back a few million of those one-pagers," Cyrus said.

"Maybe," replied Reese, not looking up.

"What about all those people who want to give more than one dollar, Doc," said Calvin, getting involved, "what do we do about that?"

"We let'em but we don't solicit them," said Cyrus. We play by our rules, everything gets disclosed.

No support for Citizens United the excesses of its council, Jim Bopp—although I was pretty impressed in 2009 when he tried to pass a resolution in the RNC that called on the Democratic Party to change its name to the Democratic Socialist Party. We will not become the bought, not now, not ever. Monitor our growth, Calvin,

and keep me informed. We'll talk about the future when it arrives. Hell, maybe Mr. Bopp will be joining The Front, or not, probably not. I forgot for a moment he lived in Indiana."

There was silence in the little office. Calvin and Reese, who had been working while listening, stopped working and looked up almost simultaneously. Calvin stretched and remarked, "You are going to have more enemies than Hitler."

Chapter 19

Cyrus and Jax were kindred spirits. It hadn't been a traditional marriage, with Tripper John and Colleen always in the picture, but as time passed, changes began to occur. They developed their groove, danced a lot, kissed more than most, and developed their own slang, sort of a Cajun-southern blend. It was a dialect of their creation. For two old hippies they were hanging in there and Cyrus had those big paws of his on her all the time.

"You are some kind of lowdown perv," Jax would say. "A groper."

"A coper," Cyrus corrected.

At the end of all this messing around, Jax just smiled her come hither. What to outsiders might appear to be confrontation was merely consensus building.

As Cyrus sat with his feet propped up on the ottoman beside Scout, their black seven year-old hound dog, Jax said, "I am mounting a three-pronged attack," simultaneously using the vacuum, broom, and Swiffer.

"You are aware that you haven't moved your fat ass all day boy," she said, pretending to mean it.

"Hard to do when you are half drunk and full up with potato chips," Cy replied. "Leave me alone, skank, I'm looking for the Cardinals game."

"Well, god, how could I ever come between a man and his true passion?" she said.

Beneath the kidding, though, she worried about him. He was no longer that guy he used to be. On some days she was sure he thought so himself. He was in his 60s now, not 28 and fully armed. What Cyrus, her beloved, was setting out to do would cost many influential people their jobs and reputations. A policy of no PACs and no lobbyists would bring the tribes into full war mode. Making it difficult for the Deep State and their legion of supporters would have consequences. She remembered the day in 1963 when she and Cy stood on the steps of the university library and listened as Martin Luther King shared his vision on the future of our divided country with 5,000 college students in attendance. King was passing through and had made a slight detour at the request of the SIU president, Delyte Morris. She remembered Cyrus looking at her after it was over, the crowd buzzing all around them as kids left for class. "They are going to kill him," Cyrus said, and it happened. Promptly. And then there was Anwar Sadat, who rattled the world of big power and influence in Egypt by making peace with the hated Israelis. Killed him, too.

Jax hoped that everyone would look at Cyrus as some obscure philosophy professor from Southern Illinois and not as a game changer. She suspected her hopes were flawed but realized this could easily be a Bobby Kennedy moment. The Mob more than likely killed him. Coming from a family unconsumed by the feelings of other people, Jax, being of a different cut, was at times overwhelmed by the magnitude of this tidal wave she saw coming. She had talked to Cyrus about her feelings, and he had leveled, responding with his fight to survive those grim battles with dead bodies all around him. Before he was The Front, he had been there. Cyrus was a soldier, and as such, his response was measured and even. She loved him for that. Every day she adored her big boy.

"I have all the pieces, Jax," he would say, over and over, "all the pieces. I would never have imagined in my most stoned moment that this picture would be painted by such an ordinary artist, me, a person who had never shown any indication of ever contributing anything more significant than being a teacher and dad."

And now, with us closer to the end than the beginning, thought Jax, our spiraling destiny has in its sights the most powerful establishment in the world.

They had sat silently then, alone with each other and their thoughts. Dusk came, the sun left, a chill replaced the heat of the day. Cyrus's final words resonated in Jax's mind.

"It's the parchment on the church door that changed history, Darwin on the Beagle, Ardrey's

Territorial Imperative. It is pretty humbling even to think that The Front could take a seat at that table. Faced with a way out of Hawking's black hole, will we be more concerned with who we are or who we can become?"

Chapter 20

Lan Trang Pham was a small woman with short, straight black hair that revealed a long thin neck. Her stature seemed to dispute her French Vietnamese ancestry. Slim and stern, she was not the traditional result of that coupling, but rather a blending of cultures. Dr. Pham had received her doctorate in mathematics, certainly not in interpersonal relations. Cold, some critics would say, professional, said others. Calculating was undoubtedly an accurate portrayal. She liked to be called Lan because it sounded more casual. It masked her formidable play in a very strong field with NFL caliber politicians and their looters. She competed for this playing time with men and increasingly more women who had chosen politics as a career. Some were in; some were out, others had been kicked out, only seeing their removal for cause as a temporary situation. Their

remedy was to land in a nonprofit or think tank while they sorted out their future. Lan thought of them as men and women that knew the system. The system was their refuge from the storm surge of daily living.

Dr. Pham wasn't a politician, at least not in her mind. It made her feel dirty to think like one. She was above all that but hip enough, she reasoned, to deal with their shit. She was an academic responsible for the lives of 20,000 young people just beginning to find their way in the world. That was her responsibility, making sure they had what they needed to get where they were going, which was a hidden garden full of man-eating plants. At least that was what she told herself.

She was all about the money. More was better than less, the total being determined by how well she played the game. Heading up a major university was demanding in this new electronic age when kids were frequently ahead of leadership. That virus thing, going viral, god it scared her to think that one small slip-up could ruin 30 years of effort. In these times it was not just possible but a reality. And because the media exploited every possible opening, even though most were fellow liberals who should show some compassion for a brother or a sister, she had to be on constant guard duty.

Today was going to be a bad day. She was suffering from reverse heel pain, an inflammation of the plantar fascia. This could be a result of running, aging, or getting fatter. In Lan's case, it was caused by flat feet and not from kicking ass, as was commonly rumored.

So her feet were killing her when the phone rang and Chelsea Mulroney, her personal secretary and assistant, daughter of one of the most powerful women in Illinois, Betsy Mulroney, Chairman of Alpha Digital, intoned that Dr. Kenton McFarland, Chairman of the Philosophy Department, was on the phone. "Tell him to call me back on my cell," she said, limping over to the couch, sitting, and digging her iPhone 5 mobile out of the giant cavern she called a purse. Everything lived there, including baby Sig, a beautiful, custom, pearl- handled, engraved Sig Sauer 380, "9 in the hole and 1 up," she liked to say. Her cell rang. Chelsea stuck her head in the door to tell her the switch was on but she was too late. Probably had trouble walking, Dr. Pham thought,

frowning. Chelsea's dress was so tight it was going to wear out from the inside. "Got it," she replied, punching the mobile. After more than 30 years of American life, Dr. Pham still had a decidedly Asian accent. To combat this, she spoke slowly. "Yes, Kenton, how can I help?" she said in her most cheerful voice while taking off her shoe and rubbing her sore left foot.

"Well," Kenton started in his high-pitched voice, "we've got a situation."

Lan could imagine him in her mind's eye, pacing somewhere, light sweat on his brow. She never heard from Kenton unless it was a clustering moment or something along those lines.

"What is that situation, Kenton?" Lan replied. "Be specific, tell me everything."

Kenton proceeded to describe the details of his conversation with Dr. Cyrus Kohler, one of his esteemed fellow philosophy professors. Dr. Lan Pham knew Cyrus Kohler. Their paths had crossed before. She knew the Ranger professor was very well regarded and no one to take lightly. Whatever was coming her way would be a black hole if it were indeed coming from that direction. If Kohler was giving a heads up to Kenton, the dam was already seeping. Heaven's gate had sprung a leak.

"So, Kenton, what are you saying here?" Dr. Lan Pham hissed so slowly Kenton could taste her words.

"I'm saying, Chancellor, that you need to talk to Cyrus Kohler about the lectures he's going to be giving," said Kenton with purpose inflected in every syllable.

"He is going to piss off some big people, and unless I miss my guess, he is going to strike pay dirt. He is attempting, I believe, to create a new process for doing political business in America and, maybe, a new party. That will make all your supporters and donors very unhappy, as they may foresee the possibility of waking up some not too distant morning without a job."

"OK, Professor, duly noted, thank you, I'll be in touch," said Dr. Pham. Kenton knew it was time to go away, and he did. As for Dr. Pham, she would wait now. Cyrus Kohler would call soon, and everything would come into focus.

Chapter 21

Cyrus and Jax each took a deep drink of their morning coffee. Lost Lake was covered in mist. Jax smiled and said slowly but evenly, "Here comes the sun, Baby."

Cy nodded. "Yeah, and to think I had it ass-backward all these years."

"I've heard you say 'it's not their money' for years," said Jax.

"That I did, "Cyrus agreed.

"It was always capitalist money. It just took the pols a little longer to engineer the principles of usage." "I like that," said Jax. "You are saying the politicians are their progeny, right?"

"That I am, Madam," said Cyrus. "It's difficult separating the two since they have mutual interests and are both largely unrestrained by the current system. George Orwell once said, 'insincerity is the enemy of clear language.' He could have promoted clarity of response since that requirement

has largely been omitted from political dialogue. Simplicity has been replaced by obfuscation, which we should distrust or otherwise tire of hearing."

"Social tribes," said Cyrus, "have mastered this art form and, if he were alive, would provide Mr. Dickens material aplenty."

"How'd we get from Rand to Orwell to Dickens?" asked Jax.

"Call it reverse progression," Cy said. He got up and walked to the sliding glass door to the deck overlooking the lake. Jax and Scout followed him outside, Jax wrapping her robe around her tightly to ward off the morning chill.

"Our adversaries have been enabled," Cy started back up. "Yesterday, George Will, after quoting George Orwell, pointed out this language issue. Will said when our government talks about quantitative easing, rather than printing money, enhanced interrogation, rather than torture, or vetting the opposition; they are using language to hide the cold hard truth. It's that way of thinking while doing business with the American people that bothers me. It's like saying, 'We know you are childlike. In reality, Jax, the con is an attempt at compliance. Until our direction as a country changes, open discourse will continue to search for its home. The road we're on goes straight to hell."

Cyrus and Jax looked at each other. "Every day I have reservations about my chances for success," he said, "although some days I'm more bullish than others."

"I have seen you take on some big projects in the past 30 years," Jax said softly.

"Yeah, but the distance here is further, the terrain more treacherous. I'm 65, honey," Cy said, "and time is not my friend. I'm not even close to the guy who walked off that train in River City and swept you off your feet," he said with a small smile lingering in the corner of his mouth.

"You do realize The Front may cost me my job," Cyrus said.

"What're we going to do with more money at this late date?" asked Jax. "That's a commodity we don't need. We own the house, and the trucks still run. We've both got teachers' pensions, I have health insurance, and you have the VA."

"Everyone can go to hell," Cyrus added.

"That was a wonderfully objective analysis, dear," said Jax, "but you left something out." "What's that, honey?" said Cyrus.

"These folks may want more than your job," she said, "and I don't want to even think about that, much less the kids you have working with you. What about them, Cy? Do you think they have a chance against these professionals? I am not looking forward to that side of this at all."

She got up and walked to the railing.

"They can goddamn well do it," responded Cyrus with conviction. "They know as much about IT as anybody," he said, walking out to join her. Jax just nodded. When Cyrus was in this place, the shit was in the wind. Better duck.

Chapter 22

Two days later, at nine on a rainy morning, after postponing the inevitable, Dr. Lan Pham had stopped waiting and phoned Dr. Cyrus Kohler. She had pondered the situation and opted for direct action. Soon after, Cyrus found himself being ushered into the chancellor's office by a young lady in a very tight dress.

"Dr. Kohler," the chancellor intoned slowly, as they shook hands and she turned back toward her desk, "we have a situation, do we not?"

"I don't think so," said Cyrus pleasantly.

"Don't be coy with me, Professor," admonished Pham.

"Just doing my job," said Cyrus, "building my support base for this new political philosophy of mine. Publish or perish, you always say. Anyway, we're preparing for an event that some colleges would die for."

"Highly questionable," said Dr. Pham grimly.

"No, no, no," said Cyrus, looking and acting calm.

"I've decided, since the timing is so perfect, to give a series of lectures explaining how Trump, Clinton, McConnell, Pelosi, and their minions ascended to power and stayed there in the face of overwhelming incompetence. My lectures will establish the basis of a new political philosophy and its supporting organization, which I call The Front. The Front focuses on reason and what's best for America," Cyrus said, fixing the chancellor with a steady stare. "We have a set of values dramatically different from the current political model."

As Chancellor Pham digested The Front, she walked to the window looking out on Faner Hall. Cyrus followed her.

"Kenton is worried that you may upset all the apples in our carefully constructed cart," she said, "the one we built to finance this great university."

"You didn't build that cart, Chancellor," Cyrus said, "it was constructed by skillful hands long before your arrival. In any event, there is more to be won from the lectures than lost."

"That depends on your point of view, Professor," the chancellor responded icily.

Cyrus said, "You were walking around in a rice paddy when I was a student here. One day the Vietnam War happened. A panty raid on Southern Towers ignited downtown Carbondale, Chancellor," Cyrus said, deciding to take off the gloves. "Girls throwing out their panties in the morning led to a full-blown police confrontation, looting that night. All across America it went, from Kent State forward. Some of us nice little boys were 1-A in the draft, so to us it was pretty goddamn relevant. The war escalated, some of us were drafted, sent to your country to stop communism."

"Before Vietnam ended, this university changed, our country changed. The world changed. Vietnam forced that change forward and dismantled the concept of trust. As these events unfolded the university you now lead grew and became diverse. Did it become a better place for learning, depends on whom you ask? We certainly have more Ph.D. programs, more foreign student enrollment, a med school, dental school, and law school. That is impressive, but I don't think Southern Illinois

University was ever more relevant than when it served the children born in Southern Illinois. Those days are long gone. I get that as our visibility worldwide increased, it strengthened your ability to garner support in the state legislature. However, please remember, it's not their money, it was never their money, and if they're giving it to you, they want something in return. My advice would be, learn to live without it. Today, I say you need to embrace The Front. This bullshit you heard from Kenton is just that—bullshit. You and I need to have an agreement," Cyrus said.

"If the lectures succeed and The Front finds support for their arguments and organization here, you need to step out and look like a staunch supporter should look. If that doesn't happen, you eventually distance yourself. I have tenure, so you put me on the early retirement shelf. Either way, you are covered. I have your initial blessing, and we all march forward. You operate behind the scenes but make it clear you're concerned and attentive to all developments. If we are successful. my organization will help this university in any way consistent with our principles. Perhaps you should think endowment."

"So," said Chancellor Pham, backing slightly away from Cyrus, who had been getting a little too in her face, "I see you have thought this through. I have a way in, a way to stay in, a way out, all conveniently packaged for my consideration by Dr. Cyrus Kohler, Ph.D. Department of Philosophy, Vietnam ex-Ranger veteran."

"Sorry, Ma'am," Cyrus interjected, "correction, there are no ex-Rangers; please continue."

Pham looked a little put-off, her eyes narrowed, she pursed her lips, licking the bottom one slightly.

"Dr. Kohler, this university is reliant on state and federal funding for a significant portion of its livelihood. We're not likely to become self-reliant any time soon. The state and federal governments must bless millions of dollars in grants and funding for every type of project imaginable. Getting what we want is measured against what we need. Those are two separate bars. Losing affection is easier than winning it. There are those who will see your intentions here as a direct threat to their livelihood, which is, and I do get it, Sir, maintaining their power grid by staying in office forever or becoming lobbyists, both of which I have been advised you are not advocating.

"So, at this beginning of yours, you are a gnat who has tenure. Will you go further, will you become something else, something more? What you propose will cause controversy, that much is sure. You will rock the cart. No one likes sleeping with snakes. When they bite you, and they will, you can only say you knew it was a snake when you lay down with it.

"You've been pissed off at these people for a long time, haven't you, Cyrus Kohler, a very long time? It's hard for me to imagine a man who could survive the A Shau Valley, our jungles, giving anything up easily. So, I know that you have left as little to chance as possible. You've thought your way through this and are ready to lay the trap? You are going to show the concertina wire but not the Claymore fields behind them. Am I close, Professor? I suspect you are going to be more than they bargained for," she said, sitting down and taking off her shoe.

"Don't give me too much credit yet," said Cyrus. "This enemy is well armed, but the real nut for them is that I don't have anything they want or can take from me, except my life and my loved ones. Hopefully, that can be a non-starter, but anything's possible."

"One small omission does strike me as particularly amusing," he continued.

"Until now, not one person, organization, or elected official cared enough about what I was doing to return so much as an email or phone call. Every paper tossed my op-eds. I am no one, they said, no one to consider."

Cyrus was looking her dead in the eye.

Pham could see the fire that burned blue behind that calm countenance. She glimpsed the giant killer that resided there. Quietly, moving slowly, Pham repositioned herself until she stood inches from Cyrus. Facing each other, one 6'3" and one 5'0", she looked up as she moved in a slow circle, widening her arc, much like a mamba seeking an opening but fearing the unmoving mongoose.

"Be assured, Professor," she said, halting barely out of range, "if you are bringing visibility and prominence with manageable conflict, I am on board. I'm a risk-reward girl at heart. As long as there is a debit balance, I stay committed."

She turned away, indicating dismissal.

"Come and see me again soon."

"I'll see myself out," Cyrus said, walking to the door. It had been a civil meeting. Only one of them was lying, and they both knew it.

Chapter 23

Charley Mills was no slacker, the product of Marine combat experience, he had developed the ability to separate fact from fantasy. Charley was a logical man who was extremely good at putting things together and sorting out the dung of those who offered it up. He had started carrying weapons at the age of nine and graduated from a Daisy pump BB gun to an old Remington 12-gauge shotgun in due course. In between, there were had proficiency exams on Benjamin pellet guns and Winchester 22 long rifles. One day at Camp Pendleton, at the ripe age of 20, an old drill sergeant handed him an M-16 and suggested he learn how to use it. Charlie made the rifle his friend.

He became a small piece of history when the Marines slipped into Cambodia in 1972 looking for Pol Pot, one of the world's all-time brutal killers. They didn't find him but left behind a trail of dead Khmer Rouge murderers, mainly murderer's of women and children, who found out soon enough the gut wrenching feeling of being the hunted. The Khmer Rouge had a bully's mentality whose primary targets were defenseless, and that, Charlie was not.

After the war, Charley, all 5'10", 165 pounds of him, took his handsome self into law enforcement. After five years as a beat cop and then a vice detective with the Chicago Police Department, he was hired by Southern Illinois University to be its lead detective reporting solely and directly to the chief. Only one thing in the past 34 years had slowed Charlie down. He had never been able to solve the Old Main Fire.

On June 8th, 1969, shortly after the first Tet offensive had shaken America to its core, the most beautiful building on the SIU campus was destroyed by fire. All documents in the building burned, nothing remained. Accelerants were found, causing authorities to rule in favor of arson. After all these years, there had been no closure. The current administration liked to say the student center,

celebrating its fiftieth birthday this year, was the house that students built. Maybe so, thought Cyrus, but Old Main was the house that students burned.

No one ever came forward with any information that might have put the whole issue to rest. One day a soldier came back from the Vietnam War and started working on his Ph.D. in philosophy. Four years later, he graduated, again, soon landing a position on the faculty. Two years after that, he became an associate professor. Now a full professor, Cyrus Kohler, Ph.D. had formed a steady relationship with Charley Mills. They had discussed the Old Main fire for about 35 years, and their theories abounded. Cyrus kept telling Charlie he would look into it, but no new evidence had appeared, until now.

When the phone rang, Charlie picked it up as a matter of course and said dryly, "Detective Mills here. Can I help you?"

"Don't know," came the reply, "maybe, maybe not, but I might be able to help you."

Charlie recognized Cyrus immediately. "You old Lurpster, what are you up to?"

"A strange event happened," said Cyrus, "a bizarre instance given all the time that's passed since the fire."

"Did someone see the ghost of Bob Marley?" chuckled Charley.

"Sort of, maybe, listen to this," Cyrus replied. "My old Cherokee friend and hunting companion

Tommy Black Lance Wanderone, who I met back in Vietnam, is a maintenance supervisor at SIU and

lives a few miles away from me, near the Garden of the Gods. You know Tommy," said Cyrus.

"We reunited about seven years after the war when Jax and I moved to Lost Lake. By then
Tommy was already working for the university." Tommy could track nearly anything that walked on

the earth. His keen instincts, short stature, and small frame made it easy to see how Tommy had climbed up and down those dark tunnels during the war. Very few tunnel rats, as they were known, had more real stories to tell than Tommy, stories too frighteningly real to be imagined.

"So, here's the thing, Charley," said Cyrus. "Tommy works four to midnight in the history building and has done so for years. He knows or has known everyone, their schedules, routines, and all the current gossip. Tommy was leaving a dump of his own in the men's room one-night last week, about 11 p.m. he said, when someone entered, went to the end stall and had just started relieving himself when his phone rang. Tommy said he wasn't paying much attention until he heard the pisser, out of the clear blue, say, "My fire fetish days are over. Forget it."

He didn't think anything of it until he was washing his hands and that stall door opened and out walked a particular college professor whom we all know and have discussed, at length. My favorite guy, Charlie," said Cyrus, "Mr. Patriot himself. Tommy thought this over for a few days before he told me about it at the student union. We just ran into each other and decided to grab a cup. Started talking about what was going on and up this came. "

"Probably nothing," Charley said.

"We swapped a few new lies and went our separate ways," said Cyrus.

But Tommy had said the right thing to the right person, who was now passing it on to Charlie Mills. On more than one occasion Cyrus and Charlie had discussed the Old Main fire and a possible connection Cyrus had never dismissed.

Back in the day when Cyrus was playing football at SIU, he had joined a fraternity. Delta had all the jocks and some of the collegiate brain trust. Their haphazard plan that seemed to work mostly

was to help each other. The jocks could get the nerds dates and in return the nerds tutored. As a result, most of the Delta house graduated.

All in all, it was a good experience. Beer and liquor were consumed in nonfatal amounts, women were procured willingly, and issues of the day were regularly discussed. Number one in the hearts and minds of all male college students from 1963 through 1969 was the war in Vietnam, a place our politicians tried to obliterate with bombs and a flammable sticky jelly called napalm.

Everyone had their own opinion about Vietnam. Most thought the domino theory was a reality. It was hard not to believe that Nikita Khrushchev was on the move, and spies were living next door. The Berlin wall was formidable and not coming down yet. Tripper's famous proclamation had not been made.

"Get 'em all radios and TVs," he had said.

Cyrus later called that 'a fucking prophecy.'

If you weren't in the National Guard, you needed to be. And if you weren't yet, you probably weren't going to be. Slots in the Guard became black market commodities. Local Guard unit commanders were available for purchase if the price was right. Some families with money got a get out of jail free card for their kid. Tripper called those passes 'the ultimate deferments.' Jax called them 'blind gimmies.'

Cyrus told Charlie, "During the time we were pledging Delta our big skip-out was memorable. We kidnapped an active and transported him somewhere unknown to all other actives. During this week, I had a roommate. There were 30 of us occupying one big room in the old Jung hotel in New Orleans. That's where I first met and got to know Leonard Ray. The pledge experience had only been going on for three weeks, and the skip-out was designed and formulated under the

premise that the task of kidnapping and being together was a relationship builder, which was a joke. Everyone was too drunk most of the time for any serious discussions to take place, but there were a few memorable moments, and one of them was with Leonard."

"I think we were all walking south on Bourbon Street, hell, it could have been north. There was me, Leonard, Rick Lownes, and Johnny Martin, the four of us, all barely walking. We were looking for Carlos 'The Little Man' Marcello's place; maybe we just wanted to experience the mob, who knows, when the conversation shifted to politics. Kennedy was dead, Lyndon was in office. Rick, Leonard and I were all 1-A. The war was escalating, and everyone, as mentioned before, was trying to get into the Guard. Our graduation date was '67, and it looked like the Guard would be chock full by then.

"Leonard was silent for a while and then said, 'It's wrong we're there. We have no business in Vietnam. It's just government killing civilians. I'll never go. I'll go to Canada first.' And, in July of 1969, after getting his master's degree in history, he did just that. Old Main had been ashes for about 30 days when Leonard departed. Coincidence? Maybe. But the fire fetish talk opens the door a crack, don't you think, Charlie?" Cyrus asked.

"Hard to say," Charlie replied.

After a few more sentences, Cyrus and Charlie decided they would ring up Duster McCaulkin, ex-Secret Service, private investigator, and cohort in all things illegal to discuss the toilet talk. Duster owned the marina, located at the south end of Lost Lake, and lived on the premises. His place was on the way to Nashville, as he liked to say. Duster loved country music. 'Back the truck up' was not invented by Jax, although rumor had it otherwise.

Duster had owned the marina for the past ten years. Forty or more of the locals kept their boats on lifts at the Marina. In the summer, parties were likely to break out at any moment. Duster

didn't mind that at all. It was necessary for business. He did, however, ask that all desiring to perform any illegal activity do so discretely and preferably without his knowledge. He wanted to have plausible deniability should anyone serve a warrant.

Thus, it came to be that Charlie, Cyrus, Duster, and Tommy found themselves on the dock one afternoon not long after the incident, watching big Cumulonimbus thunderheads move west, over the Garden of the Gods. Tommy lived near the Garden and knew they were in for some weather.

"Big storm brewing," he said, not referring to the clouds. "Maybe," said Cyrus, watching two beautiful young jet skiers flash by near the five-mph marker.

"Maybe it was just Leonard all along. It wasn't like we had all this modern forensic equipment we've got now to ferret out the evil pups," said Duster.

"The deed went down at night, around 2 a.m. by all estimates," said Charlie, "everything burned, no documents left, no smoking gun."

"Theories abound," said Cyrus, "but one thing is for sure, he hated the ROTC with a passion and the ROTC was housed in Old Main. That's one coincidence, but another is the supporting cast that ran with Leonard. That would be those CORE and SNCC dogs."

"Being more definitive," he added, "Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis were card-carrying members of the Congress of Racial Equality and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. These were not students. They had terminated that activity and become serious war protestors in general fuck you mode."

"Hayden married Jane Fonda," said Charlie.

"That's special to everyone who went to Vietnam," said Cyrus.

"These guys earned an A+ in disruption," said Duster, "they aced 'Protest 101A."

"Aced it and went on to graduate courses," said Cyrus.

"Leonard went to Chicago regularly, missed plenty of social events at the frat. One day he introduced some of us who were around to Bobby Seale, the black dude who killed the cop."

"He was one of the original Chicago Seven," said Duster, "which also included Abby Hoffman and Jerry Rubin."

Cyrus continued, "Leonard hung with these guys. They hated all things military. It would make sense that these folks wouldn't flinch at the idea of driving the ROTC off campus by burning the building."

"Seven of those boys went to trial for conspiracy but were ultimately found not guilty of that crime. Five were found guilty of crossing state lines to start a riot," said Charlie, "but they beat that too."

"I'll bet that was a drunk," said Duster. "From the slammer to salvation," he added sarcastically.

"Even though all the convictions resulted in reversals by the 7th Circuit US Court of Appeals, at least Bobby Seale got four years for contempt," said Charlie, adding, "For all I know, he served it." "Anyway, this was Leonard's crowd," said Cyrus. "He knew Tom Hayden and Tom came to SIU to organize the riot here in 1969 that nearly burned the town down. So, Leonard could be involved." "Absolutely," said Duster.

"Sort of makes sense," said Charlie.

Cyrus was silent for a moment before continuing, "The other theory out there is one held by Judy McSettle, you guys all know her, the librarian queen of the rare book room."

Everyone nodded, shifted their weight, and waited for Cyrus to speak.

"Judy has heard from the locals, and family contacts, that a certain prominent person in the community today was, back then, an aspiring graduate student whose dissertation was under review somewhere in Old Main by the history department, which was also housed there during those years. The faculty deemed this student's dissertation to be plagiarized. Before any action could occur, the building and all contents were lost. If you look at the layout of Old Main in 1969, the first floor was comprised of classrooms on the north side and the main library on the southwest corner. The second floor was mainly classrooms with the assembly and study halls located on the south side of the third floor. The FBI and IBI concurred that the fire was set in the library, on the southwest corner of the first floor, which was adjacent to, and nearly underneath, the Regents Office on the second floor where the dissertation was being evaluated."

"Convenient," said Duster, "also easy access because of all the windows on the library's west side. Once the books caught fire, there was way too much wood in the building for the fire to be contained. That's how true arsonists, I mean, people who like their work, think," said Duster, becoming more animated.

Cyrus looked at Charley, then to Tommy, and finally Duster, "For my money," he said, "it's door number one." Not everyone agreed, but they moved on to a discussion of how to proceed.

"Although Leonard still has a house in town, he is probably not going to help us," Cyrus said caustically.

"So, we're going to have to help ourselves," Duster interjected," by finding out who he was talking to when Tommy overheard him. Maybe someone knows what he knows."

"Well, we could call him in for questioning," said Charlie. "It's been a long time since Old Main burned and, even though it's still an open case, it's not exactly on the front burner. Leonard Ray would want to know why he's being called in, and it would just alert him to where we might be going. If he felt the pressure, he might leave the country," Charlie added, "seeing as how he does that frequently."

"So, what do you recommend, buddy?" Cyrus said, raising his hands in the air in mock surrender.

"You know I've always thought this cocksucker burned Old Main and now we're just wobbling around like we don't have a clue."

"No, no, no, Cyrus," Charlie rebutted firmly.

"We have a clue. I have a clue. Can you spell grand jury? You might have to come testify, Cyrus, but we have a sitting jury empaneled as we speak."

"We could see Dale Hostetler, our prosecuting attorney about this. There is some strong circumstantial evidence here that might justify a subpoena for those phone records he was creating that night in the john. Maybe it would uncover a smoking gun, maybe not, who knows."

"I say we go in that direction," said Cyrus.

"Then let's talk to the prosecutor," said Charlie.

"I've got to get home and let Scout out before he unloads item one or item two on the kitchen floor," said Cyrus, getting to his feet.

"That boy can carry a load beyond expectation, as he has demonstrated over the years," he said.

Scout weighed 54 pounds. A Plott by breeding, he was a true hound. Cyrus was convinced that at any time Scout might be carrying at least 4 pounds of that weight in liquid. The meeting adjourned.

As Cyrus drove home remembered a wise old dude who once told him, "Revenge is best served cold." Well, the ashes of Old Main were cold. No doubt about that. Hell, the current crop of students might not even know or care about the old girl. Justice for sure had never been rendered.

Chapter 24

Sitting on the front screened-in porch of their home at Lost Lake was a morning ritual to Jax and Cyrus. Summer, winter, spring, and fall, they just dressed for it. Jax was stretched out on the chaise lounge that occupied the south end of the porch. Her slim athletic frame and beautiful face perspired. She had just done five miles around the east side of the lake, her morning ritual when time permitted. The semester's first classes would start a little later in the day, which gave them time to catch up on current events or whatever else was on their docket.

"Hey Buddy," she said affectionately. He was still her big Ranger. It made her smile just thinking about the day she got him back in 1970. Her dad, Sonny Hollister, had thrown open the front screen door and yelled at the top of his lungs, "HOO-AH!" Jax came running. They were expecting Cyrus that day; they didn't know when. That was when. She had hit the front screen door at full speed and almost tripped over her dad's size 17s. Sonny was no little boy, standing about 6'6" and weighing in at a svelte 340 pounds. He'd been one hell of a football player. Signed by Bear Bryant himself at the University of Alabama, Sonny had been the starting right tackle on two of the great man's national championship teams. After three years with the Green Bay Packers, blocking for Paul Hornung wasn't the issue, walking was. He took his saved money and bought a farm in his hometown, River City. All seven kids graduated from Southern Illinois University while dad slowly but surely established

himself in the raising of purebred Angus beef. The farm was a beautiful 380 acres and allowed everyone who lived on it the privilege of working dawn to dusk.

On the porch, all these years later, Jax remembered those times vividly. She had known Cyrus for a while and knew who he was. He could hold up under a big load, that was for damn sure. The Front was not his first rodeo and no one, as he was fond of saying, was shooting back, at least not yet. Jax was confident her husband was about to have his moment of fulfillment. There was that.

Cyrus had always felt the need to do something significant. It was his Manifest Destiny, so to speak, some contribution he was supposed to make, something he was meant to leave behind. Making a difference was his master, not money. He did not measure his life by the gold standard.

That was not going to change, she reasoned. Neither of them was considering a second job. They'd have to make do. Anyway, her dog, she liked to think of Cyrus and Scout as her dogs, was getting ready to bite somebody. All his life he'd been that same reluctant soldier, not accepting the norm. The possibility of him challenging the establishment had existed for some time. She had seen the look in his eyes and face more often the last few years. He had a serious disconnect with the social tribes.

Last week he and Scout had slogged through the rain to visit Tante Colleen, the old Cherokee sorceress who lived on Craggy Bluff in the Garden of the Gods. He had meditated with Colleen, seen his future, and was ready to go there.

"Well, big dog, is your truck loaded?" Jax said with a grin.

The truck is backed and loaded, dear," he replied, looking at her, a small smile dancing behind his eyes. "I am going to break loose tomorrow, sometime around 2 p.m. at Woodward Hall," he said.

"It's the nearest building to the Old Main site, and I want the Old Girl to hear what I have to say. The journalism department is there, as well as the studio where most of the news shows are taped. That

will be the spot where the first bullet is fired. I like Woodward, and I want to be in my comfort zone," Cyrus said, stretching his long frame.

"I thought maybe I'd leave my 1 o'clock a little early and drop by for the lecture," said Jax.

"Who's going to do the filming?"

"Ed's going to do it himself," replied Cyrus.

"He has a couple of helpers from the studio to assist with the taping, but he's going to handle the camera and run the audio."

"Baby," Jax got out of her chair, came over and snuggled up on his lap, "you take your time tomorrow, don't get in a hurry, understand?"

"I do," said Cyrus. "Don't worry. Tomorrow I'm just identifying the players in this social drama."

She kissed him on the cheek and went into the kitchen. It was time for Cyrus Kohler to introduce the United States of America to The Front. A worried look crossed Jax's face. Her little family would soon become a focus of public attention. The old privacy days were over.

Chapter 25

By 1 o'clock the next day the temperature was already 50 degrees and getting warmer. Cyrus had on his favorite pair of jeans and his 30-year-old black, lightweight wool sportscoat with the small 75th regiment patch pin on the left lapel. He'd also pulled out a 25-year-old blue, long-sleeved, button-down shirt that he saved for special occasions.

As Ed's assistants fitted the tiny microphone to his shirt and went through their checklist, Cyrus was quiet. Winging it thoughts ran through his mind, but once that foolish moment was over, he lifted his hand, touching the old jacket's left pocket where his presentation rested. Except for one part, he knew the content because he had lived with it for years. Now was the first real sharing with someone other than Jax, his student team, and Colleen. He was ready.

"Hell, yes," Cyrus replied, grinning. "I've been preparing for this for at least 30 years."

"Jimmy Jackson here" ... Ed pointed to a young man of about twenty standing beside him ... "is one of our news anchors. He will introduce you, and then it's yours to begin and end. Keep it under 25 minutes. Other than that," his voice trailed off.

"Ok, Cy," Ed said, as he walked over to the lectern, "are you as calm as you seem?"

Then he cued Jimmy who held up his right hand, and focusing on Cyrus, folded his fingers, five, four, three, two, and then his thumb, one—he nodded.

Cyrus stood straight and looked directly at the camera. "My name is Cyrus Kohler. I teach philosophy at Southern Illinois University and have done so for 33 years. My talk with you today will be the first of two lectures that will discuss our American political system, its dysfunction, and why a third major party is desperately needed. We will be discussing ideas that must be understood clearly by the American people so that we, as a nation, can set higher standards for the people we've chosen to represent us. My talk with you is about the world we live in, an America that yearns for a reprieve. This world is an unpredictable place. We dwell in it for only a moment. I submit that, in this brief time, our stewardship must improve. Those up to the task must replace those who refuse to accept the reality of our responsibility to society and planet. The floundering subset currently occupying Washington has reinforced the fears of Madison, Adams, and other founders who predicted the flaws inherent in the two-party system.

"Let's start our discussion by examining the broken Process before explaining how evolution has played a huge role in the worlds of politics and capitalism. If we are going to choose, for whatever reason, to destroy our planet, our society, and ourselves, we are on schedule, on task, off to a brilliant start. When people like Stephen Hawking say they think we have one hundred years left, given our current trajectory, everyone needs to listen."

"I would say that in the world of today, almost any type of behavior has the possibility of acceptance if repeated often enough. You can have your way under the umbrella of human rights if you exhibit persistence, even if that course of action appears destructive. Society enables previously unsurmountable fortresses of conduct to be overrun. We have all watched, horrified, as our legislative system of government has imploded. For more years than we care to admit, our lives, newspapers, and televisions have been full of this dysfunctional process we call government. It has impacted us all. The lists of objections are long as they involve players more interested in their careers as lifetime politicians than in their obligation to oversee the health and well-being of the United States and its people."

"Research tells us that the political and religious tribes are engineered to value power and territory. Understanding that thesis helps solve our current dilemma, which is a partisan, two-party government that, being highly social itself, has difficulty addressing problems of sociality and dumbs down standards to make outcomes more palatable."

"We have come a long way from the Greek model of democracy, where citizens were involved in two-year cycles that did not repeat. In our time, we have gravitated toward a system of government that has grown increasingly repetitive and unapproachable. Now, not only do our representatives hold office forever, but they purchased by bidders with massive influxes of capital

from largely unknown donors whose mission is to own a piece of the ultimate winner. We can thank our Supreme Court for the gift of elitism."

"When candidates and funding converged, our Process slowly started to break down. It did not happen overnight. I knew a man, back in the day, who was extremely well read and railed against the morning news. After a few years, I realized that what we were reading about were events, things that had already happened. These Events, with a capital 'E,' remained constant because their governing Process was unchanged, or worsening. Why was that, I asked myself, was it because the players were so entrenched, unchanging, and increasingly polarized that the results continually repeated this dysfunctionality? Absolutely, and today there appears to be no solution to this two-party war. There will have to be a moderator.

"A broken Process yields unsatisfactory and predictable Events. If we change, or modify the Process, that change, by and of itself, will produce different outcomes.

"Our political class violates this basic rule with impunity, being enabled by a principle I call 'Social Congruence' which is the mutual support system built over the past several thousand years by political and religious tribes, working together, to achieve their goals. Tribes, determined to see their government or religion prevail, offer up this thinking as reason enough for invasion or war. The god hierarchy is in play meaning the only god and the best god is your god. Under this pretext, humanity has been, at best, violated, and at worst, exterminated.

"Social Congruence exposes the separation of church and state as pure mythology. Science can expose myths, but in reality, science is merely an enabler, a funding mechanism of the sociality which keeps it in business but disregards its findings when inconvenient. Social Congruence is the root behind the broken Process, and until this mutual support system is altered by the science that serves it, events will remain constant. As science continues to expand its event horizons and

humankind evolves, there is hope that tribal sociality will become less influential. In my opinion, these tribes will either someday go extinct or take us all there before our time.

"So how then, you may be asking yourself, do we fix a Process so broken neither of the combatants can fix it for themselves? I believe the only patch in sight to reseal our democracy is a fully functioning major third party that has a basic understanding of science. To my thinking, this party must occupy the middle and provide balance to the combatants. This party of independent thinkers and doers capable of being difference makers would populate The Front.

"Our world continually evolves. In my life and yours, fabulous discoveries have occurred in nearly every field imaginable. Medicine now enhances our health and extends our lives. Algorithms, in the brilliant hands of men like Albert Einstein, are dating time. The universe around us is becoming more accessible as we attempt to answer three questions brilliantly depicted in Paul Gauguin's famous painting: Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? E. O. Wilson, biologist, researcher, theorist, naturalist, and author wrote extensively about these questions, including his 2012 New York Times bestseller, The Social Conquest of Earth, as well as two Pulitzer-Prize winning titles. All of this has happened in my time.

"Yet, during this admittedly brief history, the social equation has remained unaltered. We now have a clear path to self-destruction that is being ignored.

"Our greatest forefathers—notably John Adams and George Washington—expressed a deep fear of the adversity inherent in a two-party system, having already experienced how divisive that concept could become. We have such a system today. In days gone by, the Whigs and Tories fought no less fiercely than our modern day Democrats and Republicans. Thomas Paine once said, 'Time makes more converts than reason.' My question to that is who decides the issue of time? The answer is nature, where there are no predetermined outcomes. 'Society,' says Thomas Paine, 'is produced by

our wants.' Ayn Rand believed that government should use its power to protect man's rights regardless of whether his needs were met. So, to her, a want did not equal a need. The Front agrees, a want that equals a need is simply bad business. Rand felt that the difference between political power and the collective power of individuals was the government's legal monopoly on the use of physical force. This authority had to come, in her opinion, from "the consent of the governed," which made the government the servant of the citizens, and not the opposite.

Furthermore, it also meant that the government has no rights except the rights delegated to it by the citizens for a specific purpose like enforcing laws or making wars. We are far from that place today. The Front philosophically maintains that the costs of consensus are paid for by those who are denied a voice in shaping it. A society such as ours has no social solution since the territory under dispute has been conceded, captured, and will now be defended at all costs by its possessors. Our political class knows all too well that an electorate following blind tradition and dining on a menu of divine intervention serves their purpose well. The maintenance of fundamentally wrong ideas is crucial to maintaining the momentum of democracy's disintegration.

"John Adams commented in a letter to Abigail in 1776 that Thomas Paine, 'was a better hand at pulling down than building.' Again, he remarked to James Warren, regarding Paine's ideas in Common Sense, 'It is much easier to pull down a government, in such a conjuncture of affairs as we have seen, than to build up at such season as present.' I agree. My answer is that we have to try to rebuild our system of government without tearing it down. America must have a viable third party patch, The Front, to fix a broken Process. We must have a higher qualification for governance than merely knowing the system. We must have access to a higher standard of elected representation. We must attract the unbought.

"How will we do that? Are we evolved enough to make this change? Polls have indicated that only 28 percent of the American people have a true understanding of science. That is a hurdle. Also, 78 percent of the American people identify with Christianity, which means many tend to look to the past for a solution to their future. Do not construe my words as an attack on religion; this is not about the churches' Christianity, but rather their humanity."

"I have to think that most Christians and other religious folk have an interest in survival here on Earth, unless some concept that Earth is just a way station, worthless once they're rescued from it, has overridden that of preservation for themselves and their progeny. Perhaps The Front, on middle ground and applying logic, will be a rational choice.

"When I hear that 90 percent of incumbents are re-elected in districts where 70 percent of the voters say they are unhappy with the current situation, it tells me the selection choice is inferior.

Under our current system, voters have little hope of a better selection pool since party insiders do the 'slating,' as they refer to it. When Einstein said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, he must have been referring to our political system, under the management of congruent social tribes who are unequipped to solve today's substantial social issues.

"My time is about up for today, but in the weeks to come, I will identify The Front further and what I believe can be accomplished, especially with you on board."

Cyrus's inner voice told him to stop. He did. He never questioned that voice—his guide since childhood. Once, in the jungle, at Ripcord, his "keeper," as he referred to the voice, stopped him from stepping out from behind a half-destroyed bamboo cluster that stood at the end of an earthen dam built up directly behind a claymore field to provide cover for riflemen protecting that portion of the perimeter. Cyrus heard the bullet's high noise next to his head, felt the air it displaced, and then felt

the blood on his neck. A half-inch piece of his left ear was no longer attached to his head. Just a few more inches and it would have entered his skull.

The set went silent as Ed turned off the camera and lights, and the ambiance turned from surreal to normal. "Cyrus," he said, flipping on the natural lighting, "you weren't kidding. I had no idea you were going to say all that. Did I misunderstand you or did you call for a revolution?" he asked, looking a little incredulous.

Over the next 24 hours, the Council of Ten did their jobs. When morning dawned, the campuses of America's school newspapers and their affiliate radio stations were reporting on The Front and the Process.

"The Process Is Broken" was the lead story for many of the more than 1,000 schools now engaged. A full transcript was printed by many and available, online, virtually everywhere. Cyrus Kohler, a name that would not soon be forgotten, watched in amazement as TheFront.com website took 41,000 hits between 5 p.m. and 11 a.m. the next day. Their PayPal account showed a balance of \$17,450. That meant there were now 17,000-plus members.

Reese called to say the San Jose State Spartan Daily had endorsed Cyrus's lecture with its "5 Star Recommendation." The Spartan Daily was the west coast version of the Harvard Crimson, which weighed in 30 minutes later. From all over the country it came, hits, messages, pokes, e-mails, tweets, requests for interviews. A completely overwhelmed Cyrus Kohler watched as the Council of Ten e-mailed and tweeted back replies. The Daily Illini said it all on their front page, running the headline "Country First," as it ran Cyrus's lecture word for word. Another collegiate paper focused on the new Principle of Social Congruence while some called out The Age of Violence.

"New concepts to build on," Cyrus told Jax as they watched The Front begin to gather force.

"People need to rediscover trust," Jax said softly.

"We need to rediscover ourselves, one person at a time," said Cyrus, putting his arm around her tightly.

By the end of day one, TheFront.com had received 118,000 hits and was under a digital siege with requests and comments pouring in. The account held \$64,127. Maybe there would be a change in the Process. Perhaps they would write their own story.

Book 2

Revelations

Do not wish for time to pass. It will do so on its own, and then you will have no more of it."

Cyrus Kohler

Chapter 26

As the schools of journalism and campus newspapers across the USA clamored for a little of Cyrus Kohler, the world of Dweebert Lampkin shuddered and fell back on him. As the word gradually spread from campus to the local news establishments, rookie reporters, way down the pecking order,

received directions from on high to check out the "Man Who Would Be King." Dutifully, these young minds read the first lecture and wrote their stories for the next morning's papers. Although newspapers as a whole have suffered declining readership for more than a decade, the digital Front hit Kindle® and iPad® tablets across the country. Slowly but surely, Cyrus was going viral, and Dweebert was at the point of attack.

A small fish in a small pond, Dweebert Lampkin, now 60 years of age, was showing signs of wear. Hard politicking does that to a man. For eight terms, 16 years to be exact, Dweebert had been in the Illinois State House of Representatives. His constituency was Jackson, Union, Pulaski, and Massac counties, deep in Southern Illinois. Roads got built because Dweebert did something. He took credit for all the job growth, although in that arena, the pickings were slim. Dweebert had never had a real day job that he could remember. Like his father before him, he worked his way up the local Republican chain of command by doing everything requested and asking no questions. Dweebert was coachable and did as instructed. When the National Republican Committee or higher-ups called, he paid attention. So, sometime around noon, Dweebert's cell phone buzzed. He knew the number. "Hello, Ray," he answered warmly, "what's up in the big house?"

The man on the other end of the phone was Ray Malencia, US Senator Ray Malencia of Illinois, the ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee.

"Business as usual, Dweebert," said the Senator, grimacing as he said the name. How could a mother do that? At least the name fit. Short, balding, somewhat prone to sweating, Dweebert was currently contemplating a wardrobe update from a 44 waist to something a little more comfortable.

"Did you hear about this Cyrus Kohler guy, D?" Ray called him D whenever they were oneon-one. Dweebert took it as a sign of professional respect although Senator Malencia had little of that for anyone. The Senator did not have a Ranger database but suspected The Front had a real honor code and a general loathing for politicians in general. He would have to be careful about what was said and done and do it from a distance. Malencia always abided by his old rule, learned long ago, to never comingle the money with the product and be doubly sure to touch neither. He would give Dweebert the resources and make him the front man.

"Yeah," Dweebert replied, "I heard, I read the Saluki this morning. Kohler's an academic, Ray. His crowd doesn't want to get their hands dirty with our shit, they just want to bitch."

"He's a Ranger bitcher, Dweebert," Ray said uneasily.

Dweebert caught the tone in his voice and regrouped. Ray was nobody to contemplate fucking. Rumor had it he had a crew with guns who used them on people when the need arose. Particularly bothersome Malencia adversaries would sometimes go missing.

"What's your plan, Ray? How do we move on this?" asked Dweebert.

"Carefully," Ray replied.

Wiping his forehead, Dweebert took a deep breath.

"Some temporary measures must be put in place, you know, business issues."

"Yeah, got it," Dweebert replied.

"Get started with finding out all you can about this Professor Cyrus Kohler," said Malencia.

"Information rules the world, D."

Dweebert suspected Malencia was suggesting a bug. He shuddered at the thought of executing that plan but understood a hidden camera was probably going to be the least of Kohler's problems. Hell, he wasn't above putting a mic anywhere as long as he didn't get caught. Using a

generic that couldn't be traced was one measure a man could take to separate himself from certain events.

"Put something close to the desk, the chairs, where the man sits," said the senator, affirming his suspicion.

"Move on it," he commanded Dweebert. The Dweeb did as he was told by picking up the phone and calling Congressman LaRue Arnold in Peoria to request an operative, knowing full well he had one.

Chapter 27

Reese and Calvin were excited, and a bit overwhelmed. The overall response level had exceeded their expectations. They had spent the first 12 hours of the organization's real-life responding to inquiries from all over the country. There were even a couple of mainstream national reporters whose organizations had picked up on the proceedings, discovered the distribution process, and been intrigued enough to query. Reese handled print media while Calvin worked on contacting the broadcast mainstream media, as well as FNC, MSNBC, CNBC, and CNN. It was difficult not to notice the connection between Reese Kerley and Calvin Barnes. They were an in-love item and happy to be doing whatever needed doing as long as they were together. The two soldiers for The Front ran like twin Rolexes, no twitches on their second hands.

Reese and Calvin had high-level requirements on honesty, commitment, and sex, all of which were daily requirements. It all went back to their roots. Cows had to be milked every day. Work could not be missed. Pumps needed to be primed. The duo's priming techniques were a different sort from their peers. Reese came from a family with rural values. Calvin was merely a willing disciple. Two kids who believed in fidelity, to each other. They had decided to have a traditional marriage after thorough field testing. Nothing premature would be in their future.

It was refreshing to see the two of them working side by side for endless hours through the startup. People were plumbing the waters, which appeared to be deep and rising. Every imaginable type of correspondence was landing in their physical or digital mailboxes. The cards and letters kept coming in. By the close of business on Day Two, the website had over 300,000 hits and \$112,422 in PayPal.

