

The
REPRESENTATIVE

Copyright 2014 by Matt Minor



dead tree
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*For Pablo,
who was one cool cat.*

The
REPRESENTATIVE

a novel by
Matt Minor

dead  tree

*Then, drop by caustic drop, a perfect cry
Shall string some constant harmony,
Relentless caper for all those who step
The legend of their youth into the noon.*
-Hart Crane

I said all hope was vain but love...thou lovest...
-Shelley

chapter one

I.

The high definition screen illuminated perfectly the charred remnants of a little arm swinging like a metronome from a blackened bus window. The pressure from the extinguishing hose rocked the crowded, formerly yellow vehicle. Firemen raced about in the background through a thinning film of smoke. In the foreground, a network reporter spoke into a trembling microphone, repeating the same two lines: “Who could do such a thing?” And, “The sky reeks of burning tires!”

State Senator Reed Jackson stood very close to the suspended television, turning his good ear slightly upward. The volume was down very low so as not to disturb his wife Jill, who slept in the hospital bed behind him.

When the breaking news flash finished, he clicked the apparatus off. For some moments he sat staring at the blob

that was now his beloved wife of fifty years. Reed thought it cruel that one so emaciated could possess such little shape. *But this is cancer*, he reconciled. For the aged state senator, all was part of God's plan. There was reason for everything. *We are not meant to understand*. He felt his cell phone vibrating from the pocket of his black suit. He stepped quietly out of the room to take the call.

"Yes Governor, what is it?"

"Reed, my God, have you been watching the news! Have you heard what has just happened down in McAllen?"

"Yes sir, I was just watching; despicable."

"What kind of a sick son-of-a-bitch would blow up a school bus filled with elementary school children?"

"If I had to guess, I would say it was the cartels, sir. The Gulf Cartel to be exact."

"But why?"

"The federal amnesty law paved the way for legitimate trafficking. The cartels now have legal competition. This was most likely done to deter that competition, and will no doubt be persuasive. I doubt any church groups or do-gooder organizations will venture into this area; not after this."

"What can we do?"

"Ever since the federal amnesty bill became law some months back, I've been thinking about just that. I suggest you call for a Select Joint Committee on Immigration Reform to address the immigration issue. We will need it to be a mixture of republican and democrat; it must be bi-partisan."

"Do you think the Dems will play along?"

“The general election is in less than two weeks. Everyone who voiced his or her support for amnesty will be running for the exit, sir. This is Texas’ 911. To answer your question, yes, I believe the Dems will play along.”

“Speaking of the general, it looks like Harry is going to get clobbered. Did you have any idea he was involved in those things?”

“Harry has the personality of an addict. Years ago I cured him of one addiction. I suppose his great flaw is that he is in need of a vice. But no, of course I had no idea. This is unacceptable. I am disgusted.”

“Do you have anyone in mind for the committee?” the governor asked in an attempt to reroute the discussion to less personal and more productive aims.

“This terrorist attack occurred in McAllen, along the border. That’s Representative Ron Martinez’s district. I will call him shortly.”

“This can’t wait, Reed!” the governor implored.

“I understand, but I am at the hospital right now. It will have to wait, sir.”

“I’m sorry, Reed, how thoughtless of me. How is Jill?”

“She’s dying, Governor.”

“I’m terribly sorry Reed...terribly sorry.”

“It is alright sir; soon she shall be with the Lord. I will call you tomorrow when I have something.”

“God Bless you, Reed.”

“God Bless Texas, sir.”

When Reed reentered Jill’s private room, he found that all the instruments which detailed her vital signs had collapsed. The

EKG was flat. He kissed Jill on the forehead and then pressed the remote that alerted the nurse. A single stoic tear traveled the furrows of his face. Taking a seat near the bed, he took her hand, which was still warm. *Yes*, he thought, *now she has gone home*. He wondered when he would join her. He prayed it would not be too long. Reed was now alone on this earth: His son having died years ago in a car accident and his lesbian daughter estranged and beyond contacting. In joining Jill, he prayed it would not be long.

When the nurse arrived, he informed her of his wife's passing. Personnel came and went. Reed, having returned to the television, watched more of the unfolding devastation. He had loved God with all his heart his whole life. The Lord had repaid him with professional success, but balanced that success with personal tragedy. It had been his cross to bear. He watched as the firemen started the careful process of removing tiny bodies from the explosion; knowing he had one more cross to bear before he joined his wife in eternity.

II.

Though the rain had subsided, the weather now took a turn for the worse. The dark country road shot with certainty into an increasingly confident mist. Within this fogbank traveled someone wholly uncertain.

"Damn it, where is it?" Tryphena mumbled tensely, as her right hand blindly sifted through her purse, which sat in the passenger's seat. Having located her cell phone, she then began the

dangerous process of dialing the proper contact. The car, a Mustang nearly ten-years-old, had slowed to a glorified roll. The brights were promptly switched on.

“Answer, please answer,” she pleaded, as a fragmented ring became audible in her ear.

“Hello?” A deep voice asked, cutting in and out.

“Warren?”

“Yes.”

“This is Tryphena! Can you hear me?”

“Tryphena! Yes, I can hear you, but not very well. Already done with the interview? How did it go?”

“It didn’t go, not yet. I’m not there yet.”

“What! Why not? It’s after eight!”

“Warren, I’m lost! I have no idea where I’m at! The road has vanished. There are no streetlights. I don’t know what to do!”

“OK, calm down. Are you following your GPS? Why has the road vanished?”

“Warren, I don’t have GPS.” While this conversation dragged on in confused frustration, a neon smudge appeared through the numerous running cracks of the Mustang’s front windshield.

A neon ‘PECK’S BARBECUE,’ gradually took form. “I’m here; oh my God!” Tryphena shouted, slamming on her brakes.

“You’ve found it?”

“Yes, yes! I’ll call you back.” She hung up and pulled the Mustang off the road. Gravel popped under the worn tires.

The young woman, freshly graduated from college, let go a deep sigh, opened her car door and stepped into the dank November night.

“God, I hope he won,” she muttered to herself. “Jesus Christ,” she nervously complained as her dark blue pumps struggled across the rocky parking lot.

Tryphena was late, very late, nearly an hour. As she walked towards the entrance of Peck’s Barbecue, her head swam with doubt. *What kind of Democrat has a victory party at a hick BBQ place? I bet this place is all white people. They won’t understand my name. I’ll have to repeat it again and again.*

Country music roared as she opened the heavy wooden door. Rich meat smells hit her like a soiled diaper. The fresh graduate was correct; it looked to be all white people. She surveyed the long skinny room of littered tables and searched for the face she knew only from a shitty website, newspapers and mail advertisements. No one distinguished themselves.

“Excuse me; I’m looking for Candidate Dothan?” she asked a trashy patron who stood leering into the jukebox selection screen.

“Over there!” the woman answered, gum smacking—her nipples apparent through her white tank top. Tryphena took a deep breath, zeroed-in on the respective spot, and made her way through the tangle of tables. Dothan’s short, jet-black hair caught her radar, although his back was turned to her. He sat talking diligently to a table full of white-collar men without jackets. As she approached him from behind, suddenly he turned in his chair and addressed her.

“You!” He declared, pointing his finger straight at her.

The woman was completely taken aback. She stopped in her tracks and stiffened. “What do you prefer...” he paused, “Black or African-American?”

“I really don’t mind. I’m not easily offended,” she answered smugly, tightly clenching her eyebrows involuntarily.

“Good answer!” Dothan replied definitively, without a hint of self-consciousness. He turned back towards the table of men and continued his discussion.

Tryphena stood, confused. *What has just happened?* But before she could get her bearings, a chubby, visibly balding man stood up from the table.

“You’re Ms....” He snapped his fingers and began shaking his head up and down as if trying to jar his memory.

“Taylor,” Tryphena confirmed.

“Taylor! I’m sorry, Ms. Taylor, I’m Jack Clark, Dothan’s campaign manager. Your recruiter, our consultant, Warren Jenkins, told me you were coming out tonight. With all the excitement, it slipped my mind. Please forgive me. Please, take a seat.”

Tryphena took the only available seat, the one directly across from the candidate. “Ms. Taylor, to your right is Mitch Stevens from the *Herald*; left, yours truly; and sitting across from you, the next State Representative for House District 100, John David Dothan!”

“There are still too many precincts out to say that officially, Clark. Don’t jinx me now.” Dothan retorted, looking straight at Tryphena.

“Pleased to meet you, Representative Dothan,” she confirmed.

“Look what ya’ started, Clark!”

Just then, Clark’s cell phone started ringing. “It’s the County

Democratic Chair!” Clark announced while vacating the table in search of a quieter locale.

“Tell me, Ms. Taylor, what is your first name?” Mitch Stevens asked.

“Tryphena.”

“What?” Dothan interrupted.

“Tryphena!”

“Oh, that’s pretty. Where did you go to school?”

Tryphena knew that neither one of the two men understood her name—they never did. “University of Houston.”

“What in?”

“Political Science.”

“JD!” Clark yelled from across the barbecue joint. “It’s in—it’s official—it’s yours, you lucky so-and-so! You won!”

“Speech time!” Tryphena said in a sing-song tone, looking straight into Dothan’s glassy black eyes.

“You want to wait for Jessica?” Stevens asked Dothan.

“No. She’ll be here, at some point.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Harry to call?” Dothan inquired of Clark as the campaign manager stood over their table, squeezing into his jacket like a sausage into a wrapper.

“No, we can call him back if he calls to concede while you’re speaking!”

Peck’s Barbecue consisted of two compartments: the long skinny dining area where the party presently sat, and a banquet hall. All activity now moved to the latter. Several local reporters fluttered about, snapping pictures. This was not an election of sufficient magnitude to warrant television. Jack Clark, sifting through

the collection of supporters, mounted the small stage at the very back. It, like the dining area, was littered with animal heads, a taxidermist's dream. The floor, the walls, indeed the ceiling were covered with hunters' paraphernalia. The entire establishment looked to be carved from some giant piece of wood. In fact, a live oak rose through the center of the banquet hall—literally rising up through the floor and out the roof.

“Can I have your attention, please?” Clark requested through the microphone. “Folks, I would like to present to you our new State Representative, John David Dothan!”

As the newly elected Rep. took the stage, his newly hired aid listened from the banquet hall entryway. But was she hired? *How informal could this be?* Tryphena pondered. From the corner of her eye a group of country black folk entered the dining area. *Are they a part of the party?* she wondered.

Dothan's speech was well delivered. Only, he sounded a lot like a Republican. At one point, he even defended ending ethanol subsidies, a major economic boon to the region. His logic was eloquent, however.

“In the past decade, we have seen our cotton production fall into the proverbial furnace where we now burn our corn! As a result, not just agricultural feed, but global food prices, have sky rocketed, further disenfranchising the already desperate peoples of the Third World!”

What the hell does this have to do with state government? she wondered.

Dothan continued, “Through unwise trade agreements, the Free Trade Republicans have consummated the destruction of our

once formidable textile industry of the Southeastern United States. Meanwhile, the price of cotton rises!”

His summary, due to its melodrama, irritated her.

“Soon, we might find ourselves, not only unable to feed our livestock, but unable to clothe ourselves.”

“That’s right, brother!” A fat, elderly black man dressed in overalls bellowed from where he stood in line, waiting to order. This further irritated Tryphena, as it was a strategically dropped line meant to appeal to the emotions.

But all in all, Dothan was OK, she surmised. Even if he were not, he was going to have to suffice. Tryphena wanted a job as Chief of Staff, period. She was applying for this position at Dothan’s office at the Capitol in Austin. With no experience, this was the only opening available to her. Observing his gestures, the way he moved when he spoke, it was obvious his success was due to his good looks; not that his oratory skills were not above average. But a short, chubby, ugly man, saying the same thing with the same voice would most likely not have been elected; particularly not a Democrat; not in this part of the country.

Dothan was finishing up his speech as a band began setting up behind him. The musicians were wearing cowboy hats. The newly elected signed off to overwhelming applause, yielding the microphone back to Jack Clark.

“Now, how many of y’all would like to hear JD sing a few songs?” Clark’s feigned plea was given an exaggerated twang. Tryphena was over it. She pushed her way towards the front of the crowd and kindly demanded to speak with the campaign manager turned American Idol host.

“Mr. Clark, I appreciate the jubilation, but I’m curious as to the status of my employment. I did drive a long way. No one, as of yet, has interviewed me.”

With the band in the middle of sound check, it made it necessary for Clark to nearly scream as he leaned down from atop the stage. “You’re hired, Ms. Taylor!”

“What?”

“You...are...hired!”

“Hired? Really?”

“Yes! Welcome aboard!”

Tryphena shook hands and then subtly drifted out of the banquet hall. Dothan, now stripped not only of his jacket, but his tie as well, stood at the mic with a guitar strapped around his neck.

“I wasn’t planning on doing this, but I guess...”

