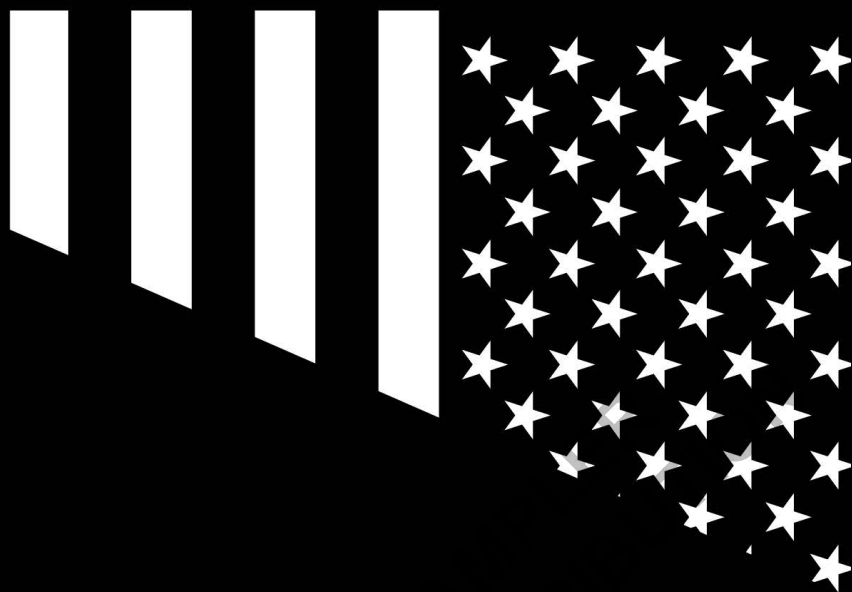


The first Civil War was just practice



# A FEAST OF WOLVES

WILSON  
CONEYBEARE

A NOVEL  
by

There is a guillotine on the steps  
of the U.S. Capitol building.  
Three hundred members of Congress  
and the Supreme Court  
are locked in the basement.

It's a city divided.

It's a new American Civil War.

Twelve elite thinkers have been chosen  
to fix things. They're called Reasoners.

Except one of them, Chase Selby,  
realizes that reason isn't going to work.

He will have to destroy the country to save it.

The question is, can Chase live long enough  
to do it?

# A FEAST OF WOLVES

A novel by

Wilson Coneybeare

□ **INDENT  
PUBLISHING**

[IndentPublishing.com](http://IndentPublishing.com)

# A FEAST OF WOLVES

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*For Lisa, who fights all the time*

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## Author's Note

I don't go in for authors' forewords. Get to the story. But in this case, a word or two of explanation might be necessary, because how this novel came into being was crazy enough, but the events that took place after it was written were even crazier.

About four years ago, in 2018, I wrote and directed a movie where more than half the action takes place in one room and the other half takes place with cops doing a lot of talking. I kept thinking, this has been great but boy, do I want to do something big. Adventurous! On a massive scale! Set in America and about America.

Things being the way they were, I came up with what I thought was a big enough idea: a civil war in America. Not the one with the cannons and the cavalry, but a modern one with iPads, TikTok, and lots of tech.

But I had never written a book before and I wasn't familiar with the freedom a novel gives you. Pretty soon, I discovered you can go anywhere and do anything. So I did.

I imagined and wrote about half the country warring against the other half, an armed insurrection, the overthrow of the U.S. Capitol, a guillotine on the steps of the building itself, and members of the government (including the Supreme Court) tossed into makeshift prisons – all backdrop for a hero who has to unravel it all. And what kicked it off? How about a nationwide virus that led to race riots, which led to anarchy in the streets – not just extremists, but pissed-off senior citizens, kindergarten teachers, truck drivers, nuns, and yes, people dressed in animal furs (I'm not kidding).

I have to admit, even to me it all seemed totally unbelievable and ridiculous, but I kept going and finished the book in 2020. I

started to get a creepy feeling once it was done, however, because soon enough some of the things I had written about didn't seem so outlandish.

The idea was to roll it out online and gauge initial interest, so I began chopping the book up into "postable" sections. But then a thing called COVID stopped the world in its tracks.

We didn't preview the book online until October of 2020, and it caught a small but dedicated following. But soon enough, what became more significant was a weird serendipity as the real world began to unravel strangely like the events in the book. The riots of January 6, however, shook me most of all. The images on the news weren't of a guillotine on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, but it was a gallows and that was close enough.

I didn't want to seem to be taking advantage of something so terrifying, so we pulled down most of the book. After a while, though, I decided that fiction has a crucial role to play in understanding the craziness around us. So maybe people should decide for themselves. I also discovered something I hadn't really anticipated: The people who control big publishing and big agenting have their view of what people ought to be reading and I have mine.

Fortunately, the good folks at Indent Publishing came to champion the work and the result of their faith is what you're holding in your hands or looking at on your phone or tablet right now. This is the book that I completed in 2020 – in print for the first time. My crazy big adventure story that somehow wound up reflecting, by sheer accident, a lot of the things that have rocked this country for the past few years.

So here we go. Like I said, I don't like prefaces. Get to the story. So let's get to the story. Fortunately, fiction is still stranger than truth. We hope.

Wilson Coneybeare  
October 2022

## Book 1:

### *A Guillotine in Washington*

“But what is more divine, I will not say in man only,  
but in all heaven and earth, than reason?”  
– Cicero

“The extreme suppression of your rights deserves the  
most extreme reaction you can dream up.  
And it is never wrong.”  
– *Words of the Wolf*, pg. 22 (Free Kindle Edition)



## 1. *Pointy Shoes*

### 1

To everyone's surprise, and flying in the face of the Reasoner Compromise, they resumed culling on Friday night, although the leadership made it clear they were restricting themselves to junior civil servants and Capitol staff. There were a lot of pissed-off people when word got around about that, but even the most diehard Changer had to admit that in the first culling they'd kind of lost their minds and wasted far too many Senators and Congressmen in the rush of enthusiasm, and at least half of them outside prime time, when the eyeballs – particularly on the West Coast – were low. So what was the point of that?

They still made a good show of it, though. They randomly chose and dragged a young man from the staffer pen in the basement of the U.S. Capitol building. He was in his late twenties at most, a classic junior power broker in skinny suit and pointed shoes. He cried and screamed and yelled as they hauled him up the steps. Webs of gob latticed across his mouth and nose as he kicked back at them with those pointy dress shoes. "No!" he shouted. "No!" Three huge men – one in a Philly Eagles jersey, another in a Washington Capitals jersey, another shirtless but covered in tattoos – carried him feet first to the guillotine.

The crowd was really into this until they learned from CNN and Fox (almost everyone on the lower steps watched their own actions live on smartphones) that this guy wasn't actually a power broker at all. He was just a junior-level data-entry clerk in the government. Once that got out, most everyone lost interest and began talking amongst themselves. They cut his head off anyway, so as not to lose face.

Beavenstock, the Changer's leader, felt the crowd's disappointment. He had an instinct for those things. So he made a snap decision and assured everyone over the loudspeakers that there were still plenty of big fish to fry. They would most definitely be decapitating a Senator tonight if the weather held. That perked everyone up. Beavenstock chose Tobias Brubaker (R.-Iowa), about whom neither he, nor anyone in the crowd, knew anything. Fortunately, the weather not only held, but it cleared up quite nicely. So they decapitated Senator Brubaker and no one was disappointed. There were a lot of barbecues out on the Mall that night. You never leave the audience wanting less.

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## 2. *Chase*

### 1

By August, Washington's train station had become something it hadn't been for sixty-plus years: important.

The airports had been shut down since April. At first this was because the Secret Service had determined that aircraft landing indiscriminately posed a very real threat to the White House specifically (back when they had something to protect), and then because the FAA had determined that *all* aircraft around D.C. were a threat to the region generally. This was after the first wave of protesters in Washington had somehow laid their hands on a shoulder-to-air missile. By sheer dumb luck, these jokers had managed to take out one of the engines on a United 737 right over Ronald Reagan National Airport. So that was the end of that.

Trains were better suited to the hordes that kept streaming into the city anyway. Every day there were more and more of them, everyone hoping there would be a second culling and that they hadn't missed the excitement. The country watched them on TV, and in time divided them into groups. First there were the diehard Changers, who unofficially wore a uniform of sports jerseys (Patriots/49ers/Colts/Seahawks). These folks could be mistaken for rabid football fans on their way to the Big Game, if you ignored the firearms and the wolf hats. Then there were the bikers, whom most people referred to as Harleys, after Harley-Davidson. In tense opposition to these were the people in tactical armor, weekend warriors tricked out from head to toe in combat or riot gear. Then there were the regular folks, moms and dads and kids who looked

like they'd come to Washington for a weekend cookout. Almost all of these – and most of the Jerseys – had wolf gear: plastic snouts for the kids, cheap faux fur caps hawkers sold on the street for moms and dads, or more legit ones sold at sporting goods stores or Target or Walmart. Some hats even had the plastic snout on them, complete with bared teeth, but those you could only get online from Amazon.

## 2

That August afternoon, Chase Selby was on one of the few trains entering Union Station that didn't have crazed wolf-hat-wearing, gun-toting revolutionaries clinging to its side or squatting on its roof. Chase's was a special, which in this case meant an armored train six cars long with the middle fourth car and the caboose loaded with reserve military personnel.

Chase stood alone in the passenger car, which had been emptied expressly for his security. As he looked out at Washington passing slowly by the picture window, he knew he had less to fear than almost any other person in the city at that moment. Chase was a Reasoner, after all, and both sides had agreed – in principle, anyway – that only Reasoners could pull everyone out of the shit mess the United States had somehow made for itself. This agreement between the two warring sides – the Changers and the Government of Record (GOR) – was called the Reasoner Compromise, and while the language was iffy in a lot of places, in one area it was explicit: Reasoners were given special status. To be protected by both sides. At all costs.