Cyrus was astounded. His hopes had been high, but no one could have known what to expect. Reese and Calvin had him on their update list, so he received real-time reports. In and out of classes during the day, Cyrus was keeping tabs on his phone when Kenton McFarland texted a query asking him to check on availability for a 4 p.m. meeting at Kenton's office. Cyrus said okay and showed up on time to find a packed house. At least 15 philosophy department professors and their assistants were crammed into Kenton's 200-square-foot office looking out over Saluki commons, the old parade ground, and a large, rectangular, barely visible, remnant of the ancient foundation that once held up Old Main. Everyone was talking when Cyrus walked in. People smiled at him and appeared welcoming.

"Well Cyrus," Kenton intoned, "you dropped a round in the breech, as you like to say."

"And pulled the trigger," added Melissa Shortridge, the reigning Existentialist on staff.

"It's that trigger part we want to discuss a little," said Kenton, who then shifted from breezy to serious.

"What we want to discuss are the merits of your case." Everyone shuffled to a stop.

Bill Rearson, counted as a Nihilist, said, "Cyrus, if I understand you correctly, you are saying that what we see and read every day are Events, is that right?"

"Right," said Cyrus, "absolutely."

"To change these Events," Rearson continued, "you are advocating a change in the Process, right?"

"The Process determines the Events," said Cyrus. "Until we elect people with higher goals than their party's welfare, or getting re-elected, we will get the same results, or Events, even if the parties change regularly. We'll see more of the same dysfunction."

"So do you think one of the solutions," added Kenton, "is to equalize campaign funding and institute term limits?"

"I do," said Cyrus.

"Why didn't you say something about it then?" Kenton's voice was rising.

"It's in the pipeline, Kenton, that's why there is more than one lecture.

I have a lot of information to get out in a short time."

"You are aware," Kenton broke in, "that our regular good old dollars of funding come from these guys that you are attempting to replace. You're aware of that." He pointed his finger at Cyrus.

"We could lose our asses supporting you," said Kenton, eyes narrowing.

"I wasn't aware you were supporting me, Kenton," said Cyrus, looking evenly at the man. Nothing to size up here, Cyrus thought. It's just about the money, Kenton's 401k and pension with maybe a raise or two thrown in for good measure.

"Look past yourself, Kenton," he said. "There are too many citizens on life support. It's not that people don't want change; there is not a solution available. Well, here we come marching out of Middle America."

"Sort of like the Hobbit," ventured Professor Shortridge.

"Sort of," Cyrus concurred, "like Gandalf looking up at Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor, on his mountain, protected by all those Orks."

"Good analogy," said Rita Braverman, Rationalist.

More talk went back and forth—about what, Cyrus could only guess. His take on it was that Kenton was keeping close track on attitudes and positions, the better to inform Chancellor Pham, who was probably on his new favorites list. That would eliminate manual dialing.

Cyrus found a vacant seat and occupied it. Around him, people sat quietly. One by one or in groups of two or more, they got up and filed silently out into their world. Cyrus sat quietly and gazed out the window. It was a cloudy day, and he could see storm clouds forming.

Chapter 28

Two hours later, sitting on the deep end of Lost Lake Marina's 150-foot dock with Jax,

Duster, and Charlie, Cyrus was starting to feel relaxed when a voice rang out, "How about it, Cy?"

Tommy Black Lance Wanderone was walking down the wooden platform and heading straight for the cooler.

"How about what Tom," Cyrus shot back, knowing goddamn well Tommy did not think of himself as Tom.

"I drove over here so you could fill me in on the Leonard Ray shit," said Tommy.

"I don't have a whole lot more," said Cyrus, "just a hunch that my old hunch was right."

"What made the old hunch come to life?" asked Charlie, getting into the mix.

"Well, I was walking on campus last week," said Cyrus, "and who did I see but Leonard Ray. After Tommy had told us about the strange conversation he overheard, you all know about that, in the Altgeld john last week, I was going to talk to the man, I use that term loosely, but he spotted me about the time I saw him and did a right face and scooted. He doesn't want to talk to me, that's for sure, which does make a man wonder."

"Maybe we ought to bug him," said Duster, smiling.

"Our problem is we don't know where exactly to do that," Charlie replied.

"Have I shown you that new directional homing wafer the boys at Langley are using?" said Duster.

"Say what?" Cy responded. "You've got that? No way!"

"Yeah, up in the Love Shack." Duster liked to call it that. It was an exotic storage shed complete with surveillance that sat on the marina's backside.

The marina proper, built out of concrete block and measuring about 2,400 square feet, sat just back of a 150-foot boarded walkway that ran across the front view of the only window in the building. Duster McCaulkin, the marina's proprietor, sold everything possible in that building, most of it legal. Duster, who also did occasional work as a private investigator, had been known to hold court at dock's edge under the gazebo he and everyone he could recruit had built a few years back. A few reportedly wild parties had been conducted at that location, the foremost being his all-night romp with the Emerson twins, two beautiful 50-year-old twin sisters, who lived on the south end of the lake and came by for groceries and gossip on occasion.

Cyrus had put it to Duster one night when they were opening a couple of cold Dos Equis,

Duster's favorite beer, and Duster had said rumors of Catherine and Grace's affinity for their own

kind were somewhat questionable. That's all Cyrus could get out of him. Duster could keep a secret.

Any time Cyrus, Jax, and Scout made it to the dock was a special occasion, more so with current events multiplying rapidly. The boys all knew as much about what was going on with their old Ranger buddy as anyone could, which wasn't necessarily saying a lot. There was also the recurring problem of maintaining focus due to the immediacy of Jax's wardrobe. She favored less over more, which suited the boys just fine and made them, each year, further rue the onset of winter. Today, she was styling a blue halter top and white shorts, her auburn hair casually up in something. Duster wasn't sure what but found focusing difficult. And then there was that dog, the old Plott Hound. The boys were the only ones who knew he wouldn't bite, and even they had moments of doubt.

"In the Love Shack," Cyrus said.

"Yeah," said Duster. "It's all polymer and plastic, even the cell, not a piece of metal in it. That small feature and other properties make it very hard to detect. You can program it to turn itself on and off, so if it's off when you sweep the room, you're not going to find it."

"How do you find it?" Jax asked, from her corner of the gazebo.

"If it's imbedded and in silent mode, you would probably have to tear the walls apart to be safe from this beauty," said Duster.

"Or you could keep a directional homing beacon on constantly in the room or rooms where any conversation might occur," he said.

"It's an upgrade, Cy," Duster shrugged.

"How did you get it, man?" Charlie asked.

"One of my old friends from Delta Dawn got it for me," said Duster.

That's what Duster called the ops team from his days in the Mekong Delta where the 3rd Marines did a lot of their fighting.

"And speaking on that subject, Cyrus, we need to start sweeping your office and even the house."

"We've got Scout there doing recon," said Jax, bringing a laugh from the group. It was the damn truth though, that dog could smell a fart in the Sahara.

"I mean, you're going to get bugged if you aren't already," said Charlie in agreement.

"These political boys and girls don't waste time and the more they consider you to be a real threat, well, you get my drift," said Duster.

"You tell him, Duster," Jax chimed in, with a grin over all her face.

"The man," she said, "has forgotten most of what he knew, and he is remarkably slower. Help him please," she pleaded.

Everyone was laughing, but there was some truth there. Jax was a remarkable creature, a term Cyrus picked up from his youngest son Nick, who was a fan of The Scorpion King featuring The Rock and his babe. Jax was that thing to Cyrus, a woman with a whole lot of Kama Sutra. Whatever that meant, the tiny former gymnast had it. It's a wonder they hadn't had 50 kids. Jax could turn on the house light, metaphorically speaking.

She was, however, to Cyrus's thinking, way too independent. After one particularly poignant moment in bed, Jax had asked Cyrus if there were a way to identify early onset ED.

"Just talking like that, Jax, makes a man just want to stand across the room from you," he said.

"Maybe cockus interruptus would be more professorial," she had added, goading him on. "I'd have to stop sleeping in the same bed with you," she said, "if I thought you were coming down with it."

"Like the measles?" asked Cyrus.

"Yeah, like that," she said frowning. Cyrus had put her love to every test imaginable over the years, except for one. There never were any women. Just cocaine. Lots of it during the early years. He'd wander off into the woods, on his way to Colleen. A couple of days later he'd surface, all tired and worn out. It's a wonder he hadn't gotten fired. It certainly was one of her all-time best-kept secrets. But, over a decade or more, it took a toll.

"A good marriage is always wanting to come home," she liked to say, "and a great one is being sure of the one you love. Whatever it seems like on the outside doesn't matter," she said, "as long as you know the inside."

To Jax, that mattered for everything. She was 5 feet tall and 110 pounds of business. Susan Jackson could run, catch, and do many things women half her age would be proud of achieving. She just tied up that hair, or let it down, and got after it. Jax set fire to the rain whenever. The conversation went on into the evening that beautiful afternoon at Lost Lake. So much was yet to be decided, but there was no mistaking the promise in the air. The lake was a decompression chamber for Cyrus and Jax who stepped onto their pontoon boat, which they had long ago named "Today," and sailed off down the lake. The name reflected the value Cyrus put on time. He was an admirer of Mohammad Ali, who said, "Don't count the days, make the days count. Do it today."

The friends laughed and chatted until the sun told them it was time to stop. After one last beer, everyone headed for home. The lake was calm as Cy, Jax, and Scout piloted northward toward the power plant that supplied most of the electricity to that part of Southern Illinois. There were always ducks and geese in abundance on Lost Lake, and in the late afternoon, they squawked and quacked incessantly. Two geese, mated for life, took off slowly from the back of Cottonmouth Cove and flew directly over "Today" on their way to the rocky point that jutted out from their house, one-half mile across the lake.

As the geese landed, Cyrus could make out the shape of someone standing on their dock. It was a man, no mistaking that, and something about him looked familiar. Cyrus couldn't put it together until their property came into clear view. No doubt remained. There, smoking a Marlboro, looking keenly toward "Today," was his old ex-friend, Tripper John Calhoun who he hadn't seen in years.

Cyrus took a deep breath and looked coolly at Jax, who had also recognized their new arrival. She knew, better than anyone else, the history here, and most of it was terrible. In fact, at the end of the 30-year relationship between these two men, whatever good had existed was primarily destroyed by Tripper's now contemptible comment to Cyrus, "No matter what you ever said or did, you never changed shit in my mind." Rather than kill him, Cyrus had gotten up and left. That was 15 years ago. Since that time, they hadn't spoken or made the slightest attempt to do so. They were eyeing each other, not moving much. Jax half expected a fight to break out at any moment; she just wasn't sure who was going to throw the first punch.

John Calhoun, aka Tripper, was a son of Kentucky. Born and raised on Louisville's south side, Tripper was no one to take lightly. He had fought to defend himself most of his life. In Vietnam his defense elevated. The man had achieved an impressive body count. They had met up on one of Cyrus's forays into the A Shau Valley and been together since, until 15 years ago. They had kept each other alive several times, and not just in Vietnam. As Cyrus looked back on it, theirs had been a strange alliance. Not really a friendship, Tripper was too self-contained to get much of that rare treat as payback. No, they'd had this long relationship because they were each other's enablers during the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Cyrus had known that.

Tripper gave Cyrus access to this portal cloaked in obscurity, a world he had never been in, the world of crime and law enforcement. Cyrus and Tripper went on stakeouts, smoked pot, and snorted plenty of coke. Their behavior made a person wonder how Jax stuck it out, but she did. She had stopped participating very early on and was glad when the end came. Cyrus, by then, was himself long removed from the drug world, but not Tripper. He was, at all stages of life, by the estimation of those who knew him best, a dedicated hedonist devoted to himself. He smoked reefer relentlessly and had a built-in functioning mechanism that defied analysis.

People stopped trying to figure it out and decided to err on the side of caution. Stoned was typical for John Calhoun, a cop with a gun. Never confused with bigger men, Tripper was, nonetheless, very well put together and always in possession of clear and lethal intent. You had to want to be there to get sideways with Tripper John Calhoun. If there was going to be trouble, he was going to go first, which made for risky business. Tripper had plenty of dirt on Cyrus. Hell, he had enough to bury him and fill the hole twice. They had not only done drugs but sold a few pounds and provided each other with some mutual excitement that they must have required. It wasn't the action of Vietnam, but it was action of a dangerous sort.

Whenever Cyrus looked back on those years, it was a head shaker. Regret was a commodity that fluctuated with the market. He had known at least 20 of those 30 years how debilitating any relationship with Tripper John Calhoun would be, both in the short term and the long run. He had done absolutely nothing to change the course of that history, and that was on him. Looking at Tripper standing there, his short hair and mustache neatly trimmed, smoking a Marlboro, Cyrus marveled that the man was still walking upright. Those lungs must look like black bricks, but unless your examination was carefully constructed, you couldn't see the toll all of this behavior had inflicted. The man still reflected calm, but his insides had taken a beating. By the time the two split, Tripper couldn't play basketball or run much anymore. His lungs wouldn't take it. He'd had a small heart attack somewhere along the way, which slowed him down briefly. But hallelujah, praise Jesus, before long he was back to two packs a day and regular multiple daily doses of quality weed. Not just any pot, mind you, but the best wherever he lived had to offer.

Tripper had made a few stops in his business career as the owner of Security 75, a traveling security company that went wherever he did and kept him in touch with the dark side. The first thing on his agenda wherever he was living, located, or stationed, was finding who had and was selling the best pot. He was a connoisseur. Of course, he'd been using in the army with Cyrus, but the drug habit

flourished once he hit civilian life. Because he was his own boss, Days off were always available, and needed, when he and Cyrus went on a binge.

So, there he stood as "Today" came alongside to dock. Jax tied down the bow while Cyrus cut the outboard and stepped onto the dock. Jax said her hellos and goodbyes and smiled quite insincerely before heading up the path to the house. At no time did either she or Tripper make any attempt to shake hands.

"You packin'?" asked Cyrus, looking directly at Tripper's waist and trousers.

"Nah, it's not comfortable to drive," Tripper said.

"Never bothered you before," Cyrus responded.

"Times were different. It was all that weight."

"Yeah, okay," Cyrus said, pulling a folding chair out of the rack on the dock, setting it up and sitting down.

"Get yourself one if you want it."

Tripper did just that, exhaled, and flicked his cigarette butt into the water. He knew Cyrus despised his casual abuse of the environment, so to piss him off, he used nature as his mobile ashtray.

"Saw where you gave a little speech," Tripper said, his gaze unflinching while he reached for and lit another smoke. He was going to do a few before this meeting ended. Cyrus said nothing.

"It crossed my mind, reading your little piece on my University of Virginia website, that I'd heard some of this before. A late night monologue," he said, referring to one of their many all-night drug induced conversations.

"You get an A," Cyrus said calmly, stretching out his feet and crossing his legs. "You come all this way to tell me you can read?"

"Nope, I came to tell you that should you run out of material and for some unknown reason would use 'yours truly' as a point of reference for all these evil things you allege are going on, well, I might have to respond."

It was a direct threat and a valid one. Tripper had a key to demonic places known only to himself and Cyrus, and there was no doubt in Cyrus's mind that Tripper John Calhoun wouldn't hesitate to use this ammunition.

"It's nice to see you're that same caring individual I knew all those years," Cyrus said, trying to look indifferent.

"What was that you said, let's see if I can remember, nothing I said ever meant shit to you, something like that? Never made you change your mind, not even once. That was it."

Tripper took a puff and very slowly exhaled. "Yep, just that. You got it right, bud."

Cyrus suspected the real reason behind the visit was that Tripper's current situation couldn't stand a jolt of bad press.

"I'd tell you to relax," said Cyrus, "except that would be futile, seeing as how you're always tense, anticipating trouble or making it. So, I'll put it to you this way; I got something out of that purple haze. Without you, there might not be The Front. You were the catalyst behind my attempt to change our political system. You were the man behind the Process. Other than that you didn't make one goddamn contribution. I can't imagine myself trying to explain to your sorry ass how genetics and evolution have nurtured our political class. That was not a compliment, in case you missed it. Those late-night binges weren't an accident for me; they didn't just happen. I was on a fishing expedition,

and you were the bait. I had never met anyone, anywhere, who was more informed about local and world affairs than you, John. You were a walking International Herald Tribune, but from that useful platform, you could also be counted on to spew forth that venom you possess, so like the paper, your usefulness also died."

"But the real cahuna is you think you've got something over me, right?" said Cyrus.

"Oh yeah, yeah I do," Tripper said puffing and nodding.

"Some terrific shit, Cy, dead bodies never reported, kilos untaxed. I can see the lead line, "Father of the Front exposed."

"This isn't about me. I'm just the messenger reporting on bad behavior. Yours doesn't matter; I don't give a rat fuck about you, Tripper. You care about you enough for both of us. Your story does not possess any redeeming value that I can see. You live under a cloud of smug indifference."

"And while we're on the subject ..." Tripper interrupted.

"Fuck you, you sanctimonious prick. Don't go passing judgment on me."

"Watch your language, Tripper—we might discover your actual feelings."

They were both silent for a moment until Cyrus added, "Along those lines, what are you doing with yourself these days, besides smoking yourself to death."

Tripper said nothing, glaring at Cyrus before finally replying, "A little security work here and there, surveillance, divorces. Somebody always wants to know who their significant other is bedding, or not."

"Well," Cyrus said, "you're certainly qualified."

What got Tripper by, kept him out of Leavenworth, were his high performance and job evaluations. So high that the right people often looked the other way. If Tripper owned a private investigative firm, he could operate it in his sleep, or stoned.

"Stop fretting John," Cyrus said, "You'll never see your name in print."

"Most of us have more than one side to our lives, John. I'm not sure you do."

"You're the one who always thought he was better than everybody, giving orders like you were from on high."

"Kept you alive," Cyrus tossed back.

Don't take credit for it, Lieutenant," Tripper said, "I pulled my own trigger. I always liked it when you got on your holier than thou soapbox and intoned the scripture for our lives. Maybe I didn't want to be saved," he said. Scuffing his shoe over the deck, Tripper got up, lit up, walked over to "Today," and looked out to the setting sun as he surveilled the perimeter.

"You have no hope of pulling off whatever it is you have in mind," he said. "Have you identified the enemy? I'll tell you to be sure you know. Not that I give a fuck, but what the hell, every so often I like to be the bearer of bad news. Big guys, Cy. You're in the Big Guy league."

"When I was a street cop in DC, after the war, you wouldn't believe the shit that went down every day. I crossed my fingers when I went on some of those runs, sometimes with a rookie, and me his training officer. Me with somebody who'd never killed a man, never attached a bayonet, much less used it. Me. Me. It was a lonely feeling. I preferred the armed robbers. They wanted to spend the money they stole. Not that they were smart, they weren't, but they were a step up from the

gangbangers and domestics. Oh yeah, those domestics. There you walked a fine line between being killed and killing a civilian, both of which could land you in a pile of shit."

"I was just out there defending some ho with four baby daddies who was smart enough to follow the rules of having no man in the house. She didn't mind getting her ass beat so she could turn out more kids for more welfare rewards. Everyone's armed and pissed. To my constituents, Duck Dynasty is a desirable way of life, and you're riding in from Valhalla to save them. You're going to get them educated enough to turn off Jerry Springer. Hell, they want to be on the show and probably have the creds for it. They'll understand the Process, Cy; they'll get it on the first pass. Oh, forgot to tell you, they can't read or afford daily delivery."

Tripper hooted with laughter, flicked another butt into the water, then pulled out a joint, lit it, and took a deep hit.

"Anyone going to reach those people," he took another deep drag, "it's going to be the criminal justice system or a welfare agency. You are dealing, Cyrus, with the lemming society, where a want, as you like to say, definitely equals a need. You always did understand that part. These people stagger forward in the dawn of every new day, barely able to function much less feed themselves and their families. They have flunked creative thinking 101A and aren't reenrolling. They are one step from the man, and they know it. Three generations of them welcome the welfare dime daily while they keep on procreating money-making little bastards."

"They know right from wrong," Cyrus said, interrupting Tripper's flow, "even if they can't or don't abide by it."

"Hell, they can't survive if they abide by it," Tripper replied. "It's not like they have a choice.

Anyway, It's not the struggling class that is going to fuck you over, get me exposed, put us both in the grave."

"Who is it then?" Said Cyrus.

"The big guys baby," said Tripper, "The ones who feast daily." "The chosen few."

"They're going to put you in a hole, Cyrus."

"Then they are going to get their chance," Cyrus said.

"What a dreamer," said Tripper, shaking his head. "Are you in some fairytale land, Cyrus, or do you occasionally understand that this is the goddamned fucking United States of America?"

Cyrus was amazed. Tripper could get all that out in one breath. "I know where I am, John," said Cyrus, beginning to feel a slow boil beneath his skin.

"You don't act like it. Good luck with your vision. You'll need to find a way to deal with a whole lot of criminals in nice clothes to pull off Act One."

"Don't give one more thought to whether my ideas are fact or fantasy. This doesn't concern you."

"LT, I don't give one small fuck about the mystery of it all or the teeming hordes," Tripper replied.

"That pretty well sums it up then," said Cyrus, getting to his feet.

"Even if you do succeed," said Tripper, "in doing what, I'm not exactly sure, righting a world gone mad maybe, you'll turn once you're in the chips. Everybody does once their passion disappears. It's the reality of life; no one escapes corruption, including you. Everyone's dirty, sooner or later.

Don't break your mirror," he laughed derisively.

Having finished his small soliloquy on human behavior, Tripper shrugged, flicked the remainder of his nearly consumed joint into the lake and started up the hill toward the driveway. Hurtling toward

oblivion as he had been most of his adult life had not forced Tripper into a restructuring of his priorities. The old green Austin Healy, which had taken him 23 years to restore, sat waiting.

"If we never see each other again, Cyrus, it's fine with me," he said. "You're a fool if you think an ordinary guy like you can pull this off. Try your best to forget my name."

"I lost your number a long time ago, John, but forgetting your name would be asking for a miracle."

Just remember," he said, as the man crawled into his low-slung sports car, "it's easier to disagree than it is to make a difference. There was this one ordinary guy, probably the biggest piece of history ever to come along. Certainly, the biggest mystery, whose parents were dead broke when his mom gave birth to him in a stall surrounded by animals."

Tripper took his eyes off the dashboard and looked up. "You're a fine one to be talking about Jesus. That is your direction, right, or have I missed the point?"

"Yes. I'm saying a better man than I tried, and from all accounts did change the world. More than that, I do not know. So don't let my small effort register, don't give it another moment's thought," said Cyrus. "I'd hate to see you grow up and be an adult."

Tripper revved the Healey and drove away. Jax came out of the house, walked straight up to him, put her arms around him, got on her toes, and kissed him.

"You OK, big boy?" she said, taking a breath.

"Yeah, always wanted to get that off my chest," Cyrus replied.

"Satisfied?" asked Jax.

"Absolutely," said Cyrus.

They walked inside where Jax was serving up chicken, long grain rice, and cold tea. It would take Cyrus a while to normalize.

"Cy," Jax said, walking in from the kitchen,"Do you ever get the feeling that time has us locked in here, inside these walls, locked us into our own time, our destiny?"

"Yeah, I do," said Cyrus, "And we're not doing a very good job of managing it. It moves so fast, this time of ours. Just the other day we were twenty five and starting out in life."

"And then boom, it's gone," said Jax, "Lost forever, never to be recaptured."

'Just like the AntiKythera Mechanism," said Cyrus.

"The what?" Jax exclaimed.

"It's an ancient hand powered Greek analogue computer used to predict astronomical positions and eclipses that would happen decades in the future. It was lost for centuries. Boom. Time passed. One day, 2000 years lter it was found off the coast of Greece. If we aren't careful we'll be just like that, gone with no trace. It sounds crazy but we are screwing with nature so bigtime nothing would surprise me. All of us, individuals, societies, have an accounting in our future.

"You'll have that when you're on a big job," said Jax, trying to lighten the mood.

"Well sister," said Cyrus, "We certainly qualify there. Speaking of the Mechanism brings back memories of my days reading Zecharia Sitchin's books about the Nefilim. He laid out a pretty convincing argument about the period of 4,000 BC. which was during the time of the Sumerians. They invented the first written language we know of and called it Cuneiform. The tablets that survived spelled out the great flood of the old testament long before it was written by the prophets as well as Gods coming from the sky. Time swallowed it all. We are not unique, just the latest players."

Jax served dinner up and all conversation ceased. While emptying their plates they discussed the day's other events. Cyrus was carrying plates to the kitchen when the phone rang. It was Calvin calling from command central.

"You won't believe who called here this afternoon and left a message for you."

"Ok, I won't believe it, who?" said Cyrus.

"Wilson Hahn," replied Calvin trying to contain his excitement, "that Wilson Hahn, the one."

"Hum," said Cyrus. "What did he want?"

"A meeting," said Calvin. "He wants to talk Constitution."

Chapter 29

And so it was that on a bright morning, with the advent of spring displaying its budding branches all around the 40-acre Thompson Woods, Wilson Hahn, Juris Doctor, the university's resident constitutional scholar, met Dr. Cyrus Kohler, father of The Front, beside SIU's Campus Lake. They sat down on a wooden bench and struck up a conversation.

Wilson Hahn was a constitutional professor of law in the SIU Law School. Having retired from overall private practice in 2010 as a partner in Hahn, Morgenthaler, and Daniels, a firm specializing in corporate and appellate law, Hahn continued to teach part-time in the university's law

school, which he had helped start in 1985. Over the past 25 years, in addition to his highly successful law practice, Hahn had developed the constitutional studies program within the department and been its first instructor. He had turned down numerous judgeships and was always rumored to be considering one. A short, slightly built, balding, very fit man, it was a rarity to see Wilson Hahn without a suit and tie.

Cyrus was his complete opposite in that regard, seldom wearing anything more formal than Wrangler jeans or Dockers. They made an odd couple indeed. Having known of each other for several years, this was only the second time they had talked face to face. The previous meeting was three years before at a cocktail party hosted by Chancellor Pham for all faculty and guests. The event was a crowded circus, and their encounter was brief. Professor Wilson Hahn was curious and interested in Professor Cyrus Kohler and this Front. Hahn knew that at some point soon, Kohler would need a constitutional advisor. He thought to himself that he might be of some help if he chose to do so, which he did.

Cyrus had realized immediately on hearing Hahn had called, that getting a \$750+ per hour attorney to volunteer his time, for free, didn't come along every day. Diligence was needed. No bigger decision currently existed than bringing on board a man who could be The Front's legal advisor.

"Thanks for meeting me, Cyrus," Wilson said, opening up the dialogue.

"Everyone's buzzing about your televised lecture. Me, I read it in the Saluki," he said. "We have a mutual interest," he said dryly. "For years, I have watched our political process unravel, become contentious, hostile. It always was dirty. I think many of us agree on what men will do to achieve power, but recent events have led to an all-time low watermark. Then, amid all this intensity of partisanship, comes a philosophy professor from my university who says the Process is broken, and unless we change the Process, these Events will continue unabated. Am I on track so far, Cyrus?"

"Absolutely," said Cyrus, leaning back on the bench and putting his hands behind his head. His gut told him to advance. The keeper said, "Yes."

"Well then," said Wilson, "what's the next step, as you see it? Where are you going to go from here? Before you can answer, let me advise, Professor, that the waters are murky and your steps need to be well thought out."

As Wilson took his turn in leaning back, Cyrus sat up, faced him, and said, "Let's say you and I have a division of labor. My job is to introduce The Front and its platform. What I am introducing to the American people will break new ground and encourage more participation in this massive reformation. There is one big sticking point that I would like for you to consider advising us on if you decide to invest your time," said Cyrus.

"Oh, I'm way ahead of you, Cyrus, I've already sent my dollar." Wilson laughed. He had more than paid his dollar; he had found the messenger, a person he felt was genuine. Wilson was a man who could put his client in a position to win. He was going to do everything within his power to see that Cyrus was always strategically informed. That would involve coaching while remaining in the background. A good coach can often eliminate initial failure. Don't ask an offensive lineman straight out of college to block. Clay Matthews. Unquestionably, he would fail, and sometimes an initial failure can have long-term negative consequences. No, here Wilson wanted to move carefully, cautiously, achieve small victories, take small steps, all the while having a long-term plan aimed squarely at the target, which would become a third major political party that could control and balance two sharply divided political foes. If the third party became successful, all the money and corruption in the world would not sway public sentiment.

Getting there would require a significant amount of work. So, Wilson wanted to hear the plan. "So, that sticking point, Cyrus, what is it?" For more than an hour, Cyrus talked to Wilson Hahn.

Wilson listened, nodding from time to time. Cyrus told him that in the beginning, he had been focused on just building an organization that could attract the disaffected and have an eventual say in the election of candidates. Starting a political party was not a consideration. Over time, it became evident that millions might join if a break or two went their way. Then The Black Lives Mattered, and The Kids stood up, and The Teachers walked. So, Cyrus went straight to his roots, to a rollout that he saw with his own eyes could change America for the better. The boat was sinking but could be repaired. Cyrus spelled out that philosophy. The Doctrine of Limited Rights and Social Congruence would forever separate The Front from the Democrats and Republicans.

Wilson exhaled. Looking at Cyrus, he remarked, "On the 4th of July, 1776, The Second Continental Congress, composed of 13 states, issued a public declaration which insured all of us, as citizens, the right to redress, if this about-to-be constituted government ever became destructive. Now, facing a dilemma as affected by our broken two-party system, there appear to be no satisfactory means of accomplishing this task. Enter Cyrus Kohler and The Front."

Immediately Cyrus realized the monumental significance of Wilson's words. Cyrus felt that time had stopped at this precise moment, and nothing from this point on would ever be as it had been.

"Let me help you change that Process of yours, Cyrus," Wilson said. They shook hands, smiled, accepting and acknowledging the path they would travel together, and went to work.

Chapter

On Day Three, Calvin called to say they had received 516,000 hits to their website, The Front Facebook page was lit up with encouragement of all kinds, and they had \$162,000 in the bank. Also busy on the other side of the aisle was Chancellor Pham, who had received calls from several political organizations

who were positioning themselves to survive multiple outcomes. Dr. Pham heard her funding initiatives discussed by more than one party. Duly noted, she thought, what else would matter to these brokers. When Senator Ray Malencia's fiefdom, the Freedom Action Coalition, checked in, the good doctor became fully aware that people were paying attention to the goings on of Dr. Cyrus Kohler and his Front. I wonder if his team is measuring all this, she thought, making mental notes before punching her PDA to contact Calvin Barnes.

Chapter 31

Duster McCaulkin and Tommy Black Lance Walderone were deep in thought. There were several theories about the Old Main fire. The plagiarism notion didn't light their front burner. Only the story of Professor Leonard Ray made any sense. The facts they had varied dramatically from the ones proffered by several law enforcement agencies, local, state, and federal. No one had looked or was currently looking for Leonard. He'd been interviewed years ago but never charged, an obscure piece of a complex puzzle that wasn't on anyone's radar.

A man intelligent enough to earn a Ph.D. in history and have a successful teaching career was never so much as considered a suspect. When local law enforcement and the FBI went digging back in the day, they missed this frat boy radical, and in the confusion of war, somehow Leonard Ray just blended into the turmoil of the time.

Shining more brightly in the spotlight of that moment were Bobby Seale and Abby Hoffman, fellow radicals who received their fair share of sympathy on campus, where thousands of students hailed from Chicagoland. Ray never showed up in the regular protests over the ROTC brigade which was housed in Old

Main, but the war protest movement wanted it gone. Bad. After talking to Cyrus, Duster and Tommy were sure he believed Ray knew what had happened. This belief was strong because Cyrus had seen Ray frequently during those years, listened to him put forth his antiwar vitriol at the fraternity, and watched him go out of town on many weekends, presumably to his hometown of Chicago, The man had antiwar posters in his room, and Cyrus had seen them. Hell, Ray said he was going to invite Abby Hoffman to homecoming. How much of all that was true? Cyrus's part for sure. Then Charlie Mills called.

Charlie, campus detective that he was, took an active role in all campus security matters. Over the years, Charlie had reached out to Duster, Tommy, and Cyrus whenever any Old Main information surfaced, which it rarely did. After Tommy's interception, he began to tighten his focus on the retired professor. That reawakening was gaining traction when he read an obscure announcement posted on a Friday afternoon near the bottom of the inside front page of the Saluki. The caption read, "Major Endowment" and detailed, in a limited manner, a gift to the SIU rare books room by none other than Professor Leonard Ray. The man was giving his entire collection of books, documents, and papers covering the Vietnam war period of 1963-1975 to the school. These documents would be housed and available to approved individuals in the rare book archives, ruled by Judy McSettle, the house librarian. The boys decided a visit to see Judy was highly appropriate.

"Better ask Cyrus if he wants to go along," said Duster.

By the time they had texted Cyrus, he had already read the Saluki, which was one of his daily habits and uncovered this little gem on his own. Duster had to give it to him; the boy didn't miss a lot.

"How'd you find that in the paper?" asked Duster when he got him on the phone.

"I read it every day, Duster, just like I do the Chicago Tribune and the Southern Illinoisan," said Cyrus.

"What do you make of this?" Duster asked.

"Did you know Leonard was a Vietnam aficionado?"

"No, but I'm not surprised. The man was a history professor."

"Yeah," Duster replied, "that he was."

"I just googled him, and he's quite an authority on the Civil War, too," added Charlie. "The man wrote two books about Reconstruction and the New South, but not a word about something that must have interested him his whole life."

Cyrus was quiet for a moment, "It's more than a coincidence. Let's find out where and how he put that collection together. Get Tommy's butt in your truck, Duster. The three of you see Judy. Better yet, make an appointment, and I'll go with you. I don't have a heavy schedule today if she can see us on short notice."

Whenever an endowment is made from a donor to a university, there are always grant conditions that accompany the gift. Judy McSettle was happy to see the professor walk in with Duster, Charlie, and Tommy, and she was more than willing to let them see the terms and conditions of Dr. Leonard Ray's grant. It was an extraordinary gift consisting of 43 original editions by established and unknown authors about a variety of subjects, and 27 of the books were signed. Also, there were detailed military maps collected from field officers who had used them during their tours and kept them as mementos and souvenirs of their time in hell. These maps were not just topography, degrees of separation, latitude, and longitude, but meticulously detailed depictions of supply lines, troop movements and field positions. One map, in particular, stood out, and it caught Cyrus's attention.

"Holy crap, I'm looking at Dien Bien Phu," Cyrus said, shaking his head. "How did Leonard Ray get his hands on a military map, showing, in detail, bunkers, fortifications, topography, the Viet Minh trenches? How would Leonard Ray ever have collected this? He must have known the owner, who had to be a high-ranking party official, you would think. A field officer wasn't carrying this map; I can tell you that from experience."

"What do you think this means?" Charlie asked, pointing to the handwritten Vietnamese symbols in the bottom right corner of the document.

"I don't speak or write the language," Cyrus said, "but it looks like some English letters there below the Vietnamese. Does it say HCM? Is that what you see Charlie? Right there, just below the signature. HCM. Goddamn! That could only be Ho Chi Minh himself."

"If those are his initials in his hand," Duster said, "how the hell do you get something like that?"

There were other authentic-looking documents showing wear and water stains which indicated usage in the field.

"Battle maps," Cyrus said.

Tommy added, "I've seen plenty of field maps, and these are pretty special. Ray was some collector."

"I'd also like to know," Charlie said, "how some goddamned Vietnam draft dodger ever got his hands on them."

The others nodded or shook their heads.

As they went through the maps, mouths dropped. Notes from foreign diplomats, US intelligence reports, and letters from President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of War McNamara were scattered throughout the collection. Then, as they looked at the last pages somewhere near the bottom of the stack, out dropped an unabridged, rumpled, folded, and now unfolded, original floor plan of Old Main.

The four men looked at each other, dumbfounded.

"Holy shit," Charlie said, "what in the hell is that doing here? Are we playing Clue?"

"The professor in the library with a lighter," said Cyrus.

"You think the professor is playing games with us?"

"Damn," said Tommy, his hand resting on the bone handle of his knife which had earned the name Blood Taker. In 1970, the band saw blade from whence it came had cut its way through the 304b, the NVA division that had overwhelmed the French at Dien Bien Phu.

Before they could speak further, Judy broke the silence by saying, "There is one rather strange condition of this endowment."

"That is?" said Cyrus, turning to face her.

"That is, Dr. Ray has insisted, and received agreement from Chancellor Pham and the library board, that his letters, written to god knows who, will not be opened by anyone until he has passed."

That's them over there in that UPS box," she said, pointing to the culprit.

"I don't believe it," said Cyrus, "it's all right here, the clues, the maps, and he is going to his grave with it."

"Yeah, but it sounds like he wants to take credit for it," said Charlie.

"Maybe," replied Cyrus, "but it's unlikely that anyone will unravel the mystery before the professor says goodbye."

The boys went downstairs to the faculty lounge and huddled around the coffee pot. Duster spoke first. "After the war, I remember your old friend Tripper John telling me about his girlfriend, Clifteen. That's where you and Jax got that Nudeen shit of yours," he said.

"It seems that after they broke up, she hooked up with none other than Dr. Leonard Ray. They dated, lived together maybe, sometime after Ray came back from his little vacation in Canada."

"Go see her, Duster. Take Tommy with you," urged Charlie. "I've got so much to do, I can't take off right now, especially since it is a cold case."

"No budget for that?" asked Duster.

"Right you are," said Charlie.

"Last time I heard," said Duster, "she was living somewhere down by Lexington, Kentucky."

"Probably long gone by now," said Charlie.

"Tripper never really said where Ray and Clifty lived, somewhere around here," Duster said.

"He didn't say where he lived when he came to see you, did he, Cyrus?"

"You mean Tripper? I didn't ask him, but the old Healy had a Florida plate."

"Let's go find him and ask him," said Tommy. "He'll probably remember if the dope hasn't numbed him out."

"He's the kinda guy that strikes me as keeping track of those who cared about him," said Duster.

"You've got to be joking," said Cyrus.

"He doesn't give a rat's ass about much of anything, much less a woman. I don't know where he lives and don't want to find out," said Cyrus with a tone of finality.

"Find her some other way."

"You still got his social?" asked Duster.

"Yeah, I believe I do somewhere," responded Cyrus.

"As a matter of fact, maybe it's in one of my old notebooks, PDAs, somewhere."

"You find that son, and I'll give you a phone number and address today," Duster said flatly.

Chapter 32

Reese Kerley had two eyes that were tired and puffy from hours of looking at a computer screen, slogging her way through the endless stream of communication. She had two split nails and needed a manicure and massage. A day off would be useful, but there weren't going to be many of them in her near future.

If managing The Front website wasn't enough, Reese was pursuing a double major in the graduate schools of journalism and philosophy. Her skills had landed her a position as the business editor of the Daily Egyptian newspaper, where she reported directly to Ed Randle, the managing editor. Her job with The Front had ended that project in its infancy which had not made Ed particularly happy. He came around when she shared her sentiment about Dr. Kohler. Reese called him a Giant Killer.

Ed assured her she could have her job back and gave her a politically correct hug. Reese kissed him on the cheek. Randle was a good man.

Now, she managed the website and the money that poured in daily. She and her staff of two corresponded with every new member who sent them \$1 and an address, digital or otherwise. As of Veteran's Day, they had 216,000 members. With Cyrus's blessing, Reese and Wilson Hahn set up a fund that would be the backbone of the organization's explosive growth.

Roughly one-third of the people who were visiting the website were joining the organization. New arrivals short on details but long on spirit. Cyrus could sense the starvation syndrome being experienced by so many of those stepping forward. They sent short notes with their dollar. "Don't give up," they said, "Finish

what you started." "Don't abandon us in the field," wrote one veteran. Cyrus and Jax, hell, all of the cast and crew, could not read too many of the letters at one time without being visibly shaken. You could feel the emotion. It poured out of those tiny sentences. Cyrus had learned in Vietnam a lesson for the ages that has resonated throughout history. There are nations and their warriors who fight because they want to, have to, will die unless they don't. Too many to name. Some fight because they like it and place no value on human life. Hitler, Pol Pot, those guys. Then there are a few tribes who are committed. It was their land before it was taken. No one forgot. No one asked to live their lives in submission. Right or wrong, they are a very difficult enemy to defeat, hardened as they are by years of frustration, loss, and denial. Cyrus couldn't make himself believe the current crop had that fight in them. He on the other hand, well, time would tell.

Calvin was also under siege, albeit in a very different way. After decreasing his course work to accommodate the requirements of The Front, he had created and distributed press releases through the Council of Ten to all the schools that would be publishing and live streaming lecture two which was on the horizon. He had to be ready.

Calvin and Reese shared a small bungalow on the southeast corner of Tatum and Grant streets on Carbondale's eastern fringe. Given the demands on their time, both fought fatigue daily,. Somehow, they managed to hold their quarrels to a minimum.

Calvin was used to long hours and seemed to hold up a little better under strain than Reese. Gifted both athletically and academically, the Rhodes committee had placed his name in nomination. All that work had not prepared him for this. The requisite work hours required exceeded the real-time that existed. Cyrus had told him, "what the mind can conceive the body will follow." Cyrus's bastardized theory was working so far.

After everyone settled into chairs meant for nonhumans, Calvin thanked The Council of Ten for getting together on such short notice.

"Dr. Kohler is here to give us a very brief update," he said. "I think you will find the content logical but also challenging and controversial. Now here is Dr. Kohler." Cyrus walked to the front of the assembled Council members.

"You could say, with some degree of confidence," Cyrus began, "that our world, indeed, our America, has experienced an evolutionary separation. While the social tribes, which include our religious and political organizations, continue to dominate life as we know it, their scientific brethren have roared past in the night, painting sociality as terminally ill. Fortunately, science is evolving while sociality remains mired in mythology, longing for days now vanished in time. As science outdistances its social counterparts, an opportunity arises for us to encourage the best and brightest to participate in governance. Although science has served as an enabler to sociality for hundreds of years, that time is about to pass.

"How and why did this evolution occur? How is it related to the Process? My next talk with the American people will discuss those key points and pinpoint genetic and behavioral studies that identify our current political operative as one whose main qualification is knowledge of the system. Until the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, power has trumped knowledge. That is going to change." Cyrus went back to his chair and sat down.

"After the lecture," Calvin said, as he walked to the front of the room, animated now as he saw the rapt attention around him, "we can expect an onslaught of questions, so prepare! Submit these questions to Reese, and she will get Dr. Kohler's responses promptly back to you. "Text me, email me, tweet me, call me if you need anything. No question is unimportant. Get ready to be busy, folks."

"That's all for now," he said, dismissing the assembled.

The room broke up, and people went to their workstations to clean up unfinished business. The teams prepared formatted query sheets to send out after the second lecture. Calvin had devised a simple approach that relied on blast emails, using one of the latest mailing and reporting programs. The content specified key talking

points and positions of The Front and asked for feedback. The team produced 'primaries,' as they were called, putting each position statement onto the query sheet in as few words as possible. These primaries were superimposed onto the home page of The Front website. This protocol fostered transparency and honesty that would hopefully encourage more people to join the movement as the footprint grew. On the back end, Reese and her team live chatted and blogged content responses around the clock.

"The power of a few can change history," Cyrus said, putting forth another one of his aphorisms.

They believed.

Around America, schools of journalism buzzed with the breaking news. A college professor in Southern Illinois was proposing significant changes to the American political system. He was a professor of philosophy and a Vietnam veteran, a Ranger. Through the colleges and universities of America, the information flew, then soared under the power of social media.

The Front had sent out a teaser for Lecture Two that had something to do with Social Congruence, Evolution, and the Doctrine of Limited Rights. Some laughed, some didn't.

"Just another loony," said William Strathmore, who wrote for the Harvard Lampoon. He was so used to wild opinions and statements that it became tough to take the political class seriously. His editor, Bill Kleinhurst, a man who trained his students for the highest reporting platforms in America, the Washington Post and 60 Minutes, wasn't so sure. He had watched the Process break.

"Pay attention, Bill," he said. "This is like nothing I have ever heard. We might be encountering history in the making, and if it is, I expect you to get it right and get it first. Are we clear about this?"

Bill Strathmore's attention cycle rose. Kleinhurst smiled; it was good to be king.

Chapter 33

An extremely tired Ezekiel Octavious rolled over slowly in his king-sized bed and looked out the picture window occupying nearly a third of the west side of his twenty-fourth-floor condo overlooking Lake Michigan and Wacker Drive. He had lived in Chicago for most of his 63 years and had no intention of leaving. Ezekiel's primary employer of record was Johnson Stone Company, which mixed aggregate in Dupage County and was headquartered in Cook County, alongside the Calumet River. Octavious only showed up for work when requested, usually to satisfy an employee audit of some kind. Few requests were issued, and that suited Ezekiel just fine. In between the infrequent contacts with his employer, he was free to do what he damn well pleased. That line of work was a little different and much more exciting. Ezekiel Octavius was a real-life assassin and all-purpose villain.

The difference lay in the tasks which he contracted. These included murder, extortion, surveillance, and enforcement, although not necessarily in that order. The list would not, however, be complete without mentioning arson. He wasn't a big man, 5'10", 180 pounds, and he would be one of the last men you'd pick out of a crowd, just an average looking, regular kind of guy. He even looked friendly, most of the time. Call him Zeke, or by his last name, Octavious, and his friendliness would go away pretty quickly, replaced by an unsmiling countenance that usually preceded action. With his hair pulled back in a ponytail, he fit right into modern avant-garde society, just another artist or old hippie out for a stroll. That was Ezekiel.

The reason he was worn out had to do with the long drive he'd had the night before. One of his clients, a particular mid-state Democratic politician by the name of LaRue Arnold, had sent him to Southern Illinois University, solely to plant a listening device in the office of a Professor Cyrus Kohler. That he had done. The job was easy enough and went down in broad daylight when the office was open. He'd been in and out in less than five minutes. Wearing a rumpled sports coat and tie, he'd just walked in, as any professor would. The

office was empty, so he walked around the only desk in the small room, put the small battery-powered listening device on the back of a large wall picture of Custer at the Little Bighorn, looking gravely down on all observers as only a man with minutes left to live possibly could. Ezekiel drove back to Chicago impressed at the masterpiece Edwin Paxson had created. It had been over 40 years since he'd set foot on the SIU campus. The school was hardly recognizable. Oh well, for \$7,500 cash, complaining was a luxury. He drifted off.

Chapter 34

"The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse."

-Edmund Burks

At 7 a.m. the phone started ringing. It was Ed Randle from the SIU Saluki press.

"Cyrus?" he shouted into the phone, "is that you?"

"Nope, it's me," Jax replied.

"Let me get him for you."

She did that, and the next voice was Cyrus's deep baritone.

"Hey Ed, what's up?" he said sleepily.

"We're setting up the press tent, getting badges for 375 reporters."

"Holy shit," said Cy. "That's a bundle of credentials."

"Yep," Ed said in a weak voice, "and that is only the press. There are also 30 to 40 TV stations. These guys are going to have a live feed into their local networks plus streaming video, and all the majors from Illinois and surrounding states are coming. Next thing you know, I'll see the ESPN truck pull in."

"This isn't sports, Ed," Cyrus said with a laugh.

"Are you sure?" Ed shot back. "Damn," Ed cursed straight into the phone. "You won't believe this, a big hauler with CBS on the side just pulled up University Ave. It could be the Face the Nation guys, Cyrus. I better put on a tie."

The big day dawned bright and sunny. The lecture was scheduled to go live at 11 a.m. Central Time, which coincided with lunch in the east and breakfast out west. The day seemed sent from the cosmos, bringing no hint of bad weather, even though that was on the horizon.

The Front was four million strong, Reese was proud to report. There was so much to do that She, Calvin, and the Council of Ten had moved into their new building, leased with some of the 4.4 million dollars they had collected from \$1 donations and other in-kind receipts. They had a dedicated CPA now, and Wilson Hahn was more active than ever in keeping up with legal issues.

People from many nations were watching the website, reading the lectures and blogs, and following Cyrus's every move. His picture was out there, and you could damn well bet a lot of busy interns in both parties were digging for gold dirt. They weren't going to find anything about Cyrus that would require a lie. The public wasn't fully tuned up to Tripper and Cyrus' coke escapades which had ceased by the '90s, which were long gone. Only a naïve fool, though, could envision the whole mess not surfacing at some point. No women were going to crawl out of the woodwork, or over it, thanks to Jax's two rules which were no drugs, no women. He had been sued once by a developer who claimed Cyrus misrepresented a joint business deal, had lost, paid up, and gone on with his life. There was no denial to be covered up.

Another potentially loaded gun was Vietnam, but there were very few witnesses to be found. He might have to explain his years with the 75th Ranger Regiment and the insubordination charge. In a way, that subject would be a blind trap, one not easily seen by the sighted, asked by a desperate person eager for blood. His answer would resonate in America and throughout the military revolving as it did around life and death. No different from The Front.

Traveling over to the University that morning, Cyrus stopped to pick up a few groceries and parked his old X5 next to an even older Oldsmobile station wagon with a bumper sticker, 'Global warming is a hoax.' It reminded Cyrus how difficult his task would be. Living in this particular stage of the evolution of man and facing a very diverse population could prove problematic. Some were easily led, some not. That was the algorithm.

It was slightly overcast by the time the lawn began to fill up. Jax, who had been working out after her morning class on piano theory, jogged over and took a seat, still sweating profusely. She immediately noticed Cyrus was wearing his blue blazer, the same one he wore when he graduated from college the first time. It still looked great on him. He looked focused. When his cue came, he stood up and began.

"We are all here today, at this site of wanton destruction where our beautiful old building was burnt to the ground to take step two in the story of The Front. Step two is a trip through the jungle, one without land mines or snipers but sheltering an enemy armed with vast powers, not the least of which is our own Constitution. Today we will define our current political class and inform the American people how they got there."

"Once, somewhere back down the road, I wrote this book and submitted it everywhere only to find out I had no platform which meant I did not have the credentials to write the book. I let those criticisms stop me then. Today, The Front is just getting started. It is up to all of you, the readers if you will, to tell me if we

have a platform, in our case ideas, worth considering. I can tell you all one thing, I would vote for a corpse before supporting the charade going on before me." But let's start on a positive note.

"Several great men who came before us have set the table for The Front. These men changed the world we live in forever."

"The first set off one day in 1831 on the HMS Beagle and for the next 28 years studied, gathered data, and at great urging, published a book that broke from traditional thought. The Origin of Species spelled out, in all the detail Charles Darwin could muster, that evolution was everywhere and ongoing. It provided a vast and accurate body of evidence showing that existing animals and plants cannot have been separately created in their present forms but must have evolved in a slow transformation over time. This concept, which his friend Alfred Wallace called 'natural selection' rendered evolution intelligible, showing it to be a universal phenomenon. It revealed the diversity of life as a whole and diversity is a word we all need to embrace.