The roar of the small crowd overtook him. Tryphena, slipped out the front entryway and just barely escaped.

III.

Tryphena’s alarm went off every morning at 5:30, except for Sunday. She rubbed the previous night’s grit carefully from her youthful eyes and searched for the case to her contact lenses. A hacking cough became audible from the other side of her bedroom door.

“Rufus?” she inquired, emerging from her tiny room into the tiny den of her tiny apartment. She discovered the thin, gray-headed man in a wheelchair, leaning forward, his head hovering over the toilet.

“It’s alright baby, it’s alright.” The man struggled to enunciate through spasms and phlegm.

“Have you called Dr. Corel?”

“That nigger don’t know what he’s doin’!”

“Father, I have asked you repeatedly not to use that term around me.”

“I’m sorry baby, but it’s true.”

Tryphena smiled a fatalistic, forlorn smile. Then, squeezing into the narrow crevice that existed between her father’s chair and the toilet and wall, she wheeled him into the breakfast area.

“How’d it go last night, baby?” he asked.

“I got the job,” she answered from the bathroom where she stood methodically putting in her contact lenses. “Thirty-five thousand a year.”

“Thirty-five thousand...my God that’s more money than I ever made in my entire life. I’m so proud of you, Tryphena.”

The two stood looking at one another strangely through the mirror, like the last two survivors of a shipwreck, having just washed ashore, their meager rations between them. “I’m going to the bank this afternoon. Give me your disability check and I’ll deposit it.”

“I already cashed it, baby.”

“You already cashed it? You didn’t,” Tryphena scolded.

“I only spent a hundred dollars on the Lotto, baby. That’s all!”

Before she could descend into interrogation, her cell phone rang.

“Where’s my purse?” she asked, flustered. She found it where she did not remember leaving it and answered, “Warren?”

“Yes, hey, Tryphena, sorry to call you so early, but I talked to Jack Clark.” There was a pause.

Her heart now began racing with doubt. *Did I leave too soon? That same trick I always play on myself, when I think something is in the bag; I begin to have contempt for it.* “You talked to Jack Clark...and...?”

“Well, there’s a bit of a problem...”

Tiny beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. Her heart rate was accelerating. “A problem?”

Rufus reacted, turning around in his wheelchair.

“Well, first off, you left without giving them your contact information. But no biggie, they can call me. The problem is, well...”

“What is it Warren, please, just tell me!”

Rufus looked up at his daughter with a look of passive alarm.

“I know you signed on to work at the Capitol, but Dothan needs some help putting together his district office first. It’s really not official until the House approves it, next month, after the swearing-in. But we want to get it going now. Do you mind going down to Matagorda and helping him get it in order? It’s pretty informal; Clark said they’ll write you a campaign check.”

“When?”

“This afternoon if you’re available.”

“What’s the address?”



The sun was just beginning to rise as Tryphena vacated her complex. She lived in a suburb of Houston known as Alief. Alief, like so many parts of Houston, was once a prospering area. It was now home to so many different, unassimilated nationalities as to render it dysfunctional. Her newfound job was her ticket out. Matagorda was some fifty miles away.

The fog of the previous evening still lingered. The drive was slow and dull, like the weather. The whole way down she was wracked with the anxiety so familiar to the working poor. The sense that at any moment, the balance might shift and the proverbial car plunge into the abyss.

She arrived at her destination with little difficulty. The district office was only a few hundred yards from the Gulf of Mexico, and situated in a strip center. There was no sign on the building, only a single banner hanging in the front windows. The door was open, the stopper nudged against the mildewed sidewalk. Tryphena entered. The front room was completely vacant with the exception of a few boxes.

“Hello?” she asked with just a touch of timidity—nothing, no reply. The front room collided with a short hallway. The hallway offered up several doors. “Hello?” she asked again, wondering if maybe somehow she was in the wrong place. Then, the very faint sound of music emanating from a room at the end of the hall drew her towards it. The door was partly open. She knocked and stood, waiting for a response; again nothing. She pushed the door softly open with her index finger and discovered her new employer seated at his desk. His face was concealed by an old,

crinkled Tomb of Dracula comic book; headphone wires pouring out from his ears. The music he listened to did not sound like country and western.

Tryphena stood feeling awkward, wondering how to make her presence known. Perhaps a minute went by before Dothan realized that she was standing before him. He was startled as much by her sudden appearance as by her beauty, which in the chaos of last night he had failed to really take note of. He put the comic book down and removed the headphones from his ears, one at a time. “Tryphena, right?”

She was amazed that he had gotten it right—first try. This aided considerably in her judgment of him, particularly considering that she had just discovered him reading a comic.

“That’s right, Representative Dothan: Tryphena Taylor.”

Dothan stood, staring at her for an instant. In that instant he devoured her exquisite figure as well as her tasteful dress. Although her cloths were not expensive, Tryphena knew how to make do. Truth is, to the individual man, a woman whom he finds attractive, looks good in anything. This woman wore a long sleeve, green top. Her pants: black. The blouse broke up perfectly the black of her hair and the black of her slacks; the high cheekbones created a soft angularity—consistent from top to bottom.

“Let’s find you a chair, what do ya’ say?” Dothan placed the iPod down and emerged from behind his desk. The music in the headphones continued to saw. He wore blue jeans with black cowboy boots; a blue collared shirt tucked neatly in.

Tryphena could not help thinking he looked cute. “What are you listening to?” she asked.

“Oh, the Ramones. Do you like old school punk music?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m kind of partial to old school R&B. It’s what my mother used to listen to.”

Dothan was as impressed with her taste as she was confused by his. “Used to; why did she stop?” he asked loudly as he went room to room looking for a chair.

“Oh, she passed away a few years ago: cancer.”

“Here we go,” he said, entering back into the office. After placing the chair down, he stood over it from behind, offering her a seat.

“Thank you.” She sat down and became aware of the Columbia blue on the surrounding walls. It seemed to radiate a sort of cool warmth.

“So, your mother died of cancer. I’m so sorry. How old were you, if you don’t mind me asking?” Dothan now resumed his previous position, seated behind his desk.

“I was twenty, sir.”

“That’s awful. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s been four years now. I’ve gotten somewhat used to it.”

“But your father, your father is still alive?”

“Yes, he came to live with me after my mother died.”

“Then he’s a comfort to you, good.”

“Well, I hardly knew him growing up. He was never really around. He has emphysema, now. He’s kind of sick.”

“My God, you must be wise, very wise beyond your years.”

Tryphena was somewhat startled at that observation. Few people ever read anything significant into her personal issues. They rarely listened. She had not expected a statement so

observant from a politician who hardly knew her. Although Tryphena was very politically liberal, she was not an idealist. Years of deprivation had marked her with a raw realism. She knew all too well the flaws inherent in people.

The day was productive, with Tryphena exhibiting a decorating flair unknown even to her. Box after box was emptied. When the movers arrived, they delivered more bookshelves than filing cabinets. Dothan it seemed, was a reader, and not just on politics. There were numerous books of poetry, as well.

People came and went all day: Jack Clark, Mitch Stevens, and congratulatory constituents, each with a crate of files or office-warming gift. Dothan's cell phone rang incessantly. The short day spilled over into night; Tryphena noticed one consistency above all others: there was no sign, or mention, of a 'Ms. Dothan.'"

chapter Two

The road to John David Dothan's residence wound through a grove of squatty, unkempt palm trees. The grounds beyond stretched out in a sandy flatness—broken only by weedy dunes. All that was left of a productive day was a strip of orange to the west.

Dothan killed the engine of his green, short-bed, '74 Ford pickup and gathered his things from the passenger seat. He climbed the twelve steps to the front door and set down his briefcase and beer; he hesitated. He carefully unlocked the door and pressed it open softly before bending down to retrieve his articles. The door creaked open like an out of tune, aching violin.

No one was present upon entry. The low cedar ceiling of the den reverberated with a radio playing down a hall.

"Hey there, fella!" A feminine drawl called from his flank, the kitchen.

"Hey there, gal," Dothan replied, startled.

Jessica, his wife, emerged from the shadows of the kitchen;

dressed only in her nightgown, drinking a Screwdriver. The way the light outlined her face made her look gaunt, almost old. Jessica was one of those women of middle age obsessed with matching the weight she had once had in her early twenties. As a result, her facial bones pulled too tightly at her skin. Although aloofness might, health no longer sparkled from Jessica's once supple features.

"State Representative, congrats."

"Thank you. I thought you wouldn't be back 'til tomorrow."

"I cut the vacation short. Sorry I missed the shindig. How'd it go?"

"I won. It went well."

"Daddy sends his congratulations as well, JD."

Dothan put his six-pack in the refrigerator and went searching for a bottle opener. Jessica stood on the perimeter of the light and looked her husband up and down. "It's probably in the dishwasher. That damn maid never unloads that thing."

"She needs to dispense some sort of air-freshener. It smells like the beach in here." Dothan cracked his beer open and turned around to find Jessica right behind him; her gown open, her breasts exposed.

"I've never done it with a congressman before." She now had her hand on his crotch.

"Technically, I'm not a congressman. Didn't you get enough of that this past week?"

"Whatever, 'congressman' is close enough! And oh please, you know that was just a girl's getaway. Won't you forgive me? I tried to get back in time," she teased.

“It’s not like the first Tuesday in November is that hard to schedule around. They’ve had this thing since Ancient Rome, it’s called a calendar.”

“You’re such a smart ass!” Jessica retorted and pulled away.

Dothan slammed his beverage down on the counter, lurched forward and grabbed Jessica’s arm; thrusting her forcibly into his chest.

“Oh, you’re not gonna tie me up, are you? I like it when you’re rough with me.”

“Is that what I have to do to get you to love me, knock you around?”

“You’re such a sucker, JD.”

Dothan lifted Jessica up in his arms and marched her into the quarters that were once their bedroom. He threw her down on the bed and the two proceeded to perform an act that had become a rarity in this house.



“You want a beer, JD?” Jessica asked from the bathroom.

“Sure.”

She returned from the kitchen with the two beverages and discovered her husband sitting up in bed smoking a cigarette.

“Isn’t that a bit cliché? When’s the last time you checked your blood pressure?”

“This morning, it was a little high. But I had had a couple of cups of coffee.” Something was eating at Dothan. A something that sex could not entirely purge.

“It was bad enough that you weren’t present last night. At least you could’ve sent your father. There just wasn’t anybody there. I was so embarrassed.”

“You know Daddy always goes goose hunting this time of year. Don’t go feeling sorry for yourself, JD. If those puppy dog eyebrows droop anymore it might make me want to cry.”

Dothan exhaled the last of his smoke and crushed it out in the spotless ashtray beside the bed.

“You’ll hear from him soon enough. You know, he’s gonna expect you to go to bat for him in Austin.”

“Our state’s in debt Jessica; in this climate I don’t know how I can justify tax breaks and subsidies that won’t bring in any revenue in the short term or the long. Besides, the Republicans run this thing wholesale, for now.”

“You’re good at maneuvering, JD. You’ll figure something out. Daddy’s gonna expect a return on his investment.”

Dothan sat staring into space.

Jessica could tell he wasn’t listening. “Well, we can talk about it tomorrow. Do you want the light out? What time you want to get up?”

Lying alone in the dark, Dothan’s mind was teeming with thought. He simply could not get to sleep. Images from the previous night, as well as from that day, filled him with a mixture of pride and anxiety. But the thought of Tryphena brought a smile to his face. What a beautiful, driven woman she appeared to be. She seemed to take nothing for granted. Juxtaposed with his wife, Jessica, she seemed almost angelic. Jessica was typical of her background: smug, indifferent, and largely uncaring. Oh, she would pontificate about

this cause or that cause, but it was all abstraction. The tangible, the real, she met with almost derision. She would write a check for a thousand dollars to an animal shelter, but she could not be bothered with actually helping a stray. *Has she always been like this?* he wondered. They had known each other for nearly twenty years. *Where did the time go?* he pondered. The universality of the question belied his innate sense of isolation. For an instance, he brooded on his lack of originality. *Almost twenty years?*

JD and Jessica met when the former was twenty-four, and the latter twenty-three. Dothan, who was scratching by, living the life of a rock-n-roll singer, was larger than life to the young woman. He seemed the iconoclast incarnate. She enjoyed his petulant swagger, that insignia of passionate, vain, carefree youth. It was Austin in the nineties. Jessica was a student at the university. Life was an open book. Like her girlfriends, Jessica had become something of a groupie around Dothan's band. The other girls, less confident, less rich—sought after the other members. Jessica, however, wanted the frontman; she wanted Dothan.