Chase was looking south as the train inched its way into town. He saw smoke rising from somewhere in the near distance. Was that as close as the Mall? Chase didn't know Washington that well, but it seemed to him the reflecting pool and the long stretch of green grass called the Washington Mall was somewhere over there. He had been to the city only twice before, but obviously under entirely different circumstances.

There were angry – no, furious – people waiting on the banks of the rail line as the train slowed in its approach to the station. Just as many women as men, Chase noted with surprise. They shouted and hurled rocks and food at the train. Idiotically, some official had put a government emblem on the side of the train, so maybe that had set them off. Some joker wearing a hunter's red plaid jacket fired a potato cannon right at the window. Chase had been told to expect this kind of thing. He had also been told the train's windows were reinforced and bulletproof.

Still, though.

He stepped back.

Captain Holden, the able young state guard commander assigned to his security detail, returned to the car through the connecting door. Chase noted his costume change. Holden had been wearing a perfectly cut single-breasted business suit and open collar when he and the security team had escorted Chase onto the train at Princeton. Now the captain was in full combat fatigues, complete with sidearm – no, two sidearms – and a lethal-looking bowie knife. Apparently, he had just made the change. He was adjusting the cap to his liking, as if preparing for battle, and pulling on a pair of expensive-looking calfskin gloves. Chase had read in the dossier that Holden came from an exceedingly wealthy family, so maybe he had a dog in this fight beyond his patriotism.

“We’re going to be at a full stop in four minutes, sir,” the commander said. “I want to warn you of what to expect. Fucking savages!” This last was in response to a row of fat middle-aged men in Washington Capitals jerseys, who had just hurled a flaming seven-foot log (a telephone pole?) at the window of the train. Their exertion was so great, and the men so out of shape, that the three of them promptly fell over.

Holden apologized for the outburst. “My apologies, sir.”

“I’m nobody you need to apologize to,” Chase said.

“When we arrive, you’ll need to wait approximately five minutes while we make sure the train is secure. You’ll stand by the

disembarkation door. Then Commander Guerra will escort you off the train. We've set up a security corridor and you'll be escorted to an armored vehicle that will take you directly to your accommodations. We've arranged for a motorcycle security escort."

"No," said Chase. "I want to go by the Capitol first."

"Sir?"

"To see it."

"Absolutely not."

"How am I going to be able to fulfill my duties if I don't even see it?"

"You can see as much as you want on CNN. Or Twitter or Instagram or Tik Tok."

"Things like that are different in person."

"Things like what, sir? I don't know that we've ever had anything *like* this, have we?"

He had a point, but Chase wouldn't be swayed. "All the same."

"You are aware they started again last night?"

Of course he was. Everyone was aware. Chase had, in fact, spent a good part of the journey from Princeton following last night's adventures on his smartphone. Reception, of course, had been terrific, and data unlimited, because the Changers were nothing if not technically capable, and the early takeover of the telecom companies had been one of their first shrewd moves, burning down Verizon's headquarters and murdering not just its CEO but its entire – and perhaps unnecessary – board of directors. As a result, Chase had been able to witness replays of last night's madness in full HD, including the final seconds of the life of Senator Tobias Brubaker in all their gory detail.

"That's why I need to see it," Chase said.

"They're savages, sir. Anything could happen."

"So let's get a look at the savages."

They were about the same age, around thirty, and Holden had the military stature, but Chase won the stare-down. He knew he would. His whole life people had said he was one of those who just

seemed to know the right way to go. He wondered if that was the mark of a Reasoner. He hoped so, because truth be told, Chase had no idea what a Reasoner was, or what was expected of him. Now that he was in the city – or almost in the city – and was seeing the state of things, he wondered how he, or anyone, was supposed to be able to fix such a colossal shitshow.

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### 3. *Loosing the Fateful Lightning*

#### 1

Some said the government shutdown, which took up most of the early part of the year – a mind-numbingly stupid stare-down between the President and Congress that made everyone’s life miserable and achieved nothing – had started it all.

And there was truth in that. After all, the shutdown led to the viral epidemic that spread like wildfire across the East Coast, up from Georgia all the way to New York. It was called VIRA and *that* was caused because the governor of Georgia refused to deem water and safety inspectors as crucial services during the shutdown. Nor did he have any interest in interfering with the business practices of Dynastic Chemicals Inc., a company that saw the shutdown as the perfect opportunity to flood the Middle Savannah River with more than 11,670,000 pounds of toxic chemicals. After all, the CEO of Dynastic Chemicals was a golfing buddy of the President’s, and the President had shares in Dynastic, so where was the risk?

By the time it wound down, the VIRA epidemic killed more than 146,000 Americans, and created God knows how much economic turmoil and civil unrest.

Nowhere was this truer than in Virginia, where martial law had been declared. The cops in some of the smaller towns took this to mean you could shoot a lot of Black people after dark, which they decided to do with even greater frequency than usual.

Which is where the first guillotine came in.



## 2

It appeared on March 17, in front of the Lynchburg, Virginia sheriff's building. A lot of people thought it was a joke.

The civil rights group Black Force had come to Lynchburg in response to the curfew crackdown which led to the killing of a group of Black teenagers the week before. For his part, the sheriff said the police had no choice but to shoot the kids, because every time one of his officers – “good, God-fearing family men,” he said, forgetting the women in the force, something for which he later issued a written apology – approached a Black teenager to ask him what he might be doing out after dark, the cop became so frightened for his life that he had to kill the Black kid sooner than he had planned to.

The VIRA epidemic had created chaos, but no one could have guessed that it was only prelude compared to Lynchburg. From here on in, things were about to get really hairy.

By the end of that first week of March, Black Force had wound up occupying the actual sheriff's office and making good on their threat to shoot any cop who tried to retake any part of the building. For their part, the cops were determined to do exactly that – retake their building and, specifically, the secret armory in the sub-basement. This contained an astonishing arsenal of semi-automatic weapons, which would be crucial if the cops wanted to keep the peace. To make all that happen, and to keep Black Force occupied and from discovering the arsenal for themselves, the cops kept up a barrage of gunfire from the weapons they already carried, which was satisfying for now but nowhere near as satisfying as using the stuff in the armory.

So it went, back and forth.

On the fourth day of this standoff, during a lull, the Black guys watched in amazement as some of the cops bravely scampered out into the open. Right there on the lawn, they quickly erected a sort of prefabricated gallows, complete with noose. This was an obvious

reference to lynching and the Jim Crow South, and MSNBC and CNN made their outrage known. Shootings were one thing, but this kind of intolerant racial slur was outrageous.

Two days later, the cops awoke to discover the gallows gone and replaced by a guillotine – Black Force demonstrating that they too had a pretty bleak sense of humor.

It wasn't a real guillotine, of course. That kind of thing is hard to come by, even in Lynchburg, Virginia. Anderson Cooper would later report that it was actually lifted from a nearby prop house that usually rented it out to amateur theatrical companies putting on community theatre productions of *Les Miz*, always a crowd pleaser, particularly in Savannah or Asheville or Knoxville.

What the Black Force leaders didn't know and couldn't have imagined as they were engaging in a literal gunfight with the law enforcement officials of Lynchburg, Virginia was that they were giving inspiration to a group of irate senior citizens who had just seen their retirement savings disappear due to the latest investment house crash. The announcement of this disaster took place literally two days after postings of the annual compensation paid to the top five bank CEOs (average weekly pay packet: \$532,000) were plastered all over the internet.

### 3

No one would ever know how exactly things went from a group of senior citizens in fleece and Tilley hats chanting "This is what democracy feels like" to moms and dads literally lighting the Goldman Sachs building at 200 West Street in Manhattan on fire, but things got out of hand in the Big Apple with lightning speed. Soon protesters were smashing most of the windows on the first, second, third, and half the fourth floors of the Citigroup building at 399 Park. On day three of the Streeter movement – which became the genesis for the nationwide protests over income inequality – a guillotine appeared right where the Merrill Lynch bronze bull stood,

or used to stand. Here as well, no one knew where it came from, but no one missed the implied solidarity between senior white Americans and their Black brothers and sisters shooting it out with the cops in the town that had made Jerry Falwell a symbol of clean American living.

## 4

Violence inspires violence. The riots in Bentonville, Arkansas may or may not have been juiced by what went down in Lynchburg or New York, but for sure things wouldn't have gone so crazy had one of the Walton family not made the poor decision to step outside the retail giant's corporate office. He wanted to talk to the folks demanding living wages. At that very moment, the Walton scion explained, Walmart had in fact instituted a base wage of \$17, which was considerably higher than almost all state minimum wages. This sounded good to some in the crowd, but not to a forty-five-year-old factory worker named Wes Montana, who didn't even work for Walmart but had watched his wife succumb to breast cancer the year before. Wes lost not just the love of his life but also his home, the sale of which was necessary to cover what the family's inadequate medical insurance (set up by Walmart) would not. So, being in the right place at the right time, Wes Montana smashed in the Walton scion's head with a brick, an image which was caught on an iPhone and went viral. A day later, a guillotine appeared in Bentonville, Arkansas.

## 5

The people of Lexington, Kentucky weren't shy. They made it clear they were very much inspired – some would say divinely inspired – by the events in Arkansas. Three days after Wes Montana clocked the Walmart scion, two nuns who worked as nurses at St. Nicholas's Hospital set about burning down the Humana building as well as

the state Blue Cross headquarters. Both acts were performed in the name of the Lord and memorialized by the nuns themselves, who sent their videos into the cyber world by virtue of their Samsung Galaxies. Overnight, the two sisters discovered they had a lot of converts to their cause, and suddenly there was a run on tiki torches, which turned out to be very handy when it came to setting ablaze the offices of health insurance companies, or in fact any business related to the iniquities of private health insurance across the country.

Protests from the state's elected representatives – that Kentucky did not have the worst health care in the country (in fact, Arkansas did; Kentucky was only forty-third of fifty) – didn't cut much ice. It seemed kind of splitting hairs too. People clearly wanted change, and they were no longer interested in being polite or good citizens.

Perhaps that's why, sometime after Kentucky and right before West Virginia, when pissed-off miners led by a righteous powerhouse named Jeff Beavenstock literally blew up the state Capitol, one word was discovered the next morning, spray-painted into the smoking wreckage. "Changers."