Cyrus looked around him at the crowd, saw Jax, smiled directly at her and continued. "Though Darwin pointed out that later evolving groups are more highly organized, he said not to expect all groups and organisms to make progress. Nature is indifferent. Natural selection is always at work. American political organizations have followed this directive and been distanced by their scientific counterparts. Listen to these men on TV; they need to take notes to remember what they said yesterday.

"Whenever an opportunity or crisis develops, our political class becomes incapacitated by its overwhelming desire to stay in office and adhere to tribal rules. If a candidate for reelection is to be considered a loyal tribesman, he has to be on the bus. Universal laws are paramount to the country's welfare. Every day men make decisions based upon their capacity to reason. This observation is based on an extensive examination of events and their controlling processes. Poorly evolved species eventually go extinct, impacted by nature, whether man approves or not.

"There is an invisible link between genetics and behavior called the 'human pedigree.' It is our individual roadmap to the past. You will probably never hear this spoken by a public official. Some of us have a link represented in the form of a mutant recessive gene on the maternal side, once again proof that women are in charge. Laughter cut the air's tenseness for a moment before Cyrus continued.

"Most mutant genes are, in fact, recessive, which explains why most humans do not inherently want to rape and plunder their neighbors to take what is not theirs. Mutations also shed light on how a man and woman with five children can conceive an isolated anomaly, a middle child with autism. The unexpressed gene has been there all along, invisible to the eye.

"We have made legends out of murderers like Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and Caesar. We know more than we want about Hitler, Mussolini, the Japanese generals who started WWII, and Pol Pot, but we don't know their gene pool. I suspect if we exhumed them and tested for DNA, the revelation could be startling. They are simply carrying a different genetic code that has expressed for violence. Perhaps our modern terrorists possess the MAOA gene variant, known as the 'warrior gene,' and a buddy, CDH13, the 'violence gene' that are present in the genomes of many violent offenders. In other words, they are carrying a genetic predisposition to violence and its accompanying behaviors. Science is wrapping its arms around our world, exposing abnormal behavior as it evolves."

"The idea I'm driving toward," Cyrus said, looking from left to right, taking in the entire crowd, "is that regardless of current social, political, or economic thought at this time, we have a leadership model that is flawed by design. This model stresses loyalty to the tribe and disregards any analysis to the contrary. It is a social coding in a world grown increasingly complex, a world that has changed and now demands a new model whose developers and managers are capable of correct interpretation and execution."

"These new managers must be focused on outcomes. Think about applying modeling theory to political issues. Decide for yourself if our President and his followers meet that high bar. When you examine

435 members of Congress and 100 senators, the performance data is startling. Constant division and strife is not the healthy working environment the body seeks for itself. Most of you out there would be terminated in a minute for exhibiting these types of behaviors. That is what we now have in our elected community."

"It makes me furious to think about the diabolical scam foisted upon the backs of our citizens. We do not choose these representatives, not really. We get to vote on who is chosen for us. Are you okay with that? I'm not. They are selected for us by their like-minded peers, members of their very own tribe. Once picked by them, you are allowed to vote for one of the selectees. Why do we throw parties out with regularity? One answer is because the public has no proper say in the selection process."

"I believe the political system can be challenged. I want to end this oligarchy."

"Our scientific community, the science tribe, our brightest and best, most evolved thinkers, environmentalists, writers, humanitarians, and so forth, have repeatedly shown little or no interest in the lives the political class aspires to attain. Science has enabled the social tribes and stood aside as chaos became accepted. And so, as time passed, the dysfunction of social tribes and their hunger for power and perks proceeded unchallenged by qualitative minds.

We are not all equal and never will be. What does matter is that we have equality under the law. All of us must participate. Just because a person is uneducated, poor, and struggling to survive doesn't mean he or she deserves to be mistreated by those who have no relationship to the average citizen's daily life."

"There is another giant standing here with us today, although he passed away in 1980, without him we would not understand what we need to know about this political species. This man's name is Robert Ardrey, and in 1966 he published The Territorial Imperative. In this seminal work, he stated that you and I are the consequence of evolutionary inheritance. He knew that as the science on this subject of evolution grew, some of his work would flourish, other parts would perish. He never claimed to know it all. "Ardrey defined territory as an area of space, whether water or earth or air, which an animal or group of animals defend as an

exclusive presence. His concept of territory as a genetically determined form of behavior in many species is today accepted beyond question in the biological sciences."

"Of all species, Homo Sapiens are the most territorial. Enemies can be genetically similar or different. The point of separation involves territory. Robert Ardrey said, "We act as we do, for reasons of our evolutionary past, not our cultural present."

Take the work of these two men and apply their findings to the founders of our democracy who, in 1887, wrote a document that has endured for 229 years. Over the years, our Constitution has been changed, through the addition of amendments, when necessity demanded. The Constitution spelled out our freedoms, and we have been expanding them ever since. As our country grew, in numbers and stature, our way of life, as in civilizations before us, changed as well, becoming more permissive. The legal profession, encouraged by successful litigation against our public schools, which opened them to lawsuits for the first time beginning in 1962, brought contention in our society to a level never before experienced. It can be argued that attorneys created a new culture in America."

"Cyrus began to notice a slight buzz coming from the crowd. He continued. "In the past few weeks, I have spoken about our broken political Process, which virtually guarantees Events will repeat themselves.

These Events, school shootings, murder in the inner cities and elsewhere, business and government corruption, lack of access to healthcare, contention over immigration, and the significant danger of climate change, can be mitigated, but only with substantial alterations to the Process. Throwing out self-serving legislators while keeping the same Process will only perpetuate the problems."

"Our Country must be balanced by a third political party. Period. This is not a lifetime achievement award. Well, actually it is, now. Today, The Front, asks you, the people, to consider changing our two party system for the betterment of us all. To facilitate this change, The Front asks that everyone consider our lynchpin, our Magna Carta, The Doctrine of Limited Rights, which holds that the rights of society should take

precedence over the rights of an individual. The time has come to reverse the outgoing tide of human rights and freedoms. It is time to rein in the Second Amendment, as our legal interpretation of the privileges it bestows has led us into a social crisis both costly and deadly. We have to, simply have to, do something about what is acceptable to us as members of our society. The weapons and murders are just a part of it. The NRA has a point, the weapons don't kill, people do. Makes sense to me. Restrict access and enforce the hell out of it. The NRA are heroes in waiting, if they so choose. The industry would still sell plenty of guns, just not some of them and not to everyone."

"Never, during my days as a member of the 75th Ranger Regiment, did I envision an America so racked with violence as to defy description. The Age of Violence has swallowed us whole. As we moved in from the countryside, our cities became more Compressed, our value system shredded, trending forward came the brotherhood of murder, corruption, guns, drugs, trends that must change. It will take a rediscovered will to accomplish the task. This is a critical time into which we have been born. Let's hit the reset button and chart a different course. Americans will always be cowboys but over time things do change, even the cowboys."

"When a child misbehaves we take away their privileges. See where I'm going? We have proven what we are doing doesn't work so let's change the Process. It takes a strong will to reel in violence, which will not stop itself. It is difficult to voice, but some humans cannot be saved, some do not want to be saved. Whatever we decide to do will require concrete, legal remedies. Once that framework is in place, we can address the hardware, but not the other way around."

"What a territory, what a profit center this must be, for those we confront, to hold on to such tools in the face of carnage beyond comprehension. And yet our leadership and countless citizens make no effort to rein them in because they hold membership in the same social club." "Faith tribes, churches, and civic organizations can have a massive impact by vetting the candidates they support on issues of conscience. Just ask these men and women before you endorse them if they support constraint. It is a yes or no answer. Just do it."

"Do not let Social Congruence or any failure of will trump The Doctrine of Limited Rights. The business of political leadership will attempt to defeat your best efforts. Be resolute. As many of you know, The Front has secured a following in each state, starting with our already established registered student organizations. We have moved forward and in so doing have gained members, which, by the way, now total approximately four million.

The crowd broke into scattered applause.

"Thank you," Cyrus said, smiling and gesturing for quiet.

"I have one more item on my agenda and then we can all go home."

Cyrus looked at the multitude. It was quiet out there. No jeers, no applause. The cat was out of the bag, and now was the moment.

"The conjoined efforts of the three monotheistic faith tribes and the two major political tribes to promote their mutual agendas across a broad platform of social issues has been a catastrophe. We, the people, have lost faith in them. Join the Front, and one day you will again have leaders you can trust, but the journey will be arduous. George Orwell, in his novel 1984, warned of totalitarianism, whether from the right or the left. We are in those times."

Someone in the crowd whistled, from somewhere else came a clap. Suddenly, a roar tore loose and ascended to the cosmos. It was unexpected, and Cyrus could only watch and listen, taken entirely off guard. These were academicians, reporters, TV crews, and the public, standing side by side, making the heavens shake.

It took a while, but when silence once again came to the beautiful lawn outside Faner Hall, Cyrus spoke. "I/we," Cyrus said emphatically, pointing both of his index fingers inward toward his chest, "live in a democracy drowning in a tidal surge created by its unchecked excess. A wave of unlimited freedoms, growing daily, engulfing our citizens who may or may not, be able to crawl from the wastewater of their own making. The Process, being so broken, gives us no remedies to fix ourselves. We cannot, at present, select the unbought, because they cannot be selected.

"History looks through a long prism. Tightening up our intolerance for crime, tying education to welfare, getting rid of PACS, lobbyists, equalizing campaign funding, setting term limits, providing a health care, housing, and immigration solution while reeling in the Second Amendment's voracious expansion of individual rights seems like good corporate business to me. This time, however, the USA is the LLC.

"There are many other issues on our plate, but I want to close with the issue of global warming. "I talk to people all the time," Cyrus said calmly, looking out over the sea of cameras and reporters, "whose take on climate change seems closely tied to their sociality. One of Oscar Wilde's witticisms was 'In America, the young are always ready to give those who are older than themselves the full benefit of their experience.' That might not apply here. The Millenials seem to grasp their planet's destiny more securely than their elders, but regardless, The Front supports the notion that even if we were to accomplish a breakthrough now, there are no guarantees that action would have been timely. The time for debating is gone. Society needs to get on board and embrace the science surrounding this controversy. Only the dinosaurs are in denial. I don't want to go with them. Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said, 'Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.' Those who deny climate change create a discussion that is less than engaging, but sensible to those whose livelihoods are impacted.

Cyrus stepped back from the podium and raised his arms skyward. "Great men have come before us, opening the doors to our future, men such as Isaac Newton, Michael Faraday, Albert Einstein, and Stephen Hawking.

"We must find a way to bring these types of men forward. All men are not created equal but must be equal under the law. Our current model must be abandoned as we realign ourselves with common sense, where decision making reeks of clarity. Snatch the day and pocket it," said Cyrus, "wring its textures and hues from its exposed fabric. Make it into life."

It was over. Cyrus turned, walked back to his chair, and sat down. There was no applause now. People whispered to each other. It was a quaint murmur. That murmur engulfed the nation. For the next few weeks, all the talk would be about The Front and their call to action. Age-old myths had been targeted, and given the opportunity, would be replaced by logic and facts, bringing with them a new world.

Chapter 35

"He said what?" Representative George McCreary was having a bad day, and now some idiot professor was doing what?

"I shit you not," his aide, Bill Riley, was saying in language much too rapid to understand.

"Slow the fuck down, Bill. Goddamn, you get excited. What did you say?"

"Excited," Riley shot back in a combination of words and spit.

"You are going to herniate when you hear this story."

George McCreary was 62 years old and had served ten two-year terms in the US House of Representatives. A Chicago Democrat, he was born and raised four blocks from Wrigley Field. George had survived all manner of downtown politics and political wars. The casualties lined the lakefront, sometimes literally. He was, by now, a wealthy man, but he'd grown up poor in the third ward and had, through hard work from the age of 16, earned his political stripes.

Nothing was too menial for young George McCreary, a trait well-liked and duly noted by his bosses. George handed out flyers, went door-to-door, drove shut-ins to the polls, sometimes taking the same voter back time after time. Elections were serious business with big payoffs for the winners. The losers went home, never to be heard from again except in the op-eds. George learned from the ground floor up how to get elected in the city with big shoulders. It was a dirty game, but George was patient, and when his time came, when he had sucked every political cock in the ward, he was slated. A big word, 'slated.' His party chose him, internally, with no input from the public, to be their candidate for third ward alderman. Aldermen controlled school contracts, local zoning issues, that kind of thing, a lucrative first job. The election part was a formality. The Democrat Party was an overwhelming majority in the inner city, and the candidates chosen to represent it were party soldiers. The tribe was unforgiving. Do as you're told, and the next step was possible. George obeyed, rose in political stature, eventually became a state representative, and one day was slated to represent his party as a candidate for membership in the United States House of Representatives. He was about to become a congressman. In one of, if not the filthiest political states in the union, George McCreary was elected to office ten times. Over two decades, he acquired serious clout. Hundreds of millions of dollars flowed through his domain. If you wanted to be selling or buying in this city of five million people, you needed the support of Congressman McCreary.

The congressman also had collected a few scalps by the end of that tenth term, and he intended to take more. Whenever danger raised its viperous head, George could be very proactive. That didn't mean he had to

jump at whatever was threatening his kingdom, but his territory was too valuable just to sit idly by and risk losing.

But, in all honesty, a problematic concept for George McCreary, the ideas behind Professor Cyrus Kohler's Front, whatever it was, was difficult to imagine, much less understand. He'd never heard such garbage. Kohler could screw himself. People would never get this message right, much less go for it. George McCreary had never heard anything quite like this. "He said what?" he asked his aide again.

Bill Riley was a tall, gaunt man who was 55 going on 70, one of those guys that looked like he'd just spent the night on a park bench. Disheveled, but not disorganized, that's how Bill was known to the political establishment, including reporters who lived in his world. Bill had a 16-hour a day job when things were going smoothly. You had to go through him to get to Congressman McCreary, and there was a seemingly endless supply of requests for just that. A moment of the congressman's time was commodity trading redefined.

Long ago, Bill had started taping, and backing up, every conversation that went on in the office, the congressman's preferred arena for all things political. Hell, they could get half the city officials indicted there was so much shit deposited in their safe. A man couldn't be too careful, he reasoned. After all, Bill Riley's mission was to take care of the boss. He reckoned his MS in IT at Purdue was being put to good use. His job description was a little vague, but the perks were endless. Women, travel, great accommodations, money, after 12 years together, he didn't want a career change any more than his boss.

"This Professor Cyrus Kohler, from SIU, is on the record as saying you and most of the Congress are genetically flawed, territorial, and very bad for the USA," said Riley. "The professor says the Process which governs how you are chosen and elected must change. He says you are a part of something he calls 'Social Congruence." Riley then went on to give his boss a comprehensive overview of the first two lectures. After that, he put two copies of the Saluki on the congressman's desk along with an editorial that had come out from Northwestern in support of The Front.

"What's your opinion, Bill?" the congressman said, getting up and walking around his desk to stand directly in front of his aide. "Is this something real or fictional? We had one of these groups start up a few years ago, The 'Americans' First' maybe that was their name. They were just old politicians and attorneys who'd been fired."

"Don't forget the Tea Party," Riley interjected. "They had, and still do, have clout."

"Yeah, but they have isolated themselves and polarized the Republicans," said McCreary, who was reading and talking at the same time. He went quiet for a couple of minutes while digesting the Saluki. "Bill," he looked up slowly, "you need to keep an eye on this. It's not like anything I've ever seen. Hard to say what Professor Kohler will or won't achieve. Who's my next appointment?"

Chapter 36

Downstate, things were popping in Congressman LaRue Arnold's Peoria headquarters. LaRue was an eight-term Republican representative who had managed to get enough labor support to stay in office for sixteen years. Not bad considering Caterpillar and Navistar, formerly International Harvester, were both in his district. LaRue was a big man, literally and figuratively, standing 6'5" and weighing in at 290 pounds, more or less. Like many of his colleagues, Arnold was a lawyer. Although he practiced very little, he held down a lucrative partnership in King, Chesney and Ralph, prominent Washington lobbyists and corporate attorneys. His insight was well worth the seven figures he hauled in every year, plus bonuses. The firm knew what was coming before it came. Information like that had no ceiling. So precise, in fact, was the counsel of Congressman Arnold on economic and financial matters, he a working member of the House Ways and Means Committee and associate of US Senator Ray Malencia, Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, that his law firm, careful to distance themselves legally, formed an in-house hedge fund. They bought and sold futures with utter certainty. The profits were spectacular.

Congressman LaRue Arnold was no man to take lightly. He knew the system and was a prudent man, in most respects. Nearly every transaction he touched went through the law firm which, in essence, made him a legal money laundering operation. When the law firm offer came, at the beginning of his fourth term, it solidified his financial security and made him determined to stay elected forever. LaRue wanted to die in office. As the years passed, his power grew from substantial to enormous. The oversight was manageable. In the early years, working his way up the ladder had been rough at times, but it taught him to delegate the potentially dangerous, career-ending tasks to those not connected directly to him. The least a working representative could do was make it difficult for the Woodward's and Bernstein's of the world to put the pieces together. Besides, the press did not consider Peoria a regular stop. LaRue was out of the way, out of sight, in a place with no name.

He'd met Ezekiel Octavious in Peoria. The things they had done were ancient history, happening while he was serving in local and state government. After years of loyal service to the machine, he'd been slated, finally, and the rest was a formality. Representative Arnold was especially proud of the work he'd done for his Democratic-leaning associates in their hours of need, earning favors that needed regular repayment. LaRue called in his chits whenever necessary.

It was just that type of event that initiated a call to his old friend Ezekiel a week earlier regarding this Cyrus Kohler guy. Oh, he didn't make the call. It went out from some junior associate at the firm, someone expendable. But make no mistake about it, Congressman Arnold was the originator.

LaRue was not a happy man that day. After being briefed on the content of Cyrus's second lecture, the first one was bad enough, he was seething, professionally of course. This was an attack from an unknown, a nobody, but a foray to be taken very seriously. LaRue decided a briefing with the partners was in order. It was a somber moment.

"We need to keep tabs on this guy," he said.

So it was determined, after receiving Dweebert's request, to send their man for all seasons, Ezekiel Octavious. After all, Ezekiel knew the way to SIU and was a professional. They had back history in their pocket. Congressman Arnold had no reservations about protecting his interests. He didn't even think about a higher order of necessity, which made him ideally suited for his job. LaRue was a man whose moral conscience could be cleansed with a few Hail Marys. The church was convenient and necessary. He was cautious, however, not to get carried away during confession. It would be like dropping your drawers in public. Besides, it was hard to say what the good father did for spending money. Too much information in the wrong hands helped no one. He had chosen his religion well and didn't appreciate Professor Kohler branding them a tribe. That sounded rather savage. Money and power in the Catholic Church usually trumped sainthood.

Besides, it made him feel better about himself, being church-affiliated and all. That was another story. He was helping the community.

LaRue headed up the Northern Freedom Fund, or NFF as it was popularly known. The NFF was a major PAC and staunch supporter of the NRA. With the help of King, Chesney, and Ralph, anything that caused so much as a fart at the NRA received immediate attention. The NFF used every psychological ploy known to man to raise money from the populace, much of which they dutifully passed along to the gun lobby. Generally speaking, the firm had determined early on that they could build a constituency around the issues of rampant crime and urban black males.

White folks, especially the uneducated, blue collar, welfare types, were sure it was God's will for them to protect themselves and the holy sacraments while carrying assault weapons. The firm fanned the fires of fear and hate. It was logical that the solution to violence was more guns. Everyone needed assault rifles. Background checks slow down sales, which meant they needed to be eliminated. The NRA loved this man. In their eyes, he could do no wrong.

LaRue was, however, getting a bad vibe about this guy Cyrus Kohler, a former Army Ranger with an education who wanted to put the country first. Now there was an evil plan. He'd better talk to Chancellor Pham about this guy before there were any more surprises.

Chapter 37

Constance Abel and Dweebert Lampkin were trying to have a meaningful conversation. They had both attended Cyrus Kohler's second lecture. Constance had taken notes. She was giving Dweebert her views on the subject, but it was proving very difficult for his roundness to concentrate on much of anything in the presence of this American goddess. Constance was on Senator Ray Malencia's payroll, but her job as an information officer and all around girl Friday was to inform, and she was doing precisely that. The tall, beautiful brunette could not have looked any better, Dweebert thought.

Crossing her legs just right of center, Constance said, "The message Senator Malencia wants to put out is one of political anarchy. What Professor Kohler is asking for is a regression to earlier times when the rights we have today didn't exist."

"I don't think so," chimed in Dweebert, causing her to blink in disbelief that this man had a voice, albeit a shrill one.

"I don't think so," he continued, even more earnestly.

"And what don't you think DL," Constance asked coolly. Her authority was being challenged, and she did not approve.

"I just think he was talking philosophy, his philosophy, not particulars," said Dweebert. "He was saying those who flagrantly abuse their constitutional rights should lose some. He was saying either amend or revise actual specific laws that have been passed and then enforce them like never before."

"And that's OK with you?" asked Constance.

"Kohler was speaking about how we look at things, what we take for granted," said Dweebert.

"That may be, DL, but our rebuttal has to be delineated. We are going to stake out our so-called territory that has already been won and defend it."

"The first polls," said Dweebert, who was experiencing acute eye strain from staring at the opening in Constance's red silk blouse, "show less than 10 percent of voters from the last election have read or heard anything about The Front and Kohler."

"Our numbers are close to that too," said Constance. "Chicago folks haven't got a whole lot of interest in daylight politics," said Dweebert, getting a chuckle from Constance, "except on election day when transportation rolls up."

"That's all well and good," said Constance, "but the esteemed Senator is about to change that dynamic. After a little prime time, those numbers will soar."

"Guess you're about to find out," said Dweebert, "Go with your plan, Constance, it's probably the path with the fewest pitfalls."

"Yeah, well, it's not like I have a choice or a whole lot of input here," replied Constance, uncrossing her legs and standing up.

"I'm just the messenger."

Chapter 38

Chancellor Pham heard from her board members before she had barely begun to digest Kohler's lecture.

"No, the ship isn't sinking," she said.

"No, our funding will not be impacted."

Her reality was that it damn well could be. Kohler was right about the social tribes being all in or all out—they had territory to protect for God's sake. At some point, she would have to decide where her bed was made, but until then her perch on the fence must be portrayed as impartial, academic. She had to avoid taking sides until the outcome became clear.

Kohler was a longshot, but she'd been to the Derby and seen big money payoffs. She'd wait in the darkness, lying like the mamba she admired, letting the prey close in.

"Pardon me, Chancellor," Malencia had said brusquely, "but your professor is a fool."

"Yes, maybe," replied Pham, "but Hitler was a house painter."

Chapter 39

Duster McCaulkin had recently broken out his new surveillance equipment, thinking it wouldn't hurt to sweep Cyrus's office and home at least once a week to make sure that there was no malice aforethought lurking in the shadows. Duster had been collecting quite a stash over the past six months, and it was all stored

at Lost Lake Marina. There was, actually, more to the Marina than the 30 boat slips and an outdoor bar. An investigative firm with no name was headquartered there.

Duster McCaulkin had been, back in the day, a Marine Forces recon guy. The man had some serious training under his belt and lots of experience. From the jungles of Vietnam to the peaceful community of Lost Lake, Duster had learned something from every situation. He was a sniper grade marksman with rifles galore, his favorite being a custom .223 M-16, weighing 8 pounds, with a 4x-8x Zeiss scope. Duster kept it hanging directly behind his desk, loaded. Yes, he had pointed it at someone before. Yes, he had pulled the trigger.

Duster, tall and athletic, kept himself in good shape for an old guy. Except for his buds, the locals didn't know much about him except he was a good neighbor, a vet, and was gone for weeks at a time, at very infrequent intervals. The locals also knew he could, if interrupted early enough in the morning, be found unresponsive as a direct result of sour mash consumption.

Duster had recently come into possession of a new mini spy cam and digital bug detector, courtesy of his clandestine employers. The spy cam looked just like a digital clock and included a DVR. A desktop unit, it took photos in motion detector mode. The camera possessed a 1080p high-resolution color video and audio capability with a 160 degree viewing angle. In short, if something or someone moved within a 2-meter range of the clock, it would be detected and recorded. Duster liked clocks that operated on demand, especially when coupled with ordinance. This one also told the time, date, and temperature and would even wake you up in the morning. Hell, it even included an HDMI cable for plugging video into a TV — what a deal.

The new wonder gadget, though, was his digital bug detector. A state-of-the-art unit, this little 7" x 5" x 1" jewel could detect new hidden bugs which used Bluetooth or WiFi protocol. It was just an innocent looking piece of molded plastic, on the outside. Bluetooth was practically undetectable by conventional RF detectors because of their low power transmission and unique type of modulation. With Duster's previous equipment, he had always risked the chance he'd miss one, but not anymore.

Thus armed, Duster set out in his trusty Jeep Wrangler for Faner Hall where Cyrus's office stood empty and unprotected. His first stop, though, was the Kohler's Lost Lake homestead, where he spied Jax sitting in their swing on the front porch. Picking up the wonder gadget, he walked up the steep driveway.

"Hey, Jax," he called out, "you contemplating your future?"

"How'd you guess?" Jax said in a relaxed manner.

"Was it my slow rocking that gave me away?" She had her hair up and blue jeans on. A worn flannel shirt covered the rest of her equipment, which Duster noted, was still quite impressive.

"Let's check out the house," Duster said, strolling up the stairs to the porch proper, holding out the little box for inspection.

"You just never know about inquiring minds."

Jax nodded. "We'll just call you the Orkin man," she said, laughing.

Duster went to work and 30 minutes later was satisfied no mischief existed.

"Off to the school," he announced, blowing her a kiss.

"See ya, Duster," Jax replied, "real soon."

Duster stopped at Lakeside Café, located near the entrance to Lost Lake Energy Corp., the local power plant, The restaurant was more than 50 years old and had more repeat business than it could handle. He placed a to go order for a large sweet tea and brisket on white bread. Back in the car, Duster went around the north side of the lake up to Route 37. Turning right he soon came to Route 13 which meandered west to the university.

Cyrus's office was vacant, Reese, Calvin, and the Council of Ten having moved into larger digs.

Cyrus had told him that, at last count, The Front had banked almost \$600,000 and taken more than 2,000,000 hits to their website.

The professor had a newly installed digital lock on the only door. Punching in the code, Duster let himself in and turned on the DBD, as he'd decided to call the bug detector. Slowly working his way around the room, he made damn sure to respect the 2-meter range of the unit. He was focusing on that distance when the DBD began to blink. He was standing exactly two feet from Cyrus's desk, between it and the northeast wall. The west side of the room contained the rooms only window and had turned up nothing, but this was a whole different matter.

What the hell, Duster thought. Where is the little monster? He decided to triangulate and locate. Several minutes later, the DBD was flashing as Duster approached the old Battle of the Little Big Horn painting Cyrus had hung in his first house in 1973 and then transferred to his office. It was valuable only to Cyrus. The back covering was from pages of an ancient Sears and Roebuck catalog pieced and glued together to protect what Cyrus claimed was a lithograph of Custer and the 7th in their last five minutes. A signature that could, or could not, have been Edwin Paxson's, was scribbled in the bottom right-hand corner. Just below the name, on the back, was a tiny cut made by a very thin, sharp-bladed instrument, and there between the protective cover and the front of the painting was a minute electronic device. DBD had done its job. Duster thought for a moment and, being ever so careful not to compromise the back of the painting, opened the tiny slit and examined the contents. Whoever had placed the bug had put it in a very tight spot. It was a Bluetooth device as well, nearly impossible to detect. Little bugs like that would cost a couple of thousand dollars, meaning whoever put it there was more than likely well-financed. Duster left the small incision intact, being careful not to damage the paper's ancient edges. Working cautiously, he set up the spy cam digital clock on the corner of Cyrus's desk nearest the painting. The distance between the two devices was three and a half feet, well within the camera's range. Walk this way, Duster thought, and we will know you.

It didn't take him long to call Cyrus.

"Guess what was lurking behind, or should I say in 'Custer's Last Stand.?"

"Really," replied Cyrus. "you found a bug already?"

"Surely as Delta mud don't stink," said Duster.

"I have a little plan, Cy, that you might want to consider."

"Roll it," said Cyrus, totally engaged.

"Well, whoever put that little bug there has been listening and wants to keep listening and reporting or recording or both. Let's have a conversation, in the office, to the effect that we are going to paint the walls. During this renovation, we will move everything on the walls to temporary storage. Our storage is on the floor. We'll say the painting should take two weeks. That's our story, but here's the good part. While we're moving Custer, we will drop him and crack the bottom corner, near our silent visitor. We will damage the bug enough to impair the reception. What would you do if that happened? Maybe you'd come for it, since no one knows it's there, and replace it with a working unit? Whaddya think?"

"Do it," came the reply.

And so it came to pass that these events unfolded, the frame was cracked, the bug damaged, all manner of shit taken off the walls and unceremoniously dumped in a pile next to Cyrus's desk. The better to see you with my dear thought Duster. Shortly after that, Ezekiel Octavius's cell phone received a message, sent by one of LaRue Arnold's underlings, bug damaged, replace it. The game was afoot.

Chapter 40

The political spectrum was humming. Reese could see the daily activity building. Calvin believed much of it was coming from political circles as the establishment was evaluating the two posted lectures. Reese had also edited information about Cyrus on the website to answer many of the questions about his personal life. With Calvin's help, Reese had started up a Facebook page. Her daily postings received thousands of likes, and her Twitter following was exploding. She was asking friends and followers to re-post to their pages and thereby get it to their network, and beyond. The Front was going viral as boomers and millennials alike twitted, tweeted, and posted like there would be no tomorrow.

Reese was continuing to receive pounds of \$1 donations. The Front now had over 2,300,000 hits and \$680,000 in its account. She was in the process of hiring a CPA firm to manage the accounting and the money. The volume had become unmanageable for one person. The time was close at hand when she would have a tough decision to make, continue graduate school or postpone that for a while and become the organization's first employee and executive director. The latter was the leader in the clubhouse.

The interest in The Front covered a broad spectrum, which was not only political and academic but also included public participation. Social media worked overtime as students got their friends and parents involved in passing on the message.

Establishment politicians were starting to have conversations among themselves. LaRue Arnold's anxiety was growing, maybe because Kohler and SIU were a part of his fiefdom. Hell, he'd had many adversaries and no shortage of crises. He'd beaten down lots of rational thought in his time. The congressman knew that the people in his world, given enough media barrage and terror propaganda, would not think past their front door. His organization, including PAC's and lobbyists, kept the prisoners well-guarded. LaRue had just gotten anti-pollution regulation, badly needed for years to clean up the Calumet River watershed, tabled and sent back to committee. The people were screaming but to no avail.

There were more lobbyists handing out trips and campaign funding to the state and federal legislators than ever before, thanks to his friend, Attorney James Bopp, from the great State of Indiana. Bill had spent the last 20 years of his life tearing down every law he could lay his hands on that had to do with the restriction of fundraising. He had succeeded mightily. With the decision of Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, the Supreme Court elevated the looters to the head of the class and allowed corporations and unions to have the same rights as individuals in paying for political ads. It was all guaranteed by the First Amendment.

So, as far as LaRue could ascertain, these Front cocksuckers were just another shot across the bow. This philosophy, or whatever Kohler called it, could and would be contained and discredited, as another academic suicide. While all these pleasant thoughts were running through his head, the phone rang. His assistant informed him the caller was Senator Ray Malencia.

"I'll take it," LaRue said firmly and picked up his phone.

Senator Ray Malencia was, without question, the most well-known politician in the great State of Illinois. A staunch Republican Conservative and three-term senator, he was a big fish in a big pond. Malencia was the Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, a position he had held for six of his eighteen years in office. The man was a precious asset to his Republican tribe. He had proven, on more than one occasion, to possess the ability to navigate the treacherous waters between his own position and those of his supporters, some of whom were Tea Party conservatives. These folk represented 18 percent of all registered Republican voters. They were also known to cast those votes.

The senator was hard to miss, resembling as he did a Roman senator. His lanky, vigorous, well maintained frame had a distinct look that won elections. Malencia counted on it. He understood the magnetism of a John Kennedy better than most. Most of his votes came from constituents who exercised their right to thin democracy, which he defined as voting and paying taxes. People were busy, and that worked in his favor. Two more years and he'd be 20-year man. A lifer, as they say in the military.

Before running for the Senate, Ray had been the duly elected Republican Governor of Illinois. Born and raised in Champaign, home of the University of Illinois, Ray had gotten himself into the National Guard after graduation, barely in time to avoid the Vietnam draft. During this time, he was active in the antiwar movement and had met a couple of the Chicago Seven at school rallies. At the insistence of his mother, a socially prominent Republican fundraiser, Ray began helping out with whatever he was asked to do. When he attended and graduated from U of I Law School, there was soon an opportunity waiting for him to run for state representative. His good looks, connections, family, and speaking ability launched Ray Malencia on a political career that never looked back. From state representative to state senator to the governor of Illinois, not once did Ray have a day job, and he was proud of it. He suckled at the public tit, never risked his own money, and seldom hesitated to ask others for theirs.

Ray, being born into privilege, had little in common with the masses., especially those at or below the poverty line. He recognized their presence every six years; then it was back to being Ray.

Malencia could move political mountains, and LaRue knew it. He was on the boards of several Fortune 500 companies and headed up the Freedom Action Coalition (FAC), which had raised hundreds of millions of dollars in the past decade to defeat every progressive attempt at gun control that crossed their radar. FAC was the nation's largest supporter of the NRA, and vice-versa. Both of them knew people were conflicted. The citizenry, on the whole, didn't trust the government so why give up anything for any reason whatsoever? Never mind the violence or a bleeding America. All the death did not, in Ray Malencia's world, trump his Second Amendment rights. When Ray heard a French writer's comments on the violence in America, he laughed and called the NRA to inform them of the quote which was, "When the children died at Sandy Hook, and the United States did nothing, I understood what was now acceptable in America."

"Senator," LaRue said warmly, "how goes it in the big house?"

"About the way it goes every day, Congressman, until we reelect man we want in the White House without losing our majority here in the Senate," Malencia replied coolly. "We aren't as lucky as you and the Northern Freedom Fund," he continued, implying that the House of Representatives was blessed with better targets. The NFF was LaRue Arnold's PAC and private welfare agency. His welfare. Also on the muscle for the NRA, the NFF was not only powerful but wielded an impressive array of lobbyists.

"Listen," Malencia said after a short pause for effect, "my staff just briefed me on a little issue down at SIU. I'm on the board there and this Cyrus Kohler guy, you heard of him? He's a philosophy professor. He wants to call us out or kick us out, at least that's what it sounds like to me. The good news is, he's not the first to have that plan, and he has no money or support, yet. The bad news is people are paying attention to his little rant."

"Oh yeah, I am in the loop where Kohler is concerned," Arnold replied. "Have you heard his two lectures?" As Arnold spoke, his voice rose, intensified, unmasking his concern.

"Not yet," replied Malencia, "but my press corps has, and they just told me he thinks we, that being you and me, are genetically flawed and tribal. What the fuck is that all about?"

"I don't know," Arnold answered. "I've never quite fielded this kind of problem."

"Well," Malencia continued, "you'd better keep an eye on him."

"We intend to," Arnold said. He couldn't very well tell Senator Ray Malencia that he was miles ahead of him, having already bugged the professor's office. Anyway, he wasn't all that big a fan of the "Roman Conqueror." The feeling was mutual. The two men rarely spoke to each other and privately expressed their mutual loathing. Arnold and Malencia were both headquartered downstate. Proximity yielded friction where opportunity was concerned, and there was a lot of that.

The northern part of Illinois had the industrial base the south longed for but would probably never have. Chicago and its environs also had the most crime, resulting from Compression plus years of mismanagement and corruption that the south loathed. The north was liberal, the south conservative, for the most part. The unions, bastions of liberal thought, were mostly gone from Southern Illinois, hence the two Republican politicians. The universities were primarily liberal, but Malencia and Arnold, both members of SIU's two main governing boards, had a willing ally in Chancellor Pham. Their labor had borne fruit for all of them. Malencia had cultivated and promoted Pham, whom he now considered to be his property. Arnold could damn well keep his hands off of her. When Malencia had gotten his slick ass appointed to the Board of Directors, one step up from LaRue's slot, it galled Arnold to no end. If he ever got the chance, in the right way, at the right time, he'd show that arrogant bastard a thing or two.

Chapter 41

Although heads would have rolled had LaRue Arnold or Ray Malencia even so much as suspected a leak in their organizations, the out of town information highway existed and went straight to Congressman George McCreary, a Chicago Democrat. McCreary was pleased that he had been able to recruit Bill Riley, who in turn recruited two women, both of whom he'd promptly bedded. One of the women worked for Congressman Arnold, the other Senator Malencia. For a few more dollars they kept him in the know. Information was king, and McCreary knew he could buy damn near anyone for the right price.

In Illinois, if you knew the senator and the two congressmen, it was inevitable that sooner or later you had to deal with them. Thus it was that shortly after Cyrus's second lecture he received a call from Wilson Hahn.

"Cyrus, Wilson Hahn here, got a minute?"

- "Absolutely," Cyrus replied, getting settled behind his desk, cradling a cup of hot coffee.
- "We need to have a meeting," Hahn began.
- "My action item list for you is beginning to become unwieldy."
- "Such as?" Cyrus asked.

"Such as getting yourself ready to handle open debates with the political establishment from the great State of Illinois and elsewhere," said Hahn.

"You have three big dogs right here in your backyard. Their names are Arnold, Malencia, and McCreary. Cyrus, by my interpretation, you have said they are poorly evolved socially as well as being territorial, and perhaps genetically flawed. Did I get that right?" Wilson smiled to himself, barely concealing a laugh.

"Pretty much," Cyrus replied, grinning at the synopsis.

"So, it should come as no surprise to you that Republican Senator Ray Malencia's office has contacted us to inquire if we would have a little chat, public invited, on you and The Front."

Cyrus sat up in his chair, his senses gaining focus.

"He wants to give us an opportunity for a public discussion? Do I hear you right?"

"Believe it," Hahn replied.

"Will it be an open debate, no boundaries?" Cyrus asked.

"Is that what you want?" Hahn asked.

"It is," Cyrus answered calmly. "It is."

Shortly after that, both parties agreed on a Sunday morning event hosted by the local Channel 6 (CBS) affiliate. For the past ten years, the station had broadcast a State of the State program, called 'Today in Illinois,' which came on air immediately after Face the Nation had concluded. Some Sundays were better than others, and this one promised to be exceptional. It wasn't every day that a local professor took on a United States Senator.

"Cross your fingers," said Ed Randle, trying to decide when to start the run-up to the debate in the Daily Egyptian, "that the senator doesn't get cold feet or listen to reason."

Randle was on the record as saying the senator had no business even acknowledging Cyrus Kohler.

"Cyrus will eat that smooth talking SOB alive," was Randle's opinion, unshared by only the powerful.

"Unfortunately, there will probably be fallout for the university to deal with," said his assistant, Jimmy Jackson, slumping against the back wall of the recording studio.

"The entire state government and the Republican party, everyone who does business with the senator and the university, will play their muscle card," said Randle.

"Folks, if the war wasn't on before, this will start it. Prepare to deploy."

The next day Wilson Hahn met Cyrus and the Council of Ten, Reese, Calvin, and Jax at The Front's new office, located at 604 South Main. The organization had, by this time, received more than 1 million dollars in mainly \$1 increments, although some contributions were as substantial as \$50. Approximately 800,000 people had become members. These folks were located primarily in the Midwest and East, but cards and letters were coming from the western states as well. Almost 4 million people had visited TheFront.com to read about The Process, Social Congruence, and The Doctrine of Limited Rights.

"OK guys," Wilson began, walking around his eighteenth-century wrought iron desk and looking quite intense, "we're going to have a public sparring session with Republican Senator Ray Malencia in four weeks, and we need to know a lot about him. Divide and conquer. As results come in, route them to Calvin. His job is to assemble the facts, then run them through me. I will lay out our battle plan with Cyrus. Let's get to work."

Chapter 42

Her headache had returned with a vengeance causing Chancellor Lan Trang Pham to grimace when the phone rang. It was her secretary, Chelsea Mulroney, sounding a little breathless.

"Chancellor, can you take a call from Senator Malencia?"

"No, absolutely not," she said, her head screaming.

Reverse pivoting, she said, "One moment," and picked up the phone.

"Senator," she offered in her most pleasant tone, "How can I be of service?" She knew he wanted something. This man didn't just pick up the phone and call people like her. She was barely on the radar.

"Just staying in touch," Malencia said smoothly.

"We have a board meeting in a few weeks, and I like to check everyone's agenda so that I can be prepared to carry on an intelligent conversation."

"That's it?" she asked, assuming he would shortly get to his real purpose.

"Chancellor," Senator Malencia continued after a short pause, "if my memory serves me correctly, there have been numerous times in the past six years when my help with your building agenda and diversity

programs has been fully utilized. I want to call in a chit if you will. We need to reel in this situation that's brewing with your philosophy professor, Cyrus Kohler. He is taking a position which opposes to how we do business. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Senator," the chancellor replied, "Dr. Cyrus Kohler is, if I interpret his first two lectures correctly, attempting to start a new world order. My advice would be to sit tight and let this play out. I would also be cautious," she continued, "about taking an unnecessary position on these matters. You are not require to say anything" she said, barely getting the words out of her mouth before the senator interjected.

"I am going to say something," he said. "I'm going to get in front of this write-your-own-story crap of his. I'm going to be proactive and have a word or two with him on public television."

"You're going to debate him on TV?" asked Dr. Pham incredulously. Malencia sensed the worry. It was unspoken but very, very present.

"Yes," admitted the senator, "I am."

"Well," said Chancellor Pham, "everyone knows you are a very gifted public speaker. I would only say that any misstep could have consequences since, without a doubt, your downside far exceeds your upside, but do as you see fit. Be advised; there is not a lot I can do to rein in Cyrus Kohler. He is a decorated veteran and beloved professor who has never caused so much as a ripple of discontent in his 30-plus years at SIU. He can retire and probably will shortly. You don't have much leverage with him as I see it."

"Thanks for your support," said Senator Ray Malencia, as he pushed the red circle on his iPhone.

Chapter 43

LaRue Arnold's cabin sat south of Frankfort, the state capital of Kentucky, near the Mills Springs battlefield. LaRue's little 240-acre spread was nearly inaccessible, and only the locals knew his road. The place

was home to a significant population of deer, coyotes, turkeys, rabbits, squirrels, coons, and a few red weasels. You could find him here every November hunting whatever was in season, as long as the inconvenience of congressional sessions didn't interfere. In this obscure part of Kentucky, everything was unspoken and unseen. People didn't talk to outsiders much, and there were no witnesses interested in exposure since they were also busy breaking the law.

At this particular moment, LaRue had some female companionship, and it was not difficult to figure out why he routinely paid Lenora Hemmings, a very high-class hooker even by Washington standards, \$5,000 a day, her discounted rate, plus all the coke she could snort or smoke, to be his travel companion. Lenora was pushing 30 but looked 18. Her long blond hair hung down her lower back and covered the tramp stamp just above her beautiful posterior. The tattoo was a Queen of Hearts playing card.

LaRue had been hitting it hard all morning. Well, as hard as his hard was these days. He liked impersonal sex, as he described it, meaning from the rear. He had just achieved his definition of indecent. When your balls slap her butt, you were indecent. As LaRue grounded and humped, Lenora hallucinated and sucked her pipe. She had decided two years prior, when the whole affair began innocently enough at a fundraiser for the NRA, that LaRue was good business. He fit her client profile, which seldom deviated from successful politicians with national exposure. She regretted she could not go to events on his arm, but they could both be at the same place, at the same time. The entry fee was usually a blow job, but there was a price for admission. Over the past two years, she had added 11 new clients, all at the state or national level. Her rate was never an issue, and the stacks of dead presidents in her bank account ensconced her comfortably in fat city. Lenora had little time for vacations.

LaRue finally reached the promised land and rolled over onto the floor, landing on his back.

"You're gonna kill yourself, Lena," he said, using his pet name for her, which she allowed as a concession to some perverted form of intimacy.

"That shit causes heart attack and stroke. If you leave me carrying a heavy load," he said, "where would I dump it?" Lena was too high for amusement.

"I'm eighteen with a bullet, got my finger on the trigger and I'm gonna pull it," Lena crooned, so into her world that she preferred singing little ditties to herself instead of talking. LaRue got up, put on some clothes, and went outside. He walked briskly toward a three-acre lake on the property that lay on the other side of a small greenhouse, about 40 yards from the main cabin. The greenhouse sat catty-cornered from the lake, facing east to capture the morning sun.

LaRue loved exotic flowers and grew them successfully in a humidity controlled environment.

Control, a keyword in his world, had to be correctly measured. Have it, and you could climb mountains. Lose it, and the mountains crumbled, and you along with them. LaRue grew orchids and roses, but orchids were his favorite. If you got him started, he would inform you of the genus, species, and variants of each plant.

To a trained eye, anyone who knew what to look for would see that the tall, purple petaled flowering perennial seemingly surrounded by its family of brothers and sisters of astilbe or verbena did not belong to their family. It belonged to the family Ranunculaceae. The beautiful flowering plant, Aconitum, is also known by many names like monkshood, wolf 's bane, devil's helmet, and "The Queen of Poisons." Native to the mountainous parts of the Northern Hemisphere—China, Japan, and Alaska—Acontinum would turn you a whiter shade of pale if ingested or mishandled. Its roots contain large quantities of the deadly alkaloid pseudaconitine. Acontinum Napellus, with its purple or blue flower which numbs the nerves, slows down the pulse and stops the heart if taken internally. The only post-mortem signs are those of asphyxia, which soon vanish, leaving a virtually undetectable cause of death. Why LaRue Arnold had such plants, and what he did with them was a mystery. He certainly didn't pick them to put in vases.

Chapter 44

As the Council of Ten began looking into the history of Senator Ray Malencia, an ugly picture came into focus as details of his climb to political power slowly emerged. From the beginning of his initial term in office as an Illinois state representative, about 30 years ago, Malencia had been a staunch opponent of all efforts to clean up the environment or control the regulation of any firearm, for whatever reason. He consistently vocalized for the elimination of campaign spending and funding legislation and had, as a result, received millions of dollars from the gun lobby and big oil. Malencia took trips all over the world, whenever he felt like it, each paid for by some particular interest group trying to sink their harpoon into the whale. The pattern that became clear was one of a US Senator steadily voting for and representing those who supported him. Ray Malencia had long ago abandoned the concept of America first. He was a conservative who served a marketplace inhabited by powerful, corporate, and wealthy denizens.

Currently serving his fourth term, Malencia for the past twenty years had built his power base to encompass not only the state apparatus but also several major corporations. Malencia was a dictator in charge of his world. Even Scott Kellerman, the NRA's legislative lead attorney and partner in the law firm of Kellerman and Tankus, knew when to say uncle where this beast was concerned. It took money, lots of money, to buy Senator Raymond Malencia's vote.

The University of Illinois-educated Malencia had never worried about political casualties. Bodies littered his landscape. There had been the prerequisite hushed affairs, early in his career, that put two Chicago families in the chips for life thanks to their pregnant daughters, one of whom was married at the time.

Nothing seemed to stop Ray. With the help of Duster McCaulkin, the team was able to document several payoffs from people who wanted something they couldn't get for themselves. These people had names and, as they began to surface and plans developed from interviewing them, Wilson Hahn called a halt to the proceedings.

"We need to hold off here Calvin until after the debate," he said emphatically, "unless we want to risk the possibility of Senator Malencia finding out about our vetting process. He doesn't need our help." Wilson concluded. Calvin nodded and informed Duster to stand down.

The Front had just scratched the surface of Malencia's bloody trail, white-washed pearly clean with cash. Out there in that yet undiscovered land stood mountains of collusion that could best be tolerated and covered up with political compliance. Ray was way too big to fail.

Except for his consistent support of the NRA, through his Freedom Action Coalition PAC, Malencia avoided hot topics. He liked to say, "No one ever got fired for not buying IBM." Too much ill-designed exposure and Ray might find himself on 60 Minutes for the wrong reasons. Polls showed he was liked, which made sense to Ray, because he was so damn good looking, and he played the game like a champion. His incumbency, money, and political clout made him difficult to unseat, even if he did occasionally bend the rules.

The Senator's congressional floor time was spotty. Sometimes voting in person was inconvenient, so pre-signed proxies were ready for use when needed. His "absent" votes, convenient when an actual position was controversial, considerably outnumbered his "yeas" or "nays." Deadlock, confusion, dysfunction, and polarization aside, Ray Malencia was not a champion of lost causes, and he continually polled to avoid them. That problem existed now. His people were having trouble resolving the data. They couldn't even agree on the questions to ask regarding this Cyrus Kohler and The Front phenomenon that had pissed the boss off to the point he had completely blown his cool and dialed for debate. After the challenge was issued, and Cyrus Kohler had happily accepted, the Senator realized there might be more to lose here than previously anticipated, but it was too late, the shit was in the wind. So, he wanted information. A poll could give him that if his staff of incompetents could come up with the damn questions. Jesus! Unfortunately, Jesus was not available.

Ray Malencia had one true passion, not counting sex, and that was reelection. It made his heart beat faster and gave him boners. There was a lot to put up with, though, to achieve that pinnacle, tasks that must be performed. Like the eponymous barrister in the BBC TV series, Rumpole of the Bailey, who only gives in to "She Who Must Be Obeyed"—she being his wife, Hilda—Malencia also had a fearsome queen of a wife, the church, and the Tea Party to which he must feign obedience. In reality, he disliked them all. Ray couldn't count the number of born-again Christians that had crossed his path. Theirs was a powerful tribe that went to church on Sunday, Bibles in hand, but upon leaving and having being seen by as many as possible, put their Bibles away and resumed regular activities that had nothing to do with God or his Son. He was careful not to ever come across as condemning, lest he be christened the Antichrist.

"How," Ray wondered, "could the self-proclaimed righteous be so unconcerned the other six days of the week? How do they square carrying guns, supporting violence with that Prince of theirs? Oh well, not his problem."

One thing about church folks he liked, though, was their reluctance to embrace or dig for the truth. They rode the faith train and accepted events without questioning the process that caused them. If God parted the Red Sea, then that was that. The Flood happened, just like the Bible said, no questions asked. Malleable voters were precious to men like Senator Ray Malencia, without them there would be no reelection. Ray grimaced at the thought of the church folks insisting on gun control, or whatever, and vetting every candidate on the issue. They didn't seem to care who they were voting for as long as the representative was born-again or opposed abortion. He worried, a little, that a guy like this Cyrus Kohler could change all that.