Dothan was a dropout—even better. How better to piss off her controlling father than to date, not only a wannabe rock star, but also a college reject. She had first seen him perform when opening for Jesse Jackson. The activist had come to the campus to speak; Dothan's band had been chosen to warm up the crowd. JD commanded the stage. With his long curly black hair, his angular jawbone, he resembled Jim Morrison—from a distance that is. Up close, it was sadness rather than madness, which emanated from his eyes. They melted the surface of Jessica's heart. The man himself would quickly thaw what was beneath. What a time that was. But time can

work on the respective heart the way it works on the world: ages of fire...ages of ice. The epoch of fire had diminished. What was now left was a frozen wasteland. Dothan had given up trying to rekindle what was now a phantom. He had become accustomed to the notion that divorce was imminent. Running for office was less a way to earn back Jessica's devotions, but rather a reassertion of the man's instincts.



Dothan had hardly been up for five minutes when the phone rang.

"It's Daddy."

He removed himself and his coffee into the privacy of his office; the representative elect took the call.

"Yes, sir."

"Am I to understand congratulations are in order?"

"Yes, sir, you understand correctly."

"I knew you could do it, JD. Sorry I couldn't be there for the victory party."

"No problem. I'm looking forward to some good eatin'."

"Next year you need to come with me."

"I'm putting it on my calendar as we speak."

"I'm having my secretary fax over some new figures on the proposed Historical District in Brazoria. The figures come straight from the Chamber of Commerce. This will be a big project, bring in many jobs."

"I'm not sure if this is the climate to ask for almost twelve

million in pork, sir.” Dothan waited for what he knew would be a severe reproach.

“Goddamn it JD, just look over the figures and get back to me!”

“Uh, yes, sir.” His resolve never sustained itself. This conversation was over.

“You know I appreciate it, JD. Put Jessica back on, will you?”

‘Daddy,’ was Jacob Langhorne II, son of a wildcatter turned millionaire. Although Jessica’s father had no aptitude for the energy industry, he had managed to carry on the family fortune, perhaps not in the capacity of his father, but sufficiently enough. Jacob Jr. joined the contracting world in his thirties, and found his niche in the restoration industry. His life’s blood was government money.

II.

Through the duration of her college years, Tryphena had worked as a waitress at an Italian restaurant not far from her apartment. The young woman, though accustomed to menial jobs, was a little embarrassed, being that she was now a college graduate. The clientele at this restaurant was diverse, like her neighborhood. The tips varied.

“So what do you say, Saturday, after work?”

“Rudy, you know I have a policy of not dating *any* coworker.”

Tryphena would surrender. Rudy had what the other losers without plans lacked, charm and ambition. The charm was easily identifiable; it was the ambition that was hazy.

Saturday arrived and Tryphena was nervous. It had been some six months since she had dated a man, more than a year since she had actually slept with anyone. In her aquiline mind she had made many dating resolutions. Of late, she had resolved herself not to date African-American men ever again. They were simply incapable of responsibility. But after dating a white man who was incorrigibly lackadaisical, she concluded men as a whole were worthless. Loneliness successfully retorted with her acceptance of Rudy's advances.

While Rudy, the weekend manager, went over receipts with the cashier, Tryphena readied herself in the bathroom. She felt sick to her stomach and worried about the night ahead. *What if I have to go to the bathroom while I'm with him? What if he tries to get me back to his place? What if he tries to have sex with me? What if I concede and he doesn't want to wear protection?* Her mind was conjuring every negative possibility imaginable. She had a Xanax in her purse, given to her months ago by a girlfriend who suffered from anxiety. In a fit of haste she almost took it, but decided against the notion.

"So you're good with the pool hall, right?"

"Yes, that sounds like a plan," Tryphena replied, sitting up stiffly in the passenger seat of Rudy's car. Her stomach issues had not abated and she felt like she was on the verge of panic. Tryphena reached over and turned up the dial on the radio. "I like this song!"

"Cool!" Rudy said as he hit the accelerator.

Once inside the pool hall, Tryphena excused herself to the ladies room. *What is happening to me? Why do I feel like I'm on the verge of something terrible?* She sat on the toilet and began going

through her purse. Again she struggled with whether or not to take the tranquilizer. Again she decided against it. What she did need, however, was a drink.

Tryphena rarely drank, but she reasoned this was as good an excuse as any. Neither did she know much about pool, which Rudy liked. The game gave him the opportunity to take charge, be the man. After a few glasses of wine, Tryphena's nerves settled. The night, which began anxious, was turning out to be just fine. By the time two a.m. rolled around, and it was time to go, Rudy had found that sweet spot that most women possess—the sweet spot that dismantles the barricades.

The question invariably came up, on the theoretical way home, as to the next destination. The wine was working its magic in unison with Rudy's charm. It didn't hurt that Tryphena found the man physically attractive. Rudy was very athletic. She looked over at his profile from the passenger seat and replied with a question, a riddle of sorts. The answer of which was the final click in the combination that unzipped her pants.

“So, are you going to pursue football anymore, maybe walk on at the University of Houston?”

Rudy had been the star quarterback at the high school that they both had attended. Numerous colleges had scouted him. The only bite, however, was a school in North Dakota. After one winter in the frozen northland, Rudy had had enough. Coming home, he bounced in and out of school.

“Oh, I don't know. I'll be twenty-four soon. That's kind

of old to be trying to play college ball, Tryphena.” Whether or not his answer, in reality, made sense or not, was irrelevant. Rudy had failed to answer the riddle.

“We need to pick up my car at the restaurant.”

“Yeah, I know,” Rudy replied with a laugh meant to disguise his disappointment.

Tryphena unlocked the door to her apartment and entered into near darkness. A television flickered, illuminating a dreadful sight.

“Rufus?” she called out.

Her father was sitting in his wheelchair at the kitchen table, slouched over with his face crashed into the top of it. Tryphena hastily switched on the lights and discovered her father sitting in a small pool of blood.

“Father!” she cried, carefully lifting his head up. Rufus was unconscious; blood was caked all over his face, presumably from his nose.

“Oh my God!” Tryphena’s heart was racing. Any lingering effects of the alcohol had vanished. She reached for the phone and dialed 911.

As Tryphena filled out the endless paperwork in the emergency room, her mind drifted into a curiously odd direction. She began pondering her first date with Rudy. Though not for very much longer, Rudy was her boss. *How will this affect my work environment? Maybe I was too hard on him. I’m just so sick of worthless men. But he is the manager. Someone entrusted him with a degree of responsibility. I certainly wouldn’t want to do his job. The owner is a prick.* Indeed, she began to reevaluate the entire experience. She

would surmise that somehow, she had blown it. Her dark musings were interrupted by the here and now.

“Ms. Taylor?” A tired looking man in a white coat asked as he stood over her.

“Yes?”

“We have your father stabilized. I understand that you found him passed out?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Well, Ms. Taylor, your father simply passed out. His COPD is inhibiting his intake of oxygen. If it flares up, and he can’t get enough air, he simply passes out. Obviously this is dangerous. But there are more serious issues at stake, as well,” the doctor said, setting down the clipboard.

Tryphena, gazed forlornly at the doctor and asked despondently, “What could be more serious than not being able to breath? I mean, that will kill you.”

“Yes ma’am, but what we’re really concerned about is Anoxic Brain Damage; or, to a lesser degree, a slowed dementia.”

“What are these?”

“If your father goes long enough without air—literally just a few minutes—it could kill a portion (or portions) of his brain. That’s not what happened tonight. It wasn’t that severe. If what happened tonight continues, which is the more likely scenario, he could steadily lose brain function. The symptoms of dementia resemble Alzheimer’s.”

“What do we do?”

“I’m going to up the dosage on his meds.”

“He’s on Medicaid, that doesn’t cover what he takes now.”

“Yes, I understand. Maybe you should talk to your...Dr. Corel, I believe is his name?” The ER doctor asked, looking at his chart.

“What’s *he* going to do?”

“Perhaps he could supply your father with enough samples to at least see if it will help?”

With that piece of good cheer, the doctor excused himself.

Tryphena sat staring at the pale phosphorescent walls all around her. She felt cold, very cold. Her mind wandered back to the recent past, recalling the warmth of a certain state representative’s office; the cadence of crashing waves in the background.

chapter Three

As they receded, the dirty gray waves left salt stains on John David Dothan's old gray boots. Looking out over the Gulf of Mexico, which served as his backyard, the leaden surroundings struck him profoundly. The heavily overcast sky was indistinguishable from the waters. It was almost dark out. Dothan turned toward his house and his gaze was drawn to the Christmas tree in the window. *What a peculiar time this is*, he thought. Christmas in his adult years had become an annual disappointment. Dothan tried in vain to recapture something from his youth. Only once in his adult life had he caught that "something," and that was itself a long time ago.

"Are you ready JD?" Jessica called from the balcony.

Her shout shattered his meditation. "Yes," he answered.



"I hope she doesn't get pissed off like she did last year."

“She might, we didn’t go to see her at Thanksgiving.”

“There was too much going on, Jessica.”

“I know JD, but she’s gone crazy!”

The two were headed to a retirement facility down the coast towards Corpus Christi. The retiree was Dothan’s mother. It was after eight in the evening when the couple arrived at their hotel.

Black night oozed into gray day. JD and Jessica arrived at the rest home around 9:00 a.m. the next morning; both were hung over.

“How is she?” Dothan asked the nurse at the front desk, concerned. “Was she angry that we didn’t come to see her at Thanksgiving?”

Jessica interrupted, “What he means is he won an election last month and hasn’t talked to her since. She knew he was running. The question is, does she remember?”

Dothan peered over at his wife in silent disgust.

“She ain’t been doing well. That’s all I know,” the nurse informed them.

“What, why didn’t anyone contact me?”

“We did call. In fact, we called several times,” the nurse, scolded.

Dothan was in no mood for a confrontation. When Jessica sent out the signal to her husband that she might be, he nudged her in the ribs with his elbow. Surprisingly she acquiesced.

As Dothan moved down the hall towards his mother’s room, behind the nurse and Jessica, he could not quell that familiar swell of tears that always accompanied this instance.

“Mrs. Dothan?” the nurse asked, peering into the room.

There was no reply.

Dothan stepped into the doorway and saw the gray, straight, knotted hair of the woman who bore him. She sat in a wheelchair facing the wall. "Mother?" he asked.

"Mrs. Dothan, " Jessica interjected. "How have you been? Merry Christmas!"

"What? I know that voice," the old woman replied. She tried to turn her chair around and the nurse hurried over to assist her. "Yes, I know that voice," Mrs. Dothan declared with joy as she saw the couple standing in the entrance of her quarters.

"Hello mother."

Perplexed, the woman looked up at her son in confusion. "Mother? You must be kidding mister. I don't have a son. I only have a daughter named...Jessica. Isn't that right, dear?" She smiled and turned towards her perceived progeny.

The nurse turned her gaze to Dothan and shook her head at the tragic situation.

No, Mrs. Dothan, I'm your daughter-in-law," Jessica said, stressing the last two syllables. "This nice looking man next to me is your son, John David."

"John David? I don't know any John David."

Dothan was unable to control the muscle spasms of his face; he began to tear up.

"What are you crying for mister, are you some sort of fool or something?"

Dothan left the room abruptly.

Jessica found her husband sitting on a bench outside on the nursing home grounds. She could tell he was sobbing, however

discreetly. She paused and studied his crooked figure with a sense of regret for time itself, and its ravaging effect on us all. Dothan, through sniffles and tears was gazing out at the barren yellow landscape, spiked with small trees supported by stakes and rope. *How odd a moment can be in a life*, he thought, *a line of demarcation that once drawn, divides our time into: before and after*. Before entering the room, John David Dothan was someone's son. Now, after exiting, he was only a stranger.

Jessica had not felt much for the sordid character sitting on the bench in quite some time. But this display of quiet grief reminded her that JD was her husband and not just a series of unfulfilled longings and desires. She went over, stood behind him and put her arms around his neck. When she bent down to kiss him, Dothan began to sob uncontrollably.

"Hey, hey there fella, it's alright now. The nurse said that she goes in and out. She'll remember you here soon enough."

This was a lie. The nurse had actually informed her that she was surprised she recognized anyone. The old woman's mind was going quickly now.

"It would be better if she had just died like my father—one day—just gone. Like a drop of the guillotine. Not like this. This is monstrous, Jessica."

"I know JD. I know," she agreed as she rubbed his shoulders.

It had been a long time since the passing of Dothan's father—over a quarter century. His death meant more than just the loss of a parent; it meant the loss of a lifestyle. A well-to-do attorney, Phillip Dothan had provided his wife and only child

with a fine standard of living. No need went unanswered. Few wants were denied. But a fatal heart attack ended all of that.

John David was only fifteen when his father died, abruptly. As he sat on the bench, still in his wife's embrace, he thought back upon that dreadful day—the day when he arrived home from school and found his mother, a young woman, much like Jessica now, in tears.

“I remember coming home that day. It was so nice out, so fair. It was late September.”

“Yes, yes it was.” Although Jessica had heard this tale before, she listened as if listening to a sad sentimental tune, while painful in the abstract, one never tires of.