6

Changers.

It meant all of them: Lynchburg, Bentonville, Lexington, Wall Street, anywhere the people were fed up and demanded change. "Changer" was the word from late March through April and into May.

Suddenly guillotines were popping up everywhere.

A big blade appeared in front of the state house in Texas after the governor decreed protesters would be thrown in jail for sedition; another popped up when the Department of Homeland Security declared that the United Federation of Public School Teachers protesting against pay discrimination were a threat to national security; a third appeared in Davenport, Iowa after the city announced they were raising taxes but had no plans to fix the water supply.

This was the crisis the news media called the “middle-American protest” or “the crisis in the small towns” and then, eventually, “the Uprising.”

Then, two days after Davenport, on May 1, the public employees who make up most of the population of Washington, D.C. awoke to find an eighteen-foot-tall guillotine bolted to the mezzanine steps of the west front of the United States Capitol building, the side which looked all the way across the grassy Mall and the reflecting pool to the Lincoln Memorial.

This was clearly *not* a prop. With its counterweight released, it set the 88-pound blade rocketing downwards at a drop speed of almost 21 feet per second for a total drop time of 1/70<sup>th</sup> of a second, delivering a wallop of 5,100 pounds of pressure per square inch. It could cut a human arm off at the shoulder in less than 0.005 seconds, and a head absolutely no problem.

This clearly, and finally, was the real thing.

7

CNN reported that as of 3 a.m. that Wednesday, the 66 as well as the 495, 395, and I-95 – and every other road leading into Washington – was jammed bumper to bumper. Soon, the Virginia and Maryland state police shut down highway access to the capital. Commercial bus service was also cancelled. Reagan National Airport had been shut down due to the anti-aircraft debacle. Dulles and BWI followed two days later.

If this was the establishment’s best attempt to keep Changers from flooding the city, it was too little and too late.

The Changer cause had spread by social media. Soon, therefore, everyone who used Twitter or Facebook or Snapchat or Instagram or even a phone knew that the best way to get into the nation’s capital was by rail, a form of transportation the authorities – most of whom flew on private jets – had completely forgotten about. Suddenly, railroads were back in full use for the first time since

1967, the year the Commerce and Trade Act, written by GM, Ford, and Chrysler, had done everything they could to destroy the use of passenger rail travel.

Ironically, many of the people who had renewed that bill on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary were herded into the basement of the Capitol building on May 22<sup>nd</sup> (a date later abbreviated to 5/22). Here they would live, the once High and Mighty, ears pressed to the walls or ceilings through which they were able to hear the crowd outside the nation's capital, yelling as loudly as any mob at the Superbowl or in a Roman Coliseum. But it wasn't the cheering crowd the terrified public servants wanted to hear. They wanted to hear whose name was going to be called next.

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#### 4. *Chase and the Guillotine*

##### 1

The train finally stopped in the station. As instructed, Chase waited in the doorway between rail cars for the better part of four minutes.

The window which normally made up the top half of the door had been reinforced with a steel plate, so Chase could only hear, not see, the chaos on the other side. What he heard were crazy people shouting at one another, police whistles, and a loudspeaker mindlessly repeating the same instructions over and over: “Step away and vacate the platform area. This is a red zone. Repeat, step away and vacate the platform area. This is a red zone.” A voice broadcast through a bullhorn delivered exactly the same message, except in this case it was pretty much screaming.

Two separate messages, for a very good reason. Washington was now a city divided, like old Berlin. Two forces – what remained of the U.S. government and the Changers – controlled it. And nowhere was this division and its resulting chaos on better display than within Washington’s Union Station.

The door was suddenly ripped open. Commander Guerra – or someone Chase sure hoped was Commander Guerra – reached in and grabbed Chase’s upper left arm. Without ceremony, Chase was yanked down the two steps and practically carried through a corridor of armed soldiers in full riot gear. They lifted their shields at odd moments and thrust them out. Chase was confused by this at first, but then realized they were deftly deflecting garbage and cans of food – tuna cans in particular – thrown by the mob.

Once they got him through the rear of the station to its vaulted atrium, Chase was shoved out the front doors and hustled toward an SUV that stood by the curb at Columbus Circle, the rear door opened at the last possible second. He did a double-take. The person holding the door was an enormous, pot-belled senior citizen wearing a leather Hells Angels vest. He carried an AR-15 – the gun of choice these days – held upright against his left arm. Three hundred and thirty pounds of belly and beard and yet he nodded politely to Chase like a doorman at the Dorchester. He actually said, “Good to have you with us.”

Chase started to respond to this politeness with a politeness of his own, but Holden shoved Chase into the back of the car and hopped in after. The door was slammed. Someone smacked the roof. The SUV pulled away.

Inside the car, Chase pulled himself up and looked out the windows. There were motorcycles in front and on either side of them.

“Hells Angels?” Chase asked, looking back through the rear window at the man who had held the door for him.

Holden nodded with embarrassment. “They’ve announced themselves neutral, so we decided to recruit some of them as a secondary force. We’re facing a manpower shortage due to the ...” He hesitated just a second. “Reallocation. It’s just temporary.”

Chase started to respond, but a tuna can hit the car. “Pick up the pace!” Holden told the driver. He explained to Chase, “We’re harder to hit the faster we go.”

The Capitol was only a few blocks away. The motorcycles up front did a pretty efficient job of clearing a path, spikes and taser prods sticking out either side of the bikes and the lead cyclist firing a pistol in the air to herald their approach, but it was still a pretty thick crowd to plow through.

The route took them down Delaware Avenue and along Northwest Drive to the west side of the Capitol and beyond that, the wide, grassy Mall.



“Why the tuna?” Chase asked.

“It was something she said.” Holden said. “On MSNBC or somewhere. She said, ‘If you only have a garden hose or a snow shovel or a can of tuna, use it.’ Churchill, or almost. She’s shrewd. I can tell you, a can of tuna hurts.”

She. The whole country knew who ‘she’ was. The whole world, likely. She called herself Sister Sheena, the ying to Changer leader Beavenstock’s yang, one half of a very unsteady and volatile political alliance. She wasn’t exactly a kid, but her youth pissed off a lot of people. So did her stridency. And appeal.

“Like she’s ever used a shovel or a hose,” Holden said. “All that street stuff is bullshit. I heard she went to Yale.”

“I heard Stanford. Doesn’t she come from California?”

Holden shrugged. “Like all the other bullshit, they took her literally. But it’s weird she chose tuna. Cat food is cheaper but because it’s more tightly packed turns out nowhere near as clean a yaw. That’s a hell of a thing for her to know, don’t you think?”

They were coming around the bend from Northwest Drive. The crowd was getting thicker and edging closer to the car on either side.

Chase gazed out at the snarling, misshapen faces screaming in at them. “It’s worse than I expected.”

“I told you, they’re savages.” Holden now had his sidearm out and was holding it up, ready for who knew what. He took the safety off. “And of course, they’re more psyched up because of last night.”

They took the right and then the left turn. The first thing Chase saw as they came around the bend were people perched on top of the Grant Memorial and the Peace Monument. Some of them had binoculars. More than half of them wore wolf hats.

Then Chase saw it. The top of it, anyway.

## 2

What the country called the Great Guillotine rose eighteen feet from its base, but because it was placed on the second terrace of the Capitol steps, it seemed to tower that much higher. And the great blade was up at the moment, so it caught the light. It seemed to beckon you forward.

At the moment there was a guard around the guillotine, made up of Changers in football jerseys ('Jerseys') and the weekend warriors in full tactical gear ('Tacticals'). It was this formidable force, as well as a rope strung across the stop step, that kept the crowds back. The rabble were clearly expecting more excitement today, because they were chanting and singing and seemed almost high. There were a lot of smartphones poised at the ready.

"They're hoping the Reasoner Compromise is broken," Holden said. "Because Beavenstock did the staffer first, then finished off with a Senator. That really riles them up."

"What do you mean?"

"They love it when you do a Congressman of any sort, but especially a Senator. So it's become a big finish thing with him. The only problem is, you can't control them the next day. It's like a drug. Like I said, savages."

The crowd forced the small motorcade to move away from the Capitol steps and down alongside the Mall.

Chase had expected to be shocked by the guillotine – and he was – but to his surprise, it was nothing compared to the Mall. That left him speechless.

## 3

Everything was so well set up. That's what struck him first. It was like an Independence Day picnic. There were camp chairs and beach chairs, umbrellas and coolers of beer and cold cuts and potato salad,

as well as snack bars and barbecues every few yards and, down the side of Independence Avenue, food trucks. Children were on their dad's shoulders and moms had brought sunscreen. When announcements weren't being made from the Capitol mezzanine, music was playing from speakers clipped to the top of wheeled basketball hoops that had been placed every seventy-five feet or so, all the way to the Lincoln Memorial. At the moment, the song was *96 Tears*, which Chase had always liked. Everyone was armed.

Violence, he discovered, erupted quickly and was dealt with instantly.

As they were edging up 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, a man jumped out in the middle of Madison Drive waving a hatchet. Someone – one of the Jerseys positioned along the sidewalk, Chase thought – shot him. The body was quickly moved to the side. A five-year-old boy, surprised by the loud noise, dropped his snow cone and started crying when he saw it melting on the pavement. His mother rushed in and evidently promised him a new one, because the kid perked right up.

“Holy shit,” Chase said.

“Have they told any of you why the Changers resumed?” Holden asked Chase.

“I just got here. I haven't been briefed on anything yet.”

“It certainly does seem counter to the Compromise,” said Holden, fishing for information.

Chase shrugged. “I imagine a lot of people are looking for a lot of answers.” Then, Chase gave it a shot from his side. “How would one know if they intend to go again tonight?”

Holden shook his head. “There's no way of knowing until they put it on Twitter. But if they do, it won't be until eight at the earliest.” Holden saw Chase's inquiring look. “They're always careful to catch the West Coast.”