One of his most ardent supporters, The Tea Party, was full of church folk who tended to be politically religious as well as righteous. The Tea Folk considered themselves irreplaceable and that mattered. Ray Malencia was keenly aware that Professor Cyrus Kohler was trying to burst that bubble. What if all his constituents started to see him in a different light? The idea that the public had no real say in who was chosen

for high political office needed careful handling. What if The Front pulled off this little coup? He might be out of a job, and he'd never practiced law on his own or had to do all the mundane daily tasks of ordinary civilian life. He certainly didn't want to start now. If for some reason, things ever did go south, Ray had his Senate Finance Committee to ante up for him. They didn't want to lose what they had either. The whole goddamn world came down to money.

Chapter 45

Representative George McCreary's aides informed him of the debate offer going out from the Malencia camp.

"What in the fuck is he thinking," McCreary moaned out loud. Having served more terms than God and being from Chicago, he was more familiar with LaRue Arnold but hadn't missed the power of Malencia. All three had survived their share of political wars. George might not have Malencia's war chest, rumored to be upwards of 20 million dollars, but his grassroots network, totally bought and paid for, was incomparable. The Senator might be a rock star, but in his world, McCreary was king.

He had never laid his hand on the plow. Any time there was dirty work to be done, his phone dialed Anthony Rocchio, The Torch. Rocchio was a multi-talented man and by now a wealthy local business owner. Besides being an influential member of the Teamsters Local 666, Rocchio had a variety of business interests, some even involving transportation, warehousing, loading, unloading, and driving. At other times he could be found painting white lines on roads, cleaning up regular waste, hazardous waste, and wastewater, or just fixing things. Given complete autonomy, which was mandatory, and provided with sufficient remuneration, nothing was impossible for "AR," which was his preferred nickname. It referred to his skill with an Armalite AR-15 during his military service.

In reality, Anthony Rocchio had received a dishonorable discharge from the command at Fort Benning, Georgia, for issuing improper leave settlements to soldiers coming back from Vietnam. Most needed extra ETS money and Spc. 5 Rocchio helped them find it. He assured them it was foolproof. All reimbursements were split, and the parties went their separate ways until, one day, Tony picked the wrong target. He miscalculated. His attempted transaction with a soldier going home to Cordele, Georgia, who didn't like his plan so much that he told JAG resulted in an unexpected conference, at attention, before a bird colonel who read him his rights.

"What pisses me off, specialist, is we have no corroboration. It's your word against his," the colonel spat, referring to the snitching bastard that had broken Rocchio's money machine. The army sent him home two weeks later with a dishonorable, which he of course deserved but refused to accept. He was helping those soldiers by God. As with many men who had walked this path before him, Anthony "Big Tony" Rocchio, who didn't classify as big in any respect, gradually left the realm of justification and settled for much less. Cash as the worshiped king became his salvation. So, when his speed dial glowed with "GM," he knew it was the devil calling.

"Tony, thanks for taking my call," came McCreary's smooth, vote-seeking, fund-raising, voice. He wanted something.

"Good to hear from you, GM," Tony replied.

"Same here, listen, we need some good intel. Take a trip to Southern Illinois and find out all you can about this Cyrus Kohler guy. Our esteemed senator is talking about having a public conversation with the man," said McCreary.

"Get back to me, AR." Click. He was gone just like that. It was a given that before Rocchio would do anything, dollars would change hands.

"God, isn't America a blast," thought Rocchio. Being highly motivated at the moment, he picked up the phone and called Ezekiel Octavious, a working associate. Although the men had an unspoken dislike for each other that stemmed from their different lifestyles, they found joint ventures to be extraordinarily profitable and had always been willing to set aside their differences.

Ezekiel was having an up close and personal relationship with a young lady named Cassandra. Cassie, as her closest associates called her, was an afternoon delight and only that to Ezekiel. One of Chicago's best, she made fifteen hundred an afternoon two days a week. A slim, athletic, arctic goddess with "Playboy" cred and a six-year-old daughter, she was sweet, in the most real sense of the word. No matter the moment, Ezekiel had to take the call. When Rocchio requested his services, he went from payer to payee.

"We haven't been south in a while, Zeke," said Rocchio.

"Yeah," replied Ezekiel, despising the use of Rocchio's abbreviation. The man was full of information, a real communicator.

"Usual fee, two days, see you tomorrow at nine," replied Rocchio.

"I'll pick you up."

"OK, see you." Click. No details were ever mentioned over the phone. Such a thing as too careful did not exist — no need to inform Rocchio of his recent trip.

The call from Rocchio made Ezekiel start thinking that depending on where they went maybe he could kill two birds with one stone considering LaRue wanted him to fix the bug. Southern Illinois was pretty to look at, too. He liked the countryside. Life was a vacation to Ezekiel Octavious.

Chapter 46

Congressman LaRue Arnold had heard enough. After all the appropriate "through channels" bullshit, he had finally been connected to Senator Ray Malencia.

"Ray," he got right to the point, "once again, why are you setting the stage so handsomely for this unknown prick professor? Answer me that Ray," Arnold snarled into the handset.

"His opinion doesn't matter. He is no one, hell, he even called himself that. Leave him the fuck alone and let this shit die a peaceful death." LaRue's forehead was wet with sweat, and it felt like he was in the early stages of dementia.

"You heard the man, LaRue," said Malencia, getting personal. "He attacked us all, all of us, and someone has to answer. Someone has to carry the ball," said the Senator. "I'm not afraid of losing anything, LaRue."

"You should be," LaRue fired back, "you definitely should be. You've heard the old phrase 'those with nuthin have nuthin to lose.' Give that a little thought, Ray. Let him have his success, quietly. He'll turn, once he's in the chips with a few million in the bank, everyone does. In our world, corruption lands on every doorstep. Am I getting through to you, Ray?"

"Yeah, I get it," said Malencia, "you were just making an analogy, right?"

"I hope it was a good one, Ray," said Arnold, shaking his head as though he had people watching. Of course, he was taping the call, couldn't be too careful these days.

Where LaRue was concerned, the word careful fell into that subset often serving as a shield for pure criminality, which was LaRue's modus operandi, suffering as he did from failure to internalize self-denial, a

necessary ingredient for the political stew eaten daily by the social tribes. Denial assuaged the conscience by preventing its action or reaction, presupposing that conscience did indeed exist.

"What business is it of yours, anyway?" asked Malencia. "You are just venting sour grapes at me getting to him first. I will slay David while he's loading his slingshot. If you saw my poll numbers, you'd change your tune. I am more popular than God," said Malencia.

"Holy fuck," said LaRue, "I can't believe I'm listening to this shit!"

Before he could say another word, Malencia noted, "His little story about the Process, genetics, whatever, is steaming merrily along. The man is collecting money and people, people that voted for you, and me, I might add."

Malencia confidence could be fatal, LaRue thought. The senator was dealing with an old Ranger, one who had several combat medals.

"Your business has been my business before," LaRue said tersely.

"I don't know what it would have been," replied Malencia, " other than you trying to bang Constance."

"Make that we, Senator," said LaRue, "you get yourself pinned here, and I assure you there will be no cavalry riding to your rescue."

"Damn, LaRue, I was counting on backup, but I think we understand each other and have for a while."

There was a chilly silence until Arnold said, "Okay, Ray, good luck defending your honor. Be careful with this guy, be real careful," his voice trailed off as both disconnected.

Chapter 47

Duster and Tommy were doing a little work themselves. Duster, who had found the device, devised a plan of attack which put Tommy on point, monitoring the surveillance equipment. So far results were an absolute zero. No one had attempted to replace the partially disabled bug. The motion activated camera was ready to do its job, Tommy reported, having just field tested the unit by walking within the stated parameters and being duly photographed.

"Good to go," Tommy remarked cheerfully, starting to make his exit. They both thought sooner or later, their mystery person would surface. Why anyone would go out of their way to monitor Cyrus Kohler baffled Duster. It just didn't compute. Even though he made no pretensions about understanding the political arena, Duster had lived through Watergate. The watcher was either a politician or some other offended party. There were those who, without question, wanted to preserve the status quo, which meant protecting the current process. One certainty existed, an attempt at surveillance was being made by a person with something to lose, someone who wanted as much information as possible and didn't care how they got it.

Duster realized this could be a new experience, never having provided security for a professor before. After coming home from Vietnam, he'd been undercover as a government asset, but once that ended, he spent most of his time working for himself at the marina or using his military experience to conduct private investigations. Marine Force recon training rivaled the Navy SEALs and Army Rangers in difficulty and taught a man survival and operations tactics a world apart from the norm. Training never stopped for all the disciplines, including live fire, ordinance, sniper school, and hand-to-hand fighting. Duster had the goods, and even at the age of 59 he looked the part. He'd catch the bastard who put the bug on Cyrus; then they'd talk.

Chapter 48

LaRue Arnold was insistant that Ezekiel do the bug cleanup in person. After all, Ezekiel had proved himself many times over the past 20 years, and LaRue came to understand that for a price, practically nothing was off limits. Having digested Kohler's agenda, Congressman Arnold realized the man wanted to change the system, which would be a catastrophe for his side should Kohler pull it off. Large scale changes were not in LaRue's business plan, hell, who knew what would happen if Kohler was successful? It would be helpful to have some information to slow the man down should that situation occur. If he got lucky, he'd catch Kohler on top of his secretary, a college student hopefully, or something like that.

It was hard to tell, LaRue mused, when, with this Front thing, a protest would upscale to a full-blown riot. Kohler was saying LaRue was unqualified for his job, that his most outstanding trait was he knew the system. A man had to take that kind of attack personally. It was a loaded weapon pointed directly at his established incumbency. Cyrus Kohler had pulled the trigger twice. There needed to be an intervention. LaRue supposed that Kohler could potentially reach a wider audience, and that thought gave him pause. The man had no platform, so they say. He'd never held office or run for election. Although his cronies were downplaying The Front as irrelevant, LaRue wasn't buying. He was dead sure about one thing, though. This debate idea that Malencia had cooked up was a bad one. Let sleeping dogs lie. National airtime was the best freebie that any unknown could ever get. Stupidity, that's what it was, just plain stupidity or arrogance. You'd think a pro like Malencia would know better. Now, he had to discredit the newbie, which might or might not be possible. An old Ranger might not be an easy target. He would not be stationary, that's for sure, and would have an exit strategy. The man had been hard to kill before; maybe he was still that guy. Anyway, Kohler had seen tougher times; he'd bet on that. He had soldiered in North Vietnam, Cambodia, the A Shau Valley, and lived to tell about it. Ray Malencia was liable to get his nuts cut off. A cessation of hostilities accomplished with a

preemptive strike seemed in order. LaRue's gut told him they were in over their heads with this guy. Sending Ezekiel Octavious was the first step in determining the threat. It was thoughtful of Senator Malencia to take the lead while he worked in the background. Nice of him to stick his neck out.

LaRue also realized that while Kohler's argument might be too complicated for your basic American, there was always the undeniable fact that Americans had voted many a contender whom they no inkling of into public office. Rocket scientists did not inhabit the country. LaRue had proven that adage several times over. Vast sections of some states were submerged in decades of welfare and poverty. LaRue expected, with good cause, that these folks would keep voting for the same good ole boys even though their situation never improved. That couldn't possibly help Kohler. The little man would be taking it up the coal chute 'til hell froze over. LaRue had witnessed firsthand the general public's lack of attention. His polls said Americans didn't have time to read the paper, couldn't afford the delivery, and listened to sound bites. He had heard somewhere that forty-eight percent of the American public never so much as read one book after graduating from high school and those, by god, were the ones who graduated, what about the ones who didn't?

The college kids read, but those self-centered little millennial fucks were too busy getting laid to care about politics. The scientists and environmentalists were concerned, but there weren't enough of them to matter. Schools could be problematic, but the men in charge of the little monsters had a demonstrated track record for accepting money as a solution to their objections. When the dollar talked, academia walked.

LaRue knew his world, where organizations like the NRA had enough power to alter events. With crime everywhere and schools torn apart by gun violence, they chose the status quo. Life would be problematic should their position change. Of course, when all else failed, there was always prayer. In any event, it would be prudent to keep an eye on Kohler and see to it the first shot came from someone other than himself. Bad intentions could sometimes be beneficial.

Chapter 49

A little farther south, the conversation was moving Senator Ray Malencia into position as the first visible combatant of The Front. The senator was no stranger to pitched battles, albeit of a much different nature than those Cyrus Kohler had experienced. The senator's expertise lay in making sure lines of communication were in place to relay battle commands. Reaching out through his aide Constance Able, he contacted Dweebert Lampkin. The idea was to give him marching orders disguised as a simple request to be paid back with political favors. Malencia's offer wasn't, however, quite as simple as advertised.

As the Illinois state representative for District 13, encompassing five counties with a mostly rural population, Dweebert was a small fish in a smaller pond who occasionally ventured cautiously into the deep end. Deeper water possessed more oxygen but also harbored bigger fish with more prominent teeth. His horrible breath, self-medicated by years of chewing Skoal and smoking Marlboros, was hygienically lacking. Dweebert surely didn't field many US senatorial requests, much less the one Constance Able was making.

Constance was hot, single, maybe even available. She was a 30-something with a political agenda of her own. About to get a law degree from Illinois State, Constance could be persuasive. She had driven down from Champaign to deliver the message from Senator Malencia personally. The gorgeous brunette packaged the edict from on high into a short presentation highlighted by tight slacks and a silk blouse open to the third button. That would be the button of possibility, offering hope in the absence of promise. Rumor had it that Constance never wore panties. Dweebert tried his best to validate the gossip but could not complete the task.

"DL," she said, "Senator Malencia wants your help." Constance sat down on the front of Dweebert's leather couch, her back straight, and crossed her long legs. Dweebert winced and took a deep breath.

"Such as," he asked, coming back to reality.

"Identify the members of the Council of Ten," Constance said.

"Find someone who knows one or more of them and see what you can find out about them, Kohler, his wife, the team he has in place. See if you can get a handle on their game plan. Call us when you do. You've got two weeks."

Constance got up and walked over to Dweebert who was still standing, staring at her, transfixed. He should have brushed his teeth and gargled is all Dweebert could think as she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, bringing the third button into full view.

"Maybe you can find us someone on the inside that could be helpful?" she said. Dweebert sighed, knowing this was as close as he'd ever get. Correct. Constance and the goods made their exit.

Later that day the Council of Ten had a meeting of its own. Calvin Barnes and Reese Kerley had gotten engaged. What had started as just another day had turned its back on routine. A little chow at the Italian Garden had come with dessert in the form of a one-quarter carat, brilliant, solitaire diamond, all Calvin could afford. After joyous hugging and handshaking all around, everyone present got down to serious business. Discussion flowed back and forth regarding the capacity of The Front to stand up to the pounding it was going to take before and after the coming debate.

Reese said to all concerned, "We have to add capacity over the next two weeks or our website will crash like ACA'S did, and we don't want to go there.

"Get us ready," she said, looking at the council members intently.

"Call all your RSOs. Brief them on our plan to stand fast as the ideas we've put forth hit the mainstream public media. Tell the RSOs to keep the message simple. When in doubt, refer to the text."

"Hell is empty, and all the devils are here."

- Justified, 2012

Chapter 50

Rocchio and Ezekiel were on task. They hit town fully intent on learning more about Cyrus Kohler. Using fake credentials, they rented separate vehicles from Hertz. After parking their personal car, Rocchio drove south on Highway 51 to see where Cyrus Kohlers' history began. Maybe he'd meet someone who knew him. Cyrus had graduated from River City High School in 1965. Maybe there was an old yearbook to be had. A drive around Lost Lake, Alto Pass, and Brookport might yield some results. He'd find out who Cyrus had been as a younger man. Who he was after he left his childhood home and college was Ezekiel's job.

So down south he drove on a beautiful spring day looking at the apple and peach orchards, smelling the lilacs and peonies. Everything in southern Illinois was in bloom. Rocchio was trying to remember the last time he'd been this deep in Illinois. He recalled a little job that he and Ezekiel had pulled together back in the 60s when they were both young and stupid. They'd gotten over the stupid, and the young had gotten over them.

His rental, a Chrysler 200, was not a bad ride. American car companies had pulled themselves out of a deep rut with plenty of help from their congressional cronies, men like LaRue Arnold, Ray Malencia, and George McCreary, one of his frequent benefactors.

After the big hire, as Rocchio called the Event back in time, George took a few years off before contacting him again. About 20 years ago, things had returned to normal, hot and heavy, shortly before the congressman got to the House of Representatives. Once they reconnected, business was steady.

Rocchio drove into the little town of Alto Pass on that spring day, exited highway 127 and pulled into the drive of the one-room schoolhouse where Cyrus first went to school. It was no longer a school but instead flourished, from the looks of it, as a general store. The sign said 'Open For Business.' Rocchio picked up his tablet and went into the building, another writer looking for a story. The folks inside had resided locally for three generations. They still remembered Cyrus Kohler as the little boy he used to be, the soldier he became, and the professor he was.

"He was just a chubby little boy back then," said Grace Rendleman, whose family had owned a local orchard for almost 100 years, "a chubby kid that couldn't play a lick of sports. No one ever chose him for their team, not first anyway. He got in fights a lot. He was a good student, though, smart boy."

Grace was a tall, thin lady. Rocchio guessed her to be in her 60's. She looked pretty keen, sort of stern. People around here probably knew each other better than they wanted to, he thought. They sure as hell were Bible-toting Christians bent on participating in the next life. Religious symbols were everywhere.

"I stood by the train tracks when he came home from the war," Grace added, "we all did. He's one of ours."

"There was some feud led little Cyrus into all that trouble," said Sally Berghofer, the shop's co-owner, and Grace's lifetime friend. The two ladies sang in the choir together at the First Baptist Church and had a complete running history of the small town mostly memorized. Sally, about Grace's age, was a short, stocky brunette with a butch cut who had a Mujahadeen quality about her. She stared at Rocchio.

"Where you from, mister," she asked? "Why're you writing about Cyrus anyway, what's all the interest?"

"Man, I'm in the country," Rocchio thought.

"He's come up with this new political philosophy. My paper thinks it might be a big deal."

"Philosophy? Cyrus?" Sally said. "I didn't know he was into that."

Sally's line of questioning perked Grace up as well, seeing as her friend was highly curious about this obvious foreigner.

"The whole town knows Cyrus Kohler," Grace said tartly, "a long time before he went to war, became a Ranger. I thought Cyrus was gonna make it to the NFL, but that didn't happen," she said somewhat dejectedly.

"Guess it wasn't God's will," added Sally.

"Cyrus never liked to lose," said Grace, "at anything. There were just too many coaches and lots of losing in his SIU years," she added, continuing to muse.

"The school never really committed to Cyrus and everyone knew he would have left for the University of Illinois, where he should have gone the first place if it wasn't for being 1-A. That 1-A stopped a lot of traffic," Sally said while rearranging the daily newspaper for pick-up and delivery. People in this part of the world relied on The Southern Illinoisan for news.

"Where are you from, mister?" Sally asked again.

"City boy, I bet," she added with a hint of disapproval. Tony Rocchio didn't need this bullshit. He wasn't here to be interviewed.

"Salem, ma'am, I live in Salem." Which state that Salem might be in was not offered. The misdirection was Tony's little backhand slap that had been perfected over the years, a somewhat subtle verbiage which only he understood, most of the time.

"I don't think I got your name," Sally said to his back as Rocchio departed the store. She didn't get it either.

"Smart ass," she said to Grace. "Looked like one of those Mafia's on TV with that dark complexion and slicked back hair. No people down here look like that."

Chapter 51

Ezekiel had read Blue Highways, by William Least Heat-Moon, about traveling the backroads marked in blue on old highway maps. His Toyota Camry was clattering along on one of them, its tires throwing stones that made driving treacherous. What the hell, he thought, it was a rental, so what if the gravel roads nicked it up a bit, it wasn't his problem. He was out here doing the grunt work while Tony did interviews, which didn't sit too well with him.

He eventually managed to locate Lost Lake and casually asked about Cyrus and Jax at the neighborhood grocery. Ezekiel welcomed all the information, and he received plenty of it. Lots of people knew those two and liked them.

"They live in Lost Lake Shores," said the store cashier, who proceeded to tell him how to get there. How different life here is from Chicago, he mused, smiling his best smile while writing the directions on a matchbook cover before driving away.

The Kohler house, with its big front window, looked vacant. There didn't seem to be anyone at home, or in the vicinity for that matter. Ezekiel parked his car behind the curve in the asphalt road, about a football field away. He walked down the side of the rectangular parcel, a two-acre peninsula with water on three sides, pausing to look at the "Lot for Sale" sign next to Kohler's home. Good cover. He was starting to edge onto the property from the east when he heard the unmistakable growl of a dog. It sounded like a dog anyway, and it was pretty fucking menacing. Ezekiel unconsciously let his hand slide down his leg to a concealed Walther

PPK .380 holstered on his calf. He couldn't see the dog, but there was no mistake, the dog saw him, or smelled him. The growl was now a deep rumble.

It was Ezekiel's experience that this sort of greeting was not conducive to relationship building. He'd remember the dog if he had to come back. Content with knowing where Cyrus lived, he looked over the neighborhood, sketched out the location of the homes and roads, and headed back toward the university, where he snapped off a few more photographs and ran smack dab into Cyrus Kohler as he entered Faner Hall.

About 6:30 that evening, after four more hours of close area surveillance, during which time Cyrus left and didn't return, Ezekiel entered Faner Hall from the west and proceeded past two janitors who were doing their nightly duties. On the right, just past the closest room, he entered Kohler's office, which was open and unlocked for cleaning. After determining it was empty of humankind, Ezekiel proceeded in no more than 25 seconds, to take down General Custer, replace the bug with a fresh one, and rehang the picture. Short and sweet, the way he liked it. Duster's small video device, triggered by the motion that started its impersonal heart, recorded every one of those 25 seconds in unblinking detail, which included a stellar full frontal of Ezekiel Octavius.

Chapter 52

After a long day of lectures followed by a planning session with Reese, Calvin, and the Council of Ten, Cyrus finally got his aging but home around 6 p.m. Jax was waiting on the porch for him with a cold beverage in each hand. His would be Makers on the rocks with a lemon wedge. It was perfect.

"Saw a werewolf shooting jack at the Colony Hotel. He was drooling,' Cyrus warbled softly, the lyrics known only to himself.

"That must have been quite a group when they were young and writing all those songs," he said to Jax. "Jackson Brown, Warren, all the Eagles, Linda Ronstadt, JD Souther." He and Jax had lived in a time and

place that was now only a memory. All those years had passed under sleeps dark, silent watch where America now stood, waiting for The Front.

Jax sipped on her Glenlivet scotch, with a wedge, and said: "Cy, you've looked a little peaked this week, you feeling OK, the pressure getting to you?"

She smiled that big wide smile while walking over to him, putting her hand on his and guiding him to his favorite porch chair. "We are in this together, this philosophy of yours, this life. It's all been making me think how I want to be completely used up when my time is over," she said. "I don't want to have one ounce of energy left. No hidden mystery agenda left unfulfilled. Part of the reason is there aren't many women married to 65-year-old guys who want to change the world. The other part is I want to see you do it. Guess I'm just lucky, and I mean that," she added, pulling his face up to hers and kissing him gently. "No one you know, or who knows you, will ever be able to say they saw this coming, but I will. I saw it the day I ran down dad's steps and jumped into your arms."

"I remember that day," Cyrus said softly.

"Oh yeah," Jax murmured, "I bet you do. You nearly banged my eyeballs out."

"It was the first time I'd seen you in 14 months," Cyrus offered weakly.

"Sure, I get it," Jax replied, taking a big sip, "that is the only excuse you are putting out there in response to a domestic rape." They both laughed.

God, Cyrus mused, I love this woman, and there was no doubt that she loved him. She was all in.

They sat talking on the porch that early spring evening until darkness landed on their doorstep. Their only interruption was Scout's frequent forays to be petted. When Jax had returned home from school, he had

been gruffing, a deep sound he made in his throat when he was on high alert. Something had riled him. Oh well, he was a dog, she thought, dismissing his anxiety as no more than invading squirrels or chipmunks.

Jax refocused on Cyrus, the principal combatant. He had that faraway look in his eyes.

"A penny for your thoughts, buddy," Jax said.

"I have been thinking about Martin Luther tacking his manifesto on the church door," Cyrus replied, "and all that went with it."

"In his day the pope felt it was okay to sell 'Indulgences' the way politicians sell their favors today. The Catholic Church used that money to finance crusaders whose religion was better than yours. They were also busy denying various rights to the underclass, which included women. Hell, they murdered and burned 5,000 of them who wanted to be priests. But the parchment on the door was a roadmap for change, and that change, the birth of the Reformation, marched forward as humans slowly evolved.

"To the elite, the rich, the socially advantaged, holding on to their territory matters more than the future of humanity. So, when updating the roadmap, worst-case scenario, we may have to be content in dealing with this level of social evolution. Regardless, I am going to do my part, Jax," Cyrus continued, "to rewrite our nation's story, and my own, but my expectations are clouded. Some days I have none."

No wonder he looked so beat, Jax thought, instinctively putting her hand on his shoulder, as if in doing so, she could join her energy with his and together change the odds.

"I've had calls and conversations with too many people who look at me as if I'm crazy," he said.

"We are at least a generation away from a broad realization that these issues of The Front are crucial to our survival. Some days I have no faith in people still rooted in mythology who show no ability to solve the most basic equations. I live with a species for which Sunday is an intervention, intent as they are the other six

days on war and planet destruction. Perhaps the supreme power in the universe, God, as the faith tribes call him, will rescue us, but I see no path to that outcome. Ed Wilson says the conflict between faith tribes and science is not resolvable. The paths do not intersect, he says. Stephen Hawking flat out says there is no god; we were not created; we are in this alone. I don't have a chrystal ball and I can't fortell the future so I'm keeping my mouth shut. I hope that one day, the tribes will will understand that their denial of science as the source of information on this earth only increases their risk of extinction."

"Whatever happens, I accept the challenge and the risk. I'll continue to offer my opinion and defend it against the old guard."

As night fell, Jax slipped Into Cyrus's big arms, and before long they were asleep in a pod.

Chapter 53

Reese and Calvin were lying together in a hammock that they had strung up just off a little cove on the back end of the campus lake. The student population had departed for spring break, and quiet reigned. The male crappies were on their beds guarding the eggs, and so were they. The lake was a regular spot for the dynamic duo, who had thrashed here before.

After their recent lovemaking, as they put on some clothes and took opposite ends of the hammock.

Reese reached out to gently rub Calvin and said, in a low husky voice, "Just remember, Calvin, the cool don't say how they got that way."

"Right baby, they don't say," Calvin said languidly, noticing some slight pressure down below.

"Twat's that you say," joked Reese, angling for more business with a proven model.

"Put a raincoat on that Sailor Boy," she intoned.

As round two crashed to an end, Calvin said in a tired voice, "What's gonna happen here Reese? Where do you think Doc's going with all this?"

"Just what he says, Calvin. He's out to start a third party."

"It's not that easy," said Calvin.

"Just because you've never seen it done successfully doesn't mean it can't happen."

"True enough," said Calvin.

"If I were a betting woman, I wouldn't bet against him."

"Nope," Calvin agreed, "neither would I."

In Reese's mind, humankind walked together. Some roads were just better than others. The trek could be alternately terrifying and exciting. Political life in America was going to change for the better if Cyrus Kohler had his way about it, and she was going to be right there with him. The Front was in the vanguard of political philosophy, and people would have to grow into accepting the ethical underpinnings of this way of thinking. It could happen, or not. Either way, she was committed.

Reese preferred not to dwell on the evolutionary state of the human race. It made her feel defeated and too aware of the uphill battle they were waging against an established bureaucracy of socially congruent tribes. Her preference was to compare their nascent movement to the apple and peach buds growing each spring into fully developed fruit. It just took the right conditions to make it happen, a miracle she had observed many times.

Reese understood that those with a concept of science would see the control of political and religious life by the social tribes much as she did. It was social congruence at work. Their numbers, however, were likely to be few. Cyrus's message was going to have to resonate with the mainstream to be successful, and that

was an entirely more complex and challenging population to assess. She had done the math and could only hope for the best.

Genetics and the environment make a strange coupling, especially when matched with heredity and maternally recessive genes. The fact that social animals make decisions favoring their tribe because they are members, often disregarding more logical solutions, can give the most qualified of researchers pause.

"Tribal loyalty and territoriality, Doc hit it squarely on the head," Reese said.

"I hope it doesn't get him killed," said Calvin, rolling over on his side and closing his eyes.

"Don't say that, Calvin," said Reese to no one who was listening. Calvin was already fast asleep.

Chapter 54

Halfway back to Chicago, Ezekiel Octavious and Anthony Rocchio had rolled down the windows of their vehicle so Rocchio could smoke without totally pissing off his passenger. Ezekiel condemned cigarettes as being worse than his many criminal acts.

As far as vices go, Ezekiel was relatively unencumbered. He drank a little Maker's from time to time and seldom violated his capacity. Running, exercise, and the range, generally kept his skill set in serviceable working condition. Not being able to turn back time, he no longer accepted jobs, no matter how lucrative, with heavy lifting required. All overnight stakeouts had been eliminated to serve his health better.

His hard running days were over, no more special ops. Choosing not to inhabit a conundrum, Ezekiel left guilt as a byproduct for others to absorb. Eternity might be out of the question, but Saul made it through, albeit after a seismic transformation, so why couldn't he? So far, the bright lights of heaven had not visited,

perhaps because his plan did not include a last-minute confession, which might or might not be required.

Recanting was problematic if time intervened hurriedly to claim a departing soul. Perhaps the end game could be an accidental fall where a message could be dispatched if rescue did not appear imminent. Ezekiel tried not to overthink about those he'd forwarded to their earlier than expected rewards.

Rocchio, at age 64, was barely Ezekiel's junior. The man smoked like a dilapidated two-stroke engine. Unclean fumes poured from his mouth in the form of two packs, sometimes three, of Marlboro Reds daily. Tony was riding the horse. Only God knew what his lungs looked like, and God wasn't talking, at least not to Ezekiel. Surely, if the day ever came when they had to run, his advantage would be a head start of exponential proportion.

Rocchio was an exceptional man for hire. For a price, he would do damn near anything, which to Ezekiel's mind was a mite reckless but seemed to have worked out for him so far. Rocchio Transportation, LLC, had a reputation for efficiencies that organized crime came to value. For intricate jobs, there was the power of transportation to whisk away evidence in the blink of an eye.

Anthony Rocchio's business sense was keen, and he was tidy, in a professional sort of way. Over the years his primary assignments had included the use of fire, his specialty, and one true love. Rocchio learned early on that fire remains were harder to trace than a fleeing fart and left even less evidence. His expertise with flammables was well documented within the criminal community, who kept their asset hidden in plain sight. In 30 years of service to the trucking and criminal industries, Rocchio had never seen the inside of a jail cell. The man had never even been fingerprinted. He was just the CEO of Rocchio Transportation, LLC, and that's the way he intended to keep rolling.

"So how'd your visit to the boonies go?" asked Ezekiel, turning down the radio that was blasting some Taylor Swift pop ballad he'd never heard.

Rocchio, butt packing his unopened Marlboros in the palm of his hand said, "I ran into the usual shit, small towns, locals. One of 'em was a little nosy, too much so for my taste," he added, flicking ash out the window.

A subscriber to the Cheech Marin philosophy, "If it looks like shit and smells like shit, it's probably shit," Ezekiel asked, "Yeah, so how'd you handle it?"

"Walked away, went away, out of sight, out of mind," said Rocchio.

A red flag went up in Ezekiel's mind. He'd done way too many ops. Someone had taken offense to big city Tony and his slicked back hair. Ezekiel didn't have that problem; the old hippie look was neutral and didn't require pomade. If these people were connected in any way to Cyrus Kohler, and why wouldn't they be, he'd hear about it. Although he was older now, Kohler would probably always have those instincts that got him through the war, and those instincts would kick in, once he had possession of the information. Rangers could smell surveillance.

Ezekiel and Rocchio were two very different criminals who had fielded several successful joint operations with no glitches. Ezekiel did the hit while Rocchio provided transportation and incendiary skills. The mere fact that they both carried handguns belied the distance between their respective capabilities.

"How about you," Rocchio asked blankly, "anything interesting?"

"Yeah," said Ezekiel, "Kohler has a dog."

That was the extent of his information. It didn't make much of an impression on Rocchio, who had thought for years that Ezekiel was a mean dog himself, one who needed a shock collar.

Chapter 55

Duster McCaulkin was on edge. It was an age-old urge that spelled danger.

He had found a bug in Cyrus' office which didn't surprise him given Cyrus' entry into a world where money, business, and politics intersected. Someone cared. Kohler wasn't planning a robbery or a pyramid scheme; the man was stating his opinion and discussing a new political philosophy. The device itself was thought-provoking. It was a very sophisticated digital bug that no petty criminal would likely have. No doubt, he was dealing with a well-financed professional.

Duster worked at fitness. He had been a piece of muscle once and still was to a degree. His marina workouts were the stuff of legend. A former triathlete, his 6-foot, 190-pound body was ripped by years of high school and collegiate wrestling, not to mention his four-year stint in Marine Force Recon. He had not known Cyrus in those days. They hadn't met until both located themselves at Lost Lake, and Duster purchased the marina. Duster understood plenty about Ranger life having met several during his tour in Vietnam. The past gradually came out, as did Cyrus's story, over 20 years of drinking beer on warm summer nights.

Duster had learned to reserve judgment until he possessed all the facts. Best not to say much yet about their little discovery until he'd checked the tape and seen the installer. What worried him wasn't the bug, but a phone call he'd gotten from his old friend Sally Berghoff.

Sally had called to tell him about a stranger, a short, heavyset smoker smartass with slicked-back hair. There weren't an overabundance of Italians in Southern Illinois, and Duster knew most of them. Few still spoke with a northern dialect. Behavior was more cordial the farther you got from the cities. Southern Illinois was far enough.

"He wasn't nice," said Sally, her voice huffier than usual.

"He pretended to be a reporter, but I didn't buy that."

Sounded like professional talent to Duster, who was beginning to connect a few of these random dots. When the man had been verbally confronted, he had merely walked to his car and left. Someone was making a real effort to find out as much as possible about Cyrus Kohler. It all felt wrong to Duster McCaulkin, who had experienced that feeling before. When something felt off, it usually was.

Chapter 56

Clifteen Lee, also known as Clifty, hadn't had a Leonard Ray visit in years when Duster McCaulkin knocked on her front door and introduced himself. Charlie Mills had put together a file on Ray that included a picture of Leonard with a beautiful brunette on his arm. The caption indicated a civic function, and everyone looked happily inebriated. It took some digging, but eventually, a name was put to the picture and before long an address surfaced.

Clifty, all these years later, was still an eyeful. She hadn't gone far, living in a charming two-bedroom bungalow on Lake Murphysboro. She was only 12 miles from Leonard Ray's A-frame in Hilanoa, an older subdivision in Carbondale. Thirty-one years ago, Clifty had moved there with her boyfriend, Tim O'Connell, an environmental attorney. They never married or had children, just an active, steady, peaceful life and, yeah, she remembered Leonard Ray.

"He was a strange duck, Duster," Clifty said, making herself comfortable in an old leather Barcalounger that faced the lake.

"We met at one of his fraternity parties. Back then, I was a legal assistant to a local attorney, that's how I met Tim, and we used to party with the frat boys whenever the offer was right. They were the horniest bunch of dudes I've ever been around, including soldiers," she said, with a twinkle in her eye and a shake of her curly brown hair.

"Anyway, we drank drain piss, you know, vodka with anything, got a little drunk and went from there. Ray drove me home one night and didn't even ask to stay. I can't remember if he kissed me goodnight, but the next day I had roses on my desk and a note that said, 'The favor of your company is requested for dinner Friday night at The Italian Garden. I'll show up; maybe you will too.'"

"That's how our relationship began, and it lasted four years, on and off, mostly on. Ray graduated, started grad school, and then, with no warning, he was outta here. Later I found out he'd bolted to Canada to avoid the draft. God how he hated the war, the military, the ROTC," she said. "He railed on those folks."

"Did he travel much?" asked Duster. "Was he gone from school a lot? Did you go with him? Do you remember any of the people you met during those years?"

"I remember Tom Hayden," said Clifty, looking at Duster directly, her big brown eyes steady.

"That Tom Hayden?" asked Duster.

"Yeah, him, that guy," she replied. "Leonard went off to Chicago all the time. I went with him on a few trips, but the accommodations were shitty, and he'd leave me alone for hours at a time. Leonard didn't give me spending money either, so shopping was out of the question. We were always around South 47th Street, near the University of Chicago. And speaking of Chicago," Clifty leaned forward as she spoke, "I met the band, well, two of them. You know, the band, Chicago. They were still the Chicago Transit Authority, I believe."

She furrowed her brow, thinking back in time.

Returning to the moment, she said, "Leonard was a traveler, that's for sure. Once he took off for Canada, I didn't see him for ten years or more. No letters, no calls, nada. That's Leonard, a real lone wolf if there ever was one."

"You know he never got married," said Duster.

"Really," said Clifty. "Well, I'm not surprised. He wasn't gay or like that, but he wasn't eaten up with booty calls either. He was like a once-a-month guy. How do you do that at 24?" she said, throwing up her arms with a look of astonishment.

"I have no idea," Duster replied somewhat ruefully.

"I think Leonard was pretty religious," Clifty added, "although not in a conventional way. The times we did have sex, he was fresh off meditation. He'd sit on the floor in a lotus position with his legs crossed for a couple of hours, burning incense and smoking pot. The boy liked his reefer. He was always trying to get me to do it, but I didn't need help kick-starting anything," she said with a laugh.

"I could get it going on a moment's notice back then."

"I can only imagine," Duster said out loud, immediately wishing he could take it back.

Clifteen smiled.

"I kept waiting for him to put the Bible or Bhagavad Gita, whatever it was, under my ass and call it divine meditation, but he never did. He was a strange one."

Chapter 57

Senator Ray Malencia and the law firm of Johnson, Jackson, Taft, and McKinley were having a question and answer session. The partners were struggling to understand the senator's decision to debate this unknown professor and were especially chafed at not being consulted about this risky move, and Ray's reluctance to discuss the situation. The senator wasn't even going to bring it up. A fitting reward for lining his pockets with millions of dollars.

Ray Malencia wasn't a particularly qualified attorney. He'd never really practiced law or developed a specialty and had failed the bar exam twice before a merciful Jesus had granted him absolution. The debate was only a few days off, and any excuse for recusal, short of death or dismemberment, would be seen as an act of extreme unction.

The debate bore all the trappings of a public relations nightmare. It had not taken the partners long to reach a consensus, which was to protect their billings at all costs.

"Let's frame the debate," said Oswald Taft, the partner in charge of litigation. Oswald smiled a lot, which mitigated the unruly shock of black hair that lay on top of the smile. At the moment, it was not a happy smile, but then Oswald was not a happy man, suffering as he did from Compression.

Oswald had made a fortune in law because he thoroughly understood the rules of engagement. The man never stood on protocol. It was essential to control your demons. His strategy was simple. Keep those closest to the action well paid. Money bought loyalty.

This plan seemed to be working, until now. Short in stature, Oswald's chubby self detested the gall of Ray Malencia and his Grecian Formula. He had never voted for the man. It was his ultimate protest, flying as it did in the face of corporate correctness.

Ray thought he was going to bowl over this nobody. Oswald wasn't so sure. He had taken to carrying a picture of Cyrus Kohler in his leather attaché, one of Cyrus during his time in Vietnam. The man looked resolute and was carrying an M16 and several grenades. This kind of man struck Oswald as someone who could, and would, blow your ass up. Malencia had no life experience that would get him ready for a Cyrus Kohler.

"Senator," said Oswald, "Until the debate is over I will be your consultant and coach. We need to prepare the answers to any questions that we think might surface. Nothing is off limits or too inconsequential to consider. Oh yes, one more thing, no ad-libs."

Malencia looked shocked and deflated. He wanted to orate and fly by the seat of his well-tailored pants. Ray wanted to put forth a dialogue that would render his opponent helpless and castrate these Front buffoons. It was a time for greatness.

"Oswald," Senator Malencia said, looking at the litigator with his most senatorial stare, "after all this is over, there will be no more Cyrus Kohler. The Front will be excrement flushed down the nation's toilet."

Oswald stared at him in disbelief. Who was he kidding? The man saw himself above the law he doled out to mortals.

Oswald nodded and handed him a list.

"These are the topics we are willing to debate, no variables, Ray, okay?"

Chapter 58

Duster went straight back to Carbondale and made a beeline for Charlie Mills, whom he found asleep at his desk. Duster nudged him gently since rattling Charlie's cage was not a formula for success. Charlie snapped to life.

"You could have called, or knocked," he said irritably, lurching to his feet. "What's so important it can't wait?"

Duster proceeded to tell him about the bug, his trip to see Clifteen Lee, and the phone call from Sally Berghoff. Charlie took notes in the old leather field manual he had carried with him for millennia. When all

was duly recorded, he said, "We'd better call Cyrus, Duster. This information of yours, coupled with Leonard's letter to Judy McSettle, is starting to sound like evidence. The stranger is an entirely different matter, though."

Chapter 59

Wilson Hahn looked intently at Oswald Taft. The man's hair, black, unruly, disorderly, went well with the perpetual look of amusement on his disproportioned face. Much like Clarence Darrow, this man was no visual masterpiece. If he hadn't been wearing a \$4,000 Armani suit, you would swear he had just walked out of a Charles Dickens novel. He had defended some of the highest profile cases in his firm's long and storied history.

Founded in 1869, after the Civil War, Johnson, Jackson, Taft, and McKinley became a powerhouse Washington law firm whose rates routinely exceeded \$1000 an hour. This man pacing in front of Hahn had made partner in his fourteenth year of practice. Oswald Taft possessed one of the sharpest legal minds in America. There was no doubt in Wilson's mind about his ability. The man was damn good, and today he had come to protect Senator Ray Malencia, a most valuable asset.

Now, faced off with Wilson Hahn, Oswald was determined to stack the deck, and in so doing, propel his man to victory. Malencia was Kohler's quintessential leader of the bought and was non-replaceable.

The first stumbling point was the senator's insistence that his status entitled him to speak first. It was a mistake that gave an edge to the rebutter. Oswald railed, but Hahn held fast.

"Someone has to go first," said Hahn, cautiously eying the pacing man. "Someone will, your man," replied Oswald firmly, showing no sign of quarter. "Your senator asked for the honor, and we're giving it to him," said Hahn.

"Not so much giving," said Oswald, "as taking an offer made in haste."

"Made?" said Hahn. "It was put on the table by the senator, who might not be willing to agree with your prudence, seeing our man as fodder for the taking."

Wilson peered down his spectacles at the younger man as though he were a student. "Here's your problem, son," he said, causing Oswald to bristle, "Senator Malencia, of his own free will, without coercion, volunteered, no, demanded would be a better word, to be the first speaker. The fact that his demand was verbal matters little since he delivered it on Channel 6. So, Mr. Taft, do we start this process with a non-event caused by your man's public withdrawal? He now sees Cyrus 'Nobody' as such a menace that he feels threatened before a single word is spoken? It's not a good picture, Oswald, so can we move along?"

Hahn's apparent confidence concerned Taft. He seethed at his lack of control over this outlier. Every attempt Taft made to frame a question in political rhetoric was rebuffed and the question restated. Clarity was not Taft's intention, nor that of his client. Rhetoric and delivery were their hallmarks, and the framing of the issues was vital. What would happen if his man had to give a straight yes or no answer? That would be a loss for their side and victory for Kohler, who would come across as more forthcoming and truthful.

They did agree that a moderator would handle the debate. Since the filming and feed would go out from WSIU public television, a PBS affiliate, Ed Randle, program director at the station, would be that man. Public television exposed awkward truths and took risks other mainstream news organizations found uncomfortable. National networks had long since left the realm of Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow and replaced them with glam reporters and sound bites.

Randle ran the station and was also on the board of the Saluki. Oswald knew this was convenient for Kohler. They knew each other. The man had creds and had been a highly regarded professional newsman before ever landing in Southern Illinois. His career highlights happened with Reuters, five years after Vietnam. They sent him to Lebanon, on and off, for six of the remaining ten years of that civil conflict. The man was a pro, and Oswald doubted a purchase could be brought about even if one were available.

What Oswald didn't know was that Ed Randle, a liberal, independent, and conservative, depending on the issue, was convinced that Cyrus Kohler was going to feast. No one should walk into such an event, thought Randle, without an outstanding exit strategy. How could the senator possibly answer the questions he was going to be asked by the leader of the unbought.

Cyrus would force the engagement and Randle intended to let him. Malencia wanted to talk about his record, the votes he'd cast for significant legislation such as the Iraq war, transportation, health care, jobs, immigration, and gun control. Cyrus was focused on the Doctrine of Limited Rights, Social Congruence, Process v. Events, and Compression. It was shaping up to be a real donnybrook.

Oswald, whose bid of five spades included a heart ruff in dummy, had just heard five no trump. It was nearly dark when the two men signed their names, of counsel, to a document defining the debate agreement, the result of a contentious discussion with no quarter asked and none given.

"Look at it this way, there isn't a question that can be asked that I can't give a straight answer to," said Cyrus. It was late in the afternoon, and he was pacing up and down the dock at Lost Lake Marina where a full-blown discussion of the debate rules was well underway, having earlier been convened by Wilson Hahn.

"See this," said Cyrus, bending over and scooping up some lake water and then releasing it. "This is us, a small amount of water in a vast lake; yet we are powerfully connected to the whole, becoming as we are a part of something much bigger. Make sure, Wilson," Cyrus said, directing his vision skyward, "that the man makes it there alive."

Jax, Reese, and Calvin, sitting on the dock with their feet in the water, the latter two holding hands, looked at each other and nodded at Duster and Tommy who were seated in Duster's old folding chairs, which he had furnished free of charge for this special occasion. Their acknowledgment was returned.

"Understand, guys," said Cyrus, looking at Duster and Tommy first, then around the whole group,
"Malencia intends to cut the head off the baby before it grows up. What he is about to accomplish is the
exposition of the baby's diet. Let's be thankful that we, the unimportant, the unbought, the no ones, are
important enough to be on the radar of this highly social creature. He will soon find out the baby has premature
molars."

Chapter 60

Transportation and logistics issues filled the morning of the debate. Jax was coming from her music theory class, which she let out 20 minutes early for the first time in history. No way she was missing any of this. Reese and Calvin rented a minivan to pick up council members, each given a departure time by Reese who expected them to be punctual, especially today. Duster, Charlie Mills, and Tommy rode over in Tommy's old F-150 that should have died years ago but lived in spite of repeated assaults.

Cyrus showed up wearing his debate uniform, looking as happy as the day he was married. The old sport coat stood out over the lightly starched blue cotton shirt and maroon silk tie that he had brought home from Vietnam. Of course, there were those ever-present Converse All-Stars, but no one was going to look at them unless he fainted, and that wasn't likely. The boy looked dapper, thought Jax.

"That's who he is," she said out loud to herself.

Wilson Hahn, who was walking with Cyrus, heard her and smiled. The senator and his entourage had arrived in their campaign tour bus two hours earlier and had already checked the lighting and sound systems. They were now getting ready for makeup. Unlike Cyrus, whose tanned face, acquired from hours spent golfing and boating, covered nearly every age spot, the senator required professional attention. Never far from his side on this day, Oswald Taft saw to the details, the proceedings, issuing orders, approvals, and denials. Oswald

was on what he sometimes referred to as high alert. Some would call it a state of anxiety. Close to the studio's epicenter was two lecterns, a table with two chairs for Ed Randle and Judy McSettle, lots of lights, and two camera crews.

Constance Abel watched intently as the one hundred or so invitees gradually took their seats in this room WSIU used for special events. If the radio station's management had thought of it, they could have sold out Shryock Auditorium where Cirque de Soleil had just performed. People would have paid \$100 a head to see this show, she mused. Chancellor Pham, Kenton McFarland, Dweebert Lampkin, some faculty, and assorted other desirables, including the press, took their seats. It was time. Ed Randle, microphone securely attached to his lapel, signaled the cameras and took his place across from the two combatants.

"WSIU is proud to host a debate between Senator Ray Malencia and Professor Cyrus Kohler. Senator Malencia is a four-term United States Senator, a Republican. He is the Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. He is a member of the SIU Board of Directors. Senator Malencia was previously Governor of the State of Illinois.

"Senator," Randle held out his hand. He then motioned him to his chosen lectern. It had been crucial to the senator, and therefore to Oswald that the senator's standing position be on the right. Oswald had numbers from previous debate polls, including JFK-Nixon, that indicated the right was a stronger position.

Oswald's staff had studied all the pollings because the slightest edge could prove decisive. Starting right now, Ray needed to be believed.

When informed of this logic, Wilson marveled at the assumptions prefacing that conclusion. It was smoke on the water. Cyrus had the fire, and Wilson damn well knew it.

"Professor Cyrus Kohler," Randle continued the introductions, "is a former officer in the United States Army's 75th Ranger Regiment and a member of the 101st Airborne Division Currahees, also known as, 'The Band of Brothers.' For the past thirty years, Professor Kohler has been a member of the faculty here at SIU. He teaches in the School of Philosophy."

That was it, no boards, no other offices, no particular status. Ed shook hands with Cyrus and watched as he took his place behind the lectern on the left side of the staging area.

"This debate," continued Randle, "has an agreed-upon format which includes a discussion of the top issues of the day. You may be familiar with some and unfamiliar with others. The debate will last 60 minutes. Each participant has a five-minute opening statement, after which I will ask a series of questions intended to contrast the positions of the participants. At the end of our debate, each man will have a five-minute summary, and that will conclude the evening. Shall we begin, Senator?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, members of the national media, Mr. Randle, Professor Kohler, I have come here today to defend myself and my party against what we see as an attack on our very being, our core values if you will. Today, I represent not only my party but the American political system, our Constitution, and our chosen way of government.

"Our values have been assaulted recently by Professor Kohler and his Front. Their contention is we are the wrong people for the job. If we are the guilty party, no pun intended, why have we had such a continuous run of freedom? Our democracy has not been interrupted. It endures because of the division of authority provided to the people by our Constitution, which allows for sometimes contentious debate but consistently yields to a majority opinion.

"Professor Kohler and his group are challenging not only the results of our democracy but also our methods and rules of engagement. We, the Congress, your elected representatives, are here to serve the people. Our two major parties often have different views. This difference creates choices that require thoughtful debate and compromise. Congress is a trained, professional, educated body of men and women that are elected, under our laws and system of government, as specified by our founders. To change our procedure would be an

enormous mistake and Professor Kohler and his followers are the only ones I know of who are contemplating doing so."