“My mother was sitting in the kitchen, at the table. I could tell she was crying. It was an odd kind of crying...it's like I knew. ‘Your father's had a heart attack. He's dead. I have to go to the hospital. I know you don't have a license yet, but do you think you could drive me?’ As she spoke this pathetic request, she looked up into my eyes with a look of terror. ‘John David, I don't know what we're gonna do. Your father had very little life insurance, just enough to bury him. I don't know what we're to do.’”

The whole way back home the two were consumed in their respective unhappiness. Dothan just stared out the passenger window while Jessica drove.

II.

The stress of work is the great reliever of personal stress. And for Dothan, there was much to be done on a professional level. His

“day gig” was littered with loose ends. Mr. Langhorne, several years prior, had hired his son-in-law on as a public relations man. While this was initially an act of nepotism, Dothan would prove somewhat talented at off-the-cuff bullshit. The former singer also demonstrated the gift of persuasion. His one flaw was his lack of interest. But this lack of interest would not interfere with his success. The customers loved him.

The fact that it was Christmas Eve and Langhorne had the office functioning at full capacity was a testament to his relentless nature. Dothan, always the insolent, strolled in just before noon. He would now be met with something he was not expecting; a sort of hero’s welcome. Or was it a star’s?

“You’re the man, JD!” A fellow salesman declared as he came out of the bathroom.

“Congrats, JD. We all knew you could do it.” A young admin, who secretly had a crush on the representative-elect, concurred.

His confidence up, his new pair of boots just breaking in, Dothan emerged onto the work floor where a sea of cubicles filled with the over-worked and the under-paid sat waiting.

It was unanimous; the entire office now stood and cheered him as he made his way towards Langhorne’s office.

“Hey, JD, the boss has been waiting for you,” Langhorne’s secretary said. She looked up at Dothan with adulation.

“Didn’t mean to keep him waiting—I’m here for the grill.”

“I doubt he’ll roast ya. Not this time.”

“Good, he doesn’t want me to have him investigated by the Comptroller, now does he?”

As the door shut behind him, the big talk and bigger attitude dissolved. Langhorne was on the phone, chewing someone out. He signaled at JD to take a seat. Dothan complied and plopped down in the big black leather chair like a child at the dentist's office. Langhorne was a tall, slim man. With his crew cut and the white streaks in his hair and mustache he reminded Dothan of Peter Parker's boss from Spider Man—the consummate comic book character.

Dothan grabbed the local paper from the nearby table and flipped through it while he waited. He happened upon an article that concerned him. The headline read: "Governor calls for Select Joint Committee to address recent federal immigration reform."

In the midst of Dothan combing through the article, the comic book character hung up the phone, clearly irritated.

"Why are you wearing goddamn blue jeans?" he asked his son-in-law, without making eye contact. He began searching through his desk. "Janet!" he yelled.

"Yes, sir," the beleaguered secretary asked as she bolted into the office.

"Where are my cigarettes?"

"Sir, you told me not to tell you."

"Well, I'm ordering you to tell me now, or you're fired!"

Janet left the room and returned a moment later with a pack of Marlboro's.

"Here, Mr. Langhorne; will that be all?"

"Yes, yes. Thank you. You'll be getting a raise soon."

Janet shook her head in disapproval as she vacated the office. "She's good. Best goddamn secretary I ever had."

“Let’s hope you can keep her...sir. By the way, I think the proper term is, Office Administrator...sir.”

Langhorne took a slow drag from his cigarette. Exhaling, he looked long and hard at his impertinent employee. “You haven’t answered my question, JD. Why are you wearing jeans?”

“It’s Christmas Eve.”

“Not around here it ain’t. OK, enough of that shit. We’ve got five deals lingering. Have you talked to that son-of-a-bitch in Louisiana? What about that deal in Brazoria?”

“No, to both.” Dothan always began bold.

“Why not?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I’ve been busy with...with...everything.”

“Well this is a part of everything!” Langhorne declared, crushing his smoke into the ashtray. “Figure it out.”

“Yes, sir; I’ll get on it immediately.”

Dothan spent that night, as well as the next several days, reviewing the Louisiana and Brazoria deals respectively; neither having much in the way of private investors. All were contingent upon exacting pork, or incentives, from state governments. Both would require his ability to garner influence. Although the amount of money he and Jessica would make in the deals was sizeable, Dothan found his focus repeatedly in a fog. He constantly had to return to the documents in order to remember what it was he had just reviewed.

Christmas passed with a whimper, as it had almost all of his adult life. Once upon a time he had dreamed that success in life might revive the enchantment in life. That notion seemed as remote now as the magic he missed. Back home out on his deck,

he sat at the patio table and looked out over the great gray Gulf. The sun had not shined in days.

III.

New Year's Eve was a ritual with the Dothan's. The couple had attended a masquerade function in one capacity or another since they had first begun dating. Jessica always went as a cat. For years Dothan had gone as a dead Confederate soldier, smearing white makeup on his face. There was not a hint of racism in his disguise, but the present politically incorrect nature of it had willed him to alter his costume. The last few years Dothan had gone as a vampire—very chic.

The cat and the vampire tonight were headed to a rather ritzy shindig in an exclusive neighborhood of Houston, known as River Oaks. River Oaks was the heart of “player's-ville.” Although largely Republican, there were intermittently scattered among its colonial-style mansions, enclaves of liberalism. As they cruised down the freeway in Jessica's Mercedes, the couple started into their most recent past time—arguing.

“JD, you must have lipstick on your fingers or something, there's black shit all over the console!”

“Oh, I'm sorry. I hope I don't have it on my shirt. Mind if I switch on the light?”

“Goddamn, dude! I can't see the road with that on!”

“Sorry,” Dothan apologized in a conciliatory fashion as he switched off the light.

“Jesus! Did you get any on your costume?”

“Yes.”

“Serves you right; you really have no respect for my things. This isn’t that piece of shit pickup, JD.”

“It’s not a piece of shit, Jessica, it’s vintage—considered a classic.”

“It’s a piece of shit!”

Then, after a moment of agitated silence, Dothan cautiously spoke, “I went ahead and invited my new assistant, Tryphena.”

“What? Why?”

“Why not? I thought she might enjoy seeing how the other side lives.”

“How is she going to get there? They’re not going to let her in.”

“Sure they will; I had Jack contact them. It’s all good.”

The destination now came into view. Under an arbor of ancient oaks, the couple surrendered their car keys to the valet.

“This is nice,” Dothan remarked, as he looked up at the eight giant columns.

“Beats the crap out of our beach house,” Jessica added.

Once inside the vast home, structured like a maze, the two went their own directions. Dothan made his way towards the back of the house to the bar.

The corners of the vast room were littered with odd, abstract sculptures. The walls were covered in signed black and white photos of glamorous people who looked like they were starving. The bookshelves lacked books.

While standing in line at the bar, his eyes were suddenly covered by two small hands that reached around from behind him.

“You’re not going to suck my blood are you?”

“Jeanie?”

“How did you know?” Jeanie said, playfully flabbergasted.

“Oh, it was the hands, I assure you,” Dothan replied, facetiously. He’d turned around to greet her.

Jeanie grabbed Dothan and pulled him into her bosom, hugging him tightly. Somewhat startled, he surrendered. After a longer than appropriate embrace, Jeanie let her hostage lose. “Congrats, Count!”

“Well thank you, Marilyn.”

“It’s Jane Mansfield, you dummy.”

“Jane Mansfield...whatever you say.”

Jeanie was one of Jessica’s on-again, off-again friends from college: on and off, because the two were constantly quarreling over the most insignificant of matters. While still early, she was already drunk. Dothan himself started to kill Whiskey Sours.

Tryphena would not show until much later. Unable to find her new employer, she skulked awkwardly in and out of the crowd of guests, horribly out of place. After several drinks had not calmed her nerves, she decided to take a cigarette break out on the back patio. The night, for the first time in weeks, was clear. Puffing her smoke, admiring the moon, she heard the sound of giggling, then the sound of a voice—a voice she thought she recognized. She could swear she heard Dothan as she made her way out into the garden. Two silhouetted figures, standing near the edge of the pool, came into view.

“Come on, you suck my blood, I’ll suck your...”

“Jeanie, come on now. What would Jessica think?”

“Jessica’s a slut!” Jeanie spewed, followed by a devilish laugh.

Tryphena emerged from behind a large live oak. She recognized the two figures that stood, partly illuminated.

“Unzip!” The buxom blond demanded, dropping to her knees.

Dothan, looking about for people, spotted Tryphena, right as Jeanie engulfed his half-limp penis.

“Tryphena?” Dothan asked, startled beyond cognizance. Tryphena could not keep from gagging. Every atom in her body cried out in revulsion. Hurrying from the patio, then through the house and to the valet, she claimed her car, leaving in disgust. *Who is this pervert I’m working for?* She questioned herself again and again on her long drive back home across the cold proverbial tracks.

chapter Four

“Please be careful with that! This was my father’s Edwardian writing desk!” Dothan pleaded with the movers as they struggled to get the large mahogany piece of furniture through his office door. Today was moving day at the State Capitol in Austin. The utter lunacy of it all had the legislator out of sorts. Dothan’s designated quarters were below on one of the subterranean floors deep in the bowels of the giant red granite building. After several incarnations, the present structure was finally completed in 1888. The Texas Capitol actually stands taller than the nation’s capitol in Washington D.C. Freshman representatives were usually stationed as far away from its lofty dome as possible. Back and forth to the garage, where the small moving van as well as his pickup sat, was the order of the day.

Apart from the obvious anxiety over his new responsibilities, Dothan awaited with a mixture of trepidation and embarrassment the arrival of his new Chief of Staff. New Year’s,

just the week prior, was still in the forefront of his crowded mind. He had not spoken with Tryphena since that stained evening. He'd gone over in his head countless times, searching for an excuse. He still had little confidence in his ability to exonerate himself in her eyes.

Although January, Austin was hot enough for sweat marks to appear beneath his white shirt as he walked to and from his truck. As he made his way down the long hall towards his new office, with numerous wall ornaments under each arm, a smiling figure stopped to introduce himself.

"How are you? I'm Ron Martinez," the fellow representative said, extending his hand.

"Ron, I'm John David Dothan. Pleased to meet you, sir."

"Let me help you with those, John David."

"Please, call me JD, Ron."

"Just as I thought, you're my new neighbor. Thank God, a fellow Democrat, too," Martinez said as the two entered Dothan's office.

"We're becoming a scarce commodity around here these days, huh?"

"No doubt."

After viewing the pictures that the two comrades had just set against the freshly painted wall, Martinez commented, "Interesting choice of decoration, JD. Most guys around here have Texana they hang from their walls: Sam Houston, Jim Bowie. But you—David Bowie, Elvis Costello, U2—this is rock-n-roll, man."

"Yeah, well...that was my former profession."

"I seem to remember reading something about that. How

does a rock singer make it into the state legislature?”

“I thought it was the logical extension. Like my wife says, ‘You picked the one thing sleazier than the music business.’”

“Rock-n-roll, brother.”

“What kind of music do you listen to, Ron?”

“What kind of music? I don’t know... whatever. I’m not into music really. I like baseball.”

“You’re from the valley— the border actually, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, Elsa to be exact; about twenty miles from the border, near McAllen.”

“Don’t you have a Chief of Staff or someone? Is it just you here alone?”

“I’ve got one. She’s coming. Be here soon.”

Martinez continued assisting Dothan with the hanging of his unorthodox decor. It wasn’t long before the talk turned to politics and policy.

“So tell me, JD, what’s your position on the illegal issue?”

“Conflicted.”

“Have you heard of the new joint committee that the governor has called?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I have. I read about that just a few weeks ago. It’s in response to that amnesty bill passed this past fall by Congress. Fueled by the subsequent deaths of those school children on the border—near your district, right?”

“Yes, that’s right; it was actually in my district. But I’m not sure that the Immigration Reform Law was really the cause of the bus being bombed. I know they have not been able to prove it, but it was the cartels. Human trafficking is more profitable than drugs.”

“Yeah, bad timing, I suppose.”

“Well, anyway, I’ve got a bill ready to be filed, a State of Texas guest-worker bill. I think it addresses the issue from every angle. Bottom line is: we need to realize and utilize those who are here and want to work.”

“Yeah, but Washington decides it ultimately. Even though they usually screw stuff up pretty bad—whatever it is.”

“The new law doesn’t go into effect for another year. I think what I have will appease them. It could use your support, JD. It’s not official, but after the House and Senate file their resolutions this week, in order to get this thing going, it’s a good chance I’ll be the Vice Chair.”

“Really! Well lucky me, stationed next door. Send it over and I’ll be happy to look at it before it goes to committee. If it gets that far that is.”

“It will because it has bi-partisan support. This conundrum with the Feds has opened a huge opportunity for state leadership in this area. And though I’m what some conservatives would call a ‘big government’ Democrat, one can’t deny that recent events have hurt the Hispanic cause in this state as well as the nation. Would you be interested?”