They were going up 7<sup>th</sup> Street now. Chase was unsure about his geography, but this seemed wrong. “I thought we were staying at the Hyatt.”

“There was a problem with that.”

“Booked?”

“In a manner of speaking. You’ll be staying in one of the old off-site State buildings. But your meetings are going to be held at Treasury.”

So many last-minute changes. “We were supposed to be meeting in the government accounting building,” Chase said.

“You were,” said Holden. “But they burned it down this morning.”

There was a pause.

“Probably no great loss.”

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## 5. *The Reasoners*

### 1

Chase's motorcade drove across the "border" between Changers Washington and the GOR Washington, which was roughly Pennsylvania Avenue. Right past the Hyatt hotel. Chase leaned forward, peering across Commander Holden's body to get a better look at the hotel where he wouldn't be staying.

Clearly the problem wasn't that the place was closed. On the contrary, the Hyatt was a veritable beehive of activity, with all sorts of folks happily streaming in and out through the double sliding glass doors and plenty of others crowding the sidewalk. The problem was that most of the clientele of the four-star hotel were Jerseys, Harleys, or badass Tactical guys wearing civilian riot gear. Everyone was armed, with a good quarter of them carrying semi-automatic or even automatic rifles. The sidewalk litter baskets outside the street entrance were filled to bursting with fast food garbage, and three heavysset teenagers were busy jumping up and down on an overturned USPS mailbox. In other words, the Commander had been correct – the Hyatt was not available, but it was very much occupied.

The off-site State Department building which had been chosen in its stead turned out to be only a few blocks away. In contrast to the handsome Hyatt, this was a dismal grey bunker, tall for Washington, with a surrounding iron fence reinforced by razor wire. Clearly, it had been chosen because it could be protected.

Armed state guards stood at full attention every ten feet outside and inside the barrier, and roadblocks of Normandy fencing had been erected at each mouth of the driveway. As his car pulled in,

Chase saw that the men guarding the entry were in full combat gear with stars and stripes on the left breast pocket. No Hells Angels mercenary support here – strictly U.S. issue, although they had to be reserves or state guards, as per the withdrawal on Capture Day.

“Do not exit the car until advised to do so,” said Holden. “We need to secure the area first.”

Chase, who had absolutely no intention of getting out of any car until he was advised to do so, eyed the state guard, the razor wire, and the Normandy fencing. “This isn’t secure enough?”

Holden didn’t respond. He was looking in all directions through all windows at the same time, as if waiting for an attack. To Chase’s eye, this seemed far less likely on the Government side of town. Since they had driven up from Constitution Avenue, the crowds had thinned noticeably, and there had been no overture toward the vehicle or its escort SUVs. In fact, for the last half-block since passing the Hyatt, you could have convinced yourself that you were in normal Washington. More than half the stores and coffee shops were open.

Apparently satisfied that it was safe to do so, Holden popped open the door and vaulted from the car to address a fellow Commander standing just outside.

Chase stayed in the back seat as the military men did their thing, which seemed to be saluting one another, speaking in hushed monotones, and exchanging papers.

A sudden rifle shot. Chase spun around in his seat. The escort Harleys, so handy in getting them through the Capitol crowds, were parked on the other side of the fencing, waiting dutifully. This turned out to be the source of the ‘rifle shot.’ One of the armored Harley Fat Boys had backfired.

“Professor!”

Chase turned. Holden was holding the door open for him.

He was yanked out of the car and, not unlike the scurry through the train station, rushed into the State office building under more than his own power.

## 2

Everything changed the second they entered the marbled reception area. There were friendly faces in here, or at least one. A young man in a blazer and striped school tie stood in the center of the vast polished atrium, holding a clipboard. He greeted Chase enthusiastically. “Professor Selby!” He wore a security badge and introduced himself as either Tyler or Skyler, Chase wasn’t sure which. Whoever he was, he clearly had some sort of authority, for he thanked Holden and summarily dismissed him, saying he would take it from here.

“We won’t need you until the tea,” Tyler said.

To Chase’s surprise, Holden responded to this discharge by turning about-face and snapping off a smart salute directed at ... Chase!

He had never been saluted before, so he just nodded to Holden and thanked him for his help. Holden turned on his heel and marched toward a double set of crash doors which led to a corridor on the north side of the building.

## 3

Chase was relieved to be away from the guns. Tyler seemed relieved as well, but for other reasons. “You’re all here now,” he said as they rode the elevator together. “That’s a good thing.”

Chase noticed that Tyler had to start the elevator by swiping a card as well as turning a key attached to his belt. As if this weren’t enough, he also entered a six-digit access code. “I will be your PSLO – personal services liaison officer – during your time here,” Tyler said. “Which means you can turn to me for anything related to your stay.”

“How many personal services liaison officers are there?”

“Six. Twelve Reasoners, six PSLOs. Two Reasoners per floor, with Director Brueler on Four. Here we are. Top floor.”

They got off on a floor that clearly at some point had been the exclusive domain of executive directors and high-level bureaucrats. As Chase followed Tyler to the right, they passed a half-dozen closed doors, wide, set apart, of polished walnut, now sealed with crisscrossed aluminum braces. Someone had forgotten to remove the nameplates, however. “DIRECTOR, INTERNATIONAL ACTION ASSESSMENT,” and “CO-ORDINATOR, ASIAN INITIATIVES AND FEASIBILITIES.”

Tyler nodded at an armed guard standing sentry at the far end of the corridor, then unlocked the second-to-last door. He used both the key and the card. “This entire building was spillover State,” he explained to Chase. “It was evacuated on 5/22.”

“But why here?”

“As a State building it had been a high-level security location, so that meant reinforced entry and exit, daily sweeps for surveillance, easy to protect, and – ” Tyler gave him a wink, “it had enough executive offices with their own ensuite bathrooms.”

Tyler held the door open. Chase entered. He was standing inside what could easily pass for a luxury suite in any five-star hotel.

Tyler said, “It was determined that it would be easier to bring in beds and headboards and retrofit offices than to figure out how to make the Intercontinental or the Hyatt externally safe.”

“They did a magnificent job.”

“We aim to please.”

Chase went to the window. Even though they were only on the sixteenth floor, from this angle he could see just over enough rooftops to get a glimpse of the Mall and, beyond that, a piece of the Capitol building. Not surprising, given that the Washington Monument was the tallest structure in the city and there were rules about how high you could build in D.C.

“Don’t worry,” said Tyler. “The windows are one-way, and destruction proof.” Chase noted the careful avoidance of the word ‘bullet.’

Chase turned from the window and considered the artwork on



the walls. He studied a portrait of James K. Polk. “Is that original?”

Tyler nodded as he squatted down to check the mini-bar. “They figured that as long as they were moving the entire contents of the National Portrait Gallery, they may as well place some of it in a secure location. It’s assumed you won’t spill anything on it or sell it.”

“When did they decide to make the change?” Chase asked.

Tyler craned his neck around to look at him. He hesitated just a fraction of a second, barely noticeable, before answering, “Last night. When the Changers broke the Compromise.”

“That probably meant a lot of scrambling.”

Tyler shook his head as he rose out of his squat. “In my opinion, the Hyatt would never have worked. We were ready with an alternate, of course. So we just released it. I hear there are Changers with AR-15s hanging around the lobby now, getting drunk and reloading. Maybe they’ll accidentally shoot one another. Hope springs.” Tyler disappeared into the bedroom and called back. “The linen is fresh and you have a change in the lower drawer of the dresser. You can always call down for extra. You will have daily maid service if you want. I made sure there are four pillows on the bed – I always like extra myself – and two more in the closet. I hope that’s sufficient.”

“It’s more than enough. Thank you.”

Tyler emerged from the bathroom. “Your Wi-Fi information is on the desk. You’ll need it. Cellular service is non-existent here – part of the security protocols, I’m afraid – but the Wi-Fi is government protected. And you must only use *that* Wi-Fi. And obviously you wouldn’t use cellular for any official business.”

“No, of course not.”

Chase, having just driven past the U.S. Capitol building with the eighteen-foot-tall guillotine out front, wasn’t exactly sure what ‘government-protected’ meant, but he appreciated the spirit. A large part of him was truly sorry to be doing without Free-Fi, though, the lightning-fast cellular and Wi-Fi service that he and the rest of the country had come to enjoy free of charge, courtesy of the Changers’ can-do tech.

Tyler gestured to an old-fashioned red telephone on the coffee table. “That’s your government-issued communications lifeline.”

Chase looked. “Also from the museum?”

“Our people say analog is almost impossible to crack.”

“Can the Reasoners call one another?”

It was a question Tyler hadn’t anticipated. “For now, you can only call your PSLO or their surrogate.”

“What about individual security? Within the building?”

“There will be one armed military personnel per floor. It’s unnecessary, though. You can rest assured this is the safest building in Washington.”

Chase could have pointed out that the White House was supposed to be the safest building in Washington, but he decided to let that go. After all, as far as anyone knew, the White House was unoccupied at the moment.

“Director Brueler has called for a meeting with the GOR for later this afternoon,” said Tyler. “That will be at three. That still gives you all plenty of time to refresh, and you can be on time for tea.”

“You mentioned that to Commander Holden. A tea?”

“On the fourth floor, in less than an hour. Boardroom One. It will allow you to meet all your fellow Reasoners for the first time.”

“I see.”

“Your daily schedule has been sent to you via secure text and is also printed and on the coffee table. It will be left under your door every night.”

“Thank you.”

“There are also research binders and background material on the desk by the window.”

They stepped out into the hall and Tyler showed Chase how the lock on the outer door worked. Chase peered down the long corridor past the elevators and saw his neighbor moving in on the other side of the building; a tiny, older man in a nondescript beige raincoat. A young woman in a blazer identical to Tyler’s was opening the door for him.

Chase could hear her giving the same speech Tyler had given him: “There are twelve Reasoners, two per floor, and six Personal Services Liaison Officers per . . .”

“I didn’t know he was so small,” said Chase.

Tyler looked up. “Excuse me?”