"What kind of an argument is it to contend our process of governance is damaged? It works beautifully every election cycle. Parties select, slate, or nominate candidates for the public to approve or disapprove. I am currently in the middle of my fourth term, during which time the State of Illinois, my state, has grown exponentially. I have been able to bring in thousands of jobs and countless businesses to help secure our future.

The senator looked sternly at the assembly and, trying to project the visage of Caesar, raised himself to his full height.

"To say that we are not doing our jobs is a disservice to the men and women who sacrifice their personal lives to serve this great country. Our elected officials are routinely asked to make difficult decisions affecting our welfare. It is the nature of the work we do."

"Today, Professor Kohler and I will discuss our respective views on many issues, including healthcare, immigration, gun control, global warming, campaign funding, term limits, education, and taxation. I hope to be able to resolve concerns these issues have raised to the satisfaction of the American people. You have elected me four times, and I shall continue to work tirelessly to accomplish these tasks."

The senator stepped back from the microphone and tried to look senatorial. He smiled his big voter-come-hither smile, but he did not wave, feeling it might be inappropriate since this event was much different than a campaign stop. God, this was just what he hoped for, a chance to put that prick Kohler in his place.

"Professor Kohler," Randle said, punching his Timex. Cyrus, who had stood quietly as the senator spoke, was thinking on his feet. He couldn't believe what he had just heard. It equaled nothing. The man had said nothing. Well, let's see how he feels about this, Cyrus thought as he began.

"First of all, I would like to thank our great university for agreeing to hold this debate." "Chancellor," Cyrus nodded and smiled at Chancellor Pham, seated near an aisle on the second row, "thank you." Lan Trang Pham never twitched so much as a hair. She'd had no choice in this matter. No one consulted her. Maybe they'd blow each other up. She did not care.

"Ladies and gentlemen, members of the press and media, Senator," Cyrus began, "when the idea of a debate was first brought up by Senator Malencia, I was amazed that anyone that far up the political ladder would even acknowledge the presence of The Front. This risk was taken because our argument threatens the social establishment. We have already been successful, and that momentum is growing daily as people by the thousands join a more inclusive political process in America. I am an educator. The Front is educating as we speak. Our mission is to change the rules by which our current political class is selected and elected. As we do so, the PACS, lobbyists, and other buyers of the American vote will be stripped of their power. They have long flourished in the bedchambers of congruency but that time is passing.

"As we eliminate the buying of America and the incumbency that has enabled it, as we become the true party of the people, able to discern right from wrong and advocate for the former regardless of the political winds blowing around us, the dysfunction will lessen, until one day, which I probably will not see, our party will disable sociality and political malfeasance. We are The Front. We are the Unbought. We are both conservative and liberal. We will be the middle, doing what the situation warrants. We have no master and are beholding to no one."

"The American political process is broken because our two parties have become so opposed that they need remediation. A third party able to act unencumbered by political baggage must be formed, whether it be our party or another. This new party must have an understanding of science that will move us forward, away from the mythology of our past and present."

"I contend that the social evolution of man has been surpassed by that of its scientific brethren who, no longer acting as enablers, must assume the mantle of leadership in our rapidly changing world. When this happens, social issues now unsolvable will vanish from sight as we alter the course of Human Events."

"We live in the Age of Violence because our political system has been unable to say no to the tremendous expansion of human wants. As society became more compressed, as desires became needs and were granted by governments, an expanding Second Amendment allowed the Age of Violence, which began in the '60s when our schools were first attacked legally, to take hold and eventually reach monumental proportions. The Front proposes that Americans consider our Doctrine of Limited Rights, which states that the rights of society must supersede those of an individual as a deterrent to this violence. Today in many American cities anarchy rules.

"It is imperative to us that Americans also understand the Principle of Social Congruence. Regardless of what may be the window dressing or commonly conceived idea, America has no separation of church and state. It exists in name only. A candidate cannot get elected to office in this country, be slated by their party, without a religious affiliation. Look for yourself. The 435 members of Congress and 100 members of the Senate all express a religious affiliation. No church support makes a candidate much less attractive. Our two parties are unwilling to take that risk. Why should they? And can you explain why the churches and the three monotheistic religions that comprise the vast majority of worshipers in the United States have not seen fit to vet the candidates running for public office on the issue of violence? What are they praying for, an end of times? America needs this group to lead, not enable.

"Society is sick, lying on a bed of lies and deceit. As our two major parties have polarized and distanced themselves from each other, the social and territorial ambitions of their members have rendered inconsequential the best interests of America. The Front can balance the political equation with your support. Until we occur, Events will remain constant."

Ed Randle held up one finger.

"My remarks here today are a plea to my beloved country to arise from its stupor and understand that the world we live in has changed, and we must change with it."

Cyrus stepped back,, looking composed and ready for round two. It wasn't long coming.

Ed Randle said, "All right then. Now we want to get focused on some of the key issues facing our society today. Our format is to have a spontaneous, back and forth exchange, with the senator, per his request, going first."

As each man spoke, it became evident that each saw the world through dramatically different prisms.

Malencia saw Obamacare as a disaster and wanted to repeal it, regardless of the lives it impacted. Cyrus believed all people needed healthcare, not just for physical reasons but for a sense of self-worth.

"The idea," Cyrus said, "would be to make universal healthcare better, not to discard it. Nothing should be free in America. Work for it. You and yours had twenty years to get the job done. You didn't.

Perhaps we should consider the German model," he said, "where doctors compete with each other. The Germans spend 8 percent of their national income on healthcare compared to our 15 percent. Something is working. People need the basics to maintain their human dignity. Standardize procedure cost, make it happen."

People in the audience were either nodding or shaking their heads or writing furiously.

The senator spoke of wanting to protect the middle class, of which he had never been a part, and reduce tax loopholes. Cyrus advocated for a flat tax or a use tax. Everyone pays. One size fits all, with exemptions, but not freebies, for anyone below the poverty line. The senator wanted to send all illegals back, period, while Cyrus advocated for building an Ellis Island refuge in Texas and finding a way to legitimize those already here.

"Americans have the right to defend themselves," said Malencia, forcefully, on his favorite issue of gun control.

"We will never lay down our arms."

"Not as long as you are sleeping with the enemy," said Cyrus, looking at the Senator with cold disdain.

"Since when did you need an AK47 to defend your home, Senator?"

"Whenever I want to buy one," said Malencia, wishing instantly he could take it back. Oswald cringed, picturing the headlines.

"Who came up with the bright idea that it was okay to have assault weapons and handguns on school property as long as the owners' cars were locked?" asked Cyrus casually.

"The former Governor of Indiana, Mike Pence, endorsed it," said Malencia.

"Right," said Cyrus, "That makes it OK, right? Don't either of you forget the NRA set the agenda. Senator, it was their idea, their response to Sandy Hook, their way of showing the victims and the protest groups that The Age of Violence was okay with them, and they were in charge of the people in charge."

"Now wait a minute," Malencia fired back.

"Wait for what, Senator," said Cyrus,

"Wait for you to get another payoff. It says right here in my notes for this debate that the NRA directly or indirectly gave you more than 3 million dollars in the last four years, not counting the ads they and your super PAC ran on your behalf."

"Three million," Cyrus repeated, "will buy a lot of loyalty."

"Wait a minute now," the Senator interjected, "you are calling me a criminal, sir, are you calling me that? Everything I do is completely legal."

"That's the sad part of this little dialogue," replied Cyrus, "you have bastardized and gerrymandered the system to be congruent with your organization."

"We have a wonderful system of bipartisan government," said Malencia.

"You've shut down that beautiful bipartisan model three times in the last seven years," said Cyrus.

"You enacted a sequester because you couldn't solve your problems. That's a real service to the country, don't you think?" Cyrus asked. Laughter rang out throughout the studio.

"Yeah, that was a real victory for democracy," said Cyrus, eliciting more chuckles.

"Now wait a minute," Malencia's voice raised once again, "We reached an agreement, got the job done, crisis averted," he said, raising himself to his full height.

"Right," said Cyrus, "you did such a bang-up job that automatic spending cuts kicked in. Above the law is what you are and what you do. Our skies are full of pollutants, and our cities are wracked with violence because there is too much money at stake to do the right thing, which is clean up the air and get rid of the guns and the people who use them criminally."

Ed Randle stepped into the argument, attempting to restore calm.

He said, "Gentlemen, I have let you take a different path than we agreed on because your dialogue was unrehearsed and pointed out key differences in your political philosophies. We have run a little bit over our time, so if you would each wrap up? Three minutes, Senator."

"If we didn't live in America, sir," said Malencia, glowering at Cyrus, "I would call your program treason."

Oswald shuddered. The ship was listing to port, and the Coast Guard was not responding. Cyrus returned his melting glaze with indifference.

"To call our governments highest elected officials the wrong people, with that Human Pedigree thing, whatever that is, is an insult, sir. We have a process in this country for selecting qualified candidates for public office that has worked well for 250 years and will keep on providing the leadership this country needs. Our committees vet the candidates. It is not the churches' or anyone else's responsibility. Our selected candidates largely support the position of the party, or they are not our candidates."

Oswald's ball sack shrank.

"Shut up and sit down, Ray," he screamed inwardly.

"You are under some collegiate illusion," said Malencia, "that this is a kind and gentle society where we can turn over our guns and everything will be fine, but that doesn't work. We can't just shut down our factories; people need jobs. This is America, and you can't just come here because you want to," said Malencia, shaking his senatorial hand from side to side, pointing at Cyrus.

"Until we amend our Constitution, it is the law of the land, and I intend to follow it." The Senator stepped back, indicating he was finished.

Cyrus stepped forward. Those same blue eyes that had focused on the PAVN 324 were unblinking, staring at the senator.

"Congress, your Congress, is a living beta test of Social Congruence, and until at least some of that is eliminated we will continue to have dysfunction." Cyrus's impassioned words began to incite the crowd.

"I am angry, Senator. Maybe you can't tell that because I have learned to keep my temper under control, but I am disappointed in you and your crowd for making such a mess of our way of life. You have

abandoned America because of self-interest and greed. You have promoted racism and social polarization because it has served your interests. You are not the best of us, and you damn well know it. For the record, our society, permissive and disintegrating as it is, went overboard on your watch. You did nothing to save it. We are here to reverse that inefficiency, so buckle up, Senator, the ride may be a bit bumpy."

Book 3

Dien Bien Phu

"It's better for everybody when it's better for everybody."

Eleanor Roosevelt. 1933

Chapter 61

Thirty days after the debate The Front took a head count. The pitched argument had gone off the rails, and no one was sure what to expect.

"Cyrus," Reese reported in, "we're almost to 7 million, many of whom are sending more than their dollar, although they are particular about the allocation. No signs pointed to a slowdown.

"That's pretty impressive," said Cyrus, walking out the door. He had refused to have expectations that might prove disappointing, but that hadn't happened. Each significant exposure, like this debate with Malencia, had fueled a surge. There were problems, though, that came with such an explosion, like what to do with 13 million dollars.

Wilson Hahn, ever vigilant, set up a revolving fund, a money market account, and a subordinate trust to properly disperse funds when needed. Any expenditure over five thousand dollars required board approval, not a disqualifying hurdle since the current board had only two members. Letters had been sent to several potential new directors, including Lionel Rand, a military and political soldier known to and respected by many Americans.

Rand had retired recently as Secretary of State, negating the opposition's need to ask. Although conservative by nature, his advice and counsel were in demand by all the social tribes. As the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Rand's opinion was considered widely as most influential in matters of war and peace. Lionel knew what he was doing, and most everyone understood that. Whether they agreed or not was another matter. Differing with him was a task you performed at your own risk. Lionel Rand did not suffer fools lightly, which spurred the departure that had been coming for a long time.

Rand was known as a reasoned man who took thoughtful approaches to matters of life and death, the arena where he had cast his lot. His troops fought for him because they knew he cared, but better yet, they trusted him. Not so the political right and left. Although the right adored Lionel's tactics, their attempts to secure his cooperation were unsatisfactory. Lionel was not a team player, they concluded, at least not their definition of such, and was a poor fit. Rand, a lone wolf who had served tours in virtually every combat zone, described his experience with Congress as the worst of his life. Rumor had it that this phraseology would never have surfaced without his consent. The man ran a tight ship.

"Cyrus," Wilson said, thoughtfully pursing his lips while rolling his white meerschaum pipe between his fingers, "have you ever met Lionel Rand?"

"Nope, can't say as I have," said Cyrus, "although we are roughly the same age and more than likely served together in Vietnam."

"If the day ever comes when Lionel Rand walks through that door, I might get religion."

"Can you imagine the validation he would bring?" said Wilson.

"Yeah, well, don't hold your breath too long," Cyrus said, hopeful yet unconvinced such an event would occur in his lifetime. It would be like going to battle beside my old friend Captain Fred. You were in the wrong place but with the right guy."

"Tell me more about him," said Hahn, stoking his pipe and settling in for a treat.

"Years later, after he had retired, we met up at a VA hospital in Indianapolis, where we were both having some repair work done. He asked me if I had ever seen the movie 'We Were Soldiers..and Young.' I said yeah, I had. Do you remember the scene where we were lined up, going out looking for the Lieutenant? Yep. That was Lt. Colonel Hal Moore in the middle, Sgt. Major Basil Plumlee on the right. The guy on the left was me. Never thought I'd come back from that night, but I did. That was the Ia Drang valley in 1965, early in Vietnam. By the time I hit Vietnam and Captain Fred, the US was about to fight its last major battle in Vietnam at Ripcord, a big hill which stood just north of the A Shau Valley, due east of Khe Sanh. We were facing the 324b and the 304b. The 304 did the French at Dien Bien Phu."

Tommy Black Lance Wanderone walked through them at night with Gigadanegski, the Blood Taker, an 11" bone-handled knife which he still carries, doing most of the talking. There were 40,000 seasoned troops against 600 of my Currahee brothers. Currahee means stand alone. The Currahees are famous from WWII

times as The Band of Brothers. I was an LT. in the 2/506th and damn proud of it. We got shot up pretty bad, including yours truly. Lost part of my ear and took a hit close to my femoral artery. Fred got us out from under Colonel Andre Lucas and Brig. General Sid Berry by the skin of our teeth. They were more concerned about their budgets and promotions than our men. Fred called an ArcLight on the NVA. Arclights are high-level bombing runs. In this case, 500-pound bombs wiped out thousands of the enemy who were storming Ripcord to finish us off. No amount of training could get a man ready for that. Spaulding was the only reason I can think of why about 200 of us got off that hill alive.

"There are but a few," said Hahn, "who are able to think clearly under those conditions."

"Very few," said Cyrus, "But Lieutenant Colonel Spaulding is one of them, and from what I hear Rand qualifies as well."

Cyrus had no experience with Lionel Rand. He only knew what he read and had been told by former Ranger buddies. The man was a leader with a clear focus and powerful will. He had marshaled both to stay alive this long.

"Let's keep working, Wilson," Cyrus had said then, "working for someone like him to come our way."

"Yes," came the measured reply," let's do that."

Chapter 62

Wilson Hahn had a big job on hold. He was putting a stop order on The Front's political future until something told him, or showed him, it was time to take that next step. Moving fast was best performed by

sprinters, and The Front had entered a marathon. As their status changed from an organization to a caucus, the change demanded a well thought out plan. Wilson was thinking baby steps, not leaps and bounds. It was highly likely that the organization would evolve; Cyrus was too dynamic for it to be otherwise. More of an unknown was the evolution of the citizenry, which might or might not happen.

After the debate had wound to its merciful end, NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, FNC, and PBS all weighed in with their perspectives. There were various areas of disagreement, but on one issue all were in accord, Cyrus Kohler was the clear cut winner. The usual scramble for interviews and press coverage was intense. The Republican notion that Kohler's altruistic philosophy would fail because "things aren't that simple" was debunked as total nonsense.

"No one has much of an argument," said Willis Overton of CBS's 60 Minutes, "to back the notion that the ideas Kohler presented won't work because they haven't been given their day in court. You can bet we'll be having him here soon to talk about Social Congruence and the Doctrine of Limited Rights. In the meantime, until we have an opportunity to test his thesis, it will be business as usual in Congress."

Cyrus was hopeful the debate would help grow the RSOs, which seemed to benefit from almost any national exposure. Once an RSO was solidly entrenched, it could reach outside the campus to sponsor meetings and events for independent candidates who supported The Front and whose process of validation was underway. Until they garnered victories, Wilson's advice was to avoid any further talk of party status, even though that was the only prize on the shelf worth winning. Wilson was also of the opinion that, at a minimum, The Front needed 25 million members, or one-sixth of all registered voters before taking that step.

"Better get to work, folks," he said. "We've got a long way to go."

Wilson planned to use nominating petitions to gain ballot access for independent candidates The Front chose to support. Every political operative worth his salt knew you needed to get twice as many "raw" signatures on the petition as the individual states required. Some signatures would be illegible, incomplete, or

belong to unregistered voters. All of this paled when compared to the most pressing dilemma, that of a qualified candidate who could and would win. The clock was ticking.

One of the Council suggested a Constitutional Amendment to allow independents to run for public office. Wilson could only shake his head.

"We'd be waiting," he told Cyrus, "for a year with two Christmas'."

"I agree, "said Cyrus.

"Stay with the nominating petitions. They'll give us a chance to canvas the communities and spread our message at the grassroots level. We'll meet some people this way that are interested in better government. We are where we are because of who we are. Let's find out if that's enough."

Chapter 63

Senator Ray Malencia was struggling to accept the notion that the Roman definition of hubris had accompanied him to the debate, or even more so, led him. His camp had been polling nonstop and the results were conclusive, not to mention discouraging. The public approval rating for Kohler had hovered near the 75th percentile, with a 4 percent margin of error. Every PAC and lobbyist in Ray's court feverishly tried to engineer a reversal of fortune but to no avail. There are a few things that money cannot buy and the support coming Kohler's way appeared to be one of them. The Front was trending higher and higher. For a solid two weeks, the numbers remained constant. Even major commissioned op-eds by Malencia's trusted colleagues and journalists accomplished little. Gallop took a poll, same result. The senator had committed an unforced error was the opinion of even his closest supporters and indeed that of Jackson, Johnson, Taft, and McKinley. Within those walls, the stakes were countless millions, and their meal ticket had put it all at risk.

The senator was blue from the beating. He decided his libido would be unburdened from this considerable load if he could somehow get his hands on Lenora Hemmings, LaRue Arnold's unspoken property. That would improve his attitude.

"Constance, do you think it possible that a brief tryst might be possible shortly?" Constance had learned from experience that usually meant today or tomorrow.

"Let me guess, with a certain 'lady' whose name begins with L? I'll see what I can do Senator," she said, moving toward the door she had walked through only minutes before.

Ray watched Constance walk, her long black hair held back by two side braids, her linen skirt accentuating a body he regrettably had never handled. His imagination would have to suffice.

He came back to reality as Constance stopped by the door, turned, and said, "I'll find Lenora for you, Ray, it's the least I can do." The bitch, he thought, as she left the room. He couldn't help but worry a little about LaRue's reaction to Lenora becoming a timeshare, but what the hell, he just rented her too. LaRue Arnold wasn't exactly the picture of fidelity, but Ray understood that all dalliances needed proper management.

Chapter 64

The two combatants had no more than walked off the dais when Lenora Hemmings' private phone rang.

"Lena, get ready, we're going to the cabin," Larue said in a profane tone.

Lena knew from experience not to ask why the short notice. She could tell the congressman was upset by the tone of his voice.

"Pick you up in 45, walk straight out to the tarmac," LaRue instructed.

She knew that meant no was unacceptable, and being late was not an option. Either of those choices might be just enough, in a moment surrounded by a bad day, to suggest a replacement strategy. Someone else would be getting paid, instead of her.

Larue didn't say much on the flight down to Kentucky, but Lena could tell he was furious. It didn't take her long to find out the source of his anger.

"Just what in the fuck did the man think he could accomplish by all that posturing?" he asked incredulously once Lenora was supine.

"What in the fuck was he thinking, Lena?" repeated LaRue, rubbing her elevated posterior as he plunged as deeply as possible into its owner.

Lena didn't answer, at least not in English. LaRue was rough sometimes, and she was getting sore, literally and figuratively.

At that very moment, LaRue ended her torture by pulling out, rolling over and up, announcing as he rose, "Lena, I need to borrow your phone."

It was a demand, not a request, and Lena handed him the phone. LaRue, as was his custom, took a quick look at the recent calls, and there, for all to see, was the name of Constance Abel. The man couldn't leave well enough alone, thought LaRue, furiously shaking his head.

Dialing from memory, LaRue placed a call to Ray Malencia's cell, not that he had any intention of speaking to the man. It was one thing for Malencia to create such a fantastic opportunity for Professor Cyrus Kohler and his Front but entirely another to dispatch Constance Abel on a job recruiting mission with his Lena as the new hire.

When Senator Ray Malencia saw who was calling he smiled, pushed the round green button on his iPhone, and answered in the most optimistic tone, "Lenora, is that you?"

When the line suddenly went dead, he thought about calling back but reasoned that it must have been Lena sending him a signal of some sort. Constance had connected them, and this was verification. He'd wait for her to call back.

Lena fired up a fresh bowl and inhaled deeply. It was futile, she knew, chasing that first hit, but it was an attempt she made over and over because she could. Maybe there would come a time to give up her crack habit at life's end, but those thoughts only came the morning after when limbo became her partner, and no pretense could find lodging in her wasted soul. Lena usually went to church then, to confession. The local priest must be worn out listening to her same old story, which was repeated ad nauseam. Lena was Catholic for that reason alone. Confession offered an avenue for fresh starts.

"Lord, I have sinned," she would begin each confession.

"Haven't you all." came the unspoken reply of the unseen Father.

LaRue handed Lena back her phone and headed out the door in the direction of the shed. He opened the door to the small pole barn that housed the John Deere and a variety of tools, equipment, and fertilizers. Scuffling through one of the wall cabinets, LaRue found a pair of yellow latex gloves kept handy for skinning dead animals and cleaning fish. Donning them, he walked outside, turned and headed directly for the greenhouse where his flowers were always blooming. Carefully entering his orchid heaven, LaRue plucked a beautiful purple flower. Dien Bien Phu was coming.

Chapter 65

The Freedom Action Coalition had been polling, binding up wounds, and raising the money they knew would be needed sooner rather than later to protect their vast territory of political spoils. The NRA sent money as well. Two like-minded souls can do real damage. It was unpleasant to imagine discarding Senator Malencia for any reason. He was too big to fail.

Ray sat back in his big leather chair and made a few calls. Since he had not heard back from her, he wondered if Constance had the right phone number for Lenora Hemmings. Constance assured him she had spoken to Lena and that Lena had consented. If Constance said so, it was true and would eventually happen.

The senator and Constance had reached an agreement early in their relationship. When it became apparent that Constance was not going to be a notch on his gunstock or the flavor of the month, Ray decided that the smoking hot brunette would be an exception to his rule.

Instead of adding her to his list of conquests outside marital parameters, he added her to his staff. In return for the senator's support, and his recommendation when the time came, Constance had agreed to function as an enabler. Whatever Ray wanted, she would procure or deliver.

In this case, it was Lena she recruited, describing to her the delicate balance that must be maintained because of Senator Malencia's position and public persona. She gave Lenora the senator's private cell number and \$10,000. This number, she explained, was used only for very personal and political matters and was unregistered. It didn't exist.

After touching base with several of his flock, Malencia dialed up SIU Chancellor Pham. When she saw the caller ID flash on her cell, she took off her shoes and sat on the windowsill facing Old Main Commons. Grimacing, she rubbed her aching foot and summoned her best behavior. Pham had watched the

debate unfold with disbelief. The trap had been set and sprung with little effort on the part of the hunter, her very own Professor Cyrus Kohler.

"Senator," she said, as cheerily as she could muster, "how nice to hear from you. Are you coming to the board meeting?"

"Just checking in, Chancellor," Malencia replied, "to see if you have any unresolved bucket items on your wish list, something I may need to consider."

Pham nearly collapsed. She had read Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams but did not expect to experience it in real life.

She realized, all too soon, that the senator's folly would require significant repairs, and that he, along with a few million others, knew he'd lost the debate. She almost laughed. This call was so sick it bordered on comical. Weakness called for action. The mamba sprang.

"Yes, Senator, my building fund budget is coming before the full board. It deserves all our support."

"What kind of numbers are involved?" asked Malencia.

"Twenty-three million for new construction at Life Sciences and 17 million for upgrades and repairs to infrastructure, which includes, among other things, a new artificial turf system for the stadium," she added, not being able to think of any more specifics.

"Duly noted," said the senator agreeably. Click. He was gone.

Just like that, she had accomplished the improbable. Malencia would never have considered sending 40 million dollars downstate in a nonelection year if all was well, which it wasn't.

"Chelsea," the chancellor called out, "come in please; we've got work to do."

Chelsea Mulroney came rushing in. Pham never ceased to be amazed that the girl could walk, much less run, being so constrained. Chelsea, who had some endowment of her own, was a promotion oriented girl whose enhancements required a certain knowledge of physics. Sitting down, somehow, Chelsea opened her pad and looked very attentive.

"We need to get a memo out on our building program," said Pham, staring without constraint at Chelsea's protuberance. Did her mother know, she wondered silently.

"To whom, Ma'am?" Chelsea asked earnestly.

"Our board members, dear," replied the chancellor, aware that her distraction had resulted in a crucial omission. She smiled as Chelsea scribbled furiously.

"Call the university accounting office and see if they have all the numbers and let me see them before I sign off on the memo," said Pham.

"Now go to work and get back to me as soon as you have a draft."

Chelsea rose, controlling her forward motion, and left the room.

The chancellor knew all too well that very often, we over analyze. What seemed tragic for her esteemed board member had resulted in a funding coup. She certainly didn't see it coming and hadn't included the possibility in her financial model. The unachievable had become a reality. Maybe Cyrus Kohler's activities would create more upside than she imagined. The professor did seem to be standing up admirably to his recent challenge. Still, she'd wait for that 40 million before seriously considering changing sides.

Chapter 66

LaRue Arnold was on the record with Lena as saying, "I would rather sodomize myself than spend one more infinitesimal moment discussing your proposed suitor." He hadn't told her about his travels to the undiscovered country of cellular technology. The proposed tryst with Ray Malencia was not going to happen. He was sure of it.

Lena, floundering in her moment of crack-induced haze, had a momentary return to reality as she considered the potential for trouble, all over a phone call. A little reassurance would probably be appropriate, so she pushed LaRue onto his back and knelt before the throne. LaRue smiled. He had to admit, Lena knew how to set a man's mind right. Still, there was work to be done, serious business to attend to, so after debiting his account, LaRue went to his car, found his cellphone, and started to text. Realizing the potential danger, he went back inside, got Lena's phone and began anew.

"Ezekiel, will call in 20, need a plan."

He did just that from one of the few pay phones still in existence at the run-down grocery store and gas station on the north side of the Kentucky River near the old Jim Beam Distillery. It had been there, from the look of it, for the last 100 years. The old phone, no booth included, was one of the remaining dinosaurs still roaming the analog highway.

"Do you know how you want to do this?" Ezekiel asked Arnold after listening to the congressman's hate-filled spiel.

"I do," replied LaRue, who then elaborated on his flowers and their potential for premature, undetectable termination of life.

"Yeah, I get that," said Ezekiel, pursing his lips and nodding to himself.

"That would ... you've got some of that?"

For all the killing he'd done, Ezekiel had never seen Wolfsbane, just heard about it.

"Yes, I do," LaRue said.

"Now how would you propose we deliver it?"

"We do this," said Ezekiel, "by getting him a date with Lena."

"No," said LaRue, "we do this by giving him something, a peace offering that he can't refuse. The stupid son of a bitch needs all the goodwill he can gather at this point."

"That would be Lena," said Ezekiel.

"No, that would be the costly wine I give him. Let bygones be bygones, all that shit," said LaRue, liking the plan more and more.

"I want to be there to see the look on his worthless face when he realizes his arrogant ass is headed for the other side of living."

"Yeah," agreed Ezekiel, "toast the truce with a fine bottle of wine, Sebastiani Cabernet Sauvignon, make that his new favorite," said Ezekiel.

"You're not thinking of adding this to the whole bottle, are you? The bottle could have some residue.

And he's going to wonder why you're not drinking it. You need to add it on the spot."

"Add it while I'm there," said LaRue, mulling over the idea, "to one glass only. Then we toast to our mutual success while the untainted bottle stays for evidence. Every camera will record that I poured it, then sat across from him, sipping my wine when he croaks, how fitting."

Ezekiel smiled; he loved hands-on endings.

"Your main job, Ezekiel," LaRue concluded, "is to do the recon.

Tell me if I can find a spot with no camera coverage."

The delivery of the aconitum had to be flawless. LaRue's back needed to be between the cameras and the ring which LaRue would have on his right hand. Finding those cameras and getting him in position was Ezekiel's job. As Ezekiel thought about the ring, he realized there could be questions, but LaRue had worn a pinky forever. They just had to reproduce an identical hollowed out original.

Ezekiel, bring a resourceful criminal, tracked down the company that did the security installation at Malencia's mansion. The firm's name was prominently displayed on several signs posted around the five-acre estate. Given plans similar to Malencia's home, they suggested locations that would cover the entire interior. As it turned out, the cameras didn't cover everything.

Malencia spent much of his time in the den, where an old Victorian desk sat in the northeast corner. Three cameras covered the interior. Ezekiel did the math. A man standing at that desk with his back to the room could not be seen from the front — no possible way.LaRue was a big man, and his body size would be a definite asset.

Chapter 67

Duster McCaulkin sighed wearily and slid further down in his old leather straight-back chair, his feet slipping across the ancient matching ottoman. This chair was a place to ponder, and he and Tommy, who was sitting ramrod straight at the kitchen table about 10 feet away, had been talking for hours about recent events, the debate, and the subsequent revelation of foul play in Cyrus's office. They now possessed several pictures of the intruder, taken from different angles as the subject had gone about his business. They had never seen the man, but if he were in the system, Charlie Mills would know how to find him.

Duster and Tommy dialed up Charlie who rang Codis. Two hours later, Codis spoke back. The man in that picture was one Ezekiel Octavious, and he had quite a dossier. Born and raised in Chicago, Ezekiel had attended Holy Rosary Catholic High School and had gone straight into the Army upon graduation. There he excelled, went to jump school, NCO Academy, and eventually Special Forces, where he acquired tactics which would serve him well on his return to civilian life.

Where that existence left the tracks was hard to say, given the appearance of steady employment. It was apparent that something had snapped. From 1978 to the present, Octavious had been arrested for battery, theft, and attempted murder. All of these charges had been dropped before indictments could be procured. After each occasion, he returned to his foreman's job at Rocchio Transportation. Investigators had noted in his file one troubling problem. They had never been able to interview him working. His residence was currently listed as 43 Wacker Drive, a high-rise condominium complex along downtown Chicago's lakefront. It was hard for the boys to imagine a trucking foreman being solvent enough to afford that location.

Everyone went their separate ways, Charlie back to work at campus police, Duster to the marina, and Tommy to the Garden to see Colleen and bring her groceries. Having spent the previous night at the marina listening to Duster's war stories, with a few shots of Cuervo thrown in sporadically whenever the storytelling faltered, Tommy was powerfully hungry. Swapping lies with Duster took a lot out a man, but it was Duster's lack of cooking skills that sealed the deal. The motivation for nourishment took Tommy directly past the Lakeside Café that sat beside Route 13 and Lake Road. The old restaurant was a mandatory coffee and donut stopping point for all locals and truck drivers headed out on early morning business. Tommy loved donuts as much as they loved him and pulled in whenever he got close. His visit this particular morning would be more disturbing than fulfilling.

Chapter 68

Tony Rocchio and Ezekiel Octavious were both back in Southern Illinois conducting separate missions. Ezekiel, the bug doctor, was becoming more familiar with Cyrus's schedule and life at SIU. Tony, who had heard several stories about the beauty of Lost Lake, decided to see it for himself. In doing so, he got lost.

"Drunks made these goddamned roads," he fumed. With a map of Southern Illinois lying across the front seat of his rental car and an iPhone in his palm he gradually put it together. Calling Ezekiel, he ranted, "Fucking Lewis and Clark couldn't find their way around here."

"Slow down, partner," said Ezekiel, "take a deep breath of that pure air."

"Okay, all right, I see where I am now." Rocchio seemed to stabilize as he found his location on the map. They were both returning to Chicago tomorrow, or maybe even tonight. He just had to get a look at the Lake and The Garden of the Gods, if he could find it.

It was still early when he stopped, parked, and walked into the Lakeside Café to try their coffee and maybe have a little breakfast. There were tables scattered seemingly at random from the front door to the back wall. Seating was always at a premium. Plopping his considerable bulk down at one of the few vacancies, Rocchio ordered coffee, sausage gravy, and biscuits. He casually looked over the room. It was slammed full of fishermen just coming or going, a few plant workers from Lost Lake Power Corp, and several stragglers with no apparent affiliation. At that moment, what appeared to be some sort of Indian like fellow sat down across from him and ordered coffee and donuts. They were strangers to each other but that was about to change.

Rocchio's phone rang. It was Ezekiel. "Hey, buddy," he said, knowing full well they were nothing like that, "got to leave town, pronto, just got a solid, see you soon." Click, he was gone, just like that. Fucker thought Rocchio; now he'd have to find his way out of this goddamned hillbilly heaven.

Tommy Black Lance Wanderone, always an observer, was aware of the stranger seated next to him. Although it was not uncommon for city folks to stop at Lakeside during all hours of the day, this fellow had a whole different profile. In addition to being extremely Italian, complete with black, combed back hair, leather jacket, and pointed leather shoes, this guy was packing. That, in and of itself, was somewhat of a non-event given the number of firearms present at any one time, but those were mostly shotguns and rifles. This guy had a leg holster and that suggested handgun. It was meant to be challenging to detect, but then, Tommy was Tommy.

Rocchio was never an avid spokesman for the American Indian and was not particularly impressed by the tribesman with his little ponytail. Tommy didn't speak. He just looked at the stranger who seemed so out of place and uncomfortable in this crowd.

"How are you?" Tommy finally said, breaking the silence.

"Lost," replied Rocchio in his big city accent, which kind of clipped the T's. Maybe he was Jamaican, or not, Tommy thought.

"Lost in a good spot," said Tommy, with no sign of emotion or welcoming in his voice.

"Right," said Rocchio, sliding his chair away from Tommy toward the front counter. It was a gesture meant to end the conversation, and it worked. Both men remained silent until their orders came. Rocchio ate faster than Tommy, finished, put some money on the counter, got up, nodded, and walked out the door.

Tommy saw him climb into a silver Chrysler 200 and drive off. Tommy finished his donuts and followed.

Rocchio had a couple of action items on his docket. The first of those was a trip back to Carbondale to get his belongings at the Holiday Inn Express on Route 13. He'd been staying there, three doors down from Ezekiel, who had been a little slow in departing and was surprised to see the Chrysler pull up not far from his room. There was no reason to notice the old pickup pulling around the corner, near the roadway.

Ezekiel's cardinal rule, never stay together, never be seen together, was broken when Rocchio, seeing his cohort leaving, honked and pulled up beside him. Ezekiel, annoyed, said, "See you back home," through his rolled down window, and left. It was just a brief encounter but one long enough for Tommy Black Lance Wanderone to snap off four pictures with his iPhone 6 at full zoom.

After Ezekiel drove off, Rocchio collected his belongings, checked out, and drove to the university.

Parking his car on Main Street, Rocchio walked briskly toward what at one time was Old Main. There he stopped, took out his phone, and clicked twice before walking back to his car and driving away. Rocchio was a happy man at that moment. The only other person who knew diddly shit about the Old Main fire was dying.

That would leave only him with the memories of that great burning.

As soon as Rocchio left, Tommy scrolled through his pictures, made the connection and called Charlie.

"The man in Cyrus' office," he said, "has an armed companion. Neither of them are local. I'll be over."

When Charlie saw the pictures, he called Duster.

"So it looks like the stranger with the weapon knew the bugger," said Duster to Charlie Mills.

Charlie shook his head. "Yeah, looks that way, and the packer took pictures of the bare lot where Old Main had been."

"Not a coincidence," said Duster.

"Maybe not," said Charlie. "Let's put a name to this face. We'll put our new boy in Codis and check with the State Police in Missouri, Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky to see if he's got any priors. If he's in the system, someone will match him."

Charlie printed out Tommy's pictures and scanned them into the document reader on their new 250K printer, which was a computer of sorts. Back, with no real pause or fanfare, came Anthony Rocchio, Jr., transportation executive and suspected arsonist. Questioned on four separate occasions for transporting stolen property, battery, arson, and attempted murder, he had never been formally charged or arrested. All the charges had eventually been dismissed, or plea bargained. Rocchio had never served one day in lockup.

The boys could see glaring similarities between the two suspects. Without question, they knew each other, were both from Chicago and had danced their way out of some severe situations which spelled powerful connections. They were here for a reason, and all traffic signs pointed to Cyrus.

The meeting broke up then, each of them having an agenda that wouldn't do itself. Tommy headed for the Garden after a pit stop at Kroger for groceries. Charlie pondered the circumstances and decided to err on the side of caution, taking Duster with him to look for Tony Rocchio.

Chapter 69

Tante Colleen was ancient and well known in Southern Illinois for the long life she had led as a reputed voodoo sorceress. Living, as she did, high up in the Garden of The Gods did not hurt her legend. The old woman had, as far as most locals could tell, lived there for the majority of her life. No one doubted she could cast spells and predict your future. It was rumored that influential people had made the trek up the rocky trail that led to her home, perched on Craggy Bluff. There was a consensus Tante Colleen was legitimate.

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An untrained eye, observing The Garden of the Gods from a distance, would likely say that the giant boulders, strewn about in seemingly random fashion, were the duckpins of the gods who, when finished, had forgotten to reset the rack.

The Garden of the Gods was approximately 320 million years old and had several landmarks, roads, and creeks surrounding it that helped travelers arrive at their destinations. Located on the northern edge of the Shawnee National Forest, east of Herod and north of Rose Creek, the Garden's breathtaking beauty bespoke its view of the history gone before, highlighted by a stunning sheer rock face that rose from the valley floor into the heavens. Nature's evolution had gone on unabated here, and the Garden had witnessed it all.

(Photo)

Photo Courtesy of the Forest History Society, Durham, NC

The Garden of the Gods is located in the Shawnee National Forest of Southern Illinois.

On the back side of the rock face, accessible only by one-lane dirt and gravel road, passable in the summer, impossible in the winter, was an approximately 1000 square foot, four room cabin, meticulously put together and finished by Colleen's father, a Cherokee craftsman, in 1962. Tante, who was called Colleen by almost everyone who did or didn't know her, had old roots growing in the Garden. Her great grandmother, Dani, had walked the Trail of Tears, which wasn't far from the Garden, running along Highway 146 from Cave in Rock on the Ohio River to Vienna. Her folks had settled near the little town of Herod, which lay slightly to the southwest.

Tante Colleen was made of legend. Her persona and relationship with Cyrus Kohler and Tommy

Black Lance Wanderone had reached mythic proportions seeing as she was known to take in wanderers. The

Goddess of the Garden, as people sometimes called her, could have made a small fortune reading palms, but that was not her center.

Cyrus had stumbled on Colleen during one of his forays during the late 70s. His squirrel hunting trips, coming after an all-niter with or without Tripper, could last three or four days. He just went into the bush and stayed gone for a while. As he worked his way east from Stonefort, where he usually parked his car, through the 286,400-acre Shawnee National Forest, Cyrus, Army compass in hand, felt a deep peace come over him as he distanced himself from humanity. At some point he would head for Herod, crossing on foot over Route 34.

Colleen's father had built the cabin to last. With the help of the family mule, he dragged cleaned pine logs up from the forest a half mile below. The log cabin was efficient by even today's standards. It stood adjacent to a spring that had flowed from the rocky outcrop for centuries. Over time the small family grew, and a limestone floor and outbuilding provided more shelter. Slowly, her father cleared two acres, and by the time Colleen came along, that patch grew breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The family kept chickens for their eggs and mostly hunted for their meat. They became one with Myoconda, the great bald eagle, and his descendants, who answered to the same name. The big bird's nest was high up in a giant sugar maple on the Garden's western rim and was visible from the cabin on most days. The family revered the giant birds, whose flights often took them directly overhead, their mighty screeches filling the air from high up in the sky, bringing the family peace and comfort. Tante Colleen was one with nature, and nature was with her.

Cyrus had a place in his heart for Colleen.

"I covet your peace, Colleen," he often said during the drug spiral that nearly brought him down.

"Can I find that land where your spirit dwells?"

"You are standing on it," she said, touching him, her eyes looking forward into time.

"A great moment will come for you, Cyrus. It will be a time of reckoning. I cannot see you there at that time. You and I may have gone on, but your people, your new people, are standing in front of you. I can't tell if it is them or others like them, but," she paused, looking far away to a place only she could see, "the world has them." She said no more.

"A better world," said Cyrus, "imagine that."

Chapter 70

Still determined, despite his recent setbacks, to see Lost Lake and the Garden of the Gods more closely, Tony Rocchio followed his map religiously and took Illinois Route 145 North to Route 34 East to Karbers Ridge Road. At some point, he began to marvel at the stillness and beauty of this ancient place. There was nothing like this in Cicero. No wonder, he thought, why so many of his locals had gravitated to Southern Illinois University. A glimpse of this, he reasoned, would take them away forever. Rocchio pulled over to the side of the road to get his bearings. He could see signs for the Rim Rock recreational area, Pounds Hollow Creek, and some cabins for rent. The Garden was only 15 miles away, no time to turn back now. What had initially started as an expedition to gather information on Kohler had the full potential of getting him lost, again. The roads out here didn't make any sense, and his GPS wasn't working right. Well, he wasn't on Mars, so damn the terrain, he'd find his way back. Crossing Pinhook Creek near 250 east, he felt that he was getting close to the Garden when he saw an old lady standing by herself near a shelter with an attached sign that read "Good Hope Cemetery." A small parking space covered with stones and dirt sat next to thirty or so weather-beaten markers. Rocchio parked the Chrysler and got out.

The old woman was still there. She hadn't moved but was looking in his direction. He walked toward her until only a few feet separated them. They both stared at each other silently.

Rocchio finally said, "Old lady ..."

Before he could finish, she interrupted, "My name is not old lady. My name is Tante Colleen. You can call me that. Call me Tante Colleen."

Her eyes were fixed, unwavering.

"I'll call you what I goddamned well please," Rocchio said flatly, observing the woman's unrelenting gaze. Then it hit him; he'd heard that name somewhere. Somewhere on his Southern Illinois journey, someone he couldn't place had told him about this wild Indian bitch who lived out by the Garden. It must be her.

"What you doin' here in this ole' run-down graveyard, old woman?" asked Rocchio. The woman did not reply.

"I asked you a question," Rocchio said, raising his voice slightly.

"You have fire all around you. I see fire all over your body," said Tante Colleen, not moving anything except her lips.

Rocchio was unnerved. Could she see his addiction? Would she be able to see his deeds? He licked his lips in a nervous gesture, not lost on the old lady. Could this be happening?

In that instant, Tony Rocchio decided to put his fire on permanent exhibit. Reaching down, Rocchio pulled up the trousers on his left leg and took out the small, compact, 9mm Sig Sauer. Walking up to the old woman he struck her viciously across the left side of her face, spinning her around and knocking her to the ground.

"You see what happens, whore bitch, when you piss me off," he hissed, kicking her in the side of the head with his pointed leather boot.

"Get up, goddamn it, get up or they'll be more of what you just got."

Rocchio bent over the still form of the old woman, who wasn't moving, and pulled her to her feet.

"Come on, you're not dead, yet. Call your God, do a spell, voodoo me up."

He was laughing now, adrenaline flowing, already anticipating what he had just figured out would be a fitting send-off for this old soul. He would offer her up to the Garden's Gods if there were any. Rocchio didn't believe any of that shit.

The old lady was bleeding from the savage blow that had broken her nose, which now lay at a grotesque angle on her face. Looking over the rolling landscape, Rocchio could see the rugged bluffs and small cabin perched just behind the outcropping. It was only about one-quarter of a mile up the dirt road leading to the cemetery.

"This must be the Garden of the Gods. I found it in spite of myself. Hope her relatives reserved a spot here for her." Half pushing, half carrying her, he moved them both up the road in the direction of the small structure.

Tommy picked up the groceries and drove his F-150 directly to Herod, where he had lived for several years. Parking the old truck in his driveway, he headed up the half-mile road that was accessible only to off-road vehicles. Tommy had been Colleen's outside supplier for several years. He knew this road and decided that even though the Ford could probably make it, getting stuck was a mother. Walking was much simpler and eliminated all uncertainty. It also allowed him to soak up the beauty around him. Tommy was near Colleen's house when he saw her and a man. They were less than 100 yards away. Colleen was slumped, being barely kept upright by the man he had seen talking to Octavious. Tommy put down the groceries. Quickly and silently, he lay down in the roadbed. The man had a gun in his right hand. Tommy squinted and could see the man getting closer, dragging Colleen. She had blood all over her face. Tommy started to crawl for the back of the cabin. What kind of hell had brought this murderous bastard here? His soul would be lost in these hills forever, screaming for eternity in the forever night, but no one would be listening. Tommy would see to that.

Lying on that rocky dirt behind Tante Colleen's cabin, Tommy heard a high-pitched, screeching sound coming from overhead. Mournful and penetrating, it tore through the fabric of heaven as it descended. Tommy knew the Eagles were coming, and unlike Rocchio, he knew that Colleen might have summoned the giant birds. Regardless, they had arrived.

Tommy pushed through the back door, still horizontal, and crawled to the front of the cabin. The screen door was shut to keep critters outside, but the front door was open. Rocchio was pulling Colleen, who had either been struck again or collapsed. He dumped her into the firepit which was about 20 feet from the front door where Tommy lay. Rummaging around, Rocchio found plenty of kindling and firewood stacked nearby.

Pulling Colleen's head into an upright position and bracing it with logs, he built a pyre over her motionless body. The weight of the wood on her now, in her current barely conscious condition, eliminated any hope of escape.

"Got any last words, sweetheart?" Rocchio laughed while reaching into his pocket and pulling out a Zippo lighter.

"This would be an excellent time," he went on like an animal sensing a kill, "for you to call upon all your magical powers to save your ancient ass." He laughed at his joke.

He was still laughing and fingering his lighter when out of Tante Colleen's mouth came one barely audible word. Tommy couldn't hear it from his vantage point behind the screen door 20 feet away, but he could not mistake the movement of her lips as she called "Myoconda."

An eternity passed silently in the space of nanoseconds. In that time and place, on a rocky outreach in the Garden of the Gods, a giant bird, descending from only God knows how high, diving with tremendous velocity, drove its razorlike talons and massive beak directly into the back of Tony Rocchio's neck and head, exploding the man to the ground, forcing him into the rocky escarpment. Twisting its buried beak free from the broken skull, the giant bird launched itself back into the sky.

The gravely injured Tony Rocchio, in a state of shock and disbelief, staggered to his feet, blood spurting from a severed artery and an open head wound. Reaching for his handgun, he pulled it out and swung around, searching for his ascending target. Not being able to do so did not stop him from reacquiring the Zippo. With blood flooding down his body faster than it could ever be replaced, he snapped back the lighter's top. At that moment, Tommy Black Lance Wanderone, son of Broken Feather and survivor of Ripcord, standing now in Colleen's front doorway, launched with all his power and the skill taught by fathers to their sons through centuries of Cherokee time, an 11-inch wolf bone handled knife made from a band saw blade. The weapon had been given to him as a gift in 1968 by Bud Worrell, a noted knife maker. Now, Giga-danegiski, the "blood taker," flew through the air, burying itself in Rocchio's chest. He died standing up, his lifeless body sinking slowly to the ground.

Chapter 71

Cyrus was leaning back in his big chair when his Pink Floyd ringtone started announcing a call. He picked up his cell. It was Tommy.

"Goddamn son of a bitch, what is this fucking world coming to?" Cyrus heard his mild-mannered friend's anguish and knew something serious had already happened.

"Whoa, buddy, hold on there," Cyrus said, as he jumped up and ran for his coat and car keys.

"Someone, that guy I met, tried to kill Colleen," Tommy exclaimed in a broken voice. "She's in terrible shape," his voice barely audible now.

"She's bad Cyrus, her head's all bloody, her nose is broken, and she's unconscious."

"Call Charlie Mills; he'll get a chopper from the VA in Marion. Take her to Marion Memorial. Get her there now, Tommy," said Cyrus.

"Do it now, buddy, we're on the way."

With that Cyrus disconnected, yelled at Jax and together they ran for the old Beemer.

It took Cyrus 14 minutes, driving through a dense fog that dangerously reduced visibility, to get to the hospital. The only time he had ever driven that fast was in broad daylight. As they drove, Cyrus could not help but wonder what gods conspired to bring about this tragic, brutal attack on such a peaceful soul. Colleen was living with nature, close to her departed, not hurting anyone. The Age of Violence had reared its ugly head close to Cyrus's epicenter, and he felt a deep hurt for a woman who had led him back from the madness caused by war and drugs. Cyrus seldom prayed, but when he did, it was from the heart. Just before they reached the hospital, Tommy called.

"We're airborne," he said.

Cyrus and Jax tore into the emergency parking area of Marion Memorial's back lot. The helipad hung, like a spider's web, over the hospital's rear corner, eight floors up. These pads were very technical, highly engineered aluminum reinforced landing structures. All the lines had to be highly visible; crashes in bad weather were not an option. Cyrus and Jax squinted upward as the chopper touched down. Tommy exited, along with two EMTs who had Tante Colleen fully secured and in a neck brace. She had IVs plugged into both arms as they moved the gurney swiftly over the aluminum floor of the pad to an open service elevator with an ER doctor standing there. Cyrus and Jax ran for the emergency room, which was on the ground floor. Cyrus's phone rang. He grabbed it.

"Cyrus," Duster said, "just heard from Tommy. I'm on the way." He disconnected. Cyrus didn't need to give any information to Duster. He knew what to do and where to go.

As they entered the emergency room, Tommy came toward them.

"She's conscious, Cyrus. Her eyes are still rolled up, though."

"Probably a concussion," said Cyrus, who had seen more than his fair share.

"She's hurt bad for a woman of her years. We could lose her here," Tommy said, his voice trailing off.

Cyrus nodded as Jax slipped her hand into Tommy's.