“Interested in what, the committee?”

“You’re a performer. You’ve got a fantastic speaking voice. Maybe you could help our cause.”

“I’m not sure what the cause is. Anyway, I think you over estimate my talents, Ron...and my connections. The speaker and I aren’t even acquaintances. I don’t really know anyone.”

“We’ll you know me. Think about it, JD. I mean it.”

“Get me a copy of the bill.”

After helping out, Martinez left. The busy day gradually died down. As the day dragged on, there was still no sign of Tryphena. Dothan sat down at his large mahogany desk, swung around in his brown leather swivel chair (which bore the state seal), and allowed himself to feel important.

A figure appeared in the doorway.

Dothan swallowed hard and wondered how he should handle this situation. *Should I stand and greet her, or stay put?* he wondered. *Should I apologize for New Year's or inform her that she was very late to her first official day on the job?* He did neither.

“Tryphena, good afternoon. Your desk will go over there,” he said awkwardly, pointing towards a corner of the small office space. I ordered it several days ago. It probably won't be here 'til tomorrow. For the time being, you can put your things on top of that bookshelf over there.”

“Thank you, Representative,” Tryphena responded. She entered the office and gently closed the door behind her. She moved stiffly with her head hung down and placed her purse atop a tall bookshelf. She looked around for a chair.

“Oh, I'm sorry, a chair!”

As Dothan went in search of a chair, she reflected on how much this scene resembled their first meeting. But this was not their first meeting.

Dothan returned with a gray folding chair and placed it next to the bookcase. Both took their respective seats and looked awkwardly into each other's eyes. Tryphena moved her

lips to speak. Dothan interrupted before more than a syllable could be uttered. Realizing after his initial utterance that he had cut in, he addressed his employee, "I'm sorry, how rude of me. Tryphena, please, you speak first."

"It's OK, sir. You can go first."

"OK. Well...look... I can't take it anymore.... About New Year's..."

"It's OK, sir. Really, sir; it's OK."

"Look, stop calling me sir. Just call me JD. OK?"

"JD?"

"Look, let me say what I'm going to say."

"Yes, sir. I mean..."

Dothan was getting agitated with the rigid formality. "Stop!"

He rose from his chair and began pacing about the room like a caged tiger. His agitation made Tryphena even more uncomfortable. Suddenly, he twirled around on the soul of his boot, stopped and took a knee in front of her.

Is he going to ask me to marry him? No way! He's already married.

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm sorry about New Year's. That was the absolute worst thing that you could have been exposed to, and... I'm sorry." He paused, waiting for an acceptance, a confirmation of his apology. When a few too many seconds passed and it did not come, he continued. "Look..."

Tryphena had had enough, and finally broke in, "Look? You keep saying that. I did look, and it was disgusting. I can't believe you are so...so..."

"So what?" Dothan asked, troubled by this reproach.

“So irresponsible, flippant, perverse, stupid...”

“Hey now, watch what you say, Tryphena.”

“Watch what I say? If you want respect, sir, you should act accordingly. How do you expect to ever get anywhere doing those kinds of things? And what about your wife? I almost emailed you my resignation. I need this job, but I almost quit. Then I thought, ‘no, I’ll go in and tell him to his face.’”

Dothan knew he’d been defeated. Still kneeling, his head sank low.

Tryphena, still seated, gazed down at the back of his head—studying the thick black locks. *He seems so sad*, she mused. Tryphena wanted badly to run her fingers through his hair. Not in a wanton way, but a maternal one.

There was a knock at the door.

“Who can that be?” Dothan asked bolting up from the floor.

“JD. Hey, sorry to bother you, but here’s the latest draft of that bill I was telling you about earlier.”

Dothan took the heft of unbound paper as Martinez realized the presence of another: a very attractive third party. “Oh, I’m sorry miss, my name is Ron Martinez, Representative Ron Martinez.”

“Pleased to meet you, Representative Martinez.” she said, lifting her frame proudly from her chair, “I’m Tryphena Taylor, Representative Dothan’s new Chief of Staff.” She shook Martinez’s hand and gazed subtly over at Dothan; a self-assured smirk accompanied her dark eyes.

Dothan stood there, startled. He regained his composure, “Yes Ron, Tryphena is my new assistant...very sharp.”

“Is that right? Lucky you. Have you ever worked up at the Capitol before, Ms. Taylor?”

“No, no I haven’t. Representative Dothan was kind enough to hire a rookie.”

“Well JD,” Martinez said, “I must be going; I have a meeting with the speaker. Let’s keep our fingers crossed.”

The employee and the employer now stood awkwardly alone together.

The matter concerning that one ludicrous New Year Eve... was settled.



The next few days were lonely ones for Tryphena. Dothan, though in the building, was rarely present. He was on the floor, at caucus meetings or attending functions, as well as the inauguration ceremony; all this took the bulk of his time.

Tryphena was charged with the task of organizing the chaos of the representative’s office. Similar to the district office in Matagorda, there were many boxes of books, even more here than there. Thankfully, the small office was wall-to-wall bookshelves.

She knew that arranging the vast array of volumes would take time and she delved into the task with abandon. Most of the inventory consisted of reference books dealing with legislative history, bills, etc. A healthy number of volumes existed on history of all sorts. Poetry eclipsed the other subjects. The poets were varied and Tryphena did not recognize many of the authors. She

was disappointed there was not one volume of either Langston Hughes or Dereck Walcott while books by and about the poet Shelley abounded. She lifted an aged, hardback of poems by the great Romantic and a photograph fell from between the pages and landed on the floor.

“What’s this?” she wondered out loud.

She picked up the small, wallet-sized picture and gazed at the subject. It was of a very young woman of olive complexion and chestnut hair. The cheekbones were high, the nose slim, the jaw defined. Her dress, visible from the bosom, was an elegant red. She turned the photo over and read the faded writing: “*To John David, from the Rose of your memory, Love Rachael.*”

“The Rose of your memory,” she repeated, “I like that.”
Who was she? she wondered.

She placed the photo back in-between the yellowed pages.

JD is quite the lure, what with his contradictions and mysteries, quite the lure, indeed.

II.

“JD, what in the hell is this tome I have sitting on my desk?” the voice on the other end of the phone asked angrily.

“Well sir, it’s a house bill I wanted you to take a look at. It’s been authored by a fellow rep. and it’s going to go before that new joint committee the governor has called for.

“It’s a goddamn State Amnesty bill, JD. Hasn’t the federal government already fucked this up enough?” The voice was that of Dothan’s employer and father-in-law.

“It’s a guest-worker bill, sir. Though it’s not perfect...”

“Same damn difference!” Langhorne interrupted.

There was a protracted silence on the line. After taking a deep breath, Langhorne tried to instill reason into his newly elected plant. “JD, we’re in the construction business. That means we use illegals, right?”

The question was rhetorical and not meant to be answered.

“Look, I don’t give a damn about some new constituency for the Democratic Party. I care about money. And if I have to document workers, that means I have to deal with payroll taxes, workers comp, and all kinds of bureaucratic bullshit. The way I see it, the more under the radar the better. We don’t need some crusade to enfranchise the goddamn Mexicans! I don’t give a shit if they’re apart of the American Dream or not. Truth-be-told, nobody in Austin or Washington does either. They just see votes. It’s a damn lie. Think about it this way, Mr. Idealist, once the illegals are as expensive as the natives, then what?”

Dothan, as usual, sat silent, not knowing how to respond. At his core, he felt his father-in-law to be a fiend. But his intellect knew better. His intellect told him that Langhorne was right. It was all a lie.

“We’re just now forming a committee. It won’t go anywhere, sir.”

“It better not!”

JD hung up the phone. His mind wandered back to a thought that often plagued him—the reality that he had been

born on the backend of possibility. The dreamers had come and gone and the azure kingdom they had labored with their lives to construct, torn to shreds. Unable to bear the weight of it, he defaulted back into his innate utopianism.



At week's end, Dothan drove home. He had intended to stay in Austin that weekend and did not inform his wife of his return. As he approached his home, with the night air as fresh as showered skin, Dothan noticed the silhouette of a vehicle in his driveway. The automobile did not resemble any he owned or recognized. He killed the headlights and the engine of the Ford and stealthily coasted into the drive. He opened a beer from his six-pack and sat in the darkness, his heart beating rapidly.

A figure moved past the bedroom window. His heart beat faster. He swilled down the dregs of his drink and got out of his truck, leaving the door wide open. He paced uncertain to the front door of his home. He felt like a stranger, or worse, an intruder.

There was no one present as he gently closed the squeaking door. Then, from the shadows of the hallway, a figure appeared. Dothan switched on the light and felt his adrenaline surge. "Who the fuck are you?" he shouted at the man standing in his den.

"Oh, oh...I'm a massage therapist! I am here consulting your wife!"

"Consulting her on how to purr like a kitten I bet."

“That’s ridiculous JD!” Jessica retorted from the hall. “Rico is my new masseuse.” She emerged from the shadow, wearing only a long navy blue robe.

“Since when do you have a masseuse?”

“Since my back started hurting again and your state insurance kicked-in. It covers everything.” Jessica stood, hands on her hips, in a self-righteous pose. Dothan stood perplexed and distraught.

“I was just going out to my car to get some oils, Mr. Dothan. I’m leaving them here with your wife. Then I go.”

Rico’s Euro-trash accent irritated Dothan. As the man vacated and then reentered, leaving the articles behind, Jessica stared with indignation at her ridiculous husband. “I’m taking a shower,” she said, plainly.

Dothan had not moved. He stared across the den, into the next room at the dated design on the kitchen wallpaper, he pondered an ancient question: *The men women cheat on their husbands with, why?* He knew that women cheated, and understood why at some level, it was who they cheated with that seemed... bizarre. And while he understood why Jessica would want someone different, *would she really go for a complete opposite?* Where Dothan was tall, Rico was short. Dothan’s hair, a thick mane of jet-black, Rico’s a thinning (obviously peroxide-dyed) blond. Dothan was thin. Rico was short and tubby. “Uggh,” he gagged.

He walked into the kitchen and grabbed a beer from the refrigerator. He couldn’t get Rico out of his head. The man was definitely no porn star. *Or maybe he was? Maybe he has the equipment?* The whole thing made Dothan cringe.

He heard the faint hum of running water and his heart's rebellion subsided. The conquering mind, intervening, rationalized: *Rico is an employee, nothing more...or is it more?* Back and forth he went.

When Jessica finished her bath, she dressed and went out without saying a word. From his office, lit only by a solitary lamp, he heard the door shut then the revving of the engine. He followed the drone until it was out of earshot, then he resumed the task at hand—an endeavor he had not undertaken in sometime—writing verse. An hour and six beers later, he had completed his meditation—a sonnet.

The Cheating Wife

*What was it that brought her to this point?
The brutish things he said but never heard?
Her learning that the beast was not a prince;
And yet recalling that the beast was the lure?*

*Was it liberating? Certainly not,
Her guilt rallied around her like a mob.
And thus within this irony her true pain lay;
Having become the Diana that shed her lace.*

*But the flippant sheets she thought she sought
Were fetid at best, like trash to be took out.
A child extinguished in the womb:
Her enterprise foiled by her femininity.*

*What was it that brought her to this point?
To find that feral spark in her refuge soft?*

He read it out loud and then reread it to himself over and over again. He concluded that it had no merit and tossed it in the wastebasket.



The Texas House of Representatives officially convened that Thursday. Representative John David Dothan was fashionably late, very unfashionable for a freshman member of the minority party. The learning curve was considerable, but not cumbersome.

The clerk read Representative Martinez's bill on the floor of the House. The Speaker sent it to the Select Joint Committee on Immigration Reform; a committee that Martinez had subsequently been appointed to as Vice Chairman.

Representative John David Dothan was appointed as well, the only freshman to have this distinction.

Across the gaping mouth of the rotunda the Senate swarmed in their respective chamber.

chapter Five

The phone rang endlessly and Tryphena felt more like a receptionist than a chief of staff. Lobbyists continuously arrived unannounced and monopolized her time. She could not get anything done. A file containing resumes of potential receptionist candidates sat largely ignored. Dothan had entered the Capitol essentially unprepared with regards to staff. All the other offices on their hallway had interns, legislative advisors, and the like. Dothan had only Tryphena.

The day was drawing to a close. She did what she could in between calls to make her representative's new office look less like a dungeon. When five o'clock struck, though willing to remain in order to review resumes, she decided to ignore the phone. A single number that kept appearing on the caller I.D. constantly interrupted her concentration. No name was listed.

She finally answered, "Hello, Representative Dothan's office. May I help you?"

“Who is this?” A husky feminine voice blurted from the other end.

“This is Representative Dothan’s Chief of Staff, Tryphena Taylor, ma’am.”