Indeed, the old man at the end of the hall was thinner and smaller than Chase had ever imagined, but the odd droop of his head and the half-pitched smile were unmistakable.

“Hamer,” Chase said.

Tyler followed Chase’s gaze down the hall. “Is there anything else I can do for you right now?”

“He won the Nobel Prize before he was forty. Did you know that?”

“I’m always accessible through the red phone.”

“Then he did it again. Economics *and* Physics. I don’t know if anyone else has ever done that. No native-born American, certainly.”

“Anything, at any hour, day or night.”

Chase focused back in. “Yes, there is.”

Tyler seemed crestfallen, like he’d lost a bet. “Of course.”

“A pair of binoculars. High-powered. Military-grade.”

“May I ask —”

“Thanks,” said Chase.

Only the slightest flicker from Tyler, a look that said, ‘Oh, so you’re one of *those* assholes.’ Aloud, Tyler said, “Of course. I’ll get them for you right away.” Then he added, because he couldn’t resist, “We would of course make a record of something like that.”

“Of course,” Chase said.

Tyler made to go. “And remember: Always use the red phone.”

“Why only the red phone?”

Tyler shrugged. “You know what they say. ‘Good Times Bad, Bad Times Really Bad.’”

With that, Tyler left Chase alone.

## 6. *Wolf Words and Windows*

### 1

The quote was inaccurate. Tyler was using the T-shirt version of it. The actual sentence in the book was, “When times are good, you need good government; when times are bad, you need terror to make them *give* you good government.”

For slogan purposes, however, sometime around April this had been shortened into “Good Times Good, Bad Times Really Bad.” It was a threat, which came from a book that was basically a collection of threats.

It was later estimated that less than a hundred people had actually read or ordered the tract *The Words of the Wolf* (later, folks just shortened it to *Wolf Words*) when it had been published more than four years before, courtesy of one of those print-on-demand publishing houses. Its authorship was attributed to the pseudonym “The Wolf.” After that inauspicious debut, it had disappeared without a trace, its true author or authors unknown, its purpose almost as inscrutable as many of its sayings and aphorisms, even if its point was clear: Citizens should “reinstate” the American Constitution by any means necessary, especially violence. The book went to great lengths to explain why that wasn’t such a bad idea.

Then, after the government shutdown had lit the spark and the epidemic had fanned it into flame, quotes from *Wolf Words* were suddenly and mysteriously on the lips of every insurrectionist leader and tuned-in, pissed-off American. It became a sort of jingoistic framework upon which folks could hang what was being touted as a

new, Second, American Revolution. And the more it was quoted, the more people read it, and the more it spread.

And why not? An outrageously pissed-off America wanted its own *Das Kapital*, written in plain simple American language that laid the case and the objective out plainly. They found it on Amazon for \$12.99.

*“When your leaders tell you the truth, that’s freedom; when they keep lying to you, you’re living in a dictatorship.”*

*“Sometimes the leaders must die so the country can live.”*

*“When the leaders of a country believe they’re the good people and the people they govern are bad, it’s time for the leaders to go.”*

And, to some, the most disturbing of all: *“If you want to create true and unquestionable Justice, first you have to create true and unspeakable terror.”*

In a matter of weeks, against the backdrop of the Uprising in the small cities, these invocations were everywhere: Someone started a Wolf blog, a group of privileged kids at Duke started a Wolf website, and boldly, folks began to represent themselves as the Wolf on Twitter and on Instagram. The real key was the book itself, however, which now became a national bestseller and was sold by the skid-load not just through Amazon, but soon at Barnes & Noble, Target, and CVS. Soon, an ebook was offered up free, which meant everyone – *everyone* – had it on their phone, an AAA roadmap for a revolution and easier to understand than Ikea bookshelf instructions. Here, finally, were some goddamned answers.

It was perhaps even more appealing because there didn’t seem to be an actual author. Some of the Uprising’s original and most violent leaders, especially the Black Force guys in Lynchburg, began to suggest that maybe *they* were behind the volume of revolutionary wisdom – but that was a claim pretty quickly disproven. Then there

was a long investigative piece in the *Washington Post* that pointed to a cadre of academics out of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; supposedly they had written the piece as part of their thesis, and something of a joke at that. This claim was also disproven. Jeff Beavenstock was an impossible candidate and the four-year-old print-on-demand edition almost surely erased Sister Sheena due to her age. The only thing experts could agree on – and soon there actually *were* experts – was that inconsistency of spelling and grammar suggested more than one author at work and likely more than three. Five seemed to be the generally accepted number.

What the academics missed was that it didn't really matter.

What mattered was the effect it had on people, and the fact that it was an immediate and identifiable brand; you couldn't go wrong with a cartoon wolf snarling at you. That image was reprinted on everything from keychains to backpacks to gun holsters. The Wolf brought home the message to every pissed-off American out there. "The extreme suppression of your rights deserves the most extreme reaction you can dream up, and it is never wrong." In other words, "Get as mad as you want and be as extreme as you want, it's okay because people really *did* fuck you over as badly as you think."

The way Chase viewed it, the problem wasn't when the Changers quoted the Wolf, or even when maniacs in Chicago Blackhawks jerseys marched down the main streets of America chanting its simplistic aphorisms; the problem was when a Government keener like Tyler casually tossed off a quote without entirely realizing what he was doing. If you looked at it from that perspective, the Changers weren't an aberration of the nation's culture, they were becoming part of it.

## 2

He cleaned up in the bathroom, which was as modern as any found in a new Park Avenue condominium. While he was drying his face, there was a discreet knock at the front door. He padded out to

peer through the peephole and discovered there was no peephole. Something they missed. He opened the door.

A Personal Services Liaison Officer in a blazer that matched Tyler's – in fact, this PSLO looked pretty much like a seventeen-year-old mini-me of Tyler – had Chase's luggage behind him and a small leather satchel under his arm. "Dr. Selby?"

Chase opened the door wide and held out a hand. "I'll take that. And please, put the bag in the bedroom."

As the young man wheeled the bag in, Chase opened the leather satchel. Inside was the finest pair of binoculars he had ever seen.

The young man came out and asked if there was anything else he could do. Chase said no and asked if he was allowed to tip him.

"No, sir. Besides, it's my honor." He gave Chase an odd, awkward little salute, a bow, and then left. Chase's second salute of the day.

He didn't know what to make of this new phenomenon, but he hoped it didn't recur. He didn't like what it suggested. The Reasoners, by definition, were meant only to be reasonable. While they had been given enormous, sweeping powers, they were not meant to be a replacement for the U.S. government nor any elected representatives, even if the elected representatives – those that were still alive, anyway – were teetering in their power, or had already had it taken by force.

He locked the door behind him and went to the window with the binoculars.

They were so high-tech. At first he had trouble even adjusting them. Once he figured out the basics, however, he was able to focus on the office tower across the street. But when he looked beyond that to clear sky and took the zoom out as far as it would go, he was rocked back on his heels by the sheer power of the lenses.

Once he made adjustments, he focused in on part of the Capitol building itself and the area around the guillotine. Not close, but close enough. His view was partly blocked by buildings, so all he could see was the top of the frame high above the heads of the crowd. Right now, the blade was up. He remembered Holden telling

him that Beavenstock always waited for best coverage on the cable news nets, which was never before eight.

He could also tilt down and get a pretty good look at the crowds on the Mall. They were stretched all the way west to the Memorial. Through the lens, it was a silent show of almost genial confusion. There was an energy to these people, a pulse, an excitement. They were expecting *something*.

He moved to the other end of the window and stepped in so close that the lenses touched the glass.

Joy. That was it. These people had the joy of violence in them. You could see it in their faces, in their movements, the way they called to one another, in their too-loud, exaggerated gestures. Somehow it made a mockery of Chase even being there.

How could you erect a barrier against this kind of force? It seemed absurd. All the precautions and preparations in the world wouldn't protect Chase or any of the other Reasoners from harm if things went wrong. Fighting against this kind of exalted, willful anger and energy was whistling in the wind, or spitting in the eye of a hurricane.

Chase checked his watch. 1:30.

He laid down the binoculars and slipped off his shoes and began climbing on the furniture. A half-hour wasn't much time to disable all of the surveillance devices he was sure they'd planted, but he could get a good start on it.

The simple fact was, he could act the role they wanted him to play – yes, he could do that – but he couldn't allow himself to be watched or recorded. Because they had made a mistake about him. From the beginning.



## 7. *Recruitment*

### 1

At the time, Chase had just been transfixed by her hair. He couldn't take his eyes off it.

A wig. It surely had to be a wig. But maybe not. Perhaps it was just an incredibly bold dye job to match the cut, which was a jet-black flapper bob that ended abruptly at the jawline – saucy and piquant on a woman of, say, twenty; on a woman of eighty, however, which the Senator surely was, it was really something else. So was the Victory red lipstick. So were the rings which adorned each gnarled finger. Add the stylish Dior pantsuit and owlish Woody Allen eyewear and the whole package said, “You want to laugh at me, and I'm encouraging you to laugh, but you can't laugh, because I am the very embodiment of power.”

Her hand reached across the table and rested on Chase's. It was downright flirtatious, as was the honey drawl that went with it. “Things have progressed with our little project, Chase,” Senator Sofia Puccelli said in an almost Marilyn or Jackie breathy whisper. “So, you deserve to know where we are.”

“We?” he asked.

Eighty or not, there was still sparkle in her eyes. “*You*, Chase, are about to become a very important person.”

It was still four months before he would board an armored train to go to Washington, D.C. and long before he would be saluted by a U.S. Army Commander and a bellboy. So Chase could be forgiven for almost laughing when she said, “a very important person.” He was, at that moment, nobody.

Well, maybe not entirely. A tenured professor at Princeton, yes, one of the youngest in its history, yes, but that was Princeton important, not *important* important. He was the author of two rather dry books – one on the genesis of the U.S. Constitution, another on the nature of American patriotism – but very few people had bought these books and even fewer had read them. Despite his dozen appearances on television and maybe a dozen podcast interviews, no one stopped him on the street. So, on this unseasonably warm early spring afternoon, he viewed himself as simply a young man with an exceptional academic CV, which in the Princeton environment meant he was entirely unexceptional.