"I know, Tommy," he said, putting his arms around his Cherokee friend, remembering many lost before their time. Jax joined in, and they just stood there staring at nothing in particular, each trying to bear the weight of uncertainty.

Three hours passed without speaking. There was little need for words in this place. Duster had arrived and soon after was joined by Charlie Mills. The team waited.

About two hours later, a young doctor walked out of the emergency room and motioned to Cyrus, who immediately put down his fourth cup of coffee and walked over to him.

"I'm Dr. Bennett," he said, extending his hand. "It doesn't look good, Professor Kohler," he said, rubbing his right hand over an already balding head.

"She took quite a blow for a woman of her years, maybe in her 90s?" He said it more as a question than a statement, like everyone else, not knowing.

"It concussed her but also caused bleeding on the top and side of her brain. Her cerebral cortex is drowning. She may even have suffered a stroke. Her nose was shoved into her frontal lobe. A blow like that can kill a person outright."

Cyrus nodded. He'd seen Special Forces soldiers use the technique with remarkable efficiency.

"I think it would be advisable for those of you who wish to see her to do so now," the doctor said, motioning for everyone to follow him.

"She's conscious and getting oxygen," said Dr. Bennett. "The surgery lasted about an hour and a half, and we're giving her a blood thinner to prevent any clots. We don't want to move her for any reason right now so ..."His voice trailed off as they entered the room.

"Say your goodbyes," said Tommy to them all as they walked in and saw Colleen lying in the hospital bed. Her face was horribly swollen, but her eyes blinked on seeing Cyrus and Tommy. Both men felt drawn to her presence.

They leaned in as Colleen, in a very faint voice, said, "Tommy, the cabin, yours," and blinked again.

"Thank you," she said, adding, "Tell Myoconda." Tommy touched her arm to signify understanding.

"Cyrus ... her voice began to fail. Ashes, bluff." She closed her eyes then and never opened them again.

Jax and Cyrus took care of the arrangements that Tante Colleen had requested. Along with Tommy, Charlie and Duster, they went to the Williamson Crematory in Carbondale and left a few hours later with an urn containing the irreplaceable Tante Colleen.

"Cyrus," said Tommy, in a reverent, almost inaudible voice, "I'll carry her home." Cyrus nodded and handed the ashes to Tommy, saying, "I want to be there, Tommy."

"Tomorrow, at sunset, the cabin," Tommy said.

"Now I will dance and call Myoconda. He will want to know this ancient spirit has flown."

"He probably already knows, my friend," said Cyrus softly, "Already knows."

A tear crept down Tommy's face as they slowly stumbled to their vehicles. Tommy started the old Ford, and was gone.

Chapter 72

The next day it rained all morning, as though a cleansing was needed to rid the Garden of all that evil. Tommy, who had been 'ghost dancing' all night, in and out of the rain, had built a fire in the pit to consume the unclean wood put there by the killer. As the fire burned, Tommy thought of Gakori-yi-a, a place of setting free in the Cherokee language, a place where Colleen's ashes would be scattered.

In the throwing, some would fall on the craggy bluff from which she had gazed for so many years, and that was okay with Tommy.

As Tommy danced, all was quiet, except for the steady sound of his feet. Then, a distant noise that became a screeching wail broke the silence. An otherworldly lament he had never heard before intensified until it overwhelmed the sky. Tommy kept moving and chanting as the screeching continued unabated. Looking up, he saw two giant birds circling lower and lower, their shrill dirge enrapturing Tommy as he slowly circled the fire pit. Theirs was a mournful song that ended as the magnificent birds folded their enormous wings and landed, their piercing eyes transfixed on Tommy and the flames.

Tommy stopped to behold their splendor.

"Myoconda," he said, "a spirit has flown but remains in this place, as will I, to protect its memory until I am not."

Tommy went to the cabin door and picked up Colleen's urn, which he had left sitting on the wooden steps. He approached the giant birds but, as if on cue, the smaller of the pair elevated straight up and was gone. Tommy moved closer to the still, giant eagle. Reaching into the urn, Tommy pinched some of the ashes, put them in his palm and extended his hand toward Myoconda. The razor-sharp beak that could have torn Tommy's hand off in an instant touched him so softly he scarcely felt it. Then, Colleen's ashes were gone.

"Tonight at sunset, I will look for you at the scattering."

With that, the big bird slowly lifted off, circling the fire, then the cabin, in gradually widening arcs.

Like a vapor, it vanished. An eerie silence remained.

Two tail feathers marked the spot where Myoconda had landed. When his friends arrived shortly before sunset, Tommy gave one to Cyrus, speculating that the feathers, when stroked, would summon the eagles.

Walking to the edge of the bluff, the cabin silhouetted behind him, Tommy held up the urn and said, "Great Awahili, sacred bird of the Cherokee, take from me our beloved sister, take her home."

At that moment, the giant bird seemed to fall out of the sky. Gliding down to Tommy, Myoconda stretched out his tufted legs punctuated by his immense talons to display the urn Tommy had given him. With a ferocious screech the eagle lifted off with Tante Colleen, Cherokee Voodoo Priestess, clutched to its breast. Banking over the bluff, gliding on fixed wings, Myoconda flew south into the setting sun, scattering Colleen's ashes all along the rock parapet. Thus it was that Tante Colleen, eternally at peace, took her place with Nature.

Several days after the scattering, Cyrus had gotten in the old Beemer and driven to Herod, parked and walked up the one-lane gravel road to Colleen's place on Craggy Bluff where Tommy now lived.

"Call Myoconda, Tommy," he had asked earnestly, putting his big hand on Tommy's shoulder.

"Just think it, Cyrus," Tommy replied, "and I won't have to."

Cyrus, with his eyes wide open, envisioned the big bird spreading the ashes so majestically. Before he could muster another thought a faraway screech descended upon them. Soon after Cyrus witnessed the largest Bald Eagle he had ever laid eyes on dropping from an enormous altitude toward Colleen's homestead, setting down beside the fire pit from where he had so recently departed,. Folding his wings and with eyes like hot coals, the big bird stared at Cyrus and Tommy. Cyrus left the front of the cottage where he had been standing and walked toward the motionless eagle.

"Thanks, old friend," he said, stopping a few feet away and reaching out his hand to gently caress the bird's head.

"I had to come and see you close up. It's just what I had to do," he said, dropping his head, staring at the ground. Something, some noise, moved in the eagle's throat as it unfurled its massive wings, took two steps in Cyrus' direction, slowly lifted off....and was gone. "He is in the spirit world," said Tommy following the bird's ascent as long as his vision would allow.

"She is there with him, I think, or somewhere close by! He is the Great Awahili, the sacred bird of the Cherokee!"

Cyrus looked up to an empty sky as rain began to fall from unknown heights. They would meet again if need be. He was sure of it.

Chapter 73

Ezekiel Octavious stopped at his favorite coffee shop just off Michigan Avenue and Clark Street. He was out for his morning run and always looked forward to drinking the best coffee in Chicago. Picking up the

Sun-Times, he sat down for a moment. Page two of the inside cover featured a story about the killing of a local businessman. Police were not providing many details, but it was clear to Ezekiel that an old woman who lived up in the Southern Illinois hills and his sometime traveling companion were both victims in what appeared to be a double homicide. The man's skull was fractured, and he had huge puncture wounds on the back of his head and neck. Police had no suspects at the time but were interviewing the only witness, a local Cherokee man. Who got behind him, to kill him like that, Ezekiel wondered. What hit Rocchio? He might have killed the old lady, that much looked likely, but there were no witnesses except for the local. From his perspective, the story was shaky.

The Indian had an alibi witness, one Cyrus Kohler. How had that stupid fire-loving fuck gotten himself killed? No matter, Congressman George McCreary, among others, would be looking for a replacement player. Tony Rocchio had always been a loose cannon, and now he'd fired his last shot. Ezekiel jogged back to his condo, got his surveillance information together, went down to UPS, and sent it to Peoria. After finishing that task, he decided to do a little marketing.

Chapter 74

LaRue Arnold walked out of the Capitol Rotunda, where he had been speaking to some of his most dedicated lobbyists, and got into the limo. Instructing his driver to head for the airport, he slid back into the luxurious leather seat and dozed off. One hour later, he touched down in Champaign, deplaned, and walked to his rental. Congress had recessed, stalemated over yet another ideological conflict of interest. Everyone was headed for home, except LaRue. He was about to sample a vintage bottle.

Senator Ray Malencia was a proud man, arrogant to a fault. In his 20 plus years of sucking the public tit, he had amassed a fortune without having to spend a dime — what a return on no investment. The fed was his ally and working partner. It was an unbeatable combination. Ray was a commodity broker trading in the

power and influence market., a real upside business. . Ray was a man who got what he wanted, and, having just gotten back from Washington, he wanted Lenora Hemmings.

There was a note in the foyer from his wife, Martha, letting him know she had gone to Chicago on a day trip that might be somewhat longer. Before he could digest the opportunities that trip might afford, there was a knock on the door. It was Marita, his longtime housemaid, cook, and general all around help.

"Senator," she said, "you have a guest, Congressman LaRue Arnold."

"Show him in," Malencia said, absolutely surprised.

"LaRue, this is unexpected," said Malencia, extending his hand while professionally hiding his disgust. Why Lena would ever want to take up with this grifter was mystifying, but he knew the answer.

"What brings you to my little town?" he asked, glancing at the box under LaRue's arm. "Come, let's go to the den, it's more comfortable there." With a wave of his arm, he led the way.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" asked Marita as the men moved off.

"Bring us some snacks," said Malencia, "fruit, cheese, crackers ought to do," he said. "The congressman must be hungry after his trip."

"Yes sir," she said, and headed for the kitchen.

LaRue walked over to an old desk at the far end of the room and set the box down. "LaRue," said Malencia, after they were settled in their chairs, "you've never been to my little abode, this must be something essential." It was more a statement of fact than a question. The drawing room, expansive with large bookshelves lining solid oak walls, antique furniture, and high vaulted ceilings, had observed many conversations, most of them recorded.

"Yeah, it is that," said LaRue.

"It is more than that. Just getting right to the point, Ray, for the past two decades you and I have been building our business, the business of governing with other people's money. We each have a powerful PAC, our own lobbyists, fine houses, cars, free health care, millions of dollars, a pension second to none."

Malencia laughed. "Go on," he said, knowing all this information was being recorded as they spoke. The man knew the value derived from having an edge. Ray had realized early in his career that politics was a brutal business environment where the next recession, betrayal, and its bedmate abandonment, were just around the corner.

"It's time we buried the proverbial hatchet," said LaRue, loosening his tie to give the appearance of a man getting comfortable when, in reality, his pulse was spiking. Homicide was a little over his pay grade if there was such a thing, and he was having a moment. He felt his face to see if he was sweating. It was a little moist. Thank God he was overweight.

"You and I," he went on, "have fussed and feuded publically and privately for too long." Malencia shot him a look so icy it could have stopped global warming.

LaRue got up and went over to the Victorian desk and reached into the box he had brought with him and lifted out a bottle of Sebastiani Cabernet Sauvignon bottled by the distinctive Napa Valley winery in 1975.

"Peace. Time for a glass of reconciliation," he said as he looked longingly at the bottle before handing it to the senator.

"You're right, LaRue," the senator said, standing up, "It's time to end the war."

Both men were doing impressive impersonations. Their true feelings for each other started with loathing and contempt and went downhill from there.

"It's ironic," thought Malencia, "I'm about to fuck Arnold's favorite whore, and he's making nice."

"That motherfucker will never get his hands on Lena," thought Arnold. "This is Ray's Last Supper."

Malencia pushed a button on the wall and spoke to it, instructing Marita to bring two glasses and a corkscrew. He had barely finished speaking when said supplies and the snack tray arrived. LaRue took the bottle, glasses, and corkscrew to the old desk at the opposite end of the room. The layout was precisely as Ezekiel described.

"Care if I use this desk as my launch pad?" LaRue said over his shoulder.

"Make yourself right at home, Congressman," replied Ray cheerfully, wondering how the man thought an expensive bottle of wine could cure twenty years of acrimonious interaction.

At the same time, Malencia's synapses were screaming their rejection, LaRue uncorked the bottle, poured two glasses three-quarters full, and, using his thumb, carefully popped the top of his gold pinkie ring open to reveal a few grams of purple dust, which he dumped into the glass on the right. He closed the ring top, making sure not to get Hannah's flowers on himself. For years LaRue had worn a small gold ring with an "A" engraved on top. It had been a simple matter to build a similar piece with a hollow interior. This one would be in Lake Michigan, or melted, he hadn't decided which, as soon as practically possible.

LaRue turned back to the senator and walked to where Malencia sat. Smiling, he handed him the glass.

"Peace," he said, and held out his glass for a toast, clinked once, and looked intently at his host. Both men drank from their glasses then set them down on the small, mahogany end tables beside their chairs, flashed their winning campaign dental work and nodded. It was a spectacular vintage to be sure.

As the first wave of Wolfsbane splashed through Ray's central nervous system, he suddenly felt tired. His left arm ached as his heart, attacked by one of the world's most virulent poisons, began to shut down.

Breathing was becoming difficult.

LaRue paused to watch the effect for a few moments. As the senator slumped over, breathing heavily, clutching his chest, LaRue bolted from his chair, threw open the door to the den, and ran down the hallway yelling at the top of his lungs for Marita. By the time they reentered the drawing room, the senator had no pulse. He had been dead for more than a minute. Yep, thought LaRue, that's some potent shit.

Marita called 911, and within minutes all hell broke loose. Ambulance and fire truck sirens filled the air as all sorts of law enforcement, and medical personnel poured onto the property and filled up the room.

Every effort was made to revive the senator, to no avail. Twenty minutes after Congressman LaRue Arnold knocked on the front door, the IBI and Illinois State Police officially recorded Senator Ray Malencia's time of death. The possible cause was listed as a massive heart attack. The senator had also suffered a cerebral hemorrhage, which could have been a contributor or a result. The room at some point was carefully gone over, the wine glasses and remaining bottle tested for foreign substances, but there were none to be found.

As he drove away from the scene, LaRue Arnold once more wore a satisfied smile, only this time it was real. He turned on a local Chicago radio station, WLS. The press was already reporting the death of a prominent US senator. They had not released more information pending an autopsy, which made LaRue giggle just a little as he envisioned Malencia being cut stem to stern. The cause of death was thought to be a heart attack. About that time, his cell phone rang. The local authorities and IBI wanted his statement now! He turned his car around and went back.

Three days later LaRue had made his way to the cabin, Lena in tow. She had never seen LaRue happier and had no problem recounting that fact.

"Dear, I will never share you with anyone," he had told her after an intense session. That was complete bullshit since Lena had a client list longer than Route 66. She was also a woman who looked out for herself.

Chapter 75

After being notified by Duster of the bug in Cyrus's office, Charlie Mills called the FBI in Springfield.

Wayne Throgmartin, one of the field agents stationed there answered and said, "Your Professor Kohler has become a national figure, which makes bugging his office technically our business."

Charlie put the phone on speaker. "What do you mean 'technically'?" he asked in an agitated tone.

"I just mean maybe there hasn't been more than a little snooping going on," said Throgmartin, "what if it's a local feud, you know, one of his fellow professors got annoyed by his rhetoric?"

"So you think one of the professors hired a criminal like Ezekiel Octavious to bug Cyrus's office?

Seriously? Judging from his abode, Ezekiel makes a lot of money, and he doesn't do that by spying for college professors. Man, we practically did the work for you, can you take it from here?

"Look, we've got a lot of serious cases to deal with, this is minor in comparison," Throgmartin said.

"What if it isn't minor?" Charlie threw back. "What if someone is out to discredit Kohler, or his organization, or maybe they're thinking of silencing him? You plan to put off looking into this case until he gets shot?"

"Well," said Throgmartin, "the rules of engagement are open to interpretation."

"What in the hell does that mean?" said Charlie.

"It means we need to find out more about this guy in the photo, this Octavious guy," Throgmartin said.

"Yeah, he's a career criminal, unless I miss my guess, who has been charged multiple times but never convicted," said Charlie, "doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"Do you suppose someone rich and powerful, like maybe an embedded politician, might want to pay to shut Cyrus up? Maybe Ezekiel's working across state lines; maybe he's mobbed up."

"Maybe," said Throgmartin, "maybe it's within our jurisdiction."

"We'll look into it," he said, "and get back to you."

Click. That was it.

"That's what they do," said Charlie to an exasperated-looking Duster.

"They take their damn sweet time doing it too," replied Duster.

"Yeah, well, got any better ideas?"

"I do," said Duster, "let's bring our boy in for questioning. You have jurisdiction since the alleged crime took place on campus."

"I suppose I do," said Charlie, looking thoughtful and chewing a bit on his bottom lip. "What if we can't find him?" he asked Duster.

"We can find him, Charlie," said Duster, "leave that to Tommy and me. We'll find the SOB alright."

"Let's bring the Carbondale police in on this," said Charlie.

"They have a couple of detectives with lots of miles under their belts. Let's see what they think."

Duster agreed, but before any of that could be arranged, the phone rang. It was Wayne Throgmartin calling from the FBI. The Bureau wasn't dragging their feet on this one, which spoke volumes to the space currently occupied by their friend Cyrus Kohler.

"It seems," said Throgmartin, talking to Charlie, "that there is some level of interest in this guy Octavious way over my pay grade. Let's have a meeting, and I'll bring you up to speed."

"Suits us," said Charlie, "when and where?"

"Your office at campus police, give us three hours and pick us up at Williamson County airport.

We're coming in the Mooney," replied Throgmartin.

"I didn't know you had a plane up there," said Charlie.

"Yeah we do, and I'm its pilot," said Throgmartin. "See ya."

The boys had lunch. After Charlie updated Cyrus on their progress, they headed for the airport where, precisely at 2:15 p.m., ahead of schedule, a four-passenger Mooney Acclaim Type S requested and was granted permission to land. Two men exited the craft and walked toward the control tower. Throgmartin was a tall, rugged-looking man in his mid-thirties. He had just been promoted to field agent and was catching his first real assignment since joining the agency 14 months ago, straight out of the army and three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. In that time and place, Lieutenant Wayne Throgmartin had learned to survive and command. His plan here was tested there: whenever possible, let the locals lead. Maybe they would pass the smell test. After a complete briefing, he decided they did.

"Charlie," said Throgmartin, "what's our next step? How do you see us moving forward?"

"Not so fast, boss," said Charlie, slowly wagging his finger back and forth. "Why don't you tell us what possibly could make the FBI move this rapido," said Charlie, straightening up in his chair.

"You're about two weeks ahead of schedule," he said.

"Well, there's that," said Throgmartin, understanding a reputation well- earned cannot be easily or quickly dismissed.

"This guy, this Ezekiel Octavious, is no small-time bugger and no little fish. We have had him as a principal suspect in four missing person investigations over the past ten years, all politically connected. We believe, as Charlie suggested, that this goes up the ladder, possibly to Washington, but definitely to the Cook County kingpins. He's a real pro," said Throgmartin. "All these people gone missing can be presumed dead. The Washington connection is to a Peoria Congressman named LaRue Arnold. There has never been enough to tie the two together and make it stick. They are slick operators, and the trail always goes cold or has gone cold, before we could hit them," Throgmartin continued.

"So here comes your man, Cyrus Kohler, being looked at directly by this man, which is most certainly not good. Our level of interest in Octavious is high, and his showing up here looks like a work in progress, so we're in."

"OK," said Duster, who up to this point had been listening intently to the agent, "let's connect the dots. Just after Cyrus's first lecture, a very sophisticated bug was planted in his office by a person or persons unknown, but more than likely by this Octavious guy, since he's the one who came back to replace it when it was 'accidentally' broken. He's a pro. How do I know that? I know because I have those skills myself and understand what is needed to operate in broad daylight. The bug went in during the day, not long, we think, after Cyrus got the ball rolling with The Front. That's just smart," Duster continued. "Do it before the professor ratchets up his public profile. We used a DBD to ferret

out the bug, which had wash hidden in a painting of Custer. Then we decided to have a furniture moving party, and oops, who in the hell would have guessed we'd drop Custer. Once we put our little plan in motion, here came the repairman, and he wasn't a bottom feeder but a high-priced talent that got a little sloppy."

Charlie listened intently to Duster's analysis and said, "Anyway, the other guy who came with him on at least one of his visits, maybe from the start, is dead. Tommy got a pretty good picture of them talking in the parking lot over by the hotel where they were both registered. No one knows why he was up there at Colleen's, how exactly he died. We do know Tommy might have finished the job. No one can explain that broken skull and those deep puncture wounds. Tommy didn't do that," he said.

"All that aside, let's assume," said Duster, who knew damn well how the son of a bitch died, "the two men are connected bad boys on a field trip for someone protecting his assets, someone with a hell of a lot to lose."

Chapter 76

Ezekiel was mad at himself. He had broken one of his sacred commandments, "Thou shalt act alone." There was no going back now that Rocchio had stumbled onto Gomorrah and been turned to stone.

"Never say never," said Ezekiel, referring to the best-laid-plans thesis. Perfection on the order of the Holy Grail was unattainable. There was no excuse for casual, which had buried many a soldier.

To avoid being traced, burner phones were used religiously, except for this time, when the mission had been a stroll through the pastoral countryside to do a little surveillance, a little bit of nothing he could quickly have done by himself. Crossing his boundaries with that wild man Rocchio made him depressed. They

had acted like schoolboys, and it was highly possible their connection had been made. Those thoughts were running through Ezekiel's mind when his doorbell rang. "Building security," said the officer of the day, presenting himself at the door. Security was tight here at Ezekiel's condo on Wacker Drive, which was one of his primary criteria for ownership. It took a warrant to climb those stairs.

Charlie Mills and Wayne Throgmartin had such a document. With Duster waiting downstairs, they stepped back and held up their badges as Ezekiel opened his door. It was hard to miss that FBI shield. Ezekiel had never been served or arrested by the Bureau, thank God, and was justifiably concerned. Both men were armed, he could see that, and the big guy looked very capable, probably a combat veteran. The other guy was older and less of an issue, should it come to that horrible conclusion. Ezekiel's years of experience said 'caution,' and he acted accordingly. If his thinking had been otherwise he would have attempted to kill them on the spot.

The taller of the two officers, the FBI man, said, "Are you Ezekiel Octavious?"

"Yes, I am."

"We have a warrant for your arrest, Mr. Octavious, on a federal wiretap charge. We also," he continued, "have a warrant to search the premises. Will you come peacefully, or will it be something else?" the big man said.

The big boy would be the one to take out first, thought Ezekiel, noticing the two men, having declared their intent, had separated and were visibly ready to pull. Ezekiel could see no upside in a shootout. Hell, they were here on a wiretapping charge, not murder. Of course, they could be lying. Ezekiel had always understood, being on the wrong side of the law most of his life, that the authorities were not obliged to be forthcoming. Ezekiel also knew from experience that everyone fibbed a little.

Ezekiel reached down to hitch up his pants. "Whoa there, big boy," said the tall man, pulling a .40 caliber Walther and pointing it in Ezekiel's direction. In a heartbeat, Ezekiel realized that this man had a close relationship with his primary weapon of choice. He noticed how he gripped it, fingers on or near the trigger, the gun itself a beauty. His stance and unflinching gaze all said professional soldier.

Ezekiel continued, "I'm just pulling up my trouser leg and putting down my piece."

"Slowly," said the older man on Ezekiel's left, pointing a .45cal. Beretta at his lower body parts.

"Grip the handle, finger on the outside," Charlie said smoothly, eyes focused on Ezekiel's hand.

"Absolutely," replied Ezekiel, doing precisely as requested. "Hands behind your back, assume the position," the younger man said. Again, Ezekiel hugged the wall and did as ordered.

Once the suspect was in custody and adequately secured, Wayne and Charlie escorted Ezekiel inside his condo, sat him in an upright kitchen chair, handcuffed him to the chair, and went about their work. They were looking primarily for Ezekiel's cell phone. It wasn't hard to find, resting where Ezekiel put it every evening, right beside the bed on its charger.

Chapter 77

Sitting on their front porch, looking out over Lost Lake's quiet expanse, Cyrus and Jax rocked silently back and forth in their old wooden swing. Built by Cherokee craftsmen in the late 1800s, the swing had been a gift from Tante Colleen. A sparrow hawk dove headlong into shad minnows flashing on the surface.

Cyrus was sad and had been for several days.

"Colleen was a Cherokee, not many of those folks left in these parts," Cyrus said. "Her mother was related to Dani somehow. I don't know the whole story, but I do know some of the ancestors walked the Trail of Tears." Cyrus fell silent then, his eyes moist, his heart heavy with loss.

"You wouldn't even be here, Cy, if it weren't for her," Jax said, swinging her legs around so she could look directly at Cyrus.

"Those were hard years, buddy. You were running with the pack, running on empty."

"Yeah. I have no idea to this day what made you stick it out," said Cyrus, looking her way now.

"All those drugs and the trouble that came with them." He shook his head in disbelief. "What was a boy like me, with my folks, my education, doing with that shit?" he asked for the thousandth time.

"You got dealt a hand you didn't like, Cy, and that's what happened."

"Pretty well sums it up," said Cyrus, "a bad situation made worse by my denial."

"Just know," said Jax, "that I loved you more than I wanted to leave you, to lose you. I never forgot that Ranger saying you told me when you got back from Vietnam, 'Get out like you got in.' During that time, when I was struggling to justify staying, I remembered that."

"It is so easy to bail when your feelings get hurt. It can make you lose that lovin' feeling. It's right then you have to hold on hard to what got you there in the first place."

In Cyrus's mind, those years had all gone way wrong, past the realm of too far. All those nights binging with Tripper had created an explosive strain on his fabric of life. Without Colleen and Jax, he wouldn't have made it. They'd have found him dead out there somewhere. They had pulled him through, and as the years passed their value to him became infinite. Those two women gave him something to live for, and that

won out over Tripper John and the purple haze that surrounded him. When he detached from Tripper, he saved his own life. Without Tripper, though, there would not have been The Front.

Jax's phone rang. She took it out of her pocket and said, "Hello, Duster. What? Holy fuck! You've got to be kidding me." No matter how long Cyrus lived with this delicate woman, he would never believe the language she could produce. The conversation went on, causing Cyrus to perk up, but he said nothing.

"Yeah, I'll tell him right away. Yeah, he's sitting here beside me right now." She disconnected.

People were used to Cyrus not having his phone, so when he didn't pick up, they called Jax, who was never far from hers.

"You will not believe this Cy," she said, wide eyed, her head shaking in disbelief, "Ray Malencia died of a heart attack."

"A heart attack," Cyrus exclaimed, "holy shit! When did it happen?"

"It came in over Duster's State Police scanner about two hours ago."

"Whew," Cyrus exhaled, "you just never know, do you?"

Jax said nothing but was thinking how people around them were unexpectedly leaving. She didn't count Rocchio among the losses. The worthless piece of garbage had killed their friend. Thank God for Myoconda and the Blood Taker. He had gotten more justice than she would have given him.

Jax had a Ph.D. in death and its companions, suffering, fear, and loneliness. The end was unavoidable, she knew that, having followed Cyrus for so long. It didn't sit well with her, though, and she wasn't on speaking terms with those bastards. Cyrus had always had a calculated recklessness about him, which worried Jax, being the devoted rule follower that she was. The landscape around them was changing,

and hard to miss, even with your eyes closed. From the day Cyrus introduced The Front, bad things and worse people bobbed to the surface. She got up from the swing and walked toward the screen door. The air had cleared. The path before them was visible, although there was no end in sight.

Back at the university, Chancellor Lan Trang Pham had barely walked in the office door when Chelsea Mulroney burst forward from her desk, exclaiming, "Have you heard, have you heard?" The chancellor hadn't heard. She'd gone to bed early, gotten up at the crack of dawn, then made coffee and toast before leaving for the office. She hadn't turned on CNN, the radio, anything. She was out of the loop; sometimes, she preferred it that way. Nevertheless, the news of Malencia's death blew over her like a tsunami.

"Goddamn heart attack," she shouted. Chelsea jumped back, nearly ripping a seam. There goes my funding, she thought. Is that not fucking incredibly lousy timing? Goddamn it. She was going to have to find a replacement player with clout. Maybe she could talk to LaRue Arnold since he and George McCreary were now the alpha predators. Not for a moment did Dr. Lan Pham have one compassionate feeling for the deceased. Theirs was a business relationship, pure and simple. She had never wanted any personal relationship with the senator and understood his lack of visual stimulus when perusing her tits and ass. Fortunately, there had been no bedding the monger to get what she wanted, which was a good thing, because it would not have been an obstacle. Then she would have despised herself, for a while.

Pham was a quick healer, understanding it was "best to just move forward." She plunged headlong into her daily reports.

Chapter 78

The King of Smug Indifference, Tripper John Calhoun, had lived an exciting life if killing, drugs, and cigarettes rocked your world. The man was intelligent in a closed sort of way, and if you paid attention, there was evidence to suggest he expected his adoring fans to agree.

Over the years, Tripper would show up, stay a few hours or days until the drugs ran out, and go his merry way. Out of the blue, into the blue, usually semi-comatose, was an apt and accurate description for Tripper John. Cyrus had some information on the old Tripper that he had acquired at Ft. Benning before his ETS date, but it was now a dead end. That Tripper was gone. The new one who had visited Cyrus had a whole new identity complete with a birth certificate and social, courtesy of the United States government.

Tripper could get a little sloppy from time to time, and that must have been the reason he drove his ancient Healy to see Cyrus, which resulted in Duster running the plate. Before long, he was located in Casselberry, Florida, near Orlando, married, no children.

Tripper John had his wife Catherine were conducting a visitation on the pounding couch when the doorbell rang. He was acquitting himself admirably and was loathe to abandon his post or dispatch a runner. The erectile dysfunction brought about by the several boatloads of coke and weed consumed over the years had something to do with that. To his credit, he had conducted experiments, using Catherine as his human guinea pig, and been able to come up with a proper dose of Viagra that would give him a boner without stopping his heart. Now, Tripper John reluctantly disengaged and dispatched Catherine, who hurriedly threw on shorts and halter top, as she scurried to the front door. Moving slowly, Tripper fumbled his way through the haze until he was reasonably sure his pants were on and zipped. Throwing on a tee, he managed to get downstairs without injury.

Tripper was no one to surprise. Duster had taken that into account and was committed to making the first contact occur in broad daylight. Somewhere after noon would be preferable. By then Tripper was sure to have gotten a couple of bowls under his belt. Sure enough, other than rousting him out of the rack, the timing was right and things went smoother than expected.

"So how in the fuck did you find me," asked Tripper, after Duster had introduced himself as an associate of Cyrus Kohler. "You must be some sorta spook," he added in a less than complimentary voice, "to execute this little search and destroy mission."

"Not really," said Duster, "somewhere along the line you got that car you drove to Cyrus's, and I just ran the plate. Lengthy, with several name changes but a trail none the less. The final version included a name and address.

"Here I am, just like that." Tripper made a mental note to get everything changed, including his address. If this guy could find him that easily someone else might also.

"Everyone can be found, John, you're no different," Duster said.

"I know Cyrus doesn't give a rat's ass where I am," Tripper replied, "so what brings you here on your stealth mission?"

"I'm here to see if you can give us any information about Leonard Ray."

"Amazing, just amazing," he repeated. "Didn't really know the man," Tripper replied curtly, hitching up his pants. "Our only connection was Clifteen, I mean Clifty. We both did Clifty until we couldn't," he said, smiling slightly.

Duster was developing a severe dislike for Tripper John but understood too well the necessity of keeping that emotion hidden. This conversation could quickly go down Alice's rabbit hole.

"We're not here to discuss your love life," he said.

"Clifty is our next stop," Duster lied, "and we just need to ask you both to tell us as much as you can remember about Leonard Ray."

"What did he do?" asked Tripper, beginning to fill up his bowl with fresh herb.

"Bad things," said Duster, not about to share any unnecessary information with Calhoun. "How well did you know him?"

"I didn't," said Tripper flatly, "only met him twice, coming and going."

"That's it?" asked Duster. "He never said jack shit to you about anything?"

"Nope, dead end, amigo," Tripper replied, taking a deep drag.

"All the cards have been dealt," he said, exhaling.

"Not a completely dead end, Tripper," said Duster.

"Why all the secrecy, all these years, the new name, new address, everything new except you, you're still the Tripper."

"Call me John," Tripper interjected, taking another deep hit from his bowl. "Call me, John," he repeated, sounding a little ominous.

Duster knew to be careful when warning lights flashed red. The man had violence in him, no doubt about it.

"So, John, why all the mystery?"

"You know why, don't bullshit me," Tripper said.

"Cyrus Kohler sent you here to find me so he can do whatever he goddamned well pleases to get even with me," he said. "I hurt his feelings, poor little Cyrus."

Tripper walked over to a gun rack mounted on the east wall of the living room, pulled down an AK-47 Russian made assault rifle, complete with inserted clip, and said, "Relax, if I wanted you dead that would have already happened. And, yes, it's loaded, and it has a story to tell, but that story has

conditions. One of those is, lose my social," said Tripper. "I'll be out of here this week, so don't try to find me again. Can we agree on this?" he asked.

"We can do that," Duster assured him. "We don't care so much about the rifle or Clifteen.

Let's hear it."

"I'd only been back for two years when I met Clifty and fell in lust. She was such a good girl, such a malleable spirit, anal to a fault," said Tripper. "Everything had its place, including me. My position was on top of her as much as possible. She couldn't get enough. We fought a lot but were a steady item for almost three years. Clifty wasn't really a drugger, but she'd smoke or snort a little once in a while. I kept my past separate from our present. I'd killed way too many people in the war, mostly soldiers, VC, you know what I'm saying, too many, and figured the day would come when your fuck buddy would spill the beans on me about the executions. It's usually best to keep things like that as quiet as possible. It turns out, none of that mattered."

"Time passed after the war," Tripper continued, "there was Clifty and a couple of others, I married Catherine, and here we are."

Lucky her, thought Duster, a dream date come true.

"One day I got a call from an old Secret Service buddy. You knew I was in the Secret Service after the war, right?" Duster nodded, so Tripper continued. "My old buddy told me about Kohler's first lecture on this process thing. He asked me if I'd seen it, and I said no but that I would. When I found out it was me he was talking about the alarm bells went off. If the wrong people were listening, they might connect the dots. The last thing I need is to have my fucking name out there."

"This is starting to sound serious, John," said Duster, remembering the previous request.

"Fucking A tweet," said Tripper emphatically.

"You didn't, like, mess with the mob, did you?" asked Duster.

Tripper paused, "Yeah, it was something like that," he said. "Just like that. Without writing a book, let me brief you and let you figure out the rest," he said, starting to pace around the living room.

"I was undercover, had been for more than a year, working with some of the Bulger gang in Boston and DC. Having been dirty in Vietnam I fit right in with the gang crowd, a disgruntled veteran out to set things right for himself, I guess. We were selling weapons and drugs to the Devils Disciples motorcycle gang; The Sons of Anarchy predecessors. Their gig was dope, guns, and women, and they did business with the Detroit Mafia on all three fronts. One day I did an awful thing, I stole the mob's dope, 30 kilos of Pink Peruvian Flake to be exact.

"The deal was going down; everything had gone just fine until the brotherhood modified the financial terms at the point of delivery, which caused the biker boys to begin pulling and shooting. My two associates and two mob boys were dead in three minutes, leaving just one of them and me, then just me. A kilo was worth 25K on the street; you can do the math. I kept the money, nearly 800K, and took the dope to the Company. The mob boys were pissed; they'd lost their cash. The bikers now knew I was a fed, so my time there was done. Everyone came looking for me, so I went into witness protection, assumed the first of my many new names, left DC, and disappeared. When I realized Cyrus Kohler was talking about me, for all the world to hear, it was a moment. Old wounds heal slowly. Tell him to leave me the fuck out of his speeches or deal with it."

They sat silent for a minute or two before Duster spoke, "I believe you," he said, having lived some of that life himself. "Thanks, John," said Duster, standing up and moving toward the door. "I can see myself out." It was time to go, time to leave this man to his bowl.

Chapter 79

Ezekiel's plan to be as deceitful as possible underwent revision when Wayne Throgmartin produced a picture of him in Cyrus's office followed by several clear shots with the no longer living Tony Rocchio.

"This," said Agent Throgmartin, with a friendly smile, "puts you at or near the scene of Tante Colleen's murder. After charging you with murder, we plan to hold you in the Williamson County Jail without bail." Wayne then rattled off the Miranda warning for the umpteenth time in his career.

Ezekiel understood, all too well, that he was thinking on his butt, being seated and restrained as he was.

"Tell me," he said, addressing the big man, "do you think there might be a solution to my dilemma? After all, we both know I wasn't within miles of that idiot, didn't put him up to it, and wouldn't have approved or permitted anything like that to happen had I known. Am I the big fish in the barrel?" he asked. "Is there a barrel?"

"We need to stay on point," said Charlie, the slightest hint of a smile forming on his face. It was more of a grimace than a smile, but it conveyed to Wayne the notion that Charlie saw Octavious headed somewhere and was trolling for the destination.

"Go on," said Throgmartin.

"Well, off the record, I figure the most I can get for planting the bug, assuming I did that, is probation. Not having a conviction will help, and I have a top-notch law firm that will render my 'no bail' provision moot. Please take note of the fact I have not yet lawyered up and have shown no interest in doing so. You, for argument's sake, have found me, but the higher charge does not apply, and you won't be able to make it stick."

"I can't help it if a man I knew lost his life committing a crime," continued Ezekiel, "a crime I knew nothing about."

"Stop right there," said Charlie, walking over to Ezekiel and crouching to bring himself to eye level, "you are not a choir boy, so cut the bullshit. An unfortunate roll of the dice has snapped you up, Mr. Octavious. If we keep looking, will we find a pattern of your life and crimes?" Charlie was inches from Octavious' face, breathing his oxygen.

"I want my attorney," said Ezekiel Octavious. "I want him right now. Give me my phone call."

Ezekiel's problems were mounting. He could have a severe situation brewing and understood that the moment he placed his call to King, Chesney, and Ralph, the local authorities and FBI would raise more than their eyebrows at his relationship with such a highly visible law firm. Someone could put together his connection to the bug, a thug, and the lawyers. Washington's King, Chesney, and Ralph served well-connected clients and had an enormous billing rate, which was problematic. On the other hand, if he intended to save himself, this would be a logical move. It would be difficult for feds and the locals to burrow beneath the skin of such a firm, and it would establish his credibility as he slowly substituted his present for his past.

When Stanley King was informed by his secretary that a call was waiting, he routinely transferred it to an associate. That procedure presented a problem in this instance. KCR had reach, but it didn't entirely extend to Marion, Illinois, wherever in the hell that was. After a two-hour delay, during which time phones hummed feverishly, an agreement was struck for the local representation of one Ezekiel Octavious. The criminal law firm of Slaynes and Stephens, in the person of one Thomas Slaynes, contacted Ezekiel, who had not been moved to a holding cell but kept in interrogation, chained to the metal desk and floor at the insistence of Charlie Mills.

"How can he order that up?" said a Carbondale sheriff's deputy. "He isn't even on the force." Regardless, Ezekiel stayed put.

"Before the big bus in the sky runs over me, I'm cutting my losses," said Ezekiel to Tom Slaynes, newly arrived on the scene in the third hour of Ezekiel's confinement. After being physically connected to his attorney via handshake, Ezekiel had been transferred to solitary, a single cell that ten minutes earlier had been a drunk tank.

"Exactly what do you mean by getting run over?" the counselor asked, thinking for the first time he might not have asked for a large enough retainer.

"What I mean," said Ezekiel, "is before this train goes off the tracks, I need a deal that removes me from Rocchio and all that mess. I wasn't there, didn't know about it, didn't sanction it," he said, looking at the attorney with a dead man's stare.

"I may need witness protection, that sort of thing," he said, "FBI, whatever."

Thomas Slaynes' eyes stared blankly. Holy shit, he thought, who is this man? The guy could be anything, maybe even a real hitman. He'd never represented one of those before.

Over the next hour and a half, Ezekiel alternately lied and informed his attorney about his relationship with Congressman LaRue Arnold. He omitted details that would be too much for a born again southern Illinois attorney, events such as limb removal and rectal probing might be reasons for withdrawal from his case. Better to stay with the familiar themes of kidnapping, extortion, and arson. Better to focus on his most recent recon assignment, now highlighted by a deceased Senator Ray Malencia.

When a plea was agreed upon, Charlie was pissed., but he got it. Tony Rocchio, Ezekiel's occasional partner, had ended Tante Colleen's life. Ezekiel's story added up, and his profile supported his assertion that

he had no idea, not the slightest inkling, that his compatriot was going to randomly target an unknown to feed his addiction, before getting dead himself.

"What I do know," said Ezekiel, "is who hired us to come down to Carbondale and who hired me to check out the home of a now dead US senator."

Everyone agreed the bug charge had to go. Knowing those facts aided Ezekiel as he bargained for a deal whose terms stipulated he would avoid prosecution in the death of Tante Colleen as well as on charges of bugging Cyrus Kohler's office.

To the FBI, Illinois State Police, Carbondale Police, and SIU Campus Police, the case looked like a mini-Watergate with lesser players. Although Kohler's office wasn't the Democratic National Committee and Ezekiel wasn't Gordon Liddy, who was this guy?

Ezekiel hoped that was for him to know and others to hopefully never find out. He was a man who had killed eleven people in the United States alone over 30-plus years. He had also inflicted damage on others and had been employed repeatedly in those capacities by politically motivated individuals, including a certain US congressman.

"The dead guy, Tony Rocchio," said Ezekiel, "was on assignment. His usual employer, for all types of requests, was Congressman George McCreary, but I have no idea about his motives, or if he was the man behind the bug. What I do know is LaRue asked for me, and that was that."

The story was compelling, and it all checked out. After Duster returned from his Florida trip, he was fully briefed, leading him to join Charlie and Wayne on the believer's list. However you spun it, though, Ezekiel's generous sharing smelled of motive. There was more here, just outside the line of fire. Duster noted that Ezekiel referred to Rocchio's nickname, The Torch, on more than one occasion. He and Charlie made a note to inform Cyrus of their observation.

"There were rumors," said Ezekiel, "that Rocchio had previous southern Illinois jobs, but what they were I couldn't say. I'd heard rumors he'd burned something big here in the 60s when he was just getting started."

Duster texted Cyrus as Charlie continued to listen intently.

"He'd haul anything for a price," said Ezekiel, omitting that the cargo manifest included bodies, some of them Ezekiel's victims. At that point, Tom Slaynes produced a mobile phone that he stated belonged to Octavious.

"How many does he have?" asked Throgmartin, who had confiscated another one during the initial arrest at Ezekiel's condo.

"Just two," answered Slaynes, "that we know of." No one knew for sure that Ezekiel used burner phones regularly, but they were beginning to suspect there was that possibility. Wayne put the second phone into an evidence bag, labeled it, and handed it over to Garret Sims, the prosecuting attorney for Williamson County, who handled cases for the Illinois State Police.

"That phone will document my client's calls to and from Congressman LaRue Arnold," Slaynes said.

Ezekiel interjected, "There are also calls on that phone from me to LaRue's girlfriend." He made quotes with his fingers around that designation.

"Her name is Lenora Hemmings. People call her Lena. I've picked her up many times and delivered her places for LaRue."

That may have been a critical piece of information, thought Charlie, who looked at Wayne and saw he'd picked up on it too.

The interrogation went on until Ezekiel said, "The last job I did for the congressman was a small surveillance job on the audiovisual setup at Malencia's mansion. I turned it over to him about a week ago. Congress was still in session, and he didn't say much or call back. You know the rest," he added.

"What was his purpose behind that?" asked Throgmartin, seeing a pattern that was intended to be recognized.

"He was furious over Malencia's debate with Kohler and wanted to know the security system, the layout, where all the cameras were installed. I supplied that information. What's ironic to me is that the congressman was there when Malencia had his heart attack. I'm amazed LaRue even called 911," said Ezekiel, "as much as he hated the man."

"Those two pieces don't fit. Besides, he didn't call," said Throgmartin, "the maid did."

Charlie Mills said it first, on the phone with Cyrus and Duster after Ezekiel was returned to his free accommodations pending the outcome of the FBI's upcoming sortie to Lenora Hemmings.

"Wayne thinks we could have a premeditated murder here, boys," he said. Cyrus and Duster agreed.

"The thing I don't like about all this," said Charlie, "is we're giving Octavious the moon. We're practically letting him walk."

"Don't be too sure, Charlie," said Duster. "I can feel it coming. After this little phase is over, someone, a lawman or reporter, will start to dig into Mr. Octavious and the earth will open up and swallow him whole. That is one bad mother. He is a killer. I ought to know."

Octavious, it seemed, was dangling a bone too heavy with meat for the FBI to resist. Still, Duster,
Charlie, and Garrett Sims, working with Wayne Throgmartin, managed to insert language into the plea
bargaining agreement that did not immunize Octavious against a lifetime of sins. The document agreed to by

all parties covered only the events relating to the bugging of Cyrus's office and complicity in the death of Tante Colleen.

Chapter 80

LaRue Arnold was posturing, his face beaming for all to see even as his bulky, and growing, body filled with disgust. The calling, absent a corpse, had been an event of such proportion that it had nearly sucked the life out of him. LaRue had been forced to utter all kinds of platitudes about his deceased friend. Elected officials of all persuasions had intoned their fabricated litanies. Underneath all the bullshit, there wasn't anything redeeming LaRue could think of to say about the man. That's why he had a speechwriter on call. If hell were real, Malencia would be there or arriving soon.

The senator's widow, Martha, after the requiem had ground to a halt, thanked everyone profusely and expressed her regrets that there would be no following services because her dearly beloved's last will had resulted in his cremation. That had been accomplished the day after his death but not before a lengthy consultation with Oswald Taft of Jackson, Johnson, Taft, and McKinley.

Any evidence had gone permanently missing. There would be no exhumation. Senator Ray Malencia had flown. LaRue cracked open a bottle of Woodford Reserve and took a slug. God Bless America.

Chapter 81

With Ezekiel in custody furnishing addresses, it was a small matter to track down Lenora Hemmings.

Lena, who had been in and out of police custody several times in her illustrious career, answered the knock on

her door. Three agents from the FBI's Chicago office greeted her with search and arrest warrants. "You have the right to remain ... Yeah, yeah," said Lena, reaching for the order. Being arrested for prostitution in Chicago was like having your period, inconvenient but not terminal. As she read the charges, her concern elevated when she saw "possession" highlighted as a reason for granting the search. Lena was a frequent drug user and currently in possession of powder cocaine, crack cocaine, a small amount of heroin, half an ounce of pot, and assorted pills for which she had no prescription. Another drug charge would likely be a long sentence for sure. Some cocksucker had gotten himself in trouble and given her up. That's the way it worked on the street, march up the food chain, and be sure to give up only what you can replace.

As one piece of evidence after another found its way into her living room, Lena began to think creatively. In the outside hallway, the local agent in charge of serving the warrant was on his phone calling Wayne Throgmartin.

"Wayne," said Peter Fanning, "we've got a shitload of drugs here, and one of the guys is running her cell. Unless I miss my guess, we're going to find a client list somewhere. How do you want to move on this?"

"Pete, this will be her third drug charge, not to mention the pros," Throgmartin said.

"That's 5 to 10 no matter how you cut it. Call me when you're done," he added, pushing "End" on his iPhone. Not long after, a .44 caliber "Dirty Harry" number emerged from Lena's phone records.

"Wayne," said Fanning, calling back, "we have taken Ms. Hemmings into custody. She's a little the worse for wear seeing as how her drug supply is in limbo."

"She has a pretty lucrative business for sure and a clientele most hookers would kill to get their hands on, metaphorically speaking. There were enough drugs in her place to stock a small pharmacy. She had 14K in cash stashed in a small wall safe, but the real eye-opener is that call log.

This girl has repeated calls to and from Congressional and Senate offices, some to personal cellphones," Fanning said.

"People oughta be more careful," Wayne replied, excited at the possibilities.

"There is one phone number; actually two," the agent corrected himself, "that are real attention grabbers."

"Enlighten me," said Wayne.

"This young woman was recently contacted by and had returned a call to our deceased Senator Malencia. She was also a regular flavor for a certain Congressman Arnold who, if I'm not mistaken, was the last man to see the senator alive."

"Man," said Throgmartin, "what a coincidence. And since I don't believe in coincidences, you hold tight; I'll be up in two to three hours."

After notifying Garrett Sims, the two of them hopped on I-57, the Mooney having left on prior business, and headed directly for Naperville, where the FBI had a field office. Lena was transported from the Cook County jail, one of the city's more desirable housing additions judging by the number of people living there, and arrived just about the time the men were pulling into the parking lot.

Lena's looks and attitude were suffering from the absence of stimulants. She was living in the State of Pissed Offedness when two men she didn't know walked her into a brightly lit room, home to a solitary metal table, to which she was secured. Four sturdy, bland metal chairs completed the setting.

"Ms. Hemmings," said Peter Fanning, pointing to the two men but not identifying which was which,

"Mr. Throgmartin with the FBI and Mr. Sims, prosecuting attorney, are here to assist me in your questioning. You have been fully Mirandized, have you not?"

"Yeah, yeah," replied Lena, hallucinating under the bright lights. "Where's my attorney?" she said grumpily.

"We're waiting for him just like you are," said Throgmartin. About that time, the metal door opened and Percy Hauck, one of Chicago's most visible sleazebag lawyers, entered the room. Percy, a short, slim, impeccable dresser, was a clever manipulator of the legal system. His reputation for bargaining and springing his clients resulted in a brisk market for his services by hookers, pimps, drug dealers, and gangsters. Percy's salvation was his refusal to represent the mob, which was why he was still alive. There was a steep retainer for all this job security, but you got what you paid for with Percy, who was both connected and efficient. If freedom could be bought, bribed, or otherwise purchased with cash or favors, Percy knew how to accomplish the task.

The problem here, as his Harvard educated mind had quickly deduced, was the feds. They were more difficult to reason with and usually required a completely different set of tactics.

"Could I have a moment with my client?" were the first words out of his mouth.

"What have you got, Lena?" he said when they were alone.

"Who do you have that they want?"

Lena always had information, which was why she had never been behind bars very long.

"I have exactly what they want," said Lena, shaking from withdrawal, knowing full well she had the next link in a murder puzzle that was slowly coming together.

"They got all my names, Percy. One of them just died and one of the others was there."

Percy Hauck did not need further explanation.

In return for a custodial drug rehab treatment program, Lena agreed to spell out, and testify to, her relationships with several elected officials, including Congressmen LaRue Arnold and Senator Ray Malencia.