“Don’t go thinking you’re all that, Sugar. JD’s always been good at making the help feel more important than they are. And not out of benevolence, I assure you. He always gets something out of it.”

The attitude of this woman was hard to take. But Tryphena maintained her composure. “Um, may I ask who this is?” She intuitively knew the answer before the woman in question answered.

“Mrs. Dothan. And where’s my husband?”

“Representative Dothan is in a meeting, Ms. Dothan.”

“He’ll always just be JD to me. And will ultimately be just that to you too, I’ll bet.” There was a pause, Mrs. Dothan continued, “Just tell him to call me. And not too late, I have a back-ache. I’ll be going to bed soon.”

After hanging up, Tryphena could not contain her spleen. “What a bitch!” The words had just left her lips when she realized the door to the office was wide open. She quickly rose from her desk to close it. She stood in the doorway and peered down both sides of the long empty hallway. Thankfully, she was alone.

She returned to her chair and began to ponder the odd conversation of just a few moments ago. *What was that all about? It’s like she had something to prove. Weird.* Still, based on recent events, she could not discard entirely the reproaches of Mrs. John David Dothan...*but what a bitch.*

Sometime around 9:00p.m., she finally finished organizing what she needed so she could hit the ground running in the morning. She left a note for her employer, informing him that his wife had called. She stood and grabbed her things to go, but as she was locking up the office, a loud deep voice echoed from somewhere. She saw coming down the corridor, two dark suited figures—one dwarfing the other. It was Representatives’ Dothan and Martinez, returning from their committee meeting.

Well Ms. Taylor, still working are you?” Martinez asked as they approached. “You got lucky here JD, lucky indeed. I will tell you Ms. Taylor, if your employer doesn’t fawn over you and your performance each and every day, let me know.” He turned to Dothan and prodded him in jest, “What are you paying her, JD? I’ll double it.”

Tryphena liked Martinez because, so far, he had always maintained a Latin chivalry towards her. “I will let you know Representative Martinez, I assure you,” she said.

“Call me, Ron.”

After a few more moments of triviality, tempered with bits of business, Martinez excused himself. Tryphena and Dothan stood awkwardly alone for a moment outside his office.

“So, I guess you’re heading home?” he asked, acknowledging the obvious.

“Yes, I’m headed home.” Their relationship had taken on a strange dichotomy. Their interaction was less like employer/employee, more like two co-workers who shared a forbidden secret. It was too close, and as such, was ironically uncomfortable.

As Tryphena walked down the corridor, she paused, turned around, and called to him, “Your wife called.”

“My wife?”

“Yeah, I left you a sticky note on your computer.”

“My wife...hmm. Thank you.”

“Oh, and just to let you know, I won’t be available on Friday. I have to go back to Houston so I can take my dad to the hospital for some tests he has scheduled.”

This was short notice, but given the circumstances, Dothan refrained from comment other than, “I’ll make do. Goodnight Tryphena.”

Once at his computer, he stared perplexed at the sticky note. *What could she want?* He really didn’t want to make the call. The day’s events had been laborious enough. Now he was expected to call his wife. *I need a drink.* Dothan just wanted to get out of there. So he did.

He stopped by a convenience store on the way back to his apartment and picked up some adult refreshment. He had just signed the lease this past weekend to his new digs just off of Congress Avenue, not far from the Capitol. In fact, he could just make out the dome from the small porch of his second story patio when the lights cut through the drought stricken branches.

He collapsed onto his sofa and popped open a lukewarm beer. Suddenly, it dawned on him that he had not called Jessica back. He checked his cell phone and saw she had called that number as well. He slammed down the brew and hit her contact name on his device.

“What?” Jessica sounded as if she had been asleep.

“Jessica?”

“JD, what time is it?”

“I don’t know, sometime after nine. If you’re sleeping I can call back in the morning.”

“Didn’t that...what’s her name... tell you not to call too late. My back hurts!”

“Goddamn it Jessica, it’s only nine o’clock. And her name’s Tryphena!”

“Oh, that just rolls off your tongue, doesn’t it, JD?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What am I talking about? What are you talking about?”

“What, wait...why did you call?”

“I called to let you know that I talked to Daddy today. He wants us to come up to Austin. Check on his investment.”

“Investment? You know I hate it when you call me that, Jessica!”

“I know. Isn’t it funny?”

He didn’t laugh and just asked, “When?”

“In the next couple of weeks, I’m sure.”

“You can come up, but I can’t guarantee that I’ll be available. I have a job to do—we’re in session.”

“We’ll see. So how old is she, JD?”

“Who? How old is who?”

“Try...whatever-her-name-is.”

“Tryphena. She’s twenty-four.”

“Is that right? She sounds black. Is she?”

“Yes.”

“You and Slick Willy: Two peas in a pod.”

“I’m going to let you go now.”

“Ok, but in a couple of weeks.”

“We’ll see. Goodbye.”

As soon as the call disconnected, he threw his cell phone at the wall. It ricocheted off of numerous pieces of furniture and came to a rest beside his boot.

“Goddamn it,” he complained when he discovered that the screen had been irreparably compromised, “I’ll have to get another phone...and my contacts!” he lamented.

He brooded as he polished off the six-pack “I might as well end the day,” he resolved. What a day it had been! It was only Monday, and he was ready for the weekend.

Sleep evaded him. As he tossed and turned, his mind kept going over and over the meeting he and Martinez had been in that afternoon. *What has Ron gotten me into?* he thought. It had been announced earlier that day on the floor of the House that Dothan had been appointed to the “Select Joint Committee on Immigration Reform.” With no time to prepare, he cut his teeth with the group. This committee was stacked with twice as many Republicans than Democrats, with apparently more “Elephants” on the way.

Nothing had been accomplished thus far because neither side had, as of yet, produced a leader. It seemed to Dothan a load of nonsense. The Chairman, Senator Jackson, was not present, leaving Ron to run the show. During every break, Martinez pressured Dothan to use his oratorical skills. Dothan, a novice, was not yet convinced of his “skills.” And besides, he had no idea what to say.

Thought beget thought, and soon he was worried about Langhorne. *What will his reaction be once he discovers I'm on this committee?* Dothan fretted.



Morning found him grappling with a fit of diarrhea, but a bottle of Pepto would assuage it. With a slight hangover he confronted a new day.

“I tried calling you last night, but it went straight to voice-mail.” Ron informed him as they strode quickly towards the House floor.

“Yeah, I dropped it in the toilet by accident. I’m gonna have to get another one. Remember to write your contact info down for me, would you?”

II.

Friday took forever to finally raise its triumphant fist. What a week it had been. Dothan was not by nature confrontational, but he was getting an education in conflict. Sitting in Martinez’s office, the two went over the first week of proposals: rejections and emotions.

“JD, I wish you’d be more assertive when discussing the plan.”

“I’m a freshman, Ron. Frankly, getting in people’s faces makes me uncomfortable.”

“You need to,” Martinez said.

“Apparently.”

“Look, nobody speaks as well as you. I mean shit, you’re the only guy I know who can drop those big words without looking like a pretentious ass.”

“Yeah, I believe in the plan, I just wish we could get more of these damn Republicans to acquiesce.”

“That’s what I mean, ‘acquiesce!’”

“Right,” Dothan replied with an embarrassed chuckle.

“There are a couple of senators who will be coming in next week. I guess we’ll see how things go.”

“Do you know who they are?”

“Well, Jackson is Chairman, of course. He’s been out—down in the Valley on Home Land Security stuff; and Rachael Logan, his protégé.”

“Never met them.”

“That’s right, you missed the Legislative Mixer.”

“Yeah, I had an emergency with one of my father-in-law’s clients. It was BS. What do you know about Jackson and Logan?”

“Well, Jackson, Reed Jackson, he’s an old bastard; arrogant; institutional.”

“I think he was in the tank for my former opponent. That is until the dirt was delivered. And Logan?”

“A woman in her late thirties early forties. Pretty; staunch Pro-Life advocate.”

“Lord help us!”

“Oh JD, you’re such a heathen,” Martinez retorted in jest. “It’s all that rock-n-roll, man!”



Luckily, the rest of the day didn't have much on the agenda. That morning, the committee had convened for the weekend; the members met only briefly to distribute a vast amount of paperwork; paperwork that Dothan largely disregarded.

Dothan was grateful for the lax schedule because Tryphena was absent, dealing with her father. Dothan returned to his lonely office and tried combing through some of the morning's amendments. From a cursory review of the committee paperwork, a clause sent out from Senator Logan's office caught his eye.

"You're kidding me!" he shouted out in surprise.

Dothan was elated; his weekend made. He had entered into this committee both green and utterly skeptical. The past week had only confirmed his apprehension. But now, there was a proposal—from a Republican, which struck him as not only workable—but ingenious. This was somebody he wanted to meet. Browsing over the committee information he looked for Logan's office number. It was upstairs.

He jumped up from his desk, grabbed his coat and sprinted out of the office, leaving the door wide open. It was late and there was little wait for an elevator. The hallway upstairs was dauntingly long. Nevertheless, Dothan scanned the doors trying to find the correct name and number. Upon locating the correct office, he discovered that it was locked and no light illuminated through the tempered glass. His elation leveling, he journeyed back downstairs, nonetheless inspired.

He searched through his library—the library that Tryphena had organized, looking for the Texas Legislative Handbook. He desperately wished to put a face on this particular state senator. Just as he found the right publication, he heard a knock on his door. He assumed it was Martinez and went to welcome him in. The hall light was turned off, making it difficult to determine who the figure was standing on the other side of the glass. A harder knock followed, suddenly filling Dothan with a sense of dread. He opened the door and discovered his wife and father-in-law.

“Damn JD, what the hell was keeping you?” Langhorne belted out, clearly irritated.

“Oh just working on some things in my office. Sorry, sir. What brings the two of you here this late...and unannounced? Dothan asked, looking accusingly at Jessica.

“Unannounced, hell, I’m never unannounced, JD!” Langhorne retorted, turning around to face the two after placing his coat on the coat rack.

“Why don’t ya’ll come back into my office, take a seat?”

“Jesus JD, this place looks like a teenager lives here,” Langhorne observed with his customary disrespect.

Langhorne and his daughter sat fidgeting in their dark red leather chairs as they stared over the large mahogany desk at Representative John David Dothan.

“This place looks like the bedroom of a Goddamn teenager!” Langhorne declared again.

Dothan was only partly present. One third of his attention was fixated on the book of legislators that lay in front of him on

his desk; one third swam in the euphoric realization that it was his office that the two guests sat in and not the other way around. The last, unfortunately, was spent listening to his father-in-law rant.

“It’s come to my attention that the project in Brazoria might run into problems because of some Environmental Assessment Study or some shit.”

“Right, they do this on almost every project we’ve done in the last few years,” Dothan replied.

“One problem here, however, apparently there is some issue with aquatic something-or-other. Hell, I don’t know! I need you to figure this out for me, JD!”

At this point, Jessica decided to chime in, “No one wants to hurt the environment JD, as our hefty checks to the Sierra Club will attest, but Daddy needs a way around some unneeded, expensive study.”

“Right!” Langhorne affirmed.

“This is a federal issue, sir.”

The two guests now engaged in a heated discussion between themselves, as if Dothan were not there. Slyly moving the handbook into his sight, he resumed the search for one, Rachael Logan. As he searched for the page number listed in the contents, he suddenly realized that the discussion had stopped.

“Are you going to listen to Daddy or read that book?” Jessica asked haughtily.

“Sorry.”

“There’s a fella I know in Washington. I’ve got his information here. I need to make a phone call,” Langhorne said.

“Sure, sir, by all means,” Dothan said, pushing the apparatus towards Langhorne. “Just dial the number, no problem.”

“Long distance OK?”

“You’re in the State Capitol, of course.”

Jessica resumed her fidgeting while Langhorne began his conversation with Washington. Dothan, freed up at last, gazed at his book again, thumbing his way towards the desired page. The page found, his eyes combed the column of senators’ photographs.

Life is lived at its most intense while experiencing the unexpected: That dash or surge of electricity that fills a person with a sense of both adrenaline and dread simultaneously. Dothan tore a sticky note from its pad, folded it in half, and marked this specific page. He was now in a world far removed from the one that contained his wife and ranting father-in-law.

Are you OK JD?” Jessica asked, noticing that his breathing was abnormal.

Langhorne, trying to carry on his important conversation, waved at his daughter to shut up.

Dothan smiled at his wife unconvincingly.

Once finished with his long distance talk, Langhorne placed the phone down with an air of contentment. “That fella’s alright. I might be able to do business with that man. He’s a lobbyist in D.C. I got the number from the Texas Builders’ Association. Proven to be more helpful than you so far JD.”

The business for that evening was complete. Langhorne insisted that he take his daughter and Dothan to dinner. Dothan sat polite but distracted.