Chase was fine with that, but the octogenarian holding his hand had spent forty years surrounded by people who more than anything else in life wanted to be *very* important, so she laid it on with a trowel. “Because of your importance,” the Senator continued, “we feel it’s time to brief you fully. Bring you up to speed. About how things have suddenly accelerated.”

“Because of the crisis?”

That’s what it was called then. Sometimes it was ‘the crisis in the small cities,’ but for the most part it was ‘the crisis’ or, a new phrase, ‘the Uprising.’ Whatever name you gave it, it was hard to grasp that while Chase and these two visitors from Washington were sitting on a porticoed patio overlooking the lawns of Princeton stirring cappuccinos, a gentle breeze ruffling their hair, a good two dozen smaller American cities were in the middle of insane, violent revolution. Just that morning Chase had read about two nuns trying to burn down an Anthem Blue Cross building in Kentucky. Could that be right?

“Why do you assume our little project and the crises are linked?” asked the Senator.

“Aren’t they?” Chase sipped his cappuccino. “Why else would you be here? Surely two such highly placed public servants could be doing better things while one half of the country is trying to figure out how to destroy the other half. Therefore, yes, I assume they’re connected.”

Senator Puccelli looked at him a good long while, as if trying to determine if he were man or mouse, then let out a delighted hoot of laughter and clapped her hands together. Her hoopy bracelets jangled. “You’re wonderful!” She looked at the man with her. “Isn’t he wonderful?” She leaned in on Chase, even closer. “All right, Chase, then *you* tell us! Show us how clever you are.”

Chase shook his head. “I’m not so clever. And I haven’t thought very much about your project since last summer, so I can’t tell you anything.”

That was only partly true. In fact, he hadn’t given their thinktank – or whatever it was – *any* thought, not since his last interview at the Holiday Inn. Months before, when they’d first approached him, there had been no crisis, no burnings of banks, no shootouts with Virginia’s finest, not even an epidemic named VIRA. There had only been the murmurings of discontent over a stimulus bill that might lead to a government shutdown.

Senator Puccelli turned to her companion, the big, rumpled man with the walrus mustache. *Literally* a walrus mustache. Another anachronistic hair choice.

The man gave Senator Puccelli a small nod.

She turned back to Chase. “Well, obviously there is a connection. Although I must be clear that our project started long before all this madness. Back in the dark ages, when a wolf was just a wild dog.” She laughed at her own joke. “I can’t even read *that* trash!” She nodded at the walrus man. “Dr. Barnhardt is one of the project’s architects. I think he can explain it best.”

Finally, Dr. Ross Barnhardt looked prepared to speak. Maybe. First, he adjusted his ass in the uncomfortable metal garden chair, then studied his knuckles, then he actually smoothed the insane mustache. These two, Chase wondered in vague amazement, are the face of power in D.C.?

Barnhardt’s voice was like sandpaper. He sounded like he was in the final stages of throat cancer. “This actually started as a mere

theoretical concept. The science is in how we make our choices. Your name wasn't just pulled from a hat."

"That's good to know," Chase said amiably enough. "But what's it about? What's its purpose?"

Dr. Barnhardt adjusted his ass again. Here was a man who would likely never be comfortable with the furniture he was given. "Well, when it started, it was simply a basement concept that didn't attract a lot of attention. Because no one was really sure of its application. It was all theoretical."

"I know I filled out a lot of forms," Chase said, prodding the man to focus. "And I know I had few options in the matter ..."

That was putting it mildly. When they had first approached him, he rebelled against helping them in any way. Then the college's counsel made it clear that he didn't really have any choice in the matter, and that it was wiser to fill out all of their forms and background checks and sit for two interviews in the Holiday Inn ("consider it like being tested for the draft," he was told) than kick up a fuss. The alternative was that some of his research grants would be at risk. "All major universities have a close relationship with the Feds," the school counsel said. "And to pretend otherwise is to be naïve." So Chase went along with it, assuming he was being used as a test subject at best or at worst being head-hunted to work for one of the intelligence services or some equally absurd branch of the government for some low-level make-work thinktank. Which he would later turn down.

"So tell him," the Senator said to Barnhardt.

Dr. Barnhardt adjusted his ass again. "It's really your enterprise now, Sofia."

"Oh no," she said. "Not mine." The girlishness in her voice gained a bit of edge.

Dr. Barnhardt explained to Chase. "It was really Howard Pierpoint's. Before he died."

Finally Chase's curiosity was piqued. Pierpoint? Did he hear that right? Everyone knew who Pierpoint was: a historian and

psychologist but also a vigorous anti-capitalist of the old school, and exponent of 1930s radicalism. Since Nixon, the man had been in a kind of perpetual war with the system.

“Pierpoint worked for the U.S. government?” Chase asked skeptically. “What department?”

Neither wanted to answer. Finally, Barnhardt said, “Defense.”

Chase felt a cold finger tracing down his back. Defense? Wherever this was going, he didn’t like it. If, in fact, any of it were true.

“And with the DNI,” the older man added.

“That’s the Director of National Intelligence,” the Senator said helpfully.

“I thought this was some thinktank,” Chase said, slowly. “Your people said it was a test of – what did they call it? ‘Alternative methods of maintaining governmental integrity?’”

Barnhardt sat forward. He looked at the other café patrons before shifting to a quiet, intense voice – kind of like Dick Cheney whispering to the boys in the silo. “After the Middle East incursions – after *that* debacle,” he said, “Howard had a notion that we might one day reach a point in this country where civilian leadership might be unable to distance itself from entrenched commercial interests. Do you understand what I mean? Unable to act exclusively in the chauvinist interests of the United States. He imagined the temporary collapse, or maybe more than temporary, of the traditional governmental structures. So Howard began to consider the notion of a panel of mandarins to be brought in during a potential time of crisis to help create the smoothest possible decision-making process.”

*Traditional governmental structures, smoothest possible decision-making?*  
But the word that stuck out most with Chase was ‘mandarins.’

Barnhardt shrugged. “A team of thinkers. For want of a word, we call them Reasoners. Working for but outside the traditional lanes of government. As Howard stressed, only in a time of crisis.”

“Outside?” Chase liked the sound of this less and less. “To do what?”

Dr. Barnhardt counted off one calloused finger. “Primarily to evaluate and contemplate and advise. Also, to – ”

“To stop the crazies from destroyin’ the country!” said the Senator. “To force upon the President real solutions to real problems outside the political realm! And to work around Congressional entanglements.”

“Force? Upon *which* President?”

“*Any* President.”

“You do realize what this sounds like,” Chase said.

Barnhardt shook his head. “The Senator misspoke. Not to replace existing Presidential power. Just in case something happens. How we could stabilize decision-making in a potential time of crisis. To create the most streamlined process possible.”

“Except,” Chase said, “the President already has something set up for that. Every President does. It’s called a Cabinet. And the people have something too. It’s called Congress.”

Barnhardt leaned forward, continuing as if Chase had never spoken. “What fascinated Howard – what got him going – was figuring out who would comprise such a panel and how such an apolitical body could be assembled. What standards would be required. It was the psychological profiling that interested him, determining what kind of mind was best suited to – ”

“No!” shouted the Senator. A few of the other heads on the patio turned. “No, no, no. You’ve told him enough.” She gestured to Chase as one might gesture to a particularly gifted child standing beside a piano. “Have *him* tell us.”

Barnhardt looked at her, considered what she had said, then looked to Chase. He sat back and waited.

Chase knew when he was being tested, and he didn’t like it any more than he liked the sound of their project. Yet he also knew the answers to some of their problems. They were obvious. “Well . . . ” he said slowly, “if you’re talking about a panel of super advisors and not administrators, you’re talking something far more focused than the Cabinet and probably not answerable directly to the President.

So, no lawyers. Too many lawyers within the legislative body already, and obviously SCOTUS has its own constitutional mandate, and that can't be crossed. Age cross-section, sexual, economic, immigrant, native-born. Racial representation would matter but not as important probably as experiential background. But they would have to have seen something of the world. Adversity? Yes." As he was talking, Chase could now see how 1930s socialist Howard Pierpoint's interest was captured; this was social engineering and psychology and the re-creation of the American compact all rolled into one. And it tested the strengths and elasticity of the Constitution. Perfect for a man who had little respect for the nation state to begin with. Unfortunately, Chase, who *was* a patriot, had bad news for them. "Of course, versions of this have been done before."

Now it was their turn to look baffled.

He continued. "Many times. FDR's Brain Trust. LBJ's Wise Men. JFK's Ex-Comm ... "

"No!" said the Senator. Again heads turned. She leaned in and whispered. "That was free advice and there were no balls in a vise. No consequences. And half of them were Cabinet officers. The purpose of our project was to imagine what kind of people we'd have to draw together for the *sake* of reason and to meet outside the constraints of executive overview."

Chase turned to Barnhardt. "What was the word you used earlier? Reasoners?"

Barnhardt nodded.

"So, a panel of elites who simply must be ... reasonable?"

Now the Senator nodded.

"And you want me to what? Advise on your choices?"

Barnhardt and the Senator looked at one other, flummoxed. This they hadn't expected at all.

"You misunderstand, Chase," the Senator said finally. "You have been chosen to *be* one. A Reasoner. That's why we're here. This has been in the cards a long time. Long before we contacted you, even."

Chase stared at her. "Pardon me?"

“We drew up a dossier on you, observed, and only then did we approach.”

“Observed?” Chase felt his jaw clench. “What kind of observations?”

“Not invasive. Just keeping tabs.”

He was surprised at how angry he was. “Going back how far?”

“Well the project didn’t start yesterday, did it? Three years ago, at least.”

Chase was stunned. “Three years?”

The Senator grinned. “Even a patriot like you knows not to trust the government, Chase. Look, I wouldn’t be upset. This is only a ‘what if’ project and a shaggy dog one at that. It’s only in the past few weeks that a few sober minds have decided this program may have some real application after all, if things go . . . poorly. And they want to move it to the next level.”