Wayne Throgmartin was experiencing shock and awe. He had never been privy to this much information about the lives and lifestyles of the elected class.

Lena didn't mince words either. She was a beautiful woman, long, blonde, and angular, with legs up to her throat. For the past seven years, she had sold her body to some of the highest bidders on the planet. Her rates were chump change for the rich and famous, who knew that she was negotiable.

It hadn't taken Lena long to figure out the threshold for those senators and members of Congress that demanded access to a woman of her caliber. Some were more violent than others, but they didn't get seconds. Lena was not into physical abuse.

"If LaRue," she told the authorities assembled, "was not so generous, I'd have cut him off years ago."

When she said, "He's long since forgotten I have a pussy," everyone winced. When she told them of

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their frequent trips to the cabin, someone got a warrant.

Constance Abel's meal ticket was deader than a frozen maggot. She would have to make a stride adjustment or be stalled in place. Her flight that day from Champaign, Illinois, to Washington, DC, had been uneventful and gave her time alone, out of the office, to contemplate her future. The National Republican Party would be appointing a temporary successor to serve out Malencia's term, which would extend two more years

until the general election. Two years would give the beneficiary time to cement their territory. Constance Abel was the frontrunner to fill that spot. She had all the right stuff and had paid her dues. She was about to have the most important day of her life. This meeting with the Republican Senate Majority Leader would go a long way toward determining her future.

Malencia's Washington office was a virtual hive of activity. Everyone with interest in the late Senator's fieldom had surfaced to stake their claim, none too small, and it wasn't even their money.

Constance looked cover girl ready as she entered the Senate Rotunda and walked briskly to her destination. She held out her hand as the older man greeted her. There was some light chit-chat about her flight before the rubber met the road.

"Constance," said the majority leader, an old Sagamore of the Wabash from the great State of Indiana, "As you know these are times when all of us here in this chamber have decisions to make that are unpopular and sometimes downright uncomfortable."

"We have caucused on the issue before us," he continued, "and we decided to promote the Illinois

State Senator from Champaign to the US Senate seat formerly held by Senator Malencia. He is in line, has paid
his dues, and has proven to be a reliable soldier," said the Senator.

"We would like to offer you his seat, once vacated. You are very bright and capable. In three more years no telling where your star will be."

You son of a bitch, Constance thought. The competition's chief qualification, by their reasoning, was that he knew the system. He was in line. Cyrus Kohler was right, she thought at that moment, it's the damned territorial imperative in action. She smiled, stood up, and when the Senator stood up said, "Thank you so much for your generosity. I'll be in touch."

Walking straight to the door, she exited without a backward look. As her steps approached a waiting cab, she paused, pulled her iPhone from her purse and speed dialed Wilson Hahn.

"Wilson," she said, "tell me about Cyrus Kohler." He did just that, and Constance Abel headed in a better direction.

Chapter 83

Malencia's death also energized George McCreary and Dweebert Lampkin. As the third most powerful politician in the State of Illinois, George was thinking more and more about moving up. Maybe he would announce for the Senate. Malencia's Senate seat would probably accrue to the Abel girl, but that would provide him an opening, should he decide to move forward. Time was plentiful. Today, the mess with Rocchio had consumed way too much of it. Potentially, this man had made him vulnerable, but dead was better than captured. He supposed it was possible that a deceased murderer could reach out from the grave, but he considered it a long shot. In any event, he would have to keep close tabs on Kohler and his boys.

He'd come to see Dweebert Lampkin to dangle a carrot that only he could offer. In return for Dweebert's diligence and cooperation, should McCreary decide to vacate his house seat, Dweebert could expect a call. All he had to do to earn this chit was keep an eye on the investigation. Garrett Sims, Wayne Throgmartin and the FBI, and Kohler's gang were digging into the pasts of Rocchio and Octavious as well as the dead senator and Arnold. He did not want to be one of the worms they unearthed.

"DL, good to see you," he lied, walking briskly into Lampkin's less than suitable office. This cubicle of a room had no visual amenities. No wonder Lambert looked depressed most of the time. The man needed a diet that worked for him, thought McCreary, and a makeover. A hair transplant and dental whitening would be

a plus, but that name! McCreary flinched at the thought of hearing the sergeant-at-arms call out, "Congressman Dweebert Lampkin, Illinois." The state had enough problems already.

"DL, what do your people tell you about the investigation?" he asked. "It was an Indian woman, right?"

"It's a homicide investigation, George," said Dweebert. "They are charging Mr. Rocchio with her death, post mortem."

"Not good," said McCreary.

"Not so much," said Lampkin. "Now the FBI's involved, organized crime or something like that.

Garrett Sims brought them in," he said. "The agent's name is Wayne Throgmartin. I think he's out of Springfield. Charlie Mills from the campus police and Duster McCaulkin, friends of Kohler's who knew the Indian woman, are assisting. Then, of course, there's the guy who put the knife in Rocchio. I believe his last name is Wanderone. He's a janitor at SIU. Some of these guys have known each other for a long time, and they're all veterans. They were in the war together."

"Which war?" a fatigued McCreary asked, bored at the thought. It was wearing him out. "I don't have much mojo for veterans," he said, "they always want something." Siphoning off dollars from welfare recipients who wanted that money was not in his best interest, and that category came first.

"In any event," said McCreary firmly, "no good will come of our relationship with Tony Rocchio if it lands on page one. Shred and then burn every memo with his name on it. Anything that went in his direction over the years, it's all gotta go. Anything else surfaces, we write off to hiring continual transportation and over-the-road haulers. He was just one of them," McCreary concluded.

"We'll acknowledge his company, not him personally."

It was personal, though, and McCreary knew it. Time had passed, but there were a few who still remembered Old Main.

"By your command," said Dweebert.

Chapter 84

Cyrus, are you there?" said Judith McSettle. "I can hardly hear you," she said, hunkered down in her office immediately adjacent to the SIU library's rare book room.

"You've got a lot of steel around you, Judy," Cyrus replied. "What's going on?" he said, taking a swig from his Route 66 mug. He liked the smell of vanilla and pineapple juice together. The vodka helped. "Well, I'm afraid it's all about Dr. Leonard Ray," said Judy. "We were just notified that his health is critical. The cancer has metastasized, and they're giving him less than 30 days. It could be tomorrow, or today, it's that serious. Two days ago he was admitted to the Eagle Creek Hospice. Why don't you try to talk to him while someone can?" she said. "The worst he can say is no."

"You're probably right, Judy," said Cyrus, putting on his jacket as he stood up to leave. "On my way, dear, going as we speak," he said, grabbing for his car keys.

It was a 35-minute drive to the hospice located near Carbondale's western flank on old Route 13 headed toward Murphysboro. Heavy traffic made for slow going.

The hospice stood on the eastern edge of the property where Stella's Bar once operated. Cyrus had no idea when the developers tore down the old frame building and put up a parking lot for staff and visitors. The hospice itself could house up to 12 residents, all in the final stages of life.

Leonard Ray was sitting up in bed when Cyrus walked in, accompanied by a staff nurse. His brightly lit room had two flower arrangements of roses and peonies, one in the western-facing window and the other on a portable tray stand. Cyrus noticed the oxygen tank sitting on the floor next to the bed and an IV drip inserted into Ray's left arm. Monitoring equipment was attached to Ray's right index finger and upper arm.

Even though he was sedated, Ray's eyes seemed focused on Cyrus as he made his way over to the bed. The first words out of his mouth were, "So, it takes this state of affairs to get a personal visit."

Cyrus smiled, "Sorry to hear about all this."

"Yeah, well, it happens to us all," said Ray. "I was planning on a later exit," he said, coughing repeatedly. It was clear to see that speaking and breathing simultaneously were more than his cancer-ravaged lungs could handle. Another Marlboro and weed man thought Cyrus grimly.

Ray looked at Cyrus evenly through the purple pain killing haze. The steady morphine drip was his primary barrier, reducing the stabbing in his chest to a mostly tolerable ache.

"Lean in," Ray whispered, motioning feebly in Cyrus's direction. Cyrus pulled his chair close to the gaunt man with little remaining hair and breath fouled by narcotics. Ray, who in his prime had been a dashing figure, was now barely a skeleton. Slightly under 6 feet tall, he might weigh 100 pounds, Cyrus guessed.

"I went to Canada after the fire," said Ray in a nearly inaudible voice, "stayed until '74 when Ford pardoned Nixon and then came home," Ray gasped and sank deeper into his pillow. "Did you burn Old Main before you went to Canada?" asked Cyrus, bending closer to be heard. "No," said Ray, after what seemed like an eternity, "but I was there."

"Who did the job?" asked Cyrus hopefully.

"Don't know his real name, Torch, burned out ROTC," said Ray, drifting off and not coming back.

But Ray had given Cyrus a piece to a puzzle disassembled for all these years. It was up to Cyrus, Duster, and Charlie to put those pieces together again.

"Professor Kohler," a registered nurse said, coming into the room with a purposeful stride, "I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave now. He is frail as you can see."

"All right," said Cyrus.

Looking at Professor Leonard Ray for perhaps the last time, Cyrus said in a clear voice, "Leonard, almost everybody comes clean at the end, if they have that luxury. It was a bad war; we were drafted for the worst of reasons." Cyrus walked out the door.

A few hours later, Cyrus hooked up with Duster, Charlie, and Tommy. They were anxious to hear what Dr. Ray had said. Duster's whole body jerked to attention when he heard the word "Torch." As Cyrus related Ezekiel's information, it became evident that Ray could have been referring to Tony Rocchio. Adding the acronym "ROTC" in the same breath made a powerful connection and motive.

"This was our conversation on more than one occasion," said Charlie, looking at Cyrus. "What Ray is alluding to is that the Torch set the fire. He intended to burn out the ROTC."

"We still don't know who sent him," said Cyrus, adding, "He sure as hell didn't dream it up on his own."

"The radicals were going to have their day in Carbondale," said Charlie, "this was just the warmup."

"It was Chicago in southern Illinois," said Cyrus, scowling at the thought.

"They were here," said Tommy, "and so was Leonard. He was one of them."

"Still, finding an arsonist, maybe even a pro, takes resources and contacts," said Duster. "All this time, and not a peep, no one ever came forward."

"Let's do some more digging," said Charlie. "We made a half-ass effort before, but we need to do better now. Let's go back into the archives and pull every damn picture and report on 1965-67 and see if we can put anyone with Dr. Leonard Ray that is still alive."

"Maybe we'll get lucky," said Duster in agreement.

Two weeks later, one of the grad students Charlie had recruited for the project brought him a picture of eleven students arrested for throwing rocks at police at the corner of University and Campus Drive. They had just looted Jackson's Sporting Goods and demolished the front window getting in and out. There were names in the article identifying those taken into custody. Two of the names stood out. Professor to be, Leonard Ray, stood in the back row looking defiant while George McCreary, a former student who later went to law school at DePaul and one day was elected to the US House of Representatives, knelt in front.

Chapter 85

Cyrus, looking out on Lost Lake as he stood near the front picture window, walked around the big oak dining table and called out for Jax.

"You won't believe what happened today," Cyrus said, sitting down while admiring the minimal effect time had wrought on Jax's most excellent posterior, which was all of her he could see as she did whatever she was doing in the kitchen.

"I talked to Leonard Ray," he said, trying to peek around the corner, "or what's left of him."

"Is he in assisted living?" asked Jax, sticking her head around the refrigerator while puttering contentedly around the stove.

"Hospice," replied Cyrus. "It's about over for Leonard."

Jax walked into the dining room carrying a rhubarb pie, one of her specialties. Cyrus immediately got his hands on a fork to attempt a small sample. "Stay away," she commanded, realizing long ago that you needed to be very firm with Cyrus, who usually got his way.

"You'll get yours at dinner," she said with finality, "now scoot."

"CliffsNotes," said Jax, returning to the kitchen expecting a summary.

"Well, in the same sentence Leonard used 'Torch' and 'ROTC.' He also said Chicago. I believe that was it," Cyrus said.

"Maybe he was trying to say this Torch was from Chicago and had gone after the ROTC, which happened to be in Old Main," said Jax, "too bad he's short."

"Maybe," said Cyrus, "he sure looks good for it. Charlie is tracking down leads on Tony Rocchio, the Torch guy, as we speak."

Jax turned away from her labors to catch every word and said, "That was the dude Tommy stuck with the Blood Taker, right?"

"Right," replied Cyrus.

"No shit," exclaimed Jax.

"Yep, it was him in the flesh," said Cyrus, walking over to the little closet they called the bonus room to fetch the Makers.

"Make it two," said Jax, "only make mine Glenlivet."

Cyrus performed his obligatory task, and they both adjourned to the front porch.

"From listening to you, Cy, I have the feeling that whatever Ray put in his letters will be revealed very soon," said Jax.

"Looks that way," said Cyrus. "Whatever it is," he continued, "I don't expect him to say anything else. What he whispered, I believe, was the truth as he sees it. You know, getting it off his chest without spoiling the suspense.

"Anyway, today, when I stopped at Big Red Liquors on the way home, a customer was at the cashier's window buying a lottery ticket.

"You feeling lucky?" I asked him.

"It's the only way I'll ever have anything," he said.

"He turned around and left, never looked back. I'll probably never see him again, just like Old Main."

Cyrus looked out over the blue expanse of Lost Lake as evening closed in and spoke in Jax's direction,

speaking not to her but some unseen participant.

"Nevermore, there are a lot of those moments in life."

Chapter 86

Congressman George McCreary walked over to his longtime aide, Bill Riley, and said, "There's no getting around the fact that the man sees himself as the champion of the oppressed."

"I don't think so," said Riley, "it's not that simple with him, George."

After all their years together, McCreary had consented to a first name basis with his most trusted advisor, although he was a person who felt some formality was essential between the haves and have nots. McCreary had never needed to look closely at himself, an uncaught, unpunished criminal whose knowledge of the system and its constantly rotating players was exceptional. There were reasons he'd escaped the fires of political hell.

"I'm telling you, Bill," the congressman continued, "this man will say and do anything to scare off our constituents."

"I heard he went on an overseas flight the day after 9/11," said Riley.

"Goddamn it, Bill, that's not what I mean," said McCreary, "although that is sort of who he is, unconventional, it's in his DNA, as he likes to say."

"He's a former Army Ranger, George, try not to let that escape your perimeter," said Riley.

"Who does that shit, for God's sake?" said McCreary.

"Someone who's not us," said Riley.

"He doesn't like me, Bill," said the congressman.

"No, he doesn't," agreed Riley.

Chapter 87

"Insincerity is the enemy of clear language."

- George Orwell

The business of The Front was more than a full-time job for Wilson Hahn. As The Front flourished through their RSOs, overall membership grew. It was somewhat amusing to Hahn that some of this growth was due to the funding that universities gave the RSOs, universities that might not otherwise be supportive of The Front. Hahn could see that The Front was ready to take the next step of becoming more than just an organization.

"How many RSOs do we have, kids?" asked Wilson.

"942," said Calvin. "Just think, if they were evenly distributed, that would be about 19 per state."

Walking around her five computer screens and digital server, Reese said, "Six and a quarter million members plus and counting."

"The schools were publishing the lectures," said Calvin, "so that was good, but the debate rocked the Kasbah."

"People started looking at Malencia like some village idiot," said Reese, "and then he went and got himself dead. That's when people with resources began to look at his professional and personal life."

"What they found was garbage, lots of waste," said Calvin, "too much to ignore. Someone is already doing a biography."

"That ought to be a real stunner," said Wilson, starting to become more focused on the overall picture.

"We've also had a lot of YouTube coverage," said Reese, "which has focused on the debates and earlier lectures. Some people are getting pretty jiggy with it."

"What," said Wilson, "is jiggy, may I ask?"

"Oh. It means getting into the groove, getting creative, you know, thinking outside the box," Reese said.

"Right," said Wilson.

"These videos and shorts are amazing," said Calvin, "we try to respond, send a short Instagram, or tweet to everyone posting or putting up content about The Front."

"Four people are doing nothing but social media," said Reese, "and they work at it every day."

"So," said Wilson, "how about we turn our everyday attention to becoming a caucus?"

"What would you two think of that?"

Just at that moment, Cyrus, on his way to see Wilson, saw the assemblage and joined the crowd. Wilson took that as a cue and began outlining some of the steps they would have to take to become a significant third party in America.

"You all need to know that there are 54 registered political parties in the United States," he said.

"Two do all the business."

"The plan," said Hahn, holding up printed handouts, is to have our RSOs in each state set a meeting to gather signatures. "Before becoming a caucus, each RSO must gather 50,000 signatures. In other words, they must have 50,000 members before going to step 2. At that time, they will select their leaders and develop plans to begin submission of nominating petitions for local and state elections. Statewide membership will all vote on that state's leadership."

"This group, representing the RSOs, will focus on state issues, vet and support candidates, raise all their funding from within their membership, and elect one member to represent them on the national caucus, which I will chair," said Wilson.

Hahn went to the chalkboard and outlined the organizational chart.

"Any nomination, indeed, all nominations, need national board level approval," he said emphatically.

"As of now, that board consists of two people, Cyrus Kohler and I. We will select the first members from among us, based on qualifications and recommendations. After that first board is in place, we will establish rules of voting for future boards."

"So," said Hahn, "Let's go get the signatures. When that task is accomplished, we'll see if we are ready for that next big step. Remember, our goal is to get candidates on ballots, without PACS or lobbyists. Let's use our grassroots organization to separate ourselves from our social opponents."

We can change the course of history," said Wilson, "if we have the will to do it."

Over the next 60 days, the RSOs did as requested. They sent out a universal call for membership in their respective states. Social media went viral with Front related topics. Money flooded in from these new members, many of them millennials, some barely eighteen. For them, this would be their first opportunity to change history. Beautiful, young, unbought minds and their peers and mentors joined forces and bought into The Front.

One of those buyers was Constance Able. When Cyrus's phone rang on his way to class, he didn't recognize the number, so he let it go to voicemail. It wasn't until he was in his car on the way home, listening to his 23 messages, that one seemed too essential to erase.

"Dr. Kohler," said the professional voice on the other end, "My name is Constance Abel. A conversation please, with you and Mr. Hahn." Click.

Wilson Hahn made that happen. Three days later, as they all sat around Cyrus's office, the proper introductions having already been made, Cyrus led with live ammo.

"Ms. Abel," he began.

"Call me Constance, please, Dr. Kohler," she said, fixing him with a direct, but not combative, countenance.

"Constance," said Cyrus, "for the past five years you have been the right hand of Senator Ray Malencia. What brings you here?"

Constance nodded in understanding.

"After five years of disciplined trial and error, I have been abandoned in the field. My options have diminished, my commander is gone, all promises have been revoked. I have decided to no longer live in the boys' locker room," she said firmly. "Please don't misconstrue, I didn't come here to cry but to ask in the best way I can whether or not there might be a place for me here with The Front?"

"We can't offer what you had," said Cyrus.

"There might not be enough here for you," said Wilson. "Our program and platform are so different from the political life you have known. Could you give that up?"

"Frankly, gentlemen, I could use a strong shot of honesty. All I have done the past five years is toe the party line and learn the stinking system. There is no reward for excellence, just for longevity and subservience. If you'll have me, I will declare for the victor. Do you have an admission for one?"

As Cyrus would later recall, the defection of Constance Abel, Republican political operative and handpicked successor to Senator Ray Malencia, became a more significant event than it initially appeared. Constance brought credibility, and although many came after, tired of the old rules and wanting to make a difference, she would always be the first with serious name recognition.

Chapter 88

Wayne, Charlie, and Duster thought, given that the FBI had obtained a warrant to search Congressman LaRue Arnold's retreat, it might be a good idea to take Tommy Black Lance Wanderone with them. His attention to detail and outdoor knowledge were exceptional. Cyrus was quick to point out that Tommy had been a Currahee pathfinder. His trust in Tommy was absolute.

Duster said they would probably find a cabin with a lot of liquor and condoms. There was that.

Getting to Frankfort, Kentucky from southern Illinois had taken the better part of five hours in the FBI's Ford Expedition. Their trip had taken them north on I-57 to I-64 East through Louisville to Frankfort. Along the way, Tommy was brought fully into the loop regarding Malencia's death by heart attack with LaRue Arnold present.

Tommy had seen Ezekiel through his camera lens but had never met the man, just his running buddy who had tasted the Blood Taker. Tommy was still mourning Tante Colleen and had put his small home in Herod up for sale and moved into the cabin on Craggy Bluff in The Garden of the Gods.

"Every day," Tommy said as the SUV traveled southbound, "Myoconda flies over to see if I still walk among the living. Some days he lands beside the fire pit. The great bird and I have forged a bond which my passing will not break."

Tommy's sincerity touched everyone and time passed in silence, each alone with his thoughts.

The boys were not far from their destination when Wayne said, "Lena only drove with LaRue from the airport, so her directions were from Frankfort to the cabin on Glenn's Creek Road, not far from the Woodford Reserve Distillery on McCracken Pike. Fortunately, the cabin's address is programmed into our GPS."

They left the interstate and descended toward the river, curling and winding through the countryside. The cabin sat near a bend in the Kentucky River, 40 feet above flood stage. There were years when 40 was not enough. In sixty years it had gone under twice. The first time was in 1978, when the river crested at 48 feet, nearly removing the wood structure from its foundation. Aspiring hippies who had not yet experienced the Summer of Love built the cabin in the late 50s on LaRue's 240 acres. The building itself sat on an acre-and-a-half of cleared waterfront with the acreage, mainly old-growth woodlands, out behind. Nearer to an outbuilding, being used as a shed, was a beautiful garden of hyacinths, lilies, peonies, and orchids. There were a couple of genetically engineered sensimilla plants in full bloom when the scouting party arrived. The smell was hard to miss. 660 Glenn's Creek Road was a place to behold. Tommy was impressed with its beauty. A big open sweep of river curved around the bend that lay below the cabin. LaRue's pontoon boat, the Second Amendment, sat at a dock engineered to rise and fall with the river. The door to the cabin was locked, and they didn't have a key. Fortunately, they had Duster.

There wasn't a lot to search in an 850 square foot cabin on a slab with one toilet and one bedroom. It was nicely furnished, with a big leather couch, 60 inch HDTV, and a king size bed with adjustable firmness.

This man lived for comfort. Wayne took samples of every visible stain available while Duster and Charlie gave the cabin a thorough going over. Tommy headed outside to look around the grounds and the boat dock.

LaRue's 24 foot Sea King pontoon had the usual accompaniments. Tommy opened the cushioned compartments, the live well tank, and took off the motor cover. Other than a bottle of Makers and some unused rubbers, there was little evidence to indicate anything abnormal.

Tommy wound his way back up the 34 steps from the dock and walked along the edge of a manicured flower garden that was bursting with color. Tommy admired the beautiful plants. Someone was taking great care of this little plot. All the rows had been weeded by hand.

Tommy especially admired the orchids. The beautiful flowers demanded your attention. Bumblebees flew from flower to flower, pollinating their hosts, perpetuating the species. He could see several worker bees moving in slow motion. That movement took his eye to three gorgeous purple flowers, slightly shorter than the rest, which stood near the garden's center. The bees seemed to avoid them, and Tommy knew why. Those were some bad boys, didn't see a lot of that growing around. No question about it, he was looking at Wolfsbane, the Queen of all Poisons. "Who the hell would grow such dangerous flowers?" he wondered aloud. Tommy called for Duster, who donned his gloves and took a sample.

Chapter 89

LaRue pipeline informed him of the FBI's visit to his river retreat. He should have disposed of his little beauties after the Sebastiani, but those purple petals had captured his soul, or whatever he had left of it. Ezekiel being in custody had defused any earlier expiration plans for Lenora Hemmings. Lena had info, no doubt, but knew little of his day-to-day operations. She was just his sex toy.

What LaRue had to do now was cooperate. It was also time to call Stanley King of King, Chesney, and Ralph to talk a little strategy. He probably ought to tell them he'd killed a man, and not just any man, but a sitting U.S. Senator. But in the end, he decided not to volunteer a goddamn thing. Good for them if they had figured it out. What had happened was no one's business, not even Stanley's. He would deny any involvement should the issue arise. Having decided on his parameters, LaRue made the appointment.

At approximately the same time, 200 miles south of Peoria, FBI forensics determined the purple petals found in LaRue's garden to be Aconitum. Why would a US Congressman be growing such a poisonous plant? Wayne Throgmartin could think of only one reason. He intended to use it. The FBI noted in its report that

Tommy Wanderone was present when the warrant was served and had observed that one of the plants had recently been snipped.

Chapter 90

As summer turned to fall, conversations across America were caught up with The Front and this Cyrus Kohler guy. Some people wanted to anoint The Front, while others felt threatened and vulnerable. In between heaven and hell, Wilson Hahn reached for his phone and dialed Cyrus's number. "Hey, old buddy, I've got some good news for you."

"Tell me now," said Cyrus.

"Calvin texted me this morning that he just received a 'soft' support email from two

Democratic congressmen and one Republican senator. It's too early to tell if a mass defection has

started," Wilson went on, "but one thing's for sure."

"What's that?" asked Cyrus, ready for anything.

"Over the past fifty days we have received almost 8.5 million dollars that we didn't ask for," said Hahn, "and nearly 7 million members. We can't answer the emails fast enough, so we've hired the best email marketing service guys, Exact Target, Reese's idea, to expand our server capacity and database tools."

"Just like that," said Cyrus. "Yeah, like that," replied Wilson.

"Tell you what," said Cyrus, "call CBS in New York and get ahold of the 60 Minutes gang.

Tell them I want to be on the show, and I want Dan Rather."

"He's retired, has his own TV news magazine," said Wilson. "That's probably not going to happen.

How about Laura?" he volunteered.

"Dan," Cyrus replied, "was in Vietnam with all of us. He's someone I respect. Get Dan or no deal."

"OK, Cyrus," said Wilson. "Given the miracles that have happened so far, this could happen, too. Just don't shoot the messenger if it falls through."

As they hung up, Cyrus's phone rang as if on cue. He looked at it and took the call.

"This afternoon's good," he said.

Chapter 91

Chancellor Lan Pham was considering her options. At any one time, she might have several state or national officials in the office or on the phone. Lobbying and its close companion, payback, seldom vacationed. After Senator Ray Malencia's untimely passing, she had reached out to Congressmen LaRue Arnold and George McCreary to test the waters of the new alpha dogs. There would have to be an instate board replacement; an out-of-state candidate wouldn't find shelter from the storm that would be created by such a move. No, it would have to be one of them, and the other was sure to be pissed off.

Today her main concern was Dr. Cyrus Kohler. Chelsea Mulroney knocked on her open door and entered before receiving an invitation.

"Chancellor, Dr. Kohler is here," she said.

"See him in," said Pham, standing and walking briskly across the room. Cyrus followed Chelsea into the office, and he and Pham shook hands. With a motion of her hand, Pham directed Cyrus to a big, brown leather couch. She sat next to him in a handcrafted wooden straight-back chair that had been passed down from mother to daughter through three generations of her family. Chancellor Pham was very proud of the chair and sat in it whenever possible. It reminded Pham of her mother, who had carried the small chair, with a few

belongings wrapped tightly between the chair's legs, aboard one of the last choppers to lift off the Saigon Hilton in 1975 when the communists rolled into town and effectively ended the war. Her father had stayed behind, and neither of them ever saw him again.

"So, Dr. Kohler," Chancellor Pham said sweetly, the mamba inside her coiling ever so slightly in preparation, "I was sad to hear of your adversary's untimely passing. It was quite a confrontation you two had. As you know, Senator Malencia was on our Board. Replacing him will not be an easy task."

Cyrus said nothing but looked steadily at Pham, not smiling, not frowning. Pham prided herself on being able to read the human expression, but she saw only a blank.

"He must be replaced by someone with his ..." At this point, she chose her words carefully, "capability. Any ideas?" she asked, eyeing her prey.

"Take your time," Cyrus said finally, "let the situation play itself out."

Cyrus knew that Pham must be on edge until she could get Arnold or McCreary signed on. They were the logical replacements, ones with clout at the state government level. Cyrus reasoned that Pham couldn't know much about the ongoing investigation that was looking at both her candidates but would not be out of the loop for long. If Pham did know anything, she wasn't letting on, but both of them knew this polite interchange was smoke.

The chancellor had lost her leverage on Malencia almost as quickly as she had received it. No sooner had the senator been forced to make amends because of his debate performance than he got himself dead. How inconvenient and upsetting.

Kohler had caused all this to happen. He was the guilty party. All the man had to do was teach, publish a little, and quietly retire with his teacher's pension in tow. But no, he had to pick this time in her career to rock the boat, and there were already bodies overboard.

"So, Dr. Kohler," said Pham, "how goes it with you and The Front? Do you still have time to teach?"

"I do," said Cyrus. "My students are working hard, and speaking to that point, so is The Front, all 20 million of them."

Chancellor Pham could not hide her amazement. She had no idea.

"We've just finished filling out our paperwork in each state," said Cyrus, "and will be filing the forms this week to start our caucuses. 'A Caucus Committee's Statement of Organization' is its official title," he said, smiling a little at Pham's apparent dismay.

"You can, I'm told, get all this information on each Secretary of State's website."

"How convenient for you," Pham said dryly, the mamba dancing a little closer to those thin lips. "So you're in the process of forming a political party?"

"We're headed in that direction," Cyrus responded.

"Be advised, Professor, that could be a conflict of interest," Pham said.

"I don't see how," said Cyrus, "since you and this university have such established precedence of political patronage. Your beloved Senator Simon lectured here while still in office. Was that a conflict, Chancellor?" he asked, "drawing speaking fees from the university while he arranged millions of dollars for the school and its building programs? Who's to say on which side your bread's going to be buttered. Just look at us as a temporary inconvenience. Think of all our supporters and what they could do for the school, especially if you treat me like Simon, who practiced congruent sociality his entire political life. Just remember, as Senator Simon knew full well, it's not your money."

Pham saw the light of divine revelation. Even though she would have had immense satisfaction from firing the bastard, her instincts told her to back the bus up. Times they were a-changing, she reasoned, this wasn't the first old hippie who, after drinking his own cool-aid, wanted to change the world. The mamba slithered back into darkness.

Chapter 92

Cyrus drove home unflustered, realizing the chancellor was on a fishing expedition with him as the only angler. Later, sitting on the front porch with Jax, he watched a trumpeter swan glide slowly into his favorite fishing hole, a little cove that sat just to the north of their property on the lake's western shore.

As he watched the magnificent bird in its natural element, Cyrus smiled to himself, feeling at peace with his environment. Being the scorekeeper that she was, Jax also understood that Cyrus had gone to a good place. The drug years were history. There would be no more wasted time. Sometimes knowing the past can provide keys to the future. They were living in the springtime of their lives.

There was more good news on his radar. His nephew, Lincoln, had returned from Afghanistan and passed muster with the FBI. He had recently finished his initial training at Quantico and was being assigned to the Chicago field office. Cyrus had already devised a plan to introduce Lincoln to Wayne Throgmartin at the first opportunity. The FBI was a giant cluster and Cyrus had never been a believer in coincidence. Tying those two together made all the sense in the world. After all, the three of them were members of a very special club with unique attributes. They were all Rangers for life.

Chapter 93

The FBI lab issued a toxicology report on Tommy's discovery at Larue's cabin. The sample submitted was 'Aconitum Napellus, also called Monkshood or Wolfsbane, of the family Ranunculaceae, one of the most poisonous plants in the world.'

On receiving the report, Wayne Throgmartin called Charley, Duster, and Garrett Sims for a consult.

"Here's the picture I see," said Wayne. "Ray Malencia has a heart attack in the presence of LaRue Arnold, who is growing this shit. They hate each other from a long way back, and that escalates after the debate when Malencia goes for LaRue's private stash, which would be Lena."

"Why in hell would a man in LaRue's position take such a stupid risk?" said Charlie. "It doesn't make sense."

"Absolute power corrupts," said Wayne. "This isn't the first muckity-muck I've seen consider themselves above the law."

"Yeah, and this particular poison can't be detected in the body, it dissipates," said Duster. "Even when you find the source, as we did, there's only circumstantial evidence that LaRue used it to commit a murder. The autopsy confirmed the heart attack and brain hemorrhage, both of which could have been the result of poisoning with aconitum. Malencia died, and the coroner, not knowing or even suspecting foul play, let the cremation proceed, not that it would have made any difference if he hadn't."

"Wrong," said Wayne, "It's more than circumstantial; he screwed up. They'll probably fire the son of a bitch."

"The only thing that might save him is he wasn't stupid enough to get paid off for it, not that we know of anyway. What we do have is Larue in the building, at the Victorian table, with his back to the only camera that could have detected his tampering when he poured the wine."

"That's where he did the deed," said Duster.

"I agree," said Wayne.

"How could he have gotten the poison into the bottle?" asked Garrett Sims.

"He didn't put it in the bottle, Counselor," said Duster, "he put it in the glass, the one he gave Malencia."

"Did they check the glasses?" asked Charlie.

"Yep, nothing there," said Wayne. "Maybe it slipped under the radar. Who knows?"

"He had the flowers," said Charlie, "knew how to grow them, and had a motive. Tommy said one had been cut. He even took a picture of it."

"My money's on LaRue," said Wayne emphatically.

"Me too," chimed in Duster and Charlie simultaneously.

Garrett was still digesting the facts he was hearing. The boys were talking murder.

"And then, of course," said Duster, "there's Ezekiel Octavious."

"We need to leverage Ezekiel and Lenora," said Sims.

"You know Lena doesn't want jail time," Wayne said, "and who the fuck cares about a drugged up hooker whose crime revolves around spreading and snorting. Lena needs to give

us a sworn statement, a step beyond her directing us to the cabin, about her relationship with Congressman Arnold."

"A further statement," said Sims, seeming to come to life over a part of the discussion he understood all too well.

"That, in and of itself, coupled with the now suspected aconitum, would be additional fuel to get LaRue impeached or shit canned, whichever comes first."

"It's too much of a coincidence," said Duster.

"We need to move on this while the press still has Malencia's death in its crosshairs," said Wayne.

"Maybe a tiny little leak of information would be appropriate," he went on, moving to the center of the room and picking up his folder.

"What would that leak be about?" asked Duster.

Chapter 94

For his part, Ezekiel was chagrined to still be in southern Illinois. In his mind, he could see himself doing some time as an accessory after the fact. Murder might mean a little bit more to these farmers than to city folk, who regarded such events as a part of their daily lives. His biggest concern wasn't how long a stretch they were considering for him, or where, but whether these rubes, with an assist from the FBI, would crank up a real investigation and start looking at him hard. If the feds wheeled out that big ass database of theirs, bodies could start popping to the surface with their fingers pointed directly at him.

Ezekiel knew full well the scrutiny his travel schedule could potentially come under. The magnification certainly might be damaging because he'd done a lot of work for LaRue Arnold. The authorities

had Lena, and god knows what else. Rocchio was dead, and they were joined at the hip. He needed to get ahead of this or take it in the short chute.

"Guard, guard," Ezekiel called when lunch was served through his cell hole, "I need to talk to Throgmartin."

Chapter 95

The press was full of articles on The Front, with Cyrus and Susan Kohler the featured attraction. The Chicago Tribune did a front page piece on the organization and its ascension to caucus status. Accompanying articles featured the defection of Constance Abel and her backstory, which made for some spicy entertainment. The tabloids craved Constance, but she said no. She was spearheading The Front's nominating petition program, which was going gangbusters. The Front was not waiting on the world to change. They had 21 million members and intended to press forward.

Headlines read, 'On The Front.' 'A Changing of the Status Quo?'

There was no shortage of talk shows angling to land Dr. Kohler, but Cyrus was taking his time making those decisions. Besides, he still had classes to teach, and the kids wanted to see him now more than ever. They hadn't signed up for a substitute. Polls showed a steadily increasing support and awareness of The Front and its political philosophy, which was like fresh rainwater to a parched nation. On the opposite side were the PACS, lobbyists, and various members of the Democratic and Republican parties. They all had territories and careers to defend that had nothing, or little at best, to do with the nation's welfare unless there was a convenient overlap. The Front was growing daily. Its members woke up every morning, excited about the future, ready for the sea change that was blowin in the wind. The Front's two-story building in downtown Carbondale was filled to capacity with very busy, committed people.

Chapter 96

Congressman George McCreary needed a strategy.

"Bill," the congressman said to his longtime aide, "where do you think we are with all this?" He was referring to the death of Tony Rocchio, which could fall into the realm of crisis management, and the passing of Senator Ray Malencia, which could open wide the door for countless opportunities. Bill Riley was no stranger to Tony Rocchio or the senator. Riley had, himself, issued several sets of marching orders resulting in favorable outcomes for the rising star of Congressman George McCreary. Rivals had been intimidated; buildings burned, lives lost or scattered like billows of dust.

"We need to let the situation mature," said Riley, sitting in a big leather chair, feet propped up, arms behind his head.

"Mature," said McCreary irritably, "just sit around and wait, hope something good happens, that your idea of mature?"

"Not exactly," replied Riley, "I would be thinking more along the lines of reaching out to key constituents and supporters to inquire about some of the plums dangling from the proverbial tree."

"Such as?" asked McCreary.

"Such as you have a sit down with Dr. Lan Pham at SIU about extending our influence in a southerly direction. Someone has to fill that board seat, and it will be you or Congressman Arnold, more than likely.

"I don't know why, sir," Riley continued, "but my gut tells me this business with Malencia is all too hush- hush. A cremation?" his voice rose slightly.

"Are you kidding me? When's the last time that went down for a US Senator?"

McCreary nodded. Nothing needed to happen overnight. Besides, Bill Riley needed a little time to erase every conceivable document that could connect the congressman to Tony Rocchio. In this digital world, there was no such thing as too clean.

"Burn the goddamn computers and cell phones," he told Riley once again, "and buy new ones. Make it look like an upgrade."

He got up and left the room to call Dr. Pham from a more private location.

For her part, Dr. Lan Trang Pham was not surprised to hear from Congressman George McCreary. She had wondered what had taken him so long. Congressman LaRue Arnold had gotten to her first by several days, but she needn't disclose that tidbit.

"Good to hear from you, Congressman," she purred, the mamba dancing slowly in the shadows.

"You as well," replied McCreary.

"Listen, I won't take much of your time. I just wanted to check in to see if there were any hot button issues on your plate that need addressing in the absence of Senator Malencia?"

"Of course there are, George," said Pham, becoming more personal. "I've lost my funding spear, so to speak," she said.

"I understand," replied McCreary, "what was the agenda?"

With that question filling the room, Dr. Lan Trang Pham, the mamba now flicking its forked tongue, tasting the air for prey, knew that both sides of the political aisle were in hot pursuit of the board seat, which came with enormous perks and mordida.

"Support for our building program, Congressman," she said, "was and is the highest priority item of my administration."

"Is that it?" replied the incredulous Congressman.

"Afraid so," said Pham, lying as usual.

"And you," she continued, "There must be something else we can talk about, something on your plate?"

"Kohler," said McCreary tersely, "He's after our jobs."

So that's what it is, thought Pham, it's his job.

"He probably is," she replied.

"We ran a deep background on him," said McCreary, getting right to the point, "he had a serious drug problem, and there was something about a court martial while he was in Vietnam. We haven't been able to find out much about that. The 75th Ranger Regiment, from whence he came, is still alive and well and harboring their fugitives."

"Good luck with that," said Pham, shifting gears.

"If you uncover anything material, provable, in a court of law, that could withstand intense litigation let me know because we'll be dealing with Kohler's friend, Wilson Hahn, a first-class attorney and litigator.

McCreary was silent for some time thinking just how difficult it was going to be to discredit or silence Kohler. The man had been allowed too much rope already. Malencia had enabled Kohler, and now he was temporarily off limits.

"Do not make the mistake Malencia made," Pham continued. "Do not call the man out. You might not survive the old Ranger either, and I need you to be available. Do you understand my position?" she asked.

"I don't care if anyone's feelings are hurt, and that includes him and his goddamned supporters," said McCreary. "How did that SOB ever become a college professor, I'd like to know."

"He received an athletic scholarship to this university," Pham said dryly, "made excellent grades all along, and one day did enough to earn a Ph.D. I wasn't here then, but who wouldn't want a decorated veteran?"

Tolerance, she cautioned herself, the man she was talking to knew the system, it was his chief qualification, and those of his ilk within the system knew him.

"Promise me you won't take up the debate, some radio call-in or op-ed, promise me," said the chancellor.

"Not to worry," said McCreary. "I have fundraisers to do before Kohler makes them illegal." They both laughed, said their goodbyes. The Mamba's scales glistened as it slinked silently back into the shadows.

Chapter 97

"Cyrus, this is Wilson Hahn, can you drop by after classes this afternoon?"

"You bet, Wilson, what's up?" asked Cyrus.

"You won't believe it," said Hahn. "I just got off the phone with 60 Minutes."

"Really," was about all Cyrus could muster.

It took forever for a few hours to pass, but finally, Cyrus made his way out of Faner Hall. Walking briskly down the hill that led University Avenue to Route 51, he bounced up the old stone stairs at 231 South Main and entered The Front's new digs. The building was 7,000 square feet of walls, floors, cathedral ceilings, gas heating, and air conditioning.

As the day developed, Wilson continually monitored their progress in the ongoing negotiations with CBS. When Cyrus walked into Wilson's corner office on the second floor shortly after 4 p.m., he was full of questions.

"Lay it all out for me, Wilson, tell me what's going on before I imagine the truth."

Wilson laughed as he walked out from behind his desk.

"Cyrus, plain and simple, 60 Minutes wants to interview you. They said it was obvious to them your moment had arrived."

"Set it up," said Cyrus, "and tell them we need at least a 30-minute segment with no commercials. If I get that much time, I can hit the high points and cover some new ground, namely capitalism, and economics."

"I can attempt that," replied Wilson, hauling out his iPad and making an entry.

"There is one more thing I'll want," said Cyrus.

"Dan Rather?" said Wilson cautiously. "I thought you were kidding when you brought that up before."

"Dan Rather," was Cyrus's reply.

"Well, Dan Rather doesn't work for 60 Minutes anymore, he has a show on AXS TV," said Wilson.

"You know the man is 84? You do know that?"

"I'll do this interview with Dan Rather and only Dan Rather," repeated Cyrus.

Wilson filled up his old Cobb Pipe with one of his aromatic tobaccos.

"Dan Rather," he repeated as if speaking to himself.

"Dan Rather," answered Cyrus.

The wheels of commerce churned, lists were made and revised. Three days passed. Wilson was in his office when his phone rang, summoning him to service.

"Wilson Hahn," he answered, following his lifetime protocol of never following his name with a question or introduction.

"Dan Rather," came the reply.

Rather had left CBS over a situation in 2004 about George Bush and the National Guard. Neither side benefitted.

The Bushes were a powerful family with enormous hooks into corporate America. Even a profile as elevated as Dan Rather's was not off limits at this altitude. Cyrus had held fast to his position that there would be no interview unless he spoke to Dan Rather. Eventually, given that CBS's parent company, Viacom, could not turn down what would surely be a rating bonanza, Dan Rather would do one more show for CBS.

Chapter 98

One week later, the town of Carbondale watched as three huge haulers wheeled up University Avenue and set up in what had been the Old Main Commons. They could have been carrying an armored regiment, but

inside the 18-wheelers were millions of dollars of sophisticated transmission and recording equipment. CBS was sending the A-Team.

Dan Rather flew in from New York City and arrived looking much like he did the last time Cyrus saw him on TV.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Kohler," he said in the clipped accent Cyrus remembered from years gone by.

"Cyrus," said Cyrus.

"Cyrus it is," the 84-year-old icon said in his unchanged, clear voice.

"One more thing and then we'll get started," Rather added. "I want to personally thank you for allowing me the opportunity to fulfill my contract." Cyrus later learned that when the two sides had gone their separate ways, Rather had one Evening News show remaining on his contract.

"You are welcome, Dan," Cyrus said.

The next day was spent doing a pre-shoot, during which a variety of topics were discussed. The body of the interview was split into two 15 minute segments. The set was lighted and checked, video equipment was set in place and tested. By Cyrus's account, the interview filming was pretty damn cool.

"No stones left unturned that needed turning," he told Jax and Wilson the next day at 2 p.m., shortly after the interview wrapped. Everything had begun at 10 a.m. when Cyrus took a seat in a folding captain's chair about 4 feet from Dan Rather. Scout, Cyrus' constant companion, lay at his feet, eyeing Rather carefully.

Cyrus had on his usual. Dan Rather had on a CBS blazer, matched to a red tie, and dark slacks.

"For the past year and a half," Rather said, throwing his steely gaze into the camera, "a steadily growing organization has taken its place alongside the two political heavyweights dominating our American political landscape. The Front, as they call themselves, now numbers more than 23 million

members. They have Registered Student Organizations on the campuses of more than 900 American colleges and universities. They have caucuses established in every state. Their founder is Cyrus Kohler, here with us today. For 30 years, Dr. Kohler has taught philosophy at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. We are filming this interview on the previous site of the university's most famous building, Old Main, which was burned to the ground by an arsonist in 1969.

"During the Vietnam War Dr. Kohler served as a lieutenant in the 75th Ranger Regiment, 101st Airborne, Currahees. Dr. Kohler is the author of several books on political philosophy. He and his wife, Susan, also an accomplished professor, were born, raised, and still live in Southern Illinois.

"So, Cyrus, tell me, what was the starting point for The Front?"

Cyrus began, "In one way or another, my brain has been working on this since I was a kid.

One day, more than 50 years ago, my friend Ernie and I were fishing in a little boat on the Ohio River.

On the Kentucky side, a big open pipe spewed raw sewage into the river. Ernie told me a chemical company owned the pipe. Right there, I discovered the relationship between capitalism and politics.

The government was being paid to look the other way, and the company didn't care."

"What was the name of the company?" asked Rather.

"The name doesn't matter now. It could have been any one of a hundred, no, now it must be closer to 200 large chemical companies in the United States," answered Cyrus.

"Was this an isolated incident?" asked Rather.

"Not really, it was just the first time I had paid enough attention to notice what was happening in my own backyard. I was starting to become more and more aware of the injustices heaped on ordinary people by those who valued profit above all else."

"We had a report come in from an unknown source," said Rather, tacking to port, about your troubles in the army."

"My experiences as an Army Ranger in Vietnam," said Cyrus, sitting up a little taller in his chair, "were harsh ones. I learned to stand up against authority when that authority was wrong. I risked, and underwent, a field court-martial, by refusing to accept an order from an utterly unqualified officer who had just arrived in country that would have caused unnecessary loss of life. I was vindicated. My superior, then captain, now Colonel Fred Spaulding, stood up for me. I survived watching one of my men slit the throats of captured enemy troops. One of our commanding officers and his top man on the ground valued their budget more than our lives. The Currahees survived Lyndon Johnson and bad management. After Vietnam, a war we never should have entered, I carried scars on my soul, like most soldiers, for what we had to do there. I had to go on with my life. For years, I mulled over the idea that a broken Process caused the negative events I saw in the political arena. Every night, our dysfunctional Congress broadcast their battles into my home. I realized it was time for me to address that broken Process and to engage the American people in the solution."

"Given the impressive number of members you've enlisted, what you're doing is ruffling a lot of embedded feathers and putting yourself at risk. I'm sure you've considered that," said Rather.

"Exactly how do you intend to repair or replace that broken process?"

"Not through confrontation. You can watch the parties argue and figure out for yourself that isn't a long-term solution. This country needs a strong, unbought, third party to counteract the negative effects of this ongoing social battle. The Front may yet be that party, applying logic and reason to social and scientific issues."

"I've studied your lectures, Cyrus, and you are brave, some might say foolhardy. You've referred to political and religious groups as 'tribes,' which doesn't appear to sit well with either group. Where does this all come from?" said Rather.

"Years ago I picked up on the research of biologist E. O. Wilson. In The Social Conquest of Earth, he posits, with strong evidence, that sociality has conquered humanity. He says that the primary trait of the more advanced social species is their ability to work together, to compromise. Our political parties have lost that ability, so we are going to do it for them. They are leading our country and our planet down a dangerous path, and it has to stop."

"And you want to alter that path," said Rather.

"Absolutely, through education and reformative thinking, The Front hopes to halt this rush to destruction brought about by the social congruence of our political and religious tribes.

"Define that for us."

"Social Congruence is the co-joined efforts of the political and religious tribes to support their respective agendas. The tribes often share values, but over time, tend to develop 'us and them' mentality. The tribes have made enemies of one another, and have forgotten their responsibilities to the nation and its people. Using the foundations of logic and reason The Front has built a platform which restates the goals our political class must achieve. We will need an understanding of genetics, evolution, and its application to politics, religion, and capitalism to tear down this antiquated system that strangles America. The Front has developed a clear understanding of how the people in charge got there, who they are, and why their ranks must be diminished."

"So you want them out?" asked Rather.

"We want to lessen their power and influence," said Cyrus, "by governance that is more pragmatic, unbought, logical, focused on the end game of survival on this planet and not invested in ideology."

"Cyrus, tell us about the science behind The Front."

"As our species evolved," Cyrus said, "hominids possessing social genetics became dominant. Social tribes, much like the ants before them, conquered the earth. Science was an enabler. During the past two centuries, things began to change as science came out from the shadows. The result has been an exponential decrease in the social tribes even though they still rule. Sociality uses but does not preserve, science and nature. In our time, this phenomenon has led to nature becoming increasingly challenged. People need to understand that nature has no predetermined outcomes. As humans have developed chemicals, sophisticated weapons, fossil fuels, and a global economic system that continually screams for more production and more waste, we have detracted from our natural environment. We have forced into extinction countless species that were of great value. We have put our future at such risk that, more likely than not, we will reach a point where reversing the damage will be impossible. The application of this thinking tells us that order and reason must be restored to our chosen system of government or chaos and disaster will ultimately prevail.

"In the history of the universe, humans have existed for a speck of time, and yet we've done enough damage to destroy our world. We have a large population of citizens who operate in a fundamental mode with not so much as a thought of what the future might hold. They must be held accountable.

"That particular goal," said Rather, "strikes me as nearly impossible. Right now, many well-intentioned, loving parents are homeschooling their children to protect them from the 'lies' of science that contradict the Bible. How do you plan to enlist these people?" "What could get through to them in your message?"

"I won't lie," said Cyrus. "It is a conundrum. When I was researching what would become the foundation of The Front, that inquiry took me through the papers of Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton and Thomas Paine. More than just 'common sense' prevailed. Hamilton and Payne were deists, the others were fundamentalists. Paine's beliefs nearly got him executed. None of them endorsed a two-party system. Their experience with the Whigs and Tories was a lesson learned.

