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Rachel closed her eyes as the plane rocketed skyward. She wondered where she had gone wrong this morning. She was supposed to be at a desk writing gists. Now she was straddling a testosterone-fueled torpedo and breathing through an oxygen mask.

By the time the Tomcat leveled out at forty-five thousand feet, Rachel was feeling queasy. She willed herself to focus her thoughts elsewhere. Gazing down at the ocean nine miles below, Rachel felt suddenly far from home.

Up front, the pilot was talking to someone on the radio. When the conversation ended, the pilot hung up the radio, and immediately banked the Tomcat sharply left. The plane tipped almost to the vertical, and Rachel felt her stomach do a somersault. Finally, the plane leveled out again.

Rachel groaned. " Thanks for the warning, hotshot."

" I'm sorry, ma'am, but I've just been given the classified coordinates of your meeting with the administrator."

" Let me guess," Rachel said. " Due north?"

The pilot seemed confused. " How did you know that!"

Rachel sighed. You gotta love these computer-trained pilots. " It's nine A. M., sport, and the sun is on our right. We're flying north."

There was a moment of silence from the cockpit. " Yes, ma'am, we'll be traveling north this morning."

" And how far north are we going?"

The pilot checked the coordinates. " Approximately three thousand miles."

Rachel sat bolt upright. " What!" She tried to picture a map, unable even to imagine what was that far north. " That's a four-hour flight!"

" At our current speed, yes," the pilot said. " Hold on, please."

Before Rachel could respond, the man retracted the F-14's wings into low-drag position. An instant later, Rachel felt herself slammed into her seat yet again as the plane shot forward as though it had been standing still. Within a minute they were cruising at almost 1, 500 miles per hour.

Rachel was feeling dizzy now. As the sky tore by with blinding speed, she felt an uncontrollable wave of nausea hit her. The President's voice echoed faintly. I assure you, Rachel, you will not regret assisting me in this matter.

Groaning, Rachel reached for her hack sack. Never trust a politician.

13

Although he disliked the menial filth of public taxis, Senator Sedgewick Sexton had learned to endure the occasional demeaning moment along his road to glory. The grungy Mayflower cab that had just deposited him in the lower parking garage of the Purdue Hotel afforded Sexton something his stretch limousine could not-anonymity.

He was pleased to find this lower level deserted, only a few dusty cars dotting a forest of cement pillars. As he made his way diagonally across the garage on foot, Sexton glanced at his watch.

11: 15 A. M. Perfect.

The man with whom Sexton was meeting was always touchy about punctuality. Then again, Sexton reminded himself, considering who the man represented, he could be touchy about any damned thing he wanted.

Sexton saw the white Ford Windstar minivan parked in exactly the same spot as it had been for every one of their meetings - in the eastern corner of the garage, behind a row of trash bins. Sexton would have preferred to meet this man in a suite upstairs, but he certainly understood the precautions. This man's friends had not gotten to where they were by being careless.

As Sexton moved toward the van, he felt the familiar edginess that he always experienced before these encounters. Forcing himself to relax his shoulders, he climbed into the passenger's seat with a cheery wave. The dark-haired gentleman in the driver's seat did not smile. The man was almost seventy years old, but his leathery complexion exuded a toughness appropriate to his post as figurehead of an army of brazen visionaries and ruthless entrepreneurs.

" Close the door," the man said, his voice callous.

Sexton obeyed, tolerating the man's gruffness graciously. After all, this man represented men who controlled enormous sums of money, much of which had been pooled recently to poise Sedgewick Sexton on the threshold of the most powerful office in the world. These meetings, Sexton had come to understand, were less strategy sessions than they were monthly reminders of just how beholden the senator had become to his benefactors. These men

were expecting a serious return on their investment. The "return," Sexton had to admit, was a shockingly bold demand; and yet, almost more incredibly, it was something that would be within Sexton's sphere of influence once he took the Oval Office.

"I assume," Sexton said, having learned how this man liked to get down to business, "that another installment has been made?"

"It has. And as usual, you are to use these funds solely for your campaign. We have been pleased to see the polls shifting consistently in your favor, and it appears your campaign managers have been spending our money effectively."

"We're gaining fast."

"As I mentioned to you on the phone," the old man said, "I have persuaded six more to meet with you tonight."

"Excellent." Sexton had blocked off the time already.

The old man handed Sexton a folder. "Here is their information. Study it. They want to know you understand their concerns specifically. They want to know you are sympathetic. I suggest you meet them at your residence."

"My home? But I usually meet-"

"Senator, these six men run companies that possess resources well in excess of the others you have met. These men are the big fish, and they are wary. They have more to gain and therefore more to lose. I've worked hard

to persuade them to meet with you. They will require special handling. A personal touch."

Sexton gave a quick nod. " Absolutely. I can arrange a meeting at my home."

" Of course, they will want total privacy."

" As will I."

" Good luck," the old man said. " If tonight goes well, it could be your last meeting. These men alone can provide what is needed to push the Sexton campaign over the top."

Sexton liked the sound of that. He gave the old man a confident smile. " With luck, my friend, come election time, we will all claim victory."

" Victory?" The old man scowled, leaning toward Sexton with ominous eyes. " Putting you in the White House is only the first step toward victory, senator. I assume you have not forgotten that."

14

The White House is one of the smallest presidential mansions in the world, measuring only 170 feet in length, 85 feet in depth, and sitting on a mere 18 acres of landscaped grounds. Architect James Hoban's plan for a box-like stone structure with a hipped roof, balustrade, and columnar entrance, though clearly unoriginal, was selected from the open design contest by judges who praised it as " attractive, dignified, and flexible."

President Zach Herney, even after three and a half years in the White House, seldom felt at home here among the maze of chandeliers, antiques, and armed Marines. At the moment, however, as he strode toward the West Wing, he felt invigorated and oddly at ease, his feet almost weightless on the plush carpeting.

Several members of the White House staff looked up as the President approached. Herney waved and greeted each by name. Their responses, though polite, were subdued and accompanied by forced smiles.

" Good morning, Mr. President."

" Nice to see you, Mr. President."

" Good day, sir."

As the President made his way toward his office, he sensed whisperings in his wake. There was an insurrection afoot inside the White House. For the past couple of weeks, the disillusionment at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue had been growing to a point where Herney was starting to feel like Captain Bligh-commanding a struggling ship whose crew was preparing for mutiny.