“Poorly like in the cities?”

“Yes. We may need something exactly like this before a bunch of fools rip this country apart.”

He calculated. Three years. Long after his time in London. Just after his first book. After the Princeton Project got him the profile in *Slate*, then *The New Yorker*. After.

“How many people have you been looking at?” Chase asked.

“In the very first round?” asked the Senator. “Just over three hundred.”

Chase stared at them. “You expect three hundred people to get together as some sort of American Politburo and come up with reasonable solutions to difficult problems the government can’t solve themselves?”

The Senator laughed. “Not three hundred at the *end*. We winnow the candidates down. Like picking a judge.”

He could see how that would work. Their first pass would be easy. Almost a game. Simply list the purportedly finest and most interesting minds in the nation across a broad range of disciplines and over a reasonable age range. There would be Nobel prizewinners,



journalists, economists, writers, educators, and social activists. But soon enough, the obvious problems would present themselves; prospects would have to be free of ethical conflict, which might take as many as half of them off the list. They would all have to be actual American citizens, which would knock off a few more. They would also, most importantly, all need to be noted for their temperament and reason as well as their accomplishments. What good was a Reasoner who wasn't reasonable? This would strike the greatest number from the list. Alphas are seldom the most reasonable people, and the first criteria meant you needed alphas.

So, a chosen panel of pragmatists to help make reasonable decisions in a time of crisis when there was no one left in America to be reasonable. Working around the President. Around the Cabinet. Around Congress itself. And somehow, people who ran the ship of state thought this might be necessary one day soon.

"Are the people in your world really that worried about what's going on?" Chase asked.

Senator Puccelli spoke carefully for the first time. Chase felt she was choosing her words with rehearsed precision. "There are concerns, within certain levels of the legislative branch, about the President's viability to handle the Uprising. Especially if things escalate and go in the wrong direction."

"Viability? What does that mean?"

"He may not be able to stand by his own decisions much longer."

Chase didn't know what that meant, but he knew he didn't like it.

"That's why the project has been picked up again," said Barnhardt finally. "Some feel there's no more time to wait."

"To do what?" asked Chase. He felt more and more uneasy and he liked these people less and less. "You folks aren't seriously worried about these ... " He had to search for the word. "Changers?"

"Yes," said the Senator.

Chase didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I don't think I can go along with any of what you have in mind."

Her eyebrows went up. "Chase, this is your country calling you."

“I don’t know who is calling me,” Chase said, “but it doesn’t sound like my country. What you’re talking about is actually unconstitutional, which I’m sure you know. You’re saying a government thinktank project that arose from somewhere deep inside the Defense Department is now being proposed as a reality in a moment of crisis that in fact doesn’t really exist yet. So it sounds, if put into practice, and coming from a proto-military structure, more like a . . . coup.” The word lingered. “A coup against the elected United States government. I mean, if it’s coming out of the Defense Department, how is it anything but?”

They stared at Chase. This was not what they had expected from him. At all. Stalemate.

Chase stood up. “You’ve wasted your time focusing on me. I had no way of knowing that this is what you had in mind. I assure you I’ll keep everything you told me in strictest confidence, but it’s a bad idea for all sorts of reasons. The biggest one is obvious.”

“Which is?” asked Barnhardt.

“This is a democracy. People are elected to solve problems and run things. That’s how we’ve always done it.” He looked at the Senator. “The United States government doesn’t need people like me to make decisions for them behind closed doors. It needs the people who were elected *by* the people to do their job out in the open. That means you.”

The Senator snapped. “And if the people who elected them no longer want them to do their job? Or they simply can’t do their jobs because the system is so corrupt?”

“We’re nowhere near that yet,” said Chase.

“Young man,” she said, “we’re already *past* that.”

He stared at her. He had no idea what to say. So he simply turned and walked away. Later, he would realize he hadn’t paid for his cappuccino. It probably didn’t matter. He wouldn’t have been able to pay even if he had remembered. His hands were shaking.

## 8. *Choosing*

### 1

He had just turned off his light and now someone was knocking on the front door of his bungalow. He checked the time. It was just after one o'clock. The knock soon turned into kicking. When she called out, "It's me!" he recognized the honeyed voice instantly.

Chase turned his light back on and reached for his robe.

He padded across the living room, which is where he slept. Since he'd moved into the little wartime bungalow four years ago, he'd made his bedroom in the living room and outfitted the bedroom as his study, which afforded him the most isolation when he was working on something serious. It meant, however, that books spilled across both rooms, and as Chase was a stacker-upper and not a shelver, he had to step around small book towers just to open his own front door.

She was standing on the front porch, shivering in a too-light but most definitely designer raincoat. The temperature had dropped since the balmy afternoon on the patio. "We did not adequately represent who we are," she said. The sweet lilt was still in her voice, but there was something else in it now as well. That edge.

"I thought you did just fine," Chase said, truly sorry he'd answered the door. "I'm just not interested."

"Well, you're wrong about both those statements. Invite me in for a drink."

She pushed past him before he could answer. He closed the door after her. To his surprise she went right for the bed and removed the comforter and wrapped it around herself, then dropped into his

comfy reading chair. She looked around. “Mother of the savior!” she said in amazement. Then: “Darling, do you have something to drink?”

He went into the kitchen to find whatever he had under the sink. “Mother of the savior what?”

“Your digs,” she said. “Live up to all my expectations.”

He returned with a bottle of Southern Comfort and she brightened considerably. “Now that’s a good boy!” The only clean glasses he could find were wine glasses, but they would do. He filled two halfway up and handed her the smaller one. She took the larger one.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “That you didn’t adequately represent who you are.”

“I made a mistake in deciding to only give you half the picture. I have been remiss.”

“No, I think you did just fine. I just don’t want to be involved and I don’t intend to change my mind.”

“Well, I’m afraid you’re going to have to.”

“Why is that?”

“Due to the half of which we have not yet spoken. Of. Yet. That half.” Chase wondered how many drinks she’d already had that evening.

“Meaning, exactly who you are?” he asked.

“Exactly.”

“But I know who you are. You’re a United States Senator in charge of a project that – ”

“Ha!” she shouted. “That is your *first* misapprehension.”

“You’re not a U.S. Senator?”

The Senator sat forward, her 80-year-old knees gracefully drawn together. She delicately turned the wineglass of Southern Comfort in her hand. “It is Ross – Dr. Barnhardt – who is in charge of the project for the United States Defense Department, as I already told you. He represents them in this matter.”

“So you are the one speaking for Congress.”

“Again, wrong. Or partly wrong.”

“So you represent some other interested party as well as Congress?”

“You see!” she said with great delight. “That is why I know you are so right for this project.”

Chase was intrigued, despite himself. “So who do you represent, Senator?”

“Only in this case, mind,” she said. “Only in this case.”

“Which case?”

“The recruitment-of-you case.” She sat forward and fixed him with a very steady gaze. “My boy, in this very unusual case, you are looking at a representative of the so-called Changers.”

Chase was at a loss for words.

The Senator smiled. Weakly. “But before we go on, we must be clear: I am most obviously still a representative of the United States of America and my belief in it is whole, it is absolute, it is my rock, it is my redeemer. No, I am still a U.S. Senator but, in this matter – choosing the Reasoners and this one in particular – I am a Designated Hitter for the other side.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“Chase, it is clear to me from our earlier encounter that you and I share differing views on where this nightmare is going. These Uprisings.”

“I don’t think that it *is* a nightmare. Yet.”

“And if it becomes one? One even you recognize? What do you think will happen then?”

He thought a moment to make sure he said what he believed. “Eventually, the military is going to have to clamp down and put an end to all of it.”

“And if they can’t?”

“That seems unlikely. For the most part, these people are just maniacs with tiki torches and Twitter accounts.”

“Well, don’t be so sure this country is as strong as we think we are, or as state-of-the-art as we think we are, or even as organized.

And tiki torches have power. For a long time now I have believed that our great skill isn't doing things so much as believing our own fairy tales."

"A U.S. Senator truly believes pockets of citizens who quote a non-existent wolf are going to –"

"Are going to be in Washington soon. Yes, Chase, I do. And God knows what they're going to do once they get there."

"Nothing."

"Because the military will stop them?" She snapped. "And how have they done so far? Haven't we already had a dress rehearsal for that kind of chaos? Not just in D.C. but on Wall Street and in Davenport and Lexington and in Wheeling? Have you paid attention to that Beavenstock man? He is *terrifying*. And brilliant."

Chase tried to remember which one was Beavenstock. There were a lot of people who claimed they were the one true leader of the Changers. He had an image of black coal smoke. "The miner?"

"Yes, he's the miner, if you accept that Lech Walesa was just an electrician. Take a closer look at what he's done. He's convinced a small army of his fellow workers to torch an entire city without blinking an eye, and with almost military precision. Those people did everything he said. And that business with the TVA ..."

"I'm sure that if D.C. is even in a hint of danger –"

"Chase, have you ever heard of something called the *Posse Comitatus Act*?"

Chase nodded. "Of course. Power of the county."

The Senator brushed a loose strand of jet-black hair back behind her ear. "I *do* so like a very bright boy! Yes. And that's what it means. It was put into effect after the Civil War, and it forbids the use of the United States military to enforce domestic law. Even in the event of an insurrection. The Act can only be countermanded under explicit and direct orders from the President. That's not a big issue in itself, and we've obviously seen our Presidents issue that order any number of times – the Civil Rights movement, Detroit in '67, Rodney King

– ” She pulled the blanket tighter around herself. “But in this case, with this President ... ”

Chase recalled her words that afternoon. “There’s an issue with him, isn’t there? Something no one is saying.”

Senator Puccelli did an odd thing. She put her arm across to her shoulder and leaned her chin upon her elbow. It made her look like a little girl. “Let us be clear,” she said. “He is a very, *very* weak man. His act was good in the beginning, or good enough, but I think we all know now it’s just bluff and bluster. Did you know he has never actually fired anyone? He’s never run any organization at all. And he’s frightened of horses.”