When Tryphena opened the office up that Monday morning she found a mess. Dothan was no organizer. Files and folders sat on chairs and on the floor, everywhere but in their place. On Dothan's desk she discovered the procured handbook, a small piece of yellow paper protruding from its pages. Opening to the designated page, she was hit profoundly by the unexpected.

chapter six

Dothan stood outside the committee room trying to pat the sweat from his neck, face and forehead. *Am I having an anxiety attack?* he wondered. Most of the committee was already in the room and seated. He was late as usual.

Martinez suddenly emerged from behind the closed doors and saw his restless colleague in the hall. “JD, you alright there man?” he inquired.

“Yeah, I’m fine...I think I ate something bad. I don’t feel very good, Ron.”

“Well go back to your office, or to the men’s room, whichever one you think you need. Sit this one out. I really think you should, brother.”

“You sure that’s alright? I mean...this is the first meeting with the chairman and what not.”

“Man, you got lots to learn my friend. You’ve got plenty of time. By the way, what and where did you eat?”

“Don’t worry, it wasn’t from the cafeteria, you bastard.”

“Alright, buddy.” Martinez chuckled and patted Dothan on the shoulder. “You go do what you need to do. I’ll cover for ya, JD.”

Once back at his office, Dothan immediately felt relieved. Then regret settled in. The uneasiness returned—he felt like a coward. He reached into one of his file cabinets and removed a bottle of Pepto-Bismol.

Tryphena, returning from the restroom, entered the office. “Representative Dothan, aren’t you supposed to be in a meeting?”

“What?” he asked, startled; he turned around to face her.

“Are you OK?” she asked, noticing the pink bottle in his hand.

“Yes,” Dothan answered after gulping the bottle’s entire contents.

“Oh my God, did you read the label? That’s like ten times too big of a dose!”

“What? I don’t care. I’m late. I’ve got to go!”

“Well, wipe that pink rim from around your mouth before you go in to the meeting!”

Dothan brushed past her, almost rudely, and charged down the hallway towards the meeting he was missing. Tryphena was left feeling troubled about him as usual. Her instincts told her the true reason for the incident that had just played out.

The doors loomed before him. Clutching his briefcase tightly, Dothan entered the meeting. Ron Martinez was in the middle of addressing the committee.

“Well, speak of the devil. There he is. I was just telling our group here that you were ill. I guess you’re trying to make a liar out of me, huh, JD?”

The entire room feigned laughter.

Dothan swallowed hard and spoke, "Yes, I'm sorry everyone. Something I ate for lunch did not agree with me; nothing a little Pepto can't resolve, though. I'm ready for battle." Dothan grabbed a seat at the first available chair.

The table was a large mahogany oval, where nine senators and representatives sat. The room itself omitted a brown aura. It was barely large enough to accommodate the table. Uncomfortable, Dothan had not yet surveyed the room.

Martinez took control. "Chairman Reed and Senator Logan, I would like to introduce you to Representative John David Dothan."

Two voices sounded their hellos in succession. One was across the table, to the right. The other was clearly female, but he could not see her as she was on his side of the table, to the left. Her back had been to the entry door.

Dothan knew he needed to stand and greet the two. Rising, he nodded at Reed Jackson who nodded back with an air of rigid plasticity. He turned left and gazed down on a presence out of the past. Suddenly, Dothan was struck with an immense confusion: *Should I acknowledge her as a past relation or simply say hello and sit down*, he wondered. Dothan chose the latter.

He looked across at Martinez and noticed that Ron was signaling something, pointing to his mouth. Remembering what Tryphena had called out as he was leaving his office, he rubbed the pink powder from his lips. Embarrassed and uncomfortable, he sat listening as the committee discussed the infant legislation. He wished he had another bottle of Pepto. He said nothing.

Vice Chair Ron Martinez, who served as de facto chair on the committee, now rose to make a few remarks. “Folks, taking what we had previously worked on, and enhancing it considerably, is one of our newest members to The Select Joint Committee on Immigration Reform—Mrs. Rachael Logan. Rachael, the floor’s all yours.”

Dothan felt an intense tingle shooting up his spine. His breathing became labored...and what of his heart? It was suddenly immersed in that chaos which is exclusive to its precincts. From the corner of his eye he witnessed a tan figure rise from the table. From the table the figure passed him from behind, emerging before the small assembly.

It’s her, he thought, awed.

John David Dothan understood not a word Rachael Logan said in her twenty-minute presentation; he merely sat, his eyes fixed on this creature before him; the sound of her voice a lilting that mesmerized him.

After she finished, questions were solicited. Several of the members inquired as to this and that. Dothan sat silent. Rachael Logan, through the duration of her presentation, never once looked Dothan in the eye.

Martinez spoke a few words in closing and then passed around the committee’s homework, adjourning the meeting. Rachael was ensnared immediately with a swarm of bodies seeking to congratulate her, in order to increase favor.

Dothan remained seated; pretending to review the printed material passed out by Martinez.

Rachael gradually guided her milieu of sycophants to her

original position at the table. Shaking a few remaining hands, stuffing the paperwork in her briefcase, she exited politely but swiftly.



That night, Dothan stood on the balcony of his apartment and chain-smoked.

Come morning, the bewildered representative's chest hurt when he inhaled. More alarmingly, his pulse felt awkward. Dothan suffered from hypertension, as did his father before him. He was diagnosed in his early thirties. For the past decade he had been on medication. A regimen he was less than responsible at.

"Shit!" he exclaimed after checking his blood pressure. He tossed the cuff on the couch and began rummaging through old prescription bottles, looking for a stray blood pressure pill—he was unsuccessful. His exacerbating worry resolved itself when he began to recall yesterday's meeting. Recalling it only drew out more memories. Soon the man was consumed in instance after instance of nostalgia and he forgot about the pills.

However, time was not a commodity that was his to squander.



When Dothan arrived at the Capitol midmorning, Tryphena barged him with work.

“I can’t focus on any of this, right now!” he bellowed.

She noticed Representative Dothan’s irritation and backed off. “These things can wait, but I suggest you at least take this report home and study it before your next meeting.”

“Can’t you just read it and brief me?”

“I have read it, I can brief you. But I think you need to read it yourself. It says some things that you need a firsthand knowledge of. That’s my advice.”

“Very well, just put it in my briefcase,” he said, rising from his desk.

“Where are you going, sir?”

“I’ll be back later, Tryphena. Hold down the fort.”

“The fort, sir? she asked sarcastically.

“The office for Christ’s sakes!”

“Yes, sir.”

Dothan quickly strode to the elevator. He was a man on a mission. Somewhere, buried deep within him was the man that the world, and disappointment, had almost extinguished. Like a mythical stag, that man now appeared through the thicket. Breathing heavily and fighting back a rebellious gut, he paced the elevator floor, waiting for the doors to open. Upon opening, he was jettison.

“Yes, I would like to speak with Senator Logan, please.”

“Do you have an appointment, Mr...?” The receptionist asked, startled by his intensity.

“Representative Dothan. No, I don’t have an appointment.”

“Well sir, if you would like to make an appointment, I’m sure Senator Logan will be happy to meet with you.”

“Could you just tell her that I’m here, please?” Dothan more demanded than asked.

“It’s OK Caitlin. I can see Mr. Dothan now,” a plaintive voice stated plainly from behind him.

Dothan turned and his eyes met Rachael’s for the first time in more than twenty years.

“Hello, John David.”

“I haven’t been called that in long time.”

The receptionist looked confused.

“Caitlin, would you please go down to the library and look into the drunk driving stats of undocumented workers? I’d like only the last five years, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Caitlin methodically gathered her things.

Dothan stood stiff; Rachael was at ease.

Once the receptionist was gone the two just stared at each other for a moment. Dothan felt his stag slipping back into obscurity.

Rachael broke the standoff. “Congratulations on your victory. It’s my understanding that your candidacy was a long a shot. Good job, John David.”

Dothan detected a slight patronizing tone in her delivery. He let it go. “Thank you. Yes, it was a trial. More than I expected in fact—brutal really,” he replied, leaning against the wall, crossing his legs, and his arms.

“That’s campaigning for you; never a dull moment. How are you?”

“I’m fine. I guess I’m just a little confused.” The stag was back.

“Confused over what?”

“Confused over why you’ve been ignoring me.”

“Funny, I thought you were ignoring me.”

“Ignoring you? I didn’t even know you were in the Senate. Rachael Logan?”

“Yes, I got married. It happens you know. I’m Mrs. Donald Logan.”

The air was not thinning, but getting thicker.

Rachael continued, “Look, I’m sorry John David. I didn’t know how to act. It was very confusing for me as well. You know that Reed Jackson and I have been colleagues since I first entered the legislature almost ten years ago?”

“You and Reed Jackson are friends? Lord. Well, okay; so what?”

“So what?” So what, is that I’m sorry...sorry for not coming to see you the first day of the session; telling you hello and wishing you the best. I knew you were here, but I...I’m sorry John David.” Rachael’s tone had transformed. She was convincing.

He peeled his form from the wall and paced the room with his hands in his pockets, staring at the floor.

Rachael continued, “We have our work cut out for us. This bill has some potential. Although the Feds will most likely sue if we do anything at all.”

“Then it’s all for show?” Dothan sharply retorted, looking up at her.

“I didn’t say that. I simply meant that it’s complicated.”

“I really liked your offerings. They were unanimous. I think it has potential, as well.”

“Still using big words nobody understands, I see,” Rachael replied, smiling adoringly. Dothan’s boyish smirk did strange things to the woman.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Gazing casually around the front office, Dothan noticed numerous family portraits. Several included two children: a boy and girl. “Are those *your* children?” he asked, pointing to the pictures.

“Yes, they are: Matthew and Kathryn.”

Dothan looked at her with an air of puzzlement, clenching his eyebrows and cocking his head.

“They’re both adopted,” she commented.

“Oh, that’s fantastic. Congratulations on your family, Rachael.”

“Yes, they’re wonderful. Matthew’s ten and Kathryn’s six. They’re good too. I hear horror stories about other peoples’ children. I guess I’m blessed in that regard. Do you have any children of your own, John David?”

“No, I don’t. I am married, however. To Jessica Langhorne, daughter of Langhorne Construction.”

“Yes, I knew that.”

“I guess you probably would, being friends with Reed Jackson.”

Disregarding this subtle, but obvious jab, Rachael approached Dothan and placed her hands on the shoulders of his black, well-tailored suit. “I’m looking forward to working with you, John David, both in our committee and in general. I’m so glad you’re here, and I want you as a co-sponsor if this bill

takes flight. And I'm so very proud of you. You've come a long way from your days as a singer."

The shimmer in her eyes belied the patronizing nature of such a statement. But Dothan had grown used to it, particularly from Republicans.

The two parted. Both with a feeling the exact opposite from the outset of their meeting: Dothan strode the hall with an air of contentment, Rachael, remaining in her office, was fraught with a sense of unease.

But the spell of peace would prove short-lived. Returning to his office, Dothan was reminded of reality's default ugliness.

"Representative Dothan." Pam, his recently hired receptionist, addressed him, meekly.

"Yes Pam, what is it?"

"Well sir, Ms. Taylor had to leave suddenly while you were out. Her father was found out by the vending machine of her apartment. He had fallen out of his wheelchair and was unconscious."

"My God! Do you know what hospital he's at?"

"No sir, she didn't say."

Dothan hastily retired back into his office. So much was swimming around in his mind that he closed the door behind him—something he rarely did. He turned on his computer and stared out into space, waiting for it to boot. His thoughts were not of the crisis at hand, however, but far from it. They were of how lovely Rachael looked, and how well preserved. She looked ten years younger at least, and so much better than his wife, Jessica.

Dressed as she had been these past two occasions in her fitted skirts, she had retained that elegance that first attracted the young singer to her so long ago. He pulled out his book of Shelley and turned to the picture that marked “Prometheus Unbound.” He removed the wallet-sized photograph and held it up to the light, believing that it had been tucked away undisturbed for years. He was unaware that Tryphena had recently discovered it quite by accident. Gazing longingly at the picture, he flipped it over and read the writing: *The Rose of your Memory.*

How prophetic he was to grant her that title. He was sinking now, the undertow of his memory pulling him away from the present. The phone rang. Pam answered.

“Representative Dothan!” she cried, knocking on his door.

“What is it, Pam?” he pleaded. His mind was still fuzzy.

“Ms. Taylor is on the phone, sir!”

Bursting with sudden alertness, he reached for the phone; Dothan felt a tremendous foreboding. “Yes, Tryphena, what’s going on?”

“Sir,” she was sobbing.

“Tryphena, try to calm down. What is it?”

“They think my father had a massive stroke. They’re rushing him into a CAT scan. Nobody knows how long he lay by that vending machine. I’m so scared.”

“Well stay down there; don’t worry about anything up here. We’ll make it fine. Do what you have to do. You have my cell phone. I want you to call me if you need anything. And let

me know the status of your dad when you get to Houston. Hang in there, Tryphena!”