"Since the original American settlers were religious malcontents, kicked out of their European tribes for dissension and civil disobedience, that fervor came with them to America. These settlers were monotheistic, primarily Protestant, except for Massachusetts, which became home to American Catholics. The religious tribes were powerful influencers of all things political. Their support yielded money and votes. From the beginning of our culture, these tribes were implicit in their support of each other. The founders saw this, perhaps more clearly than we can imagine. To this end, they drafted a Constitution whose First Amendment called for a separation of church and state, except that it was too late for this noble idea to happen."

"Whoa there, Cyrus Kohler," Rather said, "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"I am saying," said Cyrus, "That the concept of separation of church and state is a fiction of enormous proportion. From the time of our first settlers, the political and religious tribes were reliant upon each other. They are both huge businesses with tax exemptions and lifetime perks. The social congruence these tribes achieve perpetuates sociality, resulting in an oligarchy that uses science as an enabler of their joint dictatorship."

"I can't imagine either of our two parties ever endorsing such a position," Rather said.

"Nor can I," said Cyrus. "Why should the parties wake a sleeping dog that has no idea such food exists? Why interrupt the message?"

"The good news is that the older generation is leaving. We have a new tribe coming that possesses enough education and scientific knowledge to accomplish a political renaissance. We call them millennials, and it is clear they reject the socially congruent tribes and are distrustful of the political and religious systems they control. They are marching, and taking on violence in America at the grassroots, just like The Front. Millennials are rejecting our thin democracy daily."

"What do you mean by thin?" asked Rather.

"Many think their obligation to America stops as long as they vote and pay taxes," said Cyrus.

"I see," said Rather, his expressive face reflecting the gravity of this revelation.

"That level of activity won't cut it with the new kids. Most of them live in urban areas, and their lives are undergoing enormous Compression, as rural America has given way to overdevelopment. The millennials, for the most part, embrace diversity and are witnessing, not only the murder of their friends and schoolmates but also the unwillingness of our political establishment to do anything about it, being bought as they are by the NRA. Daily, they also see our poor and minorities being denied basic respect from those who have never wanted for anything.

"That comment is probably going to create a firestorm," said Rather. "You are about to be labeled a racist and more."

"Why?" said Cyrus. "Can you take issue with the fact that not all segments of our society come forward evenly? Some of us here in America have decidedly more advantages, but we all make our own choices, and we can choose to pursue our ambitions. Race and birthrights can be overcome in America. Get an education, go to work, save your money, have a family, live happily ever after, has been short-circuited by the social tribes who have bruised the people they claim to serve. The tribes have succeeded in selling small gratuities to oil their perfect machine. How is that working out?"

"All right," Rather tensely responded. "I think we understand what you mean by social congruence. How do you propose to go about fixing all this?"

"We propose to transform society laterally by authorizing the implementation of The Doctrine of Limited Rights, which is, in essence, a withdrawal from the expansion of the Second Amendment."

"Do you believe in a Second Amendment gone wild theory?" asked Rather.

"The writing's on the wall, Dan, and I didn't put it there."

"What are you saying, Dr. Kohler?"

"I am saying that because of social congruence, we now live in the Age of Violence. I am saying the forces of violence are so powerful that a pathway to a solution will not exist without a third political party made up of those willing to make it happen. It is time for the thinkers to become doers. No one within our current two-party system clearly sees and articulates an end to the Age of Violence as a reality this country needs to embrace.

"So here we are, Dan, growing like weeds because there are millions of us who can think, inside and outside the box, and we know that to survive there will have to be a political change in this country.

We must have an evolution, no, it's more of a revolution of political thought."

"We got sidetracked a little," said Rather. "Spell out this Doctrine of Limited Rights in a practical way."

"The thought is that the rights of society should supersede the rights of an individual. The Second Amendment has moved far away from this concept."

Rather raised his eyebrows and asked, "So you think it is possible to undo two centuries of political and societal direction?"

"It will be done," answered Cyrus, "either by us, voluntarily, or by nature. Either way, balance must be restored. All of these societal ills, guns, porn, greed, all manner of evils, exist because the citizens allow them. We elect unqualified and irresponsible people to public office and expect them to elevate their thinking and actions to a high level of selflessness. We encourage them to raise vast sums of money to accomplish their mission. We allow them to run for office because of their religious beliefs. How can that be a qualification? You don't elect a representative because your primary connection to this individual is his or her belief in the second coming. That is not good enough. You vote for them because they represent to you that they will act for the country at the expense of everything else. They will not overstay their welcome but hand off their crown, thus encouraging participation. They will not be bought by the highest bidder or accept money from PACs or lobbyists. The Front, and others like us, will someday run on a platform that separates the forces of sociality from governance."

"Is any of this achievable, in your estimation?" Rather asked, "Because I know there are Democrats and Republicans out there laughing at such a preposterous idea that Americans, having been given all these privileges, would ever want to give them back?"

"We have 23 million members who want to be a part of this change, Dan, and we've just started. They are willing to think ahead, differently, to change the process to alter events. Our members accept the undeniable fact that we were given rights that we stopped earning or deserving long ago."

"Okay," said Rather, "We've discussed the process, events, Social Congruence and the Doctrine of Limited Rights. What are we missing here, Professor? You've got your foot in the door and the attention of every operative in America. You know what happens to people who change the status quo."

"I do," said Cyrus, "but because I am committed to our great country and the men and women who have defended it, the price of admission is worth whatever the costs may prove to be. Change is

measured in larger increments of time, where societies are involved, and may not happen in my lifetime, but then again, it may."

"So, Cyrus, your Front is certainly a potential challenger to the established parties. It is clear to me that business, as usual, is off the table. You do not want to play by the established rules of engagement, do you?"

"No," answered Cyrus, "we do not.

Rather nodded his head. "If I heard you right a while back, you said science had passed sociality like a bullet train passes coal cars. What will it take for The Front to take that next step?" "A few more like minded souls," replied Cyrus.

"Let's shift gears," said Rather. "I've heard you say some pretty negative things about capitalism and our economics. Care to comment?"

"First of all, I'm not negative where capitalism is concerned, just convinced its masters, those too big to fail, have to be held accountable for their mistakes. Many have proven to be amoral, driven only by profits and greed. Their actions have withered our nation. I went to school with some of them. They know more than the regulators and have proven, through the introduction of derivatives and credit default swaps, there is no boundary too tall to leap.

"Not only do they need controls, since they can't or won't control themselves, but they also have to be stopped before the dangers inherent in their process overwhelm us again and again.

Rather looked through his notes and asked, "Any final comments, Cyrus?"

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"Yes," he said looking straight into the camera, his blue eyes brightened by the intense TV lighting,

"To everyone listening, on the left and right, envision what might be possible. I am simply asking you

to try. Help us change this world we live in for the better."

Cyrus leaned back. "Thank you, Dan, for giving us this platform. Thank you 60 Minutes." As soon as

the cameras and sound were off, Dan Rather leaned in toward Cyrus, "You are quite a guy, Dr.

Kohler, and you've got one hell of an idea."

Chapter 99

"Let It Be"

John Lennon, 1970

The two weeks after 60 Minutes were remarkable times to be an American. Over 11 days, The Front computer system crashed three times in spite of daily and weekly updates. The massive additions of RAM, DRAM, and overall computing power were not able to enroll, respond to, or even measure the onslaught of citizens seeking membership.

The Council of Ten increased its numbers steadily. It now had 56 working members, 11 full-time, with the rest being part-time students and advisors. It kept everyone busy just getting back to the queries and new applicants. Cyrus was under fire as well from virtually every news media representative with a budget. One local station, WXIN 104.5 FM, otherwise known as the Vixen, had contacted him immediately after the show to set up an interview.

The station's name was partly attributed to its owner, Lucinda Purifoy, a tall, middle-aged brunette whose notion of marriage coincided with her station's moniker. Usually, Lucinda did what she damn well pleased and was not one to let protocol intervene. She was a top-rated talk show host whose Sunday evening call-in show, Lucinda Live, was on the radar of many Southern Illinois households.

Nearly 6' tall with a mane of black hair almost down to her waist, Lucinda did not look 55, which she was not admitting to anyway. She had more Botox in her body than an over-the-hill soap opera ingenue and was proud of it. When Dr. Cyrus Kohler agreed to a half-hour segment for the following Sunday, Lucinda got busy selling ads. Just paying the bills, she liked to say, not imagining that this would be the most massive audience in the show's entire 8-year history.

As Lucinda Purifoy looked out her window, Cyrus pulled into the parking lot. She was immediately disappointed to see Jax Kohler walking up the steps with him. So much for that concept, she lamented, getting up to greet her guests.

"Hey there, folks," she said, holding out her hand, "Come this way." She motioned toward the studio.

After getting Cyrus wired up, Lucinda laid out the ground rules.

"It's going to be one question at a time, Professor. Answer as you see fit. Our system cues the calls, so there will always be one waiting. We can hold up to seven calls at one time. The good news is we could have several hundred incomings. We told everyone we could reach out to about your visit, and your appearance is my highest single one-night of sponsorship ever," she said, looking energized and ready to get it on.

"Are you ready, Dr. Kohler?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Cyrus replied.

After introducing her guest, the phone lines opened, and the first call came in. "Dr. Kohler," said a voice from the void, "this is Betsy in Marion."

"Hello, Betsy," replied Cyrus.

"I just wanted to tell you that all five of us, including the kids who can't vote, have sent our dollar. We are The Front. No one gives a damn about us, and we know it. Like you, no one ever stood up for us or cared about us. My husband John and I both work and we get by, but it's a struggle. Dr. Kohler, could you explain what you mean by the broken Process and what fixing that could do for us?"

"Thank you, Betsy, for your support and your question. When I say the Process is broken, I mean that this government of ours isn't working for way too many people. When you read about a deadly train wreck in the paper, you know the train can't be unwrecked, the dead can't be brought back to life. This disaster is already an Event, a part of history. Something caused that Event, and that something has to be fixed. Does that make it clearer?"

"Thank you," said Betsy.

"Dr. Kohler," the next caller came on immediately, "this is Billy in Mt. Vernon. Are you an atheist, a socialist, or both?" he asked.

"That's a great question, Billy," said Cyrus, "let me answer it this way. I could never be an atheist because I believe in evolution. Science tells us there is a bottom and a top to the evolutionary ladder. You may have heard me say that Earth's citizens are near the bottom of the ladder because of our relatively short development cycle compared to the age of our planet and the universe. You can rest assured that I believe in the top and am not put off in the slightest by people who believe in a heavenly presence. Something is at the top of all creation, the most potent force in the universe. I can only imagine, Billy, the power of an entity or civilization alive for most or all of 14.5 billion years.

"As to the socialist part, well, even though I know capitalists often cheat, I cannot fault the opportunity capitalism offers for creativity and hard work. I want oversight on the big guys because when they cheat and fail all of us in the middle suffer. If we ever get to the point of treating white collar criminals like burglars, we'll see how arrogant they are when they start to hit the prison's general population. I hope that answers your question."

Cyrus took a deep breath just as Adrienne in Mounds came through on his headset. "Doc," she said, "what can we do to get rid of all the guns?"

Adrienne," Cyrus replied, "I will never endorse getting rid of all our weapons. We need to make this a matter of common sense. People need to understand that violence has become more prevalent because of the cooperation of the social tribes and their political leaders' unwillingness to take any stand. Speaking against the Second Amendment would jeopardize their reelection by losing the support from their primary sponsor, the NRA. We need to be more like Switzerland, where you have to have one hell of a reason to own a handgun carry permit, much less an assault weapon. We have NRA members joining us now that understand this logic. When we, as a country, have had enough of the violence, we will take a stand against guns and enact laws with no gray areas for violators. Following the Doctrine of Limited Rights will require a sweeping reform unlike any other, and in our opinion, it will start at the grassroots level with The Front and the kids. When this happens, when guns come down, the Age of Social Congruence will be ending. At this point, people will be more engaged in the Process because they have accepted that what they do matters. The Doctrine of Limited Rights will not be viewed as socialism, but as a savior, a way to correct excesses in government. Thank you, Adrienne."

The calls continued to come in nonstop. Thirty minutes passed in a flash. When the magic genie dropped the curtain, Cyrus slumped back in his chair, breathed deeply and exhaled. Lucinda Purifoy rushed

over, bringing Cyrus a Creal Springs bottled water, and bent over to give Cyrus a proper hug. Just at that moment, Jax came over, leaned in on Cyrus, and whispered, "Let's get a drink."

Chapter 100

LaRue Arnold's phone rang. He picked it up and said, in his most professional business voice, "How ya doin', Scott?"

Scott Kellerman, the senior partner of Kellerman, Tankus, LLP, had heard that voice many times before, and he hadn't liked it then.

"Doing fine, Congressman, good to hear you sound so chipper," he lied.

Kellerman, the NRA's lead litigator, had gotten a gentle nudge from his client to strike up a conversation. Malencia was long gone, and the troops were queasy about the unsettling fact that a man with no history or genetic predisposition for coronary heart disease had just keeled over in the presence of one Congressman LaRue Arnold. Washington insiders well knew that LaRue despised the man, which ruled out coincidence unless you believed in blind fucking luck. Anyway, what was done was done, and there was nothing, yet, to implicate LaRue except that he'd been there.

"Cutting to the chase," Kellerman said, "what's going on downstate with this Cyrus Kohler fellow?

What's your take on The Front?"

Scott Kellerman knew goddamned well what every politician on the planet Earth who cared about their severance had already figured out; these guys were for real. They had tapped the wellspring, and

it was gushing one dollar bills. The Front was just a few baby steps away from lighting a fire that might be inextinguishable.

"You have someone who could do a little field work, man-on-site type of thing?" Kellerman inquired.

"Absolutely," replied Arnold, "got just the man for the job."

He didn't of course or wasn't sure if he did or did not have the man. Ezekiel Octavious had not been returning calls, which was highly unusual. LaRue hadn't been able to contact Lena either and was beginning to suffer from lower ball heat. Things, in general, were falling apart. He did not need a reminder from his largest donor of this abnormality, this Kohler, who the now departed Malencia had brought forth from obscurity.

"The worst-case, absolutely disastrous, scenario, LaRue," said Kellerman, "is if The Front makes it to the head table, and we have to smile and join hands in their America First program, whatever in the hell that is," he snarled.

"I don't need to tell you how concerned everyone here is, and I haven't even touched base yet with your PAC. Just remember, Kohler and his crowd want to put all of us out of business, so be as proactive as possible, Congressman."

The line went dead. LaRue was bewildered. Where had everyone gone? He hadn't received a happy call in months, and why the roaring silence? The rats were jumping ship in droves. Ezekiel had disappeared, which was possible given the nature of his work, but Lena, she was a commodity, a sexual market maker. This problem required a solution that only she could provide.

Chapter 101

Lenora Hemmings did her part," said Agent Wayne Throgmartin, digging through his desk for a long-lost file folder while talking to Charlie Mills and Duster McCaulkin.

"She gave us what she had," said Charlie.

"Not exactly," said Duster, making a small attempt at humor.

"All but that," corrected Charlie.

"Looks like she's willing to do a year of house arrest plus a 90-day detox stint," said Wayne.

"The State wants to see if they can get her clean," he added with a chuckle.

"Like that is even possible," said Duster, who was under no illusion when it came to rehabbing crack whores. Only heroin users had a higher recidivism rate, and he wasn't sure he believed that. Duster knew one of the mitigating factors was not whether an addict could get sober but did they, or someone, have a plan for the afterlife. A real job skill would be useful to fill the void in Lena's life. The bottom line on whether Lena got her deal or not would ultimately come down to how her connection with LaRue Arnold played out.

The FBI had enough circumstantial evidence to take Malencia's death to a grand jury. When that happened, Agent Throgmartin fully expected an indictment. The Aconitum was a powerful link to Arnold, and he had a motive if you can accept sex as a trigger to irrational decision making. The other key to a successful prosecution of a sitting member of the United States House of Representatives was Ezekiel Octavious.

"I am a betting man," said Charlie Mills to Agent Throgmartin, "and my money says Octavious has the goods on Arnold."

Garret Sims entered the room and said in his low baritone, "It's a double-edged sword, men.

You can bet the ranch Octavious won't roll completely over unless he is convinced there is no way out

for himself. He has probably had more than enough time to internalize his situation, much of which, I suspect, is known only to him. The fact is, we don't know a lot about the man. We suspect, but are unsure, so until we can pin this down ..." His voice trailed off.

"He'll give us the least of his stash," said Duster, who had some interrogation experience on his resume. Duster's familiarity with waterboarding and related coercive techniques went unspoken by those who knew him well.

"The approach we make to Octavious needs to be focused directly on his relationship with Arnold," he said adamantly.

"I'm not giving him blanket immunity for all his past crimes, whatever they are," said Sims, drawing his line in the sand.

"That's what he'll ask for," said Duster.

"I have a feeling these two had a long history together," said Throgmartin.

"I mean, how many marginally employed individuals have a fifteenth-floor lake view condo on Wacker Drive that has no mortgage? That's a half-a-mill and change," he added emphatically.

The men were correct on all counts. For his part, Ezekiel wanted blanket immunity. Tom Staynes, although not his primary attorney, standing in for Kellerman as he was paid to do, knew full well the FBI and state authorities were looking directly at his client. His plan sought to balance the negotiation by confining the scope to current events only. Any prolonged examination of his client would not yield a result that was likely to be decided in their favor. Timing, as always, was of the essence. His message to the FBI covered Ezekiel's surveillance of Kohler, no harm there, and Malencia's security system. The latter showed intent on Arnold's part; the former was already forgotten. In the modern social media world, Staynes reasoned, popular trending

was as fickle as El Nino. There were miles and miles of topics to cover, which, when properly directed, would shift the focus from his client to an elected member of the House of Representatives.

Representing the other side were Duster McCaulkin, Wayne Throgmartin, and Garrett Sims. They had anticipated Staynes' strategic plan for Ezekiel Octavious and were having none of that. What they wanted from Ezekiel was probable cause linking LaRue Arnold to the death of Senator Ray Malencia. There was no way Agent Throgmartin or any of his uppity ups were going to offer blanket immunity to someone with Octavious's suspected track record. Unless, of course, they had to.

"This guy could be a serial killer," Wayne said to Duster as they prepared for yet another interrogation of Ezekiel, still incarcerated in the Williamson County jail, as an accomplice in the murder of Tante Colleen. As the two sides were ushered into a brightly lit interrogation room that sat adjacent to Ezekiel's cell, the group agreed that Throgmartin and Garret Sims should do the questioning. Charlie Mills took a seat in the back of the room along with Duster McCaulkin. Four straight-backed metal chairs with no padding surrounded the room's nondescript metal table. Ezekiel was cuffed to a metal support stanchion, running the length and width of the table. Before reading Ezekiel his rights, Garrett Sims turned on the tape recorder. After concluding legalities, Wayne Throgmartin began, being careful not to show any indication of interest in Ezekiel's prior activities, whatever they were.

"Mr. Octavious," Wayne said, "you have been charged as an accessory to murder in the bludgeoning death of Ms. Tante Colleen, whose last known address was The Garden of The Gods, Craggy Bluff, Herod, Illinois. You were formally identified and photographed in the company of a Mr. Anthony Rocchio, deceased, who has been indicted for the murder of Tante Colleen."

"The point?" questioned Tom Staynes, "we all know where you're going with this."

"Where would that be?" asked Throgmartin.

"LaRue Arnold," said Staynes, straightening his tie and trying to appear calm.

"Well, since you brought it up, what about him?" asked Wayne.

Ezekiel spoke for the first time. "What if I could supply the missing link?"

"What link?" asked Throgmartin, looking mildly interested when in reality, he was on the edge of his seat.

"A connection, relevant to that day in question, between Arnold and Malencia, that was more than a social visit," he said.

"Go on," said Garrett Sims.

"Not so fast," interjected Staynes, poised to earn his retainer. "All charges against my client go away in return for his testimony?"

Throgmartin replied, "If Mr. Octavious can give us enough to arrest Mr. Arnold for the murder of Senator Malencia our recommendation will be to dismiss all charges pertaining to the unlawful wiretap of Dr. Kohler and complicity in the death of Tante Colleen."

Staynes contemplated the offer and whispered something in Ezekiel's ear. All his senses told him to ask for blanket immunity from any charges present or future that might relate to LaRue Arnold but concluded that would be like ringing the mission bell to call the faithful. There was always the possibility they could make the Arnold case without Ezekiel, so all in all, the proposition appeared fair.

It was southern Illinois, and there would be no change of venue since Ezekiel was an unknown in these parts. Colleen was a local treasure, and she was gone. Staynes reasoned there was nothing he could do to stop the FBI from doing serious background on Ezekiel and Rocchio. That was going to

happen with or without this deal. His job was to handle the present and let his client deal with the past.

Besides, there might be another handsome retainer in his future, what the Texans in North Dallas called a shit pot full of upfront whip out. No reason to reach too far.

"All right then," Staynes said to the room, "let's revisit the evidence."

Ezekiel went on the record then. "Two weeks before the Senator's untimely passing Congressman Arnold contacted me."

"How?" Sims interrupted.

"Phone, cell phone," replied Octavious. "Burner?" asked Sims.

"No, he used Lenora Hemmings' phone," replied Ezekiel. "She came up on my caller ID."

"Do you still have your phone, that phone?" asked Throgmartin. "Yes," replied Ezekiel, "you have it in the evidence room with all my personal belongings, those that were in my possession after Rocchio did his thing which, by the way, I did not know about at all. For the record," said Octavious, smiling.

"Continue, go on," said Sims.

"So," said Ezekiel, "my orders were to find out where all the cameras and security were set up in the senator's house. That proved to be easy enough," said Ezekiel, rubbing his one free hand through his thinning hair. "I found the company that installed the system and got a blueprint."

"Those are good PI skills," whispered Duster from the back of the room. "It's what I would have done."

"What was the outcome of this research project, Mr. Octavious?" asked Throgmartin.

"Eleven cameras, if my memory serves me correctly," said Ezekiel, "on two floors, one camera on the south wall of the basement."

"What was Arnold's purpose?" asked Throgmartin.

"The only sense I can make of it was he had to be looking for a blind spot, out of camera range."

"Was there one?" asked Wayne.

"I don't know, maybe," replied Octavious.

"Maybe where?" asked Duster, following the line of questioning closely.

"Maybe the old Victorian table at the east end of the den," replied Ezekiel.

The group looked at each other with emotionless faces lest they divulge that the senator had been found in that room, with LaRue, and an open bottle of wine that tested negative for poison.

Redirecting, Throgmartin asked, "Have you done other jobs like this for the congressman?"

"Not relevant to our current plea agreement," Staynes quickly interjected. "We don't answer that question, Mr. Octavious."

Ezekiel said nothing. That question could lead down a dark road he wanted to avoid or at least travel as quickly as possible. He realized that the minute his testimony was over, he needed to have his money in hand, or off-shore, and everything in his life on ready-set-go. The FBI would undoubtedly make an effort to end his days on the street, why wouldn't they? He had no choirboy credentials to fall back on, and there would not be another deal in his immediate future. Two hours later, Ezekiel's bond was set at 500K, and he bonded out for cash in a matter of minutes. During that time, all hands turned their attention to the surveillance tapes taken from the senator's home. The tapes clearly showed every moment of Arnold's visit, his costly worsted navy suit, and a gold signet ring on his right hand. You

couldn't miss the ring since it looked like a small Roman Coliseum. It was a lion head with a golden 'A' in its mouth. You could see Arnold take the tray with the snacks and wine glasses from the housekeeper, turning his back to the camera while he poured wine at the old Victorian desk that Ezekiel had mentioned.

"It's very possible," said Duster, reading everyone's mind, "that Arnold had the aconitum ready to put into the glass but needed a small bit of privacy to do it."

"He also needed to do the pouring," said Throgmartin, who had been listening carefully to Duster's comments and was beginning to see the developing thread.

"I believe we have more than enough," said Sims, "for a probable cause warrant for the arrest of Congressman LaRue Arnold."

"We need a search warrant for his house," said Duster, beating Wayne to the punch.

"Yeah," said Wayne, "that we do."

"We're looking for Aconitum, in any form," said Sims.

"You might check the man's jewelry," said Duster. "See if you can find that ring."

The following day at 10 a.m. Congressman LaRue Arnold was puttering around the garden on his 9-acre estate just outside Peoria when he saw two black Chevy Suburban's pass through his security gate. They rolled up the long asphalt driveway to his house, which was a modest 15-room, 6-bath residence that resembled the White House. Stopping on the front circle, which formed an arc along nearly the entire frontage of the property, six men exited the two vehicles. Two of them walked briskly to the front door, where Arnold's full-time maid met them. She directed the men to the garden where LaRue was standing. They identified themselves as agents of the FBI and officers of the Mulholland County Sheriff's Department.

One of the agents, Wayne Throgmartin, read LaRue his rights, cuffed him, and placed him under arrest for the murder of Senator Raymond Malencia. Agent Throgmartin had no sooner pushed the big man's head down to clear the back door of the Suburban than he stuck a folded blue document inside the pocket on LaRue's work shirt.

"That's a search warrant," he informed the congressman. "We'll be going through the house and over the grounds with a small army of investigators. They are on their way." Smiling at the large, angry, red face that was so very close to his own he said, "You sit tight here for the next few hours, call me if you need a potty break."

The congressman said nothing. He just glowered at the agent until finally, uttering the magical words, "I want my attorney, now," he was allowed by law to make the call.

Chapter 102

Wilson Hahn was having a beautiful day. The dark clouds that often loomed just over the horizon were invisible for the moment. Wilson knew they were there but appreciated their momentary absence. Sitting in his old law office at Hahn, Morgenthaler, and Daniels, Wilson was waiting for Cyrus Kohler to make an appearance. He was certain Cyrus would be late, but he would be there.

Wilson's specialty over the years had been corporate and appellate law. He occasionally dabbled in constitutional law and was licensed to practice before the Illinois Supreme Court, various appellate courts, and The United States Supreme Court. As he sat in his old leather swivel chair, Wilson reflected on a career spanning four decades. His short, slight, very fit, frame was still in service to a skillful mind.

"What the mind can conceive," Cyrus was fond of telling him, "The body can follow." Wilson kept both in good repair.

Just as he became lost in a moment of reflection, in came Cyrus Kohler wearing that blue blazer.

"About time you got here," Wilson said dryly, his eyes welcoming. Cyrus smiled at the old attorney, and they went to work.

"The time has come, Cyrus," Wilson said, reaching for the old leather satchel that had seen him through many legal wars, "for us to start our process, to write our story, to become that third party you keep talking about."

Cyrus nodded.

"You remember the movie, 'Finding Forrester'?" Wilson asked, looking up from his pile of papers.

"I do," replied Cyrus, "Sean Connery as the reclusive Forrester was perfect."

"Yeah, well, there was a great line in that movie that I never forgot," Wilson continued. "Forrester was talking to this exceptional kid, Jamal, helping him to go beyond his societal constraints and live up to his potential as a writer. He said, 'We walk away from our dreams, afraid we may fail or even worse that we may succeed.' Forrester should have met you, Cyrus, so he would be able to see a person in full bloom, unafraid."

Cyrus said nothing.

Your faith in our little mustard seed has flourished, and now you stand ready to tell the mountain to move because nothing is impossible," said Wilson, recalling the mustard seed parable.

"Now we have 32 million members, one-fifth of the registered voters in the USA who identify with The Front. We are in play throughout all 50 states. The RSOs are thriving and growing as we speak.

And, you haven't seriously pissed anyone off that wasn't pissed off already," Wilson said with a laugh.

"That's several million tons of warm bodies," said Cyrus, total amazement beginning to sink in.

I never dreamed this would happen so quickly. It would not have if a serious case of territorial imperative didn't kick our late departed senator into overdrive."

"You're probably right, Cyrus," said Hahn, adding, "All that attention he so kindly provided certainly gave legs to The Front, and now the time has come to file for party status. We get hundreds of emails, texts, and tweets daily, saying 'Come on guys, C'mon man.'

Cyrus laughed at how well Wilson had delivered wide receiver Keyshawn Johnson's stock phrase.

"It's your baby, Cyrus; you're the daddy, what do you say?"

Cyrus did not immediately respond but looked to be pondering.

Wilson said, "Be careful what you wish for, Cyrus. It will get a lot dirtier from here on, forever. The tribes will not go gentle into this or any other good night.

"The ballgame will get bigger now," Hahn continued.

"The social tribes will soon discover, if they haven't already, that they are playing for their very existence. They will dig up every misstep you ever made in the hopes of slowing down this speeding train. If you can be discredited, they will do it. Are you ready for that type of filth?"

Cyrus looked thoughtful as he stood up and began to walk around the big oak table. "You know, I had such a mediocre middle life I could never have imagined what I was assembling in my head would one day come to this. I am the embodiment of no one, with very little to show for a life spent casting stones on the water and watching most of them sink. I did serve my country, never ran,

never walked on the backs of my fellow man for profit, never have taken people's lives from them with no remorse, so I guess it could have been worse."

"Identifying the problem is at the center of all mathematical equations," said Wilson. "Once identified, there can be a construction which encompasses the beginning and the end."

"A problem defined can be a problem solved," said Cyrus, digging around in his briefcase.

"Here," he said.

"Here, I've found it," he exclaimed, holding high a torn document taken from some bygone publication. Cyrus waved it triumphantly.

"What is that, Cyrus?" asked Wilson, looking puzzled.

"It's the Higgs Boson," said Cyrus, "the Higgs Boson, you know the guy, Peter Higgs, who theorized the 'God particle,' and they found it, the building block of the universe that gave all particles mass and validated all of particle physics. I know scientists hate the "God particle" thing, but until something smaller comes along, it is the stuff of dark matter which they say is 95 percent of the universe."

"And your point is?" asked Wilson.

"It took time for Higgs to be accepted by his peers."

"Ah," said Wilson, "I see your point."

"Only here," said Cyrus, "my peers will be the general overall body of people who understand science and those they tow along, not just a gifted few who can do the math Higgs gave them."

"How could I possibly disagree with your assessment," said Wilson. "However, even though your ideas are revolutionary, given the competition, there will still be a firestorm. Nothing I have seen yet

would ever lead me to believe the Congruent will lie down and roll over, welcoming The Front as they bend the knee. The loss of turf does mean every joint you smoked, every woman you used, will become public knowledge. You will have to play the game if you want to win it, and right now it's still their game. The Front is upsetting the status quo and that, to your adversaries, is Pandora's Box, a unit best unopened."

"Let them come," said Cyrus, starting to count on his fingers and mumble, a departure he was capable of producing at any moment.

"You see Wilson, I've lived forty years longer than I ever thought I would. If the game gets too rough and anything dire ever happened to me, Jax, even Scout, it would ensure the future of The Front."

"Maybe," said Wilson, "but with the head cut off the body falls."

In an email and subsequent podcast to over 32 million members, a number that was growing daily, Cyrus Kohler delivered his very personal message that he agreed with them that the time had come for The Front to take that next step. In the text, Cyrus outlined the prerequisites for party status, a to-do list if you will.

"The first requirement is the support of likeminded individuals. Check. The Front is about to register with the Electoral Commission, which will document our numbers and formalize the use of the term 'The Front.' Registering a party nationally is prohibitively expensive, but we have 32 million members committed to changing America for our idea of better. In the United States today there are 157 million registered voters, more or less, of which 132 million voted in the last election. Our number is undoubtedly comprised of both populations, but I genuinely believe The Front will be more inclined to vote than groups previously polled before us.

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"We intend to finalize our platform and submit it to the Electoral Commission at least 154 days before the primaries. The Electoral Commission will evaluate and hopefully register us, as a party. Since we are seeking to become a federally represented party, our opponents will be the Democrats and Republicans. We will file for and put candidates on the ballots of states throughout the union. These candidates will represent all levels of state and local government. As our candidates will not be supported by PACS or lobbyists, they will only have our internally raised funding for campaigning. We will publish a platform for each candidate and we will mount a grassroots effort to get each one of them elected. We'll get the word out, make no mistake about that. This is the beginning of the end of the political crisis brought about by the social tribes, their congruence, and territoriality.

"Soon we will be sending out an email form asking your approval to appoint Wilson Hahn as our National Party Chairman. Please understand that I cannot fill this position, having inhaled on more than one occasion while Wilson did not. We are excited to be waiting on the arrival of our leader, and as candidates emerge, we will seek your input on every item of importance. Each state's nominating committee must put forward all candidates for public office, and our national caucus must approve them.

"Until Wilson is approved, you all have plenty to do. Begin the selection of candidates and get your state apparatus, minus the payoffs, up and running. Remember, every member of the organizing unit behind each candidate gets one vote on who represents us. Never consider a closed Process."

My Best to you all, Cyrus Kohler.

As Wilson reviewed Cyrus's letter the sincerity and tone struck him.

"So you think a few drugs, women, and failed experiments cancel your Get Out of Jail Free card, Cyrus?"

"Way too much to ask for forgiveness," responded Cyrus without hesitation. "If I'd known the life ahead I'd have committed suicide."

Wilson took the letter to Reese Kerley, Calvin Barnes, and approximately 50 other full and part-time staffers who handled the day to day operations of The Front. Reese fired up the database, which was now in the cloud and on a redundant computer system. More than 32 million members soon received a copy.

Cyrus was pensive as he pondered the day when their future would walk through the door. Cyrus knew that person would have to be someone that society placed above politics and who commanded the respect of friend and foe alike.

"And who might divine providence declare that noble soul to be?" asked Reese, with a curious smile on her face.

"I'd rather not say," said Cyrus, opening the office door, "but I know someone who can wear that hat."

"Remember what you told us," said Calvin, as Cyrus made his exit, "a hat's a party on your head."

Chapter 103

Cyrus was the first person Judy McSettle contacted. "Cyrus," she said, in her usual, matter-of-fact voice, "we just received word that Leonard Ray passed away last night. I thought you might want to know. We're going to open his package."

"Damn," said Cyrus, looking for his car keys.

"Your language is reprehensible and shows no signs of improvement," Judy said, half seriously. She had known Cyrus for more years than she cared to count and his vocabulary, or choice thereof, remained a work in progress.

"Be there in 30," said Cyrus, remotely opening the garage door and firing up the old Beemer.

By the time he arrived at the library so had the reporter and cameraman from the Daily Egyptian and Southern Illinoisan. Judy had the package on an 18' x 10' study table that occupied part of the SIU library's rare book room. Cyrus noticed Charlie Mills the moment he walked in. They had no sooner shaken hands than Judy began to carefully open the top of the 36" x 24" x 3" UPS shipping carton. She pulled out the contents, arranged in a manner that allowed them to all fit neatly into the box. There was a small army hidden inside. On the very top of the pile, centered and held in place with a tiny sliver of Scotch transparent tape, was a letter.

Cyrus had always expected a letter and, whispering, said to Charlie, "The motherfucker got out."

Getting out was an old army phrase from back in the day, which meant not only getting out alive but unscathed.

In a sense, that was what Dr. Leonard Ray had accomplished. He had done no time, and now his time had expired. He'd spend the rest of eternity wherever it was that souls like his went. There would be no earthly penalty remaining for the good professor.

As Judy McSettle read the letter, notes were taken and the camera rolled. Cyrus and Charlie tried to keep their tongues from falling right out of their mouths. In Leonard's own words:

'If you are reading this, then I am gone. You may be considering my approach here as a cowardly way out, but to me, it is a final act of defiance. Coming from where I originated, on a farm near Belleville, Illinois, to University was a milestone on our family tree. No one in my family had ever gone further than grammar

school. Can you imagine my dismay when, after enrolling to be the first college graduate in my family, the United States government sent me my draft card, and it said 1-A? Four years later, it was identical. My entire collegiate experience spent under the gun.

What right did the goddamned Army (pardon me for swearing) have taking my life so capriciously? It wasn't fair, and I refused to be a part of such a grievous conflict. The Vietnam War shaped my life and who I became. As I stood up to those who would send me off while protecting their own, I met two boys; we were all just boys, with whom I would walk headfirst into the war protest movement.

Abby Hoffman and Tom Hayden encouraged me to become a part of something bigger than myself. I did. They insisted I act. In an event significant to some or all of you reading this letter, on a bright June night in 1969, I, as a representative of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and a professional arsonist known only by his pseudonym 'The Torch,' burned Old Main and the ROTC range it housed to the ground. I occasionally had regrets, only for the demise of such a beautiful building, regrets that vanished whenever I contemplated its inherent evil. The two of us burned other structures at universities throughout the Midwest. Those were some trips. Eventually, I escaped to Canada to avoid being drafted and some years after the war received a pardon and came home. It was like I never left. SIU gave me a graduate fellowship.

America treated me better than its soldiers.

As time passed, my activism grew. Over the years, I made several trips to North and South Vietnam, all paid for by the university in the name of research. One of those trips included lunch with Ho Chi Minh and General Giap. Enjoy what I've left and thanks to the chancellor and her predecessors for all their assistance.

Resist. LR

The treasure trove of historical documents included pictures, maps, and letters. Historical fiction it was not. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Dr. Leonard Ray had been an anarchist and arsonist his entire life. A college faculty with liberal political leanings was a perfect place to hide.

"Ray's arsonist had a big reach as well," said Charlie as they all filed outside.

"How do you mean?" asked Cyrus, who had not been as involved in the field work that was ongoing with Ezekiel Octavious, Tony Rocchio, and LaRue Arnold.

What I mean is Octavious occasionally worked with Rocchio. Who knows what those two did that's still lying in the weeds," Charlie said.

"We do know this wasn't their first rodeo. My guess is Octavious will be more than willing to share those tidbits since he is bargaining for his freedom."

"There's that," Cyrus replied.

"There is also," said Charlie, "that picture of Ray swilling beer with two of his college buddies out doing whatever they were doing."

"Yeah, yeah, I remember," said Cyrus.

"Wait a minute," he continued, "the other guy, Ray's buddy in the picture, I can't remember if he ever mentioned him, said his name, it was Crady, no Crew, no no, it was McCreary. He went to school with our esteemed Congressman George McCreary."

"How about that," said Charlie. "It's a small world — liberals, classmates, war protestors, who knows what else. I'll get with Wayne on this," he said.

"Just two lost souls in a plane, flying under the radar," said Cyrus grimly.

Don't you know McCreary's pucker factor went up when Tommy planted his boy," said Charlie, looking like he'd just found nirvana.

"The last thing a criminal needs is to surface in the company of other, already apprehended, criminals," said Cyrus.

"Be careful calling an unindicted congressman a criminal," said Charlie.

I guess if he sued for defamation, it would be one helluva bluff," said Cyrus massaging his sore back.

"It looks to me like McCreary is about to come in out of the cold."

"Yeah," said Charlie, "Arnold and McCreary might end up as roommates."

"I wonder if McCreary's on Lena's list," Charlie said with a slight look of amusement.

"She may have done them all, dude," said Cyrus, slapping him on the back.

"Maybe they've put their last quarter in the jukebox," said Charlie, as he and Cyrus walked toward his office, which was on the other side of University Avenue.

"Let's go sit inside the old girl's foundation, Charlie, and tell her all about it," said Cyrus as they approached the remnant of Old Main's foundation. Two men, well past their primes, proceeded to do just that.

Chapter 104

"Bubba shot the jukebox," Wayne Throgmartin said, talking on his cellphone to Cyrus two weeks after Malencia's death and the subsequent passing of Leonard Ray.

"That's sort of what Charlie said," Cyrus replied, recalling Charlie's words as he flopped his lanky frame into his office chair.

"Did it make him cry?"

"It was pitiful," Wayne replied, "watching McCreary hem and haw, trying to avoid those wicked probes from the press who hadn't fed that morning."

"Maybe they just weren't full," said Cyrus, knowing how the feeding frenzy of the American press had no parameters and could start and stop at a moment's notice.

"Those boys and girls have large appetites, Wayne," said Cyrus, laughing now as the conversation got more out of hand.

"Dirty politicians are a dime a dozen, but it's the side stories surfacing that make some of our leadership so special."

"It's a wonder they're not all obese," said Wayne, "so many targets of opportunity chumming the water at once. By the way, not to change the subject but a while back I found out that your nephew, Lincoln, is now a full fledged G-man. I plan on getting him transferred to me. You can believe that Cyrus."

Cyrus smiled. He wouldn't have to make the introduction after all.

On cue, the great ball of justice had started rolling downhill, obeying the laws of physics, picking up speed as its mass accelerated. Lenora Hemmings had spilled her guts about LaRue, which was enough to spur most resignations, but secondary to the charge of first-degree murder which had been leveled against the big man by the FBI.

Octavious, seeing the ballast discarded into the high seas surrounding his employer, made the best contribution he could justify. He was beginning to understand that whatever the FBI dug up on him would lead to more. There were whole fields to till.

LaRue's wife filed for divorce immediately, on the advice of counsel, to maximize her return on investment. She reluctantly described for the assembled crowd of reporters how many times a particular articulated noun, often used to describe a woman's body part, had come from her now incarcerated spouse's unclean lips. People shuddered, and sympathy rained down on dreams crushed in plain sight. She had withstood his ridicule for years, and now this.

Wilson Hahn had filed the paperwork necessary to begin The Front's road to full party status. The caucuses were selecting their leadership. The two major parties were talking to each other over this no longer merely perceived territorial threat. Their Human Pedigrees were on full display as they denounced the folly of The Front. Well over 32 million people did not share their vision. These new totals, the result of long nights spent tallying returned emails and every type of correspondence imaginable, had exhausted Reese, Calvin, and the Council's now gargantuan database team. In slightly less than two years, The Front had gone from zero to more than 20 percent of the registered electorate, and they were growing.

"Can you believe," said Cyrus, "that of the 32 million people who sent their dollar ..."

Jax interjected, "Nearly all opted in."

"Yeah, that's where I was going," said Cyrus, picking her up, his big hands engaged in improper touching.

"It's a moment," said Cyrus to Jax, Wilson, Reese, Calvin, Duster, Charlie, Tommy, Constance, 56 Council members, and all those gathered for the celebration, including his nephew Lincoln, which was taking place inside the Old Main Fire Foundation, in broad daylight, on a gorgeous summer afternoon. A beautiful Century Tent had been erected to house the participants, but there was no way to contain what was happening here. Everyone was of one mind. The Front had pumped new life into America's heart and was moving forward with dispatch.

"Sometime in the next 30 days," said Wilson, who had stepped up to address the assembled, "we will receive our party status notice from the Federal Election Commission. Our member's addresses and identities have been verified. We cannot thank Reese, Calvin, and the Council, which now is far greater than 10, for their enormous effort."

Wilson clapped, and thunderous applause filled the big tent as the journey was acknowledged.

When the noise died down Wilson continued, "Once we are legal, our first convention as a true political, or nonpolitical, party will be held. The planning for an event of this type is monumental and will rely heavily on the people here today. The caucuses representing each state are developing their agendas and candidates. I predict right here and now that, playing by our rules prohibiting PACS, lobbyists, and campaign fundraisers, and running on what we decide is appropriate for each office, we will secure some victories. The Front will force the hand of the social tribes We will have an impact on their congruence. Our Doctrine of Limited Rights will be talked about every day, by millions of people and their associates. People in this country will learn about Compression and The Age of Violence, and one day, maybe not in my time but many of yours, we will have an electorate that believes that everyone's vote does make a difference because of us, the unbought, and the path we have blazed."

The entire tent reverberated with confirmation as Hahn said,

"Years and years ago, I came up with this phrase, 'One Nation Army.' Wouldn't that be an excellent acronym for The Front? We are, indeed, an army of millions. We are that rarest of political anomalies, a fully committed electorate that knows the agenda going in is not likely to change.

"It will be crucial for all of us to wear our mantle lightly, as scrutiny will follow our every footstep. It is up to all of us to see that our contract with America remains untarnished. Violate our rules, and you'll be banished to the social tribes."

Applause rocked the hall and when it subsided Hahn said, "Most of you here have met Constance Abel. Constance was the first political operative to leave the sanctuary and join The Front. Constance ran two election campaigns for the late Senator Ray Malencia. Cyrus, as the Chairman of our party, I would like to propose to the full membership that Constance be appointed as The Front's National Campaign Committee Manager. She will have overall responsibility for working with, developing, and managing each states campaign efforts. Each state's caucus conducts a vote of every member to choose every candidate. There will be no slating, no lifetime achievement rewards. Constance will oversee this colossal process and monitor and report it to The Front National Headquarters.

Wilson motioned to Cyrus, who extended his hand to Constance as she walked to the front of the room.

"I would never in my wildest dreams have expected to be here at this time and place with all of you," she said in a clear voice which carried with it a reassuring tone of certainty. "Understand that I am just a soldier in this battle for our great country, one who will give her all and do her duty when asked. I will never abandon you in this, our chosen field."

The whole tent erupted, and it was chaos for a moment until Constance held up her arms and asked for quiet.

"There is another whom I have known and admired for years, one who wishes to join with us in this struggle to educate the hearts and minds of our citizens," she said, radiating an unmistakable glow as she walked back and forth across the distance between herself and Dr. Cyrus Kohler.

"I don't have the words to express my emotions at what this will mean to all of you, to me, to Dr. Kohler."

"It will," she went on, "be considered by those of us here today as an earned outcome, something you, more than I, have worked for these past two years."

"As surely as cannon balls exploded in the fields and hills of Gettysburg when our nation fought for its identity, here today you will meet a man who defines the unbought. No one, absolutely no one, has been able to secure his backing for their political party. Let me introduce you to an actual combat soldier who rose through the ranks to become a five-star general and United States Army Chief of Staff, a man who has recently become one of us. Let me introduce you to Lionel Rand."

Cyrus looked at Jax and smiled. It had begun.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The back story of Between the Walls of Time began in the early 1980s. I had met Frank Rowe along the way and had spent many hours listening to him condemn politicians for their excesses. Frank was a liberal minded individual who read two or three major newspapers daily. I could never quite connect Frank to my perception of what he was saying, but for me it became the Process versus Events. When you read about it, an Event has occurred. From that moment on it is history. To change these historical Events you have to change the Process. Thanks, Frank.

As the years rolled by I accumulated a virtual warehouse of documents detailing the ineptness of our political class. Any major company would fire an employee for anything remotely resembling the performance of politicians. What John Adams feared most—mediocrity becoming reality—except for occasional flashes of brilliance, became the norm. One day in 2006, I came up with what surely had to be the title of this work since I was convinced we were living Between the Walls of Time. As I began formulating the parameters that would encompass this novel, several people impacted the final product. Without their help I would not have been able to write this story.

Lt. Colonel Fred Spaulding, Ret., helped me build the opening chapters in a way no one could ever have done. I will always be grateful to CSM Jim Brown, Ret., Director of Veterans Affairs, State of Indiana, for the introduction. Fred is a genuine American Hero. Many of my friends know how sparingly I use that word. When Lt. Col. Spaulding was a sergeant, he served with Col. Hal Moore and CSM Basil Plumlee in the

Ia Drang valley. The year was 1965 and America was at war. We Were Soldiers Once ... And Young written by Lt. General Hal Moore, Ret., and Joseph L. Galloway detailed that battle and became a major motion picture starring Mel Gibson and Sam Elliott. Lt. Col. Spaulding is currently under consideration for The Medal of Honor, the only major military medal he has not received. He was very helpful in connecting me to Major General Benjamin Harrison, Ret., his commanding officer at Ripcord, the last major battle fought by the USA in Vietnam. Major General Harrison is now 90 years old and lives near Austin, Texas. He graciously took the time to talk to me, and I promised to send him a copy for his review. When Lt. Col. Fred Spaulding says Harrison was the finest battlefield commander with whom he had ever served, it carries serious weight. Major General Harrison detailed the battle for Ripcord in his 2004 book, Hell On a Hilltop (iUniverse). I also drew upon Keith Nolan's account of Ripcord published in 2000 (Random House). The heart of the book took shape over at least 15 years, maybe more. My research for Between the Walls of Time was extensive.

Reading Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species, expanded my understanding of genetics and evolution that led to my exploration of the intersection of mysticism and science. Having been an agnostic since my early days in study hall at Metropolis Community High School, tormenting Judy Sullivan's beautiful soul on a daily basis, I eventually began to see her side of the argument and understand the power of the religious tribes and their political brethren.

My ammo pouch filled as I read Robert Audrey's Territorial Imperative. When I got my hands around E.O. Wilson's 'The Social Conquest of Earth' the dots began to connect and I soon began to build what became The Principle of Social Congruence. The Doctrine of Limited Rights I had in hand soon thereafter. Dr. Wilson told me he would have preferred my book to be non-fiction, and in many ways it is. Hopefully he will not be too disappointed.

About this time, in 2014, I spoke to and met Dr. Michael Munger, Professor of Political Science and Economics at Duke University who was very helpful and encouraging. Chris Norwood of Norwood Economics sat down with me twice to elaborate and explain economic questions I raised.

As the book began to take shape I met Kathryn DiBernardo, who became my content editor. Without her constant help and support I would not be typing these acknowledgments. Minus Kathryn there would have been no Between the Walls of Time. She was referred to me by Ben Hale, a fantasy writer living in Florida, who was using her as his editor. Kathryn liked my project and its political philosophy. We developed a long distance relationship as she moved from Florida to New Hampshire and then to Portland, Oregon. Our efforts bloomed. Every time we edited the manuscript it improved. We rewrote, and wrote again. In total, over a 2 year period I counted eleven edits and countless rewrites. It was a laborious process that seemingly had no end. My sincere thanks to you, Kathryn.

During the middle years, as I came to call 2013-14, Judy Simpson, Ret., librarian at SIU, was kind enough to discuss my Leonard Ray/Old Main plot and send me pictures of The Old Main Fire and SIU in its early years. She also referred me to the Trail of Tears Association, The Garden of the Gods, and Lake of Egypt information. Thanks, Judy for helping me build that part of the story.

I would also like to thank all the real life people portrayed as themselves in the book. I never forgot Red and Violet Kerley, now deceased, and stopped by on several occasions to see Violet, living as she did by the side of Highway 51 with a clear view of Red's headstone in the cemetery, which rose above the roadway. Red went there in 1970. Violet lived into her 90's. They don't build them like that anymore.

Here on the home front, my father, Carl Minton Stafford, who passed August 7, 2017 at the age of 93, offered his perspective on the Depression of 1933 and our ancestors who walked The Trail of Tears. I was fortunate to have such a wonderful man as my role model. I could not have done better. As I neared the end of

my process, Lee Henderson, David Yearwood, Reed Cearley, and Patrick Sanders lent their support to my project. Thanks guys.

This book was designed using the Adobe Caslon typeface, originally designed by William Caslon (1720-1766). He based his typeface on Dutch models. This Adobe variant was designed by Carol Twombly. Caslon is regarded as one of the most readable typefaces.