Chase raised an eyebrow.

She smiled. “That really struck me, too, the first time I heard it. It tells so much, doesn’t it? Please don’t get me wrong. I quite like him. He has a decent courtliness that I think he learned from old movies. He’s charming. I have spent many enjoyable hours in his company. But he is so very, very weak.”

Chase persisted. “But there are safeguards in the event of a national emergency, Senator, and constitutionally he has an obligation to ... ”

“To what?”

“He will have no choice but to rise to the occasion.”

“Well, he hasn’t so far, has he?”

She had a point. The government shutdown had been absurd, and the epidemic that followed it had been a complete botched response by the federal government. But it had been the first insurrections which had revealed President Drury’s true problem: He was terrified of his base. As a result, so far local police, state police, and in some cases the National Guard were the only ones to respond to the violence that was spreading across the country. The President had refused to step in. He even refused to federalize the guard when the New York governor had pleaded for it, primarily because he had been elected on a promise that the federal government would stay out of all state affairs. President Drury

knew his base would turn on him, and that was something his ego couldn't handle.

"Mark my words," the Senator said. "We are not what people think. And as a result, if things go very wrong, we may need the military for other protections. Besides, are you able to imagine American troops firing and killing American citizens on American streets, no matter how many pitchforks and tiki torches come out?"

"Yes," said Chase.

Now it was time for her to look surprised.

"1932," he said. "The Bonus Army. Hoover had MacArthur fire on veterans wanting their army bonuses. Right there on the Mall."

"Hoover? You're going with Hoover?"

"I'm just saying it's been done. So what did you do, Senator? You anticipate the very worst, so you opened a back channel to the bad guys?"

"Come closer."

He sat down on the ottoman in front of her.

She held out her glass. "I would like some more, please."

He refilled her wine glass.

"Chase, you're a big enough boy to know that there is no such thing as politics that is pure. Everything can be corrupted, and everything can be cracked."

"So you reached out to one of the leaders of the Uprising? Or they reached out to you? Who? The Black Force? The Wall Streeters?"

She seemed appalled. "*Don't insult me!* Those old codgers? No, no, by the time the Changers get to Washington they will have whittled down the number of so-called Changer leaders down to two. True leadership always emerges. It will be down to that young woman and the miner, as you call him."

"So it was the miner you reached out to?" Yes, it would be the man. Senator Puccelli knew about powerful men. "Isn't that borderline treasonous? Like entering into discussions with terrorists?"

"One man's terrorist is another's man's political rival. Lincoln sent emissaries to talk to Jeff Davis. No, it wasn't Mr. Beavenstock



directly – that really would feel like treason – but suffice to say it was people who have his ear and will be very important if things go the way I imagine.”

“But why?”

“Because I am a realist, Chase. And when I see what is happening around the country, and when I look at who is in charge in Congress and who is sitting in the White House, I know we need some seriously long-term planning. So a few of us – a couple of Senators, a couple of House members, some of them very senior – dragged that old commie Pierpoint’s idiot idea of – what would you call it? An American politburo? I almost bust a gut! – out of mothballs and I shared it with my Changer contacts.”

“And what conclusion did you come to?”

“An agreement, not a conclusion. A kind of compromise. That if things got to a certain point, if the wheels truly came off, then the Reasoners plan would go into effect. That was something both sides could agree to. A maybe. A possibility.”

“In other words, you bought some insurance because you think our government might fall?”

“Oh no, honey!” she laughed. “Simply not be able to defend itself. You think that’s an outlandish notion? You need to spend forty years in the Congress. Then you’d see what the right set of circumstances at exactly the wrong moment can do. Consider our perfect storm as we sit here tonight: a hopelessly weak and corrupt President and a Vice President who is even weaker, both of them the butt of every joke on every late-night television show. Dean and Jerry. None of the intelligence agencies trusts them and why should they? Those two fools have done nothing but degrade and set those agencies against one another for their own political and monetary gain for the past three years. The military thinks even *less* of them – *and* the Senate majority leader – than the intelligence agencies. So who knows who would really take orders from who if push came to shove? It’s not hard to picture American troops deciding to lay back rather than fire on American citizens even if the President told them to do so.”

Chase couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Is that what you think? The President doesn't order the troops out because he's terrified they might not follow his orders?"

"Let's table that for a second. What we're talking about is the long game. With Howard and Ross's Reasoners project, I stumbled across something that might buy us time if things get truly frisky and be radical enough that the other side just might buy it. You understand? *It might be the only thing the two sides can agree on.*"

Chase took this in. "So why did you say I have no choice?"

"Because you don't."

"Me specifically."

"You very specifically." She sat back. "I was forced to share with Changer friends a list of our three hundred top choices. From there, it was sort of like choosing sides for basketball. They crossed off a name, I crossed off a name. That's how it went. You wouldn't believe how limited their knowledge is of public affairs. It was really rather repulsive. But then ..." She hesitated. "Chase, sometimes a girl needs the boy to move even closer."

Chase had no idea what she meant, but the Senator was not a woman to be denied. He nudged the ottoman, which was on wheels, closer to her. She gestured him even closer. Then again closer. Finally they were touching knees. To his surprise she suddenly reached up and put her hands on the back of his head. He thought, my God, she's going to kiss me. And indeed, she drew his head right to hers until they were touching foreheads. He took in her fragrance, which was surprisingly subtle, and the red wine on her breath, which the Southern Comfort had not masked. But her fingers were like iron.

She didn't kiss him. Instead she whispered. It wasn't quite the Marilyn-Jackie voice she'd used that afternoon, but it was intimate, like they were siblings with flashlights under the covers. She said, "They gave *us* a name. That wasn't the deal, of course. We were supposed to be the ones supplying names and they got a certain number of cross-offs. But one day they just presented a name. At first we balked, but then we realized it was a name that was already on *our* list."

“And whose name was that?”

“Yours.”

Chase looked into those dark green eyes, uncomprehending.

## 2

When he managed to speak, it came out as more of a laugh. “I don’t believe you.”

“Don’t you?” She certainly wasn’t laughing.

“What does it mean?”

“You tell me.” No, not a hint of laughter.

“I don’t know any of those people.”

“Well they know you.”

“I’ve written two books. I’ve been on TV. Podcasts. Maybe – ”

She cut him off. “Chase, I need to be clear. You are the *only* person they requested. That suggests that for some reason, they mean something to you. And you mean something to them.”

“I don’t know anyone in the Changer movement or anyone associated with any of that insanity if that’s what you’re – ”

“You’re not answering the question.”

He tried to pull his head back but her fingers kept their vise-like grip.

“I told you.”

Finally she let him go. He sat up and rubbed the back of his head.

She held her glass out for a top-up. He obliged. “Of course,” she said, rather conversationally, “such a turn of events raises a number of issues of concern. One is obvious: that you’re some sort of agent for the Changers. Well, that’s actually not against the law and in fact it might work to our benefit – ”

“I just told you I don’t know those people, and you don’t for a second believe – ”

She raised her voice, riding over him. “– but the more *frightening* thought is that there’s something dangerously flawed in the

methodology we used in choosing our Reasoners. Our assessors – and Dr. Barnhardt in particular – gave you top marks. You sailed right through. Yet those psychopaths see something in you that helps their cause. So does that mean we missed something? It would seem so.”

He bit down on his annoyance. “I would imagine you gave me a second look after such a surprising endorsement.”

“Surely *not*.”

He was, again, surprised. “You kept your concerns to yourself?”

“No one knows about my back channel to begin with, so how was I going to tell Barnhardt? This was something I had to solve myself.”

“And have you?”

“That’s what I’m trying to do. Here. Now.”

London, he thought. That’s what you’re missing.

“You know, I could make you tell me,” she said.

“Pulling fingernails?”

“No, but the power of a Congressional subpoena has certain charms.”

“Really? Last I heard, nobody pays attention to those things anymore.”

“Chase, I need to know.”

“Senator, I think you should go.”

She considered him a moment, decided he was serious, and got up. She balled up the duvet and started to hand it back to him, but then became thoughtful. “Chase,” she said, “I used to think nothing frightens me. Now, however, I’m not ashamed to tell you I am frightened.”

“Of?”

“Us. We can’t seem to do anything right anymore. Has no one noticed that but me? We can’t win a war, our cities are full of rage, our bridges fall down, and our towns are dying of a drug epidemic dumped on the public by Wall Street scum. We can’t stand up to what’s coming, and you want to know why? Because we’ve turned

ourselves into a happy, arrogant, Third World nation with First World luxuries. But we're no longer equipped to build a rowboat, little less fight a second civil war. You know what that means? That means our people – the angry ones, the one who still have energy – are probably going to rip us to shreds.”

Chase didn't know what to say. Finally he took the duvet from her and managed a feeble, “I just don't think that's going to happen, Senator.”

“But it *could*.”

He led her to the door.

“Make me a promise,” she said. “Say ‘maybe.’ Not ‘no.’ Call it a Politburo, call it whatever you want, but say ‘maybe.’”

He opened the front door.

She sighed and drew her raincoat on. She took a card out of the coat pocket. “Use the back number when you change your mind.”

“I won't be changing my mind, Senator.”

“There's just one more thing I have to say. Because it's important.” She leaned in and whispered one inch from his ear. The Marilyn-Jackie voice was back. “I know about the girl.”

He was frozen in place.

She went on: “You lied in every single one of your interviews, didn't you? Oh, don't worry. I didn't tell. Frankly, I believe it spoke to your character.”

Then she did give him a kiss. On the cheek. But it was still a woman-man kiss.

He watched her walk across the dark street, not toward her car but toward one of the greenways that wound through campus. She stumbled on one of her three-inch heels but righted herself instantly and continued to walk away with consummate dignity. She didn't look back.

It would not be the last time he saw her.

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## About the Author

Wilson Coneybeare has written movies, television, theatre, and radio plays. Most recently he wrote the feature film *American Hangman*, which premiered on Netflix. A proud Canadian-American, he estimates he has driven his family across the continent twenty-seven times. *A Feast of Wolves* is his first novel.

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