Tryphena was nearly hysterical when the two hung up.

Dothan and Pam were left just staring worriedly at each other.

“It looks like we might be on our own for a while, Pam.”

“Yes, sir.”



This over-eventful day finally came to a conclusion. With Pam gone, Dothan again retired to the privacy of his office, his mind not on Rachael, but Tryphena. For a time, staring into oblivion, he dwelled on the oddity of human relationships, the fragility of it all. Even Tryphena, who was as solid as a rock, was at her core completely vulnerable.

Dothan needed a beer.



Once home, having changed his clothes, he was again sitting on his balcony smoking a cigarette and swigging a beer. For a change, he thought of nothing.



The two legislators did not see each other for the rest of the week. Both headed home to their respective districts: Dothan to the Gulf

THE REPRESENTATIVE

Coast, Rachael to DFW. Their opposite drives were spent dwelling on one another. Time is indeed relative. Ten years ago, ten years prior, seemed an eternity. Now, twenty-plus years on, the past seemed clearer and closer than ever.

chapter Seven

Before Dothan hit the open road, he found himself taking a detour; almost without thinking. This was Austin after all. And Austin held a special place in the pantheon of his memories. Twenty years ago the University Tower, like the Capitol dome itself, defined the Austin landscape, but no longer. The slim, phallic relic now acted as a homing beacon.

He exited onto Guadalupe, aka “The Drag,” and faced another bitter disappointment. The once unique strip of coffee shops and bookstores was now a morass of generic corporate logos, like those seen in any city in America. This disgusted Dothan. But the disgust was overtaken by fascination at how brazenly he was trespassing, despite the generic signs and foreign structures, within the pillars of his Pantheon.

To his right, there appeared something that he had not thought of for two-plus decades: a simple convenience store. Although the name had most likely changed, (he did not remember it), the structure and parking lot remained intact. Indeed, the

garbage dumpster itself conjured familiarity. He passed by and then decided to turn around. He pulled into the compact parking lot, got out of his car, entered the establishment and headed for the beer cooler. He experienced a vague feeling, like one sensing himself through a familiar room in pitch-blackness. Dothan exited with his beverage, stopped and surveyed the concrete as cars went blowing by.

It was nearing dark. While not quite the scene he recalled from his youth, with remnants of the day still lingering, it was close enough. Suddenly, he craved a cigarette.



Who was Rachael Logan? To start with she wasn't always Rachael Logan. Born Rachael Downs, she first caught Dothan's eye his senior year in high school, here in Austin. She most likely would have captured the budding rock singer's attention much sooner, but having relocated his last year of high school to a fresh institution, this was circumstance.

It was nothing scandalous, involving delinquency or the like, that precipitated this relocation, but simply to keep his band intact. Dothan's band mates had all been a year older; and all were now freshman at the distinguished university. Leaving the world of security during one's senior year took guts, and an unflinching belief in one's ordained destiny. Dothan possessed both to a fault. He lived on the floor fellow band member's apartment; life was rough and simple, but free. Unbound at last from his doting mother, who he had reluctantly persuaded to allow this

unorthodox transition and arrangement, the young man found himself enthralled with the prospect of adventure.

The year passed largely without incident. Groupies and high school girls revolved around them, periodically. They were not the focus, however. Art was all. In fact, Dothan was so smitten with his own effortless ability to feed his need to create, that he could qualify as a narcissist. Of course, all this was lost on the eighteen-year-old. Ensclosed in the stoic indestructibility that was once young American manhood, the boy marched on fearlessly. Love was a dream, never yet realized.

It was a typical spring night in Austin, mid-April to be exact. While it was a little warm during the day, the nights were perfect. Humidity was merely a rumor. Dothan and some high school pals were prowling West Campus. The metallic orange to the west dazzled a little longer now that Daylight Savings Time had kicked in. After getting a college student to buy them a case of beer, the clan slammed can after can in the intermittent shadows. Earlier, a fraternity looking for recruits had picked them up at school. The boys had spent the latter afternoon watching skimpily clad girls mud wrestle at various frat houses. The drink they consumed at present was on top of what they had been given earlier at the event.

This was Round Up: the season when fraternities and sororities formally went to courting future pledges. In reality, this was an excuse to party. An alcohol soaked weekend that was indifferent to things such as, "being of age." This was the end of an era.

So, John David Dothan, a rock singer, aspiring fame and fortune; an artist of delicate sensibility, this is where he found himself

on this particular April night in the latter nineteen-eighties: Buzzed and on top of the world, roaming a terrain that would never again be his own. But it was tonight.

“I need some smokes!” one of the clan announced.

“I’m fiending for a cigarette!” another concurred.

“I have to piss!” yet another sounded. This pronouncement was met with a unanimous holler.

This raucous crew exited off from the back streets that wound in and out of the tree shrouded nooks, hitting the main artery that cut through the middle of campus. As cars zoomed past, the boys swaggered into the aforementioned convenience store. After relieving himself, Dothan emerged out into the freshly darkened night. A red BMW convertible sat humming in the middle of the squat parking lot. A crowd of sycophants loitered. The longhaired singer recognized the prim driver. An amicable pop song, rising from its radio, filled the space.

“So hey JD, what’s up with the band these days; where y’all playing next?” An acquaintance inquired.

“Oh man, you know we’ve been writing a ton lately,” he prefaced, “and we’re booked next on Sixth Street, in Joe’s Generic Bar.” Dothan sat on the hood of the running BMW.

“Joe’s is cool, that means I can get in. They let underage in, don’t they? That’s what I’ve heard, anyway?”

“If not, I’ll hand you a bag of mics. You can pretend you’re a roadie.”

“Hey, ” a feminine voice called from behind.

Dothan sat, swiveling his head, confused.

“Yeah, you singer man; the hood!” The origin of the voice

was now pointing to the hood of her car.

Dothan, turned around and looked the girl square in the eyes. Perhaps the first time he had ever done so. Sitting behind the wheel, proud without arrogance, secure without conceit, how some might describe grace, sat Rachael Downs. Her soft brown hair blew in the wind, accenting her well-set jaw line and her olive skin.

Dothan lifted his skinny butt from the hood of the convertible and apologized, unconvincingly.

Rachel looked him up and down and cracked a wide smile. "It's alright. We're meeting some friends at a frat party. Why don't you join us?"

"Yeah?" he stated as he surveyed the landscape, "I know where y'all are going, we'll meet you there."

"Why walk? Why don't you hop in? Jump in the back, Alicia," Rachel ordered her friend, who was sitting shotgun. Dothan, was now sitting in the front seat, his long hair flapping in the wind as the Beamer accelerated.

The party was the usual fare of drunken fraternity types: basically, gangs of well-off white boys who were spoon-fed intolerance to anything remotely unlike themselves. The young singer would have served as an obvious target had it not been for the presence of a band. If there was anything Dothan was good at, it was talking fellow musicians into allowing him to sit in for a song or two, the official singer ignorant that he was about to be blown off the stage.

The eighteen-year old worked his magic. He was now a hero. The stunned band, returning to their set, felt a little

awkward after such a superior performance: The official singer embarrassed; the rest of the band wishing they had Dothan.

Heralded as he made his way to the keg, he stumbled upon Rachael, his ride. “So, I guess you forget about the little people pretty fast?” she quipped, sarcastically.

Dothan was secretly flattered. “What are you talking about?” he shouted over the music. “I need to get a beer!” he called, signaling her towards the door.

The two convened outside the frat house, in a garden enclosed by giant, twisted live oaks; moonlight draping serpentine patterns across their figures and the moist grass.

“I really enjoy your music,” Rachael commented.

“Thanks. That was a little sloppy, actually. I’ve sounded better.”

“I know. I’ve heard you before.”

“Before; where?”

“In the gym, at the talent show tryouts; a couple of weeks ago.”

“You were there?”

“Yes, I was on the other side of the partition, working on stuff for the Youth Club fundraiser coming up.”

“O...k...,” Dothan was clueless.

“Yeah, I was really...well...really...moved. I know that sounds stupid.”

Again, Dothan was secretly flattered. “No. I mean I’m glad you liked it. I’ve been told I sound best with just an acoustic accompaniment. It’s awesome that that’s how you first got to hear me!”

The arrogance of this was not lost on Rachael. “Acoustic? You’ll have to fill me in. What does that mean?”

Dothan proceeded to explain the difference between acoustic and electric accompaniment. His sincerity excused his arrogance.

“You know, we have Government with each other?” she asked, accusingly.

“Yes, I know. I enjoy listening to your answers to Mr. Atkin’s questions. You’re by far the smartest person in the class.”

This remark drew her further in. “We’ll, I enjoy your opinions.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? You have an opinion on just about everything. Or haven’t you noticed?”

Dothan laughed at this observation. “No, I haven’t.”

“Well, you do. I like it. So many people our age just don’t care or think about anything.”

“I can’t imagine not caring.”

“Neither can I.”

“How is it, having shared a class for the last three months, that we haven’t ever said a word to each other before now?” Dothan asked, her flattery, and the booze, beginning to get to him.

“I don’t know. But we’re speaking now.”

“Yes, we are.”



“That’ll be \$6.49, sir,” the convenience store clerk replied after Dothan asked for a pack of Marlboros.

The daydreamer was shocked back to reality. “\$6.49? Jesus! A bit much, don’t you think?”

“Taxes, sir.”

“Here’s ten. Keep it.”

Dothan stepped out into the Austin night, his head cloudy, his heart full.



Back home along the coast, he arrived to an empty house. Jessica was on another one of her cruises or train trips. But loneliness was, in fact, what he was looking for. It suited his present mood and mindset.

There were numerous messages from Langhorne on the answering machine, the man rambling about some problem with a client. Dothan knew he needed to address the situation, but he was in no mood to deal with company issues.

The weekend was spent getting drunk and listening to music—a favorite past time. The only difference here was that the music he now listened to was his own. Tapes and homemade CDs of live shows and studio recordings lost to the world. He sat in his favorite chair, killing beer after beer, and gradually became enraptured with his own image. Verses and lyrics, long forgotten, were remembered with a myriad of emotions. But before passing out, Dothan could not help but feel that his life was a failure.



Come Sunday, after Langhorne had left several more desperate messages, he finally worked up the stomach to make the return call.

“Well, it’s about goddamn time! What the hell took you so long? I’ve been calling for days!”

“Sir, I’ve been busy.”

“Busy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well look, JD, I’m having problems with that subcontractor over in Brazoria. I think he’s getting cold feet—doesn’t think the deal’s gonna go through. Have you talked to that lobbyist I put you in touch with, the one that’s friends with the chairman on the Appropriations Committee?”

“Yes, I have talked to him.” Dothan was lying.

“Good!” Langhorne’s tone calmed. “Fantastic, JD, fantastic. So...what did he have to say?”

“Nothing really, he wants to meet in person. I’m meeting him at his Austin office in the next couple of weeks.”

“Next couple of weeks? What the hell’s the delay?”

“It’s the way things work, sir.”

“Alright, all right. Did you at least go over some numbers with the man?”

“Numbers?” Dothan was caught off guard.

“Goddamnit, JD, I sent the file up to you more than a week ago! Haven’t you looked at it yet?”

“Yes. I’ve looked at them. I can’t remember anything off hand. It’s all good. I’ve got it under control, sir.”

“Good. I know I can count on you, JD.” This uncharacteristic statement was followed by an odd silence. After a pause that seemed an eternity to Dothan, Langhorne continued, “Listen, JD. I tried breaching this subject with Jessica back at the beginning of this whole endeavor, and I expressed to her my reservations about you running as a Democrat. She was emphatic about it and it turned nasty, so I let it go. Look, I know that you and her are into that whole liberal thing—and I’ve been a Democrat all my life—but I’d be a liar if I told you that I wasn’t concerned.”

“Concerned about what, sir?”

“Concerned about you being in the minority party. And the way y’all crucified that Spencer fellow. And let’s face it, JD the Democrats aren’t what they used to be. Gay marriage and abortion—that ain’t exactly the things I’m concerned about, you know.”

“Sir, I can assure you that my party affiliation will not hurt me. I am making in-roads with both parties. With all the new freshmen reps., the possibilities are wide open.”

“I don’t give a shit about the possibilities; I want that job in Brazoria County— period!”

“Like I said, I’ve got it under control.”

“Alright, alright...”



Dothan spent the beginning of the week meeting with potential business associates and county officials in Brazoria. Although at his core he loathed business, it was a welcome distraction from what was ailing him at the moment. From meeting to meeting

he lied between his teeth, telling everyone involved exactly what each one wanted to hear.

Days later, when he left to return to the Capitol, he had everyone in the county excited about a project that, at that particular point in time, was merely a scheme in Langhorne's mind. Everyone, from the county judge to the county commissioners, as well as numerous subcontracting firms, were presently set in motion. Grandiose plans had been made